

Exploring Sustainability and Classic Design through Students' Aesthetic Responses

Mary Alice Casto, Ph.D., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68583 and Marilyn DeLong, Ph.D., College of Design, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108

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Sustainability is essential for the future of design and as such designers must be aware of and taught how to achieve sustainability in their work. A place to start is students' awareness and use of the concept of sustainability. Shedroff, in *Design is the Problem* (2009), discusses many ways to design for sustainability, but of particular interest is creating a product that a consumer will enjoy and keep for a long time, i.e., classic design. Classic design indicates objects that are timeless, long lasting, and with universal appeal. As such, classic design is one potential way to increase sustainability in a design industry that currently relies heavily on the process of planned obsolescence through rapidly changing trends. The resulting emphasis on staying fashionably up-to-date calls into question the place of classic design in the modern consumer's experience as they are continuously exposed to rapidly changing trends through the internet and fast fashion chains, like H&M and Zara. Therefore, consumers' aesthetic response to classic design is key.

The Aesthetic Response: DeLong (1998) defines aesthetic response as a person's "involvement in looking and [their] resulting experiences stimulated by looking, such as pleasure or satisfaction" that includes three interrelated parts that influence the aesthetic response to clothing: form, viewer, and context (p. 2). Form includes the details of an article of clothing, such as line, color, texture (fabric), and shape. It is to the form or the combination of the elements of design to which the viewer responds based upon personal, cultural and possibly universal contexts.

This research examined classic design through the aesthetic response. It addressed the following questions: 1. What are the formal attributes of design that consumers attribute as relevant to classic? 2. What place does classic design have among younger consumers? How is it incorporated as a part of their wardrobes and self-presentation?

Method: Since information about classic design and a younger, fashion-involved demographic was desired, study participants were 60 undergraduate students enrolled in a fashion course at a Midwestern University. Though a convenience sample, it was also appropriate, since over half of the students enrolled in the course were Retail Merchandising or Apparel Design majors and likely to demonstrate high fashion involvement. Such high fashion involvement, marked not only by the acquisition of fashion products but also of fashion knowledge, provides a definite benefit to this study (Hourigan & Bougure, 2012).

The two-part data collection included an initial survey followed by interviews with 19 of the survey participants. For the surveys, 60 class participants evaluated six women's coats, dating from 1947 to 1970, deemed as potentially classic. The follow-up interview questions involved

all three aspects of the aesthetic response as defined by DeLong (1998). In the interviews, participants discussed their survey answers and brought several garments from their wardrobes that they considered classic design.

Results: Participants focused primarily on color and silhouette (shape) as form attributes essential for classic design. They indicated that classic meant hues that were neutral, lower in value and less saturated, and silhouettes that were not-too-tight, not-too-loose, such as a-line and hourglass. Closely tied to participants' focus on color and silhouette was how all these elements needed to be combined for garments to be considered classic. Each had to be in balance with the others. For instance, if a color was not a neutral, then the silhouette should be more standard, without unusual seam lines or cuts and vice versa.

Participants expressed the idea that classic design is neither too boring nor too unique in the organization of its formal elements. Furthermore, participants' placement of classic design between ordinary and unique, in the sum of its formal attributes, was one of the prominent reasons given in the interviews for their use of classic design. Classic design provided versatility in the wardrobe. According to participants, classic design coordinates well with many other garments and accessories and is appropriate for almost all occasions but still allows the expression of their unique personality. Participants stated that these behavioral attributes, made the acquisition of classic garments important for their future careers and potential interactions with a wide variety of individuals and contexts. Most participants stated that classic design is a valuable and necessary part of their overall wardrobe, and given its uses across contexts it should last for a long time without going completely out of fashion. It was therefore considered a good investment even on a limited budget. Such student experiences with classic design could be valuable to educate future designers about sustainability.

References

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