NEGOTIATING FASHION DISCOURSES IN CRAFT CONTEXTS

ADAPTIVE CO-CREATION AND AGENCY IN THE VIETNAM DESIGN RESEARCH STUDIO

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Abstract

This paper examines how heritage, innovation, and sustainability are negotiated between academic researchers and textile artisans in Hoa Tien, a Vietnamese craft village participating in the Vietnam Design Research Studio. The pilot study initially sought to co-create a digital platform to document local weaving practices. However, fieldwork revealed significant gaps between academic vocabularies of preservation, digital futures, and sustainable design, and the artisans' tacit, embodied, and livelihood-oriented knowledge systems.

Using participatory action research and ethnographic methods, the study shows how textile craft operates within fashion as a cultural, economic, and discursive system. Artisans framed their practice through ancestral motifs, intergenerational transmission, and economic pragmatism, while researchers emphasised documentation, innovation, and future-oriented sustainability. These divergent discourses exposed the limits of conventional co-design models that assume shared language, symmetrical knowledge, or common goals.

The paper reframes co-creation as an adaptive, semiotic, and discursive process shaped by language, epistemology, and situated practice. By foregrounding these negotiations, it contributes to debates on how alternative fashion languages emerge from the margins and how they might inform more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to sustainable fashion futures.

Keywords: *Sustainable fashion discourse; Co-creation; Tacit knowledge; Adaptive design; Traditional crafts*

INTRODUCTION

Fashion discourse is often shaped from the centre by industry, academia and media, yet many of its most significant cultural meanings are produced at the margins where craft, community and lived practice intersect. The Vietnam Design Research Studio (VDRS) operates within this peripheral space, engaging with textile artisans in Vietnam to understand how heritage, innovation and sustainability are negotiated through everyday making practices. The pilot study in Hoa Tien, a village renowned for brocade and silk weaving, sought to co-develop a digital platform to support the documentation, preservation and adaptation of traditional crafts. More broadly, it aimed to explore how different actors articulate the value of textile heritage and how these articulations shape collaborative design processes.

While often positioned outside formal fashion systems, textile craft practices such as those in Hoa Tien are increasingly entangled with fashion as both a market and cultural field.

Locally produced textiles are adapted into garments, scarves, and other commodities for sale to tourists and regional markets, positioning artisans as participants in fashion's material and economic flows. At the same time, these practices operate within distinct cultural and epistemological frameworks that do not always align with dominant fashion discourses of innovation, branding, or trend cycles. Understanding how these textile practices intersect with, adapt to, and at times

resist fashion systems is critical to situating craft within broader conversations on sustainable and decolonial fashion futures. What emerged during fieldwork, however, was less a technical challenge than a discursive one. The co-design process revealed differences in how researchers and artisans used language to describe craft, cultural identity and future possibility.

Researchers arrived with conceptual vocabularies tied to sustainability, digital innovation and long-term preservation. Artisans, meanwhile, drew on tacit, embodied and intergenerational knowledge systems that framed weaving as both cultural inheritance and daily livelihood.

These divergent ways of speaking, and therefore of knowing, exposed a substantial semiotic gap between academic frameworks and community realities. Artisans often agreed politely to unfamiliar digital concepts without the linguistic or experiential resources to fully assess their implications, while researchers struggled to grasp the cultural, symbolic and affective dimensions embedded in local textile practices.

Such encounters challenge the common assumption in co-design that shared expertise naturally converges. Instead, the VDRS pilot demonstrated that co-creation is fundamentally shaped by asymmetries in discourse, power and representation. To move beyond a simplistic model of overlapping knowledge, the research required an adaptive approach attentive to linguistic differences, local agency and context-specific meaning-making. This paper examines these dynamics to consider how fashion discourses are negotiated at the periphery and how adaptive methodologies can better support culturally grounded forms of agency. By situating the pilot study within broader debates on language, semiotics and the politics of representation in fashion, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions about inclusive, ethically attuned and community-driven forms of design and cultural preservation.

While the project was initially conceived as a co-design initiative to develop a digital platform for documenting textile heritage, the realities of fieldwork required a reframing of its aims. Rather than focusing on the production of a specific design outcome, the research evolved into an investigation of how meaning, value, and future possibilities are negotiated between researchers and artisans. This positions the study's primary contribution as a discursive and methodological exploration of adaptive co-creation, where language, epistemology, and situated practice shape the conditions under which collaboration becomes possible.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Co-creation has increasingly been recognised as an important approach for supporting cultural heritage, community empowerment and sustainable craft futures. Bissett-Johnson and Moorhead describe co-creation as a process that fosters livelihood opportunities through craft practice while maintaining artisan autonomy and cultural identity (2019). This balance is particularly relevant in Vietnam, where the textile traditions of fifty-four ethnic groups are closely connected to cultural identity, oral history and intergenerational learning. While co-creation models often position designers and artisans as collaborators with complementary expertise, such frameworks frequently assume symmetrical knowledge between stakeholders. This assumption can obscure fundamental differences in experience, language and expectations that shape collaborative work in practice.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) offers an ethical foundation for co-creation by prioritising local knowledge and shared inquiry. Within heritage contexts, PAR enables iterative dialogue and supports the emergence of community priorities, particularly when safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Adaptive methodologies extend this by allowing research processes to shift as new insights emerge. Mazzarella et al. (2016) demonstrate how such methodologies can support textile artisan communities by encouraging social engagement, rescuing cultural heritage, strengthening economic opportunities and contributing to environmental stewardship. Their emphasis on situated design and enabling ecosystems underscores the importance of understanding craft not only as material practice but also as a cultural and social discourse.

A central challenge in co-creation lies in bridging gaps between academic knowledge systems and the tacit, embodied knowledge that anchors traditional craft practices. Groth and Berg (2018) highlight that tacit knowledge cannot be fully articulated through formal frameworks; instead, it is learned through participation within communities of practice, where skill, memory and cultural meaning intertwine. In this study, tacit knowledge refers to embodied, practice-based knowledge

developed through repetition and participation within community contexts, rather than formalised or codified systems. Case studies in Pakistan and Colombia reinforce this point. Espinosa et al. (2024) show how social innovation initiatives succeed when they acknowledge artisans as knowledge holders rather than beneficiaries, creating intercultural spaces where traditional textile knowledge can be conserved and adapted. These insights point to the importance of equitable knowledge exchange and the need to design collaborative structures that respect the epistemological foundations of artisan communities.

Digital tools have introduced new opportunities and tensions within these conversations. Choudhary (2023) describes how digital design technologies can merge tradition and innovation, to enable cultural preservation and expanding economic possibilities for artisan communities. Digital interventions, however, require thoughtful integration into local systems of meaning. Madden et al. (2014) stress the importance of bridging knowledge system gaps when co-designing with Indigenous communities, noting that digital prototypes and probes can help surface differences in interpretation, expectation and experience. Within the VDRS project, the introduction of digital scanning, photogrammetry and spatial documentation functions not only as a technological resource but also as a discursive one. These tools help reveal how artisans speak about heritage, continuity and value, and how these narratives differ from academic or design-oriented vocabularies.

Beyond methodological considerations, scholarship in fashion studies highlights the need to treat textiles and craft practices as communicative and semiotic systems. Barthes' work on fashion as a coded language underscores how garments and material practices convey cultural meaning beyond their functional use (1967). While Barthes focused on fashion media and modern dress, his insights into the relationship between material form and cultural narrative have since informed broader analyses of how craft practices communicate identity, authority and belonging.

More recent work within fashion discourse studies argues that peripheral spaces such as rural craft villages generate alternative narratives that complicate dominant fashion systems. Lotman's concept of the semiosphere offers a useful lens for understanding these dynamics, suggesting that cultural innovation often emerges at the margins, where multiple sign systems intersect and where tensions between official narratives and lived realities become visible (Lotman, 1991). These ideas resonate strongly with the context of Hoa Tien, where heritage, livelihood and identity are expressed through textile practices that exist outside mainstream fashion industries yet remain deeply embedded in everyday cultural life.

Decolonial and cross-cultural studies within fashion further situate artisan communities as important interlocutors in conversations about representation, cultural agency and global fashion discourses. Jansen (2020) argues that decolonial fashion discourse requires attention to the ways in which non 'western' communities articulate their own fashion narratives, rather than interpreting them through 'western-centred' frameworks. Rocamora's analysis of fashion media similarly demonstrates how dominant narratives shape what is considered fashionable, valuable or innovative, often marginalising alternative modes of meaning-making (Rocamora, 2009). These arguments invite a closer examination of how artisan communities such as those in Hoa Tien articulate their own textile practices, how they use language to describe cultural memory and continuity, and how these descriptions may conflict with the expectations of external researchers or industry actors.

Research into community-driven innovation in textile crafts offers further perspectives relevant to this study. Collaborative work with Indigenous and artisan communities has demonstrated that innovation in textile practice is often relational, grounded in cultural values, social networks and negotiated authorship rather than externally imposed design interventions. Portillo and Delgado (2018) document collaborative fashion projects with Indigenous artisans, highlighting the importance of cultural authenticity, shared decision-making and respectful representation. These studies suggest that innovation in textile crafts emerges through situated relationships and cultural negotiation, reinforcing the need for adaptive, context-sensitive approaches to co-creation.

Additional research highlights the complexity of aligning academic research frameworks with traditional knowledge systems. Scholarship in craft and design studies shows that co-creation must foreground social needs, collective authorship and

culturally embedded forms of knowledge rather than privileging individual creativity or universal design frameworks (Ingold, 2013; O'Connell, 2023). From this perspective, traditional craft practices operate as autonomous systems of meaning that cannot be fully captured by formal academic models. These insights underscore the need for context-sensitive, ethically attuned approaches that respect local narratives and epistemologies when engaging in collaborative research with artisan communities.

Research on adaptive design methodologies further enriches the understanding of how artisan communities engage with innovation. Mazzarella et al. (2021) propose a framework for crafting situated services that respect local values and reposition designers as enablers rather than directors. Digital technologies have also been discussed as tools that can support the documentation and reinterpretation of traditional craft practices when integrated sensitively within local frameworks (Shin & Westland, 2017; Zabulis et al., 2022). Research on adaptive and material-led design further highlights how traditional textile practices operate as sites of learning, memory and cultural expression. Kettle (2019) argues that textile making can serve as a medium for recording social and spatial change, emphasising the role of textiles as carriers of memory and identity. From this perspective, adaptation does not require technological augmentation to be meaningful; rather, it emerges through the situated negotiation of materials, techniques and cultural narratives over time.

Finally, scholarship on cultural heritage preservation underscores the importance of integrating local knowledge with digital documentation practices. Guo and Ahn (2023) discuss the role of tacit knowledge sharing in sustaining intangible cultural heritage crafts, identifying knowledge accumulation, expression, diffusion and reflection as essential components of collaborative sustainability. Shin and Westland (2017) demonstrate how digital technologies can support the reinterpretation of traditional designs while maintaining cultural integrity. Zabulis et al. (2022) propose systematic methods for digitising traditional craft processes that support the documentation and transmission of embodied knowledge for future generations.

Taken together, these studies provide a rich theoretical foundation for examining the VDRS pilot study. They highlight the cultural, epistemological and discursive dimensions of co-creation and reveal how textile heritage practices negotiate the boundaries between tradition and innovation. By engaging with these perspectives, this paper situates the VDRS pilot project within broader debates on fashion discourse, semiotics, cultural preservation and adaptive design. The literature therefore supports an understanding of co-creation not simply as a methodological tool but as a discursive process shaped by language, meaning-making and the negotiation of cultural identities.

METHODOLOGY

The study used PAR and ethnographic methods to support a culturally sensitive and community-driven inquiry into textile heritage.

A team of five researchers and one research assistant, who also served as interpreter, spent five days in Hoa Tien, a village in North-West Vietnam known for brocade and silk weaving. Communication required movement across three languages, the local Thai dialect, Vietnamese and English, which highlighted the linguistic and epistemic differences that shaped the co-creation process. These layered translations revealed not only practical communication challenges but also shifts in meaning that informed how knowledge, heritage and agency were articulated by both artisans and researchers.

To minimise disruption to daily production, the research team integrated into the rhythms of village life. Activities included gathering mulberry leaves, feeding silkworms, spinning silk and weaving brocade. Textile production in Hoa Tien involves a sequence of material and embodied processes that connect cultivation, transformation, and making. Silk is produced through the cultivation of mulberry leaves and the raising of silkworms, followed by the extraction and spinning of silk fibres into thread. Weaving is carried out on hand-operated looms, where artisans produce brocade textiles using established patterns and motifs such as geometric forms, suns, and animals, each carrying cultural and symbolic meaning. These textiles are used both for cultural purposes and for the production of contemporary items, including scarves, garments, and household textiles, which are sold within local and regional markets. The process is labour-intensive and knowledge is transmitted through repeated practice within family and community settings, where technique, rhythm, and material handling are learned through

observation and participation rather than formal instruction. These forms of participation provided access to tacit and embodied knowledge that would not have emerged through interviews alone. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted across six homes, focusing on craft practices, cultural heritage and future aspirations. Guided questions supported these conversations, which were recorded, translated and transcribed for thematic analysis. This process revealed how artisans expressed their relationship to craft through narrative, symbolic and practical lenses, which in turn informed the study's discursive analysis.

Digital documentation formed a significant component of the research. The team established a textile scanning setup, conducted 3D lidar scans of artifacts and used photogrammetry to document artisanal tools. Drone technology was used to map the village, creating immersive videos, orthomosaic maps and annotated cross-sections that connected domestic, agricultural and weaving spaces. These digital traces acted as both research material and dialogic objects. When shared with participants, they often prompted reflections on cultural memory, transmission and value, which contributed to the study's focus on discourse and meaning-making. Reflective sensory methods further expanded the ethnographic inquiry. Sketches, sound recordings of machinery and silkworms and photographic documentation of daily routines captured the textures and atmospheres surrounding textile production. These materials provided insight into the sensory dimensions of craft that are not easily translated through language, yet play an essential role in shaping artisans' identities and practices. Such multi-modal methods allowed the research team to engage with both the material and symbolic layers of textile heritage.

Ethical considerations guided all stages of the project. Informed consent procedures were used for interviews, digital documentation and all data collection activities. Participants were given clear explanations of the study's purpose, potential impacts and the ways in which their contributions would be represented. The research design prioritised community agency through co-created methods and adaptive decision-making. For example, interviews were often conducted at the loom to avoid interrupting production, an approach that demonstrated respect for livelihood realities and acknowledged the economic rhythms

Fig. 01

that govern craft practice. As shown in Figure 1, interviews were conducted within active weaving contexts, allowing discussion to emerge alongside ongoing material practice. (Fig. 01)

The research team also remained attentive to the relational and power dynamics that shaped the fieldwork. As external researchers working across linguistic and cultural differences, the team occupied a position of institutional and epistemic authority that influenced how questions were asked, interpreted and responded to.

The use of an interpreter introduced further layers of mediation, where meaning was not simply translated but negotiated across Thai, Vietnamese and English. These dynamics required ongoing reflexivity, particularly in recognising how politeness, deference and social hierarchy could shape participants' responses.

Rather than assuming transparency or equivalence in communication, the research approach acknowledged that knowledge was co-produced within these relational conditions, and that what was expressed, withheld or adapted in conversation reflected broader social and cultural structures.

This study was conducted in accordance with RMIT Vietnam University's ethical guidelines, with ethics approval number 27769.

Together, these methodological choices supported a holistic and context-sensitive examination of how artisans express, negotiate and preserve cultural meaning within textile practices.

They also provided a foundation for analysing how discourse, knowledge and agency are shaped in collaborative design encounters at the periphery of the fashion system.

FINDINGS

The pilot study uncovered critical insights into the dynamics of co-creation, cultural preservation and adaptive methodologies in the context of textile heritage. Three key themes emerged from the fieldwork, each highlighting how discourse, meaning and agency were negotiated between researchers and artisans.

CHALLENGES OF CO-CREATION

A central finding concerned the disparities between academic knowledge and the tacit, embodied practices of artisans. Researchers initially approached co-creation as a process where overlapping expertise could be leveraged to design a digital platform. Fieldwork revealed that this assumption did not hold in practice.

Differences in language, experience and epistemological foundations shaped how each group understood the aims of the project, which in turn influenced the quality and depth of engagement. Traditional interview methods often proved inadequate for surfacing artisans' priorities. Open-ended prompts such as 'What can we do for you?' elicited responses that focused on immediate livelihood concerns rather than strategic or long-term aspirations. Requests for market access, new weaving frames or support in selling products reflected a discourse grounded in daily economic realities rather than the preservation-oriented language used by researchers. As one artisan noted, "If you could find a market for our products, that would be the most helpful." In one instance, when researchers introduced the idea of documenting weaving practices for long-term preservation through a digital platform, the artisan redirected the conversation toward immediate needs, asking instead about support for selling products. Such responses indicated that the language of cultural safeguarding, sustainability and innovation did not resonate with artisans in the same way it did with the research team.

Textile production in Hoa Tien operates within small-scale, household-based systems where weaving is integrated into daily domestic and agricultural routines. Artisans typically work from their homes, balancing textile production with farming, childcare, and other forms of labour. Products such as brocade fabrics, scarves, and garments are sold through local markets, intermediaries, or directly to visitors, with income often fluctuating depending on demand and seasonal tourism. This economic context shapes how artisans prioritise time, materials, and innovation, reinforcing a focus on practical outputs and immediate income rather than long-term or speculative design interventions.

Artisans also demonstrated limited engagement with unfamiliar concepts such as integration into modern fashion. While some interviewees were able to reflect on these ideas when given concrete examples or clarification in the local Thai dialect, most had little reference point for evaluating the relevance of digital platforms or speculative design proposals. For example, when researchers asked whether traditional textiles could be adapted for contemporary fashion markets, several artisans responded with polite agreement but were unable

to describe how such adaptation might occur.
When the discussion shifted to concrete examples, such as modifying scarf designs or colour combinations for tourists, responses became more detailed and engaged, indicating that abstract notions of 'fashion' required translation into familiar, practice-based terms.
Polite verbal agreement signalled social cooperation but not necessarily comprehension or alignment. These interactions highlighted the semiotic gap between researchers' discourse of strategic preservation and artisans' discourse of practical skill, family heritage and economic necessity.
These findings align with Groth and Berg's (2018) understanding of tacit knowledge as practice-based and difficult to fully articulate through formal or external frameworks.
Importantly, this apparent agreement should not be interpreted as a lack of agency or critical engagement. Interview interactions suggested that artisans were highly attentive to social context and audience, adjusting their responses in ways that prioritised harmony, respect and relational alignment. Expressions of agreement often functioned as culturally appropriate conversational practices rather than indicators of endorsement or shared understanding. In this sense, discourse operated not only as a vehicle for communication but also as a form of social negotiation, shaping how artisans positioned themselves in relation to external researchers and unfamiliar concepts.
This observation complicates deficit-based interpretations of co-creation encounters. Rather than indicating limited capacity to engage with abstract or future-oriented ideas, artisans' responses reflected a pragmatic and context-sensitive use of language grounded in lived experience, social norms and economic realities.
Recognising this discursive positioning helps explain why conventional interview formats struggled to elicit deeper forms of engagement and underscores the need for adaptive approaches that attend to how meaning is produced, withheld or redirected in cross-cultural research settings.
Table 01 summarises these differences by contrasting the priorities, methodologies and understandings of innovation that shape academic and tacit knowledge systems.
Together, they underscore the importance of adaptive, context-sensitive approaches that engage with local forms of meaning-making rather than relying on assumed shared understanding.

Comparison of Academic and Tacit Knowledge Systems

Aspect	**Academic Knowledge**	**Tacit Knowledge (Artisans)**
Focus	Long-term preservation and adaptation of craft	Immediate livelihood and practical needs
Methodology	Structured frameworks (e.g., digital platforms)	Embodied, experience-based learning
View of Craft	Cultural and historical preservation	Practical skill and income generation
Response to Innovation	Hesitant about losing authenticity	Open if it provides clear, tangible benefits
Awareness of Digital Tools	Conceptual and strategic	Minimal; polite agreement without deep understanding

Tab. 01

These differences illustrate how co-creation is shaped not only by the exchange of expertise but also by the discursive structures that define what each group sees as valuable, possible or necessary.

PRESERVATION AND INNOVATION

The second theme centres on artisans' perspectives on preservation and innovation. The fieldwork revealed a strong commitment to maintaining traditional textile practices and motifs, which were described as symbols passed down from ancestors and essential markers of cultural identity. Patterns such as suns, moons and elephants were narrated as heritage anchors, and knowledge transmission within families was viewed as stable and secure. As one artisan explained, "We teach our daughters and daughters-in-law.

They know the importance of this work". Artisans were not resistant to innovation but approached it through a practical and market-oriented lens. Adjustments in colour or placement on contemporary items, such as scarves or shirts, were readily accepted when they responded to customer demand. As one participant put it, "If the customer demands it, we will adjust the design." This demonstrates a pragmatic negotiation between cultural continuity and economic adaptation. Innovation was not framed as a threat to authenticity but as a practical response to market needs. Rather than positioning preservation and innovation as opposing forces, artisans articulated them as context-dependent practices.

These practices were governed by appropriateness and intention.

Traditional motifs and techniques carried different meanings depending on where, how and for whom they were produced or displayed. Heritage objects were associated with ancestry, collective memory and representation, while contemporary items were framed as functional outputs embedded in everyday labour and economic survival.

This suggests that innovation was not understood as a break from tradition, but as a situational adjustment that remained culturally legitimate when it respected inherited forms and meanings.

A notable distinction emerged between the value placed on historical and contemporary textiles. Historical pieces displayed in the village's mini museum were viewed as collective memory objects embodying the history and identity of the Thai ethnic group. These textiles typically date back several generations and are associated with ceremonial or community use, carrying meanings tied to lineage and collective memory. Contemporary items, by contrast, were described as economic outputs rather than cultural artefacts, even though they often employed the same motifs and techniques. The community leader explained that the work of elders should be preserved because it represents the past, while current production was oriented toward selling and making money.

This dual perspective highlights the artisans' discursive negotiation of heritage.

Preservation was associated with ancestry, lineage and cultural meaning. Contemporary production was positioned as active, necessary and livelihood driven. Both, however, were integral to the continuity of craft knowledge. This finding points to a plural understanding of textile practice, where heritage is simultaneously symbolic, economic and lived.

ADAPTIVE APPROACHES

The final theme concerns the adaptive methodologies required to respond to the discursive and practical realities of the field. Early attempts to conduct focus groups revealed the influence of hierarchical social structures, as participants deferred to the village leader or interpreter. This produced uniform responses and limited opportunities for individual perspectives. Planned workshops were also abandoned due to linguistic constraints and the need to build trust gradually. These early methodological adjustments reveal that adaptation functioned not only as a practical response but also as a form of discursive rebalancing. Hierarchical structures and linguistic mediation shaped who could speak, how ideas were expressed and which perspectives became visible. By abandoning methods that privileged collective or formal expression, the research team created space for more situated and individual forms of participation. This shift foregrounded agency as relational and context-specific rather than evenly distributed, underscoring the importance of methods that respond to social structure as well as research intent.

In response, the research team adopted situationally sensitive methods. Interviews were conducted at weaving looms to avoid interrupting production and to support comfort and familiarity. Daily adjustments were made based on team reflection, allowing the methodology to evolve alongside emerging insights. Brooches were created and

exchanged as identifiers and gifts, fostering reciprocity and shared identity within the research relationship. Cultural participation, such as joining communal meals and engaging in a Shaman-led blessing ceremony, further supported relational grounding and mutual respect.

Digital tools also played an important adaptive role. The scanning of textiles, photogrammetry of tools and drone mapping of the village facilitated conversations about the potential uses of digital documentation. When shown 3D models of artefacts, the community leader reflected on their relevance for museum display and educational use. Demonstrating photogrammetry on a smartphone helped demystify the technology and positioned it as a tool artisans might feasibly use in the future. In one interaction, an artisan interpreted a 3D scan of a weaving tool not as a technical model but as a way to record and share knowledge with younger generations. Rather than focusing on the novelty of the technology, the discussion shifted toward its potential role in preserving how tools are made and used. This reframing positioned digital documentation as a continuation of cultural transmission rather than a departure from it. Although digital skill training was not part of the original plan, these interactions revealed its potential importance for enabling local agency in documenting and sharing textile knowledge. In this context, digital tools operated less as technical solutions and more as boundary objects that enabled exchange across differing knowledge systems. Their value lay not in immediate adoption or skill transfer, but in their capacity to prompt reflection, discussion and reinterpretation of existing practices. By situating these tools within everyday workflows and familiar devices, the research reframed digital documentation as an extension of local meaning-making rather than an externally imposed intervention.

These adaptations highlight the shift from a project-oriented approach to a relationship-oriented one. The emphasis moved from producing a defined digital platform to establishing long-term capacities, shared understanding and mutual learning. By respecting artisans' routines, acknowledging linguistic and cultural differences and presenting digital tools as conversational rather than prescriptive, the research team created the conditions for more meaningful engagement.

REGISTERS OF MEANING IN ARTISAN – RESEARCHER CO-CREATION

Across the three themes, the findings suggest that artisans' responses were not shaped by a single, stable orientation toward heritage, innovation or technology. Instead, artisans moved fluidly between different registers of meaning depending on context, intention and audience. Heritage was articulated through ancestry, motifs and collective memory; innovation through market responsiveness and material adjustment; and relational practice through harmony, respect and social positioning. These registers were not mutually exclusive but activated situationally, shaping how artisans engaged with questions of preservation, adaptation and digital documentation.

Figure 02 synthesises these registers to illustrate how meaning and agency were negotiated across the co-creation process, providing a conceptual bridge between the empirical findings and the theoretical framing that follows.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the VDRS pilot study highlight the complex discursive and epistemic dynamics that shape co-creation in heritage textile contexts. Traditional models of co-design, which assume that academic and community knowledge will naturally overlap, proved insufficient for the realities of Hoa Tien. The pilot revealed that co-creation is not simply an exchange of expertise but a negotiation between different ways of speaking, knowing and imagining the future of craft. These insights required the team to adopt an adaptive, non-linear framework (Fig. 03) that prioritised relationships, iterative engagement and local agency over predefined outcomes.

These findings also reposition textile craft practices as active participants within fashion systems rather than peripheral or pre-fashion activities. In Hoa Tien, textiles are not only cultural artifacts but are adapted into garments, scarves, and other products for sale within local and regional markets, situating artisans within fashion's material and economic flows. Through these practices, artisans engage with fashion as both a market and cultural field, while simultaneously operating within distinct frameworks of value that prioritise continuity, relational knowledge, and livelihood. In this way, craft practices both intersect with and challenge dominant fashion discourses that emphasise

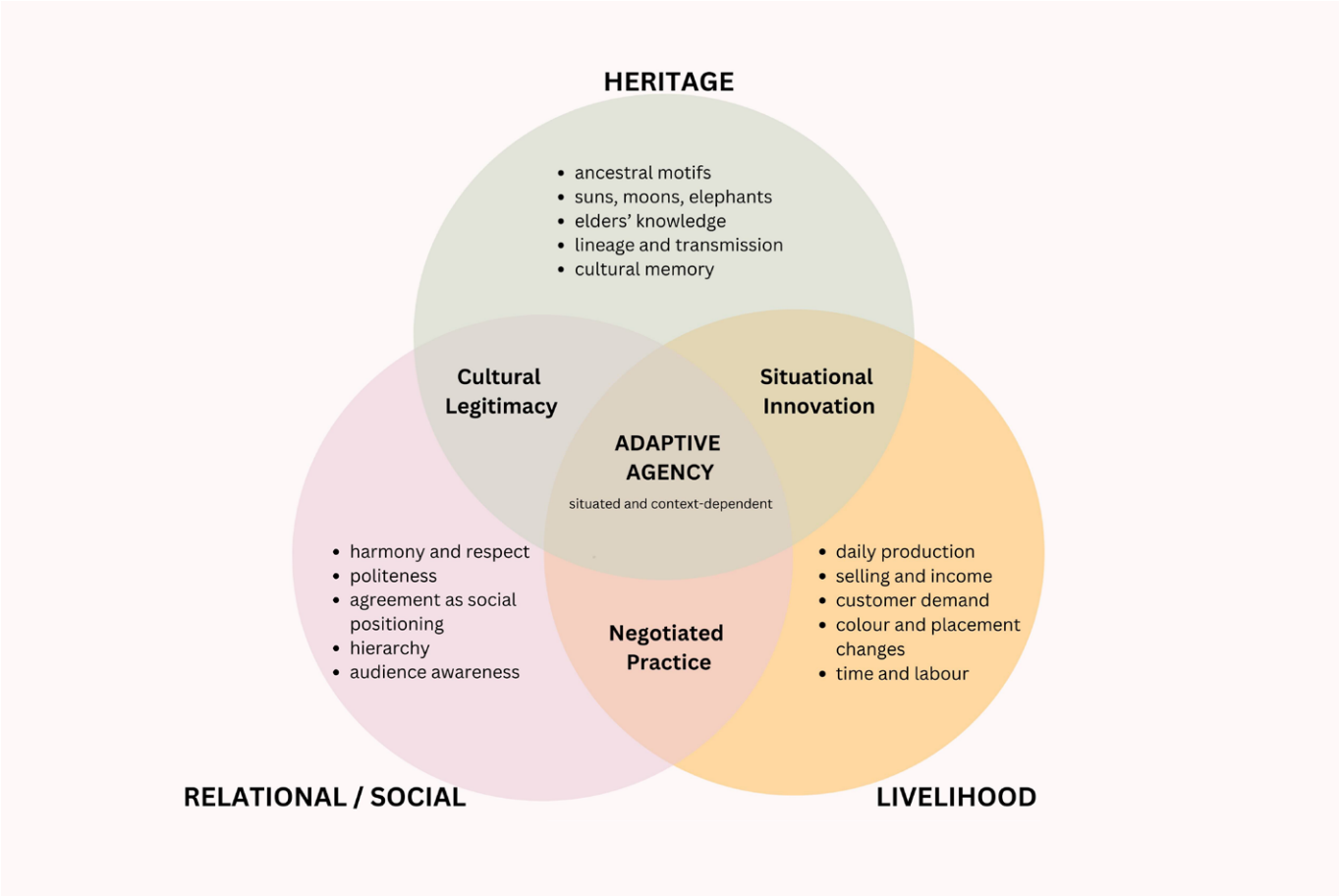
HERITAGE
ancestral motifs
suns, moons, elephants
elders' knowledge
lineage and transmission
cultural memory
Cultural Legitimacy
Situational Innovation
ADAPTIVE AGENCY
situated and context-dependent
harmony and respect
politeness
agreement as social positioning
hierarchy
audience awareness
Negotiated Practice
daily production
selling and income
customer demand
colour and placement changes
time and labour
RELATIONAL / SOCIAL
LIVELIHOOD

Fig. 02

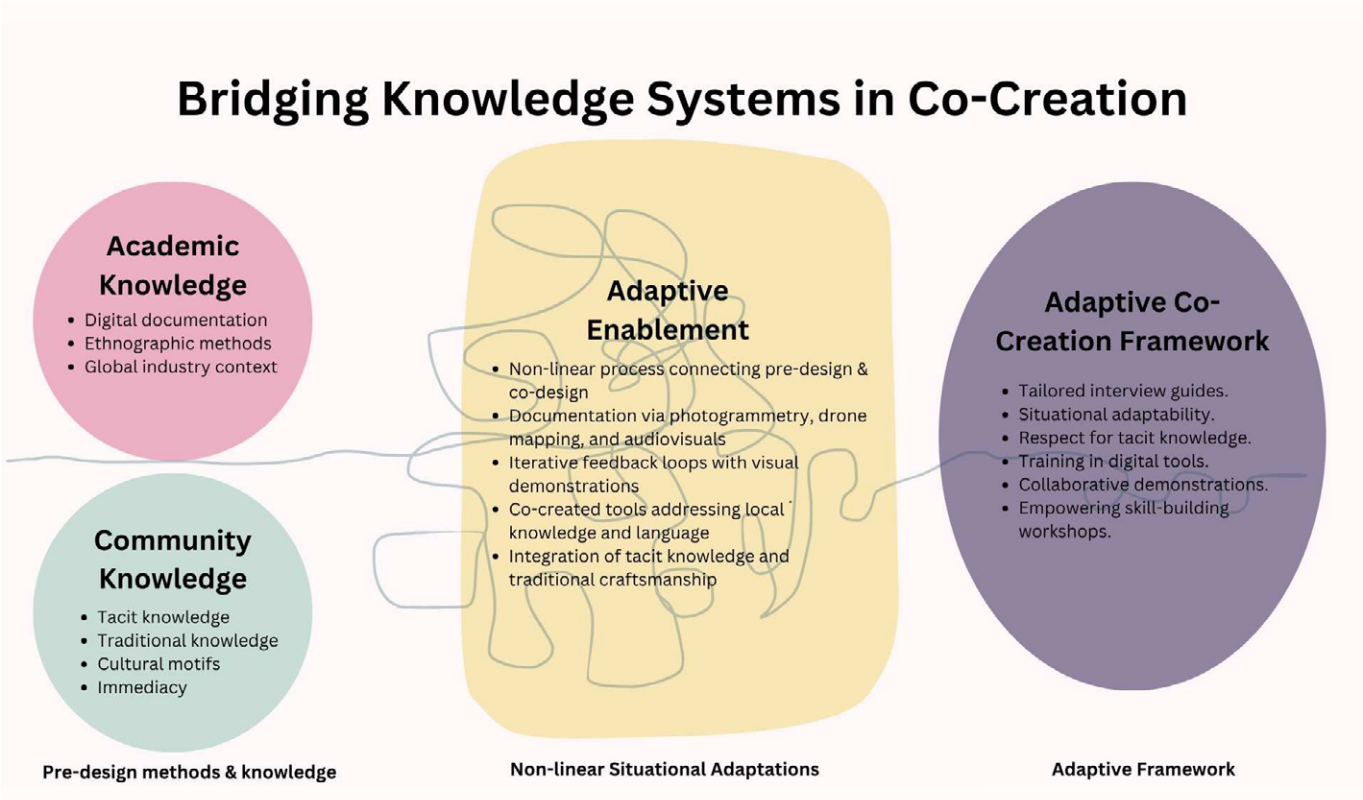
Bridging Knowledge Systems in Co-Creation
Academic Knowledge
Digital documentation
Ethnographic methods
Global industry context
Community Knowledge
Tacit knowledge
Traditional knowledge
Cultural motifs
Immediacy
Adaptive Enablement
Non-linear process connecting pre-design & co-design
Documentation via photogrammetry, drone mapping, and audiovisuals
Iterative feedback loops with visual demonstrations
Co-created tools addressing local knowledge and language
Integration of tacit knowledge and traditional craftsmanship
Adaptive Co-Creation Framework
Tailored interview guides.
Situational adaptability.
Respect for tacit knowledge.
Training in digital tools.
Collaborative demonstrations.
Empowering skill-building workshops.
Pre-design methods & knowledge
Non-linear Situational Adaptations
Adaptive Framework

Fig. 03

novelty, authorship, and seasonal change.
The use of digital tools such as photogrammetry, textile scanning and drone mapping played an important role in this process. While these technologies originated from the researchers' design vocabulary, their introduction created opportunities for new forms of dialogue. When artisans viewed 3D scans of their tools or textiles, they interpreted them not through the lens of high-tech innovation but through existing cultural narratives about preservation, memory and community pride. These interactions illustrate Barthes' observation that material forms become meaningful through the interpretive frameworks of those who engage with them. In this case, digital artifacts functioned as semiotic bridges, allowing researchers and artisans to speak about heritage using a shared visual language even when verbal language proved insufficient.
Adaptive engagement practices also supported a rethinking of agency. Rather than treating agency as the equal participation of all stakeholders, the pilot conceptualised it as a flexible, situational practice shaped by social norms, linguistic familiarity and daily routines. Conducting interviews at looms, revising methods based on daily reflection and participating in community ceremonies respected local rhythms and allowed artisans to contribute on their own terms. This reframing of agency aligns with Jansen's call for decolonial approaches to fashion discourse, which emphasise the need to recognise peripheral knowledge systems without imposing external interpretive frames.
This also requires a more critical understanding of the role of the designer within co-creation. In this study, the designer is not understood as a fashion author or product developer in a conventional design sense, but as a facilitator, design researcher, and interlocutor working within relational and culturally specific conditions. This role is less about directing outcomes and more about enabling dialogue, adaptation, and shared reflection. In the context of Hoa Tien, such a position must remain open to being reshaped by local craft practices and knowledge systems, rather than assuming that design expertise sits solely with the academic or professional researcher.
The redesigned framework that emerged from the pilot emphasised three key pillars. The first was the documentation of traditional techniques through both digital and observational methods. The second was the establishment of iterative feedback loops that encouraged artisans to reflect on, question and reinterpret the digital materials produced. The third was the integration of cultural sensitivity practices that acknowledged the social, linguistic and symbolic dimensions of craft.
These pillars connected pre-design and co-design phases and generated a more equitable space for meaning-making.
This approach also aligns with broader ethical discourse on co-creation, which argues that working with craft communities requires sensitivity to the political, symbolic and economic dimensions of heritage. The VDRS model demonstrates that digitally enabled co-creation should not aim simply to preserve cultural practices as static artifacts but should support communities in articulating their own narratives, priorities and futures.
Such an approach reflects Rocamora's observation that fashion systems often privilege dominant narratives, and that alternative or peripheral narratives must be actively supported to enter broader discourse (Rocamora, 2009).
The pilot study had limitations, including the five-day fieldwork period and the small number of interviews. These constraints underscore the need for longer-term engagement to fully understand the linguistic and cultural nuances of heritage textile practice. Nonetheless, the study provides a scalable model for integrating traditional knowledge with digital innovation in ways that respect local meaning-making and encourage global learning.
By foregrounding discourse, semiotics and adaptive collaboration, the VDRS pilot contributes to a more inclusive understanding of how fashion knowledge is created, preserved and transformed.

CONCLUSION

The VDRS pilot study demonstrates that co-creation in heritage textile contexts requires more than methodological collaboration.
It requires an attentiveness to the discursive, cultural and semiotic frameworks through which different actors understand craft, heritage and innovation. By recognising the gap between academic design vocabularies and the tacit knowledge of artisans, the project was able to shift toward an adaptive model that prioritised relational engagement, iterative learning and situated agency. This adaptive approach supported cultural preservation not as a static objective but as a dynamic, community-led process.
Digital tools, when introduced through

participatory and culturally sensitive methods, became enablers for reflection, storytelling and future-oriented thinking. In doing so, they helped create a shared space where researchers and artisans could jointly articulate the meanings and possibilities of textile heritage.

The study contributes to broader debates on fashion discourse by showing how peripheral craft communities negotiate their place within larger fashion systems. It highlights the need for design research that respects the semiotic complexity of heritage practices and that recognises the value of linguistic, cultural and embodied forms of knowledge. While the scope of the pilot was limited in duration, its insights point to a scalable model for integrating traditional knowledge with digital innovation in ways that strengthen community agency. Future research should extend these methods across different craft contexts and explore how long-term engagement can deepen collaborative meaning-making.

Continued refinement of digital tools, guided by local priorities and interpretive frameworks, will be essential for supporting sustainable, community-driven approaches to heritage documentation and cultural resilience.

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CAPTIONS

[Fig.01] Interview conducted at the loom in Hoa Tien, illustrating how research conversations were integrated into ongoing weaving practices within domestic production environments,

[Fig.02] Registers of Meaning Shaping Heritage, Innovation and Agency in the VDRS Pilot,

[Fig.03] Conceptual diagram of bridging knowledge systems in co-creation. This illustrates the relationship between academic and community knowledge systems and the role of adaptive practices in enabling situated agency.

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