

CHANEL: THE WOMAN, THE BUSINESS

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Abstract: *One of the leading women of the past century, Gabrielle Bonheur ‘Coco’ Chanel was born in a French poor family in the beginnings of the 1880s. After her mother died in her childhood, she spent almost a decade in a convent where she learned to sew. In the 1920s, she became a successful fashion designer and highly influenced the evolution of the Parisian haute couture for a long period of time. The purposes of the study are to briefly define fashion and haute couture, and to present Coco Chanel in her both hypostases: the woman and the businesswoman. In this respect, the author employed a qualitative research method, based on an extensive literature review. The findings of the paper show that despite the difficult times she encountered during the first period of her life, Coco Chanel succeeded in becoming an independent and successful businesswoman. Moreover, she created and developed Chanel, one of most famous and long-lasting couture houses in the world.*

Keywords: *Coco Chanel, Chanel, fashion, haute couture, businesswoman.*

JEL Classification: *M1, M16.*

1. Introduction

Since its beginning, fashion has been a social phenomenon affecting human behaviour. Fashion is not only about wearing clothes but also about many components of society, such as culture, communication, design or religion. It is said that “to be fashionable is to find oneself ‘following, suited to, or influenced by the current fashion’ and is a property ‘characteristic of or favoured by those who are leaders of social fashion’” (Breward, 2019, p. 206).

Since the mid-seventeenth century fashion has increasingly become popular as two important events took place: on the one hand, the European royal courts and aristocrats showed higher interest towards fashion styles and, on the other hand, the technological advances (e.g., fly shuttle, sewing machine) led to the significant rise of the clothing production (English and Munroe, 2022).

Step by step, a sort of elitism emerged in fashion, connected with social status and class, and fueled by the multiplication of fashion designers (Breward, 2003). Therefore, the emergence of haute couture (“high dressmaking” in English) in the second half of the 19th century was only a matter of time. The beginning of the 20th century brought the twinning of various factors, such as the development of global capitalism, the emergence of mass production within big factories and the proliferation of department stores, which contributed to the expansion of fashion industry (Steele and Major, 2024). Later, a plethora of haute couture houses, such as Chanel, Dior, Yves Saint Laurent and Gucci, were established not only in Paris but all over the world.

The past century witnessed the appearance and development of Chanel, one of the most prestigious haute couture houses in the history of fashion. The genius of its founder, Gabrielle Bonheur ‘Coco’ Chanel, one of the most influential designer of the world (Garelick, 2014), decisively contributed to its business success.

The purposes of the study are to briefly define fashion and haute couture, and to present Coco Chanel in her both hypostases: the woman and the businesswoman. In this respect, the author employed a qualitative research method, based on an extensive literature review.

The paper is structured as follows: the next chapter illustrates the literature review. The third chapter of the paper deals with the research methodology. Results and discussion are displayed in the fourth chapter. Conclusions are presented at the end of the paper.

2. Literature review

Since its emergence, the concept of fashion has attracted the interest of many researchers and practitioners worldwide. From an etymological point of view, the English word “fashion” derives from the French word “façon”, meaning ways of making/doing things (Kawamura, 2005). Despite the lack of an universal definition, the term fashion is:

- “an unplanned process of recurrent change against a backdrop of order in the public realm” (Aspers and Godart, 2013, p. 185).
- “a bounded thing, fixed and experienced in space- an amalgamation of seams and textiles, an interface between the body and its environment...a practice, a fulcrum for the display of taste and status, a site for the production and consumption of objects and beliefs...an event, both spectacular and routine, cyclical in its adherence to the natural and commercial seasons”, according to Breward (Bethke et al., 2019, p. 193).
- “a prevailing custom or style of dress, etiquette, procedure; a shared and internalized sense of the modish style of the time” (Craik, 2024, p. 3).
- “a style that is popular at a particular time, especially in clothes, hair, make-up, etc.” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024a, p.1).
- “any mode of dressing that is prevalent during a particular time or in a particular place” (Britannica, 2024, p.1).
- “the area of activity that involves styles of clothing and appearance” (Collins Dictionary, 2024, p.1).

Thus, these definitions reveal that the concept of fashion is defined from various points of view, such as sociological or cultural. There is a plethora of interdisciplinary approaches to fashion which emphasize its multifaceted meanings (Bugg, 2009).

During the time, the clothing industry has spread in the entire world, become a multibillion-dollar business and been a very dynamic sector. In 2022, the world’s leading clothing exporter was China, followed by the European Union and Bangladesh (Table no. 1 and Table no. 2).

Table no. 1. Share in world exports of the leading clothing exporters in 2022, by country/region

Rank	Country	Share (%)
1	China	31.7
2	European Union	27.1
3	Bangladesh	7.9
4	Vietnam	6.1
5	Turkey	3.5
6	India	3.1
7	Indonesia	1.7
8	Cambodia	1.6
9	Pakistan	1.5

Source: Sabanoglu, 2024a

Table no. 2. Leading exporting countries of clothing worldwide by value in 2022

Rank	Country	Value (USD bn)
1	China	182
2	European Union	156
3	Bangladesh	45
4	Vietnam	35
5	Turkey	20
6	India	18
7	Indonesia	10
8	Cambodia	9
9	Pakistan	9

Source: *Sabanoglu, 2024b*

In the same year, the world's biggest importer was European Union, followed by the United States of America and Japan (Table no. 3 and Table no. 4).

Table no. 3. Share in world imports of the leading clothing importers in 2022, by country/region

Rank	Country	Share (%)
1	European Union	35.5
2	United States of America	19.2
3	Japan	4.5
4	United Kingdom	4.3
5	Canada	2.3
6	Republic of Korea	2.2
7	China	1.8
8	Australia	1.6
9	Switzerland	1.4

Source: *Statista Research Department, 2024*

Table no. 4. Leading importing countries of apparel worldwide by value in 2022

Rank	Country	Value (USD bn)
1	European Union	215
2	United States of America	116
3	Japan	27
4	United Kingdom	26
5	Canada	14
6	Republic of Korea	13
7	China	11
8	Australia	9
9	Switzerland	9

Source: *Sabanoglu, 2024c*

Born in the late 19th-century Paris, haute couture combines skilled, quality and experienced craftsmanship, vast creativity and innovative design. In 1868, Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode was established to regulate the industry and promote the French fashion culture (Vogue, 2024). Being highly competitive and ever-changing, haute couture constitutes the most prestigious segment in fashion industry which is strongly connected with the activity of fashion houses. It represents “the [designing](#), making,

and selling of expensive fashionable clothing that is is not sold in shops and is made by hand (=not using a machine, factory, etc.), especially clothes made for a particular customer by a fashion company” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024b, p.1).

To obtain the nomination of a haute couture house one should fulfill several specific criteria. In this respect, the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture* (Trade Association of High Fashion) set the following:

- “having an atelier in Paris with minimum 15 full-time employees,
- having at least 20 full-time technical employees at one of their workshops,
- creating made-to-order clothing items for private clients,
- presenting minimum 50 day and evening designs every fashion season (in January & July)” (Mahmoud, 2024, p.1).

The global haute couture market was worth USD 12.15 billion (bn) in 2023 (Congruence Market Insights, 2024) and will worth USD 13.254,5 bn in 2024 (Mali, 2024). The value of this global market is estimated to grow due to a multitude of factors such as technological advancements, innovation improvements, and a rising demand for luxury fashion. Chanel, Dior, Versace, Gucci and Armani are among the global renowned haute couture houses (GlobalData Market Research, 2024). In an increasing globalized world (Toma, 2005), their highly successful businesses have at their core competitive strategies (Toma and Marinescu, 2015; Toma and Grădinaru, 2016; Toma et al., 2016a; Toma et al., 2016b; Toma, 2023a) and sound business models (Toma and Marinescu, 2012; Tohănean and Toma, 2018; Toma and Tohănean, 2018; Toma and Tohănean, 2019), and utilised different methods and techniques such as quality management (Toma, 2006; Toma and Naruo, 2009; Marinescu and Toma, 2015; Toma and Naruo, 2017), lean management (Naruo and Toma, 2007; Marinescu and Toma, 2008), agile management (Toma, 2023b), Six Sigma (Toma, 2008a), balanced scorecard (Toma et al., 2010), marketing mix (Grădinaru and Toma, 2017; Catană and Toma, 2021a; Catană and Toma, 2021b), customer experience (Toma and Catană, 2021a; Toma and Catană, 2021b), social responsibility and corporate citizenship (Toma, 2008b; Marinescu et al., 2010; Toma et al., 2011; Imbrișcă and and Toma, 2020), innovative entrepreneurship (Toma, 2013; Toma et al., 2013; Toma and Marinescu, 2017; Toma and Săseanu, 2017), organizational learning (Toma, 2012) and employees’ training and motivation (Marinescu and Toma, 2013; Săseanu and Toma, 2019).

The above-mentioned considerations show that the haute couture houses have successfully evolved since their appearance. Coco Chanel was one of their famous founders. This is why briefly presenting her life and business in the fourth chapter of the paper represents an interesting challenge and a useful example.

3. Research methodology

To reach the aims of the paper, the author employed a qualitative scientific research method based on a desk research. First, he identified and gathered the information from reports, articles and books. Then, the author analysed and synthesised the data through a comprehensive literature review. In the end, he elaborated the paper.

4. Results and discussion

This chapter of the paper displays the findings of the study altotogether with a short analysis. In this respect, the author illustrates and analyses some key facts from the biography

of Gabrielle Bonheur ‘Coco’ Chanel in her both hypostases: the woman and the businesswoman.

Born in Saumur, Coco Chanel (19.08.1883-10.01.1971) was the daughter of a poor French couple: Eugénie Jeanne Devolle Chanel and Albert Chanel. Immediately after the death of her mother, Coco was sent to an Catholic orphanage when she turned 11 year old (Cullen and Burks, 2023). There, in an austere religious environment, she learned to sew from the nuns (Baxter-Wright, 2012). However, the lack of maternal love was partially compensated by her aunt, Louise. In her house, located in Varennes-sur-Allier, Coco found kindness and love. Louise also taught Coco to sew but in a creative and pleasant manner (Figure no. 1).

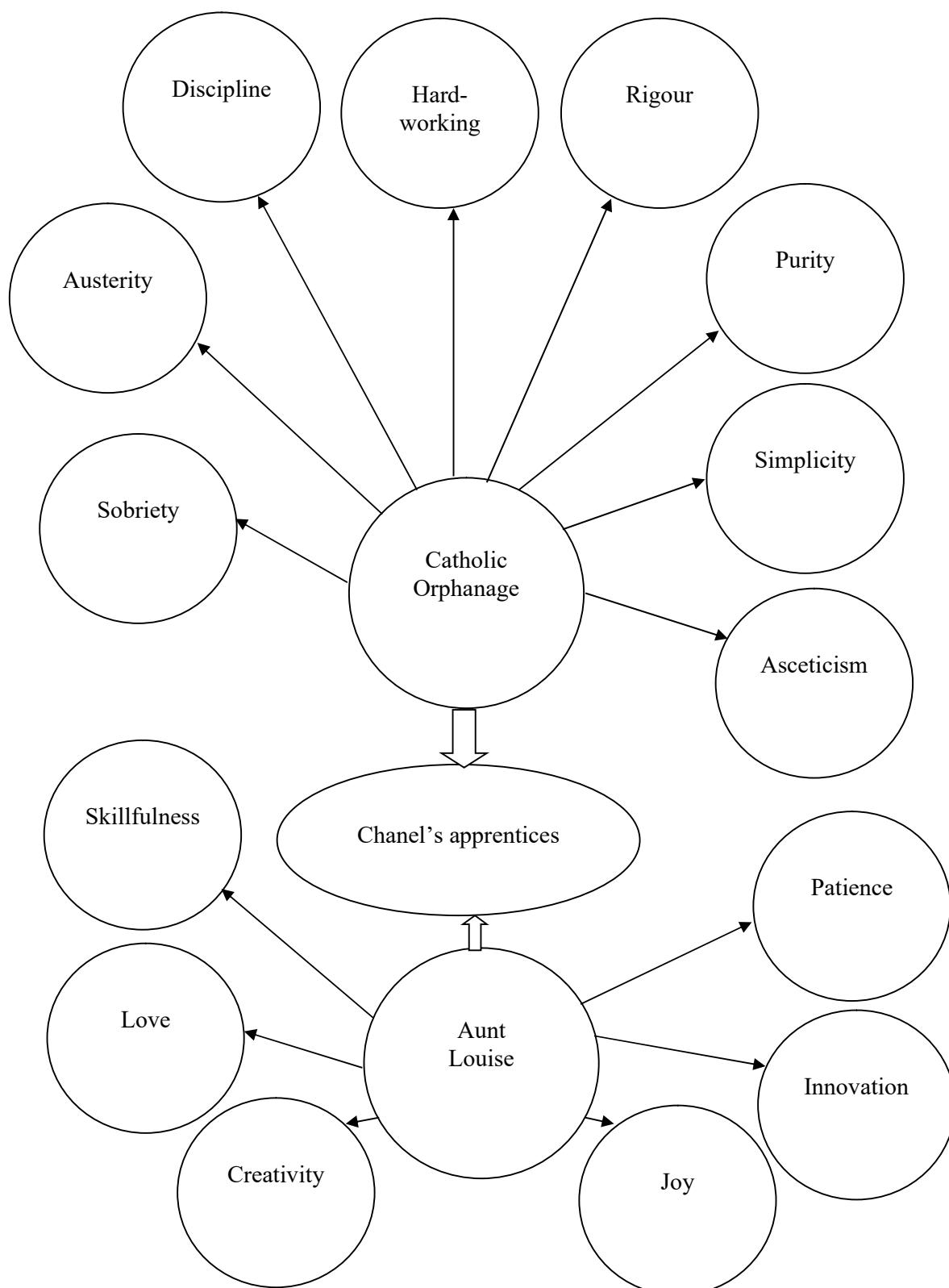
Thus, after a double sewing experience, Chanel became a seamstress when she turned 19 years old (Chaney, 2011). Two wealthy men, the French Étienne Balsan and the British Arthur “Boy” Capel, offered her an important financial support in order to launch a small business in the fashion industry: a millinery salon located in Paris, entitled Chanel Modes.

From the beginning of the 1910s, her business proved to be successfully. Having good eyes and being a creative designer, Chanel was aware of her lack of expertise. This is why she hired “Lucienne Rabaté, a highly skilled milliner from the fashionable millinery House of Maison Lewis whou brought a loyal clientele with her” (Cullen and Burks, 2023, p.12). It is said that “the boyishly simple style Coco sported looked irresistibly fresh and modern” (Garelick, 2014, p.50), a sober style that made women to feel free (Meyer-Stabley and Maache, 2017). Consequently, her business rapidly expanded in Deauville, a Normandian resort.

By radically transforming the design of women clothes, Chanel began to attain celebrity all over the world (de la Haye and Mendes, 2021). Without any doubt, she was “a legend of her time, famous all around the world- an original influencer” (Rogers, 2023, p.13). Starting from these issues, Chanel businesswoman may be characterized as follows:

- visionary;
- hard-working;
- creative;
- disciplined;
- innovative;
- rigorous,
- details-oriented,
- promoter of simplicity,
- eager to learn,
- meticulous,
- conscientious.

These features show that Chanel was both a complex woman and a thriving businesswoman in the haute couture domain (**Figure no. 1. Coco Chanel’s double apprenticeship**).



5. Conclusions

The fashion industry has always been a topic of interest for numerous researchers and practitioners worldwide. Its specialized and luxury segment, haute couture, has increasingly become prominent since its emergence in the second half of the 19th century.

The paper provides a better understanding of the concepts of fashion and haute couture by taking in account various perspectives. Also, it illustrates the story of a famous woman who obtained a remarkable business success in an industry dominated by men. The findings show that, despite the difficult times she encountered during the first period of her life, Coco Chanel will eternally remain in our memory as one of the most remarkable couturière of the world history.

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