

RELATIONAL RECORDS

EXPLORING HISTORICAL PROSPERITY FASHION WITHIN BUSINESS HISTORY

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Abstract

The profit-centric mentality within much of the global fashion industry causes great harm to societies, environments, and international economies. This focus has come under stark criticism from academia, industry, and consumers who call for broader, more inclusive definitions of success. These should consider people, places, interconnections, and relationships, alongside financial gain. This paper explores how our engagement with fashion's future can be expanded by looking into its past. This backwards gaze employing a 'sustainable prosperity' approach can provide both context and examples for current and future industry application. Focusing on fashion businesses established prior to the rise of fast fashion, we indicate the value of non-traditional sources and viewing business success from a more holistic perspective. We ask how 'prosperity' might be defined for a more diverse range of fashion firms. Utilising examples from the 19th and 20th centuries, we suggest that the boundaries of business history of fashion methodologies and sources should be extended. These should account for social, environmental, and collective as well as economic and technological success. If we wish fashion to extend the concept of prosperity, this approach should also be applied within historical contexts as well.

Keywords: *Business history, Collectivity, Prosperity, Education, Methodologies*

INTRODUCTION

The profit-centric mentality within much of the global fashion industry causes great harm to societies, environments, and international economies. This focus has come under stark criticism from academia, industry, and consumers who call for broader, more inclusive definitions of success to be applied to business models globally. These should consider people and places, interconnections, and relationships, alongside financial gain. This burgeoning approach to fashion is vital to the industry and continued global development. In this paper we explore how our engagement with fashion's future can be expanded by looking into its past, addressing the industry's history with the same extended lens through which we examine

current and future practices. This backward gaze employing a 'sustainable prosperity' approach can provide context and examples for current and future industry application.

The business history of fashion has developed within the past twenty years, focusing predominantly on famous firms, global brands, key institutions, and international conglomerates in the upper tiers of the fashion industry. Studies have typically addressed businesses with established archives. Recent work has begun to explore a broader range of geographies, products, markets and peoples engaged within international fashion networks, helping to expand our definitions of prosperity (BassKrueger et al., 2021; Bide, 2020; Dyer et al., 2022). However, approaches are often

limited by source availability and methodological scope. In this paper we query how researchers can better understand the sustainable prosperity of fashion businesses and sectors historically, how these businesses might have defined prosperity, and how their approaches might help us reconceptualise success. We propose the use of several methodological lenses which can be applied within business history research to better acknowledge prosperity beyond profit.

SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY

One way that prosperity can be measured beyond profit is through a 'sustainable prosperity' framework. Typically, 'prosperity' is understood as economic. Whilst this is significant, and businesses need to turn a profit, prosperity is not solely reliant on economic growth. Many factors can influence success, and a variety of internal and external stakeholders can benefit (or indeed suffer) from these. As Tim Jackson (2009) has argued, 'A meaningful approach to prosperity must certainly address the plight of the 2 billion people across the world who are living on less than \$2 a day' (2009, p.5). True prosperity, Jackson argues is hinged upon 'the ability to participate freely in the life of society' (2009, p.30).

Williams et al. (2021) suggest that sustainable prosperity is a 'state of personal, cultural, societal and environmental thriving within planetary boundaries,' drawing attention to the 'critical interdependencies between culture, society, environment and economy.' Whilst sustainable prosperity considers typical measures including turnover, growth and media mentions, it also encompasses other 'measures of success' (2021, p.15). These may include social and environmental impact, personal and creative integrity, fulfilling work and delighting others (Williams et al., 2021). This approach centres the well-being of people (and nature) directly or indirectly involved with businesses. Conceptions of sustainable prosperity are shaped by local conditions, and we account for the political, social, economic and cultural climates within the examples below.

Our current concept of 'sustainability' began to develop in the 1970s, and there were already early proponents of environmentally-conscious fashion in the 1960s and 1970s. Whilst the 19th and 20th century fashion entrepreneurs we examine would not have thought of their efforts as employing a 'sustainable prosperity' approach,

many of their business decisions did have notable positive impacts which our contemporary fashion industry can learn from.

BUSINESS HISTORY APPROACHES

The 'sustainable prosperity' concept, and its application to fashion leads us to consider whether historical fashion may be viewed through a similar lens. As Twigger Holroyd et al. (2023) suggest, 'a deeper understanding of the past is crucial to our grasp of the present and the development of sustainable futures' (2023, p.1) The profit-driving systems which have enabled the growth of billion-dollar fashion conglomerates have developed since the outsourcing of fashion production during the mid-20th century. As a result, focus addressing historical sustainable prosperity has often looked towards these later periods (Błaszczuk & Pouillard, 2018). However, the second half of the 20th century is not the only period which proves of interest.

The business history field has fixated for most of its existence on the role of profits and management. Following its birth as a discipline, initial research explored forms of business administration, the development of multinational enterprises and the growth of modern management methods, alongside capitalism's structures and characteristics. Later work, employing a Chandlerian approach, focused on management actions, but not on the personal, social and cultural milieu around these. This resulted in a lack of engagement with smaller industries, societal trends, women, minorities and the environment (de Jong et al., 2015; Błaszczuk & Pouillard, 2018).

Developments within parallel fields brought about a cultural turn in Business History from the 1980s which allowed space for increasingly successful consumer sectors including fashion. By the early 2010s, publications, including *Reimagining Business History*, called for further change, appealing for increased consideration of cultural, social, personal and institutional roles in small and large businesses (Scranton & Friedenson, 2013; de Jong et al., 2015; Pinchera, 2018). Work within the business history discipline is now tending towards assessments of environmental sustainability, green business, ethical capitalism and Corporate Social Responsibility, employing value-driven approaches (Bergquist, 2017; Fredona et al., 2024; Jones, 2017). Extensive studies such as that of Jones (2023) account for the importance of bottom lines alongside social,

political and environmental contexts. While these highlight businesses that have not been driven purely by profits, many of these cases still explore large, multinational firms with extensive records of their philanthropic and social actions.

THE BUSINESS HISTORY OF FASHION

The business history of fashion, (a subfield of business history) has developed within the past twenty years, focusing predominantly on famous firms, global brands, key institutions, and international conglomerates forming the upper tiers of fashion. Typically, businesses with extensive archives have been the focus of studies for accessibility reasons. In 2018, Blaszczyk and Pouillard, proposed a new approach employing an interdisciplinary lens informed by business, culture and society. Their edited volume examines social and cultural components engaged in the creation of both artistic and commercial value, highlighting the roles of a range of fashion industry figures. Pinchera described this as 'a successful first step in tracing a new pathway in fashion studies, and a useful instrument for the research agenda of business history, marketing, management and cultural history scholars' (2018, p.162).

Following works have expanded this approach, accompanied by an influx of publications from authors adjacent to the business history field - most often from fashion history, fashion studies, geography and cultural history. Studies and exhibitions have explored a broader range of geographies, products, markets, social groups, professional networks and personalities engaged within international fashion networks, helping to expand our definitions of prosperity (Bass-Krueger et al., 2021; Roldán & Encarnación Miranda, 2023; Pouillard, 2021; Bide & Whitmore, 2023; Jones, 2022). These works often highlight fashion city characteristics, taking from geographic analyses of fashion hubs (Pouillard, 2021; Bide & Whitmore, 2023; Jones, 2022; Rantisi, 2004; Green, 1997; Breward & Gilbert, 2004; Crewe, 2017; Steele, 1988). Yet studies examining these networks, still often explore successful luxury and haute couture businesses and the role of competition in driving industries forward. This, accompanied by limitations resulting from source availability, continues the focus on profit and traditional conceptions of success.

METHODOLOGY

The association of fashion prosperity with profits and large international business structures, means that success is most associated with luxury and haute couture. The financial reports, advertisements, and campaigns of such firms become headline news despite their often-unethical practices which, if examined through a sustainable prosperity lens, would decrease conceptions of their success (Ryan 2024; Bloomberg, 2024). Meanwhile 'lower' levels of fashion are seen as somewhat murkier - a reputation often based on luxury and high fashion advertising, rather than business decisions and practices.

From a historical approach, this association limits our understanding of sectors and the diversity of practices across varying levels of production. Studies focusing on historical 'everyday fashion' are growing in number outside of the business history field, (Bide, 2020; Bide & Whitmore, 2023; Buckley & Clark, 2017; Clark & Downing Peters, 2024), but business history is yet to significantly follow this approach. If business history studies do focus on mid-range brands, they are often largescale analyses of multinational firms exploring more traditional conceptions of business development (Spoerer, 2016; Roldán & Miranda Encarnación, 2023).

Accounting for this, we propose an extended viewpoint focusing on mid-tier fashion sectors established prior to the rise of fast fashion and mass production outsourcing. Through this, we aim to explore how 'prosperity' might be defined by a more diverse range of fashion firms and how practices might indicate 'sustainable prosperity'. As depicted in Figure 1, we argue that prosperity may be viewed through a number of lenses including organisations and collectivity, education, environment, social benefit and industry events, providing examples for two of these. We apply these lenses to the German fashion industry and its British counterpart during the late 19th and early to mid-20th centuries. Their selection rests on their position as ready-to-wear centres and the capacity to compare the two due to their proximity, competition, interlinking histories tied to migration, and relationships to the global fashion capital, Paris. They further merit exploration due to the growing, but still insufficient body of research focusing on their histories. Examples from Germany are taken from the late 19th century up to 1939 to account for the heyday of German ready-to-wear (Guenther, 2004; Westphal, 2019;

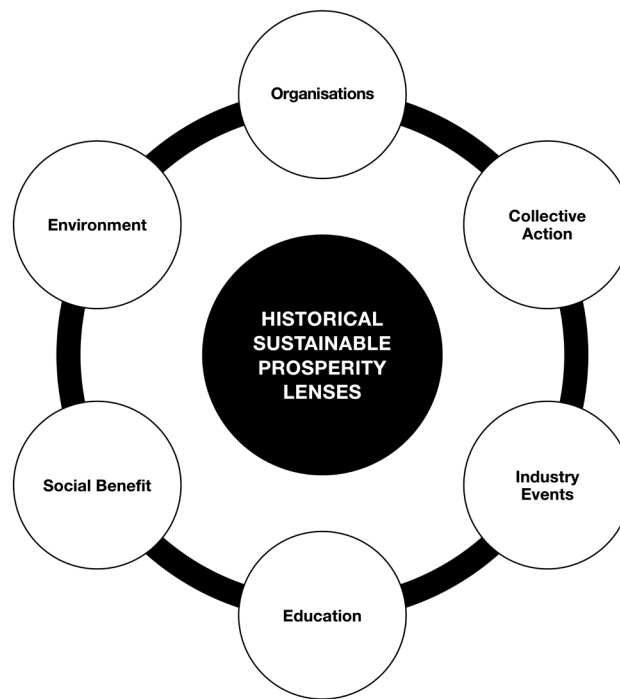


Fig. 01

Schnaus, 2017), while those from London focus on the wholesale couture and popular price sector between 1945-1960 (Bide & Whitmore, 2023; Boydell, 2010; Breward, 2006; Nyburg, 2020) (Fig. 01).

CASES

Germany is well-recognised for its extensive historical textile industry which featured a mid-tier fashion sector with strong connections to the Jewish community (Köster & Schnaus, 2018). The German ready-to-wear (*Konfektion*) sector consolidated from the 1830s around Berlin. Studies from art and design history, Jewish studies, political history and sociology have focused on the records of key entrepreneurs and businesses, but they only begin to paint a picture of the sector and its success. Meanwhile business history studies have touched on the sector in analyses of the broader German clothing industry (Köster & Schnaus, 2018; Schnaus, 2017). Regarding prosperity beyond profits, it is nigh impossible to separate society, culture and geography from *Konfektion* due to the strong role of social trends, community, clustering, and family networks. However, these connections

remain weak in business histories of German fashion.

The mid-twentieth-century British fashion industry has received increasing academic attention over the past twenty years. The majority of studies consider fashion from a holistic perspective (Biddle-Perry, 2012; Bide & Whitmore, 2023; Horwood, 2005; Howell, 2017) or focus on polarising ends of the trade, considering either the haute couture bespoke trade (Ehrman, 2015; Jones, 2022; Ness, 2021) or the mass-production clothing industry (Worth, 2007; Roberts, 2023). Less attention has been given to the medium-range popular price and wholesale couture fashion industries in Britain, which has the most in common with German *Konfektion*. These connections are particularly important as Jewish refugees from the *Konfektion* trade went on to play pivotal roles in mid-tier British fashion.

Scarce business records survive for mid-tier fashion businesses in both countries. This is primarily as the importance of maintaining documentary sources was typically not recognised. Often those that exist were rescued as businesses closed or discovered in personal archives. The most accessible holdings are firm registration

and bankruptcy records. However, these typically document the few years around a business's birth or demise, pointing to failure rather than success. WWII contributed to this source dearth in both instances. In Britain, many paper records were destroyed as part of the salvage effort. In Germany, the division of the country broke apart supply chains and international connections which had not already disappeared, while the earlier 'Aryanization' of the sector by the Nazi government forcibly removed Jewish businesses from their owners and decimated the population involved in *Konfektion* production (Kreutzmüller, 2015; Guenther, 2004). How then might we seek to understand a business or a sector's 'prosperity'? This requires a meticulous approach tracing businesses in myriad ways. For example, looking to sources such as newspaper situations vacant advertisements, trade press editorials and fashion magazine interviews. This also involves combing through records of organisations, groups, trade bodies, committees and events. Adding sustainable prosperity lenses to this approach can help build our understanding of the state of businesses and sectors, while providing a broader view of success within historical contexts and beyond the balance sheet. The following examples employ 'organisations' and 'collectivity' and 'education' lenses to examine sustainable prosperity in German and Britain.

ORGANISATIONS AND COLLECTIVITY

Both formal and informal organisations provide a key lens through which we can explore sustainable prosperity within fashion. The goal of many organisations has traditionally been and often remains, the solidifying of industries to decrease competition, standardise production and increase financial success. However, they serve other purposes including the development of community and social good.

Germany is well recognised as an early centre for the formation of industrial organisations. By the early 20th century, the fashion industry had several key associations representing both the broader sector and specialised trades. The purpose of these was largely to develop German design independent from the power of French fashion dictates, rendering them political, especially following 1933. But they also played a role in the communication of design to a broader public through events and exhibitions, mutual support, and community development (Fiege, 2009; Rasche,

1995; Vatter, 2018; Mengay, 2018). The *Verein Modemuseum* (Fashion Museum Association), for example, was founded in 1915 to support the development of the fashion museum in Berlin targeted at both industry and public (Rasche, 1995).

Collective action provides a similar lens through which we may examine sustainable prosperity. From a profits-based perspective, the Berlin fashion sector was flourishing during the late 19th century. However, influenced by broader social, political, and industrial upheaval, German fashion manufacturing during this period was characterised by industrial action. Strikes were driven by abhorrent working conditions within the garment industry where the reported average mortality age of female workers was 26 (Masur, 1974). These deathly conditions resulted in a mass strike by textile workers in 1896 which brought about a period of industrial action focused on working conditions, hours and pay (Rowe, 2013). Tensions continued throughout the early 20th century, catalysed by political, social and economic movements, hyperinflation, and general strikes, but calmed slightly with the 1924 currency stabilisation (Weipert, 2015; Biernacki, 1995). Analysis of working conditions and tensions during the late 19th and early 20th century provides us with a more nuanced view into how prosperous the sector was.

During the 1940s several industry groups were formed in Britain with similar aims to those in Germany - seeking to decrease dependence on French inspiration and increase exports. One of the most important groups was The Guild of Creative Designers (founded 1944). Partially representing the top-end of the London ready-to-wear industry, the Guild sought to re-establish Britain as a centre of international fashion importance. The 1940s were an extremely challenging decade for manufacturers, with the post-war situation more difficult for some manufacturers than it had been during the conflict. There were still extreme shortages of labour and cloth, clothing was still under ration and price-control meant garments could not be sold above fixed prices. These trading conditions made group membership more important. Because manufacturers could produce only limited ranges of garments, collaborative action - often in the form of fashion shows for the trade or general public - offered the opportunity to show full garment ranges pulled together from several different manufacturers.

Through a 'prosperity' lens The Guild's October 1946 Midnight Parade of Fashion is particularly significant. This event, featuring over 130 garments from twenty-two firms, was held at the Royal Albert Hall. The parade was designed as a spectacle for members of the fashion trade. However, owing to newspaper and newsreel coverage, the public certainly could have 'consumed' images of these garments. The parade was not intended as a sales tool, rather it was a prestige event. At a time when manufacturers were operating under extremely straitened circumstances, the parade was designed to fortify the Guild's position as the tastemakers for the top end of the ready-to-wear trade. Whilst there were no direct financial benefits to the parade (it likely cost manufacturers a considerable amount of money to be involved) taking part enhanced firms' cultural capital. Furthermore, the spectacle element of a parade ensured press coverage and that the names of the businesses involved remained in the public eye.

The parade also had charitable concerns. Attendees purchased tickets with profits divided between the Purley Schools (an education charity providing schooling for children of those in the fashion and textile trades), the Linen and Woollen Drapers Institution and the General Porters (*Fashion Trade Weekly*, 1946). We argue that donating to charity was a marker of prosperity in this period. Many individual firms also donated large sums to educational causes and particularly those related to their Jewish heritage (*The Times*, 1981). Profits were unquestionably important to firms after WWII, however in strained circumstances financial prosperity was beyond most manufacturers. Instead, they had to reimagine prosperity - taking part in prestige events to encourage long-term profitability.

Collective activity was not restricted to trade-specific activities. In the postwar period manufacturers looked at new ways to encourage brand loyalty. One way was through establishing specialist groups or clubs. In some instances, these had genuine positive community impacts. The 'Large Girls Club' founded by 'outsize' clothing manufacturer Louis Mintz in London in 1958 typifies this. This club offered regular meetups for members, a specialist newsletter for the outsize woman, and free advice from the London headquarters of Louis Mintz's brand, Linda Leigh. Group membership quickly grew and by 1961 the

group had at least 10,000 members (Segal, 1961). This club was particularly successful because it supported clothing consumers who were typically excluded. The aims of the club were not entirely altruistic, it was designed to sell Linda Leigh garments, but contemporary newspapers also point to the positive impact the club had on members while enhancing engagement with, and loyalty towards, the business.

EDUCATION

Another lens for the analysis of prosperity is the provision of education. In the German fashion industry, up to the beginning of the 20th century, much skill development was handed down through family and social networks. The development of educational institutions which served the sector and beyond was linked to broader societal shifts driven by ideas of social reform. These organisations, *Kunstgewerbeschule* (Schools of Applied Arts or Schools of Arts and Crafts), acted as technical trade schools (Sonnenberger, 1981). Through the history of these and similar institutions, we can see evidence of the increasingly flourishing sector's need for a growing pool of well-trained employees, interest from industry figures and organisations in providing educational opportunities to society, and the industry's sponsorship capacity.

One organisation with a directly traceable link to the clothing sector is the Lette Verein founded in 1866 with Germany monarchy sponsorship as a technical school for girls. Its school for trades and industries offered dressmaking, machine-sewing, linen cutting, artificial flower creation and glovemaking among other subjects (Guenther, 2004; Lette Verein; Clarke, 1892). Unfortunately, we do not have easy access to records of Lette Verein graduate careers. Yet, Guenther (2004) indicates that the school's workshops produced a range of products for Germany's top fashion houses.

The number of technical schools feeding the sector rose and by 1928, American industry reports detailed the development of a Fashion University in Berlin sponsored by the City of Berlin, Prussian State Government, Federation of the German Fashion Industries, Arts and Crafts Museum and custom tailoring organisations. The institution's aim was to 'developed exports capable of meeting the artistic and creative demands of all branches of the garment and allied industries' (*Women's Wear Daily*, 1928). While free attendance was limited to

Federation members, external students could also attend. By 1930, the institution offered a three-year programme providing key industry skills such as garment model creation, textile production and bookkeeping alongside subjects targeted more towards general public good (Women's Wear Daily, 1928). While this is representative of broader educational shifts, it provides details about the nature of the Berlin fashion industry and its investments. From 1933, industry organisations and educational institutions became increasingly tied up in politics with top executives, teachers and students expected to be affiliated with the Nazi Party, or at minimum, not Jewish (Guenther, 2004). While the provision of education continued, it shifted to serve a more politically targeted purpose.

Fashion professionals in Britain worked with many colleges and trade schools, inviting them to their showrooms and hosting them for placements. The Royal College of Art archive contains calendars and prospectuses which indicate the important role played by industry professionals in establishing its fashion course in 1948 and training emerging fashion designers. Fredrick Starke, founder and director of Frederick Starke Ltd., was closely associated with the RCA fashion course. In 1947 he was on an ad hoc advisory committee for the college from which external lecturers were drawn and between 1952-1955 he was a regular visiting lecturer. He also gave short term work placements to students and set up a yearly scholarship in his name. Other professionals from the wholesale couture trade also acted as visiting lecturers. Olive O'Neill, designer and director of Rose and Blairman taught on the course in 1949 and Marjorie Field-Rhoades a designer for Matita was also a visiting lecturer in the 1950s (Royal College of Art Archive, 1947-58). This close contact with emerging design talent offered mutual benefits; an opportunity to cherry-pick staff for their businesses and allow students hands-on experience in fashion to jump-start their careers. These connections between higher education establishments and fashion businesses were important in the developing the prestige associated with fashion design careers.

CONCLUDING SUGGESTIONS

As can be seen above, sustainable prosperity lenses can provide a depth of understanding about the nature of industries which cannot be found purely through financial and management data. While our

examples are far from exhaustive and are limited in geographic scope, applying sustainable prosperity lenses to German and British ready-to-wear industries can account for source availability issues, and provide further details about the success of these sectors. Organisations and collective actions can show connections and collaboration between firms, the development of prestige, and engagement with consumers and the public. They can also highlight sectoral issues which might not be visible otherwise. Education as a lens can highlight industry growth and needs for further employees, show what disciplines are necessary for workers, and indicate altruism and social care from industry leaders. These are only three of myriad sustainable prosperity lenses, including environment, social benefit, industry events and more. We propose that future authors exploring a range of geographies, employ these lenses as part of their business history approaches to account for source availability, deepen their understanding of sectoral situations and allow them to explore diverse manifestations of success.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] "Figure 1: Historical Sustainable Prosperity Lenses (Authors' Own Model)"

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