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The Fashion Buying Career of Vanessa Denza: A Case Study Analysis to Inform Future Buying Skills

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Abstract

This article traces the long career of the international fashion buyer and recruitment consultant, Vanessa Denza. It is the first study to document Denza's profession and incorporates research secured from access to her private work archive, which was located at her home in Berkshire, England. With no formal education in buying, Denza took a series of internships that formed the beginning of her on-the-job training as a fashion buyer and led to an important role as the buyer for a pioneering store aimed at younger people, *The 21 Shop* at Woollands in Knightsbridge, London, UK. Here, she promoted exciting designers who

worked with revolutionary new shapes and colours and introduced radical new ways to sell fashion. Subsequent roles led to her directing a series of global fashion boutiques; the establishment of her international fashion buying office and recruitment consultancy; and an influential role in developing global fashion education. The article pinpoints the key buying skills that Denza considered essential within her career and seeks opinions on them in relation to future skills requirements for fashion buying. The aim is to understand and contextualise this expertise within in an ever-changing, global fashion industry.

KEYWORDS: fashion buyer, personal work archive, key buying skills, global fashion industry

Introduction

The research has four significant purposes. Firstly, it includes a historical analysis of the career of the international fashion buyer and recruitment specialist, Vanessa Denza and identifies the key fashion buying skills developed throughout her career. It describes and identifies the role of the fashion buyer within the global fashion industry and contextualises Denza's buying skills in relation to the future of this role. The archival records documenting the chronology of Denza's career are an inescapable reality that can inform the future. By considering these legacies from the past, it can unite them with the future and this encourages people to take a much wider view of their circumstances. Understanding links from the past also enables people to build upon the future and without an appreciation for the history and background of any subject, it would not evolve. The article therefore presents a discussion about what can be learnt from Denza's career and seeks to determine a meaningful framework and reference point for future fashion buying skills. Denza's skills are assessed through analysis of a questionnaire sent to two international fashion networks. This evaluates these skills and interprets the data collected through a numeric ranking assessment of their future importance.

The literature review revealed a small amount of work related to the history and professional activities of the fashion buyer however there is limited literature that focusses on case studies of this role or specific biographies of buyers. This study will address these limitations through its documentation of Vanessa Denza's extensive career. In 2006, Nottingham Trent University in the UK, conferred an honorary doctorate degree (DDes) on Denza for services to the British fashion industry and education. The oration for the award summed up her career, "Vanessa is a supreme example of the complete professional from the fashion design business, who over a 35-year career on an international stage has always remained deeply involved in British design education as a lecturer, academic advisor, external examiner and college governor"



Figure 1

Vanessa Denza in receipt of an honorary degree, University of the Creative Arts, Rochester, UK, 2006. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Vanessa Denza Archive and University of the Creative Arts.

(Nottingham Trent University 2006b). She was awarded a further honorary degree from the University of the Creative Arts, Rochester, UK, 2006 (Figure 1). Denza's career spanned from the 1950s to 2016. During this time, both the global fashion industry and the role of the fashion buyer have evolved considerably. These developments can be traced through a content analysis of the records compiled in Denza's private work archive that was held at her home in Berkshire, UK. This includes photographs, press cuttings, news reports, interviews, business documents, clothing, letters, lectures, PowerPoint presentations and promotional material, etc. It is an original archive, which has not been previously accessible to researchers and Denza kindly permitted access to it as the basis for this study.

The research follows a systematic approach. The literature review explores and describes the limited references to Vanessa Denza's career and the role of the fashion buyer. This is followed by a description of the methodological approach and data analysis techniques used in the study. The second part is a chronological account of Denza's career from 1958 to 2016. Firstly, it describes Denza's early career where she learnt to be a buyer through working in fashion retail and establishing her own buying consultancy. The following section explores the second half of her career as she developed her fashion recruitment and licencing businesses, presenting the fashion designer to the buyer. The third part identifies the key skills Denza considered necessary in her successful fashion buying career. These skills were sent to two international fashion networks who were asked to rank them in an order of importance to the future industry. The article discusses why we need a prominent buyer from the past to provide us with key buying skills. It also considers how the fashion buyer can adapt these skills in an evolving industry

where issues such as sustainability, diversity and the impact of a global pandemic have made significant changes to the way fashionable clothes are made and consumed.

The aims of the research are:

- To record the entire career of the fashion buying and recruitment specialist, Vanessa Denza from 1958 to 2016.
- To identify the role of the fashion buyer in the contemporary global fashion industry.
- To identify and evaluate the key fashion buying skills developed in Vanessa Denza's career.
- To test the significance and merit of Vanessa Denza's buying skills within the future of the global fashion industry.

Literature Review

A literature review revealed references to Vanessa Denza in books, magazines journal papers and Internet articles. These proved to be limited and without access to her work archive it would be difficult to piece together a trajectory of her career. There is no biography published and the references to Denza are in works that document fashion history and its culture (Almond and Riches 2018; Breward, Gilbert, and Lister 2006; Conti 2022; Fogg 2003; Goworek 2001; Lobenthal 1990; Godden 2020; Ironside 1973; O'Byrne 2009; Sheridan 2010; Watt 2003). For instance, Jayne Sheridan's work, *Fashion, Media and Promotion: The New Black Magic* (2010), emphasises how Denza recognised the talent of Royal College of Art fashion students in London in the 1960s and how their designs could be promoted and sold through retail outlets. The Internet holds some written references about Denza. These range from interviews to discussion of her work with the *21 Shop* based in Woollands department store in London (Almond 1996; Sweet Jane 2012; Phillips 2007; Denza 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Nottingham Trent University 2006a; Iles 2006). The Internet also records a short interview with Denza held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2016. This gives a useful outline of her early career during the 1950s and 1960s.

An overview of literature related to fashion buying revealed works that focus on the role of the buyer (Boardman, Parker-Strak, and Henninger 2020; Goworek 2001, 2006; Gonzalez 2018; Hebrero 2015; Jackson and Shaw 2000; Koumbis and Shaw 2017; Nam-Stephen and Trimble 2015; Swindley 1992; Yurchisin Kim and Johnson 2010). Further works that consider fashion careers in marketing and merchandising were also consulted (Bohdanowicz and Clamp 1994; McRobbie 1998; Udale 2008). Helen Goworeck's work, *Fashion Buying* (2001) presents a thorough summary of careers in contemporary fashion buying. This outlines the fashion buyer's function: the buying cycle, predicting fashion trends and range planning. It also includes some case studies

looking at buying for both retail and mail order as well as branded fashion merchandise. The case studies include profiles and interviews with buyers for different levels of the fashion market. The Internet also revealed several websites dedicated to explaining the role of the fashion buyer (Bunkham 2020; Yu 2019; Baxter-Wright 2018; Fashion Mentor 2019). Aileen Yu's work, "Fashion Careers: What Does a Fashion Buyer Do" (2019), debunks the notion that buying is a glamorous career through its presentation of a factual account of the key activities of the role.

In contemporary fashion, the buyer is responsible for deciding on the range of products, sold within a fashion retail outlet, either in store or online. Fashion products selected for retail can vary from garments to accessories and will be appropriate for the customer of each company. Ranges can vary from luxury designer clothing to mid-market underwear or bags and shoes. As Helen Goworek explained, "The buying role differs between companies but fashion buyers are responsible for overseeing the development of a range of products aimed at a specific type of customer and price bracket" (2001, 4). It is important for the buyer to have the acumen to select products that conform to relevant fashion trends. Products also need to relate to changes within the marketplace, influenced by fluctuations in customer taste, income, preferences and behaviours (Jackson and Shaw 2000).

A competent fashion buyer needs to acquire fundamental skills. As professionals, they must be amenable and adaptable. Activities associated with the role vary from deskwork, phone, email and Zoom conversations to producing spreadsheets and reports as well as the ability to understand the aesthetic and technical qualities of fashion products. Travel is also necessary and this could range from visiting factories and suppliers in China to attending fashion shows and trend events in global cities. The buyer needs to be resilient, disciplined, imaginative, professional, passionate, authoritative and mathematically competent (Goworek 2001). A good buyer also needs to understand the skills of the fashion designer as well as maintain good relationships with designers and manufacturers. Activities range from an ability to put a comprehensive range of clothes or accessories together that balance different types of product, having knowledge of fabrics, colours, overall design, cut and manufacture, as well as selling prices, different size ranges, supply sources and the process of ordering different quantities. It is always important to present the customer with product choice, so they only need visit one retailer.

There are different types of fashion buyer for different products as well as different types of stores therefore the professional characteristics of each buyer often differ. This influences the way they liaise with suppliers and stores. It also includes frequent interaction with different departments and personnel, including other buyers, quality control and merchandisers. Buyers need to be seasons ahead in what they select yet

ensure the brands they choose are up to date, stylish and will sell (Bunkham 2020). They need to be aware of what other buyers are selecting as well as what ranges other stores are putting together. Buying departments in large and small organisations often have a hierarchical structure consisting of senior buyer, buyer, assistant buyer and buying clerk (Jackson and Shaw 2000).

Vanessa Denza observed that fashion buying education is a relatively new field in universities. Prior to the global introduction of such courses in the 1980s, the majority of people who pursued this career began work in retail. Some businesses supplied training courses in negotiation and finance, but most people acquired skills through retail experience. Denza recalled, “I started when I was 18 and there wasn’t a course that I wanted to do when I was training so in a sense, I developed my own course through real experience, which later was developed into the foundation for university courses in fashion buying” (Mah 2008, 2). Denza’s self-training was therefore recognised in UK higher education by Professor Mary Bromly (b. 1933), who based her successful undergraduate, fashion marketing course on Denza’s career at Newcastle Polytechnic (now University of Northumbria) in the 1980s (Almond 2020b). Today there are global university degree courses in fashion buying that include; brand management, international buying management, fashion buying with marketing and fashion buying and merchandising. When asked if she thought fashion buying glamorous, Denza replied, “Not anymore, except you get to do a lot of travelling and stay in good hotels. So much of the buying is now done by committee, buying for your own business is challenging but very rewarding” (Almond 2020a, 1). Beyond the glamorous veneer of the buyer and their global travel in order to select exciting confections from fashion week catwalks, is therefore a job that can only be successful by combining a variety of skills.

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed methods approach to collect and analyse information. This usually includes at least one qualitative and one quantitative element, which adds insight to the research investigation (Schoonenboom and Burke Johnson 2017). The sociologist Yuniya Kawamura suggested this, “... becomes a framework for the entire study, an organizing model for the research questions or hypotheses and for the data collection procedure” (2011, 25). Qualitative research permits a close analysis of the subject. As Pathak, Jena and Kalra said, it “... is used to understand people’s beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviour, and interactions” (2013, 192). The selected qualitative methodologies adopted were both investigative and observational. The first method was archival research, which involved searching for and obtaining information from the collected records held in Denza’s work archive. It included close scrutiny of these chronicles employing object-based research (Mida and Kim 2015). The fashion historian Valerie Steele

(b.1955) who wrote about, “the important role that objects can play in the creation of knowledge” (1998, 327) endorsed the value of object-based research in fashion. A quantitative survey was adopted at the end of the study to test the fundamental buying skills Denza identified throughout her career. This consisted of a numerical analysis through a questionnaire sent to two international fashion networks. The first network included 398 individuals and 116 replies were received. The second comprised of 460 members and 68 replies were received. It asked the respondents to rank the skills in an order of importance related to the future needs of the international fashion buyer. Data was also collected through two semi-structured interviews with Vanessa Denza in 2020. These were initiated during a chance conversation in 2019, between the author and Denza about her life and work, its significance within the global fashion industry and how her experiences could be analysed in relation to the future skills needs in buying. Further conversations with Denza, were held in person or by telephone and email.

The data was examined utilising content analysis, which considers systems and patterns in communication. This methodology is qualitative and often used to analyse: text, film, images and audio. It was important to analyse both the object-based data in Denza’s archive as well as her thoughts and opinions, which were transcribed as written notes from the interviews. Combined with the data collected from the literature review it helped to build up a chronology of Denza’s career and identify the key buying skills later tested through a numerical analysis related to their future importance with the fashion industry. Following the numerical analysis, triangulation of this data took place by involving six fashion buying experts who were not involved in the research. They were asked to consider the ranking of the buying skills in relation to future industry needs. This provided an objective, unbiased overview considered in relation to the literature review. The level of triangulation warranted a strong balance of methodological integrity used to draw conclusions from the findings. The sociologist Uwe Flick endorses this approach, describing how triangulation “is used to refer to the observation of the research issue from (at least) two different points” (2004, 178). Verifying the ratings from a further viewpoint therefore contributed to a greater level of integrity with the findings.

The career of Vanessa Denza

Vanessa Denza (1937–2022) was born in London. She went to boarding school at the, Convent of our Lady, St Leonards on Sea, from 1944 to 1954 and remembered how the teaching was indifferent. She learnt to speak French fluently and to sew, two attributes that would be crucial in her career. Her first lesson, at the age of six was with a thimble, a needle and a piece of fabric and for half an hour she had to practice threading the needle correctly. She said, “I had a deep knowledge of cut and make I had to push a needle through a piece of fabric, so I can cut

anything, I can make anything” (Mah 2008, 2). She also enjoyed designing, dyeing and making costumes for school plays. On leaving boarding school, she moved to London and studied at, Queens College (a school for girls) in Harley Street for one year.

After completing her education, Denza remained in London. It was the late 1950s and she indulged in a year of jazz clubs and parties combined with a firm decision not to learn to type and work in an office. In an interview with the Victoria and Albert Museum, she remembered the decade: “In the 1950s youthful clothes were non-existent. At that time, if you were on the tube you were expected to wear a pair of gloves. It was all old lady stuff. There was not a single shop apart from Jaeger that sold a size 8” (Victoria and Albert Museum 2016, 1). She recalled how the first designers to make clothes for a younger market in London were Mary Quant (b.1930) and Kiki Byrne (1937–2013). Unfortunately, she had to make her own clothes, as she could not afford their prices (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2006). On the strength of her spoken French, her first job was a short internship with couture house, Jacques Fath in Paris. The manager of the designer’s boutique, Princesse de Polignac (1918–2011) had been the director of the luxury department store, Galleries Lafayette. Denza, was fascinated by her stories of the deluxe garments and the illustrious customers who shopped there. She returned to London to work for Martin Moss (1923–2007) who was managing director of the Knightsbridge department store, Woollands. He had been employed in 1954 and tasked with initiating changes in the store. Throughout a twelve-year tenure, his duty was to turn Knightsbridge into a fashionable shopping destination. Denza recalled, “He was able to persuade everyone to do absolutely anything and to recognise talent such as Terence Conran and Mary Quant etc” (Almond 2020b, 2). The journalist David Phillips recalled how, the New York fashion magazine, *Womenswear Daily* called him, “London’s one-man wave of fashion” (2007, 1).

Denza realised she wanted to be a fashion buyer at this early stage of her career. This was an unheard of, undefined job at the time. As there were no university degrees in fashion buying, training came through work experience. Woollands, was the only store in the UK at the time to carry the Italian designer, Emilio Pucci (1914–1992). As the collection sold incredibly well, Denza quickly learned to sum up a customer’s, size and taste as well as to sell. This prompted her to go to Italy for the summer to work for Emilio Pucci. She then continued to New York to join the buyers training programme for the luxury department store, Lord and Taylor. She learnt new ways of working, this included fashion merchandising and presentation as well as business training. On her return to London, she continued learning through working in retail. She felt the real business of being a fashion buyer and looking at fashion shows did not get going until the end of 1967 (Denza 2020b). In her early days she stated, “We were just out and about, finding and buying. I was going anywhere I could to find things that I wanted and that I felt were right for the store that I was buying for” (Mah 2008, 2).



Figure 2

Woollands 21 Shop opening party, 1961. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Vanessa Denza Archive.

In 1961, Martin Moss invited Denza back to Woollands, this time as the buyer for a new ground-floor boutique within the main store aimed at style-conscious younger people. The intent was to develop the careers of young designers, introducing fresh colours, shapes and silhouettes and new ways of selling. It was christened the *21 Shop* and the interior, was designed by Terence Conran (1931–2020). On the opening night, 15th September 1961 there was huge press coverage, but no public relations representation (Figure 2). The whole concept was coordinated by Clare Rendlesham (1919–1987), who was young ideas editor at *Vogue*, with Woollands' merchandise manager, Willie Williams (no date). Three fashion shows were staged. They featured live music in a show for the first time from the band, *The Temperance*. Hair was styled by Vidal Sassoon (1928–2012), photography by an emerging photographer, David Bailey (b.1938) and a new model appeared in the show called Jean Shrimpton (b.1942). Denza described how everything, “Was fast and fun, the displays provocative and he [Moss] made sure everyone was part of that excitement” (Phillips 2007, 1).

The *21 Shop* was an immediate success. The store did a whole year's figures in the first three months and it proved difficult for the management of the business to keep up. There were no machines for ticketing the clothes and no computers. Shops closed on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, with just one late night opening a week and there was no markdown policy. The *21 Shop* quickly changed the fashion retail business. For Denza, it was an exciting time and she was pioneering in her approach. As opposed to following industry practice by buying a large amount of one style and selling it throughout the season, she fast tracked changes of stock by selling a small number of styles for a short time. The online article, Sweet Jane said, "Although relatively inexperienced, she nonetheless proved herself to be both dynamic and innovative in this role. Instead of merely choosing merchandise, already on offer from established manufacturers, she actively pursued and encouraged previously unknown designers fresh from the art colleges" (Sweet Jane 2012, 1). Denza recalled ordering hangers that were all the same colour and instructed how she wanted garments displayed and how they would be delivered to the customer. "The idea was to give a whole image, working with young designers" (Victoria and Albert Museum 2016, 1).

The *21 Shop* helped launch the careers of the designers, Jean Muir (1928–1995), John Bates (b. 1938) and Mary Quant's Ginger Group. With Moss's encouragement, Denza also bought the collections of Royal College of Art (RCA) graduates, Ossie Clarke (1942–1996), Marion Foale (b.1939), Sally Tuffin (b.1938) and Gerald McCann (1931–2019). This began her association with the RCA fashion school, as she recognised the store needed their young designers to help evolve a new idea of fashion. She was asked by RCA fashion Professor, Janey Ironside (1919–1979) to explain to her students what sort of clothes she was looking for. The writer Jane Sheridan said, "Her '21' shop sold clothes that were 'simple, zany, not for squares', and she was known as the wunderkind of turnover able to have an order of a thousand dresses delivered and within a week they would be sold out" (2010, 171). Further retailers quickly followed her lead with; Miss Selfridge, Harrods' Way In and Young Jaeger becoming established household names. After four years the *21 Shop* had expanded to Woollands 21 Shop housed in the department store, Marshall and Snelgrove, in London; Manchester; Birmingham and the William and Hopkins, 21 Shop in Bournemouth (Sweet Jane 2012).

From her innovative approach at the *21 Shop*, Denza knew she was a very good, creative buyer and could explain to designers how to tweak their ranges in order to be successful. She set up the *Vanessa Frye Boutique* in 1966 in Sloane Street, London, which ran until 1970. This was a partnership with Madeleine Frye (b.1939), who Denza had met when they both worked at the *21 Shop* (Figures 3 and 4). Frye's father was a multi-millionaire and was able to back the business with some financial input from Denza. She said, "There was a feeling that



Figure 3
Vanessa Denza and Madeleine Frye,
1966. Photographer, Martin Chaffer.
Courtesy of Vanessa Denza Archive
and Martin Chaffer.



Figure 4
Fashion show in Vanessa Frye
boutique, 1966. Photographer,
Martin Chaffer. Courtesy of Vanessa
Denza Archive and Martin Chaffer.

everything was possible. You were not laden with debt, you had time to go out and enjoy life and wear new clothes. Television was in its infancy and you stopped worrying about whether Paris said you had to have a short skirt or a long skirt” (Victoria and Albert Museum 2016, 1). The boutique was an extension of the *21 Shop* philosophy selling to a faster, aggressive customer who was young. Denza recalled visiting the USA to buy things she felt were right (Almond 2020b). Designers such as Gerald McCann and Foale and Tuffin continued to be popular and newcomers such as Rosalind Yehuda (no date) were able to supply a continuous stream of new designs. Due to the need for constant stock replenishment, she looked to brands who could make up quickly such as the manufacturer, *Polly Peck International*. They were a very large manufacturer who could produce 1000 dresses a week. Her orders also enabled several companies to start or expand their own businesses such as *Susan Small* and John Bates at *Jean Varon*. The eventual demise of the boutique was due to huge problems with shoplifters, which was a similar issue for other contemporary retailers in London at the time, such as *Biba*.

The variety of international contacts acquired during her tenure at both *the 21 Shop* and the *Vanessa Frye Boutique* led to the setting up of the *Vanessa Denza Buying Office* in 1971, representing North American speciality stores, boutiques, chain stores, manufacturers and European clients. The company also acted as a consultant to manufacturers (Denza 2020b). It began a period of working with Canadian and American buyers bringing them together with designers in the UK. Initially these buyers wanted knitwear, but this widened to dressy clothes for the upmarket stores as well as for designers such as, Ghost and Katherine Hamnett (b. 1947). She also created licensing deals for the French designer, Daniel Hechter (b.1938). She knew the UK and French markets inside out, which led to her becoming a major force in the expansion of the UK designer export market. Denza identified some of her main challenges. These included the UK’s lack of understanding of American sizes, and their colour preferences. She recalled how, “The UK designers loved heavy yarns and fabrics and couldn’t understand that the average North American lived in a much hotter apartment” (Denza 2020b, 6). Over time, the *Vanessa Denza Buying Office* began to acquire a significant rota of highly regarded international brands including: Pucci, Mulberry, Bally, Burberry, Polo Ralph Lauren, Arcadia Group, LVMH Group, Joseph, Calvin Klein, Derek Lam, Levis, Donna Karen and Nike.

Denza reflected during interviews on the activities in which her buying team were involved. As they organised buying trips for international clients it was important for them to have someone reliable to make their trip worthwhile. For instance, they represented fifteen boutiques in the USA such as: Knitwit, Betsey Bunky Nini and Hattie. The buying trips were organised by Denza who showed stores the different ranges of clothes from the companies they represented. This involved organising

small parties at their offices to bring together the buyers and designers. Other responsibilities included overseeing the quality of the clothes buyers selected and checking the sizing and colours were correct. Throughout this period, Denza continued to merge her industry work with teaching fashion buying and business at the Royal College of Art, making students work in teams on fast projects and learning to present their ideas. She described this as, “Wonderfully challenging and rewarding, brilliant students as the numbers in colleges was much smaller than they are now” (Almond 2020b, 5). The teaching of buying and business studies was often viewed suspiciously by students however Denza infused it with the excitement generated by her industrial experience and a common-sense approach to finance, buying and promotion.

Later career: Presenting the designer to the buyer

At the end of the 1980s, Denza felt the UK buying market was fading because the English were not producing what was needed at the price required. At the same time, there was a growing demand for Denza’s services in recruitment. She was buying ranges for the American luxury department store, Nordstrom as well as a host of other top international fashion consortiums. Due to her many contacts with fashion students, companies approached her to help them find an appropriate designer. In particular, French companies, such as Daniel Hechter kept asking Denza if she could recommend designers and the first, she ever placed was Gordon Richardson (b.1953), who eventually became creative director of the UK retailer, TopMan. She recognised that many stores had begun to use agents to buy clothes as opposed to coming to the UK to buy. She therefore moved her business to placing designers and buyers in fashion related jobs all over the world (Mah 2008). This led her to founding *Denza International* in 1988, initially for design recruitment but graduating to work in all areas of non-design, including buying, marketing, product development, sales, licensing etc (Denza 2020a). In 1989, Denza and the retailer and fashion commentator Jeff Banks (b.1943) set up Graduate Fashion Week in London to showcase the work of UK fashion graduates to the press and industry. This gave her greater access to a wide variety of graduating students who she helped place in fashion related employment, worldwide.

In 2008, Denza was interviewed by research assistant Alice Mah from the Centre for Fashion Enterprise at London College of Fashion. She said, “I am very good at looking at merchandise because I used to be a buyer and I really know merchandise and at the end of the day I can pretty quickly find out what the situation is with almost any company in the world. I normally know somebody who is there and can help me with the information” (Mah 2008, 7). She worked hard to develop successful relationships with companies, visiting them frequently to understand what the company was about and what they felt was important. Musing on the role of the fashion designer, she considered it

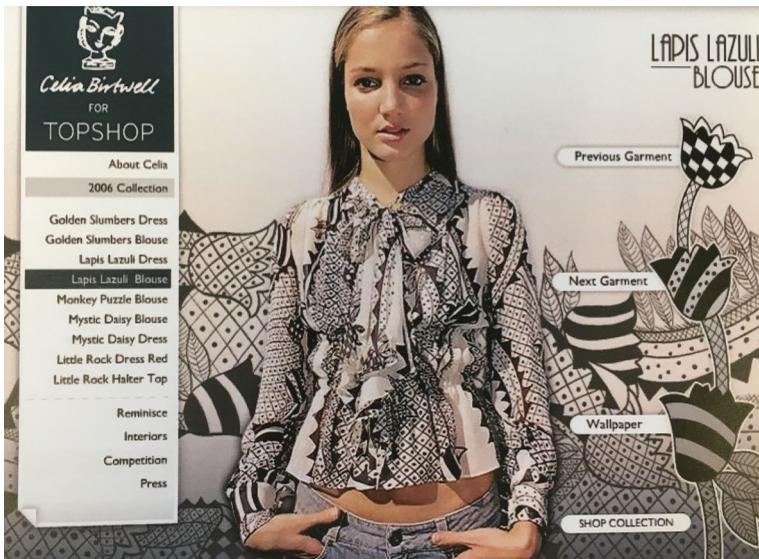


Figure 5

Celia Birtwell for Topshop, 2006. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Vanessa Denza Archive.

physically demanding, the hours very long and the pay often insufficient. Many designers gave up easily, leaving jobs at the first sign of pressure. She reflected, “I have to admit when I started out in fashion it was more fun, clothes were made in England, so you had a quick turn-around. These days they are all produced in China, India or Turkey. It was easier to be a small designer back then” (Iles 2006, 1). She considered that a fashion course can prepare you for many other jobs, but being a designer is the most overcrowded part of the field (Mah 2008).

Denza founded *Denza Licensing* in 2003. In fashion, licensing is where an established designer or brand agrees to allow another company to use its trademark on other products (Denza 2020d). This company is known as the licensee and they are responsible for producing and distributing the new products. This is lucrative for the designer or brand as they can expand into a wider array of products (The Fashion Network 2018). Denza’s acumen as a buyer proved invaluable in establishing this international consultancy, which represented womenswear, menswear, accessories and homeware designers. The business was based on a royalty or licensing basis and concentrated on establishing and developing a specialized business relationship between designer, manufacturer and retailer. For instance, Denza was closely involved in “Linking the iconic textiles designer Celia Birtwell with the Japanese global group UNIQLO and the high street shop Topshop” (Denza 2020e). These collections were an instant success in the UK, selling out within a day and generating a great deal of attention (Figure 5). She eventually sold *Denza Licensing* in 2015 to a long-standing work colleague, Emma Davidson (b.1972). Since that time, she focused on freelance consultancy work in buying and licensing.

Key skills necessary for a successful fashion buying career

The fashion buying skills acquired by Vanessa Denza evolved over her 58-year career. During this time, the global fashion industry experienced many changes influenced by vicissitudes in society and world events. In the late 1950s, the world was still recovering from the shortages and deprivations of World War II. This led to the significant political, social and cultural changes in the youth quake explosion of the 1960s, influenced by the actions and taste of young people. The strikes and job shortages of the 1970s led to the flourishing capitalism of the 1980s, a decade also dominated by the AIDS pandemic. The 1990s saw the rise of multiculturalism and the 2000s a growth of the Internet and globalisation. When questioned about the durability of her fashion buying skills throughout these changing times Denza felt they were fundamental and adapted to the social and cultural changes that influenced the way clothes were made and consumed. For instance, she utilised similar skills as a buyer for Woollands department store in the early 1960s, selling clothes to style-conscious, younger people, as those utilised when buying ranges for the sophisticated customers of the American luxury department store, Nordstrom in the 1980s. The skills were adapted to the needs of these different markets and changing times.

In interview, Denza was asked to pinpoint the key skills she considered essential throughout her career as a fashion buyer (Almond 2020b). These are listed below and Vanessa Denza's words are quoted.

- “You have to have flair.”
- “You needed to develop the skills of a merchandiser as the role didn't exist, so you had to work out your own budget.”
- “The ability to be a good communicator with a good variety of people.”
- “Develop the ability to look at 100 garments from a manufacturer and predict which three would sell the most.”
- “To be able to put clothes in good order, what colours work best on what hangers etc.”
- “Develop the skill of eclecticism.”
- “The fashion buyer has to feel that they had to buy what they feel is right.”
- “Develop the ability to look at the finished garment and predict how it will sell and to what type of customer.”
- “Be very hard working and dedicated.”
- “To gain retail experience so you understand and get a feel for what the customer wants.”

The skills are summarised as the key descriptive phrases in the table below. The skills are not listed in any form of rank.

A sense of fashion and flair
 Manage a budget
 Good communicator
 Ability to predict sales
 Merchandising skills
 Eclecticism: deriving ideas and style from a variety of sources
 Conviction in decision making
 Customer and market awareness
 Hard working and dedicated
 Retail experience

In order to categorise these skills in relation to the needs of future fashion buying professionals, the table was sent to two global fashion networks. The respondents were asked to place each skill into what they considered to be an order of importance, 1 being the highest score and 10 being the lowest. The first group were the author's global network compiled over a 20-year period as a fashion researcher. This comprised of 398 individuals from the fashion industry and education who are involved in a variety of roles ranging from fashion buying, design, pattern cutting, retail, merchandising, research and journalism. The breadth of fashion industry experience within this network ensured each respondent had a proficient understanding of the role of the fashion buyer. 116 replies were received.

Network Group 1:
 116 Responses from Research Network

Ranking	Skills and experience
1 Most Important	Customer and market awareness
2	A sense of fashion and flair
3	Ability to predict sales
4	Manage budgets
5	Good communicator
6	Merchandising skills
7	Eclecticism: deriving ideas and style from a variety of sources
8	Retail experience
9	Hard working and dedicated
10 Least Important	Conviction in decision making

The second network comprised of members of the UK creative cluster organisation, Future Fashion Factory. This is a £5.4 million partnership funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK. It works with 427 fashion industry and 23 fashion educational members to explore and develop new digital and advanced skills and technologies to boost the design and production of excellent-value, creative fashion products globally. High profile members include: the British Fashion Council, Burberry, Dormeuil, Arcadia Group, New Look, The Fashion

Network, Lectra and the Royal College of Art, UK. Some members work in fashion buying and as fashion professionals, all members of Future Fashion Factory have an understanding and appreciation of the role and context of the fashion buyer within the global industry. Sixty-eight replies were received.

Network Group 2:

68 Responses from Future Fashion Factory Network

Ranking	Skills and experience
1 Most Important	Customer and market awareness
2	Ability to predict sales
3	A sense of fashion and flair
4	Manage budgets
5	Good communicator
6	Merchandising skills
7	Retail experience
8	Hard working and dedicated
9	Conviction in decision making
10 Least Important	Eclecticism: deriving ideas and style from a variety of sources

The literature review revealed that no in-depth study has documented the entire career of a successful fashion buyer or identified key skills from a buying career and tested them in a numeric order of importance to the future of the global fashion industry. Works such as Helen Gorowek's *Fashion Buying* detail case studies that examine the buyer's role in retail outlets for different levels of the fashion market and further literature such as Tim Jackson and David Shaw's *Mastering Fashion Buying and Merchandising Management* give in-depth descriptions of the role of the buyer. The ranking of the fashion buying skills is therefore a contribution to new thinking. It is also significant that there were many similarities in both sets of results. Despite fluctuations to the marketplace influenced by issues such as sustainability, diversity and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, customer and market awareness was considered the most important skill in both. This indicates how commercial awareness links to financial profit for fashion brands and was reinforced by the placing of an ability to predict sales at second and third respectively and managing a budget scoring at fourth in both cases. Fashion flair was placed at second and third. Having a sense of what is on trend and what will sell to the fashion consumer therefore remains a crucial skill in the future. Denza introduced a pioneering new approach to fashion buying when she opened Woollands 21 *Shop* in 1961. She identified a demand for a new look in fashion aimed at a younger market and tapped into this zeitgeist by introducing new and emerging designers and a new approach to selling. Future fashion buyers will need to maintain this astute awareness and it is crucial to combine

a strong sense of fashion with an identification of what is right for the clientele of the retailer, combining commercial awareness with fashion credibility. Good communication scored at fifth place in both network groups and will continue to be important when discussing customer and market awareness with buying teams that relate to fashion awareness and subsequent sales.

The skills of merchandising and retail experience ranked between six and eight in the focus groups. Denza learnt how to be a fashion buyer through the retail experience gained at the onset of her career. She was fortunate enough to acquire this experience in the glamorous environs of stores in London, Paris, Italy and New York. This gave her the confidence to succeed in her ground-breaking approach to buying for the *Woollands 21 Shop*. Fashion buying students can gain a variety of experiences in a multitude of global retailers, working on the shop floor with customers and in merchandising departments, whilst studying. This live experience can also inform their studies. Hard work, dedication and conviction ranked low on both lists. Denza considered these skills to be vital and without them, she felt it would be difficult to sustain a buying career within the future of the competitive, global fashion industry. Despite their ranking however it should be recognised that these are professional skills that are often taken for granted and their importance can be transposed into many other careers beyond those in the creative industries. Eclecticism was ranked at seventh and tenth place. The notion of gathering ideas and stock from a broad range of sources was considered important by Denza to keep merchandise fresh and interesting for the consumer. Therefore, a level of eclecticism and diversity should continue to be encouraged that does not alienate existing customers.

Conclusion

The article is the first significant study to access Vanessa Denza's private work archive in order to document her 58-year career and its involvement with fashion buying. Her experiences have embraced many levels of the global fashion market and the buying skills she developed were subsequently analysed by the two fashion industry networks to identify their importance within the future of the global industry. Throughout her career, Denza's high profile in fashion helped to establish the role of the fashion buyer on the international stage. This was celebrated when Professor Mary Bromly based the curriculum of the BA (Hons) Fashion Marketing course at Newcastle Polytechnic on Denza's self-training programme. Throughout her career, Denza experienced the evolution of the fashion buyer's role. When the *21 Shop* opened in London in 1961, she acknowledged how its phenomenal success made it difficult to keep up with the business in an age before computers and the Internet. The skills she acknowledged as necessary in fashion buying transcend these technological developments and will continue to be relevant within future fashion (Figure 6). The ranking of the skills could therefore be



Figure 6

Future Fashion Buying. Ranges displayed for buyers at Modtissimo, 2020. Photograph courtesy of Sean Chiles.

used as a benchmark to encourage and train fashion buyers with the tools that will augment their role. Trainees can arrange these skills in a rank of importance related to their own experience within a future fashion marketplace.

When asked why we need a prominent buyer from the past to provide us with future buying skills, Denza replied, “All my career was about change and adapting to change” (Almond 2020b, 2). She therefore adapted her skills to the needs of different markets throughout changing times. It is therefore, feasible that Denza’s skills could adapt to the needs of future fashion markets, which have to consider contemporary issues affecting fashion buying and consumption such as sustainability, diversity and the impact of Covid-19. The two networks ranked the skills in consideration of these issues. In conclusion, the research greatly expands the range and depth of analysis related to fashion buying as it is the first biographical evaluation of the substantial career of a significant and inspirational buying professional and the buying skills she identified. It enriches the existing literature and provides an important reference point of lasting significance as Denza’s experiences can be upheld as a beacon to inspire others when developing their buying careers. Denza’s own career is outstanding because she harnessed her experience in buying in order to

develop her subsequent role as fashion recruitment and licencing specialist. The final words belong to Vanessa Denza: “The skills of fashion buying are fascinating and involve working with the designers closely, looking at the clothes, touching them. When you are recruiting it is crucially important that you pass these skills on, not only to fashion buying students but those studying design and the many other fashion related careers in the global industry” (Almond 2020b, 2).

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