



DESIGN CULTURE(S) | CUMULUS ROMA 2020
JUNE 16.17.18.19, SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME

Designing Resilience. Mapping Singapore's Sustainable Fashion Movements

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Abstract | Design has produced a world in which designers are presented with opportunities to alter, augment, intervene, and change existing conditions by imagining future possibilities. Many of the challenges facing the world today extend into a range of complex, societal issues that involve human actions within the natural world, resulting in a call towards sustainability. The role of design has undergone a shift from integrating systematic methods in the production of artifacts and information towards a focus on designing for more meaningful interactions. Design now requires new ways of thinking and doing through modifications, iterations and reflections to explore alternative models for education and practice. This leads to the development of new innovations and inclusive perspectives, forming social ecosystems to continually learn and evolve as a discipline for positive social change.

This research positions design as a force of change with a particular focus on sustainable fashion practices in Singapore. Design is capable of reconditioning existing knowledge against ecological concerns for methods of conservation and sustainability. It is foreseen that designing and capturing a map of Singapore's slow fashion movements will provide models and frameworks for other practices that are centred on issues of social innovation, social enterprise design, and social economies. This project presents the need to define the social ecosystem of Singapore's sustainable fashion, formalising existing industry practices towards a new paradigm for Asian design.

KEYWORDS | SLOW FASHION, SUSTAINABILITY, CULTURAL PRODUCTION, SUSTAINABLE FASHION, FASHION SYSTEM

1. Introduction

Fashion transcends time and space to communicate both individual and collective practices of the everyday within a complex system of designers, producers, distributors, marketers, and consumers. The fashion industry has shifted towards designing meaningfully, signifying a need to understand how sustainable practices can challenge and change future ways of thinking, making, organising, categorising, and sharing knowledge. This research outlines how fashion establishes a common, shared language through an examination of design initiatives and businesses to identify key perspectives, concepts, and theories supporting the symbolic communication of material culture. Taking the context of Singapore and its emerging sustainable design practices, this research examines current practices to provide a foundation upon which future models and frameworks can be developed.

The main discussion of this paper collects, organises, and evaluates the existing sustainable fashion movements of Singapore. These businesses, organisations, and design groups are categorised by scale, scope, and impact: *sustainable modes of production, second-life initiatives through reuse and recycling, circular and sharing economies, inclusive models, and education*. This paper presents three key sections to present a comprehensive overview of the fashion landscape of Singapore:

1. An introduction of theoretical perspectives to frame the discussion of how fashion, as a social practice, leads to cultural production through the adoption of sustainable movements.
2. A presentation of the sustainable landscape of fashion through an examination of current practices in Singapore, identifying five core themes of sustainable fashion.
3. A mapping of slow fashion and its future implications.

2. Theoretical Perspectives

Sustainability extends beyond conscious activities relating to the environment to involve the complexities of human relationships against the dynamics of ecological, economical, sociopolitical, global and local dimensions (Annamma et al., 2015). Fashion businesses are becoming increasingly concerned with producing value through new definitions of aesthetics and quality, as sustainable practices begin to establish new norms within the industry. This section provides an overview of how fashion acts as a social phenomenon to develop common values for the production and contribution to various expressions of culture. The review of these theoretical perspectives will lead to a discussion of how the fashion industry is shifting towards the widespread adoption of sustainability.

2.1 Fashion as a Social Practice and Means for Cultural Production

Fashion produces a world in which the dressed body presents a situated practice across varying degrees of social interaction (Entwistle, 2000). Individual identity is visually represented through bodily expressions to actively produce experiences, communicate shared values, and develop socially constructed practices. Influenced by social and experiential dimensions, the dressed body creates embodied spaces upon which durability and resilience are established through emotional values and meanings (Fletcher, 2012). Changes in style and aesthetics require active participation to form collective representations and preferences, defining the social nature of fashion.

The phenomenon of fashion contributes to new and significant symbolic values to impact consumption through cultural dissemination and material culture, resulting in cultural production (Crane & Bovone, 2006). As a social practice, the collective adoption of fashion produces new cultural currencies as an extension of cultural practices and values. Rocamora (2002) argues that the fashion system has become fragmented as a result of globalisation, which has led to an increase of stakeholders to reevaluate the temporality of fashion objects, proposing new patterns of production and consumption. Fashion is in need of a new vision that challenges the historical notion that fashion is driven exclusively by newness and change (Reily and De Long, 2011).

2.2 Fashion Sustainability

Sustainability is a concept that requires a different approach to former ways of doing, presenting a new standard based on values that include basic human rights such as justice, liberty and dignity (Ehrenfeld, 1999). There are a few other critical influences that affect business models, from the translation of sustainability principles to the form of the value proposition. Taking into consideration the different strategies required, from start of the supply chain to the end, there are a few reasons for fashion businesses to look towards adopting a sustainability agenda.

In a period where information is readily available and easily accessible, all stakeholders have greater access to education and global exposure. People, whether consumers or business owners, are more aware of the impact of their decisions and the consequences of their actions set against external levels of change. This allows them the capabilities to act more intentionally, strategically and creatively in response to the things around, whether it be a focus on community or the environment. In this sense, such consumer mentality reaps relevant business benefits to adopt environmentally friendly materials, ethical production processes, and other socially conscious decisions.

The adoption of sustainability also requires resources for education. The benefit of championing a sustainable agenda draws like-minded consumers and businesses together to form a coalition of influence to leverage degrees of power and foster collaborations and engagements between members. Often, the main causes and underlying philosophies expand beyond the nature of the business and its immediate industry, leading to potential opportunities to broaden the playing field. As people resonate with values and beliefs that are close to them, consumer education focusing on the potential benefits behind a sustainable agenda can be a first step towards changing existing practices and norms.

Due to the production of excess and wastage in the industry, another opportunity that aims to curb the situation is the development of service based business models that reduce stock or operate without a need for production. This shifts the idea of consuming fashion through means that move away from acquiring new fashion products, introducing ways to reinvent or restyle existing products (Todeschini et al., 2017). These services comprise consulting, after sale services to help consumers maintain and recycle goods, and garment subscription schemes. This section has outlined examples, of which there are many others, that pose opportunities to incentivise fashion towards the adoption of a sustainability agenda.

3. Slow Fashion Perspectives

The fashion landscape of Singapore was examined and categorised based on modes of production, rhythms of consumption and use, forming communities of practice, establishing consciousness and social awareness through design, and contributions to education. The categories of sustainable fashion have been further organised into the five areas of production, second-life initiatives, circular and sharing economy, inclusive models, and education.

Production

Despite a growing number of fashion brands and businesses adopting buzzwords such as “sustainable” or “responsible” as a means for differentiation and a form of marketing, there is a broadly accepted and understood definition that sustainable production involves ethically and ecologically-sourced materials, fair wages for workers within favourable conditions, transparent information and environmentally conscious approaches.

Second-Life Initiatives

These initiatives provide closed-loop systems adopting ecological practices by encouraging consumer participation and engagement, reducing fashion and textile waste. As users are given access to more products, regardless of time and geographical constraints, these initiatives tackle socioeconomic and cultural barriers.

Circular and Sharing Economy

As a direct response to the current internet culture of showing and discarding, these businesses address issues of compulsive purchase behaviours, patterns of excess, and waste by offering platforms for sharing, swapping, and renting. The platforms provide a sense of community between merchants and groups of consumers, developing new cultures of consumption and product use.

Inclusive Models

The term “inclusivity” has been widely adopted by the fashion industry, where business models provide opportunities and financial resources for communities in need through charities, social enterprises, collaborations through co-designing, and initiatives supporting sociocultural needs.

Education

Knowledge plays a key role in sharing and communicating the stories, narratives, traditions, and consumer responsibilities in fashion. The educational models of fashion businesses teach consumers the importance of sustainability through events and panel discussions to set new policies governing conscious practices in fashion.

Table 1. Classification of Slow Fashion in Singapore

CLASSIFICATION OF SLOW FASHION		
AREA OF FOCUS	ORGANISATION	ACTIVITIES
PRODUCTION	August Society	<i>Produces seasonless and reversible swimwear made by fair wage workers in Indonesia using recycled materials.</i>
	Esse	<i>Garments are ethically sourced using environmentally-friendly materials such as Tencel and organic cotton. The production processes are shared openly on their website.</i>
	Matter Prints	<i>The brand works with artisans from across the world to develop unique prints for garments, giving credit to artisans by conveying the stories and cultural significance of the prints to consumers.</i>
	Source Collections	<i>The brand uses sustainable fabrics, such as Tencel and Lyocel, and produces garments in factories owned by certified WorldWide Responsible Accredited Production (WRAP) individuals.</i>
	Terie	<i>Focuses on the empowerment of women by producing bralettes for all sizes with eco-friendly bamboo material.</i>

	Terra by Qlothe	<i>The brand uses Tencel, among other sustainable materials, for their garments and works with the Indonesian Prime Minister on the “Buy a Piece, Plant a Tree” program to help restore degraded peatlands and create a sustainable livelihood for native communities. They work with Noissue as part of their eco-packaging alliance, contributing to global reforestation.</i>
SECOND-LIFE INITIATIVE	Carousell	<i>Carousell is a user-based platform where transactions can be made to sell preloved items.</i>
	The Fifth Collection	<i>The Fifth Collection is a digital platform to sell/rent second-hand luxury products on a consignment basis.</i>
	The Kint Story	<i>An online store that sells preloved garments, primarily targeting teenagers and young adults. Its founders give talks in schools to educate the public about sustainability.</i>
	On the List	<i>A space dedicated to the clearance of past-season items from luxury brands through online and offline platforms.</i>
	New2U	<i>A thrift store where proceeds from sales go to helping victims of domestic abuse from the Singapore Council of Women’s Organisation (SCWO). The store also hires women to train them for future employability.</i>
	PraiseHaven Thrift Store	<i>Helps underprivileged families and beneficiaries under The Salvation Army.</i>
	Refresh	<i>Buys and sells second-hand fashion through online and physical channels.</i>
CIRCULAR & SHARING ECONOMY	Closet Share	<i>An online platform to rent occasionwear, bags and dailywear on a subscription basis.</i>
	Covetella	<i>A platform to rent gowns for formal occasions.</i>
	The Fashion Pulpit	<i>A thrift store concept that promotes sustainable fashion by screening documentaries and hosting swapping events/talks. Its founder, Raye Padit, is known for hosting talks on how to lead a more sustainable lifestyle.</i>
	Green & Gorgeous Fashion Swap	<i>An organisation that hosts events allowing consumers to swap their fashion items.</i>
	Long n Loose Singapore	<i>An organisation that organises clothes swapping events. They support modest fashion and makes swapping more accessible for Muslim women who want to be eco-conscious.</i>
	MADThread	<i>A platform to rent gowns for formal occasions.</i>

	Rentadella	<i>A platform to rent gowns for formal occasions.</i>
	Style Lease / Ivory	<i>A platform to rent gowns for formal occasions.</i>
	Style Theory	<i>A platform that sells subscriptions to rent clothing and bags for daily wear and/or special functions. The brand holds warehouse sales to clear products that are worn out.</i>
	Swapaholic	<i>A platform that promotes clothes swapping among members. Members can swap their preloved clothes at swapping events.</i>
	Your Clothes Friend Swap	<i>For a small fee, participants are invited to swap their unwanted clothes that are in good condition for other items that are on offer.</i>
INCLUSIVE MODEL	Abry	<i>Hires elderly women and supports underprivileged women by helping them find employment through upskilling.</i>
	Artisan and Fox	<i>A sustainable, transparent brand that sells accessories made by artisans from impoverished communities. Artisans are guaranteed 50% of all gross profits from each item. Micro-loans are provided, as well as pay for raw materials in advance, and the company helps to open bank accounts when the need arises.</i>
	Baliza Shop	<i>A resort-wear brand that focuses on ethically made clothing. The products use unique methods such as block-printing, beading and embroidery, which are performed by women and children living in poverty. They are committed to developing new skills for their artisans and sourcing for sustainable materials.</i>
	Covenant Jewellery	<i>The products are made by silversmiths and jewellers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The gems are ethically sourced from a family-run factory in India working with conflict-free diamonds.</i>
	Eden + Elie	<i>The brand produces handmade jewellery with artisans with ethically-sourced materials.</i>
	Ma Te Sai	<i>Works with artisans in Laos to produce accessories, with proceeds helping the communities.</i>
	Will and Well	<i>Designs garments for persons with disabilities to allow them to be more independent and comfortable when taking part in daily activities.</i>

EDUCATION	Connected Threads Asia	<i>Brings together fashion designers, manufacturers, suppliers, and consumers to start conversations on how to transform the industry into one with a conscience. They aim to promote sustainable fashion in Asia.</i>
	Fashion Revolution	<i>Unites people and organisations to work together towards radically changing the way clothes are sourced, produced, and consumed in a safe, clean, and fair way. Encourages and creates a more ethical and sustainable future for the fashion industry.</i>
	The Good in Fashion	<i>TGIF is a student-led, non-profit campaign that aims to reduce textile waste by encouraging Singaporeans aged 21-29 to donate, resell, swap and buy second-hand clothes.</i>
	Green is the New Black	<i>An organisation committed to promoting sustainable ways of living through producing articles on fashion, travel and lifestyle, promoting their causes through collaborations and events.</i>
	Textiles and Fashion Federation (TaFF)	<i>The official association for the textile and fashion industry in Singapore, TaFF plays an active role in the development of the industry from retail to manufacturing. Working closely with the Singapore government, TaFF is working to position Singapore as an innovative fashion hub in SEA.</i>
	Zerrin	<i>An online platform that guides consumers on the latest sustainable design talent — from clothing and jewellery to skincare and accessories. A resource for the latest happenings in the emerging sustainable fashion and beauty industry.</i>

According to Henninger et al. (2016), the attributes of sustainable fashion should consider sourcing and production processes as well as transparency and traceability. Sourcing and production involve all activities from the use of eco-friendly raw materials to demonstrating a sensitivity towards the social aspects of fashion production, whereas transparency and traceability work towards building trust and relationships with consumers. Table 1. provides a classification of sustainable fashion initiatives in Singapore, in which the organisations are separated according to the 5 overarching principles of sustainable production, second-life initiatives, circular and sharing economy, inclusive models and education. The classification of existing fashion practices in Singapore signifies a growing interest in the region for change and progress towards slow fashion movements, where the underlying philosophy of sustainability is defined by ethical values, environmental and social sensitivity, and moving towards awareness and change.

4. Mapping of Sustainability

The previous section presented a table demonstrating that sustainability cannot be narrowly defined and should be expressed through more descriptive categories to align activities and clarify the objectives for more sustainable practices in fashion. Clark (2008) argues that slow fashion movements, which adopt the underlying principles of sustainable practice, involve different perspectives. Designers and businesses need to develop awareness of local resources and economies, creating economic value for the communities and societies with and within which they operate. Transparent production systems communicate clarity across the supply chain, providing a connection between producers and consumers. Sustainable products embed narratives and cultural heritage through processes of making, producing meaningfulness for end users.

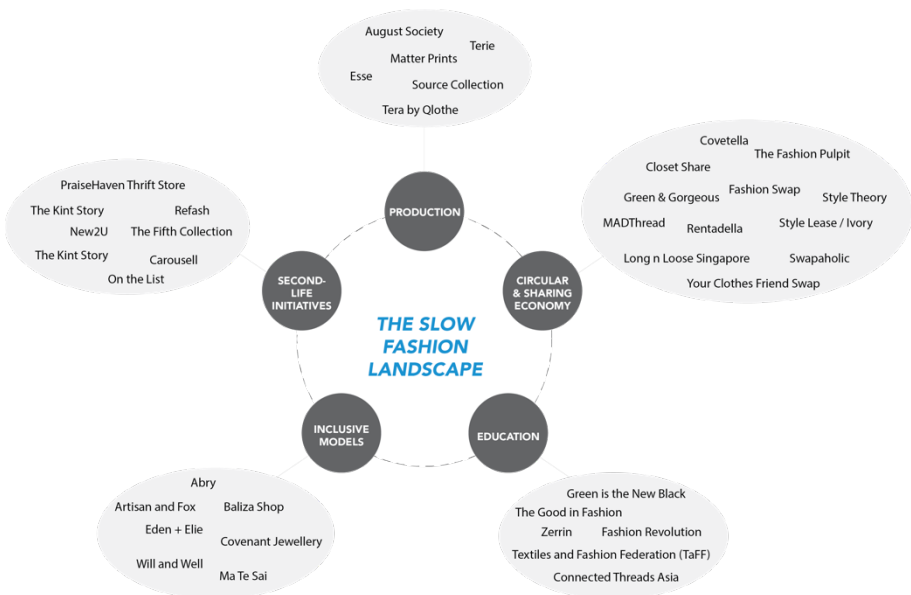


Figure 1. A Mapping of the Slow Fashion Landscape of Singapore

The shift towards slow fashion indicates a need to identify the broader scope of sustainability and question issues of governance and agency in the relationship between designers, producers and consumers. Slow culture focuses on small-scale production, traditions and culture rooted in craft techniques, an appreciation for local materials and markets, challenging the more widely adopted definition of fashion as relying on mass production and globalised style adoption (Fletcher, 2010).

Figure 1 visually articulates the various sustainable initiatives of fashion movements, platforms, organisations and communities in Singapore to present a mapping of the slow fashion landscape. The mapping shows the density of slow fashion initiatives adopting renting and swapping services as part of the circular and sharing economy, providing an alternative lifestyle for satisfying the cyclical nature of fashion that relies on the temporal rhythms of newness and change. In response to the market saturation within this space, it is foreseen that these business models will inform future practices that directly involve users through community-level interactions and communication. The mapping provides an holistic overview of how sustainable initiatives and philosophies are developing and functioning within the field of fashion, providing evidence of a growing slow movement through the cultural production of symbolic value.

5. Future Directions

This paper has presented an overview of the necessary shift for the fashion industry towards more sustainable practices. Through an examination of current and emerging slow fashion initiatives in Singapore, the landscape of sustainability begins to shape new models and frameworks through the evaluation of best practices. The mapping informs current categorisations of slow fashion while suggesting future research directions in the form of detailed case-study analysis and developing replicable frameworks for moving towards a more sustainable industry.

New rhythms of production emerge as designers and producers realign activities around the concept of care, developing new values throughout the supply chain for all involved stakeholders. This pushes for a radical change in the fashion industry and its larger system of operation, reevaluating and redefining the conditions of future models and processes of development. The philosophy of slow fashion begins with addressing stakeholders' needs and considers the larger impact of how various levels of sustainable activities inform new cultures of design, production and consumption.

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Elisa Lim is a social entrepreneur and founder of Will & Well. Her interest for social innovation grows beyond her practice as a fashion designer. When she is not designing and drafting, she is dreaming of the endless possibilities for social innovation to be weaved into the social fabric of our society.