

FASHION AS FLOURISHING

A THEORETICAL APPROACH GOING BEYOND SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

As a theoretical framework, the concept of flourishing developed by John Ehrenfeld, can be used to consider the future of fashion. Redefining sustainability in terms of flourishing, can be a way for fashion companies as well as consumers, to be guided through the radical change that is needed within the fashion industry. Through applying a qualitative method of textual analysis, the paper reveals how flourishing can be integrated into a future fashion industry, with a focus on Being and caring as the main characteristics. The data is gathered from the fashion company babaà's website and analyzed in relation to earlier research on systemic change within the fashion industry. This, in order to provide practical steps for fostering flourishing within the fashion industry. In conclusion, one of the biggest impact a company like babaà can have, is through how they tell their story to their consumers as well as through showing how they as a company let caring steer their choices, with a specific focus on locality. This article builds on Ehrenfeld's concept of flourishing by illustrating its significance in fashion communication.

Keywords: *Flourishing, Being, Caring, Earth logic, Local*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, the narrative around sustainability within fashion is that the industry is in a current phase of meaningful sustainable development (Fletcher & Tham, 2014, pp. 59-60). However, continuous rise in waste, pollution and overproduction tells another story. The reality is that fashion companies are not changing fast enough to counterbalance the fast growth of the industry. In the recent past, what sustainability has actually been doing, is to reduce unsustainability rather than creating real change (Ehrenfeld, 2008). Since the time for incremental change has passed, the fashion industry stands in front of the difficult task of a of undergoing a radical transformation (Fletcher & Tham 2019, p. 21). In order for this to

happen, the industry need to “*stay with the trouble*” of growing out of growth, as has been argued by Mathilda Tham and Kate Fletcher in *Earth Logic*, borrowing Donna Haraway's term (Fletcher & Tham 2019, p. 31). *Earth Logic* is a radical call for the fashion industry to place the wellbeing of Earth before economic profit (Fletcher & Tham, 2019, p. 31).

Through applying a qualitative method of textual analysis on the case-study company babaà, this article reveals how flourishing can be integrated into a future fashion industry, with a focus on Being and caring as the main characteristics. Flourishing entails ways of being where humans and nature thrive together, embedded in care and social connection. Being refers to being connected

in the here and now, whilst caring refers to caring for oneself as well as others and the natural world (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013, p. 84). This will be explained more in-depth under theory.

The research question driving the analysis is: How does the concept of flourishing manifest in the communication practices of the fashion company babaà, and what lessons can this offer for envisioning a sustainable future in fashion?

BACKGROUND

Western societies are currently overflowing with messages concerning sustainability within the fashion industry, however the industry have been able to use it to their advantage and as a marketing technique, by offering slightly better choices labelled “sustainable”. (Ehrenfeld, 2008, p. 7) There has also been attempts from the industry of producing and selling clothing that takes social and environmental sustainability seriously in the hopes of offering products and services that could lead to real prosperity within the industry in terms of wellbeing for people and planet. (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013, pp. 122-124) This article departs from the latter, with the aim of investigating how communication might play a role in fostering more care within the industry.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As a theoretical framework, flourishing is an As a theoretical framework, flourishing is an existential state with two parts: personal wholeness and social coherence (Ehrenfeld, 2020, pp. 130-131). Personal wholeness refers to a way of being which is in alignment with one’s authentic self (Ehrenfeld, 2020, p. 20). Social coherence comes out of how well one can exist within the surrounding institutions that constitutes modern society (Ehrenfeld, 2020, p. 25). Bringing forth flourishing, means a cultural transformation and a shift in deeply rooted beliefs about the world. There is a need to move from a society of *having* and *needing* to one of *Being* and *caring* (Ehrenfeld, 2020). This switch to *Being* and *caring*, can lead towards a future where humans and non-humans have the opportunity to live as well as possible in a state of flourishing (Fletcher & Tham, 2019). Following is a short description of *Being* and *caring* as well as their contraries, *having* and *needing*:

Being, written with a capital B, refers to human beings’ ways of being which embraces a sense of aliveness and connectedness to the surroundings (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013, p. 84).

On the contrary, *having*, is a lifestyle based on what possessions are owned and letting these possessions become one’s main sense of self (Ehrenfeld, 2008, pp. 109-110). The *having*-lifestyle, deeply entangled with the rise of capitalistic society, has led to a divide between humans and the natural world (Ehrenfeld, 2008, pp. 29-30).

Caring connects humans to themselves, to others as well as to the natural and spiritual world all around (Ehrenfeld, 2008, pp. 58-61). Furthermore, caring is something that is found in the everyday life. As humans, we are caring beings. *Needing*, on the other hand, is in close connection to *having* and clearly illustrates its characteristics through the state of overconsumption currently ruling societies in the global West (Ehrenfeld, 2008, p. 117). The notion of *need* is explained as an insecurity found in humans, fed by modern culture through pressures of consumption (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013, p. 84).

Using *Being* and *caring* as tenets for flourishing, they act as the blueprint for thinking about fashion’s future. Using the concept of flourishing as a theoretical lens through which to investigate fashion, opens up for new ways of re-thinking what fashion can be and what role fashion companies have in terms of sustainability communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on the work of American professor John Ehrenfeld, I interact with flourishing as my overall theoretical approach to what is “beyond sustainability”. Three books have been published by Ehrenfeld on the topic of flourishing: *Sustainability by Design* (2008), *Flourishing* (2013) cowritten with Andrew Hoffman and *The Right Way to Flourish* (2020). In these three books, the concept of flourishing is examined and the meaning of flourishing deepened with each one. In *Sustainability by Design*, Ehrenfeld criticises the prevailing view of sustainability and redefines it in terms of unsustainability. He argues that the addictive ways of modern life, mainly in terms of our obsession with instrumentality and consumption, has resulted in a general reduction of unsustainability rather than a move towards true sustainability (Ehrenfeld, 2008, p. 46). *Flourishing* is a dialogue between Ehrenfeld and Hoffman and revolves around the need for a complete cultural shift needed to take place in society in order to bring forth flourishing (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013, p. 81). *The Right*

Way to Flourish builds on the two earlier books and offers a development of flourishing in a philosophical sense, as Ehrenfeld argues for flourishing not as an outcome in the sense that sustainability is often measured, but rather a way of being (Ehrenfeld, 2020, pp. 7-9). Furthermore, flourishing is deeply concerned with a reconnection with nature, community and values as flourishing is fundamentally about *connectedness* (Ehrenfeld, 2020, p. 114). Hence, the book describes flourishing as a state of being in which humans and ecosystems thrive together beyond sustainability. It unfolds as an existential experience of living a meaningful life that is connected to other humans, societies and the natural world (Ehrenfeld, 2020, p. 7).

Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham has approached the problematic of growth logic within the fashion industry through their manifesto-like report *Earth Logic: Fashion Action Research Plan* (Fletcher and Tham, 2019). This report interacts with the concept of flourishing arguing that there is a need for a mutual flourishing amongst human and non-humans (Fletcher and Tham, 2019, p. 36).

The book *Designs for the Pluriverse* written by Arturo Escobar defines the pluriverse as a world where within many worlds fit, embracing cultural and ecological diversity (Escobar, 2018). Escobar interacts with flourishing and builds on the concept through arguing that flourishing should be pluriversal and locally situated, hence, arguing for multiple experiences of flourishing shaped by indigenous knowledge and local cultures (Escobar, 2028, pp. 122-124).

For this article, the focus on flourishing as going beyond sustainability is rooted in diverse worldviews in which flourishing systems and beings can co-exist. This broadens the possibilities for what fashion can be, if the design phase takes the health of the planet and its living beings into consideration before the production phase begins.

METHODS

Textual analysis is a qualitative research method chosen in this article for its ability to understand written text in themes and meanings. In order to do this, I am examining the chosen texts in terms of language, symbols as well as structures in order to discover unvoiced messages, values and cultural references within the texts (Barthes, 1990). I use Roland Barthes and his insights in the book *The Fashion System* when going about my textual analysis. Barthes argues that fashion can be

conceptualized as a language, consisting of signs and symbols that are apparent in both denotative and connotative meanings (Barthes, 1990, pp. 27-28). Denotation corresponds to the object language whilst connotation corresponds to the metalanguage (Barthes, 1990, pp. 27-28). Hence, when using the method of textual analysis, I am mainly looking at the metalanguage, the language beyond the words that are used, in order to uncover the implicit meanings.

This method is utilized in order to study how the fashion company babaà communicate their company values as well as how these values might relate to the concept of flourishing. This allows for the analysis to examine language, themes and values communicated and works as a tool for understanding the written word and how it can perpetuate meanings related to flourishing. In this article specifically, the texts that are being examined are exclusively taken from babaà's website.

Using the method of textual analysis is relevant in this specific article as it contributes to understanding how a fashion company might be able to contribute to a paradigm shift towards flourishing through their choices, practices and communication.

CASE STUDY

The Spanish knit brand babaà is chosen as the case-study company to test the theoretical framework of flourishing. The choice to focus on babaà as a case-study was based on the criteria that they are a small family-oriented business, using local organic materials and local production. The company was founded by designer Marta Bahillo in 2012 (babaa.es/making-babaa/). Babaà offers knitwear made of cotton, wool, merino wool, cashmere and linen. They offer knitwear for women, men and children.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Textual material is the data in this article and it is selected solely from the babaà website (babaa.es) and specifically from the pages called "making babaà" and "faq". The process of selecting the data was guided by the aim of this article, that is, whether characteristics of flourishing can be found in babaà's sustainability communication. Hence, the texts were chosen based on how relevant they are in terms of sustainability and flourishing.

DATA ANALYSIS

Through a close reading of the entire babaà website with a semiotic approach, the focus is on the layered meanings within the texts. That is, the denotative “literal” message and the connotative “symbolic” message (Barthes, 1990, p. 40). The connotated analysis is where the language, choice of words and tone uncovers underlying narratives. This, in turn, is when keywords are identified and grouped into themes. In analyzing the frequency of keywords, only those that aligned with the theoretical focus of this article were considered. The keyword “relationship”, for instance, was included when it referred to a caring connection between the company and nature/animals/people. It was excluded when it was used in the context of EU trading relationships. This was done in order to ensure that the keyword frequency truthfully reflects the intended aim of the research.

Key words

The keywords that were identified as being of significance to the broader theme of flourishing, are: relationships, community, people, nourish, sheep, transparency, environment, wear and cherish.

Coded Themes

The keywords identified above, were separated into four different overarching themes: care, slowness, nature and local. These themes share characteristics with flourishing in different ways. The keywords and themes appear in different frequencies, see table below for details.

FINDINGS

RELATIONSHIPS

Under the tab “about”, there is an under title called “making babaà” which is where most of the sustainability-oriented information is to be found. Here, babaà present the story of how the brand was born as well as their overall values and approaches to sustainability, which are closely linked to one another:

“In the twelve years since our launch, babaà has evolved in myriad ways, but our essence remains the same. We built the brand around the core value of sustainability, using only local and natural materials. The reasons were many: It’s good for our planet, it nourishes our local textile industry and, most of all, it is good for our souls as

we develop close relationships that are the key to making babaà what it is.”

This quote, which is also the first text found under the “making babaà” title, reveals that the company was rooted in the believes of acting for a better world right from the start. It also states that this is both for the earth as well as for their community and themselves. Caring is central in the quote, even though it is not mentioned by word. Building relationships, acting with the intention of being good to the planet and wanting to nourish a local textile industry, are all acts of caring. Furthermore, since they state that this is the essence of babaà, it is apparent that this is a core value of the company rather than something for a specific collection.

Continuing on the path of relationships, and specifically speaking to the fact that they make their own yarn, babaà states further down in the text:

“Creating our own yarn takes a lot of work, but it also allows us to control the production process from the sheep to the final stitch. We know everyone involved on a personal level and are able to provide our customers with full transparency.”

Through this quote, babaà illustrate how relationships are a crucial priority for the company and that they take pride in the fact that they know everyone involved in the making of their clothes on a personal level. As fast fashion production lines are quite on the opposite side of this spectrum, usually with production taking place far away from the company’s head office, the personal aspect of babaà is rare (Davis Burns, 2019, pp. 116-117). The juxtaposition of fast fashion’s complicated production lines and babaà’s personal relationships through production, illustrate the rareness of these personal relationships. In order for fashion to move towards flourishing, relationships are vital as they are a fundamental part of the characteristic of caring (Fletcher & Tham, 2019, p. 14).

TRANSHUMANCE

The characteristic of caring goes beyond the usual human-centered caring to caring about animals and nature (as human’s are a part of) as babaà gets into more details about the flock:

“Sheep in Spain have a very good life. At least, ours do. We adhere to a process called

Themes	Keywords	Frequency (Numbers of occurrences)	Website section
Care	Relationships, Nourish, Cherish	3, 1, 1	Making babaà
Slowness	Wear	4	Making babaà, faq
Nature	Sheep, Transhumance, Environment	11, 4, 3	Making babaà, faq
Local	Community, People	2, 3	Making babaà, faq

Tab. 01

Transhumance, which is a type of pastoralism or nomadism comprising seasonal movement of livestock between fixed summer and winter pastures. In mountainous regions, it implies movement between higher pastures in summer and lower valleys in winter. This is not only great for the animals, as they spend the majority of their lives outdoors, but also great for the environment. It enhances fire prevention (the sheep eat many weeds that are potential fodder for wildfires) and the steppe ecosystem, enriches fallow land (thus making it farmable once again), and helps maintain alpine areas.”

Acknowledging the fact that the wool from which they make their products comes from a living animal who deserves to live a good life but who also, in its turn, contributes to climate change, babaà are transparent about how they address this. The process they refer to called Transhumance, places babaà in a respiratory relationship to nature where they respect that nature has its own agency and way of thriving without human’s involvement. This relates to flourishing’s characteristic of Being, as a way to achieve personal wholeness (Ehrenfeld, 2020, p. 81). Moreover, this demonstrates how

babaà designs together with nature (Fletcher et. al., 2019). As has been argued elsewhere, the concept of design as solely an agent of capitalism can be challenged by setting design in partnership with nature (Fletcher et. al., 2019, p. 9). Hence, babaà take nature into the equation in the design and production process by seeing to the needs of the sheep and the land which they graze on, rather than seeing nature as a resource from which to take. This scratches the surface of accepting that what is created by humans belong to the earth, rather than being separate from it (Fletcher et. al., 2019, p. 25). This recognition can, in its turn, assist the reconnection with nature that is needed moving forward in the fashion industry (Fletcher et. al., 2019, p. 131). This is not only crucial because of the fact that the earth has ecological limits, but reconnecting with nature and moving from a having and needing mindset to one of Being and caring in harmony with nature, will also lead to greater social wellbeing (Jackson, 2016, p. 137). To reach prosperity should include the capacity for humans and non-humans to live well together on the planet within ecological limits. Living well does not correlate with the number of things we can buy, but rather oppositional, it is about shifting

away from overconsumption and towards valuing community and well-being (Jackson, 2016).

LOCALISM

Babaà brings up their local community:

We truly treasure the opportunity to work locally and build relationships with our community year after year. These partnerships are an integral part of babaà, and we hope you will cherish your cardigan or crewneck sweater even more knowing a bit of the background about the people (and animals!) that brought it to life.

The concept of local plays a crucial role. It is not only a valid reason for why it is believable that they have good relationships with everyone involved, since they are in fact close enough to meet the people in person. Local is also one of the most fundamental alternatives for sustainability within the fashion sector going forward. In *Earth Logic*, Fletcher and Tham presents local as one of six holistic landscapes that can move the fashion industry towards ecological prosperity and caring. Localism is described as contributing to a sense of rooted community and identity, it favors place-specific knowledge and nearby resources and can create community self-reliance (Fletcher & Tham, 2019, p. 49). The tenets of local braid nicely together with flourishing and this is illustrated through the example of babaà. It is through localism that babaà are able to build the relationships they regard as the essence of the company and this is simultaneously where the caring takes its biggest form for babaà. However, babaà also show equal care for the local sheep and the environment they live and graze on, as discussed earlier. Fostering a local fashion community as babaà exemplifies, holds the possibility of creating a diverse sustainable world (Escobar, 2018, pp. 15-16).

EARTH LOGIC

Encouraging consumers to cherish their babaà cardigan more because of how it has been made, suggest a shift in mindset from having and needing to Being and caring. This because caring and presence becomes apparent when one considers everything that contributed to the making of a sweater. This is, furthermore, a pathway towards less consumption and less, is also one of the six holistic landscapes presented in *Earth Logic*.

Flourishing cannot be present within the fashion industry without the recognition that fashion as an industry has issues that go beyond clothing production, issues that are rooted in western culture's self-enclosed outlook (Fletcher et al., 2019, p. 196). The positive effects of a company willing to put an emphasis on how they value both worker's and ecosystems as parts of how their products come into being, can help switch our current culture's obsession with instrumentality into a more present awareness of Being and caring. Moreover, letting go of materialistic needs, make room for empathies and care to flourish (Jackson, 2016, p. 69).

SLOWNESS

Continuing in the lines of design and nature's partnership in the creation of babaà wool knitwear, they celebrate the imperfection that comes with minimal treatment of the wool. For example, when asked on their website under "faqs" about why there are straws in the wool, babaà replies:

"...our local wool is minimally treated, so you may find bits of our sheep's natural habitat mixed in from time to time."
"Our wool comes straight from our sheep to you. In some cases it has never been treated or dyed. Because of this, some people may find the wool mildly abrasive at first. However the wool will soften naturally with each wearing as it adapts, softens and conforms to its new owner."

At this point, babaà celebrates the fact that designing and creating in respectful ways with nature will sometimes leave marks. In a society harshly driven by perfection, where so much as a wrinkle as a sign of aging is seen as something ugly, it is vital that a fashion company openly celebrates natural imperfections if we are to every truly reconnect with nature.

Furthermore, babaà also honors the fact that their items should be worn many times. This is a sharp contrast to the typical trend driven fashion industry and moves towards a flourishing existence of care and slowness. This tendency of care and slowness embodied by babaà is supported by their simple silhouettes, loose fits and reoccurring styles. This results in less of a stress for people to "buy the new style" or fit into one's sweater after body changes. As a result, this can encourage consumers to connect more to their items though caring and

long-lasting relationships. Care, as an act within a flourishing existence, can contribute to budding stronger relations between humans, materials and natural world (Fletcher et. al., 2019, p. 36). It is significant that babaà is not a huge company and do not use any retailers. As Ehrenfeld argues, connectedness, which is crucial for flourishing, wanes when the scale becomes larger (Ehrenfeld, 2020, p. 130). Hence, babaà holds a greater opportunity for flourishing to exist by keeping their company fairly small. Furthermore, babaà does not work with any retailers. For a company active within a fashion industry that is very much profit-driven and operates within capitalistic structures, not having any retailers means they have more freedom with their expressions and values.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has introduced the concept of flourishing as a theoretical tool for thinking beyond sustainability, in order to open up for a more caring and connected future of fashion. Through using the qualitative method of textual analysis on the case-study company babaà, the analysis has tested the theoretical concept of flourishing. Through closely analyzing what babaà communicates as their company values and translated these values into flourishing's main characteristics of Being and caring as well as relating them to other relevant research on systems change within the fashion industry. The analysis illustrates how it is possible for a fashion company to move beyond sustainability and incorporate the characteristics of Being and caring, as tenets to move towards prosperity for both people and planet.

A fashion company, like babaà, illustrates promising steps towards a paradigm shift aligned with the concept of flourishing. Although, despite these promising initiatives, it remains evident that babaà operates within capitalistic frameworks where factors such as sales, money and margins continue to determine a company's survival.

In conclusion, flourishing can offer a deeper and more meaningful understanding of fashion, especially through communication. For a small company like babaà, this is perhaps one of the biggest impacts they can have, contributing to transforming how people view fashion and its connection to the world around. Through their communication, they illustrate that they as a company care and strive for a fairer future for their community and natural surroundings. This plays a

significant role in shifting from the current system towards true prosperity in fashion, where flourishing experiences can be had for both companies and consumers.

LIMITATIONS

Whilst this article provides an in-depth insight into babaà's sustainability communication, it only investigates one company. It would be beneficial to look at several companies for comparison. It would also be beneficial to have a consumer perspective on how the sustainability message comes across.

CAPTIONS

[Tab. 01] Tables of Data Analysis. Credits: Author.

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