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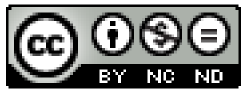

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Decentring fashion – Participatory practices for shifting narratives and regenerating cultures

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Decentring Fashion – Participatory Practices for Shifting Narratives and Regenerating Cultures

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Introduction

Historically, the textile heritage of minorities has often been subjected to cultural appropriation practices (Young, 2008) or systematically undervalued and 'othered' as 'non-fashion', as such 'sacrifice zones' do not sit within the confines of specific fashion systems (Niessen, 2020). Designers are often 'parachuted' into marginalised or disadvantaged communities premised on bringing their knowledge and expertise to solve other people's problems. However, there is growing recognition of the need to 'decolonise' such dominant approaches in collaborative design practice (Escobar, 2018; Mignolo, 2018; Tunstall, 2023). Different methods have been applied, sometimes in tandem, to tackle the challenges that face us as well as define new roles for the designer under different contexts, such as design activism (Fuad-Luke, 2009, 2017), design for social justice (Constanza-Chock, 2020), social entrepreneurship (Martin & Osberg, 2007) and policy design (Bason, 2014; Kimbell et al., 2023).

While guest editing this Special Issue, we were undertaking the research project 'Decolonising Fashion and Textiles: Design for Cultural Sustainability with Refugee Communities', which addresses some of these multiple-level challenges in the UK (Mazzarella & Mirza, 2023). In line with Walker et al. (2018) and Kozlowski et al. (2019), we advocate for adding a cultural dimension to the three most recognised pillars of sustainability: environment, economy and society. Cultural sustainability refers to tolerant systems that identify and cultivate diversity of cultural heritage, beliefs, practices and histories in connection with places, resources and ancestral lands (Williams, 2022). Starting from the premise of not re-enacting dominant power narratives, we are engaging London-based refugees and asylum seekers in storytelling sessions, textile co-creation workshops and roundtable discussions as part of participatory action research aimed at understanding what cultural sustainability and community resilience mean in this context. These liminal and peripheral communities actively search for a new voice and identity as they rebuild their lives and resettle in a new place. Our research contributes to understanding the lived experiences of refugees, mapping ways to build resilience within the local community and collectively framing a sustainable future vision. Our ambition is also to shift narratives around refugees, amplify the participants' voice and agency and foreground an alternative fashion and textile system based on equality, diversity, inclusion and sustainability of cultures.

It is essential to highlight that our project team presents a mix of cultural backgrounds, and we speak at least one language other than English, overlapping with our research participants. This position of 'credible messengers' contributes to the varied frames of cultural and social reference, which are crucial in projects of this nature. We also acknowledge the different forms of privilege each of us brings to the project. At the same time, we strive to challenge power dynamics and adopt a critical self-reflective approach, leveraging our lived experiences to foster empathy and inclusion within the collaborative design process.

With our project team, we engaged with 41 participants having either refugee or asylum-seeking status and who had come to London from 13 different countries (e.g. Eritrea, India, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan and Sudan, to name but a few) for very different reasons (fleeing from war, gender-based violence or discrimination due to racial, religious or political reasons). We conducted the research activities in community centres in East London, an area with centuries of fashion and textile manufacturing heritage and home to diverse migrant communities. We adopted an embedded and situated approach to designing (Mazzarella et al., 2021) and explored cultural, social, economic, and environmental issues faced by refugees within the fashion context of East London.

Insights

Against the backdrop of our ongoing project, key themes have emerged from the research observations and public discussions corroborated through the 'Shifting Narratives' symposium we held at the London College of Fashion, UAL, in January 2024. These themes capture the multifarious meanings attributed to cultural sustainability and community resilience, which help frame the parameters of fashion in this context and to which the authors of the papers published in this Special Issue have responded. The themes presented here relate to cultural sustainability and community resilience and are defined more specifically in the context they resonate with. This Special Issue is organised by correlating papers to these themes.

The discussion on decoloniality foregrounded in this Special Issue aims to invert power in how knowledge is presented. In discussing the themes below, we highlight the voices of the participants and MA students from the London College of Fashion, UAL, who were involved in a collaborative project brief aligned with our research. We have chosen to use direct quotes from the participants and others involved in the project to give voice to their concerns and the space they deserve, which they are often denied.

Reframing fashion

Our project and the papers published in this Special Issue exemplify ways in which the practice of textiles and fashion design can be used as the catalyst for conversations around colonial legacy and lived experiences. In our project, we learnt that participants might be far from articulating or relating to definitions in a conventional way, and this made us think about accessible terminology and how to invert narratives by listening and recording what the participants defined as fashion, cultural sustainability and community resilience. In this Special Issue, we also intend to unpick and lay out the definitions from a non-dominant perspective. The visual data – textile artworks and fashion artefacts – produced by the participants in our project show a better articulation of cultural sustainability and community resilience than the words used to describe them.

In her paper 'Designed for life: Fashioning emergent futures', Erica de Greef reviews the exhibition 'Designed for Life' at London College of Fashion, UAL, from October 2023 to January 2024. De Greef examines the various elements of the exhibition and how the projects' teams engaged with the lived experiences of refugees and migrants, involving them directly in the design process to bring forth untold stories of silenced communities and discuss the inequalities inherent in the world of design and fashion. De Greef also foregrounds a space in which design and conflict intersect at 'the meeting of art with the extreme scale of human suffering' as the unusual and challenging context from which some of the projects exhibited in 'Designed for Life' originated.

As we understand it in our research context and the papers published here, fashion is a system of what and who we interact with, not just an industry, which it is often reduced to or associated with in the mainstream narrative. Besides the fact that every garment we wear is made by a pair of hands, in the Global South, what we have understood from our diverse project participants' decentred narratives about fashion is that it can provide an accessible, desirable medium to all. Therein, 'fashion' exhibits a divergence in its perceived privilege of access to some while others are excluded. In this context, fashion provides a vehicle through which participants from different levels of society, even those with no prior experience, education or training in fashion, are still keen to learn and pursue a career in fashion to build their new life in their new place of resettlement. Here, we see a glimpse of the less-defined spaces of inclusion for diverse players. For instance, a participant in our project stated that fashion 'is about finding yourself, learning new skills, bringing together people from diverse cultures'. Fashion is conceived as 'a tool to tell a story', and the project 'creates values and feelings … beyond the idea that fashion is something worn on the outside'. In her paper, de Greef also discusses the practice of making fashion and textiles to enable refugee participants to enact 'practical negotiations between the local, global, past, present and future', undertake a process of 'becoming whole again', engage with more established residents and, in so doing, influence the place where they resettle.

Decentring fashion

This Special Issue illustrates ways in which fashion can provide a different access platform in a decentred context. Historically, it has been used as a political and social symbol of defiance to colonial power, notably in Gandhi's personal choice of dress and the Swadeshi movement (Bean, 1991; Gonsalves, 2012). Through the handmaking of clothing, cheaper industrially made imported European textiles were boycotted as a metaphor for liberty from colonial oppression in South Asia. In our project's context, amplifying a peripheral fashion system tied to 'othered' identities is also examined through the lens of clothing that is separated from the dominant stance of the 'Fashion' industry. In decolonising dominant design practices, it is vital to adopt a listening-first perspective, unlearning inherent knowledge and relearning new viewpoints.

In her article 'The decentralisation of fashion education in the Northeast of England through collaborative practice between education, communities and industry', Gayle Cantrell *et al.* report on initiatives to re-localise the fashion system through collaboration with various stakeholders. With the ambition to move away from the established centralised (London-based) fashion sector in England and contribute to a social diversification of the industry, such counter-initiatives are aimed at bringing benefits to the local system, having design education at the heart of this process. Such a system is grounded on values of localism, degrowth, circularity, sustainability, repair, activism, community engagement and social innovation. In this context, fashion is presented as a vehicle for the regeneration of the local industry and community through engagement with local fashion brands and the creative industries more broadly. The paper illustrates UK universities' role in engaging with local communities to foster place-making and decentralise the fashion system, which has the potential to shift power dynamics and contribute towards decolonisation.

Through engagement with the diverse groups in our project, we argue that language must also be decentred. It became evident that using native languages in the artefacts created can promote diverse cultures. Embracing a multitude of knowledge and approaches, this decentred process entails working in solidarity 'with' marginalised communities rather than assuming a 'helper' attitude.

Cultural sustainability

Our project defines cultural sustainability as a strong sense of identity attached to an emotional sense of belonging, such as comfort in the space of two cultures and redefining fashion through nonconformity. Sustaining textile heritage and making spaces for its discussion can contribute to fostering a sense of belonging, especially for refugees who are displaced and live transient lives, as highlighted by one of our project participants: ‘This project made me love my culture more. No matter where I go, my culture will remain with me’.

On the other hand, it is also important to note that some refugees have traumatic memories of their home countries and may want to erase some of their heritage while absorbing cultural elements of the place of resettlement. Hence, sustaining the past is not always appropriate, especially when it might echo the dominating narratives of imperial colonialism. This resonates with Hall’s (1997) definition of culture, not as a return to our fixed ‘roots’ but as ‘routes’ through which we travel; therefore, our culture changes and develops. From this perspective, cultural sustainability means continuing certain traditions while allowing certain elements to evolve and embracing change to design ‘regenerative cultures’ (Wahl, 2016).

Our research shows that the dominant fashion system is making people from cultural minority backgrounds believe that their material culture and way of dressing may be less valuable. With this in mind, we argue for the designer’s role as an advocate for foregrounding personal and cultural identity and the need to feel safe in embracing native and new cultures to express shifting identities. Equally, we advocate for the need to facilitate co-creation processes and enable the necessary conditions for all cultures to thrive in their own right, and this includes leveraging the power of cultural activism – through design, art, craft and making (Corbett, 2017; Fuad-Luke, 2009; Hackney, 2013) – to challenge social injustices and dismantle the many layers of dominant and oppressive forces that prevent equality of all cultures.

Our research also revealed that the reconciliation between values and economic differentials must be considered in any definition. This was highlighted at the ‘Shifting Narratives’ symposium. For instance, Professor Stuart Walker highlighted that regional and central government policies in the UK for economic development are often aimed at fostering innovation and change, which are at odds with the values of tradition and conservation on which the principle of cultural sustainability is grounded. Furthermore, mainstream Western cultures are grounded on individualism and consumerism, and such values are socially and environmentally damaging and should not be sustained.

Shifting narratives

The plight of people whose identity is instantly stripped away and replaced with a quick label when arriving in a new place, resounds in a quote shared by artist Laura Nyahuye at the ‘Shifting Narratives’ symposium: ‘I became a black woman when I came to the UK’.

This statement illustrates the resistance to her strong sense of identity; she felt that ‘there is no room for me because of what I look like’ as the space ‘resisted who I was’. Culturally, educationally, and linguistically, diverse people with differing backgrounds may be reduced to a single label, which confines them as the ‘other’ and, in many cases, as ‘unwanted’ in the dominant culture and power narratives. Moreover, listening to the stories of our project participants one on one and asking them to share culturally and personally meaningful textiles led to a reflection on identity and the juxtaposition of presumed identity and representation in a new context. It shed light on the human qualities and values necessary to diverse

participants in meaningful ways. For instance, the making space offered our project participants the opportunity to rebuild shattered self-confidence as well as relocate themselves within a vastly different social structure and as valuable contributing members of society whilst raising awareness of 'others' and the other 'self':

> *"I'm here to find myself. We can pray for this to happen every day and night … The reason why I do this is because I know [that] a picture can send a message to the outside world. If someone sees this [referring to her textile artwork], they know that this lady is still fighting for her freedom".*

The current prevailing narratives around refugees are reductive and limit the multidimensional aspect of being human. Our research highlights that refugees, similar to other groups, are neither a collective entity nor identify with the same things despite the collective grouping ascribed by general perception and often even those in power, such as the top tiers of governments. The refugee label might reduce the experiences of diverse individuals. Nevertheless, the labelling or exoticising or commodising of 'native culture' or people is not a new phenomenon.

Pallavi Chamarty's paper 'Kalamkari and chintz: A decolonial reassessment of entangled textile histories' in this Special Issue critiques the absence of artisanal subjectivity and the persistence of Eurocentric and Orientalist assumptions within the existing historiography pertaining to specific Indian textile crafts. Chamarty demonstrates and highlights the dialectic relationship of colonisation with traditional crafts in South India through its commodification. The paper underlines the significance of the relationships of power that may historically define spaces for cultures from non-dominant sources. As designers and practitioners working towards social change, our role is to question and identify the gaps by which we are endangering human values of creativity, resilience, resourcefulness and collaboration that form the basis of culture and ways of being.

Regeneration of cultures

What is culture in this context? Culture here can be defined as a multi-layered living reality that evolves with people as they travel, integrate, learn, unlearn and make meaning. In the paper 'Exploring the extraordinary design motifs of Wollo Gabi in Ethiopian textiles and design development of women's fashion accessories', Hazal Gümüş Çiftçi, Tewodros Tenagne, Temesgen Agazhie and Michael Reta discuss a traditional textile worn by both Ethiopian men and women. The paper discusses a commercial gap for product design in international markets and the potential for adopting co-design methods for an inclusive approach to brand development. The authors provide insight into traditional crafts that are less known in mainstream fashion and which contribute towards informing consumers against cultural appropriation practices and aesthetics. Importantly, it also frames the discussions around overlapping cultures where native material culture may have to adapt and regenerate towards a dominant one to survive. This raises questions about balancing power and values where diverse cultures meet.

Our research connected people who would not have otherwise met and focused on finding cultural commonalities that create a bridge between different worlds. While engaging with participants living transient lives and bringing together people from different countries, we were aware of potential conflicts and tensions that could have emerged across cultures. We felt our responsibility was to facilitate dialogue, co-existence, and connection. As one of our project participants shared, they were 'exposed to the sensitivities and perspectives of other people'. Another participant has consistently used a pair of jeans and

a T-shirt as symbols to campaign for unity and equity among different people, arguing that less division is created through reduced ring-fencing of cultures and cultural heritages. Our approach encourages participants to practise empathy for one another's struggles, respect diverse cultural heritages and engage in respectful and mindful conversations based on active listening.

Community resilience

Community resilience is highlighted in a description of lived experiences, as some forms of culture are carried while others are left behind in the cause of survival. Resistance is one basis of resilience in the face of extreme adversity. Similarly, one of our project participants pointed to the fantasy-like association with the UK as the home of Shakespeare and other positive Western narratives, which were in stark contrast to arriving in London as an asylum seeker where she felt unwelcomed and 'hated'.

Whilst we advocate for leveraging the power of communities (as groups of people with a shared matter of concern) to achieve social justice, we acknowledge the importance of also creating spaces for 'agonistic pluralism' (DiSalvo, 2010; Mouffe, 1999) to avoid the risk of creating echo chambers of the same ideas, seeking consensus instead of challenging existing power structures and activating social change. Our research highlights the resilience built by refugees in the face of experienced oppression and exploitation. However, it also critically challenges the notion of resilience, pointing towards the need for well-working systems and services instead of having no other choice than reacting to external shocks, as stated by one of our project participants:

> *"People from the Global South are resilient, although … they should not have to always be resilient, because they also deserve tenderness and loving care, instead of violence and resilience. … Sometimes, resilience is worshipped because it's easier to worship resilient people rather than deconstructing and dismantling the system that oppresses them. Many of them do not even want to be resilient or face this violence, but they have no choice".*

While resilience is a positive quality to have to react to adverse situations, it should not be used – for instance, by local authorities, which have a duty of care towards their residents – to deflect responsibilities.

The power of participatory practices

In social and political theory, Foucault (1994) notes power as a form of domination, while Bourdieu (1984; 1986) describes a kind of power in social and cultural distinctions. It is essential for design researchers to constantly reflect on their positionality, challenge their privilege and consider the power dynamics at play in collaborative processes. In their paper 'Sustainability culture and fashion enterprises: From creating questions to co-creating participation', Daniele Busciantella-Ricci, Marco Berni, Andrea Del Bono and Rita Duina discuss an experimental collaboration between a circular fashion company and a local third-sector entity promoting co-design for social innovation and adopting a Design Ladder model. This is an example of design's role in fostering sustainability within the fashion industry by identifying new business strategies and systematically adopting co-design tools for social change.

Active engagement in a reciprocal process of making and learning 'with' project participants rather than studying 'them' underlines the power of participatory practice. Wherever possible, enabling opportunities for shifting roles, such as empowering refugees to progress from participants to facilitators of design activities, fosters spaces for personal growth and the development of new perspectives. Active listening is

crucial in such collaborative processes to not impose one's beliefs and design ideas and not elicit traumatic memories, as highlighted by one student participating in the collaborative project brief we set up: 'Listening with mind, not just with ears'.

As brought forth in the discussions at the 'Shifting Narratives' symposium and in the co-creation process with our project participants, making things together contributes to restoring lost connections (with people, places and practices), building support networks and fostering community resilience (Gauntlett, 2011; Hirscher, 2020; Sennett, 2008). Making things together also unlocks meanings and narratives that cannot be expressed through words but become evident in the choice of fabrics, the enactment of movements such as mark-making on cloth and the building of new relationships (Mirza, 2020).

Transformative learning

Decolonising fashion implies unlearning inherent knowledge and engaging wholeheartedly in learning new viewpoints. This points to the crucial role that design education and reflexive practice play in this process. In their paper '*Drum* magazine: A decolonial shift in teaching fashion theory and history,' Khaya Mchunu and Kiara Gounder discuss a cross-institutional project which offers a new perspective on decolonising fashion pedagogies. Mchunu considers fashion within the social, cultural and political landscape of South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s and illustrates – through biographical essays and magazine covers – students' responses to the brief, with a focus on creative individuals who, although featured in *Drum* magazine, are not widely documented in fashion theory. The project presented in this paper critically acclaims untold stories and shapes new narratives centred on alternative fashion histories and imaginaries, contributing to – necessary and yet uncomfortable – shifts towards decoloniality. By proposing context-specific examples within fashion education, the paper offers a poignant call for engaging in an ongoing process of 'renewing, stretching, and decentring the teaching of fashion theory and history'.

Education implies a journey of learning and transformation through self-discovery, new skills, gaining new knowledge and finding one's role in society. Two main contributors to adult learning, Mezirow (2000) and Freire (1970; 1973) advocate for transformation through critical reflection and raising critical consciousness. Both Mezirow's meaning making and Freire's experiential learning approaches are relevant to people's transformation, but our project points towards contextually relevant material culture as central to triggering transformative learning in participants. In particular, our project has contributed towards the development of a wide range of technical and soft skills (design, sewing, pattern cutting, embroidery, critical reflection, ethical thinking, listening and communicating, teamwork, systems thinking, creativity and advocacy) as well as personal qualities (such as empathy, flexibility, resilience, resourcefulness and activism), as stated by one of our refugee collaborators: 'I improved many skills in myself, like communication, teamwork and finding mutual goals whilst we stay creative'.

Most importantly, drawing on Miller and VeneKlasen's (2006) social sciences framework for power relations, we are witnessing that the refugees participating in our project are undertaking a transformative journey, from the feeling of being powerless while power is exercised by top-down institutions 'over' them, towards gaining power 'within' themselves (in terms of self-worth), power 'with' people (as collective strength) and power 'to' shape their own lives and make a difference in society. For instance, reflecting on her transformative journey of empowerment, one of our refugee collaborators stated: 'As a refugee, I felt like a stone. You need to find a way to share your pain, and this project is giving me an opportunity to get closer to my feelings and turn my pain into something beautiful'.

Closing reflections

While findings from our research point towards the invaluable lived experience of refugees and what it truly means to be human, we hope that the papers included in this Special Issue will inspire you – the reader – with multiple ways in which design and fashion can be used to challenge perceptions and narratives around marginalised groups and to engage in participatory and decolonised processes aimed at fostering cultural sustainability and community resilience. We would like to invite you to join us on a collaborative journey to develop practices of resistance to the hostile environment in which we live, nurturing ethics of care and repair and contributing towards unlocking people's freedom to express their shifting identities and their abilities to access resources, representation and power – in and through fashion.

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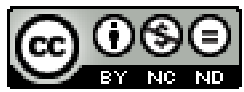

Exhibition review
Designed for life: Fashioning emergent futures

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Exhibition review

Designed for life: Fashioning emergent futures

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Designed for life: Fashioning emergent futures

A large, pink handstitched heart, an appliqued sun and earth and handwritten messages of hope occupy three large textile banners suspended in an imposing glass and concrete foyer. Reminiscent of resistance flags of women's suffrage, trade unions and queer activism, the co-created banners both announce and welcome the exhibition visitor with the words of the makers, confidently showcasing that 'we have the strength to create change', 'we inspire and learn from each other' and 'we know we matter!' (Image 1).

The colourful gestures, identity affirmations and tactile materialities resemble the dreams and aspirations that one would expect in an institution dedicated to art and design education. However, these messages calling for safety, social justice and belonging are not students' outputs – or dreams. They are the hopes of the refugee communities in the London boroughs of Newham, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest, contributing to the ongoing AHRC-funded participatory action research project, 'Decolonising Fashion and Textiles: Design for Cultural Sustainability with Refugee Communities' (2022-2024), led by the Centre for Sustainable Fashion's researcher Dr Francesco Mazzarella.

Image 1: Textile banners and manifestos for a compassionate future co-created in the 'Decolonising Fashion and Textiles' project. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.

These words and textile gestures seem familiar and relatable, hinting at a world in common. The soft textile banners share the formidable space with its massive windows and concrete surfaces and the exhibition's bright orange signage signalling emergency, danger, and precarity. Suspended orange panels and oversized quotation marks amplify the words and stories that seem to be threatened with erasure, silencing or dismissal. 'Breaking Barriers', 'Shaping a Just Society' and 'Together 'echo the concerns stitched in the cloth works and the messages of hope in the glass-topped cabinets at the exhibition's entrance. Handwritten in Arabic on scraps of tent fabric, the *Messages of Hope* (2016) convey the responses of 29 Syrian girls at the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan from the These Inspiring Girls Enjoy Reading (TIGER) collective upon the completion of the collaborative 'Love Coats' project (Image 2).

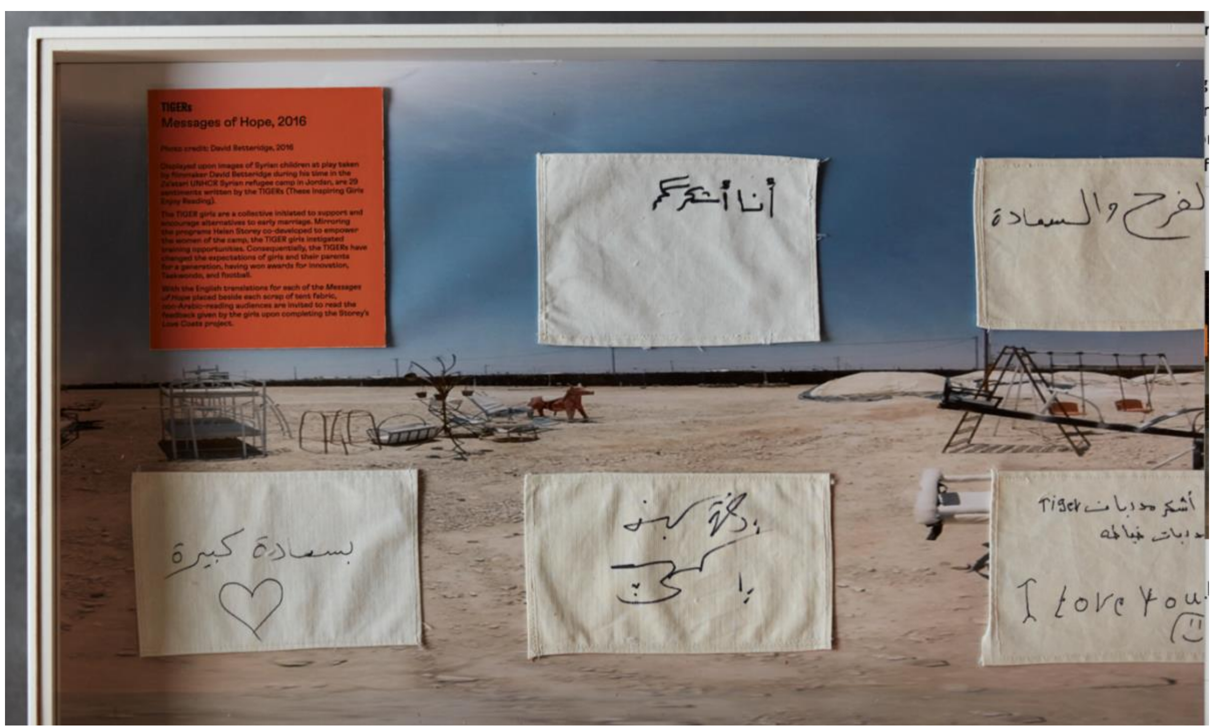

Image 2: 'Messages of Hope' (*2016) from the These Inspiring Girls Enjoy Reading (TIGER) collective, handwritten on scraps of tent fabric. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.*

The 'Designed for Life' exhibition coincided with the opening of the impressive new London College of Fashion (LCF) campus at UAL's new East Bank home on the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in October 2023. The exhibition celebrated the institution's decades-long commitment to using fashion, design and creative practice as a force for positive social change and comprised diverse projects employing textiles, design, film, photography, artefacts, testimonies and community building, illustrating both the effect of witnessing and the transformative power of creative action. Spread out across five immersive showcase areas, the ambitious inaugural exhibition presented material identities, migrant and refugee testimonies, stitched narratives and tactile touchpoints fashioned from living, fearing, moving, belonging, making, memory, pain, social (in)justices and so much more. 'Designed for Life' was simultaneously designed *for* life as it was designed *from* life.

Drawing on the histories of fashion and textile manufacturing in the East End of London and acknowledging the need for dialogue, inclusion and representation, various community engagement projects preceded the consolidated move of LCF to its new home. 'Traces: Stories of Migration 'was one such project led by UAL's

Centre for Sustainable Fashion researcher and visual artist Professor Lucy Orta, resulting in the 'Portrait Gallery' (2022-2023) of 40 large handcrafted, appliqued and embroidered artworks (Image 3). The collective tapestry of immigrant makers, their fashions, diversities and motifs from their migration stories was the culmination of a two-year collaborative project involving over 80 residents across the East London boroughs of Newham and Tower Hamlets. It occupied two entire walls in the main gallery.

Image 3: Forty immigrant makers and their portraits in collaboration with Lucy Orta for the 'Traces: Stories of Migration' project. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.

The portraits manifested diverse cultural identities and brought their material expressions into the heart of UAL. Collaborator evenings and various opening events also welcomed the long-silenced, largely immigrant communities of East London into the institution. As an act towards diversity and inclusivity, towards an idea that can accommodate cross-cultural exchange and innovation, the textile portraits boldly confront fashion's ongoing transnational inequalities.

Another series of textile-based artworks from the 'Traces: Stories of Migration' project, 'Story Cloths' (2023), adorned the remaining gallery wall (Image 4). Delicately fashioned textile objects depicted the intimate and personal, physical and metaphorical migrant journeys of each maker involved in the creative research workshops. Each carefully rendered object fashioned a unique and personal textile narrative. Inspired by a migration journey from Panama to London, project participant JC used a cyanotype printing technique on silk-organza, layering and holding the resulting four silk squares with a simple red stitch. Jasmine Karis used old family photographs and garments from her grandmother's wardrobe to collage her fashion journeys from that time. In another story, Shama's stitched cloth 'Made in Bangladesh' in Bengali used a kantha traditional heritage technique to connect with the artisans who 'make our clothes'.

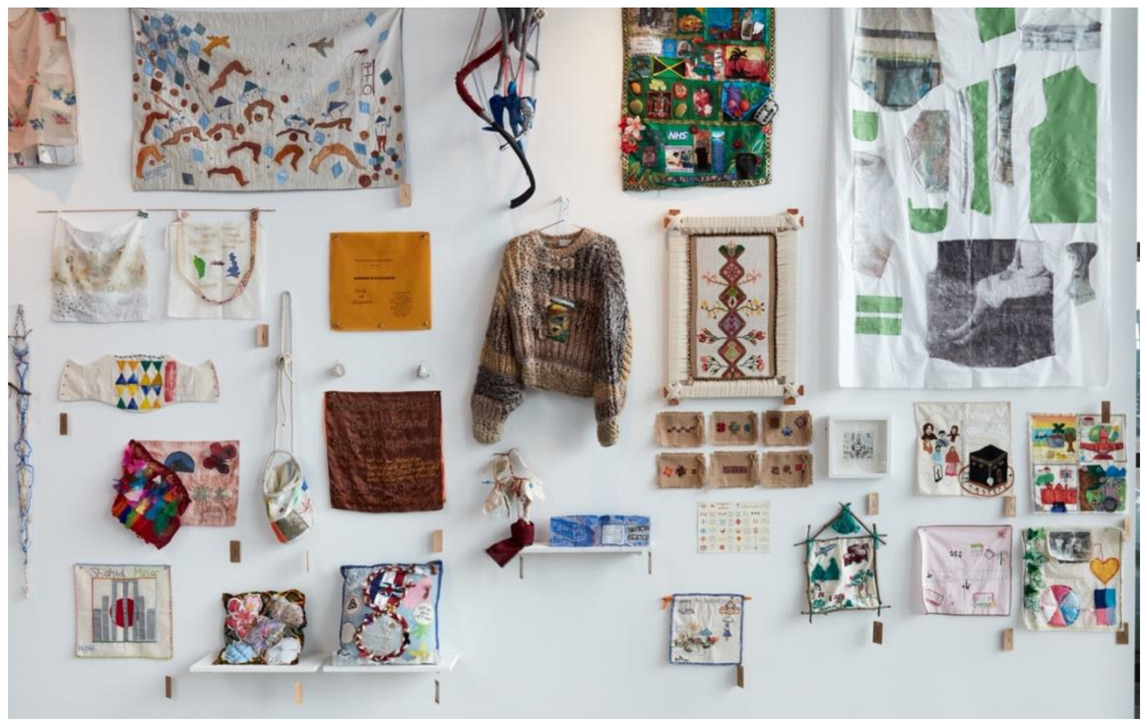

Image 4: 'Story Cloths' created by the participants in the 'Traces: Stories of Migration' project. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.

These intimate and personal invitations to listen and sit with the narratives in the 'Story Cloths' resonate with the exhibition's centrepiece, the 'Living Room Project', curated by Dr Leila Nassereldein and inspired by a Victorian terrace in Leytonstone (Image 5). The 'Living Room Project' offered an immersive East London domestic setting, co-curated by community members Pallavi Chamarty, Omolara Obanishola, Dave Sohanpal and Anh Tran with the support of Dr Michael McMillan. Filled with Lover's Rock vinyl records, vintage wallpaper, Avon cologne, parquet flooring, a pot plant, television and sewing corner, as well as a weathered leather sofa, its warm nostalgia afforded a distinctly different habitus from the University's modernist, concrete interiors.

Image 5: Dr Leila Nassereldein curated the 'Living Room Project'. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.

When barriers to home ownership, access to social housing and the constant threat of eviction are strikingly present in the lives of many East Londoners, this display offered a poignant and powerful touchpoint of home, being and belonging. With a large proportion of international and diasporic students at UAL, it would be interesting to note the affective impact of the 'Living Room' on their student journeys when thinking of home or finding their creative communities in London. The precarious lives of the East Londoners, impacted by ongoing gentrification, biases and erasures, were absent from this homely display. What did the 'Living Room' offer in the face of design education when the ambivalence of nostalgia erases the ongoing realities of cultural othering and exclusion?

Reflections of home, journeys and placemaking and the realisation of diverse identities and minority experiences in a fashion world were materialised throughout 'Designed for Life' as one of the exhibition's key threads. Between bits of coloured cloth, close communal listening and connecting to tradition, complex questions of geopolitical belonging and racial and socio-cultural hierarchies were confronted, explored, expressed and repaired. Addressing questions of diversity, decolonisation and access concerning current art and design curricula, the exhibition ambitiously threaded marginal cultural histories to sustainability discourses and stitched them into contexts where relations to heritage have been most ruptured.

A second essential thread in the exhibition lay at the intersection of design and conflict – the meeting of art with the extreme scale of human suffering. Whether the exhibition successfully bridged these polarities for the students and staff at LCF and its wider communities – to radically shift future design praxes for kinder, more ethical worlds to come – may not be measurable in the short term but may redirect some future praxis towards repairing the polarities of power that continue to produce the cultural and planetary violence that some of the exhibition's more haunting contributions shared.

Syrian war refugee and ex-construction worker, Tarek Mohammed Hamden, carved his life journey into the handle of a domestic broom over six weeks at the Zaatari refugee camp. Time haunts the intricately detailed 'Holding Hands Hammer' (2019), 'Man on a Pole Hammer' (2019), 'Chain Hammer' (2019) and 'Life Broom' (2020) (Image 6). So, too, does the brutality of displacement and the sheer scale of pain that no longer having a home to sweep or fix or care for must entail. The wall text avoids this protracted trauma of stasis and suspended life and directs the reader to the economic opportunities that skilled craftsmanship such as Hamden's affords.

Image 6: 'Holding Hands Hammer' (2019), 'Man on a Pole Hammer' (2019) and 'Chain Hammer' (2019) by Tarek Mohammed Hamden. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.

Another gallery space – past the reception of LCF, a coffee shop, a students' mingling area and more concrete and glass – offered a deeper exploration of these global traumas and displacements. Drawing on the work of UAL's Centre for Sustainable Fashion's researcher and United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) Designer in Residence Professor Helen Storey's long-term projects with Syrian refugees in the Zaatari refugee camp, the darkened gallery witnessed both enigmatic beauty and the traces of extreme suffering. The smell of jasmine and adhan (the call to prayer) filled the room.

The UNHCR gifted a decommissioned refugee tent to Storey's ongoing project. 'Dress For Our Time' (2015) was made from this tent (Image 7). The dress in the darkened room visualised real-time data of people's movements due to war, climate change or the ongoing impact of extractive economies. In collaboration with Holition, pixels of light travel up from the hem of the dress, with each pixel representing 100 human beings fleeing for their lives. The lights flowed from six points representing the continents refugees had left before finding shelter in new locations. The dress mesmerises whilst simultaneously making visible the inconceivable scale of global displacement and unbelievable harm in the world.

Image 7: ‘Dress For Our Time’ designed by Helen Storey. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.

‘Dress For Our Time’ joined two other projects in this gallery as responsive objects that made visible and tangible both the measurable and immeasurable impacts of violence and displacement. ‘Jacket of Wishes’ (2021), made from the leftover fabric of the UNHCR tent, became a worn tablet upon which the voices and wishes of women in the Zaatari camp were inscribed. ‘Love Coats’ (2017) followed another collaboration with Helen Storey and the TIGER girls at the camp, transforming thermal refugee blankets into high-fashion coats. Each girl kept one coat to battle the sub-zero winter temperatures in the camp and gifted another to a loved one.

What conditions for rethinking the world could we nurture that would open up alternative routes of inhabiting the world, of living and being in common and of connecting with a planetary consciousness? Mobilising fashion as a site of activism offered some empowerment for these refugee girls and women at the Zaatari camp. However, the more profound questions of thinking about an open and fair future that moves beyond the deeply entangled histories of oppression, violence and war demand that institutions and their students grapple equally with the shared responsibilities towards repair and change and new understandings of sustainable and ethical life futures.

Seen as a constellation of crosses from above, ‘Designed for Life’ also occupied the mezzanine area at the base of the building’s central, swirling concrete stairway, announced with another large bright orange plinth secured to a concrete pillar with orange tape.

Image 8: View of the 'Decolonising Fashion and Textiles: Design for Cultural Sustainability with Refugee Communities' project installation. Photo by Merhdad Pakniyat.

Twenty-five textile autobiographies stitched on embroidery hoops were installed at eye-level on individual stems, prompting face-to-face engagement with a diverse community. Rich in symbolism and featuring loose threads, meandering lines, colourful stitches and shy smiles, the portraits spilled out beyond the hooped frames with colours, trims and tales (Images 8 & 9). Reading as personal manifestos on the reverse of each visage, the makers shared their reflections on reciprocal learning, inclusion, co-creation and community building. Instead of studying the refugee participants, the project team actively engaged in the co-creation process, sharing their own stories and producing 'textile autobiographies'.

The artwork of Project Lead Dr Francesco Mazzarella looks like a patchwork of the diverse cultures which he absorbed in his migration journey in search of better education and employment opportunities. As he wrote, the piece is "*a reminder of my role in life, seeking constant change, and crafting (my and other people's) life journeys"*. Postdoctoral research fellow Dr Seher Mirza wrote: *"We are the sum of our experiences' […]. I made a feature of imperfect stitches to show we all have flaws and weaknesses".* These artworks are in dialogue with those of the refugees participating in the project, like Madusu, whose piece is a statement of *"fighting for her freedom"* or Ghonche, who reminds us that we are all human and advocates for *"Women, Life, Freedom!"* The pieces intend to shift negative narratives around refugees and showcase the skills and resilience of their makers whilst calling for love and safety and dreaming of a brighter future.

Image 9: 'Textile Autobiographies' were created in the 'Decolonising Fashion and Textiles' project. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.

A short film by David Betteridge peopled the room with a community of voices, aesthetics and faces often excluded from design institutions. Making visible and working with the censored histories and creative practices of the many marginalised communities of East London was a vital element of the 'Decolonising Fashion and Textiles' project. A map of colourful threads and colours re-imagined a world-making network of transient people who build resilience within themselves and in their new communities to fulfil their needs and aspirations. The map connected the dynamic and diverse makers and their rich folk histories with London's boroughs and centres of global South conversations in imagining and decolonising fashion practices. The cultural networks and possibilities featured in the project point to other creative futures beyond the conventions of standard fashion curricula. The refugee's fashioned portraits reflected the lived hybridities and practical negotiations between the local, global, past, present and future as necessary pathways to integrating, adjusting and becoming whole again.

Working with vulnerable communities through the lens of fashion does not reduce their marginality, but it can help shape languages and safe spaces for sharing. Bringing these tacit explorations – expressions of self and pain – into sites of privilege requires care to deflect the often destructive power dynamics between privilege and precarity. Using fashion as social repair also situates these crafting encounter workshops in contested terrains, as participants are hopeful. Yet, their world realities remain uncertain and on hold. A striking benefit expressed in the words of many refugee participants is the power of community building through reciprocal learning and making, where the stitches and selections of colourful textiles are moments of care, hope and glimpses of a different and more compassionate future.

Projects celebrating 10 years of LCF, UAL's social responsibility work, now known as the Portal Centre for Social Impact**,** occupied the lower levels of the new East Bank campus. First established by the Ministry of Justice and LCF in 2014, the Portal Centre for Social Impact convenes projects and training programmes that cultivate inclusive and collaborative learning experiences for students across different learning

pathways with diverse local communities, involving external creative practitioners, youth in rehabilitation centres, women in prison and other vulnerable individuals.

Each glass vitrine showcased a different Portal Centre collaboration, demonstrating various knowledge exchanges and artistic outputs from projects with fashion brands, designers, community centres, institutions and festivals. ‘Radical Weaving’ (2017, 2019) showcased handwoven textiles from industrial waste, such as paper and plastic wires (Image 10). This was a co-creation project with LCF students from the BA (Hons) Fashion Technology Menswear course and BA (Hons) Cordwainers Fashion Bags and Accessories courses, San Patrignano (a rehabilitative centre for youth struggling with addiction) and HMP Downview, a closed category prison for women.

Image 10: ‘Radical Weaving’ vitrine showcasing work from the Portal Centre for Social Impact. Photo by Jack Elliot Edwards.

The ‘Making for Change’ vitrine – a curated cabinet filled with high-fashion collaborations with designer Bethany Williams, aprons for Abel & Cole using their lorry tarpaulin and a Harris Tweed off-cuts recycling project – showcased the outcomes of various training programmes run by the garment manufacturing unit that opened in 2019 at Poplar Works, a fashion hub in East London. Building on the success of earlier work with HMP Downview since 2014, the new Making for Change unit connects LCF graduates and marginalised communities to interact, engage and collaborate in pioneering projects.

Collectively, the different projects showcased in the ambitious ‘Designed for Life’ exhibition produced a patchwork quilt of underrepresented voices, global crises and diverse communities, bringing into view various pieces of knowledge, global emergencies and some fresh perspectives (Image 11). These practitioners’ physical acknowledgement and ongoing commitment to using creativity to change the world enriched the students' exchanges and mutual learning. Thinking from sites of suffering, survival and resistance, and conjured up by materials that connect and converse, the exhibition’s positioning of East London as home, a classroom and a realm of emergent futures situated the projects and participants as the

new teachers. Resilient, strong, capable. Making the self in a broken space. Fashioning pathways to positive social change. Finding home. Healing.

Image 11: One of the public events, the Collaborators' Celebration for 'Designed for Life', was held on 11 December 2023. Photo by Merhdad Pakniyat.

For any effective reframing of fashion education, transformative decolonisation and equitable sustainability work to happen, conventions need to change. Many more ontological, philosophical, economic and political assumptions and logic must be replaced with research from contexts and perspectives that pose challenges, draw on diverse values and offer different pathways. Research, where empathy and culture are activated and society's well-being is a truly shared endeavour, demands to be undertaken through alternative forms and formats. It requires the tenacity to ask beyond the familiar.

Finding these brave spaces where socially engaged artistic practices and projects hold space for challenging issues, not just for the students and staff at UAL, LCF, but for a future fashion system that will expand the possibilities for people to live well together in a more-than-human world, will shift the contemporary narratives of emergency to new narratives of emergence towards radically refashioning new ways of living.

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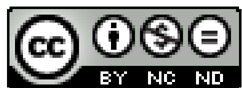

The decentralisation of fashion education in Northeast England through collaborative practice between education, communities and industry

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The decentralisation of fashion education in Northeast England through collaborative practice between education, communities and industry

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Abstract
This article focuses on a collaboration between educators at higher education institutions in the UK, reflecting on fashion education in Northeast England and how it is evolving to support and diversify aspirations for the arts outside London. The project is supported by research backed by the British Fashion Council, aiming to explore regional initiatives to enable young creatives to have stable careers in fashion and the arts across the UK. This paper demonstrates how examples of this have been implemented through the work of the community education group This is Creative Enterprise, UAL, Teesside and Northumbria universities, through building pathways from schools to universities and encouraging dialogue between schools, industry, higher education and community groups. Case studies demonstrate participatory research projects that encourage responsible engagement with fashion, supporting regional growth, community engagement and a decentralised vision.

Keywords: Decentralisation, Fashion, Higher education, Community, Participatory, Localism, Reuse and repair

Introduction

Fashion education in the UK today is facing multiple challenges. On the one hand, a volatile academic landscape, impacted by funding constraints including restrictions to international student visas (Adams, 2024) – on the other, an impending “arts apocalypse” in schools, defined by a coalition of arts and education organisations as a “deep, multi-faceted and worsening” crisis (Martin, 2024), has resulted in a steep drop in pupils taking arts subjects at GCSE and A levels, with fewer students choosing creative subjects at university. The fashion sector itself is renowned for its significant contribution to climate change through unsustainable patterns of production and consumption. It is responsible for between 2% and 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions, significantly contributing to pollution and impacting water and biodiversity, as well as social injustices on a global scale (Arthur, 2023). Fashion education appears to be in crisis – as trend forecaster Li Edelkoort predicted nine years ago in her Anti-Fashion Manifesto, deeming it “out of society, and de facto … old-fashioned … Out of step with a world hungry for consensus and altruism” (Edelkoort, 2015, p. 1).

Despite this, we find room for optimism. The United Nations Environment Programme’s *Sustainable Fashion Communication Playbook* advocates the contribution fashion can make to communities through presenting the challenges faced by the sector as creative opportunities (Arthur, 2023). As educators at higher education institutions (HEIs) located in London and the Northeast of England, we are passionate about the value of creative education and the benefits this can bring to local communities. We have set out

to develop a version of fashion education that reflects and supports regional opportunities and the communities that we engage with to create a responsible and relevant new vision for fashion.

Decentralisation is defined as **"**the dispersion or distribution of functions and powers", and in Sociology as "the redistribution of population and industry from urban centers to outlying areas" (Merriam-Webster, 2024). Traditionally, the locus of the fashion industry in the UK has been London, with bodies such as the British Fashion Council, as well as incubators such as Fashion East and the internationally renowned London Fashion Week based in the city. However, McRobbie et al. (2023) discuss how London as a global fashion centre has become unsustainable, with rents for home and workspaces out of reach for many and the cost of attending its art and design "super-brand" universities attainable only for those with independent wealth. McRobbie et al. (2023) call for the decentralisation of fashion culture away from London and the Southeast to balance social inequality and vibrant fashion cultures to grow outside the metropolis.

According to regional specificity, decentralisation can support a more responsible fashion system that begins with pre-16 education and brings together schools, higher education (HE), community groups, small or medium-sized enterprises and industry partners to support growth in local creative industries. Amongst the challenges, we see opportunities: students who reject the established fashion system, a growing number of graduates who want to remain in the region, a vibrant enterprise sector, collaborative opportunities with enthusiastic industry and third-sector partners, alternative routes into learning and broader community engagement. We also believe that collaboration between HEIs regionally and nationally is vital for creating a responsible and sustainable future for fashion.

This paper outlines methods we have used to evolve a version of fashion education that creatively addresses decentralisation through providing relevant contemporary educational projects. Case studies outline how we have done this through three approaches: increasing accessibility to fashion education through collaboration with schools and community groups; exploiting the considerable potential for future digital fashion in the region, providing opportunities for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds; and encouraging localised and supportive fashion through repair hubs, rebuilding our creative communities through a reuse, recycle and re-loved approach.

Literature review

London is well established as the location for the UK fashion industry, as one of the "Big Four" capitals – including New York, Milan, and Paris – due to its long-standing oligarchic power in defining fashion (Godart, 2014). The idea of "fashion cities" and "fashion capitals" defines the images and influences the economies of those cities (Berry, 2012; Breward & Gilbert, 2006; Godart, 2014). Fashion weeks and their ability to attract key industry players emphasise their locations as sites for the switching, transmission, and commercialisation of fashion and design knowledge (Brydges & Hracs, 2019).

London and the Southeast constitute 57% of all fashion economic activity in the UK (Harris et al., 2021). However, McRobbie et al. (2023) argue that London is no longer a viable option for those young creatives from working-class backgrounds who would until recently been able to make a significant contribution to the city's arts and culture. As the "super-brand" universities, such as Central St Martins, have built state-of-the-art campuses, the cost of living and working close to them has become further out of reach for low-

income students. As a result, the fashion industry in the UK, heavily drawn from institutions, retains an increasing inequality and a lack of representation from diverse social groups.

McRobbie et al. (2023) outline key recommendations that would need to be addressed if we are to resolve some of the inequality in the creative industries: free HE; access routes from school via youth centres and community groups; and trained and available professionals who can implement access initiatives. They recommend challenging assumptions underpinning the agendas of organisations such as the British Fashion Council and holding debates around curricula in regional universities' fashion departments to question 'the prevailing cultural values that inform professional codes and working practices in fashion" (McRobbie et al., p. 26).

The North, and the Northeast in particular, are, as Niven (2023) says, "defined by ... an enduring marginality from an imperial civilisation overwhelmingly centred on London" (p. 282). He suggests that there is no point in waiting for a great reversal of power – that the only way to respond to a national culture where politics, journalism, literary publishing, business, finance, education and the arts, are all biased toward London and the Southeast, is to focus on small, achievable ways of resisting the status quo and its arguably fixed regional inequalities (Niven, 2023).

Our aim is not to challenge the existence of the London-based fashion industry, but to encourage a localised and supportive version of it. We see a future in rebuilding our creative communities with a focus on degrowth. As Hickel (2021) describes it, degrowth stands for a rebalancing of income and resources, a reduction of inequality, decolonisation, of both lands and peoples – about reciprocity and care, centred around human flourishing and ecological stability, rather than the constant accumulation of capital. A decentralised form of fashion can focus on the positive impact of fashion, and the effect it can have on our communities.

Niessen (2022) expands on degrowth with "de-fashion", a term coined by the activist group Fashion Act Now, calling for a paradigm shift in the fashion industry that puts people, their lives and the earth first. Mazzarella and Black (2023) outline ways fashion activism can inspire positive socioeconomic change and co-design meaningful social innovations in local communities. They demonstrate how a "quiet" form of activism can be used to co-design meaningful social innovations within the local community and demonstrate how fashion can contribute to better living. The rise of repair cafés (Jobe, 2024) demonstrates how opportunities exist to engage communities in responsible fashion practice and create meaningful engagement amongst their participants. Moalem and Mosgaard (2021) discuss how repair cafés function as 'change agents' that can influence mindsets and acts spanning urban planning to pedagogical aspects.

The role of the university in bringing about positive social interactions has been explored by Fassi et al. (2019) through the role of university campuses, social innovation through storytelling and models for sustainability. Social equity is a critical element of university strategies at Teeside (Teeside University, 2024) and Northumbria (Northumbria University, 2024) universities. The latter is investing in the Centre for Health and Social Equity (CHASE) after being awarded £5.8 million by the Office for Students. CHASE aims to develop and harness the university's research, education and knowledge exchange expertise to help meet the health and social needs of multiple stakeholders and communities in the city, region and beyond.

We hope that decentralisation can bring about a more responsible engagement with fashion through accessible, inventive and approachable modes of engagement. Wilska (2017) suggests that to make the "transition into more sustainable lifestyles, [we need a] better understanding of young people's potential for change [through] more innovative research methods, such as participatory practices and analyses of youth-led innovations and initiatives" (p. 316). Von Busch and Bjereld (2016) suggest that fashion is "used to sort and compartmentalise the social world, … create[ing] genuine social and personal consequences" (p. 90). Our approach to encouraging a more responsible approach to fashion will **"**reflect and reinforce inclusion", negating the typically held views of "superiority/inferiority, normality/abnormality and desirability/undesirability" (Von Busch & Bjereld, 2016, p. 93).

Methodology

The research projects discussed in this article used a variety of methods and processes. The first phase of the project was undertaken by one of the authors, working on behalf of the British Fashion Council (BFC) whilst on secondment from University of the Arts (UAL), and supported by students from the institution as a filmmaker and report writer. Questionnaires, desk research, roundtable discussions and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 establishments to identify the challenges and barriers to engaging with a more pluralistic fashion education in Newcastle and the Northeast region of England. The participants were invited to discuss how best to bring about opportunities, support change within the region and share best practices about current initiatives. The team visited and consulted with schools, universities, and business organisations, including Newcastle College, Northumbria University, Teesside University, the Northeast Local Enterprise Partnership and This Is Creative Enterprise. They talked to locally based brands: Barbour, Fenwick, END, Slacks Radio, UKFT and Launchpad. A report was delivered to the BFC and the author's home institution to share insights and next steps, and it was also shared with the study participants.

The activities described in the case studies took place after the initial scoping study and were all part of ongoing teaching and learning/outreach/participatory design projects. Qualitative data was gathered from the participants in all the case studies, in accordance with ethical review procedures at each institution. The data collection methods depended on each project's size and scale. Due to this article's scope and the nature of the projects, quantitative data is not used here, but qualitative comments from participants are used to support the case studies.

The approaches used in the case studies included design activism – defined by Fuad-Luke (2009) as "design thinking, imagination and practice applied knowingly or unknowingly to create a counter-narrative aimed at generating and balancing positive social, institutional, environmental and economic change" (p. 27). Further details of the methods used are outlined in the respective case studies.

Northeast Project: Diversifying the creative industry

Our collaboration began with a scoping exercise supported by the British Fashion Council (BFC), initiated by their Lead on Educational and Resource Development for Diversity and Inclusion. The Northeast Project was a research initiative looking at the Northeast and its surrounding areas to diversify fashion education and aspirations for the arts outside London. The BFC is a not-for-profit organisation that supports the interests of the British fashion industry through the collective sharing of knowledge, resources and experiences (British Fashion Council, n.d.). It has also set up the Institute of Positive Fashion, with a 10-year strategy to enable the industry to reduce climate and societal impact in line with UN goals.

Working with schools, academics, and organisations around the Northeast of England, the project aimed to explore regional initiatives and support the creation of more –to enable young creatives to have stable careers in fashion and the arts across the UK. The project focused on how the fashion industry can be diversified beyond London and into surrounding areas in the UK, beginning with the Northeast of England. This area was chosen as it has experienced heightened deprivation. The Northeast has a rich manufacturing heritage and is known for technical textile production. However, this represents only 2% of fashion clusters in the UK, compared to 44% in London (UKFT; Ellams et al., 2023). GDP per person in the North East in 2022 was 18% below England (excluding London), and this gap has increased since the recession in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic (North East Evidence Hub, 2024). The project aimed to establish how to reach marginalised communities to broaden and develop current and new creative projects, primarily centred around fashion, to facilitate local industry growth.

The report concluded with key recommendations, including building pipelines between education, industry and grassroots organisations; multi-level educational collaboration, mentoring and professional development; and apprenticeships and placements, funding and developing a creative network.

It was established that many of these initiatives were already in place through HEIs partnering with schools, community groups and industry. As academics based at three HEIs – UAL, Northumbria and Teesside, we were keen to build on the BFC's recommendations and share our knowledge and experience of the region, to establish how this might be transferable to other regions and sectors. The three case studies that follow embody approaches taken at Northumbria and Teesside Universities to share learning and experience through education that supports regional growth, community engagement and a decentralised vision.

Case Study 1: Northumbria and This is Creative Enterprise: Building pathways between schools and universities

Since 2016, the fashion department at Northumbria University and the educational non-profit organisation This is Creative Enterprise (TICE) have partnered to address the obstacles and uncertainties young people face when considering pursuing fashion as an educational pathway. Our aim is to support young people with fair access and equal opportunities in the fashion industry and, more broadly, the creative sector.

Northumbria University is in Newcastle upon Tyne in the Northeast of England. Around 40% of Northumbria students are from traditionally low-participation backgrounds, with many being first in their family to attend university, 55% are from the local area, and 63% stay in the region for employment after graduation (Northumbria University, 2023, p. 55). Driving social mobility is one of three pillars of the *University Strategy 2030* (Northumbria University, 2024), with significant investment placed in creating the Centre for Health and Social Equity (CHASE) on campus to support research and teaching in this area.

The fashion department at Northumbria was established in 1955 and is internationally recognised for innovative and hands-on 'industry-ready' graduates. Our practice-based students work with industrially qualified technicians and pattern cutters, many of whom trained at the Dewhirst factory in Stockton-upon-Tees, suppliers to Marks and Spencer. This rich history and skills base is one of our USPs – employers seek our graduates because they understand technical processes and have a highly skilled ability to make decisions. Our fashion department's commitment and contribution to the local community was evidenced

through the pandemic when technical support staff and academics came together to manufacture thousands of clinical gowns for NHS workers treating Covid-19 patients.

Through our roles at Northumbria, we see ourselves as having a significant role in supporting social equity within fashion education, especially given our region's context. We believe we are responsible to our students and the wider community to deliver an education of value to the individual, the region and the industry. The industry must be diversified, not only in terms of race and gender but also social diversity – with a pipeline from grassroots and community groups and schools through HE and into the industry that supports and nurtures creativity amongst marginalised students, not just the privileged.

This is Creative Enterprise programmes and Northumbria
This is Creative Enterprise (TICE) is a national award-winning grassroots organisation that builds a pipeline from secondary education through industry interaction and HE. TICE programmes are designed to support young people in their understanding of the job roles, careers and skills needed for the future of the creative, design and digital sectors. The focus is on developing projects that cater to the needs of young people seeking fashion opportunities in the Northeast – for example exploring how artificial intelligence can elevate the work of designers, artists and other creatives.

TICE projects help students see fashion differently, demonstrating opportunities outside traditional fashion systems and frameworks that might exclude them. Projects are aligned with local businesses and fashion mentors, embedding industry context and demonstrating career opportunities in the region.

Participants are also given insight into the broader job opportunities within fashion and the creative industries and how this can be supported through further and higher education, showing students and their parents the value of pursuing a career in the creative industries. Masterclasses are provided by fashion academic and technical support staff to develop project work and bring participants into the university.

Image 1: TICE/Northumbria masterclass February 2024. Photo credit: G. Cantrell.

Teachers' continuing professional development day
Feedback from and unstructured interviews with the teachers attending the university masterclasses led to the observation that teachers themselves would welcome industry knowledge and development. Therefore, a teacher continuing professional development day was established to share insights from local industry professionals, who spoke about emerging trends in their sectors and the skills gaps that they believed would need to be addressed in future employees. The teachers could view example applicant portfolios and speak with staff about what they would look for in applicants. Graduate outcomes were also explored to help the teachers advise students and parents of the opportunities available within the creative and design sectors.

Work in progress day
Finally, a work in progress day has been established. Teachers from schools across the Northeast are invited to bring teams of children from Year 9/Key Stage 3 to learn more about the fashion department through the 'Fashion at Northumbria: Work in Progress' exhibition. This is an opportunity to gain an insight into final year undergraduate projects at a formative stage, inviting discourse and participation in the working process, methods of thinking and making. Current students lead the groups and encourage interaction with staff and students. These days have proven to be transformative for some students, many of whom had not entered a university or considered taking up creative subjects beyond GCSE. One teacher commented, "Most of these students have not even been out of Ashington into Newcastle city centre, let alone into a university!" Through interaction with current students, the visitors were able to experience genuine social and personal engagement with fashion as a subject, with some children with special learning needs, such as autism, for the first time considering their future opportunities for creative education.

Case Study 2: Fashion forward: The rise of digital careers in the Tees Valley

Technology has profoundly impacted the fashion landscape, revolutionising how clothes are designed, manufactured, marketed and consumed. COVID-19 hastened fashion's digitalisation and engagement with virtual environments, allowing the fashion industry to reimagine business strategies, emphasising sustainability and digital innovation (Choi, 2022). This study reports on the emerging opportunities in the Tees Valley for digital careers and a project at Teesside University aiming to engage with young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds who could face barriers to entry into HE and the fashion sector. The project was developed with the British Fashion Council's Barriers to Entry programme, an industry-sponsored programme with a long-term plan to create a more diverse and equitable fashion industry.

Exploring fashion's tech revolution and emerging careers
Fashion brands recognise the potential of virtual worlds and computer games as creative and immersive platforms for brand engagement and marketing. Some notable examples include Louis Vuitton's collaboration with Riot Games on the *League of Legends* game, which included a virtual and physical collection. Balenciaga and Nike partnered with Epic Games to release limited edition garments and footwear, enabling players to express their style within the game (Epic Games, n.d.; Nike.com, 2023).

The intersection of fashion and digital technology has created new career avenues, driven by the rise of the metaverse and virtual worlds and the integration of clothing within computer games. The Fabricant, The Dematerialised and DressX are digital fashion houses leading the way in creating digital clothing, giving opportunities for virtual fashion designers to create digital clothing and accessories tailored for avatars in virtual worlds (Marriott, 2020). Digital fashion design allows professionals more flexibility in their

workplace, enabling them to pursue freelance careers and license their creations online. The British Fashion Council in 2021 gave the first-ever Fashion Award for Metaverse Design. The new award acknowledges a digital designer who shows excellence in digital fashion design within the metaverse (Businesswire, 2021), recognising digital designers as professionals in the fashion industry.

These emerging careers underscore the transformative impact of digital technology on the fashion industry, offering diverse opportunities for creative expression and innovation within virtual spaces. Using computer-generated imagery (CGI) digital models for fashion shoots and catwalk presentations is on the rise as an effective means to showcase fashion collections. The rise of digital avatars in the fashion sector and on social media opens the potential for future opportunities for roles such as virtual fashion stylists, who curate digital wardrobes and advise clients on avatar appearance.

Epic Games has partnered with The Fashion Innovation Agency, The Fabricant and Burberry to create a free course exploring the impact of interactive 3D on the fashion sector and careers in fashion and games. This initiative aims to educate students to master interactive 3D tools and use them to address career-oriented challenges, providing practical insight into the fashion industry through hands-on, real-world digital fashion projects (Epic Developer Community, n.d.). As technology for immersive gaming experiences advances, visualising detailed garment styling, construction and fabric movement becomes more crucial, creating opportunities for fashion designers to engage with the gaming industry.

The Tees Valley: a world-leading digital and creative hub

Tees Valley is fast becoming one of the most vibrant digital hubs in the UK, developing a worldwide reputation for creativity, imagination and vision. The Tees Valley hosts businesses in multiple tech sectors, including VR technology, big data, digital marketing, game design, programming and artificial intelligence. The Tees Valley region has actively engaged with creative digital businesses, particularly in the computer games sector, leveraging the expertise and resources of Teesside University to foster growth and innovation through the DigitalCity initiative (DigitalCity, n.d.).

One notable aspect of this engagement is the establishment of collaborative initiatives between Teesside University and local game development companies. Teesside University offers specialised courses in game design and development and related fields, providing a skilled workforce for the digital sector. It has played a pivotal role in supporting start-ups and small businesses in the digital sector through initiatives that include business incubators, accelerators and funding opportunities tailored to the needs of creative digital enterprises. By providing access to mentorship, networking events and resources, the university has helped nurture a vibrant ecosystem of digital innovation in the Tees Valley (Walker, 2021).

The Tees Valley Combined Authority has actively promoted the region as a hub for creative digital industries, leveraging its assets such as affordable office space, supportive infrastructure and access to talent from Teesside University. In 2024, the region will attract £160 million from government funding to invest in its infrastructure, skills and workforce, business support, planning research and innovation (Tees Valley Combined Authority, 2024).

Teesside University hosts Animex, the world's longest-running games and animation festival (Animex, n.d). All the most prominent studios in the world – Disney, Weta, Bethesda, Blizzard and Aardman – have taken part in this festival. Speakers are also invited to give advice to students and review portfolios. For future

events, this platform will help cultivate a network for the BA Fashion programme, fostering opportunities within digital fashion.

Image 2: CLO3D workshop at Teesside University. Photo credit: L. Hugill.

Digital Fashion – opening new markets and opportunities: Teesside University Access and Participation Plan Innovation Fund project

Teesside University has a long-established commitment to supporting individuals from underrepresented groups. Currently, the student population has over 80% of students who would meet at least one of the criteria set out by the Office for Students as underrepresented or with a specified characteristic, and 73% are recruited from the Northeast. Teesside University's Access and Participation Plan (APP) identifies where there are gaps in performance relating to students from particular backgrounds or with particular characteristics and sets out targets and measures to address the identified gaps. The APP innovation fund allocates funds to projects that engage students from underrepresented groups.

This APP project aimed to provide a series of one- and two-day workshops to engage young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds who face barriers to entry into the fashion sector, providing exposure and access to fashion skills and raising awareness of the new market opportunities and careers in the digital sector. Additionally, they demonstrate potential pathways for studying fashion at the HE level and raise awareness of the Tees Valley, rapidly emerging as a vibrant digital hub for businesses.

Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) is a classification system used in the United Kingdom to measure HE participation rates across geographical areas (Office for Students, 2018). Students from Northeast institutions in POLAR4 Q1 and Q2 likely come from communities where fewer young people traditionally pursue HE and may be underrepresented in HEIs. These students may be disadvantaged through limited educational infrastructure, financial constraints and lack of awareness about available opportunities. However, despite lower participation rates, students from the Northeast in POLAR4 Q1 and Q2 come from diverse backgrounds, with the potential to bring unique perspectives, experiences and talents to HEIs and the creative economy.

This project focused on art and design students from Macmillan Academy in years 9 and 12 and diploma students from Middlesbrough College. This influenced some participants to consider creative studies as

they made their GCSE subject choices. Both institutions fall into POLAR4 Q1, indicating that students are less likely to pursue a university education. Students from Teesside University's BA Fashion and BA Computer Games courses were paid as researchers to develop and deliver learning materials for workshops mentored by tutors from their courses. The learning centred around the new fashion landscape and opportunities within digital careers, including practical tasks, where participants created digital 3D fashion concepts using CLO3D on avatars (Image 2) and 3D environments using the UNREAL Engine. In addition, students used the University's motion capture lab, which employed industry-standard technology to translate movement into data for animation.

Project impact and outcomes

Participant surveys evaluated the project and feedback from the institutions. Twenty-five students engaged in the learning process at the two institutions. The students gave positive feedback, with 50% rating their overall experience as excellent, 100% of students indicating that the workshops made them more interested in university study and a career in the creative industries, and 90% of students stating that they would recommend Teesside University to a friend. Only 30% had attended extracurricular activities in art and design, and 88% of the students had turned down opportunities to attend activities in the past due to difficulty in arranging travel or caring responsibilities. The Teesside University students from the BA Computer Games and BA Fashion courses who worked collaboratively on the project gained experience developing and delivering learning and developed a deeper understanding of the fashion and games industry and career opportunities. They also enhanced their research and transferable skills, including communication, presentation, collaboration and organisational abilities. The fashion and computer games tutors worked together on the project and planned further collaboration, including training for fashion and games students on garment construction and fabric drapes. Work was collated and presented to Macmillan Academy on a large canvas (Image 3) to display in the school. The students presented their work to the school in assembly and disseminated their experiences to their peers.

Image 3: Work by year 9 and year 12 students at Macmillan Academy.

The rise of technology and opportunities to develop new markets in virtual environments for the fashion industry presents Teesside University with an opportunity to equip students for emerging careers in digital fashion, promotion and virtual styling. Through the region's games companies in the thriving Tees Valley digital creative hub, the university's fashion programme is poised to establish a robust network. Leveraging

the university's expertise in computer games, students can develop skills vital for the digital fashion landscape.

Case study 3: Chopwell Regeneration Group Repair Hub Project: Northumbria University
This project explored the potential of community-based participatory research to identify, develop and promote innovative approaches to responsible fashion practice. It reflected on the value of experiential learning opportunities for undergraduate students in seeing their learning put into practice in a local community setting and seeing tangible benefits from their input.

The village of Chopwell in the district of Gateshead, Tyne and Wear, has under 10,000 residents. A former mining community, known as "Little Moscow" due to its strong support for the Communist Party (Chopwell Regeneration Group, 2024) it has suffered from poor transport links and unemployment since the loss of this industry. The Chopwell Regeneration Group CIO (CRG) was formed as a grassroots community-led drive to change the lives and life chances of people in the community. Priority activity includes bringing empty properties back into use to serve the community, with a vision to improve health, well-being and prosperity by creating services, facilities and opportunities that meet their needs and improve their lives.

The CRG created a local food shop and café, which is used for community events. The food within this shop is waste collected from local supermarkets and cooked by local residents, with a pay as you feel initiative, alongside a 'pay it forward' option. This space has become a focal point for the community, and due to its success, the CRG managed to secure another local shop in the town.

Through a community consultation and vote, it was decided that the next step for the charity would be to open a clothing and electrical repair and remanufacturing space, which they named The Regeneration Shop. The aim was to support the local community with volunteering, job creation and skills development opportunities. This new venture will bring an empty retail unit back into use and encourage residents in the village and the local area to bring household items (from small electrical goods to clothing) to be repaired by local volunteers. Residents will also be able to get involved in a series of free events to learn how to repair items and develop their skills. The shop will sell repaired and upcycled second-hand goods, contributing to a more sustainable future.

The group contacted the fashion department at Northumbria University to establish whether we could support the initiative and provide advice and skills sharing to the community. The initial steps in this project were practical. The shop needed machinery, and the fashion department was able to donate some unused sewing machines to facilitate upskilling residents once the initiative was launched.

The Regeneration Shop launch event
It was established that the community would be most interested in learning how to repair and rework preloved clothing and how to use creative styling techniques to learn how to integrate more second-hand items into their wardrobes. A launch event was planned where these skills would be demonstrated along with promoting the initiative to the community and through press activity.

Donations were collected from around the university, with over 120 items donated. Garments ranged from unworn (tagged) Primark clothing to Marni and Nigel Cabourn labels. Around 10% of garments were

damaged in some way and were set aside to be repaired. Another nonprofit community partner, the Caring Hands Community Laundrette, was engaged to wash and dry donated items.

A call for volunteers was put out to fashion students, and 25 signed up from the undergraduate and postgraduate fashion programmes. The students were given free rein over styling and invited to select garments from the rails of donated clothing to create looks for themselves or other students to model.

Students on the BA (Hons) Fashion Communication explore creative styling techniques through a teaching and learning project that uses the independent publication *Display Copy* (2024) as a model. The publication is dedicated to showcasing and elevating vintage and upcycled fashion, aiming to disrupt the perception and consumption of fashion. It is used by staff on the programme to introduce concepts of styling and curation of preloved garments to encourage reflection on circularity and personal style.

During the event, the students took on the following roles: stylist, model, social media representative, repair station, makeup artist, photographers and backstage prep. Working with second-hand clothing required improvisation, and conventions were stretched – coats became skirts, shirts became headwear. Alongside this, the event also encouraged the ordinary – the striped t-shirt and jeans, the simple black dress.

The repair corner was manned by five students, using repair techniques from *bojagi* (South Korean) to *sasiko* (Japanese) to applique. The repairs became culturally rich and told stories about their background and interests. During the event, the community and students held conversations that reflected their shared experiences of garment repair.

Images 4 & 5 – Chopwell Regeneration Shop Launch. Photo credit: G. Cantrell.

Fifteen students walked the catwalk, demonstrating how the preloved clothing could be worn, and a pop-up photography studio captured the outfits created. Garments were sold to raise money for the Chopwell Regeneration Group.

The initiative presented an opportunity to disrupt traditional fashion structures, directly using clothing, styling and repair to build awareness and implement a future scope for jobs within a community centring

around the circular economy. The circular economy relies on three key principles: eliminate waste and pollution, circulate products and materials and regenerate nature (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2022). The grander scale of the circular economy is not fully addressed by The Regeneration Shop, but as a small and localised system, it is able to use these principles to repair (fixing and extending the life of a garment) or remanufacture used garments, taking them out of the waste stream, circulating them back into use and using sales and skills to regenerate their community when doing so. Through this experiential learning platform, the students experienced their value firsthand, seeing the direct significance their skills brought to the project and the impact clothing repair, resale and remanufacture could have on this local community.

Remanufacturing is outlined by Nasr and Thurston (2006, p. 16) as "the process of disassembling, cleaning, inspecting, repairing, replacing, and reassembling the components of a part or product in order to return it to as-new condition" – using old goods to create new goods. Traditionally the remit of remanufacture sits more commonly with industrial manufacturers, one of which is the automobile industry (Stahel, 2019); however, we are seeing increased research into the development of garment remanufacturing (Wetherell et al., 2023). Different types of garment remanufacturing are noted by Niinimäki (2018): invisible remanufacturing (hidden details are added or amended), visible remanufacturing (visible details are added or amended) and design-led remanufacturing, where waste streams are used to design new garments. Chopwell are looking to do the latter by taking unwanted or damaged goods and using local ideas and skills to redesign and rebuild new goods to sell.

Project impact and outcomes

The feedback from the Chopwell Regeneration Group and the Chopwell community has been extremely positive, and money raised through garment sales on the night will help fund training in the repair and remanufacture of clothing. Following on from this project, The Regeneration Shop is looking to explore knowledge exchange, using staff and students to help upskill the community and provide advice around repair and remanufacture. One-off events or workshops could address issues like dementia, accessible fashion, including adapted clothing for people with disabilities, and sessions which are appealing to men (challenging stereotypes of women repairing clothes and men repairing electricals and tools). The next steps for the project include a series of pop-up styling workshops using preloved garments; garment repair workshops to share ideas and skills between students and the community and cataloguing garment "stories" through an exhibition or publication.

From a teaching and learning perspective, the project was evaluated through student questionnaires before and after the event, with 21 respondents. Through qualitative comments, the students fed back that involvement in the event brought them a lot of satisfaction and pleasure to be involved in community-first ideas: "I am interested in how organisations like the one at Chopwell can facilitate second-hand clothing use and upcycling to benefit the local community and the impact this has". The students welcomed the opportunity to gain experience of styling at a live event: "100000% absolutely love it, the challenges that come with it only make the design process more fun". They also welcomed the opportunity to work with preloved garments and to have the opportunity to put their learning into practice: "Second-hand clothing should become an important part of the design process as we need to become more considerate in our practice and learn how to reuse garments"; and reported great satisfaction at seeing their looks appreciated on the catwalk and through discussions with community residents.

Conclusion and recommendations

This article has introduced a collaboration between researchers at three HEIs, stemming from a scoping exercise supported by the British Fashion Council (BFC) exploring regional initiatives to enable young creatives to have stable careers in fashion and the arts. Our collaboration came about through a mutual interest in decentralisation of fashion education in the Northeast and as a result of initiatives we have put in place to address some of the challenges within the region and the sector.

Following the initial scoping exercise outlined in the Northeast Project research, the BFC has developed a strategy to pilot four fashion hubs in London, the Northwest, the North East and Glasgow, bringing together BFC patrons, industry, schools, colleges and HEIs, community groups and the Prince's Trust. The aim is to create a network and guide that demonstrates routes into a career in fashion and operates as a template for other regions. Our intention is to build on these networks and share our knowledge across the HEIs through collaborative research and pedagogical projects that maximise our findings.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of students and graduates who wish to remain in the Northeast, rejecting established pathways to London for education, internships and employment. In the words of one Northumbria student: "Fashion feels like a party to which I will never be invited". We believe we can challenge this belief through collaboration with industry and third-sector partners, supporting alternative routes into learning and broader community engagement.

This article has shown how pathways are being built through schools, industry and HEIs to show students from underrepresented groups the value of pursuing a creative education. It has shown how targeting talent from underrepresented areas through initiatives to enhance access to HE and providing ongoing support can be pivotal in unlocking their potential and fostering social mobility while providing opportunities to support the region's growth. It has demonstrated how teaching and learning projects that combine a reuse/repair approach with community engagement can lead to insights in knowledge exchange and contextualisation of learning.

We acknowledge that our research is in its initial stages and intend to develop a deeper and more robust methodological framework that can be established to underpin our research and provide support to other HEIs, industry and community groups. It has been our intention to highlight where examples of good practice are creating opportunities for a responsible and decentralised approach to fashion education that reflects and supports regional opportunities and the communities that we engage with, to create a responsible and relevant new vision for fashion.

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Kalamkari and Chintz: A post-colonial reassessment of entangled textile histories

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Kalamkari and Chintz: A post-colonial reassessment of entangled textile histories

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Abstract

Traditionally researched craft and textile histories have often been criticised for being uncritical. Research in the field of Indian crafts has been preoccupied with object-led studies of craft techniques. The popular imagination buys into the mythologies depicted and the 'discourse of patronage, kings, empresses, saints and a "golden" age of craft work'. This paper reassesses a similarly uncritical history of the South Indian textile craft Kalamkari by foregrounding the artisan's perspective in this craft's narrative. Keystone texts on Kalamkari and chintz are read critically, using a postcolonial lens to reject the academic tradition of normalising colonial encroachments on traditional knowledge and underrepresenting the artisan's capacity for artistry and creativity. While artisans have been denied learning resources and systemically excluded from all forms of discursive place-making in cultural studies, such as in literature, galleries, museums and academia, findings from this critical reading are integrated with interview responses from contemporary Kalamkari artisans. This enables the exploration of their material and cultural mediations and attitudes towards community, labour, creativity and ownership. By studying the impact of coloniality on Indian craft and attempting to bridge the gap between the theory and practice of Kalamkari, this paper hopes to encourage more craft narratives that are critical of craft's place as a communal, creative practice and industry within today's global capitalist fashion system.

Keywords: Chintz, Kalamkari, Craft, Artisan, Colonialism, Coloniality, Decolonisation

Introduction

The diversity of textile crafts in India has been internationally acclaimed for centuries, and Indian artisans have 'enjoyed pre-eminence' since before the mediaeval era (Irwin & Brett, 1970). One such craft is a block printing craft known as Kalamkari, which uses complicated and layered natural dyeing techniques to decorate fabrics. It has been practised since the early mediaeval era on the southeast Indian Coromandel coast. Initially, it was made to aid religious and mythological storytelling (see Image 1) (Von Wyss-Giacosa, 2018, p. 35). Cloth made on the Coromandel coast was also exported to various Southeast Asian courts (Guy, 2013, p. 13; Guy, 2016) in the early mediaeval period. Islamic art principles later heavily influenced this craft through patronage from the Mughal courts of mediaeval India (see Image 2) (Divakala & Muthian, 2017, p. 82). By the mid-17th and early 18th centuries, painted cotton from West India and the Coromandel coast, including chintz, was being exported to Europe and its various colonies.

Chintz is a textile pattern broadly referring to colourful florals painted or printed on lightly coloured cotton or linen fabric. The hybrid floral and faunal motifs characteristic of chintz were created on the Coromandel coast to suit European sensibilities (see Image 3). Chintz's many declines and resurgences in this period have been studied in traditional textile histories to track its aesthetic evolution, implications for the cotton trade and influence on

precolonial and colonial manufacturing policies (Crill, 2008; Guy, 2013; Irwin & Brett, 1970). This has created heavy discursive associations of chintz being an 'English floral' in contemporary imagination and design practice.

On the other hand, the indigenous Indian Kalamkari has been studied by Indian scholars as an ancient craft tradition or an entirely modern craft practice, weakening any discursive connections between its history and present. These written works, heavily influenced by Eurocentric and modernist methodologies, display a preoccupation with newness in design (Metcalf, 2007, p. 14). In the case of craft literature, this informs the notion that artisans are asynchronous with modernity (DeNicola and Wilkinson-Weber, 2016, p. 83). The bodily engagement and social conditions of craft-making are also under-researched in traditional craft literature.

Drawing upon postcolonial theory and contemporary craft research, this paper explores emic perspectives on how crafts and their histories can be understood, researched and preserved, which Western paradigms have not considered thus far. By doing so, this paper '... is not an *alternative* account of this already historicised world, but a deliberate attempt to pulverise the matrix of history, to disavow what was historicised by making repressed potentialities present again ...' (Azoulay, 2019, p. 207).

Image 1: Kalamkari hanging in the didactic Hindu idiom, c. late-19th to early-20th century. © The Trustees of the British Museum. (Trustees of the British Museum, n.d.).

Image 2: Kalamkari Cover, c. 1802-1803 under the Islamic idiom. (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d., a).

Image 3: Chintz Hanging, c. first quarter of the 18th century. (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d., b).

Literature review

This research focuses on chintz, a colonial commodity with roots in the Indian Kalamkari craft tradition. Seminal texts in chintz scholarship, such as Irwin and Brett's *Origins of Chintz* (1970) and Chishti, Jain and Singh's *Tradition and Beyond: Handcrafted Indian Textiles* (2000), among others, provide valuable historical context to chintz's manufacture. However, as with other unpolitical craft histories, these texts do not thoroughly critique colonialism's impact on artisans and craft production. They fail to account for 'views "from below"' (Mignolo, 2002, as cited in Sengupta, 2019, p. 13). This research challenges these limitations of traditionally narrated craft histories and highlights the power hierarchies embedded in them by engaging with postcolonial theory.

Inspired by postcolonial theory from authors like Azoulay, Spivak and Bhabha, this paper argues against the marginalisation of the artisan's voice and knowledge in written craft histories. In considering other traditional knowledge in craft practice, Spivak's notion of subjugated knowledge and Bhabha's theory of stereotypes and mimicry highlight the positions from which these suppressed subjectivities may be articulated. Azoulay's methodology empowered me to reject existing writings' colonial and imperial rhetoric, which depended on imperial tools to capture, measure, categorise and periodise the world.

Contemporary and interdisciplinary research into chintz and Kalamkari offers more critical insights into the nature of chintz manufacture and trade before and during India's colonisation by the British. Some key works that informed this paper were Rajarshi Sengupta's (2019) research into and methodologies for uncovering artisanal agency on the ancient Coromandel coast and Tirthankar Roy's (2021) investigation into the handloom industry in colonial India. Other 21st-century enquiries into the nature of craftwork, such as works by Mike Press (2008) and Richard Sennett (2008), offer valuable perspectives on the embodied knowledge and cognitive aspects of craftwork. However, the postmodern positioning of these works and their emphasis on studying the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the craft sector are not directly relevant to this paper.

This paper thus uses interdisciplinary scholarship to challenge the reductionist tendencies of Eurocentric literature, especially regarding artisans from the global South. In doing so, I hope to explore:

a. How might the historical record of Kalamkari have changed if its makers had been considered subjects of knowledge in fashion-craft-textile literature?
b. How have these shifted subject statuses impacted the conservation and perpetuation of craft in postcolonial contexts?

Methodology

This research explored the implications of postcolonial theory for craft, textile and fashion literature and how these works treat producers and cultural 'others' in the fashion system. Since postcolonial theory emphasises specificity in knowledge production (Ashcroft et al., 1989; Reiter, 2018; Said, 1978), my positionality as a Telugu-speaking South Indian woman with experience of working with Kalamkari artisans is relevant. The postcolonial lens as a cultural researcher further contextualised my experiential knowledge as a designer. Here, 'postcolonial' is used as a 'space-clearing gesture' (Appiah, 1992, pp. 240-241), and can be used to revisit and re-present cultural exchange during colonisation.

Qualitative research tools like critical discourse analysis were used to explore the power hierarchies inscribed in seminal texts about chintz and Kalamkari. As Jörgensen and Phillips describe in *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (2002), texts are produced and consumed through discursive practices. Discourse analysis as a methodology helps explore how these texts enable the 'constitution of the social world including social identities and social relations' (Jörgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 61). The impact of fashion-craft-textile literature on the space occupied by artisans and their 'subjugated knowledge' (Spivak, 1993, p. 76) in the contemporary fashion system is explored in this paper.

To emphasise artisanal subjectivity, findings from secondary research were contextualised with interviews conducted with contemporary Kalamkari artisans. Although academic contexts like colonialism and coloniality

seemed irrelevant or alien to the artisans interviewed, questions were framed in accessible ways to generate descriptive answers. These focused on 'Western' or academic logic of categorisation, archiving and ascribing intellectual ownership, as well as Eurocentric ways of researching design cognition and material sensitivity in the existing literature.

Three artisans were interviewed - a block printer, a hand painter and one block maker - each with decades of experience in Kalamkari. They are each referred to by their first name, followed by the Telugu honorific *Gaaru*, which precedes emic craft literature (Divakala & Muthian, 2017; Sengupta, 2019). I contacted one block printer through a professional and personal connection, and he referred my other participants. The interviews were conducted in Telugu. I translated and transcribed exact quotes and noted down general discussions and emergent themes during the interview. These responses were encoded and thematically analysed within the methodological framework and postcolonial theories underpinning this paper. The difference in class and social positions between the researcher and artisans was mediated by familiarity with one of the artisans, the craft clusters and knowing the Telugu language and culture to produce valid and reliable knowledge.

Reviewing Kalamkari with artisanal subjectivity

Discourses about crafts and artisans have frequently upheld colonial epistemic frameworks that appropriated the artisan's body, labour, knowledge and creative production. The historiography of these texts has also enforced a form of 'epistemic violence' (Spivak, 1993, p. 82) on craft communities of previously colonised countries. The violence of these texts lies in the fact that they create a perspective of artisans being 'unmodern' (DeNicola and Wilkinson-Weber, 2016, p. 83) and 'simple, weak, traditional and rural' (Roy, 2021, p. 157), subjugating their knowledge systems and ruling entire communities' ways as unfit in the modern world. On the other hand, artisans do not speak of craft and tradition self-consciously (DeNicola and Wilkinson-Weber, 2016, p. 90). Sengupta identifies through reading Irwin and Brett (1970) that 'there are archival records on the techniques of cotton painting and dyeing from the early modern period; however, a critical assessment of the textile makers' involvement in this history is lacking.' (2019, p. 4). Quoting archaeologist Uzma Rizvi, Sengupta explains that the artisan's subjectivity is inscribed in their psycho-somatic engagement with their craft (Rizvi, 2015, cited in Sengupta, 2019, p. 36).

This section textualises the artisan's material and cultural engagements while practising Kalamkari and re-visions the history of Kalamkari by attempting to bridge the gap between theory and practice. As Azoulay says, quoting Arendt, these engagements or activities can be considered 'an archive of the *vita activa*' (Arendt, 1958, cited in Azoulay, 2019, p. 218). By foregrounding these engagements, this section revises part of the history of this craft by looking beyond the imperial logic of its historiography.

Material mediation in Kalamkari and chintz

In existing written histories, the distinction between painted and printed cotton is seen as 'an essential and radical one - mainly to design students' (Irwin & Brett, 1970, p.7). Block-printed chintzes were considered less artistic or of lower quality in these works. However, the co-production of both on the Coromandel coast, both historically and today, suggests that there was no fundamental ideological or geographical segregation of craft communities who hand painted and hand block printed their textiles. While contemporary artisans interviewed for this paper saw that hand-painting allows for more creativity, employs more artisans per piece and is a more intentional, effective process, block printing allows for more repeatability of designs, which is helpful for bulk production.

However, they emphasised the use of natural dyes over aniline and chemical dyes as central to the Kalamkari process and identity. Hence, if an ideological split in Kalamkari textile-making were dictated from an artisanal subject position, it would more likely be between natural and chemical dyes.

Material sensitivity during the block printing process is another under-textualised aspect in written works. They all commend the skilled craftsmanship required to execute fine line work in even block-printed chintzes popular in the 1800s. However, these written works do not cover how this fineness is achieved or discuss artisanal sensitivity to material and embodied knowledge. To explain how outline, filling and background blocks are printed, Nagendra Gaaru elucidated the block printer's technique of using multiple layers of cloth in the dye tray to control how much dye the block takes up. Lesser amounts of dye are needed to print minute details, meaning more layers of cloth are used in the dye tray to intercept excess dye and vice versa. While the act of block printing can seem hypnotically repetitive, the printer, in fact, constantly displays *kramasiksha* or discipline while printing. This discipline is needed to engage with and mediate materials in the craft process. While the results of this labour, block print designs, have been widely imitated since the Great Exhibition of 1886 (Dewan, 2019), this strenuous and disciplined bodily engagement in crafts was not profoundly studied in craft scholarship until recently. Sennet, in his book *The Craftsman* (2008), makes a compelling case for the deep and complicated relationship between physical movements of the body and the hand and the cognitive processes that drive and control it, as well as the reciprocity between body and mind, which creates successful artisanal decisions (Sennett, 2008, p. 152).

Cultural mediations and artisanal decision-making

In the lead-up to the popularity of chintz, artisans were producing textiles in religious contexts for Hindus and Muslims, as well as for trade with non-European markets. Despite this demonstrable willingness to accept newness in Kalamkari practice, leading to the popularisation of the anglicised chintz, traditional scholarship persists in believing that crafts are reluctant to change. This may be explained through Bhabha's theorisation of a 'stereotype'. In Bhabha's postcolonial theory, stereotypes are a 'discursive strategy' (2004, p. 94) that seek to manage the image of the cultural other. To do so, they 'exaggerate difference of the other, while nevertheless attempting to produce them as a stable, fully knowable object' (Hook, 2005, p. 1). Bhabha informs us of the anxious repetition of the stereotype to achieve stability or 'fixity' (Bhabha, 2004, p. 94). In the fashion industry and scholarship, artisans are considered cultural 'others', and this ideological position given to them is maintained through the anxious repetition of the rhetoric of the '"unmodern" maker' always in need of protection, patronage and charity (DeNicola and Wilkinson-Weber, 2016, pp. 82-84). The interdependent relationship between them and designers 'has to be continually dismissed as insignificant and pushed into invisibility' to ensure 'value creation, but also for reproduction of firm hierarchy' (Kuldova, 2016, p. 76).

By activating stereotypical narrative tropes in speaking of artisans, historical and contemporary artisans' ability to mimic European taste successfully enough to create the globally popular chintz is erased and buried in existing written literature (Irwin & Brett, 1970). 'Mimic' here is used in Bhabha's sense of the word as a 'sign of double articulation' (Bhabha, 2004, p. 122), wherein painting techniques and line qualities were informed by South Indian and Mughal artistic traditions to create motifs for a European market. Following Sengupta's (2019) methodology, contemporary attitudes towards cultural newness can be understood and projected onto the past. Therefore, the artisans were asked how they approach 'new' designs that Kalamkari has not yet adopted. Gangadhar Gaaru, an eminent Kalamkari block maker, echoed all the artisans' sentiments on experimentation and called it his *dharmam* to attempt an adaptation, no matter how unfamiliar the source material may be.

Dharmam translates to a religious or moral duty. Mediating unfamiliar visual cultures by adapting new motifs is not as simple as drawing and making new blocks. It involves a series of conversations between the artisans, reference drawings, wood blocks, tools and clients. Artisans must also consider the scale and proportions of the motif, as well as the colours to be used. These attitudes and strategies to mediate unfamiliarity were essential in negotiating between cultures, media and multifaceted material processes to produce chintz, the first global textile trend (Guy, 2013, p. 27). Though chintz is considered an English textile, Kalamkari artisan Bhaskar Gaaru commented, "The British did not create anything. We already knew about natural dyes and got our ideas for designs from our temples. If anyone ever taught us anything, the Mughals started block printing in Machilipatnam. The British only came and said, 'These designs are nice; can you print them on our cloth?'"

Artisanship and enterprise

The discursive erasure of innovation and skill in the crafts and of enterprising, problem-solving artisans creates an oversimplified position for crafts in the fight against industrialisation and capitalism (DeNicola and Wilkinson-Weber, 2016; Press, 2008). As Metcalf (2007) observes, 'Most writing in the field [of craft] borrows ideas uncritically from painting and sculpture, without questioning how appropriate they are to a craft object' (p. 7). This 'paucity of thinking and writing on craft has led to a vacuum of both debate and standards' (Metcalf, 2007, p. 7). Furthermore, the nascent craft industry of post-independence India was governed by a protectionist ideology which originated in the nationalist fight against the supposed decline of crafts due to colonialism and foreign trade (Roy, 2021; Tarlo, 1996). In contemporary India, this has massively impaired historical and contemporary artisans' image and ability to be a community-based and enterprising capitalist.

Roy introduces the concept of an 'artisan-capitalist' (Roy, 2021) who is defined by their '... rootedness in textiles, preference for the non-corporate organisation, reliance on informal finance, and reliance on the community in making contracts and arranging collaborations' (p. 17). The artisan possesses tacit knowledge, which 'holds the key to success' (Press, 2008, p. 263) in craft practice in pre- and post-industrial contexts. For instance, the commercial success of chintz was only brought on by artisans responding to countless 'pattern books, designs, musters and sample cloths' (Guy, 2013, p. 23). As such, alternative reasons for the 'sameness' of chintzes across centuries, due to which authors like Irwin and Brett (1970) perceived artisans as lacking innovation, have not been adequately explored. From the perspective of an artisan entrepreneur, this may have been a function of the enormous order quantities and extended lead times of the global chintz trade rather than a shortcoming of the maker's creative faculties. Considering that these chintzes travelled long distances over months, and imagery was not commonly created or widely circulated, it is possible that artisans had to curb creative spontaneity and create chintz patterns that were predictable, with only minute innovations, to ensure that their clients were satisfied with the type and quality of fabrics they received from India.

Rather than approaching artisanship through rigid and politicised ideologies, emphasising their problem-solving and entrepreneurial tendencies can prompt a deeper study into the areas of progression available to artisans. Avenues to empower self-employment, create democratic access to contemporary resources and technology and engage in a fulfilling manner with their crafts and communities can also be developed through such study.

Ownership and craft communities

Attitudes towards creative ownership also differ between Western theory and praxis and Kalamkari practice in South India. The ability and practice of signing an artwork to credit the piece back to the artist is a given in the Eurocentric artistic sphere, but community-based artisans seldom sign their work. In the context of extant

chintzes, there are scholarly preoccupations with certain marks left on chintzes, including stamps, seals and other inscriptions (Irwin & Brett, 1970, p. 11-12), which might signify the maker's identity. However, there is no definitive evidence regarding who left these marks, why or if these were even meant to signify individual artistic ownership (Irwin & Brett, 1970).

However, interviews with contemporary artisans signify that these practitioners do not share this preoccupation. Artisans interviewed for this paper did not see a need to sign their works. When asked about creative ownership, owning their artworks readably seemed too alien a worldview even to be a comprehensible question. Considering the collaborative nature of the work, involving designers, block-makers, dyers and printers, they acknowledged that there would be no fair way to credit everyone and did not feel any resentment or other negative feelings towards their artworks not being traceable directly back to them. They believed credit and further opportunities would accrue if the broader market liked their work.

Additionally, artisans who supply Kalamkari to other businesses that make it into apparel or home furnishings are more restricted from leaving any ownership trace. Signing the product itself would damage it in the eyes of buyers, who want pristine fabrics that they may put their own brand's labels on. The lack of naming enables commodification and circulation of crafts as goods, unlike singular artworks defined by the artist's name.

This section has highlighted edits, omissions and revisions that could be made to the written histories of Kalamkari, which centre on artisans as subjects in craft research instead of perpetually appropriating their productions. Discussing alternative or subjugated forms of material, cultural and entrepreneurial engagements also textualises their 'nonacademic' and 'nonprofessional' (Azoulay, 2019, p. 231) experiences as viable sources of knowledge in postcolonial craft literature.

Re-entering the preservation of craft history

This section explores how broader craft histories can be more authentically preserved in a postcolonial context, furthering the previous section's discussion of artisanal subjectivity in craft research. This involves considering more suitable ways of preserving craft history and recommending highlighting artisanal subjectivity in the preservation and communication of craft histories.

Empowering learning

Somatic and material involvement in craft suggests that in addition to the textualisation and archiving that craft scholars have relied on so far, the perpetual practice of craft or embodied preservation may be a pivotal way to preserve and propagate traditional knowledge (Sengupta, 2019, p. 6). As intangible cultural assets, the craft can be 'discovered and kept alive … not by academic study, but by being 'lived' and moulded through use' (Patankar, 1984, as cited in Ashcroft et al., 1989, p. 119). Considering the multitudes of aesthetically and functionally similar crafts that have been localised and practised in various regions in India, educator Maulshree Sinha proposed 'artisan forums' as a tool for inter-communal knowledge exchange. Based on her observation of the technical improvements resulting from interactions between potters from distinct craft cultures in Kutch (Gujarat) and Delhi, Sinha further ideated these forums by drawing upon Etienne Wenger's *Communities of Practice* (1999). Citing Wenger, Sinha posits that inter-communal interactions could enable artisans with comparable histories and techniques to come together and create solutions for each other's needs (Sinha, 2019, p. 1).

My research shows that knowledge has already been lost from individual artisans and communities, which may be regained through interactive knowledge exchange between craft communities. For instance, Irwin and Brett (1970, p. 11) mention the gilding of chintz as a value-adding technique in the late 18th and 19th centuries. While this technique has since disappeared from chintz and Kalamkari practice, one of my interviewees mentioned an interaction with an artisan from Jaipur, from whom he learned that West Indian artisans could print with gold by using a special gum on fabric. In today's craft practice, this process could refer to gold-leaf printing or *khari* printing, which is still prevalent in West India. A more sustained and purposeful interaction between West and South Indian artisans who practise these distinct crafts could help both communities recreate a technique and visual aesthetic that is considered lost.

So far in contemporary history, these interactions have been brokered by administrative or institutional actors like state governments, ministries and design institutions. Sinha (2019) urges the creation of collaborative platforms where artisans may interact with each other without the 'interpretive and selective lens of organisations' (p. 10). Sinha also hypothesises that digital technology can be leveraged to enable these cross-cultural exchanges without intermediaries. Digital technology also presents opportunities to preserve and build upon traditional techniques, provided it is applied thoughtfully. In his interview, Bhaskar Gaaru also concurred that technology may connect artisans and partially retrieve lost Kalamkari-making processes. He said, "I cannot learn what was taught hundreds of years ago, but maybe I can copy it with technology. If I could still use natural dyes in that process, I would still feel like this is Kalamkari, even if I made it with the help of technology."

Craft knowledge can be preserved through research and literature, but it must also be perpetuated through embodied practice by artisans with democratic access to contemporary resources. This preservation mode also maintains artisanal subjectivity by putting artisans at the forefront of instituting artisanal knowledge exchange.

Textile archives and Sampada

In addition to emphasising the role of the artisan in the preservation and perpetuation of artisanal knowledge, it is also vital to reconsider how traditional approaches to the preservation and communication of history, such as by archives and museums, value, capture and communicate craft histories. Proposing a universal systemic overhaul of the archival practices and processes goes against my postcolonial position by being prescriptive. However, in this section, I would like to expand on how artisans archive their histories. In doing so, I will also highlight some critical distinctions in how traditional academic archives, galleries and museums are conceived and realised by institutions, as opposed to the creation and use of a practitioner's or artisan's archive.

The archiving and exhibition of Indian handicrafts have received scholarly attention since at least the mid-20th century (Sengupta, 2019). As Sengupta (2019, p. 25) highlights, landmark exhibitions like the *Textiles and Ornamental Art from India* exhibition in New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the establishment of museums like the Calico Museum of Textiles in textile hubs like Ahmedabad have made information about Indian crafts available to researchers and the public. The wealthiest and most prestigious archives based in the West are often alienated from artisans and practitioners of the global South and do not consider artisanal subjectivity in their archiving or exhibiting procedures.

In stark contrast is the archive that Kalamkari makers maintain for themselves. For the block print Kalamkari artisans I interviewed, the physical archival space is no more than scores of blocks stored along the walls in their work shed, each a composite of a larger design. This archival space's history of the craft's aesthetics is preserved

as decades-old blocks. However, only one or two artisans in the workshop know the specific layout of block storage, where allover trellis-like patterns, borders or standalone *butti* motifs are present. Artisans refresh their memory of this crowded, confusing space by constantly engaging with the block store to retrieve blocks for use or cleaning them to prevent termite infestations. In other words, the knowledge from this space can only be accessed when the archive is activated through an artisan's mind and body. However, the primary use of these blocks is textile printing, not meaning construction, and thus, none of the artisans interviewed considered exerting a 'logic' on this space to make it more commonly 'readable'.

One of the most interesting materialised artisan archives is what Gangadhar Gaaru calls his *sampada* in his interviews for Sengupta's (2019, p. 118) doctoral research and my study in this paper. *Sampada* is a Telugu word for material wealth. In this context, *sampada* is the name Gangadhar Gaaru gave to a book of collected prints he and his brother created over the last 40 years. As opposed to a material archive in an academic sense, this *sampada* serves the practical purpose of allowing printers in Gangadhar Gaaru's workshop to access designs from the past, depending on the needs of a contemporary project. It also immortalises historical patterns, even after wooden blocks decay. Beyond this, Gangadhar Gaaru sees his *sampada* as fulfilling a more significant purpose like academic archives - 'I work with the belief and conviction that handcrafts need to survive. We store a *sampada* because we believe these are good works, and we preserve these designs and details for future generations. If anyone wants to access it, they may.'

However, a critical difference between academic and artisanal archives, besides retrieving meaning from artefacts, is the question of ownership or whose voice controls the telling of this craft's history. Gangadhar Gaaru explained that he once turned down an offer from an (undisclosed) museum in Hyderabad that asked for his pattern archive to be displayed within their museum. Contrary to established research which talks about the clannishness of craft communities, his refusal did not stem from wanting to protect or gatekeep the craft from outsiders - indeed, as he said, 'How would people learn about our craft and work if we just keep our pieces with ourselves?' Instead, it was the fact that his archive would be stored behind the museum's closed doors, and his name would be associated with it only as a footnote in a more extensive exhibition. His *sampada* would be perceived as the museum's property without benefitting him or his community. From the artisan's perspective, the purpose of museums may not be primary education but the accumulation and gatekeeping of cultural wealth. Expanding upon which circumstances he *would* consider for collaborating with a museum, Gangadhar Gaaru mentioned that he would welcome the opportunity to travel with his *sampada* to this museum and conduct participative learning sessions himself. His apprehension with the extractive tendencies of museums and institutional amnesia in supporting living craft cultures is not unfounded or isolated. It may be mitigated by treating artisans as 'an archive of the *vita activa*' (Azoulay, 2019, p. 218) and creating academic, archival and curatorial cultures that amplify maker communities' perspectives. By amplifying these subjugated and previously excluded voices, these cultural practices and institutions can exit the coloniality of their contexts and change the discursive conditions of lesser-known crafts like Kalamkari.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for a re-visioning of the history of Kalamkari, which foregrounds the agency and knowledge of Kalamkari artisans. By studying how contemporary artisans practise their craft and their stances on colonialism, creativity, ownership and preservation of crafts, it aims to create space and amplify the voices of artisans in the evolving historical record of Kalamkari and craft. A critical analysis of seminal texts (Irwin & Brett, 1970) informed

by postcolonial theory has exposed the limitations of traditional scholarship on chintz and Kalamkari, which often uncritically propagate Eurocentric methodologies and orientalist assumptions.

Contemporary secondary research (DeNicola and Wilkinson-Weber, 2016; Divakala & Muthian, 2017; Roy, 2021; Sengupta, 2019) and interviews with artisans highlight the need for fashion-craft-textile literature to move beyond the discursive erasure of the creativity and enterprising nature of artisans in written histories. Artisans' decisions to mediate between materials and cultures and the artisan's role in the success of a design process can represent the place artisans correctly hold in the global fashion, craft and textile industries. Understanding the history and evolution of a craft from its maker's perspective also helps scholars see artisans as problem-solving, creative entrepreneurs instead of perpetual victims in a capitalist market. This shift in the perception of artisans in popular discourse may also catalyse how the fashion and textile industries think of, use and value their cultures, people, vendors, supply chains and products. Ideas of collaborative ownership from community-based artisans can also help the more significant fashion and textile industries rethink the unstable boundaries between copying, mimicking, learning and inspiration in the contemporary design industry. A more robust theorisation of collaborative production and ownership is also needed to create policies to safeguard community-based artisans' cultural, social, and economic interests from appropriation by an industry where intellectual property is otherwise gatekept religiously.

By considering how traditional cultural studies captured, recorded and preserved information about chintz and Kalamkari and their makers, this paper also highlights the oriental, colonial positions we must 'exit' (Azoulay, 2019, p. 211) to ensure the authentic representation and preservation of intangible heritage through craft. I have attempted this by highlighting how the writers of culture maintain differential archives – curators, researchers and academics – and the sources of that culture – the artisans themselves. This is intended to highlight the areas in cultural studies and praxis where artisanal voices can be amplified.

To maintain the position of postcolonial research, this paper has focused on only a portion of *one* craft's history, precisely its encounter with colonialism and coloniality. In doing so, I explored a few context-heavy ways in which cultural studies can effectively and ethically 're-enter' (Azoulay, 2019, p. 211) their relationships with maker communities in a postcolonial context. Though the recommendations in my research are partial, the encroachments of colonialism and coloniality on traditional knowledge are, in my view, pervasive. More diverse case studies relating to coloniality and craft that reflect different global contexts could add depth to the arguments and suggestions laid out in this paper. This would retrieve new ways of material engagement, cultural mediation and artistic creation and reframe how we, as academics, practitioners and policymakers, think of labour, creativity and belonging in the design industries.

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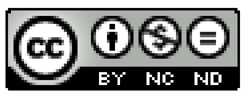

Exploring the design motifs of Wollo Gabi in Ethiopian textiles and design development of women's fashion accessories

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Exploring the design motifs of Wollo Gabi in Ethiopian textiles and design development of women's fashion accessories

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Abstract

Ethiopia, renowned for its rich tradition of craftsmanship, particularly in textiles, boasts a variety of regional styles and fabric types utilised in traditional and everyday attire. This study represented a collaborative effort between two universities, Arizona State University in the United States and Wollo University in Ethiopia, explicitly focusing on Wollo Gabi, an intricately patterned, gauze-like handwoven fabric of symbolic significance. Embarking on this endeavour were four design researchers who have explored Wollo Gabi's historical lineage, production techniques and contemporary applications. Subsequently, our endeavours evolved to encompass the conceptualisation and development of designs intending to demonstrate Gabi's commercial potential in the US market. We employed a practice-based approach working with artisans to integrate diverse perspectives into the design process, fostering a more inclusive design process for product and brand development.

Keywords: Social design, Traditional crafts, Textile design, Gabi textile, Ethiopia

Introduction

Ethiopia is prosperous in various traditional costumes, showcasing diversity of ethnicities. Gümüş Çiftçi and Walker (2021) write that traditional crafts, originating from societal needs and honed over generations, have faced a decline in the wake of technological and scientific progress. Additionally, the rapid evolution of contemporary clothing, furnishings and lifestyle tastes contributes to their disappearance, as craft products are often deemed outdated. As Du Bois (2008) claims, Ethiopia's history is rich with crafts making and crafted objects, which are still prominent in daily use around the country.

Within the many currently practised crafts in Ethiopia, weaving has a significant place. Traditional Ethiopian handweaving and embroidered fabrics represent one of the most essential cultural identities in the country (Adamu & Sitotaw, 2021). According to Puarungroj and Boonsirisumpun (2019), handwoven fabric pattern designs commonly represent the traditions and culture of local communities. The ethnic and cultural diversity of Ethiopia has given rise to many unique and dynamic visual traditions (Ergetew, 2018). Gabi, Netela, Kuta and Gemis are the critical pieces of traditional dresses worn throughout the country. This paper will discuss the Gabi (Image 1), a white cotton gauze-like wrap worn over other garments. Although this type of garment is accepted as indicative of Ethiopian ethnic dress in general, it is specifically associated with the people of the highlands, especially in northern Ethiopia (Itagaki, 2013).

Gabi is woven by hand using looms that are mostly 70–90 cm wide so that both edges of the warp thread are within arm's reach (Temesgen et al., 2018). With its intricate handwoven texture, Gabi has adorned Ethiopian wardrobes for centuries. Its 100% cotton composition makes it eco-friendly, aligning perfectly with the global shift toward sustainable fashion.

Image 1: Traditional Gabi fabric. Photo credit: Hazal Gümüş Çiftçi.

In Ethiopia, there is a notable absence of scientific studies, comprehensive inventories and initiatives concerning the conservation of traditional crafts (e.g. Gabi production). Consequently, practice-based design research addresses pertinent research inquiries for this study, and this paper focuses on the initial design development of women's fashion accessories using Gabi textiles.

This initial investigation into the history and background of Wollo Gabi, how it is used traditionally and how it is developed within the contemporary Ethiopian fashion industry is a collaboration between Ethiopian and US-based designers to further explore the potential of this age-old, beautiful garment's place in the US market primarily and in potentially different markets. Since there have not been many resources about any type of crafts, let alone Wollo Gabi, in Ethiopia, we had very limited resources for the literature review. Therefore, we employed practice-based design research, starting with focus group discussions with artisans, observations, inventory for the meanings of motifs, digitisation of motifs and interviews with designers who use Gabi in their designs, and we designed proposals for women' accessories.

Methodology

The primary issue in craft and design projects lies in the lack of connection between designers, artisans and the surrounding community (Gümüş Çiftçi &Walker, 2021). With this practice-based design research, we explored Wollo Gabi motifs and investigated the design development of contemporary women's accessories using Wollo Gabi fabric by focusing on its cultural significance and motifs. Data were collected through a focus group with local Wollo Gabi handloom artisans and through interviews with designer who use Gabi for their products, complemented by observational fieldwork. Purposive sampling guaranteed a wide variety of perspectives from knowledgeable individuals. Four main categories of Wollo Gabi motifs – Nigus, Monalisa, Mekes and Sindid – are of important social significance, and the authors of this paper have examined them through focus group discussions. We then collected information about contemporary fashion design companies in Ethiopia that specifically use Wollo Gabi in their designs. With this benchmarking, we realised that there is potential for Wollo Gabi to be used in women's accessories.

With a practice-based design approach, we then digitised the Wollo Gabi motifs, created design proposals and manufactured the designs with artisans. This study will inform a series of co-design workshops, and these product samples along with the co-design workshops' outcomes will be promoted in the US market.

Our findings about the Wollo Gabi

The Gabi is a large, heavy, white wrap used by both men and women in Ethiopia to protect themselves from the cold air during night-time and the chilly rainy season. Its dense cotton weave serves as an effective barrier against the chill. It is woven using traditional techniques that have been passed down through generations. The production of Gabi involves several intricate steps, from collecting cotton to the final product. Gabi is a general term for Ethiopian traditional fabric. However, in different regions, Gabi has unique and varied patterns and designs that deeply collaborate with the distinctive cultural practices and societal norms of each community's culture and traditions. Regions such as Oromiya, Sidama, Welayta, Amhara, Siltie and Harary, have distinct fabric designs that express their cultural values (Adamu & Sitotaw, 2021). For instance, the Wollo Gabi, named after the Wollo community, showcases specific motifs and patterns that represent the traditions and heritage of the Wollo community from the Amhara region in northeastern Ethiopia, which was once a centre of power and culture.

The Gabi, a timeless symbol of Ethiopian cultural heritage, is more than just a large, heavy, white wrap. It is a woven tapestry of warmth, comfort and tradition passed down through generations and worn proudly by men and women across the country (Temesgen et al., 2018). The Gabi's weight becomes a source of 'grounding'. Each layer, meticulously woven from locally sourced cotton, speaks of patient hands and generations of knowledge passed down. It is a shield against the elements, a silent guardian against the bite of the night air. Wollo Gabi is distinguished by its complex patterns and colours, often blended with metallic yarns (Getachew, 2015). The Wollo Gabi is usually worn by men as a shawl on special occasions or used as a blanket in homes. The Wollo Gabi is also a source of pride and identity for the people of Wollo.

The Wollo Gabi has different names for different designs, such as Sindid, Monalisa, Mekes and King. The Wollo Gabi is a form of artistic expression and communication for the weavers, called Shemane (Image 2), who use their skills and imagination to create these unique pieces.

Image 2. A weaver (Shemane) of the Ethiopian Gabi. Photo credit: Bobo Global, 2024.

Whether draped casually over the shoulders or wrapped tightly around the body, the Gabi transcends its form to symbolise resilience and cultural pride. It is a silent testament to the Ethiopian people's enduring spirit and ability to find warmth and solace despite adversity. In the traditional production of Gabi, the journey commences with women engaging in the initial stages of cotton processing within the confines of their homes. These women acquire unprocessed cotton from the local market and separate it from the seeds, employing a tool known as Mabazecha. Once this crucial step is completed, the cotton is primed to transform into thread, facilitated with specialised equipment called Inzirt (Image 3).

Image 3. Inzirt. Photo credit: Hudson, 2023.

The resulting threads are delicately wound onto small bamboo sticks featuring hollow stems called Kesem (Image 4). Subsequently, a collection of the Kesems is dispatched to a skilled weaver. The Shemane's adept hands weave the threads into a fabric known as Shema. Intriguingly, the Shema crafted from threads produced through this intricate process serves as the material for crafting the distinctive Gabi garment.

Image 4. Kesem. Photo credit: Michael Reta.

The art of weaving, deeply ingrained in the Ethiopian tradition, is the venerable craft behind creating many exquisite traditional garments. Carefully selecting threads, colours and patterns shapes the resulting fabric's essence. This process unfolds under the diligent hands of a singular artisan, as weaving equipment is designed for operation by a single artisan.

Image 5: Mewerweria. Photo credit: Michael Reta.

The weaving apparatus comprises various components, each contributing to the construction of the fabric. One such element is the shuttle, known as Mewerweria (Image 5) in Amharic, which traverses from side to side, skilfully guiding the threads. Another pivotal part demands the alternating movement of upward and downward motions facilitated by the weaver's foot. This dance of manual and foot-operated elements intertwines the threads, giving rise to the fabric in a manner that embodies Ethiopia's rich weaving heritage. Notably, the traditional weaving process involves diverse setups of this equipment, each

contributing to the distinct characteristics of the final fabric. However, recognising the surge in demand for these culturally significant textiles, a more convenient iteration of the equipment is being introduced, blending tradition with contemporary efficiency. This evolution, in response to the growing popularity of Ethiopian fabrics, underscores the resilience and adaptability of the age-old art of weaving in the face of changing times.

Wollo Gabi motif types and their interpretations

Gabi serves the Wollo community for multiple purposes – from a traditional garment worn for warmth to a cultural identity and heritage symbol. Wollo traditional Gabi has unique motifs (tilet in Amharic) with different social meanings. One of the Wollo traditional Gabi motifs is the Nigus (Image 6). This pattern features a stylised 'W' symbol at the centre, resembling a crown and representing the historical leadership wisdom of the Wollo society. The choice of colours, including rose and blue, along with neutral tones, signifies the balanced leadership roles of both men and women in Wollo.

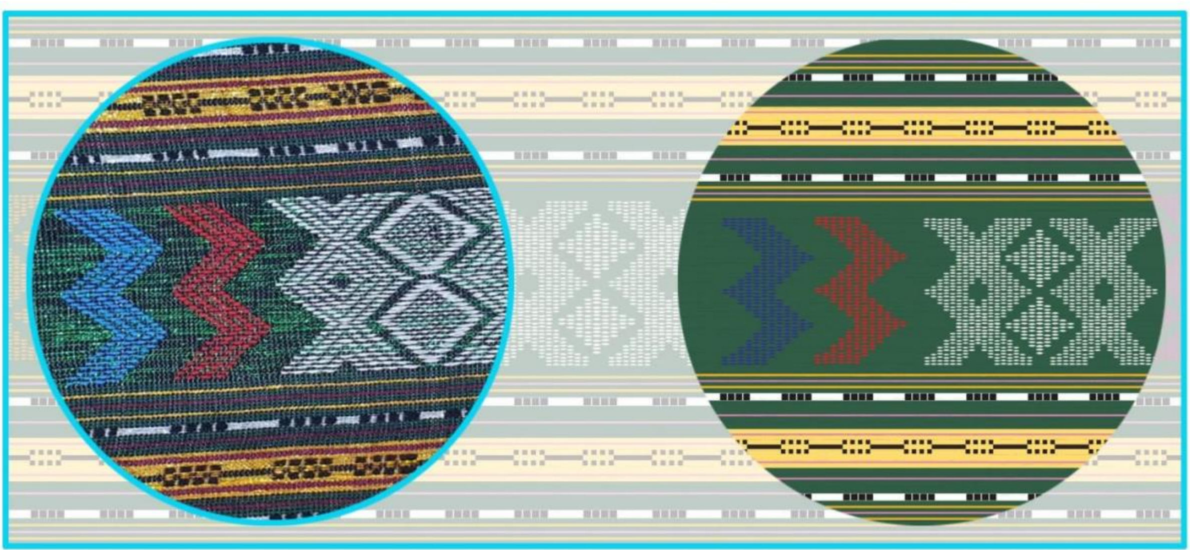

Image 6. Nigus tilet. Photo credit: Tewodros Tenagne.

The artisans who created this Gabi shared that the Nigus motif's design aims to express the leadership qualities valued in Wollo. The contrasting colour of the 'W' symbol emphasises its regal significance. The combination of rose and blue represents qualities associated with all genders, creating a harmonious portrayal of leadership. In essence, the Wollo Gabi with the Nigus motif is not just a piece of fabric but a visual story reflecting the leadership philosophy and societal values of the Wollo community. Through its thoughtful design, this cultural piece invites us to explore the rich traditions of Ethiopia, specifically within the vibrant context of Wollo.

The specific variant of the Wollo Gabi motif referred to as Mona Lisa (Image 7) derives its name from the artisans' appreciation of its aesthetic appeal, drawing parallels to the renowned beauty of Mona Lisa. This terminology is employed to underscore the tilet's inherent beauty, analogous to the way the name Mona Lisa symbolises attractiveness. In crafting the Mona Lisa motif, the artisans of Wollo Gabi purposefully endeavour to depict the elegance characteristic of women in Wollo society. This motif serves as a visual homage to the beauty of Wollo women, and, as such, it predominantly features a palette of light colours. The deliberate choice of soft hues, such as rose, complements the motif's thematic focus on feminine

beauty. The Mona Lisa pattern uses light colours like rose, avoiding darker shades like blue. This choice aligns with the motif's focus on capturing the graceful and delicate qualities associated with Wollo women.

Image 7. Monaliza tilet. Photo credit: Tewodros Tenagne.

A Wollo Gabi with the motif Mekes (Image 8) has a symbolic meaning. Known as the scissor motif, it gets its name from the unique form that resembles the letter 'X'. This motif uses the craftsman's illustration of cutting to illustrate the act of cutting figuratively.

Image 8. Mekes tilet (Photo Credit: Tewodros Tenagne).

According to the dictionary (EthioCloud, n.d.), Sindid is a phrase of great value in the language. It means 'beautiful and carefully organised'. The nomenclature of this specific theme has a tastefully straightforward history. The motif is called Sindid (Image 9) because its shapes line up carefully to create an aesthetically pleasing and well-organised pattern. Since Wollo Gabi's artisans recognise and value the delicate craftsmanship in precisely arranging this design, they have appropriately named it Sindid. The design is a tribute to the artistry and craft that characterise the cultural depth ingrained in traditional Ethiopian textiles, particularly the Wollo Gabi.

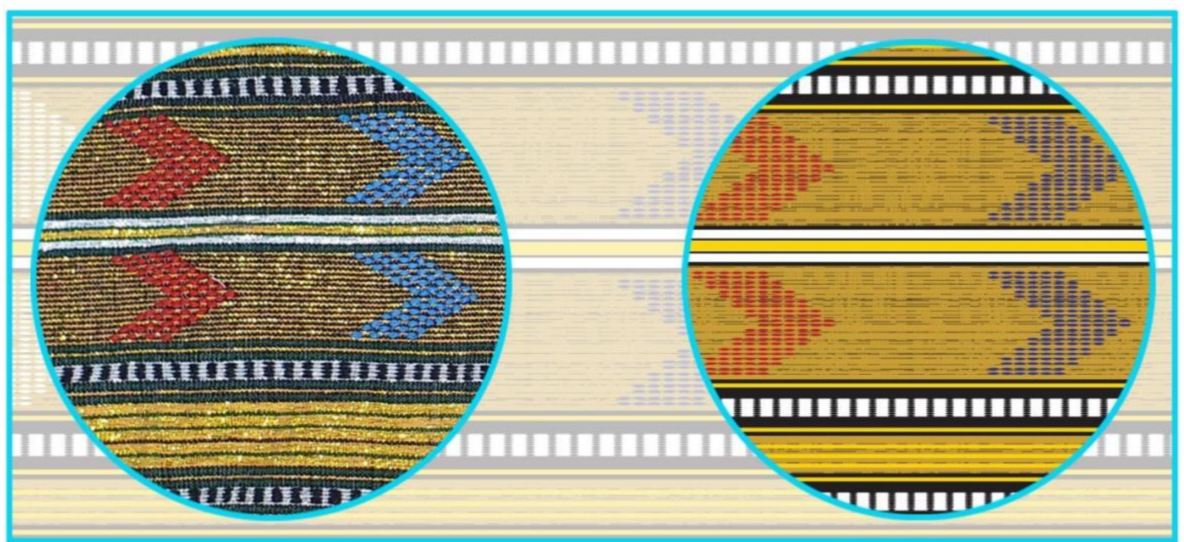

Image 9. Sindid tilet. Photo credit: Tewodros Tenagne.

Application of Gabi in the contemporary fashion industry

Using the traditional Ethiopian handloom textile, Gabi has seen an emergence and evolution in the Ethiopian fashion industry: designers and brands, such as Chewa, Sewasew and Séralesti are increasingly incorporating Gabi into their products – not only as a tribute to Ethiopian heritage but also to infuse their designs with unique textures, patterns and cultural significance. Gabi's adaptability allows it to be used for various clothing and accessories – from scarves, bags and hats to jackets, coats and dresses. Its eco-friendly and sustainable qualities also correspond with the rising demand for ethical fashion practices.

Image 10. Chewa, Sewasew and Seralesti contemporary designs. Credit: Temesgen Agazhie.

One well-known fashion brand in Ethiopia, Sewasew (Image 10), was created by the designer Sewasew Hailu, who started her journey in 2007, aiming to blend modernity and tradition in a more compatible way (Sewasew, 2022), creating a brand that embraces current trends while echoing Ethiopia's rich cultural heritages and legacy. The brand produces jackets using Gabi's textures and patterns, which tell a story of evolution and tradition. In addition to Sewasew, Ethiopian-based fashion brands, such as Séralesti by Bethel Tura and Chewa by Estifanos Minchegrot, share similar brand goals. They are connecting contemporary components with traditional ones to create elegant and sustainable pieces, such as modern hoodies and jackets made from Gabi fabric. Séralesti, as a brand, adds an artistic edge to its high-quality Gabi-made jumpers and jackets (Skadmas, 2024). Together, these brands have redefined the Ethiopian fashion industry, highlighting the grace and adaptability of the 100% cotton artificial Ethiopian traditional textile Gabi.

Our design propositions

Culturally oriented products can create stronger user bonds (Razzaghi & Ramirez, 2005). Thackara (2005) endorses this concept by asserting, *“Local context is significant not only as a marketplace but also as a catalyst for innovation”* (p. 74). Integrating culture into products can be viewed as exceedingly advantageous and beneficial to the design discipline and product users for a plethora of reasons (Razzaghi & Ramirez, 2005).

Our design research team in Ethiopia has laboriously created ten contemporary designs, five women’s bags, and five hats (Image 14), each crafted to honour the many cultural motifs in Wollo Gabi. We have ensured that every accessory resonates with authenticity and reverence for the culture it represents by carefully researching and paying close attention to detail.

Image 11. Mood board for designing with Gabi. Photo credit: Tewodros Tenagne.

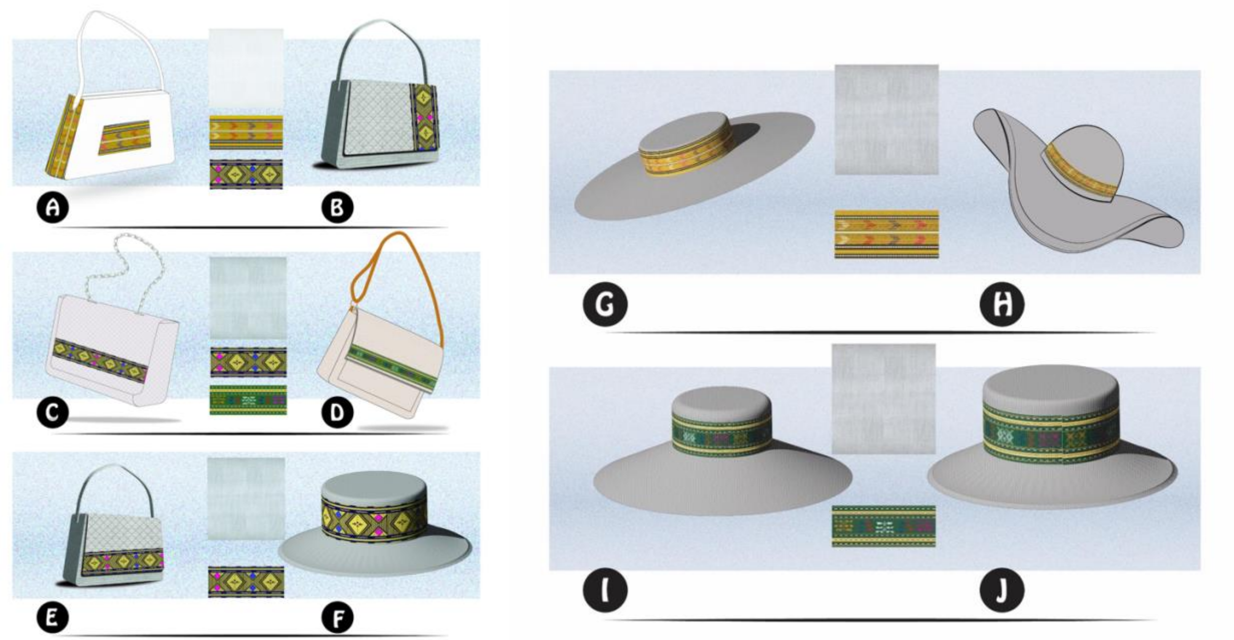

Image 12. Set of designs.

Our design propositions are adorned with Sindid, Monaliza, Nigus and Mekes motifs. Out of the ten designs (Image 12), we produced four samples (Image 13). As wearers use these accessories, they will carry a piece of Ethiopia's past into the present. Fashion becomes a canvas – a statement that transcends trends, weaving together heritage and innovation.

Image 13. Sample products. Photo credit: Temesgen Agazhie.

Our insights and future studies

Our primary objective initially aimed to establish an inventory and knowledge repository for Wollo Gabi and significant Gabi motifs, addressing a notable research gap. As we delved into understanding the Wollo Gabi, we have produced design propositions and manufactured samples for the US market.

In the light of this study, a series of co-design workshops will be organised with the designers and the artisans working at each stage of Wollo Gabi production – from yarn making to hand-weaving to sewing/manufacturing the garments. Furthermore, by focusing exclusively on women crafters, these workshops will address gender disparities within the industry and promote female entrepreneurship. Subsequent workshops will focus on design entrepreneurship and global business development, equipping participants with the skills and knowledge needed to establish their enterprises and tap into international markets.

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Sustainability culture and fashion enterprises: From creating questions to co-creating participation

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Sustainability culture and fashion enterprises: From creating questions to co-creating participation

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Abstract

The potential role of co-design in the fashion industry and system toward a more sustainable future and as a critical action for social change can be addressed through the role design assumes in an organisation. This article describes a strategy to develop a sustainable consumption culture through participatory design activities. It does so by reconstructing the collaboration between a company and a local third-sector entity promoting co-design for social innovation. The methods used to drive this collaboration included ideation techniques and intensive co-design workshops aimed at developing a recognisable sustainable brand and understanding sustainability-related topics for the company's customers. Strategies, design probes and replicable design tools emerging from the workshop were applied as innovative actions. This collaboration provided several experiences that, on the one hand, allowed the identification of new company strategies for supporting sustainability in the fashion industry and, on the other hand, created the condition to systematically adopt co-design instruments for providing social change through company actions.

Keywords: Co-design, Circular economy, Co-design for sustainability, Fashion co-design, Service-system co-design, Co-design ladder, User research, Community design, Organisational design, Design for innovation

Introduction

In this article, the case study of an experimental collaboration between a third-sector entity and a company is used to illustrate (i) how co-design for social change can contribute to redefining the fashion industry system towards more sustainable horizons and (ii) the processes that can be applied to promote cultural sustainability within contemporary entrepreneurship in the fashion field. These two aspects are the core of the research question addressed in the presented study. The article opens with a literature review to introduce the theoretical focus through which the case study has been observed. The context of the collaboration between the two main actors is then examined. This central part of the paper highlights how co-design activities and research can be applied to an industry rethinking itself. It also describes the adopted toolkit and how the main findings emerged. The paper closes with recommendations and future steps to undertake for design research to stimulate the development of sustainable cultures through design, particularly in the fashion industry.

Sustainability and fashion and their intersections with co-design and participation are crucial themes discussed at the beginning of the next paragraphs. Then, the research context of the case study is introduced. This is also decisive for understanding the background for where the two entities collaborated to explore how to embed co-design in fashion systems for sustainability purposes.

Co-design, fashion culture and sustainability
The theoretical positioning adopted in this paper revolves around the debate concerning sustainability, participation, co-design and fashion. With regards to the entanglements between the first two, participatory sustainability has often been analysed in the literature concerning urban governance and policymaking (Certoma et al., 2015) as a filter through which to assess the quality of decision-making exercises (Dawodu et al., 2021) and as an approach for triggering effective actions for environmental protection (Fritsch & Newig, 2012; Grifoni et al., 2014). Crucial, in this context, is the notion of 'community', not only as the unit to assess the adoption of evidence-based practices for social change (Hacker et al., 2012; Marschalek, 2008), but also as an increasingly complex ecology entangled in different types of social and technological transformations (Smith & Iversen, 2018). Participation, sustainability and design are also increasingly analysed in the literature within sustainability governance strategies (Esguerra & van der Hel, 2021) or, to put it differently, as methods of inquiry capable of stimulating new conversations towards innovative policies (Gaziulusoy & Ryan, 2017). Adding the broad concept of 'fashion' within the sustainability-oriented design research literature opens the discussion to concepts of sustainable fashion designs and innovations (Claxton & Kent, 2020; Hur, 2015; Hur & Beverley, 2023). Terms such as 'sustainable fashion design' (Hur, 2015; cf. Claxton & Kent, 2020) can also be difficult to define because they embed a unique concept with complex components within a broad discussion.

By and large, even though the fields of application of these concepts seem to stretch from fashion activism (Hirscher & Niinimäki, 2013) to cloth-making practices (Townsend & Sadkowska, 2020), sustainability, design and fashion also appear to be often investigated within the education field (Fletcher & Williams, 2013; Lam et al., 2022). Fully aware of the expanding field of application of these concepts, in this paper, we attempt to contribute to the debate by providing first-hand evidence of how co-design methods can be applied to contribute to fashion industry companies' attempts to gear towards more sustainable modes of operation. We refer to co-design as a resource for participatory design research (e.g., Busciantella-Ricci & Scataglini, 2024; Wilde, 2020), as an essential process for designing social innovations and sustainability (Manzini, 2015) and as a facilitator to balance powers among the different actors and knowledge (cf. Freire et al., 2011). In the field of sustainable fashion, co-design can facilitate the relationship between service designers and local textile artisans (as in a UK study), where service co-design tools and outcomes help to visualise and share possibilities for future sustainable directions (Mazzarella et al., 2017). At the same time, processes driven by 'design activism' and co-design are assuming a crucial role in creating counter-narratives in fashion towards sustainable solutions (Mazzarella et al., 2019) and exploring more open and democratic approaches to fashion manufacturing, such as 'social manufacturing' (Hirscher et al., 2018). Also, according to a socio-ecological perspective (White & van Koten, 2016), co-creation and co-design can help find a better sustainable future by disrupting current fashion consumption patterns and addressing environmental and social sustainability concerns. It means understanding how to provoke sustainable fashion innovation through co-design by also adopting new instruments such as the Sustainable Fashion Bridges (Hur & Beverley, 2023) toolkit to support ideation processes (Hur et al., 2013).

Co-design also helps exploit technical and technological innovations in the fashion industry. For instance, it can help understand how to use intelligent textiles to create more harmonious solutions and avoid the technology's mere adjunct strategy (cf. Fairburn et al., 2016). In the realm of fashion for social change, participatory design helps to use techniques such as patternmaking and garment-making in a framework of fashion design for social innovation (Monteiro, 2023). At the same time, co-design is also seen as an ethical

key in design pedagogy for fashion design education, where future designers can establish relationships with fashion artisans (cf. Ghai, 2022).

Co-design's potential value as a strategy for sustainable futures and social changes can also be addressed by exploring its role in fashion industry organisations. To reflect on these aspects, literature on design ladders may help frame a background for future sustainable design processes in the fashion industry. In the early 2000s, the Danish Design Centre research team introduced a design ladder with four steps, from 'No use of design' (Step 1) to 'Design as a strategy' (Step 4) (Ramlau, 2004), to describe how design is present in organisations. While it is still challenging to find a specific connotation of the design ladder in fashion industry-related changes towards sustainability and co-design, this ladder has been interpreted in several ways, such as understanding the relationship between design and the public sector (Design Council, 2013); design capabilities in the nonprofit context with a specific design ladder (Nusem et al., 2017); the pedagogy of design thinking with an educational design ladder (Wrigley & Straker, 2017); and design culture in the industrial context (Palmares et al., 2022). These references describe a potential background for understanding how co-design and sustainability can impact the fashion industry with a distinct perspective and culture.

Research context
The adoption of co-design-inspired methodologies that we describe in this article in the business activities of a brand that is active in the fashion industry (and that subscribes to a particular ethic in the textile domain) is shaped by the social, economic and cultural trajectories inscribed in the history of the city – Prato – and its recent reconfigurations. The city, the second largest in the Italian region of Tuscany and one of the most important world textile clusters, is where the presented company and association are based. The case study presented in this article is titled Co-Rifò. It emerged from the joint work between Rifò (i.e. a small to medium-sized company that aims to create a line of quality clothing and accessories produced entirely in Prato and the surrounding areas with regenerated and regenerable fibres; see Rifò, n.d.) and Codesign Toscana (a collective of professionals animated by multidisciplinary research and co-design inspired methodology for social innovation and the creation of eco-sustainable communities).

The case study has been developed by the authors of this paper, who are both members and co-founders of the aforementioned association. All are engaged in forms of research through co-design activities by working on the edge between the voluntary association and academia. Indeed, despite the authors' very different backgrounds, they all hold design education and research positions in academia (i.e. an assistant professor, a professor with a temporary appointment, a post-doc researcher and a research fellow). The work of Codesign Toscana has been applied to that of Rifò (hereafter 'the company') over two years (Figure 1), adapting the contextual needs of growing the sustainable fashion brand with tools and methodology inspired by co-design.

Two phases of the collaboration between the two entities are considered: in the first stage, co-design has mainly been conceived as a lever for community building and as a support for Rifò's start-up phase. In this phase, co-design functionality was used to co-create local promotional events, and design tools qwew employed as boundary objects to raise awareness within different user categories and concerning the company's core leverage (i.e. a circular process, ecological thinking, sustainable transition and advocacy in the fashion industry). In the second stage, the co-design dimension acquired space as a transversal tool among the organisation's departments: processes, tools and results were used for user research, testing

and concept validation of products, communication and sales strategies and as a relationship management tool with the community of users. Regarding the first stage, we refer to two practices conceived in 2017 and 2018, respectively: Rifò NEXT and Circular Fashion Map. Rifò NEXT was the title of an envisioning session organised by Rifò and Codesign Toscana in December 2017 at the iconic Textile Museum of Prato. This was conceived as a collective discussion with enthused local stakeholders about sustainability. Relational design was used on this occasion as a methodology for collective envisioning and ideation through the 'How Might We…' tool (Nicolai & Thompson, 2023). The Circular Fashion Map, developed and optimised from 2018 to 2020 by Codesign Toscana, is the name of the co-design tool used by Rifò team members to spread the concept of sustainable fashion among schools, practitioners and within the Fashion Revolution context – a global movement formed by activists who believe in a different fashion industry that respects human rights and the environment at all stages of the supply chain. Here, the collaboration between designers and textile and communication experts has been essential in shaping some assumptions and delivering the principles underlying the social entrepreneurship project.

The second stage of design-driven application to Rifò's brand development toward a recognised sustainable fashion brand, using design-based and collaborative tools, led to the launch of the Co-Rifò project. Co-Rifò can be understood as a research process that integrated gamified elements, including playful and interactive parts within the user research processes, favouring peer learning and the emergence of strategic insights. Thus, the collaborative design approach and a playful dimension sought to balance economic sustainability in favour of the social sustainability of the people participating. Through Co-Rifò gamified research workshops (GRWs), Codesign Toscana put in place a double objective: on the one hand, the organisation of relational moments that represent the basis on which social design can deliver value; on the other hand, involvement of and listening to users through hybrid qualitative-quantitative methodologies provide strategic insights for different company departments.

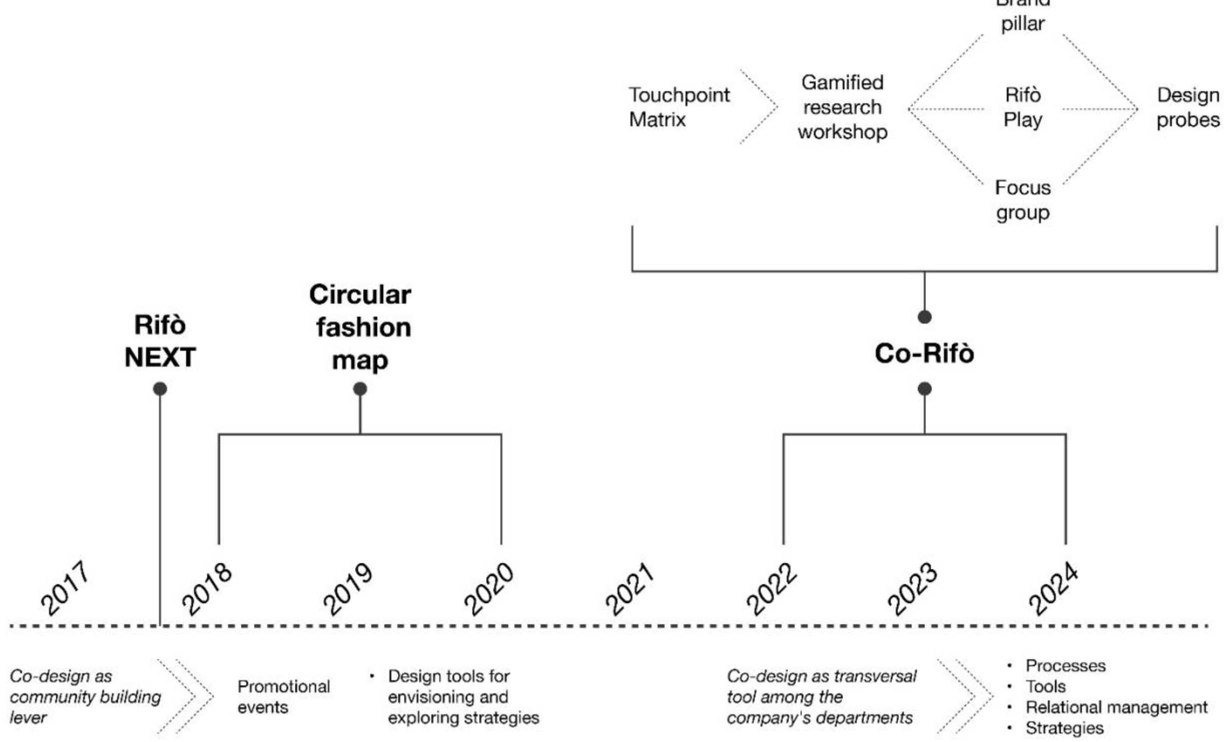


Figure 1: Sequence of the main activities and related tools of the presented case study.

Methodology

Rifò NEXT and Circular Fashion Map

In the first phase of collaboration between Codesign Toscana and Rifò, ideation techniques such as the How Might We …' tool (Nicolai & Thompson, 2023) were mostly used. The following are some of the design questions and challenges (defined a priori), themes and issues that Rifò wanted to address:

- How might we help the company overcome the problem of overproduction and overconsumption by having a social impact in the territory?
- How might we help the company create jobs for the associations' users to be the natural bearers of social inclusion?
- How might we help the company solve the problem of overproduction of clothes by adopting circular economy strategies?
- How might we support the company in creating social value for Prato and its citizens?
- How might we contribute to the company project in an active way?
- How might we decrease the purchase of clothes that would otherwise remain unused?
- How might we include needy, marginalised or differently-abled people in the company project?
- How might we adopt a homemade process to recycle clothes we no longer wear?

Referring to the Circular Fashion Map, design tool portions from distinctive design thinking phases (Dam & Siang. 2021) were adopted. Functional pieces were later embedded in a unique canvas to depict an overall process for the co-design of an engage-collect-recycle sustainable chain. Portions of personas, eco-systemic maps, scenario design and business model canvases from the Codesign Toscana open-source learning toolkit (Codesign Toscana, n.d.) were used.

Co-Rifò

In the second stage, design-driven application to Rifò's brand went towards developing a recognised sustainable brand and understanding sustainability-related topics for Rifò's customers. The work structured in 2022-2024 focused on intertwining engagement strategies with user research on sustainable consumption and beliefs, fashion industry communication perceptions and fashion-consuming habits. Three main actions of Co-Rifò can be synthesised as pillars of this design-based application for sustainable fashion brand development: contextual analysis through internal diagnostics, engagement with the users through a GRW and long-lasting research through design probes. An initial phase of semi-structured interviews with employees was conducted to understand the main topics shared in the exploration. This qualitative method of listening and dialogue (Parker & Tritter, 2006) created common ground for collaboratively developing participatory activities with stakeholders and consumers. Thanks to the Touchpoint Matrix (Figure 2), a tool specifically designed for debriefing the interviews and intertwining these results with quantitative post-purchase questionnaires, sustainability-related themes emerged that were used for the following phase. Second, going deep into the GRW, we could depict a process design focused on user research and co-design techniques adapted to the thematic clusters identified in the contextual analysis phase. On this occasion, a set of personalised co-design tools were designed to match the results of the preliminary qualitative research.

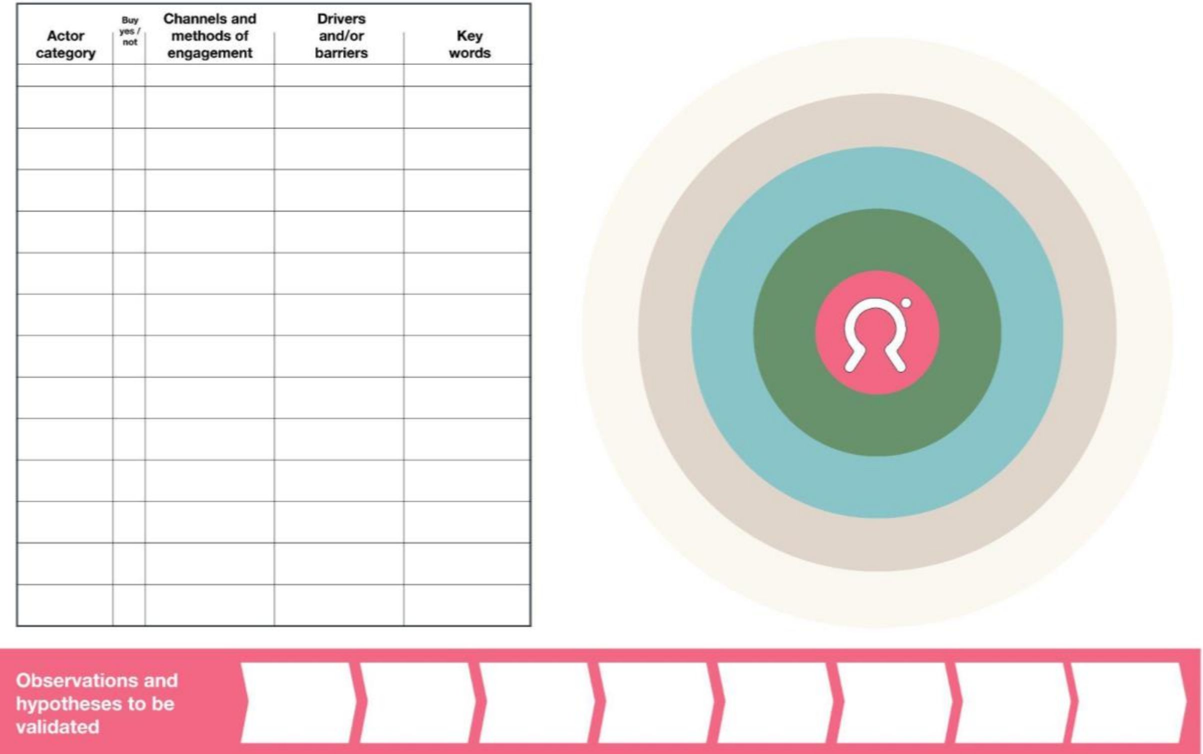
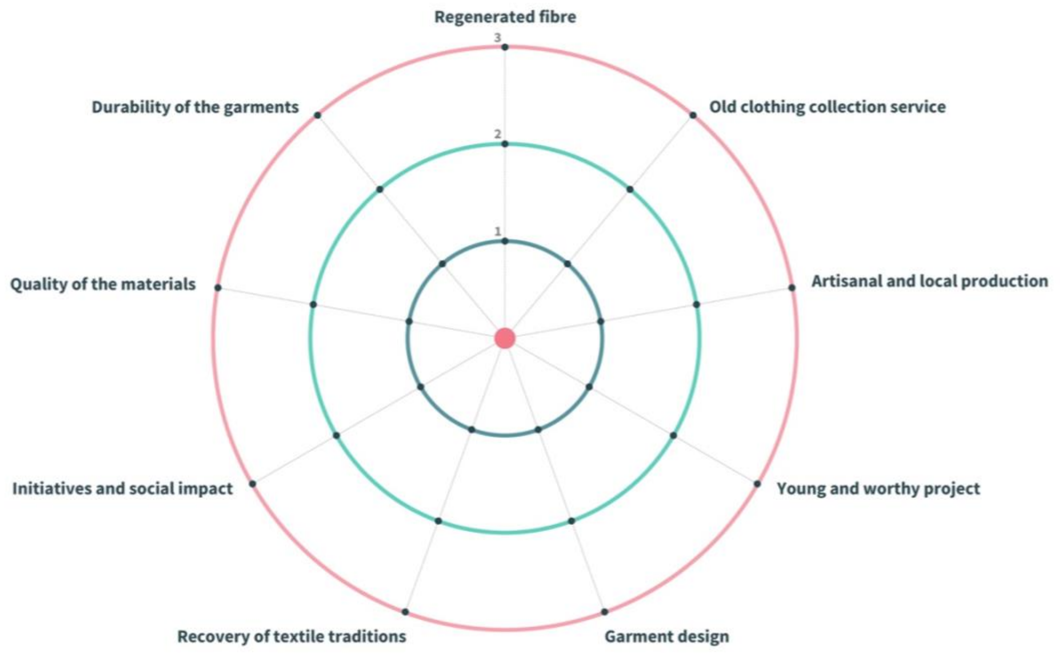


Figure 2: Touchpoint matrix and stakeholders map canvas.

First tool development: Brand-pillar tool

This aimed to deconstruct the main elements of the Rifò brand. It connected them to sustainability trends and allowed its users to evaluate their relevance concerning their brand attitude. Based on the contextual analysis phase, the tool was co-created with the Rifò team, and the pillars of the brand were recognised as regenerated fibre, collection service, artisanal and local production, young project, garment design, recovery textile tradition, social impact, material quality and durability of the garments. The tool (Figure 3) is visualised as a spider graph (with scores from 1 to 3, where 1 indicates weak points and 3 strong points) designed to be compiled collaboratively with thread, tacks and cardboard.

• **BRAND-PILLAR** State how each of the following characteristics of the Rifò brand is relevant to you, then briefly explain why yes/no.



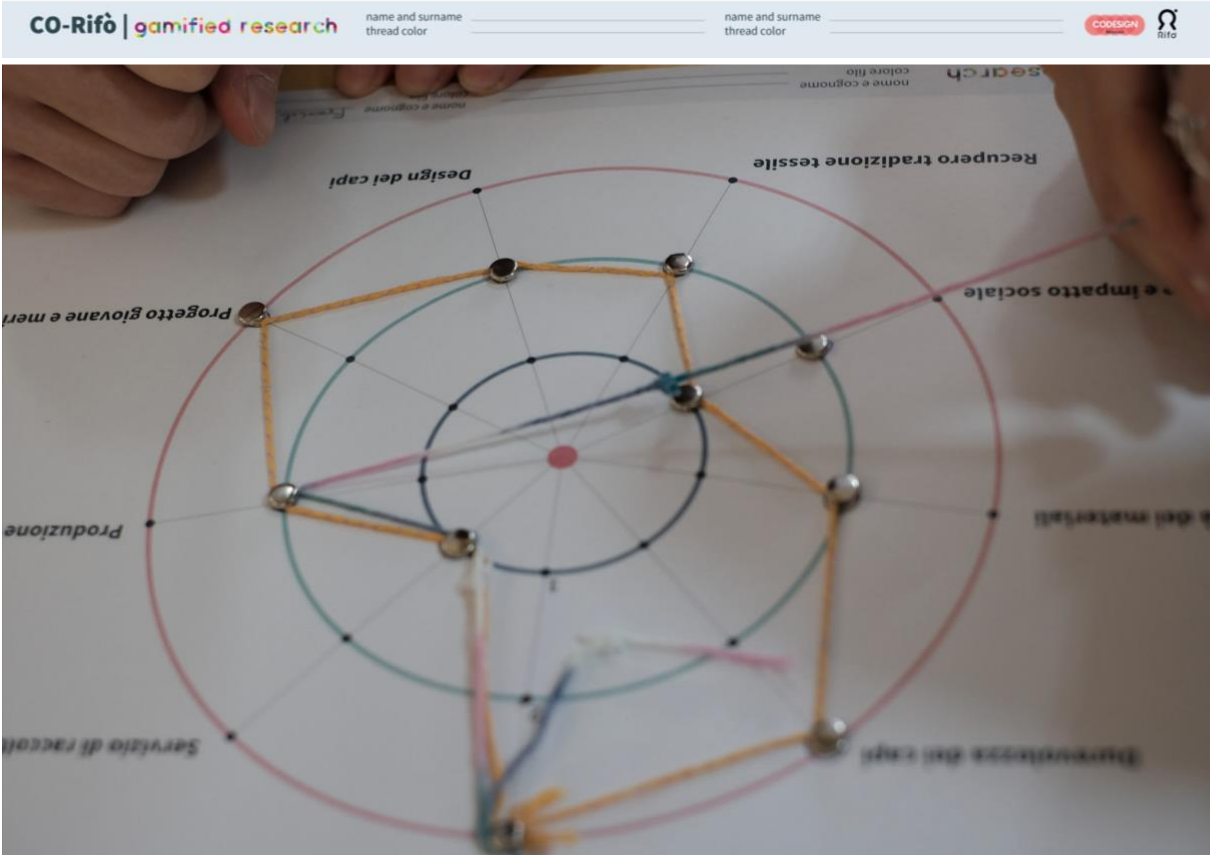


Figure 3: Example scheme of brand-pillar canvas and activity interaction.

Second tool development: Rifò-Play tool and CO-llage

The Rifò-Play tool aimed to simulate an individualised purchasing experience calculated on the average expenditure declared when completing the questionnaire. The participants were called to make expenses

catalogued in two macro-areas: the first, based on an actual calculation of the resources available; the second on a choice dictated by one's desire and regardless of economic availability.

Image 1: Example scheme of Rifò-Plafigurey canvas and activity interaction.

Image 2: Focus group in action.

In parallel, the participants were stimulated to provide a collage - namely CO-llage - by taking inspiration from fashion magazines according to (i) a chosen or preferred kind of clothing, (ii) perception of the Rifò company, and (iii) their definition of the term 'sustainability'.

Third tool development: Focus group
As a final exercise of the GRW, through a focus group, exploratory open questions and debate focused on some specific topics related to the macro-concept of sustainability:

- Topic 1 - Sustainability and eco-anxiety
    - What is your perception of climate change?
    - What specific consequences of climate change worry you most?
    - As a consumer, what types of purchases and consumption choices make you feel like you have a positive impact on the environment and others?
- Topic 2 - Information
    - When does a company prove to be genuinely sustainable in your opinion?
    - What are the main elements that distinguish sustainable clothing brands for you?
    - What information do you look for to assess the sustainability of a brand and/or a product?

Fourth tool development: Design probes
Finally, during the first Co-Rifò phase in 2022, Codesign Toscana and Rifò agreed on the usage of cultural probes (Halpern et al., 2013) as design means that can dilate – i.e., long-lasting research – the listening and co-design process through self-reflection by users and their potential close community. Adopting the shape of an audiobook and a logbook, the assumptions at the basis of these have been to test the legacy (Berni & Del Bono, 2022) of the co-design approach by engaging users through forms of care and reflection on sustainability issues during their daily lives. Using observation, self-reflection and research tools that complement traditional digital strategies, we assumed probing as a potential example of design-driven and community-oriented innovation.

Image 3: Examples of probes covers and their calls to action.

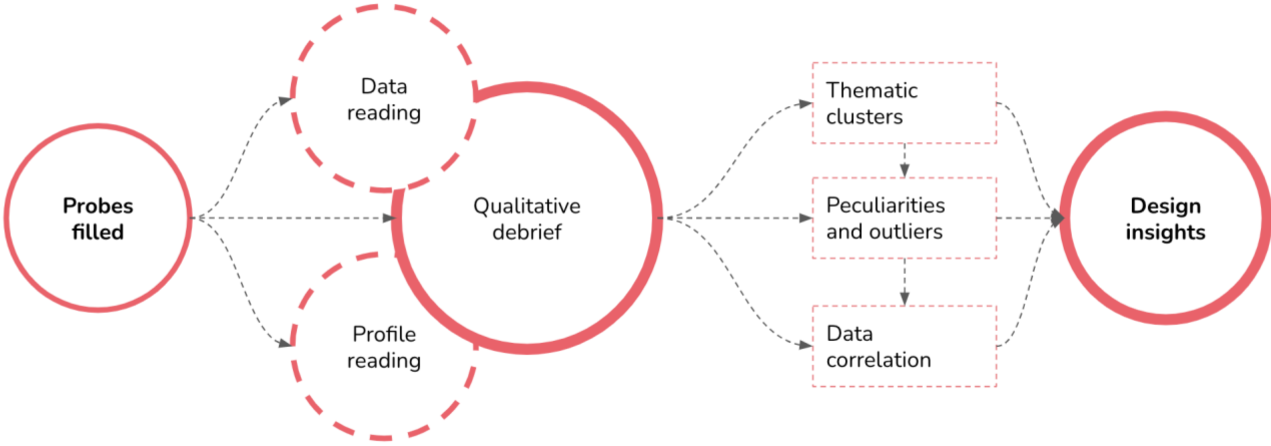


Figure 4: Example scheme of probes analysis operations and extrapolation of results.

Results

The main results of the presented case study can be framed through the outputs provided during the three main initiatives: (i) the Rifò NEXT session, (ii) the work with the Circular Fashion Map and (iii) the Co-Rifò experience. These moments of the case study provided specific results that can be clustered together according to the following paragraphs.

Rifò NEXT and Circular Fashion Map

First, the session named Rifò NEXT (2017-2018) provided a series of visions that can be clustered together according to the following categories:

- Promotion and offline/online engagement: engaging users through social media and digital volunteering, organising sartorial hackathons and discussing the Rifò project on various occasions.
- Sustainability and clothing recycling: in this set of ideas, creative ways to recycle unused clothing are proposed, such as transforming them into new garments, donating or exchanging them.
- Involvement of associations and local entities: this cluster emphasises needs, values and opportunities to collaborate with local entities, international associations and user associations through tailoring training, sustainable deliveries and exchange of experiences.
- Education and awareness: from this set of ideas emerges the possibility of promoting conscious shopping, educating on fashion taste and organising scheduled pickups for clothing recycling.

These categories have been used to design the canvas of the Circular Fashion Map (2018-2020) (Figure 4). The canvas itself is one of the early results that emerged from the joint work between the two involved entities. The Circular Fashion Map has been employed as a collaborative design tool in different environments, including outside the company to introduce students (e.g. of design or economics) to circular thinking and circular business models. This canvas embeds the main aspects that need to be considered systematically in a unique framework to assume a circular economy perspective. Technically, it is the logical and sequential combination of well-known design tools such as personas, eco-systemic maps, scenario design and business model canvases. However, they are arranged and redesigned in a manner that favours connected and strategical reasoning for assuming a circular fashion perspective. The map emerged from the early activities arranged during the encounter between the fashion company and the voluntary associations, considering the participation of the local communities in public events.

Exploratory strategies
The development of the Rifò NEXT session and the application of the Circular Fashion Map provided insights that contributed to centring Rifò's 2021-2023 strategy. Specifically, the collaboration between the company and Codesign Toscana led to some strategies emerging that were applied as innovative actions to be explored.

The actions implemented by Rifò can be divided into the following strategic areas:

- Improving multi-channel community management activities with social impact and the ability to drive sustainability principles to the community of users. This strategic line was developed through the following actions:
  - The Co-Rifò/Gamified Research Workshops explore new forms of collaboration between the company and their potential clients through 'gamified research' activities.
  - The Textile Tours are guided tours to discover the companies involved in textile regeneration in Prato.
  - The 'Nei nostri panni' project is a course for textile artisans and spinners involving migrant people in Prato.
- Embedding a series of communication and advocacy contents. This strategy was developed by the 'Rifolution' tagline of the brand that delivers the message of 'the [sustainable] revolution of Rifò'.
- Providing complementary innovative services. This strategy has been developed with the Rifò take-back service, which is a diffused system to gather used clothes.

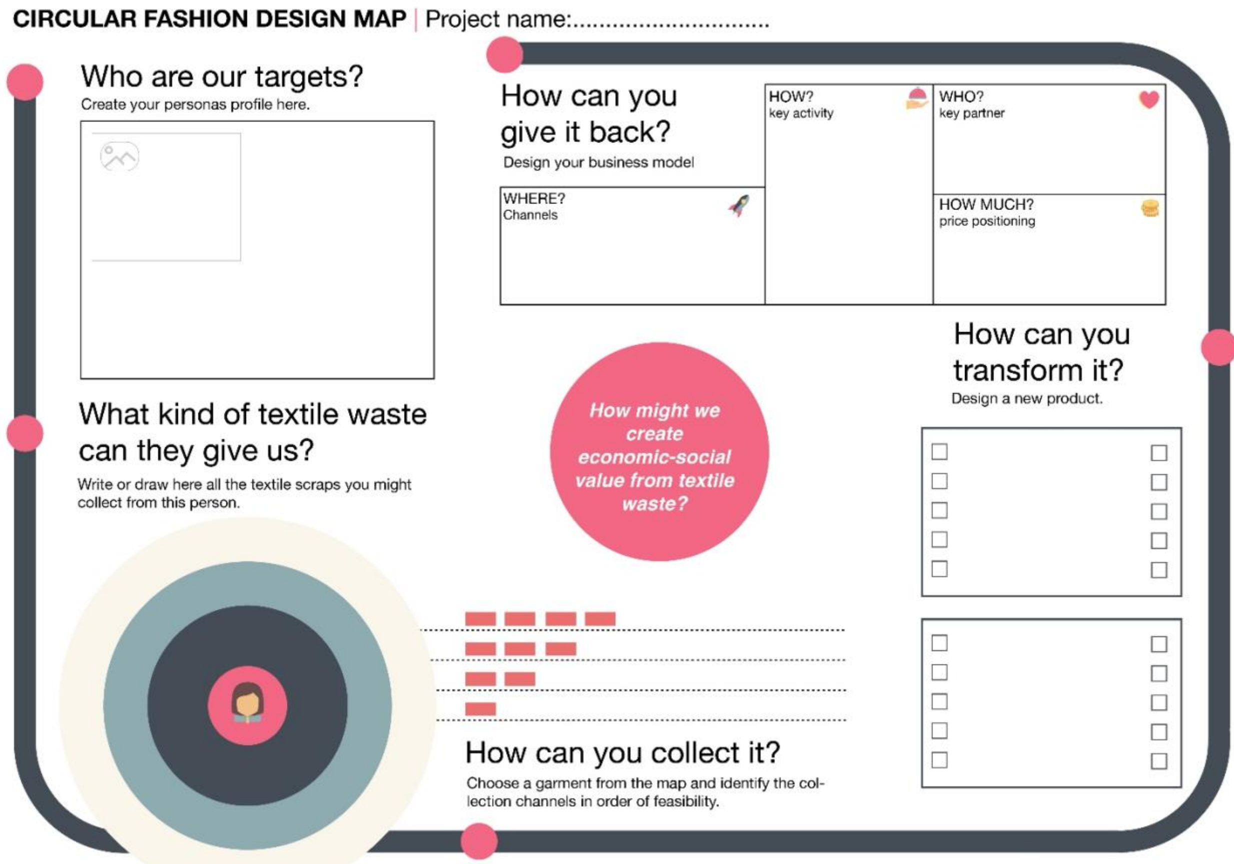


Figure 5: Circular Fashion Map canvas obtained by assembling parts of different design tools.

Co-Rifò results and practice

The activities performed in the Co-Rifò phase (2022-2024) provided five sets of results. They emerged both from the internal activities within the company and through the development of the GRW sessions that involved more than 80 participants.

The first set of results is nine categories of themes to be addressed and developed as they are crucial to addressing sustainable fashion processes. As emerged from the internal exploration of the Co-Rifò activities, these categories are considered crucial for the company. They are (i) product and fibre quality; (ii) brand recognition; (iii) prices of products; (iv) daily sustainability choices; (v) sense guilt/indulgence toward (un)sustainable choices; (vi) active participation; (vii) style; (viii) sales channels, engagement and distribution; and (ix) complementary services.

The second set of results is persona profile elements obtained by intertwining quantitative data from six-monthly questionnaires with qualitative results from focus groups. The assemblage of these elements shapes the personas profile (Image 4). The elements that describe each persona profile are as follows:

- Age range (20-30; 31-40; 41-50; 50+);
- Social status (Married; Parents; Single);
- First purchase/Purchase frequency (Rifò; general brand);
- 7 gamified personas cluster (4 women - 3 men):
    - Green Freaks are sustainability-conscious women, primarily self-assessing themselves as consumers of sustainable products and services.
    - Safe Fall/Winter - Safe Spring/Summer are the most represented group among women, with an average age of 36 (min. 23, max. 56). The majority have no children, almost all have bought Rifò in the last year, half buy presale and very few use the used garment collection service.
    - Stylish are the least represented group, with an average age of 37. The majority have bought Rifò in the last year 4+ times. Only one uses the garment collection service, and another uses the presale.
    - For non-primary users, Bit primary users and super basic users, men represent a minority. All of them, although with different degrees of 'basicness', do not stand out in terms of attention and care to their style and sustainable choices. Average age 38, largely childless.

Image 4: Gamified persona data visualisation examples.

The third set of results is the design probes, both as a template and a set of contents that emerged in their early application. The design probes ask for self-reflection and daily reporting from users. Through open

questions and mood boards, design probing has been striking for exploring aspects of the user's culture that may:

- influence Rifò's sustainable design choices;
- suggest design insights by reading the user's characteristics and peculiarities;
- probe the cultural, personal, and intimate context of the user; and
- empathise with the design context through the user's vision.

In total, 10 participants were involved in compiling design probes, but only 4 effective compilers delivered the probes (see the example in Image 5).

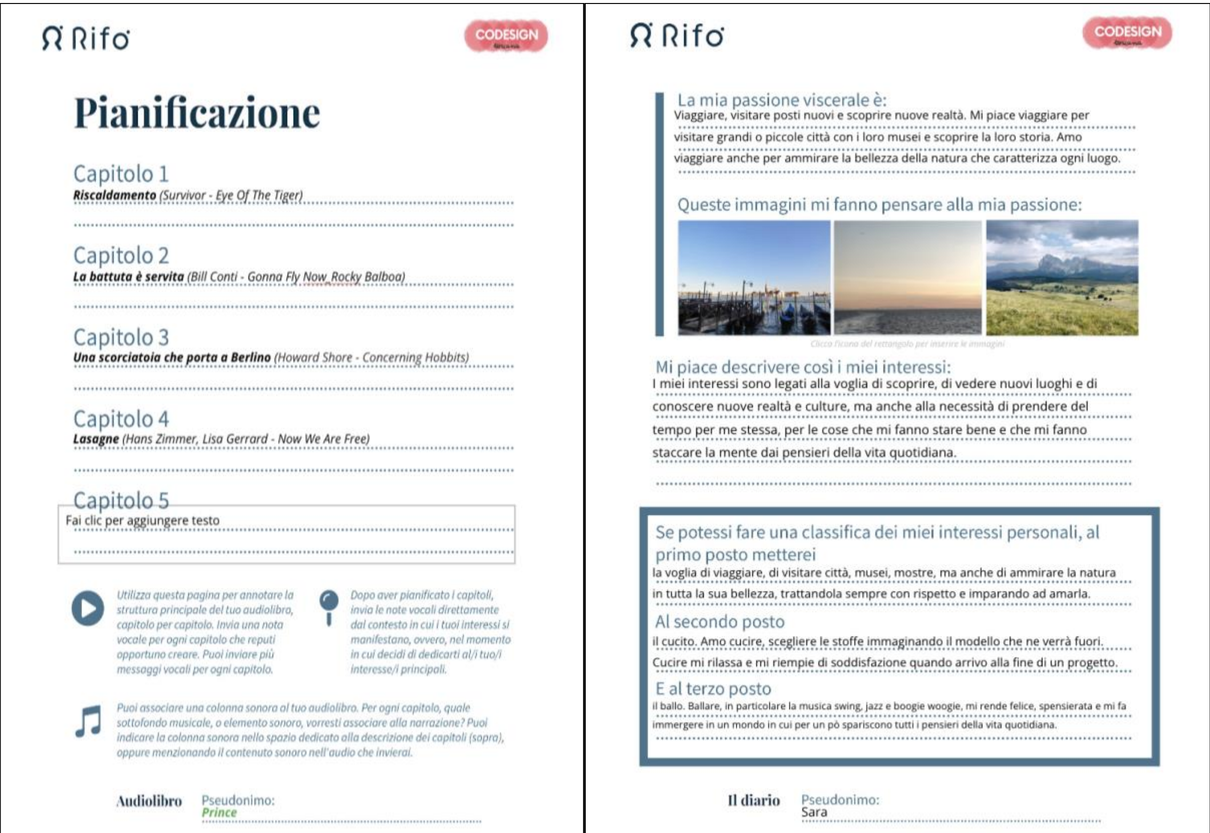
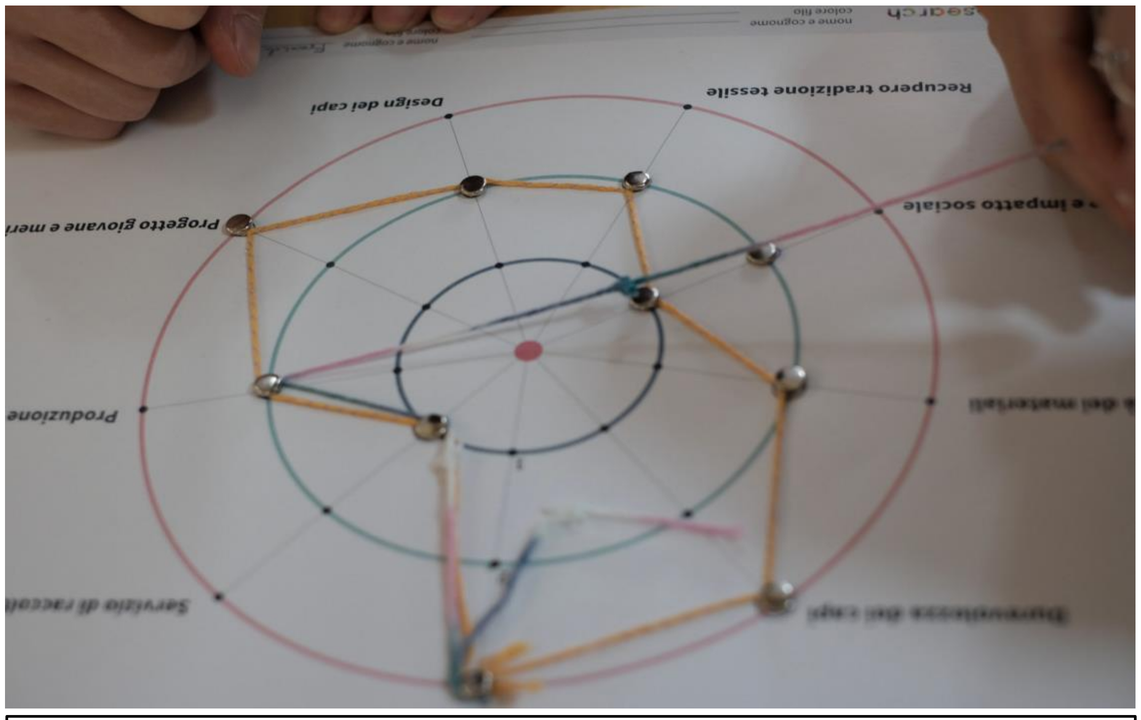


Image 5: Logbook and audiobook probes compiled by the users.

The fourth result is linked to the three replicable design tools used during the GRW of the Co-Rifò processes. As described above, the three tools are Brand-pillar, CO-llage and Rifò-Play (Images 6–9). Below are some explanatory images of their use during the participatory activities.



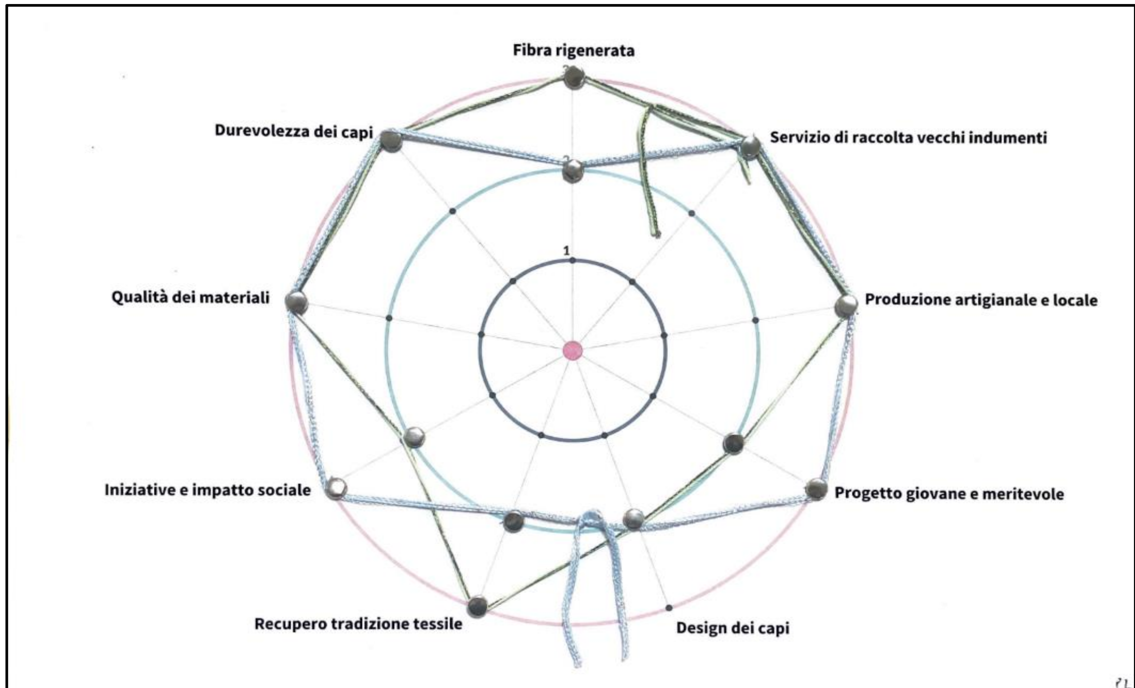


Image 6: Brand-pillar tool compiled by a group of participants.

Image 7: CO-llage tool compiled by a group of participants.

Image 8: Rifò-Play single-page tool compiled by a group of participants.

Nome e Cognome

Budget

#1

#2

#3

#4

#5 unisex

#6 unisex

Spunta se hai deciso di acquistare questo capo

Perché lo acquisteresti?

Perché non lo acquisteresti?

Sicuramente è un modello che non ho e rimarrebbe nell'armadio

Metti in ordine di rilevanza per te le informazioni che cerchi su un capo. Assegna un numero da 1 (il più rilevante) a 7 (il meno importante per te).

1 Composizione 2 Origine 4 Vestibilità 7 Peso 7 Punto maglia 7 Filato (ply) 3 Prezzo ___ Altro: cosa? ___

Pensa al capo o ai capi che hai acquistato, in che occasione lo/li indosserai?

Image 9: Rifò-Play debriefs canvas tool compiled by a group of participants.

These tools report valuable insight from the perspectives of the involved participants. As tangible results, they worked both as valuable canvases in a collaborative process and as facilitators to address complex topics around sustainability, fashion and strategic thinking. More than 40 completed canvases for each template were collected among the initiatives presented in this study.

The fifth set of results are two strategic reports produced for Co-Rifò at the end of the participatory processes. They represent concrete documentation for sharing the research process, tools and results and co-design pathways. It is important to note that dynamics produced with these activities go beyond strategic business insights but include training on collaborative design approach for the Rifò staff employed and disseminating a culture of care and sustainability for the fashion brand's involved community. Similarly, although such reports represent the traditional and most widespread form of 'legacy' for participatory and design-based processes, these represent only the beginning, the visible and immediately understandable part of the value of co-design, which needs further research, monitoring and continuous triggers in financial and design terms to bring potential forms of innovation to life.

In practical terms, the reports are the tangible output containing tools, processes, instructions and analysis of the applied cases to build the legacy of the process presented in this study. They serve to exploit the results obtained with the joined experience among the two entities. The reports make tangible the possibility for the company to use the results strategically. For instance, the Co-Rifò results have been described by the company as a decision-making support for strategic choices. The reports help to use this legacy.

Discussion

According to the experience presented in this paper, it is possible to provide answers to the research questions. Consequently, it is possible to frame three aspects that highlight both (i) the contribution of design for social change to the redefining of the fashion system and (ii) the related processes and instruments that can favour the growth of a cultural sustainability trend in companies in the fashion field.

First, combining the encounter between a third-sector entity and a fashion company with social advocacy is a vital and strategic action that can contribute to applying design for social change in a challenging sector. These encounters can facilitate counter-narratives to the mainstream fashion processes and provide valuable actions for developing forms of fashion design for social innovation (Mazzarella et al., 2017, 2019; Monteiro, 2023). As we emphasise in the present study, these aspects can be formalised by applying the research through co-design approach (Busciantella-Ricci & Scataglini, 2024). However, we argue that this process can allow us to identify a new perspective that is readable by the models of the design ladders (Nusem et al., 2017). Consequently, we can propose a co-design ladder for sustainability by generalising the process we followed in the case.

Second, we note that co-design provokes reflections on how addressing socially relevant issues can benefit both the company and society. This is evident in the legacy that emerged in the encounter between an entity that adopted design for social change and the company presented in the case.

Third, tools, processes and strategies adopted in the case are replicable instruments that may impact the company's development strategies in the fashion industry. The application of these instruments provided valuable insights into understanding how to frame a better sustainable future for the company and the related community of users. The following paragraphs provide an overview of these three aspects.

Co-design ladder for sustainable fashion entrepreneurship

The different interpretations of the design ladder (Design Council, 2013; Nusem et al., 2017; Palmares et al., 2022; Ramlau, 2004; Wrigley & Straker, 2017) inspired an interpretation of the Co-Rifò experience. Indeed, co-design assumed a different role as a social changer in the company's context. Essentially, co-design assumed the same role that it generally assumes in design for social innovation contexts or in contexts where co-design is a strategy to provoke social encounters (e.g. Manzini, 2015). However, co-design processes, tools, strategies and mechanisms assumed a different role concerning sustainability values during the progress of the Co-Rifò experience. Consequently, it is possible to frame the ladder as in Figure 5, where the steps are as follows:

- Step 1: no application of co-design and a very low possibility of reaching sustainable advancements;
- Step 2: a condition where co-design is present and adapted for specific needs or for a minimal one-step action to reach a very specific and limited sustainable objective;
- Step 3: a condition where sustainability is perceived with an ethical purpose; co-design is assumed as a collaborative-based practice to develop capabilities on this topic within the company;
- Step 4: a situation where sustainability is the policy of the company, and co-design is assumed as an instrument to identify strategies to follow the policy purposes;

- Step 5: a context where sustainability is adopted as the main goal and co-design is used for provoking transformations of the company's structure;
- Step 6: an ideal condition where co-design is an embedded practice of the company to be used for developing and taking care of the company's culture; in this step, sustainability is the company's culture.

Co-design is the instrument, and sustainability is the engine value to climb the steps and make sustainability tangible within the company.

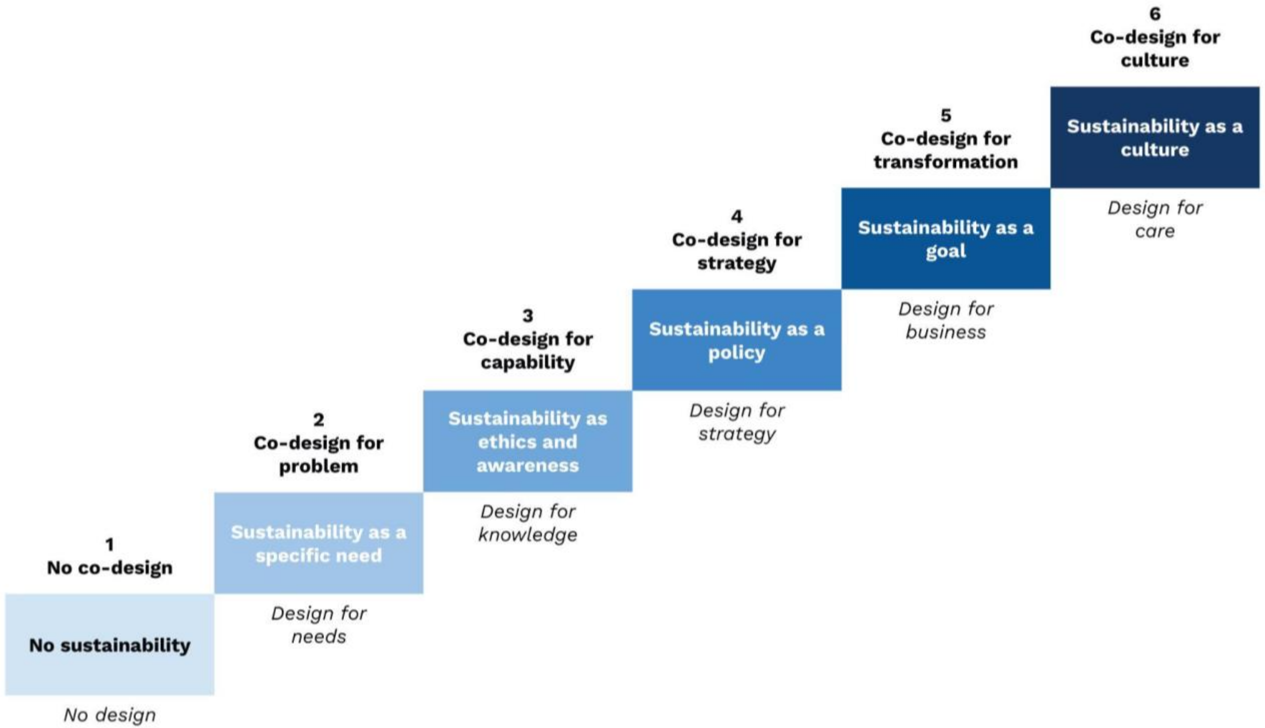


Figure 6: Co-design ladder for sustainability strategies in fashion realms.

Legacy and sustainability through co-design

According to the Co-Rifò experience, adopting co-design in a fashion company helps assume a sustainable attitude toward socially relevant aspects and, at the same time, frame possible more sustainable futures (e.g. see Mazzarella et al., 2017, 2019) for the company. Despite several co-design tools, processes and strategies being positively adopted in the Co-Rifò process, the legacy of the process is an emerging problem to consider. Specifically, voluntary associations traditionally act to promote social change. This vocation has been transferred in the fashion industry by focusing on (i) the value of co-design as a design for social change essential practice, (ii) the advocacy of a design activism approach in fashion (Hirscher & Niinimäki, 2013; Hirscher et al., 2018), (iii) reframing the scopes for co-designing (from at least steps 2 to 4 of the ladder). On these points, the legacy of the association for Rifò is represented by (i) the direct experience of the involved participants, (ii) the results and insights that emerged (e.g. see the reports among the results), with their relevant reusable and scalable outputs and (iii) the processes and tools as embedded in the company culture. All these factors, if carefully collected, applied and embedded in the company, according to the presented experience, can create a culture of care. It means a culture where both the problems and challenges emphasised by the company and the voluntary association are reciprocally addressed - via the ladder shown above (Figure 5). Step 6 of the co-design ladder for sustainability is reached if this happens.

Co-design instruments and strategies

The steps in the ladder (Figure 5) describe how co-design may impact the fashion company organisation by considering sustainability values. Each step describes a way to adopt co-design tools and strategies. These co-design resources are adaptable as an organisation climbs the steps. The act of climbing also defines how the organisation intends to position the company concerning sustainability. Conceptually, the ladder can be used as a toolbox with co-design tools for developing strategies for sustainable fashion design and innovation (cf. Claxton & Kent, 2020; Hur & Beverley, 2023). Adaptable co-design instruments (including tools, strategies, processes and professionals) give a sense of how the organisation may or may not climb the ladder and thus reach different sustainability objectives. According to this view, sustainability is interpreted with the three canonical dimensions (i.e. economic, social and environmental), and co-design is a flexible research instrument (cf. Busciantella-Ricci & Scataglini, 2024; Wilde, 2020) to help the company understand and making these dimensions and instruments their own – step by step.

Conclusion

This paper provided findings on (i) how design for social change can contribute to redefining the fashion system towards more sustainable horizons and (ii) how co-design-based instruments can be applied to promote cultural sustainability in the fashion industry. To demonstrate this, the paper presented a case study that describes the collaboration between a third-sector entity and a fashion company. They collaborated to embed co-design and improve the company's strategies toward innovative processes for sustainable fashion. This collaboration provided several experimental co-design experiences that allowed the authors to identify and discuss a co-design ladder for sustainability strategies for the fashion sector. Despite the ladder being a synthesis of a single case, it can be a reflective model for those companies that want to assume a more sustainable attitude through co-design - by climbing the ladder.
Replicating the operative model presented in this paper with the same kind of entities is the primary recommendation for adopting the ladder and creating new cases among fashion companies.

In terms of limitations, as topics for further research, it is worth mentioning the need to (i) build new cases for applying co-design in fashion manufacturing and consumption; (ii) provide the presented experiences to other stakeholders (e.g. distributors and manufacturers) of the production chain; and (iii) scale the co-design ladder for sustainability strategies to challenge those fashion industries that boost fast-fashion and mass production.

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Drum magazine project: A decolonial shift in teaching fashion theory and history

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Abstract

The *Drum* Magazine Project is a cross-institutional teaching and research project designed to explore a decolonial approach to teaching fashion theory and history. The project used the 1950s and 1960s archives of *Drum* magazine, found at Bailey's African History Archives (BAHA) in Johannesburg, South Africa. Fashion was considered by looking at South Africa's political, social, and cultural landscape during the 1950s and 1960s. Students wrote biographical essays based on individuals who, despite having been featured in *Drum* magazine, were not widely documented in South Africa. Essay writing was followed by developing magazine covers designed to capture themes related to these individuals. The text- and visual-based modes enabled students to deploy historical media archives using fashion and dress to communicate narratives of alternative fashion histories and imaginaries. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to analyse students' impressions of the magazine, the individuals they researched and the overall project. In some instances, students expressed the view that incorporating this part of South African history into fashion curricula can be uncomfortable but that addressing history in its fullness is necessary to achieve decolonial imperatives and shifts. For these reasons, this study contributes to the decolonial fashion discourse by showing how infusing context-specific examples in teaching and learning offers options for renewing, stretching, and decentring the teaching of fashion theory and history.

Keywords: Decolonial fashion discourse, *Drum* magazine, Fashion history, Fashion theory

Fashion curricula and the decolonial fashion discourse: A reflexive introduction

What do we, fashion scholars and lecturers of fashion theory and history, owe current students in the fashion education system? Does renewing, stretching and decentring our understanding of fashion in the African context play a role in teaching fashion theory and history? Fanon (1952/2008) concludes his book, Black Skin White Masks, with a final prayer: 'O my body, make of me always a man who questions!' (p. 181). Our self-imposed questions are layered with the tone of this simple yet poignant prayer. As taught to us, the content of fashion theory and history was informative but largely encompassed examples far removed from our context. The exclusion of locally situated particularities, implicitly and explicitly, situates Africa as devoid of any fashion or dress history. By implication, silencing this history from fashion education devalues its significance and the potential it holds in designing context-specific curricula. Slade and Jansen (2020) point out that reconstructing an understanding of fashion entails 'recursively revis[ing] our understandings and our histories one piece at a time' (p. 813). Assuming our transitional position (from students to lecturers), do we then teach fashion as we were taught, supporting the hegemonic power of Euro-Americanism? Or do we shift this hegemony by expanding teaching that incorporates context-specific examples?

We designed a cross-institutional teaching and research project, the *Drum* magazine project, to renew fashion curricula in a manner that better values South African history. The *Drum* magazine project was a decolonial exercise to introduce an element of context-specificity in our teaching. The student project was implemented in two fashion departments of two universities based in Durban and Johannesburg. For clarity on nomenclature, as opposed to the widely used terms 'fashion colleges' or 'fashion schools', both universities discussed in this article refer to their fashion divisions as 'departments'. We remain true to this usage and apply the term 'fashion departments' throughout this article.

As a student project of the fashion programme, it was incorporated into fashion theory and history modules. The project included *Drum* magazine content as the tools through which fashion theory and history might be taught in the context of South African fashion education. Some questions guided our project development process. These were: Does *Drum* magazine, with its history in South African visual culture, belong to the corpus of fashion curricula? If *Drum* magazine does belong to the curricula, how might it, through some of its content, renew, stretch and decentre how fashion theory and history are taught?

Revaluing and incorporating *Drum* magazine content involved sourcing alternative archives and renewing fashion imaginaries to show the plurality of epistemologies in the university space. Grosfoguel (2013) proposes the need to 'bring epistemic diversity to the canon of thought to create a pluri-verse of meanings and concepts' (p. 89). We viewed revaluing and incorporating *Drum* content as one way of decolonising university knowledge structures. This article focuses on how we renewed, stretched and decentred our teaching of fashion history and theory. Our work contributes to the decolonial fashion discourse and shows how context specificity in fashion education might contribute to attaining decolonial imperatives and shifts.

Theorising the decolonial fashion discourse

We begin with a comprehensive view of the concept to start a discussion about decoloniality, specifically in fashion. We understand decoloniality to entail confronting and opposing the coloniality of knowledge creation being exerted by the Western canon and its inferiorising of non-Western societies' ways of being, doing and knowledge creation (Adams et al., 2018; Grosfoguel, 2013; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). To confront and oppose such practices, Maldonado-Torres (2007) suggested a decolonial turn, which is about 'making visible the invisible and about analysing the mechanisms that produce such invisibility or distorted visibility in light of a large stock of ideas' (p. p. 261"

Decoloniality has recently attracted attention in the fashion discipline through specially themed journal issues, conferences and research projects. Examples include the *International Journal of Fashion Studies* (Cheang et al., 2022), *Design and Culture* (Schultz et al., 2018), and *Fashion Theory* (Slade & Jansen, 2020). The 2017 Design Education Forum of Southern Africa conference was themed 'Decolonise!' (Giloi & Botes, 2017) in response to South Africa's 2015 student protests (Fees Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall). ZoneModa organised a conference in 2023 under the theme 'Fashion in 3D: Decolonizing, Deconstructing and Decentring'. UAL's London College of Fashion has been conducting a research project called 'Decolonising Fashion and Textiles' led by Francesco Mazzarella. With an ever-expanding focus on the notion of fashion, Jansen (2020) stated that the decolonial fashion discourse framework:

> "[*P*]*roposes a radical redefinition of fashion by delinking it from modernity—the very core of its constitution—and therefore from coloniality by redefining it as a multitude of possibilities—in and*

outside of modernity—rather than a normative framework falsely claiming universality. It critiques the denial and erasure of a diversity of ways to fashioning the body due to unequal global power relations based on modern-colonial order, the Euro–American canon of normativity and the exploitation and abuse of culture, human life and Earth" (p. 817)

While the word decoloniality may not have been included in prior studies, the discourse on non-European fashion systems has been ongoing for years within fashion studies; see Mustafa (2001), Rabine (2002), Allman (2004), Gott and Loughran (2010), and Rovine (2015). Nevertheless, the inclusion of decoloniality in fashion discourse has seen a significant growth in diversifying and showing how fashion is understood.

Decoloniality, the fashion curriculum and fashion history are the focus of studies by Gaugele and Titton (2019), Cheang and Suterwalla (2020) and Ahmed (2022). Cheang and Suterwalla (2020) and Ahmed (2022) warn against superficially revisiting and replacing fashion students' reading lists as a decolonial educational practice. Cheang and Suterwalla (2020) instead promote 'making the space for experimentation and recognising the emotional costs involved in new developments are all part of designing decolonial pedagogies, in a continuous rethinking of what knowledge is and what learning looks like' (p. 881).
In contrast, Ahmed (2022, pp. 11-12) writes about imagining and undertaking new non-European teaching and learning methods that engage with local knowledge. Gaugele and Titton (2019) observe the need for a 'revision of fashion history and globalisation of fashion and dress histories, inspired by postcolonialism and world history' (p. 120.

Drum magazine has enjoyed much attention as representative of a particular era in South Africa. Its pages have visually and textually recorded dress and fashion styles in the South African context. Nevertheless, from our search, *Drum* magazine has largely been excluded from local fashion curricula. Fashion history forms part of fashion education; therefore, it is crucial to diversify the telling of fashion history, and the incorporation of *Drum* magazine in our study played this role. Furthermore, appreciating and valorising *Drum* magazine and its place in South Africa develops and renews pedagogical practices using locally relevant resources.

What is *Drum* magazine?

Drum magazine was founded by Robert Crisp and Jim Bailey and first published in March 1951 as *African Drum*. It emerged just three years after the inception of administrative apartheid. In its earlier issues, *Drum* had a low circulation and failed to attract a sizeable black readership. The reason for the failure was because *African Drum*, at the time, presented the African as 'rural, tribal, Edenic, unspoiled, exotic' (Guldimann, 2019, p. 261), a white person's fantasy of what Africa was – the kind of material the targeted black urban reader was uninterested in. The magazine was transformed after the newly appointed editor-in-chief, Anthony Sampson, and Henry 'Mr. *Drum'* Nxumalo researched a potential *Drum* reader and their attempt to determine the sort of material that that individual might be interested in reading. Their research drastically changed the look, image, approach and subsequently, name of the publication – from *African Drum* to simply *Drum*.

Fleming and Falola (2005) wrote that the magazine went from its paternalistic writing and printing of '"know yourself" stories to articles on crime syndicates, American styled jazz music, *shebeen* life, and other happenings in Cape Town, Durban and on the Reef' (pp. 136-137). Its coverage and exposé of specific issues were of interest to its readership, which saw a significant increase in circulation. So large was its circulation

that *Drum* started publishing East and West African issues distributed to Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Tanganyika and the Central African Federation. By 1956, *Drum* had become the largest-selling magazine on the continent.

The magazine's photography of cover girls was another contributing factor that increased its visibility, popularity and consumption. Nigerian and Ghanaian readers were unfamiliar with Sophiatown and District Six (reported about in the magazine) and consumed *Drum* primarily 'to find out about South African news and to gawk at the magazine's cover girls' (Fleming & Falola, 2005, p. 141). The cover imagery was used to articulate and express black urban cosmopolitanism. Through images, the urban black population fashioned an identity and a worldview 'contrary to that envisioned for them by either the white government or the older black elite' (Allen, 2008, p. 22).

With its rich history, *Drum* has served as a fount of inspiration in South African visual culture. The early 2000s saw the emergence of some fashion designers who contributed to the development of South Africa's fashion industry. Amongst these is the lifestyle brand Stoned Cherrie, established in 2000. In 2001, the brand collaborated with Bailey's African History Archives (BAHA), the digital and physical space that houses thirty years of *Drum* magazine's archives, when the magazine was under Bailey's control. The collaboration saw what would emerge as Stoned Cherrie's classic item, the *Drum* t-shirt, which incorporated some iconic covers. *Drum* covers continue to emerge in visual culture. In 2021, Mercy Thokozane Minah, a multidisciplinary artist, re-imagined and re-interpreted some *Drum* covers by re-painting them as commentary about queer existence and body positivity. These two examples indicate how *Drum* magazine continues to be used in the arts and, by extension, fashion to communicate social issues. It is a result of such a history and background that we re-inscribed *Drum* into the public imagination by infusing it in our modules as a resource to renew, stretch and decentre our teaching of fashion history and theory.

Research context

Our methods entailed visual and textual analysis of 1950s and 1960s *Drum* magazine content. These were accessed from those kept at BAHA in Johannesburg. To ensure compliance with research ethics, we sought ethical clearance for the study from our respective institutions. Once approved, we provided detailed explanations of the study to the students through information letters with accompanying consent forms for signing. By agreeing, the students consented to attend lectures, write essays, develop a magazine cover and participate in semi-structured interviews.

The *Drum* magazine project started with a two-part lecture, focusing first on South Africa's 1950s and 1960s social and political environment through *Drum* reports that were linked to certain apartheid legislation. The second part of the lecture focused on fashion between the 1950s and 1960s as featured in the *Drum* archives. The students were also introduced to two seminal readings: Ford's (2015) *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style and the Global Politics of Soul* and Tulloch's (2016) *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora*. An argument that could be levelled against the project is its use of two seminal readings penned by fashion writers from other locales. We chose these readings because they speak directly to *Drum,* and we appreciated how the texts linked the magazine to fashion. Showing the value of diasporic discourse for African studies, in this instance, African fashion and dress history. Ford (2015) wrote that "*Drum* … was adamant about making the style accessible to ordinary people. This emphasis on democratising fashion demonstrates how central issues of social consciousness and black liberation were to the politics of style' (p. 166).

Following the lecture, the students were required to work in groups and use an allocated folder with a *Drum* archival image and readings related to an individual featured in *Drum* magazine during the 1950s and 1960s. Using the folder content, the students wrote a biographical essay about their allocated individual. Lindsay (2017) sees potential in biographies to understand history. Thus, our inclusion of biographical essays introduced a focus on an individual to understand a portion of South African history through an individual.

The information gleaned from the essay-writing exercise was used to style and visually communicate a contemporary look through a re-imagined *Drum* magazine cover. The cover needed to be informed by (a) students' findings about their allocated individual and (b) the *Drum* magazine photograph of that individual included in their folders. Each magazine cover needed to be accompanied by a design statement through which the students explained the concept behind it. To support this task, we prepared a secondary folder with a resource package that included a magazine cover template, specially selected fonts and page texturing images in case students wanted to age the final photograph by giving it a nostalgic effect akin to 1950s and 1960s *Drum* covers. We then created an instructional video in which we demonstrated applying these functions using Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator. In some instances, the students used themselves as models; in other cases, they asked friends and family members to model. The biographical essays and magazine covers were then publicly exhibited at university galleries in both Johannesburg and Durban.

Biographical essays as narratives of alternative histories and fashion imaginaries

Cheang and Suterwalla (2020) wrote about deepening teachers' and students' intellectual curiosity and manifesting 'greater cultural sensitivity to redress the many social inequalities embedded in histories' (p. 881). Inequalities manifest when there is an imbalance in whose history gets told. We concur with de Greef (2020, p. 914), who propounded filling the public imagination by 'writing of forgotten and disavowed' histories. We understand the writing of disavowed histories to be about finding alternative archives, implemented as a critical expansion of imaginaries in the fashion context (Gaugele & Titton, 2019, p. 25). Before viewing the archives, we associated *Drum* magazine with individuals like jazz vocalists Miriam Makeba and Dolly Rathebe, as well as activist Steve Biko. Their photographs were featured in iconic *Drum* covers and some well-known issues. Indeed, we showed the students some of these celebrated imageries. These individuals and their contributions to South Africa remain inscribed in public memory. Although we were careful not to take away from the students' contributions, we promoted a deliberate exercise of expanding the number of individuals with whom *Drum* magazine may be affiliated.

Lindsay (2017) argued that 'history is made by a wider range of people than literate elites, and that historical forces and ordinary people act reciprocally on one another' (p. 15). Therefore, we introduced the students to individuals whose stories and lives had not been widely captured and circulated, yet whose participation had some impact on South African society. These individuals included Dottie Tiyo, Doreen Madombo, Patricia Jobodwana, Viccie 'Busi' Mhlongo, Amaranee Naidoo, Constance Molefe, Khabi Mngoma, Sewsunker Sewgolam, Sonny Pillay, Gertie Williams, Jean Hart and Hazel Futa. These individuals were associated with music (Mhlongo, Masuka, Mngoma, Pillay and Hart), sports (Molefe, Naidoo and Sewgolam), film (Futa, Tiyo and Madombo), education (Jobodwana) and the queer community (Williams). While Sewgolam, Mngoma, Dorothy Masuka and Williams have been the subjects of a biography, a PhD study, journal articles and a book chapter, respectively, the lives of the rest were minimally documented,

often in texts that focused on a different subject altogether. Furthermore, where the lives of these individuals were recorded, the information was excerpted from *Drum* magazine (i.e., Jobodwana, Williams and Molefe), meaning that there was a regurgitation of information.

Despite this minimal information, some students showed creativity, inventiveness and a willingness to learn about their subjects. For instance, because of her romantic relationship with Can Themba and the attention this relationship stirred in 1950s South Africa, the student group that wrote Hart's essay relied on a scholarly article about Themba and his short story, *Crepuscule*, to find information on Hart. Set in 1950s Sophiatown, *Crepuscule* tells the story of a relationship between a black man and white woman. The short story was included in Themba's book, *The Will to Die* (1972). Still unsatisfied with the information they found, the group read this article closely, even going through the reference list. The reference list led them to Hart's interview posted on YouTube. The discovery of the interview provided the students with much-needed information, which resulted in a multi-themed essay.

Hart's tweed skirt and polo-neck were analysed through the frame of the kofifi style. Kofifi is another name for Sophiatown, and when linked with the word style, it pays homage to fashion that echoes the style heritage associated with 1950s Sophiatown. The students' writing included topics on the African American jazz movement, the 1950s multiculturalism of Sophiatown and the criminalisation of interracial relationships in South Africa at the time. The linkages in the students' essays show that 'one cannot capture the whole past, but we have access to remnants of it held in archives' (Tulloch, 2016, p. 179).

Archives can, however, also bring forth troubling questions. The information available on some individuals only captured celebratory moments published in *Drum* magazine. The students had remaining nagging questions about their assigned individuals since they could not find further information on their subjects. These included the absence of events in their lives after *Drum's* publication. Eismann (2019, p. 66) pointed out that postcolonial archives disturb the very notion of the archive by opening questions of 'what constitutes an archive? What is in it? Who put it there?'. This quality of postcolonial archives in the context of the *Drum* Magazine Project was the students' self-imposed question of 'What happened to her?' raised while writing Jobodwana's essay. The frustration continued to be articulated in the essay's mood, an excerpt from which we present below:

"Patricia Jobodwana made headlines across Africa after appearing in an evocative photograph in Drum, Africa's most widely circulated magazine. She is shown working hard in Fort Hare's science laboratory. A second photograph shows her sitting at a piano with friends at Fort Hare's women's hostel. Drum was described as "the youngest African undergraduate ever." She may have been South Africa's youngest undergraduate of any race, having enrolled at Fort Hare University College at the age of 14. She was from Cape Town, and after finishing, she planned to study medicine... and here, sadly, the popular record of Patricia Jobodwana's life appears to end. Her name does not appear in any of Fort Hare's student records. She appears to have vanished from history as quickly as she had arrived because she was a very young black woman living in a patriarchal and apartheid-era society. Jobodwana evidently finished both her primary and secondary education exceptionally early because she could now be compared to educational prodigies like Nigerian-British Esther Okade, who in 2015 became the youngest mathematics undergraduate in the UK at the age of 10."

Image 1: Screenshot of students' essay on Patricia Jobodwana. Credit: K. Mchunu.

One of the students in this group expressed frustration in the interview:

> *"She was the first black woman undergraduate student at Fort Hare doing medicine. I just wished that I had more information on her because she sounds like a very important woman. I just wish,*

maybe, her children. I just want a little bit more". (9 September 2022, interview)

The students' analysis of Jobodwana through the lens of the scientific laboratory coat and its symbolic meaning led them to study her and the participation of other black girls and women in STEM fields (i.e. Esther Okade).

The student-penned Sewgolam essay used his wearing of the golfing uniform to present a complex and nuanced essay that married topics of poverty, oppression, lack of access, assimilation, culture and achievement. The discovery of his death in his early 40s as a pauper with a non-existent golfing career left the students disturbed. However, this group refused to leave Sewgolam's life story with a sad ending. The Johannesburg-based student group searched on social media platforms and discovered Rajen Sewgolam, Sewsunker Sewgolam's son, who got into and continues playing golf, a sport his father introduced to him. The Durban-based student group gained access to and used the *Papwa Sewgolum Golf Course* in Durban as a site to photograph their magazine cover as a homage to Sewgolam (discussed later in the article).

These instances demonstrate how life is recorded and can sometimes destabilise expectations and the linearity of life's beginning and end. *Drum* magazine did not promise to record Jobodwana's, Sewgolam's or any other individuals' lives in this way. However, we understand students' inclusion of Oskade and Sewgolam in their writings as an attempt to show that time 'is a fluid concept, and the terms past, present and future are not necessarily linear' (Eismann, 2020, p. 68). These inclusions also indicate making linkages to answer questions that archives sometimes fail to answer.

There were moments when *Drum* magazine archives proved to be frustrating and presented questions that held the potential to make students angry at the apartheid regime and its design of a system and conditions that rendered black identities as belonging to a doomed future. Writing about the Afrofuturistic universe, Eismann (2019,) states that it is a self-fashioned universe that entails 'alternative histories, geographies, and identities, members of the African diaspora imagine themselves … unbound by the chains of slavery and racism' (pp. 67-68). The students excavated stories from the past and analysed the clothing by considering the contexts in which these garbs were worn. Through this method, they crafted alternative imaginaries that saw their subjects beyond the bounds of apartheid.

The essay-writing exercise showed a text-based technique of narrating visibility, alternative imaginaries, and futurity and joining the decolonial fashion discourse through teaching and learning. The second part of the project showed the marrying of text-based and visual types – the biography-informed magazine covers.

Imaging alternative fashion histories and imaginaries: Student magazine covers

Tulloch (2016) views fashion photography as a method to communicate ideas, make social commentary and tell stories, further adding that 'whether that [story] is truth or fiction, nonetheless there is an attempt to make a point' (pp. 178-179). This idea about fashion photography was informative for the project since the students needed to communicate a message through imaging. Gaugele and Titton (2019) assert that 'fashion media—from fashion magazines to blogs—are important hubs for the dissemination of representations and collective narratives on gender, race, class, body, identity, and sexuality; therefore, they carry the potential for a decolonising transformation from within the fashion system' (p. 27). These magazine covers emphasised the point of teaching fashion theory and history through imaging alternative histories and fashion imaginaries.

Image 2: Hazel Futa-informed students' photograph. Photographer: RemyShoots (2022).

Students' creativity, demonstrated during the essay writing, was also shown in the magazine covers. For example, the Hazel Futa-informed photograph (Image 2) used ballet elements to capture delicate femininities the group believed Futa embodied. Their tutu-like ballet skirt was made of downloaded 1950s and 1960s *Drum* magazine covers the group printed in black and white, rolled up to form a swirling curl on the hem and tucked into an elasticated waistband.

A commonality across many of the students' covers was a strong leaning toward the symbolic meaning of every element in a photograph. Examples include the Constance Molefe- and Sewsunker Sewgolum-informed photographs.

The Constance Molefe-informed photograph (Image 3) was taken in one of the sports fields of the Johannesburg-based university. The students were drawn to Molefe's white tennis attire and her plaited hair, which they understood as the Benny and Betty hairstyle. Benny and Betty is a type of plait hairstyle done mainly by black girls during the apartheid period. The name of the hairstyle derives from a book of the same title, particularly its main characters. The book was introduced as an English-learning text as part of *Bantu* education. Some people continue doing the hairstyle in contemporary times. Students read Molefe's firm grip on her tennis racket and the smile behind it as symbolic of the:

> *"[H]ope that she had during the era that she was in. With reference to the oppression that hindered many dreams in the 50s and 60s, the model stands behind a rusty chain-link fence. Although she is behind this fence, which obscures her view of the future, she maintains a cheerful smile and firmly holds onto her tennis racket. In our opinion, the firm grip that she has on the racket speaks to how Constance held onto her dreams."* (Student design statement, 2022)

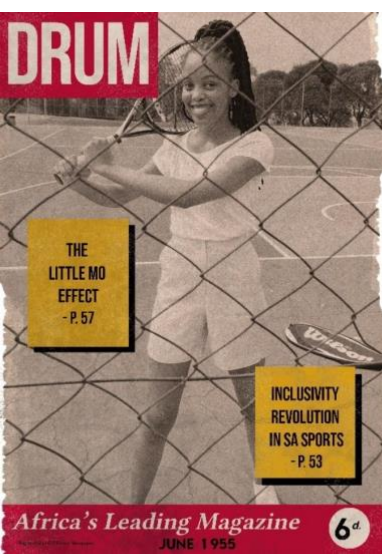
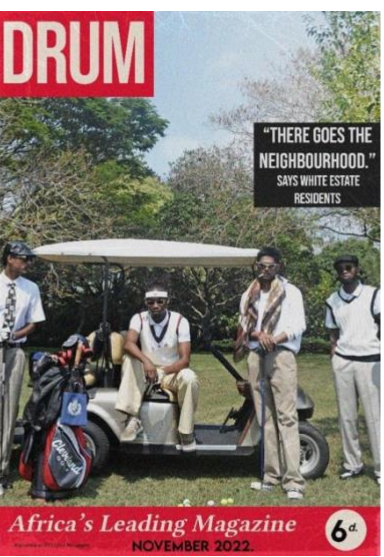


Image 3: Constance Molefe-informed students' photograph. Photographer, Nawa, L. (2022).

The golf ball (made from crumpled paper), flower petals, green field and black clothes were well-considered elements in the Sewgolam-informed photograph (Image 4). The golf ball referenced a makeshift golf club that Sewgolam's father made for him growing up. The confetti-style flower petals scattered on the grass symbolise the peak of his golfing career and referenced an event in which Sewgolam wore a garland around his neck to celebrate after winning the Dutch Open (a story covered in *Drum* magazine). Similarly, their inclusion of the green field has literal and figurative meanings. The literal connotation is the golf course's grass field, which is also 'a metaphorical grass being greener on the other side' (Student design statement, 2022).

The Durban-based Sewgolam group also highlighted his golfing career through their magazine cover focusing on racial tensions (Image 5). The students' styling choices and magazine cover creative direction are a homage to the image of Sewgolam on the golf course with his 'entourage'. The inclusion of the title '"There goes the neighbourhood" says white residents' is a reference to post-apartheid societal views of young men of colour. The group explained the significance of the cover story:

> *"'There goes the neighbourhood.' What does this mean? This is an exclamation after a negative change affects someone's neighbourhood, such as someone undesirable moving in (Privette 2021). To the golfing community at the time, we can assume that he [Sewgolum] was seen as someone 'undesirable' moving into this prestigious sport, in his story he was looked down upon due to the colour of his skin."* (Student design statement, 2022)



Images 4 and 5: Sewsunker' Papwa' Sewgolum-informed students' photographs. Photographers from left: Pondo, Y. (2022) and Moolman, J. (2022).

In a 1950s *Drum* photograph of Sonny Pillay, he wears a white shirt and cardigan shot with his slightly angled face. Students took the white shirt element worn underneath a denim jacket to 'strongly mimic the focal point of the referenced photograph and bring out the same soft and clean aesthetic' (Student design statement, 2022). The students used their findings about Pillay's immigration, first to the UK and later to the USA, to inform the inclusion of the face mask in their magazine cover (Image 6). The group wrote that:

> " *...the mask is muted and hidden even though in the foreground, which resembles how Sonny appears facially concealed right in front of the viewer. This can be seen as a commentary on how Mr Pillay, as a black artist, was censored by the apartheid regime. Drum magazine deserves its critical acclamation for being able to promote silenced creatives and untold stories* ..." (Student design statement, 2022)

A limited and limiting engagement with *Drum* magazine archives, such as reliance on Google searches solely, could have resulted in teaching fashion theory and history through the widely circulated narrative of Sophiatown and its kofifi style. Such reliance could have restricted the magazine's wide range of stories. Avoiding teaching solely through the Sophiatown canon allowed for the 'recognition of a plurality of epistemologies concerning fashioning the body [and] to revalue a diversity that has been rendered invisible, erased, discriminated and de-futured' (Jansen, 2020, p. 817). We ultimately argue that accessing these wide-ranging stories allowed us to renew, stretch, and decentre fashion education.

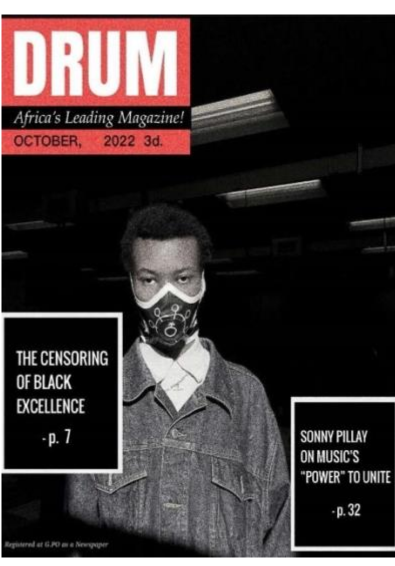


Image 6: Sonny Pillay -informed students' photograph. Photographer, Makubele, H. (2022).

The students' interpretations of *Drum's* historical photographs ranged from queer politics, diverse forms of femininities and expressions of black excellence, among others, showing the students' expanding narratives that formed new meanings. Additionally, their exploration of these themes coincided, to some extent, with the vast scale and plurality of this historically significant magazine in covering a diverse range of individuals. The records were sometimes fragmented, and their residues led to more questions than answers. However, the students formed alternative histories and imaginaries through imagination, creativity, writing and imaging.

Conclusion

We asked ourselves whether *Drum* magazine, with its history in South African visual culture, belongs to the corpus of fashion curricula. We recognise that *Drum* magazine may not be considered a fashion magazine by global standards, but it is essential to question the context in which we focused on *Drum.* Decoloniality values 'a multitude of possibilities' (Jansen, 2020, p. 817) and by implication appreciates different perspectives. In this sense, *Drum* magazine's significant role in South African visual culture and its contribution to existing knowledge in this field is undeniable. The *Drum* magazine project was a space to celebrate and validate this contribution by the magazine. Given that we considered fashion as context-sensitive and -specific, this project also expanded and challenged notions of what can be considered a fashion magazine.

Fanon (1952/2008) wrote that 'every human problem must be considered from the standpoint of time. Ideally, the present will always contribute to the building of the future. And this future is not the future of the cosmos but rather the future of my century, my country, my existence' (pp. 5-6). While Fanon's quote is about time, it also addresses aspects of identity and context. This statement urges us to go back to questions of what we think we owe fashion students existing in the fashion education system and our endeavour to renew and decentre the teaching of fashion theory and history. As South African fashion lecturers, we cannot speak to another geography or context. We aimed to speak to our specific reality and expand teaching by using context-specific resources. As we questioned whether we should teach fashion as we were taught, we grappled with how to view the future of fashion education. We cannot project how we see the future of teaching fashion theory and history, but we know that we cannot wait for the future to solve its problems.

We acknowledge that this project had its limitations and did not cover the comprehensive fashion history of South Africa. Expanding beyond the 1950s and 1960s as periods can be considered for future research, with a more fashion-focused approach as an alternative to the biographical lens that this project adopted. We also reflected on the students' question of 'What happened to her?' and how it speaks to the limitation of relying on only one archival source like *Drum* magazine. South Africa's past events and, by extension, its fashion histories, have been covered in multiple sources. To ease the answering of such questions, future studies could look at the combined use of multiple archival resources to record people's histories as broadly as possible.

The scope of the decolonial fashion discourse is too large to be fulfilled by an undergraduate assignment like the *Drum* magazine project. However, if we are subsumed and intimidated by the scope of an extensive exercise, contributions (no matter how large or small) to the process will never be recorded or started. If the decolonial imperatives and shifts are to be seriously addressed, our incorporation of archives and alternative histories, as chronicled in *Drum* magazine, addressed these imperatives in the now. Our task was to join the decolonial fashion discourse, and we believed in the role of education in this conversation. Nevertheless, the journey in decoloniality and fashion is ongoing. As we conclude this first phase of the *Drum* magazine project, we enter a new one with a set of new questions expressed in a Fanonian way.

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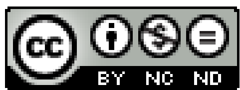

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