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BESPOKE TAILORING: THE LUXURY AND HERITAGE WE CAN AFFORD

KEY WORDS: Bespoke, Tailor, Luxury, Heritage, Technology, Fashion

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the conflict between hand crafted bespoke tailoring and computerised mass market tailoring in the UK, in order to assess the overall place for this traditional technique within fashion design. It supports a need for retaining the heritage of traditional skills practiced in bespoke tailoring and justifies this as a luxury the consumer can and should afford. The research emphasises the pedagogic approach to the delivery and understanding of tailoring technology in the fashion design courses at University of Huddersfield. This understanding underpins the student's perception of pattern cutting, fit, sizing, proportion and an overall approach to making clothes. Fashion tutors at Huddersfield believe that when students are taught to appreciate the luxury, heritage and skill of bespoke tailoring, it equips them with the confidence and expertise to create any type of garment.

The luxury of the traditional tailoring process is in the time, craft and experience instilled into each garment. A bespoke tailor is a sculptor whose medium is cloth. He moulds a shell out of this cloth that refines and accentuates the human form. It is a unique service in which the client's individual measurements are applied to the creation of a garment made to their exact size specifications. Particular attention is given to the detail, quality and excellence in the work. Bespoke tailoring as a fashionable look had a revived popularity in the late 1990's and early 2000's. Many fashion designers at the cutting edge of the fashion industry such as Vivienne Westwood and Alexander McQueen pushed the look of tailoring and the craft traditions of bespoke to the forefront of directional fashion, which in turn provoked a resurgence of interest in the craft. Holding court in a 1998 interview in *English Vogue*, Vivienne Westwood said:

"I don't understand this desperate need to always move forward. To strive for the new is the most conformist thing you can do. Everyone can tell you about what is new and clever, but no-one can tell you what is good! There is a myth that the past is irrelevant, that progress is the only thing" (Holgate, 1998).

The paper analyses how the bespoke industry considers the incorporation of new and computerised technology. In so doing, it considers how the fashion industry could determine the future of tailoring. This could either be through contemporary fashion's emphasis on the idiom as a look, or in the vast advances in technological development that could enhance it, in order to make bespoke more widely available.

The paper culminates by considering realistic strategies as the technology within an accessible and computerised mass market industry grows and develops. It highlights that its promotion as a luxurious craft with an un-rivalled heritage, at the cutting edge of the industry, could be the key to the customer buying into its continued existence.

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INTRODUCTION

Tailoring as it is perceived today began in the thirteenth century when the first coats became fashionable, requiring skilled labourers to sew together by hand, the cloth cut pieces. The labourers eventually took the name 'Tailor' from the French 'Tailleur' meaning 'to cut'. The term bespoke is derived from the fact that originally the tailor's customer 'bespoke' (or told) his tailor the exact specification for their suit. The tailor then guided his client in their choice of cloth and cut to create a made to measure garment that paid great attention to fit and detail. With the advent of ready-to-wear fashion in the nineteenth century, bespoke tailoring has gradually declined in popularity although tailored 'looks' achieved through bespoke or made-to-measure techniques have been recurrent trends in fashion.

Tailoring can conceal or improve the human form through its use of various technical tricks. Predominantly it is about proportion. Through padding, canvassing, steaming, seaming and darting, a piece of fabric may be manipulated into structural shapes that enhance or alter the human figure and its proportions. A disproportionately large head can be disguised by cutting a suit larger on both shoulders. Hour-glass shapes can be created through hip-padding and bust-padding built into the garment. Ribbons inserted in the lower back of the inside of a jacket can be pulled tight, to accentuate the arch of the back, creating a more curvaceous figure. Tailoring is also deceptive in that it can produce a structured look or a soft look through different uses of interfacing, canvassing, cloth or design. A well-cut, made-to-measure suit can deceive the eye by flattering and enhancing; it can also instil a confidence and elegance in the wearer through its flattering silhouette or style.

A bespoke tailor could be compared to a sculptor, whose medium is cloth. They mould a shell out of cloth that refines, flatters and accentuates the human form. It is a unique service in which the client's individual measurements are taken and applied to the creation of a garment made to their exact size specifications. Particular attention is paid to detail, quality and excellence in the production. A typical bespoke suit produced on Savile Row at the heart of London's tailoring industry can take up to forty hours to produce. Much of the suit is hand worked with hundreds of stitches on the inside of a jacket that secure the padding and canvassing required to maintain the tailored shape. Cloth is then hand-steamed or pressed into shape.

Considering the time and attention to detail invested in the creation of a bespoke suit, its cost can be justified. It is less expensive than paying haute couture prices. The couture industry provides a similar service however, as well as paying for a made-to-measure provision; the customer is also purchasing some of the glamour of the designer name. Bespoke tailoring is more modestly priced, but as couture prices escalate many customers recognise that bespoke can be a feasible option. The Savile Row tailor, Timothy Everest, reiterated this:

“We are men’s tailors but women seek us out as a viable alternative to haute couture. The price of a British bespoke trouser suit is much less” (De La Haye, 1997 p.61)
A suit produced at Savile Row tailors Gieves & Hawkes can cost between £1200 and £1400. There are however many small tailoring businesses throughout the UK who produce bespoke work at more affordable prices. Raymond Andrews – Gents Bespoke Tailors in Leeds, advertised a three piece bespoke suit at £400 in 2010. In contrast a wool jacket alone from the 2010 Yves Saint Laurent Autumn/Winter, ready-to-wear collection retailed at £3174. Prices for jackets from the couture collections of Dior or Valentino can cost up to £20,000.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reference to the literature is embedded throughout the text and combines books, internet sites, student work and empirical research that investigate bespoke tailoring through technology, heritage and design. Several UK publishers such as AVA, with their book: ‘Basics Fashion Design: Construction’ (2009), have developed visually accessible fashion technology texts for students. They include sections about tailoring, emphasising its significance in contemporary fashion. They also feature examples of fashion designers creating tailored garments in their studios, utilising a heritage of traditional technology. This is also evidenced in photographic books such as: Savile Row: The Master Tailors of British Bespoke (2010). All works emphasise an understanding of traditional skills in order to achieve a tailored look. As Annette Fischer said:

“Many professionals in the fashion industry worship the tailors craft and would not attempt to undertake tailored apparel. Organised in guilds and brotherhoods, the tailoring trade has been protected by the people working in it, who pass on and safeguard knowledge very carefully.” (Fischer, 2009) p.115).

Works such as ‘Clothing Industry Handbook’, (2010) and ‘Pattern Cutting for Women’s Tailored Jackets’ (2002) detail much of the traditional and contemporary technology in bespoke tailoring, whereas its historical development in the UK is investigated through works such as ‘The Development of Costume’ (1994) and ‘The Englishman’s Suit’ (1994). The student perspective is emphasised in Sarah Harris’ dissertation: ‘Is there a place in tomorrow’s fashion industry for Savile Row bespoke tailoring?’ (1998) and through an organised student visit to Savile Row tailors: Gieves and Hawkes in 2010. This resulted in an interview with technology lecturer: Irene Spink who accompanied the students. Educational information about UK courses in bespoke tailoring are detailed in web sites such as: ‘London College of Fashion, BA (Hons) Bespoke Tailoring’ (2010) and ‘How do I Become a Tailor?’ (2006). Specific curriculum information is discussed in relation to fashion course documentation from University of Huddersfield.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The nature and tradition of the craft discipline of tailoring, is such that this research is best informed from a qualitative viewpoint, working with small groups of students and fashion consumers. It is qualitative because the nature of the enquiry is focused upon small groups or the individual. Quantitative research, through mass surveys etc was considered to be inappropriate, however consideration of the macro perspective of the tailoring industry was gained through relevant conference and seminar attendance.

Primary research methods adopted included:

- i) Object based research - this included examination of garments and patterns in museum collections, retail fashion stores and student collections. This investigated and recorded how tailored garments are made and worn.
- ii) Phenomenology – this included consideration of the phenomena that occurs in the reactions people have to tailoring and the way tailored garments are worn.
- iii) Action based research – this was predominantly through tutorials and teaching as the author is a design and pattern making tutor for final year undergraduates. The research recorded design activities and garment production in a pedagogic environment. This practical approach developed an in-depth wealth of knowledge related to the skills in tailoring and how students use their skills to ensure they tailored clothes.

iv)

Triangulation of research methods was considered through different methods of gathering information, for instance in action research, discussion ensued with academic staff and students with different levels of experience.

Secondary data collection came from theoretical and historical research. As the research began a cyclical pattern developed. This began with a research question; establishing issues; collecting data; analyzing data; taking action; evaluating the results of the action and formulating new questions.

The investigation begins with a historical overview. The idea of modern tailoring had its origins in the thirteenth century when men's tunics became shorter and closer, fitting to the body. This shaping of the body with fabric pieces evolved into the tailoring techniques in existence today. Throughout subsequent centuries skills developed in combination with fashion's demands. The contemporary three piece suit has been consistently re-worked. It evolved slowly from the fourteenth century tunic to the seventeenth century frock coat, through to its definitive, classic form in the mid-nineteenth century. This has changed fundamentally little. Bespoke, made-to-measure tailoring achieved prominence in the mid-nineteenth century and maintained its popularity and relevance in fashion until the 1950's when it was preceded by the growing popularity of ready to wear. It has enjoyed several revivals as the fashion world has recognised its wealth of craft and heritage. This is evidenced in the staid Victorian male interpretation, through to the 1930's glamour of Edward VIII and Hollywood stars, such as Cary Grant's wardrobe. Its contemporary representation is through 'cool' tailors such as Oswald Boateng and Richard James.

The paper is structured around five areas that address the conflicts between new and traditional technology and how they can be successfully amalgamated within the industry and education.

- When has it been most fashionable?
- How is bespoke tailoring managing to survive?
- Heritage and Modern: Traditional tailoring versus new technology
- Tailoring and Education
- Conclusion and Suggestions

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

When has it been most fashionable?

From the 1950's onwards fashionable personalities and fashion designers alike have worn, promoted and designed bespoke tailoring. In the 1960's amid revolutionary fashion changes, Savile Row, situated at the heart of London's bespoke industry, realised it needed to change and this meant moving on in terms of design. This move was spearheaded by the tailor Tommy Nutter, who was backed by trendy personalities:

Bianca Jagger, Cilla Black and Twiggy. The move was to establish a new business on Savile Row that would merge high fashion with a new, exciting energy to the business. His style became emblematic with his creation of the suits worn by The Beatles on their Abbey Road record cover and his much copied white, three piece suit designed for Bianca Jagger's wedding to Mick Jagger.

Tailoring as a fashionable look suffered a set back in the 1970's with the increased popularity of informal clothing. It wasn't until the 1980's and the advent of power dressing that the look increased in importance, both through bespoke and a high street interpretation. Power dressing reflected the glamour of the newly wealthy yuppies of the 1980's. Structured clothing such as tailored, fitted jackets, padded shoulders and short skirts represented spirit and affluence, typified in the work of designers like Rifat Ozbek, Jasper Conran and Catherine Walker. An avant-garde force in tailoring and design also emerged in the 1980's through an increasingly experimental approach in British art schools, with graduate designers such as John Galiano and John Flett literally turning tailoring on its head, converting sleeves into trousers and transforming coats from jackets.

By the 1990's and 2000's there was a strong resurgence of interest in traditional tailoring techniques in designer fashion. Vivienne Westwood, Owen Gaster, Alexander McQueen, Timothy Everest, Richard James, Nicolas Ghesquiere at Balenciaga, Alber Elbaz at Lanvin and Ozwald Boateng are just a few designer names to have popularised it. The fashion consumer in turn has developed a greater awareness and appreciation for the heritage and luxury of bespoke tailoring, as interest in casual clothing declined. To create formal structured clothes designers have had to consider the technology used in bespoke. For instance the 2009 trend, for a hugely shoulder padded look, popularised by designers such as: Ennio Capasa at Costume National and Marc Jacobs at Louis Vuitton, demanded knowledge of traditional padding and canvassing in order to achieve the aesthetic. When asked about this renaissance in the late 1990's David Williams, Managing Director at Anderson & Sheppard on Savile Row stated: "There has been a great enthusiasm created for Savile Row tailoring by the recent trend for tailored suits of high quality. Younger people have become more interested in the classic styling of the Savile Row suit" (Harris, 1998 p,11).

How is bespoke tailoring managing to survive?

The evolution of youth fashion in the 1950's was probably the bespoke industry's biggest threat. Fashion diversified and became widely accessible. It became throw away and casual reflecting popular culture. The ready-to-wear industry established itself, led by the couture designer, Yves Saint Laurent's championing of the idiom. Its increased popularity, led to rapid developments in the manufacturing industry in order to meet demand. Today's fashion industry is fast moving and the business of fashion design is dictated by this speed. Seasonal cycles can radically alter the consumer's choice of fabric, styling and silhouette. Rapid developments in manufacturing technology have created a competitive production cycle. Increasingly, manufacturing plants have been set up globally in order to overcome the problems of escalating costs. This shifting geographical focus seems to follow cycles, for instance companies have recently begun to source manufacturing in China, as it afforded cheap labour. With the removal of the Multi Fibre Arrangement in 2005, this trend rose steeply, making China the most popular manufacturing destination for the European Union. These developments have often eroded the survival of tailors and smaller manufacturers. Their survival has often

depended on merger and sub-contracting in order to reduce the costs of producing a garment.

Heritage and Modern: Traditional tailoring versus new technology

By the late 1990's, a buzz phrase in fashion was 'new technology'. Many fashion students from Universities in the UK, were looking towards traditional cut combined with modern technology as design reference. The increase in the use of technology begun to affect both mass market and bespoke tailoring. Mass market tailoring is now produced by manufacturers who use a significant input of computerised technology. Well established companies such as Berwin and Berwin, who were situated at the heart of the Leeds tailoring industry, moved all their production to Hungary as it was far more cost effective. Computerised technology helped to afford greater communication between a small design base in Leeds and larger overseas factories.

An Analysis of up to the minute advancements in fashion technology and benefits to production helps to determine the relevance of traditional skills. It is undeniable that computer technology has made huge advances in the fashion industry. Designers no longer see it as a hindrance to their work but as a vital part of production. Companies such as Lectra, Gerber and Assyst continuously update their CAD/CAM packages. For instance Assyst have recently (in 2009) joined forces with a German company called Human Solutions to develop their interests in the 3D Body Scanning market, to remain competitive.

3D Body Scanning is a system that scans the body and produces a series of exact body sizes from which to make an individualised pattern. It has been widely introduced into the corporate tailoring market. This is due to its need to develop garments that fit many different sizes. Computer technology with the increased take up of Production Life Cycle Management Systems (PLM) is also used within mass production. PLM Systems enable the work flow in the production cycle, which consists of costings, lay plans, graded patterns, sketches etc, to be brought together efficiently, on one computer system.

CAD/CAM systems have been slow to infiltrate the bespoke tailoring industry. Interviews with Savile Row tailors Anderson & Sheppard and Grieves & Hawkes by Sarah Harris for her BA dissertation in 1998 resulted in a complete denouncement of computerisation.

Grieves & Hawkes declared:

"We will not bring in any heavy duty machinery or computer aided manufacture to the workrooms as our history and selling point is the hand craft of tailoring" (Harris, 1998 p.21).

When further questioned about the use of lay planning and storing possibilities of CAM they explained, their lay planning was all done directly onto the fabric and customer's patterns were stored until they died. By 2010, these views were strongly reiterated during an educational visit by University of Huddersfield, to Grieves and Hawkes, organised by the Association of Suppliers to the British Clothing Industry. Lecturer, Irene Spink, who attended the visit reported:

"Grieves and Hawkes showed us all the patterns for their individual customers which are drafted manually. A tour was given of the workrooms and I watched tailor's sitting cross legged on tables, using all the traditional manual methods of shaping fabric, pad stitching

and hand stitching. No computerised technology was observed” (Irene Spink, 2010).

In contrast the mass manufacture tailoring industry has embraced modern technology. BMB Menswear in Leeds is an example of a successful tailoring manufacturer who use technology to produce quality garments for designer ready to wear market. A large part of their production has become computerised and they believe the only way to remain competitive is to continue updating with more advanced technology (Spink 2010). When interviewed by University of Huddersfield student, Sarah Harris (1998), Chris Steele, who was Design Manager at Berwin and Berwin in Leeds, felt that the only reason bespoke tailoring on Savile Row does not have computerised technology is because it frightens them, however if shown how to use it and given appropriate training they would soon have it installed within their workrooms.

The one developing area of technology from which the bespoke industry could perhaps benefit most, is computerised data collection of anthropometric measurements. Anthropometry is the science and technology of precise body measurements. Over the last forty years human figures have changed dramatically in size due to changes in diet, exercise and lifestyle. For example, consider Diana Dors a 1950's icon with a 2000's icon like Victoria Beckham, one voluptuous, the other skinny. It is only recently, through a sizing survey from Size UK (who used the 3D Body Scanning equipment), that changes in sizes have altered from the standard national size charts established in the British Standard Specifications in the 1950's. Manufacturers, however are doing their own interpretations of these changes. Kennett and Lindsell, the UK model stand manufacturers are working closely with suppliers and creating stands to their specifications. One problem that could emerge here is the difference in individual manufacturer's interpretation of size specifications. The American company Alvanon INC, have done vast global research on body sizing. At a recent sizing seminar (one of a series, held by the Association of Suppliers to the British Clothing Industry) in 2010, Ed Gribbin, President of Alvainsight a division of Alvanon INC, explained the complex 'emotional consumer connection' with sizing: "20 per cent of fit is technical and the rest is how you communicate it" (Gribbin, 2010 p.24).

The bespoke business was until recently, the only place where a perfectly fitted garment could be produced. New computerised anthropometry systems and virtual reality programmes could however change this. These systems could bring bespoke tailoring to the high street. The retailer would be able to hold a database of customer statistics and offer a service that produces garments to specific body measurements from ranges shown in stores or displayed on a virtual dummy on the computer. This would present a direct threat to traditional bespoke tailoring. The technology was initially introduced by Levi stores in Milton Keynes, Sheffield and London. Customer's key measurements were typed into a computer, which then selected jeans for the consumer from a choice of 300 pairs, held in different sizes as fitting options. Once decided on fit and style, information was sent by computer link to Belgium and made to the customer's personal specifications and delivered within 21 days. The specialised programme promoted the theory of a mass production bespoke industry that provided personalised clothing and

tailoring at a more cost effective rate than traditional industries. In using such a system, purchase of bespoke garments on the internet, could change the tailoring industry dramatically. Once the customer has the confidence to use a bespoke service through the internet, companies could make a much better use of promoting the concept as a luxury product.

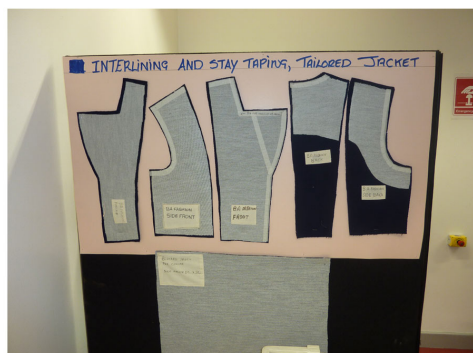
Technology is now so advanced that it is almost possible for mass manufacturers to produce garments that are equivalent to bespoke standards. There are, however problems beginning to emerge that could enforce a rethink of traditional and hand-crafted skills. As new technology takes over, less people have skills in manual pattern cutting and manufacture. The physical sense through touch and feel, in both fabrics and patterns is also being lost.

TAILORING AND EDUCATION

It could be surmised that traditional tailoring skills will be essential until a fail-safe computer system can be designed. This needs to be addressed by both the UK and the global fashion education system. Grieves & Hawkes of Savile Row commented: 'New blood is needed to carry on traditions, the one problem is that the younger generations do not want to put in the time that it takes to train up, which is four years as an apprentice.' (Harris (1998), p-26)



Tailoring class at University of Huddersfield



A small number of educational establishments in the UK, have responded to this need by reinstating a thorough understanding of the heritage of technical skills within their curricula, or have developed courses and specific modules to capitalise on traditional industries. The BA (Hons) Fashion Design Courses at University of Huddersfield, include

a compulsory tailoring module in their year two programmes of study. Each student is required to cut and make a tailored jacket for a size twelve figure. Whilst not a made to measure garment, it is produced to manual bespoke standards. A specialist tailoring tutor and technician guide students in the techniques of tailoring. This understanding underpins the student's perception of pattern cutting, fit, sizing, proportion and their overall approach to making clothes. It also helps them to fully understand and distinguish between the qualities of different types of garments. For instance, the technical approach in making a shirt or a draped jersey dress is considerably different to the approach adopted when making a tailored garment.



Examples from the second year tailoring module at University of Huddersfield.

The tailoring module was developed to link with many of the traditional clothing and textile industries within the West Yorkshire Region, the philosophy being to integrate tradition with new technology. This has enhanced student's appreciation of tailoring and its relevance in contemporary fashion. In recent years the fashion department has been sponsored by Huddersfield based companies such as Bower Roebuck and Abraham Moone, who have donated fabric. Each year the students are given different design themes to consider. In 2009 the theme was Yves Saint Laurent's classic 'Le Smoking' look. In 2010 the tailoring project had a silver disco theme. By their final year, students develop individual collections and their knowledge of tailoring is cemented in the successful realisation of tailored garments within their coordinated looks. With this knowledge students are able to distinguish between softly tailored and more structured looks. They are also encouraged to consider other designer's tailored work when developing skills. By studying a designer and developing an in-depth empathy for their individual work methods and technique, it provides a platform for students to develop their own particular knowledge. Emphasis is placed on designers such as Dior, who revolutionised structured tailoring in his New Look collection in 1947, by introducing hip and breast padding in order to enhance silhouette. Chanel is also emphasised as a designer who innovated soft tailoring, by removing structural underpinning, in order to create softer, more fluid lines.



Examples of tailoring incorporated into final year collections. These include both structured and soft tailoring.

As stated there are a small number of UK courses that offer dedicated programmes of tailoring study within their curriculum. The only degree course to offer a BA (Hons) in Bespoke Tailoring, is at London College of Fashion. This was developed in association with Grieves and Hawkes, after consultation with 'Savile Row Bespoke', a group of the most prestigious names in UK tailoring. Their aim was to formalise the trade's casual recruitment procedures and set up formal tailoring courses in both further and higher education establishments. Mark Henderson the Chief executive explained:

"Fashion graduates usually go on to become cutters – sort of supervising tailors who make the patterns, cut the cloth and then hand over to the tailors, who physically make the suits. It takes up to ten years to become a proficient cutter" (Alexander, 2006 p.1). Emphasis is placed on the passion, respect and hard work needed to gain the heritage status of the 'Master Craftsman' promoted by the bespoke industry. This is reflected in the degree course at London College of Fashion and the tailoring modules delivered at University of Huddersfield. Graduates who enter the bespoke industry must, however recognise that they still have a great deal to learn and that their introduction to the craft of bespoke in university, is the first rung on the ladder to acquiring the status of 'Master Craftsman'.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The hugely revived popularity of bespoke tailoring as a fashionable look has led fashion designers at the cutting edge of the industry to explore the craft traditions of bespoke, both in the UK and globally. This has influenced a resurgence of interest in craft and technology as being at the forefront of directional fashion. Vivienne Westwood supported tradition when she declared

"To strive for the new is the most conformist thing you can do. There is a myth that the past is irrelevant, that progress is the only thing" (Holgate, 1998)

The future of bespoke could be contemporary fashion's emphasis on the idiom as a look or the vast advances in technological development that could enhance it, to make bespoke far more accessible. There have also been recent attempts to glamorise bespoke tailoring through the publication of luscious visual volumes such as: Savile Row: The Master Tailors of Savile Row (2010). They celebrate it with specially commissioned photographs and fashion shoots that entice the consumer with the burnished opulence of bespoke as an irreplaceable fashion staple.

Conflict is inherent in the tensions between traditional, developing and new skills within the bespoke industry. The fashion business has to evolve alongside technology, yet often has to struggle with the difficulties in amalgamating minds that focus upon established processes and in training and developing staff in new technologies. The bespoke industry focuses upon the manual, technical tricks used to conceal the human form. Through the padding, canvassing, steaming, seaming, and darting of a piece of fabric it may be manipulated into structural shapes that can alter and enhance human proportions. The technological advances in virtual measuring and scanning will undoubtedly enhance the development of mass manufacture tailoring and production but they cannot sew all the luxury, heritage and mystique into their garments in the way a bespoke tailor does. This conflict ultimately makes a case for the promotion of traditional technique as a cool, emotive and edgy, craft based product.

The lack of 'New Blood' within the UK industry, described by Grieves & Hawkes and the lack of staff with manual skills described by Berwin and Berwin could be recognised as an area that needs enriching. It is also an area the fashion education system both in the UK and globally, should recognise in greater depth and emphasise in their programmes of study. This is one of the reasons the tailoring module at University of Huddersfield is considered to be an essential component within the fashion curriculum. The industry should always benefit from students who are instilled with in-depth traditional skills in order to produce the luxury and heritage in tailored garments we can all afford, understand and enjoy wearing.

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