

SUSTAINABILITY AS LANGUAGE IN CONTEMPORARY JEWELLERY

DISCOURSES, MYTHS AND THE LEGITIMATION OF VALUE

SUSANNA TESTA

Design Department, Politecnico di Milano, Italy

susanna.testa@polimi.it

Orcid 0000-0002-2164-8952

LIVIA TENUTA

Design Department, Politecnico di Milano, Italy

livia.tenuta@polimi.it

Orcid 0000-0002-9277-8674

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Abstract

In contemporary jewellery design debates sustainability is often approached as a set of technical practices or a normative objective. This paper proposes to instead interpret it as a device capable of influencing the ways in which the industry defines, communicates and legitimises value. Through a qualitative analysis of 130 case studies selected between 2019 and 2024 in the jewellery and related design fields, the research identifies four recurring configurations through which sustainability takes shape in contemporary jewellery: Conscious Crafters, Tomorrow Shapers, Change Drivers and Moulded Mindsets. Organised using the Design Orienting Scenarios framework (Manzini & Jégou, 2003), these configurations are considered not as normative models or projections of the future, but as interpretative constructs useful for making visible recurring ways in which sustainability becomes legible and establishes itself as a criterion of value. Starting from these configurations the article shows how the discourse on sustainability tends to consolidate recurring narratives (linked to responsible materiality, participation, transparency and collective awareness) that transform historically situated associations into qualities perceived as self-evident. The paper's contribution is therefore to demonstrate how sustainability operates in contemporary jewellery as a discursive mechanism that reorganises value through processes of repetition, recognition and naturalisation. Jewellery thus emerges as a privileged observatory for analysing how value is being redefined within the fashion system today.

Keywords: *Sustainability; Contemporary jewellery; Fashion discourse; Myth; Design scenarios.*

JEWELLERY AS DISCOURSE: WHY SUSTAINABILITY MATTERS AS LANGUAGE

In the field of fashion studies accessories can be interpreted as forms of condensation of social, economic and relational values capable of expressing complex dynamics on a small scale (González, 2010; Rocamora, 2009). Among these jewellery occupies a unique position: present in diverse historical contexts, it accompanies the human body as one of the oldest and most complex instruments of adornment. Its value is not limited to its material or monetary dimension but is constructed through a layering of elements that intertwine affectivity, status, memory, identity and belonging (Barthes, 1967; Lipovetsky, 1987).

Jewellery precisely because of this density constitutes a privileged observatory of ongoing transformations reflecting in a particularly sensitive way the tensions that traverse a given era.

In recent years critical reflection in the fields of fashion and design has progressively shifted from the analysis of the object itself to the observation of the interpretative frameworks that guide its reading and evaluation (Rocamora, 2009; Berger & Blake, 2021). This shift allows us to grasp transformations not only on a formal or technical level but above all in the criteria through which value is attributed, justified and made acceptable. Jewellery in this context emerges as a particularly significant case, as its historically sedimented mythologies (preciousness, rarity, permanence, purity of

material), which can be understood as the outcome of long-standing cultural and economic constructions of value linked to luxury goods and material hierarchies (Veblen, 1899; Appadurai, 1986), are increasingly confronted with issues related to sustainability, responsible production processes, visibility of supply chains and social impact. This article assumes that sustainability acts in the field of jewellery as a force reorganising the criteria of value: concepts such as cyclicity, transformation, responsibility, transparency and care intervene to redefine what is considered valuable and relevant, challenging established hierarchies and opening up new possibilities for evaluation (Barthes, 1957; Lotman, 1991).

Within contemporary design and environmental studies sustainability has increasingly been addressed as a construct shaped by institutional, cultural and economic forces, in addition to being considered a technical objective or an ethical imperative.

Recent research in fashion and sustainability studies highlights how sustainability discourse operates through the production of shared narratives, categories and legitimising frameworks that influence how practices are interpreted, communicated and evaluated (Heidenstrøm, 2024; Tao & Ryan, 2025). Sustainability contributes to defining what is recognised as responsible, credible or desirable within a given context. On this basis the research addresses two main questions: RQ1: What recurring configurations allow sustainability to be articulated in contemporary jewellery? RQ2: What mythologies and paradoxes emerge from these configurations in the construction of value? This paper adopts a qualitative cross-fertilisation approach aimed at exploring how practices and design models from adjacent fields (architecture, biodesign, digital culture, art and interior design) contribute to reorienting jewellery design. Using the Design Orienting Scenarios methodology (Manzini & Jégou, 2003) the analysed material was reorganised into four scenarios, Conscious Crafters, Tomorrow Shapers, Change Drivers and Moulded Mindsets, interpreted not as projections of possible futures but as structures already operational in the present.

Jewellery from this perspective can be considered a field of critical observation to interrogate the transformations underway in contemporary fashion. Sustainability thus emerges as a space for discussion in which new criteria of value take

shape, stabilise or come into tension, generating possibilities for change and new interpretative frictions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MYTH, VALUE AND CHANGE

The analysis is based on the idea that the value of artefacts is not an intrinsic property but the result of practices, narratives and conventions that stabilise their interpretation over time. In the fields of fashion, design and jewellery in particular these mechanisms have historically contributed to defining what is recognised as worthy, durable and socially relevant well beyond the material dimension of the object.

In *The System of Fashion* Roland Barthes shows how fashion functions through a set of descriptions, classifications and interpretive frameworks that do not merely comment on the object but determine its intelligibility and value (Barthes, 1967). Ornament thus becomes comprehensible and recognisable not only for what it is but for how it is narrated, named and placed within a shared horizon. In this process qualities such as durability, excellence of material and exclusivity tend to present themselves as evidence rather than as the results of a historical construction.

In *Mythologies* Barthes expands this reflection by showing how these processes operate on a larger scale: myth transforms contingent values into seemingly natural givens, removing them from critical discussion (Barthes, 1957). Applied to jewellery this perspective helps to frame how notions such as the nobility of materials, permanence or uniqueness emerge from a long sedimentation of practices and narratives rather than from inherent properties of the object. Repetition plays a central role in this process. Through the reiteration of specific associations between practices and meanings, these values stabilise and begin to appear as self-evident. Change therefore occurs not exclusively through technical or formal innovations but through shifts in the criteria that make these qualities recognisable and shared.

From a discourse-analytical perspective sustainability can be understood as a field structured by competing narratives, categories and regimes of legitimacy. It operates as a system that organises meaning, distributes authority and stabilises specific interpretations within the field. Recent studies in fashion and sustainability communica-

tion show how corporate narratives, transparency practices and marketing frameworks contribute to shaping the perception of responsibility, often translating complex processes into coherent and accessible representations (Jestratijevic et al., 2020; Tao & Ryan, 2025). Sustainability discourse therefore participates in defining what is considered legitimate, trustworthy and valuable.

This perspective is complemented by the contribution of Yuri Lotman who offers a useful tool for interpreting the conditions through which such transformations can emerge. In the semiosphere model culture is conceived as a differentiated space, traversed by zones of greater stability and more permeable areas in which innovation tends to develop (Lotman, 1991). The most consolidated values occupy central positions and ensure continuity while marginal areas foster experimentation and interpretative shifts, often before being absorbed and normalised.

Transposed to the field of jewellery this model allows us to observe how traditional conceptions of value (based on exclusivity, permanence and material superiority) now coexist with demands that foreground transformation, responsibility, traceability and care. These demands initially emerge in less regulated contexts where evaluation criteria are more flexible and then interact with the dominant models of the sector.

Within this framework design is understood not solely as the production of objects but as a practice capable of making orientations, priorities and visions of the future visible (Manzini, 2015). The Design Orienting Scenarios approach (Manzini & Jégou, 2003) is therefore adopted as an interpretative tool useful for organising heterogeneous phenomena and interpreting recurring configurations without attributing them a predictive or prescriptive value. The scenarios allow us to observe how different approaches to sustainability coexist and overlap generating tensions rather than linear trajectories.

Here sustainability introduces some recurring shifts: the completeness of the object is accompanied by a greater focus on processes and the possibility of transformation over time; the centrality of ownership is replaced by a more relational reading which considers the object as part of networks of actors and responsibilities; the opaqueness of supply chains is countered by a growing demand for visibility and reliability. In jewellery these shifts are particularly evident as

they intervene in a context traditionally charged with expectations and consolidated values. Precisely because of this historical density jewellery represents a privileged observatory for analysing how sustainability operates as a force for reorienting value criteria without resolving the tensions. This is the foundation of the research methodological approach illustrated in the following chapter aimed at mapping the recurring configurations and ambivalences through which these transformations take shape in the present.

METHOD: MAPPING DISCURSIVE LANGUAGES THROUGH DESIGN ORIENTING SCENARIOS

This chapter explains the research design, the corpus construction criteria and the analytical procedure adopted. The study is based on a qualitative corpus of 130 cases developed between 2019 and 2024 selected from the field of jewellery and related design fields (architecture, biodesign, digital culture, art, interior design and industrial experimentation). The extension beyond jewellery responds to a criterion of cross-fertilisation aimed at identifying emerging configurations in contexts of disciplinary contamination where practices and design models are transferred and reworked. For research purposes a "case" is defined as a discrete analytical unit (project, product or project initiative) in which sustainability is explicitly addressed through at least one of the following dimensions:

- material (e.g., recycled materials, bio-based materials, material reduction),
- processual (e.g., circularity, traceability, production techniques),
- discursive (e.g., narratives, campaigns, sustainability communication devices).

Cases where sustainability was implicit, undocumented or not central to the project definition were excluded.

CORPUS CONSTRUCTION AND SELECTION CRITERIA

The corpus was constructed through a deliberate sampling process (Patton, 2002) aimed at identifying relevant cases for analysing the discourse on sustainability in contemporary design. Sources include:

- magazines and platforms specialising in design and jewellery (Dezeen, Designboom, Klimt02, Current Obsession),

- platforms dedicated to materials and innovation (Materia, MaterialDistrict),
- academic publications,
- museum and exhibition archives (Victoria and Albert Museum, Design Museum),
- content produced by brands (official websites, campaigns, social media).

Sources were selected based on their role as visibility and legitimation devices in which emerging practices are selected, described and made recognisable. The resulting corpus is not statistically representative but rather constructed for discursive relevance with the aim of capturing a variety of ways in which sustainability is articulated.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The analysis adopts a cross-case, discourse-oriented qualitative approach in which each case is examined as a configuration structured along three interrelated dimensions:

- the material dimension, which includes the selection, transformation and combination of materials as well as their physical properties and any visible traces of the production process;
- the processual dimension, which concerns production methods, supply chain structures, reparability strategies, modularity and life cycle management;
- the discursive dimension, which includes narratives, visual representations, labels, certifications, interfaces and other communication devices through which sustainability is framed and made interpretable.

For each case the analysis considers how these dimensions interact to produce specific ways of making sustainability visible and meaningful. Particular attention is paid to the alignments or tensions between material choices, production logics and communication methods.

The goal is to identify the conditions through which sustainability becomes legible, credible and recognisable within the field. This involves observing how design decisions and communication strategies contribute to shaping sustainability as an attribute of the object, process or broader system in which it is embedded. Within this framework categories such as responsibility, legitimacy and value are considered relational and constructed outcomes. They are analysed as the result of specific design operations, narrative devices and processes of repetition and recogni-

tion rather than as intrinsic or self-evident properties of objects. This approach is consistent with a discourse-oriented perspective as it allows the analysis of how meanings are constructed through the interaction of material, processual and communicative dimensions.

ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The procedure is divided into five successive phases.

1. Construction of the preliminary corpus. Systematic collection of cases through exploration of selected sources.
2. Application of inclusion/exclusion criteria. Selection of cases in which sustainability is explicitly thematised. Output: Final dataset of 130 cases.
3. Cross-case analysis. Identification of recurrences and patterns through a qualitative comparative analysis. This phase is supported by a set of operational categories (upcycling, traceability, participation, care, activism, bio-based materials) used as open coding tools (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
4. Interpretative mapping. Organisation of recurrences along two analytical axes:
 - Brand ↔ People (institutional vs. individual/community actors),
 - Tangible ↔ Intangible (material/processual vs. symbolic/relational dimension).
 This phase allows for the identification of clusters of practices characterised by recurring logics.
5. Synthesis into recurring configurations. The clusters are synthesised into four configurations: Conscious Crafters, Tomorrow Shapers, Change Drivers, Moulded Mindsets. These configurations are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive categories but analytical constructs that make visible recurring ways of articulating sustainability (Fig. 01).

THE ROLE OF DESIGN ORIENTING SCENARIOS

Within research Design Orienting Scenarios (Manzini & Jégou, 2003) are employed as a tool for interpretive organisation. Unlike their original use in design scenarios are not used to construct visions of the future but to:

- structure empirical material,
- make recurring configurations legible,
- connect case analysis to critical discussion.

Scenarios therefore operate as an intermediate level of abstraction between empirical data and theoretical interpretation. They allow us to move

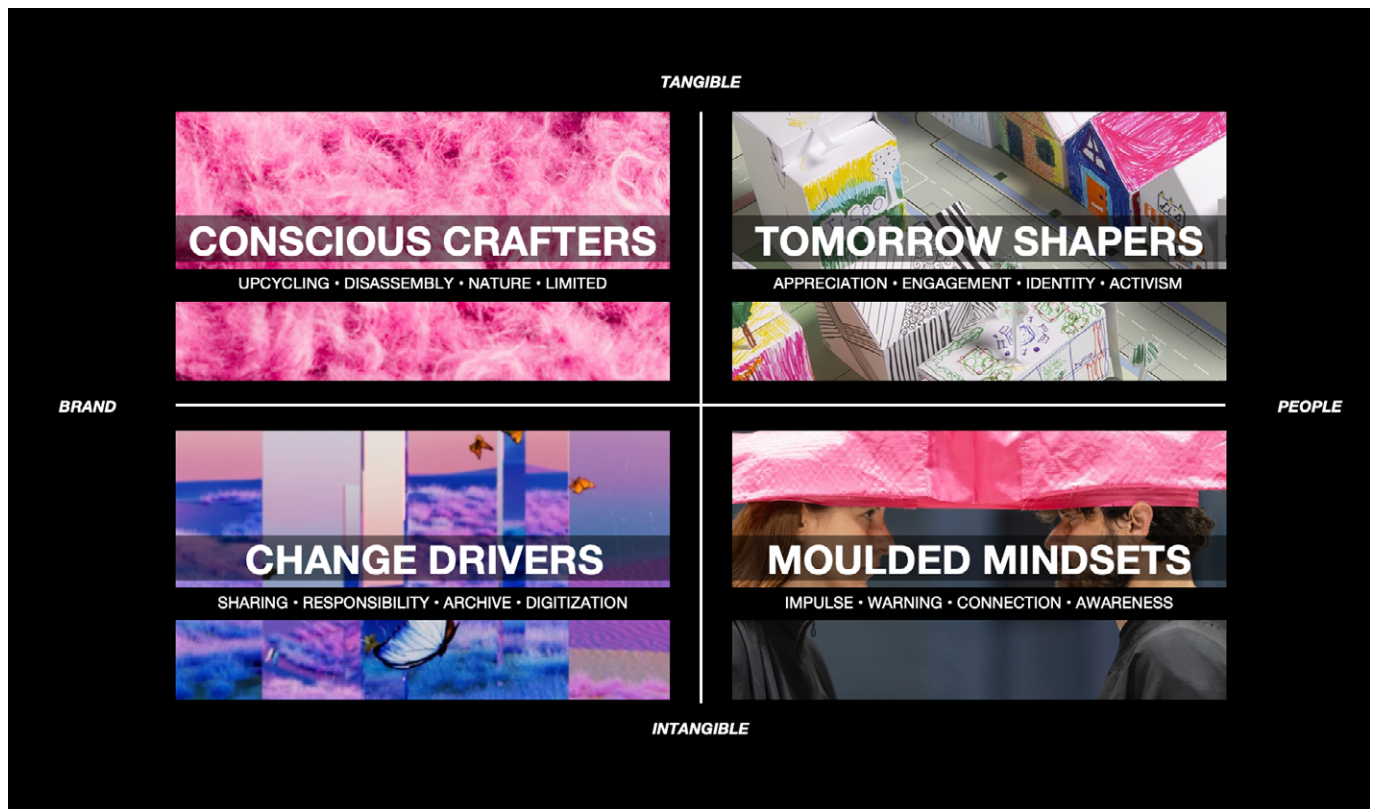


Fig. 01

from the observation of heterogeneous practices to the identification of patterns through which sustainability is constructed as a language and stabilised as a criterion of value.

FOUR SUSTAINABILITY LANGUAGES IN CONTEMPORARY JEWELLERY

This chapter presents the four recurring scenarios that emerged from the analysis and outlines their main operational characteristics in the context of contemporary jewellery drawing on a selection of case studies. The scenarios are introduced as analytical constructs that reveal recurring patterns within heterogeneous cases. They are not proposed as exhaustive categories or normative models but rather as intermediate interpretative devices that allow us to identify recurring ways in which sustainability becomes legible and establishes itself as a criterion of value. The selected cases are not illustrative examples but analytical instances through which recurring configurations are identified and examined.

CONSCIOUS CRAFTERS: RESPONSIBLE MATERIALITY AND SUBTRACTION (BRAND × TANGIBLE)

Conscious Crafters brings together design practices that directly impact the material conditions of jewellery. Strategies of subtraction, transformation and reuse challenge established conventions related to the quantity, purity and permanence of materials introducing alternative ways of assigning value. Attention focuses on the processes that occur within the material and the ways in which they are made visible. Value is linked to design choices and their legibility. Lightweight structures, modularity, exposed assemblies and irregular surfaces recur as coherent outcomes of an approach that exposes the construction logic rather than concealing it. Two dynamics consistently emerge. The first concerns the use of waste or residual materials that retain traces of their origin and the transformations they have undergone. These traces enter into the formal definition of the object and direct the reader toward its material journey. The second concerns the visibility of the production phases. Joints, assembly systems and intermediate steps remain legible and shift attention from the final result to the sequence of operations that generates

it. These dynamics find expression in a series of design practices that make sustainability directly perceptible through form.

GianCarlo Montebello's Superleggeri series (Cappellieri, 2017) translates the reduction of material into an explicit design strategy. The jewellery is constructed from perforated stainless-steel elements combined with minimal gold components. The perforation makes the absence of mass visible and transforms it into a formal element. On the material level subtraction becomes perceptible quality: the perforated structure makes the distribution of material legible and introduces lightness as a recognisable characteristic. On the process level the construction logic favours structural optimisation: the quantity of material loses centrality, while the weight of the design choices that regulate the form and determine its efficiency increases. On the discursive level lightness is associated with precision and control: this association tends to stabilise through repetition. The reduction of material is thus interpreted as an indicator of quality and design coherence. Value takes shape within this relationship and becomes recognisable.

The modular systems developed by Drilling

Lab (n.d.) demonstrate a similar configuration. The jewel takes the form of an open structure composed of standardised elements, designed to be assembled, disassembled and replaced over time. On the process level, the focus shifts toward reversibility and maintenance: the project is organised as a modifiable system, oriented toward intervention over time. On the material level the separation of components facilitates reuse and repair: durability is linked to the possibility of modifying the structure and extending its use. On the discursive level modularity and reparability are perceived as inherent qualities of the object: the design conditions that make them possible remain less visible. Adaptability takes the form of a natural attribute and consolidates as a criterion of recognition. These practices demonstrate how sustainability operates as an organising principle of the project. Reduction of material, visibility of processes and the possibility of intervention gradually consolidate as indicators of quality. In this transition what derives from situated design choices tends to be perceived as properties of the object. Responsible materiality thus emerges as a recognisable language, through which specific modes of assigning value are made evident, shared



Fig. 02

and progressively established within the field of contemporary jewellery (Fig. 02).

TOMORROW SHAPERS: PARTICIPATION AND CO-CREATION (PEOPLE × TANGIBLE)

Tomorrow Shapers brings together practices in which sustainability takes shape through the direct involvement of people in the design process. The focus shifts from the object as a defined outcome to the relationship that develops over time between jewellery, design and use.

Jewellery takes the form of an open configuration, subject to modifications, additions and continuity. Customisation, modularity, digital configurators, in-store co-design, 3D printing and DIY practices serve as devices through which the object is defined. Interaction enters the structure of the project. Use contributes to the final configuration and introduces an extended temporality in which value is distributed across a sequence of actions. Within these practices jewellery loses formal stability and takes on an adaptive nature.

The possibility of updating, recomposing and transforming over time becomes a central element in defining value. The relationship between designer, manufacturer and user is reconfigured: the user influences combinations, assemblies and parameters contributing to the definition of the object. This dynamic introduces a promise of engagement and choice. Participation takes shape within designed structures, often based on predefined options that guide the intervention without altering production or organisational conditions. The user's contribution is placed within pre-configured systems.

The projects by Atelier VM (n.d.) offer an example of this logic. The jewellery is constructed through welded and incremental elements which allow for subsequent additions over time. On a processual level the project develops as a sequence of distributed interventions.

The purchase loses its centrality as a single moment and gives way to an extended temporality made up of successive choices. On a material level the object is structured as a set of elements that can be integrated or modified. Continuity of use is linked to the possibility of intervention over time.

On a discursive level this configuration constructs value as an accumulation of experiences and decisions. The jewellery takes on the role of tracing a path. Participation is associated with the idea of



Fig. 03

the progressive construction of value.

A similar dynamic emerges in modular and interchangeable systems such as Roberto Sambonet's replaceable stone ring (Cappellieri & Romanelli, 2013) and the Bone Structures Necklace by Campana Brothers (WWD, 2010) in which elements can be recombined over time.

On a processual level these configurations introduce logics of updating and variation.

The object is organised as an open system.

On a discursive level variability is interpreted as an intrinsic characteristic.

The possibility of transformation establishes itself as a recognisable quality and becomes a criterion of value (Fig.03).

In systems based on digital configurators and parametric models interaction takes on a more structured form. Projects such as Kinematics by Nervous System (2010) and PortraitMe by Vivian Meller and Laura Alvarado (Cappellieri et al., 2014) translate user input into design variables.

In the case of Kinematics the jewellery is generated through a parametric system in which geometric constraints and the possibility of movement determine the final configuration. On a processual level the project integrates calculation and interaction. Form emerges as the

result of a regulated procedure. On a material level the modular and articulated structure makes the possibility of variation visible. On a discursive level the ability to adapt is perceived as a property of the jewellery. The parameters, limits and rules that determine its form remain less evident. User intervention takes on a natural dimension. These practices demonstrate how sustainability is configured as a shared and processual experience. Value is associated with the possibility of intervention, choice, and modification over time. Participation consolidates as an indicator of value. The design structures that enable it tend to remain in the background. User intervention takes the form of an intrinsic quality of the object. Sustainability is articulated as a language in which involvement and transformation become recognisable criteria for assigning value.

CHANGE DRIVERS: TRANSPARENCY, GOVERNANCE AND DATA AUTHORITY (BRAND × INTANGIBLE)

Change Drivers brings together practices developed by institutional players in the fashion and jewellery industry (fashion houses, luxury groups, technology platforms and certification bodies) that address information infrastructures, control systems and verification mechanisms. In this configuration sustainability takes shape through systems that accompany production, circulation and use rather than through the form of the object. Traceability, certifications, shared standards and digital tools operate as mechanisms through which the origin of materials, production processes and after-sales services are made verifiable and comparable. Jewellery takes the form of a documented entity accompanied by a structured set of information describing its journey over time. Value is linked to the reliability of the infrastructures that guarantee provenance, authenticity and responsibility.

These practices reorganise the relationship between object and information. Digital archives, certificates and product passports contribute to building trust, in a context marked by a growing demand for control and accountability. Even the historical heritage of brands is being reoriented in this direction: the archive takes on an operational function and contributes to verifying continuity in the present.

In the jewellery sector this integration is clearly evident in digital certification systems. The

diamond provenance certificates introduced by Tiffany & Co. (2021) associate each stone with a structured set of data relating to its origin, cut and trade route. Organising this information makes the supply chain accessible through simplified interfaces transforming a complex sequence of operations into a legible trail.

The presentation of data constructs an image of continuity and control: provenance and trade route are perceived as ordered and verifiable elements. In this step traceability is directly linked to the object and tends to be interpreted as its quality. The technical and organisational conditions that make this possible remain less evident.

A similar dynamic is observed in the Digital Product Passports developed by brands like Monica Vinader (2022) which extend the identity of the jewellery to include information on materials, production, maintenance, and, in some cases, resale. The product thus becomes part of an information system that accompanies its life cycle. Access to this information helps build an image of continuity and responsibility. Value is associated with the ability to consult organised and recognisable data, which strengthens the perception of reliability.

These systems are further extended into shared platforms such as the Aura Blockchain Consortium (2022) aimed at standardising data recording and sharing across the entire luxury supply chain. Here the infrastructural dimension becomes central: common protocols coordinate different actors and define shared validation methods.

Standardisation contributes to the construction of forms of authority. Data takes on a regulatory function and participates in defining criteria of legitimacy.

In these practices jewellery incorporates an informational dimension that extends its scope beyond materiality. Access to data (through QR codes, dedicated platforms, or digital interfaces) enters the user experience and contributes to the definition of value.

The jewellery thus takes on a dual configuration: object and document. Sustainability is articulated as a set of rules, infrastructures and certification practices that enable the building of trust.

This configuration introduces tensions between openness and control, visibility and authority, declaration and verification. Transparency consolidates as an indicator of legitimacy. The organisation and visualisation of data translate complex

processes into accessible representations. As these configurations recur transparency is perceived as an inherent quality of the object while the institutional and infrastructural conditions that support it tend to remain in the background.

MOULDED MINDSETS: AWARENESS, COMMUNITY AND SYMBOLIC ACTIVISM (PEOPLE × INTANGIBLE)

Moulded Mindsets brings together practices located in the most marginal areas of the jewellery field where sustainability takes shape through dynamics of awareness, relationships and social activation. In this configuration jewellery functions as a means of expression through which ethical positions, affiliations and forms of collective stance are made visible.

Adornment takes on a relational function. Value is linked to the ability to generate recognition, connections and identification within a group or cause. The focus shifts from ownership to relationships: wearing jewellery is equivalent to making an orientation visible, adhering to a shared narrative or signalling a form of engagement.

In this framework sustainability is articulated through practices that impact modes of perception, relationship and participation. The body becomes the locus of translation of these demands and jewellery is the device through which they take on recognisable form.

Two dynamics recur consistently. The first concerns awareness-raising practices in which jewellery acts as a signal, making complex themes accessible through immediate forms. The second concerns community-building processes in which ornamentation functions as a connecting element between people, histories and territories. In both cases the focus shifts from the object to the network of relationships it activates.

These dynamics emerge clearly in experiences that use jewellery as a tool for testimony and connection. SeeMe project (n.d.) founded by Caterina Occhio involves women survivors of violence in the production of objects. Jewellery incorporates individual and collective stories made explicit through texts, accompanying materials and communication strategies. On a discursive level meaning is constructed through a guided narrative that guides the object's interpretation. Value is associated with the ability to make a position visible and trigger immediate recognition. In this step the relationship between object and ethical value takes

on a direct form. The relational and communicative conditions that produce this value remain less visible. Meaning appears as a quality of the object. A similar dynamic is observed in Indego Africa's projects (n.d.), which integrate artisanal production, training and access to international markets. Jewellery emerges as the outcome of a system that connects local communities, learning paths and global networks. On a processual level value is constructed through the relationship between production and the social context. On a discursive level the object takes on the function of a testimony to this system. The relational dimension is condensed into a recognisable form.

Further examples such as the initiatives of Raven + Lily (n.d.) or projects promoted by collectives and NGOs demonstrate similar configurations. Jewellery functions as an element of connection between those who produce, those who wear, and the causes they support. In these practices ornamentation activates processes of recognition and participation. Value is linked to the ability to make relationships and belonging visible. This configuration introduces a specific tension. Visibility and involvement can take on a self-sufficient dimension. Symbolic activation can replace more structured forms of collective action. Value is constructed through narrative and relational associations that become immediately recognisable. As these configurations repeat, the connection between object and ethical value tends to stabilise. Meaning is perceived as a property of the object while the communicative and contextual processes that produce it tend to gradually fade into the background.

CRITICAL DISCUSSION: SUSTAINABILITY AS MYTH-MAKING

Continuing with the scenarios analysed in the previous section, this part shifts attention from empirical configurations to the processes through which they stabilise over time. Scenarios are used as interpretative devices to observe how specific associations between sustainability and value become recognisable and repeatable within the field.

The analysis focuses on the conditions through which these associations consolidate, orienting expectations, judgments and forms of consensus. Sustainability is considered a field in which value criteria are produced and normalised.

Sustainability operates as an organising principle that helps define what is perceived as responsible, credible or desirable. This process unfolds within specific historical, cultural and geopolitical conditions which influence the selection and legitimacy of practices. Institutional regulations, economic priorities and cultural contexts contribute to determining what is recognised as sustainable and what remains marginal or less legible (Banerjee, 2008; Brans, 2025).

In the field of jewellery these dynamics emerge in the varying visibility attributed to materials, processes and control devices. Some configurations (such as traceability, material reduction or participation) assume greater legitimacy while other practices remain less recognised. Thus hierarchies of visibility and value emerge that reflect situated conditions while presenting themselves as generalisable criteria.

In Barthes's (1957) theoretical framework this process can be interpreted as a naturalisation mechanism. Historically and culturally determined values are progressively perceived as self-evident, escaping the possibility of being questioned. The discourse on sustainability contributes to this transformation, organising meanings into coherent and recognisable forms that facilitate their circulation.

The four directions that emerged from the analysis (responsible materiality, participation, governance, and collective awareness) operate as matrices through which new forms of value legitimisation are produced. Each articulates a specific promise (authenticity, involvement, transparency, commitment) that tends to stabilise through repetition.

The central issue concerns the effects these promises produce. What is at stake in this process is the definition of who has the authority to define sustainability and under which conditions value becomes legitimate. They help define criteria for recognition, redistribute responsibilities and expectations and make some dimensions more visible than others.

The following sections analyse some of the main ways in which these processes manifest themselves in contemporary jewellery highlighting both the potential and the ambivalences that characterise current configurations of the sustainability discourse.

THE MYTH OF TRANSPARENCY: WHEN DATA BECOMES LEGITIMACY

In the context of Change Drivers transparency plays a central role as a promise of responsibility. Traceability, certifications, digital archives and product passports are adopted to make information on the provenance of materials, production processes and supply chains accessible; in this context access to data becomes one of the key elements through which the value of a jewel is recognised and validated.

As emerges from the cases analysed in Section 4 particularly in digital traceability and certification systems, transparency is built through specific processes of data selection, organisation and visualisation. These processes translate complex and fragmented supply chains into coherent and legible narratives. What appears immediate and accessible is actually the result of a structured mediation which tends to disappear once established. Transparency can be understood as a discursive device that organises information into credible and recognisable formats, shaping how responsibility is perceived and evaluated. This emphasis on information however produces an ambivalent effect: when the availability of data is assumed as an ethical guarantee in itself the risk is that attention focuses on the presence of information rather than on the conditions that determine its selection, structure and mode of communication. What is traceable tends to automatically appear reliable regardless of the criteria used to construct its content.

In Barthesian terms transparency can thus operate as a myth: a historically situated value is presented as neutral evidence removed from critical comparison (Barthes, 1957). Information is no longer perceived as the result of choices but as an objective fact making the asymmetries that govern its production and management less visible.

As Power (1997) observes verification and reporting mechanisms can transform into ritualised practices that strengthen the authority of those who define standards, metrics and formats without substantially impacting the balance of control. Here transparency can function as a tool of reassurance, maintaining established structures rather than as a lever for transformation.

This model opens up new possibilities for trust and continuity over time but it also introduces a silent redefinition of authority: those who control data, access criteria and display methods play a central

role in building value. Transparency therefore contributes to reorganising legitimacy at the level of information infrastructures rather than eliminating existing hierarchies.

THE MYTH OF PURITY: NATURE AS MORAL EVIDENCE

In the realm of Conscious Crafters movement sustainability is frequently associated with natural materials, biomaterials, recycling practices and low-impact processes.

As the material-centred approaches analysed in Section 4 demonstrate reduction, naturalness and material simplicity are not merely technical or formal choices but become visible and recognisable qualities. Through their formal articulation these characteristics are interpreted as direct indicators of responsibility contributing to a reorganisation of the criteria through which value is perceived. This approach often translates into an aesthetic of subtraction in which formal simplicity and reference to nature take on a distinctive function compared to the conventions of traditional jewellery.

From a discursive perspective this association can be understood as a process through which specific material configurations become stabilised as indicators of ethical value.

Read in a Barthesian vein this dynamic can be interpreted as a process of mythologisation: a historically situated choice is presented as evidence escaping critical scrutiny (Barthes, 1957). Nature thus becomes a self-explanatory reference evoked rather than questioned.

A first effect of this approach is the reduction of sustainability to a set of formally recognisable traits: raw surfaces, organic colours and avowedly bio-based materials can generate an immediate perception of responsibility independent of the actual complexity of the production processes involved. As Manzini (2015) observes sustainability is not just about appearances but requires an evaluation that takes into account relationships, life cycles and conditions of use.

A second effect concerns the construction of new hierarchies between materials: the emphasis on the natural tends to marginalise synthetic or technological solutions that in certain contexts can guarantee greater durability, ease of repair or better performance in terms of circularity. As Latour (2004) points out a rigid contrast between natural and artificial oversimplifies complex production

and technical intertwining. The idea of purity risks replacing - rather than challenging - previous conventions of value. If in the past recognition was based on rarity and permanence today it can shift to an equally simplified idea of "naturalness." In both cases value appears as an inherent quality rather than as the outcome of situated design decisions and discursive constructions.

THE MYTH OF EMPOWERMENT: PARTICIPATION AS A LIMITED PROMISE

Within the Tomorrow Shapers framework sustainability is frequently associated with the direct involvement of people in design processes: co-creation, customisation and the possibility of intervening on the object are presented as tools capable of rebalancing the relationship between designers, producers and users.

As emerges from the participatory and parametric systems analysed in Section 4 the possibility of interaction and modification is embedded within design structures that define and limit its scope. However the visibility of these constraints tends to diminish while the experience of choice and variation becomes central to the perception of the object. Within this framework participation can be interpreted as a discursive construct that frames involvement as a source of value while the conditions that structure and limit it remain less visible.

This approach introduces however a clear tension: in many cases involvement translates into limited interventions (formal choices, combinations, configurations) that affect the final appearance of the object without altering the production, distribution or organisational conditions that determine its overall impact. The margin for action thus remains limited and often predictable.

As Manzini (2015) observes many participatory practices operate within pre-defined structures integrating user input without questioning the underlying logic. This is accompanied by a growing emphasis on individual responsibility which tends to shift the burden of ethical choices onto the end user. As Shove (2010) points out this dynamic risks transforming collective-scale issues into problems of personal behaviour.

Participation can therefore assume a compensatory role: empowerment operates primarily at the experiential level without extending to structural change. Sustainability is associated with a visible form of involvement that produces engagement

while attenuating conflict. Empowerment becomes a stabilised narrative through which participation is recognised as inherently valuable, regardless of its actual capacity to influence systemic conditions.

THE MYTH OF AWARENESS: VISIBILITY AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR ACTION

In the context of Moulded Mindsets sustainability is conveyed primarily through experiences of emotional engagement and forms of collective expression.

As highlighted in the cases based on narrative and social activation practices the association between object and ethical value is constructed through communicative devices that guide its interpretation. These narratives make the meaning immediately recognisable while the relational and communicative processes that produce it tend to remain implicit.

Jewellery takes on the role of a public sign capable of making visible ethical positions, social bonds and forms of shared identification through the body. Awareness can be understood as a discursive mechanism that translates complex issues into accessible and recognisable forms enabling rapid circulation of meaning through identification and belonging. These practices contribute to introducing themes and issues that are often marginal to the mainstream debate but they also present a critical tension. Generating attention and recognition can become a point of arrival rather than an intermediate stage. As Rancière (2009) observes making a problem visible does not automatically equate to impacting the conditions that generate it.

The emphasis on emotional experience can also produce a saturation effect: the activation of empathy and emotional engagement if not accompanied by tools for shared intervention risks being exhausted at the level of expression (Ahmed, 2004). The communities similarly evoked by these practices can remain symbolic representations rather than spaces for real participation replacing decision-making processes with images of belonging (Bishop, 2012).

The limit of this approach lies therefore in the possibility that the attention it generates can become self-sufficient: when awareness-raising replaces more structured forms of collective action sustainability risks being reduced to a shared experience capable of generating adherence but not necessarily change.

DISCURSIVE PARADOXES: AMBIVALENCE AS A STRUCTURAL CONDITION

The four mythologies analysed demonstrate that sustainability does not simply add new values but profoundly reorganises the criteria for legitimising jewellery. These dynamics can be interpreted as effects of sustainability discourse which tends to stabilise specific narratives while simultaneously generating tensions and contradictions.

The main paradoxes that emerged can be summarised as follows:

- Responsible matter: the critique of preciousness can generate a new material essentialism.
- Participation: Empowerment can remain symbolic and individualising.
- Transparency: Visibility can replace real responsibility.
- Awareness: Raising awareness can crystallise into symbolic activism.

In light of Lotman (1991) these paradoxes can be interpreted as tensions within the semiosphere of jewellery in which centre and periphery, ethos and aesthetics, material and value collide.

Sustainability thus emerges as a contested field in which design does not resolve contradictions but operates within them. Rather than producing stable solutions it generates a space in which value is continuously negotiated through competing discursive formations.

CONCLUSIONS: SUSTAINABILITY AS AN AGONISTIC LANGUAGE OF VALUE

This paper examined how sustainability operates within contemporary jewellery as a discursive framework that shapes how value is constructed, communicated and recognised. Using Design Orienting Scenarios as an interpretative tool the research identified four recurring configurations (Conscious Crafters, Tomorrow Shapers, Change Drivers, and Moulded Mindsets) intended as modalities already present in the jewellery field rather than as ideal models or future projections. These configurations function as analytical constructs that make visible a broader discursive mechanism. The contribution of the research lies in showing how repeated articulations stabilise specific associations between sustainability and value, leading to their naturalisation within the field. The analysis showed how each of these configurations affects traditionally central areas for

jewellery: material choices, the role of the wearer, forms of institutional authority and collective recognition dynamics. In this framework sustainability does not simply introduce new criteria but impacts the parameters through which value is attributed shifting attention from the object understood as an autonomous entity to broader sets of practices, relationships, information and processes. The analysis also shows that these processes are embedded within broader cultural and geopolitical conditions that influence how sustainability is defined, communicated and legitimised. As a result the criteria through which value is recognised are not universal but situated, shaped by specific regulatory, institutional and cultural frameworks.

The critical discussion has highlighted how these configurations contribute to stabilising recurring narratives: transparency as a guarantee, naturalness as a moral quality, participation as a promise of involvement, awareness as a sufficient response. These outcomes should not be interpreted as anomalies or contradictions of sustainability but as predictable effects of any process of reorganising values. The critical issue is not the emergence of such narratives but rather their consolidation when they are assumed as evidence no longer open to questioning.

Interpreted in light of Lotman's model these phenomena can be understood as dynamic interactions between more established contexts and areas of greater experimentation. Sustainability-related issues tend to initially develop in less regulated contexts only to be progressively absorbed through practices of standardisation, formalisation and repetition. In this transition the potential for questioning risks diminishing, leaving room for new forms of orthodoxy. This process also reflects the uneven conditions under which sustainability discourse circulates and consolidates, reinforcing certain perspectives while marginalising others. The contribution of this research therefore consists in proposing jewellery as a particularly effective field of observation for analysing these dynamics. Precisely because of the historical stratification of values that permeate it, jewellery highlights the tensions that accompany the integration of sustainability into the fashion system. Sustainability appears as a contested discursive field in which meanings, values and responsibilities are continuously negotiated across different contexts and conditions.

Rather than imagining a linear replacement of previous references with new formulas deemed more appropriate jewellery design is called upon to confront these tensions acknowledging and making them explicit. The role of the project is not to eliminate ambiguities but to work within them maintaining the possibility of questioning criteria, priorities and responsibilities. It is in this openness (where competing narratives, assumptions and criteria of value remain visible) that jewellery's critical contribution to contemporary sustainability can be located.

CAPTIONS

[Fig.01] Visual positioning of the four recurring sustainability configurations identified in the study (Conscious Crafters, Tomorrow Shapers, Change Drivers and Moulded Mindsets) along the axes Brand/People and Tangible/Intangible.

Diagram elaborated by the authors.

[Fig.02] Drilling Lab; modular jewellery system featuring disassembly, replaceable components and repair-oriented design; Courtesy of Drilling Lab.

[Fig.03] Campana Brothers; Bones necklace, modular and reconfigurable jewellery structure; Courtesy of Campana Brothers.

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