

# KNITWEAR CONSUMERS, COMMUNITIES AND MAKERS

## REDEFINING FASHION ENGAGEMENT

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## Abstract

Mutable trends and a dynamic interplay between the past, present, and future characterize the contemporary fashion industry. Knitwear, a sector deeply rooted in tradition, is experiencing a resurgence and is becoming pivotal in bridging creation and consumption, challenging traditional fashion norms, and empowering individuals to engage with fashion as a form of self-expression, activism, and community building.

The article employs a qualitative research approach and focuses on contemporary sources to analyze the sector's response to changing consumer preferences, technological advancements, and global events, as well as to understand how knitwear embodies the significant paradigm shifts of our days. The analysis highlights knitwear's transformative potential in questioning consumers' position by fostering creativity, sustainability, and ethical and collaborative practices. Knitwear emerges as a dynamic space where cultural innovation thrives through a blend of heritage craftsmanship, modern design aesthetics, and technological advancements.

**Keywords:** *Fashionscapes; Knitwear Sector; Individuals and Community; Creation and Consumption*

## MUTABLE FASHION IN MUTABLE TIMES

The inability to define the contemporary has made it challenging to determine the future, altering our perception of time. Agamben (Fiorani, 2020) addresses what it means to be contemporary by suggesting that it is not about aligning with the present but rather about a transversal stance, a disconnection, a time lag, an anachronism. The contemporary individual is one who, by dividing and interpolating time, can transform it and relate it to other temporalities. We live in a time where the present and the past constantly influence each other, redefining our desires and needs. Fashion inherently tends to change; it is mutable, generating change and evolving from constant

change, often referencing and re-referencing the past in the present to envision the future. "The creative processes are characterized by flexibility, which involves considering multiple solutions to a problem, fluidity, meaning the frequency and ease with which multiple ideas are generated, and the development and refinement of an effective strategy in problem-solving by evaluating and selecting available opportunities" (Fiorani, 2021, p. 130). In a complex context and an ever-evolving society, fashion and all its related sectors must be reinterpreted as *fashionscapes* (Calefato, 2021). These *fashionscapes* increasingly demonstrate the interconnectedness between everyday styles, domestic and laboratory clothing production forms, and an unpredictable network of exchanges,

translations, and fusions among fashion symbols circulating in the social imagination through digital media.

In this scenario, the knitwear sector is rediscovering itself as an area where the culture of craftsmanship—the essence of modern and contemporary work—intersects with products capable of narrating the here and now using primarily traditional techniques within an industry undergoing technological advancements. In knitwear, the fusion of artisanal craftsmanship (Conti & Franzo, 2020) with technological research to produce innovative solutions is paramount: “For knitwear, the innovation and update of industrial manufacturing processes led to a production made by numerical control machines (CNC) where the technological contribution and the level of automation are very, and the convergence of physical and digital environments, at the heart of the Fashion Industry 4.0 debate is an established feature of knitwear design practice” (Motta et al., 2024, p. 706). The discourse on products is no longer necessarily linear; often, an image, a touch, or a gesture is enough for storytelling to draw from the wealth of knowledge deposited in cultural heritage. “It can emerge as an original narrative using hybrid communication channels that blend analog with digital and virtual realms” (Calefato, 2021, p. 58)

## METHODOLOGY

This article combines the exploratory and qualitative aspects (Creswell, 2014; Bauer & Gaskell, 2000); consequently, the research uses a multi-method approach by investigating the current representation of the knitwear sector from a systemic perspective. The investigation is framed in the European area, where the authors’ research activity is situated. Consequently, the selected sources and the case studies belong to this area. However, they do not leave behind the links they may have with other countries with similarities in market dynamics and cultural influences, like North America.

The methodology used combined Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) and the observation of the results (Kawamura, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2006) by the most authoritative contemporary observers (AA.VV., 2024) with qualitative case studies. The aim is to build a qualitative picture of the European knitwear production sector, of the evolving role of consumers in it, and of its relation with the

paradigm shifts of contemporary times.

## THE SPACE FOR KNITWEAR IN CONTEMPORARY CONSUMPTION

As already stated in the Introduction, the textile and apparel industry has been integral to Europe’s economy for centuries, with a rich heritage of craftsmanship and innovation. Italy, with its long-standing tradition of excellence in fashion and textile production, has emerged as a leading hub for knitwear manufacturing and design. Data highlight the sector’s impact on the global market landscape: in Europe, the value of knitwear imports is estimated at €25.8 billion (The European market potential for knitwear | CBI, s.d.) in 2022, while exported knitwear worth €18.5 billion, with an average annual rate of 9.7% between 2017 and 2022 (Knitwear Market, s.d.). The market dynamics indicate a positive outlook for the industry with opportunities for growth in various segments like outerwear, innerwear, sportswear, and others, all areas worth exploring for knit designers.

These opportunities are reinforced by the recorded significant shift in consumers’ preferences towards healthier lifestyles that propel comfortable, home, low-luxury clothing and the technical outdoor (The State of Fashion, 2024), all categories perfectly embodied by knitwear. These fashion segments match well with the latest knitwear technologies, which allow the design of engineered garments that offer performative solutions at the edge between functionality and style.

However, are these the only reasons why people appreciate knitwear?

We can state there is much more. Aside from mere market data, knitwear is positioning itself at the intersection of traditional ways of consuming garments and new emerging perspectives.

The public is moving towards a slower, more attentive, and more engaged way of consuming, demonstrating an interest in the process of making besides the product itself. An exemplary case is Artknit’s production and offerings. “Through a digital platform and a 100% digital brand, Artknit ensures direct access, without intermediaries, to the purchase of high-quality garments (cashmere, extra-fine merino wool) with modern and timeless designs. Artknit produces on-demand and ships directly from partner knitwear factories to customers’ homes, thus ensuring a luxurious, sustainable product at affordable prices” (Conti & Franzo, 2020, p. 132). Alternatively, consider Rifò (Vezzoli et al., 2022), which started as a social and

sustainable project with the idea of creating a line of garments made in the textile cluster of Prato with recycled materials and giving a part of the profit to local NGOs. Rifò was born as a project, and we are progressively shifting towards a more design-oriented fashion brand, with the intent to propose products at an affordable price, with sound design development, and with values behind them, cultivating both the social and environmental aspects. As Niccolò Cipriani said (Motta, in Vezzoli et al., 2022, p. 65), “There is a lot of attention and interest in the process and the benefits, even if the end customers are always looking for something well done but at an affordable price. The attention of the final customers is growing faster”. The birth and raising of such realities demonstrate the existence of new attention that allows the blurring of boundaries between products, processes, consumers, and makers.

## **KNITWEAR AS A PRIVILEGED CONTEXT TO EXPAND THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN CREATION AND CONSUMPTION-ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

A new condition where boundaries are blurred is advisable, but it is still subtle. The reality still presents an overcrowded market where understanding the dynamics that influence consumers’ tastes is mandatory, and crucial for businesses that must meet demands and stay competitive to survive. This is true for any fashion business and any knitwear designer and company, forced to generate the new while constantly monitoring a complex interplay of factors that regulate consumption patterns: fashion trends, seasonal demand, material preferences, pricing, sustainability concerns, and technological advancements.

Let these factors alone guide design decisions. In that case, we run one of the main risks of the contemporary fashion industry, namely leaving aside the cultural contents to follow the market demands, resulting in collections heavily entrusted to data and guidelines provided by merchandising. In an ideal scenario, designers’ creative contribution should balance the market’s requests. However, today’s fashion industry tends to prioritize merchandisers’ and buyers’ work, which is driven by data analytics, market research, consumer behavior insights, and sales forecasts to meet market demands and generate profits. Inherently linked to societal values, cultural influences,

historical references, and individual expression (Smith, 2018), the work of designers used to influence cultural icons and challenge gender norms (Jones, 2019), making fashion a force of change for cultural cues (Armitage & Roberts, 2016) and a shaper of contemporary landscapes. However, in such a merchandise-driven system, designers need to retain the role of cultural mediators they used to hold.

If, in big companies, the cultural content of fashion is being jeopardized by merchandising, we need new spaces for designers to be cultural sense-makers, finding new ways to explore untrodden paths, and detecting trends that arise in contexts other than traditional ones. Not least, we should question the role of consumers themselves, as they hopefully will change from consuming fashion to choosing consciously what to buy, eventually not anymore – or not only – buying it but co-designing and making it in multiple ways. A transformative path from consumers, through customers, to contributors. When observed from a broader perspective on the contemporary, we can see such changes in the practices, attitudes, and roles of consumption as expressions of the main transformative paradigms of the modern: sustainability, digitalization, and the human need for interconnectedness and mutual support (Haraway, 2003).

Restarting from this broad view, the following paragraphs of the article provide an interpretation of the three paradigms through the lens of knitwear designers, makers, and users, to understand how their practices represent opportunities to meet a new contemporaneity. This is where the above-cited cases of Artknit and Rifò find even more space and relevance. The following section frames the relation between the three paradigms and the essence of knitwear, and subsequently supports the thesis through additional case studies classified in five relevant categories.

## **KNITTING IN THE PARADIGM SHIFTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY: CASE STUDIES AND DISCUSSION**

Born as a manual practice passed from hand to hand through generations, knitwear has transitioned into public spaces and gained popularity in recent years, evolving from a traditional craft to a trendy practice that resonates with individuals seeking a sense of creativity, accomplishment, and community building. From here, knitting has become a means of self-expression, activism and empowerment, and action

towards sustainability, especially among younger generations who are increasingly conscious of fast fashion's environmental and social impact (George, 2020). The rise of social media platforms has facilitated the formation of solid knitting communities where individuals can connect, share their creations, and engage in discussions. Overall, knitting and knitted products have transcended stereotypes and, alongside they belong to a flourishing industrial sector, they easily connect with individuals in many forms and thus hold substantial potential for cultural innovation made by individuals themselves, on society and products. They are a fertile ground for people to relate and experiment with the contemporary, above-listed paradigm shifts. First, sustainability – both environmental and social – is met with self-production, mending, upcycling of old garments, and the diffusion of knitting as a practice for well-being and preserving heritage. Second, digitalization deals with intelligent manufacturing technologies, innovative software, digital environments, and spacing from large-scale industries to independent makers. Third, human connectedness, with knitting communities that recall the definition of creative community as described by Meroni (2007): a collaborative context where creativity happens on-field, with common characteristics: “a nonrhetorical view of reality, a positive even cheerful attitude, and an intrinsically entrepreneurial spirit (and courage)” (ibid., p. 10). This sense of community, together with courage, naturally opens space for dialogue and confrontation, generating social commitment and several forms of non-violent activism (Greer, 2008).

This experimental attitude moves more from individuals with their cultural identity rather than from the market data. Moving into the space of action created by knitwear, people are free to experience and experiment with all the above-cited aspects interconnected, detaching themselves from being mere consumers and becoming aware makers. Following these considerations, the following section reports cases where, thanks to the opportunities generated by the traditional features of knitting and the most updated tools of contemporaneity, we see boundaries blurring and opportunities rising.

The five case studies represent five knitwear phenomena that are either pulled by individuals or impact individuals' consuming behavior. They have been selected as they belong to the knitwear

scenario and strongly depend on the typical features of knitting practices, techniques, or technologies.

Each carries elements connected to all three paradigm shifts: albeit at a different balance, each case pursues environmental and/or social sustainability, exploits and promotes digital innovation, and enhances and leverages human connectedness.

## CREATIVE KNITTING COMMUNITIES

Free from market constraints, knitting creative communities dare to experiment with new techniques, textures, patterns, and silhouettes, introducing fresh and unique concepts to the market that then absorbs some of them. They foster collaboration and knowledge-sharing among designers, artisans, manufacturers, and consumers; they create platforms for networking, education, and skill development, nurturing a supportive ecosystem that benefits the entire knitwear industry. Moreover, creative communities play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage and traditional craftsmanship in regions with rich knitting traditions. They celebrate indigenous knitting techniques, patterns, and motifs, ensuring continuity and relevance in contemporary fashion. An example in this sense is the Oomingmak Musk Ox Producers' Co-operative in Alaska<sup>1</sup>. This cooperative is dedicated to promoting the use of qiviut, the soft underwool of the musk ox, in traditional Alaskan Native knitting practices. The cooperative works with indigenous knitters who create intricate and culturally significant garments using qiviut yarn, blending traditional designs with contemporary styles. By incorporating qiviut into their knitting projects, these artisans not only preserve the cultural heritage of Alaskan Native communities but also support sustainable practices and economic development within these communities.

Although not situated in the European territory, this case is a best practice among the initiatives taken by creative communities and is relevant to the European market when we observe it is increasingly fascinated by traditional artifacts from remote countries, too often superficially labeled as “ethnic” or “exotic”, with no further question or cultural investigation. We see the importance of such initiatives, which serve as proof of the existence of diverse cultural heritage, as a catalyst for an aware

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1 <https://www.qiviut.com/> last accessed March 14th, 2024

dialogue between cultures, and as a limitation to the risk of cultural appropriation.

*Sustainability* °°°

*Digitalization* °

*Human connectedness* °°°°°

## KNIT ACTIVISM

As a ready-to-practice technique, knitwear products are often used as communication vehicles for societal messages by activist movements (Myzelev, 2009; Greer, 2014). Born as protest objects, knitted handworks usually find space on catwalks and spread on the market, influencing mainstream fashion trends.

It was the case of the *Pussyhat*, a symbolic knitted pink hat that gained prominence during the *Women's March* in 2017. It became an iconic representation of women's rights, gender equality, and solidarity. The *Pussyhat Project*<sup>2</sup> was diffused through the web and encouraged people to knit pink hats and wear them during protests to make a visual statement for women's empowerment and social justice. The *Pussyhat* ended up on Missoni's catwalk during Milan Fashion Week in 2017 (Okwodu, 2017) as a powerful statement of solidarity and activism while adorned with Missoni's signature zigzags and stripes. The show began with models wearing these iconic hats, setting a political tone from the start and emphasizing the collection's protest theme. The fashion show became a platform for activism and solidarity, and the symbolic hat became a fashion product carrying its power and meaning.

The seamless transition of the *Pussyhat* from a protest symbol to a high-fashion runway piece exemplifies the power of knitwear as a medium for social commentary and activism. Its journey from the *Women's March* to the Missoni catwalk underscores how fashion can transcend mere aesthetics and become a potent platform for amplifying societal messages. By embracing the *Pussyhat's* symbolism and incorporating it into their collection, Missoni demonstrated solidarity with the cause and elevated the garment's significance, transforming it into a statement piece that carried the weight of its origins. This symbiosis between fashion and activism highlights the industry's potential to catalyze change and inspire

dialogue on pressing issues, ultimately using creativity as a force for positive impact.

*Sustainability* °°°

*Digitalization* °

*Human connectedness* °°°°°

## CUSTOMIZATION AND PERSONALIZATION

Suitable to be handmade, knitted garments are great for open spaces for customized and personalized options, catering to individual tastes and preferences. They empower consumers to express their creativity and individuality through bespoke designs, made-to-order services, and DIY knitting patterns.

Among others, *Unmade*<sup>3</sup> is a relevant experiment as it offers mass customization through digital technologies. It enables customers to design and order custom-made jumpers, scarves, and other knitted products without minimum order requirements, making factory production accessible to everyone. Thanks to the ultimate knitting technologies, *Unmade's* approach challenges traditional fashion production methods and empowers consumers to participate actively in the design process, fostering a deeper connection with the garments they create. By eliminating the need for stock holding and minimizing textile waste, *Unmade's* mass customization approach also promotes sustainability within the fashion industry. This consumer-centric model represents a paradigm shift, where individuals become decision-makers, and their creativity is celebrated. As the demand for unique, personalized products continues to grow, such innovative concepts will undoubtedly shape the future of fashion, harmonizing self-expression with environmental consciousness.

*Sustainability* °°°°

*Digitalization* °°°°°

*Human connectedness* °°°

## SUSTAINABILITY AND ETHICAL PRACTICES

By prioritizing eco-friendly materials, artisanal craftsmanship, and fair labor practices, knitwear communities and producers are at the forefront of promoting sustainability and ethical practices in the sector. Knitwear allows sustainable practices also

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pussyhatproject.com/> last accessed March 14th, 2024

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unmade.com/> last accessed March 14th, 2024

for bigger industries that are recently exploiting technology to reduce costs and relocate production where working conditions are safe, and wages are fair, also saving time and transport, with their harmful emissions for the environment.

Benetton's project *TV31100*<sup>4</sup> leverages Wholegarment knitting technique to increase the efficiency in knitwear production by eliminating yarn wastage and reducing environmental impact. The result is seamless pullovers of high quality and comfort, sustainable in two respects: first, environmentally, as there is no waste of yarn; second, ethically, as the technology optimizes the ratio revenues-costs, decreasing the time of production and increasing automation, resulting in the opportunity for the company to relocate part of the production in Italy, where working conditions and wages are regulated by laws that respect human rights.

These technological advancements demonstrate how innovative knitting techniques can enhance efficiency, reduce waste, and minimize environmental impact. This holistic approach exemplifies the industry's potential to harmonize environmental consciousness with ethical considerations, paving the way for a more responsible and sustainable future for fashion.

*Sustainability* <sup>oooo</sup>

*Digitalization* <sup>oo</sup>

*Human connectedness* <sup>ooo</sup>

## DIGITAL INNOVATION

With the rise of digital platforms and social media, creative communities leverage technology to showcase their work, engage with audiences, and facilitate direct-to-consumer sales. Online marketplaces, crowdfunding platforms, and social commerce channels provide new opportunities for independent designers and small-scale artisans to reach a global audience.

*Kniterate*<sup>5</sup> is a pioneering company that has introduced the digital knitting machine concept to transform how knitwear is designed and produced. The aim is to overcome the barrier of industrial knitting machines – complexity, expensiveness, dimensions – by providing a computer-controlled and easy-to-operate machine that can be used by individuals. This represents an opportunity for

hand-knitters to converge towards the makers' world and for small businesses to start small productions with sustainable costs.

By making computer-controlled knitting accessible to individuals and small businesses, Kniterate has bridged the gap between handcrafted and industrial production, fostering sustainable and cost-effective manufacturing. This innovative approach not only celebrates the convergence of traditional craftsmanship and modern technology but also paves the way for a more inclusive and diverse knitwear industry.

*Sustainability* <sup>oooo</sup>

*Digitalization* <sup>ooooo</sup>

*Human connectedness* <sup>oooo</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

As shown by the case studies, knitting, as practiced by individuals and creative communities, contributes to market diversification by offering the opportunity to experiment with more sustainable products and digital technologies, spreading into new market niches. Whether it is avant-garde knitwear for high fashion enthusiasts or handmade artisanal pieces for conscious customers, they expand not just the range of options available in the market but also the spaces people have to innovate their tastes, choices, and roles. Precisely due to the inherent characteristics of knitwear, individuals and communities hold a unique and multifaceted role in driving innovation, sustainability, and inclusivity within the distinctive sector that knitwear represents. By fostering creativity, collaboration, and community engagement, they contribute meaningfully to the industry's growth and evolution.

Suppose we do not want the market-driven approach to jeopardize creativity. In that case, the case studies demonstrate that there is space to experiment with an opposite mindset, collecting what is proposed from the bottom in an enlarged bubble-up theory. The trickle-up effect of fashion consumption, first described by Paul Blumberg in the 1970s, here does not concern just product aesthetics and cultural facets but is transferred to new modalities, practices, and motivations for making and owning.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.benettongroup.com/it/media-press/comunicati-statements/tv31100/> last accessed March 14th, 2024

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.kniterate.com/> last accessed March 14th, 2024

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