

REWEAR, REDEFINE, CO-DESIGN

TOWARDS AN ONTOLOGY OF PRE-LOVED AND PERSONALIZED FASHION

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Abstract

The concept of uniqueness is becoming increasingly central in consumer purchasing decisions, the desire for exclusivity and authenticity is manifested through the growing adoption of garments that enable individuals to express their identity, enhancing the personal value of the clothes they wear. This study explores the affective dimensions of fashion, focusing on the rise of hyper-personalized and pre-loved garments as key drivers of a paradigm of slower, sustainable consumption. Far from being simple trends, these practices enact significant transformation in how individuals and objects relate. Drawing on philosophical frameworks, the paper positions garments as transitional objects that embody personal and collective narratives, fostering emotional durability and a deeper connection with materiality. While hyper-personalization, empowered by digital interactivity, invites consumers to collaborate in the creative process, transforming garments into existential companions, the re-ontologisation of pre-loved garments challenges fast fashion's disposability, framing second-hand clothing as a means of ethical resistance and ontological continuity. These dynamics, intertwined with principles of slow fashion and circular economy, point to a broader socio-cultural shift toward inclusive prosperity, balancing individual well-being, environmental integrity, and social justice, reframing fashion as a critical practice renewing its role as a medium for reimagining a more sustainable and existentially resonant sartorial culture.

Keywords: *Pre-loved garments, Slow Fashion, Hyper-customization, Garments life-cycle, Fashion Studies*

INTRODUCTION

Fashion has always been a medium through which narratives are woven, identities defined, and relationships established. In a production landscape dominated by standardization and mass manufacturing, the value of uniqueness and relationality emerges as a form of cultural resistance. The growing significance of these principles is empowered by the rise of practices such as *hyper-personalization* and the adoption of *pre-loved* garments, which, going beyond the fulfilling of a mere esthetic desire, radically redefines the relationship between clothing and consumers. Expanding upon this relational ontology, the co-creation of a garment arises as a site of embodied intentionality in which the act of

design, thus reconceived, unfolds as a phenomenological encounter that transcends utility and enters the realm of meaning, memory, and ontological significance.

Hyper-personalization is made possible and encouraged by the accessibility of digital platforms that facilitate a high degree of interactivity; the possibility of being part of the creation process introduces a deep relational dimension to the purchasing experience through a direct involvement in the co-design process. This approach, which could be described as dialogical or *intra-active* (Barad, 2007), allows the individual to assume a participatory role, giving rise to a transformative experience that amplifies the garment's affective value, thereby reducing the likelihood of its rapid

disposal, embracing the path toward slow fashion. In this perspective, the garment becomes the product of a shared experience and, therefore, takes on a deeper role in the individual's existence as an integral part of their experiential horizon. Imbued with personal meanings, fashion transcends its material state, reconceptualizing its products as transitional objects, entities that are simultaneously *me* and *not me* (Winnicott, 1953). Through this practice, a dynamic interplay develops between subject and object, wherein fashion transcends its aesthetic or functional role to become a process of self-expression able to materialize the relation between body, material, and design (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Beyond reinforcing the emotional bond with the garment, the co-design process simultaneously encourages critical reflection on the concept of consumption and promotes a model based on emotional durability while cultivating a deeper relationship between the individual and the product (Chapman, 2005). By fostering a stronger emotional connection and encouraging mindful engagement in the design process, hyper-personalization emerges as a practice increasingly aligned with the *ethos* of slow fashion, advocating for longevity, sustainability, and a more responsible approach to consumption (Fletcher, 2010).

In a comparable manner, the growing interest in pre-loved garments, valued for their past and thus for the emotional connections intrinsic to their histories, reflects a significant cultural transformation in consumer preferences. As observed by Chapman (2005), previously cherished garments acquire a dual value, both historical and subjective, transcending the traditional stigma associated with second-hand clothing. These trends are interconnected by a broader thread linking fashion, individual affectivity, and collective well-being, paving the way for a renewed emphasis on the concepts of durability and *inclusive prosperity* (Latouche, 2012) and positioning fashion as a vehicle able to promote balance between consumer satisfaction, environmental integrity, and social justice (Black, 2012). In this context, prosperity is thus redefined as an inclusive concept that considers the well-being of the global financial, environmental, and social ecosystems (Latouche, 2012), wherein the principles of the sufficiency economy and regenerative design provide effective guidelines for a sustainable future (Antonelli, 2019). By extending the life cycle of garments and fostering a culture of reuse and repair, these

evolving consumer practices contribute to the broader framework of the circular economy, which seeks to minimize waste and maximize the regenerative potential of materials within the fashion industry (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). This emerging paradigm perfectly aligns with the principles of slow fashion, which advocates for a more reflective and sustainable approach to clothing consumption (Fletcher, 2010). By fostering an affective bond with garments, whether through hyper-personalization or reverence for pre-loved clothing, individuals are encouraged to extend the lifespan of their wardrobes, thereby challenging the prevailing culture of disposability (Clark, 2008). This reconceptualization of fashion as an experiential and relational entity has the potential to offer an antidote to the alienation of consumption, reinstating garments as subjects of a reciprocal relationship rather than objects of passive acquisition (Gentina et al., 2016).

To fully understand the move toward a more reciprocal and meaningful relationship with clothing, this paper aims to examine the underlying ontology of pre-loved and personalized fashion, exploring how these practices challenge conventional notions of consumption, moving beyond mere commodities to become vessels of personal and collective narratives, imbued with affective meaning and ethical significance.

FASHION AS AN AFFECTIVE AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL PHENOMENON

The affective and phenomenological approach to fashion has been, and continues to be, the subject of numerous investigations rooted in material culture and fashion studies. Phenomenology, as developed by thinkers like Merleau-Ponty, seeks to understand the world as it appears to us through our senses and consciousness, focusing on the embodied and subjective nature of human experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The anthropologist Daniel Miller gave a fundamental perspective on the themes of relationship-building and the fluidity between people and objects, exploring how material culture influences social relationships and how objects mediate human interactions (Miller, 2008). On the other hand, beyond the realm of the humanities, this essay, in delving into such a specific domain as the relational, finds it essential to engage with psychoanalytic thought. The studies of the British psychoanalyst and pediatrician Donald



Fig. 01

Winnicott proves instrumental in the role of garments as transitional objects, capable of bearing traces of our being-in-the-world, documenting corporeal interactions with reality and intertwining the lived corporeal experience with the affective and relational dynamics of human existence (Schilder, 1935; Winnicott, 1953).

This relational dimension also extends to the social fabric, where garments act as mediators between the individual and the collectivity. Through practices such as reusing garments or preserving items previously owned by others, pre-loved clothing becomes an instrument of affective continuity, capable of transcending temporality and establishing a connection between past, present, and future (Fig. 01). Langh (2022) introduces the concept of *bleeding garments*, referring to clothing that seems to exude emotions, maintaining an almost *magical* bond with the people, places, and moments with which they have been associated. This connection cannot be replaced or replicated, not even through images or memories, as it is the garment itself that embodies memory and emotional energy. Langh (2022) affirms that recognizing and valuing this affective domain means honoring their poetic potential,

making the complexity of the human relationship with materiality finally visible. Thus, garments do not merely function as interfaces between the self and the external world but act as material archives of experiences, relationships, and personal narratives. Weiner and Schneider (1989) emphasize that fabric, with its fragility and malleability serves as a *symbol of resilience*, carrying fragments of the past and reflecting the individual's ability to transform emotions into memory and connection.

Analogously, the experience of co-creating generates a profound relationship with the artifact, transforming the design process into a phenomenological act. When the individual actively participates in designing their garment, a dialogue is established between body, mind, and material. This process is not merely technical but ontological: the act of choosing a fabric, a color, or a cut becomes an intentional gesture in which the self is projected onto the material, infusing the garment with a part of their identity. Creating a garment thus assumes the significance of giving visible form to a personal discourse, intertwining aesthetic and subjective dimensions, and transforming these artefacts into tangible fragments of one's embodied being. Schneider (2006) emphasizes that,

in these moments of co-creation, the fabric ceases to be neutral material and becomes a relational medium capable of connecting the individual to the surrounding world and their inner self. As highlighted by Langh (2022), this emotional attachment with the co-created and, therefore, personalized artifact renders the garment a unique *material archive*, imbued not only with memories but also with the creative process that generated it.

In her book *Loved Clothes Last*, the writer Orsola de Castro (2021) underscores a crucial factor for the narrative of this contribution: the close correlation between emotional attachment and garment durability. In an ecosystem marked by resource scarcity and ecological fragility, the sentimental relation to garments becomes a strategic theme for rethinking design and consumption, emphasizing an ethic that accounts not only for human needs but also for the responsibilities inherent in fostering global and shared prosperity (Barad, 2007; Filippello & Bucci, 2019). This emphasis on emotional attachment and its impact on durability takes tangible form through the daily, embodied experience of wearing and interacting with our clothes. Having explored the affective and phenomenological dimensions of fashion, it is essential to analyze how these are concretely manifested through the embodied narratives in garments.

EMBODIED NARRATIVES: THE AFFECTIVE MATERIALITY OF GARMENTS

As previously explored, fashion operates as an affective and phenomenological experience, shaped by insights from anthropology, psychoanalysis, and philosophy. The focus now shifts from theoretical perspectives to their material manifestations, examining how these dynamics unfold in the realm of embodied narratives and the affective materiality of garments. As Findlay (2016) observes, dressing practices encompass a complex sensory process rooted in the corporeal relationship with the material itself, embodying a profoundly affective and phenomenological manifestation of human experience. Phenomenology, as developed by thinkers like Merleau-Ponty, seeks to understand the world as it appears to us through our senses and consciousness, focusing on the embodied and subjective nature of human experience. In the context of fashion, this means examining how garments shape our perceptions, emotions,

and sense of self, becoming an integral part of embodied subjectivity (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), the interaction between the body and the material world is mediated by an intentional relationship in which the garment is not simply worn but experienced as an *extension of the body schema*.

Schilder (1935) defines this pattern as a dynamic configuration that does not terminate at the physical limits of the skin but expands through interaction with external objects, such as clothing. This corporeal extension imbues garments with a significance that transcends their practical function, transforming them into *material companions* of human existence, capable of recording emotions and experiences. A leather jacket, softened and molded to the wearer's body over years of use, or a comfortable sweater, knitted by a loved one and worn through countless evenings at home, transforms into a sensory artifact, offering a sense of warmth, security, and connection. The materiality of fabrics itself contributes to shaping the evocative nature of garments: its softness, flexibility, and inherent fragility reflect human vulnerability, establishing a parallel between the skin and the material that envelops it (Weiner & Schneider, 1989). As De Castro asserts, "Clothes are our chosen skin. We can use them to speak about our principles, demand a positive change and make sure that what makes us feel good about ourselves is also an instrument to bring good to others" (De Castro, 2021, p.11).

The fabric, with its ability to mold itself to the body and capture its movement, represents a sensory medium that bonds the individual to the materiality of the world. Schneider (2006) underscores its connective potential, both in a relational perspective as in a spiritual one. This connection becomes particularly intense in moments of crisis or loss, where garments reinforce their role as transitional objects (Winnicott, 1953). In this context, garments are not merely carriers of memory but materialize genuine emotional relics, capable of evoking a sense of presence through their physical contact with the body. A grandmother's wedding dress, a concert t-shirt, faded and worn from years of wear or a dress worn on a first date can become charged with emotional significance, serving as tangible reminders of pivotal moments in one's life.

From this perspective Remo Bodei's thought is particularly significant, highlighting the

profound difference: ‘The meaning of “thing” is broader than that of “object,” as it also encompasses people or ideals and, more generally, everything that matters and is close to one’s heart’ (Bodei, 2009, p.32). Western tradition has often devalued emotional bond to material objects, considering it a regressive or superficial phenomenon. In this perspective Miller (2006) highlights how materialism has historically been interpreted as a threat to the purity of human experience, while Lipovetsky (1994), as cited in Attfield (2000), criticizes fashion for transforming garments into homogenized consumer objects stripped of authenticity and meaning. Nonetheless, this vision overlooks garments’ intrinsic affective and evocative potential, which extends beyond their aesthetic or utilitarian function.

PRE-LOVED GARMENTS: TOWARD A PHENOMENOLOGY OF AUTHENTICITY

The previous chapter examined the emotional and sensory dimensions of garments, attention now shifts to a particular category of clothing that exemplifies these qualities with distinct significance: pre-loved garments. Investigating the phenomenology of authenticity within the realm of second-hand fashion offers deeper insight into the shifting values and evolving consumption patterns that are redefining the industry’s future. Within the fast fashion landscape, characterized by homogeneity and mass production, the value of uniqueness assumes a renewed centrality. Limited capsule collections, craftsmanship, and personalization emerge as responses to the alienation provoked by the standardization of consumption, restoring meaning and depth to products (Franke & Schreier, 2008). The adoption of pre-loved garments represents a practice that destabilizes the dominant representation of fashion as a phenomenon of rapid and replaceable consumption, transcending the material state of garments, thus fostering an emotional connection with stories and meanings otherwise lost. Acquiring a pre-loved garment, therefore, signifies participating in a collective narrative, appropriating an object that carries with it the traces of a lived experience, engendering a conscious philosophical act that challenges planned obsolescence and the culture of replacement (Cervellon et al., 2012). The intersection between uniqueness and pre-loved garments is manifested in the latter’s ability to

embody an authentic and unrepeatable value. Roux and Guiot (2008) underline that the motivations behind purchasing second-hand goods include both practical considerations and affective needs, reconfiguring the used object as an emotional witness. Visible wear, imperfections, and signs of use transform into *marks of authenticity*, standing in deep contrast to the anonymity of industrial production (Roux & Guiot, 2008). Uniqueness, in this context, far from being merely an aesthetic attribute, stands as an ethical and existential principle that redefines the role of fashion in the construction of subjectivity. Pre-loved garments constitute a particularly significant category within the context of affective value, as they embody a layered temporality, an interweaving of individual and collective memories. This phenomenon, which could be interpreted through the lens of the *phenomenology of memory* (Ricoeur, 2004), transforms consumption into an act of narrative appropriation, wherein the new owner intertwines his own story with that already embedded within the fabric. In this perspective, Naomi Klein’s words seem more relevant than ever: “A fresh generation is marching for revolution, and they want to wear clothes that tell a new story. Let’s give it to them.” (Klein, 2019).

Traditionally, the second-hand clothing market has been primarily associated with the informal economy, often perceived as a marginal sector or one catering to specific consumer niches. However, this segment has experienced significant growth in recent years, establishing itself as a substantial component of the global economy. Numerous companies have decided to incorporate this strategy into their product management; among them, Patagonia has been a pioneer in this field: its *Worn Wear Program* encourages customers to return used garments, which are then repaired and resold (Talkbacks, n.d.), contributing to the philosophy of circular consumption (Fig.02). Analogously, Gucci has launched the *Vault Project*, a platform combining vintage fashion with reinterpreted archival pieces. According to a GlobalData report for ThredUp, the global second-hand clothing market is projected to reach \$350 billion by 2028, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 12% (FashionUnited). Following these principles, even the online market contributes to fostering a circular idea of fashion: a considerable number of websites have emerged explicitly with the purpose of facilitating the exchange or sale of



Fig. 02

second-hand clothing. Vestiaire Collective, founded in Paris on October 14, 2009, reported a turnover of €12.4 million after only 5 years, by 2014. On the same trajectory, a proliferation of similar platforms has been observed: Vinted, The RealReal, Depop, and ThredUp are just a few of the many rapidly growing companies in this sector.

As observed by Crane (2012), it thus becomes evident, that contemporary fashion is moving away from standardization toward a model that celebrates diversity and authenticity as central values. From this perspective, both the hyper-customization of unique products and pre-loved items represent a resistance to the superficiality of consumption, turning fashion into an opportunity to rethink the whole relationship between consumer and product. Through the lens of circular fashion, these garments provide a sense of continuity and belonging; their materiality becomes a medium through which the consumer's identity is reflected and reconfigured in a continuous dialogue between memory and desire (Fletcher & Grose, 2012).

HYPER-PERSONALIZATION: UNIQUENESS AS AN ONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The aspiration to uniqueness thus constitutes a foundational trait of human self-expression and it finds in fashion to be one of its most tangible manifestations. The desire to distinguish oneself through what one wears, embodies a form of ontological self-affirmation: the act of dressing contributes to the the construction of the self (Franke & Schreier, 2008). In this perspective, fashion takes shape as a symbolic language through which the individual communicates his style and his phenomenological existence. As theorized by Franke and Schreier (2008), this trajectory of appropriation imbues the object with heightened emotional resonance, fostering a deep sense of attachment that naturally encourages longer retention and, in turn, improves its durability.

A practical example is provided by the brand *Nike By You* (formerly *NikeiD*), which allows customers to personalize sneakers by personally selecting colors, materials, and details. According to a study conducted by Deloitte (2015), 36% of consumers express interest in purchasing personalized products, with this percentage rising to 42% among individuals aged 16 to 24 (Virid, n.d.). These figures illustrate how personalization is particularly appealing to younger generations, who view the creative act as a means to express their individuality. From this perspective, personalization assumes the role of a relational practice, wherein the consumer actively participates in creating the product. This process transforms the consumer into a co-creator, establishing a profound emotional bond between the object and its maker, thereby reducing the likelihood of its rapid disposal or, worse, neglect it. Norton, Mochon, and Ariely (2012) demonstrate this bond through the IKEA Effect, observing that the perceived value of an object increases by 20-25% when the consumer actively contributes to its creation.

Personalization also entails an ethical responsibility; when the consumer becomes a co-creator, he is consequently more inclined to value and preserve the product, thereby mitigating rapid consumption cycles. Mugge, Schoormans, and Schifferstein (2009) demonstrate that personalized products are 50% more likely to be repaired or retained compared to standard products. A notable example of this approach is Levi's Tailor Shop, where customers can personalize their

WORN  WEAR

BETTER
THAN NEW

patagonia®

Fig. 03

jeans by adding embroidery, patches, or structural modifications. In addition to fostering an emotional connection with the garment, this conscious act encourages sustainable practices such as repair and reuse. Levi's reported a 10% increase in sales for personalization services between 2019 and 2021, indicating that consumers are willing to invest in products they perceive as their own (Fig.03). Franke and Schreier (2008) also demonstrate that 81% of consumers are willing to pay a premium for personalized products, as they perceive them as reflections of their individuality. This trend is extensively explored in the luxury sector: fashion companies like Louis Vuitton and Burberry offer personalization services, enabling customers to add initials or exclusive details to their products. This approach led Louis Vuitton to record a 12% increase in sales of personalized products between 2018 and 2022, illustrating that uniqueness can also constitute a powerful economic and cultural driver.

Schmitt (1999) states that consumers who engage in the creative process develop a stronger attachment to products, reducing the desire for replacement, demonstrating, once again, that the emotional value of personalized products serves

as a compelling incentive for fostering more mindful consumption. Another example of a company embracing this strategy is Adidas, with the initiative *Made for You*, a line of customizable sportswear entirely produced on demand. This system reduces waste by 30%, as garments are produced according to the customer configuration. According to a McKinsey report (2021), adopting personalization models on an industrial scale could reduce fashion waste by 10-20% by 2030, highlighting its potential as a significant driver for environmental sustainability. Thus, garments consumers' co-creation represents far more than a commercial trend: it is a critical statement, intertwining aesthetics, ethics, and sustainability. Hyper-personalization in the fashion sector, indeed, other than offering the opportunity to stand out, can support the deceleration of the consumption cycle, promoting a culture of value and durability. In this sense, it can be regarded as a valuable instrument for reconstructing a more human and responsible relationship with the objects surrounding us.

CONCLUSION

The concept of *Slow Fashion*, firstly introduced in 2007 by designer Kate Fletcher, encapsulates the principles articulated in this discussion by advocating for a slower, more deliberate, and conscious approach to fashion consumption. In her work *Fashion-ology: An Introduction to Fashion Studies*, Kawamura thoroughly examines this concept, positioning it as a direct critique of the dominant consumerist paradigms (Kawamura, 2005). Her analysis reassigns garments the ontological status of objects capable of mirroring and enriching the subject's lived experience.

From this vantage point, hyper-personalization and pre-loved garments transcend trends, constituting instead tangible philosophical constructs that interrogate and disrupt the prevailing logic of consumption. These categories restore the primacy of relationality between individual and object within the sartorial realm. Through these practices, fashion reclaims its poietic dimension, no longer confined to an instrument of aesthetic display but, instead, a medium through which authenticity and sustainability are actively explored within an increasingly homogenized global landscape.

Empirical evidence provided by Mugge, Schoormans, and Schifferstein (2009) underscores that affective bond to garments significantly prolongs their lifecycle. This engagement with sartorial objects functions as a countermeasure to disposability, cultivating a temporally and ethically deliberate consumption mode. The affective turn in fashion studies foregrounds human-clothing interaction's embodied, sensorial, and material dimensions, thereby reorienting discourse away from symbolic or utilitarian frameworks (Ravnløkke et al., 2023). In this sense, the words of philosopher Bodei perfectly describe this relationship:

We invest objects intellectually and emotionally, endowing them with meaning and sentimental qualities, wrapping them in treasures of desire or repulsive coverings, framing them within systems of relationships, and embedding them in stories that we can reconstruct, stories that concern ourselves or others (Bodei, 2009, p.23).

Through this lens, fashion emerges as a profoundly relational practice, mediating between the human body and the material world. Such an approach opens new avenues for sustainable design,

emphasizing practices that valorize the intricate bond between corporeality and matter. In this framework, sustainability transcends its reduction to technical solutions, positioning itself as an ethical imperative: an invitation to reconceptualize our emotional and existential relationship with materiality (Fletcher & Grose, 2012). This affective approach provides a novel paradigm for rethinking sartorial practices, integrating body, emotion, and physicality into an ongoing philosophical dialogue. In this expanded vision, garments become sites of epistemological inquiry, agents of connection, and facilitators of an ethics grounded in sustainability. Orsola de Castro eloquently encapsulates this perspective in her work *Loved Clothes Last* (Fig. 04):

We shouldn't be measuring a garment's value by its price tag, but by the purpose it has in our life. We should own it because we love it, and because we love it, we should want to keep it forever, consume it, wear it to death (De Castro, 2021, p. 2).

Under this reinterpretation, fashion transcends its industrial constraints and assumes the character of an ethical practice, inviting us to rethink our modes of being-in-the-world through the entwinement of body and materiality. The affective dimension of garments emerges as a form of strategic resistance to the accelerated rhythms of contemporary consumption, advocating instead for a slower, more reflective engagement with objects, one that paves the way toward shared prosperity.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] The storefront of "SecondAbbey – The Shop of Pre-Loved Clothes" visually embodies the cultural and affective reevaluation of second-hand garments. Source: "SecondAbbey – The Shop of Pre-Loved Clothes", photograph by Gary Butterfield, licensed under CC BY 2.0.

[Fig. 02] A campaign image from "Loved Clothes Last" by Orsola de Castro, celebrating the emotional durability of garments through personal narratives. Source: "A Love Letter to My Dungarees", Orsola de Castro, Fashion Revolution, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND.

[Fig. 03] Promotional visual from Patagonia's Worn Wear initiative, which encourages the repair, reuse, and resale of used garments. The slogan "Better Than New" challenges traditional notions of value, advocating for emotional durability and environmental responsibility. Source: Patagonia, Worn Wear campaign (n.d.). Reproduced under fair use for academic purposes.

[Fig. 04] Interior view of Levi's Tailor Shop in Mexico City (CDMX), a space dedicated to customization, repair, and co-creation. Source: Levi's Tailor Shop, Madero CDMX.



Fig. 04

Image © Levi Strauss & Co., used for illustrative purposes under fair use.

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