

Quality Clothes – An Outline of a Model for Assessing the Quality of Customized Clothing

An outline of a conceptual model is offered for assessing the quality of customized clothing. The model is based on a former couture model, theoretical research on quality and related issues, and interview data from makers and users of customized clothing.

The model suggests that assessments of quality occur in three periods of time: 1) before ordering, 2) during designing and making, and 3) during the use and storage of the clothes.

Before ordering, the reputation of a maker—through shows, exhibitions, promotional letters, location, signs of professional affiliation, portfolios, clients' existing garments, stories told—is the main source of information for assessment, which is a recommendation to a potential client.

In the process, style, fit, and features are developed through design, technique, and material to obtain fitness for use. Not only the process and the emerging product are assessed, but also interaction, information and confidence.

During use and storage, serviceability, fitness for use, reliability, durability, and pleurability are assessed as dimensions of quality.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, having a garment designed and made to measure is not an everyday event. Even so, people order clothes for various reasons, for example for a perfect fit, stylistic uniqueness, special material preference, or a combination of these. Custom-made clothing demands more attention and financial investment from the person who decides to order individually designed and made clothes. Such clothing will probably assume a luxury status in the person's wardrobe, and it would be natural to expect it to be of high quality.

Quality is a complex concept even for the evaluation of more ordinary consumer goods. As not all consumers have the competence to assess the quality of an actual product, they may use other criteria, such as a label or a company's name, for their decision making [1, 5, 8, 18]. How can a product be assessed that does not yet exist at all? And, does one wish to assess only an artifact, if one is involved in the process of its creation?

THE AIM AND APPROACH OF THIS STUDY

The aim of this paper is to develop a model for assessing the quality of custom-made clothing. To lay the foundations of the model, we will discuss 1) a conceptual model of couture clients' views of their customized clothes and their patronage of a couturière, 2) the concept of quality and related issues, and 3) interview data from present day makers of customized clothing and their clients.

Although we benefit from the couture model (to be explained below), we wish not to limit the discussion to couture alone. The emerging model should be applicable to any form of individually designed, customized clothing. Thus, we exclude mass-customization. Furthermore, we have limited this study to women's clothing. Our five client informants are all women. We call the five designer-maker informants, *makers* for short. Their education varies from dressmaking to fashion design to varying degrees. Four of them are women and one is a man.

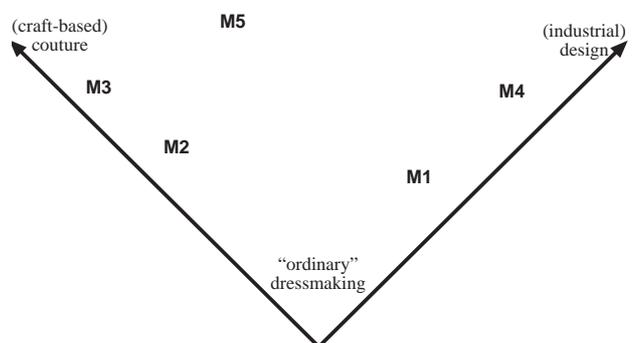


Figure 1: Orientations and work practices in the field of customized clothing (Adapted according to Kaipainen 2003).

Customized clothing today is often produced by individual makers who are self-employed entrepreneurs, as are our informants. These makers cannot be fit into a single category. Rather, they could be placed between two continuums which range from "ordinary" dressmaking to couture and industrial design depending on their orientation and work practices [11].

Ordinary dressmaking, here, refers to professional work which adapts to clients' orders rather than aiming to a maker's own artistic expression or other design ideas. An orientation towards industrial design implies a maker's readiness to offer her/his own designs for customized clothing. Although the clothes are made by hand, sewing and finishing methods are adopted from industrial dressmaking. The couture orientation also implies an originality of design, but a couture maker uses traditional, highly ambitious hand-crafting methods in contrast to faster industrial methods. Figure 1 illustrates the positions of our maker informants in this field.

It would be possible to construct a theoretical model on the basis of research literature alone. In this case, as the principal model dealing with customized clothing is from recent history, and main theoretical sources of quality are general, not domain specific, the role of the empirical data is to ground the model in the present views of both makers and clients.

The collection of data was guided, to a certain extent, by the concepts which we drew from both general quality theories and earlier studies of customized dressmaking. However, following the principles of qualitative research, which prioritize the informants' voices and their own perception of the studied phenomenon, we found all comments outside the original themes to be valuable [4]. The makers' interviews took place in their workrooms. The clients were interviewed in their workplaces or in public premises. All interviews were tape-recorded in order to capture all details and nuances of the informants' talk.

First, we analyzed the data with the pre-understanding gained from theory. Yet we kept our interpretation close to the informants' own conceptions of quality. We present the findings of this analysis separately from the makers' and clients' points of view.

To construct a model we condensed these findings and integrated them with those parts of the theory that still seemed to be relevant to the assessment of the quality of customized clothing.

CLIENTS' CONCEPTION OF THEIR CUSTOMIZED CLOTHING—A COUTURE MODEL

Couture, as a concept, is best known from haute couture, a precisely defined production concept of Paris fashion that used to influence all western fashion until the 1960s and to a declining degree thereafter. Couture, in whichever country, has assumed features of haute couture and then adapted to local conditions.

This conceptual description (Figure 2) was generated through the grounded theory method from clients' interviews. It was contextualized with fashion, couture, and craft approaches within a designer case history (1940s–1990s), but quality literature was not particularly used [13]. However, the model has many explicit references to quality and even more references which do not fit directly under quality in the model but which are similar to concepts discussed in studies of quality.

Immediate interaction between the couturière (designer) and the client is in a central position in this model. Everything else seems to hinge on this personal contact, which is particularly characterized by a feeling of collaboration and congeniality. The personality of the couturière plays a key role in creating atmosphere, which precedes such concrete matters as the physical environment [13].

The category that clearly concerns *quality* is entitled *integrated*, because the clients tended to find it difficult to say anything specific about quality. In all, quality was what they desired. The whole system was about quality, and it was conceived holistically. Thus quality is linked with almost everything else in the model above [13].

Like issues of quality, those of *service* are linked with other categories. The very idea of immediate interaction might be interpreted to be about service [13]. More than any other category, *comprehensive service* and *confidence* could be entirely seen as part of quality, as these concepts and subcategories are discussed in the literature on quality.

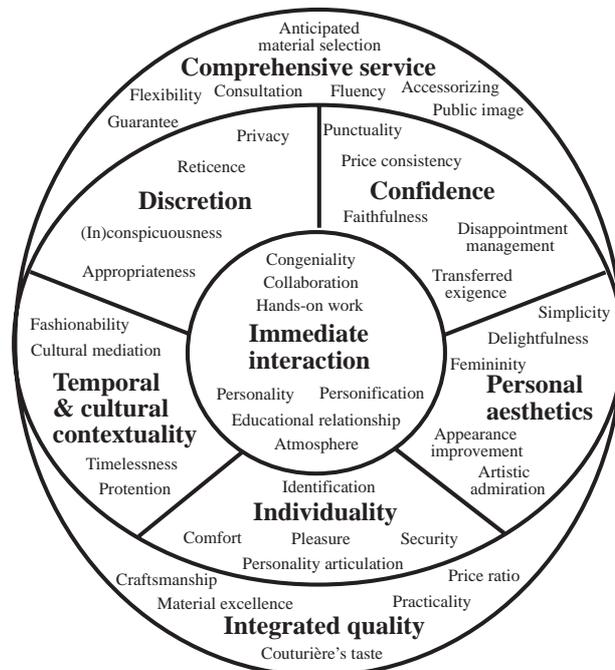


Figure 2: Clients' conception of their customized clothing and their patronage of a couture atelier (Koskennurmi-Sivonen 1998).

Individuality is what customization is about. The client's own personality is articulated while she at the same time identifies herself with the designer's style. Comfort, security and pleasure are outcomes of individuality [13].

Personal aesthetics and *temporal-cultural issues* are both concerned with style created in the spirit of individuality. As this is a question of couture, a form of fashion creation, one might expect that fashionableness would be in a more central position. However, the clients behind this model were much more concerned with timelessness than the fashion of the moment [13].

Discretion, to an extreme, was typical of by-gone couture, whether it was about transactions with the enterprise or about the clothes themselves [13]. It is highly questionable, if this concept deserves as much attention nowadays. Probably confidence would suffice to cover what remains important, such as privacy.

All in all, it is characteristic of this model that it does not distinguish between the qualities of clothes, people, feelings, and business. The reason is that to a great extent the same characterization and concepts would be applicable to different aspects of this phenomenon, independent of their ontological natures.

Many concepts in this model seem applicable to the context of today's customized clothing, and even seem appropriate to studying quality. However, this model does not illustrate how a client goes through the process of ordering a garment and hav-

ing it designed and made. The couture model especially does not give any information about how the client can assess quality before ordering in the contemporary market, in which makers of customized clothing do not usually present fashion shows to maintain their public image.

FOUNDATIONS OF QUALITY

Quality, as a concept, is multidimensional and relative, and thus, difficult to perceive. However, there is nothing fundamentally unclear or mystic about quality if we keep in mind that quality can be seen from different viewpoints and if we understand its relativity [16]. This encouragement from Lillrank suggests that it is not worth aspiring to a universal truth about quality, but it is both valuable and possible to define conceptual tools for discussing and assessing quality in a particular context and from certain viewpoints. Our context is specific, but we benefit from general theories of quality by Garvin [5] and Lillrank [16] and from the work already carried out in the context of textiles by Anttila [1].

Garvin: Five definitions of quality

The transcendent definition of quality is synonymous with “innate excellence.” It is a mark of uncompromising standards and high achievement that has a timeless and enduring element that rises above changes in tastes and styles. The transcendent approach equates quality with fine craftsmanship and a rejection of mass production. Often this approach claims that quality cannot be defined precisely; it is an unanalyzable property we learn to recognize only through experience [5]. In pre-industrial production, in which an apprentice learned craftsmanship from a master, the control and recognition of quality was included in the system. Furthermore, customers were also close to producers and knew who was responsible for quality [15]. This definition sounds appropriate for customized clothing, as well, since its production has features of this pre-industrial closeness and clear identification of those responsible for quality. However, the transcendent view leaves quality to the connoisseurs and masters, and has little to offer novice makers and new clients.

The product-based definition sees quality as a precise and measurable variable. Goods can be ranked according to the amount of the desired attribute they possess. However, an unambiguous ranking is possible only if the attributes are ranked in the same order by virtually all buyers. This definition views quality as an inherent characteristic of goods, not something ascribed to them. It seems that product-based quality can be assessed objectively, as it reflects the presence or absence of measurable attributes. However, when quality is a matter of aesthetics, the product-based approach fails to accommodate differences in taste [5]. This last item, in particular, reveals that this definition is poorly applicable to all product attributes of customized clothing, for which aesthetics are often highlighted.

The user-based definition assumes that consumers have different needs and wants. The goods that best satisfy their preferences are the ones they regard as having the highest quality. This definition is extremely subjective, and has led to the notions of “ideal points” and “fitness for use”: a precise combination of product attributes that provide the greatest satisfaction to a specified consumer [5]. This definition seems to fit well in the context of customized clothing, since ideal points should be relatively easy to define as they need to satisfy only one user at a time. This definition starts from the premise that quality “lies in the eyes of the beholder” [5]. Yet we may question whether the client always knows best what is good for her.

The user-based definition is akin to the customer-based definition given by Lillrank [16]. The user and customer—or client, as preferred in this context—are not always the same person, as Anttila notes. People (customers) acquire products for other people (users) [1]. People who order customized clothes are

virtually always clients and users of the clothes at the same time. Thus, the distinction is not vital here.

The manufacturing-based definition identifies quality as “conformance to requirements.” Excellence is equated with meeting specifications and with “making it right the first time.” In service settings, this means accuracy and timeliness. Garvin criticizes this definition because it simplifies production control and pays little attention to the link, in consumers’ minds, between quality and product characteristics other than conformance [5]. This latter issue may much depend on a client’s technical competence and interest, but getting it right the first time is in everyone’s interest—and often a crucial point.

The value-based definition sees quality in terms of costs and prices. A quality product is one that provides performance and conformance at an acceptable price or cost. Price is no doubt an important issue. However, this approach is difficult to apply in practice. It blends two distinct concepts: excellence and value. The result is a hybrid, “affordable excellence” that lacks well-defined limits and is highly subjective [5]. Although a potential client probably knows how much she can afford, just as in the case of transcendent quality, it may take time and experience for a client to learn the level of excellence that equals its price. And vice versa, as makers of customized clothes have a difficult time making their own requirements of excellence meet affordable costs [11]. After all, it only makes sense for a producer to aim at high quality if the production is profitable [15].

Lillrank: system-based quality

Garvin’s definitions or views of quality are seen as classics in quality literature. For the most part, they are present in Lillrank’s quality thinking. However, he omits the transcendent view; instead he adds one more view to quality [11].

System-based or environment-based quality arises from the fact that products and processes have consequences beyond the immediate customer, or that they may cause harm later. In the central position is the relationship of a customer’s satisfaction to the needs of other parties. Taking care of system-based quality may set limits on the satisfaction of a particular customer [16]. Systems and environment are about people, other businesses and the natural environment. This definition includes ethics towards material resources as well as people’s feelings, for example. Environmental aspects are easily overlooked in a small-scale enterprise, even if they should not be. For example, although making a dress hardly can do much harm, the production of fabrics may vary in this to a considerable degree. And as customized garments are expected to be highly individual, there are many sensitive matters to attend to, especially in the case of clients in public roles.

Eight dimensions of quality

To make things more complicated, Garvin further suggests eight dimensions of quality. These dimensions are self-contained and distinct so that a product or service can be ranked high on one and low on another. Yet they are interrelated. An improvement in one may be achieved at the expense of another, or may work in the same direction on another. These dimensions can be seen in one or more of the definitions, or views, mentioned above.

Performance refers to the primary operating characteristics of a product [5]. In clothes this approximates functionality and fluency in services.

Features refer to the secondary characteristics that supplement the product’s basic function [5]. Customized clothes may include almost any number of features, hidden or visible, according to a user’s preference, and features might even be a primary reason for having clothes made.

Reliability reflects a product's functioning and malfunctioning within a specific period of time. In principle this is more relevant to durable goods than to products and services that are consumed immediately [5]. In the case of clothing, reliability is equally important for short and long term use. Whenever clothes are made for one use only, it is all the more probable that the occasion is extremely important, such as a wedding.

Durability is a measure of product life. It is akin to reliability but is not quite the same. Durability is considered to have both economic and technical dimensions [5]. In the case of clothes, however, it would be appropriate to consider at least technical (material and structural) and stylistic durability.

Conformance is also akin to reliability but in a different sense. It refers to the degree to which a product's design and operating characteristics meet pre-established standards and industry specifications. Dispersion within certain limits is ignored [5]. In small dressmaking businesses, standards can be understood only metaphorically, yet conformance may be expected when products are compared to other clothes from the same maker and to reputation, which is a promise of quality.

Serviceability is about speed, courtesy, competence, and ease of repair. Consumers are concerned not only about product failure but also about service appointments, timeliness, dealing with service personnel, etc. Part of the service features can be assessed objectively, part of them subjectively [5]. As customized clothing is often made of delicate materials, service demands special attention. Do customized clothes have care labels and guarantees? And should they?

Aesthetics is closely related to the user-based approach to quality. It is true that how a product looks, feels, sounds, etc. is clearly a matter of personal judgment and a reflection of individual preference [5]. However, aesthetics is not always, and sometimes not even primarily, a matter of the user. A maker may be highly ambitious regarding aesthetics, and a client may seek her way to a certain maker just because of his/her trustworthy aesthetic judgment.

Perceived quality is, indeed, a subjective dimension of quality and closely related to the user-based approach. Some of these quality characteristics are inherent, while others are ascribed to the products. As some real quality characteristics are difficult or impossible to observe directly, other cues become important for drawing inferences about quality. Images, advertising, and brand names can be critical in this aspect. Reputation is in fact one of the primary contributors to perceived quality [5]. This point seems to be highly relevant when assessing something that does not yet exist and deserves some closer attention in the following section.

REPUTATION AND BRAND

Makers (self-employed entrepreneurs) of customized clothing do not usually advertise their products and services. Some of them may have media coverage: their clothes are photographed either on models or clients, and their names are mentioned in captions or editorials. This was the regular way of communication in the times when fashion ateliers used to have fashion shows [14]. Nowadays even well-known designers do not have regular shows or exhibitions, and visual communication in the media is more random. Makers may have studio windows for displaying their creations. The most probable way of making an acquaintance with existing customized clothes is seeing them on other people. However, they may be difficult to recognize and associate with the maker, as they do not have visible labels, or any label for that matter.

Reputation is a composite of evaluative narratives. Reputation must be earned while image may be constructed. Reputation cannot be changed with image campaigns. Reputation is a promise of something, and the promise must be kept [2]. In this

sense, reputation has a high truth value. Reputation as such is not quality but indeed it offers a first contact with the promise of quality. *Recommendation* is to a potential client what reputation is to the maker. Although Aula and Heinonen emphasize that reputation and image are conveyed in different ways, an image being basically visual while reputation consists of stories told [2], in the case of customized clothing, the reputation of product qualities may consist both of verbal and visual if not even tactile communication. Given the fact that a customized product and its production are inseparable, stories told about clothes circulate together with stories about their makers and creation processes.

Brand is a popular concept in the contemporary worlds of business and design. It has something in common with reputation, as it also carries information between a producer and an audience. A dynamic conception of brand is two-way communication between the company's identity and the consumer's image of it [12]. The most important function of brand is recognition. Labels and logos are crucial to recognition but not the whole thing. Brand also covers product styles and colors. It may be even extended to human behavior. Brands are outcomes of careful and often expensive developments. This is why craftspeople and designer-makers are not usually known by their brands. However, as a matter of fact, they are much encouraged to create brands and thus improve common awareness of their businesses [17].

If she/he is lucky, reputation may serve a maker just as well as brand and comes free. While the reputation of a maker is local in nature, brand is supposed to be spread much more widely. In any case, reputation and brand are not mutually exclusive concepts; they support each other.

EXTENDING THE CONCEPT OF PRODUCT

Lillrank emphasizes that quality is something that can be measured or assessed [16]. Although many of the properties of clothes cannot be measured objectively, they can be assessed. Moreover, it is worth noticing that even subjective assessment may be communicable and intersubjective, if each party knows what is assessed and on what basis. For example, matters of taste are not completely private. Criteria and methods, such as a board of judges, may be developed, as has been done in sports. These are hardly helpful in a particular case, but a general discourse in the field can heighten consciousness and make actors sensitive to their own and other people's judgments.

Quality is created in the process. The concept of process, again, is ambiguous, and it may be hard to define when a process begins and ends, as several processes may overlap. In addition to production processes, there are processes of human behavior, such as communication and decision-making [16], which all play a role in ordering and making clothes.

Deliverable. Although single pieces of clothing are products in a very concrete sense and they may be assessed as such, customized clothes, as we study them, are very strongly involved in the process of designing and making them. In the concept map describing couture from the clients' viewpoints (Figure 2), the features of clothes, the process and even the couturière are presented together, just as they were intermingled in the clients' minds [13]. However, the blending of products and services also happens in other fields. This is why the term *deliverable* is adopted for quality philosophy. *Deliverable* covers goods, services and information, or combination of these, which are designed and produced for a customer in exchange for payment. This term underlines the producer's overall effort in delivering benefit to a customer [16]. The word as such may sound awkward in this context, however, it seems to be an appropriate term to cover the interaction and exchange of information in the process of creating customized clothes.

A broad concept of product adopted in a study of craft entrepreneurs [8] is akin to deliverable in that *product* covers not only the actual artifact but also reliable delivery, transportation, packing, care labels and other information about the product, preferably even information about the maker, and her/his values and philosophy.

CONCEPTIONS OF QUALITY FROM MAKERS' AND CLIENTS' POINT OF VIEW AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY

In the following sections we present the analysis of our interview data from the makers and users of customized clothes. With this argumentation from real-life we ground the emerging model in contemporary circumstances (in the Finnish cultural context).

Quality of clothes (a garment)

The makers. From the makers' point of view, clothes that flatter a client and fit perfectly are of desirable quality. The makers find that in fit, above all, transcendent quality may be achieved in custom-made clothing when compared to the products of mass production. They talk about individuality, prestige, and pleasure, which is both physical and psychological good feelings. All this is reminiscent of Jordan's concept of pleasurability, which is based on functionality and ease of use but which is more than the sum of these [10]. The makers emphasize material as an important part of quality. They prefer natural fibers—wool and silk especially—but above all they underline the suitability of the material for particular purposes. As they are aware of the risks connected with certain materials, they also think that the maker should warn the client about these risks. The acquisition of materials seems to be safe if the maker has sample books of materials to order from or if material is acquired in collaboration. None of the makers has such a ready selection or inventory of their own as former couture houses used to have [13]. The selection of material is of prime importance to the quality of a product, and thus this part of product quality is clearly linked with successful interaction.

Sieben describes the multidimensional nature of the durability of clothing as a composite of the results of a number of different tests [18], whereby tests do not imply only measurements. Likewise, the maker informants see durability, or rather "longevity," as a cluster of factors, which then may be roughly divided into physical aspects concerning material (fiber and color fastness), technical structure (seams, buttonholes, finishing), and stylistic durability (a degree of timelessness). Most of the makers believe that their clients expect overall durability from their customized garments.

The makers assess a finished garment on the basis of fit, especially the fit of the sleeves, seams, and other details, even the lining. Finally, however detailed the scrutiny is, it only makes sense for the garment to be assessed on the user it has been made for. There is no point assessing customized clothes on coat hangers.

The clients. The clients find fit as important as the makers do. The clients find transcendent quality in fit when comparing their customized product with industrially produced clothing. Fit is one of the primary reasons to have a garment made in the first place. Perfect fit is achieved in fittings, of course, and thus the product quality is directly linked with the process.

The other reason for having clothes made is personal style. Customized garments are adapted to the client's style and include personalized details. How the style is achieved is a delicate question, as a client may find the product made according to her wishes unsatisfactory. She may realize that the maker would have known better after all.

A consequence of both good fit and personalized style is the feeling that the garment is part of the self. While wearing the

garment, it can be entirely forgotten, yet it may give a sense of security more than does any other clothing. When successfully completed, customized clothes yield physio-, psycho-, socio- and ideo- (ideological/ethical) pleasures in terms originally suggested by Tiger [10]. Physio- and psycho-pleasures are linked with each other through bodily well-being. Socio-pleasures may be ambivalent. While customized clothing supports a high social status, which is perceived positively in general, a client may also find her clothes too fine for normal use. To have clothes just right for the context is part of both socio- and ideo-pleasures.

The clients think of durability as a consequence of good materials and the techniques used in making clothing. They are more willing and able to discuss material than technique, which is quite in line with Hines's and O'Neal's findings. They found that fabric is the easiest way of approaching the concept of quality for non-professionals. Fabric serves as a main cue of perceived quality [7]. The fact that users do not easily perceive technical features is quite understandable, as at best, the traces of the maker's hand are invisible. A skillfully made product gives an impression that it was born and not made at all [13]. Finally, there is one more assessment of durability that can be given by users only, namely the fact that one does not easily get tired of customized clothes, and thus they are useful for a long time.

Although the clients seem to know about material better than other aspects of clothing, they emphasize the maker's role in selecting the materials, warning about risks with difficult materials, and instructions in the care of the clothes. Furthermore, they raise an important point: Customized clothes do not usually have care labels, although they should. Care labels also came up as a quality feature in a study of successful craft entrepreneurs, and these were supposed to be attached to the (not customized) handmade products [8].

Quality of process

The makers. The makers' orientation to production consists of design, pattern making, fitting, techniques (such as sewing, ironing and finishing), and equipment. This orientation varies in whether she/he emphasizes a couture (craft-based) or industrial type of production method. The methods are linked with the type of machines and other equipment the makers prefer to use. Both orientations aim at good quality. The differences come from education and work experience.

All of the makers regard the designing sessions with a client as an important part of the process. Designing may include creative input and innovativeness to varying degrees, but is an essential part of the customized clothing discussed in this study. The makers do not speak so much about designing as such; rather they speak about professional skills, which cover the ability to give shape to a garment, technical skills, and communication skills. Communication will come up again in the context of interaction.

Another issue that the makers find important to include at the beginning of the process is an agreement on price. One of the makers gives a client a printed document of the price of the materials and work to avoid any misunderstanding later on. All of the makers estimate a price according to a fluent process that has a certain margin. In case of complications, they take the responsibility and do not charge the client any extra. Trustworthiness, an ability to estimate the amount of work, the time needed, and the price depends on professional skill and is indeed a matter of quality and reputation.

The cutting is a crucial part of the process and the basis of later fittings. The makers either use pre-existing patterns and adapt them to the client, draw new patterns for each client, or make a *toile* (a garment of plain fabric for the first fitting).

All of the makers are critical of their work, and some of them regard this criticalness as a problem. Thus, they find themselves balancing on a tightrope between the cost and the time invested in the process. All of the makers are not sure whether or not their clients acknowledge all the finesse of their technique. However, none of them wants to risk compromising the reliability of their products. Dormer has used the term “below-the-line design” for such technical design which a user of products is not usually aware of, and which is only revealed when it fails [3]. Even when ambivalent about time-consuming work, a high work ethic in the process is regarded as an investment in the final product—“the walking business card”—which, in turn, is fundamental to reputation.

The clients. The degree to which the clients are aware of process quality varies according to their experience, knowledge, and personal interest. In any case, designing always involves communication between the maker and the client. Collaborative input is revealed in the way that the clients talk about “we” when talking about designing. Some of the clients are interested in discussing technical solutions, even when they trust the maker. A maker’s willingness to tell what is done may be regarded as a sign of quality. And in turn, a client’s interest may be a sign that she is not indifferent to quality. Instances of collaboration are similar to those of the clients of established couture houses of the past [13]. *Transferred exigence*—trusting everything whatsoever in the hands of the maker—[13] is present among the client informants of this study, but there is a variance in confidence as the maker-client relationships also have variances themselves.

The fitting is the moment in the process in which the client is present, and naturally she is most capable of reflecting on it. Although clients are also present in designing, fitting puts a garment in contact with the body in another, very personal way. Furthermore, it is not only a moment of fitting a garment, it is also a moment of fitting together the mental images of the garment. It is the “moment of truth” as Grönroos describes the event at which time quality becomes concrete to the client [6]. In a fitting session, the client can observe the professional skills of the maker, while most other technical parts are processed in her absence. Thus, from the client’s point of view, the fitting is the maker’s opportunity to lay the cornerstones of confidence. Then the client gets an impression of how the maker sees the garment on her and what is aesthetically best for the client.

The clients’ mental images of the garments ordered and especially the changes in these images during the process affect their attitudes towards price. When the process is known, the price is not seen to be so high. Actually, all of the clients think that customized clothing is expensive but that prices are reasonable, even advantageous regarding durability and how their needs and wants have been met.

Quality of interaction and service

The makers. When the makers talk about service, they talk about interaction with the client; service and interaction are inseparable. Quite like in the couture model above, immediate interaction between the maker and the client is also in a central position in today’s customized clothing production.

The maker is successful if she/he is able to participate in two-way communication. The makers do not use the term user-based design or service, but in fact they make quite an effort to map out the clients’ needs and wants, although the makers themselves are responsible for suggestions. They need to ask the right questions and interpret the answers, which are not necessarily clear due to the lack of terminology. Verbal communication is facilitated with sketches, material samples, clothes that happen to be in the atelier, or photographs of earlier creations.

User-based design and service may sometimes conflict with the makers’ own values. However, honesty is the prime principle, and all of the makers find it important to tell their clients what they think, be it about style, price or any other matter, discreetly if necessary. As a matter of fact, interaction may include a good deal of discretion, and even invisible tutoring of the client.

Making customized clothes demands such intimate interaction that congeniality certainly is facilitating. The makers usually refer to congeniality in style and taste, but being on the “same wavelength” eases the process in other respects, as well.

In an intimate interaction the maker gains the role of a confident(e). A client may wish to tell the maker not only wishes regarding her garment but whatever else is on her mind. From the maker’s part this type of interaction is not a profitable use of time, but as one of the maker informants puts it: “Listening to worries must be included in the price.” The makers presume that confidence is an important part of perceived quality from the client’s side.

The clients. Interaction is highlighted in all of the clients’ views of quality. The nature of the encounter is reflected in the entire process of having clothes made. Atmosphere, communication and congeniality are all linked with the personality of the maker. The client’s interaction and communication are based on confidence and a feeling that there is an interest in her needs and wants. The clients’ talk about congeniality is quite parallel to that of the makers.

The clients are aware of the fact that they can contribute to quality if they are able to express their needs and wants so that they can be satisfied. They recognize the same tools of facilitating communication that the makers mention.

The clients simply appreciate tactful but straightforward tutoring by a person who knows what is best for them. When confidence has been constructed in communication, honesty is expected and appreciated. While confidence is important, the highly discreet and secretive atmosphere of former couture seems to be bygone history. Privacy is simply one natural part of confidence.

Quality of an enterprise

The makers. Most of the makers suppose that they have been found “through the grapevine.” Even though their businesses were in quite visible places, clients tend to come only when they have heard about a maker’s reputation. Recommendations from satisfied clients work just as is known from a study of different kinds of craft-based entrepreneurs [9].

Two of the makers have advertised locally, and some of them have sent promotional letters directly to potential clients. A special way of informing about their services is leaving business cards in fabric stores, where potential clients may ask about makers. The makers think that the image of their enterprises—their reputation—rather emerges around them instead of being deliberately constructed. The reputation is based on what is known about their clothes and themselves. However, they are not indifferent about their premises. They presume that clients may regard pleasant surroundings as part of perceived quality. One enterprise with a distinctive appearance has managed to attract young clients of the same spirit as the maker. Yet not one of the makers believes that the premises should offer anything special; they believe in tidiness and simplicity.

Even the most famous of the makers receives clients in his studio amidst his tools and unfinished garments. The place is tidy but the glamour associated with his creations comes from the very garments and materials that are around, not from interior decoration. As for personality, he prefers to give a casual

and easy-to-approach impression, which is again linked with the interaction discussed above.

Two of the makers believe that a membership in a professional organization and having a sign of it at the window is a message of quality. Others do not consider that to be relevant. Instead, two of the makers guarantee their clothes. Clients know that they can bring the garment back if anything happens for whatever reason.

The clients. The clients have found the makers through the methods mentioned above: promotional letters, business cards in a fabric store, seen the maker's clothes or pictures of them, and recommendations, although sometimes it has taken time to find the right maker because of her/his low profile. Happy clients are willing to continue the chain of recommendations. Hearing about something "through the grapevine" works just like the makers assume it does. Furthermore, a good product is the best advertisement.

All of the clients pay some attention to the premises. They expect them to be tidy. Tidiness creates confidence. On the other hand, a "creative chaos" may be exciting in the eyes of a client. It may give an impression of artistic work and feel more in touch with the fabric and the making process.

Although they pay some attention to surroundings, none of the clients would expect any particular style. This is quite consistent with the views of couture clients who prioritized the atmosphere over the physical environment [13]. If there were a purposefully constructed image of the enterprise, they probably would not notice it. Or if it were noticed, they might even avoid the premises, as in the clients' minds deliberately constructed luxury images of ready-to-wear stores are not necessarily appealing.

Logos, recognizable paper bags and other signs connected with brands do not work to build up quality and confidence. Instead, it was found important that information is available when needed. The clients base their confidence on good reputation and their own experiences in their interactions with the makers.

OUTLINING A MODEL FOR ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF CUSTOMIZED CLOTHING

The following figure 3 includes basic conceptual tools for assessing the quality of customized clothing. We emphasize the process nature of the assessment of quality by constructing the model on a timeline (A–D). The two parties involved in the process of a customized garment, a maker and a client, have different opportunities to find out about or to have an effect on quality depending on the point of time: before having the clothes made (A–B), while having the clothes made (B–C), and during the use and storage time of the clothes (C–D).

Quality assessment before ordering (A–B)

Needs and wants arouse an interest in customized clothing. When considering ordering individually designed and made clothes, a potential client knows that she represents a minority to whom information is not readily available. On the other hand, when the financial investment is considerable, information about anticipated quality is all the more important. As makers of customized clothes have seldom, if ever, developed recognizable brands in the manner of the clothing industry, and none of them advertise broadly, a maker and a potential client are left with more informal and random information. *Reputation* then is the secondary medium of assessing a prospective product—as a matter of fact, *deliverables* (a garment + processing it). Reputation may be gained through fashion *shows* or *exhibitions*, which are the most expensive and unlikely media today, *promotional letters* or other forms of offered information, the *location* of the enterprise (with a show window), signs of *professional affiliations*, or a *portfolio*. Evidence shows, however, that reputation is more often and even more effectively based on *existing customized clothes* (not made for show), *stories told*, and *media coverage*, whenever it is available. The maker can affect all these ingredients of reputation only indirectly by being behind them. To a potential client the ingredients of reputation are *recommendations*. They form a *promise of quality*, and encouragement for a contact with a certain maker.

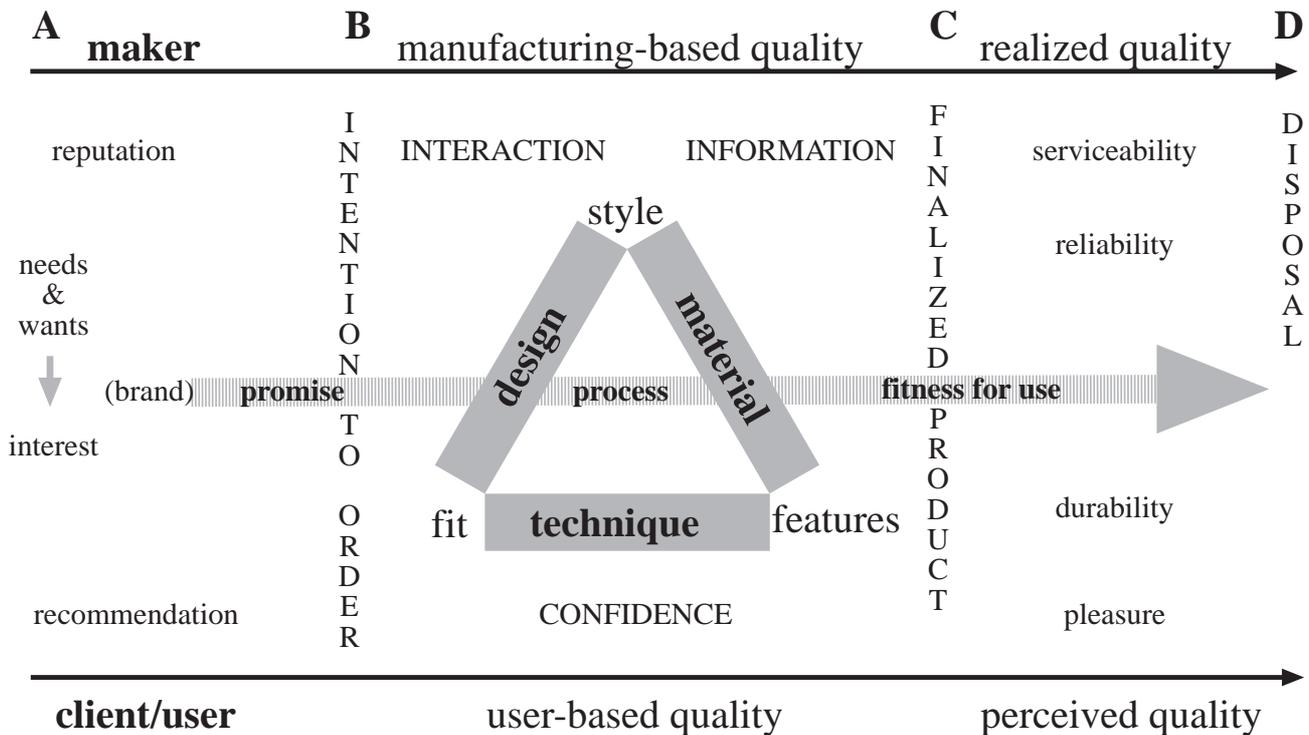


Figure 3: An outline of a model for assessing the quality of customized clothing.

Quality assessment during the process (B–C)

We start the description of an ordering and making process from an *intention to order* (B), the first contact between a maker and a client. As immediate interaction between the maker and client has a central role in the process, the promise may be tested in the first exchange of information, tentative suggestions of style and material, and the estimation of the price of the order. How much interaction and actual designing work is done before placing a final order may vary according to how clearly the client is able to articulate her needs, wants, and the purpose of use, the maker's work practices, and common experience in former orders. A (written) *agreement on price* is an ideal seal of placing the order. The agreement on price is a matter of confidence for both parties.

The quality of a garment or an outfit (a set of garments) may be assessed through style, fit and features, which are constructed in the process through design, technique, and material. This is a rough distinction, as design and technique are closely linked, and in some processes material, or part of it, is also created to order.

Style, here, is a broad concept. It includes the aesthetics—shape, cut, color, feel—and the expression of meanings connected with values, personality, status, use, culture, etc. Style is also about fashionableness and timelessness, which are not mutually exclusive features, although one or the other may be primarily targeted. Ideally, the maker's and client's styles meet in the style of customized clothes.

Fit is linked with style through cut. On the other hand, fit, like material, is a very bodily part of a garment. While style may look good in a sketched image or in a mental image in discussions, fit can be assessed on the user only. It must both look and feel good. Fit is the most crucial part of comfort and individuality.

Features refer to all those characteristics that supplement the garment's basic function. Visible features, large pockets, for example, have a clear effect on style, but concealed features may also contribute to style. When feature quality ranks high, features support fitness for use and ease of use, dressing and undressing included.

Material is a central ingredient of style, usually pre-existing to the style of a garment. Material is normally a matter of choice and not of creation in this context. Material is a bodily matter both to the maker and the user. Through the maker's hands and skills, material is connected to technique. In use, material contributes to comfort.

Design is the fulfillment of the client's needs and wants through style, fit and features. The result may be seen in these elements, and most importantly, in how the user looks and feels in a customized garment. It is most characteristic of customized clothing that designing is a process in which the main lines of the shape are given in the beginning and the final shape emerges only in fittings on the client.

Technique is hard to distinguish from design. For example, whether pattern making is part design or technique depends on the case and work practices. Below-the-line design is linked with technique and features. In principle, technique refers to human skill and the use of tools in constructing a garment. Although technique refers to something concrete, it should not be understood as mechanical and distinct from aesthetics, for example. Technique, together with material, makes style tangible.

These six aspects bind together a garment (end-product) and the process of creating it, as they are intertwined in customized clothing. The process's involvement with the emerging garment is clearer in the design and techniques of making. Yet, the

acquisition of material is also part of the process, although material as such remains a tangible part of the garment.

The process-product combination may be assessed from the maker's point of view, which is mainly the *manufacturing-based view*, and from the client's *user-based view*. However, this division is rough, as both views spiral around the common aim of both parties, namely *fitness for use*. While the manufacturing-based definition identifies quality as conformance to requirements, the maker infers these requirements from her/his own professional knowledge and from the task set by the user, when she/he attempts to see the garment as it will be used by the client. Adopting user-based quality does not mean that the maker realizes her/his client's image of a garment as such. At its best, knowing the user's needs and wants, as well as the demands of possible use contexts, results in an end-product even more pleasurable than the client could envision, and this happens in a *fluent process*.

Interaction, as immediate between the maker and the client, is an essential and characteristic part of individually designed customized clothes. Interaction distinguishes this form of production from all industrial clothing, even from mass-customized clothing. The maker is almost synonymous with the enterprise. The quality of interaction is closely assessed in the atmosphere, communication, congeniality, and the personalities involved, especially the personality of the maker.

Information is linked to interaction during the process (B-C) but should be available later, too, if needed. It refers to everything the client should know about the garment itself, its care and use. Information makes the price understandable. At its largest, information covers any cues for the overall appearance of the client, including accessories, underwear, hairstyle, and make-up.

Confidence is based on the experiences of interaction and honesty in the exchange of information, but these must be completed in conjunction with two aspects of the workflow: *punctuality* and *flexibility*.

The point of the finalized product (C) implies that the garment is ready, and everything—all deliverables—in the service space (B–C; maker–client) is settled.

Quality during use and storage (C–D)

The total of *realized quality* may be assessed only over the entire product lifetime until its disposal (D). In its use and storage time (C–D), the main object of evaluation is the garment proper, the end-product, while the process and interaction parts of the purchase are left behind—unless they live on in memories and stories told afterwards.

Fitness for use, or *performance*, refers to the general functionality and usability of a garment, as developed in the process. When a garment performs well, its style, fit, features, material, and technical construction are in harmony, and it is fit for use.

Reliability refers to the quality of the material and work, as it is understood in quality theory. Yet, this concept must be completed with psychological reliability, which is like trusting a reliable friend.

Durability is about how a garment performs over time. This concept is linked with reliability and serviceability. Yet, it seems that durability is mostly concerned with stylistic durability, or timelessness, which can only be perceived over time. The price-use ratio depends on durability. In the case of clothes tightly bound with the moment of their creation, durability is no measure of quality at all. In contrast, durability is an essential measure for any maker or user who wants to assess clothes in terms of environment-based quality.

Serviceability, in happy circumstances and for many customized clothes, is never put to test in reality. However, when care is needed the client seems to rely on instructions given by the maker or a good laundry. *Attached care labels* are recommended for customized clothes. *A guarantee* of the technical work implies high quality and the maker's trust in her/his work.

Pleasurability can be assessed, in principle, from the clothes' feel. However, it is not a trivial fact that clothes yield pleasure to other people, as well. Pleasure is obtained when clothes perform in a *transcendent* manner. Although the term *transcendent* seems to imply extreme superiority, it is worth noting that the user's subjective pleasure does not necessarily presume ultimate perfection in technique, for example.

Perceived quality implies that quality is not universal. The client's perception depends on her needs, wants, and experience. After all, this is where it matters most, and this is what is told in stories.

DISCUSSION

Consumers are categorized into market segments of individuals sharing common patterns of criteria in the acquisition of their clothes. Users of customized clothes form such a market segment, although not a homogeneous one, which shares a common interest in quality. Makers of customized clothing have different work practices, but all of their businesses depend on how they can meet their clients' needs and wants and how their mutual conceptions of quality meet.

In the model presented here, we have emphasized three facts. 1) Having clothes made to order does not happen in a single transaction. It happens over time, hence the timeline form. 2) Customized clothes are not usually recognized by the brand, neither can they be viewed in shops. Other forms of information are used for predicting quality. 3) A client does not only buy a garment as an end-product. She also buys interaction with the maker, information and confidence in the process of creation. These are also matters of quality.

We have not used dichotomist divisions, such as objective—subjective, concrete—abstract, physical—psychological, or inherent—ascribed qualities, in a central role in the study. There certainly are ontologically different aspects of quality to assess, and accordingly, we use some of these words. However, these divisions seem to be neither fundamental nor helpful. In real life, the quality of customized clothing is not measured and proved, but assessed and perceived.

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