STEPHEN M. WIGLEY
UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD

FASHIONING THE BRAND – A CREATIVE AND COMMERCIAL INTERPRETATION OF THE ROLE OF THE BRAND IN FASHION

BRANDING | FASHION | MARKETING | DESIGN | MANAGEMENT

ABSTRACT

WITHIN THE FASHION INDUSTRY, THE BRAND IS REGARDED AS CRITICALLY IMPORTANT IRRESPECTIVE OF THE IDENTITY OF THE PRACTITIONER. CREATIVE PRACTITIONERS (DESIGNERS) AND COMMERCIAL PRACTITIONERS (MARKETERS, RETAILERS) BOTH REGARD THE BRAND AS AN INSPIRATION POINT AND AN ANCHOR IN SHIFTING TIDES OF TREND AND CONSUMER DEMAND.

Designers regard the brand as a key reference in developing new products and maintaining a lineage and relationship between seasonal ranges and collections; while marketers regard the brand and its promotion as a crucial means of motivating consumer purchase and maintaining loyalty. Notwithstanding the evident significance of the brand in fashion, definitions of it within the industry are vague and occasionally contradictory and the specific applications and roles of the brand are poorly quantified.

This paper seeks to explore the concept of the brand in fashion by considering the attitudes of fashion practitioners (both creative and commercial) toward it, and their experiences of it. Focusing on the mid to upper-levels of the UK fashion market, the role of the brand in informing creative and commercial decisions will be explored in order to provide insight to the scope and specific nature

ALL ABOUT BRANDS

1

KINGSGATE
next
HOUSE OF FRASER

2

of the brand's influence in fashion. Understanding of the brand concept among creative and commercial fashion practitioners will be assessed with a view to establishing a definitive interpretation of the brand as it applies within the fashion industry. Finally, a conceptual interpretation of the brand and the functions it performs in context of the fashion market will be provided. Cumulatively these objectives will provide a clearer understanding of the brand in fashion, its role in the industry, and its ability to contribute to creative and commercial development in the sector.

The paper is informed by primary research collected from a variety of sources including interviews with senior creative and commercial practitioners working with brands representing a broad cross-section of the industry. It is anticipated that the paper will enhance academic understanding of the nature and practice of branding within fashion, while offering insight to practitioners (creative or commercial) seeking to harness the power of the brand in pursuing their industry objectives.

INTRODUCTION

Within the highly competitive fashion market the brand is considered ubiquitous (Power & Hauge 2008), but most commonly understood as a marketing tool serving a function of attracting and retaining customers, positioning products distinctively versus competitors and creating a desirable image within the minds of consumers (figure 1). However of equal importance within this highly creative industry may be the brand's function in informing and influencing the creative, aesthetic, form and fit aspects of successive product ranges. In the most successful fashion businesses, these two functions of the brand, the commercial and the creative, are performed in a complimentary and synergistic way (Wigley et al 2013, Deserti 2014, Jones 2015). Notwithstanding the apparently critical significance of the brand within fashion practice, from a fashion research perspective its contextual understanding remains somewhat nebulous, compromised by vague and sometimes contradictory definitions of the brand within mainstream marketing literature (Maurya & Mishra 2012) and by misconceptions and misapplications of it within fashion-specific research (Tseëlon 2001, Kawamura 2011). This paper, therefore, has the overall aim of providing a conceptual model representing the commercial and creative functions of a brand specifically within a fashion business. In order to fulfil this aim, two objectives must be satisfied:

1) To provide a critical account of 'the brand' as it is understood by practitioners working in fashion industry creative and commercial roles.

2) To explore the roles and functions of the brand in the fashion industry.

Before exploring these objectives specifically, a background to the pertinent issues will be outlined in the following section.

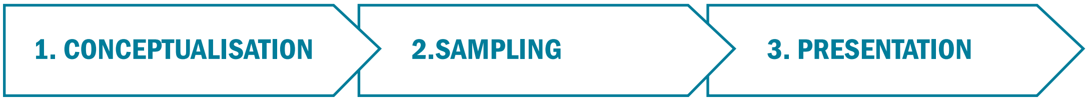
LITERATURE

BACKGROUND TO BRANDING

Even among research specific to branding (irrespective of its context in fashion or other categories), there remains some debate around the constituents, role and even definition of the brand concept (Kapferer 2004, Maurya & Mishra 2012). Beyond the recognition of brands as important in allowing a business to create and maintain success, the only apparent consensus in the literature is that brands are complex and multidimensional organisms. On this point, there is recognition that brands exist in and function on two levels, the tangible and the intangible (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley 1998, Keller 2008). Tangible aspects of the brand include primarily visual elements that are clearly evident to a consumer, for example the logos, symbols, colour-schemes, and design characteristics common to a business. Intangible aspects of the brand may include elements of the brand that are not palpably visible to the consumer, for example its ethical values, positioning and heritage. Cumulatively, these tangible and intangible aspects of the brand serve to endorse consumers' understanding of the brand and its products' perceived quality, functionality, social status and affordability which in turn influence their decision to purchase (de Chernatony & McWilliam 1989, O'Malley 1991, de Chernatony 1993). Beyond this point in the literature, the consensus diffuses into conflicting characterisations, abstract interpretations and poorly defined terms. Furthermore, a definitive understanding of the brand is compromised by the conflicting perspectives and priorities of the situational context of the research (Wood 2000, Stern 2006). In seeking to progress beyond these debates, a number of researchers have proposed that branding research may be furthered not by seeking a universal definition of the brand, rather by considering the situational industry and market-specific conditions in which a given brand may exist (Blumenthal 2004, Jevons 2007). Accordingly, fashion brand research may be furthered by studying the brand in context of the factors and issues that characterise the fashion industry as distinctive from other consumer categories (Holt 2002). The first objective of this paper is to understand fashion practitioners' understanding of the brand, with a view to informing a definition of the fashion brand.

BRANDING IN FASHION

Fashion may be regarded as a commoditised category where essentially generic and easily-replicable products with simple technical and functional characteristics are universally demanded by all consumers (Wortzel 1987, Doeringer & Crean 2006). Hence branding became the pre-eminent means by which fashion businesses (in particular) may differentiate their products, build unique, inimitable and sustainable identities in the minds of consumers, and hence charge premium prices (Sinclair & Seward 1988, Abernathy et al 1999). Over time, this fuelled the emergence of the fashion market as we understand it today, as distinct from simply a 'clothing' market (O'Cass & Choy 2008, Carroll 2009, Crane 2012, Barnes 2014). From the perspective of consumers, fashion is inextricably linked to actual or perceived social- and self-identity (Kort et al 2008, Crane 2012), and fashion products are noted as being used by consumers to express something real or desired about their social status, group affiliations and individual characteristics or personality (Amaldoss & Jain 2015). Consumers tend to regard fashion products as helping endorse their desired social and professional identities, and hence invest much effort, time and money in their purchase (O'Cass 2004) (figure 2). For all these reasons, branding is especially important for the commercial success of fashion businesses in particular, suggesting that branding may become the core competence around which the longer-term strategy and diversification of the business may be based (Wigley 2011).



3

The fashion industry is also distinctive from other sectors in being highly creative (Wenting 2008); in most western economies, fashion is recognised as one of the 'creative industries'. The traditional bi-annual collections of fashion designers and the more frequent trend-led and seasonal ranges offered by mainstream retailers, by their nature, place an emphasis on almost constant 'newness', or at least novelty as perceived by consumers (Ruppert-Stroescu & Hawley 2014). This 'newness', expressed in the aesthetic, tactile or fit qualities of the garments produced, must be sourced in the creativity of fashion designers as they develop new concepts and products. There are differing interpretations of the commercial fashion design process and it has become compressed in contemporary fashion businesses (Caro & Martínez-de-Albéniz 2015) however it is traditionally recognised as consisting of three steps, expressed in Figure 3, and examined below:

1) Conceptualisation, where inspiration is sought, refined and developed to become the primary creative basis for a collection. The sources of inspiration may be from the natural world, from contemporary trends or the designers' own experiences, but they may also be rooted in past collections or the archival materials of the business for which they work. The range is developed in flat format and experimented with, possibly via bricolage to end with a refined concept to go forward in the process (Evans & Shah 2014).

2) Sampling, where prototype garments are developed from the conceptual range and tested for their aesthetic and functional qualities. This is an opportunity for the designer to see their flat work in three dimensions, and further refine designs for production. The designer may edit the collection's colours, fabrics and aesthetics in response to input by financial, production or marketing colleagues, as well as their own observation on the 'reality' of their designs.

3) Presentation of the collection, where the designer presents the collection near completion to senior designers and company management, seeking final approval for the production and distribution of the collection. Again the designs may be altered at this point prior to being signed off for production.

The creative aspect of the fashion industry, as most clearly expressed in the development of products and collections during the design process, is another of the characteristics defining the 'fashion', as opposed to 'clothing' industry (Raustiala & Sprigman 2006). As noted above, balancing creative aspects with the commercial demands of the market is the key discipline for fashion managers in assuring their business of short and long-term success and therefore both creative and commercial disciplines must play a role in the branding strategies used by those businesses. The second objective of this paper is to identify the creative and commercial roles played by the fashion brand.

FASHION BRANDING PRACTICE

Branding, as a practice, is often considered as a function of disciplines related to marketing communications such as advertising, celebrity endorsement and market positioning (O'Malley 1991, Biggar & Selame 1992). These are self-evidently important in the fashion market, and are reflected in the related literature, with studies specifically focusing on the practice of fashion branding specifically examining marketing-related concepts such as (among many others) consumer behaviour (Mulyanegara & Tsarenko 2009), market positioning (Fionda & Moore 2009), and different means of promotion (Kontu & Vecchi 2014, Kim et al 2015). While these 'consumer-facing' aspects of the discipline are clearly important, such studies neglect the aspects of fashion branding practice that may not be immediately apparent to the consumer as a brand-related activity. These would include operational management decisions related to product pricing, manufacturing and distribution (Wigley 2011), but more pertinently also include the roles played by the creative practitioners responsible for designing the products themselves (Deserti 2014). This aspect of fashion branding practice is recognised as significant by more recent research in the area (Wigley et al 2013, Jones 2015, Merlo & Perugini 2015), however requires further exploration.

The understanding of fashion brand practice is also compromised by the fact that much of the literature covering fashion brands has been completed under the aegis of marketing management research, rather than fashion-specific research. While these studies are useful, perhaps the researchers responsible have not been fully cognisant of the particular characteristics specific to the fashion market outlined above (Tseëlon 2010, Kawamura 2011). By detailing the characteristics specific to branding in fashion, and identifying the commercial and creative functions a fashion brand performs, a better understanding of the fashion brand concept will be realised, fulfilling the aim of the paper.

METHODOLOGY

From the literature outlined above, the three previously noted objectives for the paper were developed and a mode of enquiry planned. The lack of definitive understanding of the fashion brand concept necessitated an interpretivist approach to primary data collection and analysis (Yin 2003, Cooper et al 2006). This approach lends itself to a qualitative methodology. For the main means of primary data collection, in-depth interviews with relevant fashion practitioners were arranged. The interviewees were contacted via extended professional and personal networks. Co-operation with 13 professionals including designers, marketing and management staff working for a variety of European and UK fashion businesses from across the mid-market to luxury sectors was secured. The interviews were conducted with a view to addressing the three objectives identified above and to allow participants to freely express their opinions and experiences of fashion brands and branding. The results were subjected to content analysis to identify pertinent information and recurring patterns in participants' responses, and initial findings reported back to interviewees for validation. All the participants requested that their personal identities, and those of the businesses they work for, be made anonymous. This overall methodological approach has precedent in fashion brand research (e.g. McColl & Moore 2010, Wigley et al 2013, D'Souza 2015) and is deemed appropriate for exploring poorly-defined phenomena of which there is little consensus in understanding, and which are open to subjective interpretations (Yin 2003, Cooper et al 2006, Ritchie et al 2013).

FINDINGS

FASHION PRACTITIONERS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE BRAND

As might be expected, mirroring the debate within the previously discussed literature, fashion practitioners had differing understandings of the brand. These ranged from the fairly simple, 'the logo'; 'the name of the business', to the more sophisticated, 'the central concept that defines all we do and how we do it'. The most marked difference was between the views of fashion professionals working in commercial roles including marketing and management staff, and those working in creative roles such as designers.

Interviewees whose experience was in commercial roles interpreted the brand (understandably) in context of the practical day-to-day activities they were engaged in. 'Consumers', 'advertising' and 'the media' were among the words that interviewees used repeatedly during initial discussions. Accordingly, thanks to their customer-orientated professional experience, sometimes interviewees would defer to the views of consumers rather than express their own understanding of the brand: '… my opinion doesn't matter; it's what the customer thinks the brand is that's important'. When asked to specifically define the brand, the commercial practitioners' understanding seemed in accord with the tangible and intangible conceptualisation noted above, 'a brand is something that you can see, but it's more than just a name or a logo' said one respondent, while a sales manager for a luxury brand said '[the brand] represents a guarantee of quality and qualities'. When asked to specify what made up a brand, all the commercial interviewees mentioned the obvious (tangible) components including the brand name, its logo and idiosyncratic colour scheme or visual identity as expressed in promotional materials and 'the overall look of a business', as the interviewee from a high-end business reported. The term 'look of a business' was repeated a number of times, and when asked further on their understanding of this, interviewees mentioned the design of stores, websites and advertising materials. No interviewee among the commercially-orientated interviewees spontaneously mentioned product design as being a component of their brand, except for one (working for a high-end womenswear business) who mentioned past collections as being significant to the contemporary prestige of the business. Of the intangible components of the brand, interviewees spoke of positioning vis-à-vis competitors, brand values, image, and personality. On the latter two issues, there was some consensus on whence image and personality originated. 'Brand personality… is the feel of our brand – it's quirky, fun side', said the marketing manager for a mid-market business; ‘Personality is… the human side of the brand. Where does a person’s personality come from, their upbringing, experiences, passions… our brand is the same’. Brand image ‘…is the feeling people get when they think of the brand – we’re smart, we’re prestigious, we’re business-like’ reported an interviewee employed by a menswear business. Both brand image and personality were evidenced in the promotional campaigns carried out by the businesses: ‘Our personality is the central message of all our marketing, it has to be bright, vibrant, unusual and fun to convey the coolness we want’. Brand values were almost universally described as ‘what the brand stands for’; good quality, peerless style, value-for-money, and so on. When asked where brand positioning, values, image and personality originated from and how they were expressed, again interviewees referred to marketing tactics: ‘If you see an advert for us, the personality and values of our brand are very clear’; ‘…the personality is seen easiest in the shops’; ‘The celebrities we work with say all you need to know about our positioning’. No respondent spontaneously mentioned the characteristics of their products as being critical in expressing brand positioning, values, image and personality, although all noted them as being important when asked. One interviewee noted: ‘…the product, of course, has to be right in terms of its look and quality, otherwise I’m wasting my time’. To commercial practitioners, the brand was understood primarily as a device used to promote the business and its products to consumers; ‘the brand is the… concept that customers understand, and therefore it’s the thing that we build our marketing around’. Notably, these interviewees regarded themselves as having an active and powerful role and responsibility in manipulating, communicating and if necessary evolving the brand. The menswear respondent asserted: ‘The brand is a tool, simple as that’, while another confirmed: ‘we can edit the brand by changing what and how we do things, the advertising, the look of stores and so on. That’s how we have evolved to where we are now’. The final point to note was the common use of the personal pronoun ‘we’ consistent to all conversations. Without exception, the commercially-orientated interviewees exclusively discussed the brand as ‘our brand’ or ‘we’, as if expressing confidence in a possessive and communal relationship with the brand.

After initial analysis, the interviewees were contacted with a proposed definition of the fashion brand based on their thoughts. After editing, most agreed that the following definition encapsulated their interpretation:

> *The fashion brand is a marketing tool composed of tangible components (including logos, slogans, marketing communications) intended to communicate intangible components (including positioning, image, personality and values) which are appealing to the target consumer.*

As with the commercially-orientated interviewees, the participants with creative backgrounds understood the brand in terms of their own professional activities; they frequently used words such as ‘[design] inspiration’, ‘archives’ and ‘collections’ during initial discussions. However the designers also noted the marketing function of brands, speaking spontaneously of ‘consumers’, ‘advertising’ and ‘branding’. This was a marked difference from the commercially-orientated interviewees who apparently regarded the brand as ‘their’ professional domain. The creatively-orientated respondents spoke without prompting of the brand not only in terms of their personal practice, but also that of colleagues in other jobs. However, while designers spoke confidently about ‘the brand’, it was unusual for them to connect their work with the practice of branding. ‘I understand what the brand is and why it’s important, but I don’t really see my job as ‘doing’ branding’, noted one designer. In common with the commercially-orientated interviewees, the creatives understood well the role of the brand in respect of customers. ‘Some customers are very brand loyal because it’s a fit or look that suits them, so it’s important to respect that and nurture that’, noted a womenswear designer, adding: ‘I think some customers buy into a brand more than a product… so it’s important that we make the products that fit the brand image’. When asked to define the specifics of the brand, the interviewees had a practical interpretation clearly informed by their training and professional activities: ‘[it] is the overall look of the collection and how it’s promoted’; ‘[it] is the collective choices that you make to say what those products are about and how they are perceived by customers’, reported a designer for a high-end business. These interpretations have an implication of tangible and intangible components of the brand in common with the commercially-orientated interviewees. When asked to discuss the components of a brand, designers spoke also of logos, advertising and the overall visual appearance of the business. However, they spoke more readily of the role of products in that visual appearance, using terms such as the ‘handwriting’ of the brand and its ‘signature style’ as being evident in successive collections. These terms have a similar meaning to the commercial interviewee’s term, ‘look of the business’, albeit with greater emphasis on the role of products in creating and sustaining that look. With respect to intangible components of the brand, the designers mentioned concepts of brand image and personality but as a group had a less specific and consensus understanding of the terms. 'Brand image is what the customer thinks of it, the sense they have of it being desirable, or for them', reported one interviewee. Designers in general were also less confident in specifying the origin of these intangible aspects of the brand, and although sharing similar views on these aspects developing naturally from the brand's heritage and history, they had a more passive relationship with them. One designer stated: 'Brand personality and image, just sort of 'are there', they come from the history… and can't really be changed, you have to work with them to get the best results'. When asked to express where the brand was most powerfully expressed, most designers were in agreement with the marketing professionals, citing advertising, store experience and promotional activities as important. However, informed by their professional practice, they more readily discussed the influence of branding on the design of products, not just in terms of the application of logos and idiosyncratic colour-ways, but also fit, drape and tactile aspects of collections contributing to consumers' understanding of the brand: 'The customer visits our shops not just because she gets good service, but because the collections give her a flattering fit, or the look she wants'; 'My designs are sophisticated and I think unique mainly because the brand's status is based on sophistication and innovation'. Notwithstanding this understanding of their work being informed by brands, the designers generally had a more passive view of their role in the brand and their ability to influence it. Although a number of high-profile designers (e.g. John Galliano, Tom Ford and Christopher Bailey) were mentioned as having comprehensively changed the brands they 'worked for', only two interviewees felt designers generally had a role to play in modifying their brand. One had worked for a British heritage brand that had undergone a management change and had played an active role in the subsequent 'rebrand' by helping design ranges and types of products the business had never before produced: 'I felt I was shaping something new then, but that could only happen if a business was taken over and you were totally re-writing the rule book. It's very rare'. This was the exception to the general consensus that the designers had a more passive relationship with the brand, feeling that they had little power to manipulate it, or indeed responsibility or need to do so. Finally, the designers' language when discussing the brand implied a less intimate relationship with it; the brand was less frequently referred to using personal pronouns. Instead of saying 'our/my brand', designers were more likely to say 'the brand', implying a relationship that was less communal with, and possessive of, the brand.

After initial analysis, the interviewees were contacted with a proposed definition of the fashion brand based on their thoughts. After editing, most agreed that the following definition represented well their interpretation:

> *The fashion brand is composed of tangible components (including logos, slogans, marketing communications) and intangible components (including positioning, image, personality and values) which are both appealing to the target consumer and inform the development of products.*

ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF THE FASHION BRAND

The second objective of the paper is to identify the roles and functions a fashion brand plays in both commercial and creative contexts. As implied above, the commercially-orientated interviewees were quick in identifying the prime role as generating sales. Interviewees recognised the sophistication of contemporary fashion consumers and markets: 'Of course the point is to sell the product but you can't just expect to create a brand and immediately start raking it in'; 'A customer rarely just sees an advert and thinks 'I'll buy that', rather it's a cumulative thing where you need to almost lead a customer through a process before she'll purchase'. This idea of a process was explored further, and analogies with building social or romantic relationships were discussed in context of branding: 'You don't just immediately get married, you have to spend time with your partner, get to know each other, learn to trust and identify with each other… good branding is the same'.

Interviewees were unanimous in agreeing that an effective brand strategy should:

1) Attract the target customer's attention.
2) Build a coherent identity and set of values in the customer's mind.
3) Create a perception of the brand's image, personality and status compatible with or complimentary to the customer's desired status.
4) Compel customers to purchase and continue purchasing the product.
5) Reassure and reward the customer's choice after purchase.

By following this process, the brand forms its market position, attracts patronage, and assures itself of customer loyalty. This understanding of the brand's role is consistent with mainstream marketing literature and while there was no evidence of the fashion context being distinctive, it reinforces the perception among commercially-orientated interviewees of the fashion brand as being purely a promotional tool. Broadening the scope of the discussion to include functions of the fashion business beyond the most immediately marketing-related, the interviewees confirmed that branding had a wider role to play. Most significantly, interviewees confirmed the brand may play a role in developing new products. This is understood to mean the continuing 'roll-out' of ongoing collections, but also the development of new product ranges. Interviewees confirmed brand extension and brand diffusion were both topics they had experience of, but reinforced the necessity of having a strong master-brand before launching new product categories or new related brands, again informing the sense of the brand being a tool.

The interviews with creative fashion practitioners offered further insight and a glimpse beyond the obvious marketing roles of the brand. The interviews were planned in conjunction with the design process detailed in Figure 3 above, in order to understand where and how the brand influenced the designers' work. The most significant area where this took place was in the conceptualisation phase, when the basics of a new collection are developed. Without exception, interviewees reported using brand archives to seek inspiration and develop looks: 'We need to look at the past before designing for the future'; 'The archives represent the story of the brand… to continue that story we need to make sure the next chapter flows from the previous'. Clearly, the brand's history in terms of the aesthetic and functional qualities of its garments, are critically important in allowing designers to capture the nature of the brand in successive collections. Archives were occasionally used in quite distinct ways, with one designer admitting to 'raiding the past' when she was working with the British heritage brand undergoing a 'rebrand', she stated: 'I wasn't ashamed to admit, some of the new designs I turned out were very clearly inspired by the garments and images we had in the archive'. The new designs were 'tweaked and played with' to create a more contemporary look and feel, but the inspiration from the past was very clear, and indeed specifically requested by management. More generally, all the designers used archive garments and designs to inform if not the outright inspiration, then at least the development of design concepts. 'My inspiration might be in nature, but having got a basic concept, I'd take it further by looking at the archives and working out a compatibility', acknowledged a designer for a womenswear business. The brand's ancestry, heritage and development are embodied in the archives, and thus reference to them is an essential task in helping a designer understand the ethos of the brand and chart its future. The brand is quite clearly if not the overt inspiration for the designers work, then at least acting as significantly informing it. The second phase of the design process is in sampling, where prototype garments are made and modified. Again, the brand is significant here in informing the designer's evolution of design concepts: 'Sometimes when you see the sample, you realise it's not working, that's when you look again and think 'how can I make this idea fit with what customers expect of the brand''. In this regard, designers are looking most specifically at the drape and fit of garments, something most of them acknowledged as being significant in their sense of the brand. '[The brand I work for] is recognised for how the garments fit and sit on the body, and getting it right at the design phase is tricky. We do a lot of tinkering at the sample stage to make sure we're getting each collection just right', noted a womenswear designer, mirroring the experiences of most designers. Marketing-specific colleagues are sometimes involved at this stage, not only to inform their upcoming promotional decisions, but to have input on the collection from their perspective. Several designers noted occasional conflicts between design and marketing staff teams, but all acknowledged this point as being crucial in translating a conceptual design into production reality; '… reality has to kick in. The marketing and management teams have to have an input because they usually have a better idea of what's commercially feasible'. The final phase of the design process is in presenting and seeking approval for the collection's production and distribution. At this point senior management will be involved in the process, including marketing staff again. At this point, major changes are rare, but approval is sometimes contingent on minor alterations subject to the wider strategic view of the brand and personal preferences of senior management. A menswear designer noted: 'a good creative director should be the go-between for designers on the floor and senior management so it's unusual to have surprises – but sometimes they come up'. Finally, the designers' perception of the role of the brand was also informed by the fact that fashion design is a fast-moving dynamic discipline affected by social, political and style trends, complicating the clarity of thought required to develop a coherent range. This is especially the case for most fashion companies operating in the mainstream mid and upper-markets, where the balance between following trends and maintaining a signature style is difficult: 'the brand is the thing that gives me focus and a direction as trends shift', reported a designer for a luxury brand. For all of the designers interviewed, the brand is the key reference point in informing the inspiration for, or development of, their work. These sentiments reinforce the sense of designers being subservient to the brand, of designing 'for the brand' and having a more passive relationship with it in terms of influencing it, rather designers felt they are influenced by the brand.

DISCUSSION

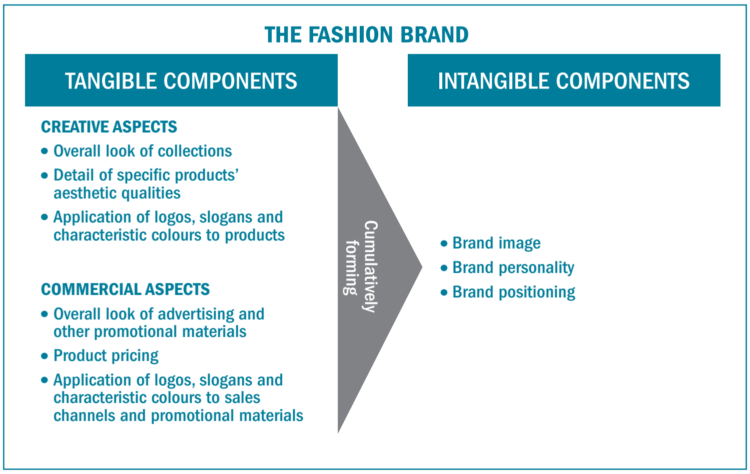
The most obvious point in respect of the aim is to acknowledge that the brand has been confirmed as particularly significant in the fashion market; every interviewee stated the brand as being of significant importance in their jobs. Understandings of the brand varied widely among interviewees, most obviously with respect to the opinions of commercially-orientated and creatively-orientated fashion professionals. To a degree these differences were simply the result of differences between each participants' educational background and professional experience; it is not a surprise to find marketing professionals interpret phenomena in context of marketing disciplines, just as one would expect to find designers to speak most confidently about their discipline. However, a number of pertinent points may be elucidated from the research.

Firstly, while there were a number of commonalities between the understandings of the brand by the commercially and creatively-orientated interviewees, there were key distinctions: commercial professionals tended to see the brand almost exclusively in terms of marketing issues and initiatives, while creative professionals generally had a more holistic view of the brand's function outside their immediate professional practice. This may be the result of either designers' education or simply the wider common awareness of branding being a marketing discipline. While all the commercially-orientated interviewees acknowledged the significance of design and designers in informing the evolution of the brand, this sentiment was secondary to the more immediate (for them) promotional functions of branding. This is significant not only for the obvious reason of there being a risk in designers, who are typically original-thinking innovators, being marginalised in a fashion business, but because past research suggests the most successful fashion businesses are those that find synergy in the relationship between commercial and creative activities. Reflecting on this in context of contemporary industry developments, it is reassuring to see the marketing and design functions in many companies becoming more aligned, as exemplified in the current popularity of the 'Creative Director' role whereby one person (often a fashion

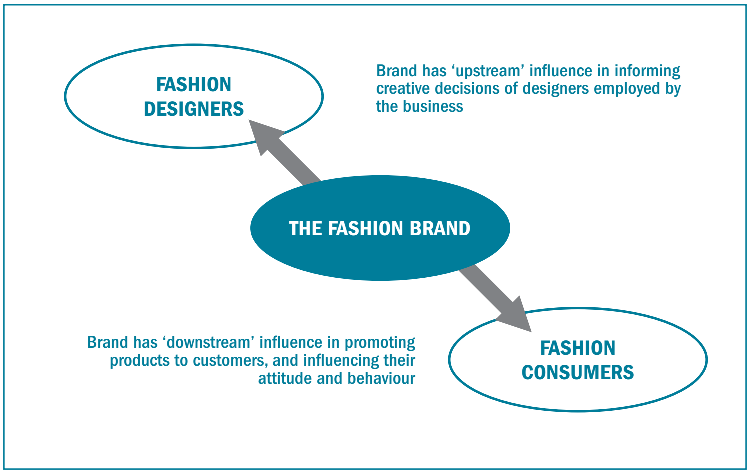
COMMERCIAL PROFESSIONALS TENDED TO SEE THE BRAND ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY IN TERMS OF MARKETING ISSUES AND INITIATIVES, WHILE CREATIVE PROFESSIONALS GENERALLY HAD A MORE HOLISTIC VIEW OF THE BRAND'S FUNCTION OUTSIDE THEIR IMMEDIATE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE.

designer) assumes overall responsibility for the design of collections and the development of promotional materials and points of sale.

Secondly, there was a marked difference in the relationships commercial and creative professionals respectively felt with the brand. Commercial professionals uniformly saw the brand as being a tool that may be manipulated and evolved in an active way in order to pursue commercial goals. Fundamentally, thanks to their apparent control over the promotional activities of the business, they felt power over the brand, that it was fundamentally influenced by them. Conversely, creative professionals had a much more passive relationship with the brand. While feeling they had some opportunities to evolve it, fundamentally the brand was more of an influence on their work than vice versa. Again this sentiment may be rooted in the experiences and attitudes of the types of professionals interviewed: commercially-orientated interviewees' responses typically implied more aggressive, individualistic and competitive attitudes while those of creative professionals hinted at more consensual, holisitc and passive sentiments. This raises a risk of power imbalance (real or imagined) within fashion businesses, but in identifying it there is also an opportunity to better understand the fashion brand in respect of its general role and its relationships with the stakeholders of the business.


THE FASHION BRAND
TANGIBLE COMPONENTS
INTANGIBLE COMPONENTS
CREATIVE ASPECTS
• Overall look of collections
• Detail of specific products' aesthetic qualities
• Application of logos, slogans and characteristic colours to products
COMMERCIAL ASPECTS
• Overall look of advertising and other promotional materials
• Product pricing
• Application of logos, slogans and characteristic colours to sales channels and promotional materials
Cumulatively forming
• Brand image
• Brand personality
• Brand positioning

4


FASHION DESIGNERS
Brand has 'upstream' influence in informing creative decisions of designers employed by the business
THE FASHION BRAND
Brand has 'downstream' influence in promoting products to customers, and influencing their attitude and behaviour
FASHION CONSUMERS

6

CONCLUSIONS

THE BRAND IN FASHION

The first objective of the paper was to provide a critical account of the brand as it is understood by practitioners working in fashion industry creative and commercial roles. The brand is noted as being significant by all fashion practitioners, and understood generally to be a concept that is used for the promotion of products and businesses to consumers. Conceptualisations of the brand varied widely between practitioners, although all explicitly or tacitly expressed an understanding of the brand's tangible and intangible dimensions. The interviews, when examined collectively, suggest that the tangible and intangible characteristics of the brand. These are detailed in Figure 4.

Tangible components of the brand were classified according to their orientation within the remits of creative and commercial practitioners. Tangible aspects of the brand regarded as being aligned to the 'creativity' of the business were recognised as including not only logos, slogans and colour schemes, but also the overall look of successive collections (the 'signature' or 'handwriting' of the brand) and the aesthetic and functional qualities of individual products. Tangible components aligned to the 'commercial' side of the business were recognised as advertising and other promotional materials, product pricing and the overall look of stores, websites (sales channels) and promotional materials. Acting together, these serve a role in forming the brand image, personality and positioning that serve to influence customer appeal.

Regarding a definition of the fashion brand, it was clear that commercial and creative practitioners had distinctly different views. The most significant distinction was in the nature of the relationship each group had with the brand. Commercial practitioners tended to have a possessive view of the brand, considering it as something within their power to control and influence, and therefore saw the brand as a functional implement to be applied in pursuing the commercial goals of the business. Creative practitioners, conversely, had a much more passive relationship with the brand, instead seeing it as something they were influenced by, as opposed to something they influenced. However, creative professionals also had a much more holistic view of the brand and were more likely to spontaneously recognise the functions it plays outside their immediate professional practice. These distinctions are reflected in the definitions agreed by each group of interviewees, noted above. Commercial practitioners use the word 'tool' and refer only to marketing-specific terms, while creative practitioners imply the sense of the brand informing their design work. However, there is sufficient in common between the two groups' definitions to propose the following as definition of the fashion brand:

> *The fashion brand is a concept composed of tangible (including logos, slogans, marketing communications) and intangible components (including positioning, image, personality and values) which serves a function in both influencing the attitude and behaviour of customers, and inspiring and informing the form and function of products.*

5

THE FASHION BRAND IS A CONCEPT COMPOSED OF TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE COMPONENTS WHICH SERVES A FUNCTION IN INFLUENCING THE ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOUR OF CUSTOMERS, AND INSPIRING AND INFORMING THE FORM AND FUNCTION OF PRODUCTS.

In turn, this leads to an interpretation of the function of the fashion brand. As recognised by previous literature, the fashion brand serves an obvious 'downstream' function in the promotion of products and services to customers. However, the brand also serves an important 'upstream' role in informing the design process of collections and products (figure 5). The dual function of the fashion brand is detailed in Figure 6.

These conclusions reinforce the view that the brand is the critical asset belonging to a fashion business. However it is an asset and a tool not only for influencing consumer perception and behaviour, it also serves a crucial role in informing the development of new products and collections. Appreciating this conceptualisation of the brand, and allowing creative and commercial policies to be informed by it, will be key to the success of a fashion business.

LIMITATIONS

The conclusions offered in this paper naturally have limitations, as any research does. Firstly, the relatively small sample size of interviewees cannot be expected to represent the full diversity of the fashion industry and the conclusions are therefore offered as hypotheses for further development and testing, rather than stated as universally definitive. Similarly, although the interviewees were employed by brands representing a cross-section of the mid to upper-levels of the fashion industry, participants who were either owner/designers or employed by value-orientated brands did not participate. Fashion brands that are very small or operating in niche or value product categories may have a different composition. Finally, the role of brand heritage and history has not been fully explored in this research and this may impact on the function of brands, particularly in regard of very long-established or new brands. All these limitations offer potential for further study.

REFERENCES

Abernathy, F., Dunlop, J.T., Hammond, J.H. & Weil, D. (1999) **A Stitch in Time**. New York: Oxford University Press.

Amaldoss, W., & Jain, S. (2015) Branding Conspicuous Goods: An Analysis of the Effects of Social Influence and Competition. *Management Science*. [Internet] http://dx.doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2014.2078 [Accessed 15/8/15].

Barnes, L. (2014) Fashion Marketing. *Textile Progress* 45 (2/3): 182-207.

Biggar, J.M. & Selame, E. (1992) Building Brand Assets. *Chief Executive* 78: 36-39.

Blumenthal, D. (2004) For The End of Brand Balderdash – and The Beginning of The Real Future. *Brand Management* 11 (3): 177-179.

Caro, F., & Martínez-de-Albéniz, V. (2015) Fast fashion: Business model overview and research opportunities. In Agrawal, N. & Smith, S.A. (eds) *Retail Supply Chain Management*. New York: Springer: 237-264.

Carroll, A. (2009) Brand Communications in Fashion Categories using Celebrity Endorsement. *Brand Management 17* (2): 146-158.

Cooper, D. R., Schindler, P. S., & Sun, J. (2006) **Business Research Methods (Vol. 9)**. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Crane, D. (2012) **Fashion and its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

D'Souza, C. (2015) Marketing Challenges for an Eco-fashion Brand: A Case Study. *Fashion Theory* 19 (1): 67-82.

de Chernatony, L. (1993) Categorizing Brands: Evolutionary Processes Underpinned by Two Key Dimensions. *Journal of Marketing Management* 9 (2): 173-188.

de Chernatony, L. & Dall'Olmo Riley, F. (1998) Modelling the Components of The Brand. *European Journal of Marketing* 11 (12): 1074-1090.

de Chernatony, L. & McWilliam, G. (1989) The Strategic Implications of Clarifying how Marketers Interpret 'Brands'. *Journal of Marketing Management* 5 (2): 153-171.

Deserti, A. (2014) Shaping the Identity of Italian Fashion Brands: The Role of Design between Tangible and Intangible. *Fashion Practice* 6 (2): 243-261.

Doeringer, P., & Crean, S. (2006) Can **F**ast **F**ashion **S**ave the US **A**pparel **I**ndustry? *Socio-Economic Review* 4 (3): 353-377.

Evans, C., & Shah, K. (2014) Physical and Digital Environments: Engaging Fashion Design Students in Archival Research. *International Journal of Costume and Fashion* 14 (1): 63-73.

Fionda, A. & Moore, C.M. (2009) The Anatomy of the Luxury Fashion Brand. *Brand Management* 16 (5/6): 347-363.

Holt, D.B. (2002) Why do **B**rands **C**ause **T**rouble? A **D**ialectical **T**heory of **C**onsume **C**ulture and **B**randing. *Journal of Consumer Research* 29 (1): 70–90.

Jevons, C. (2007) Towards an Integrated **D**efinition of '**B**rand'. In *2007 Thought Leaders International Conference on Brand Management (Cleopatra Veloutsou 24 April 2007 to 27 April 2007)* (1-11). Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham.

Jones, K. B. (2015) When **O**ne Dior **C**loses...: The **D**iscourse of **D**esigner **C**hangeovers at **H**istoric **F**ashion **H**ouses. *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture 2* (3): 321-331.

Kapferer, J. N. (2004) **The New Strategic Brand Management**. London: Kogan Page.

Kawamura, K. (2011) **Doing Research in Fashion and Dress**. Oxford: Berg.

Keller, K.L (2008) **Strategic Brand Management**. New Jersey: Pearson Education.

Kim, H., Choi, Y. J., & Lee, Y. (2015) Web Atmospheric Qualities in Luxury Fashion Brand Web Sites. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management 19* (4): 384-401.

Kontu, H., & Vecchi, A. (2014) Why All That Noise–Assessing the Strategic Value of Social Media for Fashion Brands. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing 5* (3): 235-250.

Kort, P.M., Caulkins, J.P., Hartl, R.F. & Feichtinger, G. (2008) Brand image and Brand Dilution in the Fashion Industry. *Automatica – Optimal Control Applications to Management Sciences 42* (8): 1363-1370.

Maurya, U.K. & Mishra, P. (2012) What is a Brand? A Perspective on Brand Meaning. *European Journal of Business and Management* 4 (3): 122-133.

McColl, J. & Moore, C.M. (2010) An Exploration of Fashion Retailer Own Brand Strategies. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management* 15 (1): 91-107.

Merlo, E., & Perugini, M. (2015) The Revival of Fashion Brands Between Marketing and History: The Case of the Italian Fashion Company Pucci. *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 7 (1): 91-112.

Mulyanegara, R.C. & Tsarenko Y. (2009) Predicting Brand Preferences: An Examination of the Predictive Power of Consumer Personality and Values in the Australian Fashion Market. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management* 13 (3): 358-371.

O'Cass, A. (2004) Fashion Clothing Consumption: Anticedents and Consequences of Fashion Clothing Involvement. *European Journal of Marketing* 38(7): 869-882.

O'Cass, A., & Choy, E. (2008) Studying Chinese Generation Y Consumers' Involvement in Fashion Clothing and Perceived Brand Status. *Journal of Product & Brand Management* 17 (5): 341-352.

O'Malley, D. (1991) Brands Mean Business. *Accountancy* 107: 107-108.

Power, D. & Hauge, A. (2008) No Man's Brand – Brands, Institutions and Fashion. *Growth and Change* 39(1) (March): 123–143.

Raustiala, K. & Sprigman, C. (2006) **The Piracy Paradox: Innovation and Intellectual Property in Fashion Design.** [Internet] http://escholarship.org/uc/item/1kt57197 [Accessed 21/04/2015].

Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., Nicholls, C. M., & Ormston, R. (eds.), (2013) **Qualitative Research Practice: A guide for Social Science Students and Researchers.** Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Ruppert-Stroescu, M., & Hawley, J. M. (2014) A Typology of Creativity in Fashion Design and Development. *Fashion Practice: The Journal of Design, Creative Process & the Fashion Industry* 6 (1): 9-36.

Sinclair, S. A., & Seward, K. E. (1988) Effectiveness of Branding a Commodity Product. *Industrial Marketing Management* 17 (1): 23-33.

Stern, B. (2006) What Does Brand Mean? Historical-Analysis Method and Construct Definition. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 34 (2): 216-223.

Tseëlon, E. (2001) Fashion Research and its Discontents. *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 5 (4): 435-451.

Tseëlon, E. (2010) Outlining a Fashion Studies Project. *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty* 1 (1): 3-53.

Wenting, R. (2008) **The Evolution Of A Creative Industry: The Industrial Dynamics And Spatial Evolution Of The Global Fashion Design Industry**. Utrecht: Utrecht University Press.

Wigley, S. M. (2011) A Conceptual Model of Diversification in Apparel Retailing: The Case of Next plc. *Journal of the Textile Institute* 102 (11): 917-934.

Wigley, S. M., Nobbs, K., & Larsen, E. (2013) Making the Marque: Tangible Branding in Fashion Product and Retail Design. *Fashion Practice: The Journal of Design, Creative Process & the Fashion Industry* 5 (2): 245-264.

Wood, L. (2000) Brands and Brand Equity; Definition and Management *Management Decision* 38 (9): 662-669.

Wortzel, L. H. (1987) Retailing Strategies for Today's Mature Marketplace. *Journal of Business Strategy* 7 (4): 45-56.

Yin, R. (2003) **Case Study Research: Design and Methods.** Thousand Oaks: Sage.

FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1: The fashion industry is 'all about brands'.

Figure 2: The brand has a self-evidently powerful promotional role.

Figure 3: Commercial fashion design process (derived from Caro & Martínez-de-Albéniz 2015).

Figure 4: Components of the Fashion Brand.

Figure 5: The brand influences the professional practice of fashion designers.

Figure 6: Upstream and Downstream influences of the Fashion Brand.