

BEYOND THE AESTHETE

TRANSFORMING THE ROLE OF THE FASHION DESIGNER IN AN EMERGENT SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

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Abstract

The role of the fashion designer must transform. The fashion marketplace has reached unprecedented levels of abundance, thus altering society's relationship with design. Consumers' basic needs are over-met and have surpassed the material realm; consumers are increasingly driven by their search for emotional fulfillment via design. This emerging behavior is pivoting the perception of design "value" from the tangible to the intangible. While traditional values of function and aesthetics remain fundamental, a design's capacity to deliver "emotional value" to consumers must become the focus of design practice. This requires a transformation of the designer's traditional role. Rather than creating from myopic biases, they must research consumers' psychographics to "design emotion." This new role—the "Designer-As-Social Scientist"—takes a holistic view of consumers' needs. The designer's transformed role will result in products having greater emotional value, enhanced product sustainability, and businesses increasing consumer loyalty and resultant sales by offering only those products that are truly desired by their target audience.

Keywords: Fashion Design, Generation Z, Fashion System, Consumer Behavior, Sustainability

Introduction

The traditional role of the fashion designer is no longer relevant or sustainable. As the contemporary fashion marketplace reaches unprecedented levels of abundance and consumption, consumers' needs and desires for design move well beyond the material realm. Thus, fashion designers can no longer maintain a singular focus on producing objects that offer conventional forms of value (e.g. material worth and function). Designers must now incorporate "emotional value" into their creations that targets consumers' unique practical and emotional needs.

This new practice requires the fashion designer's role to transform. The conventional and outmoded "designer-as-auteur" who espouses personal preferences and dictates to consumers must be replaced by designers who, through their use of advance research processes grounded in the social sciences, offer emotionally compelling products that provide emotional value to their audience. The very design process itself must shift: rather than creating designs from myopic, personal biases, designers must begin creative ventures by researching their consumers' psychographics and

emotional needs. This research will substantiate their creations, thereby yielding greater emotional value increasingly sought by consumers.

The need to transform the designer's role is due in part to society's changing relationship with design. In the 21st century, design has become a near-obsession for consumers who want greater accessibility to "high design" products. In response, retailers develop collaborations with extolled "guest star" designers, including Versace for H&M and Missoni for Target. Consumers purchase these unprecedented levels of merchandise, causing fashion brands to respond with correspondingly extreme levels of production.

Consequently, a new relationship has emerged between design and consumer. When viewed through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), the overabundance that characterizes first-world societies enables people to have their basic needs met and search for meaningful life experiences and emotional fulfillment. This search for meaning generates the increasing importance that emotionally compelling narratives have in oversaturated markets where consumers are inundated with offerings. Rather than seeking design that merely offers traditional, tangible value

(function and aesthetics), consumers seek products that provide “emotional value” that fulfills their increasingly complex and nuanced emotional needs. This deeper form of value leads people to cherish their goods longer, thus supporting sustainability. To succeed, fashion designers must adopt a new role—the “Designer-As-Social Scientist.” In this advanced role, designers will transform their traditional design processes into a new framework that generates detailed research to illuminate consumers’ specific needs for emotional fulfillment. This data underpins all proceeding stages of design—from design concept to final product to presentation format(s). This new role also results in products having greater meaning and emotional value; designers standing out in the over-saturated market; enhanced sustainability; and businesses increasing resultant sales by offering products that are truly desired by their audience.

The Contemporary Fashion System

At the advent of the 21st century, a watershed moment occurred when consumers’ interests in “designed” objects evolved into a near-obsession. Aesthetics became more pervasive across demographics and lifestyles, no matter their member’s social, economic, or professional affiliations. Consumers’ growing interest in “high design”—design that is commonly perceived as “cutting edge” and typically created by an acclaimed designer or brand—became especially piqued. This rising attention to and resultant sales in high design are attributed to the ubiquity of the internet that promoted higher standards of choice and aestheticism among consumers, increase of marketing campaigns that promoted conspicuous consumption, growing affluence, and emergent technologies that facilitated hyper-accelerated and less expensive production output. For the average middle-class consumer, homes could now be filled with high design—no matter how pedestrian or utilitarian the object—such as the Target housewares collection designed by the internationally extolled architect Michael Graves. The sudden, meteoric enthusiasm for design has also led fashion to proliferate. Partnerships between mass-retailers and world-famous designers have gained especially high levels of fervor and resultant sales revenue. For instance, H&M has produced over twenty five collaborations with design luminaries that include Karl Lagerfeld and

Lanvin. When the retailer unveiled its collaboration with Balmain, nearly 500 shoppers slept outside H&M’s London store the night before the opening. Similar fervor has been experienced across diverse public platforms. The television show Project Runway’s US syndicate grew 150% in just four seasons and has aired 25 versions internationally (Givhan, 2014). The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s (MMA) exhibition “Heavenly Bodies,” a display of religious-inspired fashion, attracted more than 1.65 million visitors, making it the most visited exhibit in the museum’s 150-year history (MMA, n.d.). The exhibition’s “conversation” between tangible objects and intangible beliefs and feelings underscored design’s ability to surpass mere aesthetics and functionality and deliver emotional fulfillment to broad audiences.

Consumers’ growing obsession for fashion has led the industry to swell. Fashion has grown from a \$500 billion trade to a \$2.4 trillion a year global behemoth in just 30 years (Thomas, 2019). Accordingly, the number of employees in the textile, clothing and footwear industry increased 275% in just 14 years, from 20 million in 2000 to approximately 75 million by 2014 (Duke, 2017). Today, the global fashion value chain—from designers to distributors to retailers—employs well over 300 million people (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017).

The increasing attention to fashion across consumer demographics and the attendant spike in the fashion industry’s growth have directly contributed to an unyielding amount of apparel production and consumption. For example, the number of garments produced annually has doubled since 2000 and exceeded 100 billion for the first time in 2014 (Remy, Speelman, and Swartz, 2016). Thus, factories produce exorbitant volumes of low-cost “high design” goods that perpetually entice consumers to buy things more often, consequently creating record levels of consumption. Today’s consumers purchase five times more clothing than they did in 1980 for a worldwide total of 80 billion apparel items annually (Thomas, 2019).

Amid this unrelenting production and consumption is the ever-quickening lifespan of garments. The average consumer will wear a garment just seven or eight times before it is discarded—or, keeping garments half as long as they did just fifteen years ago (Remy, Speelman, & Swartz, 2016; Thomas, 2019). In the UK, 9,513 clothing items are discarded every five minutes and, globally, of the more than 100 billion items of clothing produced each year, 20% go unsold (Thomas, 2019).

The Resulting Emotional Effect

The fashion industry's hyper-accelerated model of "take, make, dispose" has consequently produced a sea change in how the contemporary consumer understands—and relates to—fashion. Designed products become mere objects that provide an immediate sense of reward through the act of selecting, purchasing, and owning them. Design moves between the states of usefulness and garbage at hyper-speed; this rapid lifecycle decreases the sentimental value placed on items by consumers. Apparel quickly becomes "stuff" or a "thing" with no meaning, no emotional value. The approach to fast fashion and its attendant global economies of scale amplifies this expedited lifecycle and reduced emotional value due to its propagation of homogeneous design that, in turn, fails to address fully consumers' specific aesthetic and/or emotional needs. Such failings to address consumers' distinct personal needs in the immediate future could create dire consequences for fashion brands: in one recent survey, 80% of respondents stated they are more likely to do business with a company that offers personalization while another 52% said they would switch brands if they aren't getting a personalized experience (Baird, 2018).

The Emerging Consumer Generation

Commonly known as "Generation Z," today's young adults are the largest generation in history. Born between 1997 and 2012 and representing 40% of the world's consumers, they exhibit specific attributes and needs that have been shaped by the world in which they have developed as both children and emerging adults. They will therefore greatly impact how the fashion industries evolve and how brands target the attributes of these emergent consumers. While a growing body of research literature reveals extensive shared interests and associated consumer behaviors that are common to "Gen Z," this study summarizes three themes that are especially salient to the future fashion industry: Corporate Responsibility, Social Justice, and Emotional Wellness. Together, these themes illustrate how Gen Z consumers use consumption as a way to communicate their values and beliefs for a better world, and by doing so, will transform the meaning and function of design in society—and the role of the future fashion designer.

Corporate Responsibility

As the fashion industry's catastrophes and nefarious acts—including the Rana Plaza apparel factory collapse and abundant allegations of forced labor in manufacturing—are exposed by the news media, consumers are increasingly scrutinizing their purchases to ensure ethical and sustainable practices have been followed. This scrutiny is especially high among Gen Z consumers: 45% always research for background information before buying, and 75% consider a trusted brand to be an important purchasing factor (Amed et al., 2018; Granskog et al., 2020). These world events and resulting sentiments are influencing Gen Z's consumer behaviors. A recent survey revealed: 90% of Gen Z respondents believe companies have a responsibility to address environmental and social issues, 66% are willing to pay more for sustainable goods, and nearly 40% want to know what goes into products and how they are made before they buy (Amed et al., 2018). Gen Z practices "conscience consumerism" by placing a greater value on brands that practice social responsibility, support underserved communities, promote environmental sustainability.

Social Justice

Gen Z is more widely attentive to inclusion, diversity, social equity, and human rights than previous generations. Among young Americans, for instance, over 90% "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree" that gays/lesbians should have the legal right to adopt a child, nearly 60% believe forms/online profiles should include additional gender options, and 77% state a company's diversity would be a deciding factor on accepting a job offer (Stolzenberg et al., 2020; Parker & Igielnik, 2020; McGregor-Kerr, 2019). This generation's ethos is "we"-centered and one in which young peoples' concerns center around the well-being of everyone rather than just themselves. Such values are influencing Gen Z's attitudes towards consumption; its members are looking beyond tangible products and trying to understand brands' missions and purposes—and how brands contribute to a building a better society (Rahilly et al., 2020, n.p.).

Thus, a brand's practices—and not merely the physical products they offer—factor heavily into this demographic's purchasing decisions and brand loyalties. A recent survey of 2,000 consumers revealed two-thirds said they would switch, avoid, or boycott brands based on their stance on controversial issue (Amed et al., 2018). Another

survey of 16,000 participants showed 72% stated that the ability of a brand's values matching theirs is a deciding factor when shopping (Edelman, 2019). It therefore behooves fashion brands to become active leaders in promoting and advocating issues of social justice, thereby delivering the added emotional value increasingly sought by today's consumers.

Emotional Wellness

Gen Z is growing up in a world filled with turmoil that has rarely been seen in the past. These young adults were born into a post-9/11 world, are witnessing escalating terrorism, use smartphones that facilitate near-constant communication with their parents and friends, and are observing unprecedented levels of societal/geo-political discord. These and other factors that are unique to this generation are instilling pronounced worry and fear among many young adults today. This is leading them to focus on and prioritize more acutely their physical and emotional safety and security. For instance, across US campuses, there has been a rise in disinviting (or attempting to disinvite) speakers whose topics or backgrounds are unsettling, challenging, or controversial to students: between 2006 and 2022, there was a 450% increase of attempted and completed disinvitations (6 and 33, respectively) (Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, 2023). The reasons for these incidents vary but, as Twenge (2017) asserts, “[m]any disinvitations are framed in terms of preserving the ‘health’ or ‘safety’ of students—usually not physical health or safety but emotional health or safety” (pp. 155–156).

Additionally, rising numbers of young Americans are choosing to delay significant life milestones that are typically associated with transitioning from adolescence to early adulthood. Instead of taking chances and facing challenges, these individuals are choosing options that offer more physical and emotional protection and comfort. For example, between 1989 and 2020, fewer US twelfth graders obtained a driver's license (down 29%), tried alcohol (down 34%), went on dates (down 25%), or had a paid job (down 33%) (Miech et al., 2021; Twenge & Park, 2019). Today's undergraduates (vs. students in the 1990s) “scored markedly higher on a measure of ‘maturity fears.’ [They] were more likely to agree ‘I wish that I could return to the [emotional] security of childhood’ and ‘The happiest time in life is when you are a child.’ They were less likely to agree ‘I would rather be an adult than a child’ and ‘I feel happy that I am not a child anymore’” (Twenge, 2017, p. 45).

Such aforesaid factors as these—which include excessive screen time and subsequent decrease of in-person socialization—are causing Gen Z to experience deteriorating emotional health like never before. For the first time ever, most undergraduates in 2016 rated their mental health as being “below average” (Twenge, 2017). In just nine years (2010–2019), there were increases in those “feeling things were hopeless” (up 27%), who “felt overwhelming anxiety” (up 42%), and who “felt so depressed that it was difficult to function” (up 60%) (American College Health Association, 2011; 2019).

Design and “Emotional Value”

The contemporary oversaturated apparel market has resulted from consumers' exorbitant demands for high design and the subsequent spike in production and consumption. This oversaturation has spawned an environment of overabundance for consumers whose basic needs are not only met but grossly exceeded. Fashion brands must therefore distinguish their products in ways that surpass the traditional attributes of design (aesthetics and function) through the new attribute of “emotional value” in order to compete in the global fashion marketplace.

When more of our basic needs are met, “we increasingly expect sophisticated experiences that are emotionally satisfying and meaningful. These experiences will not be simple products. They will be complex combinations of products, services, spaces, and information” (Pink, 2005, p. 46). The theory of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) (Figure 1) aligns with this assertion. Today's consumers climb from the pyramid's lower levels (where tangible necessities are located) toward its apex (where intangible emotional fulfillment is situated). This progression alters how consumers relate to design; their engagement with design is no longer driven by need but, rather, by the desire for emotional fulfillment that is gained through the design's uniquely compelling narratives. This does not imply that a design's core aims can (or should) be overlooked: it must work and elevate aesthetics. Rather, it means people increasingly seek emotional worth from design. As a result, crafting a compelling narrative that strategically delivers emotional value must be a driving force behind all future stages of design rather than a consequential effect of the product's final outcome. Moreover, given the aforementioned characteristics of today's

emergent Gen Z consumers who represent the largest consumer demographic today, it behooves fashion designers to reorient their practice as one that actively supports pressing social, personal, political, and environmental realities via their designs. [Fig. 01]

These factors necessitate a new role of the fashion designer, one that will transform into the advanced “Fashion Designer-As-Social Scientist.” To succeed in this new role, designers must be proficient in advanced research methods historically found in the social sciences, not design. Pragmatic social science methodologies must fuse with creative design processes, thereby creating a new framework in which designers comprehend the complexity of people, cultures, and belief systems that exist in

their target market, which may be different from the designer’s own myopic views. The outmoded “fashion-designer-as-auteur” whose subjective predispositions guided all design choices is replaced by progressive designers who incorporate objective data-driven research to gain findings for analysis that illuminate precisely what the designer’s audience truly wants and emotionally desires. In this regard, designers proactively and strategically contribute towards the “greater good” of society via products that aim to provide targeted emotional support and holistic personal wellness—an increasingly critical and beneficial role of the designer given the previously cited widespread decrease in people’s emotional health. When adopting this advanced research

MASLOW’S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

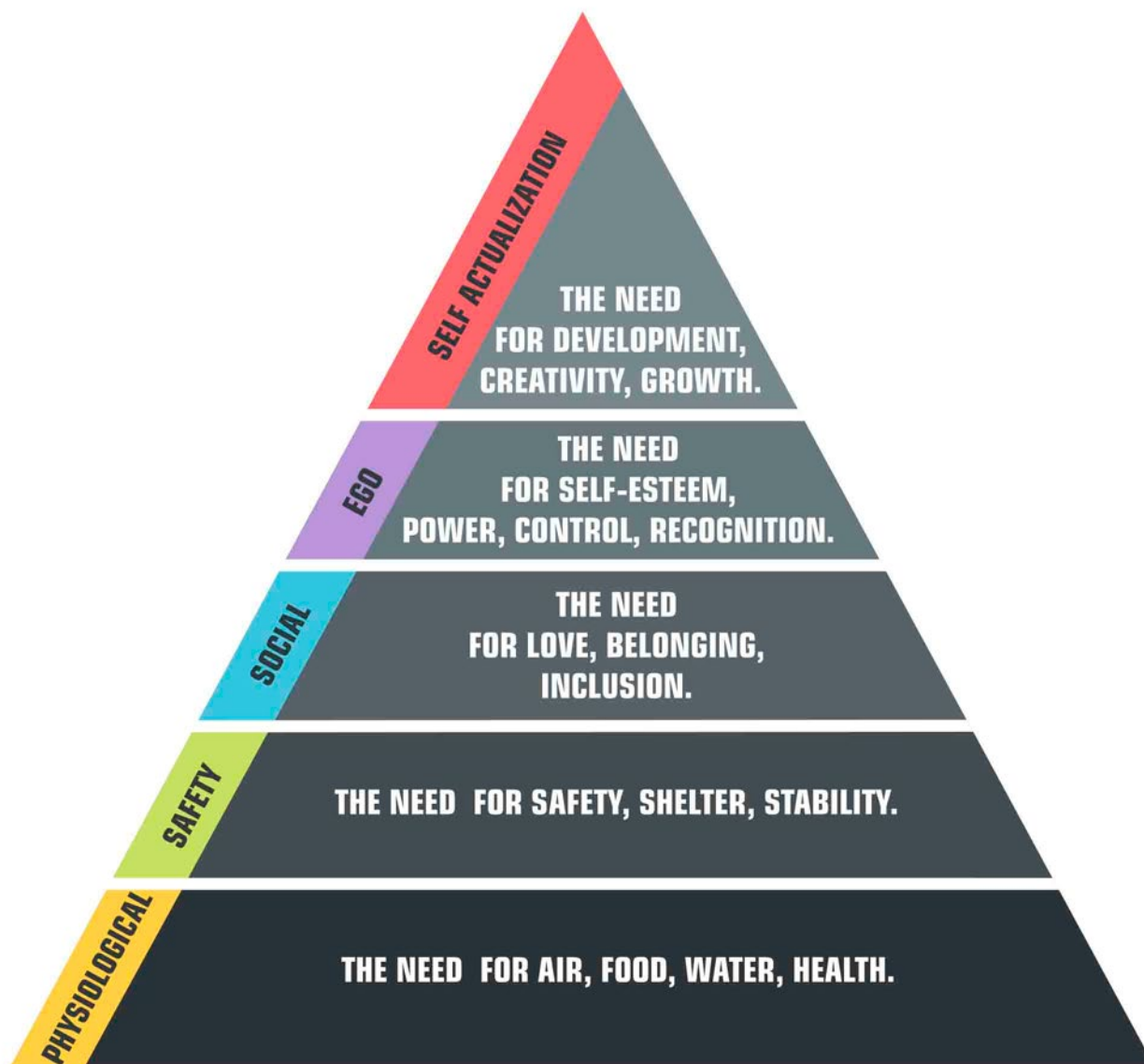


Fig. 01

methodology, fashion designers transform the conventional design process itself. Before starting any creative project, fashion designers must first develop a series of research questions that will ground the research process and provide the answers to questions that include: “What will be my customer’s emotional needs?”, “How can the products and/or experiences I design fulfill this identified emotional pleasure they desire?”, and “How can these products and/or experiences provide buyers lasting satisfaction?” When applying this new data, designers will be better positioned to determine which attributes their products and services will have. Designers will “design emotion” based on factual research data, strategically creating products and services that are imbued with stronger, more targeted narratives and emotional content. In turn, the designer’s standard competencies (such as creativity, contextualization, attention to detail, and the ability to see things in a different way) will be bolstered by additional competencies (such as ethnography, altruism, data analysis/synthesis, and empathy). As Gen Z consumers increasingly expecting brands to create products and services that respond to their

individual beliefs, values, and sense of self, this research framework, design processes, and added competencies will prime fashion designers for sustained success in the emergent fashion industry. By transforming the fashion designer’s role and creative practice, the fashion industry will no longer simply produce “stuff” that possess limited, fleeting emotional value but instead goods and services that deliver increasingly personalized, nuanced, and long-term emotional value and fulfillment required by Gen Z consumers.

Recommendations

There are extensive methods to increase emotional value in fashion. Design customization and personalization are particularly advantageous for Gen Z “who no longer respond to being treated solely as consumers and, instead, seek to occupy the role of brand collaborators” (Lonergan, 2020, p. 110). Fashion brands are responding by providing co-design and customizable options for customers. For example, Nike and Coach allow shoppers to choose colorways and materials on numerous

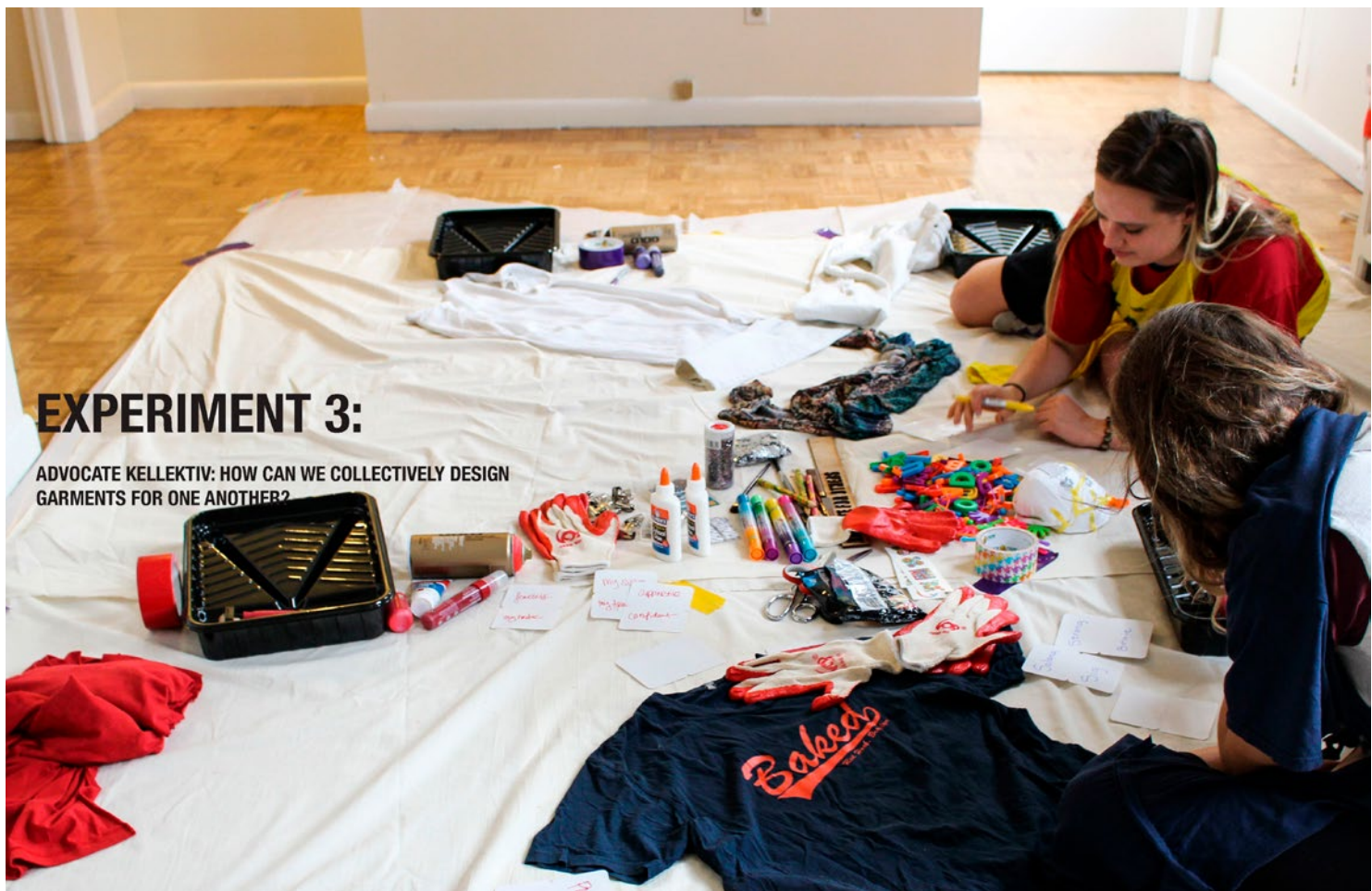


Fig. 02



Fig. 03

products. Personalized services are expected to become so commonplace that researchers speculate retailers will provide “smart” mirrors that will scan the shopper’s face and body to provide style recommendations. Consumers’ emotional needs are being met through these services, thus leading them to feel these personalized products are more significant representations of their individual identities. This, in turn, causes them to have a stronger emotional connection to their purchases, thereby extending a product’s lifespan and increase sustainability. [Fig. 02 – 04]

An exemplar of fashion design operating within this transformative fashion construct—The Designer-As-Social-Scientist—is The Kellektiv, a socially-oriented fashion system and collection created by Kendall Warson [Fig. 02–04]. Warson’s initiative aims to address, validate, and de-normalize stories of sexual assault and bodily harm amongst young women by inviting them to share their own experiences, unite as advocates for one another, and form meaningful connections through fashion. As part of the system’s design processes, participants donate apparel items that possess personal, symbolic meaning to them and, through upcycling and recycling, engage in co-design practices that reassemble and reimagine garments into modular, exchangeable components. Once completed, the garments are redistributed to the participants who then further personalize their garments/looks by rearranging layers, exchanging full or partial garments within the Kellektiv

community, and employing other methods for personalization. As Warson notes, “The system grows a collective consciousness and encourages collective advocacy in private and public spheres through the sharing, giving, exchanging, and reassembling of existing garments.” Warson’s work fulfills Gen Z’s distinct values, increasing needs for brands to address social issues, preferences for design personalization/customization, and greater needs for emotional value from fashion. Through these advanced processes of research and design, the designer’s role is transformed.

Conclusion

While fashion designers of the 20th century created products in a smaller, more limited marketplace, designers of the 21st century operate within a hyper-accelerated global industry that over-meets consumers’ basic needs; this is altering society’s relationship with fashion. The consumer’s perception of design “value” has evolved from the mere tangible to the intangible. While the conventional principles of aesthetics and function remain essential components to design, designers must increasingly shift their attention to a product’s capacity to provide emotional value if they hope to attract customers and sustain consumer loyalty. This growing imperative has been influenced by a number of factors that include: the mass obsession

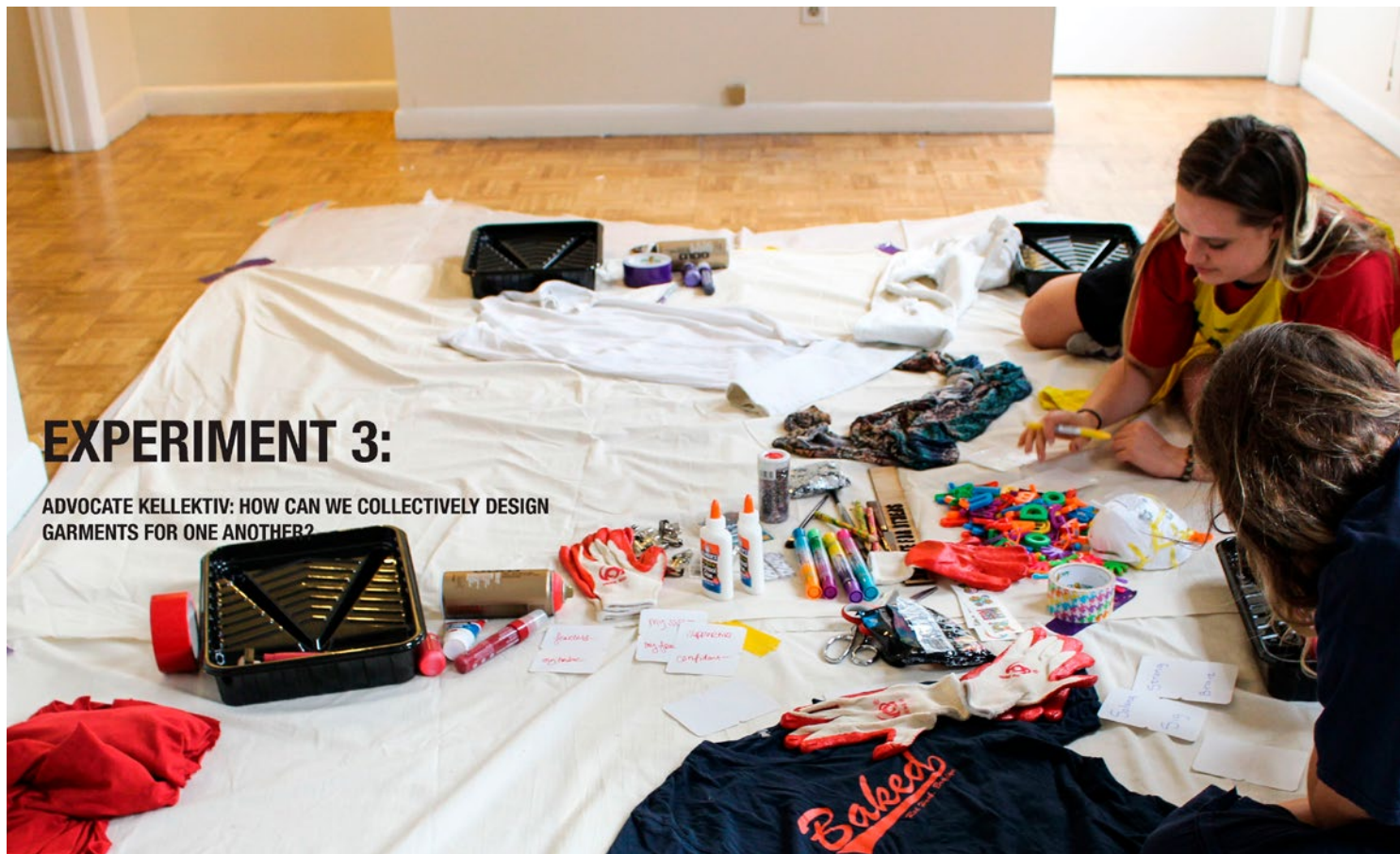


Fig. 04

with “high design”; the oversaturated marketplace in which designers struggle to stand out and capture consumers’ attention; and excessive rates of consumption fueled by affordable “high design” and consumers’ use of it for emotional fulfillment (i.e. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs).

These factors that are creating an increased demand for emotional value in design necessitates the new role of the “Designer-As-Social Scientist”—a fashion designer who understands better the psychosocial needs and wants of their audience so they may craft well-targeted emotionally compelling designs. Fashion designers must shift from their traditionally myopic design processes to those based in social sciences research methodologies that enable them to collect and analyze the actual emotional needs of their audience. In doing so, fashion brands gain detailed, factual understandings about consumers’ values, beliefs, and emotional needs, all of which increasingly influence their consumers’ behaviors. The attainment of this research is vital given the sizable population of Gen Z consumers who display markedly different attributes and needs from fashion products and brands than previous generations.

In many ways, design is a service to customers. When a designer’s work becomes informed by

the emotional needs of their audience, they will respond by crafting more enduring, sustainable designs. The role of creator (designer) and analyzer (social scientist) will synthesize as everyone engaged in the process of defining, planning, and designing fashion products and systems will be instrumental in the future of design. It is by doing so that the fashion designer and the fashion industry will remain successful and sustainable.

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Figure Captions

Fig. 01: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Source: Shutterstock.com

Fig. 02: The Kellektiv, co-design initiative Source: Kendall Warson

Fig. 03: The Kellektiv, design process sample Source: Kendall Warson

Fig. 04: The Kellektiv, modular garment prototype Source: Kendall Warson