

Textiles Crafts and Co-Creation as a Strategy for Sustainable Design Pedagogy

Usha Narasimhan and Shinju Mahajan

Abstract

Crafts are unique expressions of specific communities, using materials and craftsmanship that are local to the communities. India has a plethora of craft expressions, and many of these are textile crafts. The distinctive aspect of these textile crafts is their ability to match the fashion goals of consumers while contributing to sustainability. The consumption practices of people have a great impact on the planet, and within this, the impact of fashion consumption practices is greater than many others. One of the key aspects of sustainable fashion studies is finding a way to bridge fashion consumption with sustainable goals. Individuals derive pleasure from fashion, which emanates from its symbolic, emotional, visual, and wearability factors in their everyday experience. It is from this element of experience, derived from the use aspect of consumption, that fashion has the opportunity to meet sustainability. Craft products are known to be authentic and culturally meaningful, which makes them significant within sustainable practices, giving them the potential to inspire sustainable consumption. This article provides an insight into how textile crafts and co-creation can be an approach for sustainable design pedagogy, impacting sustainable practices, giving a new visual vocabulary to fashion, and helping attain environmental goals. The study attempts to develop a strategy for sustainable design pedagogy that employs the process of co-creation. The research is grounded in urban India, with Delhi and the craft clusters of Banaras, Uttar Pradesh, and Barmer, Rajasthan, as the main sites for the field study. It uses the rich craft heritage of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan to present the concept of co-design, which integrates crafts with the design process and has the potential to influence markets sensitive to craft traditions and sustainable fashion. The case study approach is employed to explore the use of textile crafts in creating sustainable fashion and its impact on sensitizing future designers to the relevance of crafts in times of environmental crisis.

Key Words: Sustainable design pedagogy, textile crafts, co-design, slow fashion, fashion consumption practices, prosumers

Introduction

Fashion has been shown to be an important part of both modern and postmodern studies. One example is how fashion has changed from being seen as an expensive show of wealth and status by the elite to being seen as something that everyone can enjoy in the 21st century. Technology, markets, industry, and economic structures have all made fashion a part of the ordinary and the everyday. Fashion studies include works from various scholars who have focused on its multifarious aspects even as they try to understand and define this ephemeral phenomenon. Although there are both rapid and slow changes in fashion, dress scholars have not yet identified or studied the slower ones.

Fashion is seen as a highly unsustainable industry, and this is further emphasized by the predominance of fast fashion, which has been accused of driving up consumption levels at low and competitive prices and a resultant increase in apparel waste through the high purchase-use turnover. This also brings into focus the production processes, which are further associated with sustainability issues. The rising demand for fast fashion not only requires cheap labor; it also requires cheap materials and cheap processing of the materials, which together raise questions about sustainability.

The production of fashion clothing is only one part of the sustainability debate, with the other part being the consumption of fashion clothing. While consumption of all commodities shows similar problematic issues, what calls for greater condemnation of fashion consumption, as against perhaps the latest gadget, results from fashion being considered trivial and thus fashion consumption being decadent and superfluous, with its environmental impact being higher than that of other commodities.

Production of fashion¹ is not just about the production of clothing but involves its consumption as well, making consumption practices an integral part of fashion production. Consumption involves two parts: purchase and use. While fast fashion can be identified more from the perspective of purchase, fashion consumption is more than 'purchase'; it's also 'use'. It is in the use of fashion in the everyday lives of consumers that one can find the possibility of sustainability and the use of sustainable design strategies emerging within the boundaries of fashion consumption.

Sustainability and fashion

Gordon and Hill (2014) have defined sustainability as an ecological system designed to maintain balance within the environment between what is taken and what can be renewed. Sustainable fashion is also defined as 'fashion production that

is environmentally and/or ethically conscious' (ibid.). Sustainable has also been used interchangeably with green, eco, ethical, and organic and has been subject to interpretations by practitioners and scholars as there is no standard definition.

The existing literature on fashion and sustainability comes mainly from the domains of management, business, corporate social responsibility, and practice-based studies on crafts. Perhaps the most dominant of all the sustainability issues linked to fashion involve those related to the environment arising from clothing production and consumption practices. These include the stress on the natural resources of land, water, and air arising from cotton production, the processes of dyeing and printing, the use of cheap materials that are non-biodegradable, the making of clothes in countries far away from consumers due to the desire for cheap labor, resulting in transportation costs, and the resulting carbon footprints. All of this is directly linked to excessive consumption of fast fashion, leading to landfills that are running out and bringing fashion into the limelight of environmental and sustainability debates.

The questions then arise as to how one can align fashion with sustainable practices, even as fashion maintains its role in identity formation through experimentation and communication.

Textile crafts as a strategy for sustainable design

Fletcher (2015) talks of the need for fashion to identify with the issues of sustainability that both promote and encourage urban consumer aspirations towards these issues, even as fashion connects to them emotionally to inspire and aspire. For fashion consumers looking for unique styles and desirous of an individualistic image, slow fashion² strategies provide them with opportunities for curating fashions and fashioning exclusive looks that inspire and connect with them. These consumers aspiring for timeless and sophisticated clothing also desire to be trendy and up-to-date.

Slow fashion connects consumers with the making of the apparel, the stories, the materials, and the makers, with cultural values influencing their purchase decisions. The clothing that is categorized as slow fashion includes enduring styles and pieces that are classic and versatile. It also increases the perceived value, which has a positive impact on both the purchase and use decisions of consumers (Jung and Jin, 2016, p. 540). Thus, slow fashion provides consumers the opportunity to rethink their relationship with clothing while combining the production practices of brands and designers with consumption habits that include both purchase (shopping) and use.

Domingos, Vale, and Faria (2022), in their literature review analysis of slow fashion consumer decision-making, identified five key concepts of consumer behavior. These include consumer motivation to purchase and use, which comes from unique and exclusive styles; values that align with the use of local materials and artisans and authenticity; concerns that include provenance, fair trade, and livelihoods; style concerns where consumers think of the versatility, reuse, and recycling; and the self-image of being exclusive, stylish, and responsible consumers who care about the local.

With design focusing on systems and strategies to address sustainability issues, craft practices can be viewed as a strategic approach offering opportunities that can make fashion align with sustainable values. Crafts are being looked at 'as a resilient response to the increasing demand for flexible, customized, and redistributed manufacturing, reconnecting communities to their local material culture and reaching global markets' (Mazzarella, Escobar-Tello and Mitchell, 2016, p.1). Textile crafts are those human-centered economic activities that give form and meaning to local materials made by hand and make small and flexible batches of clothing that have cultural and social significance (ibid.).

Crafts, especially textile crafts, have a greater chance of impacting the use value of consumption among fashion consumers and creating a positive emotional attachment to the product, leading to its extended life through extended wear and thus syncing consumption with sustainability. The narratives of origin, heritage, and the making of the product by hand, thus making it special, contribute to the emotional attachment of the consumer, along with the added knowledge that their purchase has helped others with livelihood generation. Thus, craft, on the one hand, has the potential to be a bridge between the contemporary and traditional, and on the other, it can provide solutions to issues of sustainability using slow fashion strategies.

This study focuses on how textile crafts have been used as part of sustainable design pedagogy to create and curate fashion by student designers, which meet consumer choices and thus attain sustainable goals. The study uses the fashion practices of consumers as a resource in the ideation and co-creation process by the student designers as they developed their design ideas. The study looks at sustainability from a production perspective.

Methodology

As fashion educationists and researchers, the authors have been involved with the Indian fashion industry, developing an understanding of the industry and how design

has the potential to bring about change. Being associated with the institute's initiatives in the crafts sector provided further opportunities to understand traditional crafts and the materials and processes involved through collaborative projects involving students and artisans. These collaborations and interactions led to an understanding of how design can address the issues of sustainability in fashion.

The research employs the case study approach using cases that were practice-based student projects, which bring forth the use of co-design and co-creation with artisans. It pushes for sustainable consumption and focuses on producing clothing that consumers can curate based on their personal fashion preferences.

The case studies are a component of the mega project that the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) has been working on with various textile craft clusters under the direction of the Ministry of Textiles. Students, mentored by faculty, work with artisans in India by first documenting and understanding the crafts and processes. Next, they co-create with the artisans, developing new ideas and designs in contemporary design language. Three cases have been examined where new designs were developed by student groups along with artisans in Banaras, Uttar Pradesh, and Barmer, Rajasthan.

The three projects selected have used craft techniques in the creative process, addressing sustainable ideas using slow fashion strategies. All three projects involved cluster visits, where students interacted with the artisans and co-created the range with them. The cluster visit was for a period of 10–12 days, during which the designs were discussed with the artisans and reworked where needed based on mutual discussions and input from the artisans. In the project done in *Banaras*, students developed the material in the cluster and designed and created the garments on campus. In the other two Barmer projects, students and the cluster's artisans jointly created the fabric and the clothing, with the final finishing done on campus. Further, the project from the Banaras cluster was done with two students who were part of the larger group that did the apparel collection in the Barmer cluster, which provided a longitudinal application of the pedagogy for using crafts as a sustainable design strategy.

The brief for these projects was to develop designs for urban consumers in India that can be used in many ways, keeping the slow fashion movement in perspective while showcasing the selected textile crafts using contemporary fashion language. The students had to ideate designs that would give agency to the consumers to create their own styles, thus making them a part of the fashion production process through their fashion practices.

While Mazzarella, Escobar-Tello and Mitchell (2016) presented the four pillars of environmental, economic, social, and cultural sustainability, there are numerous directions that design for and with textile craft practices can take. This research focuses on the creation of versatile garments, co-design, and realigning consumption practices with sustainable goals, thus shifting the focus on the production of fashion to achieve sustainable consumption.

Results

The use of traditional textiles and crafts has provided creative freedom to producers and consumers to imbue fashion objects with value. The use of locally sourced materials, craftsmanship, and skills, in combination with western silhouettes and styles, is finding takers among local consumers and in global markets. This cultural cross-pollination has meshed local flavors with global fashions, managing to adapt and morph them to find space in the wardrobes of urban Indian consumers, providing fashions that can be used in multiple ways and in multiple spaces.

The first case showcases the design ideas of student designers using the woven textiles of *Banaras*, keeping the urban middle-class consumer in mind. These were designed for the bridge market and are affordable to aspirational consumers.

The designs developed use traditional textiles to create contemporary western silhouettes, as seen in Figures 1 and 2. The Banaras silk sari is a staple in many homes across north India and is handed down from mother to daughter to granddaughter. These ideas can be used for repurposing these traditional saris using western silhouettes, thus extending their life. Figures 3 and 4 present the traditional sari styled with blouses that are contemporary. These give ideas on how to style the *sari* in different ways, thus curating multiple looks for the consumer. The *sari* in Figure 4 has been wrapped over a petticoat that has a lace edge visible below the *sari* length, giving a peekaboo effect and creating interesting fashion imagery for a traditional garment. Students researched consumer fashion practices and looked at how consumers created their styles by speaking to consumers and looking through their Instagram and other social media posts (with permission) to understand how they curated their looks. This helped them with their own design process and develop ideas where consumers could be a part of designing their looks.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

Figures 1 to 4: Design collection using Banaras brocade

Source: NIFT Banaras Cluster Intervention 2016 – Abhinav and Aastha

The second instance is a project that students at a cluster in Barmer, Rajasthan, completed using the Ajrakh craft. As seen in Figures 5 and 6, they created clothing using Ajrakh fabrics with the intention of exploring the base fabrics and utilizing the patchwork technique that the artisans frequently used to create bed linen. The use of running stitch, generally seen in the traditional *Dohar*, a type of bedcover or quilt, has been used as a value addition in an innovative way. The collection was created keeping in mind the concept of slow fashion, where consumers could use a few quality garments in myriad ways, creating multiple styles and outfits, as seen in Figures 7 to 16.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16

Figures 5 to 16: Design collection using Ajrakh textiles with multiple styling options

Source: NIFT Barmer Cluster Intervention – Ajrakh craft 2017 – Abhinav, Aastha, Vishuddhi, Kajal and Shambhavi

These versatile garments, as seen in both the first and second cases, offer consumers the potential to curate their own styles and build upon their fashion practices that they use to develop their image as being fashionable or being in fashion³. Once again, students, at the start of the project, looked at how consumers curated their everyday looks, which aided them in the design process as they developed their ideas for designing versatile garments.

The third case is a project that students at the Barmer cluster in Rajasthan completed using the block print technique. They designed home furnishings (table and bed linen, as seen in Figures 17 and 18) using block-printed fabrics co-created by the students and the artisans, where the idea was to develop a versatile range of products that consumers can use in multiple ways, thus creating their own design stories. Here too, students did their initial research to understand how consumers curated their spaces to project their self-image and used this initial research in the design ideation.



Figure 17



Figure 18

Figures 17 and 18: Home textile block printed collection

Source: NIFT Barmer Cluster Intervention – Block Printing craft 2019 – Panya, Sudhiksha, Shipika, Surabhi, Shivangi and Ritika

In all three cases, the students ideated designs where consumers are co-opted into the production process as *prosumers*. This is a strategy used by designers for the slow fashion movement and has the potential to disrupt the fashion practices of consumers by aligning them with sustainable consumption goals. The students co-created with artisans, providing market intelligence, and together they ideated the fabrics by reworking colors and motifs as per urban consumer preferences. The products, being versatile and adaptable, co-opt the consumers as producers of fashion, giving them the agency to curate their own looks and design stories. This allows the consumer to create new styles and new meanings through the use factor of consumption with fewer textile products and clothes.

Discussion

Kate Fletcher (2015, p.20) states, ‘... when we broaden the agenda for fashion beyond production and consumption of new clothes, goals for fashion and sustainability cease to be described merely in functional terms and, I suggest, emerge instead as a set of practices animated by concern for others’. Fletcher uses the words of Gary Snyder (1990) to elaborate on ‘practice’ as ‘a deliberate, sustained, and conscious effort to be more finely tuned to ourselves and to the way the actual existing world is’ (ibid.). Thus, Fletcher brings in relational fashion systems that contrast with consumerist fashions and are ‘rooted in the experience and reality of the world and its contexts; they are relational’ (ibid.). Within these relational fashion systems, Indian handloom and textile crafts find their expression and capture the consumer’s mind space as sustainable and eco-friendly. The designs made by students using handlooms and other handmade textile crafts have the potential to disrupt fast fashion. This is because the designers can use these skills to make fashion items that can be worn in different ways and give those items new meanings. These crafts also provide the capacity for disruption within the fashion practices of the consumer through the process of associating new meanings to the fashion object from its use factor and the consumer’s ability ‘to ‘put together’ or ‘assemble’ the fashionable look, i.e., ‘assemblage’ (Woodward, 2015, p.8), creating new visual fashion vocabulary.

As the student designers learned the use of slow fashion as a sustainable strategy through these projects, they also understood their own roles as tastemakers and change agents, catering to the consumers’ need to be exclusive and aiding them in curating and developing their personal styles by creating clothing that was versatile, timeless, used local traditions, generated livelihoods, and was sustainable. As one of them quoted.

“My design philosophy when creating garments is that I need to make separates that one can add to their existing wardrobes without being overwhelmed by the stress of buying the whole look for it to make sense. It makes much more sense for someone to start with a smaller unit addition rather than buying the whole range (this is keeping in mind that no two people have the same spending capacity).”

And this, he felt, matched very well with the slow-fashion brief for the project.

This could also be seen in the different ways the student designers stylized their ranges (as seen in the pictures of the *Banaras*, *Ajrakh*, and block-print cluster projects). The styles ideated by the students also fit the key concepts of slow fashion consumer behavior identified by Domingos, Vale and Faria (2022), making this a good pedagogical frame for slow fashion design briefs using textile crafts that can impact consumption practices. The students also learned how to co-create with artisans in a synergic and collaborative mode. As one of the groups expressed,

“It started with unlearning all the secondary information we had gathered. Ajrakh as a craft is a complex one, more of a time-intensive craft, which needs to be understood properly. With that also came the responsibility to respect the customs and norms followed by the artisans. We understood the meanings of each motif and the formats for using them. Without that information, we probably would have made misinformed decisions.”

While technology has been a great driver for the democratization of fashion in India, at the same time, traditional Indian crafts and textiles too have been an equal contributor to fashion production. In fact, the designers who create fashion have been at the forefront of the usage of these traditional materials and craft occupations, thus creating a taste among consumers for these innovations. At the same time, consumers are able to relate to these crafts through their narratives of origin and processes, inspiring them in their use practices. As Fletcher (2015, p.24) states, ‘when the fashion products generated are in active use, the sustainability potential of a more broadly defined fashion economy will be released’.

Conclusion

Textile crafts find resonance among consumers and their fashion practices. McIntyre (2010) argues that markets evolve in response to evolving economies, leading to the evolution of consumption patterns. Craft-based fashions sync with sustainable concepts that the discerning consumers of urban markets aspire for. This has been seen in the markets of Delhi through the presence of craft-based brands such as Anokhi, Fab India,

Good Earth, Bandhej, Taneira, and India Circus that also have a global audience. They have also made a foray into mass brands, viz., Jaypore, Tjori, Suta, etc., thus catering to this emerging segment that values the handmade.

Designing and producing versatile clothing using indigenous craft traditions, natural and sustainable materials, and sustainable processes, and creating fashions that can be used in multiple ways, contribute to the slow fashion movement. The use of design in framing a sustainable roadmap using the multiple craft traditions of India and across the world provides a working template that connects these native crafts with a global fashion audience. Combining these traditional textile crafts with fashion generates conscientious consumption instead of conspicuous consumption, even as it opens up many wonderful opportunities for the artisans and the producers. Through these processes, design students can connect with an aware market that is concerned with consuming in ways that are sustainable. They can also act as tastemakers as they curate styles using a few versatile garments for consumers who are interested in slow fashion.

Fashion consumers place importance on design, place of origin, and narratives in their everyday fashions. For the urban Indian consumer, her experience and interaction with the fashion object matter in her everyday clothing practices (Narasimhan, 2019; 2022), and 'sustainability' is something that 'emerges from' everyday practices'(Woodward, 2015, p. 132). Fashion objects that are craft-based connect consumers through the narratives of the crafts and the making of the fashion object. They also give these consumers an opportunity to experiment and develop their fashion quotient as they experience and interact with the object. These are aspects that design students can leverage both in product ideation and communication.

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Notes

1. Yuniya Kawamura separates clothing from fashion, and more explicitly, she separates clothing production from fashion production as she argues, Fashion is produced

as a belief and an ideology. People wear clothing believing that they are wearing fashion... Clothing production involves the actual manufacture of garments. The ideology of fashion needs to be sustained so that consumers return to purchase clothing labeled as 'fashion' (Kawamura 2005).

2. The term Slow Fashion was coined by Kate Fletcher and was derived from the slow food movement. It is the opposite of fast fashion and came about as a response to the fast fashion industry. It can be defined as a way to "identify sustainable fashion solutions, based on the repositioning of strategies of design, production, consumption, use, and reuse, which are emerging alongside the global fashion system and are posing a potential challenge to it." (Clark, 2008).
3. The concept of 'fashionable' has the connotation of being 'in fashion'. This means wearing clothing that is currently *la mode* and having the knowledge, competence, or taste to choose the right outfit. This means having the ability to 'put together' or 'assemble' the fashionable look—or what is known as 'assemblage'. In this, the wearer mixes different items that may have been acquired new or previously purchased (Woodward, 2015).
4. An interesting way to disrupt fast fashion is by adopting a slow approach to production and consumption and by embracing new ethical and aesthetic values at a systemic level (Mazzarella, Escobar-Tello and Mitchell, 2016).

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About the authors

Usha Narasimhan teaches design research, design methods, and pattern design at the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) in New Delhi. She is a professor with the Department of Leather Design and is currently serving as the Chairperson for the Leather Design Program at NIFT. Having a wide industry experience with the Indian fashion sector, she has steered and handled various industry and governmental projects in the areas of design, crafts, and fashion, as well as in developing curriculum and assessment rubrics for governmental agencies. She completed her Ph.D. in Sociology from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, in the field of fashion and everyday life in urban India. She has published chapters in books and presented papers at various conferences on fashion using a sociological and cultural lens. Her research interests include fashion practices, fashion representation in media, identity, and popular culture.

usha.narasimhan@nift.ac.in

Shinju Mahajan is a Professor in the department of Leather Design and the Head of Academic Affairs at NIFT. She has a PhD in design and specializes in leather and product development. She has work experience of over 27 years, and in her teaching experience of 25 years, she has expertise in product development in lifestyle and leather accessories. She has rich industry experience and has steered various industry projects related to product innovation and value addition. She has also handled projects related to curriculum development and evaluation of programs for government agencies, projects related to traditional crafts in India, and uniform design. As an academician, Dr. Mahajan has guided many undergraduate and postgraduate students in design and management. She has various publications to her name in the areas of product design, scientific footwear design, and Indian traditional crafts in national and international journals.

shinju.mahajan@nift.ac.in