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Aesthetics for Longevity: How Symmetric Design Enhances Sustainable Luxury Consumption

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Daniele Dalli", written over a horizontal line.

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Presidente
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Aesthetics for Longevity: How Symmetric Design Enhances Sustainable Luxury Consumption

Abstract

Aesthetics is a core elements of luxury products. While previous research has highlighted that aesthetics contributes to luxury products' appeal, the present research investigates the effect of luxury product aesthetics on sustainable consumption. In particular, the core argument advanced is that one key aesthetic characteristic of luxury products, namely its symmetry, leads consumers to use them longer (rather than disposing them). Four experiments demonstrate that the symmetric (vs. asymmetric) design of luxury fashion products lead to higher intended and actual length of product usage, and that this effect is explained by perceived product stylistic continuity. Results also show the moderating role of consumers' fashion orientation. Overall, the present research sheds light on the to-date untested effect of luxury product aesthetics on sustainable consumption and offers insightful suggestions to luxury marketers as to how to use product aesthetics to nudge a more responsible consumption of luxury products.

Keywords: luxury aesthetics, symmetry, sustainable consumption, length of product usage, durability.

Introduction

The fashion industry is extremely harmful to the environment, being 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. While previous, non-empirical, research, suggests that the creation of enduring goods relies heavily on aesthetics (Harper and Simonsen, 2017), the relationship between aesthetics and sustainable luxury consumption has been overlooked by extant research. Even though aesthetic experiences are mainly subjective, as they depend heavily on individual taste (e.g., Hoyer and Stokburger-Sauer 2012), the field of empirical aesthetics identifies contrast, clarity, color, unity, order, and symmetry as the fundamental factors that impact aesthetic preference (Cesareo et al. 2023; Hagtvædt 2022).

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). Indeed, it can be easily identified in objects that display two identical halves (Treder 2010) and it 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, such as how it should feel when handled, held, lifted, or worn (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. Linking these arguments with the evidence that product durability is the result of both functional and stylistic benefits of the object itself (Levinthal and Purohit 1989), we propose that product design symmetry can be an effective means to induce luxury buyers to use products longer. Formally:

H1: *Symmetric (vs. asymmetric) luxury product design increases LPU.*

Besides predicting the effect of product symmetry on LPU, we propose that perceived stylistic continuity, which we define as 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 a driver of visual simplicity and that symmetry is negatively associated with perceptions of brands as trendy (Bajaj and Bond 2014), we predict that symmetric product designs will make consumers perceive luxury products as more timeless and less trendy than asymmetric product designs therefore inducing luxury buyers to use products longer. Formally:

H2: *The positive effect of luxury product design symmetry on LPU is driven by perceived stylistic continuity.*

In line with the predicted mediation, we also argue that the effect of symmetry on LPU might depend on individuals' fashion orientation. The latter has been 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). Less fashion-oriented consumers are less likely to shop frequently as they are looking for clothes that reflect their long-term identities (Gupta et al. 2019). Consequently, even when buying asymmetric products, less fashion-oriented consumers, might tend to use them long over time. Accordingly, we expect that for less fashion-oriented consumers product symmetry will not make the difference in terms of LPU. In contrast, 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, thus leading to unsustainable behaviors (Gupta et al. 2019). However, we propose that for high fashion-oriented consumers symmetry would increase LPU. We reason that they might see asymmetric products as means to satisfy their chronic desire to be trendy, even though they quickly go out of style and need to be changed quickly. Conversely, when owning a symmetric product, which is always fashionable, they won't feel the urge to replace it, thus using it for longer time.

H3: *For consumers with a lower fashion orientation product symmetry will not affect LPU, while for consumers with a higher fashion orientation product symmetry will lead to higher LPU.*

Research methodology

We tested our prediction across four online experiments.

Study 1a involved 211 consumers recruited through Prolific and it investigates whether consumers plan to continue using a luxury product characterized by symmetric (vs. asymmetric) design over a longer period (i.e., higher LPU). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two pre-tested experimental conditions, showing a black t-shirt which was either symmetric or asymmetric. LPU was measured by asking participants how long they would plan on using the described product before they no longer wanted it (1-item, 7 point-Likert scale; 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 ($M_{\text{symmetric}} = 5.58$ ($SD=2.00$); $M_{\text{asymmetric}} = 4.58$ ($SD = 2.42$); $t(201.26) = 3.280$; $p < .0001$), supporting H1.

Study 1b sought to further test H1 by replicating the effect of symmetry (vs. asymmetry) on LPU for a real luxury item recalled by consumers. 170 luxury buyers recruited through Prolific were asked to examine different pictures of luxury products characterized by symmetric (vs. asymmetric) design and prompted to think about a real luxury product that they had already purchased that had a similar symmetric (vs. asymmetric) design. Then, they answered few questions about their owned product: (1) LPU (Sun et al. 2021), and (2) to what extent they liked the product (1=not at all; 7= very much). The results of the independent sample t-test showed that the recalled symmetric luxury product was associated with higher LPU than the recalled asymmetric luxury product ($M_{\text{symmetric}} = 6.01$ ($SD = 1.503$) vs. $M_{\text{asymmetric}} = 4.91$ ($SD = 2.060$); $t(159.04) = 4.007$ $p < .00$). We also found a significant effect of symmetry on product liking ($M_{\text{symmetric}}=6.24$ ($SD=.988$) vs. $M_{\text{asymmetric}}=5.08$ ($SD=1.400$); $t(156.796)=6.298$ $p<.001$), which aligns with theories on visual aesthetics and preferences according to which people tend to prefer symmetrical shapes (Palmer et al. 2013). Study 1b further supports H1.

Study 2 involved 213 respondents recruited through Prolific, to test H2. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions which were exactly the same as in study 1a. Then, they were asked about (1) LPU (Sun et al. 2021) and (2) perceived stylistic continuity (measured as a 4-item 7-points Likert Scale, adapted from Morhart et al. 2015). Again, the symmetric luxury t-shirt generated higher LPU than the asymmetric one ($M_{\text{Symmetric}} = 5.30$, $SD = 2.00$ vs. $M_{\text{Asymmetric}} = 4.40$, $SD = 2.32$, $t(1, 207.95) = 3.023$, $p = .001$). Moreover, symmetry made the luxury product seem higher in stylistic continuity ($M_{\text{Symmetric}} = 5.57$, $SD = 1.38$ vs. $M_{\text{Asymmetric}} = 4.15$, $SD = 1.75$, $t(1, 202.130) = 6.521$, $p < .001$). Results of a mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4, Hayes 2022) confirmed a significant and positive indirect effect ($b = .6297$, $SE = .1709\%$ [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 ($b = .4463$, $SE = .0894$, $t(210) = 4.9931$, $p < .0001$). Considering the mediator, the effect of the independent variable on LPU was not significant ($b = .2674$, $SE = .3088$, $t(211) = .8660$, $p = .3875$), thus suggesting a full mediation effect and supporting H2.

Study 3 aimed at testing the moderation effect of fashion orientation (H3). 165 prolific respondents were first asked about their fashion orientation using a 7-item five-points Likert Scale (Gupta et al. 2019) and then they were exposed to the same experimental conditions as in Study 1a and 2 and asked about intended LPU (Sun et al. 2021). The independent sample t-test confirmed once again the proposed effect ($M_{\text{symmetric}}=5.35$ ($SD=1.959$); $M_{\text{asymmetric}}=4.10$ ($SD=2.277$); $t(163)=3.800$ $p < .001$). Next, we ran a 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. We found 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.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Overall, our work provides relevant theoretical and managerial contributions. Theoretically, we advance extant literature on sustainable luxury consumption. Indeed, while prior work has linked luxury products' durability to tangible elements such as the quality of materials and production processes used (Amatulli et al. 2017; Sun et al. 2021), we explored a consumer-based view of sustainability in luxury by focusing on the role of aesthetics and product design. In doing so, we answered the call for a more nuanced exploration of product durability within the luxury context (Sun et al. 2021), focusing of a key aesthetic characteristic that is symmetry.

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 a underinvestigated individual trait, namely 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.

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Aesthetics for Longevity: How Symmetric Design Enhances Sustainable Luxury Consumption

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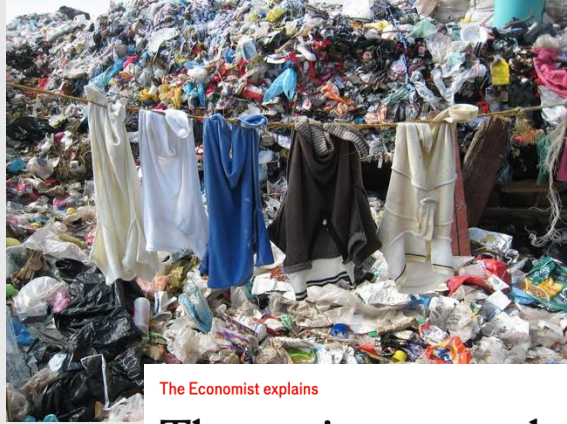
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Sustainable fashion: why do we care about it?



The Economist explains

The environmental costs of creating clothes

People are buying more clothes than ever before—and chucking them out too



The **fashion industry is extremely harmful to the environment**, being responsible of around 3-8% of global ghg emissions (Janmark et al. 2024).



Only in 2020 **Textile consumption per person** in the EU required on average:

400 m² of lands

9 m³ of water

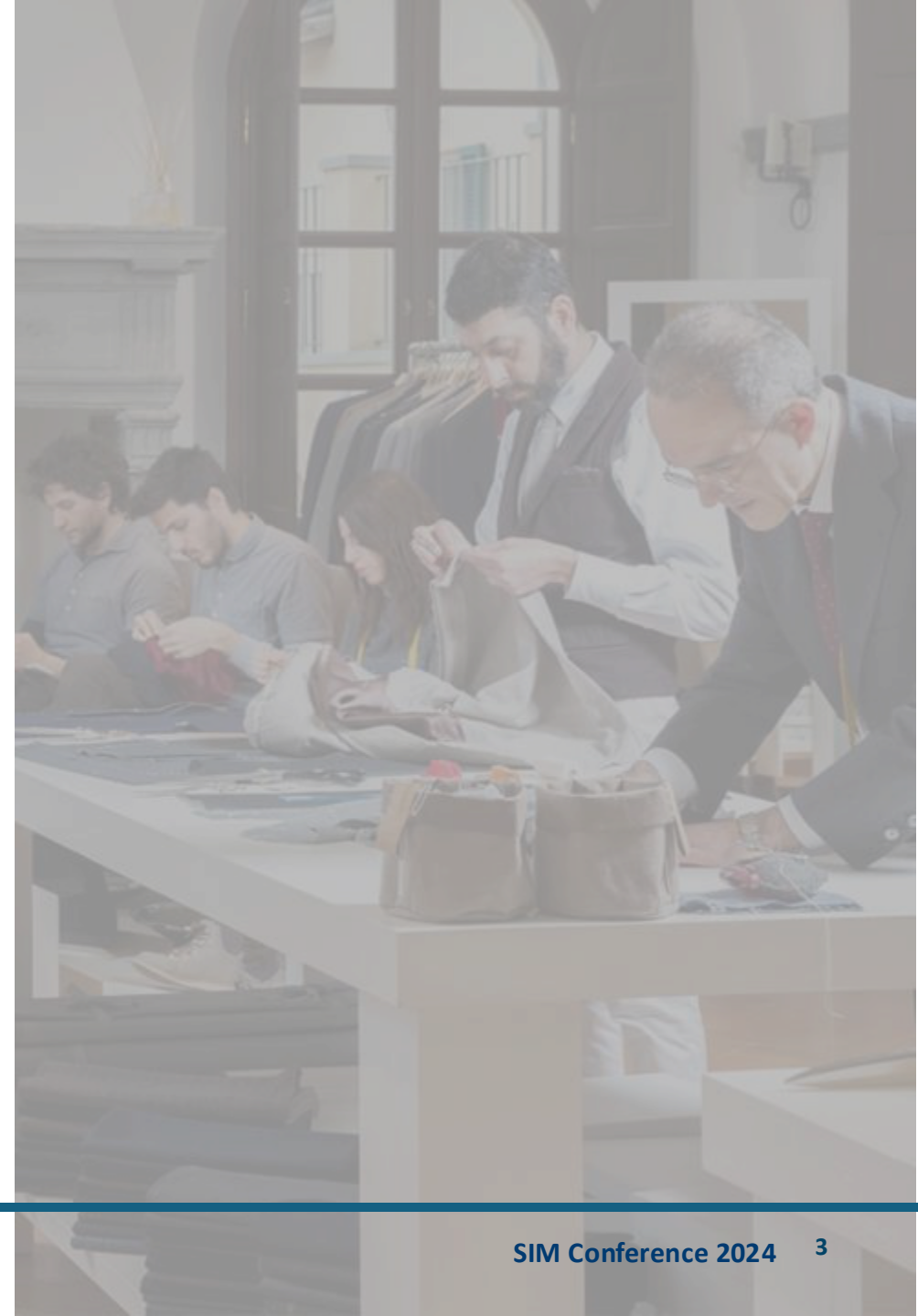
391 kg of raw materials

Source: European Environmental Agency (2023)

Overproduction and overconsumption represent key issues in the fight against resource waste.

Motivation for the study

- Luxury fashion products are recognized as **inherently sustainable** because of their excellent quality, derived from superior raw materials and artisanal production processes, which ultimately increase their durability overtime (Sun et al. 2021)
- We propose a **consumer-based view** of sustainable luxury, built around the idea that consumers' experiences with a product shape the **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; Kapferer 2014; Venkatesh et al. 2010), we propose that certain aesthetics characteristics of luxury might affect LPU, thus contributing to sustainable consumption.
- While previous, non-empirical, research, suggests that the creation of enduring goods relies heavily on aesthetics (Harper and Simonsen, 2017), the **relationship between aesthetics and sustainable luxury consumption has been overlooked by extant research.**



The key role of aesthetics: product symmetry as a driver of LPU

Contrast, clarity, color, unity, order, and symmetry are the main drivers of **aesthetic preference** (Cesareo et al. 2023; Hagtvedt 2022).

- **Simmetry** (e.g., Bettels and Wiedmann 2019): the simplest case of balance (Creusen et al. 2010), that can be easily detected (Treder 2010).
- It **convey immediate gratification** in terms of **anticipated experiences when interacting with the object**, such as **how it should feel when handled, held, lifted, or worn** (Harper and Simonsen 2017).
- Individuals usually prefer simplicity and symmetry (Palmer et al. 2013, Shepherd and Bar 2011, Harper and Simonsen 2017).
- **Aesthetic simplicity** can enhance product durability (Zafarmand et al. 2003) and it is coherent with **minimalistic consumption** (Wilson and Bellezza 2022).

H1: Symmetric (vs. asymmetric) luxury product design increases LPU.

Courrèges' Modern Minimalism: A Study in Asymmetry at Paris Fashion Week 2024

Fall 2024 Fashion Trend: Asymmetrical Dresses

Fashion

Why asymmetrical clothing is the next big thing in menswear (really)

Stylistic benefits over functionality: the mediating role of perceived stylistic continuity

Perceived stylistic continuity: the extent to which a product might survive times and trends (Morhart et al. 2015)

Symmetry conveys visual simplicity and diminishes perceptions of brands as trendy or up-to-date (Bajaj and Bond 2014, p. 402) therefore, we expect consumers to perceive symmetrical (vs. asymmetrical) luxury products as more timeless.

H2: The positive effect of luxury product design symmetry on LPU is driven by perceived stylistic continuity.

The moderating role of individuals' fashion orientation

Fashion orientation: consumers' tendency to "buy more new fashion items in order to satisfy their need to keep current" (Gupta et al. 2019).

- Low fashion-oriented consumers buy clothes that reflect their long-term identities and are less likely to shop frequently (Gupta et al. 2019; Trudel et al. 2016)
- High fashion-oriented consumers use fashion products for a shorter period of time, leading to unsustainable behaviors (Fletcher 2008; Cho et al. 2015; Gupta et al. 2019)
- Highly fashion-oriented individuals that buy an asymmetric product would soon replace it as soon as the trend changes, since they enjoy being up-to-date (Sproles and Kendall 1986) and they would look for the next fads. On the contrary, the symmetric apparel that "would never go out of style" could mitigate their unsustainable behavior

***H3:** For consumers with a lower fashion orientation, product symmetry will not affect LPU, while for consumers with a higher fashion orientation, product symmetry will lead to higher LPU.*

Overview of the studies

Study	Sample	Hypothesis Tested	Supported	Key Findings
1a	$N = 211$	H1 Main effect	Yes	Consumers plan to continue using a luxury product characterized by symmetric (vs. asymmetric) design over a longer period (i.e., higher LPU).
1b	$N = 170$	H1 Main effect (Real purchase recall)	Yes	Consumers plan to use an owned symmetric (vs. asymmetric) product that they recalled for longer (i.e., higher LPU).
<u>2</u>	$N = 213$	H2 Mediation of perceived stylistic continuity	Yes	Luxury product symmetry increases perceived stylistic continuity and this, in turn, increases LPU.
3	$N = 163$	H3 Moderation of Fashion orientation	Yes	The more the consumer is fashion oriented, the higher the positive effect of symmetry on LPU.

All the studies were pre-registered and respondents were recruited through Prolific Academics

Experimental stimuli

STUDY 1a, 2,3

This unisex t-shirt is produced by a luxury brand.



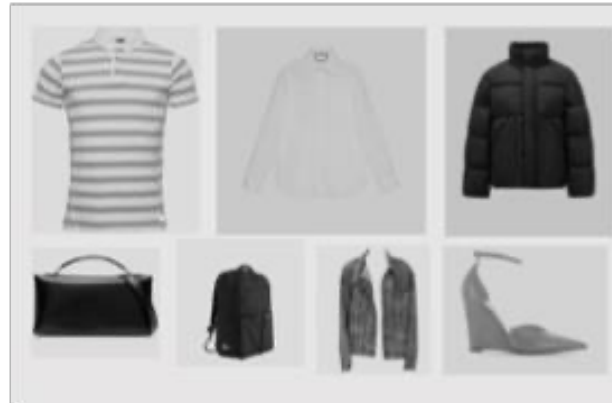
SIMMETRY

ASIMMETRY

STUDY 1b

It is a product of good quality, and its main peculiar characteristic in terms of aesthetics is its **SYMMETRY**.

Hereafter you can see some examples of symmetric aesthetics:



It is a product of good quality, and its main peculiar characteristic in terms of aesthetics is its **ASYMMETRY**.

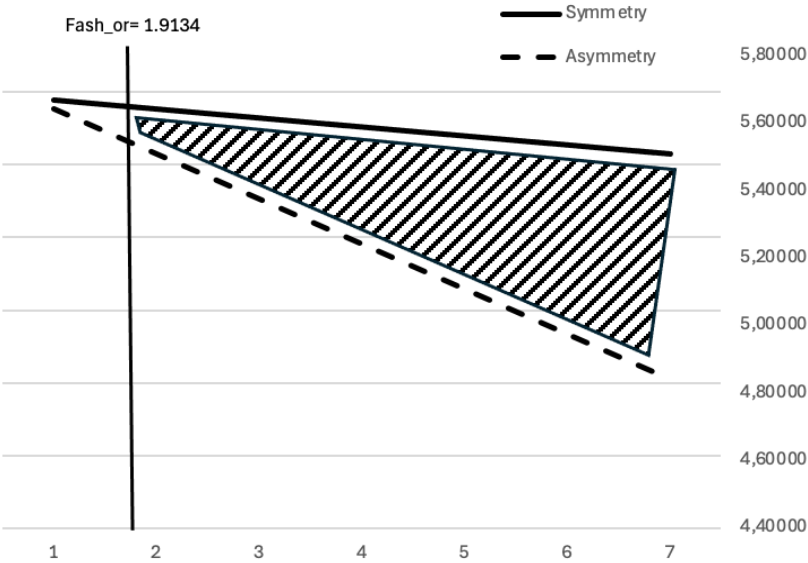
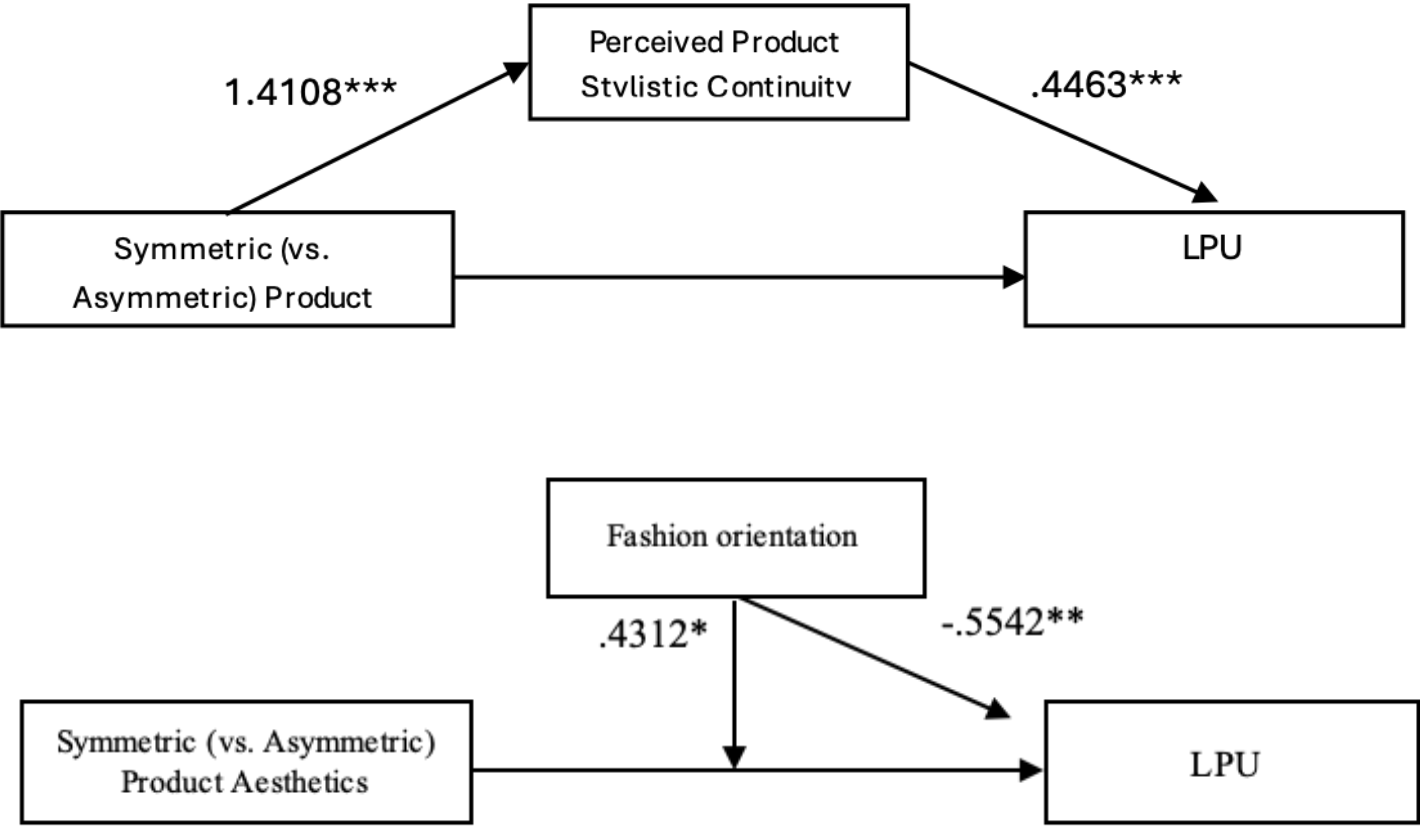
Hereafter you can see some examples of asymmetric aesthetics:



Consumers plan to continue using a luxury product characterized by symmetric (vs. asymmetric) design over a longer period (i.e., higher LPU).

STUDY	MEASURES	RESULTS
Study 1a N=211	LPU (Sun et al. 2019) how long would you plan on using the described product before they no longer wanted it (1= "0-6 months"; 2 = "6 months-1year"; 3 = "1year-1.5 years"; 4 = "1.5 years-2 years"; 5 = "2 years-2.5 years"; 6 = "2.5 years-3 years"; 7 = "> 3 years")	$M_{\text{symmetric}}=5.58$ (SD=2.00); $M_{\text{asymmetric}}=4.58$ (SD=2.42); $t(201.26)=3.280$ $p < .001$
Study 1b N=170	LPU (Sun et al. 2019)	$M_{\text{symmetric}}=6.01$ (SD=1.503) $M_{\text{asymmetric}}=4.91$ (SD=2.060); $t(159.04)=4.007$ $p < .001$
Study 2 N=213	LPU (Sun et al. 2019) Product stylistic continuity: measured on a 4-item seven-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree): "A product with history", "A timeless product", "A product that survives times", "A product that survives trends" adapted from Morhart et al. 2015. ($\alpha=.874$)	<i>Process Model 4, Hayes 2022: Y : LPU X : Symm M : Stylistic continuity</i> <i>The IV was coded as (0 = asymmetric, 1 = symmetric)</i> 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 ($b = 1.4108$, $SE = .2171$, $t(211) = 6.4989$, $p < .0001$); in turn, perceived stylistic continuity positively affected LPU ($b = .4463$, $SE = .0894$, $t(210) = 4.9931$, $p < .0001$; see Figure 1). Full mediation.
Study 3 N=163	LPU (Sun et al. 2019) Fashion orientation= 6-item 5-point Likert scale (Sproles and Kendall 1986; Gupta et al. 2019) "Keeping up with the latest fashion is important to me", "I spend considerable time and effort to learn about the latest fashion", "I keep my wardrobe up-to-date with the changing fashions", "I usually have one or more outfits of the very new fashion", "I consciously choose something that reflects the current fashion", "Fashionable, attractive clothing is very important to me". ($\alpha=.939$)	<i>Process Model 1, Hayes 2022: Y=LPU, X=symmetry MOD: fashion orientation</i> <i>The IV was coded as (0 = asymmetric, 1 = symmetric).</i> We found 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 x fashion orientation interaction was positive and significant ($b=.43$; $se=.20$; $t(159)=2.10$; $p=.04$). For values of fashion orientation lower than 1.91, product design had a non-significant effect on LPU, while for values higher than 1.91 product symmetry had a significant and increasingly positive effect on LPU (see Figure 3). These results lend support to H3.

Graphical representation of the main results



Theoretical contribution and managerial implications

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION



- SUSTAINABLE LUXURY CONSUMPTION: A CONSUMER-BASED VIEW
- STYLISTIC CONTINUITY AS A LINK BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIORS
- SUSTAINABLE PRODUCT DESIGN WITHIN THE FASHION INDUSTRY



MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS



- AESTHETICS AS A CUE FOR SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIORS
- COMMUNICATE STYLISTIC BENEFITS OVER FUNCTIONAL BENEFITS
- THE UNSUSTAINABILITY OF “UGLY” LUXURY (Bellezza et al. 2023; Zanette et al. 2022; Cesareo et al. 2023)
- BALANCING CREATIVITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

What's next: limitation and future research

- Symmetry vs. **Contrast, color, unity, order** (Cesareo et al. 2023) + combination of multiple aesthetic features
- **Other mediators?** consumers' emotional responses (e.g., Kumar and Garg 2010), perceptions of functional obsolescence (Levinthal and Purohit 1989), or processing fluency.
- **Other moderators?** Different product categories (e.g. jewellery, watches, etc.), fast-fashion products (e.g., Sun et al. 2019); previous exposure to a similar design in that category (e.g., De Angelis et al. 2017).
- Self reported measure of LPU vs. **actual LPU**: field research

Grazie per l'attenzione!

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