

# STRATEGIC DESIGN APPROACH INTO FASHION SYSTEM

## DESIGNING FOR LOCAL CRAFTSMANSHIP DEVELOPMENTS

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## Abstract

As world grapples with the consequences of unsustainable fast fashion system, it is necessary to act to overtake its design, productive and distribution models, while keeping fashion items as affordable as possible. Within this scenario, craftsmanship seems to be the most effective pattern in meeting the current design scenario and consumer needs. In fact, local fashion practices offer countless of benefits: they incorporate cultural sustainability, preserving both material and immaterial craftsmanship heritage (Brown & Vacca, 2022); they focus on a small-scale production, counteracting a pleonastic overproduction of goods; they deliver a higher quality goods, being the craftsman able to manage the entire production process (Sennet; 2009). It is all about evolving that production model based on local economies (Livesey, 2010) to limit the impact on the environment and enhance the human resources of communities, while preserving their cultural heritage. To this purpose, since 2019 the authors have carried out a didactic experimentation within a Fashion Studies master. This paper describes and illustrates the results of this activity, which has involved about 150 international students – mainly from BRIC countries – with various bachelor's degree, not only belonging to fashion field.

**Keywords:** *Local artisanship, Environmental impact, Cultural sustainability, Fashion education, Strategic design*

## INTRODUCTION

Fast fashion system, because of its persistent speed of production and consumption, has led to unprecedented environmental and ethical challenges (Fletcher, 2014). Although traditionally associated with well-known fast fashion brands, these issues are currently related to luxury sector as well. Common perceptions tend to frame fast fashion as an issue exclusively linked to low-cost brands, largely because they engage in excessive overproduction. However, luxury brands are not exempt from employing fast-fashion-like strategies: though they produce high-quality items, the signs of overproduction and the drive toward overconsumption are becoming increasingly evident (Cachon & Swinney, 2011). Indeed,

in the contemporary fashion industry, the concept of luxury is evolving into a sort of “ready-to-consume” culture. In fact, many high-end and ready-to-wear brands now adopt production and sales strategies similar to fast fashion, even though they offer higher-quality items (McNeill & Moore, 2015). This shift aims to meet – and often create – an immediate demand for an ever-expanding array of both products and styles, encouraging rapid consumption even within the luxury segment (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012).

As the world struggles with the consequences of this unsustainable model, a contrasting narrative is emerging, rooted in the revival of local craftsmanship and conscious design practices. These trends reflect two divergent yet interconnect-

ed currents in the industry: on one side, globalization continues to expand; on the other, there is a growing recognition among markets and enterprises that local and sustainable production models will be key for future resilience (Livesey, 2017). This shift towards localism is driven by a desire to address the specific needs, values, and cultural tones of local communities, thanks to its self-sufficient structures capable of meeting clients demand (Sennett, 2008).

In this context, the current paper aims to explore how these trends are integrated into educational systems, particularly within the framework of a master's degree in Fashion Studies. Since 2019, the authors have conducted a didactic experiment within this program, which emphasizes the cultural and strategic dimensions of fashion. The course prepares students to approach the fashion industry from both a global and market-oriented perspective, using the principles of "Strategic Design" as a tool for innovation and sustainability (Manzini & Vezzoli, 2003). As defined by Manzini & Vezzoli (2003), it is a method for designing complex solutions that integrate sustainability and innovation. In the fashion system, it helps rethink production models to incorporate local craftsmanship while maintaining market viability. This approach was chosen over others due to its ability to structure creative processes toward sustainable and culturally relevant design solutions (Holland & Lam, 2014).

The structure of the course is divided into theoretical lessons, which establish both general and specific frameworks for understanding the fashion landscape, and practical design tasks, which encourage students to identify and explore new business opportunities within the fashion system. Through these tasks, students are invited to investigate sustainable processes and consumption habits, while designing fashion products. The aim is to foster a deeper awareness of how fashion can evolve to meet both market demands and ethical imperatives (Martinez, 2019).

This educational experiment wants to prepare students to develop the tools to critically analyze current industry practices, and to encourage them to find and build alternative paths for the future of fashion. By engaging with concepts like local craftsmanship and strategic design, students are better prepared to address the complex challenges facing today's fashion industry, contrib-

uting to a more balanced and sustainable fashion system.

## **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT: (FAST) FASHION AGAINST (SLOW) FASHION**

Fast Fashion is both one of the biggest market sectors for global economy and the second most polluting industry in the world (Abrahamson, 2011). This fact presents many issues related to sustainability, that can be found at the level of environment, workers' conditions, local economies and cultural habits, for which it is necessary to open a proper discussion.

Although the impact of fast fashion producers into the environment is very well known, consumers are mainly attentive to overproduction of cheap fashion items. Indeed, overproduction is the iceberg tip of environmental issues, which includes a lot of harmful elements, such as water consumption, carbon dioxide emissions, textile waste and use of chemicals as well, which consumers are not very conscious about (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

Regarding social sustainability, this issue has gained much attention over the past decade, particularly following the Rana Plaza disaster on April 24, 2013, which claimed the lives of 1,134 people. This tragedy had a profound impact on consumers, raising awareness about working conditions, gender equality, and the need for modern infrastructure. As such, it can be considered the turning point for a new consciousness, leading to the founding of the "Fashion Revolution," established by Carry Somers and Orsola de Castro. Its mission is to conserve and restore the environment while valuing people over growth and profit (Ciuni & Spadafora, 2020).

The rise of fast fashion has also had significant consequences for local economies. Particularly, the aggressive undercutting of prices is one of the ways fast fashion sales harm local businesses. Capitalizing on economies of scale, mass production, and outsourcing permit to produce garments at remarkably low costs. This puts immense pressure on local businesses that are unable to reduce costs and prices to the same extent (Schwenke, 2023).

However, in contrast to the mass production model of fast fashion, artisanal production and slow fashion are emerging as more sustainable alternatives. These practices emphasize

cultural sustainability, quality, and positive impacts on local communities. These products, often rooted in cultural heritage and artisanal craftsmanship, are becoming increasingly popular with consumers. Artisanal goods offer uniqueness, cultural significance, and a deeper connection to heritage, making them a preferred choice for those who seek to support sustainable and ethical fashion (Brown & Vacca, 2022), while highlighting the importance of cultural narratives in building a socially responsible and inclusive fashion industry (Fletcher, 2008).

In this context, local practices and businesses are revitalizing through craftsmanship and culturally inspired designs that reflect a conscious lifestyle, producing a conscious lifestyle rooted in both cultural heritage and artisanal strength. Artisanal products are becoming a preferred choice by consumers, as they offer uniqueness, cultural significance, and a connection to heritage (Villarreal, 2021). Finally, local businesses that apply artisanal processes tend to manage economic and environmental optimization more effectively, especially in terms of materials and production methods (Aakko, 2016). This is because artisans have greater control over each stage of the process, ensuring that human resources, local economies, and cultural values are respected throughout.

## **A DIDACTIC EXPERIMENTATION: STRATEGIC DESIGN FOR A SLOW-FASHION EDUCATION**

The considerations underlined above highlight a stratification of elements linked to sustainability, which can be addressed through a strategic approach that lies between design and craftsmanship. In this context, it is essential to work from the basics: to provide future designers with the appropriate training to operate effectively in this direction. It is about applying the fundamental concepts of the Slow Fashion movement from the early educational stages, challenging the global fashion system and embracing the principles of “less is more” and “quality over quantity” (Clark, 2008).

To this end, a course in fashion design has been developed since 2019, conceived by the curators, which invites students to identify sustainable fashion solutions, based on the repositioning of design, production, consumption and use strategies. Authors settled a didactic experimentation starting from the Kolb's (1983) experiential learning model. It supports hands-on education

where students learn through iterative feedback and application. The course was conducted in-person, on a weekly basis, combining theoretical lectures on sustainability, fashion strategies, and craftsmanship with biweekly reviews and project submissions. Including this methodological structure would help clarify the educational approach.

To achieve the aim described above, the course has been developed using the “Strategic Design” methodology. Applying this methodology to the fashion system helps create a framework that integrates sustainability and local issues. Thus, the focus is not simply on designing fashion items using traditional fashion design methods, but rather on creating solutions that challenge the “big picture.”

The innovative aspect of the course lies specifically in this approach, as “Strategic Design” is typically used to address and identify opportunities for action within organizations (Holland & Lam, 2014).

## **DIDACTIC PROJECT OBJECTIVES**

Before going into the specifics of the course objectives and structure, it is important to highlight some general information about the degree program in which this course is offered. This will help provide a clearer understanding of some of the educational choices and the results that will be discussed later.

The course is part of the master's program in Fashion Studies within Sapienza University of Rome, and it aims to develop interdisciplinary skills in the fashion field, combining history, anthropology, and art with the knowledge provided by the SARAS Department to which the course belongs. The program's objectives include a deep exploration of the multifaceted aspects of the fashion world as both a cultural and economic feature of the Italian system, preparing students for roles in academia, creative industries, and communication.

The course discussed in this paper, titled “Fashion Design Practice | Fashion against Fashion”, has been attended by approximately 150 students since 2019. The largest group consisted of Italian students (32%), followed by Russians (10%), Middle Eastern students (11%), Iranians (10%), and Kazakh students (8.5%). Other represented nationalities included Chinese (6%), Western Europeans (4.5%), Ukrainians (4%), Brazilians/Portuguese (3.5%), Lebanese (2.5%), Bangladeshi (2%), Vietnamese (2%), Indians (2%), and Uzbeks

(2%). These students hold various bachelor's degrees – not limited to the fashion design field – and come from diverse cultural backgrounds, as they are international students. In terms of academic backgrounds, 55% of the students had a bachelor's degree in Fashion Cultures or Fashion Design, while 28% came from Textile studies. A smaller percentage had backgrounds in Arts (5%), while the remaining students were distributed across Communication, Design, and other disciplines.

Now, focusing on the specifics, the course has three main objectives for students:

- Understanding the current state of fast fashion.
- Analyzing the issue of overproduction in the industry.
- Examining the harmful practices associated with fast fashion.
- Detecting best practices of local crafts, chosen from the student nationality, close to a specific target consumer, picked from the ones elaborated by sociologist Francesco Morace.
- Proposing and designing a fashion item, coherent to the topic and the analysis, which satisfy the “ConsumAuthor” habits.

To effectively get these goals, a “learning by doing” approach has been applied (Kolb,1983), and students were asked to build the course project through the following three main steps.

- 1<sup>st</sup> Step & Delivery “Local Artisanship”: choice and analysis about a craft, typical of the student Country, to be applied into the final item.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Step & Delivery “ConsumAuthor”: choice and analysis about a “ConsumAuthor” category, from the ones developed by Morace, to be their final consumer.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Step & Delivery “Design Proposal”: proposing and designing a fashion item, coherent to the previous analysis.

Each step was organized with an introduction lecture, to describe methodology and tools, and a “show & tell” session during which students must present the required delivery.

After each presentation, the students receive critical feedback about the delivery in order to improve it for the Final Work.

## REQUIREMENTS AND DELIVERIES STRUCTURES

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the course is aimed at international students of different nationalities, with various technical and cultural

skills. For this reason, before starting the project work, each student is asked to carry out a preparatory exercise. This consists of the research and analysis of two brand categories: one linked to fast-fashion and the other to sustainability. In this way, students begin to familiarize with the two main themes of the course, and at the same time it allows us to evaluate their knowledge, their way of thinking and their analytical skills.

Through this exercise, students begin to delve into issues such as overproduction and the ethical and environmental impacts of the fashion system, thus understanding the limits of the current production and consumption system. On the other hand, by analyzing best practices in terms of sustainability, they begin to explore the concept of innovation linked to values, aesthetics and products in the fashion sector, and explain why they consider that brand an exemplary case of sustainability.

### LOCAL ARTISANSHIP

In this first step, each student explores the cultural context of his or her home country, starting with a local craft technique they choose and integrated into the final project. This step aims to make a connection between individual cultural identity and design, encouraging a deeper and more authentic connection with their work. Specifically, students are invited to examine and describe this craft technique from the following different perspectives, through pictures and keywords (Fig. 01).

- Authenticity refers to the quality possessed by a technique or product that allows us to tell how much that technique represents the cultural world in which it was born (Fry et al., 2016); whether the materials and methods used are traditional or modernized; and to what extent the technique has evolved from its initial form.
- Identity concerns how the craft expresses a specific cultural, regional, or individual character through that technique or product. Identity is thus related to the representation of who or what the craft represents (Gherardi, 2012).
- Uniqueness focuses on what makes the craft technique, or product, distinct from other similar forms of craftsmanship. In essence, a “unique” technique possesses a whole range of both material and intangible values that can manifest its distinctiveness and distinction (Cristallo, 2014).



Fig. 01

- Value is connected to the cultural and economic importance of the technique or artifact. A valuable craft may be significant because of its rarity, historical or cultural significance, or the high level of skill required to make it. Students may ask what makes this artifact valuable to the community, culture, or fashion world, and whether it possesses symbolic or economic value (Marchetti, 2011).
- Quality is related to both the level of skill and attention to detail in the making of the craft, and the quality of the materials and techniques used. From the perspective of the local, it is based on the use of the specializations, workmanship and components expressly linked to the territory of origin, and which are based on values and production techniques proper to a high level of historicized craftsmanship (De Fusco 2009).

## APPLICATION OF THE “CONSUMAUTHOR” CONCEPT

In the current context, the socio-demographic dimension assumes strategic importance in both cultural and business terms within the fashion

system. The increasingly articulated and changing generational categorization makes it essential to have an accurate understanding that overrides generalizations and identifies the real characteristics. Therefore, in this second step, students were asked to work with the concept of “ConsumAuthor.” Developed by Italian sociologist Francesco Morace, this concept marks the new centrality of people in purchasing dynamics and frees consumer activity from the supposed demons of consumerism (Morace, 2017). Starting with the main generations of contemporary society, Morace defines 16 “ConsumAuthors,” four for each of the four generations, who present different attitudes, aesthetics and preferences: for clothing, objects, places, movies, books, music, social and political ideas. Morace redefines consumer roles by integrating individual lifestyle, cultural engagement, and purchasing behavior.

Initially, students must choose a specific “ConsumAuthor” who will become the target consumers for their product. In this way, they will be pushed to design products that are not only aesthetically appealing, but also target a specific audience with a specific lifestyle. The students’ application of this model allowed them to design for specific consumer archetypes, tailoring their craft-based fashion items to meet the expectations of contemporary sustainable markets. Including case examples of how students mapped these consumer behaviors would add depth to the analysis.

The work of this step is mainly analytical and consists of the following four tasks (Fig. 02):

- 1<sup>st</sup>: To find among the fictional characters, normal people and VIP, the chosen “ConsumAuthor” to start approaching the concept from something students already know.
- 2<sup>nd</sup>: To observe the chosen category in real life and take pictures of it, impersonating a “cool hunter.”
- 3<sup>rd</sup>: To analyze for the specific “ConsumAuthor”, through nine photos taken by students and keywords, the three levels of description defined by Morace: consumption, communication, distribution.
- 4<sup>th</sup>: To synthesize all the peculiar aspects of “ConsumAuthor” in a single slide through pictures.

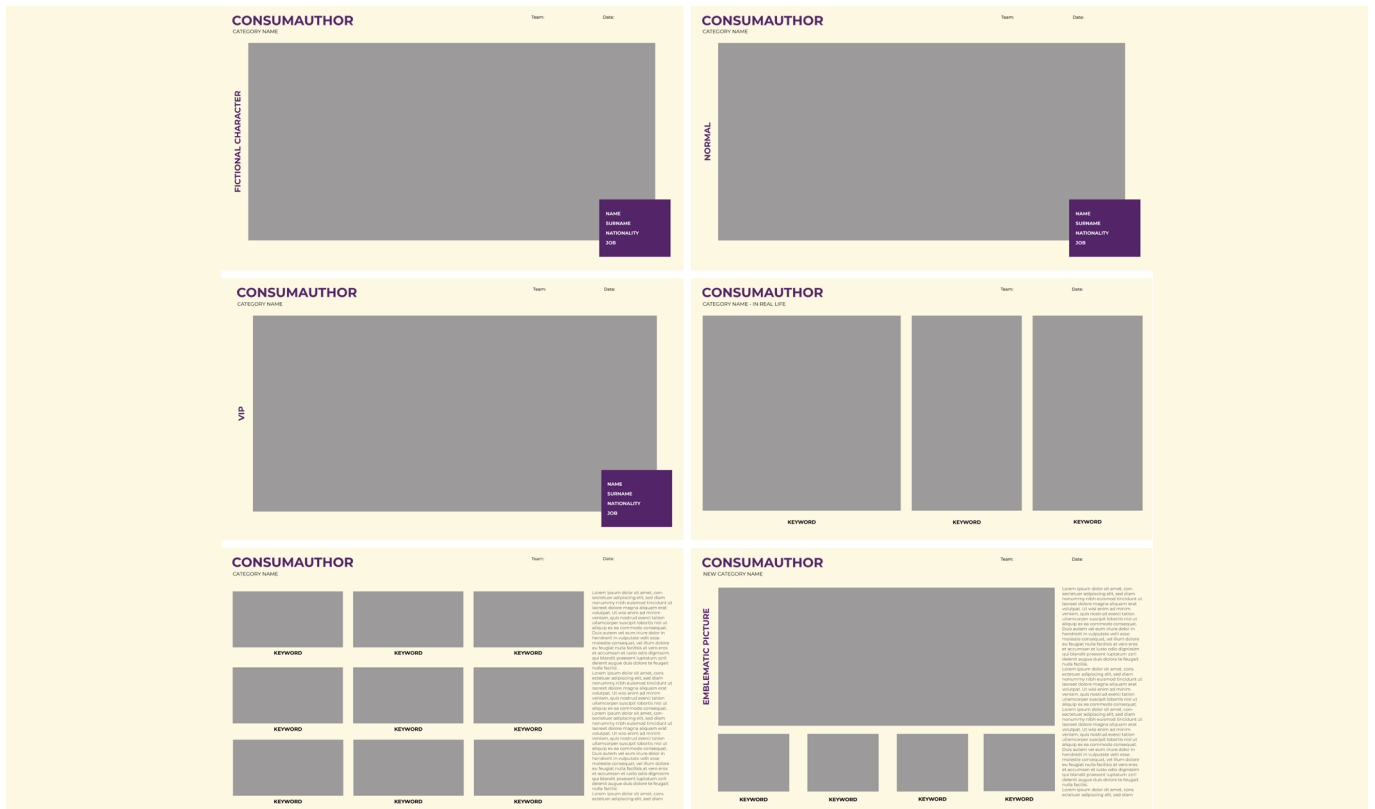


Fig. 02

## DESIGNING A FASHION ITEM

Based on the previous analyses, the goal of the third step is to imagine ad developing a new design concept a fashion items, or accessory, integrating the chosen loca technique, the consumption habits of the chosen “ConsumAuthor” and the concept of Slow Fashion.

The aim of this first part is to propose a design concept of the item through two distinctive parts: the first one related to how students intend to apply the previous findings (Design Proposal Part I); the second one containing to the results (Design Proposal Part II) (Fig. 03).

The first part consists of target audience, local opportunities, product application, object type and sketches.

- Target: section dedicated to describing the main characteristics of the target consumer, identified in the previous step.
- Local Opportunities (Country): in this part it is necessary to select the technique, object or cultural/identity aspect to be applied to the accessory, again using information from the previous delivery.
- Productive Application: taking advantage of a productive opportunity involves understand-

ing how the material is used and transformed to achieve a specific form, style, or function. If the productive opportunity is part of a cultural heritage, using it to develop a new product idea means enhancing and “regenerating” traditional value in a new way, according to consumer needs/desires.

- Item Typology: describing to which type the product belongs.
- Concept Sketches: dedicated to the sketches of the object idea.

The second part (Design Proposal Part II), on the other hand, is devoted to the final design.

- Consumption: through images and keywords, define the new consumption behaviors, showing how the design idea will change the actions/habits of the target consumer.
- Final Design: dedicated to mock-ups, illustrating all relevant aspects of the object (shapes, textures, materials, aesthetics, etc.).

In the end, looking at these steps and tasks, it is possible to see how this instructional project moves slightly away from what are typical fashion design activities. Therefore, the course doesn’t address to the simple expression of a personal “fancy design skill,” but it clearly wants to provide

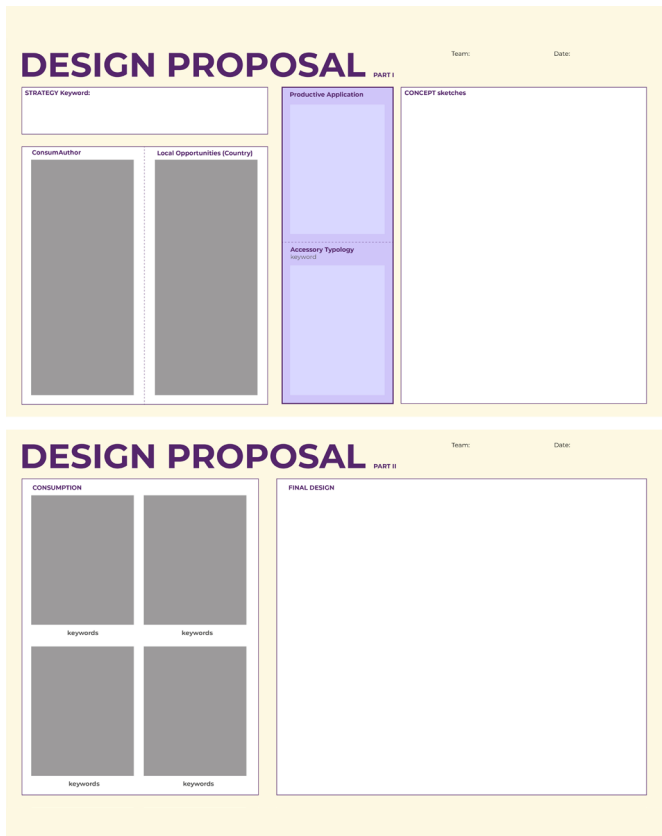


Fig. 03

students with the tools to understand and critically respond to fashion industry issues, encouraging them to explore sustainable alternatives. And this is where students' creativity materializes.

## CONCLUSIONS: RESULTS AND OBSTACLES

Considering the considerations that emerged, this didactic project reveals to be quite experimental, since it aimed to explore the trends of local and sustainability in fashion through a strategic approach, that can incentivize a successful generation of fashion designers to propose innovative solutions for a more sustainable and future-oriented fashion system.

The results were found, not so much in the technical skills for developing a fashion product, but in the students' change of perspective in looking at fashion design.

In terms of outputs, most of the projects consisted of fashion accessories, due to their suitability for integrating artisanal techniques. A smaller portion (32.5%) consisted of garments, where students focused primarily on applying traditional craftsmanship techniques rather than

fully reinterpreting them. This pattern suggests that accessories provided a more flexible medium for experimentation, while garment projects leaned toward direct applications rather than conceptual innovation.

Specifically, the project proved to be effective in raising students' awareness of a critical view of fast fashion, highlighting its impacts on daily life and consumption, and of their responsibility as future fashion professionals.

Through a step-by-step structured training course, it was also possible to broaden their understanding of the concept of sustainability in the fashion world, a sustainability that goes beyond the purely environmental dimension, and thus also embraces the cultural and social implications of the industry. This approach allowed them to develop a more comprehensive and profound perspective of sustainable fashion, going beyond the traditional view focused exclusively on ecological impact, and opening new reflections on how cultural values can and should influence design, production and consumption choices.

One of the most significant achievements was the development of the ability to approach fashion projects with a strategic vision, and not look solely and exclusively at the beauty of the fashion object. Students learned that fashion is not limited to creating aesthetically pleasing products, but requires strategic planning that considers market dynamics, consumer expectations and brand identity. This new awareness enables the construction of fashion proposals that are more conscious and in tune with contemporary market trends, without sacrificing the integrity of cultural and sustainable values.

An additional valuable aspect has been the ability to understand how to renew a traditional craft technique to make it exploitable in today's market context. This implies both a reflection on the peculiarities of this technique and an assessment of its yet unexplored potential to reach contemporary consumers. Thanks, in fact, to the discovery of the concept of "ConsumAuthor," students have thus learned to see tradition as an element of added value that, if reinterpreted in a modern key, can become a strong point to attract a clientele increasingly attentive to the quality, originality and authenticity of the product.

Despite these important achievements, however, the training course presented several challenges, which have proved to be the same over



the course of these five years of activity.

Generally speaking, through hands-on experimentation, participants developed an awareness of fashion's impact on daily life and consumption, recognizing how industry choices affect both society and the environment. Moreover, the course emphasized that sustainability extends beyond the environmental dimension, incorporating cultural and social aspects into design decisions. One of the key achievements was the shift toward a strategic vision, moving beyond aesthetics to consider market dynamics, consumer expectations, and brand identity. By integrating artisanal techniques into their work, students demonstrated an ability to connect tradition with contemporary design challenges, reinforcing the potential of craftsmanship in sustainable fashion.

One of the main difficulties encountered by the students was identifying and analyzing lesser-known brands that are not part of the immediately recognizable mainstream luxury landscape. Although this was a preliminary activity, which did not have substantial bearing on the final project, it in fact requires a critical and in-depth approach that is often unfamiliar to students, who are accustomed to more mainstream fashion references. This difficulty thus underscores the need to build an education around fashion that will allow them to further develop their skills in researching and critically analyzing the market and the contemporary world.

In addition, students found it difficult to understand the specifics of their chosen craft techniques and to distinguish them from other similar techniques. Although they had total freedom to choose among techniques from their country of origin, they found it difficult to grasp the symbolic and cultural value of the technique and how it became representative of their context of origin. Such understanding, however, is crucial for an authentic and respectful appreciation of tradition, avoiding cultural simplification or appropriation.

The level at which the most difficulties were encountered was related to the analysis of "ConsumAuthors." Indeed, during this phase of analysis, students focused almost exclusively on fashion-related buying behaviors, neglecting the broader understanding of individuals' lifestyle and how it influences their consumption choices. This limitation has prevented an integrated view of the consumer, which is necessary to build more

effective design strategies in line with their needs. But understanding how lifestyle affects purchase choices is a key aspect for those working in the sustainable fashion industry, where the value and cultural dimension plays a key role.

Integrating luxury craft techniques into affordable fashion proved challenging due to their strong association with exclusivity. This required deeper reflection on how to communicate their value without reinforcing a luxury-only perception. Despite these challenges, the educational experiment successfully fostered critical and strategic thinking about sustainability, often lacking in traditional fashion education. By strengthening students' research and consumer analysis skills, the course prepares future professionals to merge environmental and cultural sustainability with the evolving demands of the market.

## CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Layout for the "Local Artisanship" analysis.

[Fig. 02] Layout of the 4 steps for the "ConsumAuthor" analysis.

[Fig. 03] Layout for the final design project.

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