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## **FASHION DESIGN EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABILITY. A CHALLENGE ACCEPTED.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Fashion is one of the most relevant phenomena to describe contemporary cultures and societies (Fioraai, 2006; Bertola, 2018).

Despite this, fashion has always been a marginal topic within the design scientific debate. Fashion design education has been a small niche within the whole academic system. Nowadays, this exile, that could be considered both forced or voluntary, is ending. Fashion is strong of its recognized impact on global economies, society, culture, and is conscious of the need for it to engage, as for all other sectors, in guiding a coherent transition of the surrounding world towards a more sustainable paradigm.

In view of this, this exploratory paper, developed within the scope of the author's doctoral research, present an initial analysis of the current state of the art in practices across Europe, mapping existing and emerging practices within university level institution and industry, to identify approaches and practices that could be amplified, and implemented to contribute to a sustainable paradigm for fashion design education.

**KEYWORDS:** Fashion Design Education, Transformation, Fashion Design for Sustainability, Design thinking.

## 1. FASHION DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGING FASHION DESIGN EDUCATION.

Design, as discipline, is referred to the reading of contemporary culture, both in its tangible and intangible expressions. The design practice aims at identifying cultural evolutions, their motivating forces and patterns of change, and, then, at planning a possible new cultural environment that can acquire the new proposed meanings to lead socio-cultural innovation and, therefore, innovation of products and services. Fashion, as a domain, is the mould of the contemporary culture, in its ability to join the dynamics between individual and society. "Today fashion, that has always been a multi-dimensional universe, is not just a change, a trend, the spirit of the times, the succession and combination of styles. Fashion is the most complete expression of a post-modern industrial culture" (Fiorani,2006).

Nowadays innovation in fashion is driven only by functional and economic drivers and that the last business innovation, fast fashion, has made fashion the second most polluting industry and emptied it from its socio-cultural role of criticism, condemnation, protest, progressivism that it had in the XX Century (Laurent,2016).

Fashion should abandon the designer-centric approach in favour of a collaborative approach, a project-based approach instead of a collection/garment focus, an entrepreneurial attitude instead of a corporation monopolistic strategy, a sustainable core instead of a fast pace to face (and possibly suggest feasible solutions to) all issues the very fashion created. It should see beyond the mere reshoring of production (Fashion perspectives on educational programs, 2017). In this crucible we are assisting to the beginning of a slow change from the current fashion design system to a sustainability-led one. Sustainable fashion can be defined as clothing, shoes and accessories that are manufactured, marketed and used in the most sustainable manner possible, taking into account both environmental and socio-economic aspects. In practice, this implies continuous work to improve all stages of the product's life cycle, from design, raw material production, manufacturing, transport, storage, marketing and final sale, to use, reuse, repair, remake and recycling of the product and its components. From an environmental perspective, the aim should be to minimize any undesirable environmental effect of the product's life cycle by: (a) ensuring efficient and careful use of natural resources (water, energy, land, soil, animals, plants, biodiversity, ecosystems, etc); (b) selecting renewable energy sources (wind, solar, etc) at every stage, and (c) maximizing repair, remake, reuse, and recycling of the product and its components. From a socio-economic perspective, all stakeholders should work to improve present working conditions for workers on the field, in the factories, transportation chain, and stores, by aligning with good ethics, best practice and international codes of conduct. In addition, fashion companies should contribute to encourage more sustainable consumption patterns. (Green Strategy, June 2014).

There are challenges presented by this transformation, because even if the fashion design is already design-centred, as a consolidated and domain, fashion has also been deeply transformed by the impact of globalization processes. This transformation has generated several organizational models and approaches to markets and has concluded with the success of the fast-fashion paradigm that has deeply affected the whole sector (Bertola,2018).

In the first decades of the XXI Century, major fashion companies have followed strategies of outsourcing and delocalization to take the advantages of globalization and looking for low-cost production. Now, they are facing the downside of these short-term advantages, as their inability of controlling and certifying the production chain, many top product companies have already started reshoring operations, but they are expensive and intricate. Furthermore, the regions of the old continent, which were formerly expert in fashion and textile manufacturing, have been impoverished and disconnected from their traditional knowledge losing touch with their own material and industrial culture. As result the fashion lost its inner vocation of meaning innovation. It often happened that companies involved in the mass market have payed dramatic environmental and social costs in the countries of their operations. An example of this is the dramatic incident that happened in the suburbs of Dacca, in 2013 when more than 300 women, who worked in the textile industry, lost their lives.

In this scenario, there is a growing interest in the university level education institutes and the need to reshape their role and nature to accept and win these challenges.

In consideration of what is explained above, a deep transformation of education is needed. With reference to this transformation, many studies have been focusing on the impacts of universities on their surrounding contexts, showing the relevance and positive feedback on the growth of regional and even national systems, whereby academies are able to build connections and interact with their external environment (Saxenian, 1995). Academic institutions should break their internal boundaries, within disciplines, schools, and departments, but also open to the external to all actors of economy, culture, and the civil society. This to react to the maturity and turbulences of contemporary markets, and to increase awareness of their impact on a larger social, cultural, and environmental scale (Peters, 1999; Weik, 1995; Chesbrough, 2005).

The aim of this paper is providing, trough an embryonic research, some opportunity to think about the fashion design education transition and how it will be possible integrate sustainability in the fashion design schools.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The research applied the case study method to support the idea that the fashion education institution should evolve according with its context and adopt a new framework which should integrate the principles and practices of the fashion design for sustainability. To collect data in developing case studies, the research integrated multiple meth-

ods, which include desk research – looking at company reports and government publications – and field research – semi-structured interviews and observations (Yin, 2008).

The case study was the selected method for different tactical reasons. First of all, case study method using primary data is suitable in a situation where the existing knowledge base is limited to examine proposing questions (Yin, 1994).

Secondly, case study method best gives back the rich, real-world context in which the phenomenon occurs (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), that is otherwise difficult to evaluate using other methods such as surveys (Yin, 2008). For this reason, the investigative nature of case study provides the opportunity to extrapolate a qualitative data that is what the research aims. Lastly, the use of the case study method allows to declare specific assertions that are supported by the experiential knowledge that prevent from generalization, based on an individual case, but through different case studies, and result in the development of interpretative models (Nixon and Blakley, 2012).

It follows that this method leads to develop an interpretative model, which could be used in the future research.

## **2.1 CASES SELECTION**

The multiple case research methodology should be more robust than a single study (Yin, 1994), as it lets comparison and contrast within the selected cases and detect whether an emergent finding is simply idiosyncratic to a single case or consistency replicated by several cases (Eisenhardt, 1991). The research aimed to compare the different cases to identify the trend and codify the practices.

Diverse case selection strategy emphasizes its primary objective in achieving maximum variances, different engagement qualities, along relevant dimensions or themes, integrative digital technology adapted by fashion retailers, in this case. For this reason, when setting the parameter of the study, the selection included representative cases from the different types of fashion design institution and companies, who play key actors in the current fashion system. The research then examined the most appropriate cases, within the presented cultural model, where design education should be oriented towards growing professionals who are able to guide fashion into a new paradigm, centred on principles harmonized with the collective aim of pursuing a sustainable development, on a social, cultural, and economic point of view. Milano Fashion Institute and Progetto Quid have been identified as the most suitable cases for this study among fourteen European cases within institutions and companies. Both the cases are working on a process-based / projects-driven education where all fashion processes are integrated--balancing traditional know-how, and sustainability urge and because of which the final goal is not the production of a single garment but re-appropriation of meanings that a fashion design activity produce both of an economic and socio-cultural level. (Fashion perspectives on educational programs, 2017).

## **3. UNIVERSITY CASE STUDIES: MILANO FASHION INSTITUTE**

Milano Fashion Institute (MFI) is an interuniversity consortium for the higher education in the fashion industry founded in 2007 by three Milan universities: Bocconi University, Cattolica University and Politecnico di Milano. MFI aims to create an international multi-disciplinary training centre of excellence. The founding universities are the three most important Milanese universities that already worked on the fashion industry. In particular, Bocconi University is ranked 6° Worldwide, Masters in Management, by Financial Times, 2018; Cattolica University is ranked among the first 100 Universities in the world, 2018; and Politecnico di Milano is ranked among the top 20 Universities in the world in all three areas: 16° in Engineering, 11° in Architecture and 6° in Design, by QS, 2019. Through their experience, these three universities established themselves in the international scene as leaders in providing research and training activities for businesses in the fashion sector in the fields of management, communication and design. MFI trains professionals that are skilled with the interdisciplinary competences provided by the universities involved. Thus, Milano Fashion Institute is a one-of-a-kind European reality. The academic programme involves faculty members in Economics and Management disciplines from Bocconi University, in Social Sciences and Communication from Cattolica University, and in Design from Politecnico di Milano. Generally, fashion industry programs involve only one or two of these disciplines and that is why is difficult introducing students to the broad range of issues related to the creative, production and communication processes involved in fashion businesses. The teaching activity of MFI sets out to prepare students for the interdisciplinary skills they need to succeed in the entire design, production and communication process of fashion products. In 2011 Milan Fashion Institute introduce the international process for the post graduate Masters. In 2012, the MFI model became a case study presented at “Design Asia 2012 Conference” in Hong Kong, a key international event for teachers, researchers, trend analysts and designers, organized by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Milano Fashion Institute is the first interuniversity institute in Italy for the higher education in the fashion industry.

### **3.1. New Sustainable Fashion Short Course: Crafting Innovative Business Models Through Sustainability.**

Today, sustainability is rethinking the structure of the fashion industry. It is necessary working on responsible innovation, starting the integration of ethics and aesthetics into the value chain. Nowadays, industries need to redesign their business model in favour of a new sustainable one, answering the needs of the future generations.

The short course “New Sustainable Fashion” (NSF) aims to train graduate and graduating students, young managers, professionals and young entrepreneurs to face the complexity of the fashion industry by providing tools and sharing business practices. It provides the participants information and examples on innovative business models

in fashion & luxury. “The course focuses on the driver of sustainability for the creation of shared value. Creating shared value in fashion means being able to answer the needs of many stakeholders: the environment, society, institutions, art, culture, territory and the consumers. As responsible fashion company have already started the long and complex journey of integrating ethics and aesthetics into the value chain, in constant balance with all the stakeholders”<sup>1</sup>.

During the lectures, class discussions and company visits NSF explores: circular economy, recycling, upcycling, prosumer-creation, open-source, crowdfunding, wearable-technologies, online-offline integration, transmedia-storytelling, B-corporations and open-innovation among others.

NSF shares with its participants the most updated information and interesting examples on innovative business models in fashion & luxury. It also prepares the participants to face the complexity of responsibility in the fashion industry; giving proper tools to learn how and where selecting innovative fibres in fashion, how to build branding strategy in sustainability, how to create and apply some good responsibility guidelines, how to structure a good sustainability report, how to structure a good business plan in sustainable fashion; sharing inspiring business practices in both mass market, premium and luxury segment, for the different business models.

The course is suitable for graduate and graduating students, young managers, professionals and young entrepreneurs that will deal with the challenges of responsibility in the fashion industry. Specifically, NSF is built around the professional figures of junior brand managers, product managers, retail managers, PR & communication managers that want to understand the potential of sustainability, future CSR managers and young entrepreneurs that plan to start business initiative characterized by sustainability.

#### **4. INDUSTRY CASE STUDIES: PROGETTO QUID**

Progetto Quid is an Italian fashion brand which employs women from vulnerable social groups in the production of clothes and accessories. Their products are made from high quality textiles donated by some of Italy’s top fashion firms. Progetto Quid was founded in 2013 by five friends associated by their interest not only in the fashion but also in the meaningful social issues that are behind this work system. In the last five years the brand has drawn attention from both critics and public providing a rapid rise in his market.

It is been selected to be studied for its commitment in the economic and social sustainability field that provides an opportunity to advance new understandings about the research inquiry.

Their vision of design as a mode of social, economic, cultural and environmental change, can be related to an extensive tradition of design, with scholars such as Victor Papanek, Nigel Cross, Ivan Illich and Stuart Walker drawing attention to design as ‘a process of re-consideration of the present as part of the creation of shared futures.’

As a sustainable economic reality, it was able to answer to the dominant discourse of SDG - Sustainable Development Goals as a measure of economic health. Their practices are designed to guarantee decent working conditions for their whole working force to avoid disparity. The purpose is to create a virtuous economic circle with a fair access to financial services to manage incomes, accumulate assets and make productive investments.

As a sustainable social reality, they developed the ability of their community to interact and collaborate in ways that create and exemplify a flourishing social cohesion. As for all the aspects of sustainability, they refer their work to present and long-term futures, as social sustainability considers places, communities and organisations, formal and informal. In addition to exist as an independent brand, Project Quid — in its ‘Quid for ‘Project — produces ethical lines for Italian fashion companies, such as the Calzedonia, to raise awareness in relation to sustainability issues environmental and social responsibility. In a context where FDfS lays his claim to be more that designers telling other people how to live. It’s about the co-creation of tools and enabling platforms that make it easier for people to share resources.’ As a social enterprise, Quid tries to be a changemaker, providing a safe environment for each worker to grow and develop professionally and personally.

##### **4.1 Progetto Quid: Impact Model.**

Quid aims to interpret the fragility of female work not as a limitation but as a starting point to repaint a world more inclusive and therefore more resilient. The innovative approach that Quid is carrying on led it to be awarded with the first prize at the European Social Innovation Competition in 2014, the Momentum For Change of the United Nations and the Civil Society Prize of the European Commission employment and Social Affairs in 2017. Quid concluded the 2018 with sales of 2.8 million euros and 118 employees with 15 different nationalities faces the 2019-21 biennium with an ambitious growth plan to maximize social impact and commercial.

##### **4.2 Progetto Quid: Mission.**

Italian labour market is among the least inclusive in Europe (OECD Employment Outlook 2017), in Italy the category most affected are women. In the 2018, on a global scale Italy was at 70th place for gender gap, 4th in Europe and the rate of female employment is just 55% (WEF – Global Gender Gap Report 2018). For those who, in addition to be a woman, has a past or present of vulnerability — invalid, prisoners and former prisoners, recovering addicts — the employment rate does not exceed 25%. Foreigners, asylum-seekers, victims of trafficking often glide on the black market while the crisis has made women over 55 and young girls a fragility in the market.

Progetto Quid was founded with the purpose of meet the requirements of the market including disadvantaged

categories of female workers, who would otherwise be excluded. The employment of these women allows them to play an active role in the creation of beautiful fashion items and, at the same time, encounters the market demand.

Also, the brand name was a precise choice. The word Quid in Latin means “something more” and was used to indicate the will of the brand of offering more than other competitors. Behind this short, simple word they express their firm commitment to fighting the problem of social exclusion.

The founders wanted to organize an empowerment model for inclusive growth. The project aim was to nourish the unexplored talent of women who overcome personal vulnerabilities and that, exactly thanks to their fragility, were able to develop a unique set of skills distinguished by an extraordinary resourcefulness and resiliency.

#### **4.3 Progetto Quid: Future Goals.**

For the next two years, 2019-2021, Quid wants to reinforce its social impact. With a view to achieving this goal, the cooperative will create specific programmes for asylum seekers, refugees and victims of trafficking, meeting the needs of the territory, and also leadership programs and integration in the workplace that will make more effective the location of job placement and training programs. By 2020, there will be 150 Quid employees counselling desk and the company will provide educational opportunities. The impact of these new tools will be monitored monthly. Quid force is its ability to support the social impact with their commercial dynamics. The growing sensitivity to ethical fashion by consumers and companies suggests the presence of a strong growth potential for Quid in Italy as well as abroad: to express this potential tomorrow, Quid needs new tools today. Strategic investments in new spaces, new tools and new strategic partnerships will sustain a growth of production volumes and sales, catalyzing the positive impact on the world of fashion.

## **5. LIMITATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS.**

The embryonal state of the research, which started in November 2018, makes the body record insufficient to be able to define any consistent theory on how to drive academia into new paradigms. Even if the methodology was efficaciously applied across the cases, data collection and analysis for the development of additional case studies is necessary and will be performed in the next six months. However, the current data allow some points of reflection. Firstly, fashion design education is successfully incorporating multidisciplinary research questions and problems coming from the real world, interacting in a dynamic balance with external players, such as companies. (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000; Etzkowitz et al., 2008). Secondly, the fashion design education is finally obtaining the credit for its role in leading all the sectors through an innovation of meaning that is intrinsic in its DNA, within process of enhancing cultural heritage (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). This is happening when the globalisation and its related delocalisation are decontextualizing and depriving the products of their signifier and meaning. Lastly, the transformation is already in place in some advanced institutions, and it can be described as a process of transition “from being knowledge centred to becoming problem centred; from hard body of knowledge to soft skills; from passive teaching and learning to active interaction; from producing knowledge to becoming learning organizations” (Bertola, Hillen, & Swearer, 2016; Bertola, Ceri, & Vacca, 2016).

In view of the above, this paper focused on a broad but precise topic and left an open end which the author sets out to investigate through her doctoral research, in the next three years.

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