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Exploring Research Space in Fashion:
A Framework of Meaning-Making

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1.0 Introduction

The study of fashion comprises theories of material culture to examine the role and function of consumption practices, social interactions, and the production of cultural meanings. Material culture can be defined as a meaning-making process developed through the exchange of symbolic values embedded within fashion objects (Crane & Bovone, 2006), providing a form of connection and participation within the social world. In today's increasingly complex and uncertain world, fashion faces new global challenges that require different ways of looking at, reviewing, and redefining the role of knowledge and its impact on designers, individuals and society. This chapter acknowledges the role and function of fashion objects in everyday life as communicating design intent and mediating the construction of new meanings to challenge existing thoughts, traditions and systems. The interdisciplinary roots of fashion studies are introduced through a research framework that focuses on the meaning-making process as a necessary step towards establishing meaningful experiences. Considering the growing discourse around the decolonization of fashion, this chapter presents a space for questioning, reflecting, and negotiating how future fashion research can be explored.

Overview of the Fashion Research Framework

Fashion is synonymous with change and assumes an extensive scope of operation that cannot be limited to or centered in the study of costume and adornment (Blumer, 1969). As a social phenomenon, fashion has been positioned in relation to modernity, as it serves as an indication of time, space, and memory. Fashion needs, as defined by Simmel's (1971) widely adopted theory, to examine the social implications of influencing individual forms of self-expression and freedom. The social relevance of fashion is beginning to see a shift from an over-emphasis on

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interactions, in terms of how fashion is communicated and culturally adopted, towards a need for adaptability and lonegevity within diverse social groups (Buckley & Clark, 2012). This suggests that a comprehensive framework is needed to understand how fashion research can be studied through the identification of tensions, boundaries of research space, and negotiation of knowledge.

In order to discuss the situational context of fashion research, the framework is separated into three distinct spaces for inquiry. It reviews design practice, the social implications of fashion, and the influences of culture within three spaces – *fluid space, problem space, and research space.* Fluid space refers to the role of design knowledge whilst the problem space presents the various contextual issues framing fashion research. Within these spaces of enquiry, fashion is introduced as a conversational and social activity that acts as a vehicle for design knowledge exchange. Although design knowledge is often associated with the creative activities or thinking processes of designers, it is suggested here that this knowledge is not strictly contained within the domains or practice of design and examines the fashion object as a tangible representation of design knowledge that communicates symbolic meanings.

Fashion is a social phenomenon that requires the active partition of individuals, defined here as the users and participants of fashion, to adopt, reinterpret, present and communicate the dressed body. The Fashion Research Framework was developed with the intention to provide a contextual understanding of fashion-related research and the potential impact of meaning-making through design knowledge. By acknowledging the complexity of fashion studies, the spaces of tension are presented in the design, fashion, and cultural systems. The changing value of design knowledge is further explored through the framework, where knowledge is shared and exchanged across the different levels and dimensions of interaction.

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Supported by a comprehensive review of existing literature, this chapter proposes a framework for fashion research that explores knowledge flow as a meaning-making process involving designers, individuals, and society.

2.0 Fluid Space: Design Knowledge

Designers, as individuals, transform their perceptions into a form of common knowledge to construct understandings and guide behaviors. This section presents a review of literature on design knowledge to define the role of objects in transferring knowledge from producer to consumer.
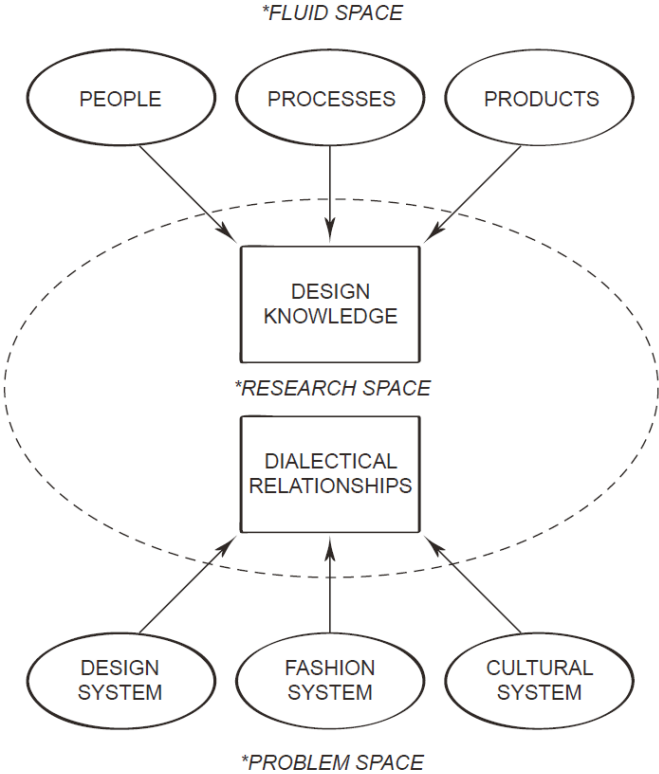
Figure 1. Fashion Research Framework

Domains of Design Knowledge

Design requires what is known as "projective ability" – the ability to understand the relationship between human beings and objects to create a social context (Jimenez Narvaez, 2000). Relying on the designer's own experiences, activities within design practice require a combination of skills, expertise, and knowledge to conceptualize artifacts relevant to the social environment (Friedman, 2000). The epistemological dimension of this knowledge shifts from tacit to explicit forms, moving and transforming thought into action, to question *what* designers know and *how* they come about knowing. Design knowledge, which is qualitatively different from knowledge in other disciplines, relies on experience, practice, and iteration to move from tacit to explicit knowledge (Hoadley & Cox, 2009). Friedman (2000) defines designers as thinkers who transform thought into action, and, further moving from *doing* to *knowing* requires the application of critical thinking and reflection. Designers undergo the process of 'knowing through making or doing' to contribute to what is known as design knowledge (Olsen & Heaton, 2010, p. 81).

Cross (2006) defines the *ways of knowing* as embodied in the designer, the processes of designing, and its products. Design ability is not strictly contained within the practice of designing nor is knowledge of design exclusive to professional designers. By acknowledging the rhetorical nature of design and the conversational aspect of design activity, design knowledge initiates a type of dialogue when transferred from designers to non-designers. Cross (1999) defines three sources of design knowledge, forming the *fluid space* of the Fashion Research Framework:

- *Design Epistemology (people)* – residing in people as the natural human ability of designers and of everyone, developing understandings for how people design, conducting empirical studies of designer behavior and design ability.

- *Design Praxiology (process)* – residing in processes of designing, in the development and application of techniques for design.

- *Design Phenomenology (products)* – residing in products, in the forms, materials, and finishes of design objects.

Jimenez Narvaez (2000) defines design's own knowledge as the result of the subject-object relationship that generates multiple perceptions of the world to become the intuitive knowledge of a society. The object represents the tangible materialization of a design, allowing itself to be perceived and communicated as an interpretation of a social reality. Knowledge produced by the design object can be classified as follows (Jimenez Narvaez, 2000):

- *Empirical-Analytical* – analysis of the object as a physical element, in itself and its properties.

- *Hermeneutical-Historical* – the object as a social and historical entity within an interacting system, producing symbolic and social significance through communication.

- *Sociocritical* – the object as a social evoker-transformer, generating social and individual changes to attitudes, habits, and values.

Design knowledge can be defined as reflecting the perceptions and experiences of the designer, transformed into a material object through the process of design. The design object contains knowledge of the designer and is communicated to the perceivable user by reflecting emotional, volitional and cognitive interests (Jimenez Narvaez, 2000). As users engage and experience the

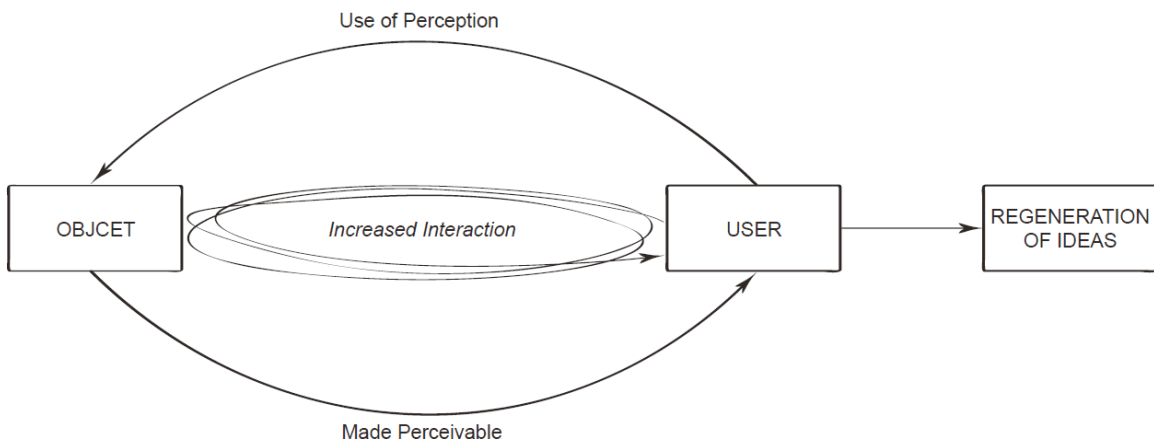object, the specific ideas or functions created and shaped by designers is communicated (Kazmierczak, 2003).

Figure 2. The User as Perceivable Being

Therefore, increased interactions affect the extent to which users can, as perceptive beings, infer knowledge of the object. This implicates the user as being shaped by perception to transform experience into creating a personal stock of knowledge which, through increased interactions, produce and regenerate new ideas.

Domains of Fashion Knowledge

Fashion knowledge is a form of expert knowledge that is socially constructed and culturally accumulated (Weller, 2007). Within fashion, knowledge is increasingly difficult to contain as social interactions accelerate its fluidity as a homogenizing force in dispersing trends across global markets. The transgressive and fluid nature of knowledge links producers to users in a socially integrated and distributed process, reconciling the distinction between expert and experienced knowledge to further empower users in future decision-making (Nowotny, 2000). Socially robust knowledge is significant for the study of social situations, as it initiates changes

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to knowledge culture by establishing relevance for future designs (Olsen & Heaton, 2010). As a socially constituted practice, fashion and dress require individual members to acquire knowledge of cultural norms and expectations (Entwistle, 2000). It is only within these norms that individuals are able to construct a space of personal freedom and develop knowledge of the inner self and an individual sense of style within fashion's standards, as a form of emancipation (Nedelmann, 1990).

The fashion system contains the ongoing dialectic between imitation and differentiation which elicits the incessant changing nature of fashion (Simmel, 1971). This tension is reflected in the hierarchal network of fashion designers and brands, where the diffusion of trends and styles flows down from key innovators and leaders to the masses. Fashion's cyclical pattern is driven by elite groups, made up of designers and consumers, seeking to set themselves apart from the non-elite (Blumer, 1969). However, developments in fashion media have widened the influential roles of bloggers, editors, celebrities, stylists and various style icons, further increasing the complexities of the fashion cycle. As fashion spreads from the elite to the masses, its knowledge becomes less viscous and fluid by moving into less complex social contexts (Weller, 2007). Design knowledge residing at the expert level, defined as the core knowledge of designing necessary for setting stylistic direction, increasingly dilutes when it is reproduced or imitated by followers. This signifies the distinction between *design knowledge*, the tacit form created and used by designers, and *common knowledge*, the codified or informal knowledge.

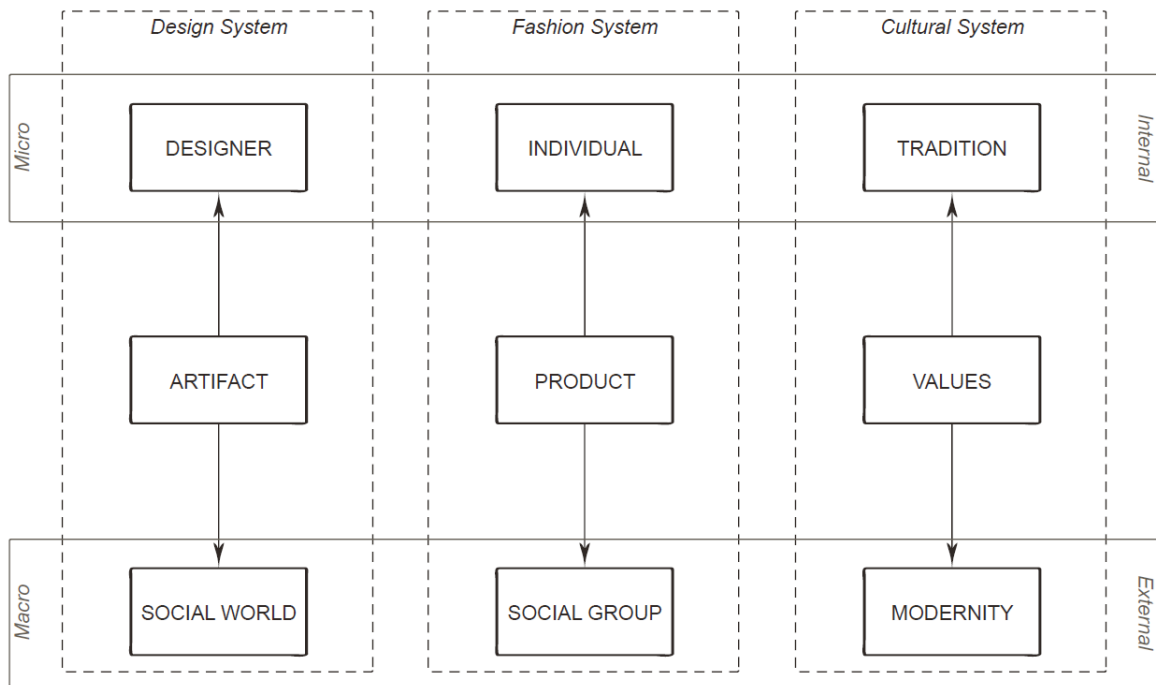### 3.0 Problem Space: Dialectical Relationships

This section presents three systems affecting design, fashion, and culture. Each of these systems contains tensions between the micro-internal to macro-external levels, as they are mediated by

the respective roles of artifact, product, and values. These systems are discussed as representing the context and problem space of fashion-related research.

The Design System

Design's significance as a social practice lies in its process of being produced, received, and used within a social context to prescribe social relations (Dilnot, 1984). Therefore, design can be defined as the socially differentiated transformation of the designer (Hillier, *et al.,* 1984) and the design process as the pragmatic activity through which designers relate to the world framing their existence (Olsen & Heaton, 2010). Positioned within a specific social context while constructing and contributing to new social relations, designers are influenced by different perspectives and perceptions to affect socially integrated outcomes. A designer's ability to perceive the world and frame it into an activity forms the connection with the external world, where the designer's "concern with how things ought to be" produces artifacts that serve as the interface between their inner and outer environments (Simon, 1996, p. 133). It is through these artifacts that the designer is confronted by social systems of symbolic production.

Figure 3. Dialectical Relationships

Designers rely on their own experiences to produce interpretations of the world and utilize these perspectives in how they develop solutions for perceivable problems. Against this backdrop, the social world becomes both the passive recipient of design solutions and the stimulating force influencing the designer's situated existence. Designers, as members of society, participate in the social world by sharing in a common past and current experiences. However, in the role of producer, their activities place them outside of this world through their ability to contribute to and disrupt future situations. This creates the tension within the design system, positioning the designer and the social world on opposing poles. The designer's influence in creating artifacts for the social world is challenged by the dependency on society's adoption of future design solutions. Within this system, the artifact mediates the exchange of power and influence by

forging a transactional connection between designers and the social world. Therefore, design functions within a commercially-focused system that involves designers, design activities, and the influences of society.

The Fashion System

Fashion is a phenomenon that evolves over the course of time and, at the height of its appeal, becomes an indication of the present (Nedelmann, 1990). Dominant fashions can be defined as high or popular fashion that is adopted and reproduced into mass fashion (Rocamora, 2002). As a social activity, the continuity of fashion relies on *innovators* or *leaders* and *followers* or *participants* to predetermine and standardize the judgment of taste. Therefore, the individual is confronted with following fashion norms to achieve union in group uniformity or deviating from social standards into segregation and exclusion (Simmel, 1957).

The fashion object, in the form of dress practice, image and communication, assumes a central role in reconciling the coexistence of exclusivity and standardization within the dialectic of the fashion system (Crane & Bovone, 2006). Through the object, the conflict between imitation and differentiation shifts into a process of social interaction (Nedelmann, 1990), where individuals project a configuration of the self representing one's existence in a particular time or history (Buckley & Clark, 2012). Participating in fashion is a creative act that has changed radically with the rise of social networks, shifting power and agency to individual representations of the fashioned body to inform new discourses for the contemporary fashion system (Terracciano, 2017). This implicates the act of dress as the presentation of self, embodying a performance that is as much an individual activity as it is social (Entwistle, 2000).

The impact of fashion and its role in society was defined by Blumer (1969) as establishing social relevance in its indifference to criticism, demand for adherence, and exclusion of those who fail to abide by its area of operation. A study by Clarke and Miller (2002) determined that in most cases while individuals are highly knowledgeable about matters of taste, they resort to social and institutional supports to validate aesthetic choice. However, the social practice of fashion is evolving as new competences have developed around the symbolic significance of partication and the recent call towards sustainability and ethical practices (Heinze, 2020). The fashion system allows for the ongoing negotiation between individuals and society through the assigning of meaning and significance to designed objects. Within this system, individuals are positioned at the boundary between expressing a personal representation of self and imitating social standards. This ongoing tension, posed by the communication of the fashioned self as a visible reproduction of individual values and meanings, represents the dialectic between the individual and society within the fashion system.

The Cultural System

Culture provides clues of the phenomenal world to determine the types of objects available (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). The fashion object embodies cultural phenomena by contributing to the production and reproduction of society through shared experiences, values and beliefs (Barnard, 1996). Defining the social world as being made up of dressed bodies, the activity of dressing becomes the expression of social relations in producing recognizable and meaningful cultural codes (Entwistle, 2000). Culture incorporates the material and nonmaterial processes of symbolic production in human beings to form the knowledge of society (Jimenez Narvaez, 2000) and it is through culture that individuals are able to divide and categorize the phenomenal world, by assigning significance to objects (McCracken, 1986).

Culture is affected by social movements and creates a state of self-dissatisfaction that confronts the individual into changing and reevaluating values, attitudes, and behaviors (Ball-Rokeach & Tallman, 1979). The natural instinct of human experience, guided by perception, imagination, recollection and judgment, is to assign value to objects (Rinofner-Kreidl, 2012). Cultural meanings fulfill the needs of individuals by establishing values contributing to the construction of self (McCracken, 1986). Framed by the opposing forces of tradition and modernity, the cultural system influences the changing of cultural values and the accumulation of meanings.

Cultural production concerns the process of meaning construction, requiring an examination of a group's collective actions and beliefs (Johnston & Klandermans, 1995). According to (Cheang & Suterwalla, 2020), the interpretation of information is conditional and depends on how one is located within knowledge hierarchies. Therefore, the conflicts affecting cultural values will significantly impact the way that individuals or societies consume and understand design objects. The cultural system is dynamic in its organization and reorganization of shared values and serves as the backdrop and context for the study of fashion.

4.0 Research Space: The Role of Design Knowledge

Buckley & Clark (2012) propose focusing on fashion of the everyday – the insignificant, the ordinary, and the overlooked. This creates a new space that considers how fashion research can be applied more critically for humanistic inquiry through examining the lived experience as a way to question and better understand the intersection between intention and social significance (Cheang & Suterwalla, 2020).

The research space of fashion is presented as the transactional system of exchange between users, objects, and the role of design knowledge. As objects are consumed by users, knowledge shifts into the transmission, representation, and reinterpretation of meanings. This phenomenological perspective of design knowledge concerns relationships between products and contexts, presenting the research space of meanings. The transactional system presents a more detailed space for exploring how fashion facilitates the conversational form of knowledge exchange through the following:

- *Transmission of embedded meanings* – relationship between designers and objects

- *Representation of constructed meanings* – relationship between individuals and society

- *Reinterpretation of co-created meanings* – relationship between designers and individuals
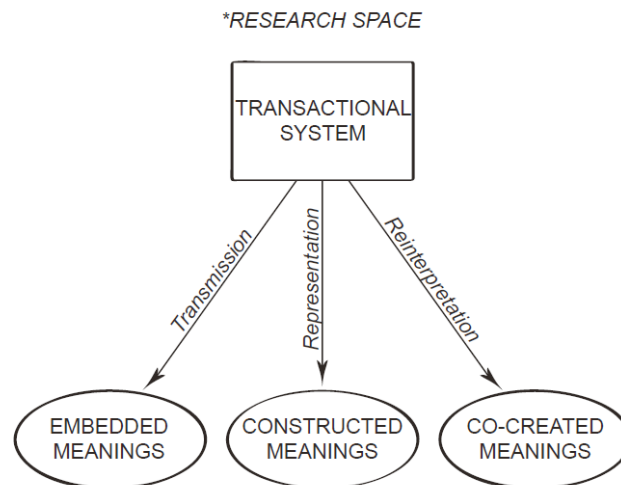
Figure 4.1. Research Space

Embedded Meanings (Transmission – Designers & Objects)

Knowledge created by designers belongs to the domain of designers, becoming design knowledge and thereby owned by designers. This knowledge is further cultivated and expanded through the design process and transmitted into the physical attributes of the finished object. The

fashion object constitutes the embodied, negotiated, and communicated form of dress, representing a product of material culture that acts as the filter between the individual and the social world (Crane & Bovone, 2006). These objects are meaningful and knowledge-rich, transmitting knowledge across spatio-temporal patterns originating from designers through the mass production system and into consumer perceptions (Weller, 2007). Designers work from local knowledge communities that are defined by physical, geographical, cultural or industrial boundaries. By collecting, recycling, and borrowing ideas, they transform their tacit understandings into creative activities and processes to produce a knowledge base. This form of expert knowledge is encoded into objects through intentional choices in the materials and cultural cues of fashion object, which carry and transfer knowledge between designers and users by materializing the semiotic content and function of meaning.

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┌──────────────┐   encode    ┌──────────────┐   decode    ┌──────────────┐
│   DESIGNER   │ ──────────▶ │    OBJECT    │ ──────────▶ │  INDIVIDUAL  │
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Figure 4.2. Semiotic Function of the Design Object

Designers are the direct producers of material objects which contain symbolic meanings that are received and used by consumers (Rocamora, 2002). As the consumption process becomes less concerned with competing for the possession of goods, it shifts into the actualization of the self through a form of self-fulfillment (Baudrillard, 1988). To consume the product is to consume its meaning and, therefore, the knowledge transmitted through the object by conceptualizing an interactive embodiment by wearing the perceived identity of a person (Thornquist, 2018). The design object connects the designer to the individual, communicating the designer's knowledge in the form of conceptual meaning and intent. Therefore, it is the role of the designer to make

content, information, data, meaning, and message perceptually accessible and translatable (Kazmierczak, 2003).

Constructed Meanings (Representation – Individuals & Society)

The mode of being-in-the-world marks one's existence, in the manner that one can "name, modify, and change his environment through the manipulation of the body" (Kim, 2001, p. 73). This schema defines the body as the unity of mind and self, relatable to other people and things, while the physical outline of the body demarcates the internal and external worlds. Accepting that one does not exist alone in the world, the body presents a common link between the unique perspectives of individuals in social situations (Scheler, 1973). Through the act of sensing, one is able to "transfer other types of conscious states to perceivable bodies, depending on the complexity of their behaviors and their relations to the environment." (Heinamaa, 2012, p. 228). The body is, therefore, the means by which one experiences the world and is made known and relatable to others. If clothing represents the human persona, then it connects the relationships between *(wo)man and body* to *body and society* (Barthes, 2006). The transactional relationship between the individual and object mobilizes design knowledge, as it comes into contact with the individual's existing knowledge and perception, to be further disrupted when reinterpreted onto the surface of the physical body and presented to others.

According to Barthes (2006), fashion is a system that creates value in the arrangement of garments on a wearer. The conscious effort of the individual, through dress, translates the actualization of meaning that shifts with the reorganization of garments on the body. Each object forms one component of the system, which can be ordered in any number of combinations, and the linking of different objects is what constitutes the structure of dressing as the medium for

self-expression. Fashion becomes a conversational activity by which human beings relate, establishing commonalities while delineating one's sense of individuality.

The physical arrangement of clothing on the body demarcates the individual's inner and outer worlds to "transform flesh into something recognizable and meaningful to a culture" (Entwistle, 2000, p. 8). Vieira (2009) defines the process of design as a tactile experience that serves both functional and ornamental needs, while clothing creates a code or visual language conveying a form of social identity. The decision to adopt a fashion is to represent one's identity, emphasizing the relationship between personal values and the perceived value of the fashion object. In the hierarchal system of style selection, the individual's decision in the selection process is influenced by the intrinsic value of the fashion object. However, this meaning evolves and transforms through increased interactions between the individual and object.

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┌─────────────┐          ┌─────────────┐          ┌─────────────┐
│ INDIVIDUAL  │  ◄─────► │   OBJECT    │  ◄─────► │   SOCIETY   │
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**Figure 4.3.** Transactional Relationship through the Design Object

Weller (2007) defines consumption as the intersection where individuals and fashion knowledge meet, providing a common platform for transforming the perceived value of the fashion product. If the semiotic function of the design object operates symbolically to generate meanings, then it is only fully realized through the active participation of a receiver (Kazmierczak, 2003). The individual, as a receiver of meaning, reconstructs the object's meaning and assumes ownership over its new significance. The consumption process allows the individual to reconcile the tensions imposed by society, created from pressures to conform to its standards, by satisfying

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self needs in addition to attaining group acceptance (Baudrillard, 1988). This signifies the point of consumption as a means for individual and collective expression, where the sensory connections between the individual and fashion object function as symbolic representations of self-identity (Workman & Caldwell, 2007).

The fashion object reinstates power and freedom to the individual, who assigns new significance or meaning, and the object assumes a new representation. This understanding replaces the original intent or codes of knowledge embedded by the designer, reiterating the fluidity of design knowledge in its ability to regenerate through increased interaction. The constantly changing nature of fashion can be seen as leading the individual to alter their perception of self and reinvent themselves through the extrinsic values associated with the fashion object.

Co-created Meanings (Reinterpretation – Individuals & Designers)

As a social phenomenon, fashion can be studied as a "meaning-making process" of expressing symbolic values in cultural contexts (Crane & Bovone, 2006). Meaning, when confronted and intervened by the individual's own perception, assumes a new representational form (McCracken, 1986). This implicates the mercurial nature of the fashion object, which shifts meanings across different social contexts and cultural perspectives, as being dependent on how its end-user decodes and represents its knowledge or significance. Fashion affords the individual with a sense of freedom, to separate oneself from any possibility of comparison by emphasizing one's distinction through clothing (Barthes, 2006) and the individual is, therefore, placed in a position to not only modify and personalize the object's meaning but to transfer its significance to others.
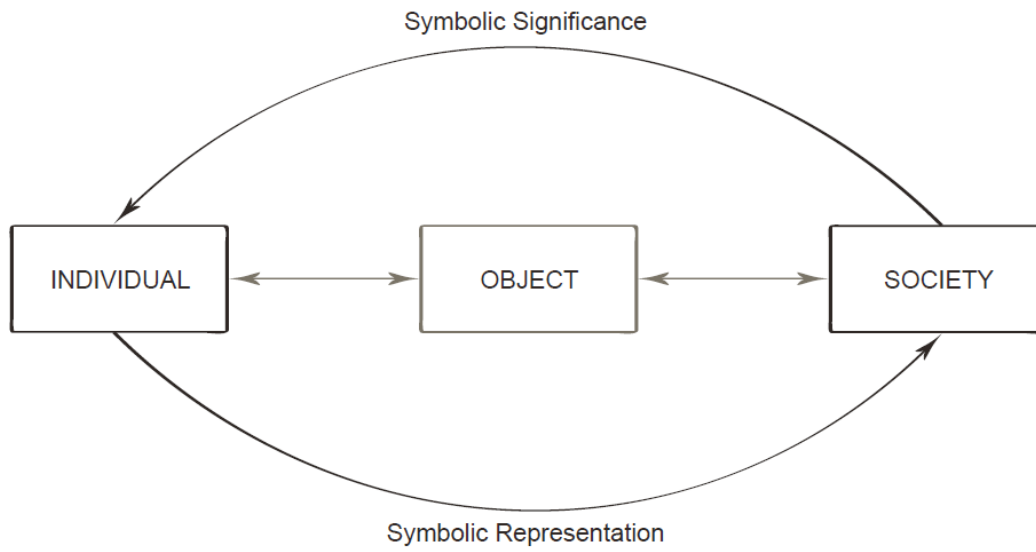
Figure 4.4. Reinterpretation of Meanings

Perception, requiring cultivation, is a precondition of meaning creation in the transaction between people and things (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Design objects provide cognitive interfaces within society to function as an interpretive structure mediated by signs pointing to meanings (Kazmierczak, 2003). Although the meaning transforms once received, it requires some comprehension of the designer's original intent for the success and effectiveness of the design. This demonstrates the shared responsibility of designers and individuals to allow the design object to maintain its proper meaning and reach a socially accepted meaning. It is in this way that meaning creation becomes a co-creative effort between individuals and designers, where fashion allows the negotiation of "different selves through ways of wearing" (Thornquist, 2018, p. 294).

Taking the traditional example of fashion, the designer creates an object containing aesthetic or conceptual purpose. The traditional model follows a top-down dissemination of fashion knowledge but abstract forms of knowledge are fluid and able to spread contagiously, which

suggests that fashion norms are no longer restricted by a given example (Weller, 2007). Slow fashion approaches indicate a potential for the fashion system to be repositioned and challenged through distributed economies, various forms of collaboration, and increased transparency between producer and consumer (Clark, 2008). Therefore, there is a need to explore the function of meaning creation in how the individual understands the fashion object, how these reinterpretations are related back to designers through self-portrayal practices in online experimentation and participation (Thornquist, 2018), and how the reverse flow of knowledge affects future creative processes of designers.

The designer and individual co-exist in the social world, where cultural experiences are often shared to develop common tastes and values within global fashion practices. Through the process of designing, the designer intentionally explicates specific affordances to communicate intentions to the user (Almquist & Lupton, 2010). Although the individual is given freedom to reinterpret the meaning or utility of the artifact, clues are given to transfer its original meaning. The designer's own knowledge, while embedded into the object, is redirected into a negotiated space allowing it to develop new meanings. This can be illustrated with the example of fashion, where the designer's knowledge is used for the creation of new innovations in style. As this knowledge moves down the hierarchy of the fashion system, it becomes "less prestigious, less complex, less lavishly produced, less valued in the eyes of consumers, and less expensive in the market" (Weller, 2007, p. 57). However, the individual is exercising autonomy in the cultivation of a personal style by refashioning or reconfiguring its meaning. The continual negotiation of meanings serves as the connection between individuals and designers, changing the perception of fashion objects and contributing to new values.

5.0 Research Space of Fashion

Design objects function as semiotic tools for establishing symbolic and significant meanings. The interpretive nature of design objects suggests the need to focus less on designing things and more on designing the inferences leading to meaning-making (Kazmierczak, 2003). Technological changes and advances in media communication flatten geographical differences, accelerating codified forms of fashion knowledge transfer by flowing impersonally and non-specifically (Weller, 2007). When these fashion codes are no longer confined by time or space, the knowledge loses viscosity by transcending the previously demarcated boundaries of the fashion system.

Fashion is being redefined through new discourses, allowing its practices to become more inclusive and shifting away from traditional canons of thought (Jansen, 2020). This has resulted in new forms of social practices, where fashion meanings and competences have evolved to reconsider the cooperation and coexistence of designers and individuals within the social world (Heinze, 2020). The former position of designers, as influential producers and contributors of material culture, is challenged by the dynamic interplay between users who define new rules towards or against conformity.

Review of Framework

The domains of design knowledge are defined as originating from people, processes and products and engage designers through reflective dialogues. According to Schon (1983), practitioners accumulate tacit knowledge and intuitive knowing through critical reflections on experience. The repetitive nature of practice facilitates the conversation-like activity of design, producing expertise to judge uncertain situations. Knowledge is contained within the fluid space of inquiry, shifting from tacit to explicit forms and is able to be communicated.

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The three dialectical systems are introduced as the problem space of fashion, which involve design, fashion and culture. Within the design system, the role of designers is opposed by the influences of the social world. Similarly within the fashion system, the freedom of individuals is challenged by style norms determined from various social groups. Therefore, the fashion system exists only in relation to the design system and is actualized against the context of culture. The cultural system is specifically introduced here to provide the context for designers and users, further emphasizing shared experiences and shifts in cultural values.

Buckley & Clark (2012, p. 28) propose the case-study approach to "research the things, people, and ideas that have remained unobserved, to locate and interpret the intimate", as social interactions and behaviors provide evidence for how fashion is consumed, negotiated, reinterpreted and represented. This places fashion research as addressing the personal and social, leading to the study of social forms of knowledge; a perspective supported by the implications of the proposed framework. The research space, as a system of meaning-making, results from how design knowledge affects the dialectical relationships of the problem space. Knowledge of designers are transferred and communicated into the creation of objects, which are consumed and adopted by users. The ways in which users integrate fashion objects into their everyday lives is explored within the transactional system, producing a more localized and personal approach for researching the social functions of fashion.
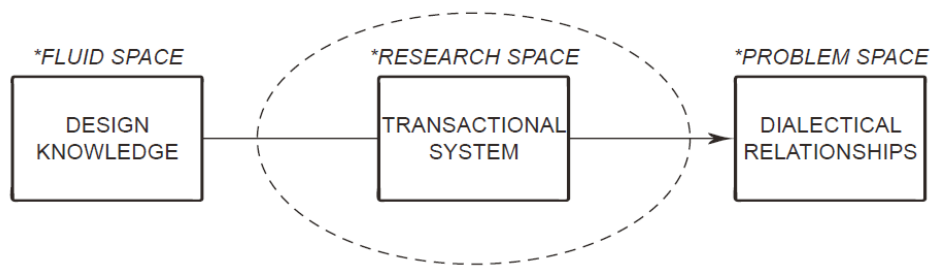
Figure 5. Relationship between Spaces of Inquiry

Fashion Research as Humanistic Inquiry

Designers, as active members in this shared sociocultural context, are uniquely positioned as being influenced by external forces while simultaneously influencing change through design activities. This significantly affects the fashion system, as movements toward individuality and independent thinking begin to disrupt the tension encased in the dialectic between imitation and distinction. Within this new cultural environment, designs begin to take on new meanings which affect how designers use their own perceptions to develop foresight in designing. The design, fashion and cultural systems are, therefore, interdependent in how they relate and interact.

Design knowledge increases in fluidity through interactions between individuals and social groups, creating a mobilizing effect. The fashion object, containing knowledge encoded by the designer, provokes individuals to reassign its symbolic significance in relation to their own self-perceptions and social contexts. This form of design knowledge instigates changes altering the individual's position in the world, not as passive recipients of knowledge but as active participants in the process of meaning-making. In this way, fashion research extends into the humanistic inquiry of individuals and the methods through which they can establish meaningfulness in design.

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This chapter supports the study and research of fashion against historical and sociological perspectives. However, the rapid movements defining the fashion system greatly decrease the personal value and relevance of fashion objects. The implication of the research framework is to define the research space of fashion as involving designers and users, dialectical tensions, and the role of design knowledge as a means to establish meaningfulness. Fashion requires a humanistic approach to comprehend the specific cultural situations within which the fashion phenomenon takes place, developing a more defined understanding of how fashion facilitates the communication and process of meaning-making.

Fashion involves all individuals and cultures, providing a means to connect and participate in the social world. As fashion becomes increasingly more socially aware, future challenges involve the dissolution of existing hierarchies, concern for exclusivity and newness, reliance on image, power dynamics of choice versus mandate, and role of agency (Clark, 2008). More research is needed to address the growing shift of fashion and restructuring of the fashion system, particularly when considering decolonial fashion discourse and the current movement towards delinking and radically departing from its dominant traditions (Jansen, 2020). This chapter contributes a research framework that provides a way of analyzing the problem spaces of fashion and reinstating the agency of object roles and individuals through design knowledge. The framework provides an overview of how fashion-related research can address the growing complexity of global challenges through questioning, reflecting, and negotiating the dynamic spaces of social interaction and the design-object-individual relationship.

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