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Emancipating in Style

Escaping the Infinite Staircase of the Fast-Fashion Industry

Thomas Beekes

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Emancipating in Style;

Escaping the Infinite Staircase of the Fast-Fashion Industry

Master Thesis by Thomas Beekes

To Estelle,
Because your love and bravery
inspire me every day.

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the support, trust, and patience of my wonderful supervisors. To both of you, thank you for allowing me to take the time I need to live up to the most of my potential and indulging my chaotic rambles and design work.

To Fernando, thank you for sharing your work and knowledge so trustingly an openly with me and coaching me through understanding it so patiently. The theoretical framework of Userism proved instrumental and the perfect method to approach that frustrated me so personally.

To Caiseal, thank you for the near infinite hours of conversation, advice, concern, and patience. You truly went above and beyond to help me and I could always trust that whatever I struggled with, you would make time to listen and find a way to help me.

To say that this graduation project has been a challenge for me, is probably not a revolutionary statement, but for me it was an absolutely life-changing experience. In so many ways it helped me realize and appreciate the love and support my friends and loved ones have for me. And for that I will always be grateful. I would like to acknowledge the fact that without the following people, I would not have been able to do any of this;

To Estelle, thank you for being my absolute backbone throughout everything. Your love and support have helped me achieve things I do not think I would have been capable of without you. You help me be the best version of myself and with you I think anything is possible.

To Bastian, thank you for your unshakeable faith in me and infinite hyping-up. Spending the weekends with you always revitalized me to start the new week with confidence and enthusiasm.

To my friends, Sam, Martijn, Romi, and Fleur, thank you for being my community and test-subjects, without your patience for hours-long sessions of sewing tutorials this project would have gotten nowhere at all and would not have nearly been as much fun to do.

Aan mijn familie, Mats, Pap, Mam, Opa en Oma, bedankt voor jullie liefde en steun over de ondertussen 7 jaar studie. Ik mag flink in mijn handjes knijpen om zo'n lieve familie achter me te hebben staan.



Positionality Statement

Before you read this thesis, I think it will be important to clarify a bit of who I am and what drives me as a designer. Through this, you as a reader can maybe understand better where my thoughts and opinions come from;

I am Thomas Beekes, a Dutch student in the Netherlands. I was raised in a globalized Dutch culture of Christian-Dutch descent. While growing up in this environment, I have noticed the dulling globalism has caused to the cultural diversity of the Netherlands. ‘Dulling’ is based on the stories of my family and the histories of what living in the Netherlands used to be like. I was always rather frustrated by this fact and grew up being unsure as to what kind of culture I could identify.

During my years of study at the TU Delft, I got the opportunity to study art history and Dutch heritage and learned about the cultural impact the Dutch colonialist practices had on the countries that were colonized by us and on our own culture. Especially how so many horrendous concepts of colonialism persist in our systems and lives today.

Learning about these dynamics and how it even persists in contexts of design and general academicism, have become driving factors in the way I approach design, with the express intention to help contribute to design moving away from such exploitative and oppressive dynamics.

Throughout this time I have developed a personal belief in the power of community-based culture as both a diversifying and unifying factor in a society. How artistic expression can make a person and their community feel heard, seen, and understood while having respect and interest in another’s. By avoiding nationalist concepts of going back in time and bringing back ‘old values’, and instead creating room, time, and attention for communities and people to share new perspectives based on their lived experiences.

Anti-Acknowledgements

In a time period in which most if not all of my colleagues are resorting to generative AI-software to supplement or even wholly create their work for themselves, I feel it necessary to address that I have made of point of not using such software. If the abhorrent labour conditions of those sorting and categorizing the datasets for the software and the horrendous environmental impact the race for the biggest AI is having on our already overstrained planet were not reason enough to abstain, the following reasons based on academic integrity should do it;

With AI-based systems, there is no real way to check the validity of the training data that is used to make the decisions. For the sake of the ‘secret of the trade’ these systems often operate as a ‘black box’ (Ulrich Aivodji, 2019), in this case meaning that there is no way to see the code or the data and processes the systems bases its decisions on. What we do know is that it uses data that it pulls from the internet, without requesting permission from their original creators and mixes them into an unrecognizable mean average. With many considering to use generative AI to create visuals and text that would otherwise create employment opportunities and the theft of data and posted work, it is not unreasonable to say that the software allows for the destruction of human art and digital media for the sake of profit.

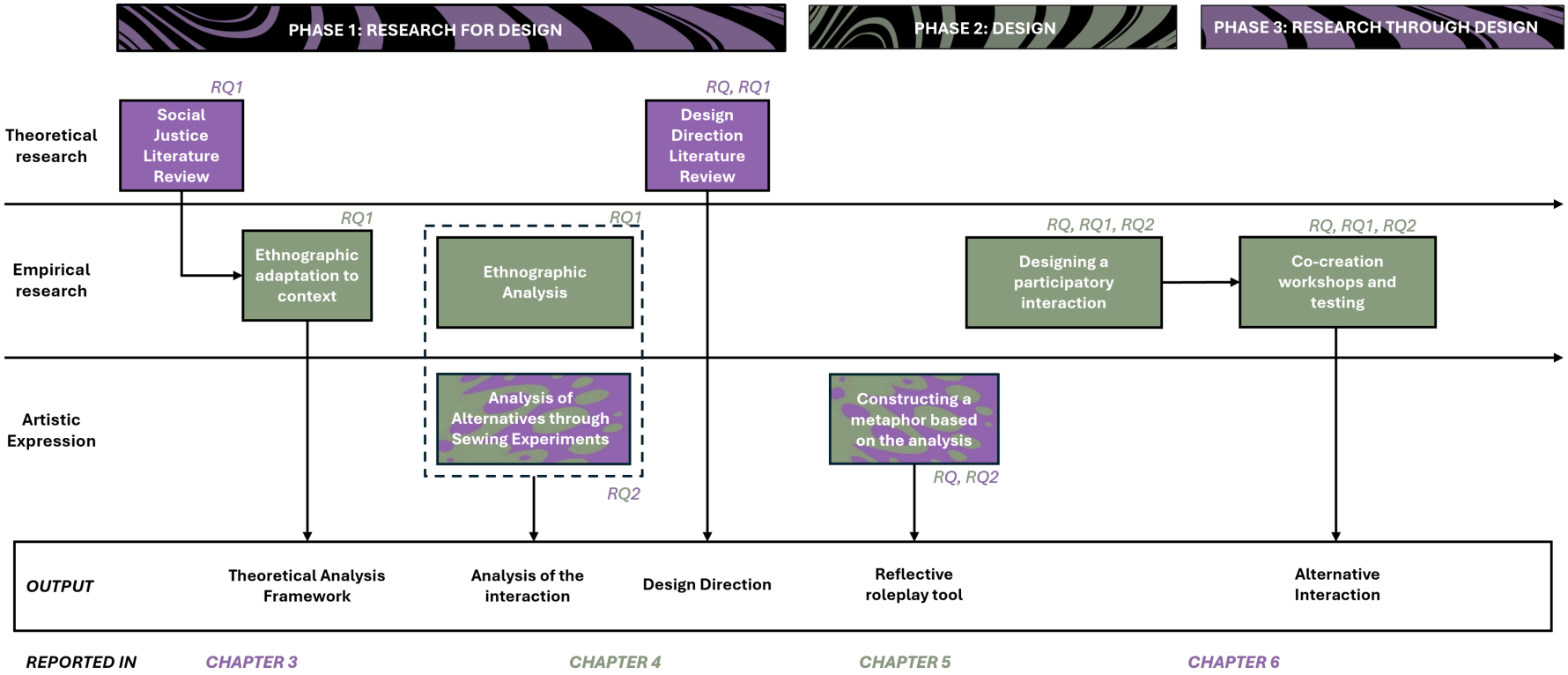
Which goes against every principle upheld in this project to begin with. Cultural references and inspirations need to come from true, lived experiences and can be based on the references collected in one’s own life. To use a mean average of whatever biased data was stolen for the development of an AI-program is to feign objectivity without stating sources and references for the information collected. By pretending that AI-written work is your own, means lying about your authorship and denying yourself opportunities to learn from trying.

Executive Summary

Growing up, I always wanted to learn how to make my own clothes, specifically because I felt that the clothing I could buy in the boy's department at the stores me and my parents visited, did not make me feel like I was could be myself. So, I promised myself, that as soon as I was old enough, I would go to my local fabric store, learn how to sew, and make all my clothes myself. But as soon as I was old enough, the fabric store had closed, and my parents would not teach me how to adjust my own clothes, for fear I would ruin them and waste their money. Understandably, because I was inexperienced and if I really wanted something different, new clothes were cheaper than sewing lessons. Leaving me to return to the boy's department, still only finding jeans and t-shirts, trying to find myself between the hangers and racks, but only finding what the world around me wanted me to be.

But according to literature research, this is now how this interaction has always felt; Fashion is one of the oldest artforms of humanity, the way in which we decorate our bodies to represent our identity, our community, and our beliefs is such a core component of our lives, that we cannot imagine leaving the house without making sure that we wear certain things a certain way. What you wear, is who you are, and becomes an integral part of how we are perceived by the people around us. But in the 21st century, barely anyone makes their own clothing anymore and most people do not know how. Most consumers resort to purchasing from the fast-fashion industry, knowing the negative impact on the environment it has and the sweatshops it employs. As a consumer, you no longer have any say in how your clothing is made, and what it looks like, you are left to be content with what is offered in store to you.

Considering this loss of agency and expression in this artform, the research project in this report seeks to identify the pillars of the oppressive interaction with the fast-fashion industry in and attempt to dismantle them in constructing an alternative interaction. Allowing people to emancipate themselves from dependence on said industry through creative means. Seeing as the creative and artistic element is such an integral part of the interaction with fashion, artistic methods and explorations were employed to gain a better understanding of the interaction throughout. This project was divided in three phases, a Research for Design phase, a Design phase and a Research through Design phase with young consumers of fashion in the Netherlands as the main context.



Phase 1: Research for Design

In the first phase, literature research was done on defining the pillars of oppression experienced int he interaction with the fast-fashion industry, by adapting a Design Justice theory on 'User Oppression', a concept which defines being reduced to being a 'user' locks you out of designing the conditions of your own life. Creating an overall experience of disempowerment caused by the designer. This was followed by an ethnographic analysis of the modern mainstream interaction with fast-fashion and an artistic exploration with auto-ethnographic reflections of alternative interactions with fashion. From this analysis it was identified that any and all components of the textile industry in the Netherlands have been monopolized by fast-fashion companies and offshored to distant continents where labour is cheap. The designs are made by unknown people high up the corporate ladder, who never interact with their client base of millions, having no clue of the lives, identities, and ideas they deem to represent. Leaving the rest of the world as disempowered consumers and users of this monolith of an industry, making us passive consumers of something that started out as an ancient community- and identity-based artform.

Concluding that the main forms of oppression experienced manifest on a systemic level in the monopolization and offshoring of the means of production, and a hegemonic level through a forced expression of allegiance to the dominant monoculture of Western conventional uniforms. Leading to an overall consistently

dissatisfying and disempowering interaction, which captures a human need and trapping the consumer in an addictive cycle of constant consumption without humanizing expression or capability.

These oppressive dynamics bore resemblances to phenomena employed in Colonialist enterprises, which came as no surprise, seeing as the contemporary fashion industry is directly descended from enterprises from Europe's imperialist and colonialist era. So in order to address these phenomena adequately, more literature research was performed on decolonizing design. This research guided the next steps to design an alternative interaction by concluding that the fashion industry relies heavily on the myth of better living through technology, and that this is a modernist design practice. This practice can be avoided by employing place-based practices that acknowledge the interdependence of all people, beings, and the earth. By emphasizing community participation to address the monopolization of the means of production and encouraging artistic expression to allow space for the development of liberation and agency to identify with their own culture and community.

Phase two: Design

In the second phase, through the combined efforts of design and artistic methods, the metaphor of the infinite staircase was constructed. This metaphor was originally meant to be an artistic representation of the information collected about the consumer experience of the fast-fashion industry, but was expanded upon. Inspired by tabletop and digital RPG-games, the metaphor became an exercise for people to reflect on their position and behaviour within an interaction they have lived inside their entire lives. And allow them to express their experience and perspectives through a roleplaying expression 'at a safe distance'.
In congruence with the decolonizing design theory, and the intention to empower people against the dynamics of user oppression, the most adequate way to address these dynamics and generate an alternative interaction with fashion, a collaborative workshop was constructed in the third phase.

Phase three: Research through Design

In this third phase, three different subjects are researched through a participatory design workshop;

- *By having the participants reflect on their experience with the fast-fashion industry, they can gain a more-detailed awareness of their experience and understand their own actions and behaviours better.*
    - From this reflection, motivational, auto-ethnographic data can be collected about the contemporary interaction with the fast-fashion industry.

- *By mentally immersing themselves in the metaphor, and allowing the participants to describe their own existence in this fictional world, they can express their feelings about the interactions and speculate about alternative futures by inventing ways to escape.*
    - From the amount of answers related to the world of the metaphor, an impression can be made whether the metaphor is an effective designed tool for its purpose described above.

- By experimenting with artistic expression and determining what it is they want their interaction with their clothing to be, the participants develop skill and empower themselves to emancipate from the fast-fashion industry on their own terms and according to their own wishes.
    - From this experiment, the interest and conditions for the viability of the alternative interaction can be learned and potential futures of fashion be determined by the participants.

To make sure that the participants could determine their terms and condition of participation in the workshop themselves they were asked to bring a sewing project of their choice and goal. Combined with the facts that the workshops were organized within their own social community-circles to encourage comfortability and expression on personal and vulnerable subjects.
our work?

The results of this research through design were;

- That the interaction analysis was mostly congruent with their experience, but that years of the dehumanizing experience of being unable to express their true identity leads to an adjustment of expectations. For many expression is also less in service of the individual and more for the desire of recognition from environment and community.

- The metaphor is an effective method for people to reflect on their own behaviour and the choices they make. It is less conducive of the construction of alternative interaction within the metaphor, but not obstructive to constructing them outside it.

- The sewing experiment, the alternative interaction, empowers their resilience in future interactions with clothing, making them feel more capable than before. While creative expression is specifically encouraged because of the social setting of the workshop, specifically when another participant can help them achieve their ideas.

Combining the information gathered made the overall conclusion of the project; Community-based creative expression and resilience built through experience could be the key to emancipating from the oppressive dynamics of the fast-fashion industry.

Conclusions

The project addresses a piece of art and culture, in order to address this in a way that did not strike down a living thing as a dead thing to be studied, the project similarly followed the artistic expression and cultural references of the author. These were combined with scientific methodologies and research so as to make sure the biases of the author would not steer the outcome of the project. But in this context they are shown to not be complete opposites that need to control and check each other, instead they compliment each other and manage to combine a search for relative objective truth with a unique perspective on the subject matter it addresses. This concept of involving personal perspectives as part of the research instead of trying to control for it, is part of the decolonial design practices which led much of the construction of the alternative interaction.

On a more personal note; the fact that much of the initiative of this project could come from personal interest ‘what could I do’ was a great help to motivation and fulfillment, rather than having to copy from a scientific reference and applying ‘what had to be done’. Allowing the author to combine their own passions and perspectives with the knowledge and skills they have collected throughout their years of study for a scientific degree.

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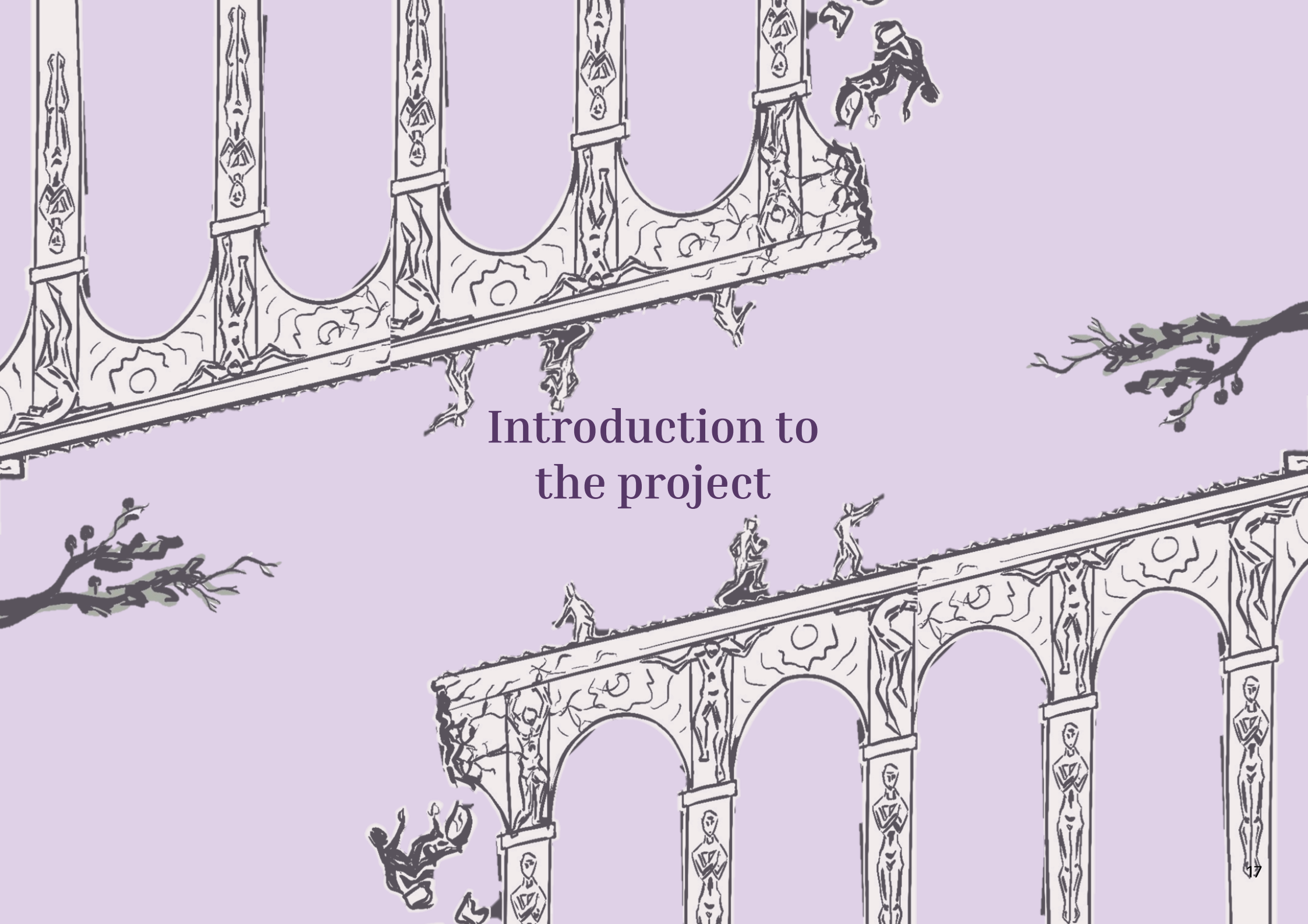


Introduction to the project

1.1 Introduction: my personal experience with fashion

Back in 2005, when I was a little kid, every time I went to the mall with my parents there used to be a fabric store, filled with hundreds of rolls of beautiful patterns and colours. I never went in, because my parents said it would be easier to just buy new clothing at the store and that I was too young to learn to sew for myself. So, I promised myself that if I was old enough to learn, my mother would teach me how to sew, and I would get to go to the store and make something beautiful for myself. A couple of years later, I asked my parents again, but I was told no again, thinking that I would start experimenting on my nice new clothes and ruin them or waste money on expensive fabric which would never turn into anything wearable. I was told to stay away from the sewing machine. A year later, the fabric store closed.

Due to this loss of accessible materials and no real training in creating or adjusting textile products for myself, I maintained the course that was set for my and instead tried to express my identity and creativity through commercial products e.g. the fast-fashion industry. Leading to a streak of extensive consumerism in which I would spend every euro of my allowance on new clothes from H&M and ASOS, chasing a feeling of finding my true identity in my expression through fashion, always coming back somewhat disappointed. And even if I found something that made me happy for a while and got me positive feedback from my peers, it would often break, fade or tear within a year and soon disappear from my wardrobe.

As someone who is part of the LGBTQIA+ community, when I came out as such to my social and professional environment, I felt a weight fall off my shoulders and started taking the first steps to becoming my most authentic self. The way I dressed was a large component of that and one of the first things I started to change when I became myself. As a person of masculine gender identity, playing with feminine elements in materials and silhouettes in my wardrobe became a direct expression of my rejection of the standards thrust upon me by the hegemony of my environment. Partially, because this was one of the biggest conflicts I faced growing up, being laughed at and bullied for liking pink things and princesses, simply because of the gender I was assigned at birth. So, a big part of this process of growing into myself was directly related recognizing the issues within this cultural hegemony that raised me to reject my true identity, beyond my sexuality and gender identity, and embrace and explore the truth of who I am as a person and how I want to express myself.

But when I would try to find something that would reflect my new, truer self, I hit a wall of there only being a set series uniform assortments in nearly all accessible stores, only adhering to hetero-cisgender normative, Western- and Americentric fashion as far as the eye could see. As much as I tried to find alternatives forms of fashion that would better suit my intended expression, there simply were none to be found, leading to a frustrating interaction with the industry. For a while, second-hand stores could fill this void in finding more unique items of fashion, but I clearly was not the only person who resorted to these alternative products, because within a couple of years all that was left in these stores were monocultural fast-fashion items as well.

This frustration is a feeling that has not left me over the years and has kept my eyes open for alternatives. Leading me to find Bernadette Banner, a vlogger on YouTube, but originally a trained seamstress and costume designer, who specializes in reconstruction of historical garments and bases most of her work on primary sources from the late 19th and early 20th century. She later published a sewing manual (Banner, 2022), containing basics and historical sewing methods, combined with pieces of advice on interacting with clothing in a more sustainably, based on historical interactions recorded in primary sources. Her work has been a great inspiration to my own experimentations with sewing and has helped me teach myself the basics, the experience has felt like a liberation and empowerment to my own interaction with fashion. This feeling is something I wanted to chase and spread among others, but I knew that it required more research to be perfected and become available and attainable to others.

While most people are aware of these alternative interactions with fashion, and even more are aware of the detrimental effects the fast-fashion industry has on both the natural environment and the lives of the people who are situationally forced to work in it. “Sweatshops” is a term which has been in the popular consciousness for some time now. Making me wonder why are we all still participating in the maintenance of this industry. Whether it be due to the willingness of the people, addiction to consumerism, or an actual blockade in capability and resources, something is keeping change from happening.

1.2 Preliminary literature research

The paradoxical standstill in the mainstream interaction with the fast-fashion industry and my personal passion for its potential for artistic expression, both frustrated and so inspired me to consider the subject for this Master's Thesis. But before I felt assured that I knew what I was defending, I wanted to gain a better understanding of the historical and modern interactions and importance of fashion described by Bernadette Banner in her book. So what follows is a preliminary literature review performed to find how design could contribute to relieving some of this frustration with the fast-fashion industry in preparation of the project of the Master's Thesis described in this report.

In order to construct relevant research questions, which adequately address the most relevant components in the interaction with the fast-fashion industry, specifically, what potential can be found within changing it, a short literature review was performed. In this research, the historical interaction, presented by Bernadette Banner (2022) is taken as guideline and compared to other research on the interaction with fashion and contemporary design research that addresses similar subjects. As such, it can expand upon the experiences described in the introduction and grant an understanding of the larger implications.

1.2.1 Fashion as an artform and a community-based craft

The art of dressmaking, styling, and wearing is as old as human society itself. The conscious adjustment of appearance and/or physical experience has been an integral part of our daily existence in one way or another, ranging from the styling of body hair, decoration of the body with material objects, or the protection of skin and hair from sight or the elements.

It is one of the major components of human behaviour, that we consistently change our appearance, not just for purposes of survival or procreation, but simply for joy and expression of identity. Arguably, it is one of the things that makes us human. This is not a concept devised through biological distinction of behaviours between different species, it is an emotional sensation and a psychological state of mind related to the development of your personality and your identity as part of a larger collective.

Vlogs about Historical Fashion

In the aforementioned hobbyist handbook written by Bernadette Banner (2022), she poses that there are many historical fashion production methods which may take a little longer to do, but produce much higher quality clothing than modern fast fashion factories do. In the introduction of the book she states; Throughout the book and in the videos on her YouTube channel she employs various methods of handcraft and home-sewing methods which result in the most beautiful and durable historical reconstructions of originally historical garments. Produced with little to no waste of materials, and the materials that is cut out of the patterns are later used for experimentation or pillow stuffing.

> *"It is my goal with this text to offer a starting point should you wish to take control of the clothes you wear – to make them more uniquely you through upcycling, alteration, mending, refashioning, or construction of full garments that have value to you; to give you the ability to make do and mend so that your clothes last you as long as possible"*
>
> *(Banner, 2022)*

Halfway Products

The opportunities listed above would allow any garment an extended lifespan. And the creation of a garment has been considered to stimulate emotional connection in a paper by Hirscher et al. (2013). In this paper the author writes about research they conducted to measure the emotional connection created by a form of co-creation of so-called 'Halfway products'. These are a form of partially unfinished products, allowing the user to finish it themselves while embedding a part of their own personality and emotional value into it. In addition to encouraging mental and physical engagement with the product and enabling personal style customization, halfway products offer the opportunity to be a synergistic satisfier by providing space for personal involvement. They can also satisfy the need for individuality, self-expression, creative expression, participation, and the chance to learn new skills (Hirscher et al., 2013).







Images sourced from Bernadette Banner's instagram profile:
https://www.instagram.com/bernadettebanner







Images source: Franzo, P. (2023). Fashion as a Practice of Care. Fashion Highlight, (1), 20–27. https://doi.org/10.36253/fh-2258

This research conducted in Helsinki mainly focused on the initial creation of the garments and only had time to interview the participants' perception of their clothing for a short amount of time. The co-creation also ended after they had 'finished' the garment, never picking up a needle again afterwards. Leading to no clear evidence of a change in behaviour or perception of clothing at large, let alone a larger bottom-up social movement.

Fashion as an Act of Care

Finally, there was a project conducted by Paolo Franzo (2023) titled Fashion as an Act of Care, which was set up to create connections amongst local communities which were not previously connected over the co-creation of fashion items.

> *"...the project goes beyond the spatial delimitation of the tailor's workshop and extends to the community. A fashion project such as Talking Hands, therefore, becomes a place for sharing values, ideas and knowledge; everyone brings their experience, makes it available to others, participates in a common goal, and leaves traces of themselves even after they have left and made room for others. They take care of each other, their specificities and interests."*
>
> (Franzo, 2023)

The decision to relocate the embroidery workshop to a public park for the duration of the summer is another step intended to take action in the area, the migrants worked outside once a week on concrete ping-pong tables (Franzo, 2023). The handicraft project evolved into a relational tool capable of igniting social change and boosting participants' self-esteem. Opinions were shared, techniques were discussed, and the community naturally got involved. Protesting outdoors, in a group, or in a public setting is a blatant example of craftivism, a movement that uses manual labour and craft to energize aspects of environmentalism, anti-capitalism, and solidarity (Franzo, 2023). This dynamic, facilitated by a co-creation dynamic, managed to bring communities of people together and create a change in the social landscape of the city.

The participation in creation of fashion items, not just as a form of individual expression, but by co-creating, the formulation of a community around it, is a layer that I had not yet considered when research into the subject-matter started. This example of empowerment of skill-building in a community-setting, makes one think about the concept of a broader social movement that could be triggered. If this project could find a way to extend these acts of 'craftivism' it could lead to a broader feeling of empowerment, which allows people to reject the boundaries that are placed upon them by a consumerist system. For this project, the fact that such a form of co-creation of fashion, not dissimilar to participatory design practices, can create a contemplative and empowering atmosphere can be an instrumental component.

When you compare the modern experience and interaction with the fast-fashion industry with the origins of the interaction, you see the vast difference in participation. A distance has developed between 'consumer' or 'user' and the people who create it, literally and figuratively. The clothes that are made in community and societal contexts have meaning, they remind you of who made it and with what; the smell of the materials, the pricks in your fingers from the needles, the jokes your friends made while they were helping you, the drinks and snacks you had during. All of these memories and associations make an object larger than the sum of its parts. It gives it meaning. And when you wear meaning upon your body, you embody that meaning, to yourself and to others who recognize it.

1.2.2 Fashion as a Declaration of Allegiance

Kodžoman (2019) describes that this placement of meaning upon your body, is a phenomenon which continues outside the original creation, the meaning of a garment can be shaped by the person wearing it, and what they did during. It can make one inspired to wear the same, or dress distinctly from them in response, creating a social dynamic.

The appearance of a cultural uniform is a direct result of the intention to dress to be recognized by peers for the meaning of their garments. This can either be meant to communicate oneself as part of a community, a distinct individual within that community, or an outsider. In extra-cultural social settings, adhering to the dress of a specific social or cultural group becomes a 'line drawn' an identification as part of a larger whole which stands apart from others. A declaration of allegiance.

No one is willing to wear 'just anything', any item of clothing carries meaning and this meaning has a direct relation to identity when worn upon the body in a public context. Making the choice to wear an item associated with a meaning a deliberate one.

French Revolutionaries and the colors of the Republic

This is a phenomenon observed in rebellious declarations of allegiance, both in revolutionary contexts of political ideologies as in minority groups and cultures, in which groups set themselves apart from a majority in order to gain visibility in the public eye or break ties with another party. Fairchilds (2000) explains that, during the French Revolution, the revolutionaries consciously maintained a freedom of costume and dress as long as the colours of the Republic's flag were somehow represented in it. Dyeing fabric was a readily available resource to most people at the time, making expressing support for the revolution an low-threshold interaction. This developed intentionally, to both express the many different people of France and their unification under the strife against the royalist's oppression. It even became one of the first laws rewritten in the new constitution, that each citizen should dress however they please. This however, was quickly rewritten when Robespierre's Reign of Terror began, immediately limiting the freedom of possible opponents to his rule. Fashion holds that power, and those in power seek to control it for fear of unification against them.



Image source: Fashions of the French Revolution | TOTA. (n.d.). https://www.tota.world/article/3230/

Flappers

Another example of fashion being used to communicate a point of view was the rise of 'flapper' fashion in the 1920s (Park et al., 2014). This form of fashion came to rise after the first world war, during which many women in Europe took up the jobs and responsibilities of the men while they were away at war. Not wanting to lose their newfound independence, women decided to do away with movement-constricting garments such as corsets and long skirts. And instead opted for loosely 'flapping' shorter skirts and hair. These more masculine figures were meant to communicate a lesser inequality between men and women.



Image source: Park, S. H., Academic Works, & Graduate Center. (2014). Flapper fashion in the context of cultural changes of America in the 1920s. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1262&context=gc_etds



Image source: History of punk fashion. (2016, March 21). https://anarchyuksite.wordpress.com/original-punk-fashion/

Punk

A more recent and still prevalent example is the fashion associated with punk subculture. This is another movement that started as a consequence of a world war (Moran & Western Connecticut State University, 2010), beginning in the 1940s, punk is a counterculture to the established powers. Many young people who joined this movement found themselves experiencing the consequences of policy through poverty and unemployment, leading to a self-made and repaired culture of clothing, combined with hairstyles that are meant to stand out and express more creative visions of identity.

The Keffiyeh

A recently reemerged example, is the “Kheffiyeh ” is a type of headscarf traditionally worn by middle-eastern men. This garment has a very rich and complicated history in the Palestinian territories, with it being considered part of traditional dress in the area, but not having been popular with the Palestinians during Ottoman rule. It was then appropriated by Zionist westerners (National Library of Israel, 2026) who settled in the region and dressed up as locals in order to justify their presence in the land.



Image source: National Library of Israel, (2026)

During the Arab Revolt in the 1920s and 30s, the garment was readopted by the Arabian resistance against Zionist rule as a symbol of unification of the Arab peoples against western invasion and quickly lost popularity among the Zionists. But it was not until the 1960s when Yasser Arafat, representative leader of the Palestinian people, donned the Keffiyeh that is truly became a symbol of Palestinian resistance and has been an associated symbol of the fight for Palestinian independence since.



Image source: National Library of Israel, (2026)

In more recent years, following the events of October 7th 2023 and the attacks on the Palestinian people that followed, a larger portion of the world population and especially university students have become invested in the oppression faced by the Palestinian people by the Israeli government, and the Keffiyeh has travelled across the world to protests all over (Porter, 2024). Black, white, & read all over: is wearing a keffiyeh enough for Palestinian justice? Cultural The Keffiyeh has now become a symbol of allegiance in the Western world to the Palestinian people and their right to sovereignty.

n May 2024 this concept manifested itself in a number of protests on the TU Delft University campus (Bonger, 2025). Because it had recently come to light that the University had withheld the fact that they were working with multiple weapons manufacturing companies that sold their products to the state of Israel. These weapons were then and now being employed to oppress and murder the Palestinian people in Gaza.



Image source: Gilad, E. (2025, October 22). 'Suddenly, the keffiyeh-wearing college kids are very quiet': Where are the pro-Palestinian protesters? Mideast Journal. https://www.mideastjournal.org/post/where-are-the-pro-palestinian-protesters

This led to many students taking to the campus where they peacefully expressed their wish for the university to cut ties with said weapons manufacturing companies and Israeli universities. Keeping as a baseline that the university be more transparent about the commercial clients their employees and students' work is sold to. The university abjectly refused this request at the time and the board expressed that they felt no obligation to listen to the protestors and that they held their relationships with the companies and universities in higher regards than the wishes of their students and staff.

So, during many of the following protests organized by the Delft Student Intifada on the university campus, the keffiyeh gained this new meaning within the campus context. Making anyone who wears this item outside of the context of the protest, still non-verbally expresses their disagreement with the University's cooperation said companies and Israeli universities and their belief in the right of life and freedom of the Palestinian people.

Starting June 10th the TU Delft board has promised not to begin any new cooperations with Israeli parties unless they adhere to severe conditions (TU Delft, n.d.). But this has not been considered enough by many of the members of the Delft Student Intifada and following protests have still been met with police intervention and arrests, called in by the university board.



Image source: Photograph taken by the author on the TU Delft University Library on May 23rd, 2024

Conclusion: Literature Review

Fashion is originally a collaborative interaction which developed in order to represent identity as part of a community and as an individual. Direct involvement in the in creation of fashion items allows for a degree of freedom in that identity and the creation of community and meaning during this process of creation. But in the mainstream contemporary interaction, this participation has fallen away. Losing these essential components of the original interaction behind, for the sake of convenience and quantity.

The meaning behind clothing carries larger implications on a societal level, in which history exhibits that fashion can be a driving force behind the unification of people in opposition to oppressive rule and regulation. Having the resources and abilities being taken away, leaves people to only be able to express separation from the parties they oppose through less clearly visible means. Perhaps even creating confusion between people who actually share interests and struggles, creating opposing factions based on factors of appearance which are unrelated to actual life-experiences, but are somehow highlighted by the predominant fashion culture.

And yet, even though the implication of this lack of agency and range of expressions available there are only a small number of ways in which people seem able to move away from the fast-fashion industry. Somehow, we have become passive consumers of something that used to be a community-based artform that defined our identity and give our appearance meaning. Creating the idea that there is something blocking people from participating in the production and design of fashion overall.
With this new perspective on the meaning that is carried by fashion, it can now be understood that the described experience in the introduction can be perceived a small scale bleed-through of a larger dynamic. The fact that participation in creation can carry such meaning throughout the existence of a product, is something that changes the importance of the agency of a person interacting and influencing its existence. To be able to influence the creation of a garment, is to represent its meaning and manifest your identity. When this interaction is somehow blocked or at least hindered, they could be considered them limitations of freedom. Possibly clarifying the frustrations I experienced in trying to express my identity.

2

Goals and Scope of Thesis

2.1 Project Goals and Research Questions

The overall goal of this design project began with an personal experience of frustration with the fast-fashion industry, which led to literature research into alternative interactions. This research gave a further insight into the importance of fashion and the freedom of identity it should express. Creating a greater urgency in the fact that there are limitations in this freedom in the current interaction. So, the goal for this thesis research project is to investigate the current state of the working class Dutch person's interaction with fashion, specifically to the degrees of freedom experienced in the reduced agency to participate in the creation of fashion items and to design an interaction which can emancipate a person from said limitations.

This makes the main research question of the project;

RQ: *What interactions with fashion can emancipate and liberate people from the oppressive dynamics of the fast-fashion industry to regain its original freedom in artistic expression, community-based cooperation, and sustainability?*

In order to be able to answer this research question, two other sub-questions must be answered as well;

In order to design an emancipating and liberating interaction which avoids the perpetuation of systemic oppression, the pressure points of the pillars of oppression need to be identified through a theoretical framework from the field of Design for Social Justice, which specializes in the analysis and deconstruction of oppressive interactions. This requires literature research to consider the applicable theoretical framework. Allowing the pillars of oppressions to be mapped, before they can be deconstructed in a formulated design direction.

Making the first sub-question of this project;

RQ1: *What are the dynamics of oppression, which are designed into the fast-fashion industry, and how can they be dismantled in the new interaction?*

Fashion is itself an artistic interaction with material and the human body, it speaks to subjective concepts of beauty and expression which cannot be defined by any truly objective measure, this is what makes it an infinitely developing and interesting dynamic to participate in.
Instead, in recent years, the interaction has been reduced to a number's game of supply and demand and mean averages, reducing the spectrum of variety to the bare minimum, including the agency of each participant. So in order to gain a better understanding and preserve this essential subjectivity and exploratory nature of the craft in this analytical design process, artistic methodologies will be employed to enrich the conventional academic methods. So, part of this project will be to see whether Artistic Exploration surrounding the academic research, will lead to enriching insights and make for interesting perspectives on the research done.

Making the second sub-question of this project;

RQ2: *How can the inclusion of Artistic expression and reflection based on emotional motivations into this design project, contribute to enriching academic design research?*

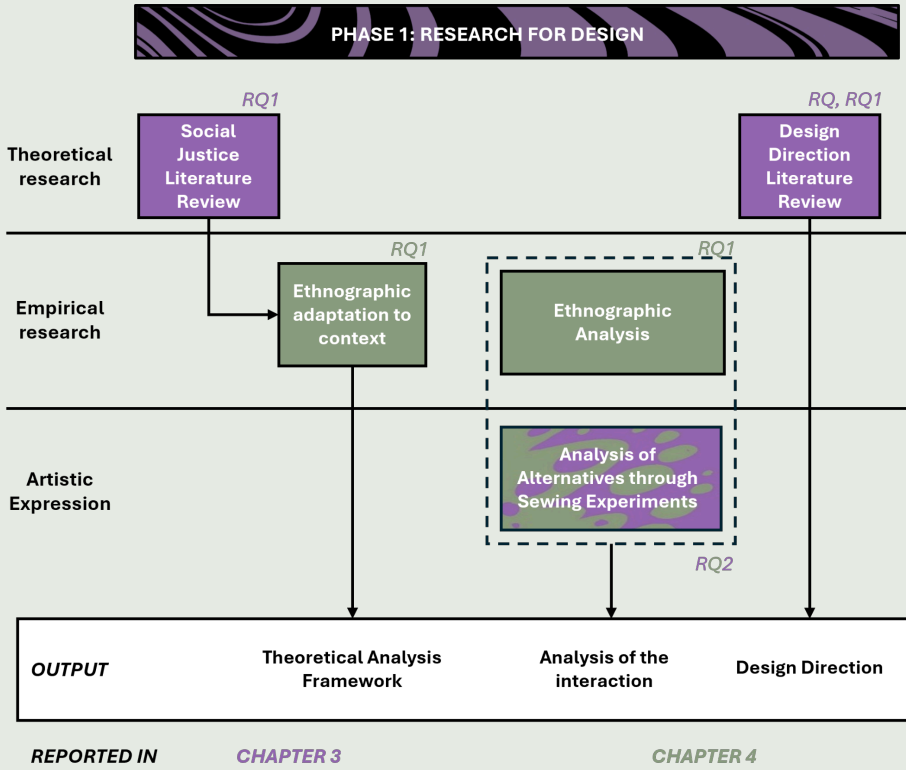

RQ2
RQ
RQ1

2.2 Project Structure and Approach

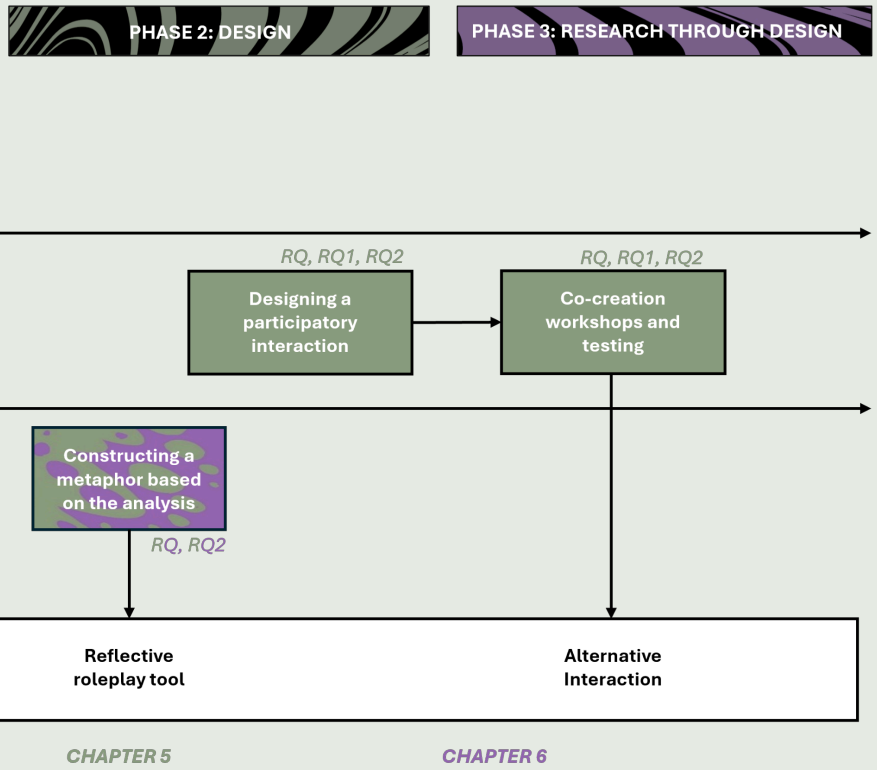
To answer these research questions, the project will be approached by employing three different overall methods. First, to answer RQ1, the first sub-question mentioned before, a Research for Design approach was employed. After which the Artistic Expression mentioned in RQ2 will be combined combined with the information collected in the first phase to design a prospect alternative interaction with the fast-fashion industry. Finally, the last phase will be a method of Research through Design, to test the alternative interaction and explore its viability and gain input from participants through co-creation sessions.

Artistic expression will mostly be used in the design phase, but it will also show up as a free-form method of exploration and expression throughout. This expression will not just entail crafts that require a needle and thread, but also drawings and other forms of visualization. Those which are relevant to the development of the project will be included in the main report, but less consequential pieces will be added to the appendix for completionist's sake.

Phase 1: Research for Design
in this first phase of the project the first sub-question (RQ1) must be answered, in order to be ablet to adequately answer the Research Question of the project. By identifying the aforementioned pillars of oppression, an alternative interaction design direction can be identified which actually addresses the problem at its core. This will inherently be the largest part of this project, since a large amount of information will need to be collected, seeing as not much research seems to have been done on this specific subject yet. So this information will be collected and generated both through theoretical research in a literature review, adapted of said theory to the context to create a framework of analysis through generative ethnographic work, and a thorough analysis of the current interaction based on a journey of use. This is then compared to possible alternative interactions, inspired by artistic expression and exploration mentioned in the introduction. During this process, the researcher will participate in a number of artistic expressions, both individually and in group-settings to experience what it feels like to use sewing practices to express yourself and what are pleasant ways to be taught and teach these practices



When this definition of 'what is wrong' with the current interaction has been identified (the answer to RQ1), design directions for an alternative can be constructed based on literature that addresses similar forms of oppression and how they can be dismantled through design (RQ). Following this work, the project will have a design direction and an inspiration to move forward to actually constructing an alternative interaction.



Phase 2: Design
Following the deduction of this design direction, an alternative interaction can be constructed which adequately addresses the identified pillars of oppression (RQ1). This phase will be a combination of artistic expressions which represent the interpretations of the collected information so far and design an alternative interaction based on the same information.

This emancipated interaction is not a solution which can be tossed at a group of people, ordering them to change their interaction with a basic human need, on which they are wholly dependent to be able to lead their lives. The initiative the of project itself was based on the fact that the average person is being excluded form the creation of fashion items, so the alternative interaction should inherently be one that allows them to design for themselves than the project designs for them. So the new interaction will be formulated into the mould of a co-creation session, as inspired by the 'Fashion as an Act of Care' article from the preliminary literature review. Through a co-creative construction of the alternative interaction, the next phase will be able to test the constructed design and adjust it, based on participant feedback, insight, and design.

Phase 3: Research through Design
Finally, to develop the emancipated interaction in a participatory manner, a number of co-creation workshops will be organized, both to gain further insight into the effects of the current interaction, and expand upon the work of phase 1, and to adjust and gauge the viability of the design. The co-creation session will consist of a combination of a semi-structured interview and a physical workshop in which participants will participate in the creation of their own clothing.
The final result of this project will be a body of generated knowledge, specific inspirations and recommendations for emancipated interactions in response to the Research Question (RQ) of this project. It will include recommendations for potential further applications of the knowledge generated. In addition to this, the experiences gained by the participants and the designer are intended be valuable assets to their future interactions with the fashion industry, in the form of empowerment and validation of their own capabilities and identities.
In the reflection on the process and progress of this project, time will be spent evaluating and summarizing the value of the artistic expression in the project overall, combined with reflections on the place of such artistic expression in academic research.



3

Researching the Theoretical Framework

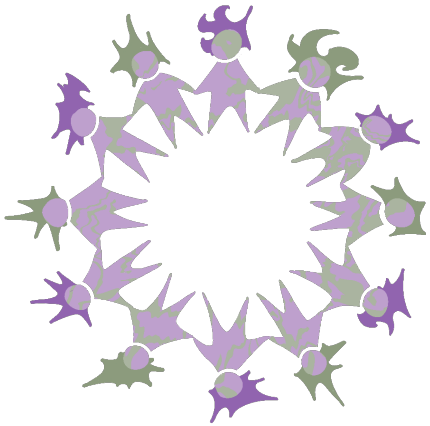
Introduction

When performing the preliminary literature review, it became clear that not much work had yet been done to report or analyse the current interaction with the fast-fashion industry on its psychological and cultural impact. Most of the existing literature specifically reports on its environmental impact and how the fast-fashion industry can try to reduce it by slowing down. So, there are few to none theoretical frameworks based on fashion interactions that the analysis of the interaction can be based on. These frameworks are very important tools to be able to make sense of complex interactions and be able to connect the measurable level of individual experiences with systemic-level influences. In this chapter, a theoretical framework is researched in literature and adjusted to the context of the fast-fashion interaction.

The framework is meant to create dimensional qualities to which the existing interaction can be compared. Consider them the values that determine whether a quality of an interaction is ‘good’ or ‘bad’. In this case, the common denominational question has to do with the freedom to express one’s own identity through fashion. In the preliminary literature review, it was determined that this freedom is effectively gained through direct participation in fashion’s creation, perhaps better defined as ‘design’. To construct such a theoretical framework, first a field of design must be identified which aligns itself with the goals and ideals that the research questions are aiming to achieve. Then a specific piece of theory which addresses the context dynamics can be found within this field to structure a methodological approach to the analysis. So, in this literature review, the defining factors that set up the framework were selected based on their ideological basis in freedom for a person to be able to determine their own forms of expression through fashion.

3.1 Design Justice

The feeling that needs to be defined is one of disempowerment in the ability to express one's identity through fashion. Specifically that the current average interaction is designed to dominate the industry and seems to make resources for participation in creation less readily available. Since this interaction directly spawned from mainstream design methodology which seek to prioritize profit over wellbeing, the analysis framework needs to be based in a design methodology which opposes that;



Design Justice (Costanza-Chock, 2020), is a book which describes a specific movement within the academic field of design. Design Justice seeks to address the relationships between design and power by acknowledging them in design methodologies, narratives, sites, and pedagogies. Specifically working to either deconstruct oppressive systems of structural inequality, or have their work not contribute to them. One of the core values that can be identified within the book of Sasha Costanza-Chock that describes this movement in design, is the idea that all people deserve to be free to express themselves as they are.

> *"Most of all it is an invitation to build a better world, a world where many worlds fit; linked worlds of collective liberation and ecological sustainability."*
>
> (Costanza-Chock, 2020)

A designer needs to start working with the idea that one designs for many different worlds of experiences and interactions, that though there are physical and material connections between us, the way we all experience the world around us is so unique, that we might as well live in different universes, even though we exist in the same physical space. The movement seeks to start a discussion on the many ways that design can contribute to forms of oppression and liberation. By including the concept of the many different worlds within worlds that constitute our collective experiences and how an understanding and awareness of that concept can tip the scales towards the liberation from systems that would oppress.

In her book, Costanza-Chock (2020) mentions many other researcher and their works, which she would classify as part of the Design Justice movement. As identified earlier, the freedom to exist with a right to your own world and experiences stands at its core.

3.2 Theory of Userism

With a field which considers freedom of expression of identity as one of its cornerstones, the next step is to identify a piece of theory which tackles the concept of participation in creation. Specifically, the reasoning as to why the fast-fashion industry seemingly gets to decide what it is we want to wear and how it represents us as people. How come someone who has designed the system as it is, gets to determine the limitations of our expression of identity? The only way, it seems, to become someone who gets to determine their expression, is to become a professional designer or someone who spends all their free time making their own clothing. For many this is too steep a price to pay for something they do want.

There is a distance which is being maintained between the people who design the fast-fashion industry, the mistreated labourers who actually create their designs, and the people who live their lives in their products. Something that used to be an expression of identity and culture, has instead become a cycle of endless force-fed consumption.

As stated earlier, the contextual theory and methodology should seek to address this dynamic of the consumers of the fast-fashion industry being intentionally excluded from the process of creation by its very design. The theory of Userism (Van Amstel et al, 2025) describes a similar concept of the relationship between user and designer as one of an unequal power balance, specifically excluding the user from the resources and possibility to design for their own needs.
This theory finds its origins in discussions on self-determination and power relations in the analysis of human-computer interactions, so after it has been sufficiently researched it will be translated to the specific context of the fast-fashion interaction.

3.2.1 Userism in Human-Computer Interaction

In the context-field of Human-Computer Interactions, a philosophy was developed concerning; 'the justification for the denial of the possibility of historically oppressed social groups to use and produce technologies to design their means of existence and to develop new conditions for being human.' (Freire et al., 2005) Relegating the people who are not the designers in a given interaction to being 'users' who can only interact with said product and its functions as a consumer without agency. Giving the name "Userism" to the perceived form of inequality taking place.

The baseline of this interaction is a conscious neglect for or even denial of the so-called user's ability to design, creating an inherent power-dynamic between the professionalized designer, and the 'unskilled' user, where the latter is considered inferior and unable to use and produce technology to design their means of existence. In marginalized groups, whose ideas, orientations, and needs lie beyond interest the greater average of the population or the ideals of the dominant groups, there is less flexibility both in resources available to meet their own needs, or to have them met by a third party.

Userism addresses this experience by ideas presented by the philosopher Hegel (Van Amstel et al, 2025), who addresses the impact not being able to affect the conditions of your life have on a person's self-worth and wellbeing. These conceptions of social dynamic will be expanded upon below;

3.2.2 Recognition

The concept of Recognition is Hegel's psychological description of the formation and influence of human identity and social connection in the eyes of another. Hegel's theory poses that in any social interaction, one is asked to present one's identity by defining the ways they have influenced the world around them and how it has influenced them. This idea is represented in (figure...) as the literal 'shape' of a person's personality. It asks a person to define themselves in a silhouette of their own complex consciousness, in order for it to be grasped and understood by another complex consciousness.

Said shape is communicated and perceived by another, who processes this shape in their own mind and by this process their own mind expands to come to understand the different kinds of people that exist (see figure ...). This process of seeing how different the shape of another's personality is to one's own is what Hegel describes as Recognition.
This dynamic functions in a healthy way if both parties consider each other as equals and both reciprocate in seeing each others' capabilities and needs, making up their identities. In the perception of each other as individual consciousnesses beyond their own, their mind and consciousness are inherently expanded.



Figure 1: Illustrative representation of a person in a healthy balance between support from their environment, be it people or resources, and being allowed to develop and express themselves. Achieving an experience of humanization.

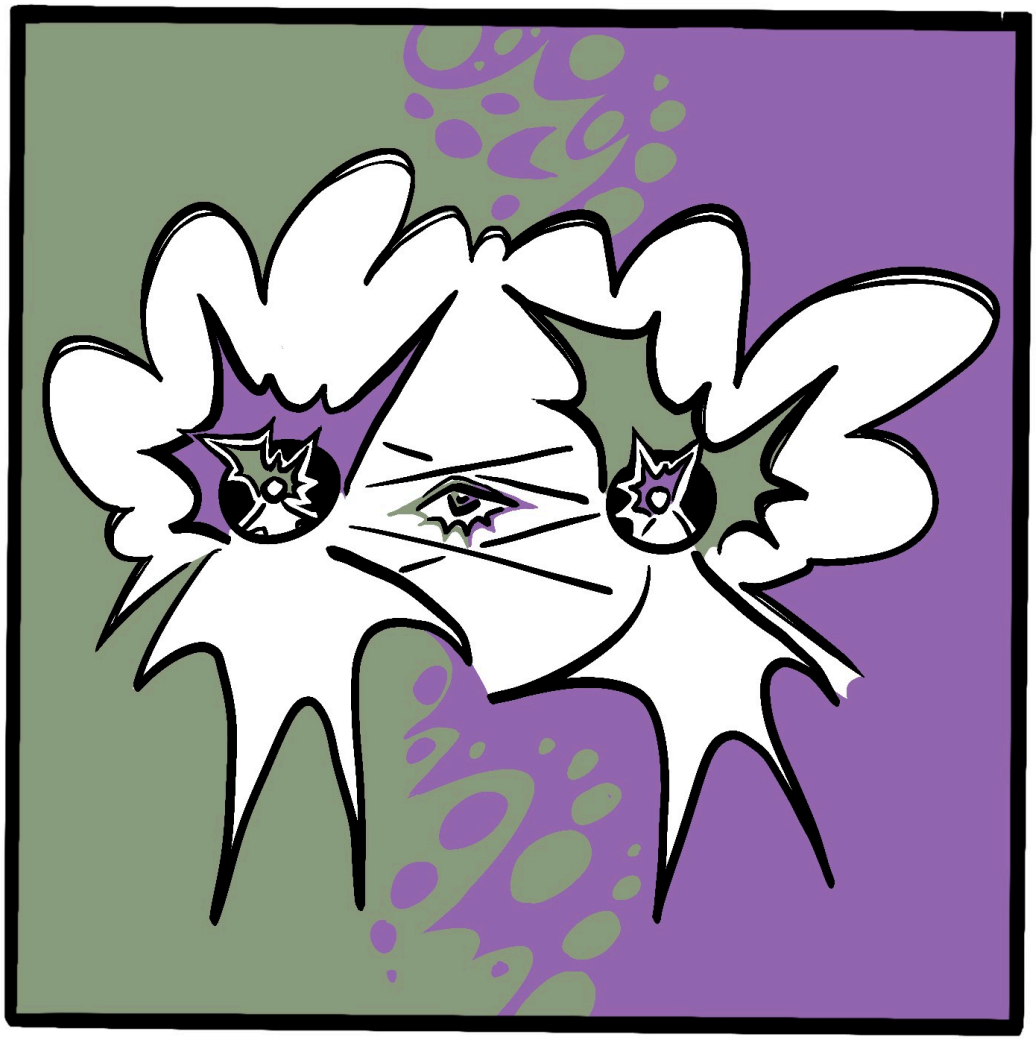


Figure 2: Illustrative representation two people in a state of true recognition, understanding that the other is as much of a complex and individual consciousness as they are.



Figure 3: Illustrative representation of two people in a master-slave dialectic, in which the master (left) demands to have their needs met to the extent where their own consciousness no longer develops and stagnates in the position of ignorant dominance. And the slave (right) has none of their needs met, leaving them to overstretch to meet the needs of the master, expanding their consciousness beyond their own, but not in a healthy manner.

When an **inequality** is created or perceived in the process of connection, Hegel's theory compares it as a hyperbolic example to the relationship between a master and a slave. In this dynamic, one person in the interaction dominates the other and demands all their needs are met and capabilities are recognized, without them actually seeing the other. While the slave is considered as 'lesser-than' and is forced to meet the needs of the master.

This concept is defined as **Coerced Recognition**, meaning the forceful observation and understanding of another whose needs and capabilities are greater than yours.

Hegel explains that this often leads to the slave having to overextend their capabilities due to none of their needs being met, while the master never develops any capabilities of their own, because their environment meets all their needs for them.

3.2.3 Humanization

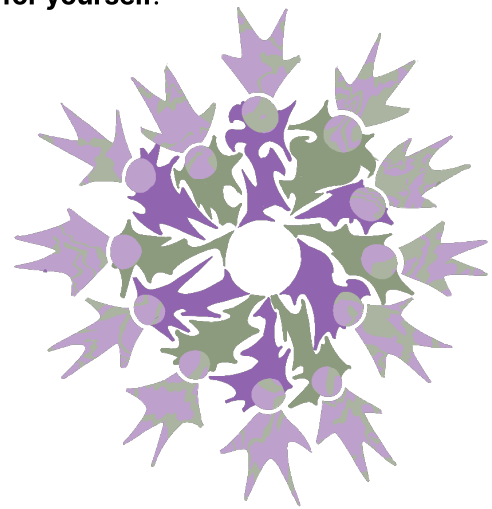
But when true recognition is achieved in an equal interaction, a feeling of validation and growth can be achieved within both parties. Hegel describes this concept as 'Humanization', which is defined as the human need to feel valued and appreciated for your capability to create and define the conditions of your existence from the world around you.

> *"A human is a social being, in the state of unfinishedness, whose essence is always in transformation, situated in a reality that defines them but which they actively act upon, in sum, producing the social existence from the transformation of the world."*
>
> (Gonzatto et al., 2022)

This innate desire to change the conditions of the reality we exist within and not remain dependent on what nature and the world around us is capable of supplying us with, has led us to the creation of tools, techniques, systems, and societal structures. For instance; things that have helped us change reality of the appearance we were born, like tools we developed with which to alter our own appearance.

The ability and freedom to develop oneself is what empowers one to achieve a form of true recognition in an equal social interaction. Gaining the feeling of being perceived and understood as an **equal complex consciousness**.

But for many, the ability to affect the world to the extent to fulfill your need is not enough to achieve true humanization, because it reduces your identity and capabilities to your ability to provide for yourself and yours and the background of your social group alone. According to Hegel, the truth of humanization comes not only from having others experience and acknowledge your capabilities and existence but also **discovering who you are for yourself**.



This form of self-actualization where people have the agency in the interaction with the world around them, requires freedom of movement and recognition from an environment which allows for that exploration.

3.2.4 Humanization theory in product design

In Userism theory, these philosophical concept are adopted and considered as measures for the impact that the interaction with a product has on a consumer. Specifically based on the idea that a person's interaction often replaces their interaction with another person and similarly dictates the conditions of a person's existence. A piece of the designer's personality and perceived identity of the user is placed into the product and given permanent form. Making the product the medium between the interaction of the designer with the person using their product.

Therefore, a product's design can include the designer's perception of the users they are designing for. In human-computer interactions, this includes the designer's idea of the skills the user has to affect the conditions of their reality, which as defined before, can be equated to their ability to design. More often than not, a consumer is on the 'consuming' side of the interaction, because they do not possess the resources to design a product to change their reality for themselves, and therefore depends on another to help them meet their needs. But it is unrealistic for a designer to be able to design for every individual person's specific needs and capabilities, hence mass-produced products. As mentioned before, Userism addresses the fact that these products leave no room for the person using them to define their interaction with them for themselves, especially when a market has been monopolized into a single line of products or product types.

In the design of a product, the interaction of Recognition, as mentioned in Hege's theory can only take place in an equitable manner if the designer of actually interacts with the stakeholders as equals, both during the design process or after its production and purchase, which considers their capabilities in a positivist and encouraging way. Allowing space for the person using the product to enact their own changes and additions to the existing product. Allowing the product and by proxy the designer, to recognize the potential in a design process that continues to its impact after your work as the original designer is done. **Considering that, as a designer, the product will mean more to others over time than it does to you now, due to others' capability to design.**

So, according to (Van Amstel et al, 2025) when recognition is not achieved through the interaction with a product, the lack thereof often contributes and presses the forms of unequal or coerced recognition already experienced by the user of the product. Emphasizing existing forms of oppression or enacting the theory's User Oppression, leading to an experience of dehumanisation.

"... the essential character of human consciousness, that of living in a future projection of the self, of permanently creating purposes that drag modifying reality actions, becomes monopolized by an ideological formulation clearly planned to lead the majority of humanity to believe that it is not the design of humankind, but that of the selected leading group, which has the privilege of shaping the future."

(Gonzatto et al., 2022)

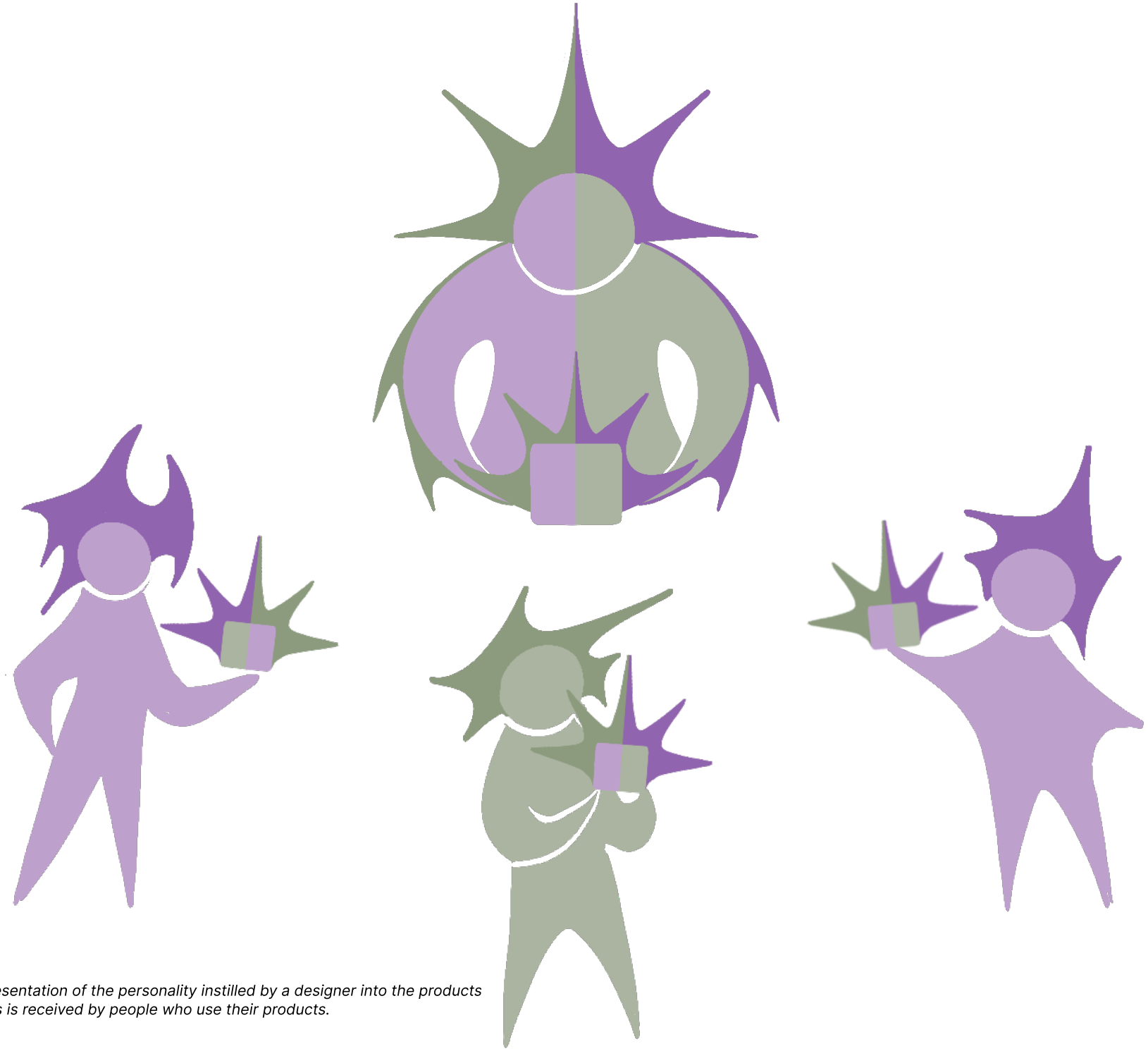


Figure 4: Illustrative representation of the personality instilled by a designer into the products they design, and how this is received by people who use their products.

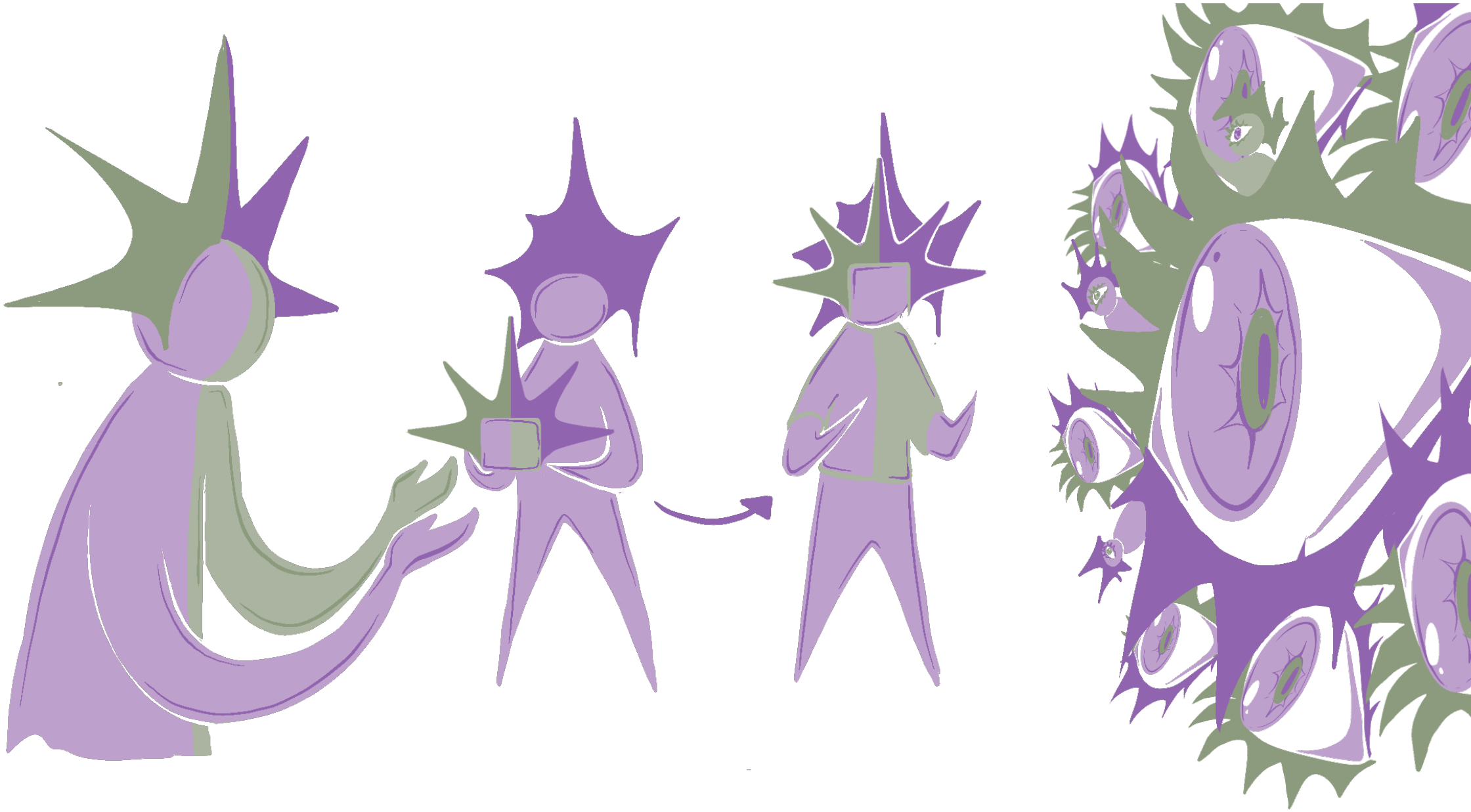


Figure 5: Illustrative representation of the interaction between designer, product, and the performative interaction with the audience.

3.3 Adaptation of the framework to the interaction with Fashion

In the relationship of HCI to the Design Philosophy of Userism, the very nature of the product is very different than an exclusively physical product such as fashion. In the rest of this chapter, these factors will be identified and adapted to the specific interaction with the fast-fashion industry. This is done based on ethnographic information on the interaction with fashion combined with literature research on the same subject.

Exclusively physical products and sustainability

With many computer products, there is an amount of communication and 'updatability' to a product through software updates, feedback, and communication between designer and user. A piece of software can be fixed and maintained over long distances by the original designer and easily updated by the user, creating larger potential for improved relationships of recognition. Although, often, users of software often have very little control over the features or impact of updates from its designers as well, as they are often forced onto them through a system through automatic updates or a end to services provided.
This relationship does not exist with physical products, once a garment is produced, it now exists in that form forever and there is no practical way to undo, revert or change the conditions of the existence of this physical object. This inherent disconnection between designer and user is why Userism cannot be addressed the same way as it is in HCI.
In order to analyse the interaction with fashion, based on the values upheld in User Oppression, more levels of the interaction need to be considered than just between the user and the designer. Because of the distance between the designer and the user, through the medium of the physical product, the alterations of this relationship will inherently lead to the production of more materials. These new fashion products would have to be purchased in order to replace the wardrobe that is reinforcing the forms of oppression that will be identified in the next chapter.

So the endorsement of product life extension should be an important part of the alternative interaction overall and the general intervention should preferably take place with existing products of the fashion industry, instead of designing something new.

Designing for Recognition

Another difference is that Fashion in general is an inherent conspicuous form of consumption (Evans et al., 2006), an interaction which is performed in the view of and for others. The driving motivation for fashion is a presentation of identity which requires another to be perceived. The interaction with the product becomes part of the expression of identity that fashion affords. And as mentioned before, because you wear the product on your body, it becomes part of who you are, what you stand for, and what you are capable of. It becomes the shape of your personality which is communicated to another, as described in the concept of Recognition. Making the experience with the product and the ability of the person using it to express their identity, not only an essential part of their own identity, but also of their perceived identity by their environment.

To define the interaction with fashion, a distinction must be made between the expression of identity and the recognition that an external factor brings or coerces. There is an amount of individual motivation to modify your appearance, even when we are alone, we still choose to look a certain way, to wear something or try something new. There is an intrinsic motivation that does not always align with the performative one, to alter our appearance Kodžoman (2019), this is a factor that should be considered in the research, and protected in the construction of the alternative interaction.

In order to do so, distinctions must be made between the different aims of expression of identity. Since the information that will be collected on these identities relate to the oppression of expression that is experienced by people participating in the interaction with the fast-fashion industry, these distinctions will be based on the concept stated by Tomasini Gianini (2020) in her master's thesis on decolonizing participatory design practices.

She divides the experience of oppression into three levels, which manifest in three different levels of expression of identity in which one can experience oppression;

- As an individual identity
- As part of a community
- As part of the hegemony

The mobility or degrees of freedom a person is capable of move around these three axes, are what determine the amount of recognition we experience from the systems, the designer, that provides the assortment of clothing through the fast-fashion industry.



Figure 6: Schematic representation of the possible degrees of freedom a person can have in expressions of identity.

Due to the performative nature of a person's interaction with fashion, the desired form of recognition (from whom and for what part of their identity) needs to be taken into consideration when analysing the forms of Userist oppression that take place with the interaction with the designer. This can be researched by **defining the points of friction between the User's and the Designer's intentions for the Recognition that a product achieves.**

Similar to Tomasini Gianini's thesis (2020), according to Costanza-Chock (2020) such analyses can best be performed by categorizing the influence by different levels in relation to the user's environment. With three different levels of interaction which can grant or coerce recognition to a person;

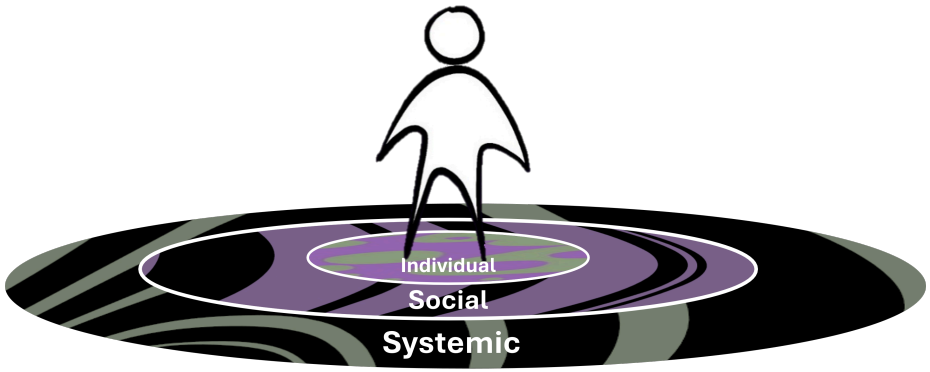


Figure 7: Schematic representation of the diffferent sources of oppression and potential recognition.

- **Systemic level (User-Designer)**
  The role of the designer as described by the User Oppression theory, is embodied by the Systemic level of the interaction. In a world in which all forms of fashion production have been offshored and turned into a consumer-corporation interaction, the relationship between the Designer and a User can only be described as a systemic one, determined by aa all-encompassing system of connecting industries on which the individual has no real impact. Unless these designed systems turn out to accommodate almost every need and interest of the User already, not presenting a form of Coerced Recognition becomes very hard to do. But that is what this research is trying to identify.

- **Communal level (User-User)**
  The social environment any user interacts with and receives most of their true recognition from is represented on the communal level. This contains both people's private social and their professional environments, if a necessary distinction must be made, but both can require a certain amount of expectations before they grant someone Coerced Recognition disguised as True Recognition, which can grant someone a form of Conditional Humanization. If the User has found a social environment which accepts them as they are, they can experience True Recognition and Humanization. The difference between this is what defines the oppressive dynamics of their interaction with fashion, though often the conditional Humanization comes from a Hegemonic conviction within their communal environment. This being a phenomenon caused by Coerced Recognition from a Systemic level which is perpetuated by the communal level. It is much easier for higher levels of environment to perpetrate into lower levels than it is the other way around.

- **Personal level (User-Self)**
  Finally, the level a person interact with themselves on is the most complicated to analyse, because they are not always aware of it themselves. But as mentioned before, hegemonic and systemic influences can take root on the personal level as well, creating a form of internalized Coerced Recognition. This manifests itself in internalized beliefs of not being able to grant themselves recognition if they do not adhere to an externally created standard.
  Although, if a person finds a way to rely on themselves for their Recognition, a form of self-Humanization or Self-Actualization can be achieved. This is probably no replacement for Community Recognition, but it can bring empowerment to stand for themselves in a person.

Because the interaction is so deeply entangled with public identity, a comparison must be made of experiences for the research to capture the range of different forms the interaction can take. An experience of limitation in freedom can come from many different sources, so in order to get the full picture and address the forms of oppression for which the fast-fashion industry is responsible, an overall ethnographic analysis must be performed of all the main stages of the journey of use.

Conclusion

In order to construct a theoretical framework with which the interaction with the fast-fashion industry's presumed oppressive dynamics can be analysed, a design field and related theory was selected which aligned with the original intention of this project; liberation from oppressive dynamics and empowerment of artistic expression and creativity.
The field of design that was identified to align best with the ideological setup of this project, is Design Justice, which, according to Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020), is a field of design which aims to contribute to a world in which many worlds fit. Based on the idea that everyone's experience is unique and deserves to be considered and included in the work of design.

The theory that relates and aligns with that field is that of User Oppression, which specifically addresses the concept of participation in design. And as stated in the preliminary literature review, participation in creation is the key to the freedom of expression of identity. User oppression defines its analysis of Human-Computer interactions by the Recognition that a designer builds into their product for a consumer's ability to design, allowing them to determine their own conditions of living and expressing their personality through the design of that product. This leads to an experience of humanization, a feeling which describes a social connection in which people see each other for the complex consciousnesses they are and can learn about and expand their own perceptions of all the different worlds of experience that exist.

This theory is based on the analysis of Human-Computer interaction, so in order for it to be applicable to the context of the interaction with the fast-fashion industry, two adjustments must be made to its theoretical framework;

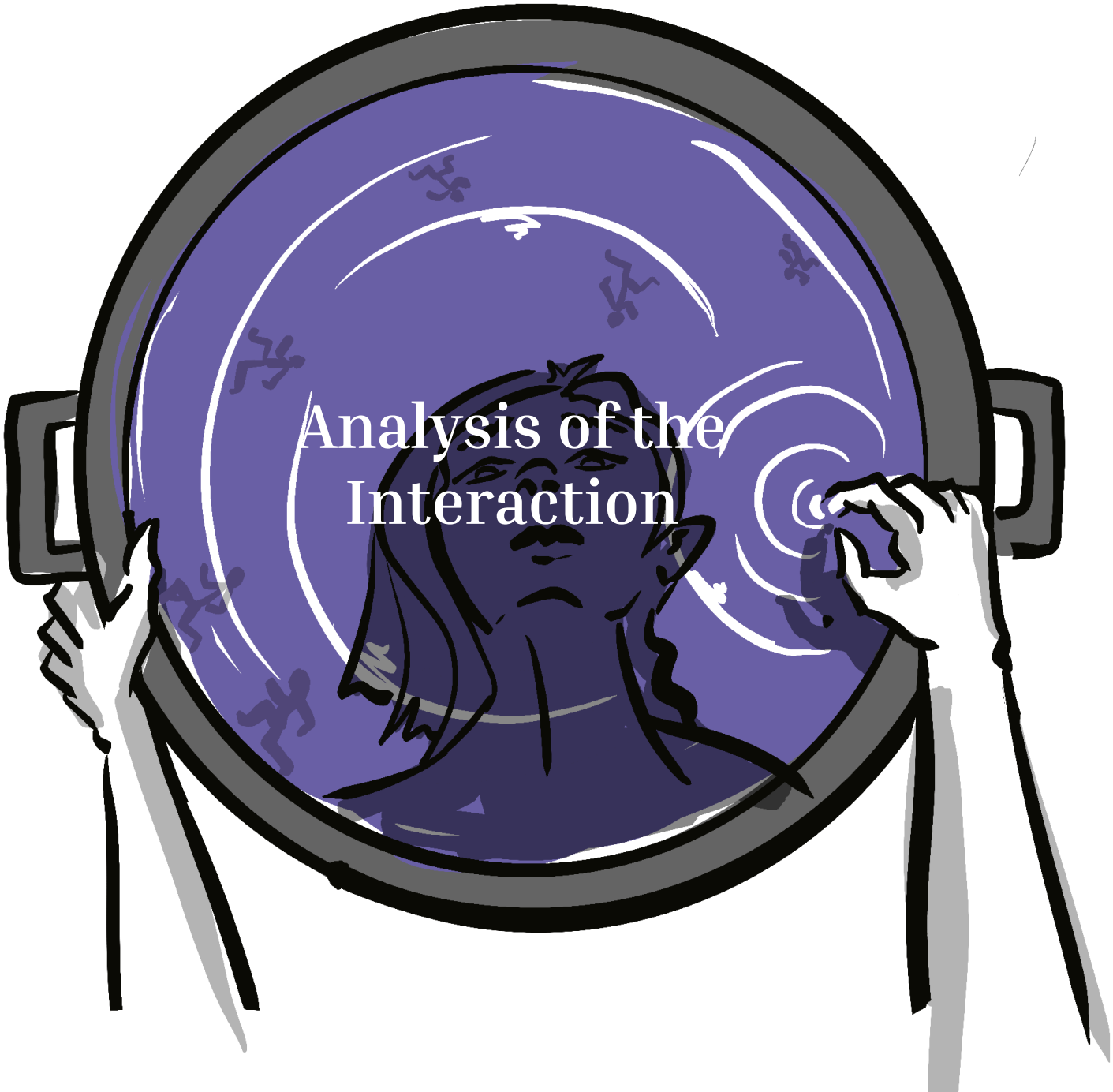
1. The interaction with fashion is primarily physical one, meaning that there can be no alterations made to the product after it being sold to the consumer. So to alter the existing interaction, the alternative interaction should interact with already existing items of clothing as to not contribute to the cycle of overconsumption already present in the fast-fashion industry.
2. The interaction with fashion is inherently performative and is deeply entangled with the wearer's presentation of their personality for the recognition of their environment. To answer the first research sub-question, the analysis of the interaction must take place at both the direct interaction with the fast-fashion industry, and the creative flow of expression of identity that happens while wearing the garment.

In the next chapter this analysis will take place in order to develop a design direction and answer the first Research Sub-question:

RQ1: *What are the dynamics of oppression, which are designed into the fast-fashion industry, and how can they be dismantled in the new interaction?*

Using the theoretical framework of User Oppression, the dynamics that form these limitations in expression and participation in creation can be identified and turned in to design directions.


4


Analysis of the
Interaction

Introduction

To answer the first sub-question (***RQ1***) of this research project, and establish a design direction for the creation of an alternative interaction, the cotemporary interaction must be analysed. In this chapter, this analysis will look for the specific dynamics which cause the interaction to have become straining on creative expression and participation in creation overall, by looking for interruptions in the **creative flow**.

In my personal experience; this creative flow originates from an innate inspiration or desire to present identity according to my internal vision of myself, either based on who I think I am or how I would like to be perceived. This usually leads me to search for something that will make this vision reality. This flow from inspiration to action is what drives my creative expression in fashion and other creative endeavours.

In these moments, when a person like myself is seeking to change the conditions of their existence and exercising their ability to design (Van Amstel et al, 2025), is when the current interaction seems to oppress their ability to do so.
By considering the lifetime of an individual garment through the perspective of the person buying, wearing, and using it, by constructing this product lifecycle a large amount of many smaller interactions can be analysed on a more conceivable scale. This list of interactions will be gathered through a combination of a literary historical analysis of the interaction over the years, with an auto-ethnographic summary of the contemporary journey. Through this focus of interaction between user and individual product, insight can be collected on the specific oppressive pressure points of the interaction.

4.1 Historical interaction analysis

Before the industrial revolution in Northwestern Europe, textiles were one of the most expensive materials available to the average person, making every piece of it a valuable resource to use, repair, and maintain. Most fabrics had to be grown as plants or harvested from insects and animals, and then woven into fine fabrics, consuming massive amounts of hours and energy from anyone participating. At which point, only the materials are ready, and they have yet to be made into a wearable garment. The amount of skills, effort, and labour involved in production of a single garment makes one grateful the convenience we experience today.

But the idea that all of these skillsets would be demanded of every single person who wanted to dress themselves is an inaccurate one. Most of these crafts and artforms were only made possible due to an amount of community collaboration. Someone who tended the fields to grow flax, another who turned the flax to linen threads, another who would weave the thread into fabric, the next to dye it, the last to cut and sew it into a shirt. Perhaps even another who would carve buttons for it. Fashion is still produced in this way. We just no longer see how many people it takes to make a shirt that you can somehow only pay about 20 euros for.

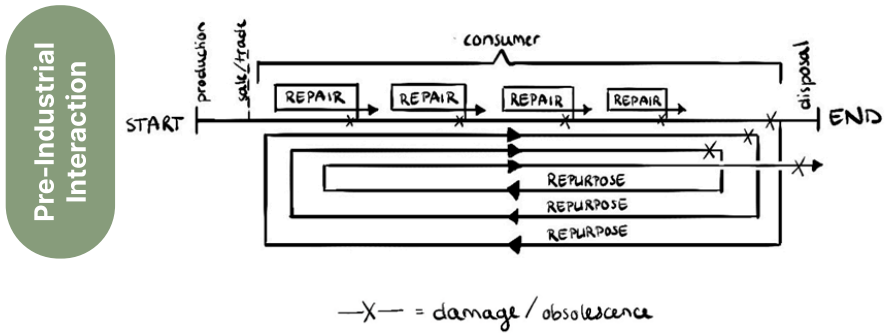


Figure 8: Schematic of the lifetime of an individual garment from the Pre-industrialization period

Throughout history, in surviving garments, examples can be seen of numerous alterations, repairs, and mending. But not very many pieces survive, because most would be turned to other household purposes at the end of their lifetimes. Often the trajectory went: garment → undergarments → aprons → household rags or stuffing for pillows and padding.

After the industrial revolution, the textile industry was automated on a much larger scale, making all textile-products more readily available to consumers. Beginning with fabrics and threads themselves, allowing the average person to make higher quantities and more complex garments for themselves and others.

This convenience was facilitated by the fusing the different components of the production process, namely the production of fibres and threads and the weaving of textile, into one automated assembly line. These were now owned by larger factory holdings and produced a set range of products. Not long thereafter, with the invention of the sewing machine also came centralized production of finished clothing items.

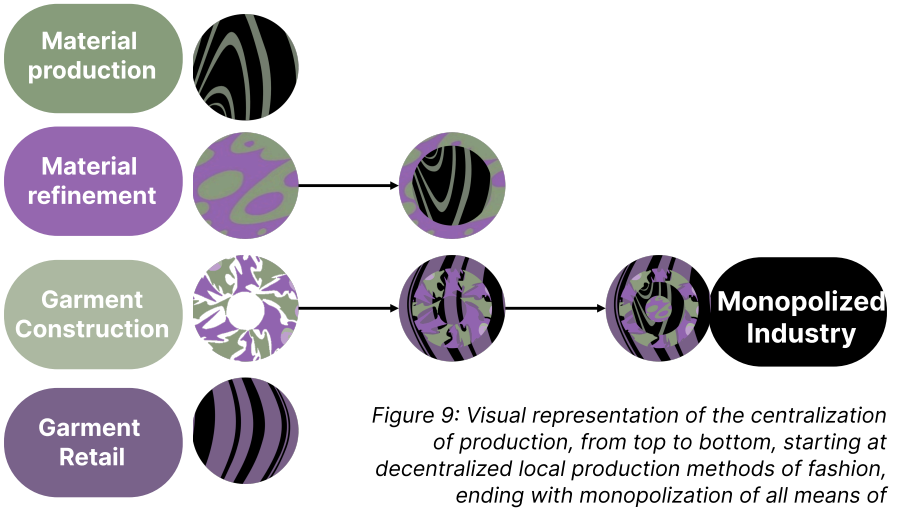


Figure 9: Visual representation of the centralization of production, from top to bottom, starting at decentralized local production methods of fashion, ending with monopolization of all means of production in a globalized industry.

A perspective that is often not considered in these phenomena, is the fact that there are many who lost their jobs, livelihoods and forms of expression due to this automation. Whenever production is centralized, so are the means of production. These are moved further away from the available levels of interaction of the average person. Taking away their ability to design for themselves.

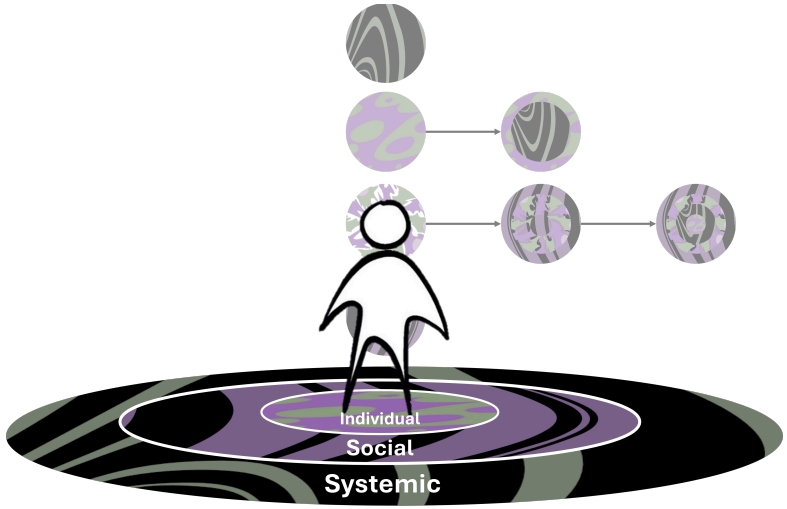


Figure 10: Schematic representation of the centralization of industry causing the means of production leaving the interactable environments of the average person.

It is important to note, that the industrial revolution of western Europe happened because of and in tandem with the rise of European imperialism. These colonies have since been deconstructed on a governmental level before we could speak of a 'Fast-fashion industry', but the commercial industries that benefitted from and drove imperialism have undergone no such transformation (Wizinsky, 2022).

Since the development of consumerist society and the extensively accelerated product lifetime turnover, added to the extreme drop in price that textile products have gone through, most garments are never repaired or repurposed in their lifetime. For most consumers, when considering the investment of time and materials, it is simply not worth it anymore to repair a garment or have it repaired by a professional. Because anything brand new costs half as much.

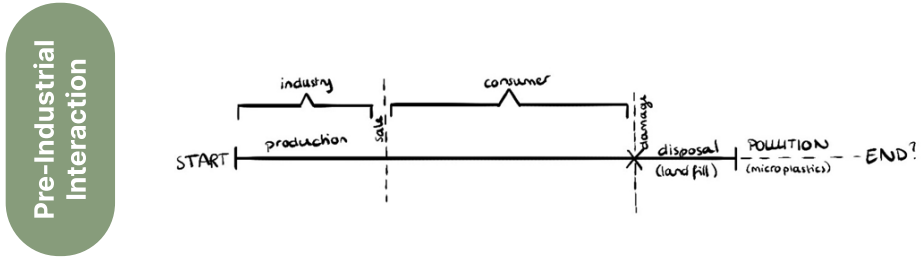


Figure 11: Schematic of the lifetime of an individual garment from the Fast-Fashion Industry

Fashion as an object of meaning

Another possible explanation for this loss of interest in repairing or repurposing could be a general lack of emotional investment. Clothing is produced and discarded quickly in a fast fashion cycle that is sustained by brands that drive mass-produced, trend-driven, and seasonal fashion. The landscape is dominated by quick and impulsive purchases of inexpensive, disposable fashion due to changing consumer attitudes that place a higher value on price than clothing heritage as stated by Niinimäki et al. (2020) in an article about the environmental effects of the fast-fashion industry and the causes for it. According to them, people no longer seem to hold emotional value in their clothing, probably because it was made somewhere far away by someone they don't know. It sours the entire interaction, making participating in it feel like a guilty pleasure, something that you have no choice but to concede to, but can never be proud of. Mugge et al. (2009) has found that emotional investment and connection to products is directly stimulated by being involved in its customization or creation. So, the fact that this component is completely missing in the current interaction, causes garments to lose perceived meaning. Fashion, something that has been used for centuries to express identity, culture, standing, artistic creativity, and opinion has become a meaningless product only meant for consumption.

Modernist design

The more advanced technology became, the more easily available fashion became, and personal participation in production lessened. This development turned the selling point of ‘not having to participate’ as a convenience, turned to ‘not being able to participate’, as the monopolization of the fashion industry advanced. Tunstall (2023), describes this movement as the spread of European modernist ideology, which poses that the best way to ‘live better’ is through the advancement of technology and efficient production, which came to dominate the global market in the era of European Imperialism.

In her book ‘Decolonizing Design’, she describes tech-dependency in the modernist project as a ‘bad romance’, detrimental to the mental health of many. In order to improve this, we must first realize the problem and the potential for a solution. Tunstall (2023) argues that the essence of the ‘bad romance’ is descriptive of the relationship the Western world has with academicism, labour and capitalism and how they have resulted in Modernist design principles. Something that was designed through academic economical viewpoints with the intention of improving the lives of those it researched, but ultimately relied on colonialist ideals which considers certain perspectives and labours as worth less than others. The system of capitalism, the idea that someone can own someone’s labour is the product of a European academic parallelism of objectivity and subjectivity (Tunstall, 2023).

4.2 Analysis of the existing interaction based on the Userism framework

With the historical interaction analysis, a perspective was gained of the lifecycle of an individual garment and how it changed over the years and with the development of industrialization. From this analysis, three main points of interaction between the garment and its owner can be identified; the moment of **purchase**, the times the garment is **worn**, and when it is either **repaired or altered**.

As observed in the historical analysis, after the garment is purchased, in a pre-industrial context, it was usual that the garment itself or the materials it was made out of would be recycled and repurposed throughout its lifetime, creating a repeating cycle of the ‘wearing’ and ‘repair/altering’ interactions. It was not until the garment was beyond wearable that it would be disposed of and replaced with a new purchase. In contrast, the post-industrial interaction subverts the repair/alteration interaction by immediately disposing of garments that no longer satisfy the needs of the person who owns them.

The analysis of the contemporary interaction will analyse all three components described above in an auto-ethnographic interaction analysis. The author will participate in each component of the product lifecycle as it exists in the fast-fashion interaction today and reflect on the experience through the theoretical framework. Because although repair/alteration are practiced far less post-industrialization, people still do it and it could contain valuable information as to why so many have stopped. Each of these interaction-components describe a form of **creative flow**, beginning at the moment of inspiration, to the action itself, and the results of said action and how they affect someone. These steps are described below;

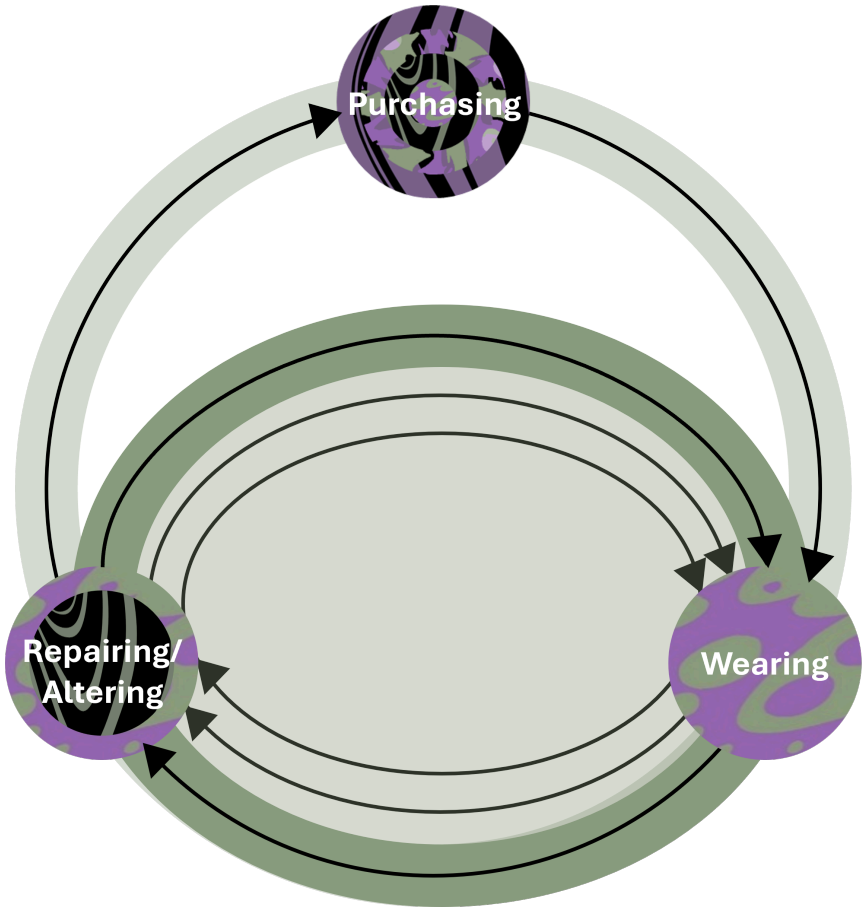


Figure 12: Schematic of the historical interaction cycle between a person and a garment

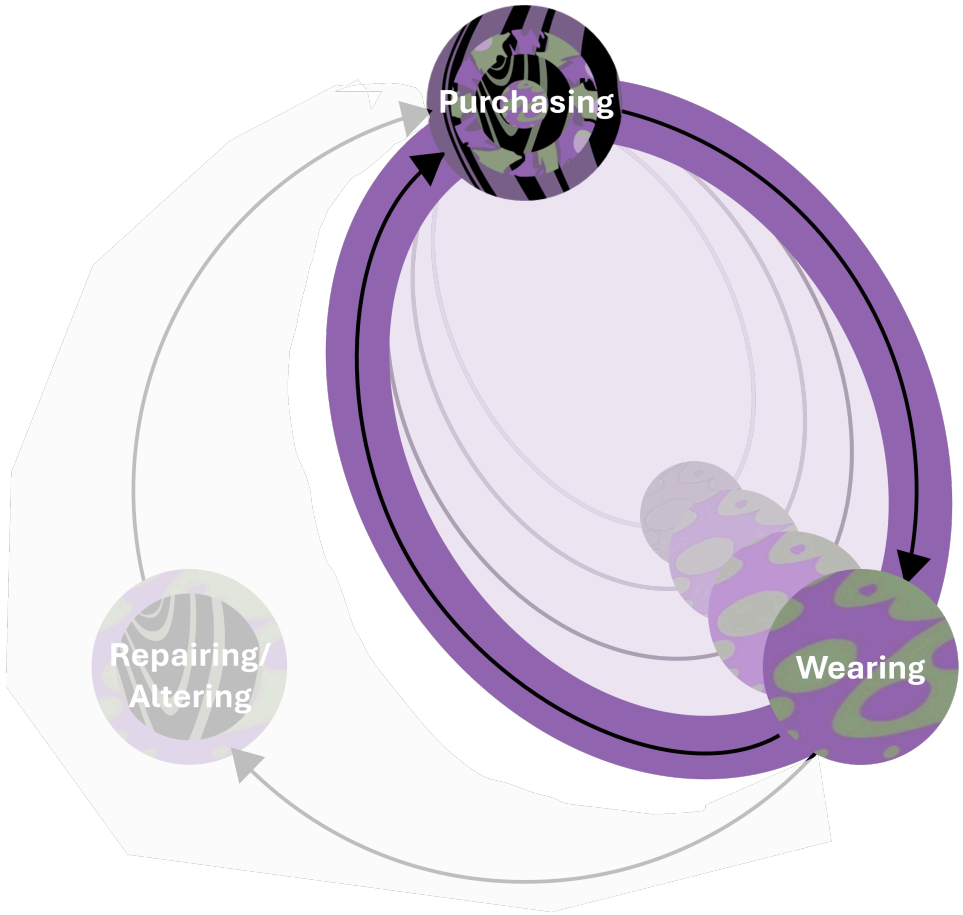


Figure 13: Schematic of the contemporary interaction cycle between a person and a garment

	Purchasing	Wearing	Reparing/Altering
Inciting Emotion	A person discovers a need for a new garment.	A person wishes to present a specific identity and chooses an outfit	A person discovers something that they wish to change about a garment.
Interaction with garment	This person then seeks to purchase a garment from a fashion store, and can choose from its available assortment	This person then places the garments on their body and experiences the identity it provides.	When altering/repairing, they experience the qualities of the garment and its potential to express the desired identity.
Result	The garment is purchased from the fashion store and taken home.	This outfit is worn out into a specific environment, to which both the wearer and their environment respond.	When they finish altering it, they experience the rewards of the labour put into it.

In order to analyse these interaction-components with the Userism-framework that was constructed in Chapter 3, an auto-ethnographic reflection analysis was performed by personal participation in the interaction. All components were performed by the author and their experiences are reflected upon with the standards set in the Userism-framework, to gain a deeper understanding of how someone's **creative flow** fares in the experience. By identifying the specific moments of interruption caused by forms of **Coerced Recognition**, which obstruct the flow of creative expression and lead to **Dehumanization**.

If these obstructions are then aligned with the relevant party or phenomenon it was caused by, we can identify a design direction to clear the obstructions.

4.2.1 Purchasing

Inciting Emotion:
A person discovers a need for a new garment (Between Individual - Self)

> A person discovers a need for a new garment, either through outside influence or internal conclusion, and comes to the realization that they are **unable to create** this garment on their own and therefore goes looking for somewhere/one to purchase said item from.

A person realizing they are '**unable to create**' something, is a form of normalized and internalized coerced recognition, in which they are faced with the limits of their own capabilities, either inflicted by external factors outside their control or because of internal choices. This specific case relates to oppressive concepts of professionalization(Wizinsky, 2022), a societal dynamic in which most citizens only consider the skills employed in their paid labour interaction worthy of developing and mastering. Skills for which one is not financially compensated are often considered to be irrelevant and things you should pay others for.



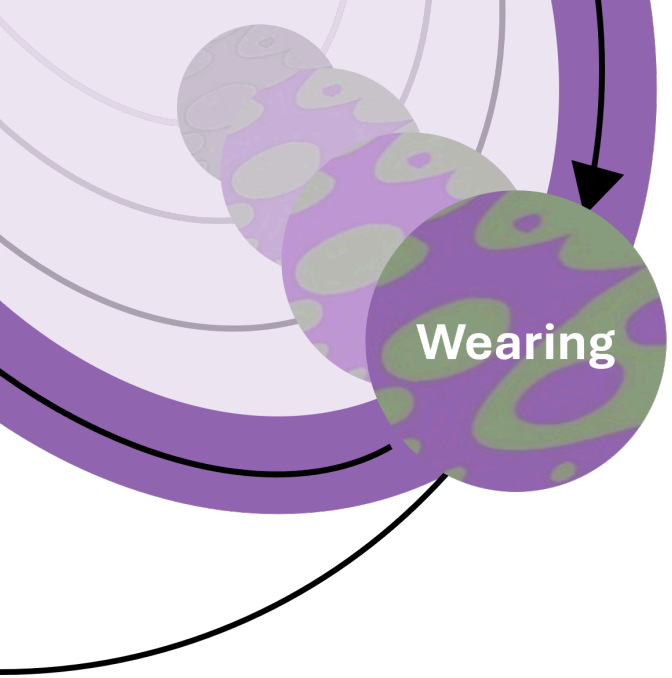
Interaction with the Garment:
This person then seeks to purchase a garment from a fashion store, and can choose from its available assortment. (Between Individual - Designer)

> When this person visits the store (either online or in person), the design of this store is meant to display the **monocultural assortment** in a way that intends to make the consumer feel as though **everything they could ever want or need**. They are **unable to influence** this assortment in ay way and cannot request it to be changed in any way, neither form nor price.

A '**monocultural assortment**' is a representation of an organisation's idea of the cultural costume which they would like to see in the world. For most fast-fashion industry supplied organization, this assortment is based on the contemporary Westerncultural costume with open declarations of allegiance to this cultural heritage and ideology and then heavily divided by the binary gender system. By presenting this assortment as **everything they could ever want or need**, makes sure that the feeling of not being able to find what you were looking for is framed as something that must be your fault. It coerces you to recognize that you must simply want the wrong thing if you cannot find what you are looking for. Heavily interrupting the creative expression of styles which do not adhere to the Western standard, or seek to break with 'what is trending' or 'in vogue'.
Additionally, the being '**unable to influence**' the assortment; a textbook example of Coerced Recognition in which the user is made to submit to the available assortment and is disallowed to pursue their own creative vision. Most stores have submitted to this system of monocultural assortments of Western styles.

Result:
The garment is purchased from the fashion store and taken home. (Between Individual - Designer)

> The results from the purchasing experience are then taken out into the world. Those **concessions, and coerced recognitions** are added to their wardrobe, to be worn upon the body and presented to their environment. Leaving mediocre enthusiasm towards the idea of creative expression the coming days.



4.2.2 Wearing

Inciting Emotion:
A person wishes to present a specific identity and chooses an outfit (Between Individual - Self)

> When a person stands in front of a mirror to decide what they will wear today. They are faced with an opportunity **to express what they want to**, to the audience of eyes they will face. What follows is a balancing act between expression of identity and the **awareness that it will be perceived by their social environment and strangers**.

The **opportunity to express** is a moment for a person to have recognition for their own ability to design. This is a moment of pure creative flow, combined with the wardrobe that this person has collected for themselves.

The **awareness that they will be perceived** can be a coercive interaction that forces them to present a certain way, but it is also an inherent performative element to what fashion is, so not many will consider this directly oppressive. In order to identify whether this components is oppressive, the different possible environments and expressions must be analysed and compared in the third part of this interaction.

Interaction with the Garment:
This person then places the garments on their body and experiences the identity it provides. *(Between Individual - Designer)*

> The way these garments are produced, advertised also makes the quality, shape, and material's behaviour, entirely the **wearer's responsibility**. Only emphasizing that you need to be the '**correct shape**', treat and wash the fabric correctly, and most of all; not wear the garment too much.

Having to put a garment on your body with which you are dissatisfied, mainly after having been convinced that you and your body are the problem, is a deeply dehumanizing experience. Especially if the clothing is of a different cultural allegiance than you identify as. It demands you **concede** to a visual representation of your being to Eurocentric beauty standards and allegiances, foregoing your individuality, while telling you that you had all the options in the world.
In this, there are small victories to be achieved in longer-lasting wearables, such as jewellery and accessories, which often carry more meaning to the wearer than others do and are not susceptible to clothing's planned obsolescence.

Result:
This outfit is worn out into a specific environment, to which both the wearer and their environment respond. (Between Individual - Others)

No Uniform
They are free to express their identity to the fullest extent and **grant themselves recognition to their ability to design**, because they **expect to receive recognition from said environment**. Allowing for a **mutual form of true Humanization.**

Official Uniform
There are limitations to your ranges of expression and the changes you can make to the conditions of your reality. This is an inherently **coercive form** of recognition taking place, which can be experienced as very **dehumanizing**.

Unofficial Uniform
You are balancing the unsproken rules and conditions to receiving recognition from your environment. This often leads to a form of i**nternalized coerced recognition**. Because although there may not be any direct kind of enforcement of the uniform, recognition is likely strengthened by adherence.

Rebellious Expression
You are self-recognizing at the cost of recognition from your environment.

4.2.3 Repairing or Altering

Inciting Emotion:
A person discovers something that they wish to change about a garment. (Between Individual - Self)

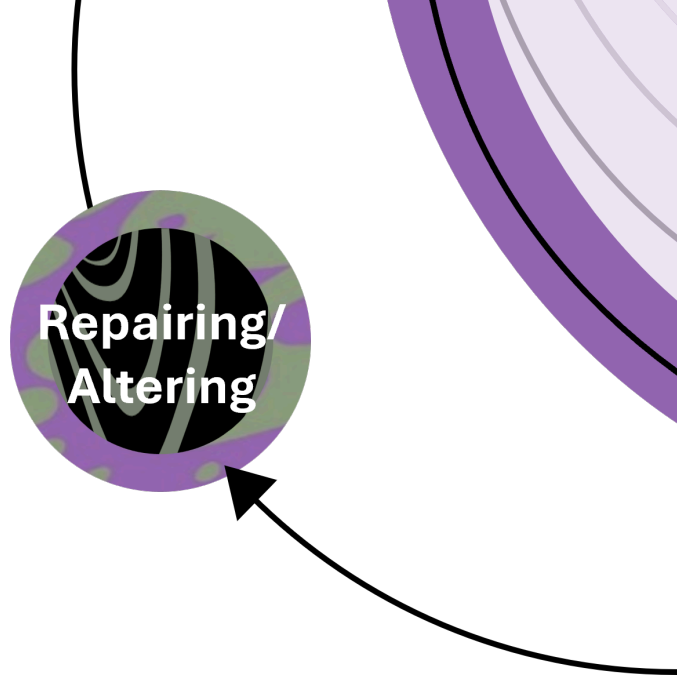
> When a garment in someone's wardrobe is either damaged, no longer fits, or no longer fits the identity they wish to present, it triggers someone to adjust the conditions of their reality in regards to said garment. Although the initiating experience is not positive, this is where **the creative flow of the interaction starts.**

Interaction with the Garment:
When altering/repairing, they experience the qualities of the garment and its potential to express the desired identity. (Between Individual - Designer)

> By knowingly creating garments that are **poor-quality**, with the express intention of saving materials and labour-hours, and counting on the fact that having it mended by a professional is too expensive/more expensive than buying new, the industry **keeps the wearer coming back to the store**. Where clothes used to be made to allow for adjustment over the years, to accommodate the changes in shape and size both style and body, the currently produced items of clothing have completely removed these seam allowances in **favour of minor profits over the fabric saved and the faster return to the store by the wearer.**

As mentioned in the history of the interaction with fashion, most fashion items were constructed with durability and alterability in mind. Motivated by the expenses of new materials and the reality that the human body changes shape over time. With no other reason than the saving of materials and money and the knowledge that by removing these originally standard features of a garment will keep the consumer coming back to the store, consumers of fashion are now nearly unable to keep up. The amount of damage, wear and tear, and material degradation caused simply by the quality of the material (to do with the amount of plastic in it and the looseness of the weave), simply happens too quickly for the average consumer to keep up with. And soon it just becomes easier to pay for a new shirt, than to have it repaired or adjusted by a professional or learn to do it themselves.

This degradation of product quality for financial gain is a direct piece of evidence for the lack of recognition and respect these companies have for their product and consumers. Assuming that no consumer will ever take the time to repair or adjust anything and therefore taking away the possibility to do so in their garments. A clear example of **Userism** and enforced Capitalist Consumerism.



Result:
When they finish altering it, they experience the rewards of the labour put into it. (Between Individual - Self)

If the alterations are completed successful, they can be worn and the **satisfaction can be enjoyed as a form of self-recognition**. If the alterations are perceived by their environment as well, they can grant them **recognition and humanization** as well.

4.3 Artistic exploration of alternative interactions

In the analysis of the contemporary interaction, it was observed that the obstructions to the creative flow of expression occur most in the context of the consumption of the fast-fashion industry. So in order to search for manners of escape from these oppressive and obstructive dynamics, the next step is to explore alternatives with the same theoretical framework. Specifically concepts that are outside the interaction of consumption of the fast-fashion industry and empower participation through design. The previous interaction analysis identified that forms of repair or alteration can be humanizing through the participant's agency in its form and the recognition that is gained by its results.
As described in the introduction, I tried to find ways to express my identity through fashion by altering some of my own clothing, to resolve my frustration with the roadblocks I experienced in the fast-fashion industry. So, in order to analyse an alternative interaction, similar interactions can be performed, motivated by artistic exploration and expression. Additionally, most original artistic explorations were performed in individual contexts, so in order to expand upon and compare the effects of dehumanization in different contexts, some will be set in larger groups of people.
The following will consist of auto-ethnographic descriptions of and reflections on artistic and explorative interactions with fashion, which are then analysed with the Userism framework in order to determine their viability as alternative, emancipatory interactions.

4.3.1 Mending Circle at Extra Practice Studio

A Repair Session in a Group Setting

On a nice day in April, I was invited to a Mending Circle organized by Wietske Nutma at the Extra Practice Studio in Rotterdam. This event was advertised to me as an interesting opportunity to see how sewing-related workshops were hosted and taught, so I happily attended. For the workshop, we were are all asked to bring as many materials as we ourselves had at home and bring a garment we wanted to mend. So I brought a box of my own sewing materials (some needles and threads and an embroidery ring). It was also noted that there was no need to bring materials if you did not possess any already.

The group consisted of pretty exclusively recent-alumni and students and most were colleagues from the Extra Practice studio. Since I am a peer of this demographic, this made connection and introduction very easy at first, but it did take away from the 'community-outreach' idea I was presented with. Everyone introduced themselves as 'a friend of' or 'a colleague of' to the others sitting at the table, which made for a very comfortable and communal atmosphere, even though I myself was not part of said community.

The session was opened with introductions and explanation of the materials brought to the session. To my surprise, however, there was no explanation of how the technique of mending was to be performed. I already happened to be familiar with the technique, but there was no general tutorial, though there was a constant opportunity to ask questions. Everyone at the table came into the workshop with differing skill-levels, some never having been introduced to the technique, others even bringing a garment on which they had performed up to 80 hours of 'Darning'.

On one hand, this created a nice variety in skill level, which lead to everyone at the table having someone sitting next to them who needed help or who was able to help them. Making for more encouragement of that communal feeling.

> *I did happen to be sitting next to someone who did not intend to mend anything, and was instead 'mending holes in their website' on their laptop,* ***leading to a bit of a disconnect.***

On the other hand, the difference in skill level created a bit of a 'power dynamic' at the same time, because the more experienced participants would turn their experience more to 'showing off' their work to less skilled participants, who were stumbling through their first stitches.

A mending technique such as darning, has the unfortunate connotation of originally being something that was considered to be 'shameful' to have to do. Denoting meanings of poverty or carelessness in the eyes of onlookers who managed to perceive the often intentionally hidden darning-work. In the technique, it was often highly recommended that a near-perfect colour match would be found or dyed for the thread applied to the fabric. Specifically in order to hide the work done on the garment, keeping it looking 'as new'. (Banner, 2022)

In the 21st century, practices like mending have fallen out of public interest and skill, and has therefore become something of a rarity. The effort and time invested in the practicing of such sustainability is often perceived as something to be proud of or to be seen as an example to set for others. **As someone from a 21st-century generation, the fact that you are able to perform such techniques, means that you went out of your way to learn and practice it.**

All these factors lead to this practice becoming something that is worn as a patch of honour, and therefore now performed with threads that stand out from the surrounding fabric, **showing off that you took the time to mend a garment instead of throwing it away**. A practical inverse of the historical context of the technique. But when something becomes a point of pride, it also provokes people to show off their proficiency in the skill, leading to a competitive atmosphere of 'neatness' and 'beauty'. **Turning a technique of mending and repair to hide damage and wear, into a decorative technique of displaying sustainability, skill, and style.**

Throughout the workshop I experienced an amount of performativity from both sides of the skill-spectrum. As is to be expected, the more skilled participants spent a lot of time talking about how they attained

their skill, how much they have been practicing it, how bad they used to be at it and how skilled they have now become. The less skilled participants mainly remarked on their own incapability and the messiness of their work, consistently asking for approval from their environment.

In one specific interaction I even observed one of the more-skilled participants remarking on the performance of one of the less skilled, saying they might as well start over with their work since it was not performed adequately to their standards. When I remarked that this comment, though in good spirit, was somewhat derogatory, the more skilled participant did not understand where I was coming from and denied having made such an impact. The less-skilled participant neither confirmed nor denied the experience.

Overall: a technique such as darning, which has a 'correct' way to be performed upon damaged garments in order to hide such damage, inherently demands an amount of skill from participants and often creates an amount of insecurity when the work is to be perceived by others. This is true for both the 'hidden' and the 'ostentatious' darner.



Figure 14: Photograph of the darning work performed on a pair of jeans during the Mending Circle

- There is something to be said for durability when it comes to the execution of darning, probably creating a more structurally sound solution to wear and damage when the darn is tight and aligned with the weave of the garment.
- But in my perception, the enjoyment of the craft is often far more effective for its continuous repairability, rather than a perfect execution the first time it is performed.

Analysis

Sometimes, when the intention is to create an egalitarian environment, by not establishing a 'teacher' and a 'student', it can lead to an uncomfortable dynamic. Specifically when a dynamic of showing-off and self-deprecation emerges, because there is an inherent inequality in the skill-level of the people involved. By not addressing that difference in skill-level, by denominating a teacher and a student from each other, it leaves space for said uncomfortable dynamic. Involving the theory of Userism, the intention of the workshop is to empower the participants to adapt and employ a new skill, which can expand upon their own self-recognition. This usually achieved by the participant accepting pre-emptively, that they arrive to a workshop to learn something from someone who knows more than them about it. Throughout the workshop, they absorb said knowledge and gain recognition from the teacher about their newfound knowledge and skill, and the participant leaves the workshop closer to the teacher's skill-level than they came in.

Because there was no official distinction of roles in a class in which the quality of your work greatly determines your success, the **showing off** ended up creating a dynamic of **Coerced Recognition towards the other participants**, and the **self-deprecation** led to a general **lack of recognition**. If a teacher was present, they could have managed to temper or accentuate the recognition and distribute it evenly across the participants.

But sitting down in a group of relatively like-minded people and facing the disappointment of a broken garment, is a great form of **community-bonding**. And when you all find a way to learn a new skill and reclaim the value of your garment by your own hands, **recognition can take place between the participants**. Allowing them to be lifted up by each other in their ability to be **resilient in their interaction with fashion.**



Figure 15: Outfit designed for the Ghost Concert

4.3.2 ‘Ghost’ concert outfit

An Individual Repair Session

For a specific event, a concert for the band Ghost, I went to on the 8th of May 2025, I decided to gather and make an outfit which fit the vibe of the concert. This band maintains an aesthetic of Gohtic Christian Horror/ Fantasy an uses a lot of Church officials’ uniforms as inspiration for their costumes on stage. So, in my own outfit, I wanted to pay tribute to these stylings, without wearing an actual costume and using the clothes already in my closet. So in order to gain an idea of what kind of clothes could be used and/or upcycled, I started collecting reference images to base my outfit on.

Above is set of drawings I made to design the outfit; the first one being a mannequin figure with a relevant pose (range of mobility) and the bag I would bring for my stuff, second being the average impression and silhouette based on the reference images collected, and then the third being a combination of the references with items I have in my wardrobe. Of these pieces, the skirt was one that bothered me, because of the way it was constructed.

The pleated pinstripe skirt in question was ordered from the fast-fashion brand ASOS by me some time ago. When it arrived, both the waistband and the bottom edges of the skirt were unhemmed and were fraying, so at the time I immediately sat down with my sewing machine and hemmed the edges by hand. What I did not anticipate was that the hemming of the edges would contribute to most of the pleating coming completely undone. The skirt is made out of a cheap polyester fabric and is very light, making it very unwilling to hold a shape for a longer period of time. Over time, the skirt had lost its pleated shape (also because I do not own a clothing iron) and started taking on a bell-shape, which I did not appreciate and does not go with the plan I had for this outfit. Though I will admit that the lack of ironing must have been the nail in the coffin for the pleated shape of the skirt, there are a number of factors that I identified while fixing the shape of this skirt;

Pleating pattern
According to Bernadette Banner's (2022) guide to sewing, there are two main types of pleating: Box Pleating and Knife pleating. The former being a symmetrical individual pleat with fabric being folded under each side and the latter being a directional folding, where each next pleat folds under the former and so on. In the specific case of this fast-fashion skirt, the designers chose to employ both techniques, by placing a box pleat at the centre front and back and continuing with knife pleats towards the side-seams.

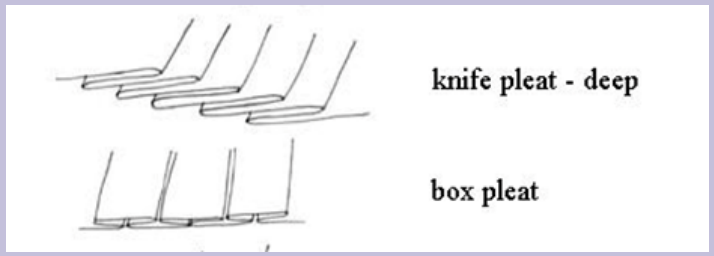


Figure 16: Visual showing the difference between pleats.

This inconsistency in pleat type does not have to be a problem, but it does make maintenance of the shape of the garment through ironing more difficult. Requiring, the wearer to take into account all different directions involved in the skirt. The integrity of the pleat is also maintained by the equal distribution of weight between the 'inner pleats' and the 'outer pleats'. Equal weight distribution leads to a lesser tendency of the fabric to return to the 'unpleated form'. In this skirt, probably to save on material costs for the factory, the inner pleats are much shorter than the outer pleats.

Cut of the pattern
Outside the pleating pattern, the cutting of the textiles used to create this skirt, do not have to adhere to classic designs and northwestern cultural practices in the construction of garments. So judging the construction of the skirt based on these ideals, contributes to the ideas of monocultural fashion assortments, which is already pervasive in the fast-fashion industry.

But the design of this skirt specifically references the classic design of a uniform pleated skirt, both in fabric choice and silhouette created, carrying the intention of producing a product of that shape and form. In addition to which, I intended to obtain a classic garment for my wardrobe, making the judgement rendered to its design valid again.

This garment was designed by someone who was either completely unfamiliar with the pattern of the garment they were referencing or had to compensate for the lesser amount of materials used in this product. The original design for such a skirt consists of two triangles of fabric of which one is pleated and attached to the other as the waistband. The weight of the pleated fabric and the movement of the wearer creates the pyramid shape in motion, but appears perfectly vertical in stasis. With the reduction of fabric used, this dynamic movement of the garment disappears, causing it to just look like a tube skirt. Likely because of this, the cut of the garment was adjusted to have a slanted angle, instead making the skirt out of two trapezoids and a rectangle. These angled cuts are completely clashing with the pattern of the fabric, and is something that should be fixed.

The choices made in the design and construction of this skirt create a direct form of planned obsolescence, because it intentionally only looks like wat it is supposed to look like for a little while before it deforms.

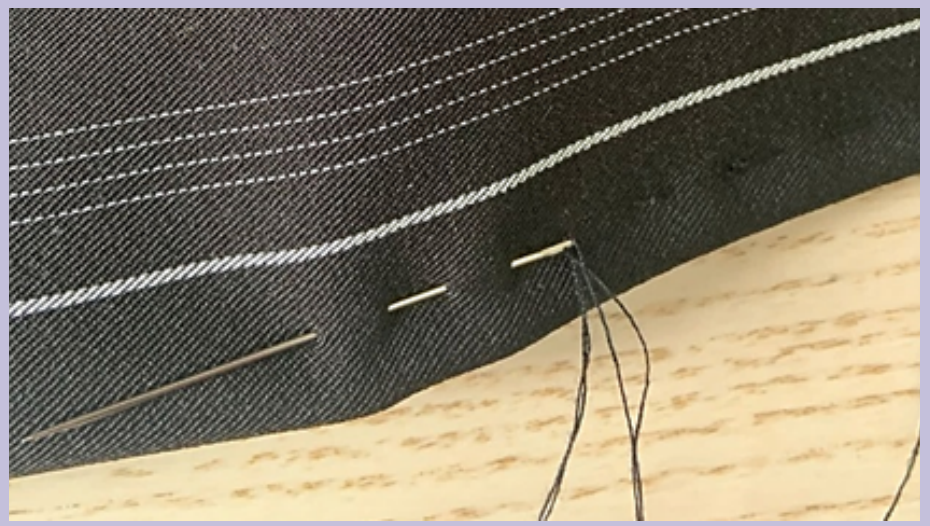


Figure 17: Photograph of a Running Stitch





Figure 18: Photograph of the eventual Ghost Concert outfit

Analysis

Overall: The experience of tackling this garment had two very different sides, seeing as the first part mainly consisted of the criticizing and fixing of the poor construction of the original garment, this was the more energy intensive part of it.

The sewing itself is pretty therapeutic, because it is a simple stitch, but because there was a time limit involved (the concert was in two days) there was a stress-factor which caused me two spend two days of 8-9 hours a day of stitching to do all folded edges. Eventually, getting to wear the upcycled/fixed garment was very satisfying and self-actualizing, especially since I designed the outfit beforehand, seeing it come together granted me a great amount of self-recognition.

Considering I was actively improving upon a poorly constructed garment, fixing it felt somehow rebelliously validating. Although the initial disappointment in something I had invested in was frustrating.

While wearing the garment, a great deal of recognition was granted by my friends and partner, who often complimented me on my outfit and the improvements I made to it, making me feel very competent overall. And I think I'll always remember what I made it for and how I felt while wearing it, giving the skirt itself that much more meaning to me.

4.3.3 Embroidery project

An Individual Alteration Session

This project began when I found an embroidery DIY-set at store, which included a ring, a piece of transparent polyester fabric with a pattern printed on it, needles and threads. It also came with clear instructions on which stitches to use for which part of the design and which colours as well.

I already had some experience with embroidery and therefore often choose to work on my actual clothes and alter designs or inspirations that I find, to better fit my vision or the clothes they are on. So I decided to take a picture of the design from the box and put it into a drawing program on my tablet. There I turned the background into the colour of the jacket I wanted to embroider and started to expand on the original design.

Along the way I got very inspired by some concepts I had been toying with related to a Dungeons and Dragons campaign I was playing with friends and decided to add in some characters from that world. When those were in there, I felt like adding in some other concepts which had been playing at the edge of my mind while working on my thesis. Leading to the design you see depicted on the right.

I decided I was satisfied with this design and copied it over onto the jacket, but when I got to the flowers at the top, I decided that their composition did not align with the rest of the design I had made anymore, so I adjusted it to a more similar style. As depicted on the bottom right, nothing was left of the original design anymore, but it was much more of what I wanted the design to express, so it made me happy.

Over time, I spent a lot of hours working on this embroidery project. This is something that I have done quite a bit before, but I still found little opportunities to try new techniques that I had not used before. This always makes the practices therapeutic in its repetitiveness, but also still challenging if I want it to be. The patient, explorative nature of the activity makes for a comfortable pastime, though I have completely forgotten about it for a while and during finishing this report, it is still not finished.

But it has been laying around my house a bit and whenever someone comes over they always love to look at it and see how much progress I have made with it. This long-term nature of this project is what makes it fun and comfortable, but it also meant that I could not wear my specific summer-jacket over the summer. But because it was my own choice, I did not feel frustrated by this fact.

Analysis

This process was very artistically expressive overall, because I was just doing it for myself and at my own pace, I could challenge and comfort myself whenever I needed it. Although the end result is not finished yet, I am very excited to see what it will become.

Because it allowed me to **design my own concepts and put little pieces of my own thoughts and imagination into it,** it allowed me a **great amount of self-recognition**. I became more confident in my skills at embroidery and my own ability to design such a piece. In addition, because it is something **that just lays around my house**, friends and family have seen it and **granted me recognition for my skills** as well. This makes the fact that I am working on it have that much more meaning and enjoyment overall.







Photographs and Design of the Embroidery project 69

4.3.4 Embroidery workshop Hii

An Alteration in a Group Setting

The embroidery workshop was taught by me for a social event to celebrate and thank the volunteers for the Hii organization at the TU Delft. Prior to the event we had all eaten and had non-alcoholic drinks together and all participants were aware that we would be embroidering together later.

At the beginning of the workshop, each participant was given a tote-bag and embroidery materials as gifts, to be used in the workshop. Then I gave them a general tutorial on how to separate threads, how to thread a needle and how to get started with your first stitches. Describing the practice as 'drawing with needle and thread'.

Across the table I had placed a number of references photos and illustrations which contained examples of possible designs and tutorials for more complex stitch patterns. Meant to allow participants to gather a couple of references they liked and determine their own way of interacting with the workshop.

Throughout everyone joked and talked while they were embroidering their bags, many sharing stories of their hobbies, lives, and interests outside the volunteer work. During I was also trying to embroider a little, but was often interrupted by someone with a question on how to repair or solve a mistake or struggle they ran into. But because everyone was struggling at similar levels and issues, there was no real perceived self-deprecation or bragging. Everyone was just trying their best, and all were doing very different things with their designs and ideas. I also tried to do some embroidery patterns that I had never tried before, making me struggle a little bit as well, which made for a pretty comfortable and casual environment.

I think the main common denominator was that, because we were artistically experimenting with a new skill, everyone felt comfortable with failing and trying again. And whenever someone did succeed, most everyone felt at ease to compliment them on their achievement.

Analysis

For me as an instructor, the experience was very fulfilling, because both the setup and the approach of the participants allowed for a comfortable dynamic of mutual recognition:

- The participants **recognized** me as someone with a developed **skillset** and the **ability to design**
- The participants were able to **recognize themselves** because they were able **to design and learn** to embroider something **on their own terms and at their own pace**. Believing in their own ability to try and adopt a new skill.
- I was able to **offer recognition** for the participants, because I did not just have to make sure they were 'doing it right', but I could see them design for themselves and **create something that they wanted to express.**

Personally, I will remember this workshop very fondly and it has inspired me to keep creating similarly comfortable and expressive learning environments in the future.



Photographs from the Hii Embroidery Workshop

4.4 Overall conclusion of the interaction analysis

4.4.1 Identifying the pillars of oppression

Historical Analysis

Since the industrialization of the fashion industry, every piece of participation in creation has been monopolized into a centralized and offshored production industry. This has led to a disconnected interaction between the production and consumption of fashion, causing a loss of agency in expression and a lesser emotional investment from the people who are now rendered 'consumers' and 'users'.

From this analysis, three main points of interaction between the garment and its owner can be identified; the moment of **purchase**, the times the garment is **worn**, and when it is either **repaired or altered**.

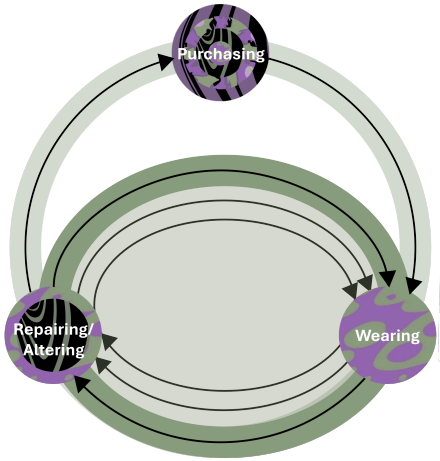


Figure 19: Schematic of the historical interaction cycle between a person and a garment

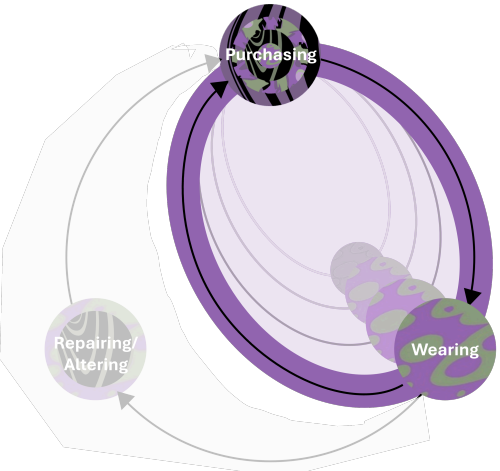


Figure 20: Schematic of the contemporary interaction cycle between a person and a garment

As observed in the historical analysis, after the garment is purchased, in a pre-industrial context, it was usual that the garment itself or the materials it was made out of would be recycled and repurposed throughout its lifetime, creating a repeating cycle of the 'wearing' and 'repair/altering' interactions. It was not until the garment was beyond wearable that it would be disposed of and replaced with a new purchase. In contrast, the post-industrial interaction subverts the repair/alteration interaction by immediately disposing of garments that no longer satisfy the needs of the person who owns them.

Later in this project, when looking for design directions, it will be important to consider, according to experts that study Colonialism in Modernist Design, that the tendencies of the fashion industry have roots and seem to perpetuate similar concepts to such colonialist structures.

Since t**he industrialization of the fashion industry**, the community-based craft and artform has been **monopolized** and moved out of the levels of interaction that are available to the average person, making it **lose its cultural and personal meaning.**

This focus of industrial and financial advancement is an aspect of **modernist design.**

	Purchasing	Wearing	Reparing/Altering
Inciting Emotion	Normalized **Coerced Recognition** of inability to make what you need yourself.	You have an opportunity to express a chosen identity for clothing, knowing that you will be perceived.	A person discovers something that they wish to change about a garment.
Interaction with garment	Fashion market is **Monopolized** by fast-fashion stores. You are **unable to influence** and are **dependent** on their collective **Monocultural** assortment.	When you wear the garment responds to the shape of your body according to **standardized sizing** and, over time, its **Planned obsolesence.**	You actively experience the **poor quality** of the garment and your expression is blocked by its intention **to be thrown away** and replaced.
Result	You **Concede** to your dependence and add something to your wardrobe which is as close as possible to your wish.	This outfit is worn out into a specific environment, which can influence their creativity positively or negatively, to which both the wearer and their environment respond.	When you successfully alter the garment, you experience self-recognition and recognition from others.

Contemporary interaction analysis

Through the ethnographic analysis of the different components of the contemporary interaction, a number of factors were identified that seem to disrupt the creative flow of expression:

Main identified factors where the creative process is interrupted:

- Coerced Recognition that the user cannot or should not create through the monopolization of most means of production into a centralized and offshored industry.
- Coerced Recognition at limited assortment of clothing and inability to influence this assortment
- Coerced Recognition at face with poor quality and planned obsolescence

As mentioned in the historical interaction analysis, a Monopolized industry which limits a person to a consumerist interaction, forces people into the role of consumer and user. In this Dehumanizing position, any person seeks to change the conditions of their reality by consistently trying to make something work. From the analysis of the contemporary interaction, these phenomena of Coerced Recognition arise directly from the mechanisms of this industrialized interaction with fashion, barring people from expressing the identities they wish to and feeling satisfied and humanized in their behaviour and abilities. Leading to eternal dissatisfaction with the results of their attempts at expression, causing an addictive feedback cycle which only grows shorter over time.
Probably related to the **industrialization of production**, but consciously sustained by the industry and its designers.

The cycle keeps promising you better around the corner, both in expression and recognition due to your inability to change these conditions of your reality in the fast-fashion interaction. You are consistently dissatisfied and feel lesser than someone else, so you start to assume that you must be the problem in the interaction. The industry is constructed to take a human need and place it just out of reach, keeping you coming back for more.

Monoculturalism , a consequence of monopolization and inhuman systems

In a monopolized landscape of industrialized fashion production, especially if there are no skills available to you to change your reality, creates a system dependant on availability. These assortments are determined by a minority of fashion designers and the corporate structures that employ them (Wizinsky, 2022). These structures, which represent a larger systemic identity begin to set the tone for the larger cultural norm and start forming a hegemony which presents a certain cultural expression that best describes their own mean average identity.

As discussed in the preliminary literature research, fashion is an inherent declaration of allegiance and an expression of identity, when everyone dresses the same they are all part of a shared identity and a shared allegiance. And due to the lack of resources available to the average consumer, one's identity cannot inspire another to push against the powers that be.

Giving form to these systems, are the designers of the fast-fashion industry, people who are often not the owners of the means of production but are similarly selling their labour to someone who does. In order to please the owner's wishes and rationally maximize the amount of profit gained through the systems they give form to, assumptions are made on the wishes, capabilities, and behaviours of the consuming party, often even promising them empowerment in their masculinity or femininity by abstaining from taking up the practice. These are often still based on the selling points of 'ease and convenience', leading to designers giving form to products which assume the user to want to have as little to do with the product as possible, often disallowing the consumer to intervene in the form of the product. **Creating a cultural sinkhole towards a specific cultural presentation and uniform**, leaving no no opportunity for anyone to express an individual or cultural identity outside it. Practically forcing the consumer to place upon their body the signifiers of having joined the globalized world.

This loss of culture and freedom of expression is not perceived as a priority over financial profit through technological advancement. This is a concept discussed in Tunstall's (2023) definition of **Modernist Design**, which will be elaborated upon in the next chapter.

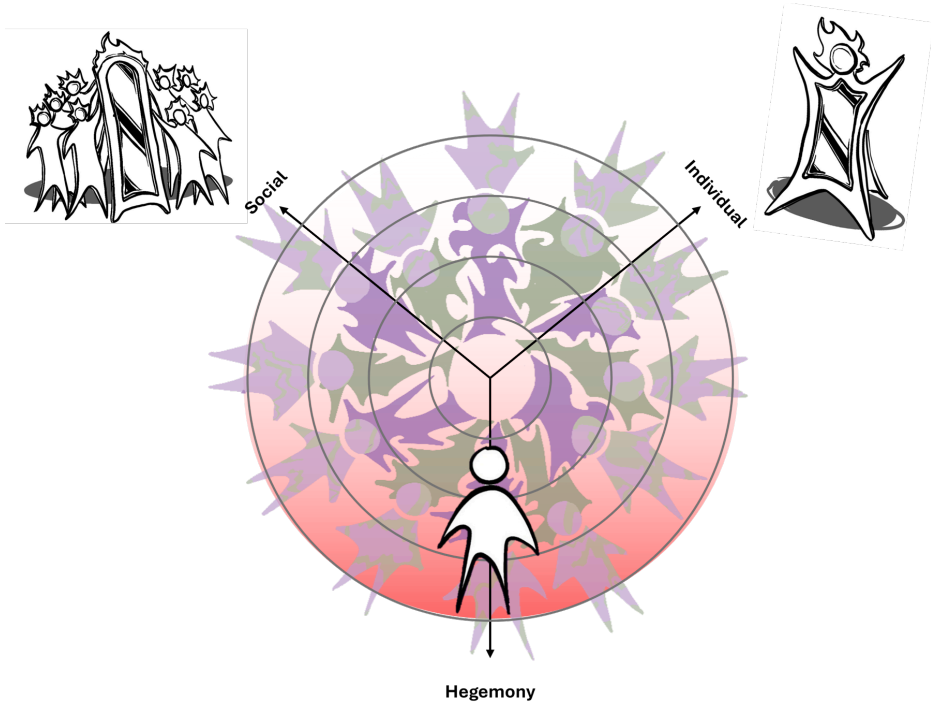


Figure 21: Schematic representation of the possible degrees of freedom a person can have in expressions of identity and how they are now being restrained from these freedoms by the monocultural assortment in fast-fashion.

	Individual setting	Group setting
Repair	Fixing a poorly-made skirt • Severe test of self-recognition, hurdled by poor quality. • Proof of capability when successful, leading to recognition and humanization by self and others.  	Mending Circle ▪ Pressure-cooker of comparison of capability to repair. Subverting self-recognition and waiting for recognition from others. ▪ When finished, recognition for capability can be granted by self and environment. 
Alteration	Embroidery project ▪ Individually driven artistic expression, driven by self-recognition.  	Embroidery workshop ▪ A comfortable environment of free artistic expression and mutual recognition. 

Alternative Interaction Analysis
The information collected during the artistic exploration of alternative interactions addresses the experience of repairing and altering clothing in an explorative format through the lens of the theoretical framework. Both in individual and in group-contexts to gauge the impact of a social and individual interaction level on the humanization process. The results are summarized in the visual above;

The results of the analysis, combined with my own experiences in sewing over the past years, has lead to the following conclusions on the humanizing nature of these practices;

Repair vs. Alteration
Overall, altering and decorating a garment is more artistically fulfilling, and repair has a more satisfying end-result due to the redemption of a broken garment. This has to do with the basis any participant starts with, because a broken garment already depreciates the recognition it can gain your from yourself and your environment, whereas a dissatisfying garment can only be improved and the recognition it offers increased. The alteration process is one driven by artistic expression, originating from a feeling of potential and a recognition for your own capability. Throughout the process, every action can empower your feeling of capability, because it can only improve from your intervention. And with every stitch the garment becomes more 'yours'. The only thing that prohibits your success and self-recognition is whether you consider your intervention to be successful, though most alteration techniques are easily reversed and often do not deteriorate the garment inherently.

The repair process begins with the disappointment of a garment failing, either through a destructive action or through planned obsolescence, both create a feeling of frustration. The actual repair is inspired by this frustration and an amount of self-recognition for your capability to repair the garment and reclaim its value. Throughout the process, this feeling of capability is constantly tested and the frustration with the damage can be extended into a frustration with the project overall. But it is this passion for reclamation of a piece of clothing that you care about which

eventually still powers the self-recognition. And similar to the alteration interaction, with every stitch the garment becomes more ‘yours’ and the damage becomes part of the story you had with the garment.

Individual vs. Group
The self-recognition experienced while performing repair or alteration is affected by the levels of interaction available in the physical context it takes place in. If only the individual level of interaction is available, you are only relying on your own motivations and encouragements to perform a task. If both the levels of social and individual interactions are available, like in a group setting, the belief in your own capability is directly influenced and often dependent on the recognition (or coerced recognition) you receive from others in your environment.

In individual settings, you have all the time in the world to go at your own pace, stop halfway through and come back whenever you have gathered the courage to keep going. This allows for the gentle development of skill and self-recognition without feeling disappointed when something does not work out. It does require you to wait for recognition from others until you can show your work to others, which can become a daunting prospect for many, sometimes even becoming discouraging.

In group settings, there are constant cycles of feedback and perception being fired at you during your repair/alteration interaction. This can lead to a negative feedback cycle of coerced recognition which discourages you to offer yourself self-recognition for your capability to create. But if the environment is conducive to a positive learning experience, as it was in the Hii workshop, the recognition received for your capability to create and express your creativity in the process can cause an increase in your confidence and self-recognition.

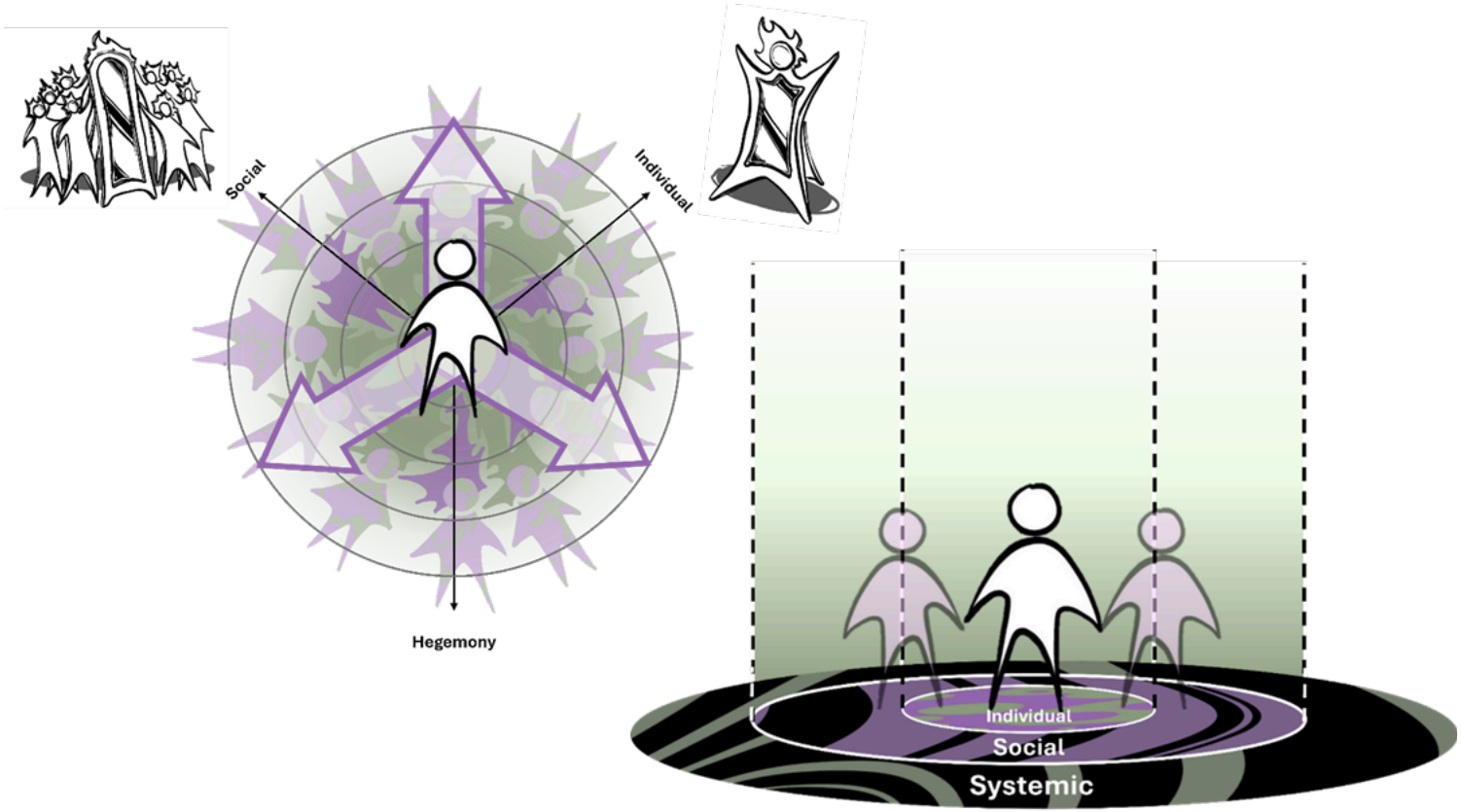


Figure 22: Schematic representation of the possible degrees of freedom a person can have in expressions of identity and the levels of interaction a person can gain recognition from

Conclusion: the search for humanization

Due to the fast-fashion industry's **Monopolization** of the means of production and structuring it into systems of **mass production**, it has lost the ability to offer recognition for a person's ability to design for themselves and express their identity, because of the distance it creates between the user and the designer of fashion products.

So when does **Humanization** occur? According to the contemporary and alternative interaction analysis, most moments of recognition happen in contexts outside of the fashion store and in a context with yourself or with your social environment. Specifically the moments when someone steps into the creative flow, taking control of their expression either through picking of an outfit or making alterations to their existing clothing. Afterwards, no matter whether they themselves feel successful, a social environment that appreciates them will appreciate their trying and recognize their effort to express themselves.
This makes the best levels of interaction for a person to seek recognition and explore different kinds of expression of their identity, and so for the **emancipatory interaction** to take place in, **the social and individual levels. Specifically in a community setting in which people are comfortable and familiar with.**

4.4.2 Researching Design directions

Based on the collected information in this chapter, the pillars of oppressive dynamics have been identified through the interaction analysis. So, the next step is to define the Design directions, which will guide the construction of the alternative interaction for the emancipation from the fast-fashion industry that will complete the answer the first sub-research question **(RQ1).**

As analysed, **User Oppression** in the fast-fashion industry manifests itself in a distancing of the the ability to produce from the average person, combined with a lack of recognition for individual expression. These dynamics stem from the following phenomena;

- the **Monopolization** of the means of production and the accelerating cycle of consumption it enforces.
- and **Monoculturalization**,causing a forced declaration of allegiance to the hegemony through an exclusively monocultural assortment of products.

Creating an overall and consistently dissatisfying form of expression and a diminishing feeling of capability in the interaction with fashion. This industry has managed to capture a human need and artform, turned it into an addictive cycle of constant consumption, making most people surrender their desire for expression.

The Pluriverse concept

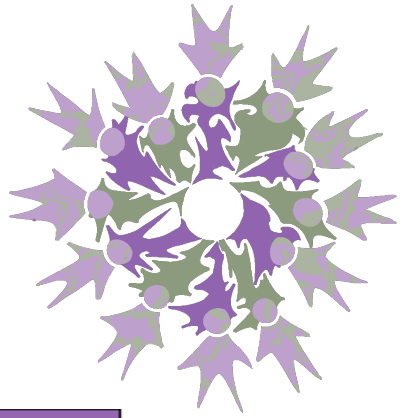
These phenomena are not just caused by a single Userist designer, but a culture and system of Modernist design ideologies. This is a form of design perpetuated by Imperialist powers that pose that the best method to live better is through the advancement of technology (Tunstall, 2023). Instead, it is primarily used to dominate the global market and hegemony by erasure of indigenous culture and capability. Similar to concepts of Userism in design.

It was discussed in the historical interaction analysis that much of the fast-fashion industry's infrastructure and procedure stems from the era of European imperialism and colonialism. Specifically considering that it is one of the industries that has maintained much of its form, and probably its ideologies.

The dynamics of Colonialism were dismantled on a Governmental level, but not necessarily in economic contexts and Tunstall (2023) states that they are perpetuated in Modernist Design.

Modernist design is a form of design perpetuated by Imperialist powers that pose that the best method to live better is through the advancement of technology.

- **Instead**, it is primarily used to dominate the global market and hegemony by erasure of indigenous culture and capability (Tunstall, 2023). Similar to concepts of Userism in design.



Elizbeth Tunstall (2023) and Costanza-Chock (2020) instead suggest that such a concept can be addressed by;

The Pluriverse concept

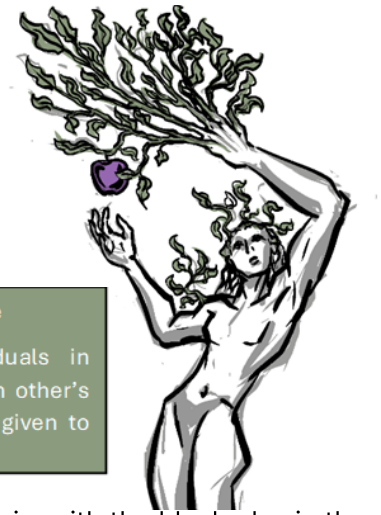
A world in which many worlds fit, a mentality which focuses on collaborative and place-based practices and that acknowledges the interdependence of all people, beings, and the earth.

This research can guide the next steps to design an alternative interaction by concluding that the fashion industry relies heavily on the myth of better living through technology, and that this is a modernist design practice. This practice can be avoided by employing place -based practices, in order to include a pluriversal perspective that acknowledges the interdependence of all people, beings, and the earth. By emphasizing community participation to address the monopolization of the means of production and encouraging artistic expression to allow space for the development of liberation and agency to identify with their own culture and community.

In the context of fashion as a culture-defining artform, this pluriversal concept can also be adapted to address the consequence of monopolization, monoculturalism;

Monoculturalism (Costanza-Chock, 2020) is a product of the neoliberal movement of globalization, with the direct intention to make all cultures into a profitable market with few different products. This intentional dynamic serves to generate financial profit, but flattens the cultural experiences it exports, not only for those who receive, but also for those whose lives it came from.

Seeing as this project's purpose is to empower and strengthen the cultural diversity that used to be inherent to fashion, it will be important to stimulate the cause of that diversity in the alternative interaction; artistic expression.



Artistic Expression as the Rebirth of pluriculture

By encouraging artistic expression in individuals in community contexts, through recognition of each other's capability, culture is born and new meaning is given to objects and interactions.

Through the results of the interaction analysis, with the blockades in the current creative flow defined, the alternative interaction can efficiently stimulate the pluricultural design direction.

With the conditions to the new interaction defined, a context and approach for the alternative interaction should be determined;

Slowing down the consumption cycle
At this point in time, one could argue that the environmental effects of the fast fashion industry are well-known and familiar to most. The landscape is dominated by quick and impulsive purchases of inexpensive, disposable fashion due to changing consumer [TB1] attitudes that place a higher value on price than clothing heritage (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

Cooper (2005) suggests in his article that it will be possible to delay product replacement and reduce the need for new resources by slowing the consumption cycle;

> *"Public commitment to the changes required if the throwaway culture is to be superseded remains unconvincing. A need to increase resource productivity is accepted, but politicians currently address this in the context of efficiency, apparently wary of advocating policies that might be portrayed as a threat to contemporary lifestyles. Prompted by quality of life concerns, the relationship between consumption and time has increasingly attracted research interest and a countercultural phenomenon, "slow consumption," has surfaced."*
>
> (Cooper, 2005)

It is exactly this movement of slow consumption, which Cooper (2005) suggests can be achieved mainly through lengthening the life spans. Traditionally, this is achieved through an increase in quality over quantity and repairability of a product and should therefore be a relatively easy goal to achieve for both consumer and producer. Buy less, but higher quality and more expensive clothing. But the core problem of the fast-fashion industry is that these options simply do not exist.

The free market has failed us in this regard, opportunities for a more sustainable future could be presented throughout the fashion industry, and yet the corporations that have monopolized the fashion market have decided to resist change. **Not only is social change from the bottom-up a likely place for innovation to start, it also seems to be the only place it can.**

> *"That many design practices have operated under the direction of the ideology of capitalism is a historical fact. However, it's also just that: historical."* (Wizinsky, 2022)

Who can afford to be critical? (Matos, 2022) discusses the challenges and opportunities for the future of designers who wish to work outside the bounds of a capitalist system. In its third chapter the book discusses the myriad of ways one could redefine the profession of design, if you

would even want to keep calling it a profession; “Framing design as art or as an ontological life force is all fun and games until you have to pay your rent.” The solution it offers is stated in its subtitle; an inquiry into what we can’t do alone, as designers, and into what we might be able to do together.

But we cannot concede to the possibility that the system to support a social innovation is ‘just not there’. As designers we should be able to consider the future as different kind of system to research. Emancipatory futures research considers it more important to impact than to search for a ‘probable’ alternative (Mannermaa, 1986), presenting a future in which one is not constricted by probabilities but empowered by the possibilities. While at the same time informing the designer on as many possible future decisions as possible.

> *“The economic system should be adapted to ecological boundaries, it should not waste energy and other natural resources, production should be based on peoples’ intellectual and material needs instead of commercial purposes, and technological development should not be guided by short-sighted greed for gain, but sensible human and social goals. This implies that the study should have a broader scope of analysis than is common in conventional economics.”*
>
> (Mannermaa, 1986)

The paper argues for a scope broader than what conventional economics offer, coming close to a form of activism against the established capitalist system. Seeing as this graduation project on slowing down the fashion cycle is expressly formulated to address a social issue created by this system, this concept of an ‘**activist approach’ could lead to a broader scope of relevant results and ideations.**

Decolonial participatory design
The thesis ‘Decolonial Participatory design’ by Tomasini Gianini (2020) is referenced in the adaptation of the theoretical framework (chapter 3.3), but the eventual result, a method for decolonial participatory design is very closely aligned with the pluriverse concept that will guide the construction of the alternative interaction of this project.

Tomasini Gianini (2020) found that the in order to decolonize the interaction between designer and participant in the creation process, that the design process needs to be a collaborative one. If translated to the framework this project works with, it can be interpreted as the designer having recognition for a participant’s ability to design and being able to shift from the role of participant and designer in a collaborative session. **Employing a similar method could be the best way to redesign something that used to be a community practice, probably even to just design something that can be used to design for themselves with humanization as its true goal.**

Hii TU Delft
Hii (2025) is a peer-to-peer workshop programme set up by students for students at the TU Delft,about behavioural reflection and self-determined adjustments. Intended to facilitate the building of mental resilience in the context of Dealing with Stress, having Good Conversations, and finding My Strengths. These workshops have a similar mission of creating a humanizing experience in which all of the participants are asked to share and reflect on their experiences surrounding mental health and student life and collaborate **to find new meaning and humanization in conversation with others.**

These workshops maintain a specific structure of self-reflection and discussion with other participants about alternative behaviours and interactions. No one in the workshop is considered a professional, not even the facilitators, all present are simply there to reflect together and learn from each other’s perceptions and experiences. **Creating a comfortable and egalitarian learning environment about complicated and vulnerable subjects.**

It also creates a space for students of the TU Delft to redefine the conditions of their own mental wellbeing, Workshop environment based on Hii’s template which creates a safe-space to:

- express experiences and wishes for a different future,
- gives people the tools to empower themselves
- asks people to express their own ability to design their alternative future

Conclusion

As stated in chapter 2.1, the first sub-research question of this project is as follows;

RQ1: *What are the dynamics of oppression, which are designed into the fast-fashion industry, and how can they be dismantled in the new interaction?*

The first part of this research question was answered by the choice of the theoretical framework, Userism. This conscious disempowerment of people's ability to design and freedom to express their identity is supported by two main pillars;

- the **Monopolization** of the means of production and the accelerating cycle of consumption it enforces.
- and **Monoculturalization**,causing a forced declaration of allegiance to the hegemony through an exclusively monocultural assortment of products.

The second can be a consequence of the capitalist practice of monopolization, but it is important to note that it is not a requirement for a monopolized system to function, meaning that it is at least a semi-conscious decision that is being made by the designers of the fast-fashion industry.

Based on literature research performed on the methods and context of the current interaction and alternative options, a number of design directions were constructed that could dismantle the dynamics of oppression.

To address the pillar of Monopolization, **The Pluriverse concept**: A world in which many worlds fit, a mentality which focuses on collaborative and place-based practices and that acknowledges the interdependence of all people, beings, and the earth. Letting go of the idea of fashion as a business practice, and embracing community and cooperative creation processes. Empowering participation in creation and resilience in production and maintenance.

Consequentially, to address the monocultural pillar, **Artistic Expression as the Rebirth of pluriculture**: By encouraging artistic expression in individuals in community contexts, through recognition of each other's capability, culture is born and new meaning is given to objects and interactions. Abandoning Monoculturalism by encouraging the rediscovery of community-driven culture; creating space and comfortability to express yourself artistically. Allowing a culture to be reborn from the people living the experience.

When considering the context to design the alternative interaction for literature research suggested that such a social change from the bottom-up a likely place for innovation to start, it also seems to be the only place it can, based on the actions of capitalist industries so far and their unwillingness to facilitate change themselves. Instead this project will take a more 'activist approach by consciously stepping away from the confinements of the fast-fashion industry and address it in a community setting, allowing for a broader scope of relevant results and ideations.

In a community setting, meaning a preexisting community in which all participants are familiar with each other, all can feel safe and recognized by the people around them and feel comfortable enough to experiment with different forms of expression and activist ideas, collaborating to find new meaning and humanization in conversation with others.
Continuing with the direction of pluricultural design, the method of designing the alternative interaction will be based on the principles stated in Decolonial participatory design to redesign something that used to be a community practice, probably even to just design something that can be used to design for themselves with humanization as its true goal. The question of 'what would be a good alternative interaction' will be asked to the participants and they will determine the design of it.

To facilitate this participatory design process, methods of creative facilitation will be adopted from the Hii TU Delft workshops. Taking on their mission, the participatory design sessions will create a comfortable and egalitarian learning environment about complicated and vulnerable subjects. Specifically allowing for participants to redefine the conditions of their own interaction with fashion.


5



Construction of the metaphor

Introduction

In the second phase, In order to make sense of the collected information for myself, I tried to describe the way I felt about it through small drawings and sketches of metaphorical representations of the interaction. Eventually turning into a combined worldbuilding exercise. This is a creative exercise which came about through an intrinsic need to artistically express the information that was collected through the interaction analysis and the literature review.

This metaphor was originally meant to be an artistic representation of the information collected about the consumer experience of the fast-fashion industry, but was expanded upon. Inspired by tabletop and digital RPG-games, the metaphor became an exercise for people to reflect on their position and behaviour within an interaction they have lived inside their entire lives. And allow them to express their experience and perspectives through a roleplaying expression ‘at a safe distance’.

5.1 Inspiration for the metaphor

In the initial construction of the metaphor, one of the biggest sources of inspiration was my experience with the 2022 video game Elden Ring. This game uses both metaphor and literal historical references in a way to communicate ideas, without telling their audience how to feel about them.

Most forms of video-game media take place in fictional settings, which are written to entice the audience to dive deeper into the secrets of the world and find out the entirety of the story. In the era of the internet, these unknown pieces of 'lore' have sparked great amount of discussions on online forums and video essays.

Elden Ring is an action roleplaying game set in the fictional world of the Lands Between. This medieval high-fantasy setting is stuffed to the brim with history and artistic designs which are both inspired by and allegorical for events in real-world history. In many places you can even find 1/1 copies of actual historical artifacts that carry both real-world metaphors and fictional exposition.

There is also no clear linear history explained in the game, all information has to be gathered piece by piece by the player and not all pieces of the puzzle are even present within it. Nothing is hidden behind paywalls, but everything is puzzle to be solved, with no one completely correct answer to solve it.

All of these factors have resulted in a thriving online community of fans who create thousands of hours of video essays, streams and forum discussions (Elden Ring Wiki, 2022) on the meaning and true 'lore' of the games. With no direct monetary compensation towards the creators of the game, but many creators have been able to make it into their full-time livelihood. Through this, the developers subvert the oft projected impotence on audiences by over-explaining every minute detail of their world-building and respects them enough to let everyone have their own interpretation of what the 'truth' of the fictional world is. In a way, the fact that this allows every participant to keep their own version of what the game stands for remain their own and equally valuable, similar to pluriversal concepts that were discussed in chapter 4.4.2

The creators of Elden Ring create their games to leave so much open for interpretation and only charge one-time purchase costs to have access to the game forever. This open-endedness, never interrupted by an 'um actually' from one of the writers allows audiences to consume the media in their own preferred way and helps create online communities in which media literacy is endorsed, celebrated and shared.

As a final kicker, the game story is often theorized to be a direct allegory for the religious history of Christianity and its crusades in Europe and beyond. This open (mainly) criticism of the Christian crusades and colonialism would normally never be published to such multi-million dollar platforms as PlayStation. But since the developers never actually name any of the actual words and never confirm the inspirations for their stories, they create conversations that many other pieces of media in the western world would never be allowed to do.

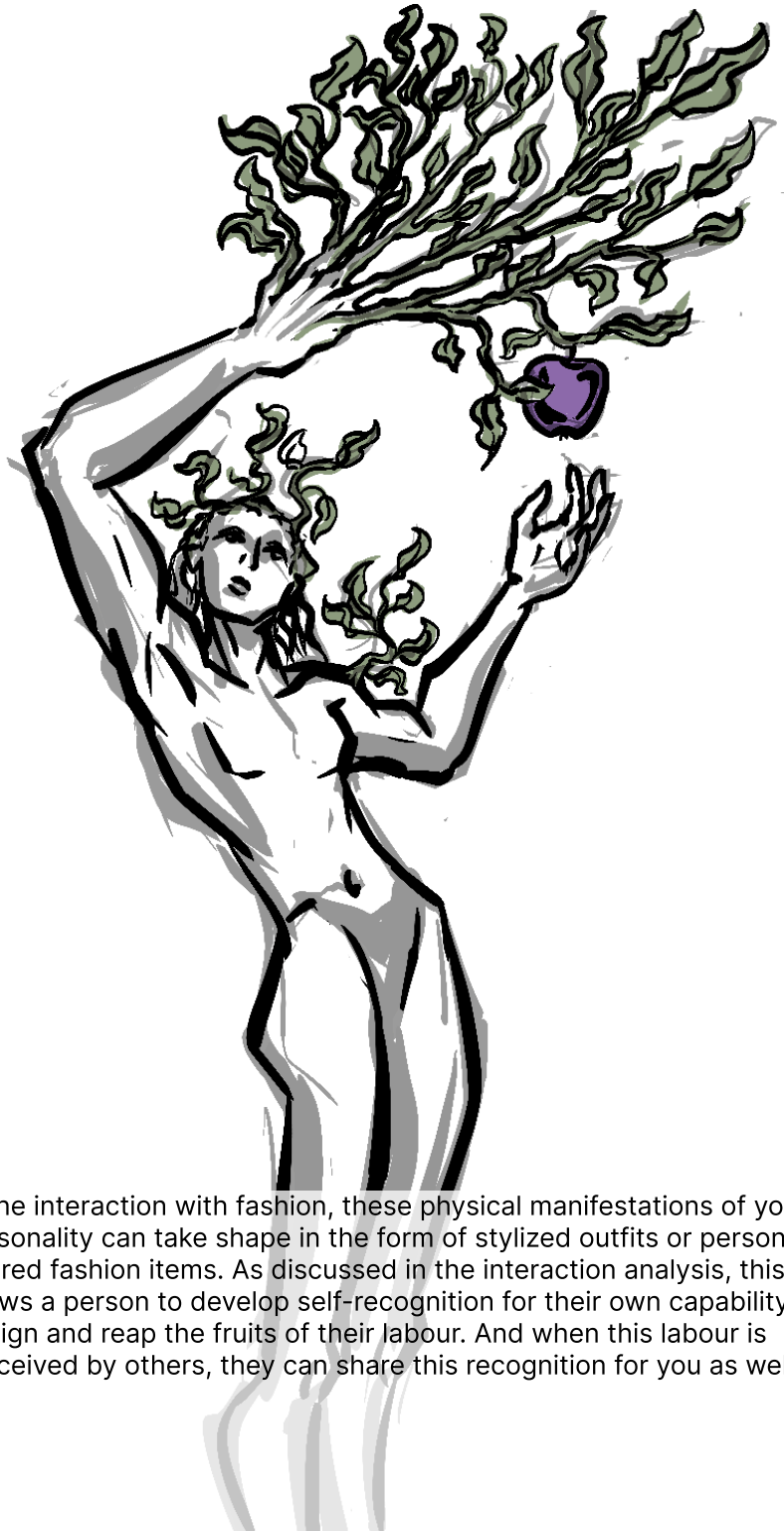
The metaphorical and allegorical representations of real-world historical concepts in this videogame create a familiar environment, which evokes an emotion based on your own perspective on the world, but turns them around in such a way that everything still feels strange and new. Because of this, you are invited to explore the Lands Between and discover the stories and secrets behind the history and the people of the world and are challenged to determine for yourself what is 'right and wrong'. In the end, there is no real right answer, metaphors are inherently imprecise an imperfect method and allow for everyone to insert their own perspective into it, allowing for a richer and more informative interaction.

In playing and learning more about this game, I have found much artistic inspiration for my own works, including the metaphor constructed in this chapter. The ways in which this world allows for such interesting discussions about the world we live in and how we can perceive it through magical metaphor has become a very important part of my joy in artistic exploration and can maybe mean something similar to others.

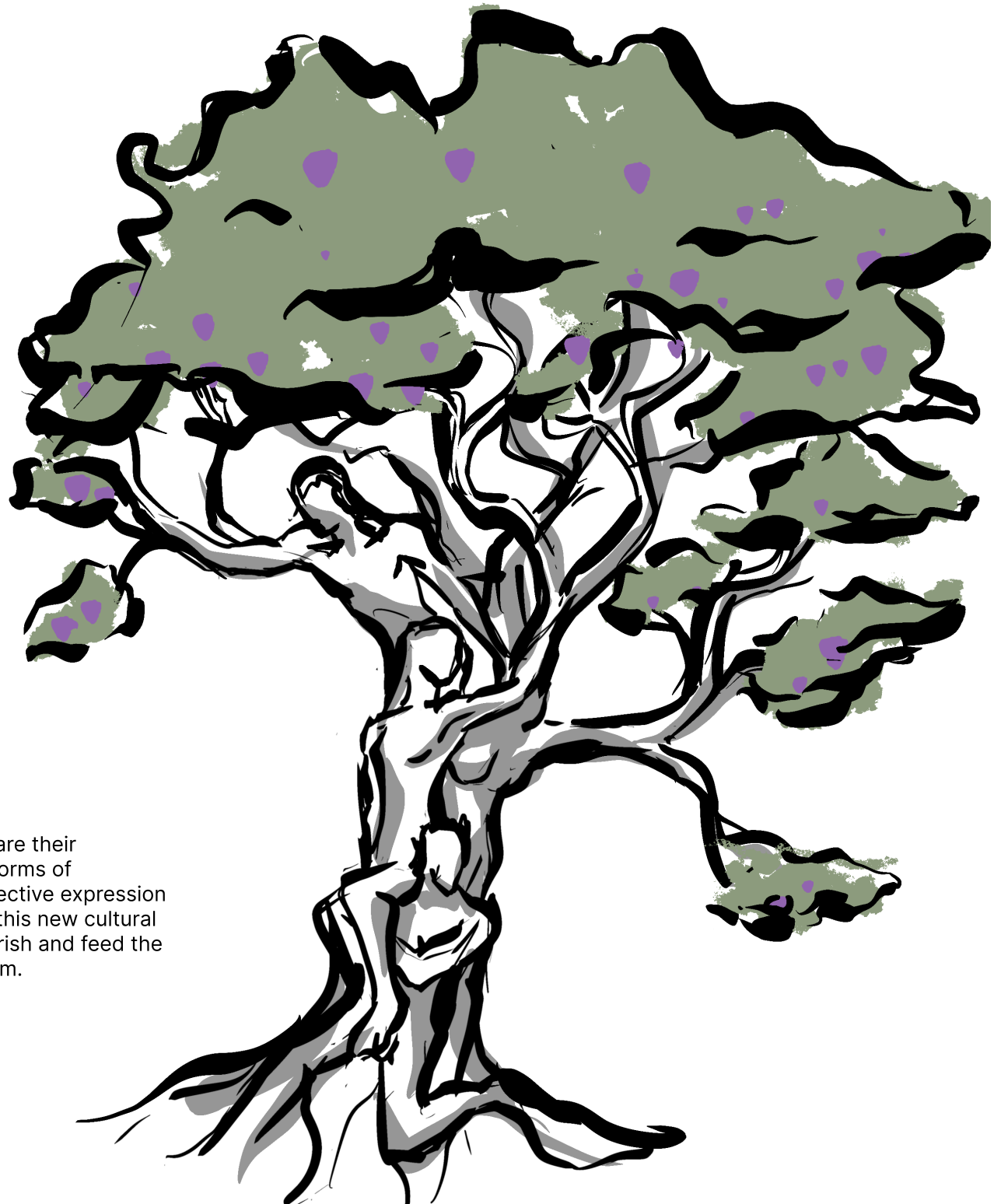
5.2 Construction of the Infinite Staircase metaphor



The development of skills combined with artistic expression of personality and vision allow a person to grow beyond themselves. The physical manifestation of your craft and creativity allows you to manifest a piece of your personality into the world around you.



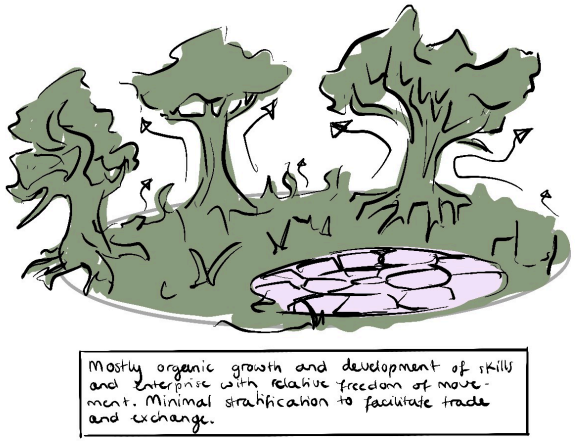
In the interaction with fashion, these physical manifestations of your personality can take shape in the form of stylized outfits or personally altered fashion items. As discussed in the interaction analysis, this allows a person to develop self-recognition for their own capability to design and reap the fruits of their labour. And when this labour is perceived by others, they can share this recognition for you as well.



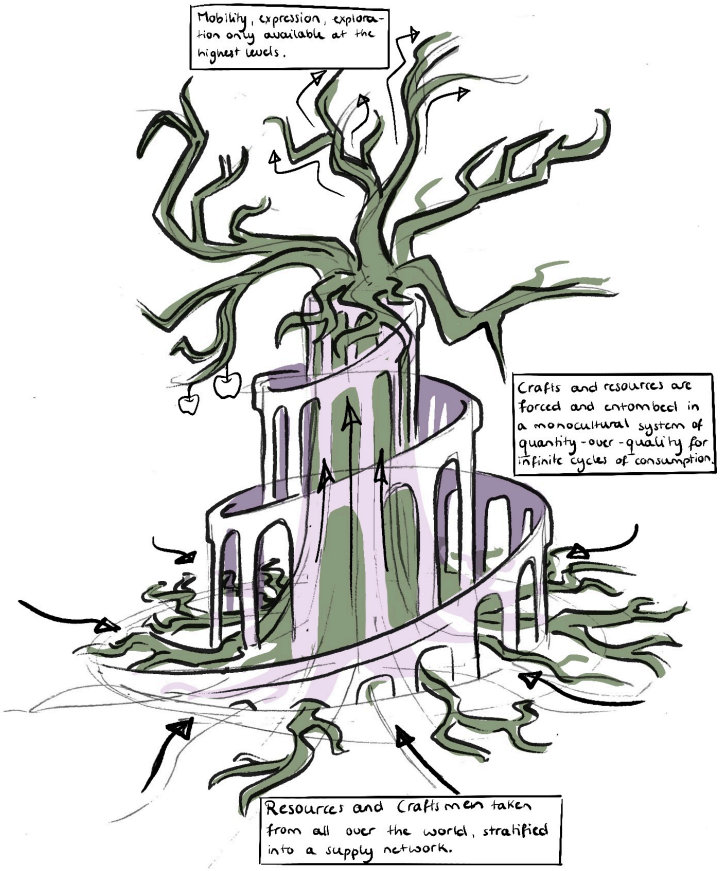
When people come together and share their creations with each other, the joint forms of recognition combine and form a collective expression of artistic perspective. The fruits of this new cultural expression of a community, can nourish and feed the creatives and the people around them.



Some will find fulfilment through recognition of their own capabilities in facilitating the availability of fashion towards larger audiences, designing infrastructures that allow them to interact with a beloved artform over longer distances and find fruitful trees. Providing a livelihood through monetary gain to the creatives in the tree who produce the fruit and supporting their focus and expansion of their work.







PRE-INDUSTRIAL FASHION INDUSTRY

INDUSTRIALZED FASHION INDUSTRY

POST-INDUSTRIAL FASHION INDUSTRY

Though the sharing of art and culture through commercial methods of exchange often carry the best of intentions, they also allow these cultural artforms to be commercialized and become part of larger and larger infrastructures over time. Combined with the sentiments of capitalism and the ‘modernist project’ as described by Tunstall (2023), this led to the industrialization of the fashion industry, which combined all the different trees into one optimized and monopolized system of production and consumption.

The infrastructure around the trees represent the commercialization of the interaction with fashion. Originally constructed to provide accessibility to others by allowing them to pluck the fruit from the branches of the tree, but slowly turned into an endless walkway from which there no longer is a way down to the ground.

The **monocultural assortmen**t is represented by a **single staircase** you can travel.

The **upward movement** requires constant investment of energy to s**how the effort and money spent** on purchasing clothing.

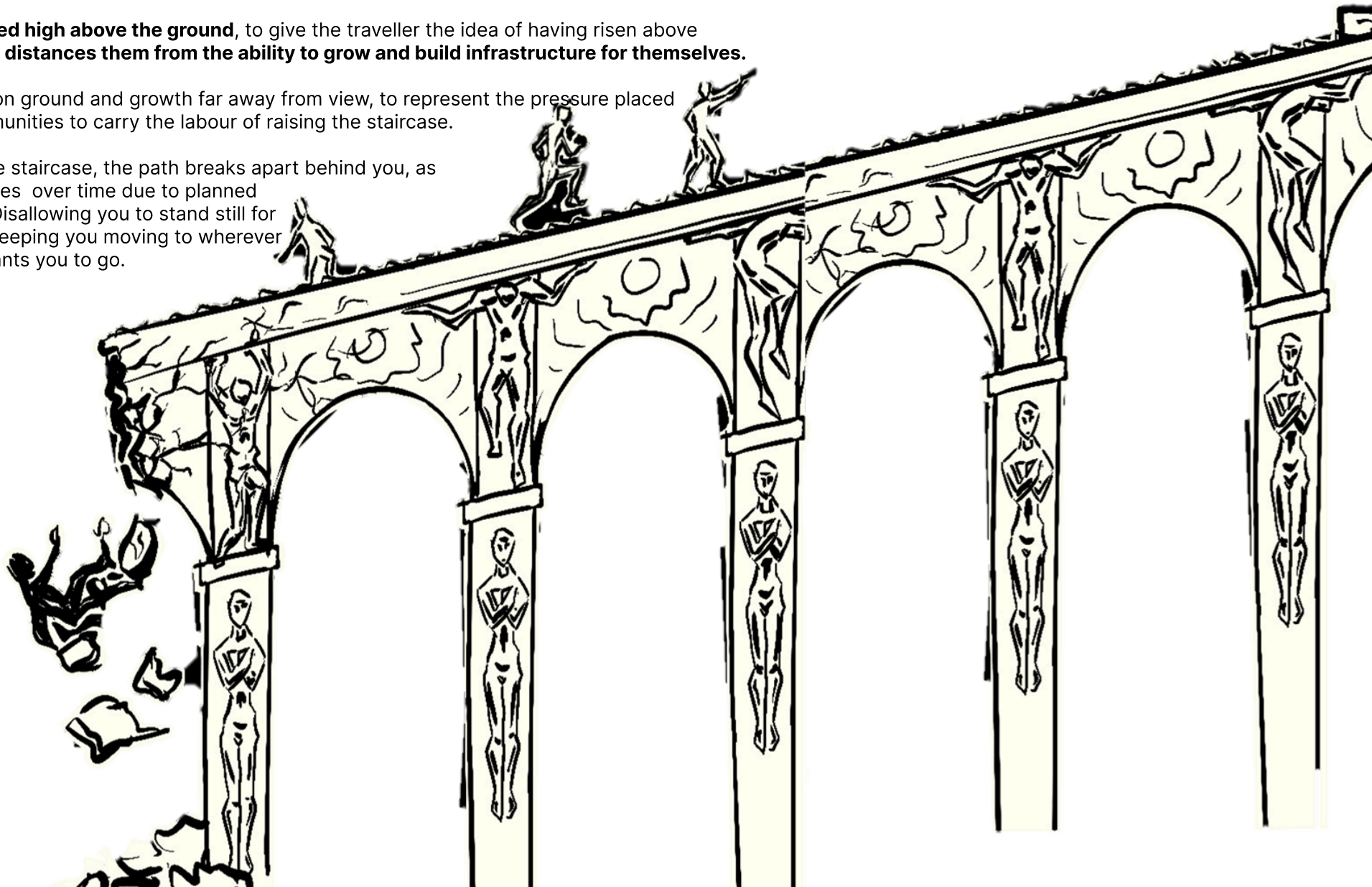
Over that path hang t**he fruits you are travelling to reach**, which depict the **humanization** you hope to reach through **expression of identity though clothing.**

The path is raised high above the ground, to give the traveller the idea of having risen above primitivity, but it **distances them from the ability to grow and build infrastructure for themselves.**

The pillars rest on ground and growth far away from view, to represent the pressure placed on distant communities to carry the labour of raising the staircase.

As you travel the staircase, the path breaks apart behind you, as your clothing does over time due to planned obsolescence. Disallowing you to stand still for a moment and keeping you moving to wherever the staircase wants you to go.







The Infinite Staircase

The industrial empire of the fast-fashion industry uniquely consists of hundreds of years of human art, craft, and expression, mechanized, industrialized, and commercialized by a system of rationality. The trees of people's combined labours and expressions are forced into a monocultural production line, and staircases meant to facilitate accessibility by commercialization are instead turned into infinite walkways that collapse behind you if you stop moving for too long. This system seeks to 'serve a need' in European and Western society, by taking away the labour involved in the production of a human need and sourcing that labour from other places. Creating a system of restrictive demand and production which dominates the market all over the world.

This system of rationality stands on many kilometres of pillars and walls in which thousands of livelihoods are entombed, created to guide the growth and development of skill into a marketable product. With its pillars resting on the exploitation of labour and resources of marginalized groups, and its walls keeping any form of skill and production within the bounds of marketable production. Leading to a monoculture, a single tree, producing a single kind of fruit, far away from those at the bottom of the building.

Supported by these walls and pillars is an infinite staircase, upon which the fruits of the of the tree fall. Running in an infinite chase, are the people for which the tree was made. Its seemingly infinite supply of fruit keeping their needs met forever.

But fruits spoil, and the staircase cannot hold the runners forever, it soon falls apart, taking the entombed livelihoods with it, because the materials need to be used elsewhere, to keep building the staircase. You think it aims to build ever higher, but you could have sworn you were higher before...

On the infinite staircase below the tree, supported by the buildings and the roots below, the worst thing that can happen to you is falling down.

Walking on the Infinite Staircase

The illusion of choice and plenty is experienced like the infinitely curving staircase, always thinking there might be something better right around the corner. And seeing plenty of fruit on he way ahead who seem more satisfied than you.

All around you on the buildings, you see the remains of the hundreds of people who have been entombed in the walls to make your journey possible, forcing you to consider either being impressed and have respect for their commitment, or walk off the edge of the staircase. The latter leading you to the loss of all recognition and security.

Sometimes you will see a small staircase to the side, representing a so-called 'micro-trend', something that will grant you relief very quickly, but for a short amount of time. Because when you take the steps up and down, the stairs behind you will soon fall away and this investment of energy will only sustain you for a short while.



Experience of beauty standards and trend turnaround in a metaphor of the Wearing interaction.

This is when the reality of the staircase becomes clear for just a moment, as you see those behind you fall down due to the planned obsolescence as you reach the moment where you will find out if your newly purchased items will fit you and satisfy your desire for expression and recognition. Does the fruit hang too high, or are you too short to reach for it?

From the road you only see the pavement, but not the pillars they rest upon, though you know they must rest on something, and you are unable to affect upon what. You can only assume that the way forwards will be worth the movement upwards, but you cannot see the road yet untravelled.





Infertile ground
The monopolized and commodified practices of fast-fashion production are dead systems. Salting the earth for growth and development.
On the infinite staircase, on the dead stones, nothing can grow. The inherently infertile stratification of the steps of this system, rooted in the inalterable way thee garments are constructed, are unable to host growth and development of skill.

Especially since most start to develop new skills on their own, with barely any guidance or roots to graft yourself upon.

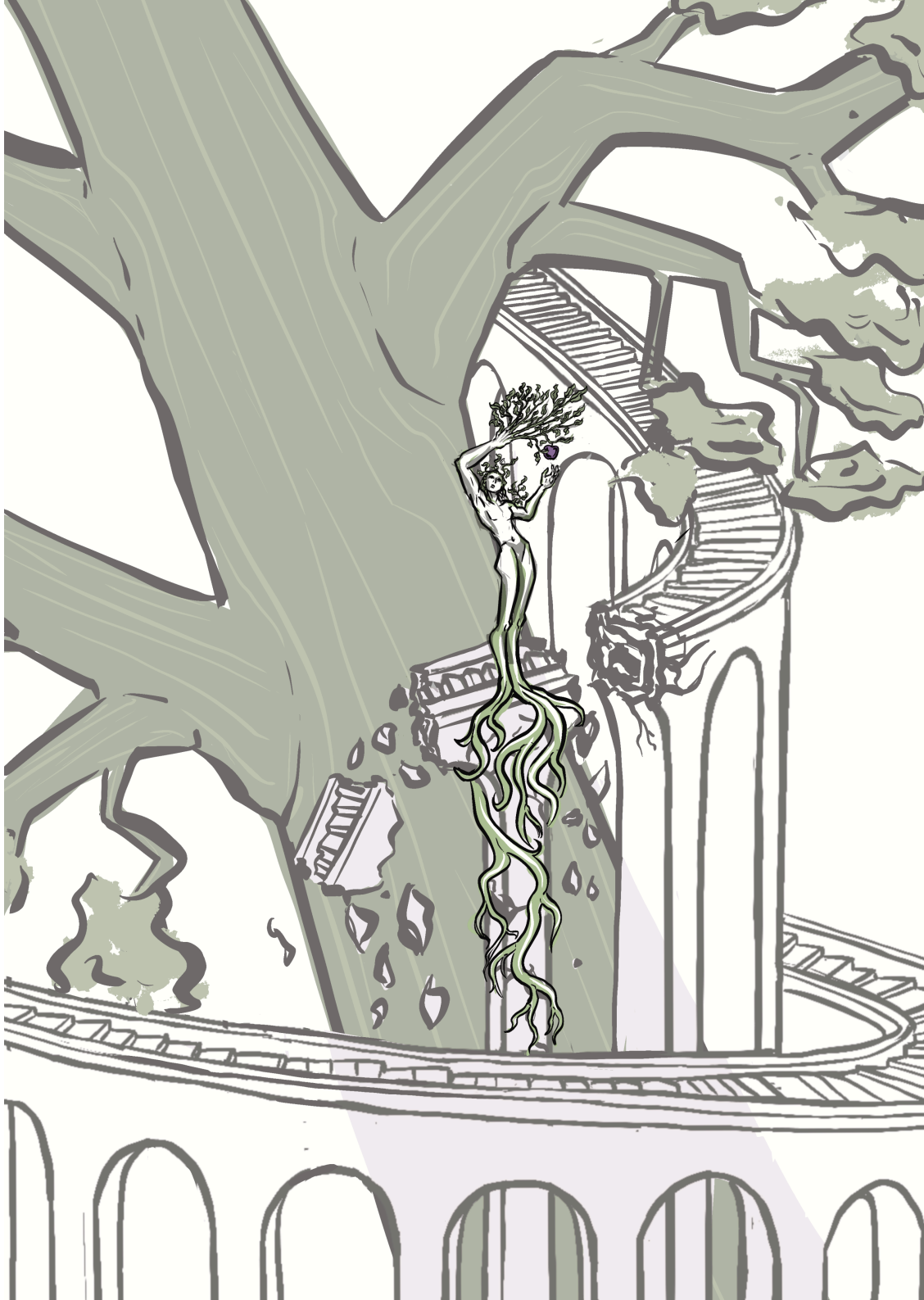
Planned obsolescence
By intentionally making the products of lesser quality, counting on the fact that they will break, like cracked stepping-stones on the staircase. Forcing the person to climb out of the hole and abandon their place on the staircase, to keep moving in hope of finding more or better in the future.

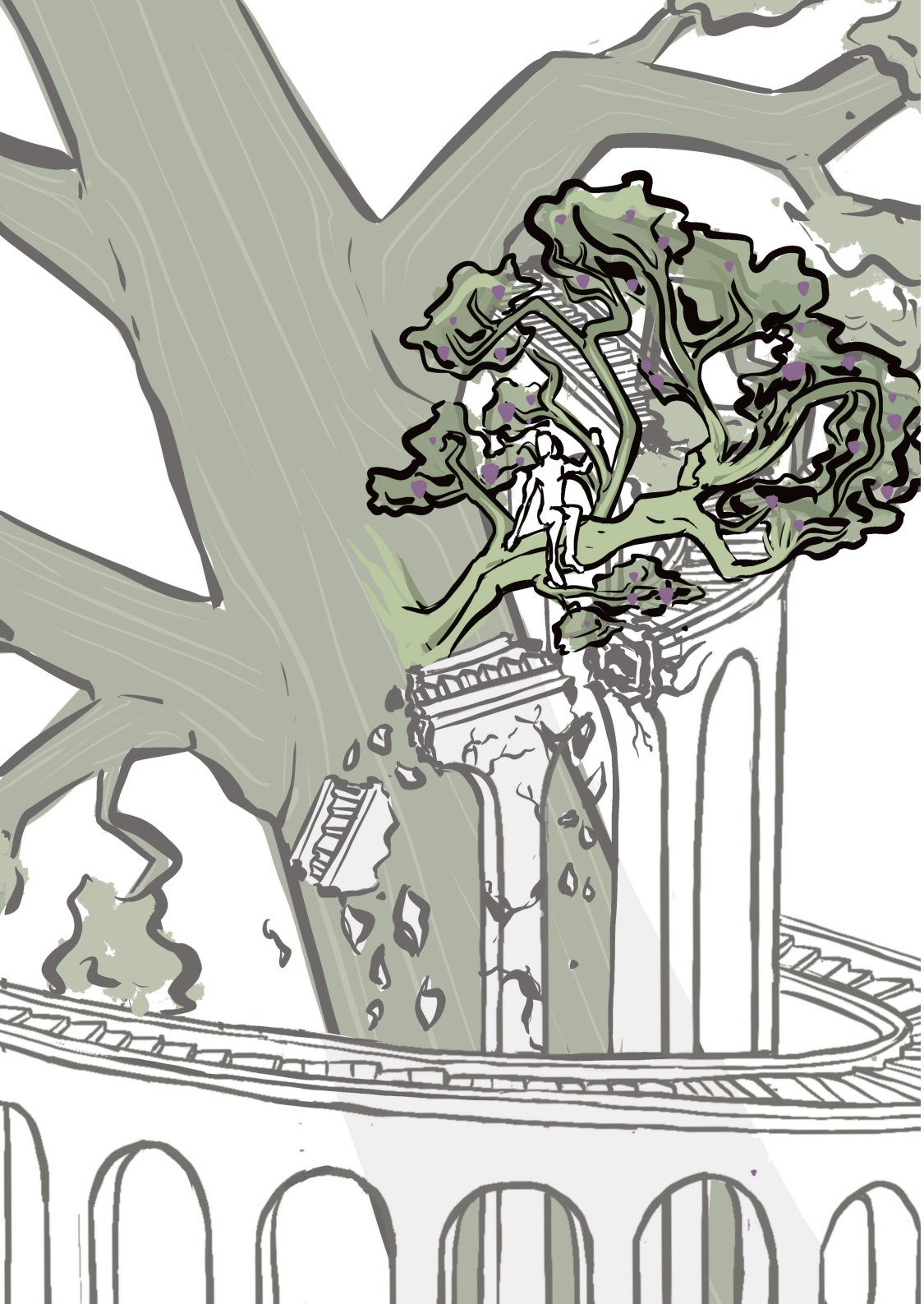


5.3 Seeing another future, escaping the infinite staircase

But the infinite staircase is not inescapable, based on the alternative interaction analysis, it was found that there are ways to humanize oneself.

For instance, by repairing the clothing you have when it inevitably begins to break due to the planned obsolescence in its design, or by accident. Through this you embed yourself deeply into the steps beneath you by growing roots of skill and determination. Perhaps even through artistic and creative manners of repair, allowing you to grow more fruit from this garment and gain more recognition from yourself and others.





Another option to begin to build of the skills of the people in the tree in the infinite staircase, by upcycling and altering and existing garments. Building outwards and growing in different directions beyond the linear directions of the trend cycles.

As the ground falls away below you, you have now begun to grow your own tree and are no longer dependent on the role of a consumer to provide you with what you need.



Individually, this is as far as repair and alteration can take you, but in a joint community so much more can be achieved. Perhaps together a new tree can grow again, next to the roots of the steps of the staircase.

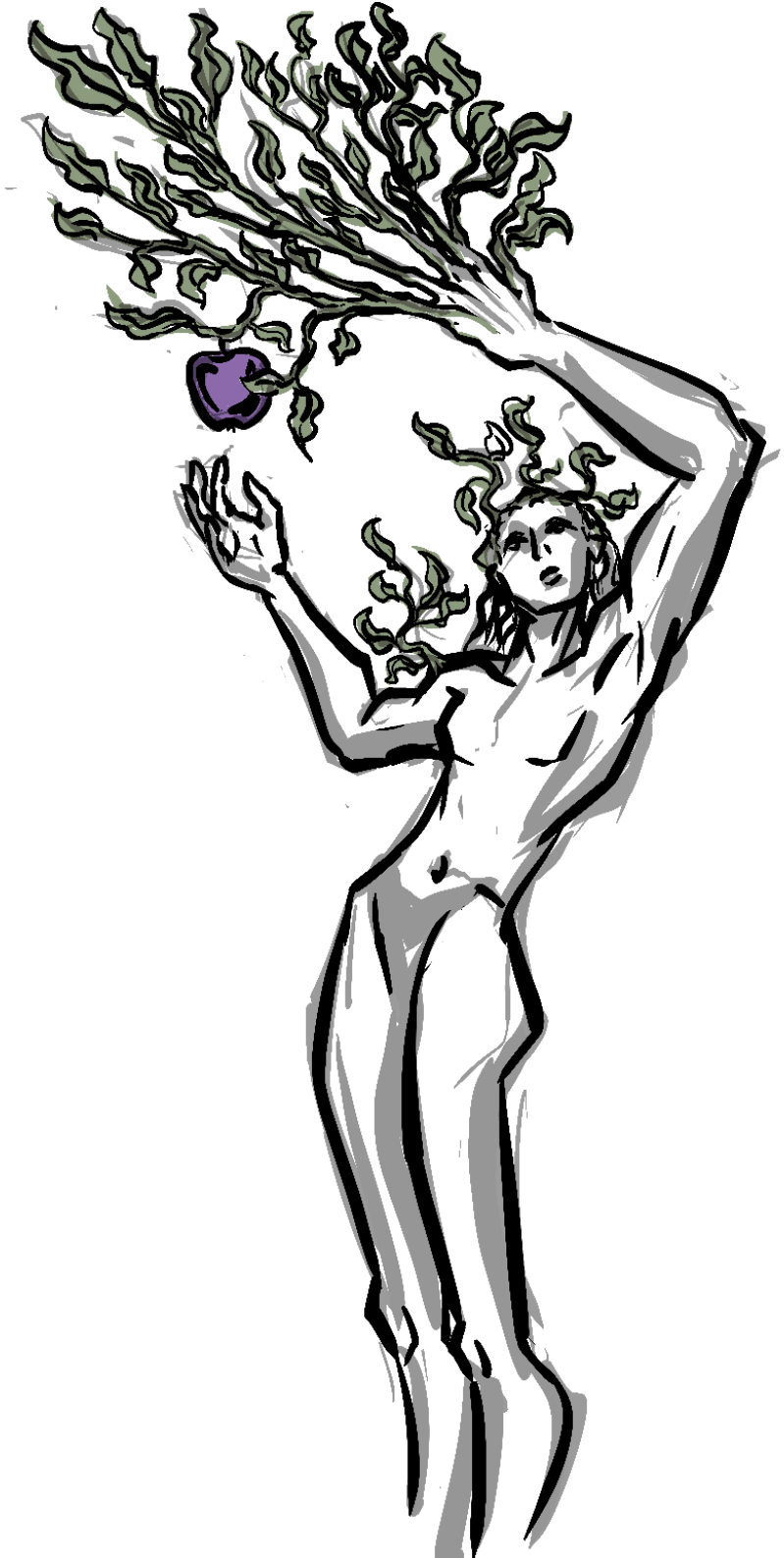
Conclusion

The metaphor began as an expressive exercise, a more ‘living’ alternative for an infographic, simply meant to illustrate the interactions observed in the analysis. But metaphors are a well-established concept in design practices that allow for more ‘pluriversal’ interpretations, because they describe a meaning more than a fact (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Different human perspectives can create a multidimensional shape of impact the metaphor can have on a people, but it can also be a tool for reflection, because most people’s perception of metaphors will be influenced by their own experiences.

As its inspiration videogames like Elden Ring already do more than just illustrate the interactions as they are, they allow the player agency in the world, grant them mobility within and the ability to enact change on a systemic level. Meaning that a similar kind of interaction could be made possible with this metaphor by translating it into a similar roleplaying setting. This can be achieved by asking a prospective community to interact with the metaphor as though they themselves exist in that world.

The metaphor was inspired by a videogame that does this (Elden Ring), but a videogame is probably too much to make happen within this project, so you can interact with it through a Tabletop Roleplaying game (TTRPG) method instead. This can be incorporated in the design of a participatory design exercise, which is set in the social context, empowers participation in creation, and asks participants to help discover what they would like to do differently.

Which is set in the social context (to achieve recognition) and empowers participation in creation (sewing lesson) and asks participants to help discover what they would like to do differently





6

Designing an Intervention



Introduction

The first part of the chapter describes the design process of the alternative interaction with fashion, based on the collected insights that seek to turn it into a more humanizing experience.

The second part of the chapter is a description of the participatory design sessions that were performed in the late summer of 2025. In these sessions, participants from my own communities were asked to reflect on their experiences with the fast-fashion industry and come up with different interactions for the future.

These sessions were formulated as co-creating workshops, based on the design of the recent but successful workshops of the Hii student organization at the TU Delft. As mentioned in chapter 4, these workshops have proven to be a productive and comfortable setting for students to discuss and learn about new perspectives they can gain for their own mental wellbeing. Their methods will be turned towards the participatory design exercise of creating an alternative interaction with fashion.

Workshop environment based on Hii's template which creates a safe-space to:

1. Ask participants to express and share past experiences about the subject of the workshop. And ask them to consider and share their wishes for a different future.
2. Offer participants the tools to affect their future or gain a new perspective on it.
3. Ask participants to express their own creativity ability to design their alternative future.

Combined with the ideas created in the metaphor of the infinite staircase:

The overall purpose of the participatory design sessions is to ask the participants what they would be willing and interested in doing differently in their interaction with fashion, but part of the insights into the original interaction shows that there are strong feelings of disconnection from alternatives, we are all stuck on the infinite staircase. So, in order to be able to think outside the confinements of the current interaction, the participants and the designers can immerse themselves in the metaphor and consider different ways to escape, which can then be translated back into a real-life interaction.

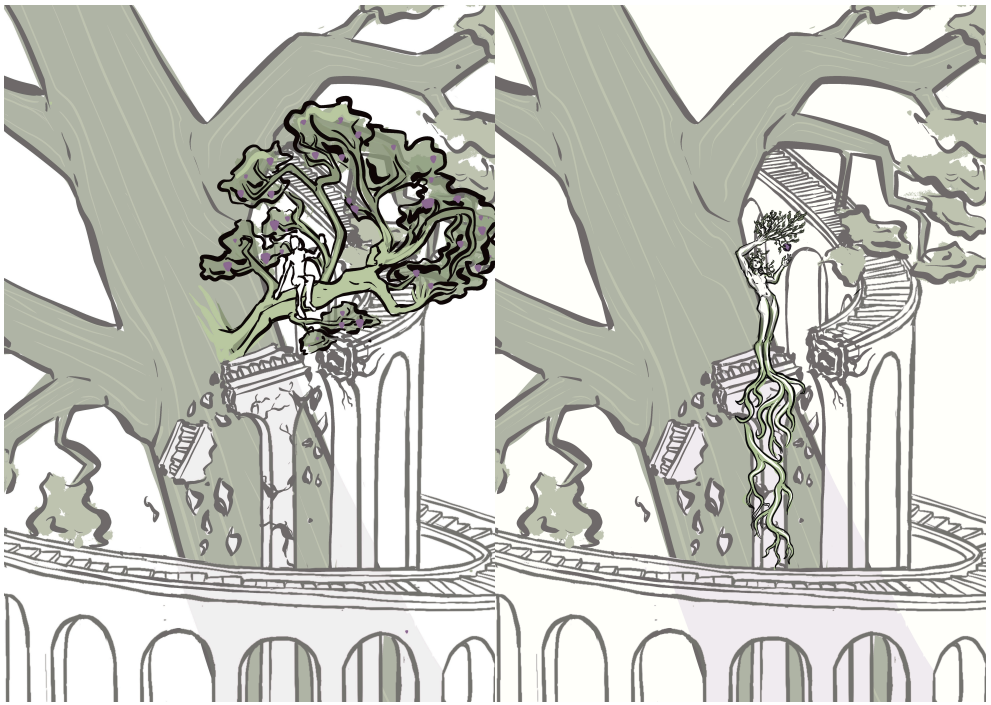
Through this exercise, the participants will be able to express their experiences through an artistically rendered metaphor and during the workshop they will be able to express their own perspectives both verbally and creatively in the projects they start with.
To construct the co-creation session, and to encourage participants to find ways to escape the infinite staircase, the Hii workshop structure will initially be translated into the worldbuilding exercise of the metaphor. From there the exercise will be rendered back into a workshop-structure which can be performed with participants.

6.1 The Design direction of the intervention

As discussed in chapter 5.3, the emancipation from the fast-fashion industry that guides this project's research into an alternative interaction is symbolized by the creation of a tree outside the infinite staircase. The pluriversal design direction suggests that there should be many different kinds of trees outside of the infinite staircase. By escaping the infinite staircase, people can start a new community of growth and artistic expression outside of the system of the fast-fashion industry.

When I look at this metaphor I see my preferred way to escape; by finding ways to grow yourself, by either grafting yourself into the mononpolized tree (upcycling of garments) or reinforcing the ground beneath you (repairing garments).
Considering my experience with sewing, these seem like likely options, but many participants will not feel that way. In order for them to consider something similar (and to participate in design directly, they should gain a form of empowerment through skill-building in the workshop





These illustrations will not be mentioned in the workshop directly, because they could influence the outcome of the alternative interaction speculation exercise.

The next part of the chapter describes the different methods in which the participatory design workshop was constructed

6.2 The meaning of the intervention

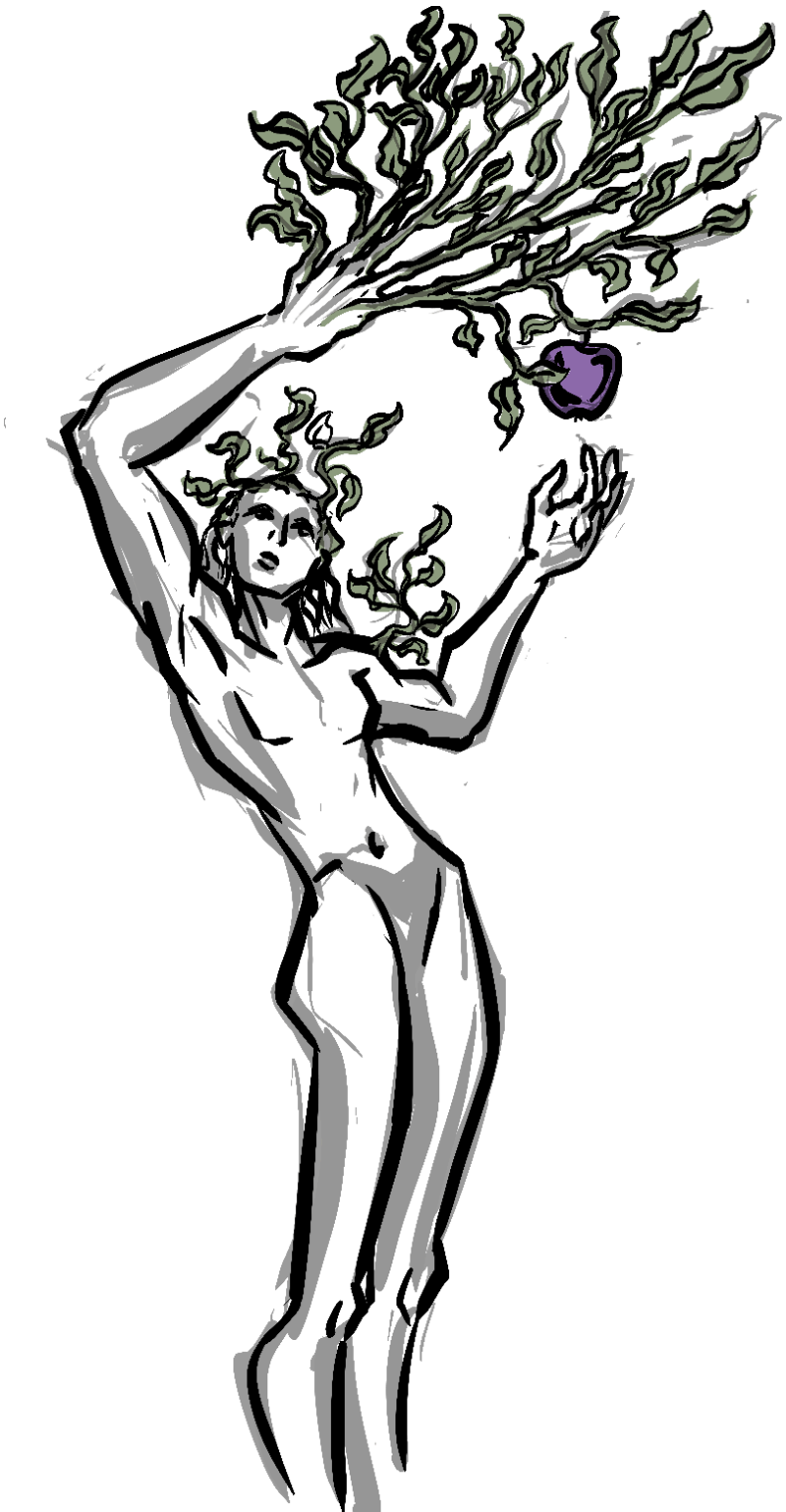
By translating the structure of the Hii workshop into the metaphor, it can be built to specifically address the context the metaphor seeks to describe and be turned into exercises that adequately encourages participants to design an alternative interaction.

The structure is based on a combination of the previously explained Hii structure with a participatory design exercise:

Reflection on past experiences and conditions
- Reflective exercises and placing the conditions of the interaction in a new frame
- Expressing wishes of alternate futures

Adapting a new skill
- Co-creation sessions like the embroidery workshop and the mending circle

Decolonial Participatory Design
- Allowing participants to determine their own conditions of participating and learning.





The alternative interaction should be designed by the people who will participate in it. This has led to the construction of this **participatory design workshop.**

Withing the context of the metaphor, this translates to **a group of people gathering on the infinite staircase to come up with a way to stop running together.**

Making the active choice to sit down and reflect together. Coming together is probably easier when people are on similar places on the staircase, as they often are in community contexts

6.2.1 Expression of and reflection on experiences

In the first part of the workshop, the participants will be asked to share and reflect on their experiences with the fast-fashion industry. By talking about these experiences and starting conversations with others, new insights and perspectives can be discovered by each participant and by the facilitator.

The structure of the workshop must therefore be reflective in a comfortable way and invite participants to share with others and evoke conversation. By reflecting on current interactions, the participants will be able to pinpoint what it is that frustrates them about it, and what their hopes and wishes would be for an alternative future. Within the context of the metaphor;

Sitting down together on the infinite staircase, staring into a reflective surface and explaining the things you have seen, experienced, and hoped for while running in the infinite circles.

The bowl is the strength that is created through the coming-together of the group and the water is the energy and information that the workshop brings to them.





Recognition-rich environment
Changes in behaviour and reflection on past actions can happen best and most productively in a recognition-rich environment. The conversations that happen between the participants are where most new insights and perspectives can appear, this does require an environment that reciprocates vulnerability and openness. **As identified before, this can best be found in a preexisting community, making the experience of humanization in a workshop about the dehumanizing interaction with fast-fashion a priority.**

6.2.2 Empowering creative expression through skill-building

For fear of the infinite staircase metaphor being a too imprisoning situation for the participants to find a way to escape from, because that is the experience upon which the artistic metaphor is based.

The artistic exploration and sewing tutorial is like water that allow the participants to grow their first roots and leaves. Eventually allowing them to grow their own fruits and repair or alter a garment within the workshop and beyond.

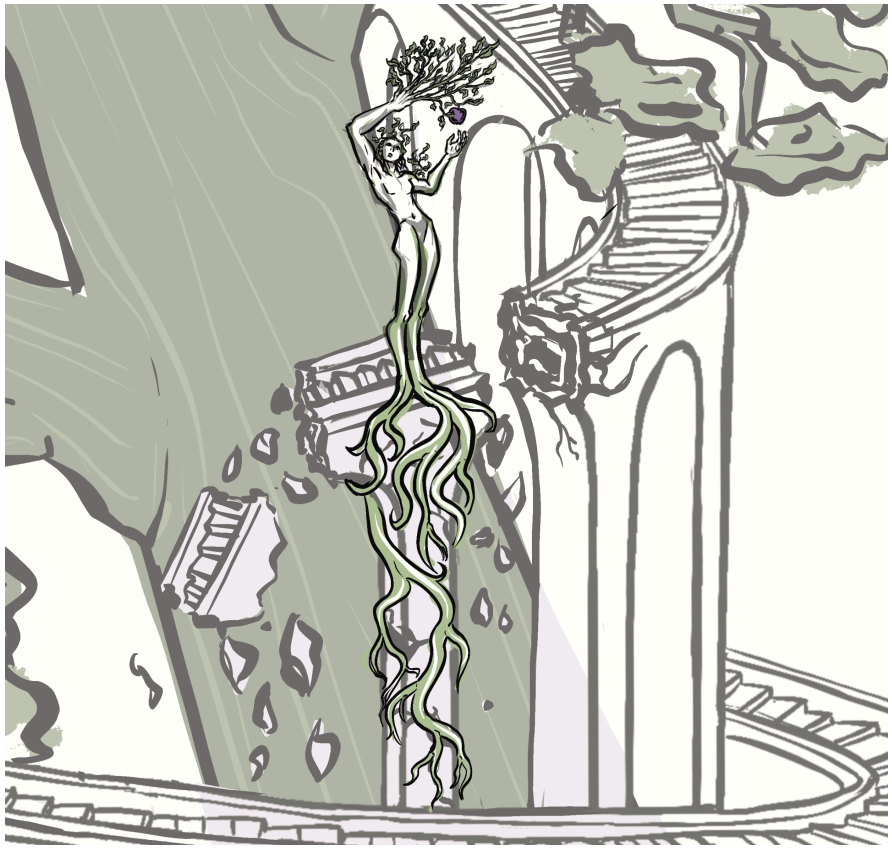
So, in order to encourage and empower the participants to believe in their own capabilities, the workshop will contain a basic sewing tutorial and an artistic repair or alteration experiment. This concept is inspired by the workshops that are reported on the Alternative Interaction analysis in chapter 4.3. Similar to the Mending circle (chapter 4.3.1), the participants will be asked to bring a garment that they want to repair or upcycle to the workshop. Through the sewing tutorial they will be able to learn the basics of sewing, which will allow them to take up their own project with confidence and with the skillset to approach it on their own terms and with their own artistic vision, similarly to the embroidery workshop (chapter4.3.4).

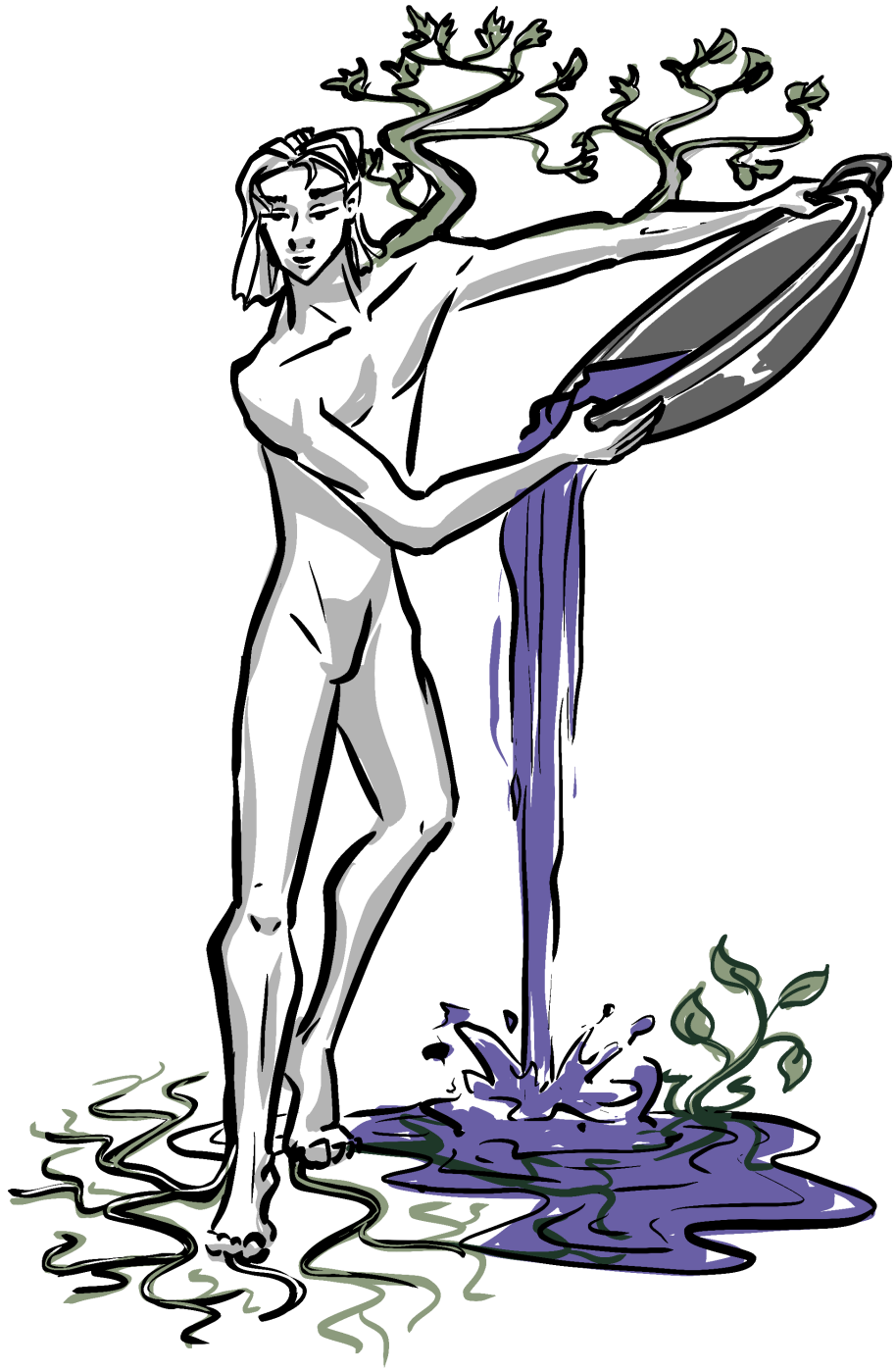






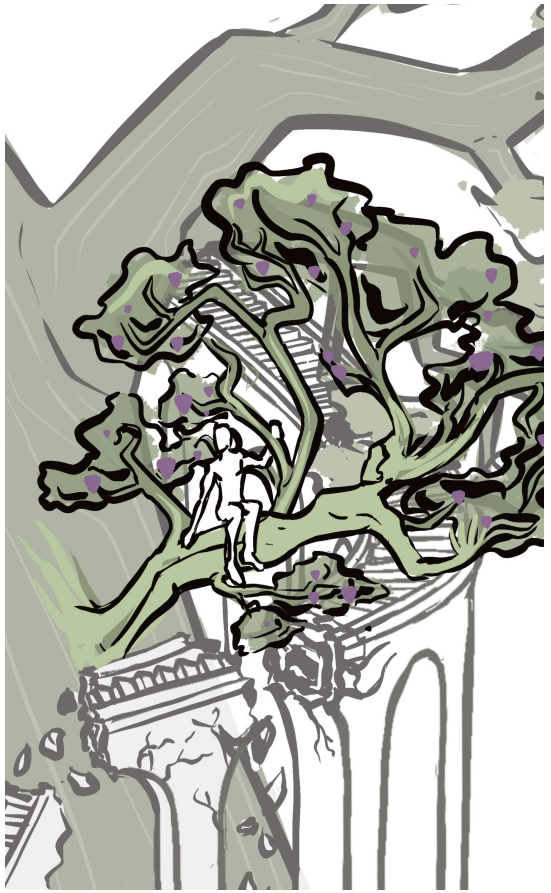
Repair Metaphor
If they choose to repair the garment they brought, it is like they are inve
energy and inspiration into the ground they are standing on (the steps c
infinite staircase). Eventually growing roots from themselves and betwe
cracks of the staircase, reinforcing them and allowing them to stop runr
a little while where the ground would normally fall away from under ther
to the planned obsolescence of the garments.





Alteration Metaphor

If they choose to alter the garment, they take the sharper edges of the knowledge they gained and cut into the tree and the steps to eventually graft themselves into the tree. Repurposing the materials from the fast-fashion industry and moving in their own independent direction based on their creative expression of identity.



Eventual intention
The eventual goal is to imbue the participants with enough resilience and creative confidence that they feel comfortable in waiting for the staircase fall away underneath them. And when they land, to grow into a tree themselves or with their community, emancipated from the existing interaction.

The movement from being on the staircase to existing outside it is intentionally an unclear and undefined path, because this is exactly what will be designed together with the participants in a participatory design exercise.





6.2.3 Designing alternative futures through metaphor

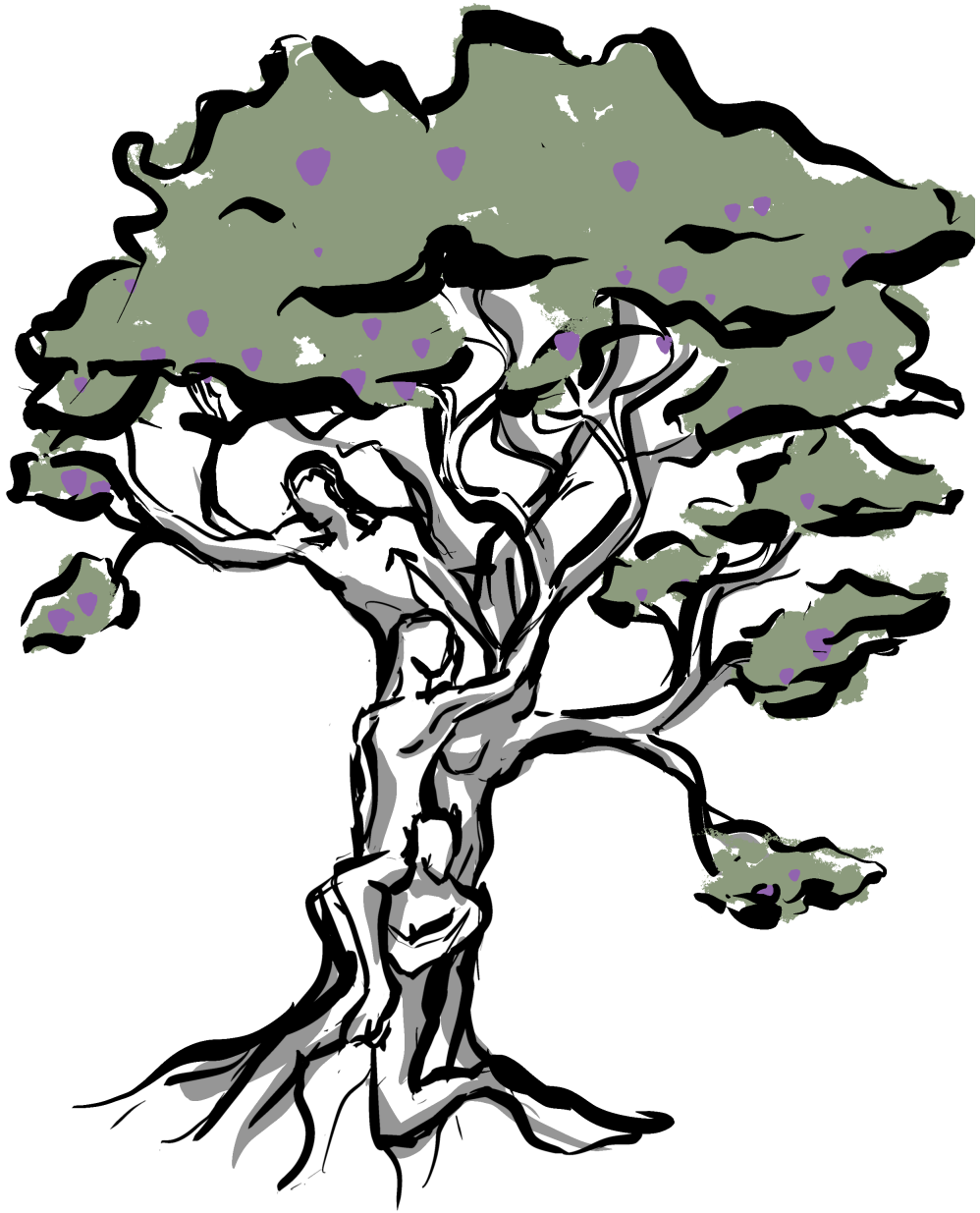
Taking this metaphor-method beyond my own design work and proposing it to the participatory design session as well. Putting it front of the participants and asking them to place themselves inside it and express their own vision of current and alternative interaction.

In the workshop, this can be achieved by **introducing the metaphor as a roleplay-setting.** Encouraging participants to place themselves on the staircase and translate their behaviour to a new context and **speculate new ways to create their own futures.**

In order to facilitate the roleplay-exercise, the participants will first be asked to s**ummarize and consider their current experiences** with the fast-fashion industry and then **translate them into movements on the staircase.**

Once they have expressed their own movements along the staircase, they can start to consider what those movements mean and how they came to be. They gain awareness of the causes and effects of their actions, allowing them to develop a new perspective on the range of opportunities. Sometime you do not know that you are following a path in a specific direction, because the path is all you have every known to be true.

After having come together on the staircase and learned to be empowered from one another, a community of people can start planning their next moves on the staircase together, similar to a party of adventurers setting out on a quest. This community can determine for themselves, whether they will simply decide to move differently on the staircase, or decide to figure out how to escape.



6.3 Constructing the workshop: First Iteration

Methodology to the workshop
The research will consist of participatory design sessions in preexisting community settings of around 3 participants at a time, up to 10 participants in total. In order to maintain a recognition-rich environment, the communities that are invited to the workshops will be those the author o the project is already a part of. The preexisting social connections with the author is intended to make it easier to create a feeling of equality that should encourage participants to consider themselves equal designers in the participatory design exercise. In these sessions, participants will learn sewing techniques and, together with the researcher, upcycle a garment they themselves chose to bring to experiment with.

The participants will be given a workbook with questions about their experiences with fashion, and tutorials on how to maintain and adjust them to their wishes. The questions will be read out to the group, after which they will be asked to think about their answers and write them in their workbooks. When all participants are done writing their answers, they are asked to share them with the group in an open discussion, in which all are encouraged to ask questions and comment on what is said.

After which, the participants are asked to talk about the clothing they brought, and the group can discuss together what the best way to address the changes they want to make to it. The workbook and the researcher will guide them through the basics of sewing if they are yet unfamiliar, but the participants will perform every part of it themselves to gain the true feeling of empowerment.

During the creation process, conversations will be had on the limitations on sustainable and expressive interactions with fashion, imposed by the global fast-fashion industry. Asking the participant to share their personal experience on these subjects and if they could see themselves be emancipated from this system through upcycling.

These answers to the questions will be recorded through audio recordings and pictures will be taken of the co-creation process, the photographs and the transcripts of the audio recordings will be anonymized. This data will inform the iteration of the design to ensure its ability and accuracy to empower emancipation from the fast-fashion industry. In addition to providing a comprehensive record of the alternative interactions designed by the participants.

After the workshops the transcripts will be categorized by the subject matter of the questions and qualitatively analysed with the theoretical framework of chapter 4 in mind. From this data conclusions will be drawn about the effectiveness of the workshop and the experiences of the participants with the fast-fashion industry. These will in turn inform some iterations of the workshop and the eventual suggested alternative interaction.

The next steps will be the writing of the workshop booklets that will guide the structure of the session;



Reflective Exercises and Sharing of Experiences



Artistic Participation:

Skill-sharing and experimentation



Metaphor as a tool for reflection and speculation

Overall structure of the workshops:

Reflective Exercises and Sharing of Experiences

<u>Opening of the session with introductions</u>

- Ask one small thing they do to take care of their appearance (through clothing)
- Braindump: write down whatever first comes to mind about your experience interacting with the fashion industry/or your interactions with clothing.

<u>Reflection based on experiences today and wishes for tomorrow</u>

- Defining the participant's experience in the fast-fashion industry
- Bringing up the idea of the 'ideal/personal style' as a wish for a future
  - Comparing that to the reality of what is supplied in stores
  - Is there a way we can incorporate a little bit of that ideal vision into the work we are doing today?

Artistic Participation: Skill-sharing and experimentation

<u>Stitching your intentions into the fabric</u>

- Start with looking into the clothing they brought and walk through the flowchart of repair/upcycling together, finding what kinds of methods can be used to repair/upcycle the piece (including creative options in decoration or stitch patterns.
- Basic sewing skills
  - Threading a needle
  - Anchoring a stitch
  - Simple stitch-patterns (running stitch, backstitch, whipstitch)
  - Using thread to draw shapes

Metaphor as a tool for reflection and speculation

Reflecting through the roleplay interaction

- A short history of the fast-fashion industry, as seen through the metaphor
- Travelling across the staircase, explaining the current interaction in the metaphor
- So what about you?
    - Where do you think you are on the infinite staircase?
    - Do you think you could escape?

These exercises are turned into a workbook which balances the interest of the author of this project and the interest of the participants of the session. These are explained in the structural visuals. The full workbook can be found in Appendix A



Emancipating in Style:

Escaping the Infinite Staircase





A Master's Thesis Research project
by Thomas Beekes

July 2025

Particpant's interest

Reflecting on their **experiences** and **associations** with the **fast-fashion industry.**

Exploring alternative interactions by **building resilience** through **creative expression** and **communal collaboration.**

Reflecting on their **hopes for expression** and comparing it to their **newfound empowerment.**

Transposing their experiences onto an **externalized concept,** which they can visualize, to **reflect on their behaviour** and **speculate alternate actions.**

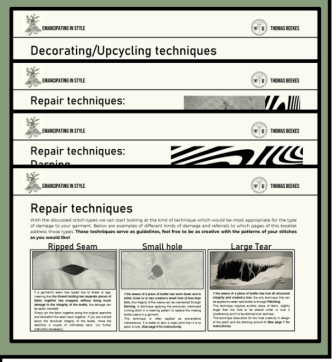
Workshop Activities

Experience with the current interaction



Artistic participation: Skill-sharing and experimentation



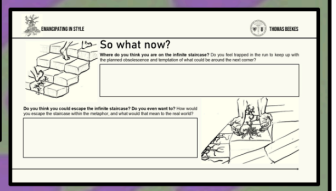


Wishes for the future



Designing alternative futures: Escaping the infinite staircase





Researcher's interest

Collecting **motivations** and **unique perspectives** on the interaction.

Testing potential alternative interactions through a **co-creative exercise.**

Collecting reflections and **perspectives** to gauge the effect of the **co-creative exercise.**

Gauging the **effectivity** of the **metaphor** to encourage **reflection** and **speculation** for **alternative interactions.**

Feedback and takeaways from the first round of testing
The first round of testing was performed on July 13th, 2025 in a group setting with 3 participants. In this setting a number of points stood out about the design of the workshop:

There are some subjects that need to be adjusted in a second iteration;

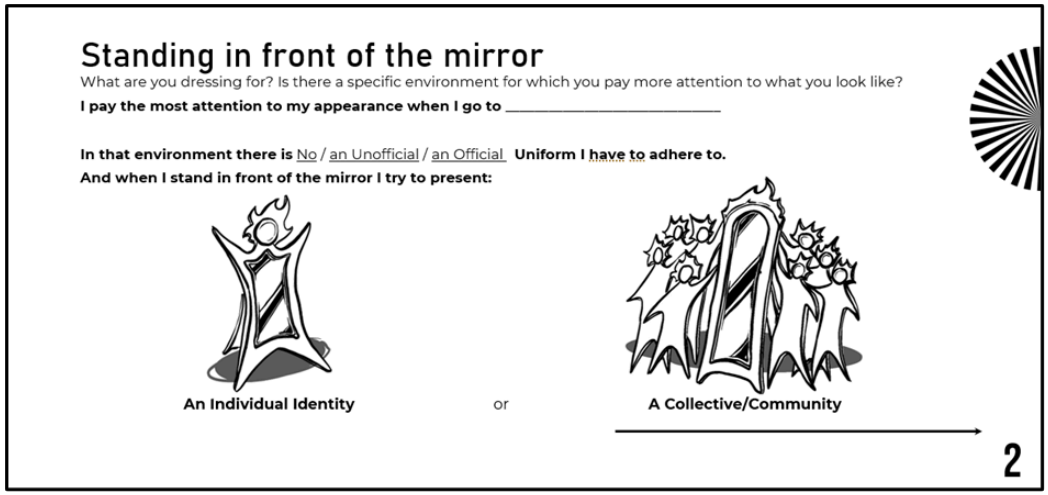
Standing in front of the mirror
The general braindump exercise is fun and can lead to greatly differentiating stories, but in order to create more streamlined and more informative exchange of information, the question needs to be more specific. Instead the second question will be centered around reflecting on the creative process of getting dressed, 'standing in front of a mirror, what are your priorities?'

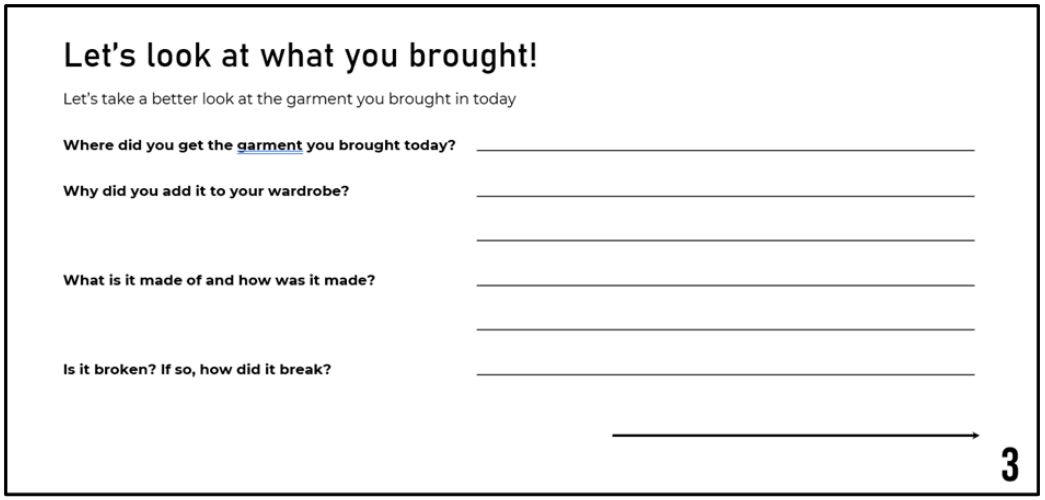
- How do you get dressed?
- And for what
- Individual expression or cultural expression vs. recognition
- official uniforms/unofficial uniforms

Let's look at what you brought!
When beginning with the sewing tutorial and the artistic exploration of their own garment, many of the initial questions from the participants were about what kind of garment they brought. So instead this can become part of the exercises as well.

A forensic analysis of the garment Creating an awareness of the state/ origins of the garment and prepping them to position themselves on the infinite staircase

- where did you buy it and why did you buy it
- how was it made/ what is it made of
- what is broken/wrong with it?
- how did that happen?



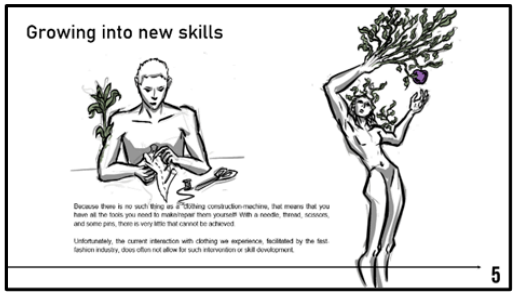


Introducing the metaphor earlier

In the original version, the metaphor was not introduced to the participants until the end of the workshop, at which point many were already getting tired and had trouble picking it up.

By introducing the concept of the metaphor can allow the participants to think more on the metaphor and involve it in their crafting process, bringing the metaphor as a 'roleplay setting' earlier into the workshop and discovering their empowerment in designing together where they stand on the infinite staircase.



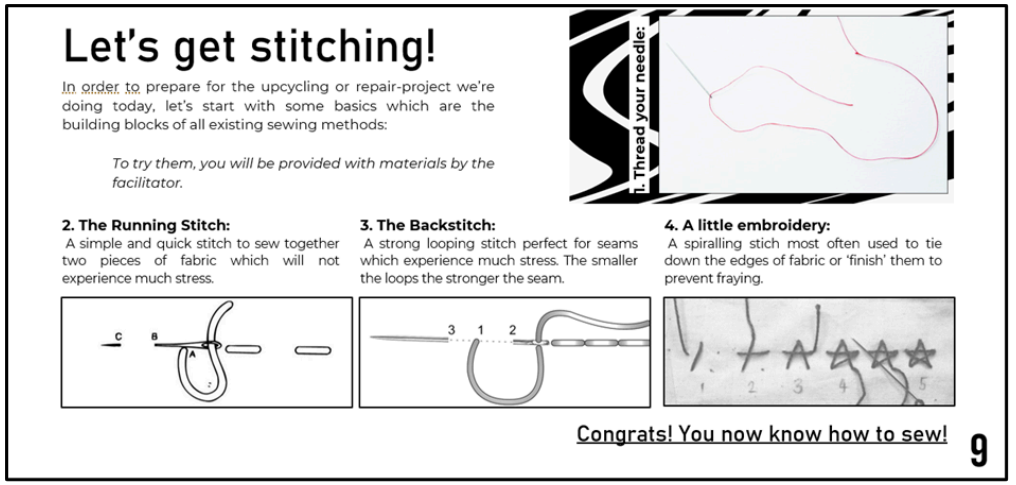


In addition to showing how the craft of sewing is inherently connected to the construction of the metaphor and the fast-fashion industry, and how their gaining of this skill can grant them an amount of recognition from themselves and their environment through their emancipation.

Stitching tutorial

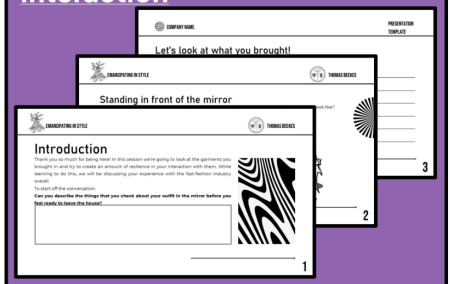
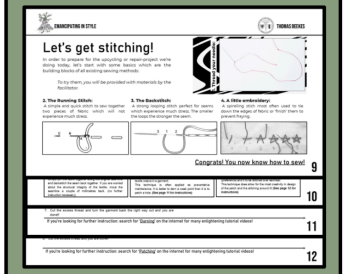
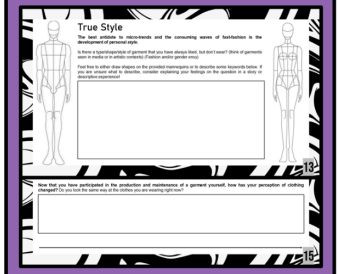
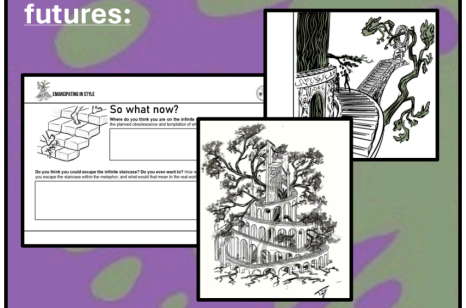
Finally, the stitching tutorial needs to include more basic skills of sewing and encourage the participants to be less rigid and more creative with it in order for it to be artistically empowering.

- Stitching tutorial:
  - Add knot + anchor instruction
  - Maybe replace whipstitch with embroidery challenge



6.4 Second iteration of the workshop

The complete booklet can be found Appendix B

Particpant's interest	**Reflecting** on their **experiences** and **associations** with the **fast-fashion industry.**	Learning about the **context** and **concept of the metaphor** in order to gain familiarity with the **researched dynamics** of the **fast-fashion industry.**	**Exploring alternative interactions** by **building resilience** through **creative expression** and **communal collaboration.**	**Reflecting** on their **hopes for expression** and comparing it to their **newfound empowerment.**	**Transposing** their experiences onto an **externalized concept,** which they can visualize, to **reflect on their behaviour** and **speculate alternate actions.**
Workshop Activities	**Experience with the current interaction** 	**Introducing the metaphor** 	**Artistic participation:** 	**Wishes for the future** 	**Designing alternative futures:** 
Researcher's interest	Collecting **motivations** and **unique perspectives** on the interaction.	Gaining a **better understanding** on the **communicability** of the researched information.	**Testing potential alternative interactions** through a **co-creative exercise.**	**Collecting reflections** and **perspectives** to gauge the effect of the **co-creative exercise.**	Gauging the **effectivity** of the **metaphor** to encourage **reflection** and **speculation** for **alternative interactions.**

Feedback and takeaways from second round of testing

This second iteration of the workshop was tested in two separate instances:

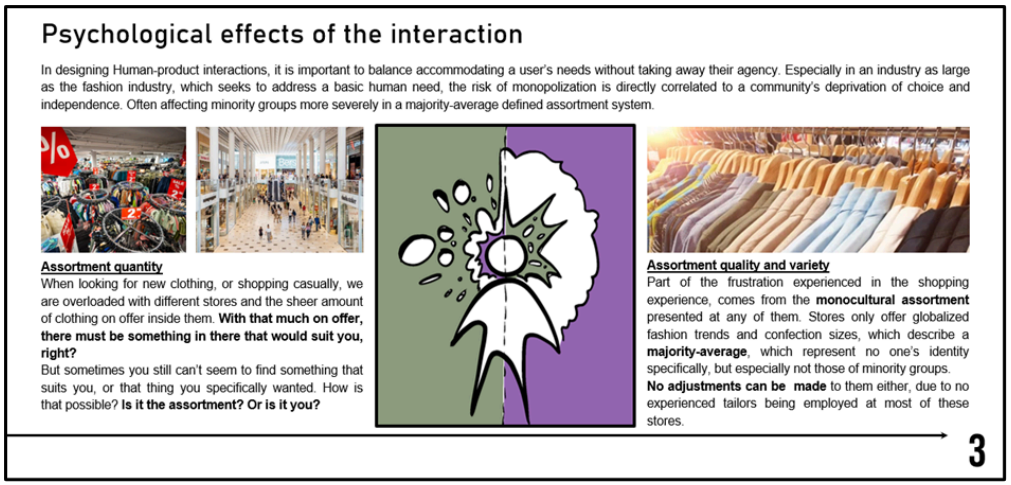
- The first on August 9th, 2025 in a group setting with 3 participants
- The second on August 10th, 2025 in an individual setting with 1 participant

The following is the collected feedback from those sessions and things that were iterated upon in the third version of the workshop;

What do you stand to gain?

With 7 participants in the workshop total, a small pattern seemed to emerge of people generally feeling guilty about their interaction with fashion. The idea was that they had pretty much given up on the morality of their consumption and simply tried to wear a piece of clothing as long as possible before throwing it away, often donating it. But for many of the participants, the idea of an expressive form of fashion seems be outside their expectations entirely. In the next iteration, some of the theoretical framework will be explained to the participants so they can learn what they could stand to gain from an alternative interaction.

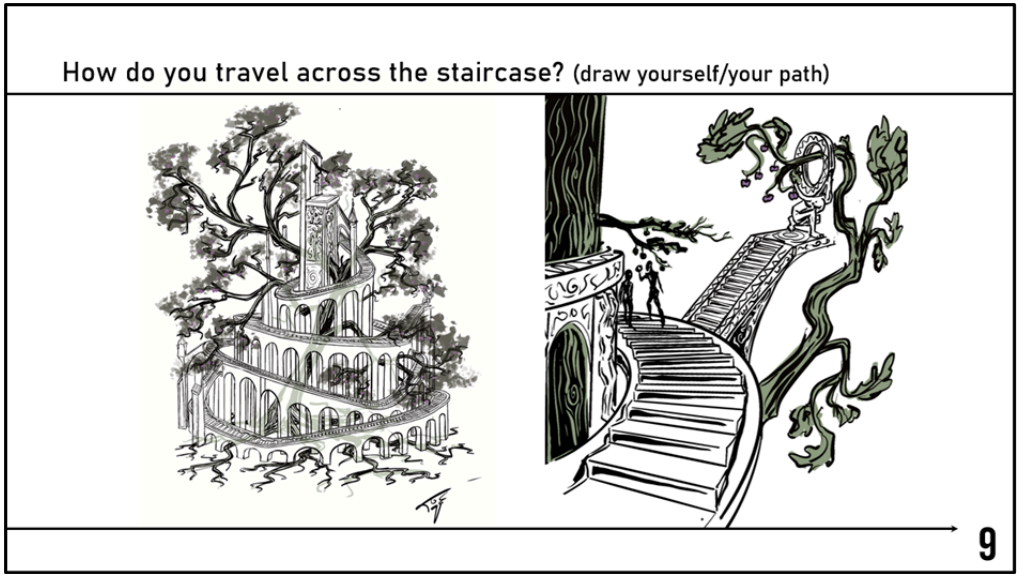
- Explain the humanization part of it all and how it doesn't just relate to sustainability, but to to the expression of identity



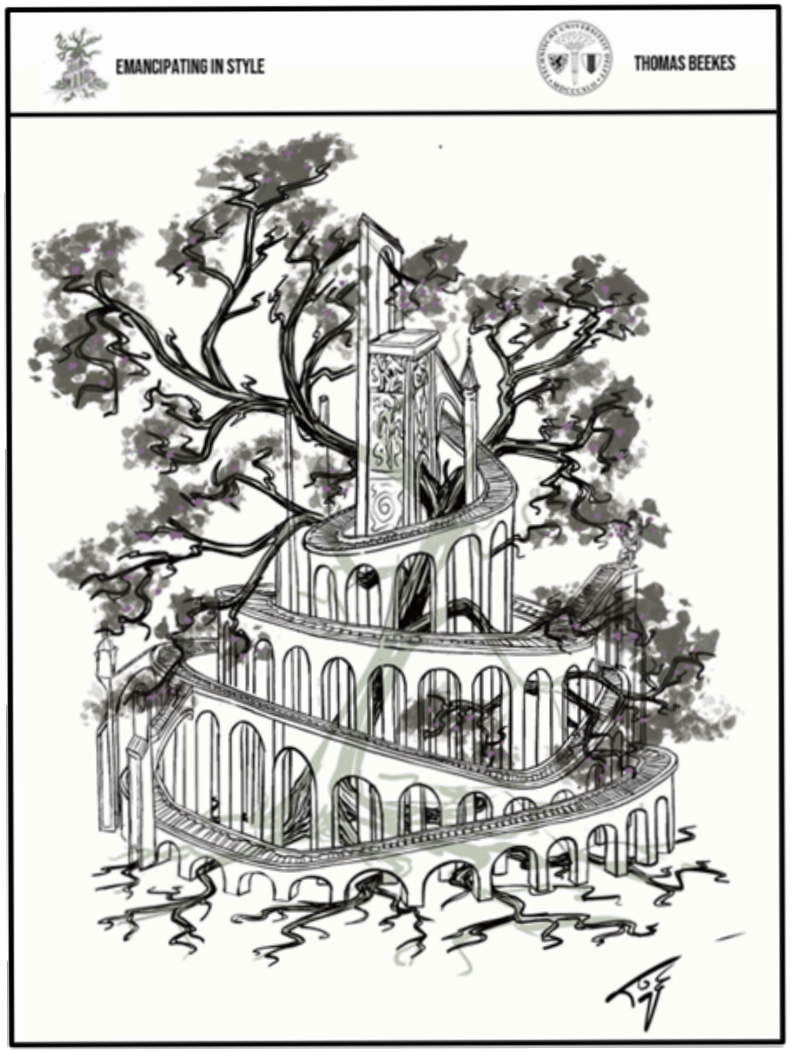
Where would you be on the staircase?

When prompted to talk about their perception of the infinite staircase metaphor, many participants still revert to the real-world context description and have trouble placing themselves on the staircase directly, because they seem to find it difficult to visualize themselves in a made-up world. So in order to make this easier, the participants need to be prompted to more specifically express their frustration with the interactions based in the context of the metaphor by having more visual aids that they can literally point to and say 'I am here'.

- Add exercise to the workshop of 'where would you place yourself on the staircase'
- What is your frustrations with the dynamics inside the metaphor?



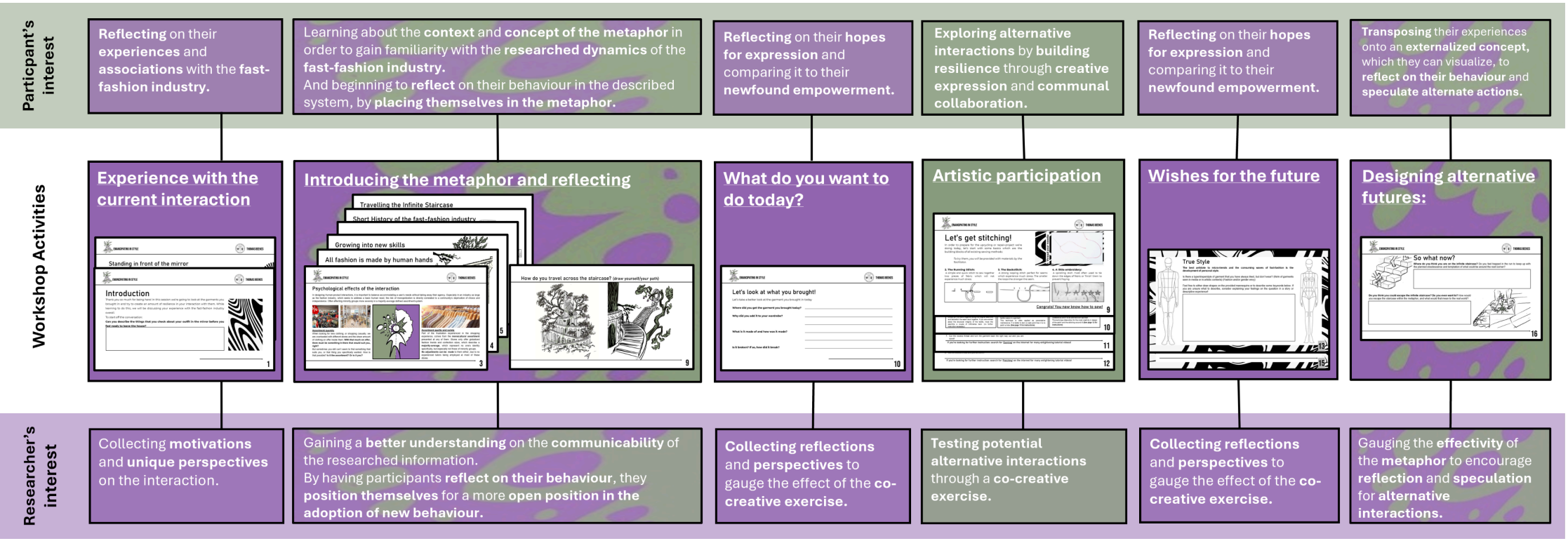
- In addition, there were bigger printouts of these visuals placed on the tables during the workshop, so the participants can look and reflect on the metaphor throughout.





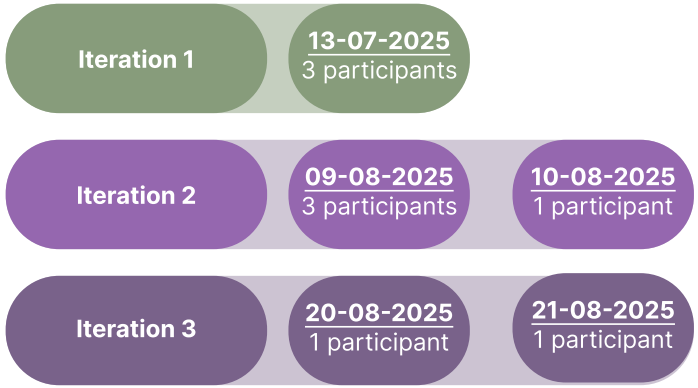
6.5 Third iteration of the workshop

The complete booklet can be found Appendix C



6.6 Results

As explained in the description of the methodology, the answers given during the workshop were transcribed and categorized on subject matter. What follows is a qualitative analysis based on these transcriptions to find meaningful patterns and insights.



6.6.1 Results: Expression and Reflection

Braindump
The braindump exercise of iteration 1 did not make it into the other iterations due to its lack of specificity, but the results gave very interesting overall impressions. Some of which were reflected in other participants' conversation about other subjects.

Most participants expressed the value of expression of identity through fashion. Especially people who feel that aspects of their identity are something they are proud to communicate with their environment. 2 participants in particular expressed that they were very proud and found importance in communicating their identity. Specifically, because their identities were representative of queer minority groups

> *"No, I had written down; depending on what gender-style I want to express more. So either more feminine or more butch-like. Uuhmm Also rather based on an emotion or vibe, based on what will give me a feeling of gender-dysphoria or -euphoria and it is not connected to specific pieces of clothing. So, it's not that I think to myself 'Oh pants are for men and skirts are for women, it's more of a feeling of the day, which can be really different each day"*
>
> (Participant 3, Braindump Iteration 1)

Even if some do not perceive themselves as creative thinkers or fashion-enthusiasts, all participants express that they do have an eye for what they think 'looks good on them' or 'is something they would wear'. This intuitive feeling seems to be based on their expression of identity and the meaning behind the pieces of clothing and the allegiance wearing them declares. They understand that wearing something means that you agree and identify with what it represents.

> *"I don't even think about it very consciously, even when I go to the store and then I'll just know immediately that 'Okay, I would wea this' yeah no without me being able to label why or how that is."*
>
> (Participant 2, Braindump Iteration 1)

Specifically having joy in recognition for the ability to design (the putting together of an outfit) they perceive in fashionable people.

> *"I have a love-hate relationship with clothing, because; 'love' I can experience so much joy when someone looks nice, for example you both often look really nice and for example, (name), friend of mine, also always looks really nice, it's so annoying (jokingly)..."*
>
> (Participant 1, Braindump Iteration 1)

After having described what value fashion brings to their life, all three participants of the first iteration of the workshop immediately state that they are aware of the environmental impact the fast-fashion industry has and how it really ruins the fun for them. This is a pattern that seemed to repeat itself in later iterations as well, but often less explicitly stated.

"I did write down that clothing is an absolute form of expression to me, Everything is so very expensive though and it's hard to find pieces that coincide with the style I see for myself in my head... ...And then I also immediately wrote down; the production of clothing and the mistreatment of it (that it breaks so quickly, it is made through slave-labour, and that it is destroyed that you return it to the store. That creates a huge dark cloud above the concept of expression for me with fashion."

(Participant 3, Braindump Iteration 1)

Additionally, the idea of involving their own bodies in a form of visual expression of identity brought up a lot of body image issues for 2 out of 3 participants, specifically because most artistic forms of fashion are designed exclusively for bodies of extreme beauty standards. This seems to act as a threshold that stops people from designing their own identity through fashion.

"... and uh, the 'hate, from the 'love-hate relationship' is because yeah I sometimes also want to wear something that makes me think 'oh yeah this is going to be really nice' and then I see myself in the mirror and I think 'oh no this is really not a vibe'"

(Participant 1, Braindump Iteration 1)

Sharing experiences with the fast-fashion industry

When prompted to talk about the moments the participants pay the most attention to their appearance all but 2 out of 9 participants replied with their presented identity to people outside their social community. In this interaction with work and strangers, they experience an amount of coerced recognition through expectations of beauty standards, modesty, and uniformity.

These are usually based on hegemonic standards and has led them to strongly adhere to them to seek recognition from the people they interact with and are dependent on. One participant expressed the feeling of having to submit themselves to these standards because they feel directly dependent on the perceptions others have of them:

"It's almost the same as submitting a portfolio for a job-interview? You're offering yourself up to be judged and at that moment you think you might be wearing an outfit that falls outside the norm, so outside the basic styles. That's when you're really offering yourself up to look at you and think 'okay I have an opinion on you' and I often just don't feel comfortable enough with that."

(Participant 8, Introduction Iteration 3)

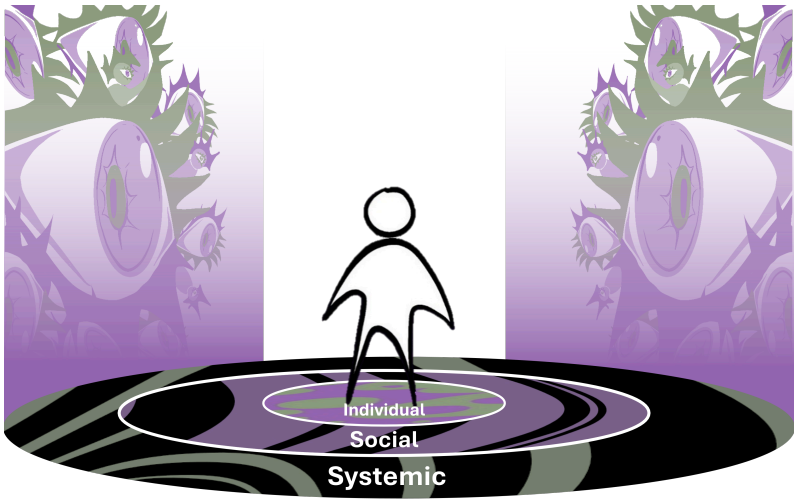


Figure 23: Schematic representation of the levels of interaction a person can experience oppression or recognition from, in this case the fact that their interaction with fashion is being perceived by the social and systemic level

7 out of 9 participants stated that they prioritize acceptance over expression when it comes to their fashion. They feel that there is a 'safety in the herd' and that they would rather be seen for their personalities or capabilities. People concede to the coerced recognition of the hegemony, represented by their social and systemic interactions in exchange for recognition for their deeper identity from their community and professional environment. The latter has a much more conditional relationship with the identities presented, but even though this seems to be a more stressful situation to achieve humanization within, the fact that you exactly know what is expected of you seems to bring an amount of peace and control.

"(P4) sometimes has a purple jacket and I never really wear that, because I wear grey or blue with a shirt underneath. And that's usually fine for me. I don't have an interest in the individualistic side. I don't want to stand out with the poohoo look aat me, because I just want to look decent and presentable."

(Participant 5, Standing in front of the Mirror Iteration 2)

One participant even had their loved ones pre-determine an amount of 'suitable combinations' of pants and shirts specifically based on the environment they would be worn within, so that they would not run the risk of losing recognition from their professional environment on accident.

"I just have designated combo's of 'okay, this is work and this is for at home' for example; a pair of pants and a dress shirt can work for both, but in my mind that just sounds like 'this is for work'."

(Participant 2, Introduction Iteration 1)

But this is not considered a problem, all participants with 9-to-5 jobs (7 out of 9) noted that there is a hard disconnect between their private-life identity and their work-environment. They appreciate being able to step out of their own skin when they go to work, because it feels like the judgement and feedback they experience on their work and appearance does not apply to their personality. The separation of personal and professional identity in order to gain professional recognition, allows people to maintain self-recognition for their own personal identity by keeping it out of competitive environments.

Even in the conceit of the personal identity, participants mention little ways in which they rebel against the expected dress codes. Little ways in which they can recognize themselves in the uniform they put on.

"So, then uhmm, I think it is important that I look appropriate. Dat is a kind of unofficial uniform, you're going to a formal event that means you cannot show up in jeans or a small top...
But I am... I do always have a uhh.. that I want to do it my own way, so ehh..Hey, with my panther-print shoes and funny stuff like that, I always find that to be important to me..."

(Participant 6, Standing in front of the mirror Iteration 2)

This can make you wonder if the distancing between personal and professional identities is maintainable over a longer period of time and for so many hours a week. It makes you question whether there are moment in the week you will have the energy and time left to truly be yourself in a creative and expressive way.

Social environment

During free time, in social and community contexts, would be the ideal times to express who you and your community truly are. While people spend time with friends, they feel completely comfortable coming as they are, and they feel no need to change their identity. They bring their true daily lives-self and sometimes even show more than they would in any other context. Because these times and events are associated with times of rest and recreation, they are often not the moments people try to dress their best. Although participants did express that it is sometimes a safer environment to experiment with new styles and ideas, because they know that recognition is either guaranteed or feedback will come with kind words.

Except for special events, parties, outings, birthdays, that is when everyone agrees they try to look their best, based on whatever their friends will like and that usually means being themselves as much as possible. In some cases it requires them to dress in a uniform that is associated with the specific custom or culture in which their community is based, but because they are also a part of said community, that just means dressing like a specific aspect of themselves.

"Uhm about specific situations in which I pay more attention to my outfit, then I think about, maybe meeting people for the first time. I just want to make a good first impression and look my best.
Or like for parties, outings. Festivals, out to nightclubs stuff like that."

(Participant 9, Standing in front of the mirror Iteration 3)

But as discussed in chapter 4 and confirmed by the participants, there is

a general feeling of monoculturalization, which forms an obstacle for more creative and expressive forms of fashion. Even when people would be willing an interested to experiment with different styles to explore their own multifaceted personalities, the option is simply not readily available.

What did you bring?
Before the practical sewing of the workshop started, a moment was taken to discuss the garments the participants had brought in.

Participants who brought damaged garments were genuinely disappointed by the poor quality and that something that they considered a part of their identity (an object that granted them recognition) was now no longer usable to them. Combined with the fact that 7 out of 9 participants felt like they were unable to fix their clothes themselves. This experience of being unable to affect their achievement of recognition causes a very real disruption in the creative process that allows them to express their identity. **Loss of recognition.**

Participants who brought garments to upcycle were disappointed by the garments inability to express what they wanted it to. But they see that either the materials or the concept of the garment has potential and it actively inspires them

True Style
Most participants have yet to consider what their 'true style' would be, since their current interaction with the system has never asked them that question. Interestingly; the most common answer was for something that 'fit them well' and comfortable for their body.

- Non-stretch fabrics and tailored,
- higher quality fabrics overall
- more colourful options (brighter colours) and designs

These wishes are formulated as a request for recognition from the fashion-industry, asking them for more resources that they themselves can then use to design a true expression of their identity.
Most participants do have references to aesthetics, character designs, or celebrities. The latter often leads to self-deprecation, because they feel they fail to attain an unattainable beauty standard

Identifying someone's true style asks them to be vulnerable about their hopes and dreams about the presentation of their identity. The industry is experienced as an unfair monolith, something that cannot be ignored and we should be grateful is providing us with anything at all. If the provided products are not satisfactory, the fault cannot be pressed to the industry, because there is no alteration or alternative. So the only thing to do is to find blame with yourself.

Due to the monopolization and consequent monoculturalism of the industry, many participants experience that the only 'true style' they can choose from is from the preexisting collections at the fashion stores. There is no real source of inspiration on the level of their community or social circle, because these have fused with the hegemonic standards. Creating a dynamic in which all answers about style relate to hegemonic fashion trends and standards, but of higher quality and variety in colour.

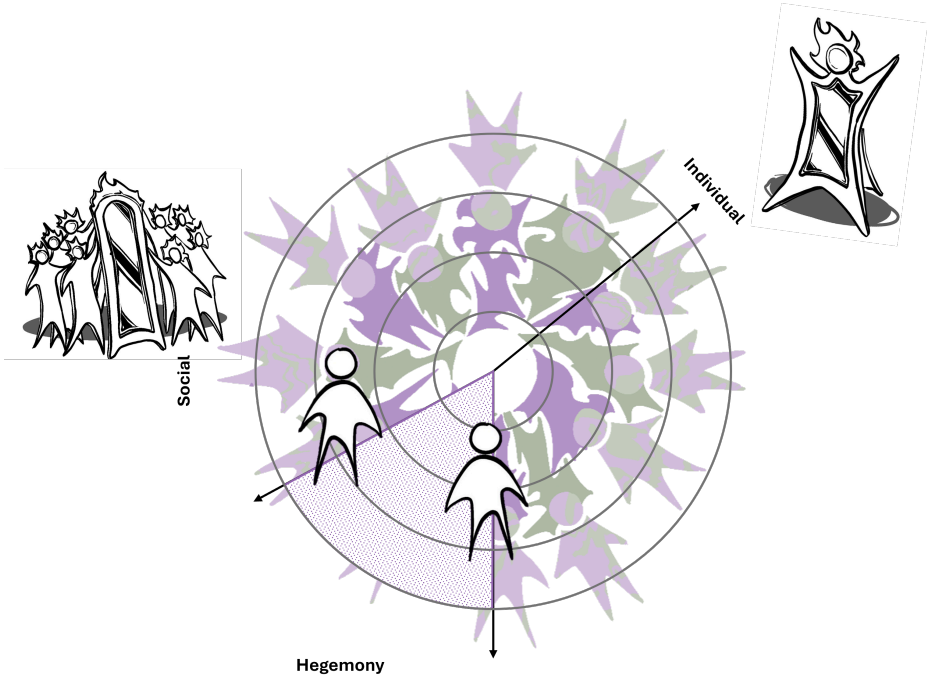


Figure 24: Schematic representation of the possible degrees of freedom a person can have in expressions of identity and how the the social degree is disappearing into the hegemonic level

6.6.2 Results: Empowering creative expression

The sewing tutorial and artistic experimentation were very positive experiences, all participants were interested and enthusiastic in picking up a new skill. Especially since most considered small forms of repair to be something they ‘should know about’. 7 out of 9 participants had no experience with sewing, other than a basic tutorial in primary school which they had completely forgotten about. The two who did were enthusiastic to participate and help other participants with their garments.

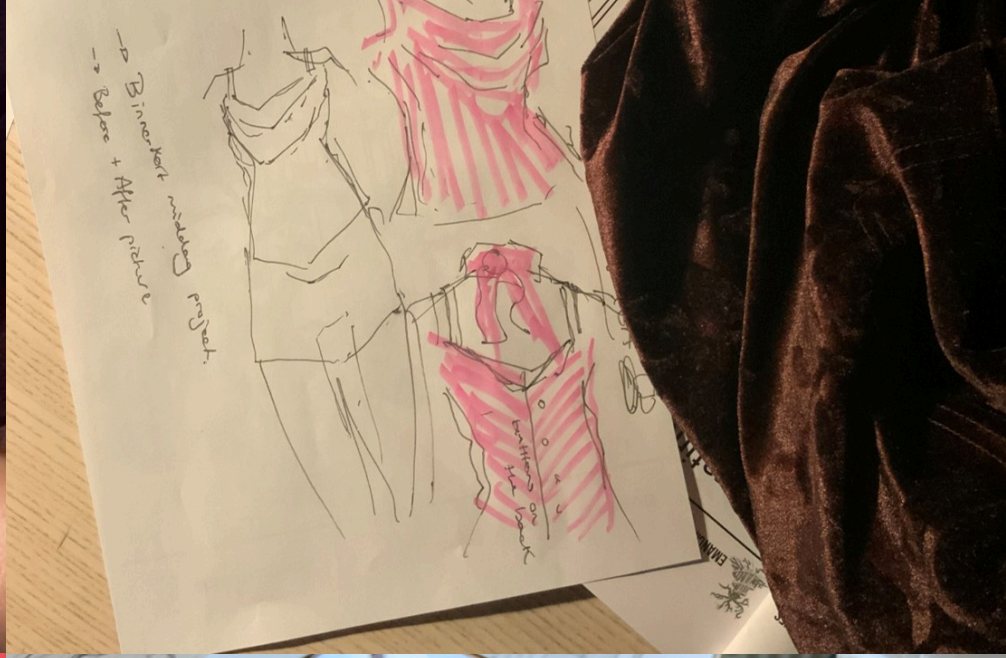
Most considered picking up the basic skills through the tutorial was easy, but transplanting that new knowledge into creative alterations and repairs will probably take some more practice and time than a single workshop can provide.

As there was in the alternative interaction analysis of chapter 4.3 there was a big difference in the experience of repair in comparison to alteration, the former elicits more critical perceptions of their own work, and the latter evokes a more creative approach and constructive attitude.
Especially the participants who had little experience in sewing experienced the feeling that now they had experienced the amount of labour involved in sewing, helped them realize the amount of hours of work it takes to have their garments made by others. Specifically raising questions about how they could possibly be so cheap to make and sell for.








Binnenkort middag project.
Before + After picture


15 METER MAASWOL
EMANCIPATING IN STYLE
Repair techniques
Ripped Seam
Small hole


there is very little that
the fast-fashion industry, does

6.6.3 Results: Designing alternative futures

When asked to translate their experiences into the metaphor
Most participants started with admissions of guilt of having contributed to the unsustainable dynamics of the fast-fashion industry (meaning that they have consumed items from it), which was often immediately followed by a small disclaimer or excuse for why they did.

> *"During peak Covid Quarantine time, I was very much trying to look for who I was and then it is very easy to jump on a microtrend. And maybe this is it and maybe it's not so much. 'alright I won't do that again' now I have become very aware of microtrends and I also just think it is a waste of money. Aside from all the environmental effects."*
>
> (Participant 8, How do you travel across the staircase? Iteration 3)

The metaphor does directly evoke awareness of the wasteful cycles of consumerism. It also immediately makes the participants think of all the ways they've tried to be better and how they seem unable to succeed consistently, it evokes and mirrors their frustration and fatigue in trying to do better but being unable to. However, the fact that their initial reaction is to feel stuck and guilty, instead of being blocked and frustrated with the staircase. Causing the participants to be frustrated with themselves rather than the industry.

Participants of the workshop do not or do not want to look for a life outside the infinite staircase, they want to stay on it because they feel as though there is nothing outside it and they do not feel capable of providing for themselves. The adaptation of a new skill like making clothes seems like something they simply do not have the time and energy for. The system, and the metaphor for it, is simply too imprisoning and the wastelands seem to inhospitable. The latter fact is likely caused by the fact that most of the visuals had a white blank page as a background, which probably influenced participants to think there was simply nothing outside this system at all.

When the participants were asked to speculate on how they would escape the infinite staircase:

- Buy second-hand clothing
- Localise the supply-chain of commercial fashion
- Enforce import policies that make fast-fashion non-profitable through the European Union
- 'Reinforce the steps of the staircase' by repairing and maintaining clothing that you have
- Localize the production of 'basic items' and undergarments and stimulate diversity on a cultural level
- Choose to buy higher-quality clothing
- Repair and alter clothing yourself
- Take away economic inevitability by 'creating mobility between the different levels of the staircase'
- 'Slowing down the running up the steps until you slowly come to a standstill'
- Build up the habit of maintaining and altering over time
- 'Walk along some lower tiers of the staircase' by being more closely involved in the production and maintenance of the garment.

Some of these suggestions do see opportunities for possible restructuring of the staircase to make for a more sustainable and egalitarian interaction. But many, especially in the earlier workshops either think the intervention should come from governmental policy or from adjusted consumer behaviour. However, the later tests do start showing more in-metaphor answers to the suggestions, some of these do just decide to surrender to the fall when the system becomes inherently unsustainable. Most participants consider themselves completely dependent or alone in the system and find the idea of working together with others complicated, mainly because **they have so little time outside their working hours already and cannot imagine spending a lot of time organizing and developing new skills.** This is not something the workshop or the metaphor can directly address. In this manner, the metaphor has not yet evoked a very creative redesign of the current interaction.

The discussion about the participant's creative expression of their experiences has thoroughly expanded on the metaphor itself. Specifically describing the comforts and cruelties of its imprisoning height, far away from the freedom and the independence of the ground. These insights and interpretations has truly enriched my perception of what kind of lives are possible on the infinite staircase.

Conclusions

Reflection on the current interaction
Most participants seek recognition from their social or communal environments, either in effort or in identity expressed. They feel a comfort in uniformity (safety in the herd), but are specifically looking for the recognition of another who will accept them as they are. Due to the disappearance of local or community-based culture, the only costume that can be adhered to is the hegemonic identity. Combined with the fact that most prioritize recognition based on personality and ability over appearance, this leads to a diminishing importance of costume and individual expression.

Most participants of the workshop were disappointed at their internalized coerced recognition of their inability to design for their own expression, but were willing to give it up for social recognition of communal identity.

Even with this surrender of expression, most participants express that there are little ways in which they secretly and minimally try to include small forms of individualism in their appearance. Be it through small accessorizing or alternative colour selections, all express small forms of rebellion against hegemonic identity and are disappointed at not daring to do more. This is a dour conclusion to what the current situation looks like, but it means that there is still a spark that makes people express themselves in little ways, which should keep the future potential hopeful.

Potential for future work: In community contexts, most will be able to experiment with practicing self-recognition of their ability to design for their own expression and to train experiencing this to an extent of humanization.

Creative expression through skill-building
These were consistently the most fun parts of the workshop, and the results achieved by the participants in the workshops were very rewarding for them and for the project.

Most were unable to completely finish their projects in the session, but the fact that they picked up a needle for the first time in their life and made something, is already such an achievement. And if even one person has discovered a new interest, hobby, or skill, that is already worth the trouble of organizing the workshops. All participants came away with a newfound respect for the amount of labour involved in the production of clothing, and a new confidence that they will be able to repair small damages to their clothing in the future..

Metaphor as a tool for reflection and speculation
As discussed in the results of the workshop, the imprisoning factor worked a little too well, and made it difficult for participants to speculate about methods of escape. But the reflection on their behaviour does help them identity what could be improved about it.

The metaphor is a good tool for reflection and assigning value to own behaviour but too imprisoning for creative speculation.

The infinite staircase metaphor was initially constructed as a method to illustrate the oppressive and imprisoning dynamics of the fast-fashion industry. But the participants' creativity has expanded on the lives of the people illustrated on the staircase. Specifically describing the comforts and cruelties of its imprisoning height away from the ground. This helped them reflect on their behaviour within the staircase very well.

When compared to its inspiration, as discussed in chapter 5.1, in order for such a metaphor to inspire alternative action, perhaps the participants need to be immersed in the world more deeply and be given a specific quest and capabilities to complete in a given session. Seeing as this is what is usually done in roleplaying-game, it makes sense that that could be a more productive alternative.

Potential: If introduced as a more in-depth Roleplay-setting, participants may be more aware of potential within the context

Alternative Interaction design
After having held a sewing needle in their hand and been asked to take their wishes for expression into their own hands, the participants expressed having gained new awareness of the amount of labour involved in the production of clothing. When compared to the original theoretical framework of Userism, this has caused them to develop Recognition for another's capability to design.
In addition to that, they realise that, with the building of new skills and capabilities, small repairs and alterations become very easily doable jobs. Allowing them to develop a form of self-recognition for their own capability to design. And although about half of them have expressed that they are not necessarily interested in developing the skill of sewing much further, they did sit down with their community and looked for ways in which they could contribute to an alternative interaction with fashion.

The main research question for this project was to look for an alternative interaction with fashion that would emancipate people from the fast-fashion industry, but most participants consider themselves completely dependent or alone in the system and have trouble seeking ways to live outside it. And this makes complete sense when you consider the fact that most of this participants are completely aware of the fact that the consumerist society they live within is completely unsustainable on an ecological and a social level. And that this awareness of an uncertain future is what is causing a fatigued response to an alternative interaction, especially when this alternative always seems to require that you put in a little extra work individually.

The feasibility of a redesigned interaction hinges on the willingness of people to put in a little more work, trusting the finding of greater humanization. But how can you ask people to do a little more when they have no more to give already. The redesigned interaction of user-intervention is wholly dependent on the community aspect of the co-creation session. Allowing expression and recognition to be combined. And all have expressed the idea that, within a community context and in a comfortable social environment, it is very fun to do. The possible future of continuing to develop more recognition for themselves and others seems fun when you do it in a community context, but many find the idea of working together with others complicated, mainly because they have so little time outside their working hours already and cannot imagine spending a lot of time organizing and developing new skills.

But community organisation is not something that once unlearned, can never be relearned, even though our current environment does not encourage us to learn it. Within a community context, there are roles to be adapted and learned by each different participant, there is no need for all to adapt the same skills. The question of 'what kind of alternative interaction can you design' should not be asked of an individual participant, but of the community as a whole.

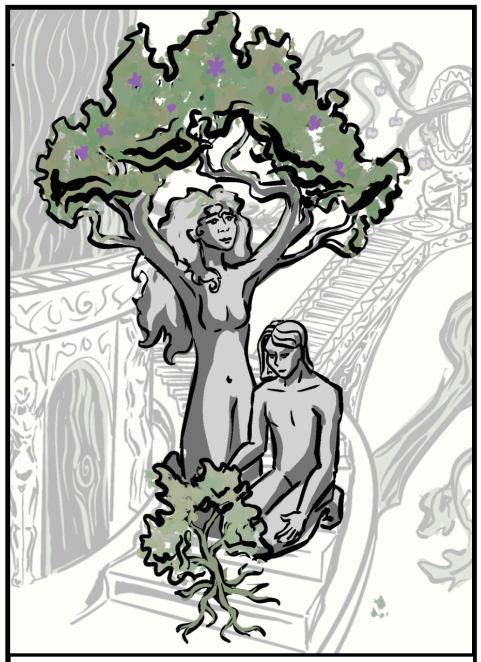
Final iteration

As a final redesign to the workshop within this project, a more immersive setting can be created through true roleplay introduction and a longer-term immersion in that setting. This will be combined with an in-world characterization for the possible roles participants could take on in their community. Initially, these roles can be explored within the roleplaying exercise of the metaphor, but directly relate to a role that can be fulfilled in the real world.

I personally identify the most with the Botanist and the Model, and I think most people will be able to see themselves in multiple roles. Perhaps, if I can find a community with a Navigator to offer direction and inspiration and a Caretaker to help us organize our collaboration, we will finally be able to feel like we can freely express who we are and escape the infinite staircase together.



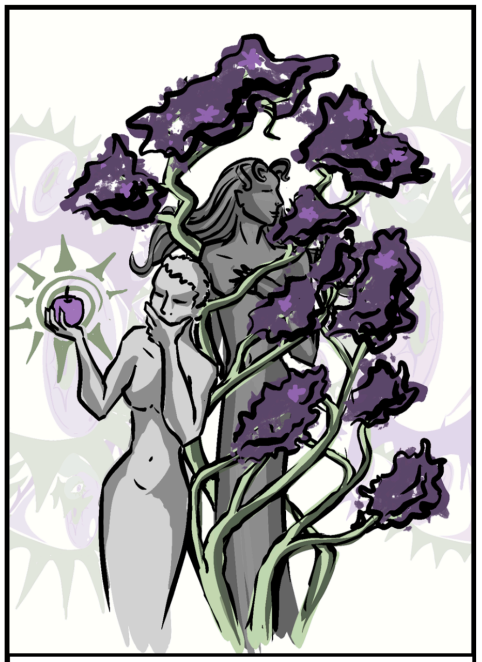
The Navigator



The Botanist



The Caretaker



The Model

As the eagle-eye of your community, it will be your responsibility to find treasures that can be of use to others and/or to inspire your community with stories from your travels.

Your role is to revitalize inspiration in your community and bring back influences and materials that you think will be the key to your community's visions.

Your ability to gather information and materials will be instrumental to your group's escape from the infinite staircase.

The Navigator

As the craftsman of your community, it will be your responsibility to immerse yourself in the craft of your choice and lend your knowledge and skill to them.

Your role is to absorb and learn from the inspirations and materials your community brings together and help make your collective visions into a reality.

Your ability to manifest ideas into the real world will be essential in your group's escape from the infinite staircase.

The Botanist

As the social organizer of your community, it will be your responsibility to connect the members of your group with each other and facilitate your community's persistence.

Your role is to make sure that everyone and every vision in the group is heard and respected and that none are forgotten or overworked.

Your ability to gauge the tensions in the fabric of your community will be the key to your group's escape from the infinite staircase.

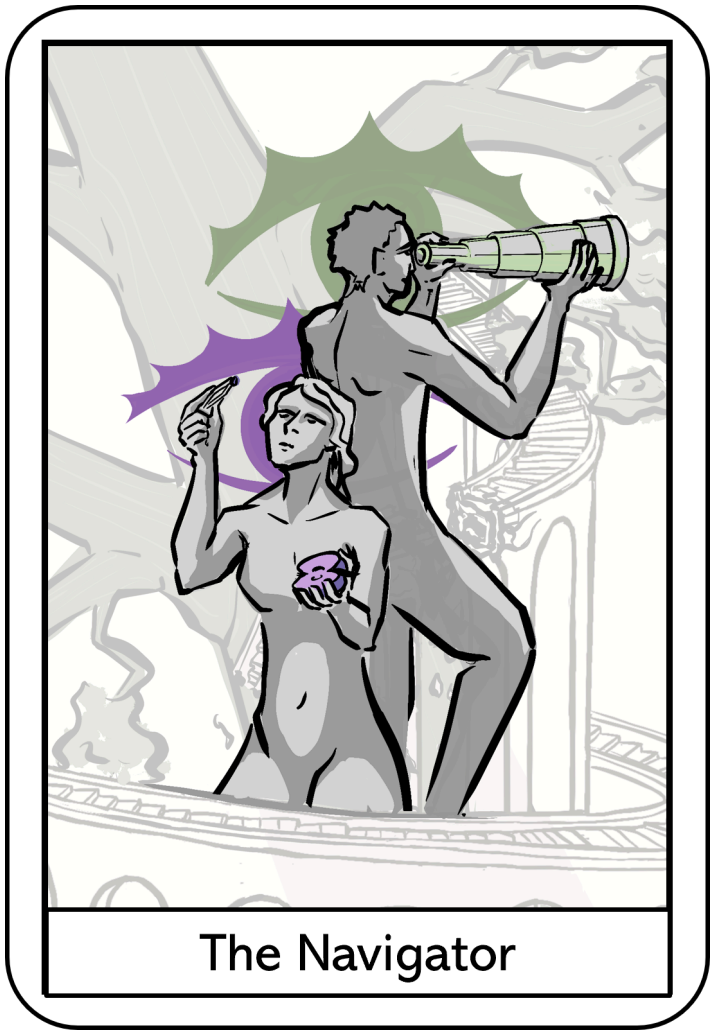
The Caretaker

As the pioneer of your community, it will be your responsibility to experiment with the creations and visions of your group to give their work purpose and appreciation.

Your role is to visualize the potential of the expression of identity and help determine what it is your community wants to do.

Your ability to visualize and herald the next projects of your community's work will be the empowerment your group needs to escape from the infinite staircase.

The Model

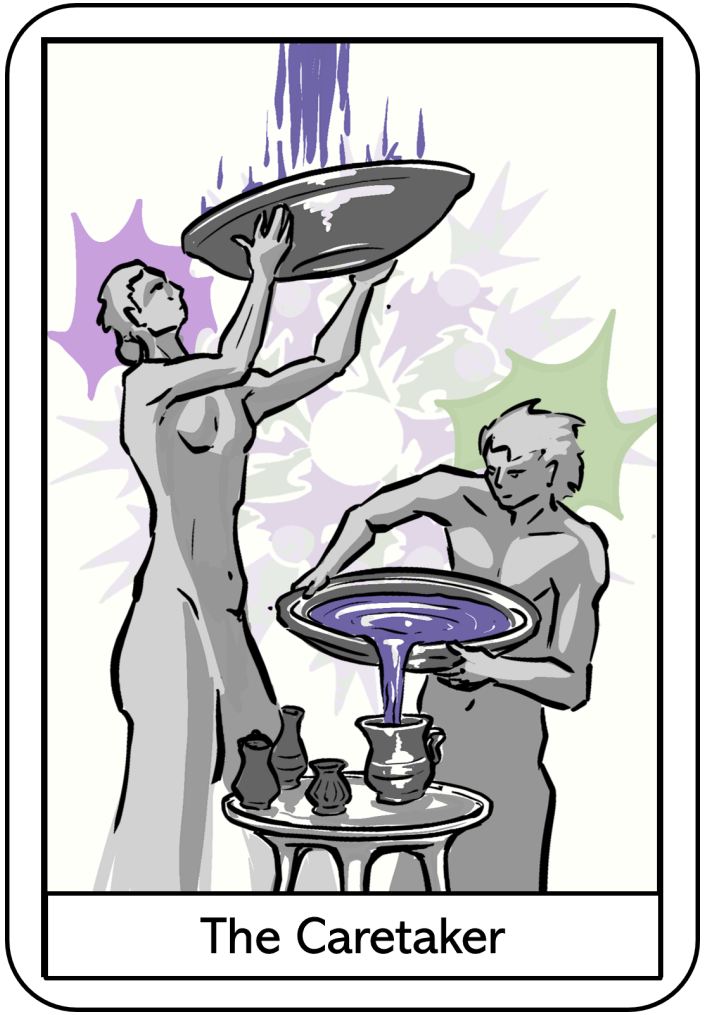


The Navigator

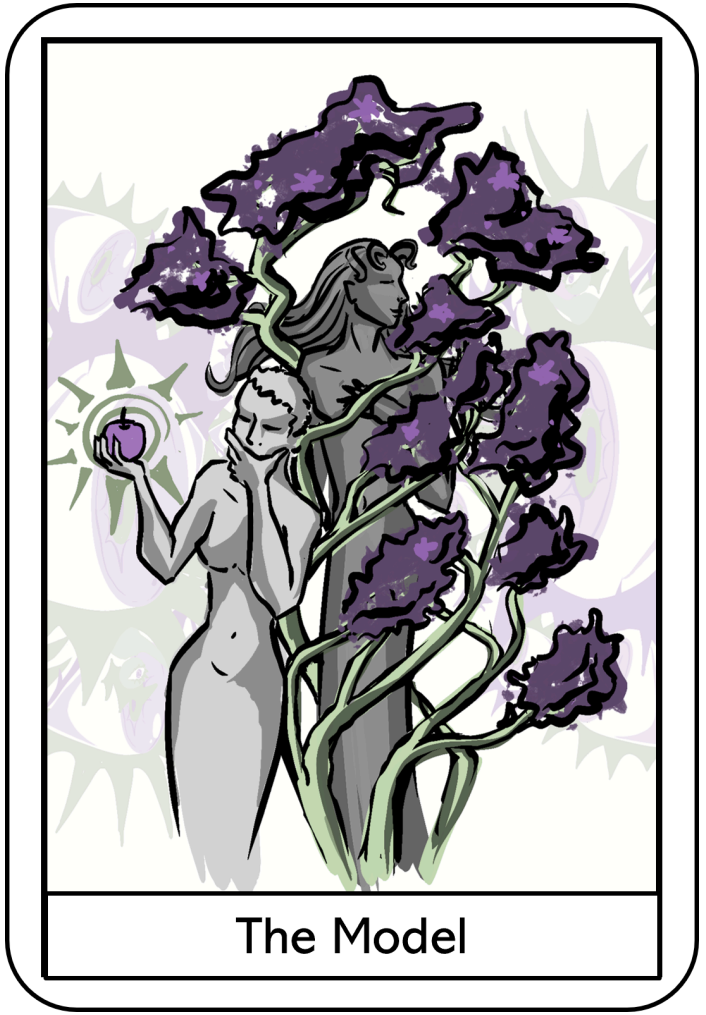
7



The Botanist



Conclusion



7.1 Recap of the project

This thesis addresses the researcher's experience of the disappearance of local culture in fashion and costume due to the Userist design principles prevalent in the fast-fashion industry. This work intends to construct an alternative interaction with fashion which allows for more diverse cultural expression. A theoretical framework that tests for Userist oppression was adapted to the tangible and performative nature of fashion and applied.

From this analysis the collected insights were translated into a metaphorical worldbuilding exercise in which one can immerse themselves through roleplaying. This exercise allows participants to express complex experiences through physical movements and interactions with the metaphorical world. This exercise stimulates reflection on normalized behaviours and speculation regarding alternatives in a less performative setting.

Both the worldbuilding exercise and insights from the Userism analysis were combined in the creation of a participatory design workshop. This workshop was designed to be held in communal social contexts, so that participants would feel comfortable to express their experiences and aspirations for interactions with fashion.

The final proposed design of the workshop, based on the collected feedback of the participants, facilitates an interaction with fashion is one of community-supported repair and alteration in which artistic expression is encouraged and inspired.

7.2 Answering the Research Questions

At the end of the project, the research questions posed in chapter 2.1 can be appropriately answered;

Based on the insights from chapter 1, 3, and the analyses of literature and auto-ethnographic evidence, the pillars supporting the oppression of Userism in the fast-fashion industry can be identified as monopolization and monoculturalism. Which in turn can be dismantled through pluriversal design and the encouragement of artistic expression, leading to a more culturally diverse interaction.

RQ1: What are the dynamics of oppression, which are designed into the fast-fashion industry, and how can they be dismantled in the new interaction?

Monopolization of the means of production can be addressed by the Pluriverse model executed in a community context.

Monoculture can be addressed through artistic expression in recognition-rich contexts.

Based on the explorations performed in chapter 4, 5, and the results of the testing in chapter 6, it can be concluded that the inclusion of said exploration and reinterpretation through an artistic perspective proved instrumental in the formation and conclusion of this project. By enrichening it with an artistic perspective, the designed interactions became more approachable and richly reflective than they could have been without it.

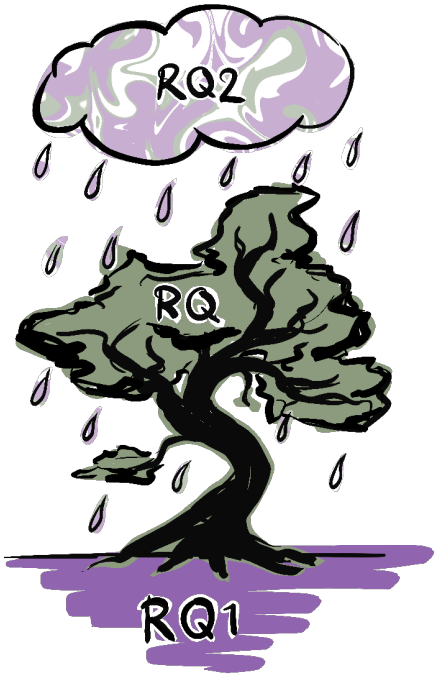
RQ2: How can the inclusion of Artistic expression and reflection based on emotional motivations into this design project, contribute to enriching academic design research?

Artistic expression in academic research can lead to unexpected additions to otherwise rigidly academic work and is able to address uncertainty in complex and very subjective and experiential situations. It is able to fill in the gaps that literature cannot.

And finally, based on the insights collected in all chapters, but mainly of the testing of chapter 6, it can be concluded that both the designed workshop can help begin a community-based movement that will be allow people to emancipate themselves from oppressive dynamics of the fast-fashion industry.

RQ: What interactions with fashion can emancipate and liberate people from the oppressive dynamics of the fast-fashion industry to regain its original freedom in artistic expression, community-based cooperation, and sustainability?

The structure and activities of the participatory design workshop can be applied as the beginning of the formation of a social community which seeks to emancipate themselves from the fast-fashion industry.



7.3 Discussions and limitations

As highlighted at the beginning of the project, both the project brief and the project overall were performed by the author alone. Meaning that the positionality on the experience with the fast-fashion industry has been a very present influence and a potential bias in the perception of it. The intention was to claim this positionality clearly at the beginning of the project, similar to the artistic explorations, so that it does not deteriorate the integrity of the project, but becomes clear that it is a driving motivation. Nonetheless, it is an important factor to consider when reading the work done.

This positionality should be especially considered when looking at the qualitative data analysis in chapter 6. Much of the observations and conclusions are based on my interpretations of the stories told by the participants in the workshops, but this brings with it a higher risk of bias. It is possible that, because an analysis was performed in chapter 4 already, that confirmation bias played a role in the results of chapter 6.

Especially considering that the participants were people from my own communities and some of them have heard me talk about this project for a long time before the workshop took place. The idea was because there were preexisting equal social relationships between the participants an the facilitator that they would feel comfortable enough to be honest and open about things they would be willing to do and what not, but that does not completely remove the risk of biased data.

7.4 Recommendations for future work

With all the positionality-based risk of bias highlighted int he discussion, the most interesting recommendation for another would be to transplant the ideas and interactions to another's communities and discover all the different stories, perspectives, and artistic visions it evokes. The metaphor and the interaction were all heavily influenced by my own references and positionality, but by placing it in the hands of another, it can only become a more enriched piece of work. Or even if a different person were to design their own metaphor for the fast-fashion industry to guide their own workshops.

This proposed interaction is meant to inspire other designers to do more research into possible applications of this alternative interaction within their own or another's social community contexts, encouraging the community to emancipate themselves from their consumptive interaction with the fast-fashion industry and reclaim their cultural agency through design. If the workshops would be organized more often for the same communities, maybe an instance could slowly turn into a habit, allowing people to discover what kind of roles they contribute and how a long-term alternative would affect them. Perhaps even through a more distant form of observation, in which the community is left to their own devices and give updates on what they have accomplished together over time.

The project overall attests to the value of experimenting with artistic expression as complementary to reflection and speculation for academic interaction design. This is something that was very important to me personally when I began this project, because it was something that I felt I had to suppress during the rest of my education, so when I could finally justify expressing the perspectives and the ideas I had in creative context, it made all the difference in the world. I hope and recommend that if anyone reads this work and becomes inspired by the use of artistic exploration, that they hold onto the passions they feel and try to find ways in which to incorporate it into their work. To not let stories of efficient productivity and complete academic objective truth sway you from the things that drive your motivations and make you want to make things in the first place. As you can see from this project, your perspectives and creativity can only enrich the work you do!

7.5 Personal Reflection

The theories of Userism that provided the framework for this research also required me to completely reshuffle the language that I had been using for the rest of my years at the faculty of Industrial Design, and I was very surprised to find such harshly contradicting concepts to the methods that have been taught to me in the past years.

Non-Userist design is, in my experience, much harder than Userist design. The amount of perspectives you have to consider in every decision and the fac that you place so much of the 'design' work in the hands of the stakeholders you are working with. It makes all the sense in the world that most existing design work is Userist, because it is much easier to lock yourself up in a room and design everything for yourself and assume everyone else is stupider than you are. But that makes the challenge of designing for Humanization all the more worth it, it requires you to be a social creature and actually design in front of and with your stakeholders, even to listen to them tell you that your work is not right according to them. There is a lot of trust and confrontation combined with holding back on your own assumptions, but that may be why the marriage of design for humanization with artistic expression worked rather well.

The fact that you do not design because others are unable to, but for you to express your point of view as exactly that; a point of view, asks you to maintain humility in your work and have respect for others'. But that is exactly what I loved most about this project, the fact that I got to share in the artistic and expressive visions of others and achieve their visions together was easily the most fulfilling part of it all. Being able to share my ideas simply as my ideas, instead of some superior academic achievement is what was always most of the joy in design for me.

That being said, there were a lot of difficulties for me along the way as well. I experienced a lot of difficulty with having to manage this project on my own and I constantly felt anxiety breathing down my neck. Probably because I was so passionate about this project, the perfectionist in me almost paralysed me and made me unable to finish nearly any deadline on time. In this past couple of days, while finishing the project I have barely been sleeping and I am still not making the exact deadline. In myopinion, inspiration and motivation often elude me and I know it does others as well, so the concept of hard deadlines has never worked for me, but it is still something that I will be working on in future.

I can not say that I have collected much data on this specific point, which is why I would not include in the conclusions of the project, but in my opinion and interpretation of the data, the disappearance of culturally diverse fashion is directly caused by the system of late-stage capitalism we live in. I think that the fact that everyone has to work 40 hours a week for little money makes it so that no one has any actual energy and time left in order to express and maintain culture in a community setting. Causing severe forms of alienation from our cultures and communities and making it overall easier to buy cheap clothes to fulfill the primary needs they need to fulfill.



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Appendix A: First Workbook Iteration





Emancipating in Style:

Escaping the Infinite Staircase



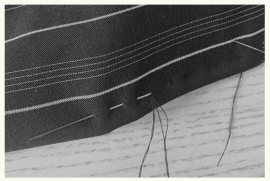
A Master's Thesis Research project
by Thomas Beekes

July 2025

Introduction

Thank you so much for being here! In this session we're going to look at the garments you brought in and try to create an amount of resilience in your interaction with them. While learning to do this, we will be discussing your experience with the fast-fashion industry overall.





To start off the conversation:

What is one small thing you do to take care of your appearance through clothing?

Braindump

How do you feel about clothing? What does this question make you think about? How do you think the shirt you are wearing was made? Write, draw, or illustrate the thoughts that pop into your head when you think about this question.



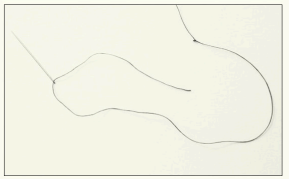
Let's get stitching!

In order to prepare for the upcycling or repair-project we're doing today, let's start with some basics which are the building blocks of all existing sewing methods:

To try them, you will be provided with materials by the facilitator.



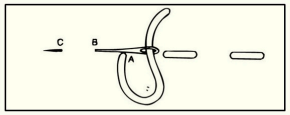
1. Thread your needle:

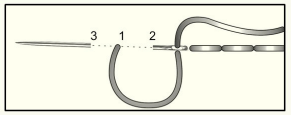


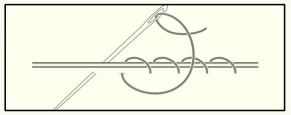
2. The Running Stitch:
A simple and quick stitch to sew together two pieces of fabric which will not experience much stress.

3. The Backstitch:
A strong looping stitch perfect for seams which experience much stress. The smaller the loops the stronger the seam.

4. The Whipstitch:
A spiralling stich most often used to tie down the edges of fabric or 'finish' them to prevent fraying.





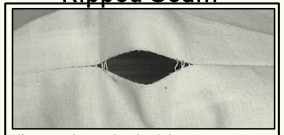


Congrats! You now know how to sew!

Repair techniques

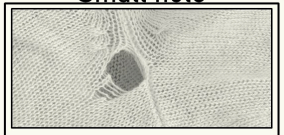
With the discussed stitch-types we can start looking at the kind of technique which would be most appropriate for the type of damage to your garment. Below are examples of different kinds of damage and referrals to which pages of this booklet address those types. **These techniques serve as guidelines, feel free to be as creative with the patterns of your stitches as you would like!**

Ripped Seam



If a garment's seam has ripped due to stress or age, meaning that **the thread holding two separate pieces of fabric together has snapped, without doing much damage to the integrity of the textile,** the damage can be easily mended!
Simply pin the fabric together along the original seamline and backstitch the seam back together. If you are worried about the structural integrity of the textile, move the seamline a couple of millimetres back. (no further instruction necessary)

Small hole



If **the weave of a piece of textile has worn down and is either close to or has created a small hole of less than 2cm,** the integrity of the weave can be maintained through **Darning.** A technique applying the previously mentioned running stitch in a weaving pattern to replace the missing textile weave in a garment.
This technique is often applied as preventative maintenance. It is better to darn a weak point than it is to patch a hole. **(See page 6 for instructions)**

Large Tear

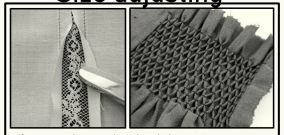


If **the weave of a piece of textile has lost all structural integrity and created a tear,** the only technique that can be applied to repair said textile is through **Patching.**
This technique requires another piece of fabric, slightly larger than the hole to be placed under or over it (preference) and it to be stitched over said tear.
This technique does allow for the most creativity in design of the patch and the stitching around it! **(See page 7 for instructions)**

Decorating/Upcycling techniques

With the discussed stitch-types we can start looking at the kind of technique which would be most appropriate for the type of damage to your garment. Below are examples of different kinds of damage and referrals to which pages of this booklet address those types. **These techniques serve as guidelines, feel free to be as creative with the patterns of your stitches as you would like!**

Size adjusting



If a garment's seam has ripped due to stress or age, meaning that **the thread holding two separate pieces of fabric together has snapped, without doing much damage to the integrity of the textile,** the damage can be easily mended!
Simply pin the fabric together along the original seamline and backstitch the seam back together. If you are worried about the structural integrity of the textile, move the seamline a couple of millimetres back. (no further instruction necessary)

Embroidery



If **the weave of a piece of textile has worn down and is either close to or has created a small hole of less than 2cm,** the integrity of the weave can be maintained through **Darning.** A technique applying the previously mentioned running stitch in a weaving pattern to replace the missing textile weave in a garment.
This technique is often applied as preventative maintenance. It is better to darn a weak point than it is to patch a hole. **(See page… for instructions)**

Deconstruction and Redesign

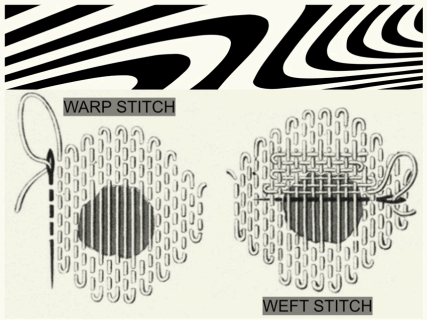


If **the weave of a piece of textile has lost all structural integrity and created a tear,** the only technique that can be applied to repair said textile is through **Patching.**
This technique requires another piece of fabric, slightly larger than the hole to be placed under or over it (preference) and it to be stitched over said tear.
This technique does allow for the most creativity in design of the patch and the stitching around it! **(See page… for instructions)**

Repair techniques: <u>Darning</u>

Necessary materials:
1 Sewing needle
1 Embroidery/thicker thread
1 Scissors
1 Embroidery ring / Object with the same surface area of damaged area and rubber band

Instructions:
1. Turn the garment inside out and span it over the embroidery circle (or mentioned object and tie it down with the rubber band) to create a tense surface to work on.
2. Cut off any excess edges to clean up the edges of the hole.
3. Cut a decent length (forearm's length) of thread and thread the needle.
4. Start away from the hole and begin the warping stitches (running stitches), don't put a knot at the end of the thread.
5. Once the hole is completely covered begin the wefting stitches by turning 90 degrees and stitching across what you've just done. Try to go above and below all the warping stitches, especially when you are covering the hole.
6. Continue the wefting stitches till you are on the other side of the hole.
7. Cut the excess thread and turn the garment back the right way out and you are done!!



If you're looking for further instruction: search for '<u>Darning</u>' on the internet for many enlightening tutorial videos!

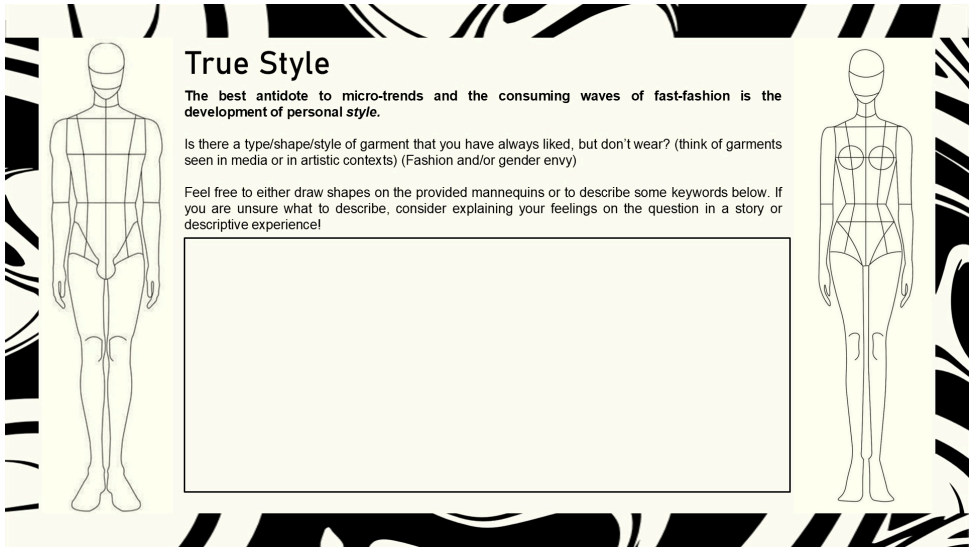
Repair techniques: <u>Patching</u>

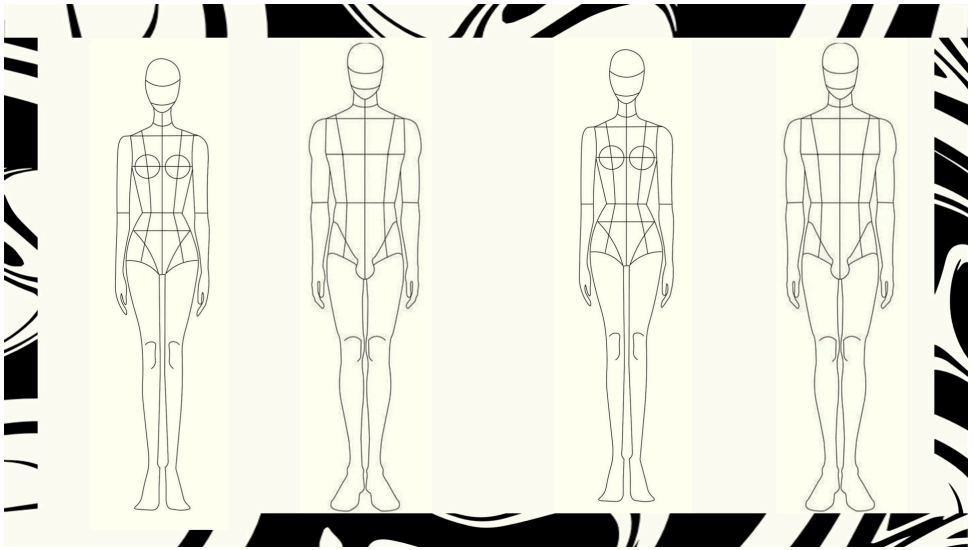
Necessary materials:
1 Sewing needle
1 Sewing thread
1 Embroidery/thicker thread
1 'Patch' fabric about 2 cm larger than damaged area (on all sides)
1 Scissors
(optional)
1 Embroidery ring / Object with the same surface area of damaged area and rubber band

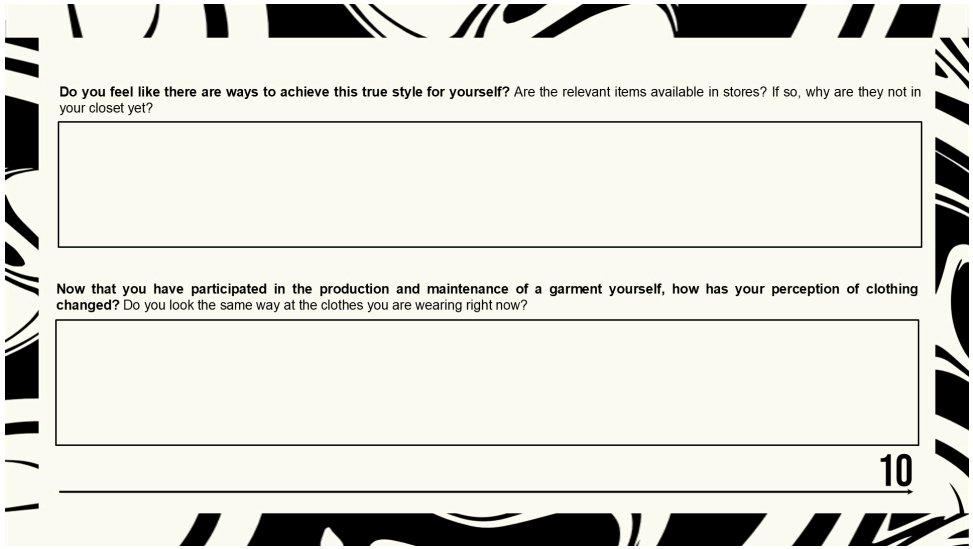
Instructions:
1. Cut off any excess edges to clean up the edges of the tear.
2. Place the 'patch' fabric before or behind the tear and pin it into the desired position.
3. Cut a decent length (forearm's length) of thread and thread the needle.
4. Select a design which fits your preference to stitch the patch to the garment. Feel free to select threads which either match or contrast with the fabrics. The only thing to remember is to make sure all edges of the tear are tied down to prevent further tearing (whipstitch).
5. (optional) whipstitch the edges of the patch down to prevent it catching and tearing off.
6. Cut the excess thread and you are done!!

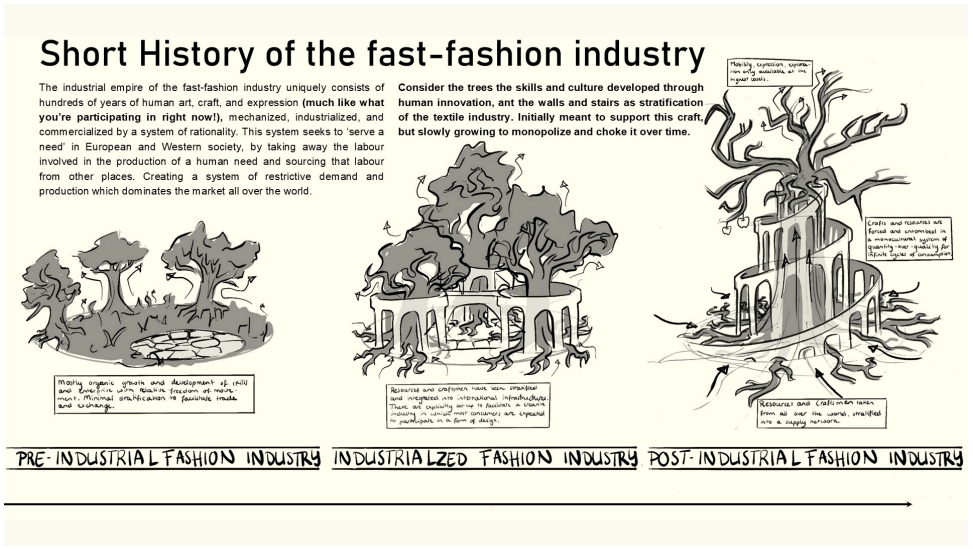


If you're looking for further instruction: search for '<u>Patching</u>' on the internet for many enlightening tutorial videos!


True Style
The best antidote to micro-trends and the consuming waves of fast-fashion is the development of personal *style.*
Is there a type/shape/style of garment that you have always liked, but don't wear? (think of garments seen in media or in artistic contexts) (Fashion and/or gender envy)
Feel free to either draw shapes on the provided mannequins or to describe some keywords below. If you are unsure what to describe, consider explaining your feelings on the question in a story or descriptive experience!



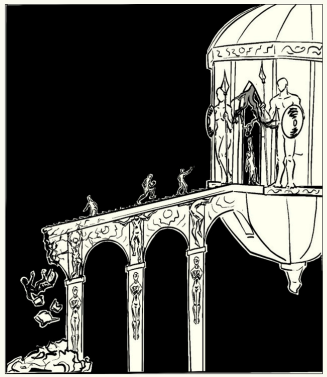

Do you feel like there are ways to achieve this true style for yourself? Are the relevant items available in stores? If so, why are they not in your closet yet?
Now that you have participated in the production and maintenance of a garment yourself, how has your perception of clothing changed? Do you look the same way at the clothes you are wearing right now?
10


Short History of the fast-fashion industry
The industrial empire of the fast-fashion industry uniquely consists of hundreds of years of human art, craft, and expression **(much like what you're participating in right now!),** mechanized, industrialized, and commercialized by a system of rationality. This system seeks to 'serve a need' in European and Western society, by taking away the labour involved in the production of a human need and sourcing that labour from other places. Creating a system of restrictive demand and production which dominates the market all over the world.
Consider the trees the skills and culture developed through human innovation, ant the walls and stairs as stratification of the textile industry. Initially meant to support this craft, but slowly growing to monopolize and choke it over time.
PRE-INDUSTRIAL FASHION INDUSTRY
INDUSTRIALZED FASHION INDUSTRY
POST-INDUSTRIAL FASHION INDUSTRY

Travelling the Infinite Staircase



Purchasing Experience Metaphor
The illusion of choice and plenty is experienced like the infinitely curving staircase, always thinking there might be something better right around the corner. And seeing plenty of fruit on he way ahead who seem more satisfied than you.
All around you on the buildings, you see the remains of the hundreds of people who have been entombed in the walls to make your journey possible, forcing you to consider either being impressed and have respect for their commitment, or walk off the edge of the staircase. The latter leading you to the loss of all recognition and security.



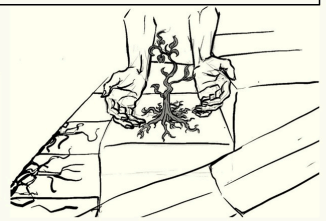
Experience of beauty standards and trend turnaround in a metaphor of the Wearing interaction.
This is when the reality of the staircase becomes clear for just a moment, as you see those behind you fall down due to the planned obsolescence as you reach the moment where you will find out if your newly purchased items will fit you and satisfy your desire for expression and recognition. Does the fruit hang too high, or are you too short to reach for it?
From the road you only see the pavement, but not the pillars they rest upon, though you know they must rest on something, and you are unable to affect upon what. You can only assume that the way forwards will be worth the movement upwards, but you cannot see the road yet untravelled.



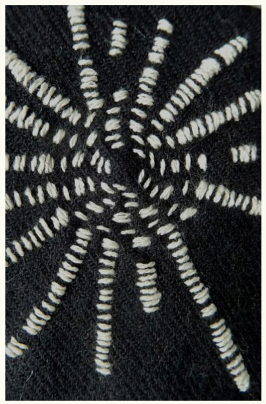
So what now?

Where do you think you are on the infinite staircase? Do you feel trapped in the run to keep up with the planned obsolescence and temptation of what could be around the next corner?

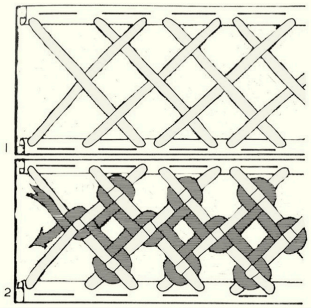
Do you think you could escape the infinite staircase? Do you even want to? How would you escape the staircase within the metaphor, and what would that mean to the real world?

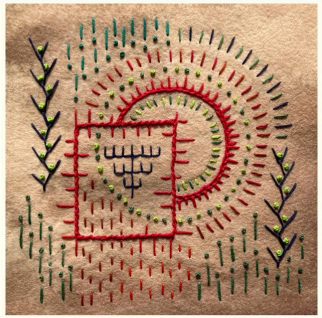










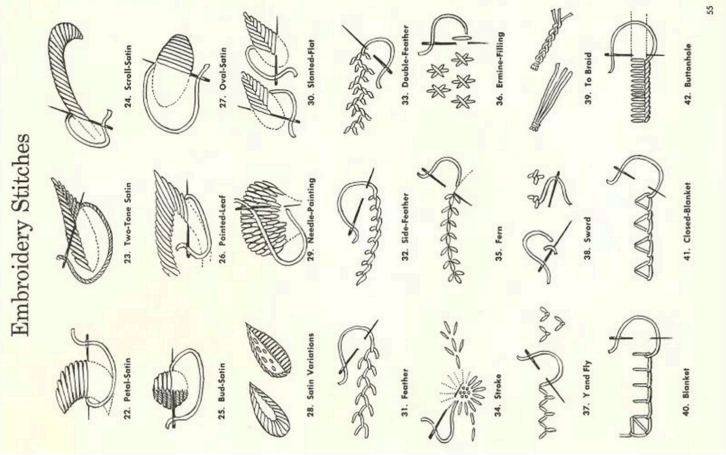










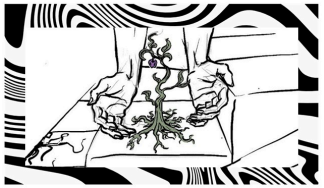

Embroidery Stitches
55
22. Petal-Satin
23. Two-Tone Satin
24. Scroll-Satin
25. Bud-Satin
26. Pointed-Leaf
27. Oval-Satin
28. Satin Variations
29. Needle-Pointing
30. Slanted-Flat
31. Feather
32. Side-Feather
33. Double-Feather
34. Stroke
35. Fern
36. Ermine-Filling
37. Y and Fly
38. Sword
39. Tie Braid
40. Blanket
41. Closed-Blanket
42. Buttonhole

Appendix B: Second Workbook Iteration



Emancipating in Style:

Escaping the Infinite Staircase





A Master's Thesis Research project by Thomas Beekes

July 2025

Introduction

Thank you so much for being here! In this session we're going to look at the garments you brought in and try to create an amount of resilience in your interaction with them. While learning to do this, we will be discussing your experience with the fast-fashion industry overall.

To start off the conversation:

Can you describe the things that you check about your outfit in the mirror before you feel ready to leave the house?



Standing in front of the mirror

What are you dressing for? Is there a specific environment for which you pay more attention to what you look like?

I pay the most attention to my appearance when I go to _____

In that environment there is No / an Unofficial / an Official **Uniform I have to adhere to.**

And when I stand in front of the mirror I try to present:





An Individual Identity

or



A Collective/Community

Let's look at what you brought!

Let's take a better look at the garment you brought in today

Where did you get the garment you brought today? _____

Why did you add it to your wardrobe? _____

_____

What is it made of and how was it made? _____

_____

Is it broken? If so, how did it break? _____

All fashion is made by human hands





There is no such thing as a machine-made garment
All items produced in the fashion industry are produced by human labour, there are no machines capable of completely constructing a garment, let alone keep up with the increasingly fast rotation of variations in the shapes of these garments.

The only automated part of the process is the weaving of the textiles, everything from there on is cut, sewn and finished by a person behind a dangerous, industrial sewing machine.



4

Growing into new skills



Because there is no such thing as a clothing construction-machine, that means that you have all the tools you need to make/repair them yourself! With a needle, thread, scissors, and some pins, there is very little that cannot be achieved.

Unfortunately, the current interaction with clothing we experience, facilitated by the fast-fashion industry, does often not allow for such intervention or skill development.



5

So what is standing in the way?



Planned Obsolescence
A concept which is intentionally designed into most fast-fashion items, either to reduce production costs or to drive up profit, causing a product to break to the point of disfunction. Often far earlier than a consumer would expect. This leads to the consumer having to the store earlier than planned.

In clothing, this phenomenon occurs in the ripping of seams or the wearing down of thin textiles, making repair much more difficult than originally was more common. (If the fabric is too thin, repairing it will sometimes do more damage than repair).

It can also be caused by higher polyester/elastic density in fabric mixes, which hold up much less well to wear, tear, and wash than organic fabrics.

Infertile ground to grow on
This problem of poor material to work with is perpetuated in attempts of consumers to take matters into their own hands. Poor quality leads to short-term emotional investment from us an consumers and makes us not see a reason or a use for investing time and energy into upcycling a garment.

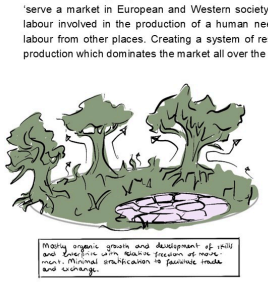


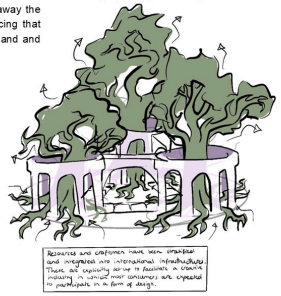
6

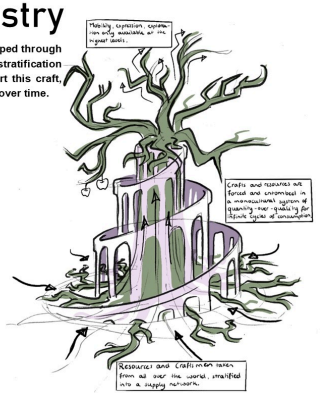
Short History of the fast-fashion industry

The industrial empire of the fast-fashion industry uniquely consists of hundreds of years of human art, craft, and expression **(much like what you're participating in right now!)**, mechanized, industrialized, and commercialized by a system of for-profit rationality. This system seeks to 'serve a market in European and Western society, by taking away the labour involved in the production of a human need and sourcing that labour from other places. Creating a system of restrictive demand and production which dominates the market all over the world.

Consider the trees the skills and culture developed through human innovation, ant the walls and stairs as stratification of the textile industry. Initially meant to support this craft, but slowly growing to monopolize and choke it over time.







PRE-INDUSTRIAL FASHION INDUSTRY | INDUSTRIALZED FASHION INDUSTRY | POST-INDUSTRIAL FASHION INDUSTRY

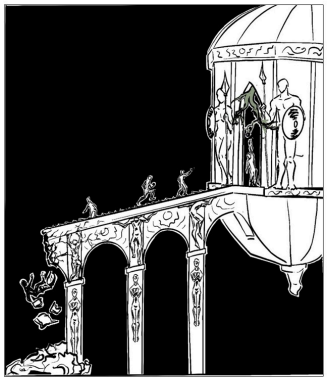
7

Travelling the Infinite Staircase



Always better around the corner
The illusion of choice and plenty is experienced like the infinitely curving staircase, always thinking there might be something better right around the corner. And seeing plenty of fruit on he way ahead for others who seem to have more than you.

All around you on the buildings, you see the remains of the hundreds of people who have been entombed in the walls to make your journey possible, forcing you to consider either being impressed and have respect for their commitment, or resent your being on it.



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This is when the reality of the staircase becomes clear for just a moment, as you see those behind you fall down due to the planned obsolescence as you reach the moment where you will find out if your newly purchased items will fit you and satisfy your desire for expression and recognition. Does the fruit hang too high, or are you too short to reach for it?
From the road you only see the pavement, but not the pillars they rest upon, though you know they must rest on something, and you are unable to affect upon what. You can only assume that the way forwards will be worth the movement upwards, but you cannot see the road yet untravelled.

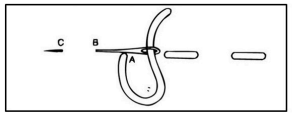
Let's get stitching!

In order to prepare for the upcycling or repair-project we're doing today, let's start with some basics which are the building blocks of all existing sewing methods:

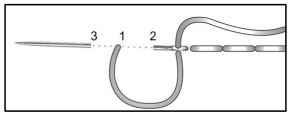
To try them, you will be provided with materials by the facilitator.



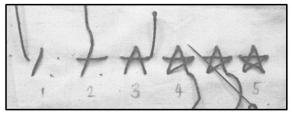
2. The Running Stitch:
A simple and quick stitch to sew together two pieces of fabric which will not experience much stress.



3. The Backstitch:
A strong looping stitch perfect for seams which experience much stress. The smaller the loops the stronger the seam.



4. A little embroidery:
A spiralling stich most often used to tie down the edges of fabric or 'finish' them to prevent fraying.

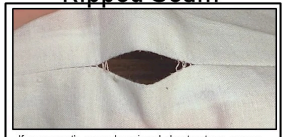


Congrats! You now know how to sew!

Repair techniques

With the discussed stitch-types we can start looking at the kind of technique which would be most appropriate for the type of damage to your garment. Below are examples of different kinds of damage and referrals to which pages of this booklet address those types. **These techniques serve as guidelines, feel free to be as creative with the patterns of your stitches as you would like!**

Ripped Seam



If a garment's seam has ripped due to stress or age, meaning that **the thread holding two separate pieces of fabric together has snapped, without doing much damage to the integrity of the textile,** the damage can be easily mended!
Simply pin the fabric together along the original seamline and backstitch the seam back together. If you are worried about the structural integrity of the textile, move the seamline a couple of millimetres back. (no further instruction necessary)

Small hole



If **the weave of a piece of textile has worn down and is either close to or has created a small hole of less than 2cm,** the integrity of the weave can be maintained through **Darning.** A technique applying the previously mentioned running stitch in a weaving pattern to replace the missing textile weave in a garment.
This technique is often applied as preventative maintenance. It is better to darn a weak point than it is to patch a hole. **(See page 11 for instructions)**

Large Tear

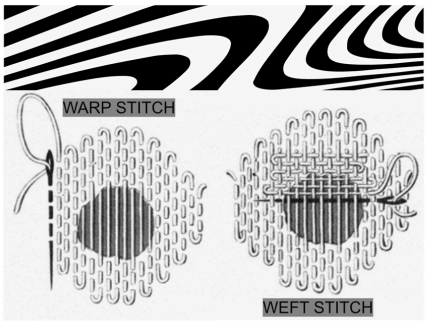


If **the weave of a piece of textile has lost all structural integrity and created a tear,** the only technique that can be applied to repair said textile is through **Patching.**
This technique requires another piece of fabric, slightly larger than the hole to be placed under or over it (preference) and it to be stitched over said tear.
This technique does allow for the most creativity in design of the patch and the stitching around it! **(See page 12 for instructions)**

Repair techniques: Darning

Necessary materials:
1 Sewing needle
1 Embroidery/thicker thread
1 Scissors
1 Embroidery ring / Object with the same surface area of damaged area and rubber band

Instructions:
1. Turn the garment inside out and span it over the embroidery circle (or mentioned object and tie it down with the rubber band) to create a tense surface to work on.
2. Cut off any excess edges to clean up the edges of the hole.
3. Cut a decent length (forearm's length) of thread and thread the needle.
4. Start away from the hole and begin the warping stitches (running stitches), don't put a knot at the end of the thread.
5. Once the hole is completely covered begin the wefting stitches by turning 90 degrees and stitching across what you've just done. Try to go above and below all the warping stitches, especially when you are covering the hole.
6. Continue the wefting stitches till you are on the other side of the hole.
7. Cut the excess thread and turn the garment back the right way out and you are done!!



If you're looking for further instruction: search for 'Darning' on the internet for many enlightening tutorial videos!

Repair techniques: Patching

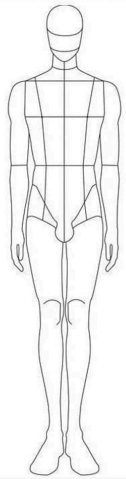


Necessary materials:
1 Sewing needle
1 Sewing thread
1 Embroidery/thicker thread
1 'Patch' fabric about 2 cm larger than damaged area (on all sides)
1 Scissors
(optional)
1 Embroidery ring / Object with the same surface area of damaged area and rubber band

Instructions:
1. Cut off any excess edges to clean up the edges of the tear.
2. Place the 'patch' fabric before or behind the tear and pin it into the desired position.
3. Cut a decent length (forearm's length) of thread and thread the needle.
4. Select a design which fits your preference to stitch the patch to the garment. Feel free to select threads which either match or contrast with the fabrics. The only thing to remember is to make sure all edges of the tear are tied down to prevent further tearing (whipstitch).
5. (optional) whipstitch the edges of the patch down to prevent it catching and tearing off.
6. Cut the excess thread and you are done!!

If you're looking for further instruction: search for 'Patching' on the internet for many enlightening tutorial videos!

12

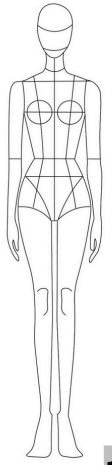


True Style

The best antidote to micro-trends and the consuming waves of fast-fashion is the development of personal *style*.

Is there a type/shape/style of garment that you have always liked, but don't wear? (think of garments seen in media or in artistic contexts) (Fashion and/or gender envy)

Feel free to either draw shapes on the provided mannequins or to describe some keywords below. If you are unsure what to describe, consider explaining your feelings on the question in a story or descriptive experience!



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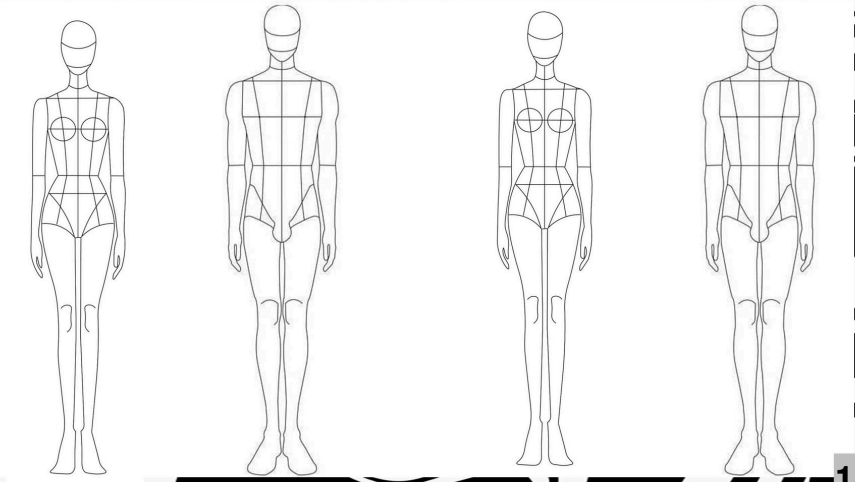

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Do you feel like there are ways to achieve this true style for yourself? Are the relevant items available in stores? If so, why are they not in your closet yet?

Now that you have participated in the production and maintenance of a garment yourself, how has your perception of clothing changed? Do you look the same way at the clothes you are wearing right now?

15



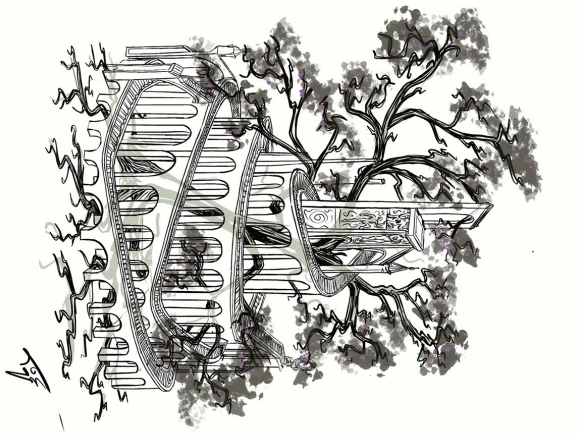
So what now?

Where do you think you are on the infinite staircase? Do you feel trapped in the run to keep up with the planned obsolescence and temptation of what could be around the next corner?

Do you think you could escape the infinite staircase? Do you even want to? How would you escape the staircase within the metaphor, and what would that mean to the real world?







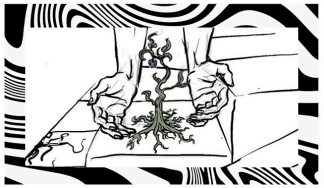
Appendix C: Third Workbook Iteration





Emancipating in Style:

Escaping the Infinite Staircase



A Master's Thesis Research project by Thomas Beekes

July 2025

EMANCIPATING IN STYLE THOMAS BEEKES

Introduction

Thank you so much for being here! In this session we're going to look at the garments you brought in and try to create an amount of resilience in your interaction with them. While learning to do this, we will be discussing your experience with the fast-fashion industry overall.

To start off the conversation:

Can you describe the things that you check about your outfit in the mirror before you feel ready to leave the house?



1

EMANCIPATING IN STYLE THOMAS BEEKES

Standing in front of the mirror

What are you dressing for? Is there a specific environment for which you pay more attention to what you look like?

I pay the most attention to my appearance when I go to _____

In that environment there is No / an Unofficial / an Official **Uniform I have to adhere to.**

And when I stand in front of the mirror I try to present:



An Individual Identity

or



A Collective/Community

2

EMANCIPATING IN STYLE THOMAS BEEKES

Psychological effects of the interaction

In designing Human-product interactions, it is important to balance accommodating a user's needs without taking away their agency. Especially in an industry as large as the fashion industry, which seeks to address a basic human need, the risk of monopolization is directly correlated to a community's deprivation of choice and independence. Often affecting minority groups more severely in a majority-average defined assortment system.

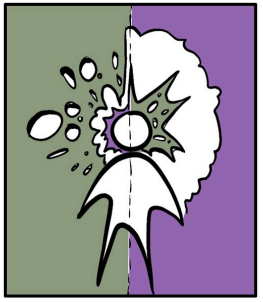




Assortment quantity

When looking for new clothing, or shopping casually, we are overloaded with different stores and the sheer amount of clothing on offer inside them. **With that much on offer, there must be something in there that would suit you, right?**

But sometimes you still can't seem to find something that suits you, or that thing you specifically wanted. How is that possible? **Is it the assortment? Or is it you?**





Assortment quality and variety

Part of the frustration experienced in the shopping experience, comes from the **monocultural assortment** presented at any of them. Stores only offer globalized fashion trends and confection sizes, which describe a **majority-average**, which represent no one's identity specifically, but especially not those of minority groups.

No adjustments can be made to them either, due to no experienced tailors being employed at most of these stores.

3

A monocultural overpass

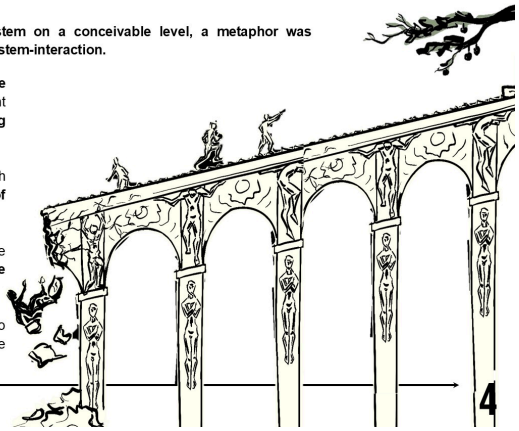
To analyse the interaction of such a life-encompassing system on a conceivable level, a metaphor was constructed to simulate the experience of participating in the system-interaction.

The **monocultural assortment** is represented by a **single staircase** you can travel. The **upward movement** requires constant investment of energy to show **the effort and money spent on purchasing clothing.**

Over that path hang **the fruits you are travelling to reach**, which depict the **satisfaction** you hope to reach **through expression of identity though clothing**.

The path is raised high above the ground, to give the traveller the idea of having risen above primitivity, but it **distances them from the ability to grow and build infrastructure** for themselves.

The pillars rest on ground and growth far away from view, to represent the pressure placed on distant communities to carry the labour of raising the staircase.



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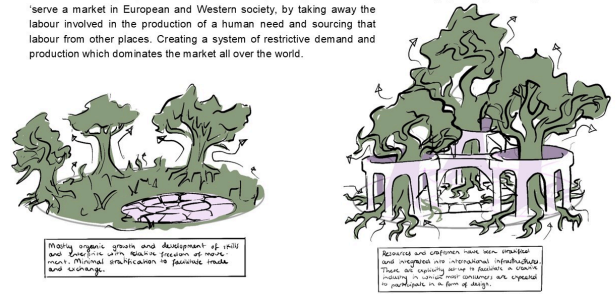

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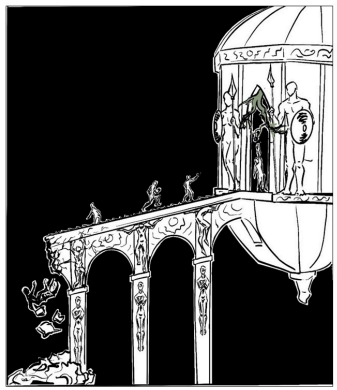

Beauty Standards and Microtrends as guarded citadels
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From the road you only see the pavement, but not the pillars they rest upon, though you know they must rest on something, and you are unable to affect upon what. You can only assume that the way forwards will be worth the movement upwards, but you cannot see the road yet untravelled.

So what is standing in the way?



Planned Obsolescence
A concept which is intentionally designed into most fast-fashion items, either to reduce production costs or to drive up profit, causing a product to break to the point of disfunction. Often far earlier than a consumer would expect. This leads to the consumer having to the store earlier than planned.

In clothing, this phenomenon occurs in the ripping of seams or the wearing down of thin textiles, making repair much more difficult than originally was more common. (If the fabric is too thin, repairing it will sometimes do more damage than repair).

It can also be caused by higher polyester/elastic density in fabric mixes, which hold up much less well to wear, tear, and wash than organic fabrics.

Infertile ground to grow on
This problem of poor material to work with is perpetuated in attempts of consumers to take matters into their own hands. Poor quality leads to short-term emotional investment from us an consumers and makes us not see a reason or a use for investing time and energy into upcycling a garment.



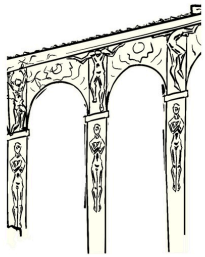
All fashion is made by human hands



The only automated part of the process is the weaving of the textiles, everything from there on is cut, sewn and finished by a person behind al sewing machine.

There is no such thing as a machine-made garment

All items produced in the fashion industry are produced by human labour, there are no machines capable of completely constructing a garment, let alone keep up with the increasingly fast rotation of variations in the shapes of these garments.





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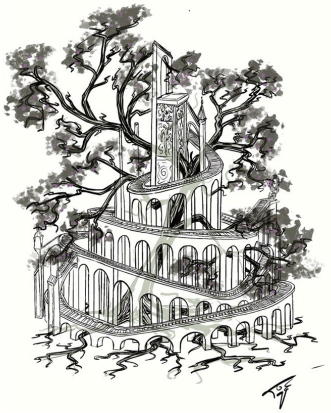
How do you travel across the staircase? (draw yourself/your path)





9

EMANCIPATING IN STYLE

THOMAS BEEKES

Let's look at what you brought!

Let's take a better look at the garment you brought in today

Where did you get the garment you brought today? _____

Why did you add it to your wardrobe? _____

_____

What is it made of and how was it made? _____

_____

Is it broken? If so, how did it break? _____

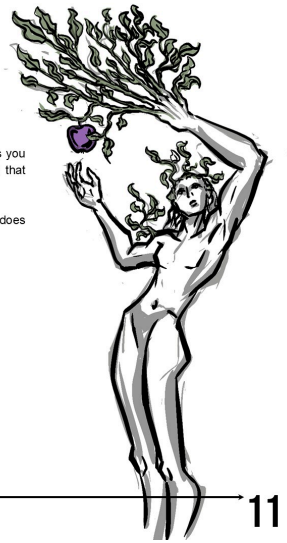
10

Growing into new skills

Because there is no such thing as a 'clothing construction-machine, that means that you have all the tools you need to make/repair them yourself! With a needle, thread, scissors, and some pins, there is very little that cannot be achieved.

Unfortunately, the current interaction with clothing we experience, facilitated by the fast-fashion industry, does often not allow for such intervention or skill development.





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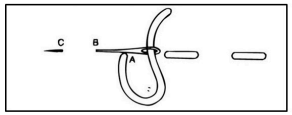

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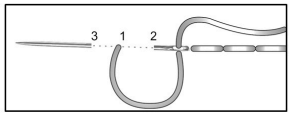

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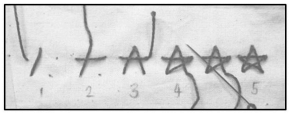

Congrats! You now know how to sew!

Repair techniques

With the discussed stitch-types we can start looking at the kind of technique which would be most appropriate for the type of damage to your garment. Below are examples of different kinds of damage and referrals to which pages of this booklet address those types. **These techniques serve as guidelines, feel free to be as creative with the patterns of your stitches as you would like!**

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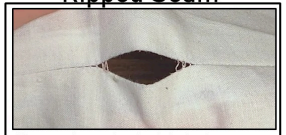

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Small hole



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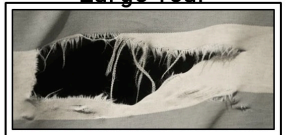

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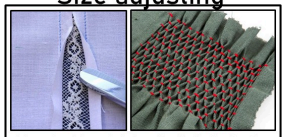
This technique requires another piece of fabric, slightly larger than the hole to be placed under or over it (preference) and it to be stitched over said tear.
This technique does allow for the most creativity in design of the patch and the stitching around it! **(See page 16 for instructions)**

Decorating/Upcycling techniques

If you are more interested in adjusting the fit or the overall look of your clothes to suit your expression better; here are some techniques to look up on the internet! Also feel free to contact me (Tom) for further questions or help. And remember; **These techniques serve as guidelines, feel free to be as creative with the patterns of your stitches as you would like!**

Size adjusting



The most well-known techniques for adjusting the size of a garment are **'letting it out'** or **'taking it in'**, which are tailoring terms.
With fast-fashion products, it is often difficult to apply these techniques, due to the methods they are constructed with. Instead look up tutorials for **'Insertion' and 'Smocking'** as inspiration! (Don't get hung up on the amount of working smocking takes, feel free to play with simpler shapes an designs!)

Embroidery



Embroidery is easily the most famous technique used to decorate clothing, consider it **drawing or painting with thread**! And the great thing is, you can always take it out and change it when you want!
There are hundreds of simple tutorials to find on the internet on fun embroidery patterns and ideas, but feel free to experiment! It does no damage to the textile so it can be taken out without any issue if you end up not liking it!

Deconstruction and Redesign

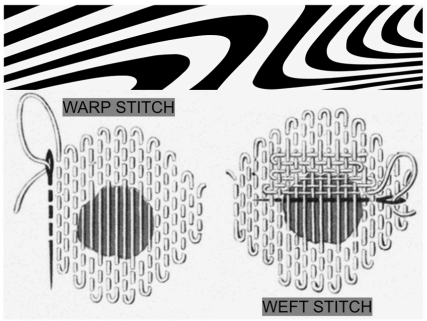


If you love the fabric a garment is made of, but the shape it is in no longer speaks to you/ is broken. **Try to deconstruct it!** By taking it apart piece by piece, you learn a lot about how garment are made and how you can take a flat piece of fabric and turn it into a 3-dimensional garment. Maybe you even find new inspiration and can turn the material into something new entirely! There are thousands of garment patterns and sewing instructions to be found online. Give it a try sometime!

Repair techniques: Darning

Necessary materials:
1 Sewing needle
1 Embroidery/thicker thread
1 Scissors
1 Embroidery ring / Object with the same surface area of damaged area and rubber band

Instructions:
1. Turn the garment inside out and span it over the embroidery circle (or mentioned object and tie it down with the rubber band) to create a tense surface to work on.
2. Cut off any excess edges to clean up the edges of the hole.
3. Cut a decent length (forearm's length) of thread and thread the needle.
4. Start away from the hole and begin the warping stitches (running stitches), don't put a knot at the end of the thread.
5. Once the hole is completely covered begin the wefting stitches by turning 90 degrees and stitching across what you've just done. Try to go above and below all the warping stitches, especially when you are covering the hole.
6. Continue the wefting stitches till you are on the other side of the hole.
7. Cut the excess thread and turn the garment back the right way out and you are done!!



If you're looking for further instruction: search for 'Darning' on the internet for many enlightening tutorial videos!

Repair techniques:
Patching

Necessary materials:
1 Sewing needle
1 Sewing thread
1 Embroidery/thicker thread
1 'Patch' fabric about 2 cm larger than damaged area (on all sides)
1 Scissors
(optional)
1 Embroidery ring / Object with the same surface area of damaged area and rubber band



Instructions:
1. Cut off any excess edges to clean up the edges of the tear.
2. Place the 'patch' fabric before or behind the tear and pin it into the desired position.
3. Cut a decent length (forearm's length) of thread and thread the needle.
4. Select a design which fits your preference to stitch the patch to the garment. Feel free to select threads which either match or contrast with the fabrics. The only thing to remember is to make sure all edges of the tear are tied down to prevent further tearing (whipstitch).
5. (optional) whipstitch the edges of the patch down to prevent it catching and tearing off.
6. Cut the excess thread and you are done!!

If you're looking for further instruction: search for 'Patching' on the internet for many enlightening tutorial videos!

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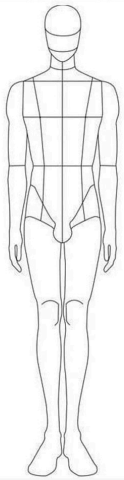
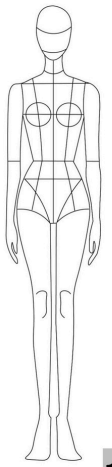


True Style

The best antidote to micro-trends and the consuming waves of fast-fashion is the development of personal *style*.

Is there a type/shape/style of garment that you have always liked, but don't wear? (think of garments seen in media or in artistic contexts) (Fashion and/or gender envy)

Feel free to either draw shapes on the provided mannequins or to describe some keywords below. If you are unsure what to describe, consider explaining your feelings on the question in a story or descriptive experience!



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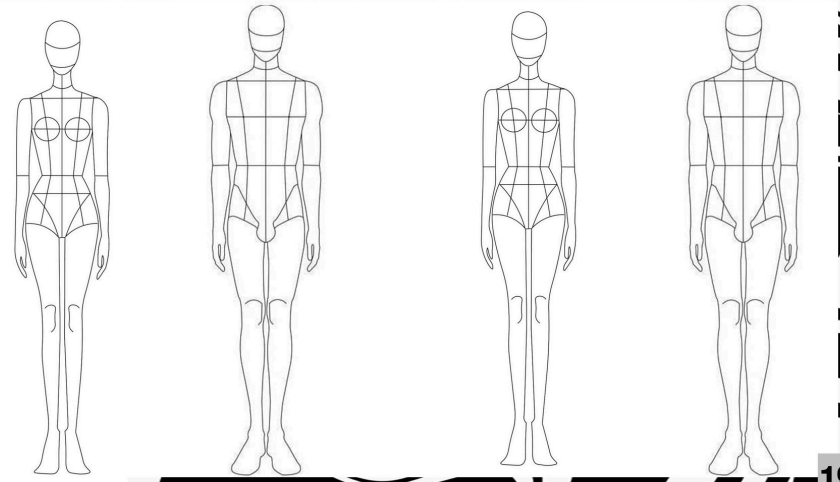

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Do you feel like there are ways to achieve this true style for yourself? Are the relevant items available in stores? If so, why are they not in your closet yet?

Now that you have participated in the production and maintenance of a garment yourself, how has your perception of clothing changed? Do you look the same way at the clothes you are wearing right now?

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So what now?

Where do you think you are on the infinite staircase? Do you feel trapped in the run to keep up with the planned obsolescence and temptation of what could be around the next corner?

Do you think you could escape the infinite staircase? Do you even want to? How would you escape the staircase within the metaphor, and what would that mean to the real world?



Escaping the Infinite Staircase

This thesis addresses the researcher's experience of the disappearance of local culture in fashion and costume due to the Userist design principles prevalent in the fast-fashion industry. This work intends to construct an alternative interaction with fashion which allows for more diverse cultural expression. A theoretical framework that tests for Userist oppression was adapted to the tangible and performative nature of fashion and applied.

From this analysis the collected insights were translated into a metaphorical worldbuilding exercise in which one can immerse themselves through roleplaying. This exercise allows participants to express complex experiences through physical movements and interactions with the metaphorical world. This exercise stimulates reflection on normalized behaviours and speculation regarding alternatives in a less performative setting.

Both the worldbuilding exercise and insights from the Userism analysis were combined in the creation of a participatory design workshop. This workshop was designed to be held in communal social contexts, so that participants would feel comfortable to express their experiences and aspirations for interactions with fashion.

