

CULTURE

## Timeless Aesthetics: How Symmetry Enhances Sustainable Consumption in Luxury Fashion

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*Symmetric design and stylistic continuity extend the lifecycle of luxury items.*

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The fashion industry is toughly criticized for its huge environmental impact, accounting for between 3–8% of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions (Janmark et al., 2024). Even though the fast fashion business model is the biggest driver of these estimates, luxury firms are also facing growing pressures to increase their commitment to being more sustainable. On this point, academic research supports the idea that luxury products are inherently sustainable because, due to their high-quality materials and artisanal production processes, last longer compared to mass-market ones (e.g., Amatulli et al., 2017; Sun et al. 2021). This product-based perspective of luxury product durability emphasizes a functional aspect of luxury goods' durability. However, we believe a more experiential aspect of luxury product durability exists, whereby that the lifespan of luxury products crucially depends on how long consumers are willing to use them. In short, we posit that how long consumers use a product for (a concept we label as length of product usage, or LPU) is a function of luxury product aesthetics.

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## Aesthetics, Symmetry and Luxury Consumption

Aesthetics is an essential feature of luxury and a main driver of customer experiences (Berthon et al., 2016; Kapferer 2014; Venkatesh et al. 2010): Luxury brand managers invest substantial effort satisfying consumers' desire for enjoyable and visually appealing experiences (Amatulli et al. 2017). However, the question of whether product aesthetics might encourage the sustainable consumption of luxury goods remains unanswered.

Non-empirical research suggests that aesthetics is crucial to making durable products (Harper and Simonsen 2017). More specifically, according to research on sustainable product design, some specific features such as simplicity and minimalism, logicity and practicality, natural shapes and materials, upgradability, and modularity can increase product durability (Zafarmand et al. 2003). Similarly, Wilson and Bellezza (2022) stated that minimalism is linked to simple, uncomplicated designs. The field of empirical aesthetics reveals that people usually favor simplicity and symmetry (Harper and Simonsen 2017; Palmer et al. 2013; Creusen et al. 2010). The latter, defined as the simplest case of balance, represented by mirror-inverted halves, is readily discernible and linked to simplicity, timelessness, and continuity (Treder, 2010) Non-complex, symmetrical aesthetics are easily detectable (Treder 2010) and thus an effective means of activating recipients' immediate gratification, that is, their anticipated experiences when interacting with an object (e.g., how it should feel when handled, held, lifted, or worn) (Harper and Simonsen 2017). Based on these arguments, in our recent experimental study, in which participants were exposed to controlled visual stimuli depicting either symmetric or asymmetric luxury products, we consistently found that symmetric (vs. asymmetric) design increased both intended LPU for fictitious luxury products and actual LPU for real luxury items owned by respondents.

## The Role of Stylistic Continuity

Given that product durability depends on both functional and stylistic benefits (Levinthal and Purohit 1989), we identified stylistic continuity as a potential underlying driver of this effect. Indeed, based on the concept of continuity of brand authenticity (Morhart et al. 2015), we suggest that perceived stylistic continuity—defined as the degree to which a product endures through time and trends (Morhart et al. 2015)—may help explain why product symmetry positively affects LPU. We specifically leverage the notion that symmetry imparts visual simplicity and reduces the perception of brands as trendy or up-to-date (Bajaj and Bond 2014, p. 402), so that customers would regard symmetric luxury products as more timeless compared to asymmetric ones. In other words, stylistic benefits are just as important as functional benefits in prolonging the lifespan of luxury fashion products.

# Symmetry and length of product use for highly fashion-oriented individuals

In our recent research we further showed that symmetry (vs. asymmetry) is particularly effective in mitigating the unsustainable behavior of highly fashion-oriented individuals. Indeed, low fashion-oriented consumers, who value durable and identity-expressive choices, are less likely to be influenced by product design (Gupta et al. 2019). Consequently, even when buying asymmetric products, they might tend to use them for a longer time, until it is still functional. On the contrary, high fashion-oriented consumers always buy more new fashion items to satisfy their need to keep current, thus leading to unsustainable behaviors (Gupta et al. 2019). However, the aesthetic timeliness of symmetrical design effectively counterbalances the consumer's inclination for rapid product turnover. The more fashion-conscious consumers will more quickly replace the asymmetrical items, while continuing to use the ones with symmetrical design, which never go out of style, thus satisfying their chronic desire to be up-to-date.

## Emerging challenges and opportunities: among creativity and sustainability

Product aesthetics can influence more sustainable consumption of fashion items in a subtle but effective way. More specifically, *symmetry*, a seemingly simple design attribute, emerges as a powerful driver of extended product usage, offering a pathway for brands to reconcile the pursuit of aesthetic excellence with environmental stewardship. For example, luxury brand managers who want their items to last should embrace symmetrical shapes, which buyers view as timeless and worthy of keeping. Moreover, even if product durability is not a key factor when making choices (Sun et al. 2019), consumers are usually confident that luxury purchases will be functionally durable. Therefore, communication about product durability should emphasize its permanent stylistic benefits, in terms of product stylistic continuity, to promote more sustainable consumption behaviors.

Finally, our findings suggest that symmetry can help luxury fashion consumers utilize products longer. This issue is particularly relevant considering wealthy consumers' growing interest in the so-called "ugly luxury": visually unappealing products that are mainly chosen as status signals (e.g., Bellezza 2022; Cesareo et al. 2023). A key challenge for fashion designers going forward will be managing the delicate balance between innovation and creativity, on the one hand, and long-term sustainability, on the other. As the fashion industry struggles with its environmental responsibilities, luxury brands are uniquely positioned to lead the transition toward sustainable consumption.

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