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THE LANGUAGES OF FASHION
CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON FASHION DISCOURSES

Edited by Benjamin Wild and Natalia Berger

07



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CONTENTS

EDITORIAL.....	9
THE LANGUAGES OF FASHION: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON FASHION DISCOURSES <i>BENJAMIN WILD, NATALIA BERGER.....</i>	10
ESSAYS.....	21
<i>ELICITING.....</i>	23
READING FASHION FROM THE THRESHOLD: DISCURSIVE INSTABILITY AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF FASHION'S PERIPHERY <i>BARBARA ALEJANDRA PINO AHUMADA.....</i>	24
HARDSHELL, SOFTSHELL AND BEYOND: THE INTEGRATION OF FOREIGN WORDS INTO THE VOCABULARY OF OUTDOOR CLOTHING IN ITALY <i>CAROLA BORGIA.....</i>	36
FASHION PHILOSOPHY: THE TRANSLATION OF PHILOSOPHICAL TEXTS INTO FASHION CAMPAIGNS <i>DANAE IOANNOU.....</i>	48
SUIT UP! THE BUSINESS SUIT AS MYTH AND REVOLUTION IN THE INTUITIONIST <i>KRISTEN HALLGEISLER.....</i>	60
INFLUENCERS, ICONS AND ILLUSIONS: MYTH MAKING IN INDIAN FASHION <i>SRIJANA BARUAH.....</i>	68
QUIET CONSUMPTION: MUJI, MINIMALISM, AND THE AESTHETIC MANAGEMENT OF THE ABUNDANCE <i>HUEI-WEN LO.....</i>	86
<i>EXPERIENCING.....</i>	99
FABRIC FIRST, LANGUAGE LAST? REFRAMING FASHION'S EPISTEMIC INFRASTRUCTURES THROUGH MATERIAL INTELLIGENCE <i>MATTHEW COATS.....</i>	100

QUIET RESISTANCE: THE FASHION TOILE AS MATERIAL LANGUAGE <i>MICHELLE MARSHALL</i>	112
WORLDMAKING THROUGH FASHION LANGUAGES: COMMUNITY-BASED FASHION PRACTICES OF RECOMPOSITION, NAMING AND REPAIR IN KAMPALA <i>DORIS POSCH</i>	126
NEGOTIATING FASHION DISCOURSES IN CRAFT CONTEXTS: ADAPTIVE CO-CREATION AND AGENCY IN THE VIETNAM DESIGN RESEARCH STUDIO <i>DONNA CLEVELAND, PETER CLEVELAND, HANH NGUYEN, CORINNA JOYCE, MATTHIAS WALDHART, KRISTINA RYLANDER</i>	142
CONTESTING MEANING AND INFRASTRUCTURES OF AGENCY IN CONTEMPORARY FASHION: THE CASE OF A SEWING MACHINE OF ONE'S OWN <i>ELEONORA CECERE</i>	156
SUSTAINABILITY AS LANGUAGE IN CONTEMPORARY JEWELLERY: DISCOURSES, MYTHS, AND THE LEGITIMATION OF VALUE <i>SUSANNA TESTA, LIDIA TENUTA</i>	166
SHIFTING TO A NARRATIVE OF FASHION FOR ATTUNEMENT <i>GIULIA CIOLA</i>	182
FASHION MYTHOLOGIES	195
ORIGINAL: FASHION'S TRIVIAL MYSTERY <i>MARIA SPADONI BATTISTONI</i>	196
THE BAKKERSBUIJS AND THE MYTH OF THE DUTCH BAKER <i>NATHAN DOUENBURG</i>	202
THE KIMONO COVER UP <i>MARIA DELIFOTI-NIKODEM</i>	210
LAYERS OF SPEED: HOW FAST FASHION REWRITES TIME, MEMORY AND MATTER <i>J CARLOS GARCÍA-REYES, ESTER G. MECÍAS</i>	214
FASHION LEXIGRAPHY	223
THE LEXICON OF SUSTAINABILITY: FAUX, ECO, VEGAN, BIO LEATHER <i>CLIZIA MORADEI</i>	224

FLATTERING: YOU KEEP USING THAT WORD. I DO NOT THINK IT MEANS WHAT YOU THINK IT MEANS. <i>LEILA KELLEHER, SHANNON FLAHERTY</i>	230
THE SEMIOTICS OF STANDARDIZED SIZING SYSTEMS <i>KARMEN SAMSON</i>	236
FROM ANDROGYNOUS TO GENDER-FLUID FASHION <i>JUDITH BEYER</i>	244
WORLD FASHION <i>ALIENA GUGGENBERGER</i>	250

EDITORIAL

THE LANGUAGES OF FASHION

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON FASHION DISCOURSES

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A SYSTEM THAT SPEAKS — AND WHAT IT CANNOT SAY

Fashion has been personified as the younger sister of Death, a daughter of Caducity (Leopardi 1982). It has been described as capitalism's favourite child, conceptualised as a belief, a system, an empire (Briggs 2013; Kawamura 2023; Lipovetsky 1987). These characterisations are not merely rhetorical flourishes. They suggest that fashion's most durable power lies not only in what it makes or sells but in what it says, and in the authority it has accumulated to say it. That authority — what fashion says, how it says it, and what it is organised not to say — is the subject of this issue.

When Roland Barthes anatomised the fashion system in 1967, his central insight was both simple and disquieting: fashion's written language does not describe garments so much as it produces them. The magazine caption, the press release, the seasonal trend report: these are not neutral communications but active interventions that transform cloth and cut into meaning, desire, and social value (Barthes 1967).

Fashion's self-description, Barthes argued, is a semiotic machine of extraordinary precision. It is also, he might have added, a machine with a remarkable capacity for concealment. Berger's analysis of fashion's public discourse extends this insight, demonstrating how the industry's communicative frameworks operate not merely as description but as ideological infrastructure, organising what can be said, by whom, and in whose interests (Berger 2026). More than half a century after Barthes, that machine has grown considerably more complex. Fashion discourse now circulates across runway shows and Instagram reels, sustainability reports and activist zines, e-commerce copy and metaverse marketplaces, academic journals and influencer captions. The sheer proliferation of contexts in which fashion is spoken, written, and imaged might suggest that the system has opened up; that its formerly narrow self-description has expanded to accommodate a fuller range of voices, concerns, and ways of knowing.

This issue of Fashion Highlight asks whether that is true, and at what cost.

The response that emerges is not comfortable, though it may not be surprising. Fashion's discursive field has indeed expanded.

But expansion is not the same as transformation. What the papers in this issue demonstrate, from

multiple disciplinary vantage points and across several continents, is that fashion's dominant language continues to stabilise certain meanings while displacing others, and this stabilisation is not neutral. The meanings that are fixed, legitimised, and rendered legible are overwhelmingly those that serve white, 'western' subjects and their histories, while the aesthetics, labour, knowledge systems, and lived experiences of those positioned outside this centre are routinely absorbed, mistranslated, or rendered peripheral (Wild 2024, 2026; Berger 2026). What is rendered visible and what remains structurally unspeakable are, in this sense, racialised and geopolitical questions as much as discursive ones.

The challenge for fashion studies, and for the industry it examines, is to develop the critical literacy to name what is being concealed, and the methodological tools to study it rigorously.

THE SEMIOSPHERE AND ITS PERIPHERIES

Yuri Lotman's concept of the semiosphere offers the structural framework through which this issue is organised (1991). For Lotman, culture is not a collection of isolated sign systems but a unified semiotic space — a semiosphere — within which meaning is produced through the dynamic interplay of centre and periphery.

The centre is characterised by codified, authoritative, self-reinforcing descriptions.

The periphery is marked by heterogeneity, instability, and productive noise: it is where different sign systems come into contact, where translation is most intense, and where new meanings have the best chance of emerging.

Lotman's key warning was precisely that excessive coherence at the centre becomes a liability.

When a system's self-description achieves full structural organisation, it gains authority but loses what he called its "internal reserves of uncertainty", the capacity for flexibility, adaptation, and genuine development. A system too certain of its own language cannot hear what it does not already know how to say. Wild's argument that fashion constitutes a form of narrative knowledge — and that the dominance of "western" metanarratives within that knowledge system actively forecloses other ways of knowing — gives this structural observation its political and historical dimension (forthcoming; Lyotard 1984).

This is fashion's current condition. The dominant

language of fashion — sophisticated, aspirational, and visually seductive — has achieved a remarkable degree of structural coherence.

It knows how to speak about creativity, luxury, novelty, and, increasingly, sustainability.

It has developed an extensive vocabulary for these concepts, circulated across an equally extensive set of platforms and institutions.

What it has not developed (or has actively resisted developing) is the capacity to speak frankly about the realities that its own operations produce: the environmental damage that accumulates at the end of supply chains, the labour conditions that underpin its luxury, the cultural hierarchies that determine whose aesthetics count as fashion and whose do not, and the communities and bodies that its aspirational imagery consistently renders peripheral or invisible.

The contributions to this issue locate themselves, in different ways, at these thresholds, the zones where fashion's dominant self-description strains against the material and social realities it cannot fully absorb.

HOW MEANING IS MADE — AND STABILISED

Several papers in this issue examine the mechanisms through which fashion produces and stabilises meaning, and the ideological work that stabilisation performs. The issue opens with Bárbara Pino Ahumada's analysis of Chile and the Atacama Desert as what she calls a semiotic threshold of the global fashion system.

Drawing on Lotman alongside critical geopolitics, Pino Ahumada argues that fashion maintains its discursive coherence not despite its contradictions but by spatially displacing them.

The centre stabilises its narratives of creativity, sustainability, and circular responsibility by relegating the material residues of those narratives (e.g. used clothing, textile waste, environmental damage) to peripheral territories that absorb what the system cannot narrativise. The illegal textile dumps near Alto Hospicio are not, on this reading, accidents or anomalies. They are the necessary remainder of a system whose language of circularity depends on the existence of places where circularity fails. The centre's sustainability story requires, structurally, a periphery that cannot be told in the same terms.

This argument is developed through the concept of subtranslation, a condition of partial inclusion

in which objects, territories, and practices are recognised by fashion's dominant system but not fully integrated into its authoritative codes.

They remain visible without becoming central, legible without becoming legitimate.

It is a concept with broad analytical reach, and it resonates across several other contributions in this issue.

The mechanisms of stabilisation appear in a different register in Srijana Baruah's study of Indian fashion influencers and sustainability discourse. Where Pino Ahumada traces the spatial displacement of material residues, Baruah traces the semiotic displacement of accountability.

Through close analysis of Instagram content from four prominent influencers, she identifies four recurring communicative patterns:

1. Symbolic amplification,
2. Aestheticisation,
3. Temporal displacement,
4. Omission through which sustainability

is constructed as a cultural value while being systematically drained of material content.

Terms like “handwoven,” “artisan-made,” and “conscious” acquire ethical connotation through repetition alone, without any accompanying evidence of sourcing, labour conditions, or environmental impact. Sustainability, on this account, functions less as a practice than as a myth in Barthes' precise sense: a second-order semiological system in which historically constructed meanings are naturalised as self-evident.

What Baruah's analysis adds to Barthes is specificity of context. In India, the mythologisation of sustainability draws on deep cultural associations between craft, heritage, and moral value, associations that give influencer content its particular persuasive force.

The cultural authority of craft in the Indian context amplifies the symbolic work that sustainability signifiers perform. This is not merely greenwashing in the conventional sense of deliberate deception; it is a structural feature of influencer-led fashion communication, in which the gap between symbolic performance and material reality is built into the communicative form itself.

Huei-Wen Lo's analysis of MUJI pursues a related argument at the level of retail aesthetics.

MUJI's “no-brand” philosophy, Lo argues, is not a refusal of fashion's semiotic system but a particularly sophisticated participation in it.

Through muted colour palettes, unobtrusive packaging, orderly spatial presentation, and the careful mobilisation of cultural associations with Japanese minimalism, MUJI reorganises consumption rather than reducing it. The aesthetic of restraint performs ethical value while leaving the underlying logic of accumulation largely intact. Consumers may purchase extensively while experiencing their consumption as disciplined, moderate, and morally legitimate. The silence of MUJI's language is itself a highly articulate statement; one that, as Lo observes, has been so successfully reproduced across global retail that it has lost whatever disruptive capacity it once possessed. Anti-consumerist language becomes, in time, one of consumer capitalism's most adaptable and commercially productive grammars. Together, these three papers map a landscape in which fashion's language consistently performs meanings — relating to sustainability, responsibility, ethical production — that it does not and perhaps cannot substantiate. The system is not simply dishonest. It is structurally organised to produce the appearance of ethical engagement while insulating the conditions of production from scrutiny. The question that follows is whose interests that scrutiny serves, and whose meanings the system was organised to protect in the first place.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF FASHION'S LANGUAGES

If one axis of this issue concerns how meaning is stabilised, the other concerns whose meaning counts in the first place, and it is, if anything, the more urgent question of the two. Fashion studies has long acknowledged that the global fashion system is not a level playing field. The symbolic centres of fashion (Paris, Milan, London, New York) function not merely as geographic locations but as authoritative positions within a system of cultural production that determines which aesthetics, which practices, and which vocabularies are recognised as fashion and which are relegated to craft, folklore, or imitation (Rocamora 2002; 2009). This structural hierarchy is not only economic; it is deeply semiotic. It determines who has the authority to name, to define, and to narrate, and whose naming is treated as authoritative versus whose is absorbed, translated, or dismissed. Pino Ahumada's contribution makes this

geopolitics of meaning explicit in its examination of the Atacama Desert. The comparison she draws with Kantamanto Market in Accra, Ghana, is instructive: both sites reveal how territories in the Global South are required to receive, sort, process, and dispose of the material excess generated by consumption in the Global North. But the Atacama case has a particular semiotic intensity. The image of mountains of discarded clothing in the desert has become globally circulated. Yet, as Pino Ahumada observes, global visibility does not redistribute responsibility. The centre can acknowledge the threshold, photograph it, and incorporate it into sustainability storytelling, while the authority to interpret, narrate, and aestheticise that reality remains concentrated in precisely the institutions whose practices produced it. Recognition without redistribution is its own form of symbolic appropriation. Baruah's analysis of the Indian influencer economy adds a further dimension to this picture. India occupies a complex position in the global fashion semiosphere, neither a simple periphery nor a straightforwardly emergent centre, but a site where global fashion discourses are translated, domesticated, and recirculated through local cultural frameworks. The moral authority of craft and heritage in India gives sustainability discourse a particular resonance and persuasive power that differs from its operation in European or North American contexts. At the same time, the structural conditions that enable influencer-led greenwashing — the decentralised and largely unregulated nature of fashion production, the rapid growth of influencer-brand economies, limited regulatory enforcement — are themselves products of India's position within global fashion's economic geography. The question of language hierarchy appears in a more literal register in Carola Borgia's study of English loanwords — specifically *"hardshell"* and *"softshell"* — in Italian outdoor fashion magazines. Borgia's paper might at first appear to occupy different territory from the geopolitical concerns of the other contributions, but its implications are connected. The dominance of English as the global language of technical and commercial fashion communication is not merely a convenience. It is a structuring asymmetry that gives English-language fashion discourse a reach and authority that other languages cannot easily match, that

embeds certain values and assumptions into the vocabulary of innovation and quality, and that treats translation as a secondary or derivative act rather than a generative one. The instability Borgia documents — the proliferation of graphic variants, the semantic ambiguity, the inadequacy of Italian equivalents — is a symptom of a language navigating the terms of its own subordination. The outdoor clothing sector makes this process unusually visible precisely because its technical vocabulary is so explicitly international.

Kristen HallGeisler's paper on *The Intuitionist* (1999) engages these questions through literary analysis, reading Colson Whitehead's novel as an extended meditation on what it means to inhabit fashion's mythological system from a position it was not designed to include. Lila Mae Watson's five identical dark-blue business suits are read through Barthes' distinction between myth, the bourgeois narrative of the American dream, and Revolutionary speech. For Lila Mae, wearing the correct costume for her profession is not an act of mythological participation but of what Barthes calls Revolution: language that refuses to be naturalised, that remains stubbornly political, that announces itself as transformation rather than confirming an existing order. The suit that signals modernity and happy progress on a white male body cannot perform the same ideological function on the body of a Black woman. Fashion's mythological language has limits, and those limits are drawn along the lines of race and gender.

What emerges across these contributions is a picture of fashion's language actively producing and reproducing geopolitical hierarchy, not merely reflecting existing inequalities but constituting them through the allocation of symbolic authority, the management of visibility, and the control of translation. Naming that system, however, is not the same as analysing it; a distinction the editorial process for this issue made unusually visible.

WHAT FASHION CANNOT SAY — AND WHY THAT MATTERS

The process of editing this issue, from the drafting of the Call for Papers to the final stages of review, brought into focus for us a tendency within fashion scholarship that has, to varying degrees, materialised across these submissions: an inclination to claim discourse without demonstrating it, to invoke theoretical frameworks without systematically analysing texts or images,

and to treat theorists as sources of authority rather than as providers of specific analytical instruments. This is a critical comment, but it is not a criticism that can or should be made of individual papers. It is, as we reflected during the editorial process, a diagnosis of the field.

The study of fashion has developed sophisticated frameworks for analysing design, identity, power, and culture. Its theoretical resources are extensive and its interdisciplinary range is a genuine strength. What it has been slower to develop are the empirical methods for examining how fashion language actually functions: how specific words, images, captions, and spatial arrangements produce specific meanings in specific contexts.

Berger's work on fashion's public discourse can stand as a model here, demonstrating what it looks like to move from identifying ideology to tracing its operation in specific discursive formations (2026). The turn toward discourse in fashion studies has sometimes remained at the level of assertion rather than analysis: naming discourse rather than tracking it; identifying ideology rather than demonstrating its operation in textual or visual detail.

The methods the field needs would ideally operate at several levels: specific enough to reveal how individual product descriptions, campaign captions, or social media posts construct value, desire, and legitimacy through word choice and visual design; attentive to who is speaking, to whom, through which medium, and with what authority, since fashion discourse always reflects identifiable actors within particular power structures; and scalable enough to identify patterns across larger collections of material, showing how meanings stabilise, shift, or diminish over time. This methodological gap matters because the claims fashion studies needs to make about exclusion, about greenwashing, about geopolitical hierarchy, about the gap between what fashion says and what it does, are claims that require evidence.

The papers in this issue tend to be most persuasive where they ground their theoretical arguments in close, specific, material analysis and share a commitment to showing rather than merely claiming: to produce the evidence that makes theoretical argument answerable.

The papers that engage material intelligence and design practice — Matthew Coats' contribution on Elena Velez, Craig Green, and Amber Jae Slooten, and Michelle Marshall's study of the

fashion toile — pursue this point from a different angle. Both argue that fashion produces knowledge through making that its dominant discursive economy cannot capture. The intelligence embedded in the studio, in the negotiation between hand and cloth, in the decision-making that happens through material resistance, in the epistemic content of iterative process, does not readily translate into the communicative formats through which fashion legitimates itself.

Press releases precede patterns; digital renders eclipse seams; the capacity to produce the right words at the right moment is difficult to distinguish from the capacity to design.

This is the blind spot of fashion's language at the level of practice. The contributions on material intelligence argue not for silence but for a different kind of speech, one attentive to process, to duration, to the knowledge that emerges from sustained engagement with materials rather than from the management of their image.

Marshall's proposal that the discarded toile might become a site of material and semiotic inquiry, that the unfinished might generate meaning rather than simply awaiting completion, is both a practical intervention and a theoretical provocation.

What would fashion studies look like if it took the knowledge embedded in unfinished things as seriously as it takes the authority of finished images?

LANGUAGE AS RESPONSIBILITY

The contributions gathered in this issue were solicited under a call that asked whether fashion needs a new language to facilitate its transition toward greater environmental and social responsibility. Having read what the submissions reveal about the gap between fashion's self-description and its material operations, about the geopolitical hierarchies that determine whose languages count, about the structural conditions that enable greenwashing to function as communication rather than deception, we are in a position to be more specific about what that question means.

Fashion does not need a new language in the sense of new terminology. The vocabulary of sustainability, circularity, responsibility, and ethical production is already extensive.

What the papers in this issue demonstrate is that the problem is not lexical but structural.

Fashion's language has become extraordinarily

adept at saying the right things while leaving the conditions that produce the wrong outcomes largely intact. It has learned to absorb critique, to translate sustainability discourse into a resource for brand differentiation, to aestheticise the evidence of its own damage, to make the acknowledgement of a problem serve as a substitute for its resolution.

What fashion studies can contribute to this situation is not more sophisticated vocabulary but more rigorous analysis. The discipline is well placed to track the gap between what fashion says and what it does, to examine how specific discursive formations function in specific contexts, how meaning is produced and stabilised, how visibility is managed and what it conceals.

To do this effectively, it needs to develop its empirical tools alongside its theoretical frameworks, to move from the identification of discourse to its systematic examination. To do so without reproducing the “western” epistemological frameworks that fashion's dominant narratives have always favoured is, as Wild argues, not merely a methodological adjustment but a reorientation of purpose, one that takes seriously what fashion's own narrative structures reveal and what they are organised to conceal (forthcoming).

This issue represents a stage in that development. The papers gathered here approach fashion's languages from multiple disciplines and multiple locations: from linguistics and literary studies, from cultural theory and design practice, from the Global South and from the studios of European fashion education. They do not constitute a unified argument. But they share a refusal to take fashion's self-description at face value: a commitment to examining what the system says, how it says it, and what it cannot or will not say.

That refusal is, we argue, a form of responsibility. Fashion studies' engagement with fashion's discursive practices is not merely academic. The languages through which fashion is described shape what wearers understand, what regulators can hold to account, what producers are expected to justify, and what communities can demand. When those languages systematically obscure the environmental costs of overproduction, or aestheticise the evidence of global inequality, or substitute the performance of ethical intent for its demonstration, the consequences are material. People and places bear those

consequences. The illegal textile dumps near Alto Hospicio, the labour conditions rendered invisible by the vocabulary of craft and heritage, the communities whose aesthetic practices are absorbed into global fashion without attribution or remuneration: these are not abstractions. They are what fashion's language, when functioning as myth, helps to make possible. The periphery of the semiosphere, as Lotman understood, is not a margin. It is a generative zone, the place where the system's contradictions become visible, where alternative sign systems come into contact with dominant ones, and where new forms of meaning have the best chance of emerging. The contributions in this issue work at precisely these edges: at the border between the centre's sustainability narrative and the Atacama Desert's reality; between the aspirational imagery of Indian fashion influencers and the material conditions their captions do not mention; between the polished coherence of MUJI's retail language and the accumulation it facilitates; between the authority of the business suit and the body it was never designed to clothe; between the finished garment and the discarded toile that contains the knowledge the finished garment conceals. To read fashion from these thresholds is to develop the literacy that the field needs, not to celebrate the margins for their own sake, but to understand what the centre depends on them to absorb.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The three concerns traced across this editorial — how fashion stabilises meaning, whose meaning the system recognises, and how the field might examine both more rigorously — cut across the issue's two-part structure rather than dividing neatly along it.

The first section, *Elicitation* — a term that signals the drawing-out of meanings fashion's discourse produces but rarely makes explicit — brings together papers that examine how fashion produces and circulates meaning across its dominant and emergent discursive systems. The second section, *Experience*, gathers contributions grounded in practice-led, phenomenological, or embodied approaches to fashion's languages.

Pino Ahumada's opening essay develops the concept of the semiotic threshold through the case of Chile and the Atacama Desert, arguing that the global fashion system maintains its discursive coherence by spatially displacing the instability

its operations produce. The analysis of *Atacama Fashion Week*, *RFD Tarapacá*, and *El Gigante Vestido* as creative interventions at this threshold demonstrates that peripheral territories are not merely sites of residue but also of critical semiotic activity — though that activity remains vulnerable to recentralisation through the very mediation that gives it visibility.

Borgia's study of *hardshell* and *softshell* in Italian outdoor magazine discourse examines loanword integration as a site of linguistic and commercial negotiation. Her diachronic corpus analysis documents the unstable, proliferating graphic forms through which English technical terminology enters Italian specialist vocabulary, and the inadequacy of indigenous equivalents to capture the semantic and functional specificity that makes the loanwords commercially necessary. The outdoor clothing sector proves a particularly revealing case study for the broader question of how English-language dominance shapes the vocabularies through which technical and cultural value are constructed.

The reading of *The Intuitionist* situates Barthes' theory of myth and Revolutionary speech within a literary text whose central argument is precisely about the limits of fashion's mythological system when confronted with bodies it was not designed to include. The analysis shows how fashion's most stabilised semiotic resources — the business suit as a sign of modernity, achievement, and belonging — become unstable, and politically charged, when worn by those whom the myth was produced to exclude.

Dannae Ioannou's paper on philosophical fashion campaigns examines how luxury brands (Saint Laurent's *As Time Goes By* and Gucci's *Aria*) mobilise philosophical texts as semiotic resources. Drawing on Barthes and Bourdieu, the analysis demonstrates how philosophical authority is converted into symbolic capital through processes of aestheticisation and mythologisation: Proust becomes atmosphere; Freud becomes fetish; Butler becomes performative surface. Philosophy is neither explained nor applied; it is consumed as depth, as intellectual aura, as the cultural credentials of brands that have learned to speak the language of theory while remaining immune to its critical force.

Baruah's study of Indian fashion influencers and sustainability discourse provides a systematic empirical analysis, combining semiotic theory

with a qualitative examination of forty Instagram posts. The four communicative patterns she identifies constitute a grammar of influencer-led greenwashing that is structurally embedded rather than individually deceptive.

Lo's analysis of MUJI closes the first section with an autoethnographically grounded examination of how retail minimalism manages, rather than reduces, the experience of consumption.

The paper traces the trajectory from MUJI's early positioning at the productive periphery of the fashion semiosphere to its status as an institutionalised aesthetic whose language of restraint has been absorbed into mainstream consumer culture.

The *Experience* section opens with Coats' contribution on material intelligence, which examines three design practices — Elena Velez, Craig Green, and Amber Jae Slooten/The Fabricant — as sites of what it terms counter-language: knowledge-making through making that operates at fashion's productive periphery and cannot be captured by its dominant communicative formats. The three practices are read through feminist materialism, affect theory, and posthuman critique, producing the analytical categories of collapse, ritual, and speculation as distinct epistemic orientations.

Marshall's study of the fashion toile, grounded in the ongoing practice-led project *The Draft Archive*, proposes the discarded prototype as a material and semiotic artefact with the capacity to generate new forms of fashion meaning. The toile's unfinished state, its resistance to the polished coherence that fashion's dominant language requires, becomes, in Marshall's analysis, a site of agency rather than absence: a place where value, desire, and self-representation may be renegotiated outside the system's usual terms.

The issue also includes *Mythologies* and *Lexigraphy* sections. These shorter contributions operate in a different formal register from the research essays, but they are not supplementary: they extend and, in certain respects, sharpen the issue's central arguments. The *Mythologies* contributions take their cue from Barthes' own *Mythologies* and Eco's *Travels in Hyper Reality* (1986), performing the kind of close, de-familiarising attention to individual objects and scenes that the essays often call for but necessarily work at too large a scale to enact. Maria Spadoni Battistoni's analysis of

two photographed garments printed with the word "ORIGINAL" — one of them "misspelled" as "ORIGIANL" — reads this apparently trivial instance with the care the editorial argues fashion studies needs to develop: the ideological work of a concept as fundamental as originality, traced through a single piece of fabric.

Nathan Douenburg's account of the *Bakkersbuis*, the traditional white coat of the Dutch baker, shows how craft identity and national mythology are constructed through workwear with the same semiotic machinery the essays identify operating in luxury campaigns and Instagram posts.

Maria Delifoti's "The Kimono Cover Up" examines luxury e-commerce copywriting as a site where cultural appropriation is naturalised through language, a micro-instance of the geopolitical hierarchies of naming and authority that run through several of the research essays. Esther Gutiérrez Mecías and J. Carlos García-Reyes read fast fashion and the circular economy as competing mythologies of speed and temporality, arguing that circularity functions less as structural transformation than as comforting aesthetic promise, a claim that runs in close parallel with Baruah's empirical analysis of influencer-led greenwashing, but pursued through a single sustained image rather than a corpus of posts. The *Lexigraphy* contributions work differently again: genealogically, tracing how specific words have accumulated meaning, shifted sense, or become contested over time.

Where the essays expose the gap between what fashion says and what it does, the Lexigraphies ask how that gap opens up in the first place, through the words themselves. Clizia Moradei's examination of the contested terminology of leather alternatives (faux, eco, vegan, bio) in Italian regulation and industry discourse is in direct dialogue with Baruah and with the editorial's broader concern about sustainability language that obscures rather than illuminates material reality. Shannon Leila Flaherty and Kelleher's genealogy of the word "flattering", exposing it as a covert instrument of anti-fat bias embedded in decades of popular media advice, and Karmen Samson's analysis of standardised clothing sizing as a sign system that produces social judgment rather than neutral measurement, both demonstrate that fashion's apparently technical or aesthetic vocabulary is doing the same exclusionary ideological work that the essays identify at the level of global supply

chains and semiotic hierarchies. The bodies rendered peripheral or invisible are not only those of the Global South but those that fashion's domestic language of taste and fit has never been designed to include. Further contributions examine the shifting, contested vocabularies of androgynous and gender-fluid fashion (Judith Beyer) and the historically weighted concept of "world fashion", whose implied universality conceals the same "western"-centrist assumptions that we identify as one of the field's most entrenched blind spots (Aliena Guggenberger). Together, the *Mythologies* and *Lexigraphies* are not a supplement to the essays but a demonstration of one of their core claims: that to examine fashion's language rigorously means attending to individual words, objects, and scenes with the same critical seriousness brought to institutional systems and global structures.

TOWARD AN EMPIRICAL FASHION DISCOURSE STUDIES

This issue does not resolve the question it calls posed — whether fashion needs a new language to facilitate the industry's shift towards a more environmentally friendly structure. It clarifies and intensifies it. The transition toward greater environmental responsibility, toward more equitable distributions of cultural authority, demands not only new practices but new discursive habits, and new tools for examining them. The field of fashion studies has the theoretical resources to contribute to this work.

What it needs to develop more fully are the empirical methods, the tools for systematic textual and visual analysis, the analytical frameworks for tracking how specific discursive formations function in specific contexts, the methodological vocabulary for distinguishing between claiming discourse and demonstrating it. These are not merely academic questions.

They are the conditions under which fashion studies can make claims that are answerable, and therefore, ultimately, useful.

The languages of fashion are already changing. New vocabularies are emerging at the margins: in the creative interventions staged at Atacama, in the practice-led investigations of design studios, in the analytical frameworks being developed by researchers working outside fashion's dominant cultural centres. The contributions to this issue provide an initial mapping of these peripheral

discursive spaces — from e-commerce platforms and influencer feeds to retail environments, design studios, activist interventions, and literary texts. But these are only the sites that have become visible enough to attract scholarly attention.

Fashion's discursive landscape is vast, unevenly documented, and continuously generating new formations. The product descriptions that mediate between brands and consumers across dozens of platforms and languages; the regulatory texts that will increasingly shape what fashion is permitted to claim; the vernacular exchanges through which communities outside fashion's established centres articulate their own relationships to dress, craft, and sustainability — many of these discursive territories remain unmapped.

An empirical fashion discourse studies cannot begin with a predetermined inventory of where to look. It must be prepared to discover its objects as the semiosphere shifts and generates new sites of tension, translation, and meaning.

What the contributions gathered here demonstrate, collectively, is that fashion's language is not neutral. It has a politics, a geography, and a history.

It produces some realities and conceals others.

It distributes the authority to name and withholds it. It makes certain futures imaginable and renders others, quite literally, unspeakable.

To examine that language rigorously — to hold it to account, to trace its operations, to identify what it cannot say and to ask why — is one of the most pressing tasks available to fashion studies today.

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ESSAYS

ELICITING

READING FASHION FROM THE THRESHOLD

DISCURSIVE INSTABILITY AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF FASHION'S PERIPHERY

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Abstract

This article examines fashion as a self-descriptive discursive system whose coherence depends on the spatial displacement of instability. Drawing on Roland Barthes, John Agnew and Yuri Lotman, it argues that fashion stabilises meaning at its symbolic centre while relegating ambiguity, excess and residue to peripheral zones. Sustainability and circularity are therefore analysed not only as corrective frameworks, but also as modes of self-description through which fashion absorbs critique while leaving structural asymmetries largely intact.

Methodologically, the article adopts a critical-semiotic case study approach grounded in a broader research trajectory on the geopolitics of fashion, global fashion circuits and textile debris in Chile. It analyses Chile, and particularly the Atacama Desert, through academic literature, media reports, institutional materials and selected cultural interventions related to second-hand clothing and textile waste.

By introducing the concept of the semiotic threshold, the article identifies internal zones where translation intensifies and fashion's discursive coherence becomes fragile. At these thresholds, second-hand garments oscillate between commodity and waste, visibility and marginality, value and residue. The analysis considers *Atacama Fashion Week/Desierto Vestido*, *RFD Tarapacá* and *El Gigante Vestido* as semiotic interventions that contest the symbolic death of discarded garments.

Keywords: *Geopolitics of fashion; Semiotic threshold; Textile waste; Circularity; Global South.*

INTRODUCTION

Fashion has increasingly been analysed not only as a creative industry or an aesthetic phenomenon, but as a cultural system that produces, organises and stabilises meaning. Beyond garments and trends, fashion operates through codes, images, institutions and media infrastructures that define what counts as fashion, what is valued and what remains marginal.

From Barthes' analysis of fashion as a system of signs to more recent studies of fashion mediation, fashion studies has shown that fashion is not simply reflected in language and images; it is produced through them.

This article approaches fashion as a self-descriptive discursive system. By self-description, I refer to

fashion's capacity to narrate its own operations, absorb critique and present itself as coherent despite the contradictions that sustain it.

Narratives of creativity, innovation, sustainability, circularity and responsibility do not merely describe the system; they participate in its symbolic maintenance. They stabilise certain values at the centre while displacing ambiguity, excess and residue toward peripheral zones.

This tension becomes especially visible in relation to second-hand clothing and textile waste.

Selected second-hand garments may be framed as ethical, circular, vintage or responsible, while large volumes of used clothing circulate through global redistribution networks and eventually accumulate in peripheral territories as waste.

The question is therefore not only how fashion produces waste, but how it symbolically manages the instability produced by that waste.

The article asks how the global fashion system maintains discursive coherence by spatially displacing instability, and how peripheral territories become semiotic thresholds where fashion's excess, ambiguity and residue accumulate.

It argues that Chile, and particularly the Atacama Desert, functions as one such threshold.

Through the circulation, classification, partial revalorisation and accumulation of second-hand garments, northern Chile becomes a site where the limits of fashion's self-description materialise. This is especially visible in illegal textile dumps in desert areas, where garments that can no longer be stabilised as commodities remain as material residues of global fashion circulation.

To develop this argument, the article first clarifies its critical-semiotic methodology, then brings critical geopolitics into dialogue with semiotic theory. It analyses second-hand clothing as a site of ambiguous value before examining Chile and the Atacama Desert as a threshold where fashion's displaced contradictions become visible.

Finally, it considers creative interventions that emerge from this threshold as temporary semiotic reactivations rather than systemic solutions.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: A CRITICAL-SEMIOTIC CASE STUDY

This article adopts a critical-semiotic case study approach grounded in the author's broader research trajectory on the geopolitics of fashion, global fashion circuits and textile debris in Chile.

This research examines fashion as a system of symbolic power that participates in the production of spatial hierarchies, cultural asymmetries and peripheral zones of value extraction, redistribution and residue.

The present article develops one specific line of that trajectory by focusing on Chile and the Atacama Desert as a semiotic threshold of global fashion.

The article also builds on previous research on the geopolitics of fashion and textile debris in Chile, which examined the relationship between global textile production networks, the entry of textile waste through Iquique and the socio-environmental effects of illegal dumps in Alto Hospicio through field-based observations, interviews, documentary analysis and design activism practices (Pino Ahumada, 2023).

In the present article, these situated observations are combined with a documentary and interpretative corpus composed of academic literature, media reports, institutional materials and selected cultural interventions.

The methodological aim is not to produce a quantitative account of textile waste flows, nor a full ethnographic reconstruction of the Atacama Desert as a field site.

Rather, the article analyses how the accumulation of second-hand clothing and textile waste in northern Chile becomes meaningful within the global fashion system. The corpus includes literature on critical geopolitics, semiotics, fashion discourse, sustainability and second-hand economies; media and visual narratives concerning illegal textile dumps; and materials related to *Atacama Fashion Week/Desierto Vestido*, *RFD Tarapacá* and *El Gigante Vestido*.

These materials are read through critical geopolitics and Lotmanian semiotics in order to understand how excess is displaced, partially translated and symbolically managed at the periphery.

This combination of situated research and interpretative analysis is important because the article treats Atacama neither as an isolated environmental case nor as a metaphor detached from material conditions. It is approached as a concrete territory through which the symbolic and geopolitical operations of fashion can be read. The selection of cases follows this methodological position. *Atacama Fashion Week/Desierto Vestido*, *RFD Tarapacá* and *El Gigante Vestido* were not chosen as representative solutions to the textile waste crisis, but as situated moments in which discarded garments become visible through different regimes of meaning.

Each case activates a distinct semiotic operation: denunciation, territorial circular design and patrimonial-landscape intervention.

Reading them together makes it possible to examine how the same material condition-discarded clothing in northern Chile-can be translated through different cultural languages without necessarily resolving the structural asymmetries that produced it.

FASHION, DISCOURSE AND GEOPOLITICAL SPACE

Fashion is not only a material industry; it is also a discursive system that produces value through language, images, institutions, media and spatial

hierarchies. As Roland Barthes (1983) showed, fashion does not reside solely in clothing as material object, but in the discursive operations through which garments are described and rendered meaningful.

Yuniya Kawamura (2005) later emphasised the institutional conditions through which designers, media, schools, museums, retailers and markets collectively recognise fashion as fashion. Following Michel Foucault (1972), discourse should be understood not as a neutral description of reality, but as a productive field that constitutes objects of knowledge and regimes of visibility. Stuart Hall's (1997) work on representation further clarifies how meaning is produced through selection, framing and exclusion. Fashion's legitimacy is therefore produced through systems of mediation and recognition. This production of legitimacy has spatial consequences. Fashion does not distribute symbolic value evenly. Paris, Milan, London and New York function not only as geographical locations, but as symbolic centres of creativity, authorship, innovation and trend leadership. By contrast, many territories in the Global South are more frequently represented through labour, manufacturing, extraction, reuse, redistribution or disposal than through their capacity to generate fashion meaning. Critical geopolitics provides a framework for analysing this symbolic ordering. For John Agnew (2003, 2010), geopolitical space is not simply given; it is produced through discourses that organise the world into centres, margins, opportunities, threats and zones of intervention. Applied to fashion, this means that centre and periphery are not only economic or geographic positions, but symbolic roles produced through narratives of value, modernity, responsibility and creativity. Fashion weeks, magazines, museums, luxury conglomerates, digital platforms, trade fairs, rankings and sustainability reports all contribute to defining which places appear authoritative and which appear secondary or residual. Agnès Rocamora's (2016) work on fashion mediation is useful here because it shows that fashion media do not simply communicate fashion; they participate in producing its temporalities, hierarchies and regimes of visibility. These infrastructures do not operate through identical languages. A runway show, an Instagram

feed, a resale platform and a sustainability report produce fashion meaning differently. Yet they can converge in stabilising a global fashion map in which symbolic centrality remains concentrated while other spaces become associated with labour, reuse or waste. Digital media have multiplied the speed and visibility of circulation, but multiplication should not be confused with equalisation. Platform visibility is structured by algorithms, commercial partnerships, influencer economies and uneven access to attention. As a result, peripheral actors may become temporarily visible without acquiring the same authority to define what fashion means. Sustainability discourse must be situated within this structure. Circularity, responsibility and ethical consumption are often presented as corrective responses to fashion's damage. However, they also function as stabilising narratives. Elizabeth Wilson's (2003) analysis of fashion's oscillation between novelty, repetition, transgression and conformity helps explain why contradiction is not external to fashion, but part of its normal operation. By translating critique into recognisable terms such as circular fashion, conscious consumption or sustainable luxury, the system can acknowledge crisis while preserving dominant structures of visibility and value. This does not mean that sustainability discourse is false or irrelevant. Rather, it means that its symbolic function must be analysed critically. The same vocabulary that can support ethical transformation can also organise selective visibility: successful cases of reuse, recycling and innovation are foregrounded, while the residual materials that cannot be reintegrated are displaced elsewhere. The question is therefore not only whether fashion becomes more sustainable, but where the unresolved contradictions of sustainability are displaced.

SEMIOSPHERE, CENTRE/ PERIPHERY AND THE SEMIOTIC THRESHOLD

To explain how fashion's discursive instability becomes spatially organised, this article draws on Yuri Lotman's (1990) theory of the semiosphere. Lotman conceptualises culture as a semiotic space composed of multiple interacting sign systems. Meaning does not emerge from isolated signs,

but from relations within a broader semiotic environment. The semiosphere is internally structured by asymmetries between centres, peripheries and boundaries.

For Lotman (1990), the centre of the semiosphere is characterised by relatively stabilised codes: dominant languages, institutions, classifications and self-descriptions acquire authority there. The periphery, by contrast, is marked by heterogeneity and contact between different semiotic languages. Peripheral zones are not external to the system; they are internal areas where meanings are less codified, where translation is more intense and where new forms may emerge. Lotman's (1990) concept of boundary is crucial because a boundary is not a simple line of separation. It is a mechanism of translation that filters and transforms elements moving between different languages or spaces.

Some elements become legible within dominant codes; others remain unstable, excessive or only partially recognised. From this framework, the article develops the concept of the semiotic threshold: an internal zone of the fashion system where translation intensifies and where the system's capacity to stabilise meaning becomes fragile. The threshold is both spatial and discursive. Spatially, it refers to territories that absorb the material consequences of fashion circulation: zones of manufacturing, redistribution, reuse, informal exchange or disposal.

Discursively, it refers to conditions in which fashion's categories become insufficient. At the threshold, garments may still be recognisable as fashion objects, but they also appear as excess, waste, residue or environmental burden.

Meaning does not disappear; it becomes unstable. The article uses the term subtranslation to describe this condition of incomplete translation. Derived from Lotman's (1990) theory of boundary translation and adapted here to fashion, subtranslation does not mean total exclusion.

It names a state of partial inclusion: objects, practices or territories are recognised by fashion but not fully integrated into its dominant language. They remain visible without becoming central, legible without becoming legitimate and meaningful without becoming stable.

Second-hand garments accumulated in peripheral territories exemplify this oscillation between commodity and residue, fashion and waste, visibility and marginality.

The concept also prevents a simplistic opposition between inclusion and exclusion. At the threshold, garments are neither simply outside fashion nor safely inside it.

They remain connected to fashion's circuits, images and narratives while simultaneously exposing what those circuits cannot stabilise.

SECOND-HAND ECONOMIES AND AMBIGUOUS VALUE

Second-hand clothing occupies a structurally ambiguous position within fashion.

It is increasingly celebrated as evidence of circularity, ethical consumption and responsible design, while also remaining associated with devaluation, informality, excess and waste.

This ambivalence reveals instability in the way fashion produces, loses and attempts to recover value.

Anthropological approaches to value help clarify this condition. Marcel Mauss (1925/1990) showed that value is produced through systems of exchange, obligation and recognition; Arjun Appadurai (1986) argued that commodities move through shifting regimes of value.

Second-hand garments make this process visible because they pass through use, donation, sorting, resale, export, reuse, disposal and sometimes creative reactivation. At each stage, their meaning must be translated again.

Recent scholarship has framed waste, circularity and second-hand consumption as central fields of transformation. Tufarelli (2026) approaches waste streams as strategic sites through which circular fashion manufacturing can be reorganised within territorialised production systems. Spagnoli (2026) argues that circularity is not merely technical, but a systemic transition involving infrastructures, coordination and the resemantisation of value.

Giraldi, Maini and Morelli (2024) identify second-hand shopping, sharing practices and conscious consumption as pathways through which sustainable fashion behaviours may emerge. These perspectives show that waste and second-hand clothing are no longer marginal topics. However, this article approaches them from their point of failure.

It asks what happens when waste cannot be reintegrated, when circularity cannot be completed and when second-hand garments cannot be successfully resemantised as desirable, ethical

or sustainable objects. The problem is not only how fashion creates circular value, but how it manages residues that resist both circular retranslation into meaning and retransaction into economic value. Within central fashion spaces, selected second-hand garments can be recoded as vintage, archival, rare, curated or circular.

Their previous use becomes a source of distinction rather than stigma. Curatorial practices, branding, resale platforms and visual mediation translate used garments back into fashion language.

Yet this stabilisation is selective.

Karen Tranberg Hansen and Jennifer Le Zotte's (2019) work on changing second-hand economies is useful here because it shows that used clothing has long occupied a shifting position between commerce, charity, stigma, repair and revaluation.

Large volumes move through redistribution networks as compressed bales, often stripped of individual distinction. Some garments are sorted, repaired or resold; others remain damaged, unsuitable, low-quality or economically unviable.

This distinction is essential because the same term, second-hand, can refer to very different realities:

a curated vintage piece in a central boutique, a garment selected for resale in a local market, a bale of low-value imports, or a discarded item in an illegal dump. The category is therefore internally uneven.

From the perspective of the semiotic threshold, second-hand clothing is a site of value oscillation.

A garment may remain materially intact and recognisable as clothing while no longer functioning as fashion. It may retain use value but lose exchange value; it may retain symbolic traces of a previous life but fail to acquire new meaning in the receiving context.

This instability is intensified by the scale and speed of contemporary circulation.

The greater the volume of garments entering second-hand routes, the more difficult it becomes for local economies to retranslate them into durable value. Peripheral territories therefore receive not only material excess, but unstable value. They become responsible for sorting, absorbing, transforming or discarding what central markets have expelled. This is why second-hand economies cannot be read only through the optimistic language of circularity.

They are also spaces where the limits of circularity become visible. Figure 01 synthesises the relationship between the semiotic threshold and ambiguous value developed in Sections 4 and 5. It shows how second-hand garments move from central fashion narratives into redistribution circuits and, at the threshold, are either resemantised, creatively reactivated or displaced as residue.

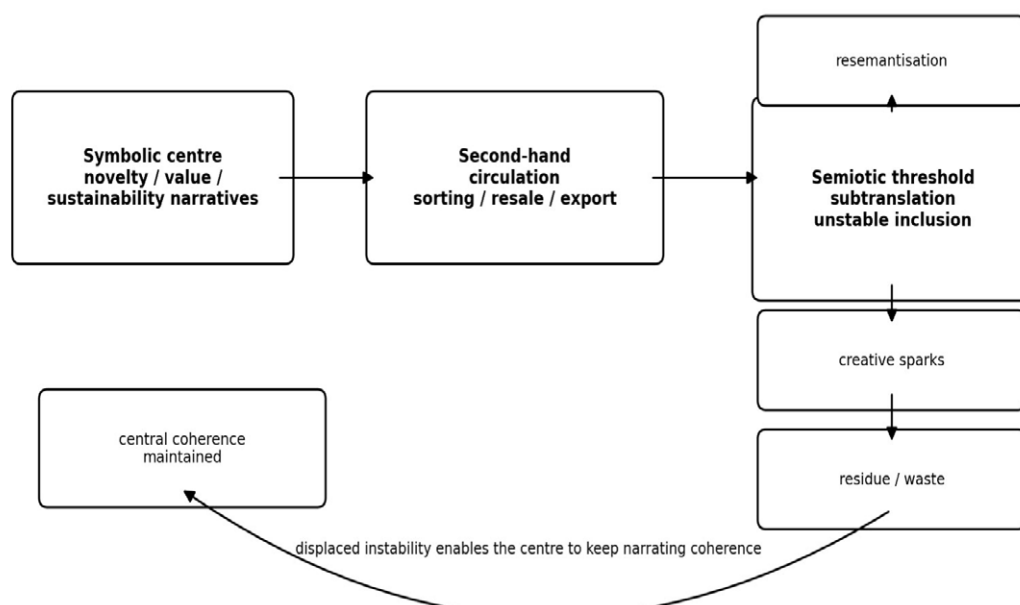


Fig. 01

CHILE, ATACAMA AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF TEXTILE WASTE

Chile offers a revealing case for analysing the geopolitical and semiotic displacement of fashion's excess. Located along the western edge of South America, Chile occupies a complex position within global circuits of trade, extraction, cultural production and consumption.

Its economic openness, port infrastructure, free trade zones and internal inequalities have positioned it as an important site within the circulation of second-hand clothing.

Northern Chile is especially significant.

The region of Tarapacá, where Iquique and Alto Hospicio are located, is central to the reception, sorting, redistribution and disposal of used garments. Iquique's free trade zone, ZOFRI, has played a key role in facilitating the import and redistribution of second-hand clothing.

Recent research estimates that approximately 40% of used textiles imported by mass into Chile enter through Iquique, while ZOFRI operates as a major logistical and commercial infrastructure for these flows (Morell-Delgado, Talens Peiró, & Toboso-Chavero, 2025).

The garments that arrive in northern Chile do not follow a single trajectory.

Some are sorted, resold locally, or re-exported to other Latin American markets.

Others lose value during classification and redistribution. Garments that are damaged, unsuitable for local demand, or economically unviable fall out of resale circuits and accumulate in informal or illegal textile dumps, particularly around Alto Hospicio. Located near Iquique in Chile's Tarapacá Region, within the broader Atacama Desert zone, Alto Hospicio is a commune and city that has become one of the territories most visibly associated with illegal textile dumps in northern Chile.

This trajectory shows that the problem cannot be reduced to local mismanagement. Local actors participate in sorting, selling, selecting, and reusing garments, but they do so within a global system that sends unstable material value toward territories with limited capacity to absorb its excess.

The Atacama Desert must not be read as an empty landscape. It is a complex geographical, cultural, economic and symbolic territory in northern Chile, associated with aridity, mining, astronomy, tourism, heritage, urban settlements and local communities.

The illegal textile dumps near Alto Hospicio are part of this inhabited geography.

They are not outside society; they are produced by a territorial system shaped by trade, labour, informality, environmental vulnerability and global consumption. This distinction matters because international images of clothing mountains in the desert can easily reproduce the idea of Atacama as a remote empty space.

A threshold reading instead insists that these dumps are located in relation to people, infrastructures, labour practices and territorial histories.

This territorial specificity is crucial for avoiding a reductive reading of the desert as a distant dumping ground detached from social life.

Alto Hospicio, in particular, is not only a point on the map near the textile dumps; it is part of a wider urban and logistical ecology linked to Iquique, ZOFRI, informal commerce, migration, labour and regional inequality.

The presence of discarded garments in the desert therefore condenses several scales at once: global overproduction, transnational second-hand trade, national regulatory gaps, regional infrastructures and local forms of work and survival.

Previous research on textile debris in Chile has shown that the problem cannot be understood only through the language of waste management, since the accumulation of garments also modifies territorial imaginaries and social relations (Pino Ahumada, 2023). The dump becomes a place where global fashion is reterritorialised: garments designed, purchased and discarded elsewhere acquire a new and unstable visibility in northern Chile. This reterritorialisation is what gives the Atacama case its analytical force.

The desert does not merely receive unwanted material; it makes visible the geopolitical chain that allows the centre to preserve its narratives of novelty, consumption and circular responsibility while the material remainder is displaced to the periphery.

From a semiotic perspective, these dumps are threshold spaces where garments that once circulated as signs of novelty, identity, brand value or aspiration become residues.

They are still recognisable as clothing, and sometimes as branded fashion objects, but they no longer operate within central codes of desirability, seasonality or consumption. They materialise subtranslation: partially legible,

but no longer fully translatable into fashion's dominant language of value. The dump is therefore not only a site of environmental degradation. It is also a scene in which the semiotic exhaustion of fashion becomes visible: labels, colours, fabrics and silhouettes persist, but the codes that once gave them value no longer hold.

The Chilean case resonates with other Global South sites of second-hand clothing circulation, particularly Kantamanto Market in Accra, Ghana. Both cases reveal how territories in the Global South receive the excess of Global North consumption and are required to sort, repair, recommodify or discard it.

Yet the two cases operate through different spatial configurations. Kantamanto is structured around a dense urban market ecology of labour, repair, resale and waste. Atacama is marked by the spectacular visibility of illegal textile dumps in desert landscapes. In Chile, fashion's residue becomes amplified through its encounter with the desert: the dump becomes image, symbol and geopolitical accusation. The comparison is not intended to transform the article into a comparative study, but to show that Atacama belongs to a broader geography of displacement while retaining a specific semiotic intensity. The Atacama Desert therefore functions as a semiotic threshold because it concentrates three forms of instability. First, material instability: garments that cannot be reintegrated into resale or circular systems accumulate as waste. Second, symbolic instability: objects that were once meaningful as fashion become ambiguous residues. Third, geopolitical instability: the unresolved contradictions of consumption, sustainability and responsibility are displaced from central markets toward peripheral territories.

The case also demonstrates that visibility is not the same as transformation.

The Atacama dumps have become globally recognisable, but global recognition does not automatically redistribute responsibility or change the structures of overproduction, export and dumping that produced them.

CREATIVE SPARKS AT THE THRESHOLD

Although the semiotic threshold functions as a zone where fashion's instability is displaced and accumulated, it is not a space of pure passivity. Following Yuri Lotman (1990), peripheries can also

be sites of heightened semiotic activity because they bring heterogeneous codes, materials, actors and temporalities into contact.

In the Atacama case, textile waste has generated cultural practices that attempt to reactivate meaning from within the space of residue. This article conceptualises these practices as creative sparks: episodic semiotic interventions that momentarily interrupt the meanings assigned to discarded garments.

They are not equivalent to systemic innovation. They do not necessarily produce scalable solutions, stable markets or enduring transformations. Their significance lies in exposing the limits of fashion's self-description by reactivating materials that the system has pushed toward symbolic death. Symbolic death is central here.

When garments accumulate in illegal dumps, they lose more than economic value. They lose their position within the recognised language of fashion. They are no longer new, desirable, seasonal, authored or properly circulated. The dump operates as a cemetery of fashion: a place where garments remain materially present but symbolically exhausted. Creative sparks contest this condition by returning discarded textiles to the field of signs. A first creative spark is represented by *Atacama Fashion Week*, an intervention associated with *Desierto Vestido* and Fashion Revolution Brazil in which models wore garments recovered from a textile dump in the Atacama Desert, as reported by The Guardian (2024, May 8).

Unlike a conventional fashion event, it did not operate primarily as a market-oriented runway. Its force lay in the visual confrontation between discarded garments, bodies and the desert landscape. The runway became a device of denunciation: it used fashion's own visual grammar to expose fashion's residual violence.

In this case, discarded garments are not simply restored as desirable objects.

They are made to appear as witnesses of a crisis. Their re-entry into visibility is accusatory rather than celebratory.

A second creative spark is *Runway Fashion Design Tarapacá*, particularly the *Pasarela RFD Tarapacá Circular y Sostenible 2025*.

RFD Tarapacá is structured as a territorial, collaborative and institutional platform involving designers, artisans and regional communities. Its 2025 runway took place at the former *Humberstone saltpeter works* in Pozo Almonte,

Tarapacá (Runway Fashion Design, 2025). This location matters: *Humberstone* is a heritage site marked by extraction, labour history and desert materiality. By staging circular fashion there, *RFD Tarapacá* connects recovered textiles to territorial history, craft knowledge and the memory of resource economies in northern Chile. Unlike *Atacama Fashion Week*, which confronts the dump directly, *RFD Tarapacá* translates the crisis through design, collaboration and regional identity. It therefore shows another possible language of the threshold: not only denunciation, but territorial rearticulation.

The involvement of Ágatha Ruiz de la Prada in the broader *RFD* trajectory clarifies the ambivalence of recognition from the centre. Her visit to textile dumps in northern Chile and her public statements on the importance of seeing what is happening there demonstrate that the crisis can become visible to central fashion actors. Yet visibility does not necessarily redistribute the power to translate meaning. The centre may witness the threshold, photograph it and acknowledge its urgency, while the authority to aestheticise, narrate and valorise waste remains concentrated in central fashion circuits.

Her later collaboration with Humana, produced from used garments selected and processed at Humana's Leganés plant in Madrid, should therefore not be confused with a collection made from Atacama garments (Humana, 2025). The distinction reinforces the argument: peripheral reality becomes symbolically available, but the power to reframe it remains centred.

This distinction also helps refine the notion of recentralisation. The visit to the dumps produces a moment of recognition: a central fashion figure sees the threshold and acknowledges its urgency. Yet the subsequent transformation of used garments into high-value upcycling within a European fashion week demonstrates that recognition can remain asymmetrical.

The centre can incorporate the affective and visual force of peripheral waste without transferring authorship, infrastructure or decision-making power to the territory where that waste accumulates. In semiotic terms, the Atacama becomes available as an image and warning, while the authorised act of translation continues to occur elsewhere.

A third creative spark is *El Gigante Vestido*, an ephemeral artistic intervention inspired

by the Gigante de Tarapacá, the monumental pre-Hispanic anthropomorphic geoglyph located on Cerro Unita, in Huara, Tarapacá.

The project reinterprets this ancestral figure through the temporary arrangement of discarded garments, linking textile waste to territory, heritage, overconsumption and environmental fragility (Universidad Finis Terrae, 2023).

Rather than returning discarded clothing to the runway or translating it into circular design, *El Gigante Vestido* moves textile waste into a territorial and patrimonial register. It confronts the long duration of cultural memory and landscape with the accelerated temporality of fashion consumption. This operation is crucial because it allows textile waste to speak through a semiotic system other than fashion itself. The garment becomes a sign of rupture between contemporary consumption and ancestral territorial inscription.

For this reason, *El Gigante Vestido* is not simply an example of upcycling or environmental communication. Its critical force lies in the collision between two forms of inscription: the ancient mark of the geoglyph and the contemporary mark of textile residue. The intervention suggests that fashion waste is also a territorial writing, one that inscribes the speed of consumption onto landscapes shaped by much longer cultural and ecological temporalities.

Together, these three creative sparks show that threshold interventions can operate through different semiotic languages: visual denunciation, territorial circular design and patrimonial-landscape intervention. None solves the textile waste crisis. They do not stop the arrival of second-hand clothing, dismantle illegal dumps or redistribute responsibility across the fashion system. Their force is semiotic rather than infrastructural. They make contradiction perceptible and temporarily restore semiotic agency to garments rendered residual. At the same time, they remain vulnerable to recentralisation.

Once photographed, circulated or incorporated into sustainability narratives, threshold interventions can become aesthetic content for the centre. This ambivalence is precisely why they are analytically important.

DISCUSSION: DISCURSIVE INSTABILITY AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF FASHION

The analysis shows that discursive instability is not a marginal dysfunction of fashion, but one of its structural conditions. Fashion maintains coherence by translating contradiction into recognisable narratives: novelty, creativity, sustainability, circularity, responsibility and innovation. Yet not all material consequences can be translated into these narratives.

What resists translation is displaced.

The semiotic threshold makes this displacement visible. Thresholds are not outside the system; they are internal zones of unstable inclusion. They receive, process, absorb, reinterpret or expose residues generated by fashion circulation.

Chile and the Atacama Desert reveal this mechanism with particular clarity. The garments accumulated near Alto Hospicio are not external accidents or local anomalies; they are material traces of a global system that produces more value, novelty, circulation and residue than it can symbolically stabilise.

This finding complicates dominant narratives of sustainability. Circularity assumes that materials can be reintroduced into circulation through design, recycling, resale, repair or conscious consumption. These practices are important, but they do not exhaust the problem.

Atacama shows that circularity also produces a remainder: garments that cannot be resold, repaired, recycled or resemantised.

The existence of this remainder does not invalidate circularity as an aspiration; it reveals its geopolitical limits. The problem is therefore material and semiotic. Some second-hand garments can be recoded as vintage, curated, ethical or circular, while others remain subtranslated residues. They are visible but not legitimised, recognisable but not reabsorbed. Peripheral spaces receive unresolved value and become responsible for managing what the centre cannot narrate. The comparison with Kantamanto shows that this is not an isolated Chilean anomaly, but part of a broader Global South condition of receiving, sorting, recommercialising and discarding the excess of Global North consumption.

This condition is geopolitical because it distributes not only goods, but also interpretative burdens. Peripheral territories are required to make sense of, extract value from, or dispose of materials

whose original systems of meaning were produced elsewhere.

Creative sparks reinforce this ambivalence.

Atacama Fashion Week, *RFD Tarapacá* and *El Gigante Vestido* demonstrate that threshold spaces are not mute. They generate critique, visibility, territorial design and artistic intervention. However, their force lies in making contradiction perceptible, not in resolving the infrastructure of overproduction, export, local dumping or uneven responsibility.

Once mediated and circulated, these interventions may also be recentralised as spectacle, content or sustainability storytelling.

This does not mean that semiotic interventions are politically irrelevant. In some contexts, symbolic disruption can become infrastructural change when it is translated into regulation, economic obligation, logistical systems, institutional accountability or new forms of material governance.

Creative sparks may therefore become consequential if they connect to extended producer responsibility, import regulation, repair infrastructures, waste-management systems or local circular economies. Without such translation, however, their force remains primarily semiotic: they expose contradiction without materially reorganising the system.

The broader contribution of this article is to shift the analytical focus from fashion's centres to its thresholds. Fashion studies has often examined how value is produced through design, media, institutions, branding and consumption.

This remains essential. However, the Atacama case shows that fashion must also be read from spaces where value collapses, where translation fails and where residue accumulates.

These spaces are not peripheral to fashion's operation; they are necessary to its coherence. The centre depends on the threshold not only materially, because excess must go somewhere, but also semiotically, because unresolved contradiction must be kept from destabilising dominant narratives of progress, novelty and sustainability.

CONCLUSION: READING FASHION FROM THE THRESHOLD

This article has argued that fashion operates as a self-descriptive discursive system whose coherence depends on the selective translation and spatial displacement of instability.

By bringing critical geopolitics into dialogue with semiotic theory, it has shown that fashion does not merely circulate through unequal global spaces; it also participates in producing them symbolically. Narratives of creativity, sustainability, circularity and responsibility stabilise meaning at the centre while displacing ambiguity, excess and residue toward peripheral thresholds.

The concept of the semiotic threshold has been central to this argument. Developed from Lotman's theory of the semiosphere, the threshold names an internal zone of unstable inclusion where translation intensifies and where fashion's dominant codes become fragile. At the threshold, garments, practices and territories remain connected to the fashion system, but they cannot be fully integrated into its central language of novelty, desirability, authorship or circular value. Second-hand clothing makes this condition especially evident. While selected garments can be resemantised as vintage, sustainable, circular or desirable, large volumes resist revaluation and accumulate as ambiguous residues.

The illegal textile dumps near Alto Hospicio are therefore not external anomalies at the margins of fashion, but internal residues of a global system that depends on peripheral territories to absorb what central narratives cannot resolve.

Reading fashion from the threshold shifts the focus of fashion studies from the spaces where value is produced to the spaces where value collapses. It invites attention to residues, failed translations, ambiguous objects and peripheral territories that are often treated as external to fashion's symbolic order. This perspective does not deny the importance of design innovation, circular initiatives or creative responses; rather, it situates them within the structures that determine which residues can be retranslated and which remain displaced. To read fashion from the threshold is to confront the places where the system's self-description fails, and where its material and symbolic debts become impossible to ignore.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Semiotic threshold and ambiguous value in second-hand fashion. Source: Author's elaboration based on Lotman's theory of the semiosphere and the analytical framework developed in this article.

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HARDSHELL, SOFTSHELL AND BEYOND

THE INTEGRATION OF FOREIGN WORDS INTO THE VOCABULARY OF OUTDOOR CLOTHING IN ITALY

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of loanwords in the Italian lexicon of outdoor clothing, a sector that emblematically reflects the international dimension of fashion and the global circulation of cultural, productive and communicative models. As the first to adopt loanwords and to experience the dynamics of their integration, specialist languages provide a privileged vantage point for the study of language contact. The outdoor clothing sector, characterised by a high technological density and a marked global dimension, makes these phenomena particularly visible and intense, establishing itself as a significant field of study. Set against the broader backdrop of the evolution of contemporary Italian vocabulary, characterised by an increasing presence of Anglicisms, this study aims to analyse the patterns of diffusion and usage of loanwords within a specialist field closely linked to technological innovation and commercial communication strategies. The analysis examines texts published in the Italian magazines *Outdoor Magazine* and *Snowbusiness Magazine* between 2016 and 2025. Particular attention is paid to certain recurring technical terms used to describe specific materials and garments. By observing the occurrences and contexts of use, the study aims to describe the dynamics of how these loanwords are employed, whilst also considering their relationship with more generic terms or possible Italian equivalents. In this way, the study intends to provide an overview of the linguistic practices that characterise specialist communication in the outdoor clothing sector.

Keywords: *Hardshell; Softshell; Outdoor fashion; Anglicisms; Specialized language.*

INTRODUCTION

The vocabulary of fashion has historically been characterised by a high degree of openness to loanwords, as it reflects the sector's international nature and the global circulation of cultural, production and communication models. Although it possesses a rich native terminological heritage for designating garments and clothing practices, the Italian language frequently resorts to loanwords¹. In recent decades, this trend has intensified further, in parallel with the evolution of Italian vocabulary,

which is increasingly influenced by Anglicisms. As Sergio (2025) observes, terms related to fashion and clothing constitute one of the areas in which the prevalence of loanwords from English is particularly significant, confirming the central role of that language in contemporary discourse on consumption and innovation. Within this general framework, the outdoor clothing sector stands out as a prime example of lexical renewal. It should be noted, first, that outdoor sports are experiencing significant growth in Italy, fuelled both by an increase in participants and by the spread of an image linked to extreme performance and outdoor living that has particularly captivated the urban youth population. What originally characterised an

¹ According to Fusco (2008), a loanword is the result of a process of interference based on the imitation of a linguistic model belonging to the source language but unknown in the target language; this model ultimately becomes an integral part of the target language.

audience of sports enthusiasts and professionals has gradually transformed into a broader cultural phenomenon. Technical clothing also takes on an identity-defining and stylistic significance that goes beyond its functional properties. As Barthes (1967) demonstrates in his analysis of fashion discourse, the language used to describe garments does not merely denote their physical features but constructs a system of cultural meanings around them, transforming clothing into a bearer of social and symbolic values. The outdoor clothing industry is also characterised by the constant evolution of materials, manufacturing technologies and the functional performance of garments. This creates a constant need for new terms, which the Italian lexicon tends to address using loanwords. In this context, English has established itself as the *lingua franca*, reflecting a global market dominated by international brands and structured around technical and commercial communication that transcends national borders.

This analysis focuses on some terms representative of sector-specific language, highlighting the fluctuations in usage that reflect a phase of integration into the Italian linguistic system that remains unstable. Studies on the influence of English on Italian have mainly focused on Anglicisms in everyday language and in large corpora from the general press, such as Gusmani 1981, Furiassi 2010 and Pulcini 2023. This paper, however, turns its attention to a specific specialist sector, that of outdoor clothing, which has so far been scarcely explored by Italian linguistic research. The words under consideration include *hardshell* and *softshell*, which are used to refer to specific types of materials and technical garments. The choice of these two lexical items is linked to the difficulties they pose in terms of translation and to the variations in usage observed in the corpus, which make them a significant case study. Although they are not officially recorded in the main Italian dictionaries nor included in lists of neologisms, these loanwords appear to be widely attested and functional in the specialist communication analysed.

The data examined were drawn from the archive of Italian journals *Outdoor Magazine* and *Snowbusiness Magazine*². The data collection was carried out through a systematic review of all issues published between 2016 and 2025, with the aim

of providing an update on the growing prevalence of Anglicisms in Italian specialist vocabulary over the last decade. For each issue, occurrences of the terms *hardshell* and *softshell* were identified, recording their spelling variations, contexts of use and diachronic distribution.

Outdoor Magazine focuses primarily on outdoor activities such as trekking, climbing, trail running and related sports, combining informative and educational content with sections dedicated to the presentation of products, materials and technological innovations. *Snowbusiness Magazine*, launched as a supplement in 2017, focuses specifically on winter outdoor sports and the related market. These magazines were selected because of their prominence within the Italian outdoor publishing sector and their online accessibility, which brings them closer to their target audience, predominantly young and urban readers who are accustomed to navigating digital communication environments and who view English terminology as a marker of identity and belonging to a globalised community. Both magazines use highly specialised language, with commercial products often described using a combination of Italian and English, making them particularly relevant for the lexical analysis conducted in this study.³

HARDSHELL AND SOFTSHELL IN THE VOCABULARY OF OUTDOOR SPORTS ACTIVITIES

THE EARLIEST ATTESTATIONS OF THE TERMS

Before being used in the vocabulary of technical sportswear, the term *hardshell* appeared in English as an attributive adjective in 1670, 'designating a (type of) shellfish, turtle, nut, etc., having a hard shell' (OED, *hardshell*). It is equivalent to the adjective *hard-shelled* in its primary sense and is mainly used in American English⁴. From 1936 onwards, the *Oxford English Dictionary* records a semantic extension of the term, which came to denote 'a man-made object having a rigid, protective exterior' (OED, *hardshell*), thus marking the shift from the zoological to the material and technical sphere. As regards the Italian translation, the Italian- English, English-Italian dictionary

² For further information on the magazines, visit the Sport Press website at: <https://www.sport-press.it/chi-siamo/>

³ The magazines are available on the Sport Press website at: <https://outdoormag.sport-press.it/rivista/>

⁴ For a more detailed account of the meanings of the term *hardshell*, see the Oxford English Dictionary.

Ragazzini 2025 records *hard-shell* with a range of meanings that extend beyond zoological references, including its use in technical and sporting contexts, such as ‘casco da ciclista’ in the expression *hard-shell helmet* (Ragazzini, 2024, *hard-shell*). Similarly, *softshell* has appeared in the English language in 1670 as an attributive adjective meaning ‘of or relating to something that has a soft shell. Chiefly in the names of animals (see softshell clam, softshell crab, softshell turtle’ (OED, *softshell*)⁵.

COMPARISON WITH THE MAIN ITALIAN LANGUAGE DICTIONARIES AND THE MAIN ITALIAN NEWSPAPERS⁶

The terms *softshell* and *hardshell*, which have been attested in the English language in their single-word form for centuries, although with originally different meanings, in the Italian language remain confined to specialist use and are not sufficiently widespread to be considered neologisms⁷ or included in dictionaries⁸.

The term *hardshell* is completely absent from the major Italian newspapers (*La Repubblica*, *La Stampa* and *Corriere della Sera*), whilst the term *softshell*, related to outdoor clothing, appears sporadically in *Corriere della Sera* from 2010 onwards and in *La Repubblica* only from 2021. Although these terms are used in a specialist context, they are part of what can be defined as outdoor fashion. It shares with the fashion phenomenon profound dynamics of identity and social positioning. In this sense, outdoor fashion allows individuals to position themselves in the social space of the world of outdoor enthusiasts.

⁵ For a more detailed account of the meanings of the term *softshell*, see the Oxford English Dictionary.

⁶ ‘Il più rilevante e specifico contributo dato alla lingua dalla stampa è la diffusione delle parole straniere, la loro fissazione nel patrimonio collettivo delle classi più istruite’ [‘The most significant and specific contribution made to the language by the press is the spread of foreign words and their establishment in the collective vocabulary of the more educated classes’] (De Mauro, 1976, p. 499).

⁷ According to Biffi (2018), it is difficult to define a neologism precisely, as well as to distinguish it from ephemeral linguistic forms linked to a specific moment or created spontaneously, sometimes justified by the historical or cultural context. These forms may derive from the rules of the language’s derivational morphology, which allow us to coin transparent words using prefixes and suffixes, without necessarily implying their stabilisation in the lexical repertoire or their inclusion in a dictionary.

⁸ To verify the presence of the terms *hardshell* and *softshell* among neologisms the reference is Adamo et al. (2018). To investigate their prevalence in the Italian language, the main dictionaries were consulted: Battaglia (1961-2002); De Mauro (1999-2000); Sabatini & Coletti (1997-2024); Treccani (n.d.); Zingarelli (2025).

‘The way we use fashion – therefore both the way we follow or do not follow it – is evidence of how we situate ourselves in the social world that we inhabit’ (González 2007, p. 66). The use of terms such as *hardshell* and *softshell*, as well as the conscious choice of garments, signals competence and belonging.

HARDSHELL E SOFTSHELL IN THE ANALYSED CORPUS

Since 2016, the specialist magazines *Outdoor Magazine* and *Snowbusiness Magazine* have documented significant use of the terms *hardshell* and *softshell*. The semantic origin of these terms can be traced to botany and zoology, where they refer to nuts and animals with hard or soft shells, respectively. However, in the outdoor sector, *hardshell* has taken on the meaning of waterproof and windproof fabric, while *softshell* refers to a fabric designed to provide thermal insulation and keep the body dry. Sometimes these terms are translated into Italian with the word *guscio* (shell). However, this is inadequate to distinguish the precise semantic and functional meaning of the two terms. In the analysed corpus the terms *hardshell* and *softshell* are frequently accompanied by images of the garments. In line with Olivero’s (2024) observations in his analysis of fashion editorials, the interaction between words and images contributes to the construction of visual and discursive narratives that transcend the simple functional description of the products. In the present context, this combination leads to the gradual familiarisation of foreign words within the sector’s lexicon. In this way, *hardshell* and *softshell* become recognisable and widely accepted elements within the outdoor sports community, promoting a common terminological competence, even in the absence of a full lexicographical recording of these terms in standard Italian.

THE PRESENCE OF HARDSHELL

The term *hardshell* appears in many graphic and stylistic forms in the texts of the outdoor magazines examined, each with a specific number of occurrences and context of use. The single-word form with a lowercase letter, *hardshell*, is the most widespread and recurrent. The term is used both as a noun, to refer to a product category in its entirety, and as an adjective, to describe the technical characteristics of a garment or material. (Fig.01)

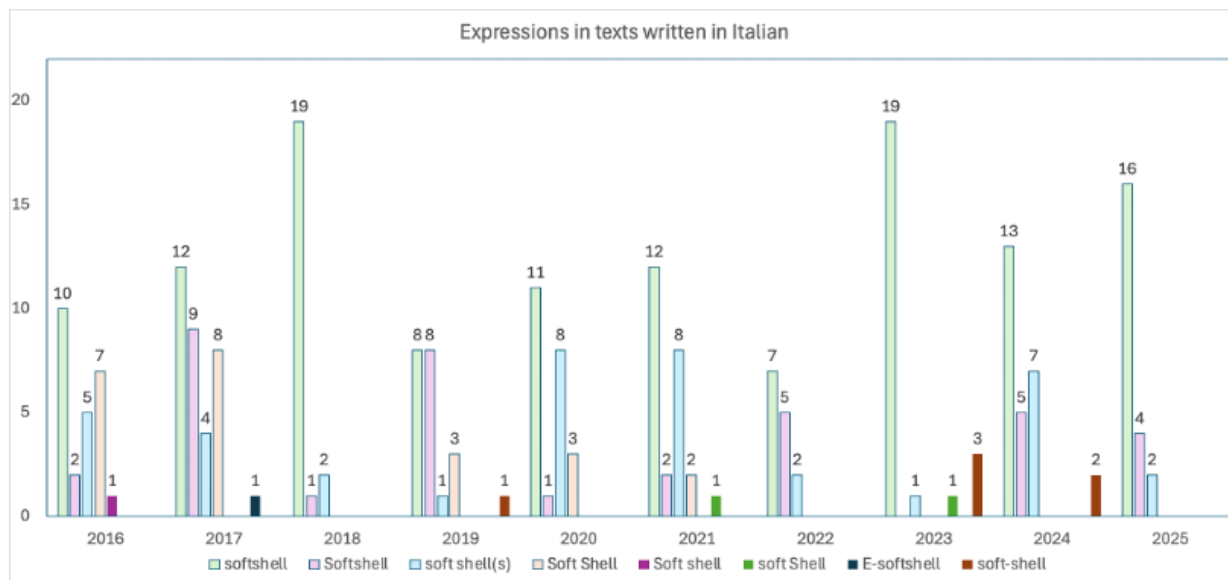


Fig. 01

‘[...] Polartec Neoshell (hardshell/stirato esterno)’ [‘[...] Polartec Neoshell (hardshell/stretch outer fabric)’]⁹ (*Outdoor Magazine*, December 2016, p. 36).

However, there is also *Hardshell* with a capital letter, which appears sporadically with a limited number of occurrences and still retains the same meaning as the version with a lowercase letter.

The term generally refers to the rigid structure of garments and technical items.

‘Solida struttura Hardshell e imbottitura interna rimovibile e lavabile’ [‘Sturdy Hardshell construction with a removable and washable inner lining’] (*Outdoor Magazine*, April 2019, p. 48).

Hard shell, which, although less common than *hardshell*, is used with the same meaning. In the example given, it refers to an adjective denoting a type of jacket; however, it should be noted that ‘hard shell’ is also used as a noun, in the same way as the compound term.

‘La stampa riflettente all-over, abbinata alla funzionalità e affidabilità di una giacca hard shell triplo stratoc’ [‘All-over reflective print, combined with the functionality and reliability of a triple-layer hard shell jacket’] (*Outdoor Magazine*, report, February 2019, p. 14) (Fig.02).

Finally, *hard-shell* does not appear until 2022. In this case, the term is accompanied by an additional

definition that clarifies the concept, referring to the garment’s rigid outer shell.

‘Cambia i vantaggi di questa tecnologia con quella hard-shell: guscio esterno in materiale plastico’ [‘Replaces the benefits of this technology with those of the hard-shell design: an outer shell made of plastic’] (*Outdoor Magazine*, preview fw 22/23, 2022, p. 14).

In most cases, the English texts contain terms that have been retained as non-adapted loanwords in the Italian texts. In two cases, *hardshell* and *hard shell* found in the English text have not been proposed in the Italian text. In 2020, the English text contains an instance of *Hard Shell*, consisting of two separate units, each with a capital initial letter, translated in the Italian text using the term *guscio*.

‘[...] the Ortlers Hybrid TWC Jacket fits under every hardshell’. (English)

‘La Ortlers Hybrid TWC Jacket [...] non ingombra sotto il guscio’. (Italian) (*Outdoor Magazine*, product guide, January 2018, p. 44) (Fig. 03).

The data show that the term is still in a phase of unstable integration into the Italian technical lexicon. The retention of the original English form is driven by specific communicative and commercial strategies, in a sector where English terminology serves as a marker of identity and authenticity. As Bombi (2015) observes, citing Arcangeli, the resistance of Anglicisms to translation is often attributable to their greater

⁹ Where the original text does not provide an English version, a translation has been included in square brackets alongside each of the examples given.

In pista con Dynafit: nuova estetica, solite performance

Le novità al femminile della collezione Speedfit 2.0 sono garanzia, di prestazioni e funzionalità, anche dopo il tramonto. Abbinare ad un nuovo look raffinato e cittadino

W's Calcite Jkt

La stampa riflettente all-over, abbinata alla funzionalità e affidabilità di una giacca hard shell triplo strato, rendono la Speed 3L Reflect il capo ideale per lo scialpinismo con condizioni meteo avverse o dopo il tramonto. Con un peso di appena 268 grammi, questa giacca leggera, elastica e comprimibile, realizzata in pregiato Dynashell 3L, protegge in modo affidabile da vento e intemperie, e si distingue per la sua particolare estetica. La stampa mimetica riflettente sulle braccia rende visibili sia di notte che con scarsa visibilità, aumentando la sicurezza in montagna. Il capo dispone di un cappuccio compatibile con il casco, due grandi tasche frontali con zip e cuciture incollate. Il taglio è aderente al corpo e atletico, e consente movimenti molto agili. Grazie all'elasticità del materiale e all'ottima traspirabilità la giacca Speed 3L Reflect è l'ideale anche nelle salite più faticose.



INFO: Oberalp - 0471.242900 - dynafit.it

Speed Jeans Dynastretch Hose

Chi l'ha detto che in pista non si possono mettere i jeans? Con i pantaloni Speed Jeans Dynastretch è possibile portare sulla neve un look urbano, senza rinunciare alla performance. Nonostante l'aspetto inusuale, infatti, questi pantaloni sono tecnici esattamente come si è abituati e come ci si aspetta da un capo Dynafit: antivento e idrorepellenti, garantiscono movimenti agili e comfort, caratteristiche per le quali peso (370 grammi) e ventilazione giocano un ruolo fondamentale. Il materiale è altamente traspirante ed elastico, per affrontare senza problemi anche ascese veloci e dinamiche. Grazie all'interno leggermente felpato, inoltre, questi pantaloni sono molto gradevoli sulla pelle. Il taglio è aderente al corpo e atletico, in modo da trattenere il calore e migliorare la gestione dell'umidità quando si suda molto. Il ginocchio preformato e il girovita elastico regolabile portano ancora più comfort sulla pista. Il fondo della gamba è rinforzato e regolabile in larghezza mediante una zip. Non mancano, infine, numerose taschine per riporre piccoli oggetti.

Fig. 02



FW 2018/19 PRODUCT GUIDE

Salewa pensa "glocal" con TirolWool Celliant

Per l'autunno-inverno 2018/19, Salewa ha esteso l'utilizzo dell'innovativa imbottitura ibrida TirolWool Celliant anche alle proprie collezioni tecniche, reinventando per l'occasione la iconica Ortles Hybrid TWC Jacket. Grazie alle sue proprietà questa giacca mantiene al caldo più a lungo anche durante le soste al freddo in attività invernali come lo ski mountaineering, l'alpinismo e l'arrampicata su ghiaccio, dove il controllo della temperatura corporea è vitale. Infatti, ai momenti di intensa attività come la salita, durante la salita si alternano periodi statici durante le soste per togliere le pelli dagli sci o per fare sicurezza, durante i quali si corre il rischio di raffreddarsi, a volte fino alla ipotermia.



La reinventazione della giacca ne ha aumentato la resistenza ai frequenti contatti con le rocce, alle lamine degli sci e allo zaino, utilizzando un tessuto ripstop in nylon a doppia tessitura in combinazione con inserti sotto le braccia in Durastretch Bamboo Light, un tessuto softshell elasticizzato traspirante, quick dry e confortevole al tatto, e che in combinazione con i soffici TirolWool Celliant assicura una ampia libertà di movimento mentre si arrampica. La Ortles Hybrid TWC Jacket occupa inoltre un volume ridotto nello zaino con soli 402g di peso aggiuntivo, e non ingombra sotto il guscio.

N | ORTLES HYBRID TWC JACKET

- Robust, extremely abrasion-resistant, wind-resistant, woven, 4-way stretch ripstop nylon outer fabric
- INSULATION: 60-gram TirolWool Celliant fill at torso, head and upper arms
- Stretch underarm and side inserts made of breathable, fast-drying Durastretch Bamboo Light fabric
- Climbing-specific cut and high-reach construction



- Pleasant, soft, breathable and fast-drying Durastretch Bamboo fabric on inside of back and under the arms
- Close-fitting, adjustable, insulated Durastretch hood with elasticated hem
- Two side pockets, easily accessible when wearing a harness or carrying a backpack
- Stows away into its own inner pocket
- WEIGHT: 402 grams
- COLOURS: Flint stone / Black out / Prince blue / Pumpkin / Lime punch



For winter 2018-2019, Salewa is increasingly using new technology to keep ski mountaineers, climbers and alpinists warm longer. With the Ortles Hybrid TWC Jacket from its ski mountaineering collection, it is launching a warm, breathable, hybrid jacket for high-octane activities in cold conditions. It is made with TirolWool Celliant, a thermo-regulating insulation material. During stop-and-go activities, such as ski mountaineering, alpine mountaineering or climbing, climate control is critical. Periods of intense physical activity are often followed by static periods where mountaineers risk overcooling. This might involve belaying, removing skins or a hydration break. That is why the right mix of insulation performance, breathability and freedom of movement is essential.

Thanks to its highly robust and abrasion-resistant, double woven ripstop nylon, the Ortles Hybrid TWC Jacket withstands regular contact with rock and ice. Underarm inserts in Durastretch Bamboo Light fabric allow perspiration to evaporate, dry fast and are comfortable to wear next to the skin. Together with the high-reach construction, they ensure good freedom of movement when climbing. Two side pockets, which can still be accessed when wearing a harness or carrying a pack, and a chest pocket provide ample storage options for items that need to be kept close to hand. With its small pack size, it stows easily in any pack and weighing just 402 grams, the Ortles Hybrid TWC Jacket fits under every hardshell.

Fig. 03

definitional precision and brevity, characteristics that make it difficult to replace them with indigenous terms capable of covering the same referential areas. In this case, the use of *guscio* does not convey the technical specifics of the corresponding English term, proving semantically insufficient to distinguish the functional properties of the materials in question.

Contrary to what one would expect from a technical item, which tends to establish a one-to-one correspondence between form and concept (Gualdo & Telve, 2011), *hardshell* exhibits fluctuations that reflect tensions between communicative needs, regulatory pressures and commercial strategies, suggesting that the integration of loanwords in this context is not a linear process.

THE PRESENCE OF SOFTSHELL

The standard form, *softshell* (written as a single word with a lower-case initial letter), is the most common in the Italian texts of the journals analysed. With peaks in usage in 2018 and 2023 and a low point in 2022, this version is the most frequently used to describe both technical garments and types of materials.

As the following examples, taken from a single article in *Outdoor Magazine* (July/August 2025, p.

46), show, the term can take on different meanings within the same text.

The first instance, taken from the title of the Lewisia jacket 'Protezione femminile softshell' ['Women's softshell jacket'], shows an ambiguous use of the term, as it could refer either to the type of jacket or to the material from which it is made. In the description of the same jacket 'La giacca da donna [...] costruita in softshell leggero a tre strati [...] ['The women's jacket [...] made from lightweight three-layer softshell [...]]' the term *softshell* is used as a noun that clearly refers to the fabric from which the jacket is made.

In the title of the Foxglove jacket, 'Il softshell per l'escursionismo maschile' ['The men's hiking softshell jacket'] the term functions as a noun referring to the garment.

Finally, in the description of the same jacket, '[...] softshell a tre strati impermeabile 10.000 mm [...] ['[...] 10,000 mm waterproof three-layer softshell [...]]' *softshell* once again refers to the textile material (Fig. 04).

Softshell, written as one word with a capital letter, appears with varying frequency and is mainly used as part of commercial names.

'[...] viene abbinata al Dynastretch Softshell [...] ['[...] is paired with the Dynastretch Softshell [...]]' (*Outdoor Magazine*, fw 21-22 Preview 2021,

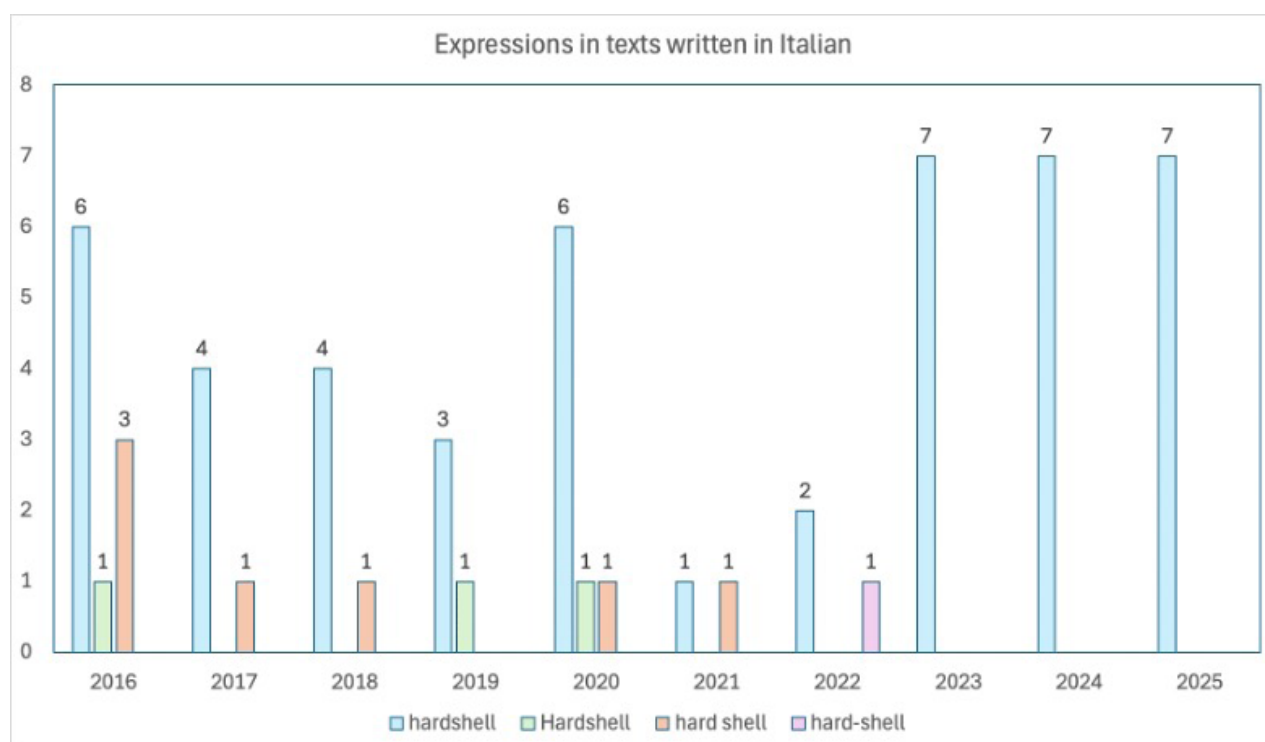


Fig. 04

p. 35). ‘Women’s Softshell Jacket Rutor XCS AIR’ (Outdoor Magazine, December 2024, p. 18) Another form is *soft shell(s)*, consisting of two separate units, which appears variably over time. Although less common than *softshell*, it retains the same meaning. In the example given, it is used as a noun to refer to a type of jacket, but in general it is also used to refer to types of materials.

‘[...] piumini, soft shells, giacche isolanti [...]’ ‘[...] down jackets, softshells, insulated jackets [...]’ (Outdoor Magazine, February 2016, p. 44).

Soft Shell, with both linguistic units separated and initial letters capitalised, is less common and appears mainly in the early years analysed. Its use has declined over time, suggesting a trend towards standardisation into a single word. In some cases, this form identifies specific technologies or fabrics.

‘[...] tessuto Biomorphic Soft Shell Water Dry 360° Adaptive Stretch’ ‘[...] Biomorphic Soft Shell Water Dry 360° Adaptive Stretch fabric’] (Outdoor Magazine, March 2021, p. 54).

The variant *soft Shell*, with the first letter lowercase

and the second uppercase, refers to a type of material. It is extremely rare and appears only once. It is a sign of the significant fluctuation affecting formations that have not yet fully acclimatised.

‘Prodotto in morbido e caldo soft Shell 3 layer con membrana [...]’ ‘Made from soft, warm 3-layer softshell fabric with a membrane [...]’ (Outdoor Magazine, preview fw 21/22, 2021, p. 33).

A very rare case is *E-softshell*, which appeared exclusively in 2017. It refers to a specific type of *softshell* and is part of the name of a fabric.

‘[...] per il suo innovativo materiale softshell riscaldabile denominato E-soft shell’ ‘[...] for its innovative heated softshell fabric known as E-soft shell’] (Outdoor Magazine, December 2017, p. 11) (Fig. 05).

The *soft-shell* form, with a hyphen between the two units, appears sporadically starting in 2020, with an increase in 2023 and 2024. It is used to describe specific materials.

‘[...] realizzato in morbido soft-shell’ ‘[...] made from soft softshell fabric’] (Outdoor Magazine,

ESTATE TECNICA

Dai trail di montagna alle escursioni urbane, Nordsen propone una collezione tecnica che mette al centro libertà, traspirabilità e versatilità

L'estate è la stagione della leggerezza: camminate in quota, corse tra i boschi, speed hiking in giornate che sembrano non finire mai. Ma è anche la stagione che mette alla prova l'abbigliamento tecnico: caldo, sudore, vento improvviso, passaggi espo-

sti, piogge non programmate. Per questo Nordsen propone una selezione di capi pensati per chi si muove in ambienti dinamici e cerca il perfetto equilibrio tra funzionalità tecnica e libertà di movimento.



LEWISIA:
protezione femminile softshell

La giacca da donna Lewisia è la risposta Nordsen al meteo estivo instabile. Dotata di membrana da 10.000 mm e costruita in softshell leggero a tre strati: traspirante, antivento e trattato con finitura idrorepellente. Il tessuto esterno è morbido ed elasticizzato per una totale libertà nei movimenti, mentre la membrana interna blocca il vento e la leggera rete migliora la ventilazione, mantenendo il corpo asciutto anche durante l'attività fisica. Il cappuccio staccabile, i polsini elasticati e il fondo regolabile permettono una vestibilità personalizzata. Le tasche frontali e al petto, tutte con zip e fodera in rete, aggiungono praticità e stile tecnico.



FOXGLOVE:
il softshell per l'escursionismo maschile

La controparte maschile è rappresentata dalla giacca Foxglove, perfetta per il trekking e le attività a bassa quota. Realizzata con la stessa struttura tecnica della Lewisia — softshell a tre strati impermeabile 10.000 mm traspirante e antivento con trattamento idrorepellente — la Foxglove garantisce protezione e comfort in ogni condizione. Il taglio è pensato per l'escursionismo attivo: leggero, ergonomico e compatibile con movimenti ampi, grazie all'elasticità del tessuto esterno. Anche qui troviamo cappuccio staccabile, polsini elasticizzati, fondo regolabile e pratiche tasche con zip. Una giacca che si adatta al passo del camminatore, senza compromessi tra funzione e forma.

Fig. 05

preview fw 24/25, 2023, p. 10).

The term *softshell* in English texts is the most common form, in line with international technical terminology. This choice ensures consistency with the global language of the outdoor sector and is easily recognisable by expert readers.

In some cases, both the single-word version and some of the other variants of the term have been replaced by rephrasing the sentence in the Italian texts.

Softshell, *Soft Shell* and *soft shell* are also used, as in Italian texts, to refer to specific textile technologies.

In some cases, there are graphical variations between the English and Italian versions.

‘[...] It’s a soft shell without membrane [...]’ (English) ‘[...] Si tratta di un Soft Shell senza membrana [...]’ (Italian) (*Outdoor Magazine*, product guide, January 2020, p. 26).

Softshell presents an even more complex picture than that of *hardshell*. The proliferation of graphic variations reflects a process of formal stabilisation that is not yet complete, in which no single graphic solution has yet acquired a recognised, stable form. This formal instability is accompanied by a marked semantic instability.

Within the same text, the term can refer to the textile material, the garment in its entirety, or function as an adjective, with instances of

referential ambiguity where the two interpretations are difficult to distinguish. As observed with *hardshell*, also *softshell* contradicts the tendency towards monosemy that characterises specialist technical vocabulary (Fig. 06).

THE USE OF SHELL AS A GENERIC TERM

In the outdoor magazines examined, in addition to the terms *hardshell* and *softshell*, it is also attested the term *shell*¹⁰. Its use shows a significant evolution over time. In the early years investigated, the term is mainly found in English language texts and commercial names, where it is frequently used to refer to a rigid structure or padding for various types of sports products, such as jackets, shoes, helmets, etc.

‘The inner shell is made in Cordura, felt and aluminium film’ (English) ‘La tomaia dello scafo interno è in Cordura accoppiata a feltro e a un film in alluminio’ (Italian) (*Outdoor Magazine* -

10 Among the main dictionaries of the Italian language, the term *shell* is only recorded in Treccani (*shell*), where it is defined, in the field of quantum physics, as the set of electrons of an atom with the same principal quantum number (translated into Italian as *anello*, *guscio* or *strato elettronico*) and, in the field of computer science, as the part of the operating system that acts as an interface between the machine and the user.

NEWS

Premi

Il softshell di Schoeller è da award



A novembre, a Langhental, il produttore di tessuti tecnici Schoeller è stato premiato con il Design Preis Schweiz 2017 per il suo innovativo materiale softshell riscaldabile, denominato E-soft shell. L'azienda ha svelato questa innovazione a Techtextil nel maggio 2017. Lo strato retrostante riscaldabile realizzato da Eschler, acquisita da Schoeller nel 2012, incorpora una fibra conduttiva che permette una distribuzione uniforme del calore. L'azienda dichiara che il materiale potrà essere venduto in rotoli e tagliato senza compromettere la tecnologia incorporata. Nato per la realizzazione di capi per l'outdoor e il motociclismo, non si escludono tuttavia applicazioni anche in campo fashion e wellness.

Fig. 06

product guide, 2017, p. 6);

‘The main idea was to build a shoe with a Kevlar outer shell and a wool inner sock’ (English)

‘L’idea di base è stata quella di realizzare una scarpa con un involucro esterno in Kevlar e un calzino interno in lana’ (Italian) (*Outdoor Magazine*, product guide, June 2018, p. 14).

In some cases, *shell* is translated as *guscio* and refers to a type of waterproof jacket.

‘Protection against water and wind without bulk: this packable shell guarantees great water resistance and breathability’. (English)

‘Protezione da acqua e vento senza ingombro: questo guscio packable garantisce impermeabilità e traspirabilità [...]’. (Italian)

(*Outdoor Magazine*, product guide, June 2018, p. 43).

The term *shell* also appears in product descriptions in Italian, where it refers to a covering or padding without a clear technical specification in terms of soft or hard.

‘La collezione Power Shield, una gamma di shell resistenti all’acqua e altamente traspiranti a basso impatto ambientale’ [‘The Power Shield collection: a range of water-resistant, highly breathable shells with a low environmental impact’] (*Outdoor Magazine*, February 2025, p. 29).

At the same time, *shell* continues to be used in commercial names for fabrics.

‘Dryshell Breathe fornisce un alto grado di traspirabilità e trasporta il sudore all’esterno in modo da mantenere la pelle asciutta; Warmshell aiuta a mantenere il calore senza aumentare il peso, fornisce traspirabilità, durata e rapida asciugatura; Microshell è ultraleggero, traspirante e antivento’ [‘Dryshell Breathe offers excellent breathability and wicks sweat away to keep the skin dry; Warmshell helps retain heat without adding weight, whilst providing breathability, durability and quick-drying properties; Microshell is ultra-lightweight, breathable and windproof’] (*Outdoor Magazine*, preview fw 22/23, 2021, p. 35).

Sometimes it is used with a capital letter in trade names.

‘I riflettori passivi RECCO, inseriti in giacche Gore-Tex Pro Shell e negli zaini Ascendor’ [‘RECCO passive transponders, incorporated into Gore-Tex Pro Shell jackets and Ascendor rucksacks’] (*Outdoor Magazine*, October 2025, p. 7).

Shell is a more general term than *hardshell* and *softshell*; initially confined to English-language texts, it has subsequently been adopted in Italian descriptions, where it has established itself as a compromise between technical precision and communicative accessibility.

Furthermore, there is a tendency to render both *shell* and *hardshell* with the same Italian equivalent, *guscio*, a convergence that reduces terms with distinct technical referents to a single form and constitutes a further indicator of the still-unstable stage of acclimatisation of these terms within the Italian lexicon of the outdoor clothing sector.

CONCLUSIONS

The phenomena observed point to broader dynamics that characterise the integration of technical loanwords into specialist languages, where global pressures, commercial strategies and resistance from the recipient language interact in complex ways.

As noted by Pulcini (2023), specialist loanwords tend to remain peripheral to everyday language, but their circulation in the media facilitates their gradual legitimisation among a wider audience. In the present context, the profile of the audience targeted by the magazines analysed, predominantly young and engaged in digital communication contexts, allows technical terms to spread progressively beyond strictly specialist vocabulary, contributing to the restructuring of linguistic repertoires (cf. Furiassi et al., 2012).

The dynamics within the language used for outdoor clothing demonstrate how sector-specific languages may not constitute closed systems, but rather represent dynamic spaces for interaction.

The lexicon of outdoor clothing thus emerges as a significant field of observation for the study of contemporary language contact.

In this process, the use of Anglicisms also takes on an identity-defining significance, linked to membership of a community of outdoor sports practitioners and enthusiasts, which is increasingly embedded in globalised dynamics.

CAPTIONS

[Fig.01] The frequency of *hardshell* and its variants (2016–2025).

[Fig.02] Dynafit; advertising page for technical outdoor clothing (*Outdoor Magazine*, February 2019).

[Fig.03] Salewa; advertising page for technical outdoor clothing with bilingual Italian–English text (*Outdoor*

Magazine, Product Guide, January 2018).

[Fig.04] The frequency of *softshell* and its variants (2016–2025).

[Fig.05] Nordsen; advertising page for outdoor clothing (*Outdoor Magazine*, July/August 2025).

[Fig.06] Article on technical outdoor materials (*Outdoor Magazine*, December 2017).

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FASHIONING PHILOSOPHY

THE TRANSLATION OF PHILOSOPHICAL TEXTS INTO FASHION CAMPAIGNS

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Abstract

This paper examines the translation of philosophical thought into contemporary fashion imagery, focusing on how philosophical texts are transformed into semiotic resources within luxury fashion campaigns. Drawing on Roland Barthes' theory of fashion semiotics and Stuart Hall's notion of trans-coding, the study conceptualizes this process not as faithful interpretation but as transformation, whereby philosophy is converted into visual, affective, and mythological forms. The analysis is situated within recent debates in fashion philosophy and cultural theory. Through two comparative case studies—Saint Laurent's *As Time Goes By* campaign (2024) inspired by Marcel Proust, and Gucci's *Aria* campaign (2021) referencing Sigmund Freud, Judith Butler, Walter Benjamin, and Jean Baudrillard—the paper demonstrates how fashion mobilizes philosophy as symbolic capital. Saint Laurent translates Proustian temporality into a regime of restraint, slowness, and interiority, constructing philosophy as an atmosphere of intellectual elegance. Gucci, by contrast, stages philosophy as excess, citation, and desire, transforming theoretical texts into fetishized signs within a hyperreal visual economy. By integrating Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth with Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, the paper argues that contemporary fashion does not merely borrow from philosophy but reshapes it into wearable mythologies. In doing so, fashion reveals both the power and the limits of philosophy's circulation in image-driven consumer culture.

Keywords: *Philosophy; Myth; Semiotics; Fashion; Cultural Capital.*

INTRODUCTION

Fashion has long occupied an ambivalent position in 'western' intellectual thought.

While philosophy has traditionally concerned itself with truth, permanence, rationality, and ethics, Fashion has been associated with ephemerality, surface, imitation, and excess.

As a result, fashion has historically been excluded from the core concerns of philosophical inquiry, relegated instead to the domains of sociology, anthropology, or cultural studies (Svendsen, 2006; Simmel, 1957). Yet in recent decades, fashion has increasingly asserted itself as a site of theoretical reflection, engaging explicitly with philosophical texts, concepts, and figures.

This paper examines the relationship between

philosophy and contemporary fashion campaigns by exploring how philosophical discourse is transformed into visual and semiotic forms within luxury branding.

Specifically, it explores the translation of philosophical texts into fashion garments through contemporary luxury fashion campaigns. Rather than treating philosophy as an abstract intellectual source that merely inspires designers, the paper examines how philosophical references are semiotically transformed into visual, material, and narrative forms that structure fashion imagery and branding. Focusing on two case studies—Saint Laurent's *As Time Goes By* (2024) campaign under Anthony Vaccarello, and Gucci's *Gucci Aria* (2021) campaign under Alessandro Michele—the

paper also explores the kind of meaning produced when philosophical thought is translated into fashion. The central question of this study is how contemporary luxury fashion campaigns transform philosophical discourse into visual and semiotic capital, and what kinds of ideological meanings emerge through this process.

Through this lens, fashion campaigns are treated as texts that do not merely reference philosophy but actively re-code it into wearable, visual, and consumable forms.

To address this question, the paper employs Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, particularly his analysis of fashion as a system of signs, and his theory of myth as second-order signification.

FASHION, PHILOSOPHY & LITERATURE: A HISTORICALLY UNEVEN RELATIONSHIP

Traditionally, Philosophy has maintained a skeptical, often dismissive stance toward fashion. Within this study, the term 'philosophy' refers not only to formal philosophical discourse, but more broadly to theoretical and intellectual traditions mobilized within contemporary fashion imagery. From Plato onward, appearance and imitation have been viewed as threats to truth and knowledge (Plato, 2002). Fashion, understood as a system governed by change, novelty, and social imitation, appeared incompatible with philosophy's pursuit of stable, universal principles.

The reason for fashion's unreliability was usually related to the emphasis on the body, the visibility and the material. Clothing, adornment, and style foreground the surface of the body, a realm traditionally associated with deception and contingency rather than rational insight.

As a result, fashion was rarely considered a legitimate philosophical object, except as an example of moral decay, social conformity, or cultural frivolity.

Fashion's historical proximity to literature rather than philosophy is not merely a matter of disciplinary neglect but reflects a deeper affinity between dress, narrative, and symbolic expression. Literary figures have often treated clothing as a vehicle for aesthetic, ethical, and even philosophical reflection, long before philosophy itself acknowledged fashion as a legitimate object of inquiry. A paradigmatic example of this literary engagement with dress is found in Oscar Wilde, whose essay *The Philosophy of Dress* (1885)

articulates one of the earliest systematic attempts to theorize clothing as an intellectual and aesthetic practice. In *The Philosophy of Dress* (1885), Wilde rejects the prevailing view of clothing as a superficial or purely functional matter.

Instead, he presents dress as a mode of self-articulation and a form of aesthetic intelligence. For Wilde, clothing is not an external ornament added to an already-formed subject, but a constitutive element of personal identity and cultural expression. Dress, he argues, should be guided by principles of harmony, proportion, and beauty rather than by blind adherence to fashion trends or utilitarian demands (Wilde, 1885).

Wilde anticipates later philosophical discussions of embodiment by insisting that the way one dresses is inseparable from the way one exists in the world. Dress becomes a form of lived aesthetics, mediating between the self and society.

In modern culture, this alliance has re-emerged through contemporary aesthetic trends such as *dark academia* or *poetcore*, which draw on literary figures and textual atmospheres rather than philosophical systems (López Millán, 2023).

Emerging primarily through digital platforms and social media, these trends are characterized by their visual citation of literary culture.

While they are inspired by intellectualism, *dark academia* and *poetcore* draw upon a romanticized vision of the intellectual life shaped by novels, poetry, and biographical myths of writers and artists. Both trends exemplify how fashion continues to seek intellectual legitimacy through literary affect and narrative imagery, rather than through explicit philosophical engagement.

They reaffirm the cultural logic identified by Wilde, in which dress operates as a form of aesthetic self-construction and cultivated sensibility.

In parallel with the rise of literary aesthetics such as *dark academia* and *poetcore*, contemporary fashion has developed a pronounced fascination with books themselves as material and symbolic objects. Beyond atmosphere or narrative suggestion, books increasingly appear as explicit visual motifs within fashion collections and accessories, functioning as condensed signs of intellectual depth, cultural authority, and cultivated taste.

This phenomenon marks a shift from fashion's engagement with literary *mood* toward the direct citation of literature as object.

A paradigmatic example is the work of JW

Anderson for Dior, particularly its series of book-inspired bags and garments that reproduce the covers of canonical and contemporary literary texts, such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs Du Mal*.

These accessories do not merely reference literature in a thematic sense but materialize the book as fashion object, transforming reading into a wearable sign. The bag ceases to be a neutral functional item and becomes a symbolic surface upon which cultural capital is displayed.

PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES TO FASHION

Although fashion was long excluded from philosophical inquiry, the last two decades have seen a major expansion of scholarship treating fashion as a legitimate object of philosophical, aesthetic, and theoretical analysis.

Rather than forming a unified field, these approaches collectively challenge the assumption that fashion is superficial or conceptually insignificant.

A key precursor to contemporary fashion theory is Georg Simmel, whose essay *Fashion* (1905) remains one of the earliest attempts to theorize fashion as a meaningful social and philosophical phenomenon. Although writing from sociology, Simmel explored themes of modernity, individuality, temporality, and social form.

He conceptualized fashion through the dialectic of imitation and differentiation: fashion allows individuals both to belong to a group and distinguish themselves from others.

This tension makes fashion unstable and temporally bound, linking it directly to modernity's accelerated sense of time and perpetual change.

Lars Svendsen's *Fashion: A Philosophy* (2004) occupies a foundational place in contemporary philosophical approaches to fashion.

Svendsen argues that fashion cannot be reduced to clothing or explained solely through sociology or economics; rather, it is a system of meaning structured around change, novelty, and collective recognition. What distinguishes fashion from dress is its temporality: fashion exists only insofar as it becomes obsolete. While Svendsen establishes the philosophical groundwork for understanding fashion as intellectually significant, he does not examine how meaning is produced through images, branding, or visual references.

Thinking through Fashion (2015), edited by

Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik, marks a methodological shift by positioning fashion not merely as an object of theory but as a site through which theory itself can be tested and transformed. Drawing on frameworks such as psychoanalysis, phenomenology, feminism, and post-structuralism, the volume argues that fashion reshapes concepts like ideology, performativity, and subjectivity through embodiment and visibility.

In doing so, it destabilizes the hierarchy between philosophy and fashion. Nicholas Pappas's *The Philosopher's New Clothes* (2015) examines how philosophy historically defined itself against fashion and appearance. Focusing on Plato's *Theaetetus* and the early Academy, Pappas argues that philosophy actively constructed fashion as its conceptual opposite, associating it with imitation, instability, and superficiality in contrast to truth and stable knowledge. Fashion thus became central to philosophy's own self-definition.

Similarly, *Philosophical Perspectives on Fashion* (2016), edited by Giovanni Matteucci and Stefano Marino, establishes fashion as a legitimate field of philosophical inquiry.

Rejecting the marginalization of fashion as merely commercial or sociological, the collection presents it as a complex cultural practice raising questions about temporality, imitation, normativity, and aesthetic value. Rather than defining fashion as a stable object, the contributors approach it as a constellation of tensions between individuality and conformity, innovation and repetition.

Finally, Gwenda-lin Grewal's *Fashion | Sense* (2022) offers one of the most ambitious challenges to the traditional opposition between philosophy and fashion. Rather than asking how philosophy can interpret fashion, Grewal asks how fashion itself constitutes a mode of thinking. She argues that philosophy's privileging of depth and truth has historically devalued surface, appearance, and change, even though philosophical thought itself depends on style and embodiment.

Central to her argument is the concept of "fashion-thinking," a form of reflection grounded in temporality, transformation, and repetition, positioning fashion as a space where abstract philosophical ideas are materially lived and performed.

APPLYING BARTHES' SEMIOTICS

This study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic theory as its primary methodological framework in order to analyze how philosophical texts and concepts are translated into contemporary fashion campaigns. Barthes' work is particularly suited to this task because it conceptualizes fashion not as a neutral object or aesthetic phenomenon, but as a structured system of signs through which cultural meanings are produced, circulated, and naturalized. By treating fashion campaigns as semiotic texts, Barthes' framework allows for a rigorous analysis of how philosophy is re-coded into visual, material, and discursive forms.

In *The Fashion System* (1983), Barthes proposes a tripartite model for understanding how fashion generates meaning.

He distinguishes between the real garment, the image garment, and the written garment.

The real garment refers to the material object itself—the clothing as worn or produced.

The image garment consists of visual representations of clothing, such as photographs, illustrations, and campaign imagery.

The written garment encompasses the textual descriptions that accompany fashion, including captions, press releases, reviews, and brand narratives (Barthes, 1983, pp. 3–26).

Crucially, Barthes argues that meaning does not originate from the real garment alone. Instead, fashion meaning is produced through the interaction of these three levels, with the image and written garments playing a decisive role in shaping interpretation ((Barthes, 1983, pp. 5–10).

This insight is particularly relevant to contemporary fashion campaigns, which function primarily through controlled visual and textual narratives rather than through direct engagement with the material garment.

In the context of this study, fashion campaigns are treated as privileged semiotic sites in which philosophical ideas are articulated not through argumentation but through image composition, styling, pacing, and textual framing.

The campaign becomes a space where meaning is actively constructed, allowing philosophy to be translated into fashion without requiring conceptual explanation or theoretical precision.

In *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes introduces the concept of myth as a second-order semiological system. In myth, a sign from the first semiological system (for example, a garment with certain

connotations) becomes a signifier for a broader cultural ideology. Myth functions by naturalizing historically and culturally constructed meanings, presenting them as self-evident or “common sense.”

Fashion campaigns that reference philosophy operate at precisely this mythological level.

Philosophical traditions, texts, and figures are transformed into signs that signify intellectual authority, depth, or radicality, which are then attached to brand identity (Barthes, 1972).

In this process, philosophy is stripped of its argumentative complexity and reconstituted as a visual and affective resource.

Through myth, fashion campaigns convert philosophy into a form of symbolic capital that appears natural and inevitable.

The association between a brand and intellectual seriousness, for example, comes to seem intrinsic rather than constructed. This mythological operation is central to understanding how philosophy functions within contemporary fashion culture—not as critique, but as legitimizing aura.

Although Barthes developed his semiotic framework primarily in relation to print fashion media, his approach remains productive for analysing contemporary digital campaigns because these campaigns continue to operate through systems of visual signification, textual framing, and myth production.

At the same time, contemporary luxury campaigns circulate within digital environments shaped by accelerated image consumption, algorithmic visibility, and participatory spectatorship.

This study therefore adapts Barthes' framework not as a closed structuralist system, but as a flexible analytical tool for examining contemporary image culture. At the denotative level, the analysis identifies the visible elements of each campaign, including garments, bodies, gestures, interiors, books, colours, lighting, and staging. At the connotative level, the study examines how these visual signs generate cultural and philosophical associations related to temporality, desire, memory, intellectualism, gender, or historical citation. Finally, at the level of myth, the analysis explores how these associations become naturalized into broader ideological narratives that connect philosophical authority to brand identity and symbolic prestige.

The campaigns are therefore approached not as illustrations of philosophy, but as semiotic systems that reorganize philosophical discourse

into visual and affective forms compatible with luxury branding. In this sense, the article adopts Stuart Hall's notion of trans-coding to describe the transformation of meaning across different representational systems (Hall, 1997).

The term "translation" is therefore used metaphorically rather than literally, referring not to faithful conceptual transmission but to processes of semiotic transformation and aesthetic re-functioning. Philosophical texts are not translated faithfully; rather, they are re-coded into atmospheres, gestures, objects, and aesthetic signs. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is employed at the comparative stage of the analysis in order to examine how philosophical references function as mechanisms of symbolic distinction within the contemporary fashion field.

CASE STUDIES

YSL & MARCEL PROUST'S "IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME"

Anthony Vaccarello's *As Time Goes By* campaign (2023) for Saint Laurent consists of a series of short visual clips explicitly framed as meditations on *Love, Time, Desire, Togetherness, Dreaming, and Memory*. The clips, directed by Nadia lee Cohen, are based on Marcel Proust's book *In Search of Lost Time*. The novel explores memory, time, desire, and social life in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France, most famously through the narrator's involuntary recollections triggered by everyday sensations.

Rather than functioning as narrative episodes, these clips operate as semiotic vignettes, each isolating an affective-philosophical concept closely aligned with Proust's exploration of subjective time and involuntary memory.

The campaign does not attempt to adapt Proust's literary content; instead, it fragments his philosophical concerns into discrete affective states, translating them into visual, temporal, and corporeal signs. The book, frequently appearing in the hands of the models, could be considered as a character itself.

From Barthes' perspective, each clip can be understood as a micro-text within the larger fashion system, articulating meaning through the interaction of image, rhythm, body, and garment. Philosophy enters these clips not through explicit citation but through the orchestration of connotative structures that render Proustian temporality perceptible.

The clip titled *Love* does not depict overt romantic interaction; rather, it foregrounds proximity without resolution.

Bodies are positioned close to one another, glances linger without culminating in action, and gestures remain suspended at the threshold of touch.

The narration reflects on the fleeting moment of falling in love and the retrospective fabrication of memory, establishing from the outset a tension between emotional experience and its later reconstruction. At the denotative level, the garments remain consistent with the campaign's broader aesthetic vocabulary—black-and-white tailoring, restrained silhouettes, and clean structural lines—while the *mise-en-scène* privileges enclosed interiors and spatial closeness.

In the bar scene, a customer sketches the waitress, yet never manages to hand her the drawing; the possibility of romantic connection disappears as abruptly as it emerges.

This unresolved encounter becomes central to the clip's semiotic logic. Connotatively, love is translated not as emotional excess or dramatic confession, but as temporal suspension.

The campaign therefore aligns closely with Marcel Proust's understanding of love as a condition structured through anticipation, delay, projection, and absence rather than fulfillment (Elkins, 2017). The refusal of consummation becomes semiotically productive because meaning is generated precisely through incompleteness.

Love exists within the interval separating desire from realization, and this distance acquires aesthetic value. Fashion, within this framework, functions less as a vehicle of seduction than as a mediator of separation: garments maintain boundaries even as bodies gravitate toward one another. Consequently, the clip reframes romantic desire through restraint and duration, suggesting that emotional intensity emerges not through spectacle but through the persistence of what remains unattainable.

The clip titled *Time* is perhaps the most overtly philosophical in its semiotic construction. Denotatively, the sequence is characterized by minimal movement, prolonged stillness, and carefully controlled pacing.

The camera refuses rapid cuts or dramatic shifts in perspective, instead lingering insistently on gestures, gazes, and pauses.

The narrator reflects on the elasticity of time and its capacity to expand or contract according

to emotion, habit, inspiration, and subjective experience. Within this framework, the characters interact only minimally, yet their exchanged glances produce an atmosphere of latent emotional significance. An elderly gentleman dressed in black enters a cab while three elegantly dressed women pass by; for a brief moment, their eyes meet before the encounter disappears almost immediately. At the connotative level, slowness functions as the primary signifier of Proustian *durée* (Elkins, 2017). Time is not represented as linear chronology or measurable progression, but as experiential density shaped by memory and perception. Importantly, the garments remain visually consistent throughout the sequence, emphasizing continuity rather than transformation. In doing so, the campaign directly challenges fashion's conventional association with speed, novelty, and obsolescence. Rather than presenting clothing as transient commodities tied to seasonal change, Saint Laurent positions fashion as a medium capable of articulating subjective temporality and philosophical reflection. The visual repetition of silhouettes and textures reinforces the notion that identity and memory are cumulative rather than disposable. Through slowness and repetition, the campaign distances itself from trend-driven immediacy and instead situates fashion within a reflective, almost meditative temporal framework. In the *Desire* clip, the body becomes a site of contained tension and controlled emotional negotiation. Denotatively, the characters' movements remain rigid and measured, while the garments emphasize structure, discipline, and concealment rather than exposure. A young maid enters a hotel room carrying several boxes while the hotel guest reads what appears to be *In Search of Lost Time*. Irritated by the maid's flamboyant cleaning, the guest retreats to the bathtub, creating a subtle dynamic of observation and displacement. Simultaneously, the maid opens the wardrobe, selects a long black dress with a deep cut, changes her outfit, and releases her hair. The narrator explains that desire possesses a protean nature: rather than obtaining what we want, the object of desire itself continuously shifts. The sequence avoids explicit erotic display and instead constructs desire through posture, antithesis, spatial arrangement, and the

tension between concealment and revelation. Connotatively, desire is represented as interior pressure rather than outward expression. This reflects Proust's treatment of desire as something fundamentally mediated through memory, fantasy, and imagination rather than immediate gratification (Elkins, 2017). The tailored garments function semiotically as mechanisms of containment, simultaneously suppressing and revealing desire through their rigidity and precision. In this context, restraint becomes more expressive than exposure. The campaign therefore reframes desire not as fulfillment or excess, but as a perpetual state of instability sustained through anticipation, repression, and transformation. The *Togetherness* clip presents two bodies occupying the same space without dissolving into emotional or physical unity. Denotatively, the figures remain side by side and aligned in posture, yet continue to preserve individual separation. A woman dressed in soft cr me lingerie and a man wearing a silk shirt and trousers lie together in bed while both read *In Search of Lost Time*. Silence dominates the scene, replacing overt intimacy with quiet coexistence. Connotatively, togetherness is represented not through fusion or romantic idealization, but through parallel presence and mutual contemplation. The absence of dramatic interaction destabilizes conventional representations of intimacy that depend upon physical affection or emotional transparency. Instead, the campaign proposes a more complex understanding of relationality, one grounded in coexistence, distance, and shared temporality. Reading becomes a symbolic act that unites the figures intellectually and emotionally while simultaneously preserving their autonomy. This dynamic resonates with Proustian notions of interpersonal connection, where intimacy is never fully accessible because individuals remain partially unknowable to one another. Fashion reinforces this condition through the tactile contrast between fabrics—silk, lingerie, soft textures—which signify vulnerability while also functioning as protective surfaces. Consequently, togetherness emerges not as the erasure of individuality but as the negotiation between closeness and separateness, intimacy and solitude. Taken together, the six clips form a semiotic

constellation rather than a linear narrative.

Each isolates a philosophical affect, yet all are unified by a shared visual grammar of restraint, slowness, and interiority.

At the level of myth, Saint Laurent constructs itself as a brand aligned with philosophical time rather than fashionable time.

Proust's thought is not quoted or explained; it is naturalized as atmosphere.

In Barthesian terms, the campaign performs a second-order semiological operation in which Proustian philosophy is emptied of discursive complexity and reconstituted as style.

Love, desire, and memory cease to be conceptual problems and become aesthetic states.

This myth does not invite critical engagement with philosophy; it transforms philosophy into a form of symbolic capital that stabilizes the brand's identity as intellectually serious, melancholic, and timeless.

Through these six clips, *As Time Goes By* demonstrates how fashion can translate philosophical texts not by representing them, but by restructuring perception itself.

Philosophy becomes visible not in content but in rhythm, gesture, and duration. In doing so, Saint Laurent offers a model of philosophical translation grounded in condensation, restraint, and mythic naturalization—one that stands in sharp contrast to Gucci's strategy of excess and citation.

GUCCI & THE PHILOSOPHY OF DESIRE

The *Aria* campaign by Gucci (2021), conceived under the creative direction of Alessandro Michele, represents one of the most explicit and self-reflexive engagements with philosophy in contemporary fashion imagery.

While Barthes and Bourdieu constitute the primary methodological frameworks of this study, the philosophical figures appearing within Gucci's *Aria* campaign are treated as semiotic references mobilized by the campaign itself rather than as independent analytical frameworks.

Unlike campaigns that draw on philosophy indirectly through atmosphere or literary allusion, *Aria* foregrounds philosophical texts as visible objects within the image itself.

The models provocatively hold the books or lay besides them, as if the objects are not accessories or props but models too.

This strategy transforms philosophy from a background reference into an active semiotic component of the campaign, allowing theory

to circulate as image, desire, and brand mythology.

According to Gucci's own framing, *Aria* is structured around Eros, described as an ancient and generative force that seeks to overcome separation through relation to the Other.

The campaign text explicitly states that "knowledge itself becomes an object of desire," and that philosophical texts "become objects of attraction themselves," with words transforming into an "amorous lexicon" (Gucci, 2021).

This declaration is crucial: it reveals that the campaign does not aim to represent philosophy, but to eroticize and aestheticize it, positioning theory as a libidinal rather than epistemic resource.

From a Barthesian perspective, *Aria* functions as a complex semiotic system in which garments, bodies, books, and interiors operate across multiple levels of signification.

Meaning is not produced by clothing alone, but through the interaction of the image garment (photography, staging, body), the written garment (campaign text, book titles), and the mythological level, where philosophy is naturalized as style and desire.

Freud's psychoanalytic theory provides the foundational logic for *Aria*'s treatment of desire. His work *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* (1905) appears more than once in the campaign, combined with fetishistic references and strong sexual connotations.

However, Freud is not translated into fashion through narrative or symbolism; instead, his concepts are trans-coded into material and visual strategies. "Transcoding" describes the transfer of meaning across different discourses and signifying systems, through which existing representations are rearticulated and resignified (Hall, 1997). Freud's understanding of desire as displacement (Freud, 1905/2000)—where libidinal energy attaches itself to substitute objects—is mirrored in the campaign's fetishistic aesthetics. Materials such as latex, leather, gloves, and sheer fabrics function as fetish-surfaces, drawing attention to texture, touch, and partial revelation. Through the campaign, accessories such as lashes and whips, which are considered both as horse riding essentials and sex toys, are used as props. In addition, the intense contrasts of colours and the use of dramatic postures play a major role in the fabrication of sensual tension. Desire does not culminate in fulfillment; it circulates endlessly between body, garment,

and object. Within this Freudian framework, the philosophical book itself becomes a fetish-object. When Gucci states that “knowledge itself becomes an object of desire” (Gucci Official Website, n.d.), it enacts a precisely Freudian operation: intellectual authority is stripped of its epistemic function and re-invested with seduction.

The book is no longer a vehicle for understanding but a site of attraction, proximity, and pleasure. Desire is thus displaced onto theory as surface. Garments in *Aria* operate as mediators of desire rather than expressions of identity.

They do not reveal an inner self; they organize eroticism. In this sense, Freud is translated into fashion not as psychology, but as a logic of attachment—where meaning adheres to objects through desire rather than truth.

Judith Butler’s theory of performativity is translated in *Aria* through the stylization and repetition of gender codes.

Gender ambiguity in the campaign is not presented as stable or essential identity. Instead, it is overtly theatrical, exaggerated, and hyper-visible.

From a semiotic standpoint, this corresponds closely to Butler’s claim that gender is not an inner essence but a repeated performance governed by norms (Butler, 1997).

In *Aria*, garments intentionally do not express gender; they produce it through citation.

Tailoring, lingerie, makeup, and posture function as signs that are reassembled across bodies, demonstrating the constructedness of identity. Importantly, Butler’s *Bodies That Matter* (1997), which appears in the campaign on the hand of a model, dressed in a red, velvet tuxedo, that lays besides a white peacock (symbol of transformation) emphasizes that materiality itself is regulated by discourse. Gucci translates this insight into fashion by showing how bodies become legible only through clothing, styling, and pose.

The body in *Aria* is never naked in a neutral sense; it is always already formatted by fashion’s semiotic system. Butler’s theory is thus translated into garments as performative surfaces—clothes that do not signify who someone “is,” but how identity is continuously enacted, repeated, and destabilized. Walter Benjamin’s influence emerges most clearly in the campaign’s treatment of history and the archive. *Aria* was conceived as part of Gucci’s centenary moment, and yet it does not present history as continuity or heritage.

Instead, the past appears as fragmented citation.

Archival silhouettes, historical references, and brand motifs are reintroduced without claims to authenticity. They appear alongside contemporary elements, producing temporal disjunction rather than lineage.

This aligns closely with Benjamin’s conception of history as montage rather than progress (Benjamin, 2008). In *Aria*, garments operate as citational fragments. They do not recover the aura of an original moment; they replay it as surface.

The campaign’s self-awareness about reproduction—explicitly referencing Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility* (1935)—renders this operation reflexive. Gucci acknowledges that it is producing aura through mass reproduction, staging Benjamin’s critique as aesthetic strategy.

Benjamin’s theory is thus translated into fashion as archival simultaneity: garments become sites where multiple temporalities coexist, stripped of origin and reassembled as image.

Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) provides the meta-theoretical frame that ultimately unifies *Aria*’s semiotic logic.

Baudrillard theorizes a condition in which signs no longer refer to an underlying reality but circulate autonomously, producing meaning through repetition and recognition rather than reference.

In *Aria*, philosophy itself enters this regime of simulation (Baudrillard, 1981).

The presence of Freud, Butler, Benjamin, and Baudrillard does not anchor the campaign to theoretical discourse. On the contrary, it demonstrates how theory functions as sign-value. Recognition replaces understanding.

The book signifies “theory” without requiring engagement with content. This is most evident in the way philosophical texts are visually integrated into scenes of desire. The book does not interrupt the erotic atmosphere; it enhances it.

Theory becomes part of the spectacle, indistinguishable from garments, bodies, and interiors. Philosophy is no longer a critical distance from fashion; it is absorbed into fashion’s hyperreality. In Baudrillardian terms, *Aria* does not represent philosophy—it simulates it.

Theory becomes an aesthetic effect, consumed as depth rather than deployed as critique.

At the mythological level, *Aria* produces a powerful ideological statement: Gucci is the space where desire, theory, and fashion converge. Philosophy is naturalized as sensual, playful, and

excessive. Intellectual depth is no longer associated with austerity or distance, but with intimacy, performance, and pleasure. Following Roland Barthes, this myth empties philosophy of its argumentative force while preserving its symbolic authority. Freud, Butler, Benjamin, and Baudrillard are transformed into cultural credentials—recognizable names that confer distinction without demanding comprehension. Through this semiotic operation, *Aria* exemplifies translation as trans-coding. Philosophical theories are not explained or illustrated; they are re-functionalized as garments, poses, textures, and props. Philosophy survives not as thought, but as form, desire, and brand identity.

COMPARATIVE IMPLICATIONS

When read through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and distinction, the contrast between Saint Laurent's *As Time Goes By* and Gucci's *Aria* campaign can be understood not only as a difference in semiotic strategy, but as a difference in how philosophical knowledge is mobilized to produce, distribute, and legitimize symbolic power within the field of fashion. Philosophy, in both cases, functions as a form of institutionalized cultural capital, yet it is activated through distinct regimes of visibility, accessibility, and authority. Saint Laurent's campaign exemplifies what Bourdieu would describe as a legitimate mode of cultural distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). The philosophical reference to Proust operates implicitly rather than explicitly, requiring a cultivated viewer capable of recognizing intellectual cues without overt explanation. This restraint is not accidental; it is constitutive of elite cultural capital, which derives its power precisely from its ability to remain understated and unmarked (Bourdieu, 1984). Intellectual depth is suggested, not declared. The campaign assumes a viewer who already possesses the symbolic competence to decode slowness, black tailoring, and interiority as signs of seriousness and refinement. In Bourdieu's terms, Saint Laurent's regime of translation reinforces symbolic hierarchy. Philosophy is converted into a form of embodied distinction that appears natural, effortless, and self-evident. The brand does not democratize philosophical knowledge; it aestheticizes it in a way

that presupposes prior cultural education. The effectiveness of this symbolic regime does not depend on the consumer possessing actual philosophical or literary expertise. The would-be customer is not necessarily required to fully understand the intellectual references embedded within the campaign in order to participate in their symbolic value. Instead, what is consumed is the aesthetic aura of intellectualism itself. The myth of intellectual elegance thus functions as a mechanism of exclusion as much as inclusion, aligning Saint Laurent with established forms of high culture and reinforcing its position within the upper strata of the fashion field. Gucci's campaign, by contrast, engages philosophy through a regime that appears—at least superficially—more open, plural, and inclusive. The proliferation of references to Freud, Butler, Benjamin and Baudrillard does not demand quiet recognition but invites interpretive play. Philosophy is rendered visible, even flamboyant, staged through excess, irony, and theatricality. From Bourdieu's perspective, this strategy corresponds to a reconfiguration rather than a rejection of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Gucci does not abandon distinction; it re-codes it. Intellectual legitimacy is no longer tied to restraint and invisibility but to demonstrated critical awareness, familiarity with theory, and alignment with progressive discourses such as queerness, psychoanalysis, and archival critique. Cultural capital here is not inherited but performed. The campaign rewards viewers who can recognize citation, irony, and theoretical reference, transforming philosophy into a repertoire of signs that signal contemporary intellectual sophistication. However, Bourdieu's framework also allows us to see the limits of this apparent democratization. While Gucci's regime makes philosophy more visible, it does not make it less instrumental. The proliferation of references does not destabilize the logic of distinction; it merely updates it. The ability to recognize Butler's performativity or Benjamin's citation remains unevenly distributed, relying on educational and cultural resources that are themselves structured by social inequality. What changes is not the function of philosophy as capital, but its stylistic register. Viewed together, the two campaigns reveal how fashion operates as a site where philosophical

capital is converted into symbolic capital, and symbolic capital into economic value. Saint Laurent naturalizes philosophy as timeless authority; Gucci aestheticizes philosophy as critical play. One strategy masks the mechanisms of distinction; the other foregrounds them. Yet both ultimately reinforce fashion's role as a field in which intellectual legitimacy is not produced through argument or debate, but through *recognizable signs* of cultural competence. In both campaigns, philosophical books undergo a transformation from first-order signification (texts with arguments, historical contexts, and internal contradictions) to second-order mythological signs (Barthes, 1972). Following Barthes, this process involves emptying the sign of its original content while preserving its form. "Proust," "Freud," "Butler," "Benjamin" and "Baudrillard" cease to function as authors and instead operate as floating signifiers of depth, critique, or radicality. This mythological transformation is not accidental but structural. Fashion campaigns require signs that are immediately legible, affective, and visually compatible. Philosophical books are therefore stripped of difficulty and reconstituted as aesthetic resources. The book becomes not something to be read, but something to be *recognized*. Importantly, this does not mean that philosophy is misused or misunderstood. Rather, it reveals how philosophy circulates in contemporary visual culture. The authority of the book is preserved even as its discursive complexity is suspended. The campaigns rely on the social prestige of philosophy, not on its argumentative force. From this perspective, the translation of philosophy into fashion does not simply involve semiotic trans-coding; it involves social stratification. Fashion campaigns do not merely communicate philosophical ideas; they organize access to them, determining who is positioned as capable of recognition and who is excluded. Barthes' concept of myth explains how philosophy becomes style, while Bourdieu's theory of distinction explains why this style matters—because it functions as a marker of taste, education, and social position. Ultimately, the comparison between Saint Laurent and Gucci demonstrates that fashion's engagement with philosophy is inseparable from questions of power. Whether through the austerity of condensation or the spectacle of excess, philosophy is mobilized

to produce legitimacy, authority, and value within the fashion field. The difference between the two regimes lies not in their use of philosophy, but in how openly they display the mechanisms through which cultural capital is produced and circulated.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how contemporary luxury fashion campaigns transform philosophical discourse into visual, affective, and mythological forms. Through a comparative semiotic analysis of Saint Laurent's *As Time Goes By* campaign and Gucci's *Aria* campaign, the study has argued that fashion does not simply reference philosophy as an intellectual source of inspiration.

Rather, philosophy is trans-coded into aesthetic signs that circulate within systems of branding, desire, and symbolic distinction.

Drawing on Roland Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth, alongside Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and Stuart Hall's notion of trans-coding, the analysis has demonstrated how philosophical texts are reorganized into consumable visual forms that function less as arguments than as cultural signifiers.

The comparison between Saint Laurent and Gucci reveals two distinct regimes through which philosophy is mobilized within contemporary fashion culture. Saint Laurent constructs philosophy through restraint, slowness, and interiority. By drawing on Marcel Proust's reflections on memory, temporality, and desire, the campaign produces an atmosphere of contemplative elegance in which philosophy becomes inseparable from rhythm, silence, and duration. Proust is not adapted narratively or explained conceptually; rather, his thought is condensed into visual stillness, suspended gestures, and controlled emotional distance.

In this context, fashion operates through mythic naturalization: intellectual seriousness appears timeless, refined, and effortless.

Gucci's *Aria* campaign, by contrast, stages philosophy through citation, theatricality, and excess. Freud, Butler, Benjamin, and Baudrillard appear not as coherent theoretical frameworks but as recognizable cultural signs embedded within a hyperreal visual economy.

Philosophy becomes fetishized, eroticized, and spectacularized. Books circulate as objects of desire rather than vehicles of knowledge, while

garments function as performative surfaces through which identity, sexuality, and historical citation are continuously reassembled. Unlike Saint Laurent's strategy of condensation, Gucci foregrounds the mechanisms of cultural production themselves, transforming theory into a visible and playful repertoire of signs. Yet despite these differences, both campaigns ultimately perform a similar ideological operation: they convert philosophy into symbolic capital capable of reinforcing brand legitimacy and cultural prestige. The analysis therefore suggests that fashion campaigns should be understood not merely as promotional images but as complex semiotic systems that participate actively in the circulation of intellectual discourse within contemporary visual culture. Philosophy, once positioned historically as fashion's conceptual opposite, is increasingly absorbed into the logic of image production, branding, and aesthetic consumption. In this process, philosophical texts lose part of their argumentative specificity while gaining new forms of visibility, mobility, and affective power. What emerges is not the disappearance of philosophy, but its transformation into style, atmosphere, and recognizable cultural authority. Ultimately, the relationship between philosophy and fashion reveals broader tensions within contemporary consumer culture concerning knowledge, visibility, and distinction. Fashion's engagement with philosophy demonstrates how intellectual legitimacy can be aestheticized and commodified without necessarily losing its symbolic force. Future research could extend this discussion by examining how audiences interpret and circulate philosophical references across digital platforms and social media environments, where the boundaries between theory, image, and consumption continue to become increasingly unstable.

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SUIT UP!

THE BUSINESS SUIT AS MYTH AND REVOLUTION IN THE INTUITIONIST

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Abstract

The business suit has long been a symbol of American achievement in business, particularly in the twentieth century. Using Colson Whitehead's debut novel *The Intuitionist*, a work of literary speculative fiction, we can see that the suit also carries the weight of being a mythological construction, according to Roland Barthes's definition, as well as the power of what Barthes identifies as Revolutionary speech when the suit is worn with deliberate precision by the novel's protagonist, Lila Mae Watson.

Keywords: *Suiting; Barthes; Mythologies; Gender; Race.*

"Thus, every day and everywhere, man is stopped by myths, referred by them to this motionless prototype which lives in his place, stifles him in the manner of a huge internal parasite, and assigns to his activity the narrow limits within which he is allowed to suffer without upsetting the world."
(Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*)

In Colson Whitehead's novel *The Intuitionist*, protagonist Lila Mae Watson wears a dark-blue suit to her job as an elevator inspector every day. She has five identical business suits, one for each weekday, and a collection of white shirts to wear with them, as well as colorful ties and five pairs of polished wingtips. Her fellow elevator inspectors wear suits, as do the heads of the elevator

companies, the mafia men, a band leader on stage, and the man she dances with in a taxi-dance hall. The suits in this novel do a lot of work: who wears them matters, as does who does not wear them. They even function as a marker for the temporal setting of the story.

At the outset of his essay "Myth Today," Roland Barthes states "that myth is a system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form" (p. 217). In light of this definition, the suits in *The Intuitionist* carry the force of myth, as the suits become a mode of signification for the characters. In Lila Mae's case, wearing a suit is an example of Barthes's concept of Revolutionary

speech (he capitalizes the concept) in opposition to the myth that serves to maintain the power of the bourgeoisie. Revolution, in Barthes's argument, "makes the world, and its language, all of it, is absorbed in this making." Where myth is merely signification and not an object or idea, "Revolution announces itself openly as revolution and thereby abolishes myth" (p. 259). It is worth noting at the outset that in American English, *bourgeoisie* is often simply used to denote the economic middle class. In French, the term has more nuance. It is a ruling class distinct from royalty; it is the class that rose up against the monarchy in the late eighteenth century. So the French bourgeoisie has more cultural and fiscal capital within the capitalist system than the American middle class, which itself is closer to the idea of the French *petite bourgeoisie*.

It is possible for the business suit to be both the bourgeois myth of the American dream under twentieth-century capitalism and an act of Revolutionary speech in *The Intuitionist*, a duality expressed in Whitehead's novel through the semiological status of this costume.

MYTH

As Barthes writes, "What must be established firmly at the start is that myth is a system of communication, that it is a message" (p. 217). Anything can be a myth, but not everything is inherently a myth. He begins by explaining the linguistic signifier, the signified, and finally the sign, which is the "resulting relation between concept and image." In one example given by Barthes, a pebble can be a signifier, but only when it is given a definite signified meaning—such as a death sentence—does it become a sign. The simple signifier, a pebble, carries the weight of a sign when presenting it in a particular context conveys the death of a human being (p. 222). In the case of the suit, the signified could be the concept of a matching jacket and pants in gray pinstripe wool, the signified the mental (or "acoustic," according to Barthes) image of this costume, and the sign the word *suit*.

This is not a myth; this is first-order language using a signifier, a signified, and a resulting sign to communicate an idea.

Myth takes this basic semiological system and builds its own hollow, metalinguistic structure on top of it, creating a second-order language. The sign, which is the end point in the first system,

becomes the myth's signifier, and it takes on a new signified. Barthes changes the terminology for myth to untangle the first- and second-language systems: the signifier becomes the myth's form, the signified becomes the concept, and the result he calls the signification.

In the case of the business suit, in the first-order semiological system, the costume itself—in this example, two matching pieces of gray pinstripe wool—plus the mental image of the costume result in the sign *suit*. Myth does not stop there.

It cannibalizes the sign to build a bourgeoisie-serving signification. Barthes writes, "The concept appears to me in all its appropriative nature: it comes and seeks me out in order to oblige me to acknowledge the body of intentions which have motivated it and arranged it there as the signal of an individual history, as a confidence and a complicity" (p. 235).

The word *suit*, containing the image and the idea, becomes the basis of myth. The concept is then our cultural context for the suit: who wears it, where do they wear it, and when are suits worn, among other considerations. The resulting signification is the myth of the suit.

The Intuitionist tells the story of Lila Mae Watson, an elevator inspector who relies on her gift as an Intuitionist: someone who uses keen observation and listening skills to diagnose an elevator's health, as opposed to the Empiricist camp, who rely on mechanical knowledge.

Lila Mae is the first Black woman (and the second Black person) to become an inspector. When an elevator crashes, the two camps ramp up their conflict, leading Lila Mae to investigate the incident on her own and off the books.

The novel was published in 1999, as the internet was skyrocketing faster than any elevator.

A few years after its publication, owners of the most influential and valuable internet companies would discard the suit in favor of the hoodies and jeans they had worn as university undergraduates. A suit no longer immediately signaled success; the mythology would move. Therefore, to determine the myth of the suit in *The Intuitionist*, it is necessary to understand the world of this novel and Lila Mae Watson's place in it, starting with the era of this speculative novel. We begin with the temporal setting because "mythology can only have a historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history" (Barthes, p. 218). Most authors will make

the setting of the novel clear, maybe even be so bold (or so obvious) as to include a year for the events taking place between its covers. Yet Whitehead has created a novel both historical and speculative, where the exact moment in history is indeterminate.

But there are clues. The first is the fact that Black people are referred to as “colored,” the term that came to be preferred and widely used in the early twentieth century. It is also notable that Lila Mae’s colleague Pompey is the first colored elevator inspector, and she is the first colored woman elevator inspector. This narrows the likely time frame to the mid-twentieth century, when opportunities for Black people were growing, thanks to the civil rights movement, and women were beginning to reconsider their assigned roles in society as second-wave feminism began to take hold.

Alexander Manshel (2021) notes that *The Intuitionist*’s cultural touchstones span the decades between the Harlem Renaissance and the civil rights movement, writing that it “connotes 1950s-ness, 1960s-ness, and 1920s-30s-40s-ness all at once” (p. 26). Saundra Liggins (2006) settles on the narrower timeframe of the 1950s or ’60s. Lauren Berlant (2008) chooses a year, “around 1964,” as the setting due to the fact that “most professions are still segregated” (p. 850). All of these critics recognize that “[i]n Whitehead’s world, history works differently” (Manshel, p. 25). As an author who has dabbled in several genres since this debut work, including sci-fi, Whitehead might find a kind of literary kinship in another writer who was working in a 1950s-ish milieu: Matthew Weiner, creator of *Mad Men*, which began airing eight years after the publication of *The Intuitionist*. Speaking to an interviewer of his being Jewish and writing a show about WASPs (white Anglo-Saxon protestants, the dominant demographic in the United States), he said:

And, like a lot of artists, I’m an outsider...

In the beginning of the show, I referred to it a few times as science fiction until someone who wrote science fiction said, “It’s not science fiction, it’s historical fiction. Don’t use that.” And I said but I am trying to take you into a world that did exist but didn’t quite exactly. I’m thinking of the *Star Trek* episode where they go back into the quote unquote “past” (Renov, 2017, p. 160).

Mad Men and *The Intuitionist* both use the cultural

power of fashion to demarcate their mid-century settings. There are no riding coats or bustles, nor are there cargo pants or babydoll dresses in Lila Mae’s world. Whitehead lists the items shoppers carry out of Huntley’s Department store:

[N]ew watches equipped with glow-in-the-dark radium dials so you can know the time even in the dark; cinch belts in all the rediscovered pastels from overseas, hot now, get them while they’re hot; Cuban-heel pumps and alligator purses so coarse and smooth in the light, dizzying tactility; hypnotic suggestion girdles and air rifles and foxtail caps (p. 159).

Each of these items would have been available and popular in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This brings us back to the suit. A suit on its own can be a signifier, and this is the foundation of Barthes’s construction of myth. Understanding the suit of the era will lead to its use in bourgeoisie-upholding myth as well as its use as Revolutionary speech.

Now that we have constrained the setting of the book to a decade or so in the middle of the American twentieth century, it is necessary to understand who was wearing suits at this time. The business suit took the shape most people recognize—jacket with lapels, optional vest, trousers—in the early twentieth century, and it was worn exclusively by men. After the camouflaged uniforms of World War I replaced the more colorful military uniforms of the nineteenth century, civilian palettes for men subsequently changed to gray, dark green, brown, and khaki. Small suiting details changed with the seasons and the decades, such as the number of buttons on the jacket or the width of the lapels. When fabric was rationed during World War II, men for the most part stopped wearing vests. And when Jack Kennedy appeared on the campaign trail in a narrow-cut suit that fit his athletic build, suits for the masses followed suit (Gau, 2010). This sharp, narrow-cut suit seems to be the style Lila Mae favors, further cementing the era of this novel as a blend of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In the 1950s tech sector, a close analog of the elevator inspector work performed by Lila Mae in the novel, companies such as IBM, 3M, and Cargill had unwritten rules suggesting that men should wear a shirt, tie, and jacket. Employees at AT&T knew that they were expected “to conform to the conservative image” (Gau, 2010).

Professional women of the era wore a dark skirt and a light or white shirt. Sometimes a padded jacket was added, creating a skirt suit of the kind Jackie Kennedy would later make famous. The narrow silhouette for women that began in the 1920s continued for decades, and the flat lines that were prized in women's clothing meant there were no pockets that might bulge or gape and ruin the smooth effect of the design. Women in film wore trousers, but even that was controversial: Marlene Dietrich's turn in a tuxedo *Morocco* was titillating and considered sexually deviant; Katherine Hepburn dressed in drag *Sylvia Scarlett* and was punished at the box office for years after. Pant suits would not become acceptable in any office in America until the mid-1960s, with more conservative professions such as politics all but requiring women to wear skirt suits into the 1990s (Warner, 2013).

Men of *The Intuitionist's* era—particularly white men—were wearing business suits to white-collar jobs. A man in a business suit on a billboard would convey the myth of success, of power, of higher class and status, of making it, of achieving the American dream. A man in a suit is assumed to have power, to have reached a level of achievement and accomplishment, to be deserving of his position. When Lila Mae sees just such a billboard of a besuited Chancre, head of the United Elevator Co., she thinks:

“[E]levator ads probably only register in civilian heads as a dim affirmation of modernity, happy progress to be taken for granted and subconsciously cherished” (Whitehead, p. 14–15).

But there is no elevator on this billboard, as far as the reader knows, only a twenty-foot-tall Chancre with his “arms struts at the tails of his signature double-breasted suit” (p. 14).

It is the suit acting as form, the picture of Chancre's success as the concept that appears in civilian minds, and the combination of these as the signification: modernity and happy progress.

Chancre in the overalls of an elevator repairman would not have this same signification.

Lila Mae is aware of this myth because she lives in this world. As a student, the myth presented itself in the form of a recruiter from Arbo, United's rival:

“The tall man from Arbo, in his dark and expensive suit, described the nurturing atmosphere and opportunities for advancement the elevator manufacturing concern could

offer graduates of the most prestigious elevator inspection school in the country” (p. 245–6). His suit is the myth's form, his acknowledgement of the students' capabilities, intelligence, and status as graduates of the Institute for Vertical Transport is the concept, and the myth is again the American dream: through hard work and connections made at university, anyone can reach great heights working in the elevator industry. “Arbo creates the future, he told them, inspectors serve the future” (p. 246). That dark and expensive suit is in service to no one. Every student in the novel tries to deny the lure of this myth at first by becoming elevator inspectors in the city's employ, like Lila Mae, but most soon “return to Arbo and United and the rest, defeated, hats in hand, begging for release and better suits” (p. 246). Notice how here, the words “better suits” are fully weighted with that mythical promise of status, wealth, and as Lila Mae says, modernity and happy progress.

REVOLUTION

As the first Black woman elevator inspector, with only one Black inspector ahead of her, Pompey, Lila Mae is aware that she will be noticed no matter what she does, and probably not in a charitable light. She knows that the white men in her profession wear suits, as most men in white-collar professions do at the time.

Though women in professional roles typically wear skirts and blouses, Lila Mae chooses to don the business suit worn by her colleagues.

It is one less marker of difference for a “first” like Lila Mae. She finds a sense of composure, of protection, and even of self in wearing a suit:

[S]he doesn't spend her little money on things she doesn't need, but she needs the cut of her suit to see herself. The bold angularity of it, the keen lapels—its buttons are the screws keeping her shut. The tailor seemed to know what she needed, understood the theater Lila Mae needs to leave the house whole and be among other people (p. 56).

The tailor was not wrong to make sure the cut was angular and those lapels keen as blades.

In the passage quoted above, she is about to meet Mr. Reed, secretary to the powerful guild chair candidate Orville Lever: “Dressed, she's in front of the mirror. Armed. She puts her face on. In her case, not a matter of cosmetics, but will” (p. 57). This armor is not always as effective as she

intends. When two thugs ransack her apartment, the thug named John finds four identical dark-blue suits and four pairs of shined wingtips in her closet (the fifth, the Friday suit, being on her body at the time). He notes her “pathological affinity for regularity, the constant and true” (p. 28).

This is fair enough, and Lila Mae may even consider the assessment flattering.

But he continues his assessment: “An attempt to fit in that unavoidably calls attention to itself.

It appeases John’s societal schemata that Lila Mae is of the colored persuasion” (p. 28).

Not even a sharply angled suit of woolen armor can protect her—in *absentia*, no less—from the racism of white people. It is notable that John does not object to these business suits being worn by a woman. It is less disruptive to his societal schemata that he is ransacking the home of a Black person and not of a white person who might typically wear a tailored business suit as a uniform. The suit’s mythological power does not extend as far as Lila Mae, no matter how smart and capable she is, no matter where she went to school (where she roomed in a converted janitorial closet due to segregation). As Manshel writes, “Whitehead’s protagonist is not at all ‘middling’ but exemplary: the first black woman to break into her field and a rising hero of new theoretical methods” (p.33–4). Berlant goes further in noting that not only is Lila Mae an expert, but she is an expert in an unexpected body:

She is black, female, poised, reserved, and an expert at something whose expertise is usually associated with a different kind of body, not that of an abstract supremacist elite, but of a white, male, working-class, appetitive subject who enjoys the benefits of the authoritarian personality, with its culture of hierarchy, deference, and pleasure in the torture of outsiders (p. 851).

Wearing a dark suit in imitation of the white men above her on the corporate ladder is the least she can do to elide some of her differences. She is not, however, “passing.” She is not trying to look or act white. She has adopted and made her own the accepted dress code for white-collar white men. This is in contrast to the man Lila Mae considers a beacon of her profession, James Fulton, who created the practice of intuitionism in elevator inspection, an ability to listen and observe carefully when assessing the workings of any elevator. Like many innovators, he is regarded as a visionary

by some and a crank by others, but he is allowed this leeway because he is regarded as white.

As Lila Mae discovers, however, he is a Black man with light skin who is able to pass in white society. At one point in the novel, she is shown two photographs of a young Fulton.

The first is a family photo with his mother and sister, who are Black. But in the second, he is with his graduating class, and “Lila Mae cannot see his eyes at all. He has found his trademark brown trilby, and the brim’s veil of shadow hides his mother’s eyes. He is surrounded by white men in their first suits, which are loose and shy at the wrists, just short of dignified, almost there” (Whitehead, p. 136–137).

Fulton is presumably wearing a suit himself in the photo, or Lila Mae—and everyone else—would have noticed the breach of conformity. The trilby is distinctive but fashionable for his day, and it serves his purpose. Lila Mae notes several times in this passage that it hides his eyes.

Only in middle age, when he has reached a level of power through decades of passing, does he stare into the camera for a photograph: “No more hiding: the better man wins reality” (p. 137).

But he is still hiding, though now in plain sight.

He lived his entire adult life, as far as almost everyone but his sister and his assistant Mrs. Rogers knew, as a white man. He accepts the myth of the business suit—anyone wearing a suit must have power, belonging, access, capability—and the smokescreen it provides. He does not take the risk of its revolutionary potential, unlike Lila Mae.

Though it provides imperfect protection against racism for a woman who is not passing, Lila Mae’s suit is the best resource she has, besides her fierce intellect and devotion to her profession—neither of which can be discerned with a mere glance.

“She did not possess any lucky rabbit’s feet or childhood dolls to ward off the monsters of the adult world. Just clothes” (p. 166).

And she is not the only “exemplary” Black person to adopt the suit’s mythology as armor. “Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized the power of clothing in getting others to listen to one’s message; like other civil rights leaders of the time, he was most often seen in a suit and tie, with a crisp white shirt, so that he could never be fairly turned away from any gathering he might want to enter” (Sims, 2010). And yet for Lila Mae and Dr. King, as for so many other Black people, the suit’s mythology did not protect them from racism any more than

a rabbit's foot would.

Using Barthes's framework for myth, this is because Lila Mae's wearing a suit is not myth; it is Revolutionary speech.

"[M]yth is *depoliticized speech*," according to Barthes (italics in the original). He asserts that political speech describes "the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world" (p. 255).

Myth does not relay the realness of anything; it builds a second-order linguistic house of cards atop semiological signs to create a fabricated historical quality. This quality is natural in that it seems to go without saying. When Lila Mae sees the billboard of Chancre and connects it with modernity and happy progress, it seems natural. No explanation is needed.

It goes without saying that a twenty-foot tall white man in a navy double-breasted suit has no other signification than the promise of the American dream. As Barthes writes, "Men do not have with myth a relationship based on truth but on use: they depoliticize according to their needs" (p. 257).

It serves the bourgeoisie, in Barthes's calculations, to drain a signifier like a suit of any political power in order to bolster their own worldview, their own mythological system.

In *The Intuitionist*, the bourgeoisie is personified by the leaders of Arbo and United, by the Elevator Guild, and in the end by the wealthy Coombs, who had been masquerading as the servant Natchez to get close to Lila Mae. Barthes argues that the bourgeoisie is "*the social class which does not want to be named*" (p. 250, italics in the original). The bourgeoisie is a "shapeless" class. Through media, including news, movies, and literature, something like the bourgeois representation of an expensive wedding "slowly becomes the very norm as dreamed, though not actually lived, of the petit bourgeois couple" (p. 253).

This is the fate of the suit in *The Intuitionist*.

"Fashion is an expression of capitalism, incorporating its structural inequalities by encouraging people to strive, behavior so critical to creating illusions of success in an unequal society" (Tynan, 2010). All manner of people wear suits in this novel: the reporter Urich wears a powder-blue seersucker suit in an attempt to appear cool and nonchalant. And his eye for fashion helps him figure out that the thugs who assaulted him were not Mob guys, who wear shirts made of cheap blended fabrics; these guys wore the oxford cotton

shirts of Arbo employees.

The suit of the Black man who dances with Lila Mae in the taxi-dance hall is "shiny, returning light in patches on his elbows and knees.

It is an old suit," with the ruby handkerchief in his pocket "an echo of finer times and better circumstances" (Whitehead, p. 215).

The men at the Funicular Follies have bought out-of-fashion tuxes with wide lapels at a discount in an attempt to be dressed appropriately for the affair (p. 146). Pompey, Lila Mae's fellow "first" in elevator inspection, wears a suit that strives for bourgeois respectability yet does not reach it, "the cuffs of his shirt bold out of sad and comically short jacket sleeves" (p. 24).

The myth of the suit, the promise of this facet of the American dream, has filtered down from the bourgeoisie to the middle class, who "[do] not have its basic status and cannot live up to [it] except in imagination" (Barthes, p. 253).

Revolutionary language, however, remains political rather than becoming depoliticized like myth.

"Wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things, metalanguage is referred to as a language object, and myth is impossible" (p. 259).

Lila Mae in her dark-blue suits is transforming reality and acting on the world to make it new. She is not making elevators; that is not the language in question in this argument.

Her language is the suit, which according to bourgeois myth is modernity, progress, and power—the American dream. By being a Black woman in a dark-blue suit working in a white-collar world, this language cannot take on that myth. This is played out time and again in the novel, when she is confronted with her race and occasionally her gender, even when she is performing her job perfectly and wearing the correct costume for doing so. In the very first scene of the novel, the superintendent of the building where she is inspecting an elevator makes a point of letting her know he sees her race and gender, despite her suit and official identification. Mrs. Rogers, the Black woman who worked with the legendary Fulton and is suspicious of Lila Mae's (and everyone else's) motives, also calls her a racial slur and then says insultingly, "Wearing a man's suit like you a man" (p. 94).

Fashion conveys class and gender, "signals that are meaningful to social participation in

modernity.” However, fashion “is also the arena for challenges to fixed identity positions” (Tynan, 2010).

The “pathological affinity for regularity, the constant and true” noted by the man ransacking Lila Mae’s closet belies the challenge that she poses to cultural norms. She is closer to the truth in seeing her suits as armor, though they are imperfect.

“The bourgeoisie hides the fact that it is the bourgeoisie and thereby produces myth; Revolution announces itself openly as Revolution and thereby abolishes myth” (Barthes, p. 259). By armoring herself in a perfectly tailored business suit and Department-reg wingtips, Lila Mae strips the bourgeois myth of the American dream and lays bare the Revolution of an educated, driven Black woman doing exemplary work. The power of the myth of the business suit was already dimming as Whitehead wrote *The Intuitionist* in the late 1990s.

As we pass the first quarter of the twenty-first century, there are fewer realms where suits are *de rigueur* or read as markers of power.

Whitehead chose to place his novel in a speculative mid-twentieth-century America, a setting where suits maintained their mythical power and people like Lila Mae Watson could challenge that power by using the language of fashion to effect Revolutionary speech. Using Barthes’s framework and the example of this fictional text, it is possible to look at the clothing people are wearing in any era, including our own, to project a bourgeois myth of power. We can also consider, then, how that myth could be, or has been, imploded by the use of fashion for political, Revolutionary ends.

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INFLUENCERS, ICONS, AND ILLUSIONS

MYTH-MAKING IN INDIAN FASHION

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Abstract

As the world faces the effects of climate change, and with fashion being one of the major contributors, the global industry faces backlash and stricter protocols to incorporate sustainable methods of operation. Thus, sustainability has become a significant discourse in contemporary fashion marketing.

In India, fashion influencers play a vital role in defining people's perceptions of craft, culture, and sustainability. These influencers translate the marketing efforts of brands that seek to position themselves as sustainable into everyday practice: they make 'eco' legible, desirable, and aspirational for large numbers of consumers. The study examines how Indian fashion influencers construct sustainability and the communicative patterns that characterise this discourse. This semiotic work contributes to the normalisation of greenwashing discourse. While influencer posts may not intend to deceive, a lack of material substantiation often makes them appear misleading to consumers.

Combining semiotic theory (Barthes), Eco's concept of hyperreality, and Lotman's semiosphere, the paper analyses how influencers reproduce and normalise sustainability myths.

The paper focuses on social media posts of eminent Indian fashion influencers.

The findings identify four recurring communicative patterns, namely — symbolic amplification, aestheticisation, temporal displacement, and omission, through which sustainability is rendered visible yet weakly substantiated.

Keywords: *Influencer marketing; Greenwashing; Fashion myth; Semiotics; Sustainability.*

INTRODUCTION

As the world grapples with the effects of climate change, every industry faces increasing responsibility to adopt sustainable practices (IPCC, 2023). The global fashion industry, which has been a major contributor to environmental pollution and inequalities (Niinimäki et al., 2020), finds itself facing stricter regulations to maintain sustainability standards, particularly in European nations (European Commission, 2022). While this marks a positive shift, the race to be established as a sustainable or ethical brand has also become a marketing strategy for many fashion houses. This is particularly true in developing countries like India, where the industry is vast, scattered, largely unorganised, and subject to limited regulatory

enforcement. With increased consumption and the expansion of social media, the era of influencers has emerged. These individuals occupy an advantageous position as representatives of the 'common person' and often enjoy reach and trust comparable to, or even greater than, traditional celebrities (Abidin, 2018; Khamis et al., 2017). Recent studies further indicate that trust in influencers can increase sustainable fashion adoption in emerging markets (Londóño-Bedoya et al., 2025). In India, influencers are trusted not because they are experts but because they appear relatable (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). This dynamic is further strengthened by long-standing cultural associations between craft, tradition, and moral value. Influencers frequently draw on these

associations to frame sustainability as inherently Indian, timeless, and natural.

A typical Indian influencer's Instagram feed often features cotton and linen garments, soft lighting, and captions referencing 'conscious choices' and 'slow fashion.' Through such content, influencers translate brand-led sustainability narratives into everyday practice, making 'eco' legible, desirable, and aspirational for large numbers of consumers. This aligns with studies showing that influencers shape perceptions of sustainable fashion consumption among younger consumers (Johnstone & Lindh, 2022). At the same time, these representations can be easily absorbed into marketing logics, where the appearance of sustainability may begin to matter more than its material reality (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). Consumers, many of whom lack the knowledge to evaluate fabric quality or authenticity, often rely on such content when making purchasing decisions (McNeill & Moore, 2015). This paper examines how Indian fashion influencers contribute to greenwashing, not necessarily through deliberate deception, but through everyday practices of storytelling, visual curation, and selective emphasis. It argues that sustainability claims within influencer content often function as symbolic performances with limited material grounding. By situating influencer discourse within a semiotic and cultural framework, drawing on Barthes' notion of myth, Eco's concept of hyperreality, and Lotman's semiosphere (Barthes, 1972; Eco, 1986; Lotman, 1990), the paper analyses how sustainability is constructed, circulated, and normalised within influencer-led fashion communication.

This paper addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Indian fashion influencers construct sustainability through visual and textual content?
2. What semiotic patterns define influencer-led sustainability discourse?
3. How do these patterns contribute to the normalisation of greenwashing in India?

THEORY: MYTH, HYPERREALITY, AND THE SEMIOSPHERE

This study approaches sustainability in influencer-led fashion communication not as a fixed material condition but as a cultural construct produced through signs, narratives, and systems of meaning. To analyse this process, it draws on

semiotic and cultural theory, particularly Barthes' concept of myth (Barthes, 1972), Eco's notion of hyperreality (Eco, 1986), and Lotman's framework of the semiosphere (Lotman, 1990). These frameworks are used as analytical lenses to guide the interpretation of influencer content.

Barthes' concept of myth explains how fashion operates as a second-order semiotic system in which signs acquire connotative meanings and ideological significance. In influencer discourse, terms such as 'handwoven', 'artisan made,' and 'conscious' function as signifiers that suggest ethical qualities. Through the process of mythologisation, meanings grounded in material or historical realities become naturalised and appear self-evident. Thus, visual and textual references to craftsmanship, tradition, and slow fashion transform sustainability into an inherent and unquestioned attribute.

Eco's concept of hyperreality helps explain how mediated representations can appear more authentic than material reality. In influencer content, curated imagery and aesthetic presentation produce an intensified sense of sustainability that may exceed or replace verifiable evidence such as certification or transparency. As a result, sustainability is experienced as a visual and affective condition rather than a material one.

Lotman's concept of the semiosphere provides a framework for understanding how meaning circulates within cultural systems. Rather than occupying the centre of meaning production, influencers operate at the periphery as mediators who translate complex fashion discourses into accessible and desirable forms. In doing so, they simplify, amplify, and circulate dominant meanings of sustainability for broader audiences.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives enable an analysis of influencer content as a site where sustainability is constructed through semiotic transformation (Barthes), affective intensification (Eco), and cultural mediation (Lotman). They guide the analysis by focusing on how meaning is produced, how it becomes persuasive, and how it is stabilised within the fashion semiosphere.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative discourse and semiotic approach to examine how sustainability is constructed within influencer-driven fashion communication in India. Such approach-

es are widely used in cultural and media studies to analyse meaning-making processes (Rose, 2016). It draws on publicly available digital content on the four chosen influencers. The anonymous examples presented in the findings are combined illustrations, developed from recurring visual and textual patterns identified across multiple posts in the dataset. To illustrate recurring communicative patterns, the analysis includes a small number of anonymised example captions. These examples are not direct reproductions of individual posts but are composite representations derived from multiple posts within the dataset. They are constructed to reflect recurring linguistic, visual, and narrative patterns identified during analysis, including the use of key signifiers, aesthetic framing, and omissions. This approach enables analytical clarity while avoiding over-reliance on individual posts. While some captions were reconstructed from secondary sources, analysis focused on recurring patterns across multiple posts, reducing reliance on any single instance. Patterns were identified through repeated occurrence across multiple posts within the dataset. Each pattern was observed consistently in at least 6 to 8 posts per influencer, ensuring that findings reflect recurring communicative tendencies rather than isolated instances. As a qualitative semiotic analysis, this study does not seek to measure sustainability practices directly but to examine how sustainability is represented and communicated within influencer discourse. All analysed content is drawn from publicly available sources and used solely for academic research and critique.

SAMPLE SELECTION

Around 40 social media (Instagram) posts and marketing materials were included in the dataset. This included social media posts (primarily Instagram) from four well-known Indian fashion and lifestyle influencers namely, Masoom Minawala, Komal Pandey, Kritika Khurana, and Sonam Kapoor. Each case study draws on a broader dataset of approximately 10 posts per influencer, with selected examples presented as representative illustrations of recurring communicative patterns. These influencers were picked based on three key criteria:

1. High visibility and reach in Indian fashion media and internet channels.
2. Active participation in brand collaborations focused on sustainability, craft, or ethical fashion.

3. Diverse representation in fashion communication, including global influencers, trend creators, lifestyle influencers, and celebrity figures.

The sample includes:

- Brand collaborations and sponsored posts.
- Editorial-style content (such as red carpet appearances and curated photo shoots).
- Influencer-generated posts that reference sustainability, craft, heritage, culture or ethical consumption.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The study used a semiotic framework, drawing on the theories of Barthes, Eco, and Lotman, to investigate the construction of meaning in influencer content. Each post was examined based on four major dimensions:

1. Visual Signs

Clothing (types of fabric, styling, and references to craft, heritage, culture, etc).

Setting (domestic spaces, heritage locations, and nature-based imagery).

Aesthetic elements (colour palettes, lighting, and composition).

2. Textual Elements

Captions and hashtags (e.g., 'sustainable', 'handmade', 'conscious').

Narrative tone (aspirational, intimate, or educational).

References to ethical considerations (such as artisans, slow fashion, and tradition).

3. Omission

Absence of information related to production processes, labour conditions, sourcing, or environmental impact.

Lack of verifiable indicators such as traceability or certifications.

4. Framing of Narratives

The positioning of sustainability (e.g., as a moral obligation, aesthetic preference, or lifestyle option).

How much attention is placed on sustainability or how it fits into larger fashion narratives?

IDENTIFICATION OF PATTERNS

The patterns were identified by comparing various posts across the dataset. A pattern was considered important when similar visual, linguistic, and narrative aspects occurred consistently across several posts and influencers.

More specifically:

- Repetition refers to the consistent use of similar signs (such as handloom imagery or 'artisan')

language, reference to heritage) across a large portion of the dataset.

- Visual tropes refer to repeated symbolic configurations (for example, sunlit courtyards, earthy tones, or handcrafted textures) that denote ethical or sustainable value.
- Omission is evaluated in connection to expected disclosures of sustainability (including materials, sourcing, and labour conditions), which are frequently absent.
- Framing of Narrative is identified through the dominant lens used to depict sustainability (such as aspirational, aesthetic or moral).

Through this process, four recurring communicative patterns were identified. These are presented as evidence-based findings, supported by representative examples grounded in the dataset.

USE OF ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

The anonymous examples presented in the findings are combined illustrations, developed from recurring visual and textual patterns identified across multiple posts in the dataset. They are not direct reproductions of individual posts but are composite representations derived from multiple posts within the dataset. They are constructed to reflect recurring linguistic, visual, and narrative patterns identified during analysis. This approach enables analytical clarity while avoiding over-reliance on individual posts.

CASE STUDIES

MASOOM MINAWALA: HERITAGE AS CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Masoom Minawala is an Indian fashion influencer and entrepreneur with a significant global presence, recognised for her appearances at international fashion events such as Cannes and the World Economic Forum in Davos. Her content draws on a rich vocabulary of Indian craft, heritage, and cultural pride. This case study draws on a dataset of approximately 10 Instagram posts (2022–2026) that reference craft, heritage, and sustainability.

A recurring pattern in Minawala's content involves the use of Indian textiles and craft traditions as markers of cultural identity and sustainability. In a post depicting her appearance at Cannes 2025 (Fig. 01) (see Appendix A1:1), mirror-work embroidery is framed through a vocabulary of cultural symbolism — 'protection, reflection, celebration' — without reference to sourcing, artisan attribution, or impact data. Similarly, a post from January



Fig. 01

2026 (see Appendix A1:4) references Jamawar and Kantha textiles in relation to 'communities' but provides no sourcing, labour, or economic data. In both instances, heritage functions as an ethical proxy. From the perspective of Barthes, these references function as mythic signifiers: 'Indian heritage' and 'craft community' naturalise the ethical value of the garment without grounding it in material verification. In terms of Eco's hyperreality, the visual scale and aesthetic appeal of Minawala's global fashion imagery produce an intensified sense of cultural and ethical legitimacy. Within Lotman's semiosphere, Minawala occupies a peripheral yet highly visible mediating position, translating Indian craft into the language of global luxury and sustainability.

KOMAL PANDEY: AESTHETICISATION OF CRAFT

Komal Pandey is a fashion influencer whose content is characterised by dramatic visual transformations and cinematic presentation. This case analyses Instagram posts and reels (2022–2026) with such words as 'handcrafted,' 'traditional,' and 'craftsmanship.' For instance, in a reel from 2023 (Fig. 02) (see Appendix A2:5), she uses the words 'handcrafted,' and 'rich craftsmanship.' Again, in a

reel involving Chanderi saree (see Appendix A2:4), traditional textile aesthetics are embedded within dramatic visual presentation, without accompanying details regarding sourcing, labour practices, or environmental impact. In both cases, the language of craft functions as an aesthetic qualifier rather than an evidentiary claim, enhancing the perceived value of the product without substantiating its ethical credentials. From the perspective of Barthes, these are floating signifiers that imply certain ethical qualities without grounding them in reality. For example, in one of the posts, a saree is referred to as ‘rich in craftsmanship’ without further information about sourcing and labour. Pandey’s visual storytelling which includes cinematic transformation and editing prioritises

aesthetics over verification. According to Eco, sustainability becomes an aesthetic and affective experience rather than a material claim. Within Lotman’s semiosphere, Pandey translates fashion discourse into a visual and aesthetically coherent language that does not prioritize ethical aspects. In reels showing traditional textiles, sustainability becomes part of visual spectacle without material grounding.

KRITIKA KHURANA: LIFESTYLE

NORMALISATION OF SUSTAINABILITY

Kritika Khurana, who is popularly known as ‘That Boho Girl’, is one of the most popular influencers when it comes to lifestyle and fashion in India. She has an online following which numbers in the millions due to her content which revolves around Bohemian style, travel, fashion and occasional messages which encourage people to promote Indian art, crafts, handlooms and homegrown brands. This case study draws on a dataset of Instagram posts (2021–2026) focusing on recurring references to ‘homegrown,’ ‘local,’ and lifestyle-oriented fashion narratives.

Kritika Khurana’s narratives integrate sustainability into narratives of routine consumption, framing it as a natural part of the consumer’s lifestyle. In one of Kritika Khurana’s Instagram posts, where she is seen wearing the DC Mumbai ensemble at Jaipur (Fig. 03) (see Appendix A3:1), there is an emphasis on lifestyle appeal and authenticity through organic discovery by mentioning that it was created ‘without incentive.’ The visual narrative includes elements like travelling, fashioning one’s own style, and the relatable aspiration of consuming products, thus depicting fashion consumption as easygoing and personally tailored. Likewise, in another Instagram post where Kritika Khurana features her ‘handcrafted’ dupatta cape (see Appendix A3:2), the use of the term ‘handcrafted’ becomes a part of the fashion language while not elaborating on sourcing, labour practices, or any other sustainability-related concerns. Following Barthes’ conceptual framework, ‘homegrown’ becomes a mythic signifier implying ethicality in relation to locally produced goods. In Khurana’s posts that feature ‘Jaipur-based’ clothing or ‘handcrafted’ clothing, sustainability becomes apparent through the discourse of authenticity and experience without material references.

From the visual perspective, Khurana creates images that include natural lighting, casual



Fig. 02



Fig. 03

environment, and familiar clothes. These elements create a sense of truthfulness and trust that are rooted in Eco's notion of hyperreality. In terms of Lotman's semiosphere, Kritika Khurana translates the notion of sustainability into language of everyday life, embedding it into routines of consumption rather than treating it as a separate aspect of ethical decision-making.

SONAM KAPOOR: MORAL SIGNALLING AND CELEBRITY AUTHORITY

Sonam Kapoor enjoys a unique status in the fashion semiosphere of India. She is a famous celebrity whose style on red carpet events and other international platforms garners attention and is seen as culture in itself. This makes Kapoor not an ordinary influencer but an authoritative figure whose fashion choices take on a cultural meaning due to her influence. Sustainability is discussed by Sonam Kapoor from the perspective of her authority as a celebrity. The case considers her posts and interviews (2019-2026) that utilize the terms 'heritage,' 'craftsmanship,' and 'responsible choices'

and show how ethical meaning is constructed through celebrity discourse.

For example, in posts (Fig. 04) (see Appendix A4:1) depicting the use of Banarasi textiles and handmade couture clothing, Kapoor highlights the aspects of heritage and craftsmanship as indicators of ethical value. In another post (see Appendix A4:2) Kapoor has stated that she tries to 'make responsible choices' thereby positioning sustainability as a practice of personal ethics. According to Barthes, these terms become mythic signifiers that imply the relationship between cultural value and ethicality. When discussing Banarasi textiles or couture dresses, the emphasis is on heritage that implies ethical nature of the garment without mentioning any information about the system of production. When considering the visual aspect of her narrative, the presence of high-end visuals that includes red-carpet shots or editorials create an illusion of sustainability through the lens of Eco's concept of hyperreality. In Lotman's semiosphere, Kapoor is close to the cultural center. Statements that she is making responsible choices become a signal of her moral stance on the issue of sustainability.



Fig. 04

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The modes of repetition, omission, visual tropes, and framing narratives differ based on the role of the influencer in each of the four cases studied above. Even as they use symbols instead of empirical reality for their communication strategies, while Minawala uses culture to define herself, Pandey highlights aesthetics, Khurana embraces consumption as an everyday practice, and Kapoor mobilizes celebrity authority. This reveals the heterogeneity of the sustainability discourse

despite its common characteristic of using symbolism instead of materiality for communication, depending on the role of the influencer within the fashion semiosphere (Tab.01).

FINDINGS: COMMUNICATIVE PATTERNS IN INFLUENCER-LED SUSTAINABILITY DISCOURSE

The analysis of approximately 40 posts created by four influencers between 2018 and 2026 reveals

Comparative Analysis of Influencer-Led Sustainability Discourse in India

Influencer	Example Context	Key Signs	Visual Tropes	Narrative Framing	Omission	Construction of Sustainability
Masoom Minawala	Cannes mirror-work post (A1:1, fig. 01); Davos craft post (A1:4)	Craft, heritage, community	Global luxury with craft aesthetics	Cultural representation	No sourcing, labour, certification	Cultural authenticity as sustainability
Komal Pandey	Craft reel (A2:5, fig. 02); Chanderi saree (A2:4)	Craft, traditional, craftsmanship	Stylised transformation and cinematic presentation	Aspirational / aesthetic	No sourcing, labour, certification	Aesthetic desirability as sustainability
Kritika Khurana	Jaipur post (A3:5, fig. 03); handcrafted dupatta (A3:6)	Homegrown, local, handcrafted	Lifestyle settings with natural aesthetics	Lifestyle normalisation	No sourcing, labour, traceability	Everyday ethical consumption framing
Sonam Kapoor	Banarasi post (A4:1, fig. 04); 'responsible choices' (A4:2)	Heritage, craftsmanship, responsibility	Luxury spectacle and couture imagery	Moral/ aspirational	No production, labour, certification	Status and intention as sustainability

Note: Table 01 summarises recurring semiotic patterns across influencers; By repetition, it implies the recurrence of sustainability symbols in posts analysed for each influencer (n=10 per influencer). Omission is based on the presence or absence of sustainability metrics such as sourcing, working conditions, certification, and environmental footprint compared to a baseline of sustainability markers.

Tab. 01

four recurring communicative patterns that shape the construction and circulation of sustainability discourse in influencer-led fashion communication: symbolic amplification, aestheticisation, temporal displacement, and omission. These patterns align with broader research on greenwashing as a communicative phenomenon rather than purely a material practice (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

Drawing on Barthes' concept of myth, Eco's notion of hyperreality, and Lotman's semiosphere, the analysis shows how sustainability is constructed through culturally loaded signifiers, visual and affective experience, and selective disclosure rather than verifiable material practices. These patterns recur across different influencers and content types, indicating a consistent semiotic framework shaping sustainability discourse.

The anonymised examples presented in this section are composite representations derived from recurring visual, textual, and narrative patterns identified across the dataset. They are not direct reproductions of individual posts but are constructed to reflect typical communicative features observed during analysis.

SYMBOLIC AMPLIFICATION: ETHICAL SIGNIFIERS

Symbolic amplification refers to the repeated use of culturally charged signifiers such as 'heritage,' 'craftsmanship,' 'hand-woven,' and 'homegrown,' which imply ethical value.

Following Barthes, these terms function as mythic signifiers whose repetition naturalises sustainability as an inherent attribute rather than a claim requiring verification.

This pattern is evident across all four influencers. In Minawala's content, terms such as 'Indian fashion' and 'heritage' frame sustainability as cultural authenticity. In Pandey's posts, 'craftsmanship' operates as a stylistic descriptor rather than evidence of ethical production.

Khurana's use of 'homegrown' suggests ethical value through locality, while Kapoor invokes heritage and tradition as markers of sustainability. Anonymous post example A (symbolic amplification):

"Woke up in this handwoven linen kurta from @brandx, supporting our weavers and loving the natural feel. #SupportLocal #SustainableStyle"

This shorthand use of terms such as 'handwoven' and 'supporting weavers' signals ethical consump-

tion without clarifying labour conditions or production processes, encouraging interpretation without verification.

AESTHETICISATION: SUSTAINABILITY AS EXPERIENCE

Aestheticisation refers to the transformation of sustainability into a visual and affective experience rather than a material condition.

Drawing on Eco's concept of hyperreality, influencer content produces an intensified sense of sustainability through imagery, styling, and atmosphere. This pattern is particularly visible in Pandey's reels, where dramatic visual transformation and cinematic presentation foreground aesthetics over information. Minawala's global fashion imagery, Khurana's lifestyle-oriented visuals, and Kapoor's luxury aesthetics similarly frame sustainability as desirable and experiential rather than evidentiary.

This reflects broader observations that Instagram-based fashion communication often aestheticises sustainability through curated visual identity and platform aesthetics (Marcella-Hood, 2023).

Anonymous post example B (aestheticisation):

"Soft neutrals and conscious choices today.

Outfit by @brandz (link in bio).

Felt so calm wearing it."

Here, emotional tone and visual styling encourage viewers to associate feeling with ethical value, while material details such as sourcing or certification remain absent.

TEMPORAL DISPLACEMENT: SUSTAINABILITY AS INTENTION

Temporal displacement refers to the presentation of sustainability as an ongoing or future-oriented process rather than a verifiable present condition. Sustainability is framed as aspiration, improvement, or intention, delaying the need for substantiated claims. This pattern is evident in Kapoor's references to 'responsible choices,' which position sustainability as personal intention.

Khurana's collaborations frame sustainability as an evolving journey, while Pandey and Minawala embed sustainability within broader narratives rather than presenting it as a measurable outcome.

Anonymous post example C (temporal displacement):

"Excited to partner with @brandq on their new conscious range—the team is committed to improving waste streams and we'll share progress soon!"

Such statements substitute future promises for present evidence, encouraging trust without immediate verification.

OMISSION AND SELECTIVE DISCLOSURE

Omission refers to the absence of key sustainability indicators such as sourcing, labour conditions, certifications, or environmental impact. Across the dataset, this emerges as the most consistent pattern. Despite frequent references to craft, heritage, or responsibility, influencer content rarely includes verifiable information about production processes. Sustainability is therefore constructed through symbolic and aesthetic cues while remaining weakly substantiated at a material level (Tab. 02).

SYNTHESIS

When viewed together, these findings illustrate how sustainable fashion discourse is constructed by combining several semiotic processes. Symbolic amplification provides a basis for establishing sustainability as a culturally loaded term, while aestheticisation turns it into something desirable. The process of temporal displacement makes sustainability something aspirational rather than an immediate issue that needs to be addressed. Finally, omission ensures that sustainability remains weakly substantiated. Different combinations of these semiotic processes can be found in the discourses of different influencers, such as cultural authorities, trendsetters, lifestyle influencers, or celebrities.

Sustainability Construction, Omission, and Theoretical Interpretation

Influencer	Omission	Construction	Instagram Links (with Appendix refs)	Theoretical Alignment
Masoom Minawala	No sourcing, labour, certification, or production transparency	Cultural authenticity = sustainability	Appendix A1:1; A1:4	Barthes: myth; Eco: hyperreal; Lotman: translation
Komal Pandey	No sourcing, labour, certification, or production transparency	Aesthetic desirability = sustainability	Appendix A2:5; A2:4	Barthes: sign; Eco: spectacle; Lotman: mediation
Kritika Khurana	No sourcing, labour, certification, or production transparency	Lifestyle = sustainability	Appendix A3:5; A3:6	Barthes: local myth; Eco: authenticity; Lotman: lifestyle translation
Sonam Kapoor	No sourcing, labour, certification, or production transparency	Status and intention = sustainability	Appendix A4:1; A4:2	Barthes: heritage myth; Eco: hyperreality; Lotman: centrality

Note: Table 02 provides dataset linkage and theoretical interpretation.

Tab. 02

WHY THE INDIAN CONTEXT AMPLIFIES THESE DYNAMICS?

There are three local features that intensify influencer-driven greenwashing.

When influencers focus on handloom or artisanal processes, they draw on deep associations between heritage, authenticity, and moral value; yet craft alone does not resolve questions of labour conditions or environmental impact (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009). Again, luxury fashion is often framed as ethical through bespoke and made-to-order couture. Celebrity endorsements of Indian designers frequently equate exclusivity with sustainability, even as luxury production involves intensive materials, embellishment, and global logistics that complicate this narrative (Joy et al., 2012). Finally, India's fast-paced influencer-brand economy enables rapid visibility through capsule "sustainable" collections promoted online, while core production models remain intact, a pattern consistent with broader critiques of greenwashing in global markets (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Importantly, the communicative patterns found in this study do not act in isolation but are augmented by cultural and economic aspects of the Indian fashion ecosystem. These include the moral weight of craft, the ethical construction of luxury, and the accelerated growth of influencer-brand economies. These dynamics are essential to understanding how sustainability is formed, circulated, and evaluated in the Indian case. To start with, the cultural authority of craft is critical. Craft in India does not only refer to production techniques, but it is also a signifier that carries moral weight and associations of heritage, authenticity, and craftsmanship.

This allows terms like 'craft,' 'heritage,' and 'artisan' to acquire ethical meaning when used. In this case, repetition alone guarantees credibility, regardless of material validation (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009).

Secondly, aestheticisation is enhanced by centuries-long cultural associations between purity, ethics, and simplicity in India. The visual code that comprises the use of organic materials, earth tones, and handmade aesthetics is symbolic of sustainability because of the cultural meanings associated with them. Celebrities and influencers use these meanings to promote sustainability as part of the aesthetics of fashion rather than its analysis.

This trend is especially apparent in the promotion of sustainability in luxury fashion, since bespoke fashion is considered sustainable because of its craftsmanship and longevity. Celebrities often

frame exclusive fashion as ethical without considering the extensive materiality involved in the creation of luxury clothing.

Thirdly, the narrative of temporal displacement is driven by the discourse of revival and preservation in the Indian fashion industry. Influencers and brands frame sustainability in India as a continuous effort in the form of 'preservation of craft,' 'support for artisans,' and 'promotion of heritage.' In this case, sustainability can be understood as an aspirational and future-oriented concept. Hence, there is no need for immediate accountability in matters of sustainability.

Finally, the omission strategy is enhanced by features of the fashion production landscape in India. The decentralised and informal nature of the fashion production process makes it difficult to determine where labour and materials come from and how production impacts the environment. At the same time, it allows for selective disclosure of information concerning production processes, including culture-specific narratives, but not specifics.

CONSEQUENCES: CONSUMER, MARKET, AND POLICY EFFECTS

The practice of greenwashing through influencers impacts consumer behavior, markets, and policies. On the consumer front, it fosters the phenomenon of moral licensing, whereby consuming 'eco-friendly' products gives a sense of righteousness, minimizing scrutiny of excessive consumption (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

In addition, the lack of sustainability knowledge among many individuals makes them rely on influencers rather than independent sources.

In terms of markets, symbolism in sustainability is lucrative because it allows companies to build their reputations and generate revenues without altering their production processes, whereas other invisible yet sustainable organizations are disadvantaged.

The current framework for regulating sustainability-related activities through institutions like ASCI is indeed an important step in the direction of accountability.

Unfortunately, they have certain limitations especially concerning influencer sustainability campaigns regarding enforceability and disclosure (Advertising Standards Council of India, 2023).

DISCUSSION OF IMPLICATIONS

These strategies of symbolic amplification, aestheticisation, temporal displacement, and omission contribute to the normalisation of greenwashing by focusing on symbolism rather than evidence. The analysis reveals that sustainability in Indian fashion influencer rhetoric acts less as a concrete practice and more as a semiotic, culturally constructed ideal. Rather than relying on confirmed acts, it emerges through repetition, visualisation, and selective disclosure, fundamentally altering our understanding of greenwashing, influencer credibility, and fashion communication.

While some influencers may engage in more transparent or evidence-based sustainability communication, such cases remain less visible within dominant aesthetic-driven discourse. First, greenwashing is not always an intentional brand strategy. While previous research has framed it as purposeful deceit (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015), this study demonstrates that it can result from ordinary storytelling, visual framing, and omission within influencer content. Second, influencer reputation is not based on competence or verification, but rather on perceived genuineness.

In India, this is strengthened by culturally significant symbols such as craftsmanship and local manufacture, which position influencers as ethical figures. Third, fashion communication is better viewed as meaning creation rather than information transmission. Fashion influencers construct sustainability through the use of words, images, and discourses, creating ethical value through continuous symbolism. This is influenced by the cultural and economic context of India, which includes the moral value of craft, the ethical framing of luxury, and the influencer economy, making sustainability symbols highly effective. In general, sustainability in Indian fashion is cultural and semiotic, highlighting the need to examine how ethical value is constructed.

There is an urgent need to strengthen sustainability communication in India, which requires coordinated action: influencers must adopt evidence-based language and practices, brands must provide transparent and verifiable information rather than token claims, and platforms and regulators must enforce standards that ensure accountability and substantiation.

CONCLUSION

The study found four recurring patterns in how sustainability is constructed in Indian fashion communication: symbolic amplification, aestheticisation, temporal displacement, and omission. Rather than representing a material reality, sustainability arises as a semiotic construct generated by these patterns. Terms such as 'craft,' 'heritage,' and 'homegrown' develop ethical significance through repetition, becoming naturalised as intrinsically sustainable rather than requiring substantiation, reflecting Barthes' concept of myth. Visual aesthetics and emotional appeal help reinforce this process. Viewed through the lens of Eco's concept of hyperreality, influencer content generates a sense of ethical authenticity that can stand in for material proof, portraying sustainability as a desirable lifestyle.

Influencers also act as intermediaries, translating brand messaging into culturally suitable formats. They accomplish this by stressing topics such as craftsmanship and legacy while minimising less visible issues such as labour conditions and supply chains. These findings redefine greenwashing not as intentional deceit, but as a discursive outcome of everyday communication practices that prioritise symbolic appeal over material detail.

In broader terms, the study demonstrates that fashion communication is performative, meaning that it actively produces sustainability rather than simply describing it. Craft and heritage hold cultural power in India, which reinforces this. Overall, sustainability in Indian influencer fashion relies on exposure and cultural legibility rather than proof, making it compelling even when its material foundation is uncertain.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Masoom Minawala at Cannes 2025, featuring mirror-work embroidery framed as cultural heritage and craft. The post invokes notions of tradition and authenticity without providing information on sourcing, labour, or production processes. Source: Instagram, May 2025.

[Fig. 02] F. Komal Pandey Instagram reel (2023) presenting a saree described as 'rich craftsmanship,' where stylised visual transformation and aesthetic presentation foreground fashion spectacle over material or sustainability-related details. Source: Instagram.

[Fig. 03] Kritika Khurana in Jaipur (2023), where fashion consumption is embedded within a lifestyle-oriented narrative emphasising authenticity and everyday experience, without accompanying information on sourcing, labour, or environmental impact. Source: Instagram.

[Fig. 04] Sonam Kapoor (2025) featuring Banarasi textile and couture styling, where heritage and craftsmanship are

invoked as markers of ethical value without reference to production systems or sustainability metrics.

Source: Instagram.

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A1. Dataset: Masoom Minawala

No.	URL	Date	Claim type	Caption theme	Missing evidence
1	https://www.instagram.com/reelDJyyixXo5g-/	15 May 2025	Heritage / Craft	Mirrorwork framed as cultural symbolism (“protection, reflection, celebration”)	No artisan attribution, sourcing, or impact data
2	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DJyyixXo5g-/	May 2025	Craft / National Identity	“Not just fashion—this is a movement” (#VocalForLocal)	No measurable impact or artisan details
3	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CXyJKAnFqYp/	Sept 2025	Craft / Legacy	Patola saree framed as legacy of craft and community	No weaver identity or production data
4	https://www.instagram.com/p/DTzabWpAuaP/	Jan 2026	Heritage / Sustainability	Jamawar and Kantha linked to communities	No sourcing, labour, or economic data
5	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cgi4vqGMYs6/	July 2022	Sustainability / Lifestyle	“Made from hemp” framed as eco-material	No labour conditions or environmental verification
6	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DVTaXqvkgYY/	Feb 2026	Heritage / Fashion	Heritage artistry framed within contemporary styling	No sourcing or artisan transparency
7	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DNspf0oxARd/	Apr 2026	Craft Awareness	“Few know the craft behind this”	No explanation or traceability
8	https://www.instagram.com/p/DWEQNWmCaH0/	Mar 2026	Craft / Heritage / Luxury	Traditional jewellery framed through styling narrative	No sourcing, labour, or certification
9	https://www.instagram.com/p/DU2wkiOKgM3/	Feb 2026	Craft / Cultural	“Heritage layered with modernity”	No sourcing or environmental data
10	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DWba0DsAmqm/	Mar 2026	Craft / Handmade	Handcrafted labour framed as experiential value	No labour structure or production transparency

A2. Dataset: Komal Pandey

No.	URL	Date	Claim type	Caption theme	Missing evidence
1	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CxUauwrPgCD/	~2024	Craft / Handcrafted	"#Handcrafted" as aesthetic tag	No sourcing, labour, or certification
2	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cam60YKtfJb/	~2023	Craft / Handcrafted	Craft as styling descriptor	No sourcing or labour data
3	https://www.instagram.com/p/CamjSz_tXOI/	2023	Craft / Handcrafted	Visual emphasis on craftsmanship	No material transparency
4	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CfzlTmj5Ah/	July 2022	Traditional / Craft	Chanderi saree and custom blouse	No sourcing or verification
5	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CzDcvjrvSBL/	Oct 2023	Craft / Traditional	'Rich craftsmanship' in styling narrative	No sourcing or labour data
6	https://www.instagram.com/p/CliYldSDmz0/	Dec 2020	Traditional / Cultural	Saree styling across multiple looks	No sustainability data
7	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CnPQN9fLYxr/	~2023	Traditional / Craft	Festive styling and craftsmanship	No sourcing or certification
8	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DLCfjFzIqyU/	2025	Traditional / Statement style	Styling reel emphasising outfit transformation and visual appeal of fabric	No sourcing, labour, certification, or production details
9	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cgr0959PX7c/	2022	Traditional / Aspirational	Festive styling	Embroidered dress without any reference to sources of labour
10	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DGILHYIINEa/	2025	Craft Aesthetic / Heritage	Fashion reel focused on performance, expression,	No sourcing, production information

A3. Dataset: Kritika Khurana

No.	URL	Date	Claim type	Caption theme	Missing evidence
1	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CwPGWmulM2s/	~2023	Sustainability / Lifestyle	Sustainability framed through everyday styling and personal expression	No sourcing, certification, labour, or environmental data
2	https://www.instagram.com/p/DLFdD9Vytbj/	~2025	Lifestyle / Cultural	Fashion embedded within lifestyle narrative and aspirational identity	No sustainability definition, sourcing, or production details
3	https://www.instagram.com/p/DNQUoQahBFx/	~2026	Sustainability / Lifestyle	"Sustainable fashion" framed through personal styling and relatability	No certification, sourcing, labour, or environmental metrics
4	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DPMNGtPAQpQ/	~2026	Lifestyle / Consumption	Fashion presented through travel-oriented and aspirational narrative	No sustainability explanation or production transparency
5	https://www.instagram.com/p/DPy_wkMATA3/	~2026	Heritage / Cultural	Cultural identity and place-based styling foregrounded	No artisan attribution, sourcing, or labour data
6	https://www.instagram.com/p/DQ16WYkgY0R/	~2026	Craft / Sustainability (implicit)	Craft or "handmade" implied within aesthetic storytelling	No labour conditions, certification, or traceability
7	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DV3p1PegeTL/	~2026	Lifestyle / Sustainability (implicit)	"Conscious" consumption framed through everyday fashion	No definition of sustainability or verification
8	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DTdO19GAdSn/	~2026	Heritage / Lifestyle	Cultural references embedded within casual lifestyle content	No sourcing, labour, certification, or environmental data
9	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DPwapUjASE0/	~2026	Lifestyle / Consumption	Fashion framed as routine consumption and self-expression	No sustainability indicators or production information
10	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DWwSc4qjJoo/	~2026	Sustainability / Lifestyle (implicit)	Ethical value implied through tone, aesthetics, and narrative	No sourcing, certification, labour, or impact data

A4. Dataset: Sonam Kapoor

No.	URL	Date	Claim type	Caption theme	Missing evidence
1	https://www.instagram.com/p/DR57M92isov/	~2026	Heritage / Craft	Traditional textile framed as cultural and aesthetic value	No sourcing, labour, certification, or environmental data
2	https://www.instagram.com/htcity/p/C1tb87Uobso/	~2024	Sustainability / Discourse	Sustainability framed as responsible fashion choices in public discourse	No measurable standards, sourcing, or production details
3	https://www.instagram.com/p/BxuS3RjFHo4/	~2019	Craft / Heritage	Traditional craftsmanship highlighted within luxury fashion styling	No artisan attribution, sourcing, or labour data
4	https://www.instagram.com/p/BvgYZD7Ffua/	2019	Sustainability / Journey	Sustainability framed as a personal or ongoing journey	No metrics, timelines, or verifiable benchmarks
5	https://www.instagram.com/p/DQD16bgEfmW/	~2026	Craft / Emotion	"Handcrafted" or emotional value embedded in fashion narrative	No production transparency, labour conditions, or sourcing
6	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CyIK8jWvS-y/	~2023	Craft / Heritage	Craft and traditional aesthetics presented through visual styling	No sourcing, artisan details, or certification
7	https://www.instagram.com/p/DBnm07iTxp0/	~2024	Sustainability / Lifestyle	Ethical fashion framed as part of everyday lifestyle and identity	No sustainability definition, sourcing, or environmental data
8	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CpU7ASmqosM/	~2023	Cultural / Heritage	Cultural symbolism used as aesthetic marker	No sourcing, labour, or production transparency
9	https://www.instagram.com/p/DUKPG3YCuZo/	~2026	Craft / Luxury	Couture and craftsmanship framed within luxury discourse	No traceability, certification, or environmental impact data
10	https://www.instagram.com/p/DUvVovnk6wD/	~2026	Heritage / Luxury	Heritage positioned within global luxury fashion	No sourcing, labour, certification, or environmental metrics

QUIET CONSUMPTION

MUJI, MINIMALISM, AND THE AESTHETIC MANAGEMENT OF ABUNDANCE

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Abstract

This research examines how MUJI constructs and commercialises a discourse of minimalist consumption through retail aesthetics, packaging, and lifestyle branding. Combining semiotic analysis of retail space and brand design with discourse analysis of minimalism, restraint, and ethical consumption, the paper investigates how MUJI's "no-brand" philosophy became globally legible as a cultural language of calmness, simplicity, and moral moderation. Drawing from autobiographical reflections on encountering Japanese minimalist culture in the 1990s, the article first analyses MUJI's semiotic strategies, including muted colour palettes, generic packaging, unobtrusive typography, and orderly retail presentation. Rather than treating Buddhist notions of emptiness (空, *kū*) and nothingness (無, *mu*) as direct explanations of MUJI's corporate practices, the study approaches these concepts as broader cultural contexts through which minimalist aesthetics acquire emotional and ethical resonance. The article then argues that MUJI's significance lies not in rejecting consumer culture, but in reorganising it aesthetically. Through minimalist design and restrained retail atmospheres, consumption becomes visually disciplined, psychologically calming, and morally legitimised. Consumers may continue purchasing extensively while perceiving themselves as restrained and non-excessive. In this sense, MUJI transforms accumulation into a quiet and aesthetically coherent practice. Finally, the paper situates MUJI within contemporary sustainability discourse and the wider transformation of minimalist aesthetics under consumer capitalism. As minimalism becomes institutionalised across global retail culture, the language of restraint increasingly functions less as a critique of excess than as a commercially scalable model of ethical lifestyle consumption. MUJI's enduring relevance therefore lies not in its delivery of "nothingness," but in its ability to aestheticise abundance while softening the visibility and moral tension of consumption itself.

Keywords: *Muji; Nothingness; Simplicity; Anti-brand; Semiosphere.*

ENCOUNTERING MUJI

This research emerges from a long-term, embodied engagement with MUJI as both a cultural object and a lived practice. As a consumer who first encountered MUJI in the 1990s and has followed its evolution for more than three decades, the analysis is informed by sustained, situated observation rather than nostalgic attachment. This positionality is mobilised not as anecdotal evidence, but as a reflexive standpoint that enables attention to the subtle shifts in MUJI's aesthetic and discursive strategies over time. The analysis is informed in part by an autoethnographic engagement with MUJI's retail environments, shaped by a longer trajectory of cultural and personal experience. I first encountered MUJI in

1994 while travelling in Tokyo, at a moment when Taiwan was experiencing a broader wave of Japanophilia. Visiting the brand's early flagship store in Aoyama, I was struck by an aesthetic that differed markedly from the visual environment in which I had grown up. In Taiwan, where written Chinese characters structure everyday visual culture, urban signage—particularly billboards and neon displays—tended toward density, multiplicity, and sensory intensity. Against this backdrop, MUJI's restrained use of space, material, and text presented a radically different semiotic experience: one that privileged absence, quietness, and visual coherence.

This encounter was not only aesthetic but also biographical. Growing up in a lower-income

household that gradually transitioned into a middle-class condition, I witnessed the accumulation of goods as a marker of security and progress. Domestic space was often defined by excess and storage rather than curation. MUJI's philosophy of simplicity and sufficiency therefore resonated as both an aesthetic and ethical alternative. This orientation deepened as I later worked as a media journalist and participated in design-related projects and workshops, while travelling extensively across East Asia and Europe. Encounters with MUJI stores in cities such as London and Paris reinforced the sense that its visual and material language operated transnationally, articulating a recognisable sensibility often associated with wabi-sabi and everyday minimalism. This positionality is not presented as personal testimony *per se*, but as a reflexive standpoint that informs the selection and interpretation of empirical materials. It enables sustained attention to how MUJI's design grammar is encountered across different cultural contexts and over time. At the same time, the analysis moves beyond individual experience by grounding its claims in systematic observation of retail environments and brand-affiliated materials, including catalogues, in-store displays, and corporate communications. In this way, the autoethnographic dimension serves as an entry point into a broader semiotic analysis rather than as its evidentiary basis.

Given this context, the article adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach combining semiotic analysis and discourse analysis methodologically.

Given my autobiographic reflection, this research first explicate how nothingness are mobilised to provide cultural and intellectual context; they do not address MUJI directly and are therefore not treated as empirical evidence of the brand's practices. The empirical materials under examination include:

1. MUJI's official design statements, catalogues, and corporate publications;
2. Retail environments and spatial merchandising strategies observed across stores in Japan and East Asia;
3. Selected product lines that exemplify MUJI's cross-category expansion from apparel into lifestyle goods.

These materials are analysed as a coherent signifying system rather than as isolated design objects. Analytically, the study draws on Roland

Barthes's account of visual signification in *Rhetoric of the Image* (Barthes 1964), which provides a vocabulary for examining how visual and material elements—such as colour, texture, layout, and spatial arrangement—produce meaning through the interplay of denotation and connotation. In addition, Yuri Lotman's notion of the semiosphere situates these signifying practices within a broader cultural field of circulation, boundary-making, and transformation.

MUJI'S DESIGN GRAMMAR AS SEMIOTIC PRACTICE

This section uses brand-affiliated materials—including corporate publications, catalogues, and design statements—to be analysed as primary data that articulate MUJI's self-representation rather than as independent analytical support. Existing scholarship on MUJI and fashion is engaged as secondary interpretation.

Maintaining this distinction allows the following analysis to ground its claims about MUJI's design and retail strategies in empirical observation, while situating them within broader semiotic and philosophical frameworks.

In terms of material selection, MUJI consistently employs unfinished wood, cotton, linen, recycled paper, and rice-based products. These choices are neither luxurious nor technologically spectacular. Rather than reading them as direct expressions of philosophical doctrines, they are approached here as semiotic resources that evoke associations with everyday subsistence and ordinariness. Through their repetition across product categories and retail environments, such materials come to signify modesty, durability, and a restrained form of ethical consumption (Abe and Heine 1997; Niigata 1998).

These materials do not simply “represent” simplicity; they organise how simplicity is perceived. Drawing on Roland Barthes's account of visual signification in *Rhetoric of the Image*, MUJI's design grammar can be read as a structured interplay of denotation and connotation.

At the denotative level, objects appear functional and unadorned. At the connotative level, however, their consistent presentation across catalogues, packaging, and retail displays produces a stabilised reading of simplicity as ethical, rational, and desirable. Meaning, in this sense, is not inherent in the materials themselves, but generated through their systematic arrangement within a broader

semiotic environment. Wood, in particular, occupies a central symbolic role. Unlike lacquered or polished luxury wood, MUJI's wood often appears Zen-influenced, pale, lightly treated, and visibly grained (Abe & Heine, 1997).

As seen in Figure 01, wood and clothes in its indoors poster, signals *process* rather than perfection—an object that has not been fully aestheticised. Rice color - while pale and white with warmth –meanwhile, carries deep cultural resonance in Japan as a staple of survival rather than indulgence. Its inclusion in MUJI's food lines reinforces the brand's alignment with basic life maintenance rather than desire production. Yet these materials do not simply “mean” simplicity; they actively organise and discipline perception. Drawing on Roland Barthes's account of visual signification in *Rhetoric of the Image*, it becomes possible to understand MUJI's aesthetic as operating through a structured interplay of denotation and connotation.

At the denotative level, neutral colours, unadorned materials, and minimal spatial arrangements appear to present themselves as functional and self-evident. Yet, as Barthes argues, such apparently “natural” images are always already coded, carrying connotative meanings that are culturally produced rather than inherent (Barthes 1964). In this sense, MUJI's retail environments and product displays do not merely present simplicity; they frame and stabilise a particular way of seeing simplicity as ethical, restrained, and desirable. Extending Barthes' insight from the analysis of images to the domain of material retail space, this research treats objects, layouts, and atmospheres as components of a broader semiotic ensemble. While Barthes' original focus was on the image as a bounded visual text, the present analysis argues that contemporary retail environments similarly function as signifying systems, in which material forms, spatial composition, and sensory cues work together to guide interpretation. What is at stake, then, is not the intrinsic simplicity of MUJI's objects, but the semiotic work through which simplicity is produced, naturalised, and rendered consumable. MUJI's materials instruct consumers to read restraint as virtue, neutrality as ethics, and Zen ordinariness as authenticity (Abe & Heine, 1997) (Fig. 02). Another important that revolves around Muji's semiotic practice is that Colour functions as Anti-Language – it is dominantly black,

white, grey, brown – everyday life nothingness, or colorless (Yanagi, 1972). MUJI's chromatic discipline—dominated by black, white, grey, beige, and brown—functions as a deliberate anti-language within fashion discourse (Hara, 2008).

Colour, traditionally associated with emotion, individuality, and seasonal change, is here neutralised.

By minimising chromatic variation, MUJI suspends fashion's temporal logic: there are no obvious “this season” colours, no urgent visual cues demanding replacement. This palette resonates strongly with Buddhist and Zen aesthetics, where neutrality and repetition enable contemplation rather than distraction (Kawamura, 2005).

Emptiness, in this sense, is not a void but a condition for attentiveness. The absence of colour excess creates visual silence, encouraging consumers to slow down and notice texture, form, and utility (Nikkei Design, 2015)

However, this chromatic minimalism has now become globally reproducible. When fast fashion brands deploy the same neutral palettes at lower prices, MUJI's colour language loses its peripheral status and becomes part of fashion's core grammar. What once disrupted fashion's noise now blends seamlessly into it.



Fig. 01



Fig. 02

THE REFUSAL OF MASS MEDIA: SILENCE AS BRAND STRATEGY

One of MUJI's most distinctive practices is its near-total refusal of television commercials and mass media advertising. Instead, MUJI relies on in-store posters, catalogues, and understated print visuals, often featuring anonymous or semi-anonymous models.

These models are neither celebrities nor aspirational icons; they resemble “good-looking next-door” figures whose identities remain opaque (Yanagi, 1972). This strategy performs a crucial semiotic function. By refusing celebrity culture, MUJI rejects fashion's typical identification mechanism—the invitation to become someone else. Instead, the consumer is invited to remain themselves. The anonymity of models produces a mirror effect rather than an aspirational one: *this could be you, but it does not have to be* (Yanagi, 1972).

From a Lotmanian perspective, this media silence once placed MUJI at the periphery of the fashion semiosphere, where meaning is generated through negation rather than assertion (Lotman, 1990).

Yet silence, when institutionalised, becomes another form of language. The refusal of advertising is no longer radical; it is expected.

The absence itself has become a recognisable sign. If MUJI speaks anywhere, it speaks most clearly through its retail environments. MUJI stores are meticulously designed as anti-clutter spaces: wide aisles, low shelving, consistent lighting, and carefully spaced products (Kunitomo, 2009). The store does not overwhelm; it reassures (Niigata, 1998). Even the mild, woody fragrance contributes to a sense of Zen-like calm continuity rather than stimulation (Abe & Heine, 1997).

This spatial language does important ideological work. By removing visual noise, MUJI reframes consumption as Zen school's contemplation (Abe & Heine, 1997). Buying becomes an act of reflection rather than impulse. The store approximates what might be called a secularised Zen environment, where the consumer experiences temporary relief from urban overstimulation.

Yet this calm is not neutral. The store disciplines desire rather than eliminating it. Products are displayed sparsely, but the range

is extensive. The consumer is encouraged to move slowly, touch everything, and imagine an entire life organised according to MUJI's logic. Emptiness here is not the absence of goods, but the absence of friction in acquisition

SEMIOTIC “INTERNAL RESERVES OF UNCERTAINTY”

MUJI's early positioning can be understood, following Yuri Lotman, as operating from the cultural periphery, where systems retain what he terms “internal reserves of uncertainty.” Rather than analysing MUJI through philosophical claims about nothingness *per se*, this section treats its design and retail practices as empirical instances of semiotic organisation.

Across product lines and store environments, MUJI consistently foregrounds muted colour palettes, functional forms, and the minimisation of visual persuasion. These strategies do not simply communicate simplicity; they suspend familiar distinctions—such as new/old or trendy/outdated—that typically structure fashion meaning.

This suspension can be read as a weakening of the oppositional codes that sustain fashion's temporal logic of renewal.

As Joanne Entwistle (2015) and Yuniya Kawamura (2005) argue, fashion operates institutionally by defining what counts as fashionable through cycles of differentiation. MUJI's early design grammar complicates this process by offering goods that resist clear classification within those cycles.

The result is not the absence of meaning, but a redistribution of it: value is articulated through sufficiency, durability, and restraint rather than novelty or display (Fukasawa, 2011).

From a semiotic perspective, this effect can be further clarified through Roland Barthes's account of signification in *Rhetoric of the Image*. MUJI's visual and material forms operate through a controlled interplay of denotation and connotation, where apparently neutral elements—colour, texture, spatial arrangement—are coded to signify ethical modesty and rational consumption.

These meanings do not emerge naturally from the objects themselves, but from their systematic organisation across catalogues, retail displays, and product design.

However, as Lotman (1991) emphasises, peripheral codes do not remain marginal indefinitely.

Once translated into the dominant grammar of a system, they lose their destabilising capacity.

MUJI's aesthetic of restraint has followed this trajectory. What initially functioned as a disruption of fashion's excess has been widely incorporated into mainstream consumer culture, where “timeless basics” and “essential design” now circulate as standard marketing vocabulary. Minimalism, in this context, no longer introduces uncertainty but stabilises expectation.

This shift can be understood, in Barthesian terms, as a process of re-mythologisation (Barthes 1972). MUJI's anti-brand language, originally positioned against conspicuous consumption, now participates in a broader myth of ethical consumption—one that reassures consumers of moral awareness while leaving underlying structures of production and accumulation largely intact.

The issue, then, is not that MUJI has become inconsistent, but that its semiotic coherence has become predictable. As its language stabilises into a recognisable formula—neutral tones, simple forms, understated messaging (Kunitomo 2009)—its capacity to generate new meanings diminishes. This moment of stabilisation aligns with broader concerns about fashion's epistemological limits. When a system's self-description becomes too coherent, it risks excluding contradiction and lived complexity. MUJI's early significance lay in its ability to operate at the margins of the semiosphere; its current challenge lies in the reduced interpretive flexibility of its now-institutionalised aesthetic.

PERFORMING NOTHINGNESS: MUJI'S DISCOURSE AND THE LIMITS OF RETAIL MINIMALISM

MUJI's philosophy of “no brand” operates less through explicit ideological statements than through carefully managed material and spatial practices. Its rejection of logos, celebrity endorsement, and aggressive advertising is inseparable from what brand-affiliated sources describe as a “careful orchestration of texture, colour, smell, and retail choreography” (Nikkei Design 2015).

Within MUJI stores, sensory restraint is communicated through muted colours, orderly arrangements, soft lighting, unobtrusive packaging, and relatively calm retail atmospheres. However, the relationship between these practices and philosophical notions of emptiness should not be overstated.

Buddhist discussions of emptiness (空, *kū*) (Abe & Heine 1997) and nothingness (無, *mu*)

(Heisig 2001) provide an important cultural and intellectual context for interpreting MUJI's aesthetic language, particularly its emphasis on reduction, ordinariness, and restraint. Yet these philosophical works do not address MUJI directly, nor do they fully explain the company's retail environments or commercial strategies. In practice, MUJI stores are not spaces of literal emptiness. Most sections—including apparel, furniture, backpacks, stationery, and household goods—resemble highly organised contemporary Japanese retail environments rather than embodiments of Zen absence or Buddhist austerity. The discourse of “nothingness” is therefore most visible not in the elimination of products, but in the moderation of sensory intensity. This is especially apparent in cosmetic and skincare sections, where lightly fragranced lotions, toners, and diffusers are packaged in generic transparent or white containers with minimal graphic intervention. Here, restraint is communicated through subtle smell, understated packaging, and the suppression of luxury cues rather than through actual absence. MUJI's retail discourse thus operates through controlled neutrality rather than emptiness itself. This distinction is important analytically. Buddhist-inflected concepts of emptiness function in this article as cultural context rather than as direct explanations of MUJI's design practices. What MUJI appropriates is not Buddhist philosophy in any rigorous sense, but a globally recognisable aesthetic vocabulary associated with calmness, reduction, simplicity, and moral moderation. Through branding, packaging, and retail presentation, these associations are translated into a commercially legible lifestyle discourse. Rather than embodying emptiness in any strict philosophical sense, MUJI more selectively mobilises culturally familiar associations with reduction, restraint, and ordinariness. This distinction becomes especially important when considering the company's scale and breadth. From its early development, MUJI was never solely an apparel brand, nor was it organised around the literal elimination of commodities. Instead, it operated as a comprehensive lifestyle retailer spanning household goods, stationery, furniture, food, clothing, and cosmetics. The significance of its minimalist discourse therefore lies not in the production of absence, but in the management of abundance.

Through consistent packaging, muted visual presentation, and restrained retail atmospheres, highly diverse product categories are made to appear coherent, calm, and non-excessive. Minimalism functions less as the removal of consumption than as a mode of organising and legitimising it aesthetically. MUJI's presence across furniture, food, kitchenware, cosmetics, clothing, and household goods can be understood not merely as a business model, but as the articulation of a broader lifestyle discourse. Rather than anchoring itself to a single product category, MUJI constructs a coherent vision of everyday life organised around restraint, ordinariness, simplicity, and functional calm. Through consistent packaging, muted colour palettes, unobtrusive branding, and orderly retail presentation, highly diverse commodities are unified within the same aesthetic and moral framework. Brand-affiliated materials consistently frame this coherence not simply as commercial diversification, but as the cultivation of an ideal everyday environment. This coherence helps explain MUJI's ability to operate across multiple consumer sectors while maintaining a recognisable identity. Yet it also reveals an important contradiction. Because the brand relies heavily on neutrality and universality, products across different categories are absorbed into the same minimalist discourse regardless of their actual necessity or functional specificity. Furniture, cosmetics, stationery, packaged foods, storage containers, and travel accessories are presented through a shared visual language that softens distinctions between essential needs and discretionary purchases. In this sense, MUJI's minimalism performs an important psychological and cultural function. The absence of decorative excess reduces the visual intensity typically associated with consumerism and accumulation. Products appear calm, rational, and non-intrusive, allowing consumption itself to feel disciplined rather than excessive. Consumers may continue purchasing large quantities of goods while experiencing little of the guilt traditionally associated with overconsumption or hoarding. Accumulation becomes aesthetically invisible because minimalist commodities occupy space quietly and coherently. This dynamic is especially significant because MUJI does not primarily encourage consumers to buy less. Instead, it encourages consumers

to buy appropriately within a carefully curated aesthetic order. Minimalist design transforms many discretionary objects into items that appear necessary, practical, or morally justified. Storage boxes, notebooks, aroma diffusers, plain shirts, refillable bottles, and organisational accessories are framed less as indulgences than as components of a rational and orderly lifestyle. Ethical value becomes attached not to material reduction itself, but to the manner in which consumption is visually organised and emotionally experienced.

MUJI's development therefore reflects a broader transformation within contemporary consumer culture. A language once associated with anti-excess, anonymity, and restraint has become fully integrated into scalable lifestyle consumption. The significance of MUJI lies not in rejecting consumer capitalism outright, but in demonstrating how minimalism can reorganise consumption into forms that appear calm, ethical, and socially responsible while still sustaining continual acquisition. What emerges is not emptiness in any philosophical sense, but a highly aestheticised management of abundance. MUJI's current challenge is therefore not failure, but over-coherence. Its discourse of restraint and minimalist ordinariness has become highly recognisable, stable, and commercially codified. The ambiguity that once distinguished the brand from the excesses of late twentieth-century fashion culture has gradually hardened into a predictable visual formula. Minimalism itself is no longer oppositional. It has become institutionalised across fashion, hospitality, technology, and lifestyle branding more broadly.

As a result, MUJI increasingly competes not only with fast fashion retailers, but also with the widespread mainstreaming of minimalist aesthetics. When restraint becomes a reproducible market style rather than a critical ethical position, its disruptive capacity weakens.

The brand risks functioning less as an alternative to consumer excess than as a familiar and nostalgic version of minimalist consumption adapted to contemporary retail culture.

If MUJI is to remain culturally relevant within sustainability discourse, it may need to move beyond the aesthetic performance of reduction toward more substantive forms of material accountability: fewer product lines, slower cycles of expansion, shorter supply chains, and greater

transparency regarding labour and production. At present, however, the company primarily offers consumers a discourse of ethical reassurance. Consumption is reorganised aesthetically and morally, but not fundamentally diminished. MUJI therefore illustrates a broader contradiction within contemporary consumer culture.

Anti-consumerist language does not necessarily reduce accumulation; it can also legitimise new forms of it. MUJI-style accumulation remains visually disciplined, orderly, and socially acceptable. Consumers may continue purchasing extensively while still perceiving themselves as restrained and ethically responsible. The aesthetics of emptiness thus risk obscuring the persistence of material expansion rather than confronting it directly. The cultural significance of MUJI lies not simply in its minimalist aesthetics, but in how those aesthetics reorganised the experience of consumption itself.

By presenting commodities through neutral colours, unobtrusive packaging, orderly display systems, and the rhetoric of functional simplicity, MUJI helped construct a form of accumulation that appeared calm, rational, and morally disciplined. Consumers could continue purchasing extensively while feeling detached from the excess traditionally associated with consumer culture.

Minimalism did not eliminate abundance; it rendered abundance visually quiet and psychologically guiltless.

This proved to be an extraordinarily influential retail logic. From the 2000s onward, the broader retail environment increasingly absorbed and reproduced MUJI's discourse of restrained consumption. In apparel, retailers such as UNIQLO, H&M, and later fast-fashion "basics" lines adopted neutral palettes, simplified silhouettes, and functional everyday wear marketed through the language of practicality and essentialism. In furniture and household goods, IKEA and regional retailers such as Nitori integrated minimalist interiors and organisational aesthetics into mass-market consumption at highly competitive prices. Even low-cost retailers and dollar stores, including Daiso, increasingly adopted MUJI-like visual conventions: subdued packaging, simplified typography, transparent storage systems, and everyday organisational products framed as tools of orderly living.

What spread globally was therefore not "nothingness" in any philosophical sense, but

a commercially adaptable discourse of aesthetic restraint. Minimalist design became detached from its earlier associations with critique, reduction, or anti-consumerism and transformed into a highly scalable retail language capable of supporting mass consumption itself.

Across industries, consumers were encouraged to perceive simplified commodities not as decorative excess, but as practical necessities and instruments of self-management.

This shift fundamentally altered MUJI's cultural position. The company once distinguished itself through the rejection of conspicuous branding and visual excess. However, once restraint, simplicity, and ordinariness became dominant retail conventions, MUJI's aesthetic language no longer appeared disruptive or singular.

The visual markers that once differentiated the brand—neutral colours, “good basics,” functional storage, plain packaging, uncluttered retail space—became industry standards reproduced across multiple price points and market sectors.

As minimalist consumption became normalised, MUJI also faced a deeper conceptual problem.

The more successfully its discourse circulated, the less exclusive or philosophically meaningful it became. What had once appeared as an alternative to consumer excess increasingly functioned as one of consumer capitalism's most effective contemporary forms.

Consumers were not asked to reject accumulation, but to accumulate more quietly, more neatly, and with less visible guilt.

In this context, MUJI's anti-consumerist rhetoric risks losing much of its critical force (Nikkei Design 2015). The issue is not simply that competitors copied its aesthetics, but that the broader retail industry successfully incorporated minimalist restraint into mainstream market logic. Minimalism became not a challenge to consumer culture, but one of its most adaptable and commercially productive languages.

At the same time, philosophical discussions of nothingness, emptiness, and restraint provide a broader cultural and intellectual context for understanding why MUJI's aesthetic language resonates so strongly within Japanese and global consumer culture (Heisig 2001).

However, these philosophical frameworks should not be mistaken for direct explanations of MUJI's actual production systems, labour practices, or environmental performance.

Rather, they illuminate the cultural vocabulary through which MUJI's discourse becomes meaningful and emotionally persuasive to consumers.

CONCLUSION: MINIMALISM, NOTHINGNESS, AND THE QUIET MANAGEMENT OF CONSUMPTION

This article has argued that MUJI's significance lies not simply in minimalist design, but in the way it transformed restraint, ordinariness, and “nothingness” into a commercially scalable lifestyle discourse (Kawamura 2005).

Earlier sections examined how MUJI's visual language—plain packaging, muted colours, generic typography, orderly retail presentation, and the rejection of conspicuous branding—functioned semiotically as a refusal of fashion excess and spectacle. However, the analysis also demonstrated the limits of interpreting MUJI too directly through Buddhist philosophy. Concepts such as emptiness (空, *kū*) and nothingness (無, *mu*) are more useful here as cultural and intellectual contexts than as literal explanations of MUJI's retail environments or corporate practices.

MUJI stores are not spaces of absence in any strict philosophical sense; rather, they selectively mobilise culturally familiar associations with calmness, reduction, restraint, and moral moderation.

Through discourse analysis, this article further demonstrated how these aesthetic associations became translated into an everyday ethics of consumption. MUJI does not fundamentally ask consumers to withdraw from consumer culture. Instead, it reorganises consumption into forms that appear rational, disciplined, and emotionally non-excessive.

Minimalist commodities occupy space quietly, reducing the visual intensity and psychological guilt traditionally associated with accumulation. Consumers may continue purchasing extensively while still perceiving themselves as restrained and ethically responsible. In this sense, MUJI's most important innovation was not emptiness itself, but the aesthetic management of abundance.

This logic proved highly influential within global retail culture. The minimalist discourse once associated with MUJI was rapidly absorbed by fast fashion retailers, furniture chains, dollar stores, lifestyle brands, and digital consumer culture more broadly.

Neutral palettes, uncluttered packaging, “good

basics,” organisational products, and calm retail atmospheres became mainstream commercial conventions rather than alternative values. Competitors ranging from IKEA and Nitori to Daiso and fast-fashion basics lines reproduced versions of MUJI’s restrained aesthetic while often operating at larger scales and lower price points. What circulated globally was therefore not Buddhist nothingness, but a commercially effective language through which consumption could appear quieter, cleaner, and more morally legitimate. This diffusion also reveals a deeper irony at the centre of MUJI’s identity.

The absence of strong logos and overt branding initially distinguished MUJI from late twentieth-century fashion culture, yet this same visual modesty also weakened the distinctiveness and protectability of its aesthetic identity. The widespread emergence of copycats, imitations, and “MUJI-like” retail formats—particularly across East Asian markets—raises a broader philosophical and legal question: can “no logo” itself function as a proprietary logo?

MUJI’s identity depends precisely on qualities that resist singular ownership: neutrality, anonymity, and ordinariness. The more successfully these qualities circulate, the more difficult they become to contain within a single brand.

At the same time, MUJI’s quietness may also explain its relative immunity from the scale of backlash and greenwashing criticism directed toward many global lifestyle corporations. Unlike brands that aggressively promote themselves as morally transformative or environmentally redemptive, MUJI rarely makes expansive ethical claims. Its communication strategy relies instead on understatement, atmosphere, and modesty. As a result, the company avoids presenting itself as a heroic solution to consumer capitalism and therefore reduces the discursive terrain upon which accusations of hypocrisy can easily attach. Ethical contradiction is not resolved so much as softened aesthetically.

The broader implication of MUJI’s case extends beyond a single company. It reveals an important transformation within contemporary sustainability discourse itself. Under advanced consumer capitalism, ethical critique is increasingly absorbed into aesthetic experience and lifestyle management. Sustainability becomes recognisable through visual coherence, spatial calmness, and behavioural moderation rather than through structural changes

to production, labour, logistics, or material reduction.

Consumers are encouraged to perform restraint aesthetically while remaining fully integrated within systems of continuous acquisition. MUJI therefore illustrates a central paradox of contemporary minimalist culture: the closer anti-consumerist discourse moves toward the centre of market logic, the more effectively it can facilitate consumption itself.

What began as a critique of branding and excess has gradually become one of consumer capitalism’s most adaptable and commercially successful aesthetic languages.

The enduring question is no longer whether minimalism can resist consumer culture, but whether any discourse of restraint can remain critical once it becomes fully institutionalised as lifestyle consumption.

CAPTIONS

[Fig.01] Wood and clothes in its indoors poster, signals process rather than perfection—an object that has not been fully aestheticised,

Rice color - while pale and white with warmth -meanwhile, carries deep cultural resonance in Japan as a staple of survival rather than indulgence.

[Fig.02] Muji in Bangkok One shopping center.

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EXPERIENCING

FABRIC FIRST, LANGUAGE LAST?

REFRAMING FASHION'S EPISTEMIC INFRASTRUCTURES THROUGH MATERIAL INTELLIGENCE

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Abstract

This paper examines how certain contemporary design practices constitute a form of material intelligence, situated, process-based knowledge-making that emerges through sustained engagement with materials, and that operates at the productive periphery of fashion's dominant discursive economy. Through close readings of three designer practices, Elena Velez, Craig Green, and Amber Jae Slooten, the paper argues that fabric, whether physical or computational, functions not merely as a medium of expression but as a site of epistemic labour: a way of producing knowledge that precedes and exceeds its linguistic translation. Drawing on feminist materialism (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2018), affect theory (Ahmed, 2004), anthropologies of making (Ingold, 2013), resonance theory (Rosa, 2020), and posthuman critique (Haraway, 2016; Bratton, 2016), the paper develops three provisional analytical categories, collapse, ritual, and speculation, to distinguish the distinct epistemic orientations enacted by each practice. Velez transforms industrial debris into a feminist ethics of material survival; Green constructs knowledge through ritual constraint and the patient correspondence of hand and cloth; and Slooten tests the framework's limits by asking what material intelligence looks like when the material is computational. Together, these practices challenge fashion studies to attend not only to what fashion signifies, but to what it makes possible through making, and to recognise design practice as a form of situated inquiry that fashion's accelerationist discursive economy consistently renders peripheral. The paper contributes a sharpened set of conceptual tools for this reorientation, building on and extending existing materialist scholarship in fashion studies.

Keywords: *Material intelligence; Posthuman fashion; New materialism; Epistemology; Material practice.*

FABRIC AS COUNTER-LANGUAGE: REFRAMING FASHION'S EPISTEMIC INFRASTRUCTURES

Fashion's dominant public discourse operates through a remarkably efficient semiotic economy. Each season arrives with its lexicon, disruption, sustainability, authenticity, repeated until vocabulary itself becomes performance. Press releases precede patterns; digital renders eclipse seams; meaning circulates primarily through language and image, and the capacity to produce the right words at the right moment has become, for many practitioners and institutions, difficult to distinguish from the capacity to design. Roland Barthes, in his structural analysis of French fashion media, recognised this logic

early. His Fashion System (1967/1983) diagnosed the apparatus by which garments are translated into signs, signs into statements, and statements into cultural value, not a description of design practice itself, but of the discursive infrastructure that surrounds fashion, shapes its reception, and increasingly determines its legitimacy.

Building on Barthes, the editors of this issue identify a further problem: when that infrastructure achieves full structural coherence, it loses what Lotman (1990, p. 129) called its "inner reserves of indeterminacy," the capacity for flexibility and dynamic development. Wild and Berger (2025) draw directly on this argument in framing their call for new critical languages in fashion studies. The system, in this sense, becomes self-sealing.

Fashion studies has, of course, engaged seriously with the material dimensions of fashion — from Daniel Miller's (2010) accounts of cloth and embodied practice to Joanne Entwistle's (2000) work on the dressed body, to Sophie Woodward's (2007) ethnographic attention to wardrobes and the social lives of garments. The field has not ignored the material. But a specific problem persists: within fashion's contemporary discursive economy, particularly in media, marketing, and industry rhetoric, the intelligence embedded in design process remains largely invisible.

It is absorbed into the language of branding, aestheticised into image, or flattened by the accelerationist logic of seasonal novelty.

The knowledge produced in the studio, through the resistance of cloth, the behaviour of seams, the decisions made in sustained negotiation with materials, does not fit the communicative formats through which fashion currently circulates and legitimates itself.

The paper's second operative term, counter-language, used here not in the linguistic sense of an alternative vocabulary, but in the critical sense of a practice that operates against the grain of a dominant sign system, names the relation between material intelligence and fashion's dominant discursive economy. It is not a metaphor for fabric-as-speech, but a critical category: a way of designating design practices that engage material

process as a mode of inquiry operating from what Lotman (1990) calls the productive periphery of the semiosphere, those marginal zones where new sign systems emerge through contradiction, interruption, and noise rather than through the smooth reproduction of existing codes. Counter-language, in this sense, does not reject fashion's semiotic system from outside; it works at its edges, where coherence breaks down and alternative forms of knowing become possible.

Three practices are examined in detail.

Elena Velez works through the collapse of American industrial infrastructure, producing garments that generate knowledge from debris, failure, and feminist endurance (Dodd, 2024).

Craig Green constructs an epistemology of ritual and resonance through repetitive, constrained making that treats fabric as dialogic partner rather than passive medium (Chilvers, 2023).

Amber Jae Slooten, through her work with The Fabricant, tests the limits of the framework itself: whether material intelligence can survive digital translation, and whether computational simulation sustains the same form of process-based knowing or produces something categorically different (Fairs, 2021). Together, these practices do not constitute a movement or a shared style.

They offer three distinct epistemic orientations, collapse, ritual, and speculation, which this paper treats as provisional analytical categories



Fig. 01

derived from close engagement with the practices themselves rather than as a universal typology (Fig. 01). Drawing from feminist materialism (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2018), affect theory (Ahmed, 2004), anthropologies of making (Ingold, 2013), resonance theory (Rosa, 2020), and posthuman critique (Haraway, 2016; Bratton, 2016), the paper contributes to fashion studies' ongoing engagement with materiality by sharpening the conceptual tools available for recognising design practice as a form of situated inquiry. Rather than proposing a new epistemological system, it argues for a reorientation of critical attention: from what fashion signifies to what it makes possible, and from the discursive surfaces of fashion to the material processes through which it produces knowledge that those surfaces cannot fully contain.

METHODOLOGY

This paper develops its argument through close readings of three contemporary design practices, selected because each engages material process as a primary mode of inquiry rather than as a means to a representational end. The analysis draws from feminist materialism (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2018), systemic design theory (Escobar, 2018), and speculative cultural analysis (Haraway, 2016) as its principal theoretical frameworks. The selection of cases is purposive rather than comprehensive: Velez, Green, and Slooten are not proposed as representative of a trend or generation, but as practices that place particular pressure on the paper's central questions, about what material intelligence is, how it operates, and what it produces, in meaningfully distinct ways. Velez tests the framework under conditions of physical and industrial collapse; Green under conditions of ritual constraint and repetition; Slooten under conditions of full digital mediation, where the physical materiality that underpins the other two cases is absent. The third case is included precisely because it is the most difficult for the argument, not the most convenient. It is worth noting that none of these three practices operates within mainstream or mass-market fashion. All three occupy restricted positions within fashion's field, working at the intersection of practice, critique, and experiment. This is not a limitation but a condition of the argument: it is precisely at fashion's productive periphery, rather than at its commercial centre, that the forms of material intelligence this paper examines become most visible.

Close reading, as used here, draws on the interpretive tradition in cultural and design studies that treats practice as a form of text, not in the sense that making can be reduced to language, but in the sense that it can be read for its logic, its internal tensions, and its implicit claims about how knowledge is produced. In practice this means attending to the material choices designers make and the constraints they accept or refuse; the process documentation, interviews, and show notes through which designers articulate their own methods; and the critical literature through which those methods can be situated theoretically. Designer statements, interviews, and press materials are treated as primary evidence about process and practice, read alongside critical literature to situate and theorise the epistemic orientations they describe, rather than accepted as self-sufficient accounts.

Theoretical concepts are operationalised as analytical lenses rather than interpretive grids. Barad's intra-action, Ingold's correspondence, Rosa's resonance, and Ahmed's affective economies are each applied at the points where they illuminate something specific about the practice under analysis, and are not applied uniformly across all three cases. This selective deployment is deliberate: the argument is that different forms of material intelligence require different theoretical instruments, and that forcing all three practices through the same conceptual framework would flatten precisely the distinctions the analysis seeks to draw.

The author writes as a designer-researcher, from within the pedagogical and material culture of fashion education. This position shapes the inquiry in ways that are acknowledged rather than bracketed: familiarity with studio practice informs the readings of process, and engagement with fabric as a speculative and political medium informs the theoretical commitments. The paper does not claim neutrality. It claims rigour, in the precision of its conceptual definitions, the specificity of its textual evidence, and the honesty of its claims about what the analysis can and cannot establish.

ELENA VELEZ: COLLAPSE AS EPISTEMIC METHOD

Elena Velez's work emerges from the wreckage of the American industrial heartland and from a maternal lineage of labour at sea. Born in Milwaukee to a single mother who captained ships

on the Great Lakes, Velez translates that biography of grit and precarity into couture that feels forged rather than sewn. Her garments, corsets cut from waxed canvas, skirts suspended from rebar, bodices assembled from salvaged parachutes, register a politics of making that refuses polish. In an industry obsessed with surface perfection, Velez's practice begins with fracture. She turns collapse itself into method, demonstrating that material breakdown can be a form of knowledge. This section reads that method through feminist materialism and affect theory, arguing that Velez's practice constitutes a form of material intelligence in which the epistemic content is inseparable from the physical residue of making.

Rosi Braidotti's posthuman feminist philosophy provides a framework for reading this practice as an affirmative ethics of material survival. For Braidotti, the subject is "relational, embodied, and embedded, affective and accountable" (Braidotti, 2018). Velez's studio is precisely such an embedded ecology: industrial detritus, domestic craft, and digital mediation coexist without hierarchy (Fig. 02). Her collections construct what Braidotti calls cartographies, situated mappings of power relations that trace how bodies, matter, and social

forces are entangled, in which matter itself thinks and remembers (Braidotti, 2018, pp. 2–4). Steel rods and acetate sheeting become active agents in these cartographies, bearing the traces of gendered labour and regional decline. They are not props in a story about the Midwest; they are the story, continuing the material life of a region that late-capitalist fashion prefers to forget.

If Braidotti gives us a metaphysics of matter, Sara Ahmed offers an affective politics through which to feel it. Ahmed argues that emotions are "impressions left on the surfaces of bodies" (2004, p. 1) and that collective feelings organise social worlds. Velez's work operates through precisely such impressions: rust marks, torn satin, scorched seams. These surfaces do not decorate but record; they capture exhaustion, defiance, and maternal care as tactile residues. Her shows are not celebrations of empowerment but choreographies of vulnerability, "the tender and terrible paradoxes" of motherhood and survival, as she herself describes them (Bobb, 2023). Ahmed's notion of feminist unhappiness, the refusal to conform to a narrative of cheerful productivity (pp. 68–69), resonates here. Velez stages the unhappy labour of fashion: garments that sag, soil, and cry out against the



Fig. 02

fantasy of effortless creation.

Karen Barad's theory of intra-action helps illuminate how this affective materiality becomes epistemic. For Barad, "phenomena are produced through specific material-discursive practices" (2007, p. 170); meaning arises from entanglement rather than representation. In Velez's atelier, material and narrative are inseparable. A corset built from industrial canvas does not signify resilience; it performs it, pulling story and substance into the same gesture. Every weld and stain is a proposition about who gets to make, and under what conditions. To work with damaged cloths and metals is to think through them, to recognise, as Tim Ingold suggests, that making is "a correspondence with materials" (2013, p. 31) rather than their domination.

This correspondence is not only aesthetic but social. Angela McRobbie's critique of the creative industries exposes how the rhetoric of individuality conceals structural precarity, especially for women (2015, pp. 17–18). Velez refuses this neoliberal fantasy of the solitary designer-entrepreneur. Her practice is collective and infrastructural: she collaborates with local metalworkers, seamstresses, and industrial suppliers, re-activating dormant skills within a post-manufacturing economy. The resulting garments are propositions for what McRobbie might call an alternative cultural economy, one grounded in craft, solidarity, and embodied labour rather than spectacle. Each piece literalises Fletcher's "craft of use" (2016, p. 23): garments are not static artefacts but evolving tools, bearing the wear and repair of lived experience. Braidotti's affirmative ethics insists that transformation begins in disintegration, the breaking of anthropocentric and patriarchal forms (Braidotti, 2018). Velez's garments enact this break materially: seams unpick themselves, hems fray into threads, silhouettes refuse vertical aspiration. Out of this disorder she cultivates what this paper calls feminist material intelligence, a capacity to produce knowledge from the debris of systems that have failed to sustain life. Ahmed's "affective economies" (2004, p. 8) clarify how such intelligence circulates: emotions, like fabrics, move between bodies, accumulating meaning through contact. When audiences respond viscerally to the grit and fragility of Velez's collections, they participate in this economy of feeling, recognising, in her materials, the textures of their own experience.

CRAIG GREEN: RITUAL, RESONANCE, AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF REPETITION

Craig Green's practice unfolds as a sustained inquiry into the epistemic possibilities of constraint. His studio, half sewing room, half workshop, produces garments that hover between uniform and relic: quilted armour, kite-like tunics, padded structures that cling to the body as though protecting and restraining it at once.

Green's formal language arises from labour, cutting, folding, binding, and from a deliberate refusal of excess. "Limitation," he insists, "is the key to creativity... there are so many possibilities even in the simplest things" (Mower, 2023). This section argues that Green's iterative, constrained making constitutes a specific epistemic orientation, one in which knowledge emerges not from innovation or rupture but from the sustained, dialogic relationship between a practitioner and their materials. Tim Ingold's anthropology of craft helps explain why Green's garments feel contemplative rather than spectacular. Ingold describes making as "a correspondence with materials, a process of answering back to what they do and demand" (2013, p. 31). In Green's collections, cotton, canvas, and jersey speak with their own tonalities: they fold, resist, and crease into meaning.

Sewing becomes a dialogue rather than a design imposition. A padded coat or tented smock is never an object of control but a record of encounter, a garment that knows something the designer learns by touch. Ingold's notion of "thinking through making" (p. 21) finds literal expression in Green's studio, where sketches often begin as draped experiments, the idea emerging from fabric's behaviour rather than from image or moodboard. This slow, dialogic relation to matter situates Green against the acceleration of contemporary fashion. In *The Uncontrollability of the World*, Hartmut Rosa argues that modern societies seek to make the world available, attainable, and usable, thereby extinguishing the very resonance that gives life meaning (2020, pp. 10–12).

Green's work restores that resonance: his garments do not master materials but let them vibrate. He often speaks of wanting viewers to feel something, "even if they don't like it" (AnOther, 2023).

Feeling, for Rosa, marks the point where subject and world meet in mutual transformation. The padded sculptures that open his shows, neither



Fig. 03

clothing nor prop, create such moments of shared vibration, producing empathy through weight rather than spectacle. (Fig. 03)

This ethic of resonance also reshapes masculinity. Green's silhouettes are martial but tender, uniforms remade for softness. "Tea towels decorated with tractors and fire engines," he once recalled, were his childhood images of masculinity (Blanks, 2024). His response has been to re-engineer those codes into garments that cry rather than command. Quilted jackets recall protective gear but read as emotional armour; strings and ties appear more as gestures of care than control. Within the framework of Juri Lotman's semiotics, such gestures operate as explosions, small ruptures that generate new cultural syntax (1990, p. 13). Green's fashion detonates the brittle sign of the heroic male and replaces it with an affective figure of the maker, bound to his tools and fabrics.

For Karen Barad, matter and meaning are entangled in their very being (2007, p. 33). Green's

practice makes that entanglement visible. When he soaks fabric in water to mould it over wooden forms, "being covered in water is our job at the moment" (Mower, 2023), he laughed, he performs Barad's intra-action: the garment and the maker co-produce each other. Each show becomes a temporary field of relational matter: wet cloth, moving bodies, audience breath. Meaning arises not from narrative but from participation in that field. A legitimate question is whether the counter-language of fabric exists independently of the maker, or only through the act of assembly, styling, and presentation. Green's practice suggests the two are inseparable: fabric does not think independently of the maker, nor does making operate on inert material. The intelligence is produced in the encounter, which is precisely what Barad's intra-action describes. Fabric and practice are co-constitutive; neither is the prior term. Ritual labour is the hinge of this epistemology. The repetition of quilting, strapping, and padding transforms production into devotion. Green has said that "making uniforms is about belonging" (Chilvers, 2023), suggesting that discipline itself can be affective. The studio operates like a monastic workshop: each task finite, purposeful, yet open to improvisation. Rosa would call this resonant practice, a form of work that "touches the world and is touched back by it" (2020, p. 44). In the contemporary fashion system, which fetishises novelty, Green's insistence on iterative making becomes a quiet form of resistance, a temporal slowing that values continuity over acceleration. Angela McRobbie's critique of the creative economy clarifies the political dimension of this ritual. She notes that fashion often demands "aestheticised entrepreneurialism," turning designers into brands (2015, p. 17). Green refuses that posture. His public persona is deliberately reticent; interviews return to teamwork, process, and humility. "It's like being in my home," he said of his studio shows (Blanks, 2024). This domestic metaphor reclaims production as care work, folding masculine authorship back into collective making. In his studio, vulnerability replaces charisma as a measure of leadership. Green's resonance extends from the workshop to the runway. Each presentation functions as a structured encounter between fabric, body, and audience. The opening and closing looks, figures bound in vast textile structures, read as temporary communities of movement rather than as spectacle. They echo Ingold's observation that "lines of

making are lines of life” (2013, p. 40): the threads, straps, and cords that tether models together literalise the relational logic of the practice itself. The garments’ physical weight and resistance, the way they drag, demand space, slow movement, invite spectators into an embodied temporality that stands against the instantaneity of digital fashion. What Green’s practice demonstrates, in the terms of this paper, is that material intelligence does not require novelty or rupture. It can emerge equally from repetition, from the patient accumulation of knowledge through iterative making, from the kind of sustained correspondence with materials that Ingold describes as thinking-through rather than thinking-about. Green’s uniforms discipline only to connect; his rituals of labour produce not a new vocabulary but a deepened relation to an existing one. That deepening is itself an epistemic achievement and one that fashion’s accelerationist economy consistently undervalues. A fair question is whether this form of material intelligence is perceptible beyond the designer and a narrow community of practice. Green’s work suggests it need not be exclusively so: the affective dimension of his shows, the weight, the friction, the slowness, is available to any embodied spectator. The knowledge may not be fully articulable in language, but it is not therefore inaccessible.

AMBER JAE SLOOTEN / THE FABRICANT: SPECULATION, COMPUTATIONAL MATERIALITY, AND DIGITAL CLOTH

If Elena Velez and Craig Green demonstrate what material intelligence looks like when it is physically immediate, held in rust, stitch, and water-soaked canvas, and when the framework is working under its most favourable conditions, Amber Jae Slooten poses the framework’s most demanding question: what happens to material intelligence when the material is computational?

As co-founder of The Fabricant, the world’s first entirely digital fashion house, Slooten describes her project as “a new material reality” (Fairs, 2021) where fabric becomes code and the body becomes an interface. Her avatars move with an uncanny fluency, their garments flickering between texture and light. This section argues that Slooten’s practice does not contradict the paper’s central argument about fabric as a site of knowledge production, it tests it, and in doing so clarifies what material intelligence actually requires. (Fig. 04)

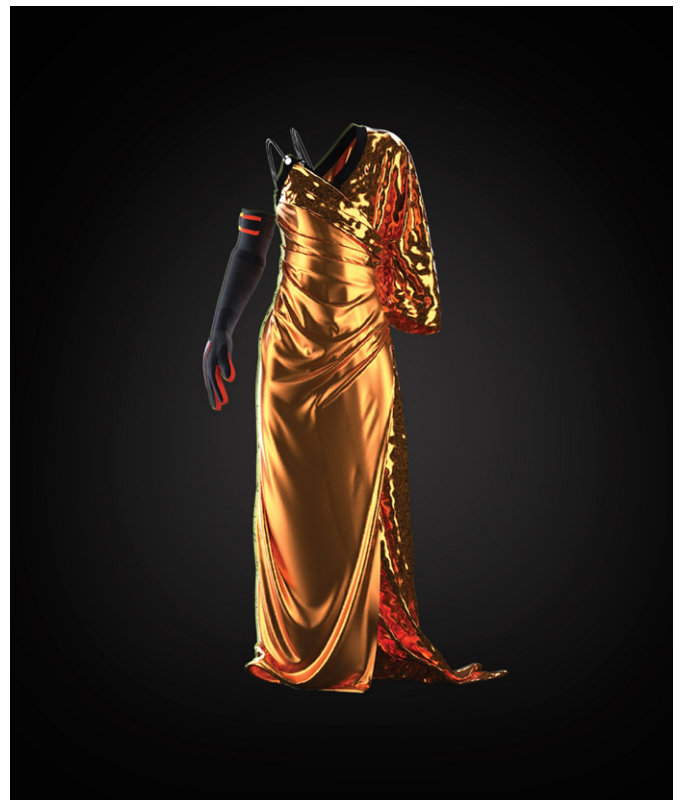


Fig. 04

The test begins with Kate Crawford’s (2021) insistence that digital systems are never immaterial. Crawford argues that AI and computational infrastructure constitute “a planetary network built from earth, labour, and data” (p. 5), dependent on mined minerals, global supply chains, carbon-intensive servers, and the invisible work of programmers and data workers.

The Fabricant’s aesthetic of weightlessness, its rhetoric of “non-physical fashion” (Fairs, 2021), rests on precisely these material foundations. This is not a reason to dismiss Slooten’s practice, but it is an essential starting point: the digital is always already material, even when its materiality is concealed. Crawford’s framework positions computational systems not as the absence of matter but as a different, distributed, and largely invisible form of it, one whose political and ecological implications are, if anything, more consequential than those of physical textiles.

This reframing allows Slooten’s studio process to be read differently. Her work begins with simulated draping in CLO3D or Blender, where the software’s physics engine introduces unpredictable folds, tensions, and falls that the designer must negotiate rather than control. This is not the passive

execution of a pre-formed idea; it is a form of correspondence with a computational material that has its own behaviour, its own resistance, its own affordances. Karen Barad's insistence that matter is "not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency" (2007, p. 183) applies here with particular force: the digital cloth enacts agency through simulation, responding to parameters in ways that exceed the designer's intentions. Each render is an intra-action between human decision and machinic suggestion. The result is a form of speculative material intelligence, process-based, negotiated, and epistemically productive, that operates through code rather than fibre, but is structurally analogous to the physical making practices described in earlier sections. Where it differs is in what it produces.

Velez's collapse generates knowledge through residue, the stain, the fray, the structural failure that remains. Green's ritual generates knowledge through duration, the accumulated memory of repetitive making held in the body and the cloth. Slooten's speculation generates knowledge through simulation: the exploration of forms, affects, and relational possibilities that do not yet exist in the physical world and may never need to. Donna Haraway's figure of the cyborg, "a creature of social reality and fiction" (2016, p. 6), born from the productive collapse of binaries between human and machine, nature and culture, offers the most useful lens here. The Fabricant's avatars are cyborgian in precisely this sense: they are neither representations of existing bodies nor pure fantasy, but speculative propositions about what bodies, garments, and the relations between them might become. To dress an avatar is, as Haraway suggests of all cyborg practice, to perform "ironic faith," believing in the liberatory potential of the technology while remaining alert to its complicity in the systems it inhabits (Haraway, 2016).

Benjamin Bratton's account of the Stack, the layered planetary megastructure of Earth, Cloud, City, Address, Interface, and User, provides the infrastructural map for this practice (2016, p. 5). The Fabricant's garments exist as software objects in the Cloud, circulate through digital platforms at the Interface layer, and are worn by the User, an avatar that is itself a software construct. Slooten's claim that "we are designing the new digital bodies we will inhabit" (Freunde von Freunden, 2022) situates this work within Bratton's vision of users nested within planetary computation. But where Bratton analyses this as an emergent form of

sovereignty, Slooten approaches it as a question of intimacy and care: what does it mean to dress a body that exists only in code, and can that act produce genuine affective and epistemic content? The question of resonance is, here, genuinely open. Rosa (2020) defines resonance as the moment when subject and world meet in mutual transformation (p. 44). In The Fabricant's digital shows, bodies do not touch, and the physics are simulated rather than felt. Yet designers report negotiating with the behaviour of the software in ways that feel dialogic; viewers describe affective responses to garments that exist only as rendered light. Whether this constitutes resonance in Rosa's full sense, or whether it is a mediated approximation of it, is a question the paper does not need to resolve, but it is one that Slooten's practice makes newly pressable. The limits of material intelligence under conditions of full digital mediation are themselves a productive site of inquiry. This section does not argue that digital practice is equivalent to physical making; it argues that it is the most demanding test of whether the concept of material intelligence has genuine analytical reach beyond its most intuitive applications.

What remains important is that Slooten's work does not resolve the tensions it inhabits.

The Fabricant's renders rely on carbon-intensive computation; its earlier engagement with NFTs fed speculative financial economies; and its rhetoric of inclusivity and decentralised authorship risks, as Haraway warned of all cyborg politics, reproducing "the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (Haraway, 2016). These are not incidental complications. They are the conditions under which speculative material intelligence operates in the digital domain and attending to them honestly is part of what the close reading of this practice requires. The challenge is not to reject the digital as a site of material intelligence, but to hold its promises and its costs in the same analytical frame. In the wider argument of this paper, Slooten's practice completes a movement from the physically immediate to the computationally speculative. Velez finds knowledge in collapse; Green in ritual; Slooten in simulation. Each redefines what it means to think through fabric.

For The Fabricant, fabric is computed rather than woven, but it is not, for that reason, epistemically empty. It still demands negotiation, still resists simple control, still produces knowledge that exceeds the intentions brought to it. That, this

paper argues, is what material intelligence looks like at fashion's speculative periphery.

MATERIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE PRODUCTIVE PERIPHERY: TOWARD A CRITICAL REORIENTATION

Across the practices of Elena Velez, Craig Green, and Amber Jae Slooten, fabric emerges as more than matter or medium, it functions as a mode of inquiry, a form of situated knowledge-making that operates at the productive edges of fashion's dominant discursive economy. Each designer refuses the smoothness of fashion's semiotic grammar: they work through friction, failure, iteration, and code to produce knowledge that cannot be reduced to slogans, campaigns, or visual polish. This concluding section draws the three case studies into direct comparison, identifies what they share and where they diverge, and repositions their collective significance within the theoretical framework established at the outset.

The clearest point of convergence is temporal. Velez, Green, and Slooten each refuse fashion's accelerationist logic, the fantasy of seamless production, instant response, and frictionless engagement. Velez works through decay and duration, allowing industrial materials to carry their own historical time. Green works through repetition and ritual, treating the iterative act of making as epistemically productive in itself. Slooten works through latency and simulation, inhabiting a digital temporality that is neither immediate nor embodied but is nonetheless affectively charged. Rosa's (2020) concept of resonance, the responsive, dialogic mode of being with the world that resists acceleration, applies differently to each, but all three practices enact a version of it. What links them is not style but a shared orientation toward slowness, uncertainty, and material resistance as generative conditions.

They diverge, however, in what their respective forms of material intelligence produce.

Velez's practice of collapse generates knowledge through breakdown: her garments are propositions about survival, feminist endurance, and the politics of who gets to make and under what conditions.

The epistemic content is inseparable from the material residue, rust, fraying, scorched seams are not illustrations of an argument but the argument itself, made physical. Green's ritual practice

generates knowledge through relation: between hand and cloth, maker and process, garment and body. Slooten's speculative practice generates knowledge through a different kind of entanglement: between human intention and computational behaviour, between the physics of simulation and the affects it nonetheless produces.

The material is not fabric but code, and yet, as Barad (2007, p. 183) insists, matter is "not a thing but a doing," the digital cloth enacts agency, introduces unpredictability, and demands negotiation in ways that are structurally analogous to physical making, even if categorically distinct. This divergence matters for how the three categories, collapse, ritual, and speculation, should be understood. They are not stages in a progression, nor positions on a spectrum. They are distinct epistemic orientations, each with its own logic, each illuminating a different dimension of what material intelligence can mean in contemporary practice. Their value as analytical categories lies precisely in this distinctiveness: they allow us to ask not just whether a design practice engages materiality, but how, toward what ends, and with what relationship to the discursive economy that surrounds it.

Situating these practices within fashion studies requires care. Bourdieu's (1993) analysis of the field of cultural production shows how symbolic capital accumulates through position-taking within a field structured by competing logics, commercial versus autonomous, mass-produced versus restricted. Within fashion's field, the logic of the restricted subfield, where cultural legitimacy rather than commercial reach is the primary stake, does create conditions in which certain forms of knowledge, particularly those that resist easy communication, are structurally devalued. Rocamora (2009) traces a related dynamic in her analysis of Paris fashion media, showing how the city's fashion press constructs and reproduces a particular image of fashion that marginalises alternative practices and non-Western aesthetics. Neither Bourdieu nor Rocamora argues directly that embodied or material knowledge is suppressed by linguistic forms; but both provide frameworks for understanding the structural conditions under which material intelligence, as described in this paper, tends to remain peripheral, visible within restricted subcultural circuits but largely illegible to fashion's dominant self-description.

That illegibility is itself significant. As Wild (2024)

argues, fashion's dominant discourses, structured by Western aesthetic paradigms, English-language media, and the commercial imperatives of global industry, consistently marginalise forms of knowing that do not translate into its communicative formats. This structural condition has been addressed within fashion studies specifically by Smelik (2018), whose account of new materialism in fashion argues that the field has been slow to theorise the agency of materials and technologies on their own terms, rather than as surfaces for the inscription of cultural meaning. Material intelligence, as this paper defines it, is one such form. By attending to the epistemic labour embedded in the practices of Velez, Green, and Slooten, this paper does not claim to resolve that structural problem. It claims something more modest: that the conceptual tools of fashion studies can be sharpened to recognise what material intelligence is and does, and that close engagement with design practice at fashion's productive periphery offers one route toward that sharpening. The implications extend to fashion research and pedagogy alike. In scholarship, the argument supports a turn toward fashion-as-process: attending to material duration, iterative making, and epistemic entanglement alongside the interpretation of objects and images. In education, it proposes the studio not merely as a site of production but as a thinking environment, one in which students negotiate the ethical, sensory, and political implications of material decisions in real time. These are not large claims. But they are, this paper argues, grounded ones.

CAPTIONS

[Fig.01] Comparative composite illustrating epistemic modes of *collapse, ritual, and speculation* across three design practices. Elena Velez, *Spring 2025 Ready-to-Wear* (2024); Craig Green, *Spring-Summer 2017 Menswear* (2016); The Fabricant, *Season 0* (2021). Composite by Matthew Coats (2025). Courtesy of Elena Velez Studio, Craig Green Studio, and The Fabricant / Dezeen.

[Fig.02] Elena Velez, *Spring 2025 Ready-to-Wear*. Backstage image showing garments marked by environmental staining, distressed textiles, and industrial construction. Photographed by Jason Renaud for *Sleek Magazine* (2024). Courtesy of Elena Velez Studio.

[Fig.03] Craig Green, *Spring-Summer 2017 Menswear*. Canvas ensemble with contrast lacing and soft utility silhouette. Photographed by Indigital Ltd (2016). Courtesy of Craig

Green Studio.

[Fig.04] The Fabricant Studio, *Season 0* digital garment render. Virtual couture dress from *Pluriform* collection, designed by Amber Jae Slooten. Courtesy of The Fabricant / Dezeen (2021).

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QUIET RESISTANCE

THE FASHION TOILE AS MATERIAL LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This paper argues that the fashion toile, usually treated as a temporary prototype and discarded once its function has been fulfilled, can be reconsidered as a material and semiotic artefact with the capacity to generate new forms of fashion meaning. Grounded in *The Draft Archive* (thedraftarchive.com), an ongoing practice-led project collecting discarded toiles from fashion studios, the research explores how unfinished garments may be reassembled, worn and photographed to produce an alternative sartorial and visual language. Drawing on material culture theory, phenomenology and semiotics, the article proposes that the toile occupies a productive position at the edge of fashion's dominant system of meaning. Its unfinished state and neutrality resist the fixed identities, polished surfaces and rapid cycles of consumption that structure contemporary fashion. Through experimental styling and image making, the toile becomes a site through which value, desire and self-representation may be renegotiated. The paper ultimately suggests that the unfinished offers not only an alternative aesthetic, but also a different model for sustainability, one grounded in reinterpretation, continued use and altered practices of meaning-making.

Keywords: *Fashion toile; Material language; Semiotics; Sustainability; Resistance.*

INTRODUCTION -THE FASHION TOILE

If Fashion has been personified as the younger sister of Death, a daughter of Caducity (Fashion Highlight Journal, 2025), perhaps the fashion toile is Fashion's quiet and overlooked sibling, suspended between creation and disappearance yet embodying the possibility of meaning without a fixed reading. Typically understood as a garment-prototype, the toile is rarely afforded lasting aesthetic, cultural or semiotic value. Once its purpose has been fulfilled, it is discarded, its status shifting from design necessity to landfill waste. Yet, in this necessary act of dismissal lies an opportunity for rethinking. What is rendered surplus within one system of meaning may acquire

prime significance within another.

As the fashion industry is increasingly required to confront the environmental and cultural impact of overproduction, the toile matters because of its ubiquitous nature as garment waste and because it is uniquely positioned to reveal alternative ways of assigning meaning and value.

This paper asks whether the fashion toile might be reconsidered as a material and semiotic artefact that establishes a new language rooted in the unfinished, while exposing the limits of fashion's dominant structural frameworks (Miller, 2015; Lotman, 2000). The question is whether the toile can introduce another mode of fashion communication, one in which meaning is provisional rather than predetermined.

This article is based on a practice-led investigation grounded in *The Draft Archive*, an ongoing project that collects discarded fashion toiles from fashion studios to reposition them as sites of material inquiry.

The research essentially asks three questions:

1. How might the toile operate as a material language in its own right, generating a new clothing grammar rather than just serving as an intermediate stage within the design process?
2. What emerges when unfinished garments are reassembled, worn and photographed, particularly within the conventions of fashion image-making?
3. How might this approach challenge dominant assumptions around value, legibility and sustainability in fashion?

As a visual and material framework, *The Draft Archive* explores toiles through experimental assemblages, where unfinished or partial garments are reassigned, producing shapes and silhouettes that resist quick legibility, with styling and photography staging new relationships between material fragments, bodies and meanings. As a mode of expression that favours reconstruction, experimentation and the unfinished, the approach foregrounds the object (toile) before the subject (body).

The project opens a space for an alternative approach to personal styling. It also expands the question of function i.e. how a garment or a piece of fabric can be worn, whilst disrupting established social and sartorial conventions through which style is normally made readable. The aim is to introduce a fashion language where materiality, imperfection and the rudimentary are sites of agency (Smelik, 2018) and value.

FASHION AND AESTHETICS OF PERFECTION

Fashion can be defined as a socially shared form of physical presentation that relies on a set of styles and conventions recognised within society or particular cultural groups (d'Errico & Rigaud, 2025). While it allows some variation for individual expression, fashion typically communicates through stable codes.

A runway look, a campaign photograph present clothing as finished statements.

Whether articulated through luxury, experimentation or deconstruction, garments are expected to appear complete, bodies rendered legible and images stabilised into coherent

depictions. This notion of perfection is not just aesthetic but cultural, structuring how fashion communicates value, identity and desirability. In semiotic terms, fashion achieves authority through the smoothness of its own self-description, a closed system in which garment, image and text mutually reinforce legibility and coherence. Fashion produces meaning through norms whose stability depends on a controlled relationship between signifier and signified (Barthes, 2010b) e.g., where a suit signals gravitas and power, a dress, femininity, and so forth.

Yet, the proposition of an assemblage of toiles as an alternative way of dressing stands to unsettle this syntax. Unlike other wasteful fashion by-products, the fashion toile is key because it already contains the grammar of dress (seams, stitches, buttons, cuffs, etc) and marks of how it has been adjusted to fit the body.

This actively shapes how the body may wear, negotiate and interpret this draft garment. Rather than treating the toile as a silent intermediary in the design process, this research approaches it as a material language.

Language here is understood not only as a system of signs but as the interaction between shared conventions, sensorial experience, affective response and the agency of materials themselves (Smelik, 2018).

The practice-led method works through sourcing and combining toiles into modular sets.

The toiles are collected as prototypes that students no longer need, which would otherwise be discarded, either given to me by fashion technicians throughout the academic year or gathered from studio clear-outs during the summer break.

The styled assemblage aims to generate a new sartorial language, where fragments are reassigned and combined in ways that disrupt their expected function and meaning.

Meaning is no longer secured through established garment categories but created through reconfiguration, ambiguity and imagination.

Photography then produces a second visual syntax, a new way of seeing and interpreting the emerging styling language, where the image determines how those new relationships are framed, read and circulated. With the photographic process, my aim is to move away from established conventions of fashion image-making, instead beginning from an emotive position and leaning into my own sensibility as an image maker by paying attention

to moments of visual harmony and dissonance as they emerge between the toiles and the body.

THE TOILE AS LANGUAGE OF THE UNFINISHED

Alongside a practice-led and object-based methodology, the project adopts an embodied research method with a sensory ethnographic dimension, drawing on my practice as a fashion photographer. This informs the research as a situated and embodied enquiry into why these unfinished forms hold greater imaginative and affective potential than the finished garment. I am intrigued by the idea that toiles are never meant to circulate beyond their purpose and I am curious as to what kinds of material and visual meaning might emerge if they were to re-enter fashion's cultural space.

For me, the unbleached calico often appears more visually compelling than the completed garment as it allows structure, possibility and uncertainty to remain visible and speak without distraction. This curiosity lies in its singular beauty. Unlike other forms of studio waste, the toile preserves the garment's underlying logic of seams, proportion and fit while withholding its intended commodified form. My appreciation of the toile is reminiscent of Aristotle's understanding of beauty as emerging through order, symmetry and the appropriate arrangement of parts (*In Our Time*, 2005).

Yet its irresistible pull is not just located within the object itself. Its beauty also emerges through my response as the beholder (*In Our Time*, 2005). My fascination with toiles comes precisely from this encounter - stripped of colour, branding and retail intent, the toile offers a blank yet materially charged surface onto which individual taste, memory and imagination may be projected.

This perhaps also explains why the toile feels relevant within a wider cultural moment in which luxury fashion is stagnating while vintage and resale continue to grow (Marshall, 2026; Shoaib, 2025). As contemporary consumers become increasingly drawn to archive pieces, one-off garments and objects with visible histories, value appears to be shifting away from novelty and towards singularity, provenance and affective attachment. The toile radicalises this idea.

It is not old or second-hand but a unique object that never fully entered the fashion system in the first place (Brown, 2001).

In its inherent refusal to be final, the toile also

reveals the assumptions through which fashion usually produces meaning. And rather than treating the toile as a silent intermediary, this research approaches it as a rich semiotic object.

Material culture theory also offers a crucial framework here.

As Miller (2015), Gell (1998) and Woodward (2014) suggest, objects participate actively in the production of meaning, shaping behaviour and embodied experience rather than simply reflecting them. From these perspectives, the toile is far from being silent.

The toile communicates through unrefined shapes and layered alterations i.e. iterative traces of labour, intention, correction and re-working.

In this respect, the toile offers a material vocabulary that sits in complete contradiction of fashion's preference for aesthetically sanitised surfaces and coded silhouettes. So, if objects participate in the production of meaning, then the toile's material properties, fragility and imperfections can also speak through embodied interactions.

The toile's transient visibility within the fashion system exposes how fashion actively protects its language of perfection.

The research understands meaning production as emerging through embodied, sensory and material interaction. As an unfinished artefact, the toile's meaning does not solely reside in its visual appearance. The methodology privileges the observation of material qualities (Fig. 01), sensory feedback and interpretive speculation in a final attempt to disrupt and subvert the toile's relationship to the fashion system.

Discarded toiles are handled, worn and reconfigured around the body in improvised arrangements that attempt to deliberately resist resolution. Meaning is understood to arise not through detached visual study but through sensory engagement, bodily negotiation and a refusal to follow the conventional codes of dressing.

This echoes Martin Margiela's and Rei Kawakubo's *modus operandi*, both of whom have used incompleteness, displacement and silhouette disruption to unsettle conventional dress.

Margiela (2014) frequently exposed linings, seams and the hidden architecture of garments, allowing process and construction to remain visible rather than concealed.

Similarly, as introduced by Granata (MoMA, 2017-2018), Kawakubo's Spring/Summer 1997 collection, often referred to as *Lumps and Bumps*,



Fig. 01

disrupted the expected silhouette with padded distortions, producing bodies that appeared unresolved, excessive and outside normative ideals of beauty and fit.

Underpinning this approach, is phenomenology. Drawing from Merleau-Ponty (2023), dress is understood as an extension of bodily perception. When worn, the unfinished toile does not simply represent or confirm an identity, it produces a situation in which the body must adapt, adjust and respond. Sleeves may become wraps, collars unexpected accessories, fragments are reoriented entirely. This is when conventional garment typologies are discarded in favour of ambiguity as an active condition (Fig. 02). The distinctions that fashion grammar relies on such as top and bottom, skirt and trousers, masculine and feminine, are set aside (Fig. 03). Through wearing, the body encounters resistance, dissonance and constraint. Meaning is tested rather than assumed and remains provisional, negotiated through movement and sensation rather than fixed form.

This somatic negotiation aligns with phenomenological approaches that understand knowledge as situated, embodied and relational. Within this framework, photography functions as a tool mitigating my attempts not to fix the assemblage of toile into coherence, instead

attending to serendipitous moments where shape, fold (Deleuze, 1993, as cited in Smelik, 2018), body and material become materially charged and visually exciting through the viewfinder. Images are not intended to resolve toiles into typical recognisable garments or looks but aim to register a process of transformation and how the body may adapt to bring the material to life. In this way, image making becomes an extension of the practice itself. The refusal to fix the visual feedback into familiar tropes operates as a guiding principle. To resolve the toile would be to preclude the very condition under investigation. Incompletion is sustained to keep meaning open.

THE TOILE AT THE EDGE OF FASHION'S SEMIOSPHERE

The experiments staged through *The Draft Archive* project do not just aim to generate alternative looks and images. They also strive to expose the limits of the fashion system's existing language. When garments no longer align with stable categories or recognisable identities, meaning becomes less fixed and more contingent. Leaning into the tension between fashion's demand for resolved products and the toile's refusal of closure reveals its semiotic condition. Unlike finished garments, which operate



Fig. 03



Fig. 02

as resolved signs within fashion's language system, the toile functions as an open sign structure. It does not point toward a singular interpretation but holds multiple meanings simultaneously and may continually be reconfigured.

In Lotman's terms (2000), the toile occupies the periphery of the fashion semiosphere, a space where dominant norms are contradicted and where new languages can emerge.

The periphery is deeply generative. It is where translation, friction and change occur.

Akin to Bhabha's *third space* (2012), it is a liminal zone where different meanings meet and interact, resulting in novel and unexpected modes of personal and visual expression thus generating new fashion meanings and identities.

The toile's failure to conform to fashion's expectations of legibility becomes precisely what makes it semiotically productive and seductive. It also exposes the way fashion's dominant language depends on exclusions. If a system requires certain objects to remain invisible in order to preserve the appearance of perfection, then the boundary between what counts as fashion and what counts as waste is not natural, it is constructed.

The toile's return into circulation therefore has the potential to destabilise that threshold, revealing how value and visibility are actively produced

rather than a given (Lotman, 2000).

If permitted to circulate without being forced into perfection, the toile can potentially re-enter the fashion production system on its own terms. By remaining wearable, adaptable and open to intervention, it no longer needs to be discarded at the end of the design process.

Instead, it can persist as an artefact that resists seasonal cycles, trends and the logic of replication through mass production.

In doing so, it signals a different relationship between fashion and sustainability, one that is not solely grounded in efficiency or optimisation but is a rethink of what is allowed to count as fashion.

FIXATION OF MEANING, FASHION IMAGERY AND ALGORITHMS

The negotiation of what is accepted or not within fashion and more broadly within society is inherently connected to the notion of culture, understood as a set of socially shared beliefs, values, ideas, norms and assumptions that we internalised as individuals and which shape how we perceive and make sense of the world around us (Williams, 2013). In the context of fashion, these beliefs and ideas also come to shape how garments, bodies and appearances are interpreted.

In that sense, fashion garments do not arrive with stable meanings attached to them, their meanings become naturalised through repetition, socialisation and cultural reinforcement.

Norbert Elias's distinction between social and individual habitus is useful here.

Social habitus refers to the historically formed norms, values and behaviours shared within a society, while individual habitus describes the ways these collective expectations become internalised and come to shape how people perceive themselves and others (Elias, 2000).

Similarly, Bourdieu argues that taste (which also includes our understanding of visual aesthetics) is never simply personal but socially produced (Bourdieu, 2010; Bourdieu, 1993).

What appears to be an individual choice is shaped by class, education and repeated exposure to particular forms of dress and value.

Fashion therefore becomes readable because we learn, often unconsciously, which combinations, silhouettes and garments are considered appropriate, attractive or desirable and how and where these can be performed.

If the toile stands to disrupt fashion's dominant language, then fashion image-making is one of the other mechanisms through which that language can become fixed and circulated.

Positioning fashion image making as a critical framework through which the values and hierarchies of the fashion system are commonly produced and stabilised, is key.

While the toile resists resolution at the level of material form, it also creates space for disrupting the visual conventions through which fashion is typically rendered legible and desirable to become transactional.

Fashion imagery provides one of the most powerful sites of cultural closure within fashion.

Through editorial spread, campaigns and fashion media platforms, garments are routinely presented as resolved products and images, bodies stabilised into recognisable poses and meanings created for circulation and consumption.

Even when styled as experimental or critical, fashion images often perpetuate the same logics of coherence, polish and desirability associated with commercial fashion communication.

The image operates as a mechanism of completion, fixing garments into legible signs and restricting alternative readings.

The normative effects of fashion imagery are

further amplified by algorithmic echo chambers that privilege images that are immediately recognisable and easily categorised and consumed. The result is a visual ecosystem that drives and rewards predictability. Aesthetic difference is frequently simulated at surface level rather than through meaningful systemic change.

In contrast, unresolved approaches to image making seem more difficult to disseminate.

So in this context, the image becomes optimised for visibility rather than reflection.

The mainstream fashion image therefore functions as a regulating mechanism. By repeatedly presenting garments as fixed objects worn by disciplined bodies (Foucault, 2020), images reinforce normative ideas of how fashion should look, fit and function. Bodies are positioned as surfaces upon which meaning is displayed rather than sites of negotiation.

This, in turn, reinforces patterns of consumption that favour instant assimilation.

When unfinished garments enter this visual space, they inherently disrupt its conventions.

Their provisional state resists photographic coherence and exposes a visible refusal of visual balance that fashion imagery typically demands.

Image making shifts from representation towards interaction. The camera no longer resolves the garment into a finished look but registers moments of friction, hesitation and transformation.

Images may record gesture, material resistance and physical dissonance rather than an idealised form.

This affective trigger echoes Barthes' notion of *punctum* (2010a), where familiar but unexpected meaning emerges through observation and interruption rather than recognition.

By privileging bodily dissonance over visual legibility, image making offers scope to reposition the body as an active participant in meaning production rather than a passive display surface.

The body negotiates the garment rather than performing it. In this context, the toile becomes a means of rethinking how fashion images might operate beyond promotion, spectacle and finality, opening image making itself as a field of resistance, value negotiation and critical practice.

The fixation of meaning through culture, fashion imagery and algorithmic repetition does more than stabilise how garments are seen.

It also shapes how they are desired, worn and consumed. When particular looks are repeatedly presented as desirable, coherent and socially

intelligible, they begin to structure the terms through which we understand both ourselves and fashion. In resisting algorithmic optimisation and legibility, images of assembled toiles as fashion garments propose an alternative fashion visual language, one that invites lingering, interpretation and sustains a different relationship between viewer and garment.

Rather than resolving the object into commodity, the images aim to keep meaning open.

To date, the research has informed three test shoots, each revealing how visual reflexes of styling, framing and gesture remain deeply ingrained in ways of working and seeing, even when deliberately resisted. The effort to translate the inherent ambiguity of toile into image-making practice remains ongoing, with each shoot functioning less as a resolution than as the next step in exploring how the toile's visual language might continue to develop beyond the conventions of fashion imagery and visual perfection.

SEMIOTICS, DESIRE AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

Reconsidered as a coded object, the toile opens alternative possibilities for fashion practice and value, operating as a counter-narrative to dominant systems of production and replication (Mazzarella, Storey, & Williams, 2019).

Its uncurated legibility affords forms of agency in wearing and consumption that resist trend following and prescribed meanings (Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

The fashion system actively structures how clothes and accessories are desired, chosen and consumed. Within dominant fashion discourse, legibility functions as a form of reassurance.

Recognisable silhouettes, trends and stylistic cues reduce uncertainty for the consumer by signalling how a garment should be read and what it communicates socially.

In this sense, fashion semiotics operates as a behavioural system, guiding consumption by narrowing the range of acceptable meanings and appearances. Engaging with fashion as consumers is therefore rarely neutral but shaped by frameworks that define what is desirable, appropriate and valuable (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Fashion's obsession with perfection and visual coherence stimulates forms of consumption oriented towards instant recognition and low interpretive risk.

Meaning is delivered in advance, allowing consumers to identify, acquire and discard with minimal interpretive reflection. Desire becomes predictable, guided by repetition rather than exploration. Garments that are easily legible circulate more readily, while those that resist categorisation are often deemed too risky or reserved for moments of sensational spectacle within fashion's marketing toolkit (e.g., the fashion runway, The Met Gala). Within our neoliberal capitalist system, ambiguity is side-lined and often becomes reserved for the elite or *avant-garde* forms of dress. This also implies that full freedom of expression may only be achievable up to a point and that unbridled self-expression is commonly associated with affluence and risk-taking. Fashion houses such as Maison Martin Margiela or Comme des Garçons, have used ambiguity as a defining aesthetic strategy, enabling their brand to become culturally valuable precisely because it is unpredictable, rare, expensive and supported by economic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 2010; Bourdieu, 1993). In contrast, the toile offers a thrilling counter-proposal in which uncertainty and expanded self-expression emerge through adaptation, reuse and reinterpretation rather than affluence. Any exclusivity derives from the singular, one-off nature of the objects rather than from luxury or status. Instead of reinforcing this dynamic, the fashion toile disrupts it by refusing immediate readability. As an unfinished object, it does not offer symbolic closure or stylistic instruction in advance. Meaning is generated through reflection, wearing, adjustment and adaptation rather than instant visual recognition. This interruption slows consumption and enables a counter-discursive mode of engagement in which value is produced through ongoing interaction rather than completion.

Across the collected toiles (Fig. 04) and within my own practice of photographing them and at times wearing them, I have observed that the toile offers a different engagement with desire. The excitement of being given or discovering a new piece or fragment, albeit an unwanted and imperfect version of a final garment that nonetheless exists as a singular object, often produces a stronger affective connection than the finished product itself.

The toile's neutrality invites tactile and imaginative engagement, suggesting possibilities for stitching, cinching, painting (cf. Margiela's Bianchetto)



Fig. 04

or reconfiguration. In this sense, the toile operates less through aspirational desire cultivated by fashion advertising.

Again, an affective pull that resonates with Roland Barthes' *punctum* (2010a) and highlights the object's ability to elicit or tap into one's affect.

The toile also presents a different kind of relationship to dress. As an open form, it affords the wearer the option to choose whether to make a statement or not.

The toile's understated appearance creates a space for self-representation that is not prescribed by trends or conformism. The toile may be worn quietly or loudly, it may be materially reworked. It can be assembled through iterative adaptation rather than stylistic coherence, allowing self-determined customisation.

As a site of resistance, the toile enables forms of self-expression grounded in what Tanver Ahmed (2025), inspired by the teaching of bell hooks, describes as '*wearing for love*', a way of dressing that is embodied and politically reclaiming, prioritising the self over social approval and dominant visual noise.

The ambiguity of the toile also challenges the link between desire and replacement.

Because it does not exhaust its meaning at the point of acquisition, value is produced through continued

engagement. Wearing becomes a process rather than an endpoint. In an industry driven by rapid turnover, such a shift suggests that sustainability might arise as a semiotic consequence rather than an operational fix.

Mazzarella, Storey & Williams (2019) describe counter-narratives towards sustainability that operate by shifting discourse and practice rather than just improving efficiency.

From this perspective, the toile's re-evaluation functions as a means of reconfiguring how fashion assigns meaning, use and worth.

THE TOILE, VALUE, SCARCITY AND ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIES

If the toile potentially alters how fashion is desired and consumed, it also raises a further question of how value might be produced and circulated differently within the fashion system.

Reconsidered as an artefact designed to move, be encountered and produce meaning, the toile opens alternative possibilities for fashion value and exchange. Inherently non-replicable, each toile carries material singularity.

Unlike finished garments designed for scale and repetition, by definition, the toile resists replication.

Its unique attributes introduce a different logic of rarity, one that is not driven by manufactured scarcity but by material contingency and process. In this context, value is not derived from brand recognition or trend alignment, but from unique properties: modularity and embodied experience.

For fashion design students and emerging practitioners, particularly those whom I collect toiles from, this provocation offers an alternative pathway into independent fashion practice.

As young designers leave education to transition into industry, could a model that enables practitioners to work with existing artefacts instead of completing collections at speed, allow for the process itself to become a site of value?

The toile could circulate as a wearable object, a collectible artefact or a collaborative platform for ongoing modification.

This approach could enable slower transitions into the industry, in which experimentation and unfinished objects are legitimised as viable modes of work and monetisation rather than limitations to be overcome.

Such a model would also challenge a prevailing system that privileges the new, replication and seasonal turnover and contributes to cycles of

overproduction and waste.

It also raises ethical questions that extend beyond representation. If fashion assigns value through perfection and visual resolution, then the exclusion of the unfinished is not neutral but structural.

The relegation of toiles to waste can be perceived as an institutional decision about what is permitted to signify. Repositioning the toile as communicative therefore challenges notions of visibility, labour and value. What fashion chooses to circulate determines not only what is worn but what is discarded or erased.

By contrast, the toile's open-ended canvas, offers extended lifespans through reinterpretation and reworking. A toile may be reconfigured repeatedly, with meaning accruing through the trace of decisions and material interventions.

The object then becomes a living wearable record of process rather than a finished commodity.

This record is also pedagogical. Within fashion design education, toiles typically exist as transitional objects, made to be left behind.

Their rapid disposal mirrors the pressure to produce, progress and perfect. Treating the toile as an ongoing artefact interrupts this model. It signals that the unfinished can be valuable, that uncertainty can be productive and that a slower relationship to making may be ethically and creatively productive.

The toile further complicates consumption i.e. if a garment is intentionally unfinished, then the wearer is invited to either participate in completion or refuse it altogether. This creates space for agency, and the option to remain ambiguous. In a culture saturated with prescriptive looks and policed bodies, the toile offers a semi-blank surface that leaves room for individuality and self-representation without prescribed conformity.

THE TOILE, MEANING AND FASHION FUTURES

The unfinished nature of the toile does more than challenge what fashion preserves or displays. By resisting closure, the toile remains open to reinterpretation, allowing meaning to emerge through repeated acts of handling, wearing, styling and reconfiguration. Rather than functioning as a language in the strict semiotic sense, the toile offers a provisional visual and material vocabulary through which alternative possibilities can then be imagined.

Drawing on Yuri Lotman's understanding

of cultural systems as open and capable of transformation, this section considers how the toile's unfinished state and openness to meaning might generate new approaches to fashion, sustainability and value.

From this idea of openness to change, we can then examine how this relates to sustainability.

Lotman (2000) suggests that cultural systems depend upon a degree of unpredictability and internal difference. When systems become excessively rule-bound and meaning becomes fixed, they may remain efficient but become rigid and lose the openness necessary for change. Fashion increasingly appears caught within this dynamic. Debates around sustainability, ethics and responsibility circulate widely, yet they often remain embedded within the same visual and linguistic frameworks that sustain overproduction, repetition and short life cycles, or are only meaningfully embraced by a small minority. Even claims of innovation in sustainable practices frequently reproduce familiar forms of desirability and consumption.

In contrast, the toile matters precisely because it does not fit fashion's dominant systems of legibility. Excluded from the polished language of the finished garment, it retains uncertainty, incompleteness and openness. *The Draft Archive* therefore suggests that fashion futures need not resort to new slogans, branding strategies or increasingly curated claims of ethical consumption ("sustainable capsule collection", "responsible edit"), but might instead consider overlooked material already present within the design pipeline.

The fashion toile does invite reflection on how fashion futures might be imagined outside dominant models of progress, innovation and growth. Contemporary fashion discourse often associates innovation with acceleration, faster production cycles, rapid trend turnover and continuous visual stimulus, a point that resonates with Lars Svendsen's account of fashion's dependence on 'the new' and continual renewal (Svendsen, 2006).

Within this framework, change is understood primarily as replacement where the new is achieved by discarding what came before it.

The toile fundamentally unsettles this logic.

As an artefact that is designed to scaffold perfection, it proposes a model of fashion design that evolves through accumulation, revision and return rather than through replacement and which

is closer to process-based accounts of making (Ingold, 2013) than to fashion's usual rhetoric of resolved product.

This re-conceptualisation also speaks to broader debates around sustainability and responsibility in fashion. Much sustainability discourse remains focused on optimisation, better materials, improved efficiency and reduced waste within existing systems. While such measures are necessary (Fletcher & Grose, 2012), they leave the cultural logic that ties value to novelty and perfection, intact, along with the semiotic foundations of overproduction and overconsumption (Barthes, 2010b; Gaugele, 2014).

As long as garments are primarily valued for being new, they will continue to be replaced rather than reinterpreted. In this sense, the toile operates less like recycling and more like upcycling.

It does not simply extend the life of material but preserves and elevates its symbolic, aesthetic and functional value.

Instead, value may arise from longevity and a modular approach to dressing, as Kate Fletcher's advocacy for systems-level shifts in fashion culture beyond speed and throughput (Fletcher, 2014; Fletcher & Grose, 2012).

Sustainability here becomes a consequence of altered practices of meaning-making.

This also has implications for how fashion knowledge is produced and shared.

Rather than treating garments as final statements, the toile reframes fashion as an ongoing conversation between body, material and context. Meaning is provisional and contingent, shaped through use and reinterpretation rather than fixed at the point of design.

This understanding challenges linear models of authorship and expertise, opening space for collaborative and distributed forms of fashion practice (Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 1977).

The Draft Archive functions not only as a collection of artefacts but as a collaborative platform of dissemination (and by extension organic promotion) through which unfinished garments may be reinterpreted across creative disciplines.

A writer may translate assemblage into a fragmented narrative structure, a musician into repetition or looping, an image maker into visual reconstruction and reconfiguration.

This cross-disciplinary translation also aligns with new materialist accounts of agency emerging through assemblages rather than residing solely

in an authorial subject (Smelik, 2018).

Seen in this way, *The Draft Archive* also resembles emerging collaborative models of circular fashion in which value is generated collectively between education, material reuse and new forms of dissemination rather than through conventional production alone (Liberti & Chierchia, 2026).

While the toiles are recovered from materials otherwise destined for the landfill, their re-contextualisation is grounded in transparency, consent and respect for the designers who choose to release them knowingly or unknowingly.

By virtue of their very nature, the artefacts remain largely anonymous yet they are approached as traces of labour of love and creative intention that hold significant cultural and material value. Long before contemporary fashion began demanding traceability through digital product passports, the toile already carried its own visible record of revision, labour and transformation through markings, seams, annotations and repeated alteration.

In curatorial terms, the toile retains use value beyond its immediate life cycle.

When situated within an archive or exhibition context, it may be understood as a record of lived experience, individuality, pragmatism and creativity, a temporal marker and a testament to forms of sustainable practice that are realistic and educationally, economically, politically and socially impactful.

The toile thus expands the scope of what can be curated, shifting attention from finished objects toward the conditions and processes through which fashion knowledge is produced.

The educational ramifications of this shift are equally significant. Fashion education may reinforce dominant industry values by prioritising finished outcomes, professional finish and market readiness. Students may be trained to move quickly from prototype to product, with little room to dwell in the unknown or that liminal zone where experimentation and meaning-making occur. Repositioning the toile as an artefact worthy of attention disrupts this approach.

It legitimises experimentation, failure and the unfinished as integral to fashion thinking and making, aligning with critical pedagogies that resist outcome-only training in favour of reflective, inquiry-led practice (Freire, 2018; hooks, 1994).

For emerging practitioners, this can foster alternative career trajectories that do not have

to depend on immediate assimilation into high-speed production cycles. Culturally, the toile also complicates the relationship between fashion and identity. Finished garments frequently function as markers of gender, affiliation, status and belonging. Their meanings are socially agreed upon and readily recognised (Entwistle, 2000). The toile, by contrast, resists such consolidation. Its ambiguity allows wearers to inhabit identities that are fluid, tentative or deliberately unresolved, reminiscent of Judith Butler's theories of identity as performative rather than fixed (Butler, 1990). In a cultural climate that often demands clarity and coherence, this refusal can itself be understood as a form of quiet resistance and an expression of self beyond prescribed heteronormative norms.

CONCLUSION – THE UNFINISHED AS METHOD, POSITION AND DISSEMINATION

Before concluding, it is worth briefly returning to the notion of the unfinished not only as a property of the toile, but as a methodological and political position. Within contemporary fashion systems, the unfinished is typically framed as a deficit or a stage to be passed through, corrected or resolved. In contrast, this research treats the unfinished as an active condition that resists premature finality. By holding garments, images and meanings in suspension, the unfinished creates space for reflection, negotiation and care. It slows the pace of fashion practice and disrupts the expectation that value must be immediately legible. Rather than treating incompleteness as a flaw to be overcome, the unfinished allows uncertainty and unresolved quality to remain active. It operates as a form of quiet resistance, not through overt opposition, but through refusal to conform to dominant trend-driven aesthetic demands. As both method and position, the unfinished challenges conventional hierarchies of expertise. Rather than presenting garments, images or interpretations as final statements, it promotes uncertainty as a productive stage. Knowledge emerges through practice, encounter and revision rather than through definitive outcomes. This reframing aligns with the logic of the toile itself, in which meaning is continually deferred and reworked through material

engagement. To work with the unfinished is not to abandon rigour, but to redefine it. Rigour resides not in closure, but in sustained attention to process, to relational experience and to the conditions under which meaning is fixed or subverted. In this way, the unfinished becomes both an analytical tool and an ethical stance, one that values slowness, care and responsiveness within fashion practice and research. This position underpins the ongoing development of *The Draft Archive*, which serves not only as a repository of objects but as a dissemination platform for an emerging language. Like the toile itself, the project extends this refusal of finality through publication bringing together multiple perspectives across diverse media. It proposes a collaborative model of sustainability, where value is generated through reinterpretation, circulation and shared authorship rather than through the production of new commodities. Text, image, digital and material documentation operate alongside one another to foreground process, contradiction and reworking. In mirroring the iterative logic of working with a toile, *The Draft Archive* acknowledges that fashion knowledge is also produced through repetition, failure and return, which hold their own beauty rather than through perfected outcomes. At a moment when fashion is increasingly called upon to address its social and environmental responsibilities, this project suggests that learning to mean differently may be as significant as learning to produce differently.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] The Draft Archive 1: Test Shoot # 1; Credits Michelle Marshall.

[Fig. 02] The Draft Archive 2: Test Shoot #1; Credits Michelle Marshall.

[Fig. 03] The Draft Archive 3: Test Shoot #1; Credits Michelle Marshall.

[Fig. 04] The Draft Archive 4: Test Shoot #2 - Toile Selection; Credits Michelle Marshall.

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WORLDMAKING THROUGH FASHION LANGUAGES

COMMUNITY-BASED PRACTICES OF RECOMPOSITION, NAMING, AND REPAIR IN KAMPALA

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Abstract

This article examines how community-based fashion practices in Kampala generate fashion languages through material recomposition, naming, participatory pedagogy, and repair. Focusing on Seamline Atelier's *Suubi Collection* and Sanvra's *Olugoye Lwo*, it approaches both initiatives as situated practices that produce meaning through garments, words, materials, and public encounters. Seamline Atelier reworks worn school uniforms into craftivist garments that address education, aspiration, memory, and youth futures, drawing on the lived experience of Suubi Solomon and spoken-word collaboration with Geof d'Poet. Sanvra transforms pre-consumer textile waste into wearable art that foregrounds Luganda language, Ugandan craftsmanship, ecological responsibility, and community engagement, extending fashion into community-based environmental pedagogy and practices of reuse. Drawing on studio visits in Kampala, exhibition observation at *Kwetu Kwanza* during the Nyege Nyege Festival in Jinja, documented conversations, and the co-conceptualization of hybrid symposium formats for *WORLDMAKING MATTERS. Sustainable Fashion, Design and Arts* in Salzburg, the article analyses how these practices speak from lived realities often excluded from dominant fashion discourse. It argues that fashion languages emerge through material afterlives, local naming, storytelling, participatory formats, and repair, challenging abstract sustainability claims and Global North-centred narratives of fashion innovation. By foregrounding Kampala-based practices as sites of knowledge formation, the article contributes to debates on fashion discourse, sustainability, and decolonial design. It proposes fashion as a pluriversal communicative ecology grounded in collaboration, care, and material responsibility, positioning worldmaking as a practice enacted through situated fashion languages.

Keywords: *Fashion languages; Worldmaking; Community-based fashion; Material recomposition; Participatory fashion practices; Repair and care; Decolonial fashion discourse; Sustainable fashion; Kampala.*

INTRODUCTION: WORLDMAKING THROUGH FASHION LANGUAGES

This article begins from encounters with two Kampala-based fashion practices – Seamline Atelier and Sanvra – whose work speaks through worn school uniforms, textile offcuts, Luganda naming, craftivist storytelling, and public forms of exchange. Rather than approaching fashion primarily through its dominant self-descriptions – as image, trend, spectacle, market, or commodity – these practices invite attention to fashion as a situated language of making. Their garments do not only appear as designed objects; they carry educational histories, waste economies, community relations, and ecological responsibilities into artist-researcher encounters and public discussion. Fashion language

is understood here not only as written or spoken discourse, but as a material, visual, curatorial, and participatory practice through which garments, names, stories, exhibitions, and encounters produce meaning within broader postcolonial fashion debates that understand garments, textures, and wearing cultures as sites where power, knowledge, and material histories are negotiated (Gaugele & Titton, 2019; Jansen, 2020).

The focus on Seamline Atelier and Sanvra emerged from research and curatorial engagement with community-based artistic practices, cultural sustainability, and ecological approaches to fashion and design. Both initiatives work from lived realities often excluded from dominant fashion discourse: colonial and postcolonial educational

infrastructures, youth futures, textile waste, local craft knowledge, and the environmental consequences of global fashion systems. Seamline Atelier's *Suubi Collection* reworks worn school uniforms into craftivist garments that address education, aspiration, memory, and social transformation, grounded in the story and participation of Suubi Solomon and extended through spoken-word collaboration with Geof d'Poet. Sanvra's *Olugoye Lwo* transforms pre-consumer textile waste into wearable art that foregrounds Luganda language, Ugandan craftsmanship, ecological responsibility, and community engagement, while also developing community-based textile actions that turn recycling, upcycling, and environmental awareness into participatory practice. Their work does not primarily speak through fashion media, commercial branding, or abstract sustainability claims, but through recomposition, naming, participation, and repair. The article asks how fashion speaks when its language is produced from lived realities rather than from dominant fashion self-description: what terms the makers use, why they name garments and projects in particular ways, and how these words, materials, and stories challenge conventional narratives of fashion innovation. These practices can be understood in relation to what Lotman describes as the periphery of the semiosphere, where established meanings are unsettled and new semiotic configurations become possible (Lotman, 1991). In Kampala, Seamline Atelier and Sanvra do not simply add local examples to global fashion discourse; they generate vocabularies through which fashion can be rethought as care, critique, and worldmaking. This relational understanding of worldmaking resonates with curatorial practice as a non-linear, relational, and processual mode of worldmaking, grounded in encounters that embrace difference, opacity, and transformation (Posch, 2025, p. 6). Both initiatives engage fashion as a communicative and relational practice (Glissant, 1997) grounded in everyday making, reuse, collaboration, and public address. Seamline Atelier transforms worn school uniforms into garments that address histories of education, social ordering under colonial governance, aspiration, and youth futures. Sanvra, in turn, begins from textile waste as a material condition through which responsibility, local language, and ecological awareness are made publicly discussable.

In both cases, garments do not merely represent social or environmental concerns; they materially compose them through afterlives of reuse, stitched traces of recomposition, naming practices, and acts of public address.

The analysis follows four interrelated fashion languages: recomposition, naming, pedagogy, and repair. It draws on studio visits, exhibition observations, documented conversations, photographic material, and curatorial collaboration. Conceptually, it engages selectively with Arturo Escobar's reflections on pluriversal design, particularly his question of "how does one design for a complex world?" (Escobar, 2018, p. 26). His concepts are used to clarify how the practices discussed here connect material transformation, collaboration, and worldmaking.

The analysis proceeds from garments, makers' terms, material configurations, and performative and public encounters before turning to theory. The article thus asks not only what fashion is or should be, but how it speaks from specific places, through particular materials, and in relation to concrete social worlds.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND POSITIONALITY

The study draws on qualitative, community-engaged, and practice-oriented research conducted through studio visits, exhibition observation, documented conversations, photographic material, recorded guest inputs, and curatorial collaboration across Kampala, Jinja, Karlstad, and Salzburg. The empirical material includes encounters with Seamline Atelier and Sanvra in Kampala, observation of their presentation at *Kwetu Kwanza* in Jinja, and sustained online and hybrid exchanges during the concept phase of *WORLDMAKING MATTERS. Sustainable Fashion, Design and Arts*. The methodological approach is grounded in attention to how knowledge emerges through making, dialogue, situated observation, and public circulation, and aligns with approaches that understand practice as a site of knowledge formation shaped by relational processes, situated accountability, and collaborative meaning-making (Chilisa, 2019; Haraway, 1988; Smith, 2012; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021).

The research process began with a pre-conception phase in Uganda in November 2023, through encounters in Kampala and Jinja with transdisciplinary artistic, performative, spatial, and

material practices.¹

The focused empirical engagement with Seamline Atelier and Sanvra took place in November 2024 through studio visits in Kampala and exhibition observation in Jinja.² *Kwetu Kwanza*, presented by IGC Fashion as Uganda's largest sustainable fashion event, provided a public framework through which *Olugoye Lwo* and the *Suubi Collection* could be encountered as material and discursive interventions around natural materials, traditional techniques, and rethinking waste (IGC Fashion, 2024).³ Data collection combined reflective field notes, exhibition materials, photographic records, and recorded guest inputs and artist conversations. Conversations were held with Asiimwe Brian Sanvura of Sanvra and with Edward Muyizi, Eria Tamale, and several Seamline Atelier team members, focusing on material sourcing, naming practices, craftivism, education, community engagement, textile waste, heritage, and sustainability. These exchanges were approached as dialogical encounters in which concepts, terms, and narratives were co-articulated (Chilisa, 2019; Smith, 2012).

In relation to Seamline Atelier, the research also followed the contributions of collaborators such as Suubi Solomon and spoken-word artist Geof d'Poet. Suubi Solomon's testimony foregrounded the lived contradictions between educational attainment, youth unemployment, migration, and the struggle for sustainable livelihoods, while Geof d'Poet's spoken-word contribution translated these concerns into an affective and publicly accessible

form of address.

Their contributions are treated as empirical and artistic material, because they shaped how the *Suubi Collection* was articulated across studio, exhibition, and symposium contexts.

In Sanvra's case, the research further traced community-based waste actions connected to *Olugoye Lwo*, particularly textile clean-up activities in Kibuye, Kampala, where discarded clothes were collected, discussed among designers, team members, and communities, and revalued as possible material for upcycling rather than burning or disposal.⁴

Working at the intersection of research and curatorial practice, the author approaches knowledge formation as situated and relational, shaped by uneven access to resources, infrastructures, visibility, and institutional platforms across Global South and Global North contexts. The co-conceptualization of the symposium inputs formed part of a collaborative process in which artistic, curatorial, and academic forms of knowledge were brought into relation (Cizek & Uricchio, 2022; Posch & Nyaoro, 2025).⁵ Following Haraway, this requires acknowledging partial perspective rather than claiming detached neutrality (Haraway, 1988; Chilisa, 2019; Smith, 2012; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012). This positionality also resonates with Whitty, Dong, and Yuan's reflection on what it means to "meet in difference" and their call for "the inclusion of diverse ontologies" when addressing environmental issues (Whitty et al., 2025, pp. 161–162). Quoted material derives primarily from recorded *WORLDMAKING MATTERS*, guest inputs and artist conversations and is cited by speaker, shortened session title, year, and

1 The 2023 pre-conception phase included encounters with transdisciplinary artistic and cultural practices in sound, music, dance, urban space, performance, recomposition, upcycling, and public artistic interventions across festival, studio, artist-residence, clubbing, and urban contexts in Kampala and Jinja. The 2023 research stay was supported by Paris Lodron University Salzburg, Austria; the 2024 empirical research stay in Uganda was supported by the Centre for Geomedia Studies, Karlstad University, Sweden.

2 The focused empirical engagement included several visits to the studios and working contexts of Seamline Atelier and Sanvra in Kampala in November 2024, as well as observation of their exhibition and presentation at *Kwetu Kwanza* during the Nyege Nyege Festival's *Afrogalactic Carnival Edition: Back to the Future* in Jinja, Uganda, from 14 to 17 November 2024.

3 *Kwetu Kwanza* 2024, organised by IGC Fashion, presented Ugandan sustainable fashion through exhibition themes including "Resurgence of Natural Materials," "Returning to Traditional Techniques," and "Rethinking Waste." The exhibition foregrounded traditional and natural materials such as Olubugo / barkcloth, Obuso / raffia, Nsimbi / cowrie shells, and Matembe, as well as natural dyeing, upcycling, and the reuse of discarded textiles. Participating designers and labels included Seamline Atelier, Sanvra, Nakimuli Crochet Everywhere, Motley Minds, Quill Clothing, Maisha by Nisiria, Amylia Clothing, IGC Fashion, My Fashion Biography, Masa Mara, and ORM Streetwear (IGC Fashion, 2024, pp. 3–4).

4 The community-based waste actions connected to *Olugoye Lwo* also involved proactive engagement and participation by members of the Seamline Atelier team, showing that the practices were not strictly separate in the field but at moments intersected through shared environmental and material concerns.

5 The collaboration continued throughout 2025 through online and hybrid exchanges connected to Karlstad and Salzburg, taking place approximately every one to two months, both separately with each practice and, at moments, in shared formats. These conversations supported the preparation of the symposium inputs, the selection and contextualisation of visual and material examples, and the translation of Kampala-based fashion practices into academic, artistic, and public discussion without losing their situated vocabulary, material specificity, or community-based orientation.

timestamp.⁶ Unrecorded field conversations are treated as contextual research material rather than directly quoted interview data. The symposium is therefore treated not only as dissemination, but as a site of shared articulation.⁷ Figures 1–4 are read as analytical material, making visible stitched traces, fragments, exhibition contexts, material afterlives, and modes of address.

MATERIAL RECOMPOSITION AS FASHION LANGUAGE

Material recomposition is central to both practices. Garments begin not with new textiles or seasonal trends, but with materials that already carry social histories: worn school uniforms in Seamline Atelier's *Suubi Collection*, and pre-consumer textile offcuts, surplus fabrics, and discarded remnants in Sanvra's *Olugoye Lwo*. These materials are treated as carriers of memory, institutional experience, ecological damage, and community knowledge. Through cutting, layering, stitching, naming, and exhibiting, both practices transform existing textiles into garments that speak from the conditions of their previous use.

Recomposition is therefore not only a design technique; it is a communicative practice through which fashion addresses education, waste, responsibility, and future-making.

SANVRA: REWORKING TEXTILE WASTE AS ENVIRONMENTAL AND PEDAGOGICAL ADDRESS

In current fashion discourse, consumption has gained renewed significance in response to social,

cultural, economic, and ecological transformations. Iannilli and Spagnoli describe consumption as involving “the reduction to nothingness of tangible or intangible elements,” rendering them unusable “through the very act of use” and exposing the “inherent tension between use and waste” (Iannilli & Spagnoli, 2024, p. 9).⁸

Sanvra's practice begins precisely at this tension, where textile waste is usually treated as the end of fashion's life cycle. Yet in *Olugoye Lwo*, destruction is not accepted as final. Offcuts and factory remnants are re-entered into cultural and aesthetic circulation, not to erase their damaged status, but to make their material histories visible.

Sanvra frames fashion as a communicative tool rather than a commodity.

As Sanvra explains, fashion is “something that I can use to speak to the world,” and transforming waste becomes a way to create impact “to my society, to the community, to this world” (Sanvra in *Wear*, 2025, min. 00:36:15–00:36:52). This framing connects to critical accounts of waste as a material, ethical, and social category rather than inert residue (Hawkins, 2006; Norris, 2019). In this sense, *Olugoye Lwo* takes waste not as an endpoint, but as its material and communicative starting point.

The project is described as “born from the unlikeliest of sources”: pre-consumer textile waste offcuts and discarded textiles that would otherwise risk entering landfill (*WORLDMAKING MATTERS.*, 2025–2026). In Sanvra's practice, waste becomes a material starting point for wearable art, ecological awareness, and Ugandan craftsmanship. Sanvra's practice also extends beyond sourcing industrial remnants into community-based waste actions. In Kibuye, Sanvra encountered residents preparing to burn discarded clothing and intervened by opening a conversation about pollution, reuse, and creative possibility.

These moments situate fashion pedagogy outside formal institutions: learning emerges in response to a concrete ecological situation rather than through abstract sustainability discourse. Sanvra also developed material experiments to demonstrate the persistence of textile waste. By burying discarded garments to observe whether they would

6 For readability, subsequent in-text citations abbreviate the recorded symposium input titles as follows: *Wear* refers to *Wear your story, wear your heritage: Weaving Tales of Identity, Culture, and Creativity through Fashion* (2025), and *Craftivism* refers to *Craftivism in Fashion: Creative Practices as Tools for Social Change* (2025).

7 A further stage of research unfolded through the preparation and realisation of *WORLDMAKING MATTERS. Sustainable Fashion, Design and Arts*, an international multi-day symposium held on 15 December 2025 and 16–19 January 2026 at the W&K-Atelier, KunstQuartier, Inter-University Organization Arts & Knowledges in Salzburg, Austria. Conceived, organised, and hosted by the author, the symposium brought together designers, artists, researchers, students, cultural workers, and wider publics through guest inputs, artist conversations, workshops, screenings, and discussions. Seamline Atelier's hybrid session, *Craftivism in Fashion: Creative Practices as Tools for Social Change*, and Sanvra's session, *Wear your story, wear your heritage: Weaving Tales of Identity, Culture, and Creativity through Fashion*, emerged from the preparatory exchanges and were developed as formats of shared articulation rather than as isolated presentations of finished work. The symposium created a space in which the Kampala-based fashion practices, artistic methods, curatorial mediation, academic reflection, and public conversation could meet and remain in productive tension.

8 Iannilli and Spagnoli also situate this destructive dimension within broader social, cultural, economic, and ecological transformations in fashion, including technological change, increased environmental awareness, shifting individual values, and growing recognition of the fashion industry's environmental and social impact (2024, p. 9).

decompose, he produced material evidence of textile persistence after disposal,⁹ thus enabling their re-use. Figure 01 foregrounds this logic of recomposition. The garments are composed from pre-consumer textile waste and recomposed textile fragments. The assemblage of offcuts, stitched traces, irregular seams, and layered surfaces refuses the clean visual language often associated with sustainable fashion. The garment does not conceal waste; it makes textile excess perceptible and turns discarded matter into an address to the viewer. As Sanvura states, “The scars, the mismatched edges – they are not flaws. They are the story of how fashion produces excess” (Sanvura in *Wear*, 2025, min. 00:47:10–00:47:42). These visible traces function as fashion counternarratives, exposing the material realities of overproduction and refusing the polished aesthetics through which sustainability is often made marketable (Hawkins, 2006; Tsing, 2015, p. 25). The figure should

⁹ Sanvura states in the same session, “Even if you throw your clothes, it will be there. It will never dissolve” (Sanvura in *Wear*, 2025, min. 00:18:40–00:18:49).

therefore be read alongside Sanvura’s community waste actions: its layered surfaces do not only show upcycling as a design technique, but carry the memory of discarded textiles collected, tested, and reintroduced into public visibility (Fig. 01). This practice connects to Niinimäki’s argument that “extending the use of clothes is one key issue in sustainable development” (2020, p. 20).¹⁰ Sanvura’s work shifts this circular vocabulary beyond technical reuse. The offcut does not only gain a longer material life; it is re-signified as a site of address, a surface of memory, and an invitation for community reflection. Circularity is therefore treated here not as a universal metric, but as a locally articulated material language.

¹⁰ Niinimäki argues that textile manufacturing causes significant environmental problems when waste is not properly treated, affecting workers, neighbouring communities, and environments (2020, p. 14). She also observes that even bio-based textiles often compost too slowly for municipal composting systems, making technical recycling cycles more likely in the fashion sector (2020, p. 17). In Sanvura’s practice, this circularity is not treated only as a technical solution, but as a situated material language of awareness, reuse, and community reflection.



Fig. 01

SEAMLINE ATELIER: REWORKING SCHOOL UNIFORMS AS EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

Seamline Atelier's *Suubi Collection* works through a related but distinct form of recomposition.

Here, the central material is not industrial waste but the school uniform: an institutional textile marked by education, aspiration, discipline, colonial histories, and personal memory. Within Seamline Atelier's broader practice of "Edu-fashion" (IGC Fashion, 2024), education and fashion are interwoven to communicate social concerns and to use fashion as a platform for dialogue and change.¹¹ School uniforms are therefore approached as charged material archives whose meanings are shaped by colonial and postcolonial histories of discipline, social ordering, and educational aspiration (Gaugele & Titton, 2019; Jansen, 2020). Seamline Atelier exhibits and narrates as a socially conscious Ugandan fashion brand that uses fashion and design as tools for storytelling, empowerment, and social transformation, with the *Suubi Collection* framed as a project that sparks dialogue around education, opportunity, and the challenges faced by educated yet unemployed youth (WORLDMAKING MATTERS., 2025–2026).

The collection is inspired by Suubi Solomon, whose lived experience foregrounds the tension between educational aspiration and structural unemployment in Uganda. The *Suubi Collection* reimagines fashion's role in addressing high unemployment among Ugandans, linking repurposed uniforms to the struggles of educated but unemployed youth. Seamline Atelier described Uganda as being shaped by "a generation of degrees" that nevertheless "lack opportunities," linking the collection to the silenced struggles of educated but unemployed youth.

Suubi Solomon's involvement is crucial because it prevents the collection from functioning as a symbolic representation of youth unemployment alone. His presence situates the project within lived experience and relational knowledge (Glissant, 1997) rather than abstract social commentary.

The *Suubi Collection* materialises the gap between childhood promises of success, formal educational

achievement, and the limited opportunities available to many young Ugandans.

Geof d'Poet's contribution clarifies the transdisciplinary logic of Seamline Atelier's practice. Reflecting on the process of translating Suubi Solomon's story into spoken-word performance, he states, "Let's embrace collaborations. They really give better niche and outreach to what we do" (d'Poet in *Craftivism*, 2025, min. 02:17:41–02:18:39). His poetic aim "to speak to the downcast, speak to the hurting outcast" further resonates with the *Suubi Collection's* concern with educated but unemployed youth and the unheard social struggles connected to Uganda's education system (d'Poet in *Craftivism*, 2025, min. 02:19:42–02:20:20). Spoken word here does not simply accompany fashion; it extends the garment's language into voice, affect, and public listening. By disassembling and reworking previously worn uniforms, Seamline Atelier transforms garments associated with regulation and standardisation into craftivist fashion artefacts. The uniforms are repurposed garments donated by local communities, giving the collection a material trajectory that begins in everyday educational life rather than in newly produced fabric. These textiles have already been worn, washed, repaired, outgrown, and remembered before they enter the design process. The collection therefore does not merely recycle fabric; it reopens the meanings attached to schooling, childhood, learning, and future possibility. The designers describe this process as a reclamation of stories:

"These materials... they carry the story of the children who wore them, of a system that promised futures but often fell short. We are reclaiming those stories through fashion" (Muyizi in *Craftivism*, 2025, min. 00:45:12–00:45:42).

The *Suubi Collection's* transformative acts operate within what may be understood as a "creative act," understood by Lotman as a moment in which established sign systems are destabilised and reconfigured (Lotman, 1991, p. 14).

Each garment retains traces of prior use, embedding institutional histories and individual narratives within new forms that resist fixed meaning. "By recomposing uniforms, we're allowing multiple stories to emerge – the children's, the community's, and the makers' – all in one piece of clothing," as Edward Muyizi explains (Muyizi in *Craftivism*, 2025, min. 00:50:22–00:51:05). In this way, garments act as semiotic interfaces through

¹¹ Seamline Atelier describes itself as a versatile fashion label working across ready-to-wear, bespoke creations, avant-garde, and costume outfits. Its practice is grounded in a commitment to using fashion to raise awareness of socioeconomic concerns. Their concept of "Edu-fashion" interweaves education and fashion as a means of communicating social messages, including sustainability through upcycling and sustainable sourcing.

which plural histories and futures are negotiated (Rovine, 2015; Pilyarchuk, 2024).

Material strategies within the collection further enact critical intervention. Rather than erasing traces of use or repair, Seamline Atelier foregrounds seams, folds, and signs of previous life. “You can see the lines, the folds, the stitches... they are not mistakes. They are the lives of the students, the stories of the classrooms,” Eria Tamale notes (Tamale in *Craftivism*, 2025, min. 01:18:40–01:19:05). This refusal of polished invisibility aligns with Escobar’s call to redirect design away from “modernist unsustainable and defuturing practices” toward “other ontological commitments, practices, narratives, and performances” (Escobar, 2018, p. 15). Visibility here becomes political, making infrastructural labour and social conditions perceptible.

Figure 02 makes this transformation visible: the school uniform is not presented simply as an object of schooling, but reconfigured as a surface through which education, colonial discipline, aspiration, and collective memory become legible. The retained fragments of uniform fabric allow the garment to speak from its previous institutional life while entering a new field of fashion, critique, and possibility. On the blackboard behind the models, the sentence “Education was key to success” is written in white chalk. In the foreground, two models wear garments from the *Suubi Collection*. The chalk sentence recalls a deeply internalised educational promise, while the recomposed uniforms expose the fragility of that promise in relation to unemployment, migration, and the struggle for sustainable livelihoods. Text and textile together form a scene of critical reflection on education, labour, and future-making (Fig. 02).

RECOMPOSITION ACROSS MEDIA AND PUBLIC ENCOUNTER

The distinction between the two practices is important. Sanvra works from the material afterlives of production waste, while Seamline Atelier works from the institutional and biographical afterlives of educational textiles. Sanvra foregrounds ecological and community-based re-signification of textile remnants; Seamline Atelier foregrounds social and educational re-signification of uniforms through lived experience and transdisciplinary collaboration. Both practices redirect materials shaped by larger systems – fast fashion, schooling, colonial legacies,



Fig. 02

and economic inequality – toward other forms of meaning, use, and public discussion.

At *Kwetu Kwanza*, material recomposition entered a public exhibition context shaped by questions of labour, origin, and accountability. Exhibition reflections such as “Who made my clothes?” and “What’s in my clothes?” placed Sanvra’s textile remnants and Seamline Atelier’s school uniforms within a wider vocabulary of material afterlives, local knowledge, and ecological responsibility (IGC Fashion, 2024).

This is where recomposition becomes a mode of address. Waste becomes “your garment” in Sanvra’s *Olugoye Lwo*. Uniforms become *Suubi*, hope, in Seamline Atelier’s collection. Offcuts become evidence of excess, while school textiles become archives of education and future-making. The practices challenge abstract sustainability language because they do not rely on claims of responsibility alone. They make responsibility visible in the garment’s construction: in seams, fragments, scars, layers, and retained traces of previous use.

In Escobar's terms, ontologically oriented design "contributes to creating the languages that create the world(s) in which people operate" (Escobar, 2018, pp. 133–134). Seamline Atelier and Sanvra do this materially: they create fashion languages in which discarded textiles are not silent, uniforms are not fixed, and sustainability is not a slogan but a situated practice of recomposition.

NAMING, WORDS, AND LINGUISTIC PRACTICES

If material recomposition shows how textiles speak through their afterlives, naming reveals how fashion further articulates meaning through words, titles, local terminology, and spoken narratives. Naming is not an explanatory add-on to garments; it is a constitutive fashion language through which garments enter social relations, public discourse, and collective imagination.

SANVRA: NAMING RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH LOCAL LANGUAGE

Sanvra's project title *Olugoye Lwo* – a Luganda phrase meaning "your garment" or "your cloth" – constitutes a deliberate mode of address. Rather than framing the project through market-oriented branding, the title addresses the wearer and the community directly, foregrounding an inclusive understanding of shared responsibility.

As Sanvura explains, "Your garment – it's not mine, it's not yours alone. It carries all our hands and histories" (Sanvura in *Wear*, 2025, min. 00:50:12–00:50:45). The choice of Luganda situates the project within a local linguistic ecology and positions fashion knowledge within a specific cultural and social context.

Sanvra further expands the meaning of the term by explaining that *Olugoye Lwo* refers not to a single dress, but to "your clothing, your clothes" as a collective field of garments (Sanvura in *Wear*, 2025, min. 00:52:28–00:53:26). Naming therefore does not simply reference the project; it gathers clothing, responsibility, ownership, and material afterlives into a shared linguistic space. By addressing clothing as "your garment," responsibility is relocated from abstract sustainability discourse to everyday practice.

Waste is no longer someone else's problem; it is linguistically returned to the wearer.

By insisting on Luganda, *Olugoye Lwo* interrupts English-dominated fashion discourse and positions local linguistic knowledge as a site of

fashion meaning-making (Gaugele & Titton, 2019; Pilyarchuk, 2024). The garment is not framed as a universal object of style, but as a relational artefact embedded in community, labour, and material afterlives. Naming thus becomes an epistemic and relational practice through which fashion knowledge is locally articulated.

This linguistic grounding is inseparable from Sanvra's repeated framing of fashion as a voice. Against dominant associations of fashion exhibited for marketing purposes or consumption, Sanvura states that "fashion is a voice... you can use fashion as a voice to speak to the world" (Sanvura in *Wear*, 2025, min. 00:19:13–00:19:54).

In *Olugoye Lwo*, naming and voice converge: garments speak by naming responsibility and by making waste publicly discussable.

In this sense, fashion as voice is enacted through community clean-ups, upcycling practices, shared learning, and ecological responsibility.

SEAMLINE ATELIER: NAMING EDUCATION, MEMORY, AND HOPE

Seamline Atelier's linguistic strategies operate differently, yet with comparable implications.

In the *Suubi Collection*, naming is tied to education, biography, and memory. The Luganda term *suubi*, meaning "hope," anchors the collection in an affective and ethical vocabulary. The name gains further resonance through its connection to Suubi Solomon, and the educational contradictions discussed above. Naming here is not symbolic branding but relational address: a linguistic gesture that binds personal biography, collective youth experience, and material practice. In this sense, *Suubi* names both a garment-based collection and a lived contradiction.

As Solomon explains during the symposium, the project carries the hope that his story can create "more hope for people" who may feel that their lives, struggles, or frustrations cannot be spoken about (Solomon in *Craftivism*, 2025, min. 01:40:30–01:41:42). The name therefore does not refer to optimism in general. It emerges from a context in which education is deeply valued, yet degrees, discipline, and skills do not automatically secure livelihoods. Hope is positioned here as a critical and collective language for speaking about youth futures, unemployment, migration, and social possibility.

In the *Suubi Collection*, garments are also named after school subjects and examination

structures, explicitly referencing the educational system from which the uniforms originate. The designers describe this naming as a form of “visual storytelling,” in which each design recalls subjects or educational thresholds that structure career pathways and social expectations (Muyizi in *Craftivism*, 2025, min. 02:00:02–02:01:09).¹² Through this naming system, Seamline Atelier turns the education system into a wearable vocabulary. School subjects no longer remain abstract curricular categories; they become garments, memories, and invitations to conversation. Naming functions simultaneously as memory work and critique.

SPOKEN WORD AND TRANSDISCIPLINARY FASHION LANGUAGE

Spoken language further extends these naming practices. Sanvra frames fashion as a voice for waste, creativity, and responsibility, while Seamline Atelier works with Geof d’Poet to translate Suubi Solomon’s story into public address. He repeatedly returns to the language of uniforms, hope, education, and betrayal, making the garment’s narrative audible as well as visible (d’Poet in *Craftivism*, 2025, min. 02:05:45–02:10:30). Building on the transdisciplinary collaboration discussed above, spoken word here transforms naming into public address. Spoken word, fashion, and public dialogue therefore become mutually reinforcing practices of transmission. This supports an understanding of fashion as worldmaking in which “fabric, form, and affect converge to construct alternative grammars of the social,” not as abstract theory but as material intervention in the here and now (Villar & Alaminos-Fernández, 2025, p. 30).

NAMING AS WORLDMAKING

In the practices discussed, naming, storytelling, and spoken performance generate fashion languages that reconnect garments to education, waste cultures, heritage, and communal responsibility. These linguistic practices do not isolate garments within aesthetic or commercial frames. Rather,

they allow garments to enter broader conversations about what education promises, what waste reveals, and how fashion can speak from specific places and social worlds. Naming and linguistic practice therefore operate as forms of worldmaking: they do not simply describe garments, but shape how fashion is imagined, who is addressed, and which realities are made present.

PEDAGOGICAL AND PARTICIPATORY FASHION LANGUAGES

Pedagogical and participatory formats show how fashion languages are learned, negotiated, and collectively produced through making, exhibition, conversation, and public encounter.

In Seamline Atelier and Sanvra, learning takes place through sewing, touching, questioning, storytelling, listening, disagreement, and collective reflection.

SEAMLINE ATELIER: EDUCATION AS LIVED PEDAGOGY

Seamline Atelier’s *Suubi Collection* foregrounds pedagogy through its engagement with school uniforms and educational histories. The garments are made from materials associated with classrooms, discipline, aspiration, and institutional belonging. Yet the project does not simply represent education; it turns educational textiles into tools for rethinking how learning happens and what education promises. In workshops and public encounters, participants are invited to handle the uniforms, observe traces of wear, and imagine how fixed institutional garments can become otherwise. As Muyizi describes, “People discover their own creativity while handling the uniforms. They see that something fixed and familiar can become new – it’s a way of learning by doing” (Muyizi in *Craftivism*, 2025, min. 00:53:10–00:53:45). Craft here becomes a mode of distributed knowledge formation, resonating with Fletcher and Grose’s understanding of craft as “political and democratic” because skills and authorship are distributed rather than centralised (Fletcher & Grose, 2011, p. 149). Suubi Solomon’s participation gives this material recomposition a lived and relational ground. As he explains, “[f]ashion is not only about creating or crafting the different clothes, but we can still use it for dialoguing and passing on information” (Solomon in *Craftivism*, 2025, min. 01:47:22–01:47:52). His statement situates education within lived experience: the challenge is not that education

¹² Specific pieces in the *Suubi Collection* are named after school subjects and educational structures such as General Paper, Two Principal Passes, Mathematics, Geography, Economics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Agriculture, and History, linking each garment to educational pathways through which futures are imagined (Muyizi in *Craftivism*, 2025, min. 02:23:35–02:28:42).

has no value, but that many young people acquire skills, discipline, and degrees without finding pathways toward sustainable livelihoods (Solomon in *Craftivism*, 2025, min. 01:37:16–01:40:30). The upcycled school uniform therefore becomes a material reminder of both promise and pressure: the promise that education will lead to a better future, and the pressure placed on young people and families who invest in that promise. Solomon's account of migration reframes mobility not as failure, but as resilience: "Moving out is not about giving up... it is showing resilience" (Solomon in *Craftivism*, 2025, min. 01:37:16–01:40:30). In this sense, the recomposed school uniform carries not only educational memory, but also the afterlives of migration, family responsibility, and survival. Geof d'Poet's spoken-word collaboration extends this pedagogy into affective and performative space. By translating Suubi Solomon's story into voice, rhythm, and narrative, fashion becomes part of a broader educational ecology. Pedagogy shifts from instruction toward dialogue, where lived testimony, poetry, and textile recomposition function as modes of collective inquiry rather than top-down explanation. Figure 03 shows one of Seamline Atelier's textile recomposition entering the exhibition space at *Kwetu Kwanza*.¹³ In the exhibition setting, the recomposed school uniform becomes available for collective interpretation as a proposition about education, memory, and future possibility.

SANVRA: ENVIRONMENTAL PEDAGOGY AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Sanvra's participatory practice is differently situated, but equally pedagogical. *Olugoye Lwo* emerged through direct engagement with textile waste, local communities, and practices of environmental awareness. In Kibuye, Kampala, Sanvra encountered residents preparing to burn discarded textiles and intervened by opening a conversation about reuse, pollution, and creative possibility. Learning here takes place outside formal institutions, responding to a concrete ecological situation rather than abstract sustainability discourse. Sanvra's pedagogy begins with a material problem and transforms it into a shared question: what else can this waste become?

Community members initially did not recycle or upcycle household or waste-site materials, yet through collective handling and explanation, perception shifted toward recognition of creative and ecological value. Fashion communication in this context is not mediated through branding or marketing, but through face-to-face dialogue, collective action, and visible transformation of waste. At *Kwetu Kwanza*, *Olugoye Lwo* extended this environmental pedagogy into public visibility. Textile waste was presented not as an abstract environmental issue, but as something local, material, and discussable. The exhibition format thus extended community-based learning into a wider public arena. Figure 04 situates *Olugoye Lwo* within this public pedagogy. The garment renders waste legible as ecological, cultural, and ethical matter rather than as residue to be hidden or exported.



Fig. 03

¹³ The figure demonstrates how the collection circulates beyond workshop and studio contexts, functioning as a public site of learning and dialogue.

PARTICIPATION, PERFORMANCE, AND PUBLIC LEARNING

The practices discussed here resonate with co-design approaches in fashion, particularly where collaborative and participatory design involves users as active contributors rather than passive consumers. Maciejko, Iberbuden, and Lecuna describe collaborative-participatory design as a process of designing “with the user as an active contributor to each step of the design development process” and argue that such approaches can support shifts in consumer behaviour toward sustainability (2025, pp. 86–87). This article uses that reference to contextualise participation, while shifting the emphasis from consumer participation toward community-based awareness and material responsibility.

In Sanvra’s case, participation includes residents, waste cleaners, makers, and audiences who encounter the afterlives of textiles.

In Seamline Atelier’s case, participation involves designers, educators, artists, students, and publics

who engage with school uniforms as pedagogical objects. These participatory formats are approached as situated encounters in which differences in access, languages, geography, and institutional support remain visible rather than resolved. Across *WORLDMAKING MATTERS*. and *Kwetu Kwanza*, fashion is articulated not only through objects, but through dialogue, translation, and collective reflection.¹⁴ These formats demonstrate that participatory fashion practice generates languages for sustainability and social engagement not through consensus, but through encounter, difference, and negotiation. Pedagogy is not external to fashion; it is one of the ways fashion becomes meaningful, critical, and publicly accountable.

REPAIR, CARE, AND CIRCULAR FASHION TERMINOLOGY

Repair sustains these fashion languages through care, visible mending, and circular responsibility. In Seamline Atelier and Sanvra, repair is not a minor technical intervention or a compensatory gesture within an otherwise extractive system. It is an ethical, pedagogical, and semiotic practice through which relationships to materials, histories, and communities are reconfigured. By foregrounding repair, both practices challenge fashion narratives that privilege novelty, seamless, and disposability.

SANVRA: REPAIR AS ENVIRONMENTAL ACCOUNTABILITY

In Sanvra’s *Olugoye Lwo*, repair does not restore textiles to an imagined original state; it keeps damage and fragmentation visible as conditions to be worked with. Pre-consumer textile remnants and discarded garments are assembled in ways that make their heterogeneity legible. Visible joins, layered surfaces, and stitched traces of recomposition make care perceptible. Sanvra’s repair is inseparable from environmental pedagogy. Because discarded garments do not simply disappear, repair becomes a way of



Fig. 04

¹⁴ Such formats echo Whitty, Yuan, and Dong’s call to “come together” through the inclusion of diverse ontologies, suggesting that environmental and fashion futures require relational spaces in which different knowledge positions can meet without being absorbed into a single framework (Whitty et al., 2025, p. 162). They can also be understood as temporary nodes that bring together different media, disciplines, generations, and publics, enabling plural modes of being, listening, and sensing to coexist without assimilation (Posch, 2025, p. 16).

re-entering into social and ecological relations rather than allowing them to accumulate in landfill. By reworking waste into garments that circulate publicly, repair becomes both a slowing of material lifecycles and a form of environmental accountability.

This approach resonates with critical accounts of circular fashion that emphasise the need to confront, rather than obscure, the material consequences of fast fashion systems (Niinimäki, 2020; Shirvanimoghaddam et al., 2020). Niinimäki's argument that "extending the use of clothes is one key issue in sustainable development" is particularly relevant here (2020, p. 20). Extending the use phase of garments is one of the most effective sustainability strategies, yet only when material responsibility remains visible. In *Olugoye Lwo*, extending use matters because material responsibility remains visible rather than abstract. Crucially, repair here is collective. Community cleaning actions in Kibuye situate repair within shared responsibility rather than individual thrift. Sanvra thus contributes to forms of community care that resonate with the idea of "caring communities" (The Care Collective, 2020, p. 45).¹⁵ Repair is not framed as a consumer duty imposed after purchase, but as a community practice that addresses pollution, creativity, and care together. In this sense, repair becomes a material language through which fashion speaks about ecological limits and shared obligation.

SEAMLINE ATELIER: REPAIR AS SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL CARE

In the *Suubi Collection*, repair is inseparable from memory and education. School uniforms are often already marked by mending, fading, and wear – traces of everyday care performed by families, students, and communities over time. By working with uniforms that might otherwise be discarded after limited period of use, Seamline Atelier questions the short lifecycle of educational textiles and extends them into sustainably crafted garments for renewed everyday wear. Seamline Atelier does not erase these traces. Instead, the designers amplify them through patchwork, visible stitching, and recomposition.

¹⁵ The Care Collective describes "caring communities" as grounded in mutual support, public space, shared resources, and local democracy (2020, p. 46). The term is used here to clarify how Sanvra's community-based waste actions situate repair within shared responsibility rather than individualised consumer ethics.

Repair here becomes a reflective practice that connects past experience with future possibility. The recomposed uniform holds together childhood memory, family investment in education, institutional discipline, and the uncertainty of post-school life. In this sense, repair operates not only at the level of material reuse, but as social and educational repair. The garment becomes a site where fractured promises of education are acknowledged and held through care. "These uniforms are not just scraps. They carry histories. By reworking them, we care for those histories, for the materials, and for the people," Muyizi explains (Muyizi in *Craftivism*, 2025, min. 00:56:30–00:57:05). This understanding aligns with Fletcher and Tham's conception of care as "everything that is done to maintain, continue, repair 'the world' so that all can live in it as well as possible" (Fletcher & Tham, 2019, p. 27).

Repair thus becomes not only visible, but audible and relational when extended through spoken word and public listening.

REPAIR BEYOND TECHNICAL CIRCULARITY

Repair in the practices of Sanvra and Seamline Atelier also functions as a critical response to dominant circular economy narratives.¹⁶ While circular fashion models often focus on efficiency, recycling technologies, and closed loops, the practices discussed here foreground the social and affective dimensions of circularity.

Repair, as practised here, is slow, situated, and relational. It involves time, attention, skill, and dialogue, and it resists the acceleration that characterises fast fashion.

At *Kwetu Kwanza*, repair was framed as part of a broader rethinking of waste and material heritage. Exhibition texts emphasised that reusing discarded garments, while not resolving the dominance of synthetic materials, remains preferable to allowing textiles to join the vast volumes of waste

¹⁶ This response to circular economy narratives is particularly relevant in a fashion context in which sustainability communication is frequently compromised by greenwashing. Shield defines greenwashing, following TerraChoice, as "the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service" and argues that both greenwashing and greenhushing can produce uncertainty and scepticism around sustainable practices in fashion (Shield, 2025, p. 372). Sbordone, Amato, and Cecere argue that the prevailing economic model fails to recognise the values emerging from circular economy principles, while ecological degradation and global warming accelerate the deterioration of ecosystems (2025, p. 441).

ending up in landfill (IGC Fashion, 2024). In this setting, repair becomes legible as cultural practice, reconnecting discarded materials to local practices of making and meaning and resisting forms of waste colonialism that externalise environmental harm (Brooks, 2025; The OR Foundation, 2020). Ultimately, repair in the practices of Sanvra and Seamline Atelier is not framed as a moral obligation imposed on consumers. It is presented as a shared cultural practice through which fashion can be reimagined. Rather than using repair as a metaphor alone, both practices enact it materially through stitching, layering, recomposing, public discussion, and community engagement. In doing so, they articulate a language of care that challenges disposability.

WORLDMAKING THROUGH FASHION LANGUAGES: SYNTHESIS AND IMPLICATIONS

Taken together, recomposition, naming, pedagogy, and repair demonstrate how Seamline Atelier and Sanvra enact worldmaking through fashion languages. These forms of fashion communication are produced not only through media, branding, or institutionalized fashion discourse, but through garments, words, materials, performances, community actions, exhibitions, and public encounters. Fashion becomes a situated practice of meaning-making through which social, cultural, and ecological realities are made visible, negotiated, and reimagined within broader debates on postcolonial and decolonial fashion discourse (Gaugele & Titton, 2019; Jansen, 2020).

This article has examined how community-based fashion practices in Kampala generate fashion languages through material recomposition, naming and linguistic practice, participatory pedagogy, and repair. Seamline Atelier and Sanvra are approached as practices in which language, materiality, and social relations are co-produced. Seamline Atelier's *Suubi Collection* reworks school uniforms into narrative surfaces through which educational memory, youth aspiration, structural unemployment, migration, and future-making become discussable. Sanvra's *Olugoye Lwo* begins from textile waste, community cleaning, and the ecological persistence of discarded garments, transforming waste into a material language of accountability.

Naming further extends this argument. *Olugoye Lwo*, meaning "your garment" or "your

cloth," relocates responsibility from abstract sustainability discourse to everyday ownership, asking wearers and communities to recognise clothing waste as connected to their own habits, environments, and relations. *Suubi*, meaning "hope," gains its critical force through Suubi Solomon's story and through the collective experience of educated but unemployed youth. Naming, in both practices, does not simply describe garments; it creates relational fields in which garments speak to people, histories, and futures. Pedagogical and participatory formats show how these practices circulate socially and publicly. Workshops, community encounters, exhibitions, spoken-word performances, and symposium-based exchanges do not simply communicate finished design projects; they produce spaces in which fashion becomes a mode of learning. Repair, finally, sustains these languages through care: in Sanvra's practice as ecological accountability, and in Seamline Atelier's practice as material, social, and educational repair.

Circularity is therefore treated not only as technical process, but as a material, ethical, and ecological practice grounded in care, reuse, and shared authorship (Hawkins, 2006; Norris, 2019). Read together, these practices illustrate how fashion operates as a pluriversal communicative ecology rather than a singular system of meaning. In Escobar's terms, ontologically oriented design "contributes to creating the languages that create the world(s) in which people operate" (Escobar, 2018, p. 133).

Seamline Atelier and Sanvra enact this proposition materially, linguistically, pedagogically, and curatorially. Their garments do not merely represent alternative values; they actively compose worlds through recomposition, naming, storytelling, and public encounter. Their work also shows that fashion's significance lies not only in what is made, but in how garments are made, repaired, circulated, narrated, and collectively encountered. In this sense, their practices resonate with an understanding of fashion as "a speculative infrastructure of worldmaking," where materiality, memory, and affect challenge dominant aesthetic regimes and open other social grammars (Villar & Alaminos-Fernández, 2025, pp. 28, 30).

These practices are also shaped by the infrastructures through which they circulate. The movement from Kampala-based studios and community encounters, through *Kwetu*

Kwanza in Jinja, to the hybrid symposium setting of *WORLDMAKING MATTERS*. in Salzburg shows how locally grounded practices can enter transnational conversations without losing their locally grounded vocabulary or material specificity. These exhibition, symposium, workshops, artist conversations, and curatorial formats function not only as dissemination, but as sites where fashion languages are translated, contested, extended, and collectively reflected upon.

For fashion practice and pedagogy, the findings suggest that sustainability cannot be reduced to technical solutions, circular metrics, or market-oriented communication.

Sustainability emerges here as a relational practice enacted through language, care, shared making, and collective engagement.

The article therefore contributes to decolonial fashion discourse by foregrounding Kampala as a site of knowledge formation rather than as a peripheral source of raw material, inspiration, or evidence. By attending to fashion languages grounded in schooling, waste, heritage, craft, unemployment, migration, community lived realities, and artistic collaboration, the analysis challenges Global North-centred narratives of fashion innovation. Rather than offering universally applicable solutions, these practices weave ecological awareness, social justice, and cultural heritage through locally grounded negotiations of material, social, and ethical relations (Escobar, 2018; Mbah & Ezegwu, 2024).

By grounding fashion in collaboration, repair, and lived material realities, Seamline Atelier and Sanvra open space for plural futures in which fashion operates not as a self-referential system of style, but as a medium of care, critique, and collective worldmaking. Their work invites attention to what fashion is for, whom it serves, and what kinds of worlds it helps to bring into being – opening space for plural futures in which garments, communities, and ecologies are mutually implicated in the continuous creation of worlds otherwise.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Sanvra; *Olugoye Lwo*. Credits: Asimwe Brian Sanvura, 2025.

[Fig. 02] Seamline Atelier; *Suubi Collection*. Credits: Edward Muyizi and Eria Tamale, 2025.

[Fig. 03] Seamline Atelier; *Suubi Collection*, presented at *Kwetu Kwanza*, Nyege Nyege Festival, Jinja, Uganda. Credits: Doris Posch, 2024.

[Fig. 04] Sanvra; *Olugoye Lwo*, presented at *Kwetu Kwanza*, Nyege Nyege Festival, Jinja, Uganda. Credits: Doris Posch, 2024.

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NEGOTIATING FASHION DISCOURSES IN CRAFT CONTEXTS

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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, suggest-

ing 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, epistemologi-

cal 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

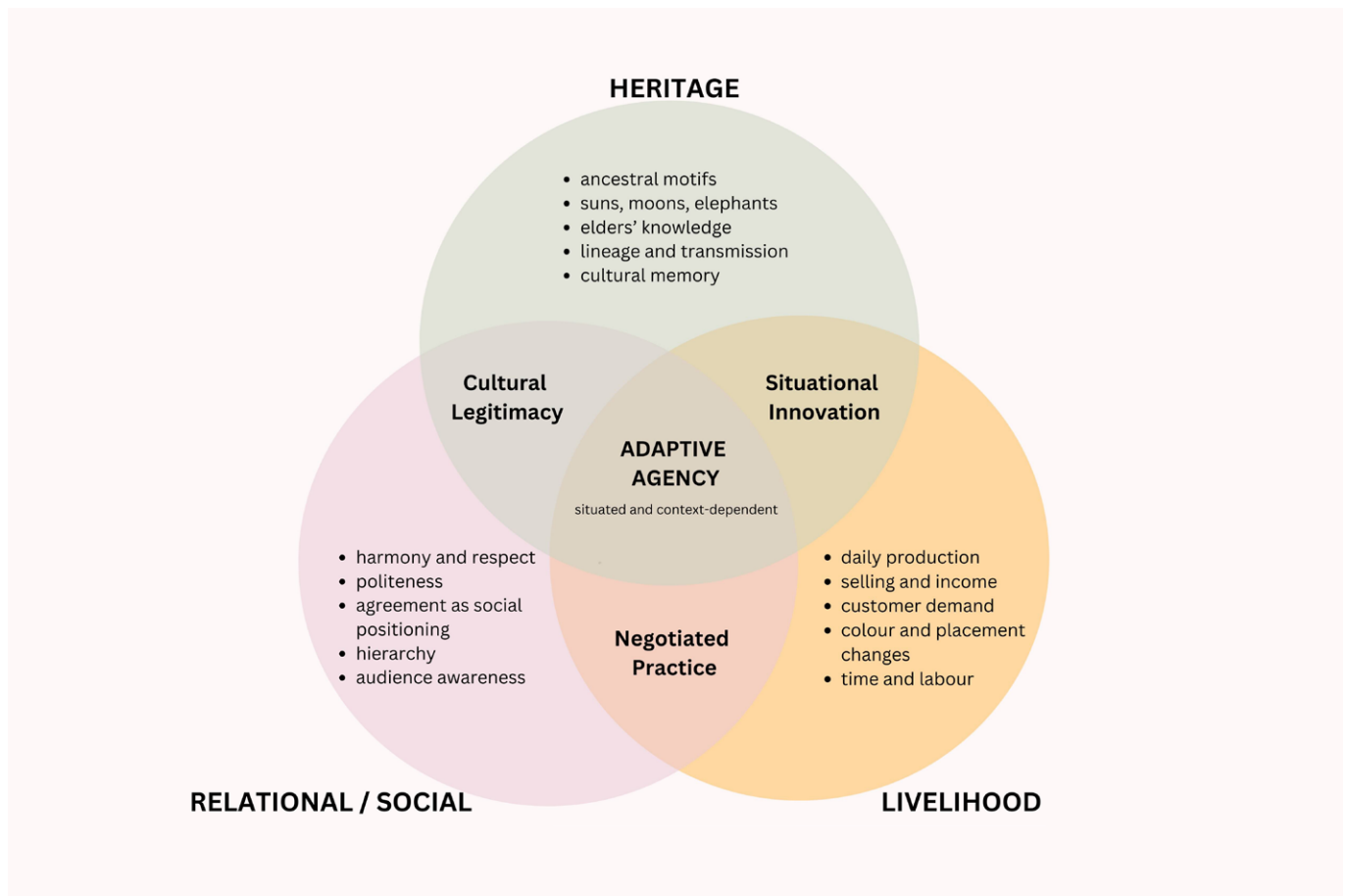


Fig. 02

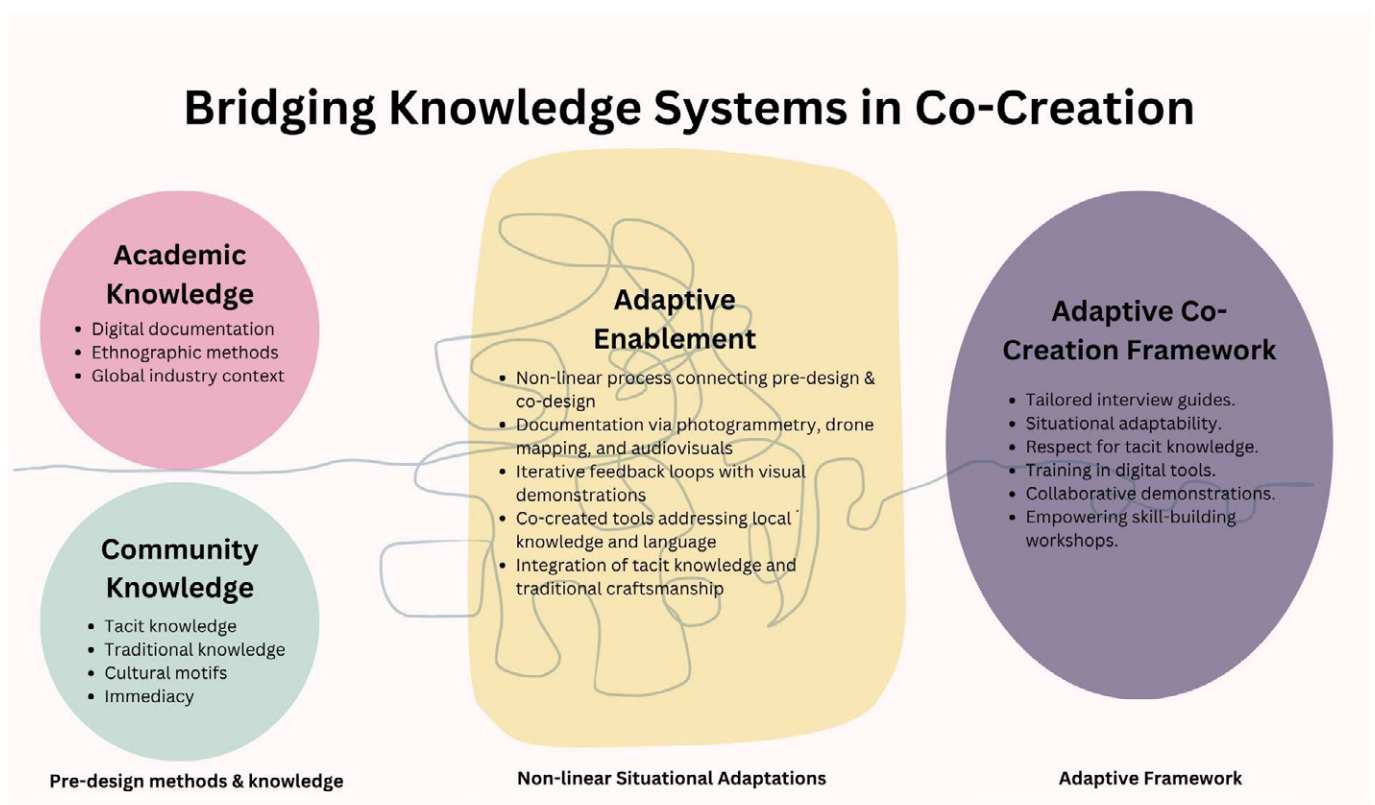


Fig. 03

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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CONTESTING MEANING AND INFRASTRUCTURES OF AGENCY IN CONTEMPORARY FASHION

THE CASE OF A SEWING MACHINE OF ONE'S OWN

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Abstract

This paper examines how fashion design practices operate not only as systems of representation, but as material and semiotic infrastructures that shape the production and circulation of meaning. While vernacular aesthetics and subcultural codes are increasingly mobilised within contemporary fashion, their incorporation into broader circuits of visibility often transforms their symbolic charge. Rather than framing this process through oppositions such as authenticity versus co-optation, the study approaches meaning as an unstable and negotiated outcome.

The research adopts a practice-based, situated methodology, combining co-design, participant observation, and material analysis. It focuses on the case study *A Sewing Machine of One's Own*, developed within a social tailoring atelier in Scampia (Naples), involving designers, seamstresses, and students in a collaborative production process.

Through the analysis of garments, design decisions, and exhibition practices, the paper identifies specific operations—such as juxtaposition, citation, and visible construction—that foreground the instability of signs and prevent their naturalisation. These are interpreted through cultural studies and camp sensibility to examine how fashion practices can both engage with and destabilise processes of incorporation.

The study argues that fashion can assume a critical role not by representing contexts “authentically”, but by intervening in the material and relational conditions that enable forms of agency and ongoing renegotiation of meaning.

Keywords: *Fashion activism; Cultural studies; Camp sensibility; Infrastructures of agency; Social design.*

INTRODUCTION

The questions shaping contemporary critical discourse on fashion concern not only what fashion produces, but how it produces meaning: which regimes of visibility render certain bodies, places, practices, and values desirable, legitimate, or even “natural”, and through which discursive devices such configurations are stabilised and made replicable. In this sense, fashion can be understood as a site of ongoing meaning production, where situated signs are translated into socially shared forms of signification that may appear self-evident while remaining historically contingent (Calefato, 2008).

This dynamic becomes particularly evident in the circulation of vernacular aesthetics, urban

peripheries, and marginal or subaltern codes within the contemporary fashion system. Such elements are increasingly mobilised as markers of intensity, authenticity, and “reality”, yet their incorporation into broader circuits of visibility entails significant semiotic transformations.

What is at stake is not simply the access of the “popular” to the fashion system, but the processes through which situated signs are detached from their original relations, reformatted, and rearticulated within new regimes of value. Rather than framing these dynamics through oppositions such as authentic versus co-opted, this paper approaches them as processes of ongoing negotiation, in which meaning is neither fixed nor fully controllable. This perspective resonates with

a cultural studies approach informed by Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall, where common sense is understood as a contradictory terrain shaped by hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces, and where the “popular” emerges as a relational field structured by power.

Within this framework, style operates as a critical site of signification, capable of generating disruption while remaining exposed to processes of incorporation and normalisation, as articulated by Dick Hebdige and Massimiliano Gualleschi (2023).

To engage with these dynamics without reverting to a moralistic discourse of authenticity, the paper adopts camp sensibility as a critical device. Following Susan Sontag, camp is not treated as a stylistic category but as a perceptual and analytical mode that foregrounds artifice, citation, and theatricality, maintaining the constructedness of the sign in view and suspending its naturalization (Sontag, 1964, p. 515).

In this sense, authenticity is not approached as an origin or essence, but as an unstable and negotiated value, continually redefined through circulation. Alongside this semiotic axis, the paper develops a second perspective grounded in design research. Rather than considering fashion as a representational medium, it examines how situated design practices can function as material and relational infrastructures of agency. Drawing on social design and craft-based approaches, this perspective foregrounds the role of tools, skills, and collaborative processes in enabling forms of action, participation, and visibility, particularly in contexts marked by asymmetries.

On this basis, the paper addresses the following research question: how can fashion design practices operate not only as systems of representation, but as material and semiotic infrastructures that shape the production, circulation, and transformation of meaning and agency? More specifically, the study investigates how situated design practices can intervene in processes of signification by mobilising strategies that both engage with and destabilise mechanisms of incorporation, and how these dynamics can be empirically observed within a concrete case.

These questions are explored through the case study *A Sewing Machine of One's Own*, developed within a social tailoring atelier in Scampia (Naples). The project is analysed as a situated practice

in which garments, processes, and interactions function as sites of meaning production and transformation. By combining a cultural studies framework with a practice-based design approach, the paper proposes to read fashion not only as a system of signs, but as a field in which semiotic contestation and material conditions of agency are co-constructed.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This research adopts a practice-based and situated methodological approach, combining elements of co-design, participant observation, and material analysis. The case study, *A Sewing Machine of One's Own*, was developed between July and November 2025 within the social tailoring atelier Fatto a Scampia (Naples), with intensive fieldwork conducted from September to November.

The project involved multiple actors operating within a shared production and learning environment: two PhD researchers with a background in fashion design, three senior seamstresses, four junior seamstresses, and a group of students (aged 15–17) participating in school–work programmes.

The atelier functions as both a productive hub and an educational space, supporting the transmission of tailoring skills within the local community. The research process unfolded through a series of interconnected phases. Initial workshops focused on eliciting situated perceptions of Scampia through drawing and discussion, allowing participants to articulate symbols, experiences, and imaginaries associated with their context. These exploratory sessions were followed by collaborative design development, in which garments were progressively defined through ongoing negotiation between researchers and participants. The production phase involved collective decision-making regarding patterns, materials, and aesthetic elements, combining technical expertise with situated knowledge. The analysis focuses on garments, design decisions, and exhibition practices as primary empirical material. Rather than treating the collection as a finished outcome, it considers it as the visible trace of a process involving interaction, negotiation, and transformation. Particular attention is given to how specific visual and material elements are produced, staged, and circulated, and how they operate within broader regimes of meaning.

Analytically, the study identifies a set of operations through which meaning is constructed and transformed, including the juxtaposition of heterogeneous materials and symbolic references, the use of excess, citation, and surface emphasis to foreground the constructedness of the sign, and the recontextualisation of situated elements within broader circuits of visibility.

These operations are interpreted through the combined lenses of cultural studies (Hall, Hebdige) and camp sensibility, allowing the study to examine how signs are both incorporated and destabilised within contemporary fashion systems.

POPULAR SIGNS AND THE CONTESTATION OF MEANING

THE “POPULAR” AS A RELATIONAL FIELD

Within the lexicon of Cultural Studies, “the popular” does not designate a stable domain or an identifiable set of cultural objects; rather, it is a relational field structured by power relations. As Stuart Hall argues, what makes something popular is not its media visibility or its belonging to specific genres, but its position within a struggle over meaning, in which practices, texts, and styles are continuously negotiated between domination and resistance (Hall, 2006). The popular does not simply coincide with what “comes from below”. Following Hall, it emerges as a space of negotiation between dominant and subordinate cultures (Gencarella, 2010), enabling forms of agency while remaining exposed to processes of incorporation and neutralisation. From a Gramscian perspective, this field is traversed by tensions between hegemonic sedimentations and the possibility of their rearticulation, making the popular a key site where meaning is continuously contested.

SUBCULTURE AS A CONDENSATION OF THE POPULAR AND THE ROLE OF STYLE

Subcultures can be understood as condensed formations within this field, where tensions of class, generation, and belonging become visible through configurations of signs (Hall & Jefferson, 2017). Rather than autonomous domains, they operate within dominant culture by reworking its materials. In this sense, style functions as a critical hinge: a mode of signification capable of producing difference while remaining structurally exposed to incorporation (Hebdige, 2002).

INCORPORATION AND THE CONTEMPORARY RE-ACTUALISATION OF STRUGGLE

Subcultural signs are structurally exposed to incorporation, as they can be reabsorbed by the market and transformed into consumable forms. This process does not simply neutralise meaning but rearticulates it within new regimes of value. From this perspective, authenticity is not an original property but a discursive effect, continuously produced and renegotiated through circulation (Gaugele & Titton, 2019).

CAMP, FASHION, AND THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING

Camp can be understood not as a codifiable style but as a critical sensibility that foregrounds artifice, excess, and citation. As outlined by Susan Sontag (1964), it does not oppose myth with truth, but suspends naturalisation by insisting on surface and constructedness.

In this sense, camp operates immanently within dominant culture, producing a form of internal distance that makes signs perceptible as constructed rather than given (Monti, 2016). In this paper, camp is mobilised as an analytical method. Rather than treating garments as expressions of identity or authenticity, the analysis focuses on how design operations—such as juxtaposition, excess, and visible construction—produce forms that resist stabilisation. This allows the study to examine how fashion practices can maintain the visibility of appropriation and prevent signs from solidifying into fixed or marketable meanings.

CASE STUDY — A SEWING MACHINE OF ONE’S OWN AS A SITUATED PRACTICE BETWEEN CONTESTATION AND AGENCY

A Sewing Machine of One’s Own is a research and co-design project developed within Fatto a Scampia, a social tailoring atelier operating in the Scampia district (Naples). Rather than treating fashion as a representational device, the project approaches it as a situated practice that intervenes in the material and symbolic conditions through which meaning is produced. Garments are therefore considered not as final outputs, but as traces of a process involving learning, labour, and social relations. The project was presented at the Fashion Clash Festival (Maastricht, 2025) and

subsequently discussed in an interview published by *33 Magazine* (Postolache, 2026).

The setting is marked by intense symbolic exposure. For decades, media narratives have compressed Scampia into a narrow repertoire of signs, producing a recognisable—yet reductive—public image. The project does not attempt to “correct” that image or replace it with a single counter-story. Instead, it shifts attention to the production of fashion language itself: who participates, how decisions are made, what resources are available, and what forms of endurance can be sustained over time (Fig. 01).

PROJECT RELATIONS AND LEARNING: THE DESIGNER'S DELICATE POSITION

Methodologically, the work is organised through co-design, suspending the authorial hierarchy typical of the fashion system. Seamstresses, volunteers, and young participants are not treated as labour inputs nor as “witnesses” whose identity must be translated into form; they are engaged as competent subjects, carrying technical knowledge,

memories, and embodied routines.

Tailoring becomes a space of reciprocal learning and of rebalancing expertise, rather than a route to a signature aesthetic (Greer, 2014).

This makes the designer's position structurally complex. The task is neither to deliver skills top-down nor to steer a pre-scripted creative trajectory, but to hold a relational space in which design responses can arise through negotiation. Formal choices are inseparable from the human dynamics that enable them: uneven timings, limited materials, expectations, asymmetries, and the slow work of trust.

Within this relational field, the project's guiding questions operate as prompts rather than extractive instruments. Asking, for example, “What do you call your neighbourhood?” or “What is the 167 for you?” does not generate ready-made symbolic content; it produces reaction, attention, and curiosity. That attentiveness, in turn, supports commitment to making: finishing a task, moving beyond the constraints of everyday life, and converting private experience into something



Fig. 01

shareable. In design-activism terms, the approach does not rely on overt mobilisation or a declared militant look. Instead, it proceeds through “stealth” interventions aimed at altering arrangements from within: design as the construction of enabling conditions rather than the issuing of statements (Mazzarella *et al.*, 2019). This relational work can be understood as an affective micropolitics, where social change is organized through the ‘minor gesture’ of shared practice (Vachhani *et al.*, 2024). From this angle, the designer’s role can resemble that of a host—setting the scene so co-creation becomes possible, and so capacity develops through learning, repetition, and relation (Manzini, 2014).

COLLECTION ELEMENTS AS PROCESS-GENERATED OUTCOMES: 167, THE VELE DI SCAMPIA, MATERIALS, TEMPORALITIES

A particularly relevant example concerns the reinterpretation of the Vele, an architectural complex that has become a highly recognisable—yet heavily mediated—symbol of Scampia, often associated with narratives of marginality and criminality. Within the project, this reference was not translated into a direct visual reproduction; rather, it was rearticulated through a process of stylisation using decorative trimmings sourced from the historic silk manufacture of San Leucio, traditionally associated with aristocratic interiors and “high” cultural production.

These trimmings, typically used for upholstery and interior decoration, were applied onto sportswear garments made from regenerated wool supplied by the Italian textile company Manteco.

The operation introduced a deliberate semiotic tension: a material historically linked to elite decorative traditions was used to construct a visual reference to a form of popular housing that carries an almost opposite symbolic value. This juxtaposition does not aim at reconciliation; instead, it produces a visible disjunction between different regimes of value, making the constructedness of the sign perceptible.

From an analytical perspective, this operation can be read as a “camp” intervention, not in terms of stylistic excess alone, but as a strategy that foregrounds artifice, citation, and incongruity. The layering of heterogeneous trimmings, the emphasis on surface, and the technical visibility of their application contribute to suspending the naturalisation of the reference.

Rather than presenting the Vele as an “authentic” or transparent symbol of place, the garments stage their own constructedness, preventing the sign from stabilising into a fixed identity marker. The number “167” operates through a similar logic. Commonly used by residents as a colloquial way to refer to the neighbourhood—derived from the Italian law regulating public housing—the term carries strong local and social connotations. In the garments, “167” is constructed through the same San Leucio trimmings and integrated into sportswear silhouettes that typically display numerical identifiers. This recontextualisation introduces multiple layers of meaning: the number shifts from a situated expression of belonging to a stylised element within fashion language, while simultaneously retaining traces of its original context (Fig. 02).

Importantly, these design decisions did not emerge as top-down impositions but through an extended process of negotiation involving researchers and participants.

The inclusion of locally meaningful symbols increased participants’ engagement, as it allowed them to recognise their own experiences within the garments. At the same time, tensions emerged around authorship and representation, particularly between senior and junior seamstresses, reflecting different expectations and degrees of familiarity with fashion design practices.

These frictions were not resolved by eliminating difference, but through ongoing negotiation, resulting in forms that embody both technical constraints and social dynamics.

From this perspective, garments can be understood as sites where meaning is not simply expressed but actively produced through interaction, conflict, and material experimentation.

The combination of symbolic references, technical constraints, and collaborative decision-making processes makes visible how signs are constructed, circulated, and rearticulated within specific conditions. This allows the case study to move beyond description and function as a testing ground for analysing how fashion practices can both engage with and destabilise processes of incorporation.

THE SEWING MACHINE: CONCRETE MEANS, NOT A FIGURATIVE EMBLEM

Here, the sewing machine is not deployed as a symbolic token of emancipation; it operates as



Fig. 02

a concrete means that makes making possible. Counter-narrative is produced less through oppositional storytelling than through the establishment of workable conditions—skills, tools, and the practical ability to sustain activity across time (Fuad-Luke, 2009).

In this shift from value-signalling to operative capacity, fashion becomes a means for people to act, not merely a surface for representing social themes (Manzini, 2014). Revisiting the demand for *a room of one's own* (Woolf, 1929), the sewing machine is treated as a material precondition that links technical competence, economic possibility, and a form of symbolic voice.

In contexts where production is not guaranteed, devoting time and attention to a process already constitutes a significant form of action.

The project, however, avoids any salvific rhetoric: it does not promise linear transformation.

It foregrounds effort, learning, responsibility, and the slow accumulation of practice.

Woolf's reference matters here because it insists that clothes do more than cover bodies: they shape

how subjects inhabit the world and how they are recognised within it, modelling “the heart, the brain, the tongue” (Woolf, 1929).

In this case study, that intuition is grounded materially: garments remain as traces of a process that produces not only forms, but practical conditions for doing (Fig. 04).

A further moment of analysis emerges in the exhibition phase, where the project was presented at the Fashion Clash Festival (Maastricht, 2025). Rather than treating the exhibition as a final display, it was approached as an extension of the co-design process. Three of the junior seamstresses involved in the project participated directly in the exhibition, working alongside the researchers in the installation, mediation, and interaction with the public. Their presence was not symbolic but operational, allowing the collaborative dimension of the project to continue beyond the production phase. At the centre of the exhibition, an unfinished prototype of one of the sportswear garments was placed on a table and activated as an open surface for intervention. The seamstresses engaged with



Fig. 04

the garment using markers, drawing and writing directly onto it, while visitors were invited to participate by adding comments, words, and visual elements. This process transformed the garment into a site of ongoing inscription, where meaning remained open and continuously renegotiated through interaction.

From an analytical perspective, this operation extends the logic of circulation discussed in the theoretical framework.

The garment, initially developed within a highly situated context, was exposed to a new audience unfamiliar with the social and symbolic conditions of Scampia. The resulting inscriptions—produced by visitors—introduced external interpretations, displacements, and reinterpretations, making visible how meaning shifts when signs enter different circuits of reception.

This process can also be read through a camp lens, insofar as it foregrounds the instability and constructedness of the sign. The garment does not present itself as a finished or authoritative object; instead, it remains open, provisional, and visibly

altered. The accumulation of heterogeneous marks, styles, and contributions disrupts any possibility of a unified or “authentic” representation, maintaining the sign in a state of exposure and negotiation.

The exhibition was further supported by a set of curatorial choices that reinforced this dynamic. A large-scale photographic image of the Vele by photographer Mario Spada—known for his stark black-and-white documentation of Scampia—provided a strong visual anchor, while a short fashion film offered contextual insight into the project’s development.

These elements did not function as explanatory devices in a didactic sense; rather, they contributed to staging a layered visual environment in which different narratives and visual regimes coexisted without being fully reconciled (Fig. 03).

Importantly, the exhibition phase generated a new form of material output: the annotated prototype, carrying traces of audience interaction. This object operates as a record of reception and reinterpretation, demonstrating how fashion artefacts can function not only as carriers of meaning but as platforms for its ongoing production. In this sense, the exhibition does not conclude the project but extends its analytical field, allowing the study to capture how agency and signification unfold across different contexts and audiences.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper has argued that when fashion mobilises situated signs, what matters is not only what they “say”, but how they endure circulation.

Political charge may intensify, yet it can also become unmoored and re-semantised within external regimes of value. Under these conditions, design practice is not an ethical supplement to form, but what provides material consistency to meaning-making, shifting counter-narrative from image to enabling arrangement.

The case of *A Sewing Machine of One’s Own* shows that critical efficacy is not secured by the “purity” of a message, nor by promises of a linear or salvific outcome. Rather, it depends on the construction of durable supports—time, skills, relations, and access to resources—that make making practicable and allow everyday renegotiations of roles and expectations. In this sense, the designer does more than facilitate existing dynamics: they may act as a catalyst by activating conditions, enabling



Fig. 03

transitions, and opening trajectories (Manzini, 2014). From this perspective, the “activist” dimension does not coincide with slogan production or with the aesthetic display of marginality.

It resides in a project’s capacity to generate operative counter-narratives—practices that simultaneously affect social, institutional, and economic planes (Fuad-Luke, 2009).

Accordingly, design is not limited to problem-solving, but involves problem re-framing and the creation of new possibilities, up to producing responses that effectively “change the questions” by shifting the criteria through which value, labour, autonomy, and fashion are assessed (Mazzarella *et al.*, 2019). At the same time, treating transformation as a situated practice requires acknowledging that every intervention introduces new vulnerabilities. What the project makes visible is not a resolved outcome, but a contested space in which agency and incorporation remain in tension. In this sense, “denunciation” is not an additional layer applied to form; it is a practice that

reorganises what can be done, said, and sustained over time. Ultimately, the paper suggests that fashion assumes a critical role not when it claims to represent a context “correctly”, but when it intervenes in the conditions that make a sign and a practice socially operative: who speaks, with which tools, through which relations, and with what continuity.

From this standpoint, fashion is not merely a vehicle for images; it can function as a device that holds together semiotic contestation and material infrastructures of possibility.

The open question this research advances is therefore not what fashion says about the social, but how fashion design can produce forms of agency without reducing difference to a consumable surface.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Workshop space at *Fatto a Scampia* during the co-design phase of *A Sewing Machine of One's Own*. The image documents the atelier as a situated environment of learning, production, and relational exchange, where tailoring functions as a shared practice rather than as individual authorship.

[Fig. 02] Detail of the sign "167" integrated into a garment developed within *A Sewing Machine of One's Own*. The element appears as a relational trace emerging from the co-design process, retaining ambiguity and remaining open to multiple interpretations rather than functioning as a fixed identity marker. Courtesy of Fashion Clash Festival 2025.

[Fig. 03] Installation view of *A Sewing Machine of One's Own* presented at the Fashion Clash Festival 2025. The exhibition foregrounds the project as a situated practice, translating its process-based approach into a spatial arrangement that emphasises making, material presence, and continuity rather than narrative representation. Courtesy of Fashion Clash Festival.

[Fig. 04] Final outfit from *A Sewing Machine of One's Own*, worn and contextualised. The image foregrounds the garment as the visible trace of a longer process involving co-design, material choices, and shared labour, rather than as an isolated aesthetic outcome.

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SUSTAINABILITY AS LANGUAGE IN CONTEMPORARY JEWELLERY

DISCOURSES, MYTHS AND THE LEGITIMATION OF VALUE

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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

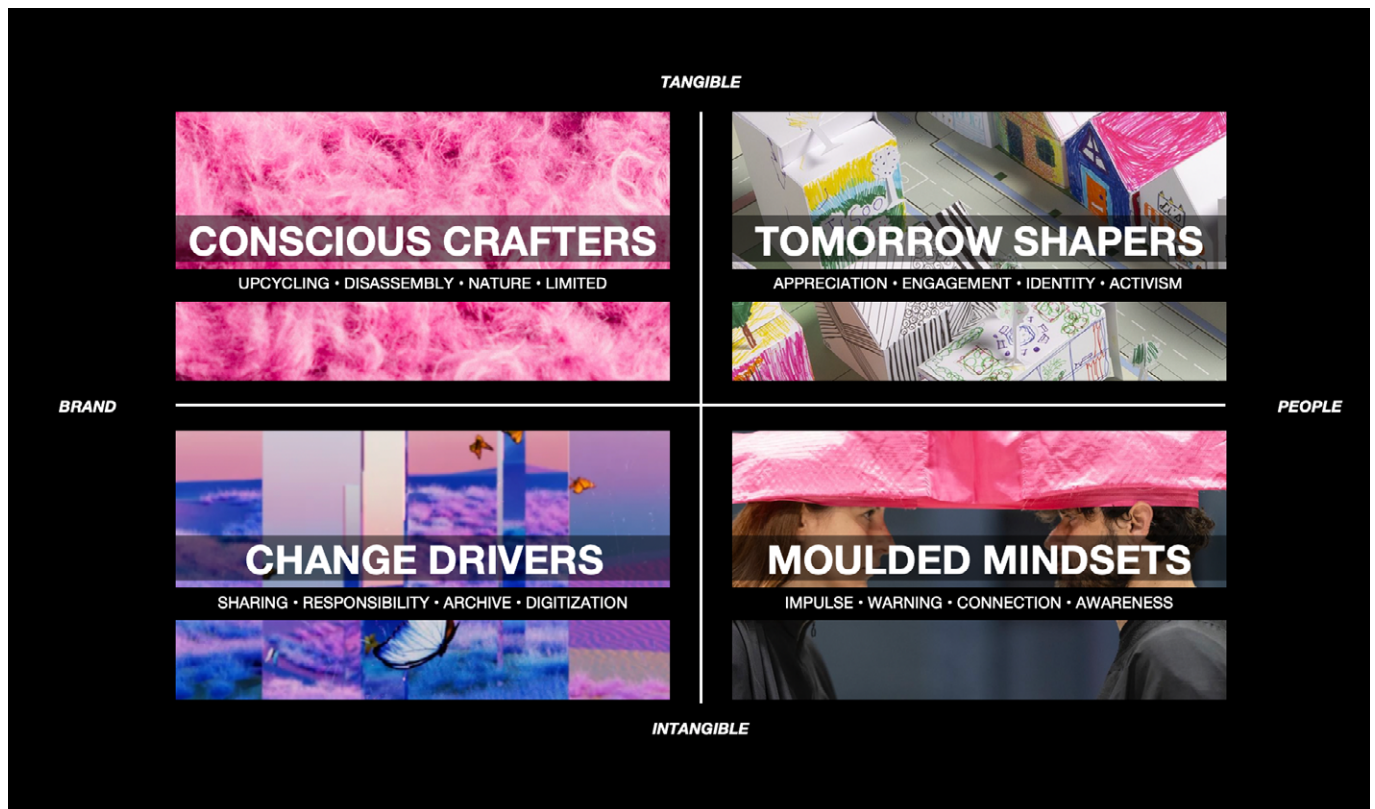


Fig. 01

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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SHIFTING TO A NARRATIVE OF FASHION FOR ATTUNEMENT

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Abstract

The fashion industry is a major contributor to the ongoing planetary ecological crisis. In response, many brands have begun to address environmental concerns, driven in part by emerging sustainability regulations that call for interventions in material selection, disposal practices, and labour conditions (Regulation (EU) 2024/1781). While these measures are necessary to mitigate the global environmental impact of the fashion system, they remain limited in their capacity to generate a deeper shift in the meanings and functions attributed to fashion by both individuals and the industry. This article reflects on the possibilities that emerge from understanding fashion as embodied practices (Negrin, 2016; Entwistle, 2000; Ruggerone, 2016; Eckersley, 2008). It asks what it would entail to reconceptualize the fashion system as a site that, rather than producing artefacts often critiqued as polluting commodities, cultivates material practices capable of fostering human attunement with the environment. Drawing on theories of affect (Ott, 2017), particularly as applied within fashion studies (van Tienhoven & Smelik, 2021; Ruggerone, 2016; Sampson, 2018; Filippello & Parkins, 2024) the article examines smart textiles as one articulation of fashion for attunement, focusing on the embodied design approach applied by Dutch designer Pauline van Dongen. While this emerging field holds significant potential, it also reveals important limitations, particularly in its predominantly human-centered orientation. This article instead argues for a broader conceptualization of fashion for attunement, inviting to explore its practices as tools to question and re-configure human-environment relational dynamics.

Keywords: *Attunement; Affect; Smart textiles; Body-environment; Fashion practices.*

INTRODUCTION RE-THINKING FASHION IN THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

In contemporary discourses on ecological crisis, fashion frequently emerges as one of the principal culprits: a disruptor of ecological processes, contaminating balanced cycles and natural matrices (Geneva Environment Network, 2025).

The industry is estimated to be responsible for approximately 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions, as well as for extensive water overuse and contamination - particularly through microplastics - and for air toxicity.

These figures place fashion under increasing pressure to respond to the environmental consequences of its practices.

As a system largely devoted to the production of commodities often perceived as unnecessary - acquired and discarded in response to transient trends and individual desires - fashion finds itself at a critical juncture, requiring reflection on its role and meaning within a world marked by widening wealth disparities, persistent social injustice, and the depletion of vital resources.

In response, measures adopted by brands and policymakers have largely focused on transforming modes of production.

Strategies such as circular design, recycling systems, zero-waste patternmaking, and the adoption of so-called ‘preferred’ materials (described by Textile Exchange as “fiber or raw material that delivers consistently reduced impacts and increased benefits

for climate,” 2023) have become central to sustainability agendas (Remy *et al.*, 2016). In 2022, the European Union’s Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles declared that “by 2030 textile products placed on the EU market are long-lived and recyclable, made as much as possible of recycled fibers, free of hazardous substances and produced in respect of social rights and the environment” (European Commission, 2022). While such initiatives are essential for reducing the environmental burden of fashion, they continue to privilege material inputs and production processes, thereby overlooking the cultural dimensions of materials and the relational dynamics through which fashion objects are engaged and made meaningful.

It has been observed that consumers are likely to persist in cycles of acquisition and disposal regardless of garments’ more sustainable attributes (McIntyre, 2019), underscoring the limited transformative capacity of product-centered approaches alone. However, the responsibility to reconfigure patterns of use in response to fashion’s environmental impact cannot be ascribed solely to individual common sense or consumer choice. Rather, it necessitates a broader reorientation of how fashion is understood and practiced.

Drawing on an analysis of how consumers relate to objects as a way of interrogating their relationship to the environment, the contribution engages with theories of affect within fashion studies to highlight the potential of the sensorial dimensions of fashion practices.

Case studies from the emerging design field of smart textiles illustrate how fashion can become a means of reconfiguring human modes of perceiving the world—its ecological processes, climates, and atmospheres—and further explore the notion of fashion as a tool for environmental attunement.

ATTENDING TO BODY-DRESS RELATIONS

Over the past two decades, numerous studies addressing the environmental impact of fashion have examined the body–dress relationship as a key site of inquiry. While some contributions focus specifically on the dynamics between individuals and fashion items from a consumption behavior perspective (Domingos *et al.*, 2022; Luchs *et al.*, 2015; Iannili & Spagnoli, 2024),

others foreground the role of emotional connection in fostering more sustainable practices among wearers (Chapman, 2015; Niinimäki, 2010; Kettunen *et al.*, 2025). The latter strand is particularly relevant to this contribution, as it highlights the affective dimension of engagement with fashion artefacts, emphasizing the sensorial and experiential qualities through which such relationships are formed. These approaches may include practices such as repairing (McLaren & McLauchlan, 2015; McNeill *et al.*, 2020), mending (Valle-Noronha *et al.*, 2025), learning to wear (Valle Noronha *et al.*, 2018), designing for intimacy and passion (Neto & Ferreira, 2020), and cultivating care for durability (Fletcher, 2012; Gwilt, 2021; Errázuriz & Müller, 2022).

What emerges across these studies is an emphasis on the experiential and relational dimensions of fashion: through its bodily practices, fashion appears to be a space able to shape the way we understand and care of the material things of the world.

As sustainability pioneer Kate Fletcher argues, achieving deeper and more enduring change requires a shift that extends beyond material innovation to encompass the ways in which people engage with things (Fletcher, 2012).

In addressing durability as a pathway to sustainability, Fletcher contends that durability “cannot only be promoted as a product-based phenomenon, but rather emerges from individual and collective practices with dynamic implications for our use of materials” (p. 223).

While it remains essential for the industry to produce less environmentally impactful goods, such interventions primarily engage the maker and tend to exert limited influence on cultural values and everyday behaviors.

A related argument is advanced by researcher and cultural studies lecturer Dagmar Venohr, who suggests that systemic transformation cannot occur solely “by changing the design, production, distribution and use of products,” but instead requires a reframing of cultural fashion knowledge “by establishing personal relationships with direct and concrete environments” (2025, p. 76).

Building on these perspectives, this contribution argues that meaningful interventions in the ecological impact of fashion must occur at the level of material culture, engaging with how individuals relate to fashion objects and, by extension, to the environment.

PERSPECTIVE SHIFT

A RELATIONAL AND TRANSFORMATIONAL TOOL

“Dress is something that will morph into my body and into which my body will change when I go out into the world, something that will open up or close down for me possibilities of becoming, of immersing in the flow of worldly practices.”

(Ruggerone, 2016, p. 585)

The visual dimension of fashion has traditionally dominated the discourse on this subject.

As pointed out by scholars who have proposed alternative approaches of inquiry (Entwistle 2000; Negrin 2016; Smelik, 2016; Woodward 2007; Filippello & Parkins, 2024; Lewis & Stasiulyte, 2022; Gork *et al.*, 2025), for a long time, fashion scholarship privileged an analysis stemming from the visual aesthetic hence limited to a dimension that often leaves aside questions of practice and experience. More recently, though, studies have shifted attention from aesthetics to lived experience, exploring what it means to address fashion as an embodied practice (Chong Kwan, 2020; Valle-Noronha, 2017; Sampson, 2018; Robinson, 2024). Within this shift, the work of theorist Joanne Entwistle has been pivotal in catalyzing a reorientation in fashion studies, proposing that inquiry into the complex system of fashion relations should begin with the body. In the introduction to her book *The Fashioned Body* (2023), Entwistle sets the focus by stating that “fashion is about bodies: it is produced, promoted and worn by bodies. It is the body that fashion speaks to and it is the body that must be dressed in almost all social encounters” (p. 1).

From this standpoint, fashion cannot be fully understood without considering the corporeal conditions through which it operates.

Entwistle introduces the concept of *situated bodily practice* (p. 4), in which the body functions as the site where fashion (as an industry and social phenomenon) and dress (as individual practice) are entangled and continuously inform one another. Crucially, this body is always already a *dressed body* (p. 6), through which the world is experienced and perceived by the individual, and which is simultaneously shaped by that same world. Dress—in this view, grounded in phenomenological theories (Negrin, 2016)—“works on and mediates the experience of self” (Entwistle, 2000). In this sense, clothing is not an external layer added to the body but a medium through which subjectivity

takes form.

From this perspective, the boundaries between body, dress, and environment become increasingly porous. Rather than appearing as distinct and self-contained domains, these three spaces make sense only in relation to one another.

The fashion object thus extends far beyond its appearance: when chosen and worn, it sets in motion a series of encounters and transformations that unfold between bodies and garments, as well as among bodies, garments, and the places they inhabit. Drawing on non-representational theory as developed by sociologist Nigel Thrift (2008), artist and professor Andrea Eckersley similarly invites attention toward the embodied dimension of fashion and its affective force (2008).

Clothes, in this reading, do not merely signify but actively shape how wearers feel, move, and behave. Along similar lines, Lucia Ruggerone - another pivotal theorist in defining this turn—describes the encounter between body and dress as “a process of becoming in which the reciprocal affordances of human body and dress result in non-predictable transformations of both” (Ruggerone, 2016, p. 581). Taken together, these contributions foreground the idea that the relationship between the dressed body and the world is a porous one (Eckersley, 2008). It is precisely this condition of porosity and openness what Entwistle describes as *leaky margins* (2000) that this article seeks to mobilize in order to ground a reframing of fashion as a tool for attunement. Rather than treating fashion as a closed system of signs, this approach emphasizes its capacity to remain open, responsive, and relational: operation that fashion must undergo in order to retain relevance and meaning in current and future unpredictable times.

In this light, addressing fashion as a way of practicing human–environment relationality may catalyze a broader cultural shift—one capable of challenging entrenched Cartesian dualisms and of understanding matter not as fixed and inert, but as dynamic fluxes and ongoing processes.

AFFECTIVE DIMENSION OF BODY-DRESS-ENVIRONMENT

The notion of affect that has informed the affective turn in fashion studies (Filippello & Parkins, 2024; Ruggerone & Stauss, 2022; Smelik, 2025), and which this article likewise embraces, is that developed by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari. The Deleuzian–

Guattarian definition identifies affect as the variation in a body from one state of affection to another (Ott, 2017, p. 9).

Bodies—whether human or non-human—affect one another through encounter, each altering the other's initial condition. As clearly illustrated by Brian L. Ott in his comprehensive article on affect theory in critical studies, this perspective “requires a view of the body, not as an organic closed system (as in Freud), but as ... a ‘machinic assemblage’ ... radically open to the world” (Labanyi, 2010, p. 225 in Ott, 2017). A pivotal element of this understanding of affect is the emphasis placed on the agency of matter. Indeed, the material world is understood as a continuous process of becoming, in which things encounter, affect, and are affected by one another.

Matter, therefore, is not static or inert but rather alive and vibrant, as further theorized within new materialist thought (Bennett, 2010; Coole & Frost, 2010). Drawing on this conceptualization of affect within the context of new materialism, fashion studies have extended the capacity to affect to garments, interrogating the kinds of affects such materialities generate in their encounters with bodies (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012; Woodward & Fisher, 2014; Smelik, 2018; Valle-Noronha, 2019; Sampson, 2022; Moradei, 2025). In other words, garments can no longer be conceived as passive objects but must be understood as active participants in relational assemblages.

Designer and researcher Julia Valle-Noronha investigates precisely this agency of clothes, arguing that wearable objects “are responsible for disclosing a world—they can direct movements, shape bodies or change the ways one interacts with what is around” (2019, p. 56).

Valle-Noronha's doctoral dissertation focuses on the affective relationship between wearer and garment, while also questioning the role of the designer in making the agency of clothes more perceptible and in shaping specific wearer–worn experiences. Importantly, this perspective reframes design practice as a form of relational orchestration rather than pure formal invention.

Another emblematic work on the mutual affect between the body and the fashion object is the practice-based research on footwear conducted by material culture researcher Ellen Sampson, as presented in *Worn: Footwear, Attachment and the*

Affects of Wear (2022). From the outset, Sampson identifies as central the question of ‘what happens’ between bodies and the things they wear—“how they may work with us, for us and upon us” (p.1)—thereby highlighting that garments, and specifically shoes, affect the body through their interaction while also being shaped by it.

As she notes, “the body-self is affected physically and emotionally through wearing and simultaneously the material of the garment, its meanings and value are changed through wear” (p.36). Within this framework, the garment—understood as the embodied material practice of wearing—extends beyond meanings rooted in symbolic value, social trends, personal aesthetics, or function. Rather, it emerges as a material object entangled with the body, whose affective capacities actively shape how the body perceives the world and itself within it.

Research on the affective qualities of fashion, such as that carried out by Anneke Smelik and Maike A. van Tienhoven (2021), further supports the idea that fashion possesses the capacity to transform individuals through the act of wearing. Consequently, the possibility of changing wearers' habits and behaviors may not reside solely in conscious practices of care for clothes, as discussed in the introduction, but also in the everyday, often unnoticed encounter between body and dress. The act of wearing thus exceeds aesthetic choice or functional necessity and becomes, instead, a moment of “opening up to a process of becoming, a line of flight, the final result of which we cannot foresee” (Ruggerone, 2016, p. 582).

Building on this line of inquiry, the proposal advanced in this article extends the investigation of the affective dynamics between body and garment to explicitly include the environment: the space in which the body–garment assemblage is embedded, yet which is often perceived as external or separate from it.

Accordingly, while it shares the guiding question articulated in Valle-Noronha's doctoral work—“what can fashion do?” (2019, p.33)—here this question is rearticulated as ‘what can fashion do in these times of ecological crisis?’.

It is precisely within this reframing that the possibility of fashion as practices for attunement begins to emerge.

THE URGENCY FOR ATTUNEMENT

The emphasis on the relational and transformational qualities of fashion—emerging from the encounter between body, garment, and environment, as well as from the agency of matter—creates the conditions for articulating a renewed narrative of fashion. In response to this, the proposal to think of fashion as a tool for attunement arises from an urgency to encourage reflection on humanity's position within the world and to imagine more reciprocal relationships with it. Here, the term attunement is borrowed from anthropology and cultural geography, particularly from studies on atmosphere, where it refers to the body's sensorial capacity to tune in to material and immaterial fluxes within an environment. In an essay, professor Kathleen Stewart observes that atmospheric attunements are not secondary consequences of distant causes but rather “the actual affects of modes of living being brought into being” (2011, p. 5).

For the argument developed in this contribution, attunement is therefore significant precisely because it bridges sensorial experience and environment, understood as a constellation of ongoing processes rather than a static backdrop. The emphasis lies on how the *dressed body* engages with spaces characterized by constant becoming. In parallel, cultural geographers Derek McCormack and Sasha Engelmann argue that enhancing the sensorial capacities of bodies is essential “to make the conditions of the present palpable” and thereby to articulate “different forms of ethical-political awareness” (2017, p. 242). Extending this claim, this article suggests that such sensorial amplification may also support the imagining of healthier relationships with the environment and its human and non-human bodies.

Within fashion studies, a comparable position has emerged in recent work by designer and researcher Todd Robinson. In his analysis of a Driza-Bone coat (2025), Robinson explicitly interrogates the human-climate relationship through fashion, proposing that garments be reimagined as tools capable of “activating and amplifying these material and embodied properties and relations” in order to “offer powerful alternative ways of understanding our relationship to the environment” (2025, p. 15). The case study of the Driza-Bone coat enables the scholar to address the garment's colonial history, and more specifically the ways in which settlers positioned themselves in relation to the

environment. Through close attention to its material properties and design—sturdy fabric marked by prolonged exposure to weather conditions, and the garment's full bodily coverage (p. 14)—Robinson demonstrates how such features sustain a narrative of human-environment separation. He therefore calls for a reimagining of the fashion garment as a means of exposing and reconfiguring these relations.

Within practice-based methodologies, the researcher identifies a site of experimentation in which to critically and creatively reflect on human engagements with climate. Robinson's work resonates with the central concern of this article: the urgency of reframing fashion in ways that can meaningfully engage with the contemporary ecological crisis.

Hence, this contribution aligns with a body of research that foregrounds the entanglements between body, dress, and environment.

Drawing on these insights—how garments shape embodied experience and inform design choices (Valle-Noronha, 2019), how body-shoe-environment relations are porous and mutually influential (Sampson, 2022), and how fashion design can function as a creative site for rethinking traditional human-environment relationships (Robinson, 2025)—it speculates on the potential of understanding fashion practices—from designing and making to wearing—as tools to attune humans to the environment, engage with the current ecological crisis, and ultimately reconfigure the ways humans relate to the world.

ATTUNING TEXTILES

THE LANGUAGE OF AGENCY AND RELATION IN SMART TEXTILES

The design category of smart textiles is among the most animated and sensational within the fashion world. It is striking to encounter jackets that change color as temperatures fluctuate (*Thermosensitive Jacket* by Stone Island), dresses that respond to surroundings (*Flowing Water, Standing Time* by Ying Gao), T-shirts that track health metrics (Ahsan *et al.*, 2022), or textiles capable of charging mobile phones (Birkle, 2022). While some of these garments may resemble costumes from a science-fiction film or appear to offer unnecessary services to the wearer, ongoing research into the integration of technology within clothing has nonetheless revealed an expanded potential in what garments might

do. Beyond novelty, smart textiles foreground action, responsiveness, and performance as defining qualities of dress. Smart textiles are commonly defined as textiles that react to stimuli originating from either the environment or the wearer. They possess an active capacity to sense and respond, enabled by technologies integrated into their structure, whether electronic or mechanical. As such, they are “artifacts that interconnect active functionalities (often electronic and computational-based) as a wearable artifact” (Ruckdashel, 2022, p.1).

These functionalities may take the form of “self-powered smart textiles capable of generating and storing energy from diverse sources” (Dejene, 2025, p. 898), or of climate-adaptive clothing that regulates “body temperature, manage moisture, and protect against environmental hazards across a range of climatic conditions” (Bera, 2025, p. 2). Depending on the technology adopted, smart textiles can be categorized according to their mode of response: passive systems, which do not alter their structure and rely on the intrinsic qualities of fibers (such as UV protection or antimicrobial properties), and active systems, which change shape or function and typically rely on electricity, as in the case of thermoregulation.

At the same time, they may also be classified according to the source of the stimuli to which they respond, whether originating from the body or from the surrounding environment.

Taken together, these classifications point to the defining characteristic of smart textiles: their capacity for response.

As Ruckdashel summarizes, “smart textiles convert stimuli from the environment (temperature, light, chemicals and moisture, pH) or interactions (mechanical force and electromagnetic field) into responses in aesthetic (color, light intensity, fluorescence, shape or form) or physical (mechanical, electrical, thermal, chemical, wetting or moisture transport) properties” (2022, p.1). Whether reacting to heat, cold, stress, sunlight, or moisture, these garments act—they do something. In this respect, smart textiles bring the concept of agency in clothing to its most explicit and demonstrative form.

What is particularly relevant to highlight here is not only that advances in smart textiles enable innovative and technically sophisticated garment functions, but also that their development and increasing visibility familiarize wearers with the

idea that material things, in this case clothes, have a quality of livingness that reacts to the body and to the world. The language employed in both academic discourse and popular media—where technologies are said to “turn clothing into living systems” (Peerzade, 2025, p. 1), or where garments are described as ‘dynamic systems’ or even as forms of infrastructure—actively fuels an imaginary of fashion as an agentic entity.

From this overview, two crucial aspects emerge: first, that the agency of garments becomes especially legible within the realm of smart textiles; and second, that garments incorporating smart technologies are fundamentally grounded in the relationality with the wearer and/or the environment. For the ambition of this article to propose fashion as a tool for attuning wearers to the environment, smart textiles appear, at least in principle, to contain many of the necessary elements. Nonetheless, the motivations underpinning the design of such technologically enhanced garments do not necessarily challenge the human position in relation to the world, nor do they automatically catalyze shifts toward more environmentally attuned behaviors.

ACTIVATING BODY-ENVIRONMENT CONSCIOUS INTERACTION

Despite their apparent suitability for attunement, a closer examination of the motivations driving research into smart textiles reveals important limitations. In most cases, these garments are designed with the primary aim of:

1. enhancing comfort (Bera, 2025);
2. adapting to extreme weather conditions (Bera, 2025; Peerzade, 2025);
3. reducing dependence on external power sources (Dejene, 2025).

While these objectives are undeniably relevant, they consistently position the human wearer at the center, directing design efforts toward improving individual conditions rather than reconsidering broader relational dynamics. Even when environmental concerns are taken into account, they tend to remain instrumental and secondary. The third motivation, in particular, occasionally extends to the preservation of natural resources. This is the case, for instance, in prototypes developed by researchers at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), led by Professor Dahua Shou at the School of Fashion and Textiles. Their cooling fabrics are designed

to respond to contexts in which air-conditioning systems are insufficient due to limited access to resources (Adegeest, 2025).

Although such innovations address pressing material and infrastructural constraints, the question remains as to whether these body- or environment-responsive garments genuinely encourage wearers to attune their senses to the atmospheric fluxes of a space.

It can be assumed that a jacket that visibly shifts color or shape in response to weather changes may heighten the wearer's attentiveness to ongoing transformations in their surroundings.

Likewise, wearing a shirt equipped with PolyU's cooling technology may foster greater awareness of the extreme climatic conditions of a given location. Moreover, smart textiles, by functioning as highly sensitive sensorial membranes, can be perceived as extensions—or amplifications—of the wearer's sensory capacities.

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However, as designer and researcher Pauline van Dongen and lecturer and researcher Lianne Toussaint observe in an article emerging from their doctoral research on crafting wearables, “most designers seem to integrate technology into fashion merely to maximize physical performance, efficiency, and productivity” (2020, p. 113), rather than cultivating an enhanced connection with the wearer's body and surroundings.

The work of van Dongen is particularly relevant to this contribution, as it is distinguished by its aim to develop smart textiles not solely to improve individual wellbeing, but to foster a heightened awareness of physical, emotional, and environmental states.

The Issho (2017) denim jacket, for instance, is designed to:

1. stimulate body and environmental awareness,
2. mediate the wearer's experience of their surroundings,
3. support the wearer's emotional state.

These capacities demonstrate the potential of garments to affect the wearer, and more broadly, the capacity of fashion practices to shape and modulate how humans relate to the world.

As such, “a sturdy denim jacket that records, senses, and reacts to touch not only shapes how wearers experience their own body but also affects the way they act, move, and behave in relation to their surroundings” (p.116).

In certain instances, the technologies embedded in garments may even influence how wearers choose to move through space. This is evident in van Dongen's own experience of wearing another of her designs, the *Solar Shirt* (2015).

Integrating solar cells that store energy when exposed to sunlight, the garment is capable of charging a smartphone after sufficient exposure.

In an article co-authored with Anneke Smelik and Lianne Toussaint, van Dongen notes that the *Solar Shirt* “made her particularly aware of her urban surroundings and guided her choice whether or not to move into the sunlight or stay in the shade” (Smelik *et al.*, 2016, p. 299).

Drawing on this example, the authors advance an embodied approach to wearable design, emphasising the importance of engaging the sensorial dimension of the body in order to intervene in body–dress–environment dynamics and foster a more attentive relationality.

This study is significant insofar as it provides concrete support for the argument that fashion can shape the relationship between the *dressed body* and the environment and, as this paper proposes, can function as a tool for attunement.

To conclude, the case study of Pauline van Dongen's design practice within the field of smart textiles is exemplary in the way it critically reconsiders the role of technology in fashion.

Her work addresses the pervasive lack of attention, awareness, and sensitivity toward both the body and its surroundings. While garments such as *Issho* and the *Solar Shirt* point to ways of integrating embodied experience into fashion design, this approach can be extended further to explore what fashion can do—and what it might become—in the context of the current ecological crisis.

It is here that the proposal to conceive fashion as a set of practices of attunement emerges as a concrete and generative direction for inquiry.

CONCLUSION

This article has proposed a reframing of fashion as a relational and experiential practice, rather than merely a system of production or a generator of aesthetic and symbolic value.

While contemporary sustainability initiatives—such as circular design, recycling systems, and the adoption of preferred materials—are essential for reducing the environmental burden of the industry, they largely operate within a human-centered framework.

These strategies focus on production efficiency, resource management, and material substitution, but often leave untouched the deeper cultural and perceptual patterns that drive overconsumption, disengagement from environmental processes, and the framing of garments as disposable commodities. By contrast, situating fashion as a tool for attunement foregrounds its potential to engage wearers in active, embodied, and affective relationships with garments, bodies, and environments.

Drawing on the concepts of the *dressed body* (Entwistle, 2023), *situated bodily practice* (Entwistle, 2023), and the *affective capacities of clothing* (Ruggerone, 2016; Valle Noronha, 2019; Sampson, 2022; Robinson, 2025), this article emphasizes the transformative potential of fashion to mediate perception, behavior, and sensorial awareness, extending its relevance beyond representation. Smart textiles offer a vivid illustration of this potential. Their capacity to sense stimuli from the wearer or the environment, and to respond through color change, thermoregulation, or energy generation, renders the agency of garments immediately legible.

By amplifying the wearer's sensory engagement with atmospheric and material fluxes, such garments can encourage environmental attunement and heighten awareness of ecological processes. Examples like Pauline van Dongen's *Isshō* (2017) denim jacket and the *Solar Shirt* (2015) demonstrate how wearables can guide movement, enhance awareness, and influence decision-making in real time, transforming the wearer's perceptual and bodily relationship with urban and natural environments.

At the same time, this analysis underscores a critical limitation: these technological interventions remain predominantly oriented toward human-centred goals—comfort, adaptability, and efficiency—and, while they may

heighten awareness, they do not explicitly seek to cultivate a more reciprocal or ethically engaged relationship with the environment.

Indeed this article advances a distinct contribution by proposing a shift in the narrative of fashion towards practices that actively attune humans to the environment.

While existing studies and design practices address the relationship between body, dress, and environment, they have not explicitly conceptualised attunement as a central framework, nor have they foregrounded its potential to reconfigure human–environment relations beyond awareness alone.

By positioning fashion as a relational and affective medium capable of shaping perception, behaviour, and orientation, this contribution articulates attunement as a potential conceptual and practical approach within fashion studies.

Future research and practice may further investigate how attunement can be embedded across material choices, design processes, and modes of wearing, extending these principles beyond technological innovation to encompass broader relational and experiential engagements. In doing so, fashion can be repositioned not merely as a domain that responds to the ecological crisis, but as an active site for cultivating more responsive, situated, and transformative ways of inhabiting the world.

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FASHION MYTHOLOGIES

ORIGINAL

FASHION'S TRIVIAL MYSTERY

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Abstract

This mythology analyzes two images of garments: a T-shirt repeatedly printed with the word 'ORIGINAL' and a jacket bearing its misspelled variant 'ORIGIANL'. Through close reading, it approaches garments as sites in which the term 'original' is tested and deformed. From this starting point, the text conceptualizes 'original' as a fashion myth: not an empirical quality, but a discursive mechanism that organizes value, novelty, and authorship within a paradoxical system structurally dependent on repetition. Drawing on Barthesian myth critique, the text traces how originality is produced through linguistic declaration and collective recognition rather than through actual material difference or origin. The mythology argues that counterfeit and Shanzhai practices do not negate originality; instead, they render its mythic structure visible, transforming imitation into a form of vernacular critique. In doing so, the text contributes to debates on fashion's discursive mechanisms, showing how the mythology of originality persists not despite repetition, but because of it.

Keywords: *Original; Fashion's paradox; Myth; Shanzhai; Counterfeit.*

INTRODUCTION

A long white T-shirt features a repeated pattern of black sans-serif text printed diagonally across its surface. Its arrangement evokes the monograms of luxury brands typically used in linings. The repetition is uncanny, almost incantatory. It reads: *original, original, original, original, original...* (Fig. 01).

'Original' is often defined as a beginning, a source, a point from which something emerges for the first time, and from which copies may subsequently derive (Oxford University Press, n.d.).

Yet, the garment does not display visible elements that might substantiate its claim of originality. Instead, the self-proclamation floats unanchored, raising the question of whether the print functions

less as material proof than as a mysterious claim. To investigate the elusive meaning of 'original', I examine how the term appears as printed text on garments. The analysis centers on two images depicting worn knock-off clothing produced in Shanzhai economies—the Chinese manufacturing system that produces modified copies and creative reinterpretations of branded goods (Han, 2017). Through close reading, I describe their material, textual, and visual features as a basis for interpreting how originality operates within knock-off and counterfeit cultures. Based on this garment analysis, I conceptualize 'original' as a mythology in the Barthesian sense. By presenting constructed meanings as self-evident, myths naturalize social and cultural hierarchies



Fig. 01

(Barthes, 1957). I argue that ‘original’ operates in this way, naturalizing fashion’s reliance on repetition while presenting novelty as self-evident (Barthes, 1967).

METHODS AND CASE SELECTION

This article adopts a qualitative close-reading approach, focusing on two photographed garments as singular case studies. The images are drawn from the *Shanzhai Lyric* archive, a multidisciplinary project that collects and recontextualizes ‘broken’ English found on Chinese counterfeit garments (Schwartz, 2023). The archive comprises both physical garments and visual documentation, including images of garments presented unworn as well as images of them in use on the body. The two images are drawn from a wider corpus for their formal comparability: they both depict human figures from behind wearing garments printed with the word ‘original’, but they differ in their graphic treatment. I propose approaching

these garments as textual-material objects: forms that function simultaneously as readable surfaces and material things, occupying a space between written clothing and image clothing in Barthes’s sense (1957), where printed words and visual form are inseparable in the production of meaning. Accordingly, the close reading attends not only to the print but also to the color, scale, typography, and placement on the body.

In both cases, placement is crucial, as the back operates as the primary site of address, making the claim to originality publicly legible.

Methodologically, this approach draws on object-based material culture analysis, which treats artifacts as primary evidence and begins with careful description before interpretation (Prown, 1982). Dress scholarship likewise demonstrates how close analysis of garments can support broader claims about fashion and meaning (Mida & Kim, 2019). Close reading is particularly suited to these objects, as it allows small visual differences to be treated as meaningful.

The argument does not depend on claims about manufacture, brand identity, or maker intention, as such information is unavailable. Instead, it remains limited to what can be established through visual analysis of the photographs.

ORIGINAL, *ORIGIANL*

Figure 01 shows a woman walking along a sunlit street. Her face is not visible; instead, the image directs attention to the back of her oversized white T-shirt dress, which becomes the primary site of investigation.

Formally, the contrast between white fabric and black lettering printed on it, together with the vertical composition, turns the back of the body into a surface to read. The garment is covered with the word ‘ORIGINAL’, printed in small uppercase sans-serif letters and scattered diagonally across the surface. In this arrangement, the words no longer read as a single statement but form a continuous graphic field.

This repetition produces a monogram-like effect that resembles the visual codes employed in luxury branding (Von Pezold, 2026). The garment does not seem to have visible brand labels or logos.

What is peculiar about the print is that it prompts the question: in what sense is it ‘original’?

Is the t-shirt claiming to be an original garment, an original brand, or original in the sense of being a prototype from which copies are derived?

The assertion of originality is unmistakable; yet its precise meaning remains elusive. Figure 02 depicts an ordinary traffic scene: a group of motorcyclists stopped at an urban intersection. Helmets, motorcycles, license plates, and street signs fill the frame. The central rider stands out: the back of his jacket is marked by a large word, printed in white uppercase letters across a black band. The contrast between beige fabric, black stripe, and white lettering makes the text immediately legible, like a billboard sign. The word reads 'ORIGIANL'.

Branded sportswear often features big typography printed across the back of hoodies or trouser legs, and the jacket seems to borrow those visual codes precisely. But the error becomes the image's decisive detail, redirecting attention from the rider to the garment as a textual object. Since it remains unclear whether the misspelling is accidental or deliberate, the jacket does not simply assert originality but renders that claim unstable (Fig. 02).

In the T-shirt dress of Figure 01, the repeated word 'ORIGINAL' is dispersed across the fabric, no longer functioning as a singular statement but as a pattern, an ornamental surface, turning the claim to originality into an atmosphere rather than a material quality.

By contrast, the beige jacket of Figure 02



Fig. 02

concentrates its claim in a single oversized back print, where the misspelled term 'ORIGIANL' appears not as a minor flaw but as the garment's most conspicuous feature.

Where the first garment seems to raise uncertainty about the intended meaning of the word through repetition, the second appears to complicate this relation: by claiming originality through a visible error, it may paradoxically affirm that authority. One could argue that claiming originality through misspelling constitutes an original strategy in itself. In both cases, the term 'original' is used to produce a visual effect through different graphic strategies. At close reading, admittedly limited by the fact that we can only see the garments in partially framed photographs, neither piece seems to clarify the intended meaning of 'original'.

Yet both are pictured in use, suggesting that the claim retains its appeal, at least for those who wear them. They seem to employ 'original' as a wearable label, a brand of newness in itself, whose appeal survives the dress's patterned repetition and the jacket's orthographic error. They exaggerate and distort the claim, offering a glimpse into how originality is declared without needing to be demonstrated.

It is precisely within this gap that counterfeit and Shanzhai objects become particularly revealing: they do not reject originality, but instead push it to its limits, suggesting that its appeal persists across repetition, displacement, and even error. Seen together, the garments allow us to question if originality depends less on demonstration than on declaration.

ORIGINAL: A NECESSARY MYTH

The ambiguity of 'original' mirrors broader patterns in fashion discourse. In mainstream fashion journalism, 'original' functions as a privileged term of evaluation (Van de Peer, 2022): it is invoked to praise novelty, as in *Business of Fashion's* description of a brand as "truly original" (Flaccavento, 2025), or to guarantee authenticity, as when *Vogue* claims that "nothing beats an original" (Jarman, 2026).

This ubiquity is conceptually unstable, as the term saturates fashion discourse by designating a seemingly self-evident quality of uniqueness, even within a system structured around recurrence, citation, and variation (Esposito, 2011). Fashion, as Simmel argued (1904), is driven by the simultaneous demands of imitation and

differentiation; it satisfies the desire to belong by following shared patterns while also fulfilling the wish to be different by presenting those patterns as singular and new.

What fashion calls originality, then, cannot be understood simply as unprecedented, since novelty in fashion emerges less from absolute rupture than from the recombination of existing forms (Kawamura, 2023; Entwistle, 2015). Esposito (2011) elaborates on this paradox by describing fashion as a system of 'originality through imitation', one that stabilizes itself precisely by masking repetition with the appearance of novelty.

Fashion relies on two interlocking paradoxes: the 'stability of transition' in which constant change becomes the only stable rule, and the 'conformity with deviance', in which everyone seeks to appear unique by adopting socially legible forms of uniqueness (Esposito, 2011).

Seen through this lens, originality therefore appears not as the opposite of imitation, but as one of the mechanisms through which imitation becomes culturally legible, desirable, and hierarchically distributed. The term allows fashion discourse to render neutral its own paradox, because it calls singular and unique what is already modified and varied; and presents as exceptional what is reproducible.

The meaning of 'original' is rarely interrogated because it appears self-evident.

As Esposito observes, "Fashion is so successful in articulating and combining its paradoxes that people usually don't think much about it [...].

The demonstration of the power of fashion is precisely the fact that we do not take it seriously" (2011, p. 610). Originality seems to function in a similar way: it seems obvious, and for that very reason remains unexamined. Its meaning persists as a trivial mystery, one too banal to question. Barthes provides a framework for understanding how this operation takes place within discourse. In *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes described myth as a second-order signifying system that transforms historically contingent relations into natural, self-evident truths, converting history into nature and making motive appear as reason.

Read in this way, originality appears less a material quality than a mythic discursive mechanism: it does not eliminate repetition but naturalizes some repetitions as creativity while relegating others to the status of derivation or plagiarism.

This is where Pham's account of racialized and culturally uneven 'copynorms' (2022) becomes crucial, because it shows that the distinction between 'original' and 'copy' is sustained not by neutral legal principles but by informal judgments about whose borrowing counts as authorship and whose counts as theft. To call a garment original, then, is not merely to describe it; it is to participate in a mythology that legitimizes designers, organizes value, and distributes cultural authority.

Originality, then, can be staged as a Barthesian myth: not a property inherent in the garment, but a discursive operation that naturalizes fashion's dependence on repetition, citation, and imitation. What it conceals is less copying itself than the social and cultural work by which some variations are authorized as innovation and others dismissed as copies.

WHERE THE MYTH FRAYS

If originality functions as a myth within fashion, Shanzhai objects can be read as one of the points at which that myth becomes less secure.

Rather than being understood only through the western legal category of counterfeiting (Liao, 2020; Wilf, 2019; Pham, 2022), Shanzhai practices also suggest a different understanding of making, one that Han describes through 'decreation', where value does not depend on a single, untouched origin but on a process of variation, transformation, and relationality (Han, 2017).

In this light, the mistranslations, misspellings, and textual distortions that appear on Shanzhai garments allow us to read these objects as sites of distributed authorship, where meaning emerges through repetition, circulation, and alteration rather than through the authority of a single creator. Such garments, therefore, invite what *Shanzhai Lyric* describes as a 'reparative mode of reading', one that is attentive to how broken or unstable language can open alternative ways of making sense under contemporary capitalism's standardization (Schwartz, 2023).

In this sense, they can be read as vernacular commentary (Schwartz, 2023) on fashion's own logic, that unsettle the claim of originality while exposing and making more legible its constructed nature.

Importantly, this exposure occurs within markets where counterfeits are not marginal but structurally significant. As Bombardini (2019) and von Pezold (2025; 2026) argue, they play an important role

in shaping access, value, and participation in specific economic and geographical contexts. What such garments make visible, then, is not the absence of originality, but its dependence on circulation, recognition, and shared belief.

CONCLUSION

The two garments examined in this Mythology suggest that originality in fashion does not manifest as a verifiable property of the object, but as a claim enacted through visual language, repetition, and social recognition.

The repeated “ORIGINAL” and the misspelled “ORIGIANL” do not merely fail to authenticate the garments; they offer insight into how originality is asserted within a fashion system structured by citation and variation.

These Shanzhai objects offer a glimpse into the translation, reproduction, and collective authorship that the myth of originality typically conceals. What they reveal, then, is not the absence of originality but the way it operates. In this sense, Shanzhai objects can be framed as points where the myth of originality becomes most legible. Ultimately, this mythology argues that originality endures not because it is materially fixed, but because it continues to be collectively affirmed.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] 2022. Courtesy of Shanzhai Lyric.

[Fig. 02] 2024. Courtesy of Shanzhai Lyric.

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THE BAKKERSBUIJS AND THE MYTH OF THE DUTCH BAKER

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Abstract

This mythology, focuses on the *Bakkersbuis*. A garment used in the context of Dutch bakeries and the practice of baking bread. It has a longstanding visual history from historic children's literature, to contemporary YouTube tutorials, resulting in this piece of workwear being recognized as a symbol of craft, expertise, and the image of the Dutch baker. However, through oral history and ethnographic insights, it has been found that this jacket is not used by bakers during the actual bread-baking practice. The garment is and has throughout time been too restricting in movement, expensive in cost, and precious to the wearer. In the spirit of Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, it is argued that the *Bakkersbuis* embodies the meaning surrounding the bakers' practice. Visual evidence shows that the *Bakkersbuis* has been used by bakers during local events and public appearances. The *Bakkersbuis* is a visual tool for nostalgia creation around the bakery trade and it is argued that the *white-coat effect* of doctors and their garments is at play here. Paradoxically, the garment signals aspects of craft, authenticity, and expertise even though it was not used during the actual labour.

Keywords: *Fashion; Workwear; Bakery culture; Work identity; Mythologies.*

ORIGINS OF THE *BAKKERSBUIJS*

The *Bakkersbuis* is a garment made for bakers and bread-baking practices. It is a piece of workwear: the product of a diversification of ordinary dress in recent times that started to develop through the industrial revolution and urbanization (Maccioni & Leopolda, 2009). The *Bakkersbuis* is in essence a sturdy jacket with (one or two) off-centre rows of buttons. The garment is made from white linen. The colour is a deliberate choice, highlighting the stains that are not the all-around white flour and being easily washed at high temperatures. Historically, the *Bakkersbuis* is accompanied by blue and white checkered trousers. Better known as a *Bakkersbroek* ('bakers' trousers'). Other historic and visual sources,

especially children's literature (Vlis & Schröder, 1940; Francina & Irme, 1928) emphasise a white bakers' hat. In contrast, the white apron that is a visible part of the outfit is not highlighted in these sources. This outfit can be traced back to '*Costumes parallèles du Cuisinier*' from the work of chef and writer Marie-Antoine Carême (Carême, 1842). Carême is known as a key figure for modernizing French cuisine (Whyte, 2021). Initially, this outfit was proposed to be the standard for chefs throughout Europe, but has made its way to the Dutch bakers practice. This first mention of this outfit in the Dutch bakery context can be traced back to literary accounts from 1839, in the Dutch literary classic *Camera Obscura* by *Hildebrandt*. In this novel the baker is described

as a man wearing a white jacket, a white hat, and smoking a pipe (Beets & Stapert-Eggen, 1978). This precise attire and its design was portrayed by Dutch costume designer Rie Cramer in 1941, showing the *Bakkersbuis* in full ornate (Fig. 01). At this time, these four pieces (*Bakkersbuis*, blue white checkered trousers, a white apron, and hat) can be considered the essential and historic outfit of the Dutch baker. Even though the outfit originated from the French Napoleonic era, and was initially intended for chefs. Over the course of the nineteenth century the complete set of clothing changed and, as for many similar trades, the outfits became fixed (Maccioni & Leopolda, 2009). This was the case for the bakers' outfit as well. So, the original blue white checkered trousers disappeared, which coincides with the rise and standardization of jeans as explained by Maccioni & Leopolda (2009). The blue jeans fit the bakers' practice as well through their sturdiness, mass-availability, and comfort during work. Next to this, the hat has most often been replaced by a simple cap. Therefore, the only contemporary garment that



Fig. 01

remained from this outfit is the *Bakkersbuis*. Today, the *Bakkersbuis* is still widely used, seen, and associated with the baker. It surfaces in YouTube explainer videos regarding bread baking (Omroep MAX, 2021), advertisements of the Dutch bakers' guild (*Echte Bakkersgilde*, n.d.), and in newspaper articles mentioning bakery culture (Fig. 02). Through consistent historic imagery of the baker and their garment, it can be concluded that the *Bakkersbuis* and its image shows up wherever there need be an emphasis on craft, authenticity, or expertise regarding bakery culture. However, through oral history and an ethnographic case study of a Dutch bakery and her archive¹, it has been found that bakers did not wear the *Bakkersbuis* during the actual bakery practice. This has multiple reasons. The first being the design of the garment itself. The *Bakkersbuis* is too restricting in motion to facilitate the heavy workload needed in the shoulders and arms. Second, bakers historically did not have the spending power to buy multiple *Bakkersbuisen*. One single garment was often what they could afford. Third, because of only having one *Bakkersbuis* the garment was worn only during public events.

The most concrete visual evidence are two photographs of where Anton Douenburg, one of the bakers from the *Bakkerij Douenburg* lineage, is seen (Fig. 03). On the left, we can see the baker working the dough while wearing the aforementioned blue white checkered trousers, a white apron, and a white T-shirt. A simple white T-shirt fulfilled the functional aspects of the *Bakkersbuis*: The same white colour, and improved movement compared to the *Bakkersbuis* itself. On the right, we can see the baker wearing the *Bakkersbuis* in combination with a historic bread delivery bike (Fig. 04). This photograph was taken during the 50th celebration of freedom since World War II in the village where the bakery is established. These photographs juxtapose each other in terms of setting: from the actual practice of bread baking behind the bakery store to the public presentation of the baker as part of the local village and its celebrations. In the bakery context itself, the *Bakkersbuis* is the only garment missing

¹ The archive of Bakkerij Douenburg near the Dutch-Belgium border in the province of Noord-Brabant which has been in operation for 120 years.

Je kunt een snee brood lezen'



vakjury keurt de witte puntjes.

foto Ingrid Bertens/het fotoburo

Bakkerswedstrijd: Joppen en Douenburg vallen in de prijzen.

door Annemieke Pepping
BREDAS - Twee tafels vol met heerlijk geurende broden van de diverse 'echte' bakkers uit de regio Zuid west-Nederland wachtten gisteren in Hotel Mastbosch op een rapportcijfer van hun vakbroeders elders uit het land. Er werd door de juryleden geproefd, geklopt, gedruwd, geroken, vergeleken en vooral gekeken. „Hoe zit het met de kleur, zijn de luchtbelletjes niet te groot? Hoe kenmerkt zich de korst?” Volgens Chris Scholtens van het bakkersgilde, kun je een snee brood lezen. Jarenlange ervaring heeft hem geleerd op aspecten te letten waar iemand die bij de bakker een brood koopt aan voorbij gaat. „Dit brood is net te droog de oven ingegaan. Kijk maar naar de korst. Dat daar heeft er 1 à 2 minuten te

lang in gestaan. Dat ziet zelfs een leek aan de iets donkerder kleur”, luidde zijn onverbiddelijke kritiek. Naast het verplichte programma van een volkorenbrood, zachte puntjes, eierkoeken, een amandelpotterlet en een kerststol, was er ook ruimte voor de creativiteit van de twintig deelnemende bakkers zelf. Dat leidde tot mooie namen als Rogge Verdommeke, Bakkers amuse of Ouddorpse Duinroosje. De innovatieprijs, die door een consumentenjury werd uitgereikt, viel dit jaar bakker Douenburg uit Rijsbergen ten deel, met een zeer donker brood gevuld met cranberries en noten. Het beste volkorenbrood werd gisteren door de Bredase bakker Joppen gebakken, die eveneens als beste 'echte' allround bakker uit de bus kwam.

► Echte bakkers uit regio Zuid-west-Nederland deden mee aan wedstrijd in Hotel Mastbosch. De bakkers Joppen en Douenburg pakt de prijzen.

Fig. 02



Fig. 03



Fig. 04

of the outfit. Whereas publicly it is the most emphasized piece of the outfit. To explain this dissonance between actual practice and public perception, it is argued that the *Bakkersbuis* is a key part in the construction of the 'myth of the Dutch baker'.

THE MYTH OF THE DUTCH BAKER

A myth is in essence a way to read everyday objects and their form as being charged with meaning, as described by Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (Barthes, 2009). The *Bakkersbuis* can be considered the vessel that combines the various facets of the bakery practice into a form.

This myth brings together not only craft and the craftsman, but relies on nostalgia as well.

The *Bakkersbuis* is embedded in more than 200 years of Dutch cultural and visual history, which makes the nostalgia argument fairly obvious.

A critical reflection through the *Bakkersbuis* is in its place because we often take 'matter' for granted, even though the objects, goods, fabrics, stuff and debris weave a complex web of meaning around us (Tynan, 2022). Maccioni & Leopolda (2009) state that clothing can be considered the armour of our physical, social, moral and cultural condition. In line with this, Loveday (2014) suggests that we should not dismiss garments like these as simple narrations of family folklore or mythologized versions of history.

The aspect of nostalgia of this myth can also be interpreted as a strategy for positive working class identification (Loveday, 2014).

Fashion reflects and extends economic tensions and conflicts (Partington, 2013), the *Bakkersbuis* being an expensive garment that could not be acquired easily has made the *Bakkersbuis* into a precious and well kept garment.

These arguments supply insights into why the *Bakkersbuis* became a special outfit worn in public. It becomes apparent that these practices shape when and where the garment is worn.

Making it an object of baker's pride and labour identity as a logical effect.

A parallel can be drawn regarding the work of Feitsma (2014) and Dutch fashion identity. Feitsma (2014) argues that fashion identities and myths are guided by *confirmation bias*: we can recognize a Dutch person through their specific Dutch brands (for instance, a *Gaastra* jacket) because the evidence overlaps with our belief of what Dutch people would wear.

This same bias shapes the bakers' identity as well: we recognize a baker through their *Bakkersbuis* because it overlaps with our beliefs which are in turn guided by the popular and visual history of the baker as discussed at the beginning. When the baker is wearing a *Bakkersbuis*, we recognize him as a baker.

When he is wearing something else we do not recognize him as a baker. This confirmation bias can be attributed to the fact that consumers create meanings by using their shared familiarity with other images and objects to make cross-media intertextual references (Partington, 2013) and in turn strengthening the fashion mythology surrounding the (sub)culture and historical constructions (Feitsma, 2014).

Looking closer at the historical construction of the bakery practice, Knutas (2013) argues that in the bakery craft there is an emphasis on the importance of the aesthetics and the association of tradition within the craft itself.

The baking craft has largely been technologized, and along with the exchange value aimed at increasing profit, the craft of baking bread, and the tradition of baking itself, has changed in character (Sennett, 2009).

Barbier *et al.* (2024) elaborate on these developments through exhibiting the changing craft from handwork to industrial machines.

Whereas the white attire as a visual marker stays present throughout time and all its visual imagery. This consistent visual marker of the *Bakkersbuis* throughout the ever technologized practice can be viewed through this lens of professionalism. Therefore, it is argued that the '*white coat effect*' (Brase & Richmond, 2004; Crutzen *et al.*, 2023) seen in the study of doctors and their garments, is at play here as well.

The *white coat effect* is a phenomenon where patient-physician interaction are influenced by the formal attire (white doctors coat).

A doctor wearing a white coat reinforces beliefs of professionalism and positively influences factors of trustworthiness for the patient.

Mapping this onto the case of the baker, we encounter the problem of the bakers not wearing the garment during practice.

However, we have seen the *Bakkersbuis* being worn during local competitions (Fig. 02), public events (Fig. 04), and in media such as YouTube tutorials. From this we can conclude that the visual sign of the *Bakkersbuis* is one of credibility

or trustworthiness through its recognition. Further endorsed by the ethnographic finding that the baker has only one *Bakkersbuis*, which is well conserved for these special public appearances. This faux-*white coat effect* relies on the *Bakkersbuis* being a visual sign for the more than 200 years of cultural history to communicate a sense of tradition, craftsmanship, and authenticity to the viewer. Even though the *Bakkersbuis* is not worn during the actual baking practice.

THE FASHION MYTHOLOGY OF THE DUTCH BAKER

To conclude, the baker's clothes represent the bakers' identity through their design and the cultural history they embody. It can be stated that the public perception of the baker and the *Bakkersbuis* is one-sided: the baker does indeed wear the *Bakkersbuis*, but not during the actual physical labour. This notion is not something harmful, or inherently false, rather an incomplete judgement formed by what can be seen by the public and what cannot, as for instance in the labour in the bakery-space. To echo the words of Maccioni & Leopolda (2009): regarding the workwear of various trades, the aprons, overalls, functional pants and jackets, smocks and clogs, generations of pastry chefs, mechanics, cooks or painters have recognized their uniform of protection and distinction. The *Bakkersbuis* is a form of pride and credibility in the visual representation of the baking world. This pride makes the garment ideal for the bakers public appearance which inherently reinforces the myth. The *Bakkersbuis* can be considered a uniform solely for public appearances and special events. Next to this, the faux-*white coat effect* creates a cycle of public appearances and confirmation of the baker wearing a *Bakkersbuis*, which deepens the myth in the public eye. The *Bakkersbuis* is more than a simple workwear garment or a remnant of Dutch nostalgia. It is a piece of clothing that embodies the bakery practice. When worn it is a sign of credibility: The *Bakkersbuis* is a vessel that represents the craft of the baker, the artisanal production of baked goods, and the authentic environment in which everything is conceived in. These aspects of meaning are weaved through the garment as a myth, more so than the blue and white checkered pants, the apron, or the hat have

achieved. The *Bakkersbuis* is a vessel for the idea and image of a 'true' baker.

All the while, embodying a central paradox: the *Bakkersbuis* symbolises the labour of baking even though it was never actually used in that labour, representing a case of mythological representation without the contemporary practice.

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CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] The *Bakkersbuis* depicted in the costume design by Cramer: Cramer, Rie, Costume design for the theatre play of Camera Obscura. 1940/1941; Collection of Allard Pierson, Source: ModeMuze,

[Fig. 02] Newspaper article depicting a bakery competition, 2007; Courtesy of the Bakkerij Douenburg archive,

[Fig. 03] Anton Douenburg at work in the bakery; Photograph courtesy of the Bakkerij Douenburg archive,

[Fig. 04] Anton Douenburg in the village parade; Photograph courtesy of the Bakkerij Douenburg archive.

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THE KIMONO COVER UP

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Abstract

Fashion does not merely reflect history; it actively rewrites it through the language of style, desire, and consumption. In contemporary fashion copywriting, garments are not only described but transformed into desirable narratives that attach style, lifestyle, and value to consumption. This article explores how the kimono, historically embedded in systems of cultural practice and social meaning, is reconfigured within luxury e-commerce language as a fashionable “cover-up.” Through close reading, the analysis demonstrates how terms such as “kimono-inspired,” “certified,” and “enhances” detach the kimono from its original cultural context and reposition it within systems of leisure, lifestyle, and aesthetic consumption. The article argues that fashion language operates not simply descriptively, but semiotically, producing meaning through connotation and transforming cultural specificity into marketable value. In this process, the ambiguity between inspiration and appropriation becomes structurally embedded within fashion discourse itself.

Keywords: *Fashion copywriting; Kimono; Cultural appropriation; Semiotics; Luxury e-commerce.*

“Based in Cali, Colombia, Johanna Ortiz is committed to the local community and works to preserve craftsmanship and encourage creativity. Handmade from certified linen, this 'Boa Whisper' cover-up is cut with flared sleeves and printed with a zebra-print motif. The wide sash belt enhances its kimono-inspired shape.”

(- Product description from net-a-porter platform.¹)

1 https://www.net-a-porter.com/en-gr/shop/product/johanna-ortiz/clothing/coverups/boa-whisper-belted-zebra-print-linen-cover-up/46376663162965802?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=GOO%3ANAP%3AEU%3AGR%3A-OO%3AENG%3ASEAU%3APMX%3AMAN%3AMXO%3A-NEW%3AWN%3AHIGH-CLUSTERS%3ALV0%3ALV1%3ALV2%3AXXX%3A0%3AHIGH-CLUSTERS%3A&utm_id=23642032934&utm_term=3074457345630280270&vtp00=GOO-GLE&vtp01=SEAU&vtp02=&vtp03=&vtp04=x&vtp05=c&vtp06=&vtp07=pla&gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=23642039909&gbraid=0AAAAADRhZnv8j_EcgqfFWwxeLJJSXot9D&gclid=CjwKCAjwntHPBhAaEiwA_Xp6RoN8hzwAFBUJNx1lxyvpw-Bom_tjhF-oVoN99cqLpMzkIjQhi_bz3DBoCu0EQAvD_BwE

Cali, Colombia, is introduced as more than a location. It functions as a guarantee: of community, craftsmanship and ethical grounding. The garment goes beyond being simply described to being justified, since its “certification” presents it not as fashion, but as virtue.

“Certified”, here, functions less as a material guarantee than as a moral one, allowing the garment to appear ethically secured before it is aesthetically consumed; “enhances” suggests a completion of the garment’s form as it is translated into a fashion language; and naming the garment ‘Boa-Whisper’ combines an exotic reference with softness and intimacy that create an atmosphere. The description moves from geography, through design details, to another geography, culminating in the originless “kimono-inspired shape,” where the kimono appears without context. As Jenny Hall notes in *Japan Beyond the Kimono*, the kimono historically functioned not merely as clothing, but as a garment embedded in systems of etiquette, social identity, and cultural practice. None of these associations remain necessary within the product description (Hall, 2020, p.123-135). Here, the kimono is no longer referenced as a cultural object, but as a form, an outline, a visual trace enhanced by a sash. Such vocabulary usage allows for alignment with the Barthesian idea, where “fashion appears essentially [...] as a system of signifiers [...]” (Barthes, 1990, p.280). As such, the kimono is not described but rather evoked, and in that evocation it is transformed. The description transforms the kimono from a culturally situated garment into a consumable fashion sign.

The phrase “kimono-inspired” is a cautious one. It acknowledges the difference while subtly neutralising it. By invoking “inspired” the cultural heritage of the kimono is flattened, suggesting distance and detachment that produce an atmosphere of appreciation rather than appropriation. As its cultural context recedes, the garment ceases to belong to a specific place, and becomes instead a stylistic resource available to be “re-imagined”, “re-defined” and “re-invented”. Inspiration does not preserve the kimono, it displaces it. The garment is no longer encountered as a cultural object, but as a form that can be mobilized and recombined. Thus, it is through the depoliticisation of vocabulary, whereby the kimono is reframed as

a fashionable garment. The transformation matters commercially because garments positioned as fashion circulate more easily than garments tied to specific cultural traditions.

Words do not merely describe the garment; they make it wearable within a different system of meaning. In this context, language must be understood not merely as a descriptive tool, but as a site of responsibility, mediating how cultural difference is translated and circulated. The description masterfully assembles multiple cultural references without friction.

It moves seamlessly, stylized in editorial voice, from one vestimentary feature to another, producing a surface that appears coherent, even natural. “Colombia” anchors the garment with ethical locality; the “zebra-print motif” introduces an exoticised elsewhere; the “kimono-inspired shape” provides a recognizable form.

Different cultural elements that coexist without tension. Fashion copywriting achieves, indeed, the interchangeability and coexistence of signs within a single object through their detachment from their original contexts.

Since the garment does not belong to any one place, but circulates between them, it now consists of a single aesthetic composition held together not by origin, but by readability.

Fashion as a system of signification elucidates how garments acquire meaning through language, transforming material features into culturally legible signs, as are aesthetics.

This circulation of the garment finds its destination in the “cover-up”. The kimono is no longer a garment to be worn within its cultural context. The clothing category of the “cover-up” situates it within a different scene: the beach, the resort, the space of leisure in general.

In this scenery, the kimono is nothing but a layer to be put on and taken off. It is now an accessory that accompanies a particular mode of dressing rather than defining it. In this context, the kimono-as-resortwear, or bohemian chic must-have, operates as a culturally re-coded signifier within the semiotic system of western leisure. What matters is not where it comes from, but how it can be worn.

Rather than expressing its original cultural context, it becomes a marker of belonging to a particular lifestyle. Through this process, fashion language does more than describe the garment—it situates it. It determines where it belongs, how it should be

worn, and what it should signify. The kimono is thus not simply transformed into resortwear or boho-chic; it is made to fit a set of expectations that govern what counts as fashionable, desirable, and appropriate. Through repeated linguistic formulations, it stabilises norms and expectations, effectively producing a system of implicit “do’s and don’ts” that govern how fashion is understood and consumed. What emerges is a form of meaning that appears stable and self-evident. Cultural difference is not erased, but reorganised into a form that can circulate without resistance. The garment becomes both legible and consumable and, thus, the kimono no longer belongs to a culture, but to a setting. This transformation overwrites the conditions under which the kimono once existed. Its history, its cultural specificity, its modes of use are no longer required. It is not a matter of misinterpretation, but of simplification that enables them to disappear while maintaining the garment’s intelligibility. The kimono is reduced in order to circulate as a westernised cover-up with new meaning: one that is immediate, aesthetic and consumable. By this means, cultural appropriation takes the form of the commodification of traditional clothing (He, 2025, p.228). When the kimono is no longer “just a dress,” it becomes a story that is easy to sell, and one that fulfills the conditions of what Barthes would identify as myth (Barthes, 1991); a form that empties history from objects while making their meanings appear natural. Appropriation, here, not an accident, nor an external intrusion. It emerges from the very process that makes the garment intelligible within fashion. In this sense, appropriation is not the opposite of meaning, but one of the conditions under which meaning is made to circulate smoothly, making up a strong, coherent, marketable story. In other words, the kimono is given meaning that can be consumed. Appropriation is not inevitable, but intelligible. The kimono is not distorted after all. What has changed is the system of its intelligibility, that is, the conditions under which it can be understood. Re-framed as a “cover-up” it appears as naturally belonging in this context. The ambiguity between inspiration and appropriation is not accidental. The new framing of the kimono gives it a form that no longer resists consumption.

In fashion copywriting, it is connotation that generates meaning beyond mere description, and it is here that desire is produced. Connotation attaches culturally loaded meanings that render the garment desirable. Fashion language does not simply inform; it situates the garment within a world of associations that give it value. This raises a crucial question: how do words move from connotation to meaning—and further still, to value? In the case of the kimono cover-up the garment is not worn so much as circulated. What is preserved is its recognisability; what is lost is its specificity. The cover-up does not conceal the body, but the process through which meaning is detached, aestheticised, and made available for consumption. This does not necessarily compose a call for the elimination of cultural influence or cross-pollination (Climer & Almond, 2023), but rather an awareness of how such exchanges are mediated. The distinction between appreciation and appropriation is enacted linguistically: through the terms, metaphors, and narrative frames that render cultural difference both intelligible and marketable. In this sense, the future of fashion copywriting lies not in abandoning myth, but in consciously attending to how myths are made, whose meanings they catalyze, and at what cultural cost.

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LAYERS OF SPEED

HOW FAST FASHION REWRITES TIME, MEMORY AND MATTER

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Abstract

This article examines the mythology of speed underpinning contemporary fast fashion through the performative artistic project *Kapadocia*, developed in dialogue with the artistic group multidisciplinary Kol·lect-if. Drawing on artistic practice as a methodological framework, it argues that fast fashion not only accelerates garment circulation but also transforms the temporal, symbolic, and affective conditions through which clothing acquires meaning. Through accumulations of used garments and hybrid textile bodies, *Kapadocia* exposes the hidden labour, environmental degradation, waste displacement, and culture of obsolescence embedded within global fashion systems. The study critically contrasts fast fashion with circular economy narratives, highlighting their conflicting temporal logics: acceleration versus duration, forgetting versus memory. By reactivating clothing as a material and emotional archive, the project proposes a counter-temporal perspective that challenges disposability and reimagines fashion through care, remembrance, and material responsibility.

Keywords: *Fast fashion; Performative art; Circular economy; Clothing memory; Socio-ecological crisis.*

FIRST FOLD

The following mythology emerges from a shared process of artistic and academic research developed within the Kapadocia project¹, in dialogue with

the Spanish artistic collective Kol·lect-if².

The reflections developed here emerge from direct involvement in the artistic processes that constitute the project itself.

Kapadocia is a performative artistic project that transforms accumulated garments into sculptural layers covering performers' bodies, generating hybrid figures suspended between recognition

¹ Kapadocia is a performative action that turns used clothing into poetic language and denunciation. The performers' bodies are covered with layer upon layer of fabric until hybrid figures emerge, hovering at the threshold between recognition and excess. A living metaphor for everything we carry as a society—identities, memories, residues, collapsed systems. Kapadocia transforms each layer of clothing into a symbol of what conceals us, defines us, and weighs upon us. The project was the recipient of a Creative Research Grant in Visual Arts awarded by the Catalonia Autonomous Government, Spain (7495 D/480000103/4411/0000), and was initially presented at the Nit de l'Art de Campos (Mallorca, Spain) in August 2025. A preview video is presented here: <https://vimeo.com/1120775625>.

² Kol·lect-if (<https://kollectif-2a8dfc.webflow.io/>) is a collective founded with the aim of creating spaces for artistic production, fostering interdisciplinary intersections and innovation within the field of contemporary artistic expression. We are a multidisciplinary artistic collective based in Mallorca (Spain), established in 2023, composed of artists with diverse experiences and trajectories in visual and sound arts, performance, theatre, dance, pedagogy, and cultural research.

and excess. *Working with archives of used clothing and collective performative actions, the project explores how garments carry memory, labor, and residue.*

Within this research context, *Kapadocia* and Kol·lect·if function as concrete cultural objects through which a critical mythology can be articulated. The performances operate as material investigations of clothing, time, and accumulation, allowing theoretical reflection to emerge directly from artistic practice.

In this sense, *Kapadocia* functions not only as an artistic project but also as a methodological device through which the temporal, material, and symbolic dimensions of clothing can be critically examined. The myth addressed here concerns the contemporary cultural belief in speed, disposability, and the naturalized expiration of clothing. In this sense, the text follows Roland Barthes' understanding of mythology as a cultural mechanism that transforms historically produced conditions into forms of naturalized common sense (Barthes, 1957).

Through the performative accumulations of *Kapadocia*, this article argues that fast fashion does not merely accelerate the circulation of garments but fundamentally alters the temporal and symbolic conditions through which clothing acquires meaning. Clothing often arrives before reflection.

It settles onto the body as an apparently automatic response to a question that is rarely articulated. Dressing today is less an act of warmth or expression than a gesture of synchronization: staying current, not falling behind, remaining in circulation. Fast fashion has turned dressing into an accelerated choreography in which novelty is desired not for its difference but for its brevity (Cline, 2012; Joy et al., 2012).

A garment matters precisely because it does not last. Its promise is not to accompany the body, but to disappear.

Within this economy of constant replacement, time flattens, producing a continuous present where memory cannot sediment.

This condition resonates with what Zygmunt Bauman describes as the temporality of liquid modernity: a cultural experience of time organized around perpetual circulation and the erosion of durable forms (Bauman, 2000).

The past becomes an obstacle, and the future is reduced to the next collection. Fashion, which

historically articulated social, seasonal, and symbolic rhythms, has become a permanent updating machine. The garment no longer ages; it expires. This naturalization of expiry constitutes a contemporary mythology. It does not present itself as ideology but as common sense.

Buying cheaply, wearing briefly, and discarding quickly appear as individual choices when in fact they are effects of a deeply structured system. The system becomes invisible precisely because it functions efficiently.

In this landscape, the circular economy appears as a narrative of reconciliation, widely promoted within institutional and corporate sustainability discourse (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017; Das et al., 2025). It promises to close cycles, repair damage, and restore balance to a system that increasingly acknowledges its environmental and social excesses.

Yet between fast fashion and circularity there is no continuity, only friction. One feeds on acceleration; the other requires deceleration. One depends on forgetting; the other requires memory. *Kapadocia* allows us to make these tensions visible by materializing accumulation, obsolescence, and the passage of time through performative layering.

To imagine that both can coexist without conflict is to sustain a comfortable fiction.

THE SIGN THAT CONSUMES ITSELF

Fashion has long functioned as a system of signs, organizing hierarchies, belongings, and desires (Barthes, 1967; Lipovetsky, 1987).

Clothing communicates social positions, affiliations, and aspirations through symbolic codes that circulate within specific historical contexts. Fast fashion, however, has pushed this language toward saturation—a condition that becomes materially legible in *Kapadocia*'s accumulation of garments. Signs repeat themselves until they lose density, circulating at a speed that erodes their symbolic weight (Cline, 2012; Joy et al., 2012). Garments no longer signify in stable ways; they circulate as commodities within global regimes of exchange where objects acquire meaning through their trajectories rather than through fixed symbolic codes (Appadurai, 1986).

Their value lies less in what they express than in how quickly they can be replaced by nearly identical ones.

In this regime, the garment ceases to mediate between body and world and instead becomes an interface between subject and image. Dressing is less about inhabiting social space than about appearing correctly within it. The mirror has been displaced by the screen; lived experience by its representation. We inhabit environments saturated with simulations that do not hide their artificiality but celebrate it, echoing what Umberto Eco described as the cultural logic of hyperreality (Eco, 1986). The copy does not aspire to resemble the original; it aims to function more efficiently than reality.

The industry accompanies this symbolic acceleration with unprecedented production volume. *Kapadocia* makes these processes perceptible by slowing down circulation, making visible the hidden labor and material traces embedded in each garment.

Reports on the global fashion market indicate a constant growth in the speed of production cycles and collection turnover (McKinsey & Company & The Business of Fashion, 2024).

More clothing is manufactured than the planet—and human bodies—can absorb (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Thomas, 2019).

THE WORK THAT REMAINS UNSEEN

Every garment has an origin, even if the system works to erase it. Behind each T-shirt lie hours of repetitive labor, exhausted bodies, and mechanical gestures. Alienation has not disappeared; it has become refined.

The textile worker rarely recognizes themselves in the finished object. The garment circulates globally while its maker remains immobilized within localized conditions of labor.

Textile factories in the Global South frequently operate as spaces of normalized exception, characterized by long working hours, minimal wages, and limited labor protections.

These environments operate through regimes of discipline and surveillance that recall the industrial dispositifs analyzed by Michel Foucault (1975). Such conditions are not anomalies but structural requirements for maintaining high speed and low cost within global supply chains.

In this context, critiques of economies sustained by disposable bodies acquire a concrete material dimension (Davis, 2003).

Kapadocia intervenes here performatively, making

visible both labor and accumulation, connecting the abstract system of fashion to tangible human experience through the physical weight and density of layered garments worn by performers.

Textile supply chains reproduce logics of discipline, confinement, and replacement. There are no visible walls, yet economic infrastructures restrict the possibilities of the future.

The worker's body is valued only as long as it continues producing; once exhausted, it is replaced.

LIQUID WASTE, COLONIAL DESTINATIONS

The garment's journey rarely ends in the closet. Containers of "used clothing," donation systems, and secondary markets symbolically extend the life of garments while effectively displacing the problem. Large quantities of clothing eventually accumulate in landfills located in countries that neither produced nor originally consumed them (Ritch & Siddiqui, 2023). From this perspective, garments acquire meaning through their global trajectories rather than through stable cultural contexts, reflecting what Arjun Appadurai describes as the "social life of things" within complex systems of circulation (1986).

These landscapes—mountains of T-shirts, jeans, and synthetic fibers—offer one of the most revealing images of fast fashion.

What initially appears as accessibility ultimately manifests as material dumping. Clothing becomes a colonial residue, as the surplus of western consumption is deposited in territories already marked by economic inequality.

In these environments, the dynamics of liquid modernity become tangible (Bauman, 2000).

Kapadocia mediates performatively to render these flows perceptible, showing how garments move from bodies to landscapes as material traces of excess through staged accumulations that echo the visual logic of textile landfills.

Objects and people share a similar logic: they are useful only while circulating. Once circulation stops, they become obstacles. Waste is not an accident but an inevitable outcome of a system that produces more than it can sustain.

CIRCULARITY AS A SOOTHING AESTHETIC

Faced with such disturbing realities, the circular economy offers a reassuring narrative of order. Within contemporary fashion discourse, circularity is increasingly framed as the primary pathway toward sustainability (Papamichael *et al.*, 2023). Yet a closer look reveals a fundamental paradox: circular initiatives are implemented without questioning overall production volume (Hugo *et al.*, 2021). Industry reports repeatedly indicate that sustainability strategies are frequently implemented alongside continued growth in production output, rather than replacing it. Recycling occurs without producing less. Waste is optimized without slowing acceleration. Sustainable garments coexist with twenty new collections per year. Within this context, sustainability often functions as another sign within the spectacle (Debord, 1967). Rather than transforming the structure of the system, it polishes its surface, enabling consumption to continue with a relatively calm conscience. Circularity increasingly operates as a visually persuasive brand narrative whose promise rarely reaches the structural core of the industry. The problem is not merely technical but temporal. Circularity requires duration, care, and repair. Fast fashion requires obsolescence. As long as desire remains organized around urgency and novelty, circularity risks remaining a simulacrum. *Kapadocia* models a counter-tempo, slowing down the cycle of acquisition to reveal the temporal depth and memory of clothing.

THE BODY AS TEXTILE ARCHIVE

At this point, it becomes important to distinguish between fashion and clothing. Fashion refers primarily to the industrial system of accelerated production and symbolic circulation that characterizes fast fashion. Clothing, by contrast, emphasizes the material, affective, and experiential dimension of garments in relation to bodies and memory. Clothing is not only merchandise. It is also memory. Garments retain traces of bodies, gestures, and events: a scent, a distortion of fabric, a repaired seam. Dressing becomes a form of bodily writing, an inscription that occurs through contact with skin rather than through verbal language, recalling feminist reflections on embodied writing in which the body itself becomes a site of inscription (Cixous, 1975).

From this perspective, clothing functions as an affective archive (Ingold, 2013). It accompanies mourning, celebrations, routines. To keep a garment is often to keep a fragment of lived experience. Fast fashion interrupts this relationship by accelerating the cycle of acquisition and disposal to the point where attachment becomes difficult. Fast fashion garments do not become memories; they become noise. Within the performative context of *Kapadocia*, this interruption of memory becomes materially visible: the accumulation of garments transforms clothing from personal archive into anonymous mass. Identity in this context is constructed through accumulation and discard. It is performative rather than stable, rehearsed through layers that overlap, replace, and abandon one another (Butler, 1993). Each garment acts as a social interface between the self and the world. Speed renders this performance fragile: identities become as replaceable as the garments that sustain them.

ACTIVE MATTER, HYBRID BODIES

Clothing is not passive. It shapes posture, restricts movement, and regulates temperature. Garments act upon bodies and with bodies, participating in the construction of human experience. Textiles have historically functioned as spaces of thought. As Anni Albers emphasized, weaving intertwines technique and sensitivity, time and matter (Albers, 1965). The textile is both material practice and conceptual structure. Within the performances of *Kapadocia*, the accumulation of garments produces hybrid bodies. Layers obscure the boundaries between subject and object, revealing clothing as an active material agent. The body becomes partially buried under textile layers, transforming into a sculptural mass where identity dissolves into accumulation. In this sense, the work resonates with broader artistic conceptions of material agency, recalling Joseph Beuys's understanding of artistic practice as a process through which matter itself participates in transformation (Beuys, 1973). In these moments, the garment ceases to serve the body and begins to dominate it. The image exposes the structural excess of the fashion system: accumulation becomes visible as weight.

CARNIVAL, EXCESS, AND COLLAPSE

This inversion—clothing overwhelming the body—contains a carnivalesque dimension.

Hierarchies are reversed, order collapses, and excess becomes a form of critique (Bakhtin, 1965). The grotesque exaggeration of garments piled upon bodies reveals the underlying logic of overproduction.

The image disturbs precisely because it makes visible what the system normally conceals: fashion no longer dresses bodies; it risks burying them beneath its own surplus. *Kapadocia* enacts this inversion physically, making the grotesque visible and experiential.

Here, categories of clean and dirty, own and foreign begin to collapse, destabilizing symbolic boundaries. The accumulation of discarded garments blurs symbolic boundaries between value and waste, echoing anthropological analyses of how societies construct categories of purity and contamination (Douglas, 1966).

Clothing, once intended to mark social distinctions, becomes an indistinct mass. The body itself turns into a symbolic landfill where the residues of production accumulate.

EXHAUSTED NATURE, PROFANED MATTER

The textile industry is one of the arenas where the modern rupture between humanity and nature becomes particularly visible: polluted waters, degraded soils, and synthetic fibers that resist decomposition (Merchant, 1980).

Fast fashion treats matter as an infinite resource, stripped of symbolic meaning.

Recovering a different relationship with clothing would require reintroducing a ritual dimension to dressing—recognizing garments as relations between bodies, materials, and time.

As Mircea Eliade argued in his reflections on the sacred and the profane, rituals historically structured the symbolic relationship between human communities and material objects (Eliade, 1956). *Kapadocia* interposes as a ritualized enactment, giving garments and bodies a temporal and material depth absent in mass production. Without this transformation in symbolic perception, attempts at circularity remain largely superficial.

DISMANTLING THE MYTH (LAST REMARKS)

The conflict between fast fashion and the circular economy is not simply a question of technological efficiency. It is fundamentally a conflict of meanings and temporalities.

Fast fashion is sustained by speed and forgetting. Circularity requires slowness and memory.

As long as desire remains organized around the constant production of novelty, circularity will function primarily as a comforting promise rather than a structural transformation.

To dismantle this mythology requires slowing down—listening to objects, acknowledging the material, emotional, and political weight of clothing, as the performative accumulations of *Kapadocia* attempt to do.

Only then might it become possible to imagine a fashion system that does not merely recycle waste but reduces the need to produce it.

Kapadocia envisions such a system, making tangible the possibility of fashion that remembers, respects, and materially enacts care.

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FASHION LEXIGRAPHY

THE LEXICON OF SU*****TY FAUX, ECO, VEGAN, BIO LEATHER

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Abstract

This Fashion Lexigraphy interrogates the linguistic and cultural dimensions of sustainability in the Italian fashion industry, focusing on how terms such as ‘faux’, ‘eco’, ‘vegan’, and ‘bio leather’ shape material narratives. While sustainability was once a revolutionary concept, its overuse has diluted its meaning, often serving as a vague moral signifier rather than a precise descriptor. The legal framework in Italy, which restricts terms like *eco leather* to animal-derived materials while permitting ‘faux leather’ as a more transparent term, illustrates how language is both regulated and contested. As consumer interest shifts toward using non-animal materials, linguistic clarity becomes crucial for distinguishing between the various types of leather alternatives. Beyond technical innovation, the cultural legitimacy of new materials depends on their ability to develop distinct identities rather than relying on conventional leather as a reference point. Industry discourse, legal terminology, and marketing practices collectively influence how these materials are perceived, normalized, and regulated. By analyzing their genealogies and rhetorical uses, this Lexigraphy highlights the performative power of language in shaping the sustainable transition and argues for more precise fashion lexigraphy as a tool to foster transparency, trust, and cultural adoption.

Keywords: *Sustainability; Faux leather; Eco leather; Vegan leather; Bio leather.*

IN THE AGE OF SU*****TY

The title of this Lexigraphy – *The Lexicon of Su*****ty* – is deliberately provocative.

The term sustainability has become so omnipresent in fashion discourse that it risks becoming an empty buzzword. Scholars, designers, and consumers frequently express a sense of fatigue, irritation, or even mistrust toward what is increasingly perceived as a “bad word”: an umbrella term stretched so wide that it loses specificity and critical edge. Sustainability is invoked to signal moral virtue, but rarely accompanied by precise definitions, measurable impact, or linguistic transparency. The importance of fashion lexigraphy in the context of sustainability is attested by experiences such as *The Sustainable Fashion*

Glossary, launched in 2020 and updated biannually, developed through a collaboration between Condé Nast and Centre for Sustainable Fashion - London College of Fashion, University of Arts London.

This Lexigraphy interrogates animal- and petroleum-free leather alternative lexical inflation and semantic ambiguity, focusing on how its specific offshoots – faux, eco, vegan, bio leather – have become central to the way the industry frames material innovation and ethical claims.

These terms are not neutral: they shape the symbolic, cultural, and economic landscapes in which materials emerge and circulate.

By examining their genealogies, legal definitions, and rhetorical uses, this Lexigraphy seeks to expose the tensions embedded in the language of

sustainability – both in Italian and English – and contribute to a more critical, transparent fashion lexicography. The terminology employed in this study has been drawn from the Italian regulatory lexicon as well as from reports produced by organizations and research centers specializing in next-generation materials. It is important to emphasize that the temporal focus of the study is the last decade, a period marked by the most significant advancements in material innovation and by ongoing challenges in legislation related to these developments. Within fashion, scholarly and public debate has increasingly focused on the transition from animal leather to alternative materials, as reflected in works such as Simona Segre Reinach's *Per un vestire gentile. Moda e liberazione animale* (2022), which examines the ethical, cultural, and material implications of this shift.

FAUX, ECO, VEGAN, BIO LEATHER

In June 2020, the Italian Council of Ministers renewed and updated the legislative decree Decreto Legislativo n. 1112 (1966), stating that only materials of animal origin may legally be labeled *cuoio* (leather), *pelle* (hide), or *pelliccia* (fur) and not anything that artificially reproduces their appearance. The renewed decree, the Decreto Legislativo n. 68 (2020) issued by ICEC - *Istituto di Certificazione della qualità per l'industria Conciaria*, specifies that the certification of leathers with a low environmental impact, called eco or ecological leather, must be based on the UNI 11427 standard. This certification implies the use of animal raw materials, primarily by-products of the food industry. The term *faux leather* (*similpelle* in Italian) has long been associated with synthetic substitutes for animal leather, typically made from PVC or PU, and appears to represent the most transparent and widely accepted descriptor for imitation leather. These distinctions go beyond a mere matter of language: they reflect how the semantics of sustainability are regulated and contested. Faux leather is often accompanied by or replaced with the prefixes *ecological* and *vegan*, terms that explicitly evoke environmental and ethical values. While the former has been declared illegal, the latter can be misleading with regard to environmental impact. As a result, this lack of clarity or greenwashing may obscure the actual composition or processing of the material being sold. In contrast, faux leather explicitly signals its non-animal and fossil fuel-derived or man-made

composition, making it – paradoxically – a more transparent and legally robust term, even if strongly subject to bias.

As this section argues, bio leather plays a pivotal role in the tanning industry's sustainability transition. Since 2020, online searches for “leather” have declined by 3.5%, while interest in “vegan leather” has increased by 69%, as witnessed by the 2023 report by Collective Fashion Justice and Material Innovation Initiative: 75% of Australians, nearly 78% of Britons, and 90% of Chinese respondents would opt for next-generation, non-animal leather if given the choice (Hakansson et al., 2023: 13). This reflects a broader awareness of the environmental and ethical costs of traditional leather production. When comparing the climate impact of different materials, the contrast is striking: per square meter, bovine leather emits approximately 110 kg of CO₂, compared to 7–15.8 kg for PU/synthetics, 8.2 kg for bio-based PU, and just 0.8–2.1 kg for bio-based plant-derived Mirum (Hakansson et al., 2023: 19).

Recent years have thus seen growing interest in bio-based alternatives to both animal and fossil fuel-derived leather.

According to Material Innovation Initiative, next-generation materials include bio-based polymers, where biomass accounts for more than 50%, which often fall into the category of bio leather. These are produced through biotechnological processes using plants, agri-food waste, mycelium, fungal fruiting bodies, microbial cultures, cultured animal cells, recycled materials, or blends (Hakansson et al., 2023: 11).

They are typically divided into two categories. The first includes biopolymers that combine plant- or fungal-based biomass with 30–80% polylactic acid (PLA), a biodegradable thermoplastic of biological origin, or sometimes conventional fossil-based polymers. The second group, still largely experimental, involves microbial cultures produced through the natural fermentation of microorganisms, such as bacterial cellulose. The industry landscape has evolved rapidly: between 2013 and 2022, the number of companies developing next-generation leather grew from 18 to 65 (Hakansson et al., 2023: 23). After a downturn in 2022, investment in plant-based and lab-grown material start-ups rebounded in 2023, reaching \$500 million – an increase of almost 10% over the previous year (Material Innovation Initiative, 2024). While still below the \$1.1 billion peak of 2021,

this renewed funding signals continued confidence in the sector despite recent challenges, including Bolt Threads' discontinuation of production in July 2023 (Kent, 2024). Global investments reflect a belief in their potential to reshape material economies: The Carlyle Group has invested in Spiber Inc., a Japanese biomaterials company collaborating with The North Face for a collection featuring Brewed Protein™ fiber, while Kering Ventures has financed Squim (home to Ephea™ and Mogu pioneering products) to scale mycelium-based materials (Rezk, 2024).

INDUSTRY DISCOURSE IN THE SHAPING OF IDENTITIES

The 2024 Biofabricate Summit in Paris highlighted the ongoing debate over the scalability of alternative leather materials and their integration into mainstream fashion. As Géraldine Vallejo, Sustainability Program Director at Kering, noted: "If you asked the average consumer, I don't think they would be particularly excited about wearing algae or fungi;" Suveen Sahib, co-founder and CEO of K18 Hair, added: "Material innovation needs to start with a great product" (Kent, 2024). Journalist Sarah Kent, echoing these perspectives, reiterates that brands have primarily invested in new materials for their performance rather than out of consumers' enthusiasm for the science behind them. Yet the success of these materials depends on more than their technical properties.

Functionality alone is insufficient. For a new material to be accepted and normalized, it must be embedded in a shared cultural and linguistic framework. This is where lexical clarity plays a crucial role. Terms like faux, eco, vegan, bio leather frame how these innovations are perceived.

A vague or misleading label can generate consumer confusion, hinder regulation, and undermine trust (Ali, 2025; D'Adamo et al., 2024).

Conversely, precise language can help create stable cultural narratives: it anchors the material in a conceptual space that connects its technological properties to values, aesthetics, and practices.

As Matt Scullin, CEO of MycoWorks, put it: "If you're looking for a leather that isn't leather, you'll keep looking forever" (Kent, 2024).

His observation reveals the danger of positioning new materials as substitutes. Instead, each biomaterial needs distinct terminologies that highlight their unique identities. This is not merely a marketing question: it is a cultural issue.

Just as early plastics struggled to gain cultural acceptance when presented as "fake wood" or "fake marble," next-generation materials risk marginalization if their language remains tethered to leather. As Karana et al. argue (2015: 36) materials require narratives and identities of their own (Cfr. Dormer, 1990; Meikle, 1997; Sparke, 1990). Clear terminology allows designers, producers, and consumers to imagine these materials on their own terms. Lexical precision fosters cultural legitimacy. A well-defined vocabulary encourages educational frameworks, facilitates the creation of industry standards, and allows for legal regulation that protects both consumers and innovators. While classificatory systems can sometimes exclude or include, they can also create semantic space for new aesthetic imaginaries. In an era marked by environmental crises, it becomes particularly urgent to reconsider what materials our Age could – or should – embody. Reflecting on expressions such as the Stone Age or Iron Age demonstrates not only how human culture is structured around the invention, production, and use of surrounding materials – hence the concept of material culture (Tripaldi, 2022) – but also the functional value of revising common terminology.

Accordingly, marketing strategies, policies and policy makers, and the industry play a central role in stabilizing – or destabilizing – fashion lexigraphy (Ali, 2025; D'Adamo et al., 2024).

While many medium and small companies lack the resources not only for production but also for cultural scaling, major fashion multinationals are actively impacting the material language of sustainability. For example through investing in strategic innovation-based infrastructures, such as Kering's Material Innovation Hub founded in Milan in 2013. Brands like the Danish Ganni are integrating material innovation directly into their strategic identity. As its co-founder Nicolaj Reffstrup stated: "We are a fashion company, but we run it like a tech company. [...] It's in our DNA to be comfortable with chaos, failure, and change" (Kent, 2024). Ganni has pledged to phase out animal leather by 2023, implementing thirty material innovations in its collections and providing feedback to producers to accelerate market adoption. Similarly, London-based brand Pangaia has positioned itself as a leisurewear company at the forefront of biomaterial experimentation.

THE LEXICON OF MATERIAL INNOVATION

Even though Italian lexicon in this field is affected by English – which sometimes hybridize or partially Anglicize traditional Italian terms – it remains crucial to focus on establishing a precise, contextually grounded vocabulary.

Moreover, the evolution of terms such as faux, eco, vegan, bio leather in Italy illustrates how language in fashion is never solely descriptive.

It is performative: it shapes material realities, market dynamics, and consumer imaginaries.

Ambiguous or misleading terminology – often amplified by greenwashing – risks eroding public trust and hindering sustainable transitions.

As biomaterials and other textile material innovations enter the market as an alternative to animal leather, promoted for being less harmful to the planet, their success will depend not only on technological performance but on their ability to establish coherent, transparent, and culturally resonant narratives. Fashion lexicography can help us navigate these tensions and propose more precise vocabularies that acknowledge complexity rather than masking it behind seductive ambiguous prefixes. The future of sustainable fashion will be built as much through language as through materials.

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FLATTERING

YOU KEEP USING THAT WORD.
I DO NOT THINK IT MEANS WHAT
YOU THINK IT MEANS.¹

¹ The title of this paper is a quote from the 1987 film *The Princess Bride* which has become a common way in popular culture to challenge misused terms

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Abstract

The word “flattering” is defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “helping to enhance attractiveness,” however we argue that the usage has shifted to almost exclusively being used to create the illusion of slimness. Through popular media discourse analysis, this Fashion Lexigraphy examines the way that flattering is in fact a tool of anti-fat bias through books, magazines, and popular television shows that give fashion advice to women. Although this remains the dominant discourse, there have recently been movements that push against the paradigm of slimness being superior to fatness beginning in blogs and then moving into more mainstream discussion.

Keywords: *Fashion discourse; Fat fashion; Anti-fat bias; Fat liberation; Fat studies.*

Within a fashion context, *flattering* may be defined as “helping to enhance attractiveness,” according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

In 2024, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) added a fashion reference to the definition of *flattering*: “Of clothing, style, etc.: that shows one to the best advantage; that enhances one's appearance; becoming.” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2026) The Cambridge Dictionary is even more explicit: “making someone look or seem better or more attractive than usual.” In earlier examples of usage, such as “Miss Frances Daley..wore a flattering gown of blue net,” from 1935, the focus is more generalized with respect to appearance.

However in the more recent examples, we can

see the focus change toward concealing societally undesirable features (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). For example, in 1993, the OED added the example “High-waisted or empire-line dresses are very flattering for pear shapes”, and in Merriam-Webster's recent example, we see “The mid-rise baggy jeans are quite roomy in the leg, which is very on-trend, but have a flattering fit around the waist to give you some shape.”

While flattering may still be used to reference complimentary or respectful attitudes towards someone's personality or actions, today its use is mainly limited to a fashion and body context. Merriam-Webster lists thirty recent examples, from 2023-2025, of which twenty-four sentences use flattering to mean enhancing attractiveness

in fashion (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2025).

While “flattering” may still be used to describe the clothing that highlights a person’s “best” features (such as through the use of particular colors), our critical media discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2015) of fashion self-help culture demonstrates that its predominant use today is tied to achieving a socially-accepted body morphology by highlighting or creating the visual illusion of slimness. Fashion self-help culture is media designed to help readers or viewers “improve” their style and presentation of dress.

This includes women’s and fashion magazines, reality television series, and books.

May Friedman, professor in the schools of Fashion and Social Work at Toronto Metropolitan University, notes that “First and foremost, ‘flattering’ will always be a euphemism for thinness,” identifying the way this once-broader term has narrowed into a synonym for slimming (Lautens, 2025).

In this way, cultural messaging around “flattering” clothing plays a part in broader systems of fatphobia by associating fatness and larger body size with undesirable appearances and unfashionable dressing.

Large-bodied people are subjected to fatphobia through health discrimination, social fatphobia, and other forms of systemic discrimination (Friedman, 2025, pp. 32–33). It is acceptable to - and even lauded - for smaller-bodied actors to don fat suits to portray larger-bodied people, as is discussed in Roxanne Gay’s commentary on *The Whale* in the New York Times (2022). Brendan Fraser won ‘Best Actor’ at the 2023 Academy Awards for his portrayal of a fat man in the movie using a prosthetic body suit, though similar portrayal of other marginalized groups would be socially unacceptable.

For example, Mickey Rooney’s “yellowface” in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* is now, rightly, regarded as racist (Fuller & Gunning, 2010), however the spectacle of fat persists as an acceptable form of discrimination, ridicule, and marginalization.

In this lexigraphy, we perform a discourse analysis examining the contemporary usage of the word “flattering” becoming synonymous with slimming, contextualized within the broader epistemology of Fat Liberation.

We analyze the use of “flattering” in English-speaking popular culture fashion advice from the

past three decades, considering how the fashion self-help genre promotes the goal of visually slimming the body through garment selection and styling. Earlier work has examined concepts of “flattering” in historical stoutwear, the plus-size fashion of the early-twentieth century (Peters, 2019), however we are specifically interested in contemporary popular media and usage.

The Fat Liberation movement is centred around NAAFA (National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance), which was founded in the United States in 1969 to challenge discrimination against fat people. A civil rights organization, NAAFA has worked to transform social attitudes toward fatness and equal rights including a bill in 2022 that outlawed height and weight discrimination in employment and housing in New York City. By highlighting the ways that fat people are discriminated against in different situations, NAAFA makes visible the systemic nature

of weight-based oppression and challenges the normalization of anti-fat bias. Racism also plays a role in anti-fat bias. In *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origin of Fatphobia* (2019), Sabrina Strings argues that today’s beauty ideals were formed within the context of anti-black racism from the “Enlightenment” to the present. In the Euro-centric worldview of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Black people were viewed as morally and corporeally unrestrained and therefore Europeans formed ideals of beauty that were in opposition to that - slimmer, with smaller busts, bottoms, and hips.

This has created the standards that persist within the fashion industry and society at large.

Both Fat oppression and racism has contributed to the anti-fat bias that is perpetuated in the use of the word “flattering.” For example, in the 1990s and early 2000s saw an explosion of media aimed at helping women dress to “flatter” their figures. Analysis of their advice reveals how “flattering” clothing is that which makes the body look slimmer, taller, and adhering to this Euro-centric standard of proportion and beauty.

“What Not to Wear” ran from 2001-2007 as a UK reality TV show that featured wardrobe makeovers for women whose family and friends nominated them as being unstylish (Barrass, 2001-2007).

The show was then re-produced in the USA by The Learning Channel (TLC) and ran from 2003 and 2013 (Hakami, 2003-2013).

For many women in the early 2000s in the US

and UK, these shows were arbiters of dress and respectability (Oak & Petrov, 2020, p. 314). The acerbic critiques given by their respective hosts were positioned as the necessary, brutally honest takes that would allow their makeover subjects to finally come to terms with their bodies and fashion. The companion book to the UK version of the show advises readers to be “honest and [come] to terms with the fact that some parts of your body aren’t great” and “[understand] that certain clothing only serves to exacerbate these problem areas” (Woodall & Constantine, 2003, p. 6). Throughout the book, the UK hosts, Trinny Woodall and Susannah Constantine, make clear that “problem areas” are generally those places where fat accumulates: large breasts that risk “tak[ing] on a lumpy quality like badly made custard,” (Woodall & Constantine, 2003, p. 16) “arms that are “gargantuan mass[es] of flesh,” (Woodall & Constantine, 2003, p. 46) and hips whose “saddlebags” are a “physical catastrophe” (Woodall & Constantine, 2003, p. 115). In the US version, Stacy London and Clinton Kelly gave advice to “rescue the frumpy and dumpy” by re-styling their wardrobes (Watch What Not to Wear | Netflix, n.d.). In both versions, the hosts’ wardrobe tips are tools to obscure fatness and offer slimming optical illusions, fashion goals which are presented as the path to more professional, age-appropriate, and flattering public images for their previously frumpy subjects.

Women’s magazines have long reinforced beauty standards of slimness. In the 2000s, many magazines offered their own contributions to the fashion self-help book genre. Glamour’s Big Book of Dos and Don’ts (2006) enumerates 10 “Rules for Flattery”, all of which focus on minimizing the figure. The most important rule is “Don’t go too baggy - big shapes make you look bigger” (Leive & Glamour, 2006, pp. 18–19). These rules explicitly use flattering as a synonym for slimming, showing that “flattering” garments are those that create the illusion of slimness. In 2014, Marie Claire published Dress Skinny which included specific chapters entitled “Dressing to Flatter...” subtitled with specific body parts. For example, in the chapter on arms, the book warns to highlight “only your leanest bits” to camouflage the parts of the arm that are less desirable, such as “bingo wings,” loose and hanging soft tissue of the upper arm (Corrigan

et al., 2014, p. 37). The book demonstrates that flattering the body is predicated on creating “optical illusions” to make the body appear to conform more closely to a specific, slim body type. The 2018 revamp of the Queer Eye franchise saw ‘style guru’ Tan France emerge as the leading advisor on women’s dress practice in popular culture. The revamp of the show, which was originally focused on men’s fashion in the 00s, rebranded as being for all genders. However, the focus on slimming clothing persisted. On the fashion blog ‘Who What Where’, Tan comments on jeans, “...I think boot-cut is one of the most universally unflattering [styles]. They make your legs look wider than they are... I love a jean that is tapered at the bottom—it’ll make you look taller and leaner” (Nichols, 2018). Although the show purports to be more inclusive with respect to body acceptance, the advice given conforms to the dominant messaging that women’s bodies should be smaller and that thinness is superior to fatness.

These examples demonstrate the way that “flattering” is used as a synonym for slimming in popular culture. In earlier definitions of “flattering”, there was a connotation of deception and insincerity, such as flattering someone through obsequious and exaggerated compliments¹. Although this isn’t regularly the case in current usage, our observations using discourse analysis suggest that when applied to fatness/slimness, that root of the word seems to persist in advice to create optical illusions that camouflage the appearance of fatness. Fatness is treated as a problem to be solved by strategic dressing, with larger, less desirable parts of the body obscured and smaller areas highlighted. For slimmer audience members, too, the specter of appearing larger than one’s actual size looms large.

Sociologists have documented fashion as a social practice that establishes identity through interactions in everyday life because it articulates social and group norms as well as resistance against them (Aspers & Godart, 2013). Therefore, the marginalization of fat people through clothing and dress affects social interactions, and

¹ See for example OED’s “Of a person, his or her actions, utterances, etc.: That flatters or tries to please by praise, generally insincere; adulatory” and “Suggesting pleasurable (usually, delusive) anticipations or beliefs. Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Flattering, adj., additional sense.

therefore lack of adherence to dressing to “flatter” or slim the body, is viewed as an aberration.

Recently, fat liberation social movements have emerged to resist this discourse. Prominent fat activist Lesley Kinzel, in her 2012 book *Two Whole Cakes: How to Stop Dieting and Learn to Love Your Body*, illuminated the way “flattering” is used as a coded, more polite way to say that the fat body is adequately disguised. She writes, “when we say something is unflattering, we’re often trying to deliver bad news in a polite way, by deflecting blame from the body to the garment, in spite of the fact that most of us are going to secretly blame the body anyway” (Kinzel, 2012, p. 17).

The discourse of flattering, she argues, gives a veneer of politeness to the critique and marginalization of fat bodies. In 2015, alternative women’s magazine *Bustle* argued that we should stop using the word, stating that “the word “flattering” is really just body policing wrapped in the illusion of a compliment” (Layne, 2015). The argument built upon the work of fat activists, citing Lesley Kinzel’s book as inspiration.

Fat fashion blogger and clothing designer Alysse D’Alessandro also wrote against the connotations of flattering in 2016, stating “There’s a level of manipulation behind the word flattering when applied to clothing that says: how you look is not okay but this garment will make you look better” (D’Alessandro, 2016).

She further elucidates the connection between “flattering” discourse and consumerism, stating, “This manipulation relies on people’s insecurities yet it’s a part of the retailer-consumer relationship that people will defend vehemently without thinking about it” (D’Alessandro, 2016).

Building on this work, a 2019 blog post by one of this paper’s authors (Flaherty), argues that flattering was not just a backhanded compliment, but a weapon used to reinforce the marginalization of fat bodies and deny fat people full creative agency in fashion. And this movement continues; in 2020, *The Guardian* reported that “for generation Z – roughly speaking, those born between 1995 and 2010 – “flattering” is becoming a new F-word” (Cartner-Morley, 2020).

In academic scholarship, recent work has analyzed the “fuck flattering” movement as a method for resisting the marginalization of fatness and forced invisibility of fat bodies. For instance, Cheryl Frazier argues that through a rejection of concepts of flattering, “fat people are able to challenge their

status as hyper(in)visible, demanding visibility in ways that force others to address and consider their own antifatness” (Frazier, 2023, p. 233).

This Lexigraphy, has discussed the evolution of the term “flattering” as it became a weapon of anti-fat bias using discourse analysis of popular media, TV spin-off books, and style advice.

Our findings reveal changing usage and offer a starting point for more comprehensive study in the future. We are currently at an inflection point, as new discussions on the impact of anti-fat bias emerge into the broader community, where we see broader adoption of the use of the word fat as a neutral descriptor of body size.

As mainstream conversation is shifting to include eliminating flattering as a form of praise, we see attention moving away from achieving a “flattering” silhouette and towards fashion that provides joy, comfort, or makes a statement.

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THE SEMIOTICS OF STANDARDIZED SIZING SYSTEMS

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Abstract

This Lexigraphy examines standardized clothing sizing systems through a semiotic lens, arguing that size labels are not neutral measurements but function as culturally charged signs. Drawing on Saussurean semiotics, sizing is analysed as a language in which labels operate through socially agreed conventions, producing meaning via differentiation rather than intrinsic reference. The Lexigraphy demonstrates how these conventions are deeply entangled with gendered body norms, particularly within womenswear, where size categories carry implicit judgments of desirability, value, and social acceptance. Historical and contemporary inconsistencies across global sizing systems further reveal the instability of both size labels and the measurements they claim to represent, exposing the tension between mathematical precision and semantic distortion. In response, the Lexigraphy proposes initial criteria for imagining alternative, non-hierarchical size languages that seek to decouple bodily measurement from value judgment. Ultimately, this research invites continued scholarly and creative engagement with sizing as a semiotic system, advocating for more inclusive approaches that respect the lived experience of the body.

Keywords: *Clothing sizing systems; Saussurean semiotics; Sociocultural body norms*
Vanity sizing; Non-hierarchical language.

INTRODUCTION

The practice of reading the body is central to fashion. It functions as a form of communication, operating through aesthetic expression (including dimensions) and social meaning. For decades, wearing a size “S” (small) has been regarded in the “West”, as the ultimate fashion must-have. But also in Asian cultures, such as Japan, China, and South Korea, there has long been a strong emphasis on thinness (Abdoli et al., 2024). In African contexts, there is generally a more inclusive view of body types. However, recent studies indicate that South African adolescents, particularly those living in urban spaces, tend to prefer thinner bodies influenced by Westernized standards.

(Szabo & Allwood, 2006.)¹ This preference for thinness is inscribed in multiple ways, most notoriously through contemporary sizing systems. Metric systems play a crucial role in constructing these charts. Although ostensibly neutral, they encompass far more than the centimetres they intended to measure. Sizing charts aimed at female-identifying bodies in particular carry with each size category a range of cultural connotations. This Lexigraphy offers a semiotic-theoretical analysis of sizing as a form of language, employing Saussurean semiotics to interpret clothing sizes as signs composed of a signifier and a signified,

¹ Middle Eastern and Latin American countries on the other hand exhibit greater diversity in preferred body types and sizes.

together with their inherent connotations. Size labels (S, M, L, etc.) are not neutral measurements but linguistic and symbolic constructs. It demonstrates how size terminology functions as a hierarchical language, assigning social meaning to corporeal difference. This Fashion Lexicography critically examines the limitations of existing sizing systems and proposes a discussion of speculative, non-hierarchical alternative size languages that seek to decouple bodily measurement from value judgment.

THE SEMIOTIC CONSTRUCTION OF SIZE

One of the founders of semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure, provides a useful framework for analyzing sizing systems through his dual construction of the linguistic sign. He proposes that a sign is composed of two inseparable components, both of which, like fashion, operate through socially agreed conventions. The first component, the signifier, is the material form of the sign, such as a word, sound, or image. The second is the signified, the concept or meaning that this form conventionally represents (Saussure, 1959/1916). Together, the signifier and the signified constitute the sign. Apart from a limited set of onomatopoeic forms², the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary. In the context of fashion, this means that there is no inherent connection between the word or sound of “trousers” and the signified textile silhouette draped around the legs. Nor are garments connected (in any uncontested way) to notions of elegance or fashionableness, as these are based on conventions, which can shift over time and are different depending on localities, rather than being framed within a strictly linguistic framework, as Roland Barthes (2010/1967) was forced to conclude.

This makes semiotics a field that demands continuous nuance and re-evaluation, as meaning is never entirely fixed. Consequently, there are gradients in this dynamic; some words appear more objective, less burdened with value judgments than others. Words that refer to garments conventionally considered appropriate for all genders tend to fall into this more neutral category, such words are: t-shirt, socks, or pants. However, the more specific the garment in question becomes, the more it

tends to be gendered and associated with particular notions of (un)fashionability. A “bandage dress”, for instance, carries far more specific connotations: the term itself invokes associations with the female body and is read through a gendered lens, which in turn invites judgments about the body and its displayment. Moreover, garments such as the bandage dress are shaped by the spirit of their time: what may be considered acceptable today might have been regarded as immodest in another moment in time. Their popularity, and thus their perceived “fashionability,” fluctuates across periods: while the bandage dress was highly popular in the 2000s, it became less prominent in the 2010s, and has more recently been claimed to resurface in the mid-2020s (Jackson, 2025).

Even more burdened with subjectivity are terms associated with the body and its size are of a different gradient, being especially culturally loaded. Ferdinands et al. (2022) provide evidence for this, observing that female bodies with larger sizes are far less visible and celebrated in mainstream media compared to female bodies with smaller sizes. Their observation displays how sizing systems and affiliated terms carry implicit judgments about beauty, desirability, and acceptance. These value judgments are far from a matter of mere vanity. As Foucault has explained extensively in his works on biopolitics, the body is politicized, regulated, disciplined, reshaped, and reconstructed³. Adopting a Foucauldian lens uncovers effortlessly how social norms are a manifestation of policing the body through an omnipresent sense of surveillance, pushed under the gaze of attractiveness.

An exemplary dynamic of this is standardized sizing systems. Although some dexterity is necessary to pinpoint where and when this policing of the body occurs. As these sizing systems suggest operating on the premise of factuality, being based on numerical and linguistic labels derived from mathematical precision. As a measurement system expressed through numbers is, in essence, neutral. Reasoned mathematically, it functions as a formal language: it has a clear syntax (rules for combining symbols), a defined semantics (meaning of combinations), and, above all, no ambiguity (a single interpretation). While the measurement system aligns with this mathematical logic from a

² Onomatopoeic words imitate the sounds they describe (e.g., bam, splash), creating a non-arbitrary link between signifier and signified.

³ Foucault, Michel. 1976. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-13607-w>

production standpoint, semiotics resonate more with the cultural way of reading and interpreting measurements, in which numbers are treated as symbols within a language system. Such a symbol can be interpreted in diverse ways depending on one's background and context, diverging sharply from the mathematical notion of a single, fixed interpretation.

Because sizing systems are embedded within the cultural practice of dressing, they are by default deeply intertwined with culturally ingrained hierarchical meanings and in turn influence how people feel about their bodies (Bishop et al. 2018). Indeed, they operate according to the very conventions on which the Saussurean sign is based, where meaning emerges not from the label itself but from the network of associations and norms that surround it.

Take, for instance, the word “small,” though arbitrarily assigned to represent the idea of a shorter and/or slender body with a lower body-fat percentage, has accrued a multitude of connotations and culturally determined values.

In the section Variant of Size (XV) of Barthes' *The Fashion System*, he discusses how size—and words like “big” and “little”—functions as a linguistic tool to express dimensions in an often subjective way (Barthes, 2010/1967, p. 136). Unlike precise measurements in inches or centimeters, these size words are what he calls indefinite or impression-based, allowing for a perception-driven description. To support his statement he grouped big with the words audacious, giant, immense, and monumental, while little is associated with simple and sympathetic. This illustrates that using size words in fashion language does more than describe physical dimensions; it also communicates aesthetic judgment.

Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth* (2002), elaborates on the effect of such indefinite and impression-based size words, by addressing the large-scale problem of how many women in the “west” experience social pressure to be thin. Not only is thinness as an Eurocentric ideal favoured over larger bodies, but it is often celebrated. It stands in contrast to the word “large”, which, as Barthes aptly demonstrated, functions as the signifier for a body that is objectively bigger in comparison to the previously labelled “small” body, and it carries its own set of socially constructed meanings. Feminist literature offers explanations for how this conditioning to value a body that can wear a

garment labeled “S” over one labeled “L”, or even “M”, is rooted in centuries of the social positioning of women (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). The interpretation of size is also gendered: a “Large” on a male body is understood differently than on a female body. This distinction is reinforced by the fact that men's and women's clothing sizes are generally constructed along different lines: men's sizes are primarily defined by body measurements, typically chest size, whereas women's sizes are coded numbers corresponding to bust, waist, and hip measurements (Bogusławska-Bączek, 2011). Such examples illustrate how through the categorization of body sizes, by linking words and symbols to physical dimensions, the size label as a symbol is not merely descriptive of bodily size but operates as a carrier of socially agreed meaning.

A meaning that is historically contingent, context-dependent, and therefore inherently unstable.

FROM TAILORING TO INCONSISTENT STANDARDIZATION

Not only is the meaning of a size label unstable, but the size it represents is also constantly in flux. The reason for this is the existence of multiple sizing systems being utilized around the world. In today's globalised shopping environment, these systems must frequently be converted across national or industry standards. In theory, such conversions should be straightforward; however, design scholar Monika Bogusławska-Bączek concluded that significant discrepancies exist between different sizing systems, making precise conversions nearly impossible (2011). She describes how diverse metric systems and varying anthropometric methodologies have produced a contemporary clothing market in which sizes no longer correspond consistently to their numerical labels. (Bogusławska-Bączek, 2011, p.1). This confusion is exacerbated by manufacturers creating their own so-called industry tables, which, when combined with subcontractors using their own measurements, can result in products labeled with the same size code but fitting very differently. Bogusławska-Bączek aptly states that purchasing clothing solely based on symbolic sizes “represents a lottery,” suggesting that sizing has very little to do with objective measurements and more to do with contextual, possibly even arbitral realities. This raises questions about the assigned value to such

systems and its symbols, both from a semantical and mathematical perspective. The unstable essence of the size label has major implications. First, the discrepancy between the size as a label, an image, a symbol, and the true bodily dimension of the wear, can create an experience in which the wearer does not recognize their own body. Secondly, it is all the more worrisome how sizing systems are a way of communicating measurements in which mathematical precision becomes distorted through the use of words and semantics. Whatever the actual dimensions may be, Wolf (2002) points out that it is generally agreed—or rather within the “west” are socially enforced—that the smallest size is the most socially approved and therefore the most desired. Further evidence for this is found in what is called vanity sizing. This is the gradual enlargement of garments despite unchanged size symbols on the labels, aimed at making the consumer feel better about themselves by allowing them to fit into a smaller size than they would normally wear (Bogusławska-Bączek, 2011).

SIZING AND SAUSSUREAN LOGIC OF DIFFERENTIATION

Vanity sizing is a lucrative practice that exploits socially ingrained conventions, often boosting sales by aligning perceived body size with desirable labels. Research has demonstrated that vanity sizing helps people to imagine themselves more positively (Aydinoğlu & Krishna, 2012). This phenomenon can be understood as a response to a widely ingrained connotation about different sizes; when a person reads the label “small,” an image of a slender individual is often immediately evoked, accompanied by attributes such as activity, success, friendliness, and intelligence. Conversely, the label “large” evokes the opposite associations, along with its own set of culturally constructed connotations. In other words, the size label as a sign—and the sizing system as a language—is the product of socially agreed conventions. It functions precisely because size categories are differentiated, allowing distinct cultural values to be assigned to each, thereby reflecting and reaffirming established hierarchies of bodily worth.

In order to understand the necessity of this differentiation in the constitution of language and messaging, it is necessary to return to Saussure's (1959/1916) conception of language as a system structured by difference rather than by intrinsic meaning. He states that meaning is not established

solely through individual definitions. A singular word in isolation means little. Multiple words are needed to point out how words differ from each other. A “blouse” is not a pair of “trousers” or a “shirt.” They are all garments, but they have different forms and cover different parts of the body. The same applies to sizes: a “small” is not a “medium” or a “large.” Therewith, another dynamic occurs where the words become progressively removed from each other due to metric categorizations, and in turn create a widening semantic gap. From a sociocultural perspective this demonstrates how body norms, together with contemporary commercial systems, shape the form of garments and the meanings we assign to size.

This effect is even more pronounced when the word “extra” is placed in front of either small or large, creating a heightened sense of difference along with more pronounced value judgments. The distinctions established through words and adjectives such as “extra” demonstrate how culturally assigned value dominates the meaning the word is intended to communicate. “Extra small” is expressive in various ways depending on the metric system used: in Europe, it generally corresponds to a size 34, in the US a 4, and in Japan a 9 (Fig. 01 and Fig. 02). These sizes are celebrated and regarded as the most prestigious, particularly in fashion contexts where the image of the tall, slender female body remains rigidly idealized above all other body types (Wolf, 2002). This is important aesthetically because research has shown how girls learn from an early age that thinness is required for being seen and heard (Ferdinands et al., 2022). Consequently, a larger body becomes the signified for social disapproval that often results in women with larger bodies being ignored, overlooked, and marginalized (Ferdinands et al., 2022).

ALTERNATIVE SIZING SYSTEM

Is it then the word that serves as the signifier of the body as the signified, or rather the body that functions as the signifier for the word that is the signified? After all, it is the body that gives context to the word and its labels, imbuing them with associations. The word, in its sound and arrangement of letters, may be arbitrary, but the shape of the body, situated within a culturally dense context, is not. The body is politicized, regulated, disciplined, reshaped and reconstructed, as argued by Michel Foucault (1976). Arguably, many would benefit from a language that deviates from suppress-

INT	XS	XS	S	S	M	M	L	L	XL	XL	XXL	XXL
EU*	32	34	36	38	40	42	44	46	48	50	52	54
UK	4	6	8	10	12	14	16	18	20	22	24	-
US	2	4	6	8	10	12	14	16	18	20	-	-
JAP	7	9	11	13	15	17	19	21	23	-	-	-

Fig. 01



Fig. 02

sive standards and instead communicates in ways free from judgments and value systems. When adopting such a view, what steps would need to be taken to create a non-hierarchical size language that addresses the sign as a body, rather than the body as a sign?

Drawing on Saussure's semiotics, initial steps can be formulated: The first, and most obvious, step is to eliminate the "extra" designation. An "extra" functions as an amplifier of the already judgmental categorization. A linear sequence where each step is equivalent, without escalation through adjectives would be desired. Second, we must remove words that are connected to culturally constructed ideas of beauty. As noted above, "small" in a contemporary context is in many parts of the world more highly valued than "large." Moreover, both terms carry aesthetic connotations beyond their function

within sizing systems. Sizing based on numbers can support a more neutral approach, or possibly even better non-lexical symbols⁴. Step three is to select words that are distinct from one another, indicating differences as is currently carried out by using "Small," "Medium," "Large", etc. Building on these principles, an alternative clothing size system that functions culturally neutral could then take shape. These suggestions come with caveats. First, because sizing is defined by bodily dimensions and proportions – which vary across individuals and populations – it is inherently linked to body shape. It reflects and depends upon the physical form it is meant to accommodate. To remove this connection would defeat the system's purpose. The second

⁴ It must be noted that the use of non-lexical symbols would be extremely inconvenient, as they consist of vocal sounds, gestures, or expressions and therefore cannot be printed on a label.

challenge is to select words that carry objectivity or possibly randomness. Here, a loop presents itself: words can be changed, but the underlying ideas will persist, transferring onto new words. Thus, the solution does not lie solely in the measurement system, the words, the symbols, or even non-lexical symbols, but in the imagery constructed around them—the ideals of beauty.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary clothing sizing system functions both as a practical tool and a culturally charged construct. Viewed through a semiotic lens, size labels can be understood as signs that attempt to capture the ever-changing nature of the body in numerical form. Fashion, imbued with evaluative language and a tendency to communicate in ways that produce exclusion or marginalization, has created an understanding of size symbols that is both restrictive and problematic. By carefully formulating initial criteria for an alternative system, this Lexigraphy demonstrates how the intersection of semiotics and metric measurement opens the possibility of imagining non-hierarchical size languages. Ultimately, this approach invites continued scholarly and creative engagement, encouraging the development of a size-symbol system designed to respect the lived experience of the human body and to operate from a principle of inclusion rather than exclusion.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Womenswear size guide.

This table excludes France, Spain, and Portugal, as these countries again use different sizing systems.

[Fig. 02] Four clothing labels communicating different sizing systems.

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FROM ANDROGYNOUS TO GENDER-FLUID FASHION

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Abstract

This Fashion Lexigraphy traces the historical development and shifting meanings of gender-fluid, unisex, and androgynous fashion from antiquity to the present. Anchored in a critical etymological analysis of terms like androgyny, unisex, and gender fluidity, it explores how fashion has continually negotiated, subverted, and reimagined gender categories. From the myth of the androgynous to the *garçonnes* and flappers of the 1920s, the unisex movements of the 1960s and 1990s to the post-postmodern aesthetics of the 2010s, this lexigraphy examines the cultural, political, and aesthetic forces that have shaped gender-bending styles. Rather than a passing trend, gender-fluid fashion emerges as a vital and visible form of resistance and self-articulation, reflecting broader societal movements toward inclusivity, complexity, and the dismantling of restrictive norms within both fashion and gender systems.

Keywords: *Non-binary identities; Gender performativity; Unisex fashion; Queer style; Post-postmodern.*

INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen an unprecedented exploration of gender-fluid and non-binary fashion design in the industry and its discourse. From Alessandro Michele's Gucci, which has been described as a revolutionary brand that 'helped usher gender fluidity into fashion' (Hirschberg, 2020), to high-fashion brands and retailers like Selfridges combining their menswear and womenswear collections, and numerous fashion campaigns featuring genderqueer and transgender models. While these examples might be dismissed as purely marketing campaigns to profit off the trend of gender-fluid fashion, the language used to describe fashion has undergone a profound shift: discussions of everyday gender identity

and expression have become increasingly central to both design and cultural critique.

Terms such as 'gender-fluid', 'non-binary', and 'genderless' have entered the mainstream and are now regularly employed to describe both garments and the people who wear them.

These shifts reflect broader societal movements and reconsiderations of the gender binary and the limitations this imposes.

Within this context, gender-fluid and non-binary fashion has emerged as a site of negotiation, visibility, and resistance. As mainstream brands adopt more inclusive policies and aesthetics, and as independent designers champion trans and queer representation, the fashion industry finds itself once again at the forefront of debates about

identity, visibility, and cultural change (Beyer, 2025, pp. 4–5). Indeed, there is a long history of fashion challenging and renegotiating gender identities and representations, one that is marked by differing levels of resistance and acceptance.

Mapping the historical development of gender-bending fashions and the etymology of relevant terminology – from *androgyny* to *gender fluidity* – this fashion lexicography offers a critical study of the ongoing changes and debates of the language of fashion and gender.

Here, language of fashion refers to two levels of meaning: One is the non-verbal, symbolic codes and communicative system that creates and challenges gender signifiers.

The other is the language and terminology used to describes these fashions and styles.

Therefore, a critical etymological analysis is used, to not only examine the linguistic and historical definitions, but to consider their usage and shifts in specific social and cultural contexts.

ANDROGYNY

The term *androgyny* derives from the Greek words *anēr* (ἀνὴρ), meaning ‘man’, and *gynē* (γυνή), meaning ‘woman’. Literally translated, the term signifies a blending or union of male and female characteristics within a single body or identity.

Historically, androgyny has denoted both physiological hybridity and symbolic duality, serving as a metaphor in philosophical, religious, and aesthetic contexts.

Although the contemporary usage of ‘androgyny’ in fashion and gender discourse gained particular prominence in the twentieth century, the conceptual roots of the term reach back to antiquity (Doan, 1998).

In ‘western’ culture, one of the earliest and frequently referenced mythological articulations of androgyny appears in Plato’s *Symposium*, more specifically in the speech of the comic playwright Aristophanes.

Therein, Aristophanes offers a creation story in which humans originally existed as spherical beings with four arms, four legs, two faces, and dual sexual organs – categorized into three types: male, female, and androgynous.

The latter being composed of both male and female elements. As punishment for their arrogance, Zeus split them in two, condemning them to wander the earth in desperate search for their other halves (Plato, 1999, pp. 22–24).

In Aristophanes’ speech, the androgynous figure becomes an embodiment of unity – a state prior to the division of gender and bodies – and a symbol for the human desire to battle their own incompleteness. This early philosophical metaphor laid a foundation for later conceptions of androgyny as both a myth, a utopian ideal, and a descriptor for gender-blurring fashions.

However, while androgyny became a recurring theme in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ‘western’ art and literature (often associated with classical ideals of beauty, balance and unity), gender-bending fashions were yet to be described as androgynous.

Rather, dress practices that challenged and subverted binary sartorial signifiers were framed as effeminate, ostentatiously perfect or conflated with homosexuality. Such was the case with eighteenth-century macaronis, whose flamboyant dress style and exaggerated wigs were considered decadent and effeminate (Rauser, 2004, p. 103), or with the figure of the dandy, strolling through eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe in exaggerated elegance and perfectly kept attire (Vainshtein, 2023).

Nonetheless, figures such as the androgyne were idealized in allegorical paintings, poetry, and philosophical treatises, where the blurring of gender served as a metaphor for aesthetic perfection or divine unity. Although, as Patrick Mauriès notes, ‘of the three types ... that made up the primordial human race in Aristophanes’ take, the androgynous type was the least perfect because of its hybrid nature’ (Mauriès, 2017, p. 12).

For nineteenth-century bohemian artists and writers, however, the figure of the androgyne offered an escape and a natural and balanced alternative against the artificial binary of masculinity and femininity (Dijkstra, 1974, p. 62).

In particular, the androgynous body came to signify a rarefied, intellectual form of beauty that transcended the mundane and bourgeois reality (Dijkstra, 1974; Wilson, 2003, p. 240).

The 1920s, then, marked a critical moment in the visual and fashionable history of gender: The figure of the *garçonne* in France and the flapper in North America emerged as iconic figures of female masculinity and early twentieth-century androgyny in fashion.

In the aftermath of World War I, shifting gender roles and urban modernity destabilized traditional ideals of femininity, giving rise to a new ‘boyish’

silhouette marked by cropped hair, flat chests, and garments borrowed from the masculine wardrobe, such as tailored suits, monocles, ties, and smoking jackets.

This gendered ambiguity was not just sartorial but symbolic of broader cultural anxieties and freedoms: a reaction to the trauma of war, a renegotiation of women's social roles, and an embrace of youth, modernity, and emancipation. While the *garçonne* and flapper styles disrupted binaries of gender, they also operated within the constraints of fashionability, often requiring high-maintenance grooming and thinness (Steele, 1985, p. 241). For some, like the artists Gluck (born Hannah Gluckstein), Radclyffe Hall (born Marguerite Antonia Radclyffe-Hall) and Una Troubridge or Marlene Dietrich, masculine dress became a form of queer self-expression (Geczy & Karaminas, 2013, pp. 24–32), while for others it remained a fashionable mode of rebellion (Doan, 1998, pp. 663–700).

These androgynous fashions offered a brief but powerful moment of visibility for female masculinities, leaving a lasting impact on fashion history and serving as a recurring source of reference for future androgynous styles, for instance, Yves Saint Laurent's infamous *Le Smoking* design in 1966. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a revival and redefinition of androgynous fashion, driven by the cultural upheavals of the time, including the women's liberation movement, sexual revolution, the gay liberation movement and a growing rejection of rigid gender norms.

Youth culture, pop music, and subcultural aesthetics played a key role in reshaping the visual language of gender at the time.

Simultaneously, male performers like David Bowie and Mick Jagger embraced flamboyant, feminized styles – tight trousers, makeup, frilled blouses –, thus contributing to the visibility of gender-bending in mainstream fashion (Mauriès, 2017, pp. 115–121). However, in 1968, the term androgyny began to be replaced by another term for dress styles being worn by both sexes: unisex.

UNISEX

In the 21 June 1968 issue of American magazine *LIFE*, Helen Carlton described the latest fashion trend as a 'Uniworld of His and Hers'.

Accordingly, she writes: 'This is the year that what's his is hers and what's hers is his – in a word, unisex', describing the fashion designers who

create 'a bright new world where both sexes get to play the peacock' (Carlton, 1968, p. 87). A few months before, in March 1968, *The New York Times* connected the 'ugly', bulky shoes sold at department stores to 'the new wave of fashion thinking: unisex clothes' (Bender, 1968).

Despite its early association with 'Monster' and 'Brute' styling, according to *The New York Times'* article, unisex fashion spread across genders and ages, from avantgarde designers like Rudi Gernreich, or Pierre Cardin to the dissolving distinction between the clothes hanging from the racks, including unisex styles for toddlers and babies (Davis, 1994, p. 35; Paoletti, 2015, p. 6). The unisex fashion of the 1960s and particularly the 1970s became an important political and aesthetic statement, while also offering designers a way to market their clothes to a wider audience (Jenkinson, 2010).

Nonetheless, unisex style challenged traditional binaries and offered new modes of self-expression across the gender spectrum, particularly within countercultural, feminist and queer communities. The term unisex, then, describes fashion styles and appearances that are indistinguishable or neutral, combining the Latin *unus/a/um* (meaning 'one') with *sexus*, referring to biological categories. Coined in the context of 1960s counterculture and gender experimentation, the term gained renewed prominence in the early 1990s alongside the rise of queer theory and critical gender studies, which began to challenge the binary understanding of sex and gender. In particular, Judith Butler's introduction of the concept of gender performativity offered new ways of understanding and speaking about gender expressions. In fashion, this coincided with the launch of Calvin Klein's *CK One*, a unisex fragrance marketed with minimalist, black-and-white campaigns featuring androgynous models. These campaigns promoted a sleek, pared-back aesthetic rooted in menswear codes – white tank tops, jeans, and workwear – that emphasized neutrality through simplicity.

While unisex fashion appeared to blur gender lines, it often leaned toward masculinized silhouettes and styling, highlighting how mainstream interpretations of gender neutrality have historically privileged male-coded forms of dress while marginalizing overt femininity (Beyer, 2025, pp. 59–60).

The early 2000s then continued to challenge masculinities, with a range of designers such

as Hedi Slimane, Raf Simons and Nicolas Ghesquière creating a unisex aesthetic that challenged traditionally masculine norms of ‘aggression, dominance, and invulnerability’ (McCauley Bowstead, 2018, p. 146), while an increasing number of products began to be marketed to the new ‘metrosexual’ man (Simpson, 1994). However, with the new millennium and the increasing visibility of genderqueer and transgender people, as well as the theoretical underpinnings of queer theory and gender studies, unisex and androgynous styles and their discourse began to change once again. As Mauriès writes, ‘the nature of androgyny itself began to ... evolve into a higher state’, now claiming ‘to have escaped from the idea of polarity altogether’ (Mauriès, 2017, p. 121).

GENDER FLUIDITY AND BEYOND

As recent theoretical work suggests, in the context of the post-postmodern condition, *androgyny* has undergone a significant conceptual and aesthetic shift, reflecting broader transformations in contemporary culture marked by fragmentation, plurality, and intensified self-performance.

While postmodern androgyny was largely defined by the blending of masculine and feminine traits into an ambiguous middle ground, recent theoretical discourse suggests a move towards a more assertive and performative articulation of gender (Barry & Reilly, 2020; Karaminas & Taylor, 2022; Mauriès, 2017; McCauley Bowstead, 2018, pp. 146–153; Morgado, 2021).

Drawing on frameworks such as Raoul Eshelman’s performatism, Marcia Morgado argues that traditional cultural categories – including gender – are no longer merely destabilized but actively reconfigured through heightened visual and embodied contrasts.

As Morgado contends, post-postmodern androgyny does not dissolve gender signifiers but rather juxtaposes them, combining archetypal markers of masculinity and femininity within a single presentation (Morgado, 2014, 2021).

This shift is echoed in Ben Barry and Andrew Reilly’s concept of ‘gender more’, which describes an androgyny that celebrates excess rather than neutrality, foregrounding the multiplicity and simultaneity of gender expressions (Barry & Reilly, 2020). Within this discourse, contemporary androgyny becomes less about ambiguity and more about the deliberate amplification of difference and multiplicity – an approach that underpins

the exploration and proliferation of new gender taxonomies as well as gender-fluid, non-binary and antigender fashions of the 2010s and beyond (Beyer, 2025).

The term *gender fluidity*, first coined by gender theorist Kate Bornstein in her book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (1994), to describe a non-binary identity that is not fixed, gained momentum in relation to fashion in the 2010s, with fashion designers like Jonathan Anderson and Alessandro Michele for Gucci creating extravagant and striking fashions that play with sartorial gender codes.

As Paul Jobling, Philippa Nesbitt and Angelene Wong write, ‘it was not until the 2010s that the popularity of genderless or agender fashion began to blur the lines between what was male, what was female and what was truly in-between’ (Jobling, Nesbitt, & Wong, 2022, p. 74).

Thus, fashion media, designers and department stores embraced ‘the notion of gender fluidity’ (La Ferla, 2015) by buying regardless of the womenswear or menswear tag, showing both collections together or depicting genderqueer, transgender and nonbinary models in advertising campaigns and fashion spreads.

Prior to transgender activism and the transgender movement gaining momentum in the 2010s, scholars had sought to challenge the ‘western’ binary gender system.

While gender fluid fashion is often discussed within the framework of ‘western’ binary understandings, it is crucial to recognize that neither fashion nor non-binary gender identities are exclusively ‘western’ concepts. Many cultures around the world have long embraced gender diversity outside the male-female binary, such as the *hijra* in South Asia, two-spirit individuals in Indigenous North American cultures, or the *māhū* of Hawaiian and Tahitian societies.

Indeed, the imposition of the binary gender system was a fundamental tool of ‘western’ colonialism, used to suppress, erase and delegitimize non-‘western’ identities. As Greg Thomas argues, the binary was produced in contrast to – and in the process, dehumanized – Black and Indigenous people by labelling their perceived gender ambiguity as ‘savage’ (Thomas, 2007, p. 28).

In the current political climate that is marked by rising global conservatism, fascist formations and emerging authoritarian regimes, queer and transgender people have once more become

the target of political attacks (Butler, 2024). It is all the more important to continue the conversation of gender fluid fashion beyond its subversion of 'western' norms of dress – it must also engage critically with the colonial legacy of gender itself, to include broader, more inclusive, and culturally diverse expressions of identity, to offer a site of resistance and field of negotiation. In light of these historical trajectories – from early mythologies of androgyny and the *garçonnes* of the 1920s to postmodern unisex aesthetics and the post-postmodern turn toward gender fluidity – we now witness the continuation of renegotiating the landscape of gendered fashion. Gender fluid and gender-bending styles are increasingly shaped by digital platforms, particularly TikTok and Instagram: From new masculine archetypes such as the 'performative male' trend, a somewhat ironic stereotype of 'feminist men' experimenting with feminine style codes and aesthetics, to masculine-presenting lesbians and queer women showcasing their appropriating and reinterpreting of traditionally male-coded styles. These expressions and discourses reflect an unwavering refusal to be confined by binary structures or essentialist notions of identity. Instead, they offer new possibilities for dressing beyond the limits of binary classification.

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WORLD FASHION

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Abstract

The Fashion Lexigraphy focuses on the main debates and nuances behind the historically developed and ‘western’-oriented concept of ‘world fashion’. Within the increasing field of global fashion history, the examination of international approaches is often limited to the contemporary idea of global dress. Instead of diversity, world fashion emphasized a dominant style in global attire. The coexistence of the key terms global fashion and world fashion necessitates a precise differentiation of terminology, which is critically undertaken in this Lexigraphy from a primarily historical perspective. The twentieth century saw various movements led by figures from fashion industries in Europe and the United States, advocating for local production and design while challenging Paris's status as the preeminent fashion capital. The drive for export expansion and the pursuit of hegemony – both within national contexts and across international borders – in the economically successful fashion industry remains highly relevant today, making the concept of ‘world fashion’ a crucial aspect of global (fashion) history.

Keywords: *World fashion; Global fashion; Predominance; Colonialism; Fashion centers.*

According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s definition of ‘world fashion’, most people in the world today wear a simplified and very low-cost version of ‘western’ clothing, often a T-shirt with pants or a skirt, manufactured on a mass scale (Steele & Major, 2025). This definition implies to a ‘western’ person the informal terms mainstream or casual fashion, whose homogeneous aesthetic standards transcend regional characteristics. The literal meaning of the attributive noun world encompasses a global scope, yet the designs’ origins in ‘western’ metropolises dismantle this connotation and reveal the underlying hierarchies in the fashion world. The concept of world fashion materializes the impacts of a Eurocentric and US-based fashion industry, highlighting the visible

effects of colonialism and capitalism. Ongoing debates and dissension about the nuances of terms such as ethnic/folk/tribal/peasant/traditional/national dress or costume (Baizerman et al., 1993) also raise questions about the subtle differences between international concepts. While global fashion, or global dress, is considered an interchange, circulation, and mixing of styles (Maynard, 2004; Ling et. al., 2019; Lorusso, 2019), and thus multidimensional, world fashion, as this lexigraphy highlights, embodies the roots of a dominating dressing culture and is thus one-dimensional. Kristin Knox's assertion that “world fashion is a global dialogue” (2011, p. 11) illustrates a lack of distinction between the terms ‘world fashion’ and ‘global fashion’.

A comprehensive understanding of transnational fashion concepts requires attention to their historical formation, as their meaning has shifted considerably over time. It is essential to differentiate historical ‘Westernization’-driven mechanisms – which I would rather describe as a monologue – from contemporary developments since the early 2000s, foregrounding local fashions and serving as a “backswing against Eurocentrism” (Knox, 2011, p. 8). In the early twentieth century, ‘world fashion’ largely referred to the global predominance of Western styles – produced in leading fashion centers such as Paris and disseminated worldwide – reflecting the structural leadership of these centers and their designers within the fashion system. By highlighting the central role of the production sector in shaping world fashion, this lexicography traces its development to today’s global fashion, in which the cross-cultural practices of consumers have become increasingly central.

In order to reconstruct the nuances of ‘world fashion’ and to capture its usage in the general press and broader public discourse from the late 19th century onwards, a systematic full-text search was conducted via archive.org, drawing on its extensive digitized holdings of historical newspapers, books and other print media. For the analysis, only the exact contiguous string was considered (excluding ‘world’ and ‘fashion’ separated by punctuation), and other semantically distinct combinations – such as the frequent 19th-century phrase ‘old-world fashion’ denoting traditional or European styles – were excluded from this first pass. This procedure yielded a first occurrence of the phrase ‘world fashion’ in 1888 (referring to the handkerchief popularized by Empress Joséphine at the French court), an early hyphenated form in the 1910 eleventh edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, and indicates that the term gained wider currency only after the First World War, as suggested, for example, by a 1919 article in *Vogue* referring to the “history of world-fashion” (To the wholesale dressbuyer, 1919, p. 7). Additionally, a query in the Google Books Ngram Viewer indicates that the term began to appear in English-language print culture in the early twentieth century and increased modestly in frequency after the mid-century, particularly in journalistic and popular discussions of international fashion. Yet despite this circulation in anglophone media discourse, the term has rarely been systematically theorized within academic fashion studies.

STATE OF RESEARCH

In academic literature, the term world fashion has been significantly shaped by the anthropologist and dress scholar Joanne B. Eicher, who first defined it with Barbara Sumberg in *Dress and Ethnicity* (Eicher & Sumberg, 1995). Their understanding became the dominant academic reference point (Griffiths 2000; Akou, 2011; Kamneva-Wortmann, 2023), and they were even mistakenly regarded as the originators of the term (Maynard, 2004; Akou, 2007). Eicher and Sumberg (1995) referred to world fashion as ordinary dress, contrasting it with two other fashion concepts: high fashion or *haute couture*, and ethnic dress.

Considering transnational design and consumer practices, such a separation seems rather artificial. The historical perspective adopted in this article also highlights moments when non-Western garments – such as the kimono, kaftan, or Poncho – were taken up by Western designers or consumers and framed as part of mainstream or world fashion (Knox, 2011). All of these garments expanded their previously regional and ethnically defined context, crossed national borders where they were often incorporated linguistically into haute couture designs and materially adapted.

That might be the reason why Eicher in *The Visible Self* (2000) states “the arbitrary separation of fashionable dress from ethnic dress and traditional dress from contemporary dress as an obstacle to understanding the role of culture in dress in the globalizing worlds” (p. 48).

In her book, world fashion was used to describe the quickly shifting styles of world dress like blue jeans, business suits and Birkenstock sandals (p. 248). Ultimately, the implementation of the term in Eicher’s *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion* (2010) requires a brief clarification, as the title was influenced by two external factors (Eicher, 2016): First, the encyclopedia was conceived following the suggestion of a colleague involved in a geographically organized encyclopedia on *World Music* (Nettl et al., 1998).

Second, originally conceived as *Encyclopedia of World Dress and Adornment*, the title was changed at the publisher’s request to *Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*. In this process, the term adornment – understood by the author as already encompassed within the broader concept of ‘dress’ – was replaced by fashion in order to highlight the growing scholarly and public interest in that term. This genesis of the title explains why

the encyclopedia lacks further examination of the conceptual history and political dimension of 'world fashion' as a fixed term.

Based on literature and primary sources, the semantic significance of world fashion can be found both in the immaterial concept – reflecting global stylistic convergence and the designers' ambition to become global players – and in the material phenomenon, evidenced by garments that evolve from local origins to gain international circulation.

QUESTIONS OF PREDOMINANCE IN THE 20TH CENTURY

The mention of T-shirts and mass production in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, cited at the beginning, implies the concept of a unitary sartorial style as a phenomenon of the twenty-first century fast-fashion industry. However, the 1910 issue of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* mentioned world fashion as part of the article about Costume.

A paragraph entitled National and Class Costume describes the disappearance of folk costumes in various regions, outlining the following reasons:

Improved communication and industrial enterprise have combined with the prestige of European civilization to commend the European type of costume to peoples for whom it is eminently unsuited. Even the peoples of the East, whose costume has remained unchanged for untold centuries, and for whom the type has been (as in India) often determined by religious considerations, are showing an increasing tendency to yield to the world-fashion.

(Philipps, 1910-1911, p. 246)

This historical perspective exposes the term's political connotations in the context of colonial history and the strong binary opposition between costume and (world) fashion, between static tradition and dynamic change. With the forced (not "commended") expansion of European dress in almost every part of the earth, world fashion during the colonial era emerged as a visible manifestation of cultural superiority. While the description of world fashion in 1910 emphasizes the expelling and costume-replacing power, the 2025 article in *Britannica* describes a parallel operation of the global fashion industry and those industries specialized to national, regional, ethnic, or religious markets. Comparing how terms are understood in different periods and how they mirror power structures is, therefore, eye-opening. During the early twentieth century the question was less about

the garments that could be defined as world fashion and more about who dictated this designation.

The phrase 'world fashion center' indicated which city or country currently dominated the fashion market (Breward & Gilbert, 2006). This led to a general understanding of world fashion as a trend emanating from and controlled by one specific place, imposed on the rest of the world through massive exports. In academic literature, the term 'world fashion' is frequently associated with Paris and described using phrases such as "dominate" or "commanding force" (MacKenzie, 2010, p. 65; 86), indicating that specific fashion centers were implicitly understood as central to the concept. While 'world fashion center' and 'world fashion' are not identical terms, designers and the places they represent can occupy positions within the global fashion hierarchy, similar to rankings in global capitalism. Although contemporary scholarship dismantled the Eurocentric idea that fashion originates solely in the 'West' (Adamson et al., 2011; Welters & Lillethun, 2018), the perspectives of historical witnesses, as reflected in the period press, are crucial for understanding how this Eurocentric view emerged in the first place. In 'western' societies, there was a strong narrative of dependency upon Paris for its models and upon France for its fabrics, along with a growing dissatisfaction with the decline of local production. In the 1910s and 1920s the influence of Paris-made world fashion on the American and European fabric and apparel industries was at its zenith. These fashions were adopted in many colonial regions overseas, reflecting the structures of imperial power by forcefully shaping local dress practices, primarily justified by social Darwinism (Baizerman et al., 1993).

DISTANCING FROM PARIS

The global connections facilitated by trade networks and fashion magazines coexisted with deliberate disconnections from world fashions, aimed at preserving local dress and strengthening domestic production. Especially in the context of Germany's nationalism from the mid-19th century onwards, there was a deep desire for independence from the fashions of neighboring countries. Repeatedly recurring German-French conflicts since the eighteenth century led to a veritable battle against French fashion dominance, resulting in counterproposals for a never-realized German national costume (Schneider, 2002). Around

1900, seizing the scepter of *Weltmode* (which, as a German term, has been in use since the late nineteenth century) became a matter of economic interest. A German pamphlet written by Norbert Stern in 1915 entitled *Die Weltpolitik der Weltmode* (*The World Politics of World Fashion*) gained international attention.

Here, the author utilizes fashion as a tool of nationalistic propaganda. He claims that dominance in fashion is intrinsically linked to military power, and *Weltmode* emerges from those countries that have achieved global and cultural prestige. Echoing this political approach, American designer Ethel Traphagen (1929) called French Fashion a „many-headed beast“ that was „trying to exercise a more complete tyranny than any monarch the world has ever known“ (p. E5). Like many artisans in Europe, Traphagen publicly expressed her tireless advocacy for her own nation's designs through contributions in magazines (Zachary, 2013). Debates who wields fashion's scepter and the global economic power that comes with it were being conducted more fiercely than ever during wartime, both World Wars I and II. With the German occupation of Paris in June 1940, the French fashion industry was cut off and struggled to preserve its infrastructure. During World War II, several international newspapers reported that Paris had lost its title of world fashion, and America's new leadership role became a topic of discussion. For example, an Australian paper in September 1940 noted that “New York's claim to be the present centre of fashion is substantiated by the fact that we get very little in the way of dress from any other centre nowadays.” (*The Australian Woman's Mirror*, 1940). In the same year, *Sikeston Standard* writes as part of its fashion news: “...proudly the American woman dresses the part of her new role of world fashion leadership.” (*America dresses up for fall*, 1940). In response, publicist Eleanor Lambert founded initiatives like *Press Week* (1943) to promote U.S. designers, marking the beginning of a perceived American leadership in fashion. The further the war progressed, the more patriotic appeals were made: Virginia Pope, fashion editor of *The New York Times*, praised American design and urged the press not to permit Paris to overshadow America; disloyalty to American artists would force them back to their old role as copyists (*Miss Pope Urges Press to Back U.S. Fashion*, 1944). The war served as a catalyst for developing and

recognizing new talents as it compelled all nations to rely more on local production. Different cities were competing for the fashion title, among them especially New York, London (for men's fashion), and, according to Germany's plans, Vienna and Berlin. Even previously overlooked South American countries, and with that, a wider exchange of fashion ideas came into focus. In 1942, fashion journalist Joy R. Parry asked if “the Señoritas” in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile would soon “dictate World Fashion” because of their craftsmen, good taste, artistic ability, and able designers (p. 36). In the pursuit of new fashion centers, there was little room for the idea that a creative monopoly confined to a certain geographical location would merely replicate the issues of world fashion, reflecting asymmetrical power relations and perpetuating colonial logics.

THE ROLE OF DESIGNERS AND CONSUMERS

Creating exportable world fashion always meant addressing a broad target group by taking inspiration from and adapting to a diverse range of cultures. The recognition, authorship, and credit for this engagement were ultimately retained within ‘western’ epistemic and institutional frameworks. The concept of the American design movement, on which Ethel Traphagen built her fashion school in the 1920s, inserted multicultural artifacts, collected in places like Nairobi, and aligned them with American consumers. The incorporation of garments like *Kimonos* and *Kaftans* in ‘western’ couture during the twentieth century has always been closely associated with an enthusiasm for simple silhouettes and exoticism (Knox, 2011). However, it is only in recent years that these connections have begun to be examined through the lens of cultural appropriation. It is important to note that world fashion already encompasses a form of cross-cultural dressing similar to that of global fashion; however, this practice was not realized by consumers but rather strategically pursued by the fashion industry and designers.

From the 1950s, instead of a whole nation, single people were named “leaders of world fashion”, among them royals such as Queen Elizabeth and her children, or designers such as Christian Dior, Yves Saint Laurent and Giorgio Armani. World fashion conveys the ultimate ambition of fashion design: global dissemination and reaching consumers across geographically distant markets.

Many localized and specialized studies of dress show highly variable combinations of western and 'traditional' clothing referring to global fashion, especially in diasporic cultures.

Examining consumers' practices, the original idea of world fashion appears outdated, as fashion no longer signifies either local or cosmopolitan identities. Recognizing the global reach of non-'western' fashion systems, Heather Akou, for example, argues for two competing „world fashion systems“, one based in Europe and the United States, and one based in the Middle East (Akou, 2007). Building on existing theoretical frameworks like Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large* (1996), Margaret Maynard, in her book *Dress and Globalization* (2004), argued against any notion of uniformity in clothes and the US as a monolithic controller of values and commodities, pointing to a "multiplicity of cosmopolitanisms" (p. 6).

While the existence of world fashion in the 21st century as ubiquity of certain garments like jeans, T-shirts and sneakers is not called into question—albeit not explicitly designated as such—its impact and dissemination are.

OUTLOOK

From an economic perspective, China, as the world's leading exporter of clothing, is currently dominating the global fashion market. Moreover, the former 'Americanization' has turned into a social media-driven form of world fashion characterized by mass-produced basic patterns and secondhand markets. At the same time, we experience an ambivalence between conformity and individualization in design, as exemplified by smaller labels that attempt to compete on the global stage. The growing visibility of local craftsmanship and indigenous textile traditions testifies to the shift from world fashion to global fashion; however, they are still struggling with issues of preservation and independence from the established infrastructure. Understanding the powerful narratives surrounding world fashion is essential for grasping the complex realities and coexistence of diverse dressing practices influenced by hegemonic claims. The term world fashion primarily refers to the historical struggle for supremacy within the fashion industry. Since the associated narratives are shaped by those vying for that leadership, further research would benefit from a multilingual approach that explores the presence and circulation of the term in non-'western' languages.

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