Beyond Western fashion sustainability:
A case study of the Bahraini, Arab Gulf context

By

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*Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)*

University of the Arts London

London College of Fashion

February 2025

Abstract

As the countries of the Arab Gulf aspire to construct viable post-oil economies, sustainability is becoming a strategic priority for governments in the region. This study explores Design for Sustainability (DfS) within the Bahraini fashion context, addressing existing frameworks within DfS in relation to the country's cultural and socio-political specificities. Despite Bahrain's distinct economic and social dynamics compared to its Gulf neighbours, its deep cultural and political commonalities with them render much of the work applicable to the wider region.

This research aims to explore how Bahrain's culture influences approaches to fashion sustainability. It has two key objectives: first, to assess the Bahraini fashion industry against key DfS frameworks, including the limitations of fashion's transformative potential in Bahrain; and second, to examine how Bahrain's context, as a post-colonial and neo-colonial society, can contribute insights to the field of DfS.

Since the research focuses on the social, material and behavioural transitions required to move towards fashion sustainability it uses a methodology that engages numerous stakeholders in the Arab country, including government representatives, social activists, consultants, designers, craft communities, and consumers. This study's multi-method approach consists of three methods: (1) a Delphi study with 16 researchers, businesspeople, civil servants and activists (2) a series of 19 qualitative semi-structured interviews with local designers, tailors, social and environmental activists, weavers and my grandmothers and (3) participant observation, which included field notes of a workshop with 22 local designers.

The research explores fashion ontologies in Bahrain derived from local epistemes. It does so by looking at language, space, relationships, and lived experiences as components of fashion ontology, and reflecting on how these impact DfS in fashion. Key findings of this research include three essential factors for fashion sustainability in Bahrain. The first is transitioning culturally towards fashion sustainability, in a way beyond individual consumer choice and decision-making (e.g., such as sustainable fashion purchases) and towards socially transformative practices. The second is growing local production through an empowered labour force; one that can creatively respond to local needs. The third is the need for public infrastructure for the end-of-life stage of garments.

Key findings of this research include a blurred cycle model, where I put forward that the categories of *source*, *make*, *use* and *last* – traditionally used in fashion sustainability research – are blurred in the Gulf context. I supplement this idea of a blurred lifecycle with a discussion of *use* in the fashion Gulf context. The Gulf experience of fashion reveals blurring of *use* and *make* in the practice of tailoring, for instance, and a blurring of *source* and *use* in the social practice of *indoore* or *nitmasha* (go around, walk around) in the mall, to window-shop, shop and socialise.

The chapters of this thesis comprise an introduction, followed by a critical literature review, a discussion of its methodology and three results chapters. The last chapter concludes with a discussion of key contributions to the fields of fashion sustainability, DfS, transnational fashion and Gulf cultural studies.

For

Ghalia Al – Haji
&
Medina Al – Anzoor

For all that they gave, and all that they were.

Acknowledgements

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1 Introduction

1.1 Context, aims and objectives

As the countries of the Arab Gulf aspire to construct viable post-oil economies, sustainability is becoming a strategic priority for governments in the region. Design for Sustainability (DfS) as a discourse has developed predominantly within a Western context, influencing the way in which sustainability theory has been applied to fashion studies. This thesis, as part of an attempt to look at non-Western approaches to fashion sustainability, explores the social practices surrounding fashion in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf. Note that this thesis uses the terms "Western" and "Non-Western" as strategic, rather than essentialist categories. In doing so, the terminology of "Western" and "Non-Western" allows for a discussion of the impacts of colonialism in Bahrain and the Gulf, while still acknowledging the role of the modern Gulf in the global world order, as an economic and political ally of the "West", and of its modern-day culture which inherently has Western influence.

While this thesis presents an ontologically driven view of fashion sustainability for Bahrain and the Arab Gulf, in doing so it contributes to the global conversation on fashion sustainability and non-Western definitions and approaches to sustainability at a large.

This research suggests that the Arab Gulf's fashion ontology – defined as not just garments but rather the "philosophical and theoretical conditions" (Torres, 2022, p. 53) of fashion – impacts what fashion sustainability in the region could look like. To challenge conceptual frameworks of fashion sustainability in Western discourse, I take an epistemological-ontological approach to fashion in Bahrain throughout this thesis. This approach caters to different facets of fashion as a system and allows for a re-framing of its components, such as material cultures, social practices, and the perceived value of fashion itself as an experience.

Lara Torres (2022) defines fashion ontology as being concerned with characteristic products, processes and experiences presented through the material form of fashion. Torres (2022) argues that exploring a fashion ontology "requires a vernacular that allows for a deeper understanding of current fashion practices and what they mean and stand for" (p.62) — in this study, I go back to the basics of language around fashion, conceptual understanding, as well as material culture around garments to build such a fashion ontology for Bahrain. Building on the work of Thornquist (2014, 2015), Torres (2022) clarifies that ontology is often confused with epistemology. But, while ontology is about

the organisation of knowledge, epistemology is the study of knowledge itself. Arturo Escobar (2016), in 'Thinking-Feeling with the Earth', examines ontological dimensions of epistemologies in the global south. In simpler terms, Escobar asks questions about how knowledge is organised (ontology) within the ways of knowing (epistemes) of the global south. Escobar (2016) says:

> In identifying the infinite diversity of the world as one of its basic premises, the Epistemologies of the South framework (ES) clearly takes on an ontological dimension. By this I mean that in speaking about knowledges, the ES framework is also speaking about worlds. Simply said, multiple knowledges, or epistemes, refer to multiple worlds, or ontologies (p.13).

Applied to this research, this epistemological-ontological mode of inquiry prompts questions such as "What are the meanings around fashion garments in Bahrain? What are the parts of the system that define fashion in Bahrain, including the meanings denoted to social and cultural practices around fashion? What does tailoring, as opposed to buying ready-made, mean in the Bahraini context? How do fashion designers understand fashion sustainability, in the Bahraini context? How is the idea of using, or experiencing clothing, understood in the Bahraini context?".

This epistemological-ontological approach invites a similar, re-positioned understanding for other non-Western contexts, stemming out of the example of Bahrain. For instance, components of fashion infrastructure that in Western discourse are celebrated as innovative are already present as part of everyday fashion infrastructure in Bahrain. This includes sharing practices, a strong local tailoring sector, and the niche role of local bespoke designers.

For the Gulf, this discussion on fashion and sustainability takes place against the backdrop of historically rapid growth since the discovery of oil in the 1930s, creating a wealthier citizenry with a high rate of material demand. Within this context, the garment sector has grown at a rapid pace. Today, fluctuating trading landscapes, plummeting oil prices, environmental degradation, and a regional focus on transitioning to post-oil economies are all factors prompting a prioritisation of sustainability goals across sectors in the Gulf. In Bahrain, a set of sustainability goals are part of the Bahrain Economic Vision for 2030 — including targets for gender equality, affordable and clean energy, reduced inequalities, and responsible consumption and production (*Bahrain's Efforts to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals 2030*, n.d.).

With the fashion industry growing regionally alongside oil-fuelled economic growth, apparel and textile exports have grown in Bahrain, in particular due to foreign trade (Miller at al, 2004). Bahrain is atypical in relation to other Gulf countries because it has historically been a dominant exporter of apparel to its neighbours (WITS, 2020). This modern-day role builds on Bahrain's history as a cultural capital for weaving, bead-making, and the mix of ethnicities and skilled tradespeople that have lived within it resulting from historic trade routes. While Bahrain has its unique economic and social dynamics to its Gulf neighbours, the Arab Gulf states share deep cultural commonalities due to shared political histories and alliances – such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – as well as intentional efforts by their governments to build cultural cohesion. As such, while this research has been conducted on Bahrain in particular, it brings in the inextricably linked Arab Gulf region in its discussions of culture and history.

Today, Bahraini national women are entering new roles as social attitudes towards women shift. The country is strongly influenced by immigration – 40% of its population are immigrant labourers from South and Southeast Asia, listed in Bahrain's 2020 census as citizens from Non-Arab Asian countries (*Bahrain: Population by nationality group and administrative region*, 2020). These migrants are often blue-collar workers, with men providing the manual labour back-bone (e.g., for construction, oil mining, manufacture) for the country while migrant women occupy domestic worker roles. Understanding a shift towards sustainability and its cultural implications within the Bahraini context has inferences for the Gulf, but also for the global context – in which fashion, like other systems of production, relies on neo-colonial dynamics in its sourcing, manufacture, distribution and end-of-life.

Bahrain's political and economic position in the world order also has implications and resonance to different geographies. By being both post-colonial and neo-colonial, as Chapter 2 and Chapter 4 of this thesis explain, Bahrain – like the wider Arab Gulf region – is often a receiver and consumer of Western cultural production. Beyond cultural production, the Arab Gulf proliferates Western hegemony, often acting as "a vector for Western capital" (Henderson, 2021). At the same time, the lived experience of the Arab Gulf's modernity is distinct. Both the commonalities to a global, capitalist fashion model and exceptions to this model – such as relationships, practices and beliefs around fashion and sustainability – are important to a discussion on fashion sustainability in Bahrain. This is a vital theme that runs throughout the thesis.

The aim of this research is to examine how Bahrain's culture shapes approaches to fashion sustainability. The objectives of this research are two-fold. The first objective is to investigate the current state of the Bahraini fashion industry against key DfS frameworks. This includes examining the limits to the transformative power of fashion as a field of design in Bahrain. The second objective is to examine how the example of Bahrain can give back to the field of Design for Sustainability (DfS). In particular, how studying fashion sustainability in a post-colonial — and also neo-colonial, as I argue in this research — society contributes to the field of DfS.

While the main area of contribution of this research is to DfS, this research also contributes to the field of fashion studies at a large, through its discussion of the link between fashion and political economy and the field of gulf studies, through its critical approach to material culture in the Gulf. The outputs of the research include a language bank for sustainability in Bahrain (including how sustainability is understood and implemented locally), a lifecycle view of fashion in Bahrain, and a discussion of the social and material cultures embedded within this transition towards sustainability.

1.2 Thesis structure

The chapters of this thesis comprise a critical literature review, building up to an explanation of methods and discussion of results. The literature review is comprised of Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. In Chapter 2, I introduce Bahrain's local fashion culture, different groups and their relationships to local fashion and fashion spaces, as well as power dynamics and the role of local fashion in modern-day Bahrain. In Chapter 3, I discuss the evolution of DfS as a Western field of discourse, and I contextualise the Gulf's philosophical position on sustainability. I suggest that a bridge to politics is needed in the DfS discourse for non-Western contexts like the Gulf. This chapter suggests that for the Gulf, a transformation towards sustainability, including both social and technical aspects, entails an ontological exploration and the need to contend with political power dynamics. Chapter 4 outlines the methodology of this study, addressing the choice of methods, my positionality as a researcher, and approach to data collection and analysis. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the findings of this study, breaking them down into an ontological inquiry to the fashion lifecycle, ranked recommendations towards fashion sustainability in Bahrain, and a discussion on the accessibility of fashion spaces. In Chapter 7, I build on the findings of the research as well as the literature review of earlier chap

ters in a discussion on Gulf identity and creative education in the region. The thesis concludes with Chapter 8, where I reflect on the contributions of this study and future areas of research.

1.3 Literature review summary

Bahrain is an island state situated in the Arab Gulf. The body of water Bahrain is in has also historically been called the Persian Gulf; in a modern context, "Arab" or "Persian" Gulf as terms are attached to historically and politically distinctive interests. The countries of the Arab Gulf are characterised by a culture that dates back to Arab Bedouin tribes as well as settled peoples – such as the original inhabitants of the island of Bahrain itself.

Bahrain is part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a political body established in 1981, alongside the countries of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Qatar (which throughout the course of this study was under blockade by several GCC members for several years). While Yemen and Iraq are culturally, linguistically, and ethnically part of the Arab Gulf region, they are not officially included in the GCC due to historical and political reasons. Policy researchers see Iraq's socialist political system in the 1980s (Saeed, 2023) and Yemen's status as a republic coupled with its economic disparity to the rest of the region (Al-Muslimi, 2016; Lackner and Varisco, 2018) as core reasons for this historical exclusion. Others believe that the formation of the GCC itself was a reaction to the Iraq-Iran war, where Gulf countries sought not only a political and economic alliance, but a unified front to address mounting security problems (Rizvi, 1982; Al-Qassab, 2017). While the Arab Gulf states supported Iraq's initiation of war against Iran (Mumtaz, 2005), including Iraq in the alliance could have been perceived as a more formal and costly declaration of war. An initial plan for an alliance in the Gulf was discussed in 1975 in Jeddah, and had included both Iran and Iraq (Dawisha, 1981; Ulrichsen, 2018). Therefore, discussions about modern Gulf identity must be mindful of the recent formation of the GCC as a political bloc, and the resulting re-enforcement of a culturally cohesive narrative between its member states.

The objectives of the GCC include formulating regulations across its various members for the sake of strengthening cultural, political, and economic ties (Secretariat General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, n.d.). Regulations across the fields of finance, trade, customs, tourism, legislation, and administration are all included under the objectives of the GCC, as well as mobility rights for its citizens to live and work in any of its member countries.

In the 20th century, the Gulf region included some of the fastest-growing economies in the world, mostly due to oil and natural gas revenues – starting with the discovery of oil in Bahrain the 1930s. Today, sovereign wealth funds, such as Abu Dhabi's Mubadala, retain billions of dollars of assets under management. These countries are now looking to build alternative sources of revenue as the world approaches a post-oil era.

The fashion industry in the Gulf has grown alongside oil-fuelled economic growth for the past four decades. Chapter 2 of this thesis is the first of its literature review chapters. In it, I describe the Gulf's modern fashion as a mixture of high-street global fashion – malls lined with global fashion chains and luxury global retailers – and local fashion. Within this context, fashion imports outweigh exports. In Bahrain, apparel and textile exports have been bolstered due to a long-standing free trade agreement on textile exports with the USA (Miller et al., 2014), which peaked at 908 million USD in 2015 (WITS, 2020). This deal was uniquely made between the US and Bahrain, rather than with the GCC as an entity. In 2018, and after the end of the agreement, Bahrain's export value for apparel and textiles dropped to $224M. Still, Bahrain, like the UAE, imports almost double of its export value in terms of apparel and textile. Neighbouring Saudi Arabia imports nine times its export value, and Kuwait almost thirty times (WITS, 2020). Chapter 2 examines modern fashion in Bahrain, both from a commercial and cultural perspective.

Despite the region's adherence to a global consumerist model, the distinctive cultural underpinnings of its fashion system manifest in nuanced ways, influenced by class, gender, and cultural origins. Fashion consumerism – as it does globally – allows consumers in the Gulf to assert social dominance in the public sphere through their material purchases. What is notable is that for Gulf women, increasing economic power over the past few decades has outpaced the slower progression of power in the social and political realms (al-Kazi, 2008; Al-Rasheed, 2013). This makes the consumption of fashion, and its use as a societal pastime and social signifier, distinctive for Gulf women of all ages. Chapter 2 reflects on the consumption of fashion as a tool of social power in Bahrain, in that it allows wearers to express, be seen, assert themselves and form sub-cultures. Such an understanding of power, however, lacks intersectionality. While fashion consumerism may be a way for Gulf women to be competitively distinctive, it does so particularly through the juxtaposition with and exclusion of migrant women or national women of lower socio-economic class. This may be true for how the fashion system works globally – where luxury fashion is a social signifier for the wealthy – but in the

Gulf this plays out with the increased proximity of domestic labour within the home, and against the backdrop of slow social progress for national women.

Subsequently, Chapter 2 introduces key components of the Bahraini and Gulf historical and societal context. This includes culturally hegemonic narratives locally – such as which ethno-sectarian groups decide on what comprises "national heritage" in Bahrain. Ethno-sectarian refers to "sectarian demarcations [that] are usually intersliced with ethnic cleavages" (Al-Shehabi, 2019, p. 2). For Bahrain, this means discussing *Baharna*, *Ajam*, *Huwala* and Arab Tribal descendants, as opposed to the binary of Shia and Sunni. (Baharna and Ajam are Shia, Huwala and Arab Tribal descendants are Sunni, see Chapter 2 for further explanation). Through understanding ethno-sectarian dynamics, this chapter also underscores the historical significance of local communities. Chapter 2 argues that the history of local groups – such as the dwindling communities of weavers in Bahrain, the immigration of craftsmen over centuries, and the dispersed communities of at-home women embroiderers – is vital in paving a unique pathway towards fashion sustainability in Bahrain.

Among the defining features that characterise the Bahraini fashion context – explored and discussed in Chapter 2 – is the notion of the Gulf as both post-colonial and neo-colonial. While it is intuitive to understand the Gulf as post-colonial, I argue that it is also neo-colonial in that it helps proliferate "the post-colonial impact of advanced industrial countries on the educational systems and policies as well as the intellectual life of developing areas" (Altbach, 1971, p.237). While Bahrain and the Gulf did not directly colonise, like Europe, I argue that through modern economic and labour relations the Gulf nations support dynamics embedded in colonialism, and fashion in the Gulf is an example of that. Henderson (2021), in 'The rise of Arab Gulf agro-capital', makes a similar argument for agriculture in the Gulf. Henderson argues that Gulf Arab states play a central role in shaping regional agricultural markets through their control of supply chains and significant agribusiness investments. This position not only reinforces their economic influence within the Arab region but also facilitates the integration of Western capital into local food systems. In Chapter 2, I also discuss the role of fast fashion in the Gulf and accessibility of alternatives, a history of local craft, modern day local tailoring, a fragmented local market for supply and making, privileged activism, and Bahrain's classes of fashion labour.

In Chapter 3, I argue that fashion sustainability and design for sustainability at a large have often been studied and practised within a culturally Western domain. Bahrain and

the Gulf, in practice, have often focused on a "light green" sustainability – one that promotes protecting the environment through individual activism, as opposed to a "dark green" philosophy, which believes in collective responsibility (Robertson, 2007; Steffen, 2009; McGrail, 2011). To examine fashion sustainability in Bahrain, a broader and more inclusive perspective is needed. Namely, one that recognises the unique dynamics and nuances of the Bahraini fashion, social and political landscape. As such, the chapter puts forward the need to reconsider the prevailing Western-centric approach to sustainability in fashion. In activist circles, and within academia, the colonial history of fashion has been asserted and is widely acknowledged in a globalised, post-colonial context (Rabine, 1997; Rovine, 2009; Horning, 2014; Semaan, 2018; Bramwell, 2020; Mayer, 2020). However, the transitions of non-Western geographies themselves towards fashion sustainability are often under-studied.

Chapter 3 critically reflects on how discourse in several, dynamic fields of design relate to the Bahraini context. Namely, I engage discourse on design justice, decolonising design, and design politics to bridge the prevalent gap in fashion sustainability discourse when it comes to non-Western fashion systems. In doing so, I establish the theoretical base for sustainability throughout this study to be explored as "ontological rather than additive change" (Abdulla et al., 2019. p. 130). Chapter 3 asks two questions that the remaining chapters aim to answer First: what could a non-Western definition of design for sustainability look like? Second: to what extent can this definition be achieved in a highly globalised world, one which shares a modernity of capitalism?

1.4 Methods

To explore DfS within the Bahraini fashion context, this thesis contests and supplements existing DfS frameworks with a broader cultural and socio-political lens, namely that of the Arab Gulf. The key methods used in this research are a Delphi study, semi-structured interviews and resident participant observation – which I have combined to give a holistic context of Bahrain; bringing together voices of those in power with those that practice, advocate, and work in the fashion industry in Bahrain. The methodology is derived from a philosophy that sees design thinking, inclusivity, and social equity as the means to make changes towards sustainability. With dark green thinking as a philosophical foundation, I have developed a methodology blending interpretivism and pragmatism. Interpretivism guides the exploration of subjective knowledge (McIntosh, 1997; Chowdhury, 2014; Bhattacharya, 2017). For my research, this means focusing on local perspectives when studying fashion and sustainability in Bahrain. As part of

critically engaging subjectivity, this research also centred reflexivity, namely reflecting on my position within the research process and my motivations (Grbich, 2004). Coupling interpretivism with pragmatism – which looks at creating practical outcomes (Biesta, 2010, Patton, 2015) – meant combining an ontological inquiry of Bahrain's local fashion system with tangible solutions, such as recommendations on waste management and local designer training.

The Delphi study is an anonymised, consensus-building series of interviews (Okoli and Pawlowski, 2004; Skulmoski et al., 2007; Brady, 2015). Delphi study participants (n = 16) included a mix of public servants in economic and environmental roles, fashion retailers, academics, and activists. The Delphi method consisted of two rounds of questioning, the latter building on the findings from the first. After each round was compiled and anonymised answers were shared, panellists adjusted their answers in light of reading the viewpoints of other participants. While the Delphi study allows for a pragmatic viewpoint on policy and change from those in positions of influence, the semi-structured interviews contributed a whole system context and narrative building, giving voice to those that are usually not at the forefront of decision making in Bahrain. Semi-structured interview participants (n = 19) included local weavers, tailors, designers, my two grandmothers for their historical lived experiences surrounding fashion and tailoring in Bahrain, small business owners and salespeople. Additionally, resident participant observation through living in Bahrain for months at a time throughout the period of research generated field notes during various visits to malls, discount stores, souks, and a workshop with local fashion designers (n = 22). Analysis my own field notes from participant observation throughout the research allowed for a mapping of fashion systems in Bahrain and a nuanced understanding of social and material obstacles to scaling local fashion businesses.

Ultimately, this thesis is both an ontological inquiry and an attempt at generating practical recommendations towards fashion sustainability in Bahrain. Findings from the research suggest a unique ontology, stemming from local epistemes, for fashion practice in Bahrain which prioritizes social practice – such as a strong local tailoring sector, a mall culture, *souq* culture, sharing culture, the niche role of local bespoke designers, and the different types of fashion labour locally. With these elements in the status quo, I argue that a definition for fashion sustainability in Bahrain must stem from *within* this system.

1.5 Summary of results

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of the thesis present and analyse the findings of my empirical research. To understand the social experience of fashion in Bahrain, Chapter 5 uses the results from the Delphi study, interviews, and participant observation to do two things. First, to create a language bank for fashion and sustainability in Bahrain. Second, to map the flow of fashion in Bahrain from a material point of view, simplified from canonical texts in fashion sustainability discourse (Gwilt and Rissanen, 2011; Fletcher, 2014, Tojo et al., 2012, Nørup et al., 2019). In doing so, Chapter 5 aligns the stages of *source*, *make*, *use* and *last* (Gwilt and Rissanen, 2011), commonly used in fashion sustainability to the Gulf ontology and experience of fashion, revealing a distinctive emphasis on spaces like malls, which serve not only as places of purchase but also integral components of Gulf civic life where fashion is actively utilised. Moreover, the chapter explores the significance of value derived from sharing and donation cultures prevalent in the Gulf. By contrasting these insights with Western perspectives on fashion sustainability, Chapter 5 introduces a *blurred* lifecycle model. This model challenges the conventional lifecycle stages by emphasising that the stages of *source*, *make*, *use* and *last* are not mutually exclusive in the Bahraini and Gulf fashion experience, as they are often positioned to be in Western discourse.

Chapter 5 also reveals, through participant observation during a workshop with Bahraini designers, the structural difficulties they contend with in a society highly reliant on global imports. Fashion design in Bahrain and the Gulf has historically been a trade rather than profession. In Bahrain, a significant portion of fashion designers are self-taught and run small businesses, often without formal fashion training. These designers, stemming from a tradition of neighbourhood tailors, now create ready-to-wear collections, sell in their own shops across different neighbourhoods, and utilise social media for advertising. The Royal University for Women, established in 2005, was the first institution to offer formal training in fashion design in Bahrain. Chapter 5 demonstrates that the way in which local designers understand sustainability within fashion is in line with or inspired by the messaging of commercial entities in the Gulf, denoting a sense of business continuity or Corporate Social Responsibility.

Building on the first results chapter, Chapter 6 lays out visions of fashion sustainability in the Gulf derived from the Delphi study. I start this chapter by discussing the vision ranked as most feasible and impactful by Delphi participants – "A cultural transition: changing relationships to consumption". It is then followed by a tie of two visions, which

are discussed in an intertwined manner: "A maker society with empowered labour" and "decentralisation, de-globalisation, and growth of local production". The remainder of Chapter 6 pulls in results from the Delphi study, interviews, participant observation and the relevant literature to reflect on what is required to *achieve* these recommendations. Emphasising the built environment, spatial experiences, and phenomenology, I discuss the most highly ranked visions in the Delphi study using an approach of "ontological rather than additive change" (Abdulla et al., 2019. p. 130). A key focus is directed towards different forms of proximity, exploring how these dynamics grant certain local sub-groups unspoken power, visibility, and distinctive experiences over others. This approach sheds light on the complex interplay of cultural transitions, labour empowerment, and localised production, paving the way for a comprehensive understanding of fashion sustainability in the Gulf.

I use the top three visions from the Delphi study as a point of departure for a discussion on Gulf identity in Chapter 7. In this chapter, I contemplate what this study's results say about Gulf identity vis a vis fashion. In this chapter, I contend with the difficult reconciliation of a collective identity developed against a backdrop of oil wealth with other aspects of identity – such as those of being a post-colonial consumer, a non-maker society and constrained creativity. Drawing on both literary sources introduced in earlier chapters and the results from the Delphi study and interviews, Chapter 7 reflects on identity and creative education in a Gulf fashion context, and what a transformation towards sustainability as outlined in Chapters 5 and 6 would mean for each. Subsequently, Chapter 8 concludes the thesis with a summation of contributions and future areas of research.

1.6 Conclusion

This thesis explores fashion systems, practice and epistemes in Bahrain in order to map a local fashion ontology for Bahrain and the Gulf. These findings for fashion sustainability in Bahrain emerge in a context unique to the Gulf, where per capita income is high (alongside local income inequality), labour conditions are often dire (Yalcin, 2015; Babar, 2019), and local customs blend historical fashion practice – such as tailoring, mending, informal sharing economies – with modern fast fashion consumption.

Findings from the research suggest unique epistemes and an ontology for fashion practice in Bahrain which prioritises social practice and expands the conventional definition of fashion "use". With these elements in the status quo, a definition for fashion sustainability locally must stem from within this system.

In its approach, this research is wary of a romanticised conflation of tradition with sustainability. In the time of the Anthropocene, it is vital to look at the Gulf in its entirety, with its unique attributes – both Western-imported and the traditional, and the flurry in between which has become indistinguishable as Arab or Western – to envision the future of design for sustainability for the region. The challenges that the Gulf has in common with the rest of the world are larger than those that make it exceptional, but its solutions must be locally derived – both culturally and politically. To this end, Chapter 2 introduces the historical and social context of Bahraini fashion.

2 Fashion as History, Culture, and Politics in Bahrain

2.1 Introduction

This chapter puts forward a historicised account of Bahrain's fashion history. In doing so, it introduces Bahrain's local fashion culture, different groups and their relationships to local fashion, production and consumption, and fashion spaces, as well as power dynamics, labour and the role of local fashion in modern-day Bahrain.

The first section of this chapter, Section 2.2, gives a historical account of production and consumption in Bahrain's local fashion industry, leading up to styles of the mid-19th century, which still exist today in modernised forms alongside imported Western styles. Building on that, Section 2.3 explores the nuances of fashion, gender, class, and national identity in Bahrain through fashion and consumerism. Within this section, I make an analogy of fashion locally to sports, and posit that both are used as social and political proxies amidst forms of governance in the Gulf which tend to present a homogenous cultural and political national identity. Lastly, Section 2.4 gives an overview of the different groups within Bahrain and their relationships to fashion, power, and labour within production. What becomes clear through a critical account of Bahrain's fashion history is that both historical and modern-day migration are integral to the tale of Bahraini modern fashion. Further, modern power dynamics within fashion point to larger questions in the Gulf relating to labour conditions, narratives of cultural homogeneity, and the functioning of the Gulf as a neo-colonial entity in relations to its own marginalised groups and global trade and labour relationships.

2.2 Bahrain's fashion history and modernity

2.2.1 History, trade, and dress in Bahrain pre-oil

> I find there is a seaport called Bareyn [Bahrain], whereunto a ship of 2 or 3 hundred tons may come, and I understand the country spends much cloth, for the Venetians bring it overland and so carry with them again all sorts of Persian silks, which trade is, as it were, offered us, and surely I think in a short time will be able to vent as much cloth as Surat. (Thomas Aldworth, 1613 in Jenner, 1984, p. 18)

Bahrain has a history of being a trading port and thus an ethnically diverse city, compared to its Gulf neighbours, as while it was historically always a predominantly Arab island, it was under both Persian and Portuguese rule, prior to its current Arab rulers, creating an influx of cultural and commodity trade. This historical trade included textile inflows from modern-day Iran and Iraq as early as 2200–1600 BC, in exchange for embellishments such as glazed stone beads, ceramics, and native pearls from Bahrain – part of the civilisation of Dilmun at the time (Larsen, 1983), which included parts of modern-day Eastern Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (Calvet, 1989; Nayeem, 1990).

Shortly after 600BC, the Babylonians incorporated historical Bahrain, or Dilmun, into their empire, and the island was consequently conquered by the Persians in 538 BC. As part of the Persian Empire, and from the 6th to the 3rd century BC, Bahrain was referred to by the Ancient Greeks as *Tylos* and became known for its wide trading network and large plantations of cotton tree. Bouchaud et al. (2011) posit that the cotton production in this period, through evidence of historic seeds and textiles at Qal'at al-Bahrain, was likely intended for trade. At the time, date cultivation, fishing and pearling, as well as local handicrafts, continued to support the population well into the 7th century, when the spread of Islam started, to a population that at-the-time consisted of Arabs following diverse local belief practices, including Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism. Adherence to Islam added a new dimension to Bahrain's polity, replacing the narrative of Dilmun's commercial and mythological golden age and creating an Islamic and Arab heritage and identity that would carry Bahrain to its modern-day ethnic and religious definitions (Jenner, 1984).

Following the expansion of the Islamic Caliphate, Bahrain and Oman both benefited commercially as port-cities for mainland Arabia, importing vast amounts clothing from Persia, India and China (al-Naboodah, 1992). During Abbasid rule (750 to 899AD), a new cosmopolitan Islamic fashion emerged that combined trends from several ethnic factions within the empire — Arabs, Irano-Turkics and Hellenistic Mediterraneans (Stillman, 2003). The Abassids were more comfortable wearing special clothing that signified their

rank than their predecessors, the Umayyads. Fashionable dressing became increasingly popular among elites, in particular high-ranking officials and members of the court who wore black robes, which were often honorary gifts from the government (ibid). Fashion at the time also included a large focus on scent, and how it was layered in with clothing. Scents that were popular among the elite included powdered musk, rose water solution, and ambergris tinctured aloeswood soaked in fermented clove water (ibid). Garment materials among the elites included silks fine linens and furs in the winter. For commoners, however, which the majority of Bahraini natives would have been at the time, every-day dressing was much less extravagant. Garments of everyday labourers were made out of cheaper materials, such as a light wool fabric called *khirqa* — this term is still used today, however to mean a rag-cloth (ibid). The dressing of elites in long, black robes, is likely to have inspired the modern Bahraini and Gulf *bisht*, an outer layer, or draped cloak usually made from wool, worn by men for formal or elite occasions today such as court visits, royal visits, and weddings. The word *bisht* is derived from the Persian "to go on one's back" (al-Mukhtar, 2012, p. 1) and is worn in Iraq as well as the Arab (also called Persian) Gulf, signifying the cohesive fashions inherited from a shared Abbasid as well as Persian-influenced history. A *bisht* is usually hand-sewn, with silk, animal hair (lama, goat, camel), or gold embroidery on the collar and sleeves. The trade and craft of *bisht* making has been passed down within well-known families in the Persian Gulf, specifically in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Hand-sewing of one *bisht* could take from 80 to 120 hours and up to four tailors – today, machine-made varieties are available (al-Mukhtar, 2012).

The weight of the *bisht's* history – and its local connotations – were a popular topic on social media and within the formal media in the aftermath of the 2022 World Cup. The Cup concluded with the adornment of Lionel Messi, the team captain of the winning Argentinean football team, with a *bisht* by the Emir of Qatar, causing a stir among global audiences. The global conversation highlighted the Gulf's evolving pursuit of cultural capital alongside its now well-established economic hubs. This cultural capital on the world-stage, however, is both complicated by Western perceptions of the Arab world and ongoing critiques of human rights practices.

Illustration 2. 1 The Bisht of the Arabian Gulf

(*Sports Brief*, 2023)

The Al-Salim store, a longstanding bisht supplier to Qatari royalty.

Criticism for the adornment of Messi in a *bisht* centred on Qatar capitalising on Argentina's win to further sports-wash (Church, 2023) its human rights record, particularly with regards to the conditions of its migrant labourers, who had built the World Cup stadiums and infrastructure. Proponents of the move, while not disputing it as a public relations stunt, saw Messi's adornment in a *bisht* as the highest order of respect in Gulf culture – analogous to a crowning moment for the winning captain.

The history of the *bisht* exemplifies both the material history and origins of Bahraini and Gulf traditional garments, as well as the shared history of styles in a pre-border Gulf and wider Arab region. Following centuries of regional trade, European colonisation of the Arab world brought its own materials and power dynamics into the region. Bahrain was first colonized in the 16th century by the Portuguese. The Portuguese occupied Bahrain for the majority of the 16th century, up until 1602. The Portuguese's rule was eventually terminated by a Bahraini revolt (led by the brother of a merchant murdered by the Portuguese governor), after which Bahrain relied on Persian protection for the majority of the 17th century. In the mid-18th century, the Omanis, the Hawala Arabs, and Sheikh Nasir of Bushire (a Persian city on the west-coast of Modern-day Iran) all fought for

control, leading to the dwindling of Bahrain's 360 towns and villages to 60 battle-torn villages (Jenner, 1984).

Illustration 2. 2 Emir of Qatar adorns Messi with a Bisht

(*Gulf News*, 2022)

Emir of Qatar puts a Bisht on Lionel Messi after Argentina's World Cup 2022 victory in Doha.

In 1782, Bahrain was conquered by the ancestors of the current ruling family – the Al Khalifa – and therefore removing Persian control until this day. The Al-Khalifa are considered cousins of Al-Sabah (the rulers of modern-day Kuwait) and originate from the same clan as Al-Sauds (the rulers of modern-day Saudi Arabia). Under Al-Khalifa, Bahrain was supported by British maritime power (Onley, 2009). By the 1870s, Bahrain had become the pre-eminent trading centre in the Persian Gulf, overtaking rivals Basra, Kuwait, and Muscat (Onley et al, 2004). Concurrently, Bahrain's socio-economic development diverged from the other countries of the Persian Gulf: by the mid-19th century, Bahrain had transformed itself from a tribal trading centre into a modern state (Larsen, 1983).

Illustration 2. 3 The Bahrain silk, gold embroidered *thobe* for celebrations

(The Zay Initiative, 2024)

Black silk thobe al-nashal dress, embroidered with gold thread. Such designs are still adopted by women for traditional events in Bahrain.

By the mid-19th century, fashion in Bahrain consisted of white or light-coloured robes for men called *thobe* (which persist today), as well as colourful and light-weight *nafnoof* (a long-sleeved and loose-fitted dress; *nafnoof* is also the modern-day colloquial *Bahrani* word for a woman's dress), occasionally paired with a *malmal* (a shawl-like cotton layer worn on top of the *nafnoof*) (interview with paternal grandmother, R01, 2018). Women's fashion were likely to have been similar to men's, adopted from both the Persian and Abbasid influences on the island over the past centuries, colourful, weaved, and tailored – women's formal dresses for special occasions consisted of gold thread weaved into dyed silks, culminating in the delicate hand-woven *thobe* or occasionally called *thobe al-nashal*. The Bahraini *thobe* is still worn by brides in the region, in traditional ceremonies such as the *Jelwa* (the celebration of a woman's entry into married life) and *Melcha* (the religious ceremony of marriage), at times in addition to a white wedding, a tradition adopted in the 20th century.

While rural *Bahrani* (belonging to the group of *Baharna*, the Shia majority of Bahrain, often regarded as native inhabitants of the island) women – who were often the wives of farmers, fabric, and basket weavers – adopted the *nafnoof* and *malmal* for everyday wear,

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fashions differed for the wives of pearl-divers, as well as for women of Bedouin or tribal origin (interview with paternal grandmother, R01, 2018). The differences in style between Bahrain's modern ethno-sectarian groups is beyond the aims of this study, however these local groups are discussed further in Section 2.5. A discussion of local ethnic and ethno-sectarian groups serves to clarify relationships to modern day power, labour, and industry dynamics.

The great trading families that emerged during the stability of the 19th century have been compared to the Borgias and Medicis (Syed et al., 2011). Their great wealth – a century before the oil wealth the region would later become well-known for – gave them extensive power, and their growth further opened Bahrain to global trade. Among the most prominent were the Shia family of al-Safar, who engaged in agency work with British companies such as Messrs Lynch (a shipping company) and Fracis Times and Co (an arms dealer) in the 19th century (Onley, 2007).

The emergence of large trade families and networks in the 19th century attracted large numbers of Persian, *Huwala*, and Indian merchant families who set up businesses on the island, making it the nexus of a vast web of trade routes across the Persian Gulf, Persia and the Indian sub-continent. In turn, this affected the mixture of clothing and sighted fashions in Bahrain. An account of Manama in 1862 found:

> Mixed with the indigenous population [of Manamah] are numerous strangers and settlers, some of whom have been established here for many generations back, attracted from other lands by the profits of either commerce or the pearl fishery, and still retaining more or less the physiognomy and garb of their native countries. Thus the gay-coloured dress of the southern Persian, the saffron-stained vest of Oman, the white robe of Nejed, and the striped gown of Bagdad, are often to be seen mingling with the light garments of Bahreyn, its blue and red turban, its white silk-fringed cloth worn Banian fashion round the waist, and its frock-like overall; while a small but unmistakable colony of Indians, merchants by profession, and mainly from Guzerat, Cutch, and their vicinity, keep up here all their peculiarities of costume and manner, and live among the motley crowd, 'among them, but not of them'. (WG Palgrave, 1862–3 in Fuccaro, 2005, p. 39)

This co-existence of different cultural and ethnic groups in the 19th century in Bahrain, the strengthening of Al-Khalifa, and the local British influence gave way to a series of structural reforms in the early 20th century, which separated religious and state affairs and contrasted more conservative sentiments in neighbouring Saudi Arabia. In the 20th century, while Saudi Arabia legislated the headscarf for women, with a large leaning towards conservative styles of dress such as the full-face cover or *burqa*, Bahrain did not legislate similar dress-codes. In tandem, the state of Bahrain provided women as well as men with education opportunities locally and abroad. With more exposure to Western forms of dress locally and abroad, Bahrainis participated increasingly in global or Western

fashion trends, while maintaining regional notions of modesty depending on the religiosity of their households.

2.2.2 Fashion in Bahrain today

Between 1920 and 1960, reforms to ensure Bahrain's liberalisation were spearheaded by the royal family in conjunction with the British Empire, under the de facto rule of Charles Belgrave, the British advisor to the Emir Shaikh Hamad Al-Khalifa. While politically motivated – to ensure that Bahrain remained a liberal ally amidst the Saudi-Wahhabi and Iranian influence of the time – the royal family's focus on liberalism had a deterministic impact on Bahrain's social norms for the century to come. The country's first modern school was opened in 1919, followed by the Arab Gulf's first girl school in 1928 (Abuzeyad et al., 2022). The impacts of this top-down social reform, combined with the oil wealth of the 1930s and 1940s, created a generation of educated women as early as the 1950s, with it being common for women to travel for university studies to cities like Basra or Egypt. Images of Bahraini women in the 1950s and 1960s show socially liberal dressing, with more modest styles increasing drastically with the emergence of conservative Shia sentiment in Iran in the 1980s. While a fraction of Bahraini youth growing up in 1980s embraced heightened conservatism in their dress and social values, unlike Iran or Saudi Arabia, Bahrain did not instigate restrictions or law for women's fashion, which allowed a large fraction of women to dress in a more "liberal" manner. In the 1990s, the entry of global chains into the Bahrain fashion market, and the larger GCC, flooded the region with international fashion chains.

Today, Bahraini fashion is a mixture of high-street Western fashion, with malls lined with chains such as H&M, Zara, GAP, and Mango, as well luxury global players, such as Saks Fifth Avenue and Galleries Lafayette, and local fashion, made locally and predominantly in semi-conservative or conservative trends. A large percentage of the female Bahraini population wears the hijab, but often pairs it with garments from the Western high street. Also prevalent is the *abaya*, traditionally black but today worn in various colours and styles, worn for modesty over other clothing.

The Instagram and social media age saw a rise Bahrain's home-based fashion businesses, ultimately leading to the creation of a commercial registration for home businesses to conduct retail operations (MOIC, 2018), which largely rely on sales through social media. A fragmented, difficult to measure, but defining and palpable part of the fashion scene in Bahrain consists of locally tailored fashion, which can range from visiting the tailor for special occasions (such as a family wedding or religious celebration), to buying ready-to-

wear garments from local designers and tailors, who capitalise on the plethora of small to medium-sized fabric and trim shops established in the 18th and 19th century. These shops, strewn across most souks in Bahrain, were established by local tradesmen that imported fabrics from Asia in particular, catering to local demand.

The traditional fashions of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries persist in men wearing a white, light-weight *thobe*, as well as women adapting the *thobe al-nashal* and *nafnoof* into more modern-style and pan-Arabian *jalabiyyas*. These traditionally-rooted fashions co-exist and run concurrently with global fashion chains, and the dichotomous trends tend to exist unanimously for the majority of Bahraini women; i.e., a Bahraini woman may wear a pair of jeans and blouse from Topshop to the mall on the weekend but choose to wear a modernized *jalabiyya* or *thobe* for a traditional function.

For the sake of this study, it is useful to think of fast fashion as a regional force in the Gulf, rather than just locally in Bahrain, as regional agents and corporations tend to supply the countries in the region and follow similar patterns of consumption. Often these agents operate from central warehouses in the Gulf, dispatching on a weekly or daily basis (R11, 2018). Also, customers are fluid, and before the surge of brands in the 2000s, it was common for Bahrainis to go on road trips to big malls in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and this still happens in the sense that regional tourism exists. This is further fortified by the fact that retail groups such as Al-Shaya, Majid Al-Futtaim, Al-Tayer, and Chalhoub Group, among others, operate as brand agents across the region as opposed to within one country (GulfTalent, 2021).

For the purposes of this study, and to reflect the spectrum of modern Bahraini dress, I have split styles into three categories: traditional; semi-traditional; and global or Western dress. These categories will be used throughout this study, and in particular in Chapters 6–8 where sustainability across the lifecycle of different garments is discussed as parts of the results of this research. "Traditional" in this context refers to garments that have retained much of their pre-colonial characteristics stylistically. It is important to note however, that even traditional styles and patterns have seen their source materials change, with a local Bahraini weaver describing how today traditional patterns are weaved with synthetic yarns imported from China, whereas yarns used to be harvested and spun locally in the past (R15, 2018). "Global" or "Western" styles refer to both luxury and high street, branded and unbranded clothing, which is stylistically informed by Western codes. This includes everyday T-shirts, office clothing, and the majority of casual clothing in Bahrain (paired with or without an *abaya* for women). As Chapter 6 explains further, some of

these garments may be made regionally by small contemporary designers as well, since "Global" or "Western" here is a stylistic identifier, as opposed to one that connotes material origin. In this way, Bahrain's local fashion system participates in creating Western-styled garments, using global supply chains in the same way a European city would.

To understand the "semi-traditional" category, it is important to recognise its development within Gulf fashion. Regionally, Gulf countries hold individual reputations – both in terms of style and quality – in terms of what they make best. Saudi Arabia, for instance, is known for high quality men's head dresses – called *shmaagh* in the Saudi dialect and *ghitra* in the Bahrain dialect (local weaver, R16, 2018). The Saudi *shmaagh* is exported across the Gulf and the Levant as well. Qatar is reputable for their high quality *bisht*, a cloak-like woollen outer-layer, worn by men over the *thoub* for special occasions (local weaver, R16, 2018), highly associated with sheikhdom and tribal culture (see Chapter 2). Bahrain, Kuwait, and Jeddah (In Saudi Arabia) are known for contemporary and trendy interpretations of traditional wear, offering modern takes on traditional and semi-traditional styles, the fashion designers in the workshop divulged. Historically, Bahrain and Kuwait have had more liberal social and legal dress codes compared to their Gulf neighbours – as well as more women in the workplace in the past four decades (Al-Kazi, 2008) – and within Saudi Arabia, Jeddah is renowned for its relatively lax dress code. A less socially defined attitude towards dressing in these three locations may have led to the contemporising of traditional styles, like the *abaya* and *jalabiyya*, giving way to contemporary semi-traditional. Often, a semi-traditional piece alters silhouettes from traditional garments, often into more modernised or globalised silhouettes and concepts. For example, instead of a traditional *jalabbiya*, a semi-traditional one might be shorter, be sleeveless, or even be tailored into a top worn with jeans.

Starting in the late 1980s, fashion conventions and fairs with both traditional and semi-traditional styles became common particularly popular in Kuwait and Bahrain, with designers from across the Gulf flocking for sales and often other art events (local fashion designer, R05, 2018). In recent years, Riyadh, Doha, and Dubai have emerged as art capitals in the Gulf, with state and corporate funding of mammoth arts and culture initiatives that have both global and local appeal. Today, large initiatives in these cities like Fashion Forward Dubai, Saudi Design Week, and Fashion Trust Arabia are shaping the regional mainstream in fashion, with the semi-traditional category gaining momentum.

The duality, or rather spectrum, of traditional forms of dress, Western trends, and the modern creoles of the two are found globally in post-colonial fashion cultures and non-Western capitals. Describing African fashion, Jennings describes:

> Some designers' work is more Afro-centric, while others make clothes that do not seem African at all at first glance, but viewed together they reflect the flair and variety the scene has to offer. It is these designers whose collection strike a balance between global seasonal trends and local inspiration, and who present fashion as both fresh and authentic (Jennings, 2019, p. 108).

In Chapter 6, the results of this study present a life-cycle view of these stylistic categories, splitting them further to "made locally" and "made abroad". While acknowledging that the reality of the style-spectrum in Bahrain and the Gulf is closer to that which Jennings describes, this categorisation allows a simpler modelling of the lifecycle.

2.2.3 A modern Gulf consumerism and materialism

An understanding of fashion and sustainability through cultural practice underpins the methodology of this study (see Chapter 5) and analytical approach of results (see Chapters 6, 7, 8). In particular, understanding fashion as "an embodied practice that takes place in a collectively shared social space" (Miller, 2016, p. 12) influences the approach of the study. For the Gulf, this collectively shared social space includes a fast pace of consumption and reliance on fast-paced global imports. Springborg (2008) notes that "the transition from tradition to modernity in the Gulf is particularly interesting precisely because it is so recent, so profound and so rapid" (p. 13). This rapid transition also included a marked shift in consumer spending and preferences, which happened within the span of a generation.

While the garments historical to the region persist today in modernised form, as described in the previous section, they exist concurrently with the import of fast fashion regionally and in Bahrain. This study explores the different routes of fast fashion and locally made fashion across the lifecycle (see results in Chapter 6) against a backdrop of literature that affirms a high degree of fashion consumerism in the Gulf, in tandem with a global throwaway culture (McKay et al., 2018). Mourtada-Sabah et al. (2008), writing about the Islamicate context in the Gulf, go as far as to say that the young generation has developed a religion of secular consumerism — a value system informed by media messages and individualism, rather than values of group life enshrined in Islam. Looking at Emiriti youth, the researchers observe that the coming-of-age generation "buy designer clothing, French perfume, and brand-name accessories" (p. 122) and many have a culture that differs from their grandparents, with "new loyalties going to material possessions" as

opposed to "virtues of self-sufficiency, localised culture, thrift, and social bonds of tribe and family" (p. 122). The researchers invoke the power of advertising in the Gulf, where "commercial art comes to represent perceived reality, advertising becomes a replacement metaphor for life experienced" (p. 127). In today's age of social media culture, particularly on Instagram and Snapchat, the Gulf's immersion in commercial art as part of daily life is also extended in the digital sphere. While Mourtada-Sabah et al. (2008) argue that conspicuous consumption has replaced ideals inherited from past generations as a site for culture to unfold, I argue that it is not a replacement, but rather an evolution of local culture in tandem with a rise of global capitalism and more recently digitisation. In Chapter 6, this study's results explore retail spaces and social media as fashion spaces, where material and digital cultures respectively unfold in the Gulf.

Understanding the material culture of fashion, its spaces of consumption, and social patterns around it is integral to this study's approach. A path towards sustainability must be derived from local culture, by allowing for the emergence of material culture as a continuation – not replacement – of historical local culture. While certain cultures are specific to the Gulf and its history, with the advents of technology and modernisation the Gulf also has a lot in common with the rest of the modern world. Mourtada-Sabah et al. find that "youngsters in Dubai and in New York have more in common than either group has with their grandparents' generation" (2008, p. 126). To hold both the individualisation of the Gulf fashion space and its participation in global modernity is important, as its material culture will have both commonality to a global materialism but a local culture in which it plays out. In Section 2.4.1, I discuss the intersection of ethno-sectarian groups in Bahrain with fashion textiles and trade, reflecting on the ways in which globalisation plays out locally and the impact on material conditions of different groups.

In general, literature on Gulf culture shows that materialism has become a vanguard of everyday life, where clothing and accessories, like much of the world today like expensive cars, have become vital symbols that reflect social priorities and notions of success (Mourtada-Sabah et al, 2008). What is unique to the Gulf is that this transition has happened quickly, with elders still evoking memories of time where individuals were judged by honour and lineage (ibid). A duality of local heritage as well as Western influence abounds, which manifests in both language and values; "compartmentalization allows Arab values, language and cosmology to be used within the home, and the global worldview, its accompanying values and the English language, to be used in business and education, or what would be considered the public sphere" (Mourtada-Sabah et al, 2008,

p. 129). The government supports the development of both values, because an educated and skilled workforce that can participate in the global economy provides human capital for economic growth; a cultural strategy for the capitalist monarchies of the region. In this way, culture creation efforts or strategies beg the question of what cultural components support transitions towards sustainability in the Gulf. Further, it serves as context for the role of materialism – particularly of Western, often imported brands – from a governance strategy perspective in the Gulf. Thus, materialism as a local culture can be examined as a social phenomenon but also a strategic, cultural form of governance, manifesting as the ultimate mechanism for personal expression and social mobility – without negotiating larger political questions.

In *The High Price of Materialism* (2002), Tim Kasser posits that materialistic values manifest in the lives of those who have a history of having their needs not well met. He explains that such a proxy for meeting needs often exacerbates the needs themselves; "remarkably, economies focused on consumption appear, in turn to foster conditions that heighten psychological insecurities, and in this sense they fuel themselves" (p. xii). Also, Kasser finds that lack of safety and security can lead individuals to focus on materialistic values, and that women with less opportunities for social advancement or controlling their reproduction have been found to be more materialistic. Others note that the inextricable link between *citizen* and *consumer* is part of the modern social contract under capitalism (Jubas, 2007; Trentmann, 2007; Oxhorn, 2010; Kuehn, 2015). While this commentary on citizenship and consumption is global (Kasser primarily conducts his research in the US, Oxhorn's research is on South America, etc.) the parallel can be made to the Gulf due to a shared modernity of capitalism and fashion in the form of multi-national corporations. What is distinct to the Gulf, and Bahrain in particular, is the way in which this materialism plays out culturally.

Kasser argues that to re-arrange societies towards post-materialism, some of the steps needed include to "vote for governmental officials who realise that increasing national wealth will not increase our happiness", "work to ensure everyone's security" and "experiment with alternative economic systems" (Kasser, 2002, p. 112, p. 113) – all of which may be difficult in a context where governance is authoritarian and non-democratic. In Section 7.2, Kasser's discussion of materialism is used to dissect the results of this study that point to fashion consumerism and materialism in Bahrain.

While these facets apply to the global consumer model, locally in the Gulf, some facets of materialism are highly intertwined with gender, class, and national identity. The next section explores these nuances.

2.3 Fashion, gender, political proxies, and heritage creation in Bahrain

This section explores Gulf fashion culture today, and how it is inextricably tied to both consumerism and identity in localised ways. For instance, the identity of modern women and men, their expressions of femininity and masculinity, as well as nationalism can all be observed through fashion choices in the Gulf. In addition, class and social mobility in the Gulf both play a role in how someone chooses to dress or consume fashion. If "the birth of fashion can be said to occur together with the birth of modernity" (Geczy and Karaminas, 2016, p. 82), then what can fashion tell us about the identity of the modern Gulf individual? What becomes clear through navigating the literature on fashion, gender, and culture creation in the Gulf is that fashion indeed operates locally as "child of capitalism" (Wilson, 2003, p. 13). Capitalism, while sharing common features across societies, adapts to unique social and cultural contexts. The Gulf exemplifies how capitalism co-exists (and can bring about) distinctive cultural and societal attributes in its modernity. In this sense, fashion's capitalism in the Gulf allows for individualistic expression, but does so often as a political proxy within the confines of local hegemonic narratives of dominant groups.

2.3.1 Fashion, gender, and expression

Within the past few decades, the role of women has dramatically changed, as have many things about the underpinnings of life in the Gulf. While each Gulf country has a nuanced history with regards to labour laws, dress codes, and strides in women's rights, Gulf countries share a similar culture, history and similarly structured political economies (al-Kazi, 2008). Following the rapid expansion of the Gulf states into welfare states in the 1960s and 1970s with a high degree of provision (including free healthcare, education, and social services), women in the Gulf transitioned from marrying in their teens and often not completing their education to today significantly outnumbering men in completing a tertiary education. However, women constitute only 20% to 30% of the workforce (al-Kazi, 2008) and have in past decades formed several lobbies for their rights, lobbying for issues like family law and the rights of women married to non-nationals (ibid). Despite activism and societal gains for women across the Gulf, political reform has been limited, and public debate has historically stopped short of substantial political issues like citizenship and public property rights (Hamzawy, 2008). These are important

political issues in the Gulf because they directly involve the distribution of power and resources within society, and political progress has often been constrained to domains that don't change the balance of power between governance and citizens. With absolute power over society and economy (ibid), Gulf monarchies rule over an increasingly educated and economically empowered citizenry. For women, this often meant becoming a big decision-maker when it came to consumption, a socially and politically sanctioned activity. Mourtada-Sabbah et al. describe:

> A typical mother now directs the family's activities of consumption, rather than preparing the meals herself (for example, various porridges of mashed dates and their extracts). No longer the repository of crafts, such as baskets and mats woven from palm leaves, she now chooses from a wide plethora of imported goods that her family will consume. (Mourtada-Sabbah et al., 2008, p. 131)

The family aside, consumption is a societal pastime and social signifier for women of all ages in the Gulf. With women's roles changing in the region and their economic power in tandem, other larger nodes of power – namely social and political – lag behind. Observing the patterns of women's participation in the workforce, al-Kazi finds that in the Gulf:

> though women are not paid less for the same job, they are often prevented from moving up the occupation ladder at equal rates. The percentage of women in the higher echelons of decision-making position is low. Early retirement of women after fifteen or twenty years of service further restricts their upward mobility (al-Kazi, 2008, p.175).

In particular, public debate in the Gulf in the past few decades has broached socio-political issues that do not touch the political order itself or core power dynamics (Hamzawy, 2008), limiting shifts in power of marginalised groups internally. This makes transitions towards new modes of power internally constrained or minimal. In her book about Saudi Arabia, *A Most Masculine State*, Madawi Al-Rasheed (2013) explores this complexity of modern patriarchal Gulf society, where a ban on independent associations and the continuous exclusion of women from the public sphere limit the ability for changes in power dynamics. This marginalisation is even more stark for migrant workers or structurally oppressed ethno-sectarian groups. While tokenistic strides for the visibility of women and public displays of "progress" are often made of the Gulf bourgeois woman, for both migrant workers and those form disenfranchised ethno-sectarian groups, social and political dynamics remain constrained. For the sake of this research, this has three implications. First is understanding that consumerism, particularly for women in the Gulf, may be a proxy for social participation in the face of a suppressed engagement in shifting local power dynamics (or to bring in Kasser, a lack of consistent security). Second, when it comes to consumerism and large-scale economic models of Gulf countries, this means that an issue like sustainability – both environmental and ethical – requires the support of

the Gulf rulers themselves. Third, it implies that any efforts of top-down sustainability may by definition exclude wide-ranging and equitable transitions in Gulf society. These implications are further explored in Chapter 3, through a discussion of sustainability and politics the Gulf.

It is no coincidence that one of the main associations with Gulf fashion is debates on modesty cultures. As the final site of power, the female body and how it is dressed is also the domain in which some women may choose to assert their power. Modesty is also not the only currency in this domain. Which brands are worn, styling, how a face is made-up, how much jewellery is worn, or the complete swearing off of fashion are all valid currencies. In a chapter of *Thinking Through Fashion* (2016), Janice Miller examines the work of J.C. Flugel, a psychoanalyst and author of *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930), highlighting that fashion itself is created through the hard-to-reconcile demands or tension between wanting to decorate the body and the modesty demanded by culture (Miller, 2016). This tension creates fashion, through "exposing certain parts of the body to view whilst hiding others" (Miller, 2016, p. 50). Of course, Flugel talks about a general psychoanalysis with regards to clothing, far from specificity to the Gulf, but rather that clothing is a material manifestation of mental forces (Miller, 2016). What is pertinent from Flugel's perspective to women in the Gulf is that that their fashion choices balance local cultural modesty with self-expression (such as style, branding, or even the rejection of fashion entirely) — and the two are not mutually exclusive.

Al-Rasheed (2013) notes how technology today disrupts women's exclusion from the public sphere, and from within the fashion discipline, Reina Lewis (2013) notes that digital communications have provided women from modesty cultures a space to dispute religious and social discourse. Lewis (2013) states that "online modesty discourse can indeed be regarded as a new form of religious discourse in which women are achieving recognition as religious interpreters and intermediaries" (pp. 6–7). As the lines between digital and non-digital blur, the online sphere also impacts in-person discourse and the reality on the ground. For instance, a surge in women selling both fashion and culinary products from home in Bahrain led to the creation of the home-business registration (MOIC, 2018). In this way, Lewis's "interpreters and intermediaries" (p. 7) trigger policy change in the offline sphere as well. While online spheres have expanded the space for women's discourse and business, Al-Rasheed (2013) warns that these technologies have "also provided new opportunities to harm women and confirm their vulnerability in a

male-dominated society" (p. 262), confirming that technology as a tool within a patriarchal order can also re-enforce dominant dynamics.

Fashion is often recognised as a space of resistance for women, where it can "create a space for alternative and transgressive version of femininity" (Miller, 2016, p. 58) and is a "unique cultural product which is always situated within the feminine sphere" (Miller, 2016, p.57). Lewis and Micklewright (2006) acknowledge that the consumption of goods for women in the Middle East has historically been a significant area to display influence and power. Another reason for women's high profile in fashion in the Gulf may be that it is designated an area of "low prestige" (Woodhead, 2013, p. xviii), making it a sphere where "women can act autonomously and creatively, outside of male control and as leaders in their own right" (ibid). Of course, in the Gulf, both social and legal codes around dress and modesty dictate the arena in which fashion plays out, but within that women express autonomy through stylistic choices nonetheless. Perhaps, for women in the Gulf fashion and its consumption are then a forum for participation in societies that often make tokenistic strides towards shifting power dynamics. Also, building off the idea that materialism is higher in patriarchal settings (Kasser, 2002) and consumerism as a competitive differentiator for women (Anthony et al., 2016), fashion consumerism may be a way for Gulf women to be competitively distinctive, particularly against migrant women or national women of lower socio-economic class. In Shaikha Al-Buhaweed's article "Why are domestic workers excluded from the feminism of Gulf women?" (2020), she highlights that in addition to constrained rights of migrant workers, domestic workers, often women, face lower protections and freedoms than their male counterparts. Within a competitive patriarchy, fashion consumerism in the Gulf may serve as both a class and ethnic differentiator, particularly when the two (class and ethnicity) are often synonymous.

While often fashion literature in the Arab world focuses on women, and modesty disproportionately applies to women in patriarchal societies, men also express themselves through fashion choices in Bahrain, including modesty. While women's rights – and their right to dress the way they would like – often receive more attention, under authoritarian regimes men are also negotiating their political place and power, albeit with the social privilege of their gender, relative to women in the region. Moreover, politically marginalised groups such as migrant workers and certain ethno-sectarian groups are often suppressed or excluded completely from negotiating their political place and power. As Sarah Trainer (2015) puts forward in her study on Emirati women, fashion choices in the

Gulf allow women performances "across different social and physical spaces" (p. 1) which feed into dynamic presentations of self-hood. Building on Judith Butler's work, Trainer focuses on young Emirati women's "ongoing processes by which they actively engaged in 'self-making' through behaviors, speech, gestures, and fashion" (p. 2). Similarly, for men in the Gulf, fashion choices have meaning. Choosing to wear the *thoub* may signify an alignment with mainstream cultural heritage and prestige, Western-style garments may signify a "modern man" or simply a non-alignment with mainstream cultural heritage (see next section).

Tailored suits, for men in the Gulf, represent the modern professional, embodying a social class across ethnic categories. These too, are all *deliberate* presentations of the self. Often, modern patriarchal norms for masculinity constrain styles for men in Bahrain and the Gulf to the three choices above – *thoub*, Western-style garments (such as a t-shirt and pair of jeans), or tailored suits. Namely, the designation of fashion as an area of "low prestige", and the association of prestige with patriarchal norms, classifies men that transgress the three stylistic choices as frivolous, and will often socially penalise them as too "metro" or "less masculine". For the sake of this study, it is the co-existence of these systems of dress – both local and Western – that are relevant for a path towards sustainability for both men and women, and for both locals and migrant communities. The garb of the modern man in the Gulf is a mixture of imported global high street garments, often manufactured with low-wage labour in foreign countries, and a few *thoubs* for more formal occasions, made by low-wage labour locally. Thus, the garb of the modern man in the Gulf illustrates both the post-coloniality and neo-coloniality of the region, through both dressing as the Western ideal and relying on and exacerbating neo-colonial labour dynamics locally and abroad. Chapter 7 uses the results of this study to reflect on the Gulf identity within this political duality, as part of a regionally powerful bloc (the GCC), but often on the receiving end of Western hegemony. Examining gender and fashion in the Gulf shows that while men uphold more political power, they are more narrowly confined when it comes to expressing their identities within areas of "low prestige", similarly to the West. The next section discusses how fashion and sports often act as political proxies for women and men respectively in the Gulf.

2.3.2 Political proxies in the Gulf: Fashion and Sports

Globally, national identity is inherently a political issue as modern states struggle to create cultural identities that both reflect heterogeneity and justify their current power structures. In the Gulf, sports and fashion are two powerful sites for the debate of national identity.

Nationalism and sports have often been linked (Eriksen, 1993; Tervo, 2001; Lozada, 2006; Bairner, 2015; Seippel, 2017), with the designation of sports as an informal form of nationalism (Eriksen, 1993). Baabood (2008) finds that Gulf governments, in fact, have a large interest in generating collective identity through sports. Similar patterns have been observed for Western governments, where states have often used sports to manage identity and to bolster legitimacy and citizen commitment (Houlihan, 1997). Similarly, I argue that fashion and its role in heritage in the Gulf, as part of building a local, often homogenous cultural identity functions similarly. Thus, often fashion and sports – and the illusions of choice and power-plays within them – act as an outlet for otherwise legally or socially suppressed political expression.

Clothing and sports as traditional tokens are used to reflect nationalism or a lack thereof locally. These can be both modern – like football and the modernised *abaya* or *thoub* – or from the traditional repertoire – like falcon hunting, horse-back riding, and heritage clothing, such as the *bisht* and *thobe al nashal*. Put simply, supporting a sports team locally, or choosing to wear a t-shirt and jeans over a *thoub* – which has come to represent a mainstream Gulf culture – are both forms of social and political expression.

For women in Gulf, fashion can be a way "to construct self (selves) and create solidarity with others along lines that do not adhere to traditional family-tribe affiliations" (Trainer, 2015, p. 20). In addition to the politics of ethno-sectarianism, women contend with the strong social organisation principle of their family traditions. Studying the fashion choices of Emirati college-aged women, Trainer (2015) sees that through "these seemingly ephemeral performances, women assess and even re-form the sociocultural values, forms of reciprocity, and ways of being in the world that dominate other areas of their lives" (p. 20). Looking at how modesty in particular plays into ephemeral performance and embodied dress, Almila (2014) outlines three aspects: sensory comfort or discomfort of material on the skin; the shape-giving aspect of dress to the body; and the movement of material as it covers or exposes the body. All three factors contribute to the comfort or protection (or lack thereof) that modesty can give the body.

In addition to modesty as both political proxy and embodied practice, for both men and women, the spaces in which fashion is practised or expressed are also political. For instance, the speed of consumption, experience and visibility of different groups in spaces in Bahrain, and the Gulf, is arguably political. Spatial considerations are then important in determining a future fashion sustainability if equitability of these different groups is part of that future. Almila (2021) adds a spatial element to her work in fashion, asserting

that dress must be understood as spatial practice as it is inherently political, like the space which it inhabits. In other words, the spaces in which dressed bodies reside and move within, and the way in which garments operate within these spaces, all have political aspects.

Furthermore, in Trainer's (2015) study on women's fashion at the Emirati university, she concludes that "fashion choices, socializing patterns, and performances in this particular population were not only inextricably linked but were heavily reliant on the physical and social spaces of the universities" (p. 2). Further she nods to virtual space, or "harder-to-classify spaces created by the exponential growth of social media and other online forums" (p. 17), tying in the spatial and phenomenological conversation to Lewis's (2013) and Al-Rasheed's (2013) assertions on the role of virtual space. Space as part of a fashion system is particularly interesting in the Gulf due to a gendered organisation of space, and the intersection of that with class. For instance, social dress codes often apply differently to groups women (such as nationals, tourists, migrant labour, and so on) in public spaces. Chapter 5, as part of this research's data analysis, links back to space in Bahrain and its intersections with gender, class, and embodied experience. For the purposes of this study, understanding that the spatial is political and intrinsically tied to fashion experience informs the approach to data collection and analysis. Specifically, in Chapter 4, a methodology built on bringing marginalised voices to the centre is elaborated, and in Chapter 6, I take a phenomenological approach to analysing experiences in fashion spaces.

Similarly, the sports analogy allows for dissent – between teams and rivalries – that may be otherwise suppressed politically. Like fashion in the Gulf, "sports is clearly linked to the construction and reproduction of specific sub-national identifies among many people—as, for example masculinity or social class" (Baabood, 2008, p. 98). During this research, and in particular in December 2019 during the second round of the Delphi study and at the end of my data collection trip, Bahrain won the Gulf Cup. Stuck in traffic on the way to the airport, with jubilations in the form of a *maseera* (a car procession), I heard the radio commentator commend this as a moment of "national unity", perhaps the biggest since the 2011 Arab Spring. Putting Sunni and Shia ethno-sectarian divides aside, Shia players going back to their villages were received like grooms on their wedding day, showered in flowers and sweets given out across these villages. National memes spread over WhatsApp, bringing the culture of the marginalised Shia to the mainstream. Baabood (2008), affirming sports as a political proxy, references that Oman had a public, national

celebration simply for being runners-up for the Gulf Cup, and that Kuwait's relatively poor performance in the past few years has sparked strong "public debates, resignation of senior sports personalities and even parliamentary questions" (p. 113). Of course, within each Gulf country, championships where local teams play each other also represent neighbourhood loyalties and local socio-political affiliations.

While sport and fashion in the Gulf are political proxies, they remain areas for direct cultural and social expression within a context where political decision-making is top-down. The extent to which these political proxies can bring about change, or are simply symbolic venues of expression, is widely debated. While Baabood (2008) lays the argument that sports have a direct effect on local socio-politics, Marx and Engels would describe fashion as a political proxy as a form of capitalism's "false consciousness" (Geczy and Karaminas, 2016, p. 83), where institutions of capitalism obfuscate means and ends, impeding effective class struggle. In this way, the Gulf bourgeoisie – or the upper middle class which owns most of society's wealth and means of production – seek consolation in the novelty of fashion (and consumerism at large) as opposed to changes in power dynamics, affirming that "fashion bears witness to the bad faith in capitalism's claim to progress" (Geczy and Karaminas, 2016, p. 84). It is for these reasons that for the remainder of this research, a focus on power dynamics, lived experience, marginalised voices, and an emphasis on labour and colonial dynamics becomes vital to the conversation on fashion sustainability in Bahrain and the Gulf.

2.3.3 Culture creation, heritage, and cultural nationalism

Further to the use of sports and fashion as political proxies, strategic culture building in the Gulf has been noted to use tools of oral history, archaeology, and urban heritage to create a homogeneous identity. Often, this type of culture building has been implemented through salvaging local icons and pre-oil traditions (Lawson and Naboodah, 2008), which are often applied through top-down government campaigning, investment, and support for particular cultural narratives. Lawson and Naboodah (2008), building on Joep Leerssen's 'Nationalism and the cultivation of culture' (2006), explain that cultural cultivation is often implemented in two ways. The first is the creation of social ambience, which occurs through an urban middle-class sociability, such as the establishment of associations, academies, and reading societies. The second is top-down "architecting", or government sponsorship and establishment of state-controlled cultural institutions. Often, the cultural sector in the Gulf is developed through the second form – top-down architecting – with the first form emerging if sanctioned by the state. The authors note

that while literature on cultural architecting tends to centre European case studies, they find the cultivation of culture to be integral to the modern Gulf's state's nation building, particularly for top-down initiatives. Nuances of Gulf culture architecting lay the foundation for what may emerge as state-sanctioned sustainability culture for fashion and beyond.

Khalaf (2008) affirms that invention of traditions in the Gulf is a cornerstone of its nation-building where "scale of this newly produced heritage culture appears to be commensurate with the speed and scale of change these societies have experienced in their post-oil, globally driven, modern conditions" (p. 68). In light of these mechanisms for culture building in the Gulf, several questions pertaining to this research arise. For instance, which overlooked and undervalued elements of culture can be invoked for sustainability culture? Or better yet, can local cultural heritage find ways for nuanced expressions of sustainability from its margins? For groups like local migrant workers, and non-dominant ethno-sectarian groups, how do their lived experiences and cultures lend themselves towards a future sustainability for Bahrain and the Gulf?

For Bahrain in particular, since its independence from British rule in 1970, culture and heritage projects have been patronised by the government directly as well as through art societies. Alkhozai (2008) describes the Ministry of Information "as an administrator and patron of the arts" and that it "played a pivotal role in fostering arts and culture, including archaeology and antiquities" (p.73). Today, the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities continues to play a major role in implementing planned restorations. In addition to state sponsored renovations, Bahrain has a precedent of restorations carried out by private citizens, such as the restoration of Sheikh Ibrahim House, the home of a notable poet and renowned intellectual of the early 20th century. Due to its enormous popularity, other homes were restored through fundraising and support from corporations and business establishments. These examples of heritage building point to non-governmental forces to establish shared cultural norms and heritage preservation (Alkhozai, 2008), but they are nonetheless suspect to proliferating local forms of power (social, economic, political, etc) and act as a consensus making tool for what "culture" is by elite society. In this way, mainstream cultural heritage in the Gulf is often used to provide the cultural and symbolic matter of the state, while also generating support for existing political structures.

Khalaf (2008) believes that "production of new cultural forms is only meaningful when we locate these forms within the broader context of societal transformations" (p. 42). For

the Gulf and transformations towards sustainability, this will require new cultural forms and relationships with the environment and labour. This negotiation of new cultural forms must include both the current beneficiaries of the system, mainly Gulf elites, as well as the fundamental admission of marginalised groups into a historically culturally monolithic narrative.

2.3.4 Mechanisms for culture change

In terms of culture change, Gulf society has reached a threshold of "no return in the cumulative trends in the movement towards globalization" (Mourtada-Sabbah et al., 2008, p. 138). This implies that while a pathway towards fashion sustainability may be unique for the Gulf, it is ultimately tied up in shifting the norms of a globalised industry. This steers the questions of this research to not only what fashion sustainability could look like internally within the Gulf, but also what lessons from the Gulf contribute to the global fashion sustainability conversation.

To explore how to enact change in the Gulf, it is useful to recognise its nuances, such as which narratives are culturally hegemonic, but also de-exceptionalise it. Hamzawy (2008) asserts that the relationship between Gulf states and societies are not simply top down, but rather the political systems of the GCC are over time defined by the cultural forces of their citizenry and "significant openings in their public spaces" (p. 155) since the 1990s. However, these cultural forces and political open spaces often exclude marginalised groups, even though these groups have prominent material cultures and social experiences within the system. Lastly, it is useful to recognise the Gulf's position within the global political order. Lawson and Naboodah (2008), building on Leerssen (2006), propose that:

> anyone who wishes to analyse the dynamics of cultural nationalism in the UAE should not tether a given national movement to its 'proper' country, or to the socioeconomic circumstances and conditions of that [specific] place, but must also situate developments in a dense and tight network of mutual contact and inspiration' that transcends state boundaries (Lawson and Naboodah, 2008, p. 25).

Lawson and Naboodah's provocations on cultural nationalism in the Gulf state are a stark reminder that even a local cultural nationalism is a result of both local forces and international political allyship.

2.4 Labour, ethics, and power across the Bahraini fashion value chain

2.4.1 Ethno-sectarian groups in Bahrain, power, and labour

Understanding the ethno-sectarian make-up of Bahrain is useful for a historical understanding of labour and power dynamics. Bahrainis in Bahrain can be divided into

Baharna, tribal Arabs, *Huwala*, and *Ajam*. *Baharna* are the Shi'a Arabs whose roots lie in the agricultural and fishing villages of the islands of Bahrain. The largest ethno-sectarian group of Bahrain, the *Baharna* represent its historical settled population before the arrival of other Arab tribes from the 1700s onwards (Al-Rumaihi, 1973; Holes, 2001; Fuccaro, 2009). As such, this group is also linked to the neighbouring Shi'a Arabs of eastern Saudi Arabia, the Hasawis and Qatifis. Bahrainis of 'tribal origins' are those whose members identify as belonging to one of the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula, of Arab Sunni ancestry (Holes, 2001; Fuccaro, 2009; Al-Shehabi, 2019). These tribes settled in Bahrain at different times, with *al-'Utub*, the tribe of the ruling al-Khalifa royal family, settling in Bahrain in the 1700s (Al-Rumaihi, 1973; Holes, 2001; Fuccaro, 2009; Al-Shehabi, 2019). This group is associated with the highest degrees of socioeconomic power in Bahrain, bolstered in this position by British protection and colonialism (Holes, 2001; Onley, 2005; Fuccaro, 2009).

As for *Huwala,* they are Sunnis with extensive historical, social, and familial ties across both sides of the Gulf (Arabia and historical Persia), but see their aspirations and identity anchored in Arab culture, thus consider themselves Arabs (Al-Shehabi, 2019). They have been identified by different scholars and actors as Arabs, Persians, Arabized Persians, or Persianized Arabs (Holes, 2001; Fuccaro, 2009; Al-Shehabi, 2019). *Ajam*, on the other hand, are a Shia Persian ethno-sectarian group in Bahrain, who live in close quarters with the *Baharna,* and have a socially and materially intertwined history with them. Many speak Persian as their native language, while speaking conversational Arabic (Fuccaro, 2009; Al-Shehabi, 2019).

While Al-Shehabi (2019) explains the history of the ethno-religious groups that make-up modern-day Bahrain, he is critical of the colonial gaze which has historically seen these cleavages as the underlying forces that shaped local society and its political power, practices, and discourse. Al-Shehabi (2019) posits that a focus on ethno-sectarian cleavages is an orientalist approach, primarily used by colonial powers to understand and rule in the region. Some of these outlooks, he believes, further fed into divisions locally, which can be observed in the modern social and political fabric of Bahrain. For the purposes of this study, these groups are relevant for their modern-day, historicised, and material positions of power. For instance, the *Baharna*, the major group inhabiting Manama historically and today, as well as *Hasawis*, *Qataifis*, and *Ajam*, are often all designated as Shia in the ever-increasing sectarian politics of the region. Moreso, these groups formed the backbone of crafts such as weaving historically in addition to the

Bahrani historical vocation of farming (Fuccaro, 2009; Hussain, 2011; Al-Shehabi, 2019). Al-Shehabi (2019) notes that even within a predominantly Sunni neighbourhood of Muharraq, there is a "notable Shi'a presence, both in terms of Shi'a Arabs and Persians" (p. 60) as rulers actively encouraged the presence of "highly sought after craftsmen, many of them Shi'a"(ibid).

Al-Shehabi (2019) explains that ethno-sectarian affiliations did in fact have an impact on both urban milieu of cities in Bahrain, as well as labour and vocations. The *Baharna*, for instance, composed majority of those trading in agricultural produce from nearby villages, and Arab Shia *Hasawis* and *Qatafis* were highly involved in local crafts. The *Huwala* made up the trading and shop-keeping class, while Arab tribes were highly involved in pearl trading (Fuccaro, 2009; Al-Shehabi, 2019). Other sources also document the relationship of *Baharna* in villages to weaving, with weaving factories numbering thirty, and today down to one single weaving workshop in *Bani Jamrah*, a Shia village (Husain, 2011). When it comes to fashion and sustainability, it is perhaps most important that activities related to local *making*, previously associated with the Shia Arabs in Bahrain, including *Baharna*, *Hasawis*, and *Qatifis*, have been replaced by imports – usually to benefit a merchant class, both locally and abroad – in the increasingly globalised world of production and consumption of the last decades. Beyond the scope of fashion, the historical farmers of Bahrain, and original settled group of the country, the *Baharna*, are often today in neighbourhoods that are less developed, of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and political standing (AbdulZahra, 2020; Jones, 2020; Khalaf, 1998). Transformed into a neo-liberal haven a century after the time period that Al-Shehabi writes about, the material conditions today of those that once engaged in making garments, weaving fabrics, and tending the farms, are often poorer than other ethno-sectarian groups in Bahrain. Local politics of the past decades have further exacerbated this, as this ethno-sectarian group, but also socioeconomic class, has demanded reforms and changes to their material conditions. Al-Rumaihi describes the *Baharna* as:

> The Shia, who are locally known as the Baharna, are generally regarded as the original inhabitants of the island, but due to their subjugation by other tribes and people, they were gradually deprived of their lands and were made to depend on unskilled forms of labour for their livelihood and eventually came to be regarded as second class citizens (Al-Rumaihi, 1973, p. 46).

Fuccaro (2009) documents a *Bahrani* saying, referring to Bahrain's natural spring resources, as "'*ayn al-'adhari tasqi al-ba'id wa tukhali al-qarib*", meaning: the "*adhari* spring waters (nourishes) far-away lands but neglects what is at hand" (p. 23). Affirming

this folk saying, these natural springs in Bahrain are now depleted, merely a ghost of their former function and presence. In this sense, Bahrain is post-colonial in its material conditions, it carries forward the impacts of colonialism, including but not limited to Al-Shehabi's descriptions of the divisions between ethno-sectarian groups locally.

Bahrain is also neo-colonial, particularly in its relationship to the South Asian migrant class within its borders. Bahrain benefits from the inequity historically produced by colonialism, despite that it is not itself one of the former colonial powers. The backbone of modern Gulf economies is formed by low-wage migrant labour from post-colonial South Asia, often employed in exploitative conditions. This enables an ongoing, informal domination of former colonial powers over former colonial possessions. Forming around 40% of the local population ('Statistics and Population', 2020), South Asians in Bahrain are tailors, cobblers, and domestic workers. A plethora of research on migrant workers in the Gulf shows that they often work in harsh conditions, with minimum protection and wages, and high psychological costs (Auwal, 2010; Gardner, 2012; Kronfol et al, 2014; Jain and Oommen, 2015). In the next section, a discussion of the free-trade agreement between the USA and Bahrain reflects further on my description of Bahrain as both post-colonial as well as an agent of neo-colonialism.

Neo-colonialism is an ongoing area of academic debate, defined as the survival of the colonial system despite formal recognition of political independence in emerging countries, which become victims of an indirect and subtle form of domination by political, economic, social, military, or technical means (Altbach, 1971; Schuerch, 2017). It involves the continuity of colonialism through economic or monetary means, allowing former colonial powers to maintain influence and control over their former colonies (Hamouchene and Sandwell, 2023).

While Bahrain did not directly colonise like European powers, not is it an imperial super-power like the United States today, it supports dynamics embedded in colonialism through modern economic and labour relations. Henderson (2021), using the example of agricultural production, argues that Gulf nations play a central role in reinforcing the economic influence and integration of Western capital into local systems. Henderson argues that Gulf Arab states should be acknowledged as "a capital that constitutes the current phase of the corporate food regime" (p. 1). He argues that through the Gulf's place at the centre of supply chains that have reshaped regional agricultural markets, as well as the outward investment of Gulf agribusiness conglomerates, these states essentially restructure "corporate food in several Arab countries" (p. 2). Thus, through modern

agribusiness, Henderson (2021) shows that the Gulf proliferates a Western hegemony in the Arab region, often acting as "a vector for Western capital" (p. 2).

Illustration 2. 4 South Asian Men Tailoring in Bahrain

(*Time Out Magazine*, 2009)

Migrant workers, such as the South Asian men pictured above, work in several roles across the fashion lifecycle.

Within Bahrain's fashion industry, several groups are relevant to the approach of this research. These groups include importers and decision-makers within retail groups, policy-makers, low-wage labour across the fashion lifecycle (mending, domestic help, waste collectors), and consumers. Within local making, two types of labour emerged throughout this research. The first is migrant labour, who participate in both local making of garments at tailors, clothing factories, cobblers, and include live-in domestic help. In the house, domestic labour includes the washing of clothing, drying, and at times mending. Differing from the Western context, the "care" part of a garment's lifecycle is often handled by domestic labour in the Gulf.

The second category is Bahraini labour in weaving, cobbling, and making. While also low-wage, Bahraini labour is designated as craft-making, and while having historically declined, is today well-regarded, and preserved as heritage – although often still confining its makers to low wages. Often, these craft-makers reside in their historical villages, may come from families in a low socio-economic bracket, and tend to learn from other family members, often passing on the skill from one generation to another.

2.4.2 Profit for whom? Bahrain's FTA and beyond

The fashion industry in the Gulf has grown alongside its oil-fuelled economic growth over the past four decades. Apparel and textile exports have grown in Bahrain, particularly due to a long-standing free trade agreement on textile exports with the USA (Miller et al., 2014), peaking at $908M in 2015 (WITS, 2020). In 2018, and after the end of the agreement, Bahrain's export value for apparel and textiles dropped to $224M. On an export-value-per-capita basis, Bahrain ranks second in the region with the UAE leading at $4,570M for total export value, and respectively Saudi at $538M and Kuwait at $57M. Bahrain also continues to be a regional exporter of apparel to other Gulf countries (WITS, 2020). Looking at imports changes the picture however, with Bahrain and the UAE importing almost double of their export value in terms of apparel and textile, Saudi importing nine times its export value, and Kuwait almost thirty times.

For the decade between July 2006 and July 2016, a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the Unites States promoted opportunities for Bahrain to import and export fibres, yarns, fabrics, and apparel (Bair et al., 2016; 'FTA Commercial Availability Bahrain', 2017). For instance, in 2005 the sector accounted for more than 60% of Bahrain's exports to the US, an annual average of approximately $180M (Grewal, 2015).

With the expiration of the FTA in July 2016, Bahrain's Minister of Industry, Commerce, and Tourism Zayed al-Zayani implored the US government in a letter dated March 23rd, 2017 to extend the FTA, stating "this expiration impeded the apparel industry, which employed some 5000 people (mostly women), in our country with a population of just over 1 million people. Indeed, the loss of these jobs will be harmful for the Bahrain economy as a whole" ('FTA Commercial Availability Bahrain', 2017, p. 1). Al-Zayani proceeded to list 35 fabrics that he requested to continue to commercially benefit the agreement, specified by the needs of producers in Bahrain.

While commercially beneficial for Bahrain, US lobbyists and organisations such as the National Council of Textiles Organization (NCTO) and American Fiber Manufacturers Association (AFMA) strongly petitioned the US Ministry of Commerce to put an end to FTAs in the apparel and textile industry in order to protect US businesses in the same sector ('FTA Commercial Availability Bahrain', 2017). During Discover America Week in 2018, West Point Home – an American home textile company – was celebrated for its investment of more than $160 million in Bahrain since the US-Bahrain FTA came into effect in 2006 (USEmbassy.gov, 2018). This gesture seemingly marked an end to

expectations that the FTA would be renewed, as no official comment was made by Bahrain or the US since the appeal to an extension from Bahrain.

The extent to how much this FTA gave back to labour in Bahrain is questionable, however. A report from 2016 found two distinct segments of Bahrain's industry that are geared towards the US market (Bair et al., 2016). The first segment is textile manufacturers, which are companies that own spinning, weaving and finishing mills in Bahrain. The second segment geared towards exporting to the US market is apparel companies. These apparel companies tend to be owned by foreign firms, and predominantly employ migrant workers from South Asia.

By 2017, of the four major units benefiting from the FTA (specifically MRS Fashion, Noble Garments factory, Ambattur Clothing International, and WestPoint Home), only one currently persists in Bahrain. The remaining three have moved to countries like Jordan and Oman, or shut down. All four major manufacturers updated their facilities and equipment under the FTA era with the US, and employed around 6,200 employees in total (Suri et al., 2017). During the course of my research, an attendee of a talk I was giving to a Bahraini audience on fashion sustainability contributed that her father had worked for one of the factories that had been shut-down, describing the after-math of closures as creating "ghost-town facilities".

Bair et al. (2016) suggest that the viability of textile and apparel manufacturing in Bahrain requires "aggressive steps to integrate the value chain in the region" (p. 3), since due to relatively high labour costs compared to other countries in Asia, apparel manufacturing firms may not be able to competitively survive. However, they find that Bahrain's relatively high labour costs are not as prohibitive of a factor for textile production, since spinning yarn, weaving, and finishing fabric are relatively capital-intensive as opposed to labour-intensive. This aggressive integration, they believe, could be in the form of catering to the demand of the fast-growing Gulf markets, as well as aiming to supply the Arab region with textiles and apparel. The report also suggests export diversification, which brings into consideration the revival of other Bahraini crafts for export. While the report's suggestions of finding other export partners than the US, finding regional demand, focusing on textile over apparel, and diversifying exports are valid starting points, the report falls short from dissecting who benefits from these strategies. While these economic solutions focus on growing Bahrain's textile exports in particular at the end of the decade-long FTA chapter with the US, they do not delve into the power dynamics within the sector, labour conditions, and integration of Bahraini human capital

into the sector. Essentially, the FTAs have historically worked as an opportunity for cost arbitrage for US manufacturers, benefitting the upper-class merchants they are contracted with locally, while labour was imported from South Asia. Even within the economically neo-liberal Gulf, Bahrain's FTA agreement with the US even garnered criticism from its Gulf neighbours, which urged Bahrain to set stricter requirements and property rights protections (Al-Khalifa, 2010).

To re-imagine a local manufacturing society that benefits local labour, relies on local abilities and resources, is a different approach. The existing literature on Bahrain's history of apparel and textile making shows that as a craft, textile-making – usually by Bahraini, socioeconomically disempowered groups – is a small sector, protected by heritage preservation efforts on the island. However, the decade of a free trade agreement with the US proved to be an economic exercise that had scant long-term benefits to the local fashion industry. With that, it becomes imperative to look into alternative models, beyond simply economic profit in the short-term for a productive fashion-making industry. And in terms of sustainability, narrow economic assessments falls short of understanding and exploring the stages of the fashion lifecycle.

In "A Brief History of Postcolonial African Fashion", Helen Jennings (2019) puts forward that while Africa may not be able to compete with other markets when it comes to high-volume fashion, the region's immaculate craftsmanship naturally lends itself to the growing demands of ethical, fair-trade, and high-quality garments. The difficulty to scale fashion production in postcolonial parts of the world, to compete with Western capitals through producing *en masse* and usually through cheap labour, in itself highlights the need for a slow fashion movement. In "Slow Fashion: An Invitation for Systems Change" by Kate Fletcher (2010), she describes a worldview that "promotes variety and multiplicity of fashion production and consumption and that celebrates the pleasure and cultural significance of fashion within biophysical limits" (p. 262). For the global south, many of which are nations built on post-colonial inequity, a global transition towards smaller volumes, prioritising craft and labour over speed, may be a prerequisite for equitable futures within fashion. This makes the call to slow fashion inherently one that challenges colonial and capitalistic power dynamics. What remains, however, is understanding the forms of localised systems that may emerge, as well as understanding how conventional sustainability discourse applies to non-Western cultures.

2.5 Conclusion

Bahrain's fashion history, as well as the history of its local groups and their relationships to fashion labour, are vital in exploring paths towards fashion sustainability. With its spectrum of forms of local dress, the presence of several fashion systems in Bahrain at once must be part of a lifecycle view to local fashion. Additionally, the understanding of local power dynamics informs the methodology of this study and approach to analysis (see Chapter 5), where a focus on marginalised and historically excluded peoples informs the methods chosen.

While recommendations from an economic point of view have been made for Bahrain's local fashion manufacture, an approach towards fashion sustainability must consider broader metrics. Henderson (2021) states that "the constitution of Gulf agro-capital and its investments are not an anomaly, but rather representative of a type of capitalism that has been fostered and promoted by the state" (p. 2). Fashion in the Gulf similarly follows a pattern where the primary beneficiaries are the state, a select merchant class, or foreign actors, while civilians typically benefit only through expanded consumer choices. Fashion sustainability in Bahrain and the Gulf must expand the notion that choice through consumerism is emancipatory.

Alternatively, it is within the improvement of material conditions of labour across the fashion lifecycle as well as the protection of the environment that a fashion sustainability in the Gulf may be defined and achieved. The next chapter discusses design for sustainability theory, and delves into post-colonial fashion theory, decolonising design discourse, and developments in the Gulf towards sustainability. Building on this chapter, it presents an analysis of what sustainability discourse is in the Gulf today, and what it can be to be transformational. Such a view is only possible through a political and historicised understanding of the Gulf, its power dynamics, and its relationships to the global sustainability movement.

3 Design for Sustainability for an Arab Gulf Context: Green politics, power and defining transformation

3.1 Introduction

This chapter reflects on the Design for Sustainability (DfS) field and its relevance to social and political realities of the Gulf. Building on the discussion in Chapter 2 of Bahrain's fashion history, local fashion culture, different groups and the power dynamics within the local fashion industry, this chapter looks into philosophies of sustainability in design and their transformational potential for the Gulf today.

To put the conversation of fashion sustainability into a wider design theory context, this chapter examines the field of DfS, defined as responses from the design discipline to the issue of sustainability (Ceschin and Gaziulusoy, 2020). Within DfS, the understanding of sustainability itself has developed from a static target to a more open and dynamic conversation (Walker et al., 2004; Geels, 2005). DfS researchers today acknowledge that sustainability is not defined by specific target to strive for (Faber et al., 2005; Hjorth and Bagheri, 2006), but rather that sustainability needs a context-specific approach which considers time, space and geography. In addition to discussing DfS within Bahrain and the Gulf, I argue that combining current DfS discourse with a politics of design is vital in establishing real transformative change to the region's systems. Through this combination, it becomes necessary to take an ontological approach to design in Bahrain. Such an approach is in line with Arturo Escobar's call for a design tradition that reorients from a "patriarchal capitalist modernity toward relational modes of knowing, being, and doing" (2017, p. xi).

Building on Arturo Escobar's call for reorienting the design tradition, this research addresses a critical gap in the field of Design for Sustainability (DfS) by exploring how cultural and political contexts shape approaches to sustainability. Current DfS frameworks, such as Ceschin and Gaziulusoy's (see the next section), are largely detached from non-Western perspectives and power dynamics. By examining the Bahraini fashion industry, this study highlights the limitations of existing frameworks in capturing the nuances of sustainability as experienced in post-colonial and neo-colonial contexts. It builds on recent calls for "diverse ways of knowing" in sustainability research, as emphasized by Fletcher and Tham (2019), to broaden the scope of DfS beyond environmental concerns to include equity, culture, and social justice.

Incorporating insights from green politics and the decolonization of design, this research challenges the Western hegemony embedded in sustainability discourses and emphasizes the importance of localised approaches. It connects the Gulf's unique sociopolitical dynamics to broader sustainability narratives, offering a richer understanding of how power, cultural production, and material access intersect with DfS. By bridging established innovation levels with Gulf-specific contexts, this study not only critiques existing models but also contributes to the evolution of the field, providing actionable insights for more inclusive and globally relevant sustainability practices — such as the call to look at lifecycles from not only a material perspective, but also from how it is experienced (which informs the "blurred lifecycle" finding in Chapter 5).

Understanding philosophical positions on sustainability, or the green spectrum, allows for an extrapolation into non-Western geographies – namely the countries of the Arab Gulf, including Bahrain – which have a unique cultural and political context. For instance, both ontological inquiry into how fashion is organised in the Gulf or phenomenological questions about how it is experienced may determine local definitions of sustainability. Essentially, this chapter posits what remaining chapters aim to answer in the context of Bahrain and the Gulf. First, what does a non-Western definition of design for sustainability look like? And second, to what extent can this separate definition be achieved in a highly globalised world which shares a modernity of capitalism?

In the past few decades, the fast-growing cities of the Arab Gulf have exemplified strategies to diversify their economies while pursuing ambitious urban development. At the time of this study, the world's tallest building is in Dubai; the most recent World Cup took place in Qatar in 2022 in facilities built for the occasion; Saudi Arabia is building several new cities; the Louvre, the Guggenheim and the Sorbonne, as well as many American and European universities, all have outposts and campuses in the region. Amidst growing investment in fashion as a cultural sector in Saudi Arabia, Istituto Marangoni announced it will open its doors in Riyadh in 2025 (Salibian, 2024). Such initiatives have been classified by scholars as extreme urbanisation (Molotch and Ponzini, 2019). While Western criticism of the region for its rapid urban development and human rights infringements is widespread – such as Western media's reporting on labour rights during the 2022 World Cup (Delaney, 2022; Olley, 2023) – this chapter contributes a critical engagement with how countries of the Arab Gulf aspire towards sustainability. Through a discussion of current sustainability frameworks and projects in the Gulf, I argue that sustainability as practised in the region is limited to the product level and does

not constitute as radical or transformative. The Gulf's ambitions and projects have large sustainability impacts – a topic that has been approached within the region from an efficiency-saving or eco-product approach, as opposed to a socially-driven or system-changing perspective. The question of why sustainability, beyond the question of fashion, has struggled to move past the approach of sustainably made products and their consumption in the Arab Gulf brings to light the political, social, and cultural forces behind the region's extreme urbanisation.

Translating current design for sustainability frameworks to the Gulf requires an investigation of how design in and of itself is defined (Fry, 2011) as well as how politics shape national green strategies (Ajl, 2021). In this chapter, I discuss the works of design and sustainability theorists, to be able to extract not only insights on green innovation for the Gulf, but on green politics for the Gulf and other post-colonial regions. In this way, this chapter re-affirms design as a particular political form due to its directive force on the world (Fry, 2011). This exploration of the politics of design in this chapter influences the positionality of this research, its methodology, and its approach to analysis.

This chapter opens with an exploration of the history and development of DfS as a field in Section 3.2, establishing that a bridge to politics is needed for non-Western contexts like the Gulf. Subsequently, Section 3.3 surveys the current state of sustainability innovation the Gulf, and 3.4 delves into green politics to bridge the DfS innovation levels to the unique political and cultural context of the Gulf. Section 3.5 lays out what a dark green sustainability – or one that is truly socially and technically transformative (Robertson, 2007; Steffen, 2009; McGrail, 2011) – for the Gulf entails, including applicable methods from the current field of design, particularly an ontological exploration.

3.2 Design for Sustainability (DfS): Innovation levels and a needed bridge to politics

3.2.1 Development of design for sustainability thinking

One of the most frequently cited definitions of sustainable development, coined by the Brundtland Report in 1987, is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p. 37). Ceschin and Gaziulusoy – in their book *Design for Sustainability* (2020) – define Design for Sustainability as the response from the design field to sustainability issues at a large. Other researchers have defined DfS as a practical approach to design, one focused on the tools and techniques available to designers (Bhamra and Lofthouse, 2008; Chick

and Micklethwaite, 2011; Rocha et al., 2019). DfS has taken an anthropocentric focus in the past years; whereas for decades prior the sustainability movement in design emphasised the environment over the cultural, social, ethical, or worker's rights component of design (Geels and Schot, 2007; Ceschin and Gaziulusoy, 2020).

Historically, the prioritisation of the environment in sustainability or design initiatives over the human cost is due to environment-as-a-resource thinking (Gaziulusoy, 2010). In environment-as-a-resource thinking, the environment is valuable due to human society's dependence on it (ibid). However, while environment-as-resource thinking is still prevalent in our global economies – through politicians, business owners, and decision makers – today's theoretical understanding of sustainability has nonetheless evolved to exploring how intricately we are linked to a dynamic environment, beyond merely a resource or capital relationship. For one, studies show that our theoretical understanding of sustainability has developed from a static goal to a dynamic and moving target, responding to our ever-increasing understanding of interdependencies between social and ecological systems (Walker et al., 2004; Geels, 2005). It is also acknowledged that there cannot be an overarching all-encompassing specific sustainability target to strive for (Faber et al., 2005; Hjorth and Bagheri, 2006), since implementing efforts towards sustainability requires context-specific indicators such as time, space, and geography. Accordingly, the DfS field has progressively expanded from a technical and product-centric field – confined to a list of targets – towards a focus on large-scale system level changes, in which sustainability is understood as a socio-technical challenge.

Accompanying this shift from focus on product to entire complex systems is an increased need for human-centred design knowledge and know-how. For instance, earlier design approaches focus on product-innovation levels, such as green design, ecodesign, and biomimicry, and predominantly rely on technical knowledge, while more recent DfS approaches, such as emotionally durable design and design for sustainable behaviour, require designers to understand consumption and behaviour dynamics (Clark et al., 2009; Vezzoli, 2013; Ceschin and Gaziulusoy, 2020).

While DfS research has shifted towards a perspective that prioritises an integrated-systems and social approach (Walker et al., 2004; Geels, 2005; Cecshin and Gaziulusoy, 2020), it often stops short from discussing particular and applied examples from non-Western political, social and cultural systems. At present, when designing transitions towards sustainability, researchers acknowledge an increasing need for sustainability research to learn from feminist theory, political ecology and post-colonial thinking and

decolonising methodologies (Fuad-Luke, 2009; Abdulla, 2014; Forlano, 2016; Avila, 2017; Abdulla et al., 2018; Cecshin and Gaziulusoy, 2020). Building on the current traditional field of DfS, this chapter looks to supplement current DfS thinking with more political perspectives on sustainability. This allows an extrapolation to the fashion context of Bahrain and the Arab Gulf.

From a capitalist political perspective, it is unsurprising to prioritise the environment as a limited means of production (capital) over that of another, less scarce, means of production (labour), for the benefit of a particular group (one that powerfully holds the means of production). Labour laws were introduced not only to the benefit of unionised workers during the Industrial Revolution to protect themselves, but also to the benefit of employers, who have an incentive to keep employees safe and healthy in order to maximise productivity. Labour laws, while protecting employees, also introduced a moral economy of customary norms, bringing forth new forms of control through service relationships and tilted the balance of power in favour of employers (Deakin, 2016). Therefore, it is ultimately unsurprising that sustainability movements, emerging in a capitalist commercial era, would initially prioritise the environment over the wellbeing of workers.

If the environment is seen as simply a resource in society, and not afforded autonomy, then it is the beliefs of how *capital* should be used, treated, and protected that will determine our true relationship with and impact on the environment. Viewing the environment as a resource or capital is a larger political question, one that is very much alive today, rather than a historical one. This re-affirms the need for new cultural and political perspectives in the field of DfS. The remainder of this chapter looks to build this wider perspective for the Bahraini context, through a discussion of how politics can inform design and sustainability.

The next sections use DfS categories as defined by Ceschin and Gaziulusoy (2016, 2020) to explore innovation in Bahrain and the Gulf, adding a political or cultural component to thinking through the design levels. Note that Ceschin and Gaziulusoy (2020) expanded on this categorisation by adding a level for material innovation, which I have omitted for the context of Bahrain as it can be considered part of the product innovation level.

Figure 3. 1 Design for Sustainability Innovation Levels
(Ceschin and Gaziulusoy, 2016, p. 143)
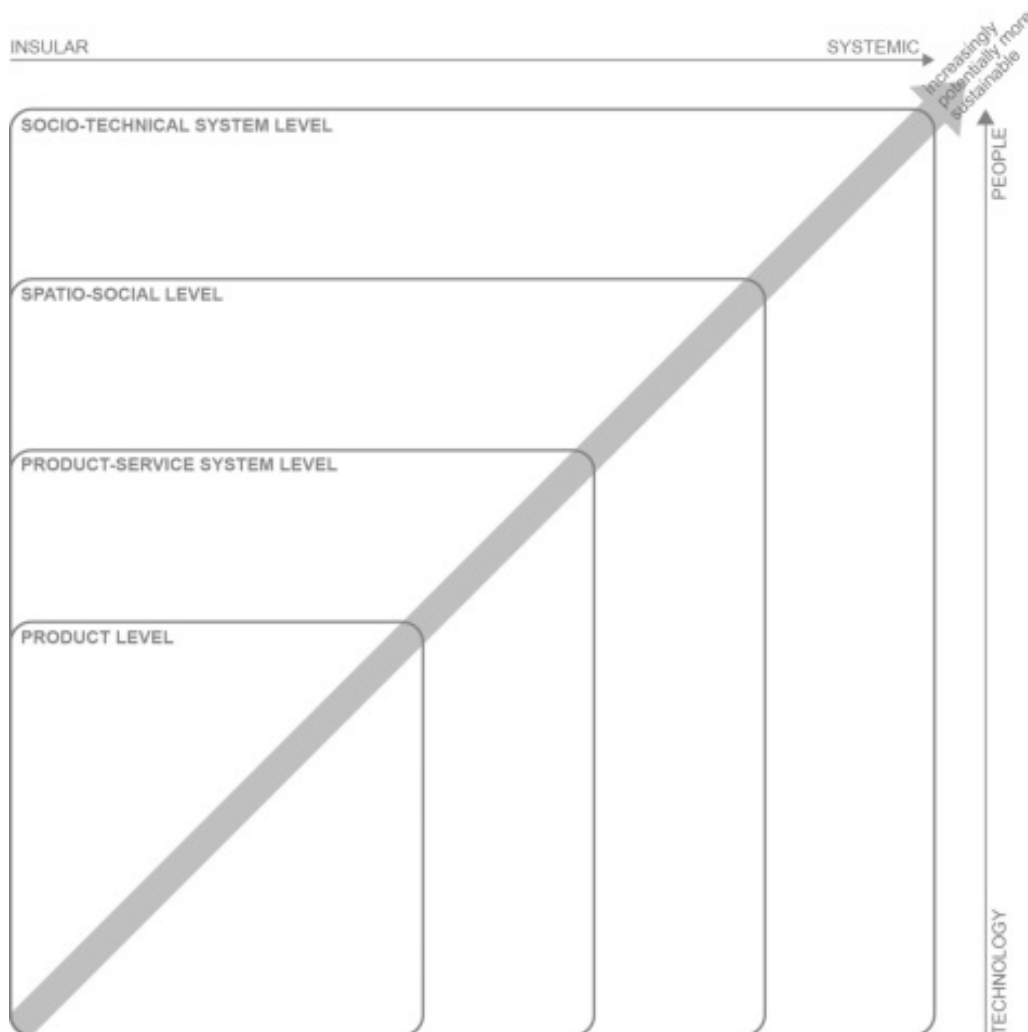
Figure shows the spectrum of Design for Sustainability approaches, starting from insular and technology-focused innovations to adopting more systemic approaches in the DfS field as well as an increased focus on social issues. It is important to note that within socio-technical approaches (DfS approach 4), technology is highly leveraged to bring about social transformation.

These DfS categories are innovation levels that follow a quasi-chronological pattern, in terms of how thinking in the DfS field has developed:

1   **Product innovation level:** includes design approaches focused on improving existing or developing completely new products.

2   **Product-Service System innovation level:** includes design approaches focused on integrated combinations of products and services (e.g., development of new business models, as opposed to focusing on greening individual products).

3 **Spatio-Social innovation level:** includes design approaches focused on innovation at the human settlement level, and the spatio-social conditions of their communities. Communities may be addressed on different scales, from neighbourhoods to cities.

4 **Socio-Technical System innovation level:** includes design approaches focused on promoting radical changes on how societal needs – such as nutrition and transport or mobility – are fulfilled, and thus on supporting transitions to these new socio-technical systems.

3.2.2 A needed bridge to culture and politics

Some discourses relevant to this study on sustainability innovation, namely that related to culture or design politics, do not fall neatly into the categories above. For instance, the way that different cultures or disenfranchised groups approach sustainability is not fully captured in Ceschin and Gaziulusoy's chronological mapping of a Western-focused categorisation of the field. In "Culture as a Resource for Sustainable Future in Indigenous Communities" (Marchand et al., 2018), the authors argue that culture is a central, rather than peripheral, feature of sustainable development. They put forward that in particular for indigenous communities, territorial transformations can have profound effects on culture itself. This implies that notions of sustainability themselves can differ, as cultures experience territory and place in different ways.

While the idea that culture may lend itself to sustainability innovation in different ways may itself cut across all the four innovation levels above (or some may argue, be a type of social innovation), Marchand et al. (2018) also explore how power can impact cultural production and material access when it comes to DfS. I will discuss the role of power in design in further sections, introducing green politics to bridge between established innovation levels in the field of DfS, power dynamics, and the political context of the Gulf.

Throughout the duration of my research, the questioning of Western hegemony in the field of sustainability has increased, resulting in the introduction of more cultural nodes. For instance, in "Earth Logic: Fashion Action Research Plan", Fletcher and Tham (2019) underscore "diverse ways of knowing" (p. 7) as one of the key values for action research in fashion. Within their framework, they emphasise an understanding of several components when looking at fashion and sustainability today, including "systems thinking and all species' interdependence" and "the intersectionality of colonialism, Western hegemony, patriarchy, human exceptionalism and growth logic in creating and

reinforcing the current environmental predicament" (p. 14). Alongside other researchers, I contributed to "Regions, communities and localism" (Gardetti et al., 2023) which examines localised approaches to fashion sustainability. In "Transnational Fashion Sustainability: Between and Across the Gulf and the UK" (2022), I explore with Kate Fletcher how positions and philosophies on environmentalism inform questions around fibres, clothing care and fashion waste. Congruently, outside the fashion sustainability space, in the past five years the degrowth conversation has also gained stride, as well as the field of decolonising design. The increasing research within these two discourses and their overlap with fashion sustainability is further discussed in Section 3.5.2.

While Ceschin and Gaziulusoy's research on DfS laudably delineates categories of design in response to sustainability issues, their quasi-chronological approach is predominantly confined to Western contexts and remains largely divorced from political context. The design researchers acknowledge that business and commercial interest have been historical drivers for innovation – and accordingly design thinking – however, other drivers are designated as contextual changes. For the remaining sections of this chapter, I will use Ceschin and Gaziulusoy's DfS framework to explore and categorise initiatives in the Gulf, and then delve into design theory to consider how sustainability can be defined in a non-Western, namely Gulf, context.

The evolution of DfS as a field is ingrained in the evolution of green politics and history of sustainability – the latter, in Western discourse, includes a departure from viewing sustainability as a field of environment-as-resource to a field that prioritises people, equity, and human rights in tandem with ecological concerns (Kusz, 2013). Building on Ceschin and Gaziulusoy's delineation and chronological mapping of DfS approaches (also called innovation levels), this chapter looks to bridge these levels to a broader political conversation. Others have noted trends that may have instigated the developments within DfS, including globalisation (Ryan, 2013), human capital and mobility, demands of ethical and environmental transparency (Kusz, 2013), and the entrance of the Western world in late-stage capitalism. As some thinkers that have written on design (Fry, 2011) and sustainability (Ajl, 2021) note, globalisation and the spread of capitalism has only been inherently possible through neo-imperialist means. Ultimately, this means the way we define sustainability is *inherently* steeped in an imbalance of power.

For the GCC, and Bahrain in particular, DfS has been predominantly constrained to the first and second innovation level (see Figure 3.1). The next section undertakes DfS as

practice in the Gulf, and places it within innovation levels while considering social and political context.

3.3 Sustainability Innovation in the Gulf

3.3.1 Product and Product-Service System Innovation

While this study focuses on Bahrain, I consider the wider Gulf's design ecosystem, especially for innovation levels 3 and 4, since the labour, geographical, and economic relations between the countries of the GCC in particular as an economic and political block dictate a regional design climate and culture. This section explores the applicability of conventional models within DfS, in particular the four innovation levels described above, to the Gulf. While reflecting on the sustainability of projects in the Gulf, this section questions to what extent transformation towards sustainability may be achieved through the technofix approach predominant in the region.

Within the GCC, products and initiatives that belong to the first innovation levels include sustainable sourcing of materials for furniture, construction, packaging, and fashion. These initiatives are geared towards making consumption more sustainable. Traditional means of making products, such as mats, bags, and baskets from palm leaves, may also be considered classic examples of product innovation, although usually categorised as heritage products.

In the second innovation level, an informal economy around services currently exists as status quo in the Gulf. This includes a WhatsApp customer service culture, where often businesses will deliver clothing or other products to residences, allowing buyers to try on or assess a product before making the final purchase. This informal economy of service also includes tailoring upgrades, where many local tailors will size up and down, and at times even alter designs completely, for their clients for reasonable fees.

3.3.2 Spatio-social and Socio-technical Innovation

As for the third innovation level, supporting traditional craft-making beyond just products – in supporting making communities, improving their sourcing and connections to other communities – may also be classified as a spatio-social innovation, as it is a type of social innovation that combines traditional making or use practices with new or re-imagined designs (Evans et al., 2018). This is particularly important for Bahrain and the Gulf, where heritage and craft preservation have been priorities for government-sponsored cultural sectors (see Chapter 2 on heritage and cultural creation in Bahrain). For instance, this type of heritage-related social innovation may include the re-

introduction of traditional design, reworking traditional designs for contemporary needs, or introducing new aesthetics to traditional making (Evans et al., 2018). These are all forms of social innovation as they seek a social mission – to preserve and re-introduce heritage – in their approach to sustainability. For the Gulf, the extent to how transformative these initiatives are often depends on their scale, ability to socially transform the lives of artisans supported, and ability to compete with the globalised influx of products in the Gulf market and similarly in global markets.

Attempts at the third and fourth innovation level in the GCC are often intertwined with governmental plans for post-oil diversification and include nation branding and top-down planning. These attempts, at the third innovation level, include green communities and cities like Masdar, Sharjah Sustainable City, and Sustainable City in Dubai (also touted as the "Happiest Community" (Foster + Partners, 2019) in the GCC at a real estate awards ceremony). A core part of the sustainability approach in these attempts is the architectural approach, or a focus on "human experience in the design of the built environment" (ibid). In 2016, the UAE announced a 3D Printing Strategy which looks to ensure that 25% of buildings are constructed out of 3D printing technology by the year 2030 (UAE government portal [online], n.d, accessed 2024). Paradoxically, this focus on experience of the built environment or technological processes (such as 3D printing) often does not centre labour during the process of construction or those later employed within these "sustainable", "happy" cities.

Moreover, projects that are not top-down governmental directives within the category of cultural revival or environmental protection often struggle to scale. An example that combines service, waste management, and heritage revitalisation for small business is seen in the modus operandi of Cro and Knit, a Bahraini-based business that transforms fabric off-cuts from tailors into materials for craft-making and craft education. In collecting waste from tailors, transforming it into thick strips, and providing a custom-made wide-set and easy to use loom, the company has fostered a subculture of craft revival in the small country (interview with co-founder of local fashion upcycling business, P15, 2019). Running workshops for adults, children, and hobbyists, outputs range from pencil-cases, placement mats, and larger chunky woven textile works. During the course of my research, Cro and Knit was unable to sustain itself and closed shop in 2022, which reflects how non-government directed cultural and craft initiatives struggle to sustain profits over time in the region.

Few attempts can be found for the fourth innovation level, and often they are governmental mega-projects with heavily branded internationally as beacons of a post-oil age. These include some of Masdar city's projects and Saudi Arabia's Neom initiative, a $500 billion project which seeks to transform mobility, food security, and biotech all at once. Whether these examples truly fit the definition and ethos of the third and fourth innovation levels as defined by Ceschin and Gaziulusoy can be contested. In particular, the extent to which technological innovation alone can bring about the social aspect of sociotechnical transformation is questionable. Due to the political constraints on social transformation in the region, what may be planned or marketed as socio-technical change may simply manifest as technofix that merely benefits the elite of society. Boenhert (2018) defines technofixes as "technologies that assume a curative role to environmental problems" (p. 161), but often this curative role has no bearing on how socially or politically transformative such a fix is.

3.3.3 Limitations of innovation level model for the Gulf

While Ceschin and Gaziulusoy's framework allows for an assessment of social and technical innovation within DfS, for the Gulf context it falls short in capturing how politically transformative a project is. For instance, within the Gulf, one of the most apt examples of socio-technical innovation is the Zayed Sustainability Prize, run by the UAE, which is awarded each year to global initiatives that seek to solve social and environmental problems. Previous winners of the prize include transformative projects in Nepal, Morocco, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Ghana, and Nigeria. While these are clearly socio-technical projects with palpable impacts on the communities they operate in, the extent to whether they can offset the political direction of the Gulf states as mediators of neo-imperialism, and often times as obstructers of the determination of their own citizens, is doubtful.

The New Arab Urban, a series of essays brought together by sociologist Harvey Molotch and urban analyst Davide Ponzini, explores the forces in the Arab metropolis that influence the design ecosystem. Molotch and Ponzini (2019) ask difficult questions about the social, political, and cultural context of design in the Gulf and address contradictions. These questions include how authorities can reconcile goals of civic betterment with hyper-segregation and inequality, how the Gulf's cosmopolitanism juxtaposes its social stratification and political control, and ultimately what investment in sustainability means in such a context (Molotch and Ponzini, 2019).

Examples of DfS in the Gulf and their concentration in the first innovation level are another reason for the importance of understanding our political relationship with the environment, and how that is embedded in the development of DfS as a Euro-centred field. The politics of the DfS levels become vastly important in a region like the Gulf where human rights and migrant rights are not aligned with their Western counterparts, and decisions are made with a pervasive prioritising of commercial values over social equity. This makes the holistic, transformational, and revolutionary changes that would be brought about by the fourth level of DfS, for instance, quite difficult to create or implement. At the same time, it is these constraints themselves that make critically exploring DfS within an Arab and Gulf context all-the-more valuable. Understanding the DfS levels in the cultural context of the Gulf is central to the conversation on fashion sustainability regionally, and globally, as the economic and design influence of the Gulf grows (Molotch and Ponzini, 2019).

3.4 Green Politics: Light vs. Dark vs. Bright Green

The increasing focus on social transformation as well as on complex systems within sustainability theory has created a spectrum of thought within sustainability thinking. The term bright green environmentalism was coined by environmental futurist Alex Steffen in 2003, shared through his online posts with Worldchanging. Worldchanging is an online forum and think tank for bright green ideas (Newman and Robbins, 2011). After this introduction, the wider spectrum of *light green* to *dark green* was further developed in the work of Steffen himself as well as other futurists and environmental researchers (Steffen, 2006; Robertson, 2007; Steffen, 2009; McGrail, 2011). This spectrum of green thinking describes philosophical positions within sustainability thinking, and how they differ on political and social beliefs, and consequently on how to achieve change towards sustainability.

Figure 3. 2 Green Politics: The Philosophical Spectrum

(Image is author's own, 2024) drawing on definitions from various sources (Steffen, 2006; Robertson, 2007; Steffen, 2009; McGrail, 2011).

3.4.1 Light Green Sustainability

The light green philosophical position sees protecting the environment as a personal responsibility that can be supported by individual activism. Light greens tend to focus on environmentalism as a lifestyle choice, with participation through green consumerism. Mottos such as "Green is the new black" espouse the movement, and it can be seen as the consumer parallel to green and eco-design in terms of its product-focused activism. Alex Steffen, a futurist, environmental activist, and thought-leader in solutions-based journalism, describes light green environmentalism as small, pleasant steps such as shopping differently or making changes around the home (Steffen, 2009).

Light green sustainability thinking is a political parallel to Ceschin and Gaziulusoy's first DfS level: the product innovation level. With the prevalence of eco-products in the Gulf region and high levels of consumerism, light green sustainability emerges as the pervasive political thought regionally. However, the pitfall of light green thinking lies in that it may lack true transformational ability, as while it allows people to vote with their money, it centres consumerism as the solution to environmental and social progress. This facet of green consumerism is global and does not apply solely to the Gulf region. However, sustainability projects in the Gulf seem to be largely derived from this philosophical position, making it the predominant form of environmental activism in a society with high purchasing power. Thus, it is pertinent for the Gulf to learn from the impact of light green sustainability's emergence globally, where eco-products have often promoted green consumerism without presenting a significant capacity to generate environmental gain (Madge, 1997; Ryan, 2013).

3.4.2 Dark Green Sustainability

On the other end of the spectrum, *dark green* sustainability thinking believes that environmental problems are an inherent part of industrialised capitalism, and that they can only be resolved through radical political change (Steffen, 2009; McGrail, 2011). The dark green viewpoint sees dominant political ideologies, such as industrialism, as socially and environmentally inequitable, in that they inevitably lead to consumerism, alienation from nature, and resource depletion. The dark green ideology sees the political emphasis on economic growth within current dominant ideologies, or growth mania, as a socially depletive force. The philosophical position of dark green thinking is associated with ideas of deep ecology, post-materialism, holism and the work of Fritjof Capra.

Capra, a physicist and deep ecologist, critiques the reductionistic Cartesian view that everything should be studied in parts to understand the whole, and puts forth an approach

that includes hidden connections between parts. The web of life is thus understood by studying the systemic information generated by relationships among parts (Capra, 1996). Today, Transition Design, as well as Ceschin and Gaziulusoy 's DfS innovation levels 3 and 4, are derived from the importance of relationships between parts of a system. This is epitomised in how Transition Design solves problems across interconnected systems (Irwin, 2015; Irwin et al., 2016a; Irwin et al., 2016b). Joanna Boehnert in *Design Ecology Politics: Towards the Ecocene* (2018) adds to Irwin's Transition Design framework with the approach of design activism, defined as "design work that is explicitly linked to the activism of social movements and/or work with marginalized communities from a perspective of solidarity, allyship and intersectionality" (p. 26). Often, design activism works to "confront capitalist developments and create post-capitalist alternatives" (Boehnert, 2018, p. 26).

Similarly, within the field of social ecology, Murray Bookchin (2003) posits that the hierarchies arising due to human-nature interactions have significant social ramifications. A society's relationship with nature informs the way in which it deals with those less powerful in its society (Bookchin, 2003). Bookchin believes that these hierarchies can only be abolished by institutional changes. Understanding the human-nature relationship within the Gulf, and how that extrapolates to social dynamics, is useful in defining a local understanding of sustainability. Ultimately, these relations form the base of all social life and experience even at the level of the tribe or village, and particularly in relation to labour (Bookchin, 2003). In this way, social ecology is an environmental field that seeks changes not only in the realm of economic relations but in cultural, ethical, aesthetic, personal, and psychological realms of inquiry (Bookchin, 2003).

The next section looks deeper into dark green sustainability and its link to postcolonialism and design, and thus its transformative potential for Bahrain and the Gulf. Boehnert posits that:

> While there is no easy solution, it is possible to intervene and transform practices, institutions and system structures that legitimize and reproduce domination in its various forms. This work can be facilitated by design. Those seeking change must simultaneously address the social practices and social structures that perpetuate symbolic violence (Boehnert, 2018, p. 31).

Ultimately, deep ecology and dark green sustainability question the current social, economic, and political status quo. These schools of thought elevate the environment beyond a resource designation, to a scientifically and philosophically symbiotic partner to human society. In that sense, dark green sustainability may be aligned with the DfS

innovation levels that deeply question and aim to change the social, economic, and political status quo – namely level 3 and 4.

3.4.3 Bright Green Sustainability

More recently, *bright greens* (Steffen, 2009) have emerged as a group of environmentalists who believe that radical changes are needed in the economic and political operation of society in order to make it sustainable, but that better designs, new technologies and more widely distributed social innovations are the means to make those changes (Steffen, 2009). A bright green thinker, policymaker or designer is likely to resonate with the second, third, or fourth innovation level in the DfS framework, where innovation can be harnessed to promote socially transformative change.

Philosophically, the idea of where the artificial ends and our natural world begins has been contested by designers. Clive Dilnot (2014) posits that the artificial is not synonymous to technology. Today, the artificial includes within it technical systems, the symbolic realm and transmutations of nature. The artificial and nature are not a simple binary. Dilnot (2014) gives the example of a genetically modified tomato to make the point. He concludes that we must see the artificial as the essential horizon of our becoming. In this philosophical bright green position, Dilnot (2014) sees the political questions of the century as first, what *form* the artificial will take, and second, how to contend with the destructive facets of capitalism.

As Ross Robertson writes in "A Brighter Shade of Green" (2007), in contrast to the dark green's nostalgic and romantic return to nature, a bright green future is the call to completely let go of such nostalgia, making room for something unknown. Robertson builds on the work of thinkers such as Bruce Sterling – who takes a pragmatic approach to the environmentalism – and sees innovation and technology as a way forward to improve a world we have *already* begun to design.

Ultimately, bright green thinking emerges as a pragmatic, design-focused, and *potentially* socially transformative discipline, combining a fundamental focus on socio-technical change with a practical acceptance of the current status quo — such as the power of corporations and dominant political systems. Bright green thinking can be the impetus for innovations across all DfS innovation levels, including a device that can improve our quality of living and the environment, to the transformation of an entire community on a socio-technical level.

The risk of bright green thinking is that it risks *not* tackling social and political change, and may indulge in progress for the sake of progress. Boehnert (2018) warns that approaching environmental problems through a technological lens alone falls short of questioning the dominant social and political dynamics which create such harms. Dark green thinkers like Boehnert believe that sustainability work must disrupt the very structures that reproduce the conditions of unsustainability. As such, disengaging from social issues while addressing environmental ones is not neutrality, but rather a *capitulation* to power, often corporate power in particular (Boehnert, 2018). This is an important distinction for the Gulf, particularly with a history of fast growth, but also for its regional superpowers that have the sole political power to make decisions on environment, labour, and investment.

Boehnert (2018) uses the example of circular economy thinking, which has spurred numerous technologies in the past two decades but has "not yet been able to achieve their goals on scale because the social norms and political structures of industria are barriers to sustainability" (p. 167). She explains that strategies such as the circular economy are thwarted by common assumptions, including the idea that sustainability can be achieved at the individual and product level rather than the system level, that profits can remain the primary priority in sustainable design and that privatising profit and socialising harms is compatible with sustainability. Again, this is profoundly important for the Gulf, which as it looks to harness technologies towards sustainability must contend with their social and political aspects.

Given the delineation of DfS approaches above, and their ranking in terms of transformational ability and complexity (as innovation levels 1-4), as well as philosophical associations (between light to dark green thinking), and economic and political implications ("green is the new black" in light green thinking versus growth mania concerns in dark green thinking) it is important to note that not all DfS approaches are mutually exclusive. In fact, the different DfS approaches are often inter-related and share common elements. Moreover, many approaches complement each other; ecodesign principles (from DfS approach 1) while-product-focused, may be used within a socio-technical system approach (DfS approach 4) as part of creating tools for the transition to a new socio-technical system.

3.5 Power shifts, dark green sustainability, the Gulf and political global order

Departing from the discussion of the green philosophical spectrum above, this study looks to reflect on environmental justice in the Gulf from within a dark green

perspective. As Chapter 2 established, the Gulf is both post-colonial in its identity and a proliferator of modern-day neo-colonialism, thus any deeply transformational design for sustainability will grapple with these power dynamics. A truly transformative design for sustainability in the Gulf is inherently political. It is one that contends with global capitalism, neo-colonialism, and both local and global power dynamics.

Figure 3. 3 Green Politics: The Arab Gulf on the Spectrum
(Author's own, 2025)
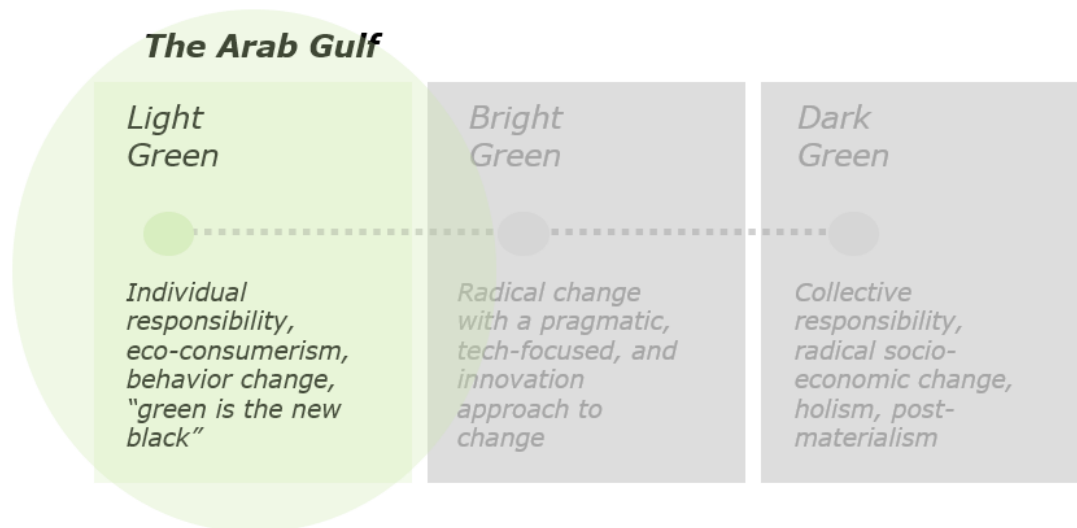
In the diagram above, I highlight that the Gulf's current approach to sustainability tends to follow a light green philosophy. Following the discussion in Section 3.3, due to the political constraints on social transformation in the region – namely, when change happens it is top-down rather than bottom-up – often even the most radical and ambitious sustainability projects are likely to benefit groups in power (such as corporate entities and authorities). As such, achieving dark green sustainability in the Gulf requires political solutions, beyond the realm of technofixes.

In *A People's Green New Deal,* Max Ajl (2021) posits that since 2011, there has been a public leftist resurgence, in the face of "catastrophic advance of imperialism during this period" (p. 5) which has "shattered entire states in the Arab world and emplaced conservatives through coup after coup in place of the Latin American radical governments which has been political fortresses" (p. 6). This political moment, both globally and in the Arab world, makes a dark green approach to sustainability even more necessary.

Currently, with sustainability discourse and innovation in the Gulf limited to technofixes, its mainstream practices and discourse around design are not socially transformative. In this political moment, it is not that the Gulf is not included in the public leftist resurgence Ajl speaks of, but that in the past decades the political process within the Gulf has

regressed towards authoritarianism, making strides toward social and equitable change more challenging, and limiting sustainability to a technical level.

3.5.1 Design and power

In Tony Fry's *Design as Politics* (2011), he takes a dark green philosophical position, ultimately asserting that design is always a political tool. Similar to Irwin's Transition Design, Fry finds that trigger points, or "wedges of affirmative change" (p. 78), can influence the political status quo. Fry (2011) affirms design as a political tool, in that it gives material form to political ideologies.

Much has been written on the relationship between design and power. Sasha Costanza-Chock, in *Design Justice* (2020), asserts that design "too often contributes to the reproduction of systemic oppression" (p. xvii). Design justice is described as a practice that "rethinks design processes, centers people who are normally marginalized by design, and uses collaborative, creative practices to address the deepest challenges our community faces" (p. 6).

Applying notions of design justice to Bahrain and the Gulf brings into light both local power dynamics between groups, as well as the dynamics of the Gulf on the world-stage. In particular, applying design justice to the Gulf brings into light both post-colonial and neo-colonial power relations. This duality, introduced in Chapter 2, is a theme that runs through the thesis and impacts how the results are discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Beyond the Gulf itself, Fry (2011) asserts that "democracy in the developed 'democratic world' has degenerated into televisiualised 'consumer democracy'" (p. 8) or a politics of reacting to consumer demands. While these claims are clearly prevalent in the social contract of the Gulf, Fry asserts this pattern as a Western export globally, where the goal of democracy for the purpose of globalisation or proliferation of consumer democracy is an instrument of "naked and age-old imperialism" (p. 9). Essentially, Fry sees the political efforts of globalisation as blatant modern-day imperialism. As an example, Fry uses the design and development of state security apparatus to illustrate that the binary of liberal democracies and repressive regimes is not as clear-cut as it is often thought to be.

Expanding on the idea that sustainability has often been used to advance imperialist agendas, Ajl (2021) describes how environmental policies in the west often still come at the expense of the global south. He asserts:

> If the People's Green New Deal enfolded demands for political sovereignty in the South, such a plan for planetary just transition would burst apart a capitalist system which rests

on super-exploitation of the Third World, using it as a garbage dump and labor supplier (Ajl, 2021, p. 2).

Ajl's dark green position sees a just sustainability as one that is eco-socialist, where a global decommodification of social life and non-human nature is achieved. Re-affirming Fry from the design perspective, Ajl's political perspective sees that a Western Green New Deal is not just the creation of an *ecological* empire, but rather *empire's end*. Thus, sustainability to Ajl (2021) is "the planet's other nations ruling themselves, including colonized nations struggling against settler colonialism" (p. 3).

In a historical study of the Western world's Green New Deals over time, Ajl (2021) notes that early versions of GNDs did not include formerly colonised nations and peoples and their right to reparations, restitution, and development. Ajl sees that this exclusion has the potential to change in this decade, where:

> [H]uge swathes of even domestic populations in the capitalist core are prepared for a more radical, transformative message – one that includes building with rather than ignoring the needs of the social movements and left governments of the South, and which accepts that we in the North also have a unique burden in carrying through worldwide social transformation, specifically in preventing our governments from imposing by violence their political values on other countries (Ajl, 2021, p.6).

In saying the Gulf is both post-colonial and neo-colonial in Chapter 2, it is both the recipient of violence and imposition of political values historically, but also a proliferator of imperialist agendas in the modern age. Ajl (2021) continues to highlight the plight of those dispossessed by political violence in the Arab region and global south, stating:

> An analysis that refuses to consider that the Sana'a or Sheikh Jarrah slum dweller has an interest in ensuring that any 'Great Transition' ensures their own liberations, and does not account for how accumulation on a world scale rests on the wreckage of Yemen and the wealth wrested form Sri Lankan tropical monocrops, is flawed (Ajl, 2021, p.8).

While this thesis, in its approach, methodology and discussion of results, looks to approach the Gulf from a dark green position, it contends with a region that is largely light green and bright green in its current approach to sustainability. Sustainability in the Gulf is politically constrained to techno-fixes. This entails that while critique of these systems takes place throughout the study, any practical recommendations emerging out of it are shaped by the political scope in which the study takes place, as is the capacity of study participants to voice ideas towards the darker end of the green philosophical spectrum. The dark green position ultimately impacts the design of this study and its methodology (see Chapter 4), in that despite hegemonic powers in the modern-day Gulf acting as agents of imperialism, the study both focuses in its research scope and methodology on the inclusion of local disenfranchised voices. As Ajl (2021) puts forward,

for environmental action to be transformative it needs to ensure "the needs of the most oppressed and exploited are woven into its weft from the beginning" (p. 12).

3.5.2 A toolkit for dark green sustainability in the Gulf I: ontology and phenomenology

Discursive pluralities

Approaches derived from a dark green philosophical and political position include ontological, phenomenological, and practical explorations into design objects and design cultures. Costanza-Schock (2020) calls these often-overlooked design domains of marginalised groups "subaltern design sites" (p. 139). They explain that "oppressed and marginalized peoples already have their own design sites, practices, and communities, although these are often ignored, pushed to the side, made invisible, or made to seem less important" (p. 139). Arturo Escobar, in *Designs for the Pluriverse* (2017), is similarly motivated by questions of whether design's current tradition can be reoriented from a patriarchal, capitalist modernity towards one stemming from the ways in which subaltern communities experience the world. Escobar's decolonial approach to design calls to "liberate design from this [Eurocentric] imagination in order to relocate it within the multiple onto-epistemic formations of the South, so as to redefine design questions, problems, and practices in ways more appropriate to the South's contexts" (2017, p. 6). Escobar defines the pluriverse as a "world where many worlds fit" (2017, p. xvi). Pluriversal design and its proponents believe that design must embrace cultural plurality (Akama and Prendiville, 2013; Escobar, 2017; Ansari, 2018; Prakash, 2022, Akama and Yee, 2024).

Subaltern design sites may focus on normatively high-tech tools and practices, or more on everyday technologies and processes (Costanza-Schock, 2020). In the case of the Gulf, and as Section 3.3 put forward, often the design sites that receive interest, funding, and a spotlight are highly corporatised or tech-focused, rather than those of marginalised groups. In order to examine the authentic experience of different groups, even within large, corporatised structures such as malls in Bahrain, this study will push for the search of everyday processes and design sites. For instance, Costanza-Schock asserts that in some cases, microsites such as the home may be where design practice for marginalised groups take place. In this vein, this study will explore locations such as the home, the souk, local tailors, and the use of public fashion space by different groups.

A dark green approach to this research, however, does not only seek to examine lived experience, but also to identify what is useful to keep and to dismantle. Fry (2011) asserts

that a new politics of design "comes out of making things otherwise, of redirecting, of telling, of claiming a space of joy and holding what needs to be valued amid the ravages of the defutured and at a time of unsettlement" (p. 13). This urges a look into joy, or everyday value, within the phenomenological experience of fashion in Bahrain, for its different groups. Joy or everyday value however, in and of itself cannot determine what we should also transition away from, while it can dictate what should be preserved or proliferated. As Costanza-Schock (2020) put forward the idea of subaltern design sites, they acknowledge that power dynamics, even within these subaltern sites, are often far from utopia. For instance, an auto workshop as a site for design for working class men can also simultaneously reproduce heteropatriarchal norms. Similarly, the mall as a public space in the Gulf, where many can see and be seen, and which this study posits operates in a way that transgresses conventional use of fashion spaces in the west (see Chapter 6), can still be an exclusionary space for national and migrant workers from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Ultimately, when it comes to sustainability discourse in the Gulf, revealing "discursive pluralities" (Boehnert, 2018, p. 150) necessitates identifying which narratives are not considered. Another emerging discipline that contests the idea of what narratives within design are assigned more power is the area of decolonising design. Costanza-Schock (2020) explains that decolonising design includes decentring Western approaches to how design is taught, while centring design approaches and practices rooted in indigenous communities. In *The Decolonising Design Manifesto* (Ansari et al., 2016), the authors put forward the idea that the disciplines of design theory and practice do not currently enable the types of knowledge and understanding that adequately address longstanding systemic issues of power. The authors continue to explain the impact of colonisation into the modern day, on the design discipline:

> These issues are products of modernity and its ideologies, regimes, and institutions reiterating, producing and exerting continued colonial power upon the lives of oppressed, marginalized, and subaltern peoples in both the 'developed' and 'developing' world.
>
> This planet, shared and co-inhabited by a plurality of peoples, each inhabiting different worlds, each orienting themselves within and towards their environments in different ways, and with different civilizational histories, is being undermined by a globalized system of power that threatens to flatten and eradicate ontological and epistemological difference, rewriting histories and advance visions of a future for a privileged few at the expense of their human and nonhuman others (Ansari et al, 2016, p. 1).

In a body of published works and conferences, this group of researchers who identify as the Decolonizing Design collective write extensively on the political complexities of design. These topics include design's role as a product and producer of coloniality

(Abdulla et al., 2018) and critical accounts of social design practice (Abdulla, 2014). Ultimately decolonising design work looks to shed light on the greater contexts of power in which design resides and operates.

Fashion, degrowth, and decolonising design

In the years in which my research took place, the surge in degrowth and decolonising discourse has had palpable ramifications on design research, and on fashion in particular. Fletcher (2010), in her work, "Slow Fashion: An Invitation for Systems Change", provokes readers to envision a slower fashion system as an opportunity to explore systems-level questions. Today, applying themes of degrowth and systems change includes conversations on collaborative fashion models (van Tol-Ravensbergen, 2019) and de-commodified fashion (Guldenbrein, 2019), social innovations for degrowth (Valladares and Thomas, 2022), post-growth fictional visions (Twigger Holroyd and Aspinall, 2022), and even making degrowth sexy (Coordes, 2022). Other applications or practices of degrowth include "the craft of use, simplicity, co-operatives, disobedience, urban gardening, post-normal science, work sharing" (Fletcher and Tham, 2019, p. 47) and also direct disruption to production. Calling for a direct halt in the pace of manufacture, Niinimäki et al. (2020) argue for a deceleration of production and Rissanen (2021) calls for degrowth through reversing the steep increase of fibre production from petrochemical sources.

Similarly for discourse surrounding decolonising design, practice, research, and public conversations have expanded rapidly in the past five years. In 2018, the group of researchers forming the Decolonizing Design group put forward guidelines for how to develop design alternatives that contest the neoliberal, colonial world order we inhabit (Ansari, 2018). Prior, this group of researchers had started a conversation on decolonisation and design in 2014 and launched the Decolonizing Design website in 2016 as an archive of their research on the topic. Since then, decolonising design has impacted many disciplines, reaching beyond physical products to graphic design and UX design (Sbravate, 2020). Today, the California College of Arts has a Decolonial School and the RSA has a Decolonizing Design Coalition (founded in 2021). Published in 2023, Elizabeth (Dori) Tunstall's *Decolonizing Design: A Cultural Justice Guidebook* examines how design must be institutionally challenged. For fashion practice and research specifically, the colonial history of fashion has been asserted and is widely acknowledged in a globalised, post-colonial context (Rabine, 1997; Rovine, 2009; Horning, 2014; Semaan, 2018; Bramwell, 2020; Mayer, 2020). However, the transitions of non-Western

and post-colonial geographies themselves towards fashion sustainability are often under-studied.

One resource that has had an impact on spreading the message of decolonising design outside of academia is the Slow Factory, an online platform inclusive of a social media channel, virtual talks, and even online classes for the public. Spearheaded by fashion activist Celine Semaan, the Slow Factory spreads awareness on issues relating to fashion, decolonisation, and the power imbalances within the current system. Targeting everyday individuals, and not only designers or researchers, the platform is unique in stoking discourse on decolonising fashion to an audience of over 700,000 followers (as of May 2024). In application, designers contesting the colonial aftermath or Western hegemony in fashion have often done so artistically – such as Hussein Chalayan and Alice M. Huynh's artistic expressions of expulsion through fashion (Dogramaci, 2019), or Afrofuturism as a decolonial tool (Eismann, 2019). Expanding the practice of fashion from designer to wearer, the choice of wearing a garment or styling may be an intentional decolonial statement. In her essay on the Palestinian Keffiyeh, Jane Tynan (2019) traces the origins of the modern anti-imperialist, anti-colonial statement headdress to its roots as a peasant headdress.

For the purpose of this study, and most relevant to fashion in the Gulf at present, the Decolonizing Design manifesto acknowledges that:

> It is unlikely that the colonized subject today can go back to a prior, pre-modern state of being – for most kinds of subjects, those have been forever lost. However, one can reach back to both historical understandings of past being and their changed nature in the present to recover essential ontological features that would point to a new futural state. For example, given that the roots of modern technology lie in the Greek conception of techne, we can ask what other possible artificials or corresponding ethics could be derived from other philosophies of technology (Ansari, 2018, p. 2).

It is this precise inquiry that prompts an ontological and phenomenological exploration of fashion in Bahrain and the Gulf. In order to arrive at transition recommendations towards fashion sustainability in Bahrain with a goal of design justice, recovering "essential ontological features" (Ansari, 2018, p. 2) is a necessary exploration, one that reveals "discursive pluralities" (Boehnert, 2018, p. 150), and seeks to claim "a space of joy and holding what needs to be valued" (Fry, 2011, p. 13) in this anthropogenic moment for the Gulf. To do so, several practical approaches towards design, described in the section below, are useful for this research.

3.5.3 A toolkit for dark green sustainability in the Gulf II: practical approaches towards design

Building on the need for ontological and phenomenological inquiry for fashion in Bahrain, this section considers several useful approaches and methods towards that end. Three important tools of design theory and practice are identified for the case of Bahrain and the Gulf: *culturally significant designs*; an exploration of *use*; and *designing away*. These three tools have been selected for their applicability to fashion practice in Bahrain today.

Culturally significant designs

In *Design Roots* (Walker et al., 2018), a collection of 25 essays on practices rooted in community and place, the authors reflect on the idea of culturally significant designs. The authors discuss the importance of place-based creative ecologies and the deep understanding of the cultural significance of different products. Jung and Walker (2018) define culturally significant designs and products as those that emerge from place-based practices and contribute to a sense of local identity. For instance, the history of weaving in Bahrain as a craft (see Chapter 2), and the current efforts at its revival – by the weavers themselves, designers, and the government – deem it a culturally significant craft. This focus on place, practice, local identity and process guides the practical approach to research. For instance, in designing questionnaires for research participants, I focused on how fashion is locally experienced and how local systems around fashion are shaped (see Chapter 4 for further discussion on approach to data collection and analysis).

One of the challenges of defining culturally significant designs, products, and practices is falling into the trope that these are static for non-Western cultures. Taking a global view, Amy Twigger Holroyd (2018) argues that evolution and change are integral parts of tradition. She posits that while the initial instinct to an endangered design, product, or practice is preservation, designers and design theorists must be careful to avoid designating cultural forms as static. This is particularly important for the Gulf, where heritage and revitalisation efforts are often central actions from cultural and government institutions (see Chapter 2). Similarly, Evans et al. (2018) note that the idea of what is culturally significant in and of itself is dynamic, in that it is continually evolving. In negotiating what this means for the Gulf, cultural evolution requires acknowledging narratives that are often left out of government-led efforts to preserve heritage. Cultural evolution also re-iterates the need to identify what to hold onto and what to let go of in the case of the Gulf.

Use

Another approach that centres experience, place, and practice is the exploration of use. This is particularly important for the Gulf, where the majority of clothing is imported. In *Craft of Use,* Kate Fletcher (2017) explores use as a disruptive tool to growth-centred fashion system that neglects the ways in which clothing is used after purchase. She theorises that the ways in which we use clothing carry associated skills and competencies which currently have no currency in fashion circles (Fletcher, 2017). Fletcher's exploration of use is within a post-growth economic context; she asserts that assumptions of continuous growth fail to consider what enriches people and how such systems might be achievable within planetary boundaries.

Exploring use in the Bahraini context (see Chapter 5) – where a large part of the fashion experience occurs – unfolds unique social norms, competencies, and behaviours surrounding what happens to clothing after it is purchased. Also relevant to the approach of analysis in Chapter 5 is the concept of social practice theory, in that looking at social practice is impactful in designing transformations towards sustainability (Mellick-Lopes, Gill, and Fam, 2015). Social practice theory examines how routinised behaviour is connected to things and their use, as well as associated know-how (Reckwitz, 2002a, 2002b; Kuijer, 2014; Schatzki, 2016; Schatzki, 2018). Research in the field focuses on social practice and context, rather than individual motives (Spaargaren et al., 2016). Researchers have applied social practice theory to design for sustainability to argue for design approaches that consider interrelated practice, focusing on the experience of use as well as the symbolic, communicative and aesthetic aspects of consuming (Wakkary et al., 2013; Mylan, 2015). Such an approach allows a reframing of how artefacts, such as laundry machines (Kuijer, 2019) or cars (see discussion of results in Chapter 6), can be considered co-performers in modern practices. Social practice theory posits that desires emerge from social practices, and therefore design becomes an impetus for shaping people's social practices (Mellick-Lopes, Gill, and Fam, 2015). Increasingly, the role of space and how it impacts practice and use has become a part of social practice theory (Reckwitz, 2012; Juvonen, 2022). For the Bahraini context, I analyse the study's empirical results – namely interviews and the Delphi study – in Chapters 5 and 6 to reflect on social practices and systems surrounding fashion, such as the roles of automobility culture, fashion spaces (such as malls and souks) and live-in domestic help. All three are deemed as intertwining experiences to the social practice of fashion in Bahrain and are

explored for what may be preserved and what needs to be transformed in transitioning towards sustainability.

Designing away

In exploring what to keep, and what to transition away from, the approach of designing away (Tonkinwise, 2014) is also useful in the Gulf context. In Cameron Tonkinwise's essay "Design Away" (2014), he describes how not-designing is also a proactive, deliberate strategy form of design, one that can make existing designs disappear. He explains that:

> The opposite of the *vita activa* of making, of designing things into existence, is not merely the privately passive *vita conemplativa*, but rather the very active act of unmaking aspects of our lock-in world—designing things out of existence (Tonkinwise, 2014, p. 198).

Tonkinwise (2014) describes ways of undesigning, between "blanket annhilation" (p. 205) and "restricted use" (p. 205), ultimately prompting the conversation of "what deserves to exist, or not, in our societies, and if so, when and where and for whom and how easily—as opposed to just accepting what the market system makes available" (p. 205). The concept of designing away is relevant for a political and ontological exploration of Gulf fashion, to not simply take stock of fashion and social practice, but to recommend what could be designed away. As to how to design away or un-design, Tonkinwise (2014) explains that there are four approaches; through vilifying (communication design); replacing (product design); or restructuring (built environment design); and disowning (through service design). These design approaches are relevant to the Gulf, particularly in examining the details of the mall experience, automobility culture, and labour across the lifecycle, to help consider what could be designed away for a transition towards fashion sustainability.

Ultimately, these practical approaches towards design complement a theoretical approach born out of dark green sustainability, power, and modern-day political context for Bahrain. These tools help lead the way on an ontological and phenomenological inquiry into fashion in Bahrain, and help to organise the approach to research itself. This study's results, in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, draw on these theoretical and practical approaches to design theory to categorise, dissect, and make sense of the data collected. Data collected within the thesis includes results from the Delphi study, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation including field notes throughout the period of research and during a workshop with local fashion designers (see Chapter 4 for detailed methodology and approach to data analysis). The three results chapters conduct an ontological inquiry in

varying ways, through studying language, experience, spatiality, and cognitive aspects of design for sustainability in Bahrain. Ultimately, they look to achieve what cultural theorist Tarik Sabry (2012) designates as reterritorialising. Sabry explains that:

> [A] conscious articulation of Arab cultural studies / media studies cannot take place without connection to key debates and problematics that are inherent to contemporary Arab thought, for what epistemic purpose would Arab cultural studies have it were unable to inform or deal with problems intrinsic to contemporary Arab thought and social theory? To not reterritorialise, to ignore this kind of epistemic dislocation –and I cannot make this point strongly enough – means to work upon a *plane* that is simply unconscious of its own history, its own time and even of the moments to which it may be responding (Sabry, 2012, p. 4).

In building its methodology and its approach to data collection and analysis, this research aims to embed itself into the contemporary practice, discourse, and localised experience of different groups in Bahrain. In doing so, this study reterritorialises fashion sustainability discourse for a non-Western context.

3.5.4 Who gets to design? Post-colonial dynamics of design culture

Further to the concepts of decolonising design and the power dynamics in design, the work of several post-colonial thinkers impacts the approach to this study. While fashion sustainability as a discipline has centred on a Western understanding of fashion systems, activism and fashion practice have often contended with fashion's colonial legacy in the post-colonial era. Also, the impact of coloniality on today's modern fashion system has been widely asserted in academia and by activists (Rabine, 1997; Rovine, 2009; Horning, 2014; Semaan, 2018; Bramwell, 2020; Mayer, 2020). As explained in Chapter 2, post-colonial fashion cultures and non-Western fashion capitals tend to contain a spectrum of dress which includes traditional forms of dress, Western trends and a modern creole of the two. This means that design culture in Bahrain is both local and Western; it has both distinctive features that set it apart from Western capitals as well as commonalities.

Influenced by the ideas of post-colonial thinkers, this research explores why local designers in Bahrain struggle to scale against the back-drop of high fashion imports. Namely, it uses post-colonial theory in its approach to methodology, such as Tarik Sabry's (2012) framework of reterritorialising epistemes within Arab cultural studies and Gramsci's ideas of cultural hegemony, discussed later in this chapter. When exploring, in the results chapters, why Bahraini fashion designers engage in mimicry or why locals believe in the superiority of Western-made products, I evoke both Bhabha and Fanon's understandings of the psyche of the post-colonial subject (see Chapter 7). Additionally, I

use Nader El-Bizri's work on *falsafa* (philosophy, in Arabic), particularly using visual perceptions of space and place, and embodiment within these spaces (El-Bizri, 2019) to reflect on experiences in fashion spaces such as the mall (see Chapter 6).

The influence of these thinkers on the work also impacts the choice of literature used, both throughout the literature review and throughout the analysis of results. For example, Omar al-Shehabi (see Chapter 2) and Sara Salem, introduced later in this chapter, both study the Arab region through a post-colonial lens.

An understanding of the Gulf as both postcolonial, in a material and cognitive sense, as well as neo-colonial in its proliferation of dominance over certain groups in the present-day is necessary. Without such an approach, exporting notions of sustainability in design from a Western understanding may re-enforce neo-colonial dynamics, where progress is measured by Western standards. Thus, reflecting on themes of fashion and post-colonialism, global and local contexts, and linking the discussion of dark green sustainability in this chapter, allows a contextualised understanding to Bahrain and the Gulf's fashion system.

One example of post-colonial impact on the Arab Gulf consumer is the preference for the Western-made. In colloquial Arabic, a preference for the Western (be it commodities, mannerisms, and even labour) is often referred to as *'uqdat al-khawaja* which literally translates to "the complex of the overlord". This complex includes performance, preference or mimicry that results from colonial subjugation, which continues into the post-colonial experience. As psychological studies show a significant relationship between intrinsic motivation and creativity (Jaquith, 2011; Amabile and Pillemer, 2012; Jesus et al., 2013), the intrinsic idea that foreign or Western is better will then have a societal impact on cultural production. Since the muscle of creativity touches many aspects of society and everyday life – such as the arts and sciences, business, education and public policy (Moran, 2010) – the true cost of the complex of the overlord in the Arab world is immeasurable.

Bringing power dynamics into play, and imploring a dark green systems' perspective, the authoritarianism of the Gulf comes into view as a bottleneck for cultural production. Ahmed Kuru (2019) argues that hindrances to development in the Arab world and Islamicate world must be tackled beyond essentialist views, where Islam is seen as a cause of underdevelopment, but also beyond anti-colonial views which explain under-development with a Western exploitation of resources. Kuru argues that the *unique*

interactions between economic, political, intellectual and religious classes in the Islamicate world has created a form of authoritarianism antithetical to development and an intellectually creative bourgeoise. He argues that historically, intellectual production resulted from an alliance of *ulemas* (scholars) and the merchant class, reaching its zenith between the 9ᵗʰ and 12ᵗʰ centuries. This alliance later shifts to that of *ulemas* with the state crowding out and suppressing an intellectually creative bourgeoisie. I argue that this view is not necessarily contradictory to the views of many post-colonial scholars, but perhaps it sheds light on the dynamics of cultural production in a way that pre-dates Western colonialism in the region. For instance, Sara Salem (2020) argues from within a post-colonial narrative that accountability may and should be drawn to the hegemony of local Arab groups in power. Then, to take a post-colonial position in design discourse is to acknowledge *both* local culpabilities and dynamics of cultural production and that colonialism may have exacerbated issues with local cultural production. Salem (2020) posits that "the tragedy of colonialism, then, is not only its existence, but its production of forms of resistance that were then mobilised for projects that continued rather than disrupted colonial violence, structures, and lifeworlds" (p. 18).

One such impact is the impact on how different subgroups use consumerism in a post-colonial context. Dissecting Gramsci's work on cultural hegemony, Lears says:

> But a given symbolic universe, if it becomes hegemonic, can serve the interests of some groups better than others. Subordinate groups may participate in maintaining a symbolic universe, even if it serves to legitimate their domination. In other words, they can share a kind of half-conscious complicity in their own victimization (Lears, 1985, p.573).

Cultural hegemony can be explored by looking at Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony within an Arab post-colonial context. Gramsci says:

> [T]he 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production (Gramsci, 1971 in Lears, 1985, p.568).

It follows that why *'uqdat al khawaja* may be upheld when it comes to fashion, and other forms of cultural production, is due to the local social politics of dominant and subordinate groups. In post-colonial, modern-day Bahrain, social capital is defined by an intersection of class with ethno-sectarian politics (Al-Shehabi, 2019). As discussed in Chapter 2, local textile craft in Bahrain is largely associated with *Baharna*, the Shia ethno-sectarian group which constitutes the majority of Bahrain's citizen population. Migration from *al-Hasa* and *al-Qatif*, Saudi's predominantly Shia eastern provinces, of craftsmen

such as weavers (Al-Shehabi, 2019), has contributed to the concentration of heritage craft-making within the *Baharna* or the closely associated ethno-sectarian group of *Hasawis* and *Qatafis*. The results of this study (Chapters 5, 6, and 7) must be contextualised within this Bahraini cultural narrative as well as notions of proximity to the *khawaja* or Western overlord. In other words, there are privileges accompanying proximity to both groups in power in Bahrain as well as Eurocentrism at a large, due to post-colonial impacts. These proximities and their privileges appear in fashion (see Chapter 7).

One example, applied in Chapter 7 to the empirical results of the research, is the notion of "anxious repetition" (McLeod, 2000; Mondal, 2014) from the point of view of the post-colonial Gulf consumer. In post-colonial studies, anxious repetition refers to how the colonial perspective anxiously repeats stereotypical attributes of the colonised other. It is an incessant attempt to keep the colonised in a fixed position (McLeod, 2000), often through stereotypes that render them in static terms (Prasad, 2016). If the colonial gaze is that of the other as innately and fixedly degenerate or barbaric (Mondal, 2014), then fast fashion may the post-colonial, Gulf consumer's anxious response of "I am ever-changing, non-fixed, and if need be disposable to be completely renewed". If fast fashion, through its fast-changing trends, can be understood to succeed by undermining the confidence of the global consumer, then the pressure to comply for the (post-) colonised other is arguably greater than that of their Western counterpart.

When thinking of creative autonomy in Arab culture, mimicry refers to emulating colonial culture by the (post-)colonised (Bhabha, 2004). This mimicry is neither original – in the sense that it is a repetition, nor is it identical, due the difference that defines it (ibid). Such a mimicry by the post-colonial Gulf person or society makes – say Western fashion trends – ambivalent; they are constantly split between an appearance as original, authoritative and their manifestation as a repetition, different. For fashion particularly, this mimicry has been *corporatised* and exported through global fashion chains that mimic high-end designers and then export across the world. As Chapter 6 discusses, shopping within a mall in and of itself could be seen as *partaking* in the neo-colonial contract. Bhabha (2004) paints this mimicry as a re-appropriation, where the observer becomes the observed. Mondal (2014) goes so far to say that Bhabha's notion of mimicry is in itself a form of anti-colonial resistance, in that by speaking English, the colonised can challenge the representations which attempt to define them. In Chapters 6 and 7, I discuss the results

of this study by engaging this post-colonial lens for fashion in Bahrain, namely understanding local power dynamics, preferences for Western products and mimicry.

3.6 Conclusion

As a field, DfS has transitioned from a focus on solely the environment as a resource to one that contends with the interconnectedness of social and technological aspects. However, concepts in the field are often practised within a Western cultural domain. This chapter builds on the thinking of design and sustainability researchers that call for political, ontological, and phenomenological inquiry (Fry, 2011; Ansari et al., 2016; Boehnert, 2018; Escobar, 2017; Ajl, 2021). Within design theory, explorations such as design justice, decolonising design, and design politics have questioned the power, politics, and status quo of the design field. This study looks to bridge the gap in fashion sustainability discourse, looking at an approach for DfS that contests political context and is embedded within a local ontological understanding using the case study of Bahrain.

This chapter begins to lay the understanding of DfS as a discipline, and how it could combine theories of post-colonial identity, neo-imperial reality, and local ontological understanding. The discussion of sustainability throughout this study aims to achieve what Ansari et al. (2016) describe as "ontological rather than additive change" (p. 1). Within the burgeoning discipline of decolonising design, researchers acknowledge that in terms of design history, we cannot go back to prior, pre-modern states of being and making, but rather aim to reach a historical understanding and recover core ontological features (Ansari, 2018). For instance, it is conceptually impossible to separate ideological modern Arab nationalism from post-colonial identity. It is also impossible to reverse the border-transgressing impact of social media, technology, and the virtual world in the modern age to pre-colonial times. In the case of Bahrain, this implies a need to understand the modern ontological landscape of fashion, associated with fashion's local social and material organisation (Chapter 5), experiences in space and phenomenology (Chapter 6), and the cultural elements that may determine a post-oil identity for the gulf (Chapter 7). In this way, sustainability in design becomes inclusive of forging a new form of collective post-colonial identity for the Gulf, one that is aware of its current role within neo-imperialism. A transition towards sustainability for the Gulf could mean imagining the Gulf to develop in a way where it is not valued only for the oil it has, or its ability to be an arm of Western neo-imperialism in the wider Arab region. It would mean a seat on the table that is de-linked from an oil identity, establishing a sustainability notion linked to local reason, values, epistemes and ontology as opposed to importing a globalised

Western notions. This makes design for sustainability solutions that emerge not only political, but also an issue of identity for the Gulf in a post-colonial, and ultimately post-oil, world.

4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

In line with a dark green philosophical position (see Chapter 3), this study's research approach and methods were chosen to bring together voices of those in power with those marginalised within the fashion industry in Bahrain. The methodology was built out of both an interpretivist and pragmatic approach; the combination enables both ontological inquiry and actionable solutions (Kelly and Cordeiro, 2020). For instance, an ontological inquiry can show different social practices associated with fashion locally, and a pragmatic approach can reveal that digitising fashion repair may have benefits within a high repair culture like Bahrain.

The multi-methods comprising the methodology include a Delphi study – a consensus building tool often used for policy – as well as qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews. A Delphi study is a series of questionnaires, where a panel of industry experts, academics, or policymakers answer questions relating to the current state and future of the area being investigated (Okoli and Pawlowski, 2004; Brady, 2015). The Delphi method consists of two rounds of questioning. After each round, compiled and anonymised answers are shared, and panellists can adjust their answers in light of reading the viewpoints of other participants (Skulmoski et al., 2007; Brady, 2015). For a nascent subject matter such as fashion sustainability in Bahrain, a Delphi study is ideal as it allows for the creation of consensus on new knowledge when the literature and previous data is scarce (Hasson et al., 2000).

Parallel to the Delphi study, semi-structured interviews are an interpretivist method selected as they enable "enquiring openly about situational meanings or motives" (Hopf, 2004, p. 203). Semi-structured interviews include cues, prompts and probing questions that allow an exploration of the perspective of the individual interviewed (Harvey-Jordan and Long, 2001; Brinkmann, 2020). Additionally, participant observation, through living in Bahrain for months at a time throughout the duration of the research, enabled me to contextualise results, conduct site visits and run a workshop with local fashion designers, all while taking field notes that I analysed for this research. Together, these methods fulfil an interpretivist and pragmatic approach to research.

This chapter starts by explaining the approach to the methodology and sequencing of the data collection. Following that, I discuss each of the Delphi study and semi-structured interview methods in detail, including how they were applied to the research and how I

approached the analysis of data collected through each method. I then briefly discuss participant observation, and how I used field notes during site visits (to malls, discount centres, souks), and a workshop with local designers to supplement my understanding. Subsequently, I reflect on my positionality as a researcher. My perspective as a Bahraini, social justice-oriented woman, and Western educated scholar impacts my research. This impact includes the research's agenda and starting point, my choice of methods and my theoretical sensitivity (or way in which I may interpret the data). I conclude the chapter with a reflection on the limitations of the methodology and a summary of how the combination of methods could be used for other research contexts.

4.2 Building a methodology

4.2.1 Approach to the methodology

This research seeks to derive fashion sustainability solutions for Bahrain that stem from its unique discourse, epistemes, fashion ontology and social practices. In Bahrain, certain social aspects like a local tailoring sector and the niche role of local bespoke designers are part of fashion's status quo, while they are often classified as aspirational systems within modern Western sustainability practice. This is seen in the emergence of new start-ups in the late 2010s and early 2020s that catered to cobbling, mending, and re-fitting clothing in Europe such as the Clothes Doctor, The Restory, Sojo and The Seam (Chan, 2022; Davey, 2021; Webb, 2021) as well as their collaborations with retailers such as Farfetch, Harvey Nichols, Harrods and Net-a-Porter (Webb, 2023). Much like the rest of the Arab world, in Bahrain tailoring, mending and cobbling are still practised as part of daily life, although in a diminished way to decades past. Thus, it is vital to create local and ontologically fitting frameworks for fashion sustainability that allow a critical classification of what is truly an effort towards sustainability in Bahrain and what is part of the status quo. This necessitates methods for data collection and analysis which combine both the varied experiences of Bahrain's inhabitants as well as an understanding of what is feasible from a range of local experts and decision-makers.

This study is rooted in the dark green philosophical position described in Chapter 3. Dark green thinking believes that environmental problems are an inherent part of industrialised capitalism and that change in the social, economic and political order may be needed for change towards sustainability (Steffen, 2009). From this philosophical starting point, I have built a methodology rooted in both interpretivism and pragmatism. An interpretivist approach focuses on exploring ontology and phenomenology, stemming from the notion that knowledge is subjective (McIntosh, 1997; Chowdhury, 2014; Bhattacharya, 2017).

In the past decades, feminist, neo-Marxist, postcolonial, green and queer theories have expanded the use and application of interpretivist methods (Westmarland, 2001; Scauso, 2020). For my research, interpretivism means studying fashion and sustainability in Bahrain as they are experienced from a local understanding, as opposed to non-critically importing global or Western frameworks. It also means questioning tenets within fashion sustainability discourse, which is today like many disciplines a Western dominated field. Pragmatism looks at creating practical and actionable outcomes (Patton, 2005; Biesta, 2010), and is often used in conjunction with interpretivist research methods to instigate or inspire action (Morgan, 2014; Kelly and Cordeiro, 2020). For my research, this means exploring tangible solutions such as waste systems and the training of local designers, in tandem with ontological inquiry. Table 4.1 outlines the methods forming this study's methodology and their uses.

Table 4. 1 Approach, Method, Data and Participants

Approach	Methods	Use	Data	Participants / Sources
Interpretivist and pragmatic	**Delphi Panel** *(Conducted in English)*	To create consensus on issues pertaining to fashion sustainability in Bahrain	• Answers written by participants in Delphi questionnaire forms • Transcripts of recordings for few participants that provided in-person answers	• Civil servants and government stakeholders • NGO employees • Fashion Retailers • Academics • Activists
	Semi-structured interviews *(Conducted in Arabic and English)*	To explore personal narratives around fashion sustainability in Bahrain	• Transcripts and recordings from interviews • Fieldnotes taken during interviews	• Weavers • Tailors • Salespeople • Local designers • Small business owners • Grandmothers
	Participant resident observation *(Generated field notes in Arabic and English)*	To (make note of and) understand local social practices surrounding fashion and sustainability	• Fieldnotes throughout period of research • Photographs of various sites visited • Photographs of workshop output (e.g. participant ranking scoreboards, brainstorms, etc.)	• Researcher observations, during: - Workshop with designers - Visits to malls, discount centers and souks

As Chapter 2 discusses, Bahrain is a society where policy and decision-making tends to be top-down and institutional, thus under-representing the viewpoints of those not in positions of power, either due to gender or class divisions. Alhouti (2020) argues that the transitions in the GCC are highly enabled by both the political will of decision-makers as well as the involvement of governmental bodies. To understand the status quo as well as future of sustainability for the fashion industry, my methodology combines a method that is more pragmatic (Delphi study) with one that accounts for voices often excluded in top-down decision-making (semi-structured interviews) and another that allows for a wide cultural understanding (participant observation).

4.2.2 Sequencing

I gathered my data over two phases. Planning for and conducting Phase I took place between August 2018 and May 2019, and for Phase II took place between August 2019 and April 2020. See Figure 4.1 for the sequence of data gathering across the two phases.

Figure 4. 1 Phases of Data Gathering
(Author's own, 2025)
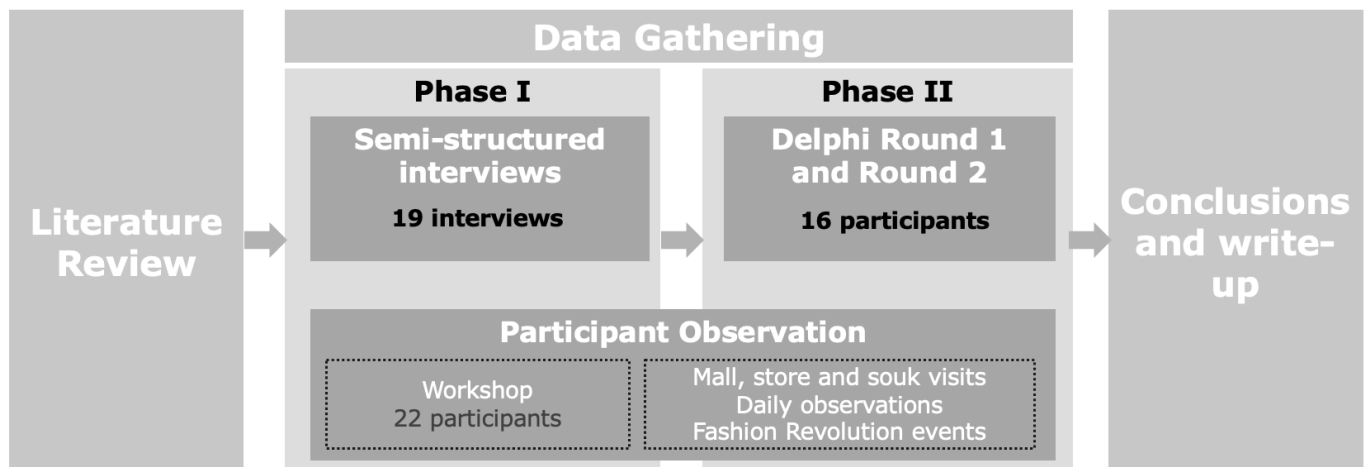
Figure shows the phases of data gathering in this study, which include semi-structured interviews in Phase I, a Delphi study in Phase II and participant observation throughout.

Phase I allowed for an understanding of emerging themes relating to fashion sustainability in Bahrain before entering the Delphi round with the panel of selected experts. Additionally, after Phase I the participant list for the Delphi study was honed for two reasons. First, during Phase I interviews, organic introductions and conversations led to the discovery of more relevant experts to either the issues of fashion or sustainability in Bahrain. Second, Phase I unearthed that sustainability, craft, and the environment in Bahrain all have socially and politically loaded histories – which have at times been re-written or re-framed by politicians or the state. For this reason, a select number of

ministers that were meant to be included in the Delphi study were removed from the participant list, to ensure that answers are not coloured by any puffery or state bias.

Phase I started with my participant observation during a workshop with local fashion designers in December 2018. The workshop was organised in conjunction with the Bahrain Fashion Incubator, the Sustainable Energy Unit (a collaboration between the UNDP and Ministry of Energy), and Fashion Revolution Bahrain – the local arm of the global not-for-profit organization and ethical fashion advocate – whose members helped run the break-out sessions. The workshop included activities that urged designers to put forward their own definitions of fashion sustainability, before delving into the topic from a global perspective, including a primer on fabric types. See Appendix E for more details on activities conducted during the workshop, including images and workshop slides.

The remainder of Phase I consisted of semi-structured interviews to close gaps in the research (such as historical information relating to garment making, dressing, and culture that were not found during a literature review) as well as capturing emerging themes. These emerging themes offered a multi-perspective approach to fashion sustainability in Bahrain and guided the development of Phase II's Delphi questionnaire – where participants were given a summary.

Phase II of data gathering commenced in August 2019 with reaching out to participants for the Delphi study. The Delphi study itself started in August 2019 with reaching out to participants and ended in April 2020 with the conclusion of second round.

4.2.3 "What is said" and "what is not said"

In *The New Arab Urban*, Molotch and Ponzini (2019) discuss methodological challenges of conducting research in the GCC where "autocratic governance limits access to officials, statistical data, and field-work sites" (p. 8). They underscore that methods such as survey, interview, or ethnography are difficult to undertake and that "even when data do exist, they might not be made available" (Molotch and Ponzini, p. 8). They conclude that Gulf cities must in fact be studied with their unique complexities, and that "part of that complexity is represented by the limits of what has been said and not said" (Molotch and Ponzini, p. 9). Others have noted reading into what is not there as a facet of transcendent qualitative or ethnographic research in general (Hepburn, 2006; Given, 2008b).

What is not said may also be interpreted politically, as is done within the method of deconstruction in the field of literary criticism. Originally applied as a way to analyse

texts, but since adopted by the social sciences (Feldman, 1995; Saukko, 2003), deconstruction refers to capturing meanings or emerging concepts in results that are not readily perceptible, particularly with research that seeks to understand marginalised voices (Gough, 2008). In this study, what is not said is due both to access difficulties in Bahrain as well as the social positioning of the researcher. A lack of access to Bahrain's low wage labour community, including domestic workers, tailors, cobblers, and sales staff, leads to a "privilege of presence over absence" (Hepburn, 2006, p. 63). Bahrainis and expatriates from the middle class were more accessible during the research process.

Access to the low wage migrant community, which forms a vital part in the sales, tailoring, mending, and caring for clothing, was constrained by language and the vulnerability of these individuals. I managed to conduct two interviews with individuals in the low wage migrant community. The first was with a tailor who had worked in Bahrain for 15 years. We struggled to communicate, in a creole of broken English and Arabic, but he was able to relay unique insight into work conditions and patterns, and his personal work history in Bahrain. The second was with a sales manager. He was worried about the safety of his job despite his keen-ness to interview. Access to domestic house workers is even more difficult, as the consent of their employer – who they live with – would be required first. Even if that consent was granted, the domestic worker may feel an implied power dynamic with an interviewer that has entered their workspace, and home, by way of their employer. A domestic worker may feel pressure by their employer to consent to the interview, or to answering interview questions in certain ways. While I managed to speak to two individuals from the low-wage immigrant community in the fashion industry in Bahrain, perhaps what is not said due to my inability to access and include more of their voices is part of the complexity that Molotch and Ponzini referred to.

What is not said also includes various instances of participants pausing interview recordings to say things off-record during semi-structured interviews. This includes a high amount of "future policy suggestions" as opposed to critiques of present-day policy in the first round of the Delphi. Observing these silences or choices of expression sheds light on the socio-politics and limits to civic engagement around potential transitions towards sustainability in Bahrain, and perhaps the wider GCC. What is not said may also be shaped by the interviewee's impression of the interviewer. For instance, a Bahraini local fashion designer during the workshop or craftsperson during a one-on-one interview

may modulate responses due to how they socially perceive me as a foreign educated fellow Bahraini.

4.3 Delphi Method

4.3.1 Delphi: Method Overview

The Delphi study was chosen as a method for consensus-building between those in positions of influence to develop recommendations on the nascent topic of DfS in fashion in Bahrain. The Delphi method is a questionnaire that achieves consensus by engaging experts or policymakers in two or three rounds of questioning (Okoli and Pawlowski, 2004; Brady, 2015; Skumloski et al, 2007; Brady, 2015). The key strength of the Delphi lies in creating consensus on a nascent subject matter while including voices from different disciplines and those with different lived experiences (Hasson et al., 2000). Additionally, the Delphi study lends itself well to recommendations, prioritisations and rankings of recommendations, and the ease of reaching consensus without having to gather experts physically, which could be impractical and difficult to orchestrate (Okoli and Pawlowski, 2004). For these reasons, the Delphi is commonly used in informing social policy and organisational decision making in fields such as education and public health (Adler and Ziglio, 1996; Okoli and Pawlowski, 2004; Brady, 2015).

Delphi studies are widely and conventionally used to create quantitative and empirical results, such as forecasting the future size of a market for a product, where participants (e.g., marketing personnel, retailers, experts in consumer preferences) are asked to give direct estimates (Gordon, 1994). However, Delphi studies are also used more open-endedly, in a form resembling in-depth interviews or qualitative questionnaires (ibid). This study takes on the approach of the latter, where the aim is not quantitative simulation but rather to elicit ideas that can lay the groundwork for recommendations in Bahrain as well as future analysis. Critical realists advocate a greater reliance on qualitative data collection as it lends itself better to understanding complexity (Clark, 2008). Post-modernist thinkers, including feminist social researchers, critique the use of generalisations, universality, as well as the ability of scientific rationality in producing objective truth. Truth is instead negotiated through discourse, textuality, fragmentation, multiple subjectivities, and flux (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). Exploring multiple subjectivities includes critically engaging with relations of power and inequality, which contributes to the choice of a qualitative Delphi.

While this study does not categorically fall into social research, it is inspired by the democratic nature of highly participatory methods, and thus the choice of the Delphi, which includes two rounds of review on findings. The Delphi's iterative process allows participants to review and adjust how their contributions have been aggregated between each round. Also, the anonymity of participants to one another eliminates the undemocratic forces of oratory and pedagogy (Gordon, 1994). Through anonymity to one another, the power dynamic of strong or authoritative personalities is removed, and each selected expert is given an equal voice.

In line with critical realism and critical social science, the use of the Delphi method in a more qualitative style than its conventional use gives voice to different perspectives in Bahrain, recognising that individuals in society "can actively shape and change wider social phenomena through channels such as collective action, the arts, and research" (Clark, 2008, p. 4). The design of the Delphi method for this study draws on the field of Transition Design. Transition Design is a growing field, which views socio-technical problems within communities as connected systematically, wherein change in one problem can trigger change in another (Irwin, 2015; Irwin et al., 2016b). Irwin posits that "transition design resembles Chinese acupuncture: where the needles are placed as calculated trigger points for connected systems" (2018, n.p.). Transition Design, therefore, inspires the dual purpose of the Delphi study to both map a fashion ontology of Bahrain (including its structures, agents, processes, behaviours, and social attitudes) before assessing trigger points, or opportunities for transformation.

Transition Design puts forth a method of visioning and back-casting for designing transformation (Irwin et al., 2016a). The visioning and back-casting Transition Design method proposed by Irwin et al. requires deep stakeholder involvement and transdisciplinarity. The Delphi method designed for this study emphasises both deep stakeholder involvement, through the re-iteration of findings and reaching of consensus, as well as transdisciplinarity, by the inclusion of individuals from government, NGOs, retail, academics, and activists.

Within Transition Design, visioning is an exercise of co-creating desirable futures, which enables stakeholders with conflicting agendas to transcend their differences in the present and find ground in common values (Irwin, 2015; Irwin et al., 2016a, 2016b). Back-casting is the creation of a plan from a certain target. Inspired by this method of visioning and back-casting, as well as deep stakeholder multi-disciplinary engagement for the prioritisation of solutions, the Delphi for this study was designed with two rounds. The

first round created consensus on the status quo, while the second focused on the prioritisation of solutions. Each round took approximately four months to conduct, inclusive of reach-out to panellists and the consolidation of viewpoints for review (see Section 4.3.3 for complete sequencing of research and Section 4.4 for more details on conducting the Delphi). The two rounds of the Delphi each served a different purpose, as outlined below:

- Delphi Round 1 (Consensus on the status quo, visioning, and back-casting)
  - Collate viewpoints from experts across disciplines to create shared understanding of fashion sustainability in Bahrain
  - Create visions for an ideal fashion sustainability future for Bahrain
  - Clarify pathway towards visions through understanding barriers and opportunities
- Delphi Round 2 (Prioritisation, feasibility, and impact):
  - Prioritise visions of long-term and desirable futures
  - Understand feasibility and impact of different courses of action
  - Short-list recommendations for fashion sustainability in Bahrain

A key drawback of the Delphi method, and especially in this context, is its tendency to give voice to experts as opposed to marginalised groups, which includes a debate on who classifies as an expert (Hasson et al., 2000). In this study, the Delphi is conducted in conjunction with semi-structured interviews and participant observation to capture holistic viewpoints. Another drawback with the Delphi can be its reliance on the subjectivity of experts (Goodman, 1987), which while inherent to qualitative research can be minimised. For the specific case of this study, influential stakeholders which might have a high risk of bias or obligations to uphold certain viewpoints such as ministers or official government spokespersons were interviewed, if needed, individually through semi-structured interviews.

4.3.2 Delphi: Sampling

The selection of participants for each method within this study varied according to the method itself and purpose of its use. Sampling in this study aimed to capture voices that vary in both social resources and in their potential responses to change (May, 2002b) which is crucial when taking into account that transitions impact groups differently, and that decision-making in Bahrain is relatively top-down.

Sampling for the Delphi study focused on participants that are "strategically located to shed light on the larger forces and processes under investigation" (May, 2002b, p. 204) while maintaining a spread across gender and social groups within Bahrain. As mentioned

in Section 4.3, the list for Delphi participants (see Appendix B) was honed after Phase I in order to remove any puffery or bias from official spokespersons, such as ministers.

4.3.3 Delphi: Conducting

The main challenges of conducting the Delphi study included access to individuals and longer than expected lead-times from point of contact to participation. Some participants took a total of 10 weeks from the initial point of contact until returning the first round of the Delphi, despite repeated follow-ups, whereas others returned the same round within two weeks.

I contacted 23 individuals for participation in the Delphi study. Of the 23 contacted for participation, 18 were successfully inducted in September 2019. Induction comprised of a face-to-face or phone-call meeting with the participant to introduce the research topic, findings of Phase I, and process of the Delphi. Each participant was given an information sheet and consent form (see Appendix A) during the induction, or by email following the meeting or call. Of the 18 individuals inducted, 16 participants completed Round 1 of the Delphi study by the end of November 2019. All 16 participants were briefed on the consolidated results of Round 1 and moved on to successfully completing Round 2. Both rounds of the Delphi study were conducted in English.

Participants filled in Round 1 of the Delphi questionnaire in a variety of ways, including in-person dictation to myself as a researcher, printing of the questionnaire and writing or drawing on it, or responding digitally through a filled-in Word document or email with bullet points. Two participants preferred to answer the questionnaire verbally while I recorded their answers in their offices, and later transcribed. The remaining 14 participants filled in the questionnaire and returned it via email. Some participants chose to fill in the form by hand (and used diagrams, flow-charts, and annotations) and sent a scanned version of their writing and drawing, while others typed into the Round 1 Word document or sent an email with bullet points or long-form text. The variety of ways in which individuals gave their input was by design open-ended to cater to how best each person preferred to brainstorm. An open format for Round 1 was in line with its purpose of collating a wide net of multi-disciplinary viewpoints and ways of thinking. Section 4.5 covers the approach to questions in the Delphi questionnaire employed in this study, which is open-ended, qualitative and inspired by the field of Transition Design.

From this open format, it was necessary to manually transcribe all Round 1 data to one consolidated format in an Excel sheet before data analysis (see Appendix C for an

example of this collation). Conducting Round 2 of the Delphi was simpler, as participants were sent a list of scenarios and initiatives to rate and give a rationale for their score. The data from Round 2 was therefore easier to compile, as it included the numerical component of ratings and was inputted by participants into the Round 2 document they received digitally.

4.3.4 Delphi: Data gathering and analysis

Approach to Delphi questions

For the Delphi, the first round's questions were open ended and derived from the field of Transition Design. For the second round, questions were in the form of two ranking exercises, to prioritise scenarios and recommendations.

While Delphi studies are often used to create empirical results, this study takes the approach of a more open-ended, questionnaire-style approach. This allows for a large range of perspectives to emerge, and the possibility of engaging with relations of power and inequality within the scope of fashion sustainability in Bahrain.

Also, derived from the gap in knowledge on fashion sustainability in an Arab country, and the GCC, the open-ended format of the Delphi ensures that the language, methods, and ideas of the Design for Sustainability discipline are not super-imposed onto specific recommendations for Bahrain, or for the wider region. Foucauldian-influenced thought posits the possibility that power can be exercised from innumerable points within analysis, and that the knowledge underpinning a discourse can be exclusionary (Given, 2008b). Therefore, the act of creating open-ended questions for the Delphi avoids constraining or excluding understandings and knowledge that could offer alternative views.

To achieve this wide array of perspectives, the style of questions was based on a visioning and back-casting approach from the Transition Design discipline. This creates a qualitative two-round consensus-building study, which seeks to go beyond an empirical understanding of fashion sustainability (e.g., waste flows, consumption rates, purchasing power, etc). The issue with overly focusing on an empirical understanding of fashion sustainability is that it may neglect a critical reflection on embodied and material differences, power dynamics, and inequality (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). For instance, measuring the amount of textile waste that Bahrain produces as a signifier of consumption may not shed light on consumption cultures, nuances between different consumer and demographic segments, as well as strategies to transition towards slower and more

mindful consumption. Thus, questions were formulated qualitatively to capture critical perspectives on the material. See Appendices B and C for the Delphi study questions.

Approach to analysis of Delphi generated data

Once I transcribed the Delphi study responses, I used Excel for my data analysis to thematically code participant contributions. In Excel, I inserted each complete idea from a Delphi participant as a row of data. I then tagged this raw data by the key theme appearing in the statement, and also assigned secondary tags (see Figure 4.2). Subsequently, I created an indexing category for the statement. This process is similar to standard thematic coding often done for qualitative interviews (Schmidt, 2004; McIntosh and Morse, 2015).

Figure 4. 2 Tree-coding during Delphi thematic analysis
(Author's own, 2025)
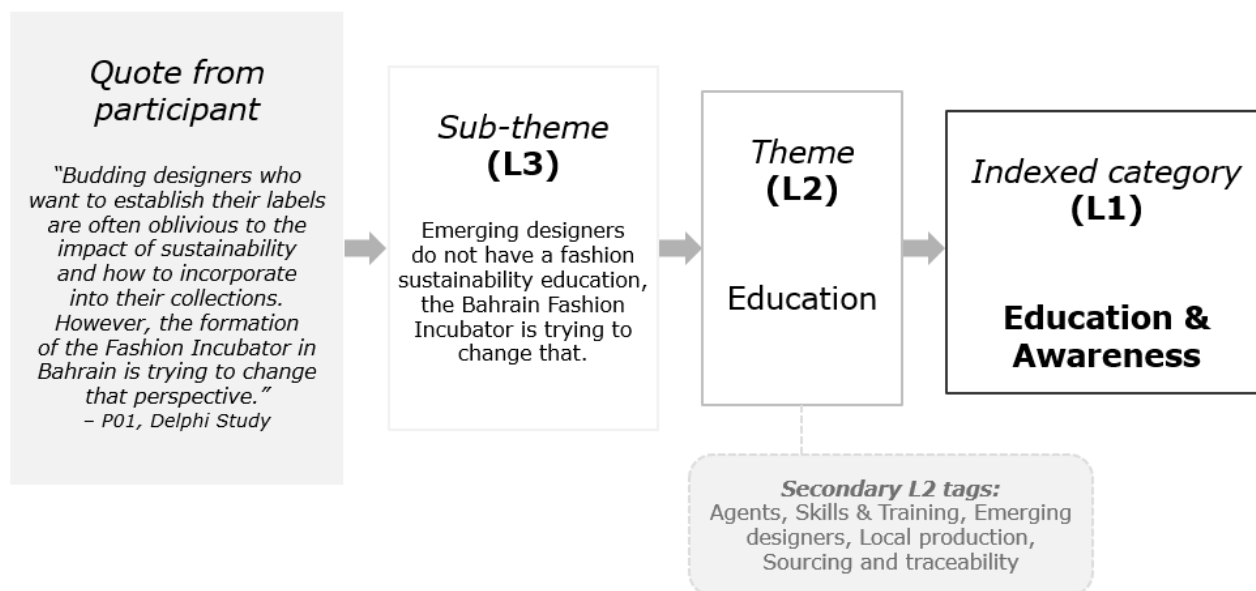
Figure shows the process of tree-coding with an example from Delphi Round 1. Participant answers are tagged with sub-themes (L3), themes (L2), and then placed into indexed categories (L1). Secondary L2 tags are also allocated, which allow for cross-referencing later and reviewing allocation of the data.

The first round of the Delphi included the most complex tree-coding conducted during this study. Round 1 of the Delphi determined the percentage of participants that believed a certain topic to be an enabler or hindrance towards fashion sustainability. This percentage was calculated at the L1 level (see Figure 4.2), meaning that participant answers under-went three rounds of categorisation to build the higher-level topics. At the L2 level, a numerical representation was not provided, but rather the themes were

gathered and summarised to be shared back with participants at the end of Round 1 (see Appendix C for results shared with participants after Round 1).

Management of the data generated into categorical levels is inherently shaped by the judgement and decision-making process of the researcher, as I explain in Section 4.6. My position as a researcher could create a higher proclivity towards certain themes over others (Delamont, 2009). This proclivity or sensitivity to certain themes is likely to develop as the research is conducted (Witzel and Reiter, 2012). Reflexivity implores the understanding that "themes do not exist independently from the researcher carrying out the analysis" (King and Brooks, 2008, p. 220).

This idea is linked to the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher, as the detection of themes can be a result of contending with familiarity to our own society (Delamont, 2009). Researcher sensitivity to themes was expanded in two ways. First, in addition to the L2 tag allocated to each sub-theme, secondary tags were assigned to serve as quality checks that stimulate critical thinking (King and Brooks, 2008). Secondary tags allowed for a review of all allocations, once all answers were coded. They were also used for cross-referencing, linking ideas together, and understanding complexities during the discussion of results in Chapters 5–7.

At times, an L2 theme could fit in different L1 categories. An example of this is the L2 theme of *agents*, which was placed in varying indexed categories. *Agents* was a strong L2 theme, denoting the formal and informal groups – such as institutions, community centres, government bodies, incubators, and so on – involved in a certain aspect of fashion sustainability. For that reason, *agents* as a theme is found in the L1 categories of design and production, policy, materials, and traceability among others. A final decision on an L1 category went back to understanding the essential meaning and overarching messaging of a certain statement. Once L1 indexed categories were coded onto the data, initial L2 tags were reviewed. This review is a result of the conceptual development that tends to take place alongside the round of L1 coding (Birks and Mills, 2011). During L1 coding, the focus is on conceptual development and at times integrating categories to describe or apply theory (Mills and Birks, 2014). Therefore, L1 coding is not only an allocative exercise, but rather a second cycle of coding that inherently includes a critical assessment of L2 themes. This second cycle of coding (L1) has been likened to an assembly process of the qualitative research findings (Saldana, 2009). By mapping secondary L2 themes onto each L3 sub-theme, review, cross-referencing, and conceptual development are all facilitated.

The second way of curtailing thematic bias or increasing sensitivity was through the iterative process of the Delphi. By design, Delphi iterations allow for a limitation of researcher bias or misinterpretation during the data analysis. A review round after data is transcribed, tree-coded, and thematically analysed allows Delphi participants to adjust, retract, or comment on their contributions.

Another aspect related to the sensitivity of the data is the capturing of intensity vs. frequency. Tree-coding essentially measures frequency, or the amount of times a topic or idea has been mentioned. Therefore, tree-coding can overlook two aspects. The first is why a participant chooses to focus on a specific topic versus another in their answer (Emmel, 2013), namely their own proclivity to certain themes or theoretical sensitivity. Second, tree-coding can overlook how strongly a participant feels about what they are saying (Corbetta, 2003). An example of the first aspect, for instance, is an economist on the Delphi panel spending a long time discussing consumption, as her expertise and exposure to themes of consumer behaviour allows her to prolifically comment on this aspect of fashion sustainability. An environmental activist may overly focus on waste management and infrastructure issues, as this is the issue closest to her area of expertise. The Delphi's design in this study alleviates this aspect by both sampling across practice areas to find individuals that are at a "critical juncture in a particular trajectory of a phenomenon" (Emmel, 2013, p. 27), and secondly by allowing participants to rank all emerging scenarios in the second round, as opposed to only considering their own ideas.

The second aspect denotes the inability of tree-coding to measure intensity. Theoretical or observational opinions, for example, differ from "consolidated opinions that are entrenched in the respondent's personal history" (Corbetta, 2003, p. 125). For instance, both the economist and the environmental activist may recognise fashion waste as a problem. The economist's experience on waste may cause her to communicate it in a detached manner, while the activist might fervently communicate experiences of families and communities impacted due to waste on the shoreline. The importance of this distinction lies in the behavioural consequences of emotional involvement (Corbetta, 2003) – the economist and the environmental activist are unlikely to act on their knowledge in the same way. While envisioning future scenarios and transitions, the Delphi falls short of embodying these varying degrees of emotional involvement, which is where the multi-perspectival and personal narrative focus of semi-structured interviews and field notes further complements the Delphi.

4.4 Semi-structured Interviews

4.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews: Overview

The purpose of the semi-structured interviews in this study is to understand current roadblocks and opportunities towards sustainability from the point of view of under-represented groups, such as workers within the fashion sector, and explore the impact of a shift towards sustainability on different groups in Bahrain.

In addition to the primary strength of qualitative research – its potential to explore a topic in depth (Carlsen and Glenton, 2011) – this study employs semi-structured interviews for their open-ended nature. The open-ended questions serve to capture viewpoints without overly constraining insights on what constitutes fashion or sustainability in the Bahraini context and therefore allow depth into cultural and social markers relating to fashion sustainability.

In semi-structured interviewing, the interviewer elicits answers fully from the perspective of the study participant and attempts to gain a greater understanding of the context and meaning of those responses through various forms of probing. Preparing for probing during the semi-structured interviews is important for a geography like Bahrain, as non-experts may not identify sustainability conceptually, but rather be able to speak of their own experiences and interactions with garments.

All interviews took place in person in Bahrain in December 2018, with one interview taking placing in Dubai in May 2019 (see Appendix D for a complete list of interviews and dates conducted). The interviews took place in either English or Arabic, depending on the preference of the speaker. They were recorded on my phone and I later transcribed and translated them manually. Data collected from semi-structured interviews was thematically analysed, using tree-coding to organise thematic sub-categories under larger themes (Wong, 2008). For instance, "buying for a holiday and disposing at end of trip" and "sharing of garments within my family" would both be categorized under "consumer behaviour", with the frequency of each theme recorded, and the possibility of further sub-themes under each to be listed (see Section 4.4 for more details on conducting the interviews and analysing their results).

4.4.2 Semi-Structured Interviews: Sampling

Phase I interviews were comprised of 19 semi-structured interviews with individuals selected for their experiences relating to fashion sustainability across the garment lifecycle (See Appendix D for full list). Selecting individuals for semi-structured

interviews was derived from wanting to amplify voices that may be unheard on a decision-making level. The inclusion of my grandmothers (for their historical knowledge on tailoring, weaving, and household garment culture), tailors, and weavers among those interviewed was derived from principles of social justice in a system where top-down policy-making is prevalent.

Interview participants also included small to medium business owners (fashion, craft, art), a fast fashion salesperson as well as social and environmental activists. The participants were carefully chosen to address gaps in the research in each of their areas of knowledge.

Sampling for these interviews targeted the following groups: activists; businesspeople; fashion designers; weavers; tailors; and grandmothers. The selection of these groups was in line with the theoretical approach underpinning the study, where a lifecycle and holistic approach is taken to fashion sustainability in an Arab region, including its unique social and cultural facets. The sampling process was conscious of including voices across gender, ethnic, and class affiliations. This group of participants was chosen for both their ability to fill in gaps in information and to some to provide marginalised narratives. The inclusion of grandmothers as well as the weaver was to capture their experiences with making – as both my grandmothers made their own clothing in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, as many women in Bahrain did – but to also shed light on how practices have changed over time and the impact of this temporality on a person level.

4.4.3 Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducting

Interviews took place during the first phase of data collection, and consisted of meeting interviewees in person and recording the interview by phone. Some interviews took less than an hour, if the interviewee was brief, and some took almost two hours from the exchange of pleasantries to a deep discussion of all questions. The interviews with my grandmothers took almost three hours each, as they weaved personal stories and everyday conversation into our interview.

After an interview, I transcribed its contents based on its recording. I translated parts from Arabic to English where relevant, however most interviews took place in English. Throughout the process of conducting interviews, I was introduced to individuals and communities that acted as gatekeepers for further introductions and research. For instance, the workshop described in the previous section was not initially part of my intended methodology, but through interviewing one of the co-founders of the Bahrain Fashion Incubator I was invited to conduct a session with the batch of designers currently

participating in the incubator, and accordingly used the opportunity to conduct observations of local fashion designers and their approaches to design and sustainability. The results of participant observation during the workshop gave unique insight into how designers in Bahrain approach the concept of sustainability, and these results are analysed alongside the results of the interviews and the Delphi in Chapter 5.

During the interview process I also kept a journal of field notes, which I later referred to when analysing my results, and more importantly as I practiced reflexivity throughout my research. Section 4.5 below further discusses my use of participant observation as a method, and Section 4.6 discusses aspects of reflexivity and gatekeepers.

4.4.4 Semi-Structured Interviews: Data gathering and analysis

Approach to interview questions

Questions for each group of participants were written to address gaps in the literature, capture the voice of individuals who have not been heard, and to identify areas for change (Plano Clark and Badiee, 2010) towards sustainability. Often, within the same interview or questionnaire, these purposes overlapped.

For the semi-structured interviews, questions were written to explore patterns pertaining to the aspect of the fashion lifecycle or industry the interviewee took part in. For instance, environmental activists were asked "What are the sustainability issues that are currently the most pressing in Bahrain? In the GCC?" while tailors and salespeople were asked "Who are your main customers? Describe your relationship with them". Questions for grandmothers were inspired by wardrobe audit methods which explore an individual's wardrobe, garment maintenance, and making and repair resources (Fletcher et al., 2017). In this case, the audit was a historical overview of what my grandmothers' wardrobes included as children and young women, and how clothing made its way into their wardrobe and where it exited to. In addition to quantities and types of garments their historical wardrobes included, the method allows for insights into daily life and social routines where garments reflect flows of resources that go towards material and social needs (Fletcher et al., 2017).

While questions varied, overlapping themes such as repair, care, and sharing culture appeared throughout all Phase I interviews – embedded within the narrative of the interviewee. What emerges in these answers is the different roles that individuals play within a process, and the social impacts certain changes have had on them. For instance, the rise of mall culture was not welcomed by my paternal grandmother who preferred

smaller souks, but the materiality of this change begot the start of a career for a salesman interviewed, who started his career as a sales employee in Kuwait before moving to Bahrain. See Appendix D for a full list of questions for interviews.

Approach to analysis of interview responses

The 19 semi-structured interviews conducted for this study were primarily analysed through a thematic analysis using tree-coding, similar to the Delphi. A different set of questions was formulated for each group of individuals interviewed. Those interviewed included a weaver, tailors, activists, businesspeople, a salesperson and my grandmothers. While each group had its defined set of questions, and probing questions were used to keep participants on track, different styles of answering emerged as well, likely due to social cues and communication preferences. My grandmothers for instance, would give stories and immense detail on their memories relating to the social experiences around clothing in their households. The tailor and fast-fashion sales manager interviewed, possibly due to a language barrier or any inhibitions towards the study, were more matter of fact and talked about empirical patterns – how their customers act for instance – as opposed to elaborating on personal stories or perspectives. Businesspeople talked in macro-trends, and activists with plenty of "must"s and "should"s and "you should look into that". The length, depth, and style of responses varied largely between the different groups interviewed – more so than with the Delphi.

For the semi-structured interviews, transcribed interview notes were first assigned themes (L2) and subsequently indexed categories (L1). This process had one less round of categorisation compared to the Delphi, as described in Section 4.3, where participant answers were first assigned sub-themes (L3), then placed into themes (L2) and subsequently into indexed categories (L1). Allocation of themes was done bottom-up, where specific ideas were narrowed down and placed into broader conceptual categories. See Figure 4.2 for an example of the tree-coding process.

In addition to tree-coding the data, one way in which semi-structured interviews were analysed was by viewing the results collected as a documentation of narratives. Documenting narratives refers to the using qualitative interviews to explore how social actors interpret the world and perceive their place within it (May, 2002a). These narratives allow participants to represent themselves to themselves and to others. In the case of interviews with the weaver, grandmothers, and some local designers and business owners, their narratives – which include storytelling, personal memories, and anecdotes – shed

light on how they view themselves as *actors* within the context, facts, and stories they shared. This differs from the answers of those in the Delphi study, where despite personal perspective and experience playing a role, answers were not centred on the self as an actor. How individuals saw themselves as *actors* within a fashion sustainability context was in and of itself informative, and reflects social and cultural nuances. Different definitions of what fashion sustainability for Bahrain could be for different demographic groups in Bahrain emerges from these nuances. A large part of the information gained during semi-structured interviews was also used for contextual information, which helped guide and refine the focus of Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

4.5 Participant Observation

In conjunction with the Delphi study and semi-structured interviews, participant observation throughout Phase I and II documented my ongoing commentary as a researcher, including any cultural and social facets on the research topic and community itself. Participant observation is a methodology that includes direct researcher observation through engagement in a particular setting (Kurz, 1983; Kawulich and Barbara, 2005; Zieman, 2012). This methodology is derived from ethnography fieldwork, where a researcher observes naturally occurring behaviour within cultural or social groups (Kawulich and Barbara, 2005; Ary et al, 2010; Zieman, 2012), and is often used in a complementary manner with other methods (Hammer et al, 2017). Throughout the course of research, I made several trips to Bahrain, where I lived in my family home and thus conducted the research with ongoing resident ethnographic observation.

I used my field notes from participant observation support the context of this research, often allowing for reflective practice, as opposed to being coded into the data analysis. These notes were often written in both English and Arabic, depending on the interview and nature of the note. For instance, long lines of thinking were always written in English, but notes on terminology or specific local social constructs were jotted down in Arabic.

Participant observation from the workshop allowed a documentation (through field notes I produced) of reactions to fashion sustainability as a concept, as well as a deeper understanding of the culture around sustainability. These observations and notes allowed for a reflection on the social interaction itself and language of discussing fashion sustainability in Bahrain (see Chapter 5 for full results of the workshop, including observations on sustainability culture and language).

My participation at the workshop was in the form of leading a day of sessions and activities in coordination with the Bahrain Fashion Incubator, which had an ongoing program for its 2018 cohort of fashion designers. As part of the Fashion Revolution group, I organised a one-day workshop with four activities on fashion sustainability (see Appendix E). All workshop attendees including the co-organisers were asked for consent before the workshop commenced to use the findings for research. To determine a baseline of the views of these fashion designers prior to the workshop (as I opened the day with a presentation on fashion sustainability in practice around the world), I coordinated with the Bahrain Fashion Incubator for the designers to fill in a short survey. This pre-workshop survey was conducted in English, as was the workshop itself. 21 of the 22 designers at the workshop completed it. The results of this survey are shared, along with an analysis of my field notes throughout the day of the workshop, in Chapter 5.

The fashion designers taking part in the workshop were predominantly self-taught, local, and owned small businesses. The majority had no formal training in fashion (such as attending a fashion college), but had learned through practice, running locally successful businesses. This category of fashion designers in Bahrain is common; an organic evolution of the neighbourhood tailor, these designers now create ready-to-wear collections, often sold in their own shops in different neighbourhoods, and advertise through Instagram or other forms of social media (Snapchat, WhatsApp, Facebook). Small fabric shops form the crux of their fabric and trim suppliers, with many of them making short day-trips to Saudi Arabia, Dubai, or even Turkey for a bigger selection of materials and trims. The phenomena of fashion-designer-by-trade in Bahrain pre-dates the use of social media, with designers like Kubra Al-Qaseer starting her fashion business in the 1980s, with no formal fashion training, and becoming an established fashion designer of traditional couture in the Gulf.

For the workshop, the 22 fashion designers that participated were all part of an incubation programme at Bahrain Fashion Incubator, a local hub for helping fashion designers create more formal businesses. As such, the group itself was chosen for the workshop as opposed to selection at the individual level. The group consisted of predominantly women designers with varied age groups, education backgrounds, and social and ethnic backgrounds. Despite social and ethnic variations in workshop participants, such as a mix across Bahraini ethno-sects and the inclusion of non-Bahraini expatriates, the workshop's participants did not include non-Arab labour, such as low-wage immigrant labour working in tailoring and mending. My participant observation throughout the workshop

resulted in field notes, including tabulations of scores for ranking exercises as well as a thematic understanding of priorities for designers (see Appendix E).

Other instances where participant observation played a vital role included events, gatherings, and conversations that were not a formal part of the methodology. This included frequent visits to malls, discount fashion centres and souks.

4.6 Positionality and gatekeepers

In their book *Interactionism*, Atkinson and Housley explain that for exploratory qualitative research "one need not deny that our understanding is partial and perspectival" and that "our knowledge is necessarily partial and provisional" (2003, p. 142). They explain that research agendas are shaped by perspective, in that "our explorations and transactions necessarily reflect our respective positions, our starting points and our interests" (2003, p. 121). Sandy Harding, in *Whose science? Whose knowledge?* (1991), argues that strong objectivity necessitates strong reflexivity, where the cultural particularity of both the researched and researcher are critically examined. Therefore, reflexivity allows knowledge produced to become more "rigorous, robust, and defensible" (Lewis-Beck et al, 2004, p. 7).

Postmodernist thinking prioritises multiple subjectivities. Reflexivity, defined as "viewing the self and the processes of data collection and interpretation in a critical and detached manner" (Grbich, 2004, p. 6), allows researchers to critically assess the process of developing knowledge and how they are placed within this process. Reflexivity acknowledges that the position of a researcher can influence both participant behaviour and analysis (Marks and Yardley, 2004). Carol Grbich posits that to achieve positional reflexivity, a researcher must examine her/himself, in order to identify the "discourses which have impacted on the lenses through which the researcher views the worlds and participants under study" (2004, p. 7).

One aspect of subjectivity, theoretical sensitivity, relates to the analysis of data. Theoretical sensitivity relates to a researcher's ability to recognise and extract elements from data that have relevance to their emerging theory (Birks and Mills, 2015). This ability is derived from the researcher's past experiences, which may shape how they see and understand the data, but also the theoretical disciplines explored for this research. My theoretical sensitivity in approaching results and making sense of the data is indisputably shaped by *both* my background and a theoretical engagement with the fields of design for sustainability, transition design, fashion studies and cultural studies.

Reflexivity is seen to have two distinct aspects (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). The first aspect involves a critical reflection on the agendas of the researcher – such as any ethical, moral, or philosophical judgements and assumptions that frame the research and analysis. The second aspect of reflexivity explores the social positioning of the researcher. Social positioning includes the personal biography and position of the researcher in relation to the research itself.

My perspective is informed by a sense of social justice, my methods are consequently derived from philosophical positions of holism, interconnectedness, and the ethical imperative to transition towards more sustainable and equitable states. Topics related to my social positioning as a researcher that impact access to individuals and data collection include social markers and small cultures, insider and outsider status, and the role of gatekeepers. Gatekeepers were an important part of my research. For instance, as part of Fashion Revolution in Bahrain, I was part of events that expanded my network, allowing me to gain access new gatekeepers and research participants for the Delphi and interviews. Aside from this network, my social positioning in Bahrain — including background, education, and even social circles — likely impacted which gatekeepers I had access to.

In Bahrain, whether a person belongs to the group of *Baharna*, *Huwala*, tribal Arab, or *Ajam* origins is often a social marker used to identify a particular individual's background (Al-Shehabi, 2019). These groups (as discussed in Chapter 2) can overlap in both ethnic and sectarian background, but denote differing histories of migration to Bahrain, and pertain distinct social group identifiers (Al-Shehabi, 2019). During the research process, those being interviewed were able to socially place my background as *Bahrani* quite easily. If not from my dialect, which I may unintentionally modulate when speaking to an individual of a tribal Arab or *Huwala* background, they could place me from the commonality of Maki as a *Bahrani* name. A weaver I interviewed in Bani Jamra – a Bahraini rural area known for its ties to craft and weaving – was able to ascertain that my parents were from *al-makharga* upon hearing me speak. Below is an example of participant observation, an excerpt of fieldnotes from my interview with the Bani Jamra weaver. These notes were typed up from their raw format of being hand-written in a notebook four months after the interview itself, as I was reflecting on my social positioning:

> The weaver was kind and humble, but also proud somewhat and eager to tell me all he knew. In that sense had a grandfather quality. Part of me wonders, perhaps he was so warm because he saw a grand-daughter in me too.

Within seconds of saying hello to him, he identified the neighbourhood my parents grew up in, lacing my speech.

He then heard me speak to Nathaly [the French designer who brought me to his workshop] in English. "Thank you for bringing me here.. it's very kind of you. If you'd like I'm happy to stay here and make my way home myself.. ". Perhaps my English accent implied a foreign or local private school education. Whatever it implied, it made him curious about my parents.

"*Min bait minhu ya bitti*?" he asks, which translates literally to "whose house are you from, my daughter?" but has a colloquial intended meaning of "what is your family name?". I respond by saying "My father's house [family name] is Al-Anzoor", and my mother's is "Al-Abed", both are from *al-makharga*.

"*Eeeee* [Yes]…", the weaver says with one long and knowing syllable. "*Bas inteen ismish mu Al-Anzoor*?" [but your last name isn't Al-Anzoor, like your father's] he asks. "*Eee, aboyi makhith isim bait umma*" [Yes, my father has taken his mother's last name"]. "*Shlon ya'ni?*" [how come?]. I go on to explain that my father, growing up estranged from his own father, chose his mother's family name as his own. My mother, while issuing legal documents for my sisters and me as children, insisted that our biological paternal grandfather's name was the legally straightforward name to give us. My father obliged, and my sisters and I grew up with a last name that denoted belonging to somebody we didn't know. Ironically, by the time I met my estranged grandfather, he had changed his last name. So, my sisters and I have a name suspended in just phonetics. This is highly uncommon in Bahrain, where last names have meanings.

Back to the weaver, he asks me if I'm doing a doctorate and in what. "Are you focused on weaving and craft?" he asks. He stares at me. Perhaps he assumes a link to social justice – weaving in Bahrain, as well as a lot of other crafts, are linked to the *Bahrani* community after all. Perhaps this made him say some of the things he did, during the interview.

With the weaver, my social markers may have created a space of familiarity, openness or trust. However, with other interviewees, perhaps my social markers hindered access or messaging. Speaking to an ex-employee of a government entity, I was asked to pause recording for off-the-record stories several times. She was of tribal Arab origins – her last name told me. Her answers were to-the-point, brief, rushed, possibly bothered. The same participant declined participation in the Delphi. A multitude of reasons could be behind such brevity or declining participation, such as valid concerns over safety or reputation. However, a lack of trust for my agenda in conducting this research – derived from social markers – is a possibility.

Impressions formed by the researcher and research participant on each other are a result of small cultures, or the nuances in their perceived differences from, and similarities to, each other (Holliday, 2007). In the case of the weaver, while we are both *Bahrani,* his perception of my background – and mine of his – creates a "small culture of dealing" (Holliday, 2007, p. 139). This "small culture of dealing" (ibid) includes my wearing of an *abaya* to his workshop in the village. It also includes me acting a little bit more reserved than I naturally do in the presence of men. From his end, it may include overly explaining

how a loom functions – perhaps sensing my lack of exposure. Our "small culture of dealing" (Holliday, 2007, p. 139) is derived from our shared overall culture, but also our respective perceived differences of each other.

A research participant's perspective of our shared small culture determines my status as an insider or outsider, or at times both. Similarly, this may impact the research participant's comfort (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014) or what they are willing to share (O'Reilly, 2009; Hesse-Bibber and Piatelli, 2012; Holliday, 2007; Given, 2008d). For instance, to the Indian tailor interviewed, perhaps I am a familiar outsider. To members of Fashion Revolution Bahrain, I am most likely an insider, sharing not only a similar social background but also dogma. To a local fashion designer at the workshop, I am perhaps both – clearly Bahraini, but also clearly studying the community from abroad, reverting to the English language for technical terms, and choosing to live abroad.

Perceptions of social positioning and "small cultures of dealing" (Holliday, 2007, p. 139) include elements of projection and othering (ibid). My perception of the ex-government employee's brevity as mistrust could be misplaced projection, when in fact she may be time-bound by her responsibilities as a mother, for instance.

Both comfort of research participants and social positioning within the research community can facilitate access to gatekeepers. Gatekeepers are individuals, groups, or organisations who can facilitate a researcher's access to participants (Groger et al., 1999; Lachem-Hastings, 2019). Gatekeepers include both formal or informal groups leaders – such as civil servants working in sustainability or craft in Bahrain – or simply socially connected individuals in those communities (Sixsmith et al., 2003). The relationship between a researcher and gatekeeper is characterised by mutual sharing, benevolence, or reciprocity (Dobson, 1989). Throughout this research, various individuals acted as gatekeepers. This included a French Bahrain-based designer as well as a Bahraini social and environmental activist, originally from one of the rural villages that has a strong history to craft. Once individuals formally participated in my research, social momentum and generosity allowed access to others. For instance, participants of the workshop in Phase I made introductions to shopkeepers, tailors, fabric vendors, and even a small business owner who comes to collect their fabric off-cuts.

Old acquaintances within Bahrain also played a role. An environmental activist and consultant introduced me to various civil servants and retail businesspeople he knew. We had become friends in 2013 due to our common interest in the environment. My own

sister and mother generously reached into their social networks to respectively introduce me to a civil servant working in renewables and sustainability and to a prominent academic focused on the environment and heritage preservation.

Mostly, a researcher is never completely an insider or outsider to a culture, and being an insider is not always an advantage (Given, 2008d; Bartunek, 2008; O'Reilly, 2009). For instance, in the GCC particularly, some women may prefer to speak to an outsider due to issues of perceived judgement or impressions of confidentiality or reputation. It may be hard for a woman from a rural village to openly criticise consumption culture in her village, if she perhaps is concerned that as a more urban Bahraini I would judge her. Alternatively, the community of individuals that attend Fashion Revolution events in Bahrain, many of which are private-school educated with liberal values, may be unintentionally virtue signalling when discussing thoughts on fashion sustainability with an insider that shares their social group or activism space. Power dynamics here, including viewing the researcher as an authoritative insider, may influence participants to say the right thing or create a positive impression (Herr and Anderson, 2005; Atkin and Wallis, 2012).

Reflecting on social positioning to the research participants can alleviate blind spots that accompany unexamined beliefs (Herr and Anderson, 2005). Reflexivity places the researcher spatially and culturally within the research process in similar or different places from the participants (Grbich, 2004). It is a starting point for understanding power dynamics in the research setting, and the possibility of multiple perspectives to arise during analysis. Awareness of how research participants or gatekeepers see the researcher also bestows an ethical responsibility on the researcher to avoid harm or exploitation of research participants (Given, 2008a) and to conduct research in a way that is meaningful and considerate to the research setting (Holliday, 2007).

Table 4. 2 Reflexivity and impact on method choice or application

(Author's own, 2025)

While the position of the researcher influences data collection in terms of perspective, the emergence of "small cultures of dealing" (Holliday, 2007, p. 139) and interactions with participants, it is also a bridge between philosophy, methodology and the application of chosen methods (Mills and Birks, 2014; Haynes, 2012). The goal of reflexivity is to

Reflexive practice within study		Impact on method choice or application
Aspect 1 of reflexivity: Agenda and philosophical position of the researcher		
Philosophical Position	Dark green sustainability thinking	• Choice of multiple methods to unearth recommendations that are socially oriented to map fashion sustainability within a holistic, systems context in Bahrain • Reflecting on who can impact change and who that change impacts when crafting methodology)
	Social justice and action-oriented agenda	• Development of a qualitative and non-prescriptive Delphi study as opposed to predominantly empirical • Choice of Delphi as democratic method for chosen participants through anonymity
Theoretical sensitivity		• Proclivity towards certain themes curtailed by L2 secondary tagging during tree-coding, allowing for critical revision of categories • Iterative process of Delphi allowing participants to have input on how results are consolidated • Recognition that intensity is not captured during tree-coding, and supplementing findings with field notes and observations • Deep-dive interviews to explore themes that are derived from Delphi at depth with expert • Supplementation of design for sustainability frameworks with cultural theory and transition design thinking
Aspect 2 of reflexivity: Social positioning of the researcher		
Social markers & Insider / outsider status		• Understanding that view of researcher by participants may affect comfort, willingness to participate, what is said, and what is not said • May determine access to gatekeepers • Sensitivity to possibility of researcher's projecting onto others (e.g. in participant observation and taking of field notes) due to social markers or researcher perception
Role of gatekeepers		• Understanding of where social positioning of researcher is lacking and supplementing by searching for and reaching out to gatekeepers • Mindfulness of conducting research in a way that is meaningful and considerate to research participants, including gatekeepers, and the research setting

ensure an alignment of the philosophical position of the researcher, derived from their position, with methodology (Mills and Birks, 2014; Corlett and Mavin, 2018). Table 4.2

expands on the link between reflexivity and the formation of this study's methodology by connecting the findings of reflexive practice in this section to the methods chosen for this study, their applications, and the approach to analysis.

Reflexivity has become a common prerequisite for research born out of social justice. Reflexivity is an exercise in honesty and transparency about the research process and the researcher's place within it. It acknowledges perspective, the social dynamics of research, and can imply limits of the research process.

From these limitations, further areas for suggested research emerge. In this study, further areas for research unearthed by reflective practice include exploring:

(a) Less intrusive ways to study low-wage labour in fashion in Bahrain, such as by using an outsider-insider approach where the researcher partners with a gatekeeper to the community that speaks both English and South Asian languages

(b) Co-creation within Bahraini villages, which would require gatekeepers within different village communities and would embed a practical component into the methodology

(c) Anonymous self-reporting on behaviour such as clothing purchasing, mending, disposal and re-use across different social demographics in Bahrain to avoid virtue signalling or saying things to pander to the researcher

A broader list of areas for further research is included in the Conclusion of this study (see Chapter 8). In closing, the paradox implicit in reflexivity is that we can only explicate the processes and positions we are aware of, and inevitably some influences arising from aspects of social identity remain beyond the reflexive grasp (Reay, 2012).

4.7 Limitations

The methodology's primary limitation lies in my inability to reach a large number of members of the low-wage migrant community. Additionally, when I was able to, language barriers and power dynamics may have prevented the interview from fully capturing the interviewee's full scope of knowledge and views. For semi-structured interviews, I was able to conduct interviews with a tailor and sales manager, but the research may be further enriched by speaking to domestic workers – who wash, clean, iron and often mend clothing at the home – as well as cobblers, waste collectors and workers at a waste management plant.

Another limitation is related to the weighting of research outcomes towards the Delphi, as opposed to semi-structured interviews. While qualitative research is inherently interpretative as a method, the Delphi requires its participants to reflect on consolidated findings and give further ideas or even amend their own answers in light of these consolidated findings. While this forms part of the strength of the Delphi panel as a consensus building tool, it also gives additional weight to the views of participants in this study compared to interviewees whose narratives were shared without revision and were interpreted only by myself as researcher. For this reason, the limitation with the Delphi in this study lies in its sample, which does not include those from marginalised communities (such as migrant workers or those in low-wage vocations, as described above). While the semi-structured interviews intentionally balance this limitation (see Section 4.2), the views of the participants of the Delphi would have a higher weighting on the findings of the research due to the multiple rounds of questioning.

The last limitation is related to my evolving theoretical sensitivity as a researcher and personal life experiences throughout the years of data collection and analysis. Specifically, the majority of data collection was done before the coronavirus pandemic, starting in August 2018 and concluding with a few Delphi correspondences for the second round in April 2020. This means that while data was collected prior to the coronavirus pandemic, I analysed it the most thoroughly during the pandemic itself. A focus on phenomenology and spatial experiences and a focus on cognitive elements of identity in the discussion of the results, for instance, were no doubt enabled by the solitude and introspective nature of the coronavirus pandemic, where I was based in London in a deep longing to be at home – both to be close to family and to analyse my research within a physical proximity of the place I was writing about. Lastly, in June 2020, my grandmother Ghalia who played a central role in raising my sisters and myself passed away. She was also one of my interviewees for the research. It took a long time to process her interview, and once I did I am certain that my analysis was interlaced with a drive to understand the role women of her generation played for their families. In October 2023, my paternal grandmother, Medina, also interviewed for this research passed away. Similarly, her interview contributed both a historical context for a 1950s Bahrain as well as deepened my connection to the roles she played throughout her life; single mother, seamstress and community leader at her local *mawatim* (plural, singular is *matam* which refers to a Shia centre of community and worship, similar to a mosque). It is important to situate the research within these social aspects that may have influenced my subjectivity as a

researcher, particularly when it comes to putting forward recommendations at the regional or country level.

4.8 Summary

Stemming from an interpretivist and pragmatic approach, the methods chosen for this study include a Delphi panel, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. This combination enables capturing both the potential for change as well as establishing the baseline of lived experience and fashion ontology in Bahrain. Beyond using this combination of methods for Bahrain, they may be applied for use for fashion sustainability in non-Western geographies, namely those defined by top-down decision making in policy. Using this combination of methods to explore fashion sustainability must be accompanied with an exercise in reflexivity and consideration of power dynamics and ethics, to ensure that the researcher is reflecting on elements of subjectivity when putting forward recommendations.

In the next three chapters, this interpretivist-pragmatic approach enables an ontological and phenomenological exploration (see Chapter 5 and 6) and then puts forward tangible recommendations for fashion sustainability in Bahrain (see Chapter 7). In particular, the discussion of the results includes establishing both a lexicon for fashion sustainability as well as mapping how social concepts and meanings are at times uniquely embedded across the lifecycle for Bahrain. This exploration of where meanings, associations and social rituals across the lifecycle are unique and is vital to creating an authentic pathway for sustainability for non-Western geographies, such as Bahrain, to ensure that hegemonic narratives about sustainability are not passed on without stemming from local material culture.

5 Results I: Language, Ontology, Material Flows, and Lived Experience

5.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses fashion's language, ontological presumptions and related value systems in Bahrain, as revealed by the results of the Delphi study, semi-structured interviews and participant observation, namely during site visits to different fashion points of sale and a workshop with local designers. It then reflects on the applicability of the Western Design for Sustainability (DfS) discourse in light of a Gulf cultural context. In Chapter 3, I discussed how DfS has progressively expanded from a technical and product-centric field of research towards a focus on large-scale, system level sustainability solutions. These larger scale solutions include considerations of services, how space is used (and equity in relation to space, or access) and new socio-technical systems. To apply learnings and methods from the DfS field to the Gulf, I argue that local power dynamics and practices must be examined. Using my empirical research in this chapter, I show that applying DfS thinking to the Gulf experience of fashion reveals social practices, material cultures and instances of fashion utility or use that are not conventionally considered the use of fashion in Western discourse. For instance, the interactions of a customer with a tailor during *brova* sessions, or fittings, in the lead-up to a special occasion are valued by the Gulf customer, while no clear counterpart exists in the Western context. Using the results of the Delphi study and interviews, I discuss the ontological underpinnings of Gulf fashion, such as how fashion relates to space, collectivism and individuality, ownership and social practice.

While analysing the Gulf fashion experience, I acknowledge that similarities to the Western context are also prevalent due to the modern experience of fashion being inextricably tied to capitalism (Miller, 1997; Venäläinen, 2013; Pike, 2011; Bauman and Tester, 2013), such as the notion of materialism as a form of cultural expression. As I discussed in Chapter 2, with a shared modernity of capitalism, what *differs* is the perceived experience of it, wherein features of capitalism manifest in ways that are culturally diverse (Rofel and Yanagisako, 2019). Building on Chapter 2, which establishes that the birth of fashion is inextricably tied to modernity (Geczy and Karaminas, 2016), this chapter's critical inquiry of how a Gulf fashion ontology may differ to its Western counterpart ultimately "examine[s] a society in relation to the comparative and relativist nature of modernity itself" (Miller, 2003, p. 135).

This chapter does not aim to create a comprehensive ontology of fashion for the Gulf, but rather aims to reflect on the components of ontology that impact DfS in fashion.

Particularly, reflecting on the idea of the garment lifecycle from Western discourse while allowing for a local, socially informed ontology conducts what Sabry (2012) defines as a double-take where both the ontology of the other and self is examined (see Chapter 3). The double-take allows for the creation of ontological understanding "not only from within and for its repertoire, but also for-the-other" (Sabry, 2012, p. 4).

After an initial exploration of language within a Bahraini fashion context, the chapter goes on to map the flow of fashion in Bahrain by tracing social practices at the stages of *source*, *make*, *use* and *last*. These four stages are established by canonical texts in fashion sustainability discourse (Gwilt and Rissanen, 2011; Fletcher, 2013, Tojo et al., 2012, Nørup et al., 2019). Section 5.3's discussion is organised around a material flow, but highlights parts of the Gulf fashion ontology or lived experience predicated in Section 5.2, such as an emphasis on the space where material interactions take place. In these spaces, garments are both *purchased* and *used* – the mall is where you *buy*, but also where you *wear* and are *seen in* a garment. Another example of lived experience is the utility derived from a sharing and donation culture in the Gulf, embedded in the flow of materials to donation boxes, or the cognitive experience of a sister wearing your clothing, embedded within re-use categorically.

This chapter non-rigidly uses the material lifecycle, despite an assertion of a different fashion epistemes and ontology for the Gulf, as my aim is not to dismiss a material understanding of fashion in the Gulf, but rather to explore its relationship to cultural norms and values. In this sense, exploring Bahrain's unique and non-unique "societal organizing forces affecting fashion" (Fletcher, 2015, p. 15) allows for "new spaces of negotiation to emerge beyond the homogenizing narratives of differences" (Sabry, 2012, p. 177).

After analysing the language around fashion and sustainability in Bahrain and mapping social practices relating to fashion, I discuss how local designers understand sustainability as it relates to fashion. Using results from participant observation during the workshop I conducted with designers in December 2018 (see Chapter 4), I supplement the discussion on the *source* and *make* stages of the lifecycle with an understanding of how local designers perceive sustainability. The workshop with these local designers was conducted in English, and thus enables a discussion of how Western discourse on sustainability is globalised. Using the results of the workshop, I discuss how Bahraini designers understand sustainability as a concept as well as the structural difficulties they face in incorporating more sustainable practices. Designers' definitions of sustainability reflect a

light green engagement with the topic (see Chapter 3), and are in line with messaging highly espoused by commercial entities in the Gulf in the form of Corporate Social Responsibility.

In its entirety, this chapter uses results from this study's Delphi study, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation (including a workshop with 22 local designers) – to explore sustainability and fashion as lived experience in the Gulf context.

5.2 Language and Fashion Ontology in a Gulf Context

5.2.1 An Arabic Lexicon for Sustainability and Fashion

Exploring sustainability thinking through the Arabic language informs the cultural history of the discourse in an Arab context. Studying language can inform an understanding of social practice, since "whether spoken or written, [language] acquires its meaning, its significance, from conventions" (Wilson, 2013, p. 109). In order to deconstruct or explore the field of meaning (Leledakis, 2000) of Arabic terminology with regards to fashion and sustainability, this section should be approached in two parts. The first part, centred around Table 5.1, explores themes of sustainability in modern Arabic discourse. I collected these terms as part of my participant observation by making fieldnotes. The sources include a mixture of newspaper opinion editorials and media segments between 2017 and 2020 that discuss sustainability (or rather, the term's Arabic counterparts). As such, terms in Table 5.1 reflect what society says about itself, embedded within a modern, globalised, capitalist culture, but one that is also derived from Arab social and cultural history.

The second part of this section, comprised of Tables 5.2 and 5.3, examines terminology associated with everyday experiences of fashion. I manually collated these terms from both my participant observation (such as data from fieldnotes written after discussions with gatekeepers) as well as the semi-structured interviews and the Delphi study – while some participants answered in English, many still referred to the Arabic terms in 5.2B and 5.2C. I marked the frequency of these terms; if a term appeared many times during my research process (e.g., within conversations with gatekeepers, interview participants and Delphi participants), I would note its appearance in conversation. Exploring the everyday language surrounding fashion informs a Gulf Arab ontology of fashion, one that may differ from a Western understanding. It is essential to understand the experience of fashion in an Arab or Gulf context as non-Western, but also to not immediately assume ontologies to be mutually exclusive. Tarik Sabry (2012) posits that an ethical and critical

Arab cultural study must both reterritorialise and deterritorialise through creatively ontologising experience. As explored in Chapter 3, Sabry urges critical Arab cultural studies to unconditionally engage with techniques and default ontologies of the other – in order to avoid the reverse orientalism of automatically excluding the ontology of the other. By looking at both written and spoken language in Bahrain in this section and from a vantage point of Western education, I aim to heed Sabry's provocation to scholars engaged in Arab cultural theory to "engage in a process of negotiation" (p. 4) between ontologies of the other and of the self – in other words consider both local and universal concepts – so that they "may learn to stammer in his/her language(s)" (ibid).

In the tables below, two types of Arabic are used – formal Arabic, also known as Modern Standard Arabic (*MSA*), and the local Bahraini dialect. The terms in Table 5.1 are in *MSA*, the official language of Arabic-speaking countries and the language of modern-day *written* Arabic. Each of the 22 countries with Arabic as an official language contain their own dialects of *spoken* Arabic. Within each country variations of local dialect are also present. These spoken Arabic dialects are treated as a local vernacular, and while they are the currency of everyday experience and interactions, they are not used in formal written discourse, when reporting news, nor in official communications. Scholars refer to this dichotomy of variance in written and spoken language as diglossia, where one variety of speech or writing is used formally, and another is used as vernacular but with no official status (Al-Huri, 2016).

Table 5.1 includes terminology in *MSA* to directly explore socially critical terminology within Arabic public discourse. Table 5.2 and Table 5.3 use the local Bahraini dialect as opposed to formal *MSA* as an "alternative to logocentric paradigms of cultural study" (Wise, 2009, p. xi). Those that study the intersection of language and culture acknowledge that examining only written language to inform notions of culture can result in a narrow understanding – one that dismisses non-textual meanings such as tone, amplitude, and even pause (Geaney 2010; Tedlock, 2011; Still, 2012). Scholars have explored the Arabic language and its links to culture, such as norms of hospitality (Still, 2012), the veil (Wise, 2009), literary avant-gardism and political activism (Christensen, 2017), Sufism (Almond, 2008), and even Quranic speech (Achrati, 2008). This section is inspired by the work of post-structuralist scholars in studying spoken language and its links to cultural values as a way to explore fashion ontology in a non-Western context.

Put simply, to understand fashion practice in Bahrain, the local Bahraini dialect will be used as it closely reflects lived experience, and to explore how Bahrainis self-reflect on

concepts of sustainability *MSA* will be used as the language of societal self-reflection and public discourse. A limitation of this approach is that migrant workers, often forming the backbone of labour within the fashion value chain in Bahrain, tend to speak in their native languages or in English. Similarly to the difficulty in conducting interviews within these communities due to access and language barriers (see Chapter 4), this study's approach limits an exploration of their unique lexicons.

While differences between local Bahraini dialects exist – such as Sunni and Bahrani (see Chapter 2), there is still a shared pan-Bahraini dialect. Terms in 5.2B and 5.2C, which emerged during data collection, predominantly belong to the pan-Bahraini lexicon, as opposed to belonging to either of the two local dialects. This implies a pan-Bahraini ontology – including behaviours, habits, and culture surrounding garments, that likely co-developed across Bahraini ethno-sectarian groups in the last 300 years as different groups migrated to Bahrain (see Chapter 2). The differences between the local Bahraini dialects within fashion terminology are beyond the scope of this study, but from initial observation include stylistic and aesthetic words to describe what a person is wearing, the naming of certain garments, and a variance in spoken accent even when terminology is the same. These differences have narrowed in the modern pan-Bahraini dialect, and within the modern Gulf fashion lexicon as whole, in line with a shared modern fashion culture.

Table 5.1 shows concepts associated with sustainability in Arab public discourse (*MSA*). These words emerged throughout the data collection of this study and are all commonly used in Bahrain, the Gulf, and the Arab world, both as written and spoken language. Likely entering the lexicon at various times, some are rooted in religious culture, some without a clear link to religious culture (such as words describing behaviour, the economy, etc.) and some mirror global discourse on the modern culture of global capitalism (these often read as direct translations of Western sustainability terminology). These categories are not mutually exclusive, as a modern Arabic discourse on sustainability has emerged, like that in other cultures, from pre-existing dogma and cultural history.

The first category, denoting terms emphasised in today's Islamic culture and teachings, includes concepts such as *al-israaf (over-consumption)*, *al-tabdheer (wastefulness)*, *al-ta'ayush* (*harmonious co-existence*) and *al-ei'tidaal* (*moderation*). Arabic as a written language is deeply influenced by pre-Islamic Bedouin poetry, which influenced Quranic Arabic, and which in turn influenced the standardisation of the pre-*MSA* Arabic language (Versteegh, 2014). From a modern-day lens, this is akin to language developing alongside social and cultural changes due to trading and migration (Al-Huri, 2016). Subsequently,

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MSA emerged in the context of social and political reaction to ideas from Western discourse in the early 19th century, ultimately influencing notions of cultural pan-Arabism, which in turn also influenced *MSA* (Versteegh, 2014). Thus, this religious culture terminology may be rooted in a cultural history that pre-dates Islam or socially developed post the spread of Islam, and perhaps even as reaction to Western discourse. Regardless, they are words associated with and invoked in modern day religious culture.

Table 5. 1 Conceptual terms related to sustainability in Bahrain
(Author's own, 2025)

Phrase or Word	Pronunciation	Meaning
الاستدامة	al-istidama	Sustainability
عادات إستهلاكية	'aadat istihlakiyaa	Consumerist behavior or consumerist habits
الإسراف	al-israaf	Over-consumption
التبذير	al-tabdheer	Wastefulness
المادية	al-maddiya	Materialism
الماديات	al-maddiyaat	Material things
تدهور بيئي	Tadahwur bee'ee	Environmental deterioration
التعايش	al-ta'ayush	Harmonious co-existence
الاعتدال	al-ei'tidaal	Moderation

The invocation of these terms in modern religious culture is prevalent, heard in mosque sermons and online YouTube videos of preaching sheikhs, but they are also common within households as cultural moral compass – such as lessons taught to children at home, usually centred around collectivism and altruism. This, of course, all co-exists with individual actions that are not always aligned with dogmas of moderation, limiting of wastefulness and over-consumption. In this sense, moral teachings and social values often co-exist with modern day consumerist lifestyles. Additionally, the use of these terms spans both Muslim and non-Muslim Arab cultures for two inextricable reasons. First, due to a pan-Arab shared language despite dialect differences, and second due to the pervasiveness of Islamicate culture (Tibi, 1997; Nasser, 2002; Dressler et al., 2019) in Arabic-speaking countries until the modern day. These exact terms, however, are unlikely to be prevalent across non-Arabic speaking Muslim cultures, as they are not (for instance) directly derived from religious teachings. However, their counterparts in non-Arabic speaking Muslim cultures – such as Persian or Urdu words denoting similar concepts – are likely to exist.

Concepts with no clear links to religious culture in Table 5.1 include *al-maddiya (materialism)* or *al-maddiyaat (material things)*. These are used both colloquially and in written discourse, often critically to discuss the pursuit of material things. Used in their literal sense, these terms simply denote the material aspect of a certain situation. Hence, one may use *maddiya* as an adjective to describe materialistic behaviour such as in the phrase "she is materialistic", but also to describe someone's financial situation such as in the phrase "her material affairs". The remaining concepts in Table 5.1 – *al-istidama (sustainability)*, *'aadat istihlakiyaa* (*consumerist behaviour*), and *tadahwur bee'ee* (*environmental deterioration*), all feature in the modern-day Arabic lexicon almost as direct translations of Western contemporary sustainability discourse.

5.2.2. Linking Terminology to a Gulf Fashion Ontology

What does the observance of these three categories within the modern Arabic lexicon denote about sustainability discourse in the Arab world? First, cultural history plays a role in how Arabs discuss and reflect on concepts such as consumption, waste, and moderation. Second, global modern culture also shapes, at the very least, the spoken conversation with regards to sustainability – and as Chapter 3 discusses, the material reality of how sustainability is practised on the ground. Coupled with the prevalence of English as a second formal language to conduct affairs in Bahrain and the Gulf, modern-day discourse is a creole of inherited culturally coded values and contemporary mainstream Western sustainability discourse.

In contrast to exploring the language of sustainability in Bahrain, Tables 5.2 and 5.3 explore terminology related to fashion as a practice – such as the acquisition, making, or wearing of clothing. In Table 5.2, I categorise terms as material, cognitive, or social. This categorisation is my own, derived by thematically organising the list of terms emerging from my field notes, interviews and Delphi study process. Terms within "material" include fabric and fashion structures such as the mall or the fabric market, which reflect spatial elements of fashion practice. Chapter 6 further explores experiences across different fashion spaces in Bahrain – such as the mall, tailor, or fabric market – and the role these structures play as crucial forms of public space in Bahrain. Cognitive concepts in Table 5.2 indicate value-systems attached to clothing, such the commonly used term *markah*, which denotes that something is simply "designer", and *kalak* or *taqleed*, which denote that a garment is a knock-off.

Table 5. 2 Material, cognitive, and social terminology in fashion practice in Bahrain
(Author's own, 2025)

	Phrase or Word	Pronunciation	Meaning
Material	خَلَقْ	khalag	Fabric
	طاقة	taaga	Roll of fabric
	سوق الخلق	souq al-khalag	Fabric market
	المجمع	al-mujama'	The mall
Cognitive	"يتم ولا يقصر"	yittim walla yigsir	"[best to have some] leftover as opposed to too little"; commonly used with food.
	ماركة	markah	"Brand-name" or "designer"; often used without name of particular brand but to denote premium-ness or luxury status, for example "her bag is maarka [a brand-name]"
	صوغة	sougha	Item purchased while on holiday as a gift for relatives, may include items such as clothing, shoes, and other gifts
	عتيق	'ateeg	Old, usually to refer to items owned for a long time
	تقليد or كلك	kalak or taqleed	A replica, usually cheaper, "knock-off"
	"vintage"	n/a	Vintage clothing, usually brand-names or traditional garments passed down
Social	"pop-ups"	n/a	Pop-up or concession shops
	"رايحين المجمع"	rayheen al-majama'	"We are going to the mall".
	ندُورْ	indoore	"Walking around" or "driving around", depending on context. Related to mall culture (See Ch4).
	نِتمَشَّى	nitmasha	"Going for a [leisurely] walk"; differs from "walking". Related to mall culture (See Ch4).
	فاشنيستات or فاشنيستة	fashionistaat (pl.) or fashionista (s.)	From the English word "fashionista"; plural form used often in Gulf public discourse to refer to fashion social media influencers
	"blogger" or "influencer"	n/a	Types of social media influencers

In examining the social category, a picture starts to appear of fashion experience that requires an ontological understanding that obscures the stages of source, make, use, and last. In the Western understanding, sustainability is often predicated on a lifecycle view, and innovation occurs by disrupting, modifying, or re-imagining along the different stages of the lifecycle. This innovation or disruption gives rise to clothing that should be responsibly sourced and made, at the use stage be re-mended, re-worn preferably forever, or upcycled and recycled if not possible. The discourse is thus stage-centred; when innovations occur in the spatio-social or socio-technical approach, they target neatly separate stages of the lifecycle, or all of them, but acknowledge them as separate stages. What emerges from analysing social concepts around fashion practice in Bahrain is that

the stages are highly intertwined, and perceived utility to the wearer is not constrained the to the use stage of a garment, as is often categorised in the Western understanding.

For instance, the act of going to the mall to purchase a garment is both an act of acquisition or sourcing at the individual level, but it is also an act of using fashion – in the form of using a space materially in existence due to fashion practice, the mall. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the mall is central to the idea of civic space and experience in the Gulf. It is within this context that understanding the culture of *indoore* and *nitmashha* from data collected during this study further cements the mall as a cultural force. So ingrained is the concept of going to the mall as an activity that terms such as *indoore*, meaning to "go around", or figuratively to "walk around", and *nitmasha*, meaning "to leisurely walk" or stroll, are derived from mall culture itself. This differs from the psychological concept of retail therapy (Kang and Johnson, 2011; Atalay and Meloy, 2011) in that one need only *be in the mall*, as opposed to *purchase* an item for utility to occur.

Table 5. 3 Names given to labour in fashion in Bahrain

(Author's own, 2025)

	Phrase or Word	Pronunciation	Meaning
	الخياط	al-khayyat	The tailor
	بروفة	brova	Trial of custom-made clothing or fitting session
Labour	بارز	barez	Ready-made
	الخدامة	al-khadaama	The house-maid
	الفراش	al-faraash	The house-guard

In comparing *indoore* in a mall to retail therapy, the occurrence of utility may be broken down to having a perceived (cognitive, inwards) and a social (communal, outwards) element. With the concept of retail therapy, the perceived utility is therapeutic and the social utility is economic – the occurrence of a transaction. With the concept of *indoore*, the perceived may also be described as therapeutic – even without the occurrence of transaction – but the social is prodigiously beyond economic; interactions with others, with space, with one's own body as they walk through the mall, with one's garments as they are worn to be seen in the mall. Visual experiences, of others, – including strangers, their clothing, their different family sizes, or couplings – are also part of this social utility. The social element in *indoore* is economic only inasmuch as spending time on a social media platform is economic; you are advertised *to* without transaction, you wander within a platform which *seeks to* extract economic value *from you*.

Another example of this ontological difference may be seen in the fashion practice of tailoring a garment. Tailoring highly differs from purchasing clothing that is *barez*, or ready-to-wear, in that it is a highly intentional act of co-designing with a tailor and engaging in perhaps several sessions of *brova*. *Brova* translates as "practice round", but in this case signifies fitting session (see Table 5.3). A *brova*, while serving the purpose of trialling a garment, is also a social practice that includes the company of a mother, daughter, aunt, sisters, or friends that attend these sessions, or if going solo, meaningful interactions with the tailor. This social practice obscures making with using. The stages are obscured not in the sense of a user-maker in design (Pettersen, 2013, Verbong, 2019), but rather in the sense that the garment is utilised way before its complete form, at times before its materiality in early stages of conceptualisation.

Prior to materiality, mothers and daughters or friends may exchange several designs – perhaps through screenshots of social media posts – or in past decades from magazine cut-outs. Later, excursions to find the right fabric before an initial meeting with the tailor may take place – upon finding the right fabric, materiality starts to manifest. In the Gulf understanding, these social practices surrounding garment making are part of the embedded meaning of these pieces. Within DfS discourse, the idea of obscuring the user and maker is well established. In this realm, scholars and practitioners go beyond the triad of product-designer-user to offer a clear shift from products to practices (Pettersen, 2013). Here, design authorship is transferred from professional designers to the everyday individuals, creating the user-maker (Verbong, 2019). While similar to examples of tailored co-design and *brova* sessions, the key distinction in the Gulf ontology is that the fashion experience itself obscures these categories, thus the obscuring is not considered *innovation* but rather simply *is*. Closely related to this obscuring is the field of social practice theory, which illuminates the everyday social experiences associated with design (Mellick Lopes et al., 2013; Shove et al., 2012; Warde, 2005; Piscicelli et al., 2016). This blurring of what is considered neatly separate lifecycle stages within the Western literature is illustrated in Figure 5.1 and is revealed by how research participants across interviews and the Delphi study described their participation within the fashion system in Bahrain. The left diagram, labelled "Western DfS discourse", shows stages of product lifecycle as defined by Gwilt and Rissanen (2011) and their interactions with Western DfS discourse (as defined by myself). The right diagram, labelled "Applicability of DfS discourse to Gulf ontology", shows how the categories of the product lifecycle in the Gulf ontology overlap. In doing so, they interact with the DfS discourse from these various points of overlap. DfS discourse is thus not automatically different for each ontology, but

the way in which it applies to each ontology, and how it defines innovation or disruption, may differ.

Figure 5. 1 Stages of garment lifecycle and DfS for a Gulf ontology
(Author's own, 2025)
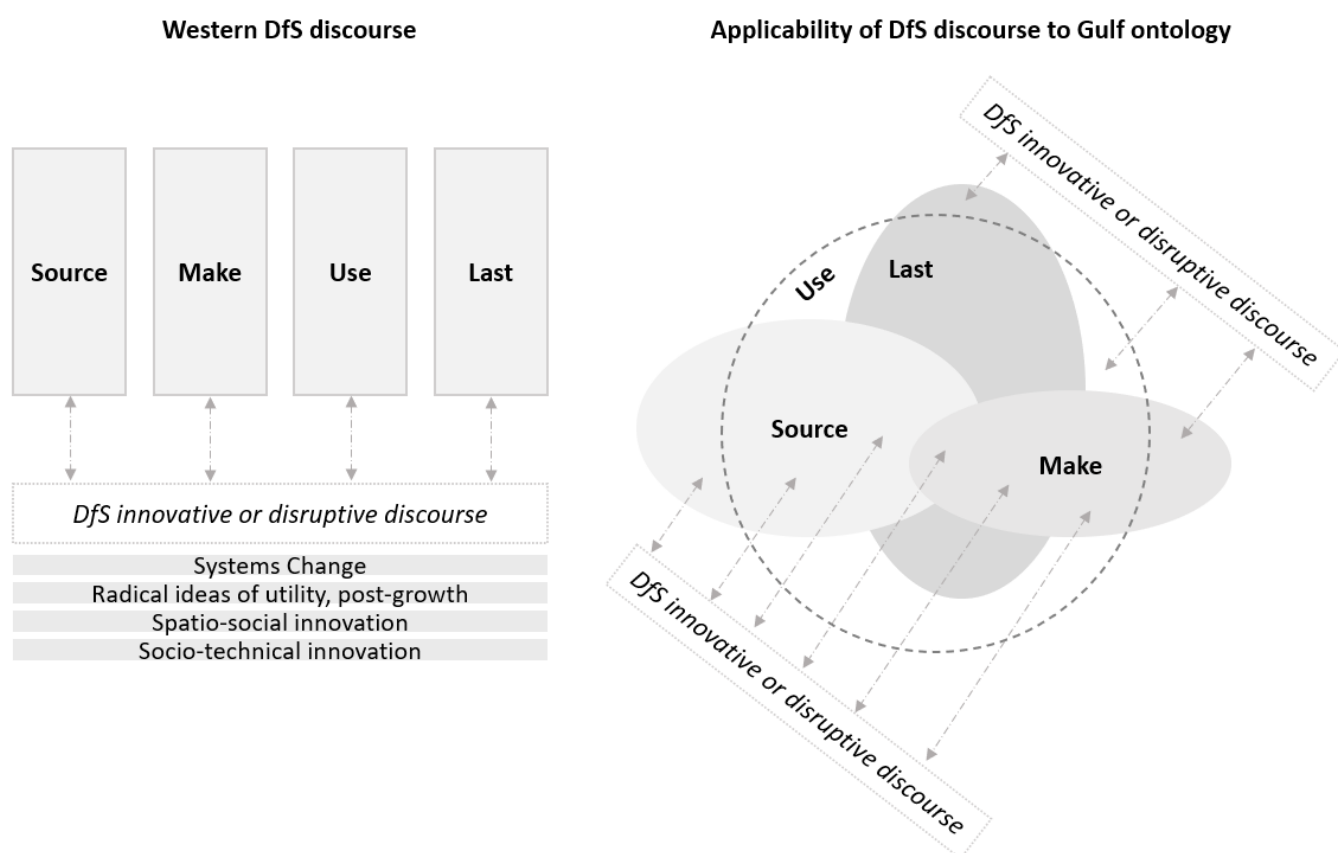
Left: stages of product lifecycle as defined by Gwilt and Rissanen (2011) and interactions with Western DfS discourse (as defined by myself). Right: overlapping categories of product lifecycle in the Gulf ontology, as defined by myself.

Perhaps the most apt example of blurring between lifecycle stages in mainstream Western tradition that currently *is*, is the traditional bridal fashion journey – which has resonance as a global tradition. Here, the act of creating for the day itself tends to have an acknowledged social value – including either shopping for a wedding dress or designing one. Therefore, similar to the idea of *indoore* or *brovas*, a blurring of "use" and "make", or "source" and "make" occurs naturally. However, in the Bahraini and Gulf context, this example of the bridal journey globally is instead everyday cultural experience. Thus, an understanding of DfS in the Gulf fashion context blurs the ontological categories of source, make, use, last, and instead assigns a fashion utility to all these stages (see Figure 5.1). Through this blurring, Bahraini garment-making culture bears resemblance to some diaspora fashion cultures which engage in several co-making rounds (Bhachu, 2005). In this light, the blurred lifecycle approach illustrated above may allow non-Western locales

as well as diaspora communities to better investigate their own unique fashion practices and set recommendations towards sustainability that are in line with cultural practice.

Another example of blurring lies in ingrained cultural beliefs about donations and catering to all part of society, including in matters of clothing. In the Gulf context, utility derived from donation may be described as a spectrum of emotions between social duty and spiritual fulfilment. The prevalence of donation culture and its associated psychological and social utility thus obscures the line between "use" and "last", as a re-use through donation belongs to both stages. The same may be said for a sharing culture within families, where utility is derived from conceptually lending or borrowing another's clothing.

In Figure 5.1, areas of source, make, and last that fall outside of the use designation completely include instances of non-social and material exchanges, such as some experiences of paid labour. These areas occur due to inconsistent and varied experiences of fashion as practice in Bahrain, as well as power dynamics. For instance, tailoring shops tend to have a head tailor or seamstress that meets with clients, with several tailors and seamstresses that work in the back of the shop. From the point of view of a tailor that works in the back of the shop, the *brova* is not a principally social experience, but rather a way of receiving orders to initiate a process of labour. Other points of view from a labour or economic exchange perspective include the domestic work of caring for clothing, collecting landfill textile waste, and even importing clothing for economic gain, and its subsequent transport. These stages are essentially similar to the material viewpoint of the fashion lifecycle, where distinct stages are tied to their respective material transactions.

Essentially, Figure 5.1 achieves what social theorist Theodore Schatzki (2010) describes as "an ontology that construes materiality as part of society" (p. 123) as an ontology for the Gulf. With ontological differences present, DfS discourse still vastly resonates with the Gulf experience, particularly that which prioritises use, space, and cognitive experience. Socially transformative concepts that apply well to the Gulf fashion context include design for social innovation (Manzini, 2014), spatio-social design and socio-technical innovation (Ceschin and Gaziulusoy, 2020), and craft of use thinking (Fletcher, 2016) where the use stage emerges as a radical disruptor to a growth-focused fashion system. A difference in ontologies, however, offers a starting point for what would be considered true innovation in a Gulf context. As some ontological schemes may be more likely than others to support particular outcomes and expectations (Hirsch, 2010), this

ontology informs which transition scenarios are will-fitted. In this sense, exploring Gulf ontology and DfS is not about dismissing Western frameworks, but rather critically examining how value and utility is assigned within the Gulf ontology. As Sabry urges, to reterritorialise and deterritorialise allows for a negotiated view such as that in Figure 5.2, where this researcher has learned to "stammer in her own language" (Sabry, 2012, p. 4), starting with Bahrain's everyday language surrounding fashion and sustainability.

5.3 Material flows of Bahraini fashion and associated experience

5.3.1 Sourcing and Making

A recognition of the Bahraini textile material flow as one that is largely imported (see Chapter 2) shapes the discussion in the next two sections, where material flows within Bahrain and their associated experiences are explored, and subsequently the perspective of local designers. This section explores source, make, use, and last (Gwilt and Rissanen, 2011) as material categories, and in line with the ontology established in Section 5.2 discusses associated experiences and spatial considerations when relevant as a facet of use. For simplicity of discussion, the diagrams in this section show "source", "make", "use" and "last" as distinct stages, with a surrounding discussion of instances of blurring or overlap. The exception to this is how the concepts of care and re-use are located within both the "use" and "last" stages of the lifecycle, designating a large degree of blurring which likely resonates at a global perspective (see Figure 5.4).

From a material point of view, both fabrics and garments in Bahrain are predominantly imported into the country. Local making, while it accounts for a smaller fraction of fabrics and garments compared to sourcing, is explored equally to establish social understanding surrounding both flows. Figures 5.2 and 5.3 summarise the delineation between material and garments sourced into Bahrain and those made locally. The figures also include purchase points for these materials or garments, a site of social activity that varies between souks, shopping malls, workshops, pop-up markets, and discount stores, but also a signifier of experience of this material flow across different income and social brackets. Note that the proportions in the diagrams throughout this section are illustrative and meant to denote key themes relevant to the material flow of fashion within Bahrain, as opposed to quantities. The discussion of the themes across the material lifecycle in Bahrain is derived from thematic analysis of this study's interviews, the Delphi study as well as extensive field notes throughout the data collection period.

Figure 5. 2 Acquiring fabric and trims through "source" and "make"
(Author's own, 2025)
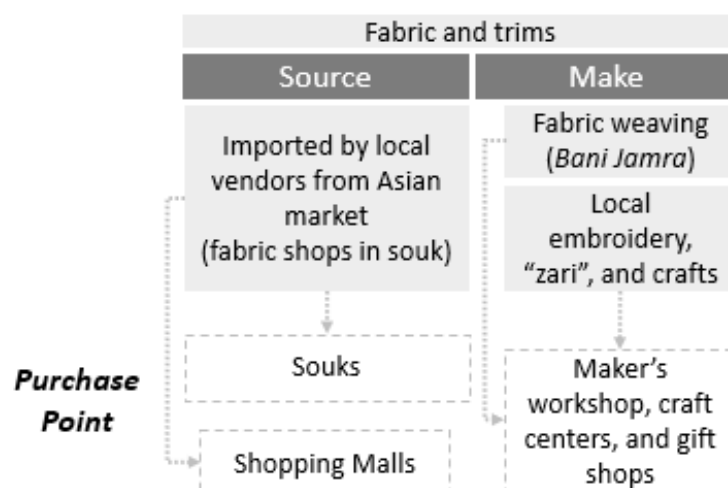
Figure shows fabrics and trims are both imported and made locally, with each having a different salespoint. Sourced fabrics are sold in souks and occasionally at shopping malls, while locally made fabrics and trims are predominantly confined to craft workshops and gift shops. Proportions in diagram are not indicative of prevalence.

Fabric and trims are imported to Bahrain primarily from Asia and subsequently sold in fabric shops to local designers and individuals for local tailoring, or rarely today to be sewn at home. Locally woven fabric is rarely made and at a higher price point. Weaving workshops in Bahrain have dwindled from fifteen to one over the course of the past three decades (Hussain, 2011). The only remaining workshop is located in the village of Bani Jamra, where it is "practised as a family craft", explained a pre-eminent weaver interviewed for this study (R16, 2018), but its continuity is threatened by a lack of large-scale demand. Historical attempts to revive weaving in Bahrain include Al Jasra House, where the brother of the Bani Jamra weaver interviewed relocated to as part of a government effort to create gentrified and contemporary craft spaces. In addition to local weaving, embroidery, *zari*, and *kurar* are all local crafts still commonly practised in Bahrain by small communities of predominantly women, such as Naseej in Manama, who work either in workshops or from their homes on commissioned requests (local fashion designer interview; R13, 2018).

Locally woven fabric is not only more expensive, but also less accessible, as it must be sought from workshops in rural areas, or a small number of craft centres and modernised heritage projects with an additional mark-up. Imported fabric and trims, however, are widely accessible in souks and even shopping malls, such as Aali mall in the Seef Area. The current socio-spatial setup of Bahrain, including accessibility of certain spaces by different groups, is discussed in Chapter 6.

More prevalent than local making is the import of ready-to-wear (RTW) clothing. Figure 5.3 divides local garments into traditional and semi-traditional and global or Western styles as per the descriptions outlined in Chapter 2. Purchase points for clothing are more varied than those for fabric, ranging from large discount stores and souks that import predominantly low-priced, unbranded clothing to shopping malls selling imported fast fashion and designer clothing.

Figure 5. 3 Garment flow of "source" and "make" with purchase point
(Author's own, 2025)
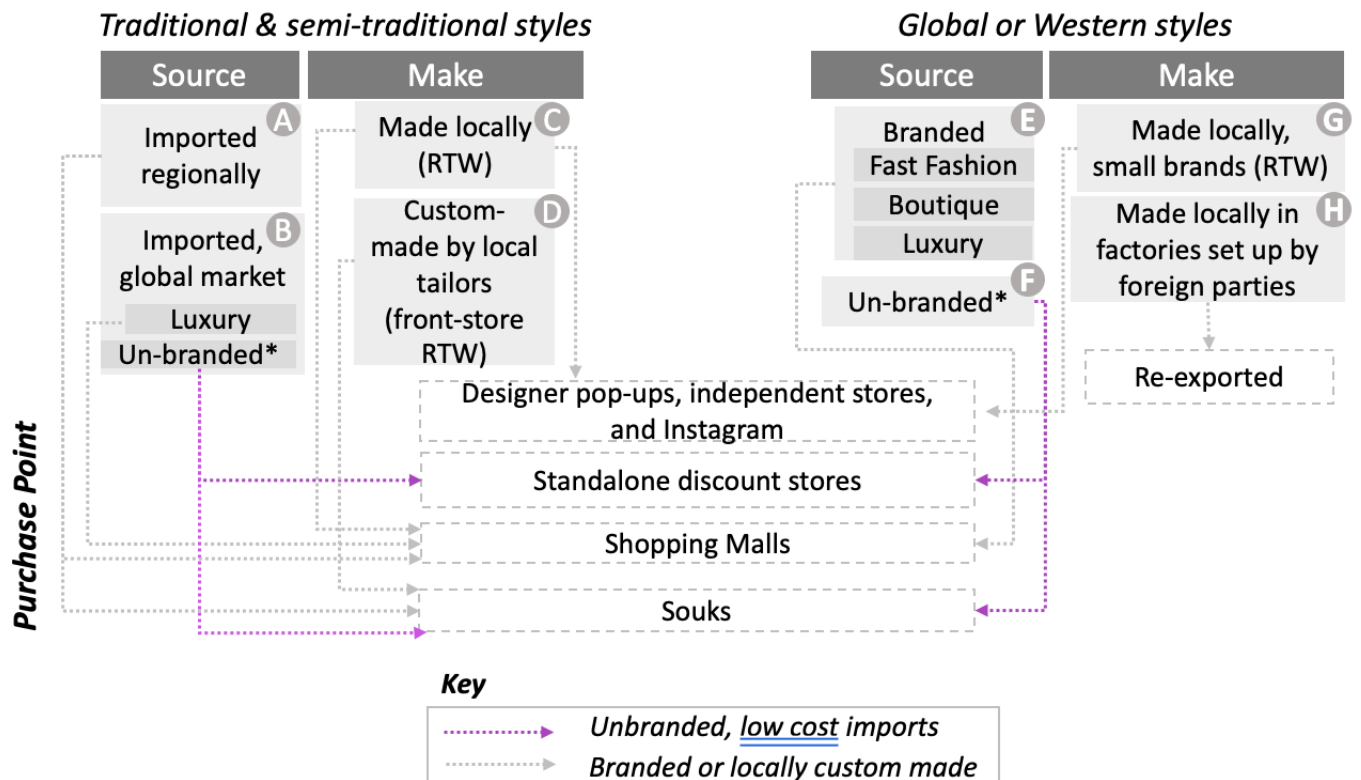
Figure shows how clothing is either sourced or made in Bahrain for both traditional and semi-traditional as well as global or Western styles. Proportions in diagram are not indicative of prevalence.

The flow of imported unbranded, low-priced clothing, signified in Figure 5.3 by purple arrows (labelled B-unbranded and F), reflects the path of clothing usually consumed by low-income households in Bahrain, as well as low-wage migrant communities. Imported from a variety of Asian countries, these RTW garments line the windows of shops in Bahrain's different souks and the racks of its discount stores. Discount stores in Bahrain include Ramez, Al Anwar, Max Fashion Outlet, and Ajeeb Discount Center. These trading companies import wholesale quantities of clothing at reduced prices, loosely mimicking fast fashion styles and with an offering that tends to be stylistically modest. In souks, prices are similarly low, at times even lower, with styles mainly catering directly to migrant communities, often with basics that cater to low-income Bahraini families as

well. Middle and high-income families may still shop in souks, although infrequently, for niche garments that are hard to find elsewhere, such as a *mishmar* (prayer cover), or low-priced traditional clothing.

A reliance of the low-wage migrant communities and low-income Bahraini households on the souk for clothing and other items is in line with demographic changes that have also occurred around these souks. The largest and oldest Bahraini souks are located in historical urban centres of Bahrain, such as Manama and Muharraq. These old urban centres were densely populated with Bahrainis in the early 20th century but have since become home to a large number of people who can be considered low-wage migrant labour, as well as Bahraini low-income households that have not migrated to more suburban areas, and elderly Bahrainis that live in the neighbourhoods they grew up in—often refusing to move. Becoming old-new urban centres, the new is a mix of well-established and antiquated family houses, which signify historical origins for many Bahrainis that have since moved to urban areas as well as a new population of migrant workers (paternal grandmother and seamstress, R1, 2018). It is common to see young migrant families shopping in the souk, or an elderly Bahraini woman supported by a young, Asian domestic worker as she does her weekly shopping. In the suburbs, newer souks have formed in tandem with the development of these newer areas in recent decades. This newer variety is more compact and tends to include convenience stores, bakeries, tailors – often close to mosques, creating areas of public gathering in suburban areas.

For branded clothing, signified by grey arrows in Figure 5.3, the ultimate destination is shopping malls. Here, the middle and upper class will come to purchase garments, and perhaps browse several times before they do so. Local designers, whether designing traditional wear (labelled C) or Western styles (labelled G), are more likely to sell their designs through Instagram, or participate in seasonal pop-ups that take place in the open spaces of malls – at times their parking lots – or convention centres as explained by designers during the workshop conducted for this study. Traditional or semi-traditional wear is more likely to find its way to shopping malls, both that designed by local (labelled C) or regional designers (labelled A), but for locally made Western-style RTW (labelled G), designer pop-ups or independent boutiques are more likely locations. A likely explanation from my participant observation during the workshop is that the local market for Western or global styles is highly competitive with the influx of global brand names – crowding out local designers to alternative platforms.

While traditional and semi-traditional styles are also imported, it is predominantly regionally from Gulf neighbours (labelled A), with a small fraction of luxury designer items (labelled B-luxury). Regionally, Gulf countries are known for different stregnths in traditional clothing – such as Saudi Arabia's reknown *shmaagh* (headdress) and Qatar's reputable *bisht* (a cloak-like woollen outer-layer, worn by men over the *thoub* for special occasions (see Chapter 2). In the semi-traditional category, Kuwait and Bahrain had strong reputations — going back to the 1980s — of blending western and non-western stylistic elements, but today capitals like Dubai, Riyadh and Doha are all developing a distinct creative presence in the semi-traditional category (see Chapter 2).

Moving to locally tailored clothing (labelled D), this segment is a fragmented and at times informal market in Bahrain but culturally pervasive. It includes traditional and semi-traditional styles custom-made for events, such as a *jalabiyya* custom-made for a relative or close friend's wedding, but also custom-made everyday wear. This is a common practice across Bahraini households of all income brackets (local fashion designer, R13, 2018). The number of these pieces, and their stylistic leanings, in individual wardrobes will vary across consumer segment. A souk well-known for abayas is Jid Ali market, close to Isa Town and Jirdab, where a plethora of abaya shop-cum-tailor stores line the streets offering both RTW and custom-made options. These tailors work closely with clients during *brovas*, and hold their own small stock of fabrics, but are willing to use a client's if provided as well (various interviews: R01, R05, R06, R13, 2018). Local designers and tailors interviewed discussed the use of leftover materials from one garment or client to line pockets of or embellish another's (various: interviews R05, R12, R13, 2018). Another common practice is creating custom-products for clients with leftover materials, such as using fabric cut-offs from a traditional wedding dress to make baby's clothing, or as one designer described making "fabric sleeves for the [paper] invites of a wedding ceremony" (local fashion designer, R05, 2018) for one of her clients. Investing in a new *abaya* or *thoub* may also warrant a visit to the tailors, perhaps even choosing from their RTW styles and having the garment modified for length or fit. Today, in addition to traditional and semi-traditional styles, some tailors may include a RTW rack with Western styles.

Clothing made in Bahrain for export (labelled H) is a category highly sensitive to trade agreements, particularly FTAs with the United States (see Chapter 2). These trade agreements include favourable terms for foreign entities to set up factories and produce clothing in Bahrain. A stated goal of the FTA relating to textile and apparel is to facilitate exchanges in technology, skills and expertise (MOIC, 2018), and the agreement has been

framed as a means of attracting foreign direct investment (Al-Khalifa, 2010). However, these FTAs have not translated to the development of skills in the local population, as Bahraini locals are rarely trained or employed in these factories. Instead, migrant workers from large textile and apparel-producing economies are recruited (Bair et al., 2016). For producers, this reduces training costs (ibid) and wages, as the minimum wage for Bahrainis differs to that for migrant workers. These factories function as a form of offshoring for producers, employing low-wage migrant labour, and simultaneously crowding out investment in the skillset of textile and apparel making of the Bahraini population.

5.3.2 Use, Care and Re-Use

The remaining parts of the flow explored, in Figure 5.4, follow the "life-world of users of clothes" (Fletcher, 2016, p. 78), in the form of different events clothing is worn during, variations to these events, and ways of care and re-use through sharing or donation. These events are not mutually exclusive, particularly in the case of traditional clothing; an *abaya* or *thoub* worn for a walk in the mall may also be worn for work. The same applies to Western-style clothing, where work wear and casual dress can overlap, as can home wear and casual dress.

Variations to these modes of dress include cultural events and seasonal weather changes. For instance, attending *Muharram* processions or *matam* requires a specific dress code. *Muharram* is a holy month for Shia Bahrainis – which includes *Ajam* and *Baharna* (see Chapter 2) – where processions, religious readings in *matam* (place of worship), and cultural events take place in Manama and across villages in Bahrain. During the month, it is customary for Shia in Bahrain to dress more modestly, wear the colour black, refrain from make-up and haircuts, and avoid the purchasing of new garments. Similarly, in Ramadan, Muslims globally tend to dress more modestly as both cultural and spiritual practice. At the same time, Ramadan has also become a major point in the fashion consumption calendar for new clothes (Maki and Schneider, 2023). Both are examples of casual dress experiencing a variation due to cultural events, and in both styling is likely to be a mix of traditional and Western. In *Muharram*, under a black *abaya*, it is common to wear a black T-shirt with black trousers, jeans, sweatpants, or leggings.

Another variation is due to seasonal weather changes, where different fabrics for traditional clothing are donned – for instance men may switch their white, cotton *thoub* to a darker woollen *thoub*, usually in shades of navy and dark brown. The last variations in Figure 5.4 are personal-styling and modesty culture – both of which stem from

differences in an individual's socio-cultural background. In this sense, modesty can be seen as both a culture that is pervasive but also a personal styling choice that is tapped into. Personal styling and modesty, therefore, vary widely depending on the individual and their immediate social norms. These social norms are influenced by family background and personal life experiences. An individual's personal styling and modesty may also be modulated based on where he or she is going. For instance, it is common for the same individual to wear a Western suit to work, a T-shirt and jeans to the mall, but don a more modest *thoub* to a *majlis* or gathering. It is also common for women that do not regularly wear an *abaya* to don one out of sheer convenience over home-wear for a grocery trip. Women are also likely to adjust how modest their outfits are depending on the perceived culture of the neighbourhood or setting they will be visiting. For instance, getting bread from a baker in a conservative neighbourhood makes the *abaya* an easy choice – both in its assimilation to the neighbourhood's norms of modesty, but also for its convenience of being worn as a cover over home-wear. The same woman may, on a trip to the mall, be dressed in a less modest style. It is also important to note that Western dressing, as discussed in Chapter 2, is not mutually exclusive from modesty, but rather Western clothing is often styled in more modest ways when worn in Bahrain and in that sense modesty becomes a "sphere of personal and community activity" (Lewis, 2013, p. 2).

Within the category of care, actions of re-styling, mending, washing, and dry-cleaning occur between the home and the souk. Washing and some light mending take place in homes, while mending of zippers, buttonholes, and larger re-adjustments – such as a change in sizing or style or re-soling of shoes – commonly take place in tailors and cobblers at the souk. The prevalence of tailors in neighbourhood souks, as well as the common practice of mending at home, both point to a historical culture of mending. A large surge in fast fashion and throwaway culture of the past two decades has altered a reliance on mending (various interviews: R01, R05, R08, R10, R14, 2018), as fast fashion today is commonly disposed of due to its steep wear and tear over time, as well as the desire to shop new styles. Today, tailors in souks are more commonly relied on for men's suiting and formal shirts, the purchase of custom-made or RTW traditional clothing, or major amendments to garments.

Figure 5. 4 Garment flow of "use" and "last"
(Author's own, 2025)

Use			Last	
Event-based dressing			**Care**	
Traditional, semi-traditional, or western-style clothing	Home wear	Re-sized or style adjusted	At tailor or cobbler in souk	
	Special occasion dress			
	Casual dress			
	Work wear			
Variations		Mended	At home	
Religious or cultural events				
Seasonal weather changes		Washed		
Personal styling, socio-cultural differences, and modesty culture		Dry cleaned	In souk	

Re-use
Shared within family
Stored for future use as family "heirloom" garment

	Dispose
	Donated to charity
	Exported · Sent to landfill

Figure shows the remaining stages of the lifecycle: "use", "last", and "dispose" for garments in Bahrain.

Similar to the idea of *indoore* and *nitmasha*, where social practice surrounding garments in Bahrain obscures the spatial distinction between purchase point and use point, the souk is a similar use point for certain consumer segments – predominantly low wage migrants (Beiruti, 2019). See Chapter 6 for a further discussion on spatial mapping of fashion spaces in different kinds of neighbourhoods (urban, suburban, village areas) and consumer segments.

Within re-use, which spans both "use" and "last" in Figure 5.4, a predominant form of re-use in Bahrain is that of sharing between family members. This sharing differs from receiving an elder sibling's hand-me-downs – which is also common in Bahrain – and is distinctive in that the item is shared and returned, rather than passed on. This is especially common amongst women, who might share among mothers, sisters, but also aunts and cousins that do not live in the same house – citing reasons as "expanding my variety" (various interviews: R04, R05, 2018) and "borrowing for an event" (various interviews: R08, R13, R18, 2018). Sharing outside of the household is particularly associated with

the lending and borrowing of traditional clothing for events, such as a *jalabiyya* borrowed by a close female relative to attend a wedding.

A sub-category of this sharing is heirloom garments, which are traditional pieces in families that are passed down through generations. *Thoub nashel*, *jalabiyya*, *bisht*, embroidered pieces, children's traditional wear, and jewellery are all common heirloom items. In the last decades and particularly in wealthy households, heirloom garments have started to include luxury clothing from global brands, as well as jewellery in more contemporary styles than traditional Bahraini gold, such as diamonds set in a modern design of white gold. The amount of heirloom items a family may have, and their value, differs depending on their social and economic background. In lower income households, heirloom items may be constrained to the bridal jewellery set of a matriarch passed on for a generation or two, while in higher income households heirlooms may include large sets of jewellery, intricate traditional wear, and high quality *bishts*. At times, these may even be lent out to relatives and close family friends, particularly in the case of traditional shawls and jewellery sets used in bridal ceremonies. For those with no access, even through borrowing, renting heirloom-like garments is possible. For instance, a bride's family may choose to rent the shawls used in a *henna* or *jelwa* bridal ceremony, if unavailable through relatives or family friends.

Examining re-use, sharing culture, and heirloom garments in Bahrain shows that high-value traditional items – usually those with a high level of craftsmanship – tend to be re-worn, shared, and borrowed the most within and between households. Everyday garments, with lower levels of craftsmanship, are often re-worn – still shared but to a lesser degree and likely only within the immediate household – until they are either donated to charities or thrown away to be sent to landfill. Donation culture in Bahrain and the Gulf is generally high due to societal beliefs about giving to the less fortunate (various interviews: R03, R07, R08, 2018; various Delphi participants: P03, P10, P12, 2019). Promoted through Islamic ideas of charity, *zakat*, and the elimination of poverty in the community, donations are a default cultural practice for giving away anything of good quality. Often, donation drives look to purchase new garments and other items for families in need – so donation is not always tied to, or driven by, ideas of re-use but rather the provision of clothing to all segments of society. Donation drives are organised both formally by charities and informally through members of the community (interviews R15, 2018; Delphi P16, 2019). Community organisers, often women that are well-connected within their communities, work year-round to connect low income families with second-

hand and new clothing as well as other items such as books, backpacks, and home amenities. These women act as gatekeepers and confidants between segments of the community; allowing anonymity of those in need, while maintaining connections with those able to give. It is common in households of all income levels, therefore, to know a woman or few that are engaged in these activities.

Charitable donation as a social force has also resulted in Bahrain's only form of sorted textile collection *en masse*. Local charities, in conjunction with the municipalities, have installed large collection bins in most neighbourhoods to allow for households to deposit clothing. Throughout the years of conducting my PhD research, the number of bins within residential neighbourhoods in Bahrain palpably increased, from select drop-off points reachable to most by car to at least one and up to several bins within walking distance. Use of these bins remains optional, and textile waste still ends up in landfill as it is often disposed through household trash. Nevertheless, the social force of the donation culture has created a material system that is highly accessible, in place, and may readily lend itself for the sorting of textile waste.

While a prominent cultural force locally, it is unclear what proportion of donations find a new wearer (various interviews: R07, R08, 2018). Unlike loaned or inherited heritage garments from family elders which are regarded with high value, donations collected from bins across the country and charity centres may still end up in landfill. I think of this as a frictional un-deployment of garments. In economics, frictional un-employment denotes when those seeking jobs have skillsets that do not match what the jobs in the market require. Hence, a state of both jobs and skilled individuals existing in the market, but not matching one another. Frictional un-deployment of clothing occurs similarly; when donated clothing cannot find a new match, leaving it to be stored, exported, or sent to landfill. Exporting clothing that cannot find a match locally to other countries may simply transfer this frictional un-deployment to another country, as organisations like The OR Foundation highlight. The organisation operates from Accra, highlighting what happens to imported second-hand clothing. Called *obroni w'awu* by locals, which translates to "dead white man's clothes", these donations have amounted to a fashion waste crisis in Ghana (Ricketts and Skinner, 2019). The organisation works to bring attention to how the global oversupply of clothing unjustly exacerbates environmental, social, and infrastructural issues for countries that receive fashion waste.

5.3.3 Disposal

Clothing that does not find a local donation match, or that which is not exported, is sent to landfill (various interviews: R07, R08, 2018). Bahrain has one municipal landfill in Askar and a landfill for hazardous waste in Hafir (Sabbagh et al., 2012; Zafar, 2017), both in the southeast of the island. Inhabitants of the area have expressed environmental concerns due to their proximity to the landfill (Zafar, 2017). Currently, recycling capabilities and material recovery are lacking in Bahrain, with only 8% of domestic waste recycled through export (Al Sabbagh, 2012). Realistically, efforts to recycle textile waste in Bahrain would only take place within a larger material recovery plan, including recycling of items more commonly recovered globally – such as plastics, glass, and metal.

Bahrain's recycling industry is comprised of private companies contracted by local municipalities and NGOs that are involved in the collection and primary processing of recyclable waste (Al Sabbagh et al., 2012, Al-Ansari, 2012) – this amounts to the recycling of 5% of domestic waste. Another 3% is fulfilled by a community of low-wage migrant workers, who collect recyclable waste in informal ways (Al Sabbagh et al., 2012). Once collected, the waste is sold to private recycling companies for final processing, usually in other Gulf countries or the Far East (ibid). In December 2019, Bahrain announced bids from foreign contractors to build its first waste-to-energy (WtE) plant in Askar. WtE was identified as a goal under Bahrain's National Renewable Energy Action Plan (NREAP), which aims to achieve a renewable energy target of 5% by 2025 and 10% by 2035. WtE has been identified as an effective way to reduce not only waste, but emissions from municipal solid waste in Bahrain (Al Sabbagh, 2019), with thermochemical technologies and anaerobic digestion identified as the best WtE solutions for Bahrain (Blanchard et al., 2019).

WtE, while a step forward in managing waste in Bahrain, may still not be the ideal for material recovery, particularly in textiles. Re-use and recycling of textiles, currently achieved at over 20% in Sweden and at over 35% in Denmark, reduces pressure on land and water resources (Roos et al., 2019). Whether WtE or recycling is more environmentally beneficial in the Bahraini context depends on the replacement rate, or how much recycled material fully replaces the production of virgin material. However, studies indicate that in countries with WtE systems, the gains of prevented production are larger than those of what may be gained through WtE (Schmidt, 2016; Sandin and Peters, 2018; Bodin, 2016). Most environmental impacts associated with the making of textiles occur in the stages of fibre production, yarn spinning, weaving and knitting, finishing and

dyeing (Roos et al., 2019). Particularly when considering Bahrain and the Gulf's impact in terms of a global footprint through their role as predominantly importers of clothing, recycling, re-use, and material recovery remain vital to explore alongside WtE.

I have interpreted the lack of registered figures for low-income households in Figure 5.5 in several ways. While I did not ask a question about waste in low-income households during participant interviews, my participant observation informs the following perspective, namely field notes during small, everyday discussions with Bahrainis throughout the research process. First, these households may be more likely to re-use and re-purpose clothing more frequently than those in higher income brackets due to poverty. Their financial limitations would also inhibit instances of purchase, such as making large purchase runs at fast fashion stores like H&M and Zara or online at Shein or Temu. Second, they are more likely to engage in the domestic upcycling and re-purposing of textiles into household products. This is a common practice, even in middle-income households, to turn an old T-shirt into a kitchen rag for instance, or an old dress for special occasions into a set of pillows. Low-income households may participate in this re-use of textiles more frequently, as it may offset other domestic costs relating to cleaning products. Ultimately, this means that low-income households would still have some degree of textile waste, albeit small, which may be harder to trace in the form of small rags or off-cuts, as opposed to entire garments. Fittingly, Al Sabbagh and her team of researchers (2012) – in what is currently, as of 2024, the sole academic paper on waste in Bahrain that includes textile as a component – note that the zero values in the waste data shown in Figure 5.5 are to be cautiously interpreted.

Figure 5. 5 Domestic waste composition in Bahrain
(Al Sabbagh et al., 2012, p. 817)

Waste component [% wt.]	Household income group			
	Low-income	Middle-income	High-income	Average
Paper	6.7	8.12	16.7	9.9
Plastic	8.4	16.0	17.4	13.4
Metals	3.7	3.7	2.5	3.4
Organics (vegetable/putrescible)	63.6	61.2	51.8	59.6
Textiles	< 0.1[a]	6.2	6.6	3.9
Miscellaneous (wood, rubber, ceramics)	12.6	< 0.1[a]	2.1	5.5
Nappies	3.3	4.8	2.8	3.7

[a]Zero values in data sources, to be cautiously interpreted.

Coupling an understanding of the utility derived from fashion spaces and practice in Bahrain with material considerations across the lifecycle points to several starting points for recommendations towards fashion sustainability. For instance, while Bahrain lacks systems for textile recycling at end of life, it has both a civic culture and collection infrastructure that may enable effective waste management system for textiles. It is quite likely that large-scale recycling efforts, both textile and non-textile, would have large compliance rates if prioritised. Moreover, focusing on the psychological durability (Chapman, 2009; Haug, 2017), longevity (Niinimäki and Koskinen, 2011; Hebrok, 2014; Durrani et al., 2016), or use stage of garments (Fletcher, 2016; Selvefors et al., 2018), and exploring the expanded definition of use in the Bahraini context, such as the vital role of the spatial, shapes the discussion in subsequent chapters.

5.4 Experiences of Bahraini designers in a local-but-global market

5.4.1 How local designers view Bahrain's fashion industry

Supplementing the perspective of utility and the flow of the material, the perspective of local designers in Bahrain points to structural difficulties of making locally, such as a lack of funding, support from formal networks, and the inaccessibility of a formal fashion education locally. These local designers see the Gulf region as their market, as ease of travel for resources (such as fabric and trimmings) or for pop-ups and fashion conventions is a road trip or short flight away. These emerging designers, predominantly self-taught designers-by-trade – or designers that have learned through practice – described the vast pressure of foreign brands, both fast fashion and luxury brands on their ability to scale. The prevalence of fast fashion in the Gulf makes it difficult to compete on prices locally, while the presence of luxury fashion makes it extremely difficult to build local brands with the high cultural capital and appeal of imported luxury. Therefore, these designers find their space mostly in a traditional yet contemporary market segment, practising their creativity in a fashion segment underserved by foreign brands, and pricing just above fast fashion.

The results in this section are predominantly from participant observation during a four-hour workshop conducted in December 2018 with 22 local fashion designers. The workshop was co-organised by the Bahrain Fashion Incubator (BFI) and the Sustainable Energy Unit (SEU) in Bahrain, with the support of Fashion Revolution Bahrain whose members ran the break-out sessions. More details on activities conducted during the workshop, including images and workshop slides, can be found in Appendix E.

Prior to the workshop, 21 of the 22 designers completed an online survey which determined a baseline for designers' language around sustainability, as well as what the designers deemed favourable and unfavourable about Bahrain's fashion industry. Is the word "sustainability" itself recognised? What does sustainability mean to emerging designers in Bahrain? The survey also included questions on the benefits and problems in Bahrain's fashion industry from a designer's point of view. Figure 5.6 shows the responses of designers to "Describe the Bahraini fashion industry in three words", categorised into three categories.

The first category reflects structural elements of the local industry, with a consensus that the local fashion industry is somewhere between "needs development" and "promising". The second category includes words that reflect the perceived local creativity, or lack thereof of designers. The third discusses stylistic elements of the local fashion market.

Figure 5. 6 Voice of emerging designers on Bahraini fashion industry (n=21)

(Author's own, 2025)

Category 1: In need of development, emerging, and unsupported designers	*Category 2:* Creativity of local designers	*Category 3:* Fashion values and aspects of style
"Emerging" (1) "Promising" (1)	"Unique" and "distinctive" (3) "Innovative" (2)	"Traditional" or "Traditions" (3) "Ancient" (1) "Classic" (1)
"Needs development" or "developing" (4) "Needs to grow" or "growing" (3) "Needs more attention" (1)	"Creative" (2)	"Values" (1) "Quality" (1)
"Small and unknown" (1) "Unadvertised and local" (1) "Not on the map" (1)	"Repetitive" (2)	"Modest" "Elegant" (2)
"Artists and creators need help" (1) "Talented designers without smart tailoring" (1) "Seasonal sales" (1)		"Modern and contemporary" (2) "Latest styles" (2)

Figure shows answers of emerging designers in Bahrain to describe the Bahraini fashion industry in three words, grouped into three categories. Words are clustered based on their thematic relevance to each other. Numbers in parentheses refer to the frequency of occurrence of a phrase or word.

At first glance, data within each category may seem contradictory. It is only so if they are understood in binary. For instance, groups of phrases show that while designers view the

market as "promising" and "unique" with "creative" talent, they attest that the local market "needs development" and "artists and creators need help". Also, in line with the data collected from interviews and participant observation during the workshop, many designers aspire to be part of the more contemporary global fashion industry, instead of commercially relying on the seasonal sales of traditional or semi-traditional styles.

Seasonality, discussed previously from the user perspective, emerges from a sales perspective as well, particularly for local designers making traditional and semi-traditional styles. As mentioned in the discussion of cultural events earlier in this chapter, prior to and during Ramadan women in particular update their wardrobes with new styles to wear during the month's social activities (various interviews: R04, R05, R14, 2018). Women that dress in more Western styles throughout the year are likely to also own a few pieces for the month or shop around for a wardrobe refresh of traditional and semi-traditional styles. In contrast, the store manager of a fast fashion brand in Bahrain described peak sales "right before Eid and New Year's Eve" (R11, 2018), where individuals are likely to shop for more Western or global styles. Another season where local designers may find it difficult to sell their traditional or semi-traditional styles is the summertime, where families are either looking for vacation wardrobes or back-to-school clothing, both of which are supplied by the foreign high street. Menswear follows a similar pattern, but perhaps with less seasonality (R11, 2018). Contemporary menswear in Bahrain is largely comprised of foreign brands for both formal work wear and casual wear, with the traditional *thoub* or contemporary Gulf street-style casual (see Chapter 2) as the exception – both of which are usually made locally or regionally.

Another contradiction at first sight is Category 2's inclusion of both "uniqueness" and "repetitiveness". These perceptions denote the need for distinctiveness in a competitive, small but fragmented market, while simultaneously a repetitive canon of traditional styles prevails. Simply put, you need to be innovative and offer something new and impressive as a designer, all while fine-tuning a default template of traditional clothing (see Chapter 2 for a discussion on what I call semi-traditional styles). Also, styles tend to spread rapidly both locally and regionally, due to the cultural compactness of the region, and aided by modern day heavy social media usage. An example of the rapid and far-reaching dissemination of style is the wave of the muted colour palette *abaya* that emerged in the mid-2010s, flooding social media, the local market, and most wardrobes.

By the time this data was collected in December 2018, most local traditional designers were likely to have released a collection of traditional or semi-traditional styles in a muted

or neutral palette, which includes shades such as taupe, pale blush, pale beige, powdered blue, or muted pale greys. Vogue Australia traced the beginning of this global trend to a taupe nail colour chosen for Chanel's SS 2010 runway, suggesting "try it on your nails however and the toasty-brown hue is a perfect match for this season's beige, bone and creamy pinks" (Cornford, 2010, para.2). From debuting as a nail colour in SS 2010, tones of taupe, mauve, and muted tones have re-appeared intermittently across runways throughout the 2010s. As recently as SS 2019, the neutral trend was donned by Burberry, Balmain, Tom Ford, Dior and Kenzo in hues of toffee and vanilla (Young, 2019).

While appearing intermittently and globally, the Gulf's trajectory with this fashion trend was unique in its persistence and prevalence across both fashion and beauty categories. Stemming from Chanel's fashion moment in 2010, the trend amplified in a separate trajectory regionally. Possibly, this independent trajectory harkens to the fact that muted or neutral colours emerged as a beauty trend, and not just clothing trend at the SS 2010 Chanel runway. *Allure* magazine online (Nast, n.d.) references the Chanel show prescribing "on the nails: an opaque grayish taupe called *Chanel Le Vernis in Particulière*". Matching make-up shades from Chanel's Spring 2010 line emerged as amethyst along the top lash line, a bronze on the lids and mauve-taupe shade shading the crease of the eyelid and up to the browbone, with just a dash of champagne on the browbone (Nast, n.d). In the Gulf, the aesthetic was widely donned by women on their nails, *abayas*, faces, and even hairdressers report a turn of hair colour trends to a muted brown – "toner is the secret to getting that exact shade!", an established Lebanese hairdresser in Bahrain explained to me in 2020. Peaking in the mid-2010s, this palette remains popular in the region at the time of this research. In this sense, the Gulf region can indeed seem repetitive, at times magnifying certain trends that emerge from the global fashion industry. Which trends become magnified in the Gulf is a result of both aesthetic preferences and modesty culture, both of which appear in Category 3 of Figure 5.6. Gulf women often pay meticulous attention to their nails, hair, and make-up – perhaps because these parts are more naturally on display in Gulf culture – and trends that cross from clothing to beauty and make-up such as the neutral palette seemingly have a more viral impact on the region.

Category 3 shows terms such as "traditional" and "modern and contemporary" or "latest styles" appearing at almost the same frequency. This co-existence is explained by the niche that local designers fill in exercising ingenuity within traditional blueprints. It is best understood not as contradiction, but rather an evolution of cultural identity, and the

way in which the modern individual in the Gulf dresses. In this sense, the *abaya* is akin to the coat; its trends may change every season – its length, colour, style of sleeves, fabric choices, silhouette, and embellishments – but it remains a coat, or *abaya*.

Designers credited Bahrain's heterogenous demographics – relative to its Gulf neighbours – to how they perceive their creativity, citing that "different cultures within a small country create different trends". When discussing their struggles, designers described a lack of accessible formal fashion education and scarce training opportunities. The Royal University for Women in Bahrain has the only fashion undergraduate level programme in the country, and survey participants deemed it to be inaccessible due to its high fees. During the workshop, designers rated a lack of knowledge to make decisions regarding sustainability as the biggest issue with regards to the social and environmental aspects of clothing in Bahrain (see Figure 5.9).

Despite a desire to create contemporary clothing that can compete with foreign brands, both locally and internationally, designers believe a lack of knowledge, networks, and fashion business management skills such as inventory management are all deterrents. Designers lamented a lack of funding opportunities, and limited choices of fabrics in Bahraini souks. They asserted that the Gulf consumer prefers international brands for non-traditional wear*,* which results in a lack of confidence for them as designers to establish brands with more global or Western styles.

Exacerbating designers' lack of confidence is a reported lack of tailoring and garment finishing capabilities, summarised by "talented designers without smart tailoring" in Figure 5.6. In addition to their own lack of formal fashion education or training, designers believe there is a general lack of skilled manpower to execute their ideas. This has resonance to the global context of modern fashion design, where supply chains are often located in low labour cost countries. In the UK context, for instance, Anne Creigh-Tyte (2005) explores using cultural creation as a method to measure the fashion design industry instead of production which is often off-shored. In the Bahraini context, designers during the workshop often compared the skillset of the migrant community of tailors in Bahrain to the standards of global brands, and their disappointment was confounded by their inability to train the tailors themselves. In practice, both designers and tailors in Bahrain are learning on the job together, usually becoming more well-versed in the gap of the market where there is high demand – traditional wear. Therefore, a designer hoping to start a contemporary wear brand will scan the market for labour, only to find tailors that are skilled in traditional wear already or looking to learn on the job – just like the designer

him/herself. Some tailors come to Bahrain with experience from their countries of origin such as Bangladesh or Thailand. Even fewer may have a background working for the Bahrain-based clothing factories that ran in the era of FTAs lasting until 2016 – such as the Indian tailor interviewed for this study. However, the majority learn on the job and become predominantly skilled in traditional wear, and thus from a designer's point of view are seen to constrain their contemporary global ambitions. Outside of their perceptions, this constraint likely originates in the historical lack of comprehensive formal education in arts and design and vocational training. This is part of a larger societal problem in the Gulf, where an arts and design education is both socially deterred and structurally difficult to attain compared to that in STEM-related disciplines, further discussed in Chapter 7.

5.4.2 Local designers' views on sustainability terminology and practice

In addition to structural issues facing designers, the pre-workshop survey explored designers' exposure to sustainability terminology. Figure 5.7 shows that 48% of designers had heard of the term "sustainability" in relation to fashion, and 52% of "fast fashion" prior to the workshop. The survey was conducted in English, in accordance with the language of instruction of the workshop. Therefore, unlike Section 5.2, which looked at discourse in Arabic, this survey captures recognition and engagement in globalised Western discourse.

Not only were more designers exposed to the term "fast fashion", but 20% of surveyed designers had heard of the phrase "fast fashion" and not "sustainability" with relation to fashion. Recognition of "fast fashion" over "fashion sustainability" could be explained by two factors. First, as an oil dependent region, "sustainability" is a word that Gulf populations may highly associate with energy concerns and renewables, and a transition away from oil. Second, it simply reflects Gulf society's high consumption of fast fashion, and the public discourse surrounding this specific consumption. All in all, with an inquiry of exposure to *either* the term "sustainability" or "fast fashion", recognition among designers amounts to 67%. These results show that there is a high overlap between those that answered "yes" to both questions, meaning that designers were either in the know across the board or not at all when it came to discussions on fashion sustainability.

Figure 5. 7 Exposure of emerging designers in Bahrain to fashion sustainability terminology

(Author's own, 2025)

Exposure of emerging designers to "sustainability" and "fast fashion" terminology (n=21)
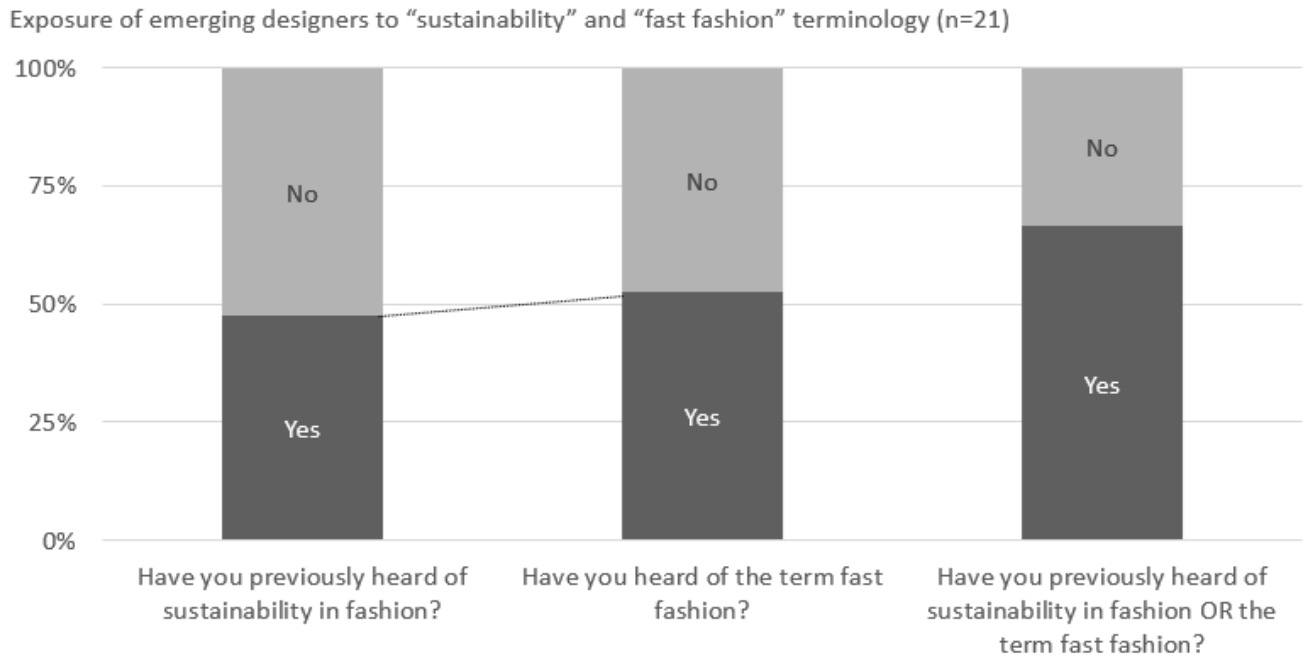
When asked what the term "sustainability" means to designers, a majority referenced an overall management of resources, namely for purposes of business continuity or efficiency. Others gave answers related to environmental protection, and some gave practical definitions such as "using eco-methods" and "re-using materials" (see Figure 5.8).

While Section 5.2 explores the lexicon of sustainability terminology in Bahrain in everyday lived experience and discourse, this section reflects a DfS understanding by exploring how designers perceive sustainability both as terminology and as concept. "Sustainability" or "sustainable" is often used in the Gulf in the marketing of projects spanning real estate, CSR of locally present multi-national companies, as well as government policy and strategies. While sustainability terminology is often misappropriated globally, giving rise to critiques of greenwashing, the over-use and ambiguity of the term often goes unchallenged in the Gulf. Fittingly, most surveyed designers in this study understood the term "sustainability" as one associated with business or economic goals, such as a proficiency in managing resources. Designers' understanding of sustainability reflects the large commercial presence of global industries in the Gulf, both fashion and otherwise, which prioritise business continuity and efficiency and identify sustainability as meeting and managing their own resource needs.

Figure 5. 8 Definitions of sustainability be emerging fashion designers in Bahrain
(Author's own, 2025)

Definitions of "sustainability" by emerging designers (n=21)

How do you define sustainability?
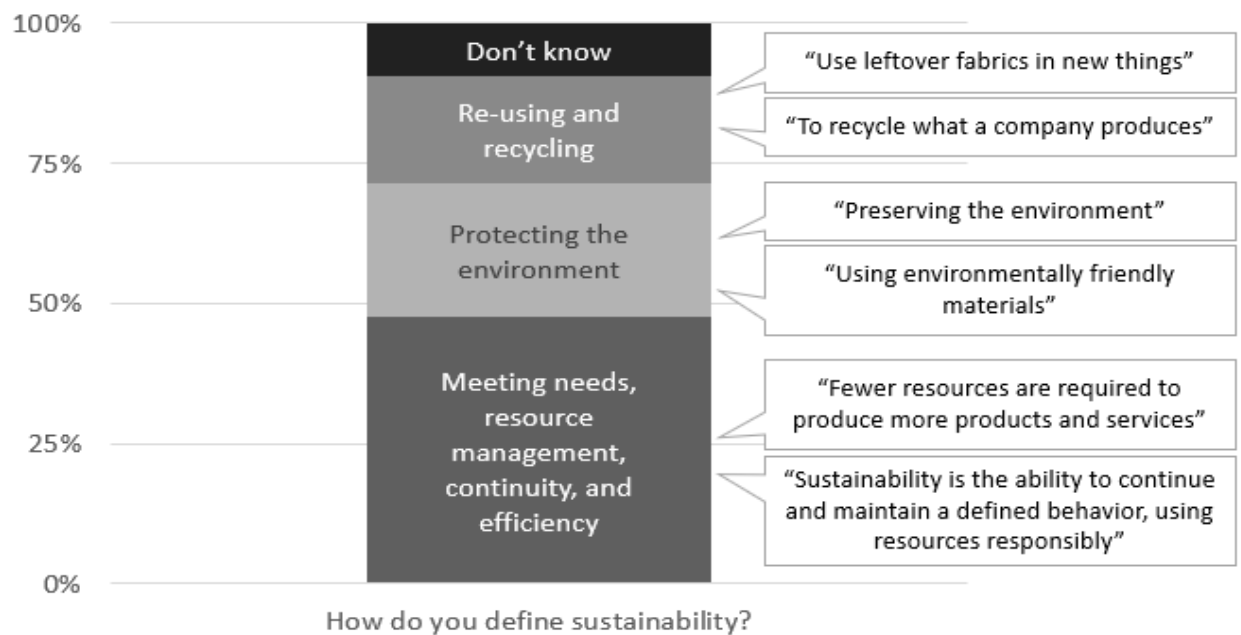
To explore designers' conceptual understanding of sustainability, as opposed to how they would define the term in writing, the workshop opened with a show and tell of items that epitomise sustainability to designers (Activity 1 in Appendix E). Items shared predominantly included up-cycled garments or garments with zero-waste thinking such as re-incorporating extra trimmings and fabric off-cuts. Rationales included cost-efficiency for the maker as well as reducing waste for society. Two designers shared service concepts – the second DfS innovation level in Chapter 3 – where they expand sizing for child customers as they grow free of charge, and often redesign, adjust, or maintain sold pieces for customers for minimal costs. Social elements were included in definitions insofar as the stories behind the materials upcycled – for instance, one female participant particularly enjoyed turning the clothing of men in her family, from jeans to traditional clothing, into female accessories.

After Activity 1, a primer on fashion sustainability which included the human cost of today's fashion industry was shared with participants. Subsequently, in Activity 2, designers split into groups to discuss how these ideas apply to Bahrain. I then asked each group to rate a list of issues relating to fashion sustainability, based on what mattered most to them. Each participant within a group ranked their top three issues as 1, 2 or 3 (1 being the highest in importance to them). To vote, the participants placed buttons of three different sizes (each size corresponded to a rank of 1, 2 or 3), onto a large hand-written

A2 paper. I produced Figure 5.9 below through tabulating these manual votes, namely through photographs of these A2 papers with the buttons placed on them (see Appendix E).

Figure 5. 9 Fashion sustainability issues ranked by emerging designers in Bahrain (n=22)
(Author's own, 2025)

Designers were provided with the list above and asked, "What issues matter the most to you when it comes to the social and environmental aspects of clothing in Bahrain?" in Activity 2. Each designer voted by placing a button next to the issues that mattered most to them, after discussing within groups of 4–5.

Once all participants ranked their top three issues, they discussed as a group. The rationale for these rankings were then shared by a spokesperson for each group. Averaging the rankings across these groups, designers rated "worker's rights and wellbeing" as the second highest issue that matters to them for fashion sustainability in the Bahraini context (see Figure 5.9).

Discussions in Activity 2 captured both the conditions of workers in Bahrain and of those working in the global supply chain that Bahrain imports from, making both branded and unbranded clothing. Missing from the designers' definitions of sustainability days prior and in Activity 1, the departure from designers' baseline shows that when an alternative definition of sustainability – one that includes labour – is shared, they were quick to affirm it as a local issue.

Activity 3 asked participants in their groups, prompted by images of Bahrain in 1950s and today, to describe what changes they believe have taken place in the fashion industry. Responses included changes in gender roles and dress, changes in types of fabrics imported, sharing culture, mall culture, Instagram culture and expressiveness through fashion across genders. These themes re-enforce findings around a unique Gulf fashion ontology, where the modernity of fashion is embedded within unique social practices and understandings. A full list of the workshop's activities is included in Appendix E.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an analysis of language around fashion, fashion material flows and their associated material cultures as well as the perspective of Bahraini fashion designers relating to fashion sustainability in contemporary Bahrain. In doing so, the results of this research reveal both differences and similarities between a Gulf and Western experience of fashion. These differences in fashion experience and ontology impact what is considered true innovation in the case of the Gulf. For instance, the cultural prevalence of informal product-service-systems in Gulf, such as ongoing (past-purchase) tailoring services for a garment, is the status quo, whereas similar notions are classified in a context of innovation in Western discourse. In this way, exploring a Gulf ontology of fashion is a crucial precursor to Gulf DfS research and to understand its potential transition frameworks.

Stemming from the Gulf fashion context, this chapter puts forward a blurred lifecycle model. For instance, blurring occurs where ingrained cultural beliefs about donations and catering to all parts of society create an additional utility or social value to the act of donation, one that is beyond material. In this context, utility derived from donation may be described as a spectrum of emotions between social duty and spiritual fulfilment. Thus, the prevalence of donation culture and its associated psychological and social utility obscures the line between the stages of "use" and "last" cognitively, as this re-use through donation belongs to both stages of the lifecycle. The same may be said for sharing culture within families, where utility is derived from conceptually lending or borrowing another's clothing.

Building on this chapter's discussion of language, ontology, and social practice associated with fashion, Chapter 6 assesses the accessibility of different segments to these experiences and spaces. For instance, the involvement of the low-wage migrant community in shaping the local experience of fashion tells of hidden instances of labour behind most of the identified utility in the Bahraini ontology. Among Bahrainis and non-

Bahraini expatriates or migrant workers, accessibility of different spaces and experiences of fashion are influenced by income levels and social background. Additionally, Chapter 6 summarises the results of the interviews and findings of the Delphi study, to create a ranked understanding of fashion sustainability issues in Bahrain.

6 Results II: Transitions through Visioning, Phenomenology and Space

6.1 Introduction

"No constraints? Actually, none?" a few Delphi participants asked. They were surprised by the prompt to put aside the limitations and structural issues they contend with every day. I had come to each participant for their expertise and at the same time asked them to put aside constraints (on budgets, approvals, and power to effect change), to create visions of a future where fashion sustainability is a reality. The prompt read:

> Describe below what the year 2040 would ideally look like in terms of fashion sustainability in Bahrain. In this ideal state, environmental, social, and ethical concerns have priority over all else.

> To envision how far the year 2040 is: by then, a child born today would have completed their college education. Consider the changes in Bahrain since the year 2000; the increase in population, rise of malls, and increase in consumer culture. In 20 years, climate change will be more palpable, the value of water will be higher due to its scarcity, and oil reserves will be minimal.

Building on Chapter 5, which used data collected through the Delphi study, interviews and participant observation to map the fashion lifecycle through lived experience in Bahrain, this chapter engages with visions of what fashion sustainability might look like. While Chapter 5 answered "what is the lived experience?", this chapter and the next explore "what should we transition to?". This chapter presents and discusses the results of visioning during the Delphi study and derived recommendations. Along with the recommendations, this chapter identifies enablers, such as improving the built environment and spatial experience surrounding fashion infrastructure in Bahrain.

In this chapter, I use my empirical research to define and discuss both visions and action-oriented recommendations for fashion sustainability in Bahrain. The discussion in this chapter focuses on the synthesised results of the Delphi study and interweaves quotes from both the Delphi study and semi-structured interviews. "Visions" throughout the chapter refer to the results of an open-ended question to Delphi study participants to describe what 2040 would ideally look like in terms of fashion sustainability in Bahrain. I analysed these answers thematically, using qualitative tree-coding (see Chapter 4) to create a list of six recommendations, which Delphi study participants later ranked during a second round of questioning. See Appendix C for a full description of each recommendation and how it was presented to Delphi study participants for ranking.

In addition to visions, I also used a thematic tree-coding method to analyse both responses from Round 1 of the Delphi questionnaire and the answers of semi-structured interview participants to arrive at nine, more action-oriented recommendations. These

recommendations, like the visions, were presented to Delphi study participants in Round 2 where they were asked to rank them on both impact and feasibility for the Bahraini context.

I then group the recommendations into clusters based on the rankings of impact and feasibility from Delphi participants. I define these three clusters as: Cluster 1, recommendations that have high impact and high feasibility; Cluster 2, recommendations that have high impact, but moderate or low feasibility; and Cluster 3, recommendations that have a moderate impact and moderate feasibility. As part of this clustering, I consider whether a recommendation is an ultimate or proximate driver, or a macro-variable, as per a forecasting categorisation convention put forward by Bina and Ricci (2016). Ultimate drivers require large-scale paradigm shifts while proximate drivers require relatively incremental or technological change, and a macro-variable is one tied to uncertainties of larger, global forces (Bina and Ricci, 2016). What is apparent through this clustering is that Delphi study participants saw fundamental changes to culture coupled with an end-of-life infrastructure for garments as the most impactful and feasible approach towards fashion sustainability in Bahrain.

Following this clustering, I discuss how material and spatial considerations may impact these recommendations. In particular, I use my empirical research to explore the experience associated with different fashion spaces in Bahrain and the Gulf. These areas include public spaces, like malls and souks, and private spaces like automobiles and homes. While these spaces have historically been regulated and demarcated on the lines of gender, age, class, and nationality in the Gulf (AlMutawa, 2019; AlMutawa, 2020; Assaf and El Karoui, 2021), I discuss how some of these demarcations are shifting – such as the role of WhatsApp and Instagram run businesses where fashion is sold at the site of the home – or may shift to be more accessible and inclusive.

In Chapter 3, I established my approach as one that sees DfS in the Gulf as one that combines tenets of decolonising design with local social practice and material cultures. Without such an approach, exporting notions of sustainability in design may re-enforce neo-colonial dynamics, where progress is measured by Western standards. An understanding of the Gulf as both postcolonial as well as neo-colonial in its proliferation of dominance over certain groups in the present day has been discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. This positioning is imperative to the discussions in this chapter and the next, where I use my empirical research to reflect on transitions within the spatial and built environment (Chapter 6) and the relationship between Gulf fashion and Gulf identity (Chapter 7)

within the context of a transition towards fashion sustainability. In examining the spatial, this chapter borrows from film studies to explore the phenomenological experience of being in fashion spaces and discusses equity of experience among different groups in Bahrain. As such, consumer spaces become background to experience, in a manner inspired by Sarah Ahmed's discourse on spaces and assigned uses can define how bodies orient and define themselves (Ahmed, 2019). Resonance to Ahmed's feminist killjoy (Ahmed, 2017, 2023) – who is seen to go against the grain and stifle joy while doing so – is traced in a participant's description of rejecting participation in shopping excursions. Ahmed's approach, and its application to bodies, spaces and how they conflate, lends itself to exploring experiences in fashion spaces for different groups in Bahrain, to questioning equity of that experience.

6.2 Generating visions for a future with fashion sustainability

6.2.1 Assessing feasibility and impact of emerging visions for fashion sustainability in Bahrain

Visioning, a method from the field of Transition Design (see Chapter 4), uses imaginative forecasting to tackle complex problems such as climate change, depletion of natural resources, and the widening of material inequality. Visioning allows for versions of the future to emerge, but first it requires us "to suspend their disbelief and allow their imaginations to wander, to momentarily forget how things are now, and wonder about how things could be" (Dunne and Raby, 2013, p. 3). As discussed in Chapter 4, visioning is thus an ideal choice of method for this study to allow for local fashion infrastructures to be re-imagined. For this study, visioning allowed for futures where social and ecological values are prioritised in Bahrain.

The first round of the Delphi (n=16) concluded with a visioning exercise; collated participant responses paint six future visions for Bahrain in terms of fashion sustainability. In the second round of the Delphi (n=14), participants prioritised these visions by ranking them from 1 – 6. A ranking of 1 denoted the highest desirability for a vision, while a ranking of 6 denoted the lowest desirability. The results of this ranking is shown below in Figure 6.1. These themes were collated using thematic analysis on the answers of Delphi participants, as explained in detail in this study's methodology (Chapter 4). For a full list of participant profiles and questions asked during each round of the Delphi questionnaire see Appendices B and C.

Using each participant's (n=14) score for each vision, I calculated an average score for each vision, which is plotted in Figure 6.1. Visions are clustered between the scores of

2.2 to 4.4; the lack of very low or high scores (e.g., 1 – 2, 5 – 6) reflects the fact that these visions originated from the participants themselves, thus these numbers correspond to how they ranked the desirability of their own ideas. Nevertheless, a cultural transition (vision A) emerges as the highest priority vision, followed by a tie of visions of an empowered labour society (vision C) and a de-globalised local industry (vision B). These six visions guide discussion throughout this chapter and the next, where material, cultural, and cognitive elements of transitioning towards these visions for the Gulf is explored.

Figure 6. 1 Prioritising emerging visions for fashion sustainability in Bahrain
(Author's own, 2025)
Scale: 1 denotes highest desirability, 6 denotes least desirability
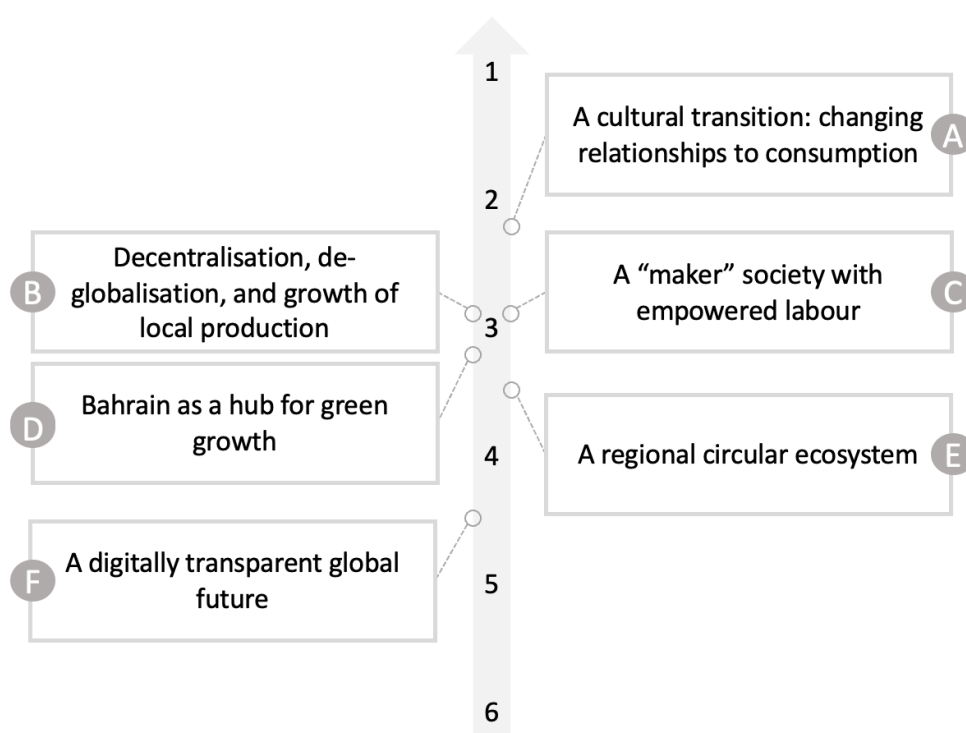
Figure summarises results of visioning in the Delphi study into six future visions for Bahrain in terms of fashion sustainability. Visions are not mutually exclusive. For instance, vision (A)'s cultural transition may happen in tandem with vision (E)'s regional circular ecosystem.

From visioning, recommendations were determined by back-casting. Back-casting in this study uses data collected on structural hindrances and enablers towards fashion sustainability from the first round of the Delphi and 19 interviews. This differs from asking participants to directly back-cast their own visions; instead, I provided them with a list of recommendations, asking them to rate each based on perceived impact and feasibility.

Participants in Round 2 of the Delphi rated these recommendations on a scale of 1–5 for each of impact and feasibility; 1 denotes low impact or feasibility, and 5 denotes high

impact or feasibility. Scores ranged between 2.9 and 4.1, as the clustering within Figure 6.2 shows. Again, this reflects that these recommendations, prior to being rated, were in part put forward by the participants themselves (unlike the visions, these recommendations also took into account qualitative input from semi-structured interviews).

Figure 6. 2 Recommendations plotted by impact and feasibility
(Author's own, 2025)
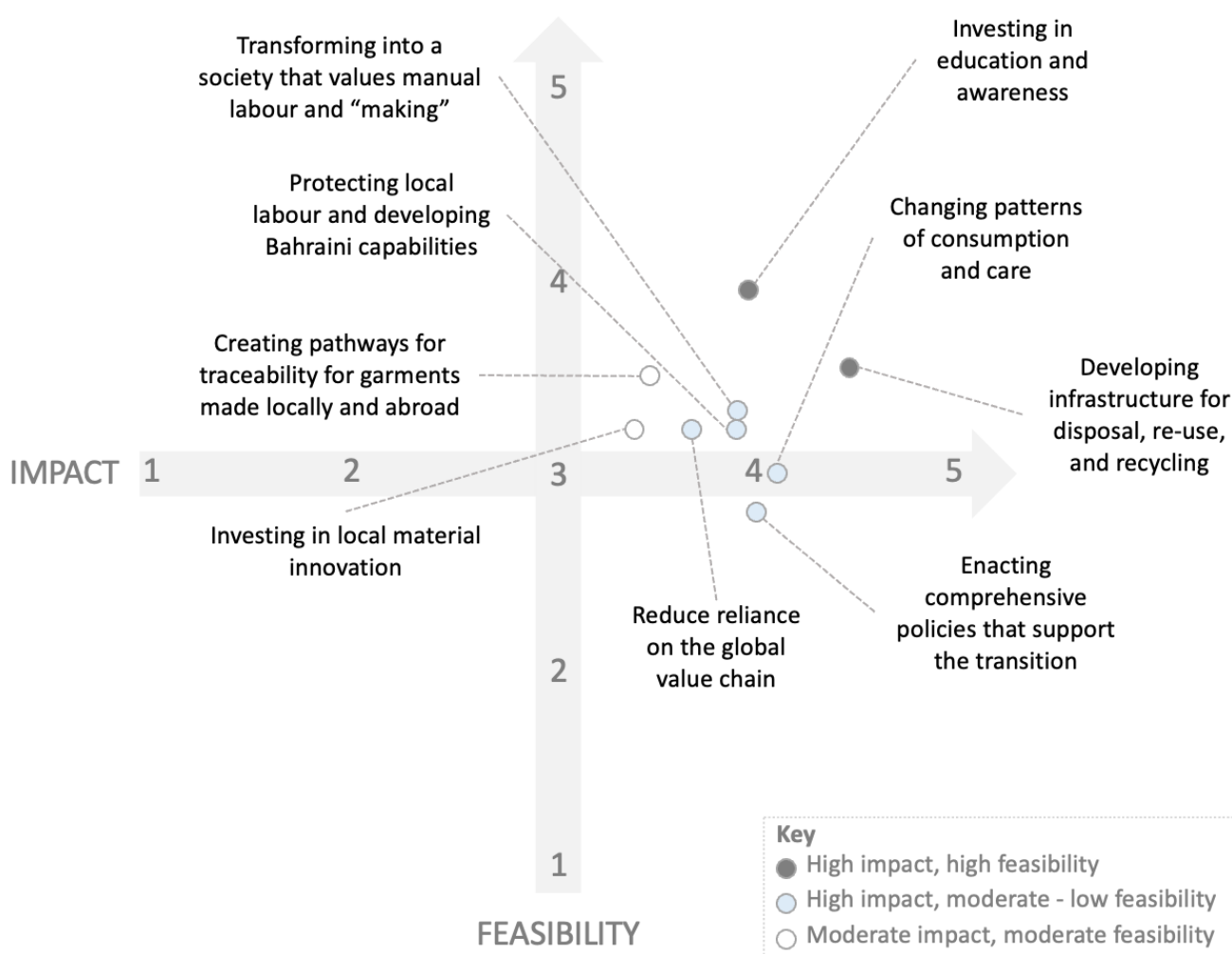
Figure plots impact of action (x-axis) and feasibility to act (y-axis) for each recommendation.

In Figure 6.2, I plot the average participant ranking of fashion sustainability recommendations across these two criteria for Bahrain. On the x-axis, I plotted the average of participants' "impact" scores for each recommendation. In this exercise, impact is defined as the potential scale this action could have in Bahrain, both direct and indirect. On the y-axis, I plotted the average of participants' "feasibility" scores for each recommendation. Feasibility is defined as the ability or likelihood of carrying out change on this facet of fashion sustainability. For a copy of how this exercise was presented

during the Delphi study, please see Appendix C. Two recommendations stand out with high impact and high feasibility. The first is developing infrastructure for disposal, re-use, and recycling. The second is investing in education and awareness.

The closeness of scores makes the discussion on what is considered high to low impact and feasibility a relative one. All recommendations had a rating of above 2.5 for both impact and feasibility, meaning that most participants rated them as more impactful and feasible than not. Thus, all recommendations in Figure 6.2 may be considered contenders for facilitating transition towards fashion sustainability in Bahrain, with some emerging as relatively more impactful and feasible.

6.2.2. Cluster 1: A fundamental change to cultural and material systems (high impact, high feasibility)

Based on Delphi study participants' perceived impact and feasibility of each recommendation, as shown in Figure 6.2, I categorised recommendations into three clusters. The first cluster comprises recommendations that score relatively high on both impact and feasibility (score of 3.5 or above). This includes "investing in education and awareness" and "developing infrastructure for disposal, re-use, and recycling". Education can be argued to be an *ultimate* driver and infrastructural change a *proximate* driver. Together these two recommendations signify large-scale cultural and material transition. On education and large-scale cultural change, a prominent environment academic (P02, 2020) wrote in his Delphi Round 2 questionnaire: "this is a long process in order to change behaviour, but it will make great difference when it is reached". For a full list of interviewee participant profiles and Delphi study questions, see Appendices B and C.

Much of the high impact associated with developing infrastructure for end-of-life lies simply in what Bahrain currently lacks: "Bahrain is still behind on ways of collecting and sorting trash, especially for recycling" expressed a sustainability analyst at an environmental government body (P06, 2019). To bolster feasibility of end-of-life infrastructure, "there has to be clarity on who bears the cost" between the government, the public, and private institutions, as "it is not easy to convince people to pay for something that they are not used to paying for" shared a senior civil servant at an environmental government body (P08, 2019). Particularly for Bahrain, and the Gulf, taxation rates are very low and until recently unprecedented. In fact, as discussed further in Chapter 2, government subsidies have been a long-standing part of the political and social contract. Over the course of this research sales taxes were introduced in Bahrain as well as other Gulf states. In Bahrain, sales taxes were introduced in October 2018 (Ernst

and Young, 2018) and peaked at 10% in 2022 (Trading Economics, 2023). While critical debate on the introduction of sales taxes has been limited on formal platforms and avenues, public sentiment, particularly from middle and lower-income households (shared on social media and overhead in everyday conversation), confirms that those impacted the most are lower income households. This is largely due to the impact of sales tax as a regressive economic tool, as opposed to a progressive taxation system, which would for instance levy an incrementally higher percentage on the biggest spenders, or in the case of the environment, corporations and bodies with the largest impact on the environment. An equitable transition towards sustainability in terms of infrastructure and built environment likely requires both progressive taxation and diversion of state funding towards such projects. Taxation, and the lack of progressive taxation systems per se in Bahrain and the Gulf, remains to be a large cultural and material hindrance to achieving public and private accountability towards the environment.

A cultural (derived from education and awareness) followed by a material (derived from developing end-of-life infrastructure) transition are therefore the two most impactful and feasible recommendations for fashion sustainability in Bahrain.

6.2.3 Cluster 2: De-globalisation and macro-policies recommendations (high impact, moderate-low feasibility)

The second cluster of recommendations have a predicted high impact, but moderate (between 3.0 and 3.5) to low feasibility (below 3.0). These recommendations can also be viewed as significant hindrances towards fashion sustainability in Bahrain – since their fruition would be impactful, while difficult to accomplish. Enacting comprehensive policies towards fashion sustainability received the lowest feasibility score across all recommendations. Considering that the Delphi included policymakers and activists, a low feasibility score likely reflects the extent of top-down decision making in Bahrain and the difficulty of changing policies through lobbying or social activism. A participant that works as an independent fashion advisor stated, "Getting a coordinated effort to apply this at present is an issue. Unless the government has a very good sustainability directive in all areas it will be difficult to achieve" (P01, 2020). Another participant, a renewable energy researcher, emphasised that, particularly for fashion, this may be difficult to achieve; "impact from high consumption in fashion is of very little priority" (P12, 2020). A third participant, an environmental activist and academic in biology, cited compounding environmental issues and weak policy approaches to rationalise this scepticism, referencing an inability to manage Bahrain's "waste crisis and

air pollution problem, which has put us in the top 10 list of the most polluted capitals in the world", stating "I doubt they can implement this realistically" (P16, 2020).

This cluster of recommendations also includes changing patterns of consumption and care:

> Although it is the most important step; to change the way we consume, it will be very hard to convince people to stop impulse-buying, to maintain the items they have, and to see clothing as an investment and not simply a fashion accessory. This is especially true with the abundance of cheap clothing and fast-changing trends (sustainability analyst at environmental government body, P06, 2020).

Another participant noted that changing patterns of consumption is futile, unless relationships to labour are changed as well:

> [In] most households people are disconnected from their own chores, when one has never washed their own clothes, it's hard to get them to care enough to mend them. In the end even if they were conscious, the responsibility of mending will be tossed upon the domestic worker rather than the actual person. Therefore, defeating the purpose of connection. Hence, is it [sustainability through conscious consumption] really feasible? (environmental activist and academic in biology, P16, 2020).

While reducing levels of consumption is a part of the global rally for a more sustainable fashion system, this relationship of labour to patterns of consumption is unique to a Gulf cultural context. Namely, in a culture where *abayas* and *thobes* need to be perfectly steamed or ironed respectively, there is a disproportionately high reliance on undervalued and underpaid labour to maintain mainstream national norms of dressing. Subsidised fuel, or undervalued environmental impact, allows for modes of transportation that protect a perfectly crisp *thobe* or unwrinkled *abaya*. Streets kept clean, swept to an immaculate state by migrant labour, enable clean white hems on the mainstream garment of the male national. In this way, labour relations in the Gulf are perfectly reflected in the white sheen of a pressed *thobe*, or the perfectly shampooed flutter of a black silk *abaya*. Of course, variances in local dress and its upkeep is seen across the Gulf for this very reason. It is no coincidence that Bahrain's working man *thobe* (worn by farmers, fishermen and many men that grew up in the 1950s) has a higher hem, easy to roll up sleeves and a *ghitra* (headdress) that sits limply on the head to protect from the sun, as opposed to starched and pointed in today's more luxurious versions. It is also no coincidence that Bahrain has a perceptibly higher proportion of men in easy-to-wear jeans and T-shirts compared to the UAE, which has almost double Bahrain's GDP per capita. Due to economic pressure and fewer government subsidies in the past two decades, Bahraini men have been increasingly moving into service vocations, such as working as retail cashiers, cleaners and security guards, which would be unlikely low-wage vocations for Emirati men. While this

relationship between labour and fashion in Gulf fashion is uniquely complex, a more equitable fashion system in the region must grapple with these undervalued forms of labour and subsidies.

Other recommendations in this cluster include *macro-policies*, such as reducing reliance on the global value chain and improved labour laws – although these are ranked at a slightly higher feasibility than trying to pass a bundle of comprehensive sustainability-focused policies. While perceived to have high impact if enacted, some participants were sceptical of Bahrain's ability to reduce reliance on the global value chain, citing that the recommendation "is very ambitious as a transformative goal. Achieving greater integration in global value chains is much more realistic but conversely limits the impact" (senior civil servant at environmental government body, P08, 2019). Participants also said that demand is defined by globalised tastes, in that "Bahraini consumers will continue believing that foreign goods are way better in terms of quality than local garments" (P14, 2020), and that restricting any kind of global purchase would simply cause consumers to shift to alternative ways of purchase, such as increasing travel abroad and buying online. Others saw a willingness of locals to support local business, and for fashion to be a strong stepping stone into sustainability, as "fashion designers are desirable in magazines, and on social media, people follow them and so it feels more realistic to achieve [a reduced reliance on the global value chain] since the public does support local design and production" (P16, 2020).

Also, the small population of Bahrain – one of the smallest countries in the world – brings into question to what extent it can be self-reliant within a contemporary, globalised fashion industry (P10, 2020). Bahrain, as a sole nation-state, is unlikely to develop a local fashion system that would make it completely self-reliant. Self-reliance therefore is not useful to be looked at in absolute terms for Bahrain, but rather aspects of self-reliance are more useful, such as radical re-arrangements of local capabilities and relationships to clothing, prioritising origins, and intentional slowing down or de-growth (see Chapter 3). Slowing down, in this sense, does not refer to simply longer lead times or individual efforts to consume more slowly but rather a "a blatant discontinuity with the practices of today's sector; a break from the values and goals of fast (growth-based) fashion" (Fletcher, 2010, p. 262).

Rankings are almost identical for "transforming into a society that values manual labour and making" and "protecting local labour and building Bahraini capabilities", reflecting that this may be in fact the same recommendation. While the first focuses on transitioning

into a "maker society" (see Table 6.1) – which includes embedding vocational skills into education and higher compensation of makers in society – the latter focuses on labour rights. Not only is it ethically imperative to protect labour while transitioning into a maker society, the two are revealed to be the same recommendation in that only a protected and well-compensated labour force can materially rely on its making. Only a society that protects and compensates local manual labour can "value manual labour". There is *already* a maker society in Bahrain and the Gulf, however it is composed of highly undervalued labour – most of which are migrants and some of which are locals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The recommendations are only two distinct ones if "manual labour and making" is associated with a bourgeoisie vocational revival, where there remains to be a class of underpaid labour used as resource for an extractive class of "makers".

With a higher rank on feasibility than "enacting comprehensive policies", scepticism still abounds towards valuing making and manual labour. A participant expressed "nice work, if you can get it [done]…" (economic advisor and civil servant, P09, 2020) in reference to an empowered labour and maker society; another said "this would be amazing but then again, would we be able to convince those with the remote controls to invest in this?" (P16, 2020) referring to bureaucratic hindrances to significant policy change. Others were more optimistic, and recognised that activities such as tailoring, mending, weaving, and all forms of making are vastly under-valued and "could be the next booming sector in the market with the right incentives. Transforming the job of a local worker in textile to a high paying job will attract lots of Bahraini talent to consider joining this sector" (P14, 2020).

6.2.4 Cluster 3: Light green and bright green techno-solutions (moderate impact, moderate feasibility)

The last cluster includes recommendations with both a moderate impact and feasibility, such as "local material innovation" and "pathways for traceability". The relatively limited perceived impact of material innovation is likely due to Bahrain's current import of a majority of its clothing, and local innovation in material – a true *bright green* position (see Chapter 3) – which might do little to solve the macro-dynamics of global trade, a sentiment heavily echoed by designers themselves who struggle to compete with imported brands (see Chapter 5). Some participants voiced concern that local material innovation should be cautious of exacerbating scarcity and if, for instance, palm leaves are used as raw material we must "ensure that such resource will not be depleted by overuse" (senior academic on environment and heritage, P02, 2020).

Palmleather, for instance, pioneered by Tjeerd Veenhoven, would rely on the palm tree; a fauna locally cherished that has declined significantly in recent decades due to gentrification of farm spaces. Water usage for Palmleather (20 litres per m^2) is relatively low. For comparison, 1200 litres of water are used in the production process of jeans (Veenhoven, 2011) – assuming a pair of jeans needs 2m^2 of fabric, that amounts to 600 litres per m^2. For a water-scarce region, this may seem like an attractive material techno-solution (see Chapter 3), but would require regenerative farming practices and more significantly a large-scale re-institution of vast farmlands, as opposed to over-using what scantly remains in areas such as Karbabaad and Budaiya.

Another recommendation seen as having only moderate impact and feasibility is "pathways for traceability", which refers to solutions that enable consumers to make educated decisions before purchasing. Traceability as a consumer-facing tool is often a light green position (targeting individual consumption) enabled by bright green techno-solutions – such as applications that provide buyers with origin and carbon footprint data. Study participants rated "pathways for traceability" as having relatively limited impact, re-enforcing that placing the burden on consumers to make informed decisions is less impactful than changing the system itself. It is worth noting that while enabling transparency is a form of awareness and consumer education, it is ranked as vastly different from "investing in education and awareness", which is seen as more cultural change, embedded into curriculums and thinking across systems – a true *dark green* position (see Chapter 7 for further discussion on pedagogy).

6.2.5 Ultimate, proximate, and macro recommendations

Categorising recommendations into *ultimate*, *proximate* or *macro* follows Bina and Ricci's (2016) delineation of levers found in forecasting work. Bina and Ricci put forward these this categorisation for the output of forecasting work by building on Meadows's (1999) delineation of deep and shallow leverage points, elaborated on by Raskin et al. (2002). Proximate refers to variables that are "direct and immediate" (p. 514) in how they impact human choice, such as technology or institutional change. In Table 6.1, *proximate* recommendations include development of waste and recycling infrastructure, as well as pursuing techno-solutions such as material innovation and traceability systems. Alternatively, *ultimate* refers to variables that "shape society and the human experience, subject to gradual cultural and political processes, and expand the frontier of the possible by altering the basis for human choice" (p. 514) – these include knowledge and understanding, power structures, and culture. In Table 6.1, at first look

"enacting comprehensive policies…" and "protecting local labour…" may seem like *proximate* levers, targeting institutional change. However, in practice the cultural change and shift in power dynamics needed for these changes to become institutionalised renders these solutions as *ultimate* levers in the context of the Gulf. Protecting labour or passing environmental comprehensive policy in the Gulf is not an issue of simply passing legislation, implementation, or even lobbying policymakers. It requires a substantive shift in the way the Gulf's capitalist monarchies are situated within a global order.

"Institutional change" or "institutional prioritisation" (see Table 6.1) is not defined as a mere passing of policies and laws into effect, but rather a changing of paradigms which have been institutionalised. As discussed in Chapter 3, social ecology posits that hierarchies that arise due to human-nature interactions can only be abolished by institutional change (Bookchin, 2003). Institutional change, however, is that which enquires into the material, cultural, ethical, and psychological aspects of these hierarchies (ibid). Thus, institutional change in the Gulf context is often an *ultimate* driver.

Macro in Table 6.1 refers to recommendations that through the Delphi and interviews have been revealed to be highly subject to the macro-economic and globalised power dynamics. While visioning (as explained in Chapter 4) with Delphi participants and interviews included ideas of localism, or regionalism within a Gulf context, during back-casting, or the rating of recommendations, a sense of powerlessness towards the entrenchment in a globalised system was expressed by participants. The finding re-enforces the fact that while this study has focused on Bahrain and the Gulf by extension, working towards localism and dissociating neo-colonial power dynamics and remedying an exploitative fashion industry within global capitalism require unrelenting international political willingness. It is unlikely that one country on its own can tackle changing global fashion dynamics, even with protectionist policies to grow its own home-grown fashion system. This is particularly true for the smallest Arab country, deep-rooted in regional political dynamics, and reliant on clothing imports. Change locally, for Bahrain at least, is only viable in tandem with a global political willingness.

Table 6. 1 Summary of recommendations and potential enablers

(Author's own, 2025)

	Impact & Feasibility	Recommendation	Type of driver	Enablers of transition
Cluster 1: Fundamental change to cultural and material systems	High impact, high feasibility	Investing in education and awareness	Ultimate	• Cultural shift • Epistemological change, not just pedagogical
		Developing infrastructure for disposal, re-use, and recycling	Proximate	• Built environment • Behavior change
	High impact, moderate-low feasibility	Changing patterns of consumption and care	Ultimate	• Cognitive experience • Spatial experience (e.g. public spaces) • Redefining values and needs
Cluster 2: Consumer culture, globalisation and de-globalisation, and policy		Enacting comprehensive policies that support the transition	Ultimate	• Institutional prioritization
		Transforming into a society that values manual labour and "making"	Ultimate	• Cultural and power structure shift • Reconnecting with values of making (the material) • Spatial experience
		Protecting local labour and developing Bahraini capabilities	Ultimate	
		Enacting comprehensive policies that support the transition	Ultimate	• Institutional prioritization
		Reduce reliance on the global value chain	Macro	• Institutional prioritization • Response to globalized fashion industry
Cluster 3: "Light green" and "bright green" techno-solutions	Moderate impact, moderate feasibility	Creating pathways for traceability for garments made locally and abroad	Proximate	• Technological innovation • Behavior change
		Investing in local material innovation	Proximate	• Technological innovation • Support of small business

Beyond aggregating visions and recommendations, the remainder of this chapter and the next explore what enables their fruition. What has the imagination of study participants spurred, in making these visions reality? What institutionalised paradigms do these recommendations and visions reveal and contest? In Table 6.1, each recommendation corresponds to "enablers of transition" in the last column. These correspond to key levers of transitioning towards fashion sustainability in Bahrain.

6.3 Assessing implications of Delphi study recommendations on the built environment and experiences in-space

6.3.1 Mapping a lifecycle flow with considerations of space

Our experience of a particular space is formed by perception, feelings of connection or disconnection, and how we perceive our own self within it. This section

explores fashion spaces and their role within Bahraini society, building on the concepts of *indoore* and *nitmasha* introduced in Chapter 5, and analysing the phenomenological importance of malls and fashion spaces, and their proximity to different groups.

In a chapter of *Phenomenology of Real and Virtual Places* (2018), Nader El-Bizri describes building as "the edifying activity of constructing designed locales" (p. 138) and builds on the Heideggerian thought of "dwelling as the ontological plight of mortals" (El-Bizri, 2018, p.138). In this plight, humans yearn for the non-ordinary, to surpass the "concrete situational quotidian places in which the rooted-ness of our lived experiences finds its place in life on earth" (ibid). The same could be said for other forms of design and art, as modes of both expression and escapism, but what makes the spatial poignant in the Gulf context is that it is highly interlinked with fashion consumption and use. Fashion spaces, such as the mall or souk, are substantial public spaces where fashion also happens to be purchased, made, and worn (see Chapter 5).

Figure 6. 3 Lifecycle flow from user and spatial point of view
(Author's own, 2025)
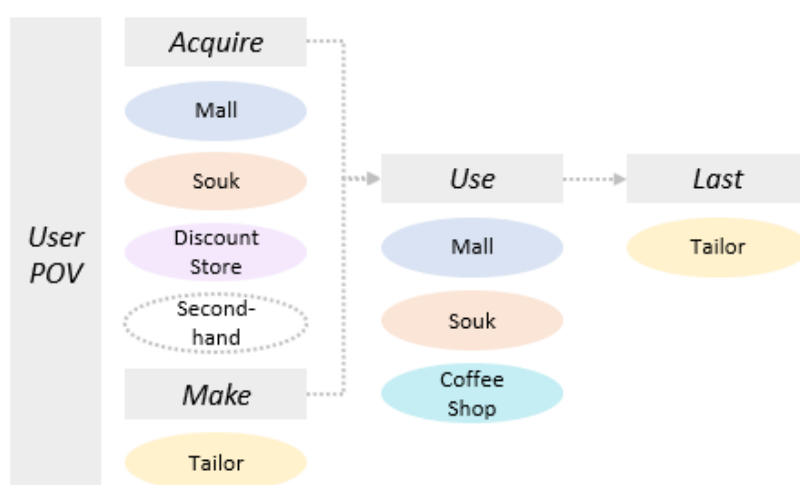
Figure shows a simplified lifecycle flow from a user-spatial point of view, where coffee shops are included as a prevalent non-mall public space. Among the spaces within "acquire" is "second-hand", which includes familial and cross-familial borrowing and donations. As a location, the home is omitted for simplicity, but remains a site under "use" and "last". Similarly, the workplace under "use".

El-Bizri (2010) explores the determinants of perception and how we experience space, asserting that "depth is the most existential of all the dimensions, since it intrinsically belongs to our personal perspective that offers a self-openness to the world and onto an inter-subjective worldly otherness" (p. 20). In this sense, spending a day at the mall is a form of *seeing* society and *being seen* by it. It is participation in community, an existential act, particularly in Gulf cultures where options of public space are limited. Therefore, adding a spatial aspect to the traditional lifecycle view helps create a starting point for the

different uses of fashion in Bahrain. In Chapter 5, a blurred lifecycle view of *source, make, use, last* was presented; In Figure 6.3, I add interaction with space to present a simplified *acquire, make, use, last* in terms of fashion related activities in Bahrain.

As Chapter 5 discussed, beyond the idea of malls as consumption centres lies the idea of malls as spaces of *use*, and they may be seen as the public squares of Gulf life, and thus as parts of civic culture. In this way, the formatting of public space around consumerist and material experiences creates culture. When transitioning towards sustainability, it is imperative to explore culture and experience as it pertains to these spaces, inasmuch as it can propel the future visions and courses of actions proposed by study participants earlier in this chapter.

6.3.2 Equity of experience within capitalist monarchy

In the context of capitalist monarchy (see Chapter 2), urban planning is unlikely to reflect the values of the citizenry, but rather the cultural vision of decision-makers. This misalignment between citizens' values and urban planning has global resonance due to the power of commercial mega-projects relative to the average city dweller. Within this context, everyday lived experience can be explored phenomenologically. While the average person living in Bahrain or Buenos Aires has limited control over their urban environment, they are fully submerged in it. Examining experience of fashion spaces phenomenologically allows a view into equity of experience and is in line with the spatio-social approach to design (see Chapter 3). A case for the equity of experience in space, atop environmental and ecological goals, can be understood through the example of *zabbaleen* in Egypt – a community of waste collectors and recyclers. Research on the *zabbaleen* in ecological, urban, and social discourse tends to praise their communities, without a focus on improving their lived experience. Desvaux and Du Roy (2019) note that *zabbaleen* are studied extensively in the intersection of Coptic and urban studies and are often lauded as heroically entrepreneurial due the estimated high rate of recycling achieved. However, studies of their communities often fall short of integrating these marginalised communities into formal urban recycling infrastructure in Egypt or improving upon their experiences (Desvaux and Du Roy, 2019). Bookchin (2003) posits that hierarchies created by our relations to the environment form the base of all social life and experience, even at the level of the tribe or village. Social ecology, as discussed in Chapter 3, therefore seeks to change subjective realms related to experience, beyond those of modern-day ecology or economics.

For Bahrain and the Gulf, a discussion of experience-in-space is largely informed by globalisation and neo-colonialism, as obstacles to the Gulf's path towards a self-determined sustainability. While Gulf nationals enjoy rights of citizenship, higher wages, and for some a participation in the dominant culture of their nations, decisions on the spatial – such as urban planning, infrastructure, and economic policy – are not decided on a societal level. Additionally, while the Gulf citizen may not get a say on choices related to urban planning under capitalist monarchies, a politically and socially marginalised migrant is further restricted from participating in the very systems they uphold, such as shopping within or walking through the mall they may spend years building.

6.3.3 Exploring the phenomenology of fashion spaces in Bahrain

Both a connect and disconnect to the built environment of consumerist spaces, such as malls, is observed in urban and ethnographic studies of the Gulf. AlMutawa (2019) critically engages with the labelling of malls as inauthentic, stating the "the reality is that 'authenticity' is socially constructed" (p. 186). AlMutawa explores studies of the Gulf as glitzy cities or buildings and finds that they are often depicted in academic discourse as extremely sanitised and void of public informality. Building on Assaf (2017) who sees malls as public spaces where various forms of distinction and conflict unfold, AlMutawa urges the discourse on urban studies in the Gulf to focus on accessibility and the exclusion of lower-income groups, as opposed to critiques and debates of authenticity. In that ethos, it is important to envision malls as locations where fashion *happens*, not just where fashion is *purchased*. Malls in the Gulf create new types of interactions between members of a heterogeneous population (Assaf, 2017), and when it comes to fashion in the Gulf they are worthy of exploration as both social and fashion locales, as Chapter 3 discussed. From this, two lines of thinking are important for fashion sustainability. First, while an outfit is purchased once from the mall, it is worn to the mall, many more times. Second, it is important to consider accessibility of the mall – or other fashion spaces, such as souks and tailors – to social groups within the Bahraini context.

This study's findings confirm that there is both a connect and disconnect to the mall as a space, and posits that age ableism and social stratification of these spaces all play a role. For instance, Medina Al-Anzoor, who saw the rise of malls as a social force in her fifties, said at 86 years old: "I only go to the souq, not to the big malls" and "I wouldn't go in [to the malls]. You know, they say if you go in with 200 dinars [400 GBP], you come out empty, with nothing" adding "Nothing is like the quality of what I make" (my paternal

grandmother, R01, 2018). Alternatively, Ghalia Al-Haji, 72 years old, said: "Me? I adore malls, but I never get the chance to go" (my maternal grandmother, R06, 2018). In reference to the fact that they require mobility, and for older women like Ghalia and Medina, trips to these fashion spaces require both mobility and navigation, bringing into question the ableism of *indoore* and mall culture.

Yet, the importance of the mall in affecting change towards sustainability remains critical. One participant, a renewable energy researcher (P12, 2019), suggested that the availability of pre-loved or thrift shops in malls, where most consumer activity takes place for the middle to upper class, is necessary. Another suggested the need to "encourage shopping malls to showcase sustainable textiles and brands" (senior civil servant at economic government body, P05, 2019). A third participant confirmed that the mall is beyond that of transactional value, an idea elaborated on in Chapter 5: "consumption has both behavioural and economic components in Bahrain, and malls are currently on the rise" (academic in environment and sustainable development, P11, 2019).

Of course, the prevalence of the mall as a site for everyday activities and encounters reflects a consumerist urban environment and culture: "in terms of clothing, the most pressing issue is, I think, how we perceive shopping. Like it is this inherently good thing and you need to be doing it all the time. And whenever there is a sale, obviously you need to go buy, because a sale is a good thing" (social and environmental activist, R03, 2018). Exploring the lived experience of consumerism brings debates on what authenticity means in Gulf countries, usually taken as the allegorical neoliberal city (AlMutawa, 2019). In Sarah Ahmed's *What's the Use*, objects take on utilities other than those assigned to them – and such is the case of consumerist spaces in the Gulf, where urban planning may be in part a top-down decision but the culture that emerges from it is shaped by the spatial context.

To explore spatial experience in Bahrain, a phenomenological experience of space may be considered. This discussion is inspired by the work of Joanne Entwistle, Sarah Ahmed, and studies of phenomenology in film studies. Joanne Entwistle, author of *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (2023), argues that dress should be studied as an embodied practice, or one that situates the body in its experience of and within a garment. Entwistle (2023) also examines experiences within fashion points of sale, travelling from markets to department stores to understand how consumers relate to these points of sale. Sarah Ahmed's "A phenomenology of whiteness" (2007) explores "whiteness as a phenomenological issue, as a question of how whiteness is lived as a

background to experience" (p. 150). Exploring consumer spaces as a "background to experience" (ibid) in the Gulf sense then, has much to say about Gulf-ness and non-Gulf-ness. This approach by Sarah Ahmed is particularly relevant to Gulf culture due to its legal structures that maintain both Gulf privilege and the otherness of non-Gulf residents in the Arab Gulf. Within film studies, scholarship on phenomenology combines cultural studies, political theory, and sense theory to explore how films are laden with embodied and situated experience (Chamarette, 2015). Farokh Soltani's work, for instance, explores the potential for dramatic experience in film and attempts to shift understanding of drama towards an existentialist approach. Perhaps understanding the *phenomenon* of the mall experience, and that of other fashion spaces in the Gulf through the lens of existentialist drama, may shed light on what is valued about the current experience. The remainder of this chapter uses this lens of experience within space to discuss privileges and proximities to fashion locations in Bahrain.

To phenomenologically explore spatial experience, the remainder of this section will rely on Fabien Cante's delineation of different types of proximity. Applying Sarah Ahmed's discourse on orientation to notions of space, Cante (2015) sees that place can be considered a material and sensory starting point that impacts social and emotional configurations. In Cante's interpretation of Ahmed's body of work, *place* is defined as that which is proximate, including physical, cultural, social, and experiential proximities.

6.3.4 Analysing different experiences in space: cultural, social, and experiential proximities

Cante explains that in addition to the basic fact of physical or material proximity, three types of proximities also shape our experience in space. First, cultural proximity, which alludes to shared representations, appreciations, habits, and beliefs. Second, social proximity, which alludes to interpersonal relationships and attractions. Third, experiential proximity, which corresponds to what we notice in passing by virtue of being in a space. For Medina, my paternal grandmother (R01, 2018), her lack of interest in the mall may be not only due to her age, but also due to her experiential proximity to the souk. Medina shared that as a girl, she was never allowed to go to the market herself, and her father was responsible for purchasing ready-made-garments from the souk in Manama. To Medina, the mall was not coveted. Instead, her trips to the Manama souk – and to the tailors where she becomes involved in the making of her clothes, as a seamstress herself – are an affirmation of her life's work as a seamstress and dweller of Manama since the 1940s.

For Ghalia, on the other hand, malls were spaces for those that have achieved a certain status in life, in line with how she saw fashion consistently as a means of social empowerment and psychological freedom. Ghalia said that as a young girl in the 1950s, "my step-mother would choose the fabrics for me", from the *dallala* – a woman who would drop by the house with a selection of fabrics to sell. Outfits were later fashioned at a neighbourhood tailor. "I was never given choices in my life… she [my step-mother] would choose according to her whims" and "none of us [women] were allowed to go to the souk, it was considered *shameful* [in my family]. The *dallala* job existed so that women would not have to go to the souk if their families did not deem it appropriate". Ghalia's experiences as a young girl were not uncommon – in 1950s Bahrain it was common for men to venture into souks, while women were often excluded from this experience. Eventually, becoming a mother at sixteen, Ghalia – while she had learned how to sew – saw purchasing ready-to-wear as a means of giving to her daughter, an expression of affection, and affirmation of status:

> Yes I sewed, but for my children, I would always buy from outside [ready-made-clothing]… My daughter was the first in the extended family to wear expensive dresses – you know previously children's dresses were one dinar and a half or two dinars a piece if they're expensive, but I chose the most expensive dresses for her (and) the most expensive shoes. Ten dinars, twelve dinars… I once bought her a birthday outfit for seventeen dinars… I raised her in a way that no one would dream of… she got all the affection and love that I was deprived of, all of it, I gave it to her. I did not leave anything [that I did not give]. My heart was brimming with the love and affection I was deprived of, and so I gave all that to her (Ghalia Al-Haji, 2018).

Ghalia's experiences show experiential proximity may also be a marker of spatial privilege – of who is allowed in certain spaces, who is allowed certain fashion experiences, and how ultimately engaging with fashion spaces can be socially and psychologically liberating. This privilege comes from historical access to spaces that can inform the constraints or range of current experience. Of interest is how this historical access can influence behaviours towards sustainability and mindful consumption. A local designer interviewed said she purchases a holiday wardrobe from fast fashion brands and disposes of clothing at the end of her trip in the destination country. She added that when moving to a new house she had disposed or given away many of her fast fashion garments (R05, 2018). Here, experiential proximity to tourism and elite experiences of travel births the idea of a holiday wardrobe disposed of at the end of the trip to "travel back lighter" (ibid). Similarly, a change in her home environment allows her to envision different wardrobes for each locale and experience, and act on these visions. Therefore, if "depth is the most existential of all the dimensions" and "offers a self-openness" (El-Bizri, 2010, p. 20), then depth is not merely what is currently seen at present, but also the expectation

of future spatial experience – a new wardrobe for a visit to a new country, or a house-move. For the class of people in the Gulf who are afforded such spatial privilege – such as participating in leisurely vacations, which informs their experience as they shop locally – a disposable holiday wardrobe is a possibility. Experiential proximity, then, may be a significant lever for transitioning towards sustainable behaviours and consumption, even given changes in infrastructure and *macro* change (see Table 6.1).

What is revealed in questioning these spatial relationships and proximities to the mall (as a site of consumerism) are patterns and shifts in gender and class norms. Department stores, which may be considered an earlier prototype of the mega-mall today, emerged in the 19th century in the West and have been widely recognised as spaces where women asserted their economic independence in societies that limited their power in the public sphere (Leach, 1984; Rappaport, 2000; VonKaenel, 2015). Malls have also been at the centre of moral panics about the negative impact on both women consumers and women that work in the space (Sewell, 2011), and criticised as commercial entities that betray the anti-colonial Arab agenda (Reynolds, 2012). Jeanne Van Eeden (2007) argues that malls are inherently shaped by consumer capitalism, and as such the relationships between class, race and space that unfold within a mall will be derived from such an ideology.

The proliferation of malls as consumerist hotspots in places like the Gulf signifies two things. First, gender and class norms are corporate-defined, and at many times imported from modern Western notions stemming from consumerism. Put simply, to keep up with class and gender expectations, a middle-class woman in the Gulf must browse the shops for the latest trends, and perhaps plan her holiday wardrobe in advance in accordance with what global fashion conglomerates define as in-trend. While the mall is very much a local space, with prayer rooms and Gulf social norms, through the acts of fashion consumption and expression that take place within the mall structure the Gulf cultural world is strongly impacted by ideals of femininity, masculinity and class aspirations set by multi-national corporations. Second, drawing upon literature of women in 19th century Western shopping hotspots, a clear parallel emerges with women in the Gulf. Rappaport (2000) describes an economic relationship "that maintains a binary opposition between an active male producer and a passive female consumer" (p. 13). Another parallel from the conspicuous consumption of 19th century women to the Gulf context is that shopping, owning and displaying clothing in these contexts exacerbates the gap between women of different financial classes (VonKaenel, 2015), in a way that undermines an intersectional feminist movement. This is particularly palpable in the modern Gulf, if one were to observe the

gap in access, ownership and economic power of domestic workers, who are usually female, and her employer (whether a Gulf local or middle-class expatriate). Within this context, cultural proximity to fashion spaces in Bahrain also becomes synonymous with fashion profiling, the unfolding of class and gender relations and the gatekeeping of these spaces particularly across class lines, both formally and informally.

Fashion profiling through "street cred" or the social capital of see-and-be-seen culture is a significant part of mall culture:

> If it does have Gucci or Prada on it, they're very happy to pay and they can! But if it is X [an unknown] brand, while you know that it is sustainably made, will you pay for that? Or does it not give you that street-cred? Or rather, street-cred with the people you want to get that street-cred with? I think that's such a big part of it here [mall culture]; what does fashion say about them [as wearers]? (social and environmental activist, R02, 2018).

From this, two components of cultural proximity are important in transitioning towards sustainability. First is the influence of brands and influencers in affecting change towards more conscious behaviours in the Gulf, echoed by several interview participants: "conscious consumption would become more acceptable the more people see it" (social and environmental activist, R02, 2018). A local fashion designer added:

> From the age of eight to eighteen, you have the most difficult age [in terms of conscious consumption]. They do not want *sustainability*, no. This age category just wants styles, brand-names, and are very influenced by social media. They want to be on social media, and they take styles from it too (local fashion designer, R05, 2018).

However, promoting a different kind of consumption may only solve part of the problem, explained one participant:

> Even with cruelty free and eco-bloggers, it's a lot of pressure to keep up! It's still a lot, every month she [an eco-blogger] posts new favourites, she's the perfect green consumer! But it just moves the consumerism problem to buying eco-products (social and environmental activist, R03, 2018).

The second relevant component of cultural proximity is the stratification that results from some groups' access to certain spaces over others, due to fashion profiling or rather identity profiling of which fashion plays a part. The abaya itself, worn by Bahrain women as it is across the Arab Gulf, is a signifier of belonging to an Arab Gulf social and cultural class. The abaya, like an outercoat, can differ in terms of the messaging it conveys – some abayas are simple and can be purchased at a small price, other abayas using high-end fabrics or trims have a more luxurious feel and look. In this way, the abaya can be both a cultural signifier, where the wearer is designated as an ethnically Gulf woman or citizen, and a class signifier, where the abaya denotes luxury. In Bahrain, where social rules around dress have been historically more relaxed than in Saudi Arabia or Qatar, these

signifiers continue for both women that dress modestly and those that choose to dress more semi-modestly. For instance, a Bahraini woman who does not traditionally cover her head using a headscarf or keep to religiously suggested modesty standards may still choose to wear a luxuriously embroidered abaya to the mall, in the same way she would wear a Dior or Hermès handbag.

The way someone is dressed may provide informal access to certain areas or another, very often a different kind of treatment, and at times even formal access – such as some private beaches or night-clubs in Bahrain having a no-abaya or no-headscarf policy (AlFardan, 2020), and similarly so in Dubai, usually in spaces considered to be expatriate-catering (Dhal, 2014). For local women, this is akin to a double colonisation (see Chapter 2), where firstly spaces such as beaches are privatised due to corporatisation and capitalism (facets of neo-colonialism), and subsequently they are excluded for not conforming to the rules of such spaces (a patriarchal policing). Another group largely impacted by cultural proximity, or rather a lack thereof, and resulting stratification are the migrant worker class, and particularly men of South Asian background, who may be stigmatised and cast as dangerous to nationals (AlMutawa, 2020). Assaf and El Karoui (2021) argue that the way in which cosmopolitanism (which they define as a modern openness to engage with otherness) is practised in the Gulf region is inherently at odds with features often attributed with cosmopolitanism, namely inclusivity, tolerance and diversity. In this way, the class stratifications prevalent in Gulf fashion spaces reflect the type of cosmopolitanism Gulf nations practice; one built on the flow of global goods and services into the nations. I would add to this that the flow of goods and services *out* of Gulf nations is increasingly part of the cosmopolitanism they aspire to, which is seen in their large investments in cultural production, such as in the fashion and arts. AlMutawa (2020), on the other hand, sees that the stigmatisation of low-wage men in the Gulf, which occurs due to the intersection of lower socioeconomic class and racial othering, is also prevalent in non-Gulf societies, and is part of a larger structural issue, wherein a mixed public space is not enough to tackle this exclusion. The perspectives of Assaf and El Karoui (2021) and AlMutawa (2020) differ in how distinct they find the Gulf; however, what is clear is that contesting these stratifications within fashion spaces in the Gulf can serve as an example for how exclusion in fashion spaces (such as malls, high streets and even fashion shows or fashion media) can be contested more globally.

When discussing fashion spaces, these proximities – experiential, cultural, social, and physical – often overlap. For instance, a retailer in Bahrain who has decided to stock

ethical and environmentally conscious fashion, a manager of fashion space herself, described the choices that led her to making these brands available locally. She described her growing confidence in decision-making as a child, as she shadowed her mother, the owner of several high-end fashion boutiques in Bahrain. Eventually, she opened her own boutiques in two of Bahrain's biggest malls. Upon becoming a mother herself, she described designating one of her boutique to become a "sustainable space" (R04, 2018), where furniture and interior fittings were upcycled. She said that "looking at my son, and the world he would inherit in Bahrain, I became more environmentally conscious… I approached global environmentally and ethically conscious brands to display locally" (R04, 2018). Both her proximity to social networks, as well as experiential proximity through a mother-daughter relationship and eventually the experience of motherhood, influenced her ability and desire to create a conscious retail space. Her sustainable ranges sell but slower than the other global brands she imports and curates, largely because the customer is still unacquainted with both the brands and premium associated with clothing that is more sustainably made.

Social proximity, in particular, was found to be a determinant of making more conscious fashion consumption choices. Of those interviewed, participants that critically spoke of fast fashion often self-identified as "privileged consumers". Advocacy for slower fashion in Bahrain emerged from two groups: elite and privileged consumer activism, or proponents of heritage craft revival. The latter includes groups from lower socio-economic backgrounds and is born out of the social and economic preservation of Bahraini maker communities, which have faced dwindling demand in recent decades (see Chapter 2). A social and environmental activist stated that due to income inequality, individuals are either "eco-consumers" or live a reality of "I'm too poor to care about fashion sustainability if it's more expensive, I need H&M prices" (R03, 2018).

Due to social and cultural proximity to consumerist spaces as the spaces-of-the-everyday, opting-out of consumerist habits is often difficult. In Sarah Ahmed's work (2017), a feminist killjoy is a sensationalist figure, "an affect alien" (p. 57) who is "not made happy by the right things" (p. 57). Interviewed for this research, a social activist with a background in psychology proclaimed:

> If someone comes to me and says: they have a sale at H&M, come with me, they have a buy one get one free – it's hard for me to say no… I just say nah, I'm not interested… but it's harder for me to tell the truth which is: no, I don't need to shop this much, fast fashion consumerism is bad… I'm just going to be that person, that dampens the mood (social activist, R03, 2018).

Ahmed (2017) says "you can killjoy because you are not properly attuned to the requirements of a social system" (p. 56) and "it is as if the point of making her [the feminist killjoy's] point is to cause trouble, to get in the way of the happiness of others, because of her own unhappiness" (p. 37). In a social and cultural order predicated on consumerist experience, it is then daunting and alienating to critically face consumerist habits in the modern Gulf. Perhaps, "if the feminist killjoy comes up in a conversation over the table, she brings other things into view, including the family, as well as the table, as a series of arrangements" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 40).

In the Gulf, where going to the mall is a daily activity, significant in terms of lived experience, it remains an engagement with a consumerist space that is hard to detach from socially. Understanding how different proximities overlap for an individual or group of people gives rise to spatial privilege and social stratification. However, malls remain to be more mixed than other social locales in Bahrain, such as gender-segregated majlises and shisha lounges. While malls are often depicted in urban discourse as sanitised and void of character, and souks as an opposite authentic space (AlMutawa, 2019), both are perhaps more accessible than spaces that are more socially stratified. While souks are accessible to all, different social classes occupy and use souks in different ways. To the migrant community, souks are everyday spaces, where one may work, have a coffee break with friends (Beiruti, 2019), or shop with family on weekends. For many locals, especially those from low-income households, this may be the case as well. For locals and expatriates from a higher income bracket, souks are usually errand-spots, unlike the experience of "let's wander around the mall, a bit of window shopping, then buy stuff" (R18, 2018). Majlises, or private halls and homes that keep an open door to visits, tend to be officially segregated across gender lines, and informally segregated by class lines – it's an open invite to usually Gulf locals within the extended social circle of the host. Shisha (hookah) lounges are also classified across both gender and class norms, where smoking shisha – particularly visibly in a lounge – is considered inappropriate for local women under the Gulf's patriarchal norms.

6.3.5 Physical proximity, automobilities and the home as a fashion locale

Physical proximity to spaces of fashion use in Bahrain reflects the social and cultural stratification of these spaces and is enabled by a car-centred culture and built environment. Souks, as discussed in Chapter 5, include clothing sold at lower prices, as well at tailors, dry cleaners, and cobblers. Formal souks include long-standing and built shopping areas, usually in the format of one-story builds, aligned one next to the other,

with large glass windows that overlook parking strips. These range in size; smaller souks tend to include a cluster of convenience stores, dry-cleaners, tailors, and bakeries, and bigger souks add clothing and electronic shops. Depending on the neighbourhood, the souk might also include an upscale offering, like premium boutiques and high-end abayas, or a more mass-market offering, such as imported clothing sold at low prices. Informal souks, on the other hand, are smaller, open-air kiosks that often consist of a sole or few vendors. Often, this is the case for fruit vendors, but also includes clothing open-air concession style spaces such as in Dumistan and Budaiya (P16, 2019).

In urban centres, such as Manama and Muharraq, a mall or discount store is usually accessed by car and is within a 1–2km radius or a 15-minute drive from residential and office areas nearby (as per my field notes and my validation of these routes on Google Maps). On the other hand, tailors are further away from the urban centres. The location of many workplaces, these urban centres reflect what is at-reach in terms of daily life at work. It is conducive to pass by a mall, or discount store, as part of one's daily activities. It is less accessible to drop by the tailor, however, as they are usually located in souks. For dwellers of small towns and villages however, the souk and tailors are the most accessible. Discount stores and malls are farther away for those that dwell in villages outside the urban centres, giving those that dwell in villages and towns the least access to these spaces. Lower disposable incomes of those dwelling in villages and towns also compounds their inaccessibility to the mall in particular, and many may shop in souks or discount stores. Learning from the accessibility of souks, perhaps through creating smaller and more distributed malls, designed with designated shopfronts for tailors and makers, could be a defining feature of a change towards fashion sustainability in the built environment.

Integrating acts of *making* within physical proximity of acts of *using* may also amend social stratification and dissonance with regards to labour. A social activist said: "people can watch the True Cost [film] and not make a connection to labour conditions in Bahrain" (R02, 2018). Another described local dissonance towards labour conditions – even locally – as "I don't want to know" (R03, 2018) despite observing "fast fashion is everywhere" (ibid). In line with the visions A and C in Figure 6.1, respectively "a cultural transition: changing relationships to consumption" and "a maker society with empowered labour", physical proximity to the process of making and mending may deter the dissonance of an out-of-sight, out-of-mind mentality. Today, dissonance with regards to labour, and a lack of physical proximity to labour locally, is seen through emphasis on "buying local" (social

and environmental activist, R03, 2018). While strengthening the local making of fashion is vital, and in line with results of visioning in this study, a focus simply on purchasing products made in Bahrain tends to neglect conditions of workers locally (ibid). In one of the smallest countries in the world, with one of the highest population densities, dissonance towards labour conditions is enabled by a lack of proximity, visibility, and relationships towards labour.

In addition to a proximity to labour, a mall-souk hybrid, dispersed in neighbourhoods, is likely to create a unique phenomenological experience that is neither *mall* nor *souk*, but entails elements of each. While much has been explored on the experience of the mall, lived experiences around souks in the Gulf have been explored by a nascent set of researchers. Rend Beiruti (2019), for example, takes an ethnographic approach to souk spaces in the UAE, exploring the *baqala*, or corner store, as "a space of multitudes of experiences and encounters" (p. 2). Atef Alshehri and Lulu Almana (2021), look at ethnographic traces of Saudi Arabia's King Khalid street in Dammam – examining its changes in the past 50 years in both tangible and intangible ways. King Khalid street includes traces of regional migration, with Bahraini tailors setting up shop in the 1950s, as well as informal spaces of convening. On these informal spaces, Beiruti describes "outside one *baqala* that I had visited, there were men sitting and chatting. Although there were no chairs, the space was transformed into an impromptu seating area" (p. 10). Beiruti explains that often, these informal spaces are created and utilised by the lower-income migrant community, but also allow for relationships between nationals and non-nationals. Within a souk, wearing, making, fixing, having a cup of tea, may all happen at the same time. AlMana and Beiruti both show that souks historically – and still for a segment of society today in the Gulf – epitomise the blurring of the lifecycle stages (see Chapter 5), in that the spatial experience combines purchase, making, using, and mending, with a focus on relationships to labour.

In terms of social stratification, while in the souk maker and user interact, national women tend to be socially excluded. Beiruti notes the exclusion of women socially from souk areas, and while less prevalent than Medina and Ghalia's childhood restrictions on going to the souk – the informality of the souk, and thus its accessibility to men of all classes and social backgrounds, designates it as less woman-friendly than the mall. Similarly, the male-dominated *qahwa* – which is a traditional coffee shop found in many souks that often caters to national men – is less socially accepting of women than the modern-style coffee shop. The latter is more socially acceptable for national women particularly

because it comes with a class demarcation. These Western-style, modern coffee shops are places for middle and upper class women to study, use for meetings and small social gatherings. In this way, historical patterns of female exclusion continue in some spaces in Bahrain, largely exacerbated by the racial and social othering of men of a lower economic status, such as migrant workers. For women that live in villages or small towns, an exclusion from the modern coffee shop or the mall for social and economic reasons is also possible. Similarly, Sewell (2011) finds that in San Francisco in the 1910s, the department store allowed upper-class women to indulge in and command deference, while working-class or lower-class women were excluded due their financial limitations. While this requires further study, the social inaccessibility of informal areas, or less gentrified areas, for national women is to be considered when localising fashion spaces at the level of the neighbourhood. A further study into accessibility of spaces across class and gender lines in the Gulf could further examine whether the exclusion of women from informal areas like souks is complementary to the exclusion of migrant, often South Asian men, from more formal and sanitised spaces, such as malls (unless they are performing labour). While rooted in social norms and under the guise of tradition, the two phenomena are likely to be two sides of the same coin, minted by decades-long classism, conventional local patriarchy and the systems of racial capitalism that define everyday experiences for various groups of migrant labour in the Gulf.

Another aspect of proximity to fashion spaces is the role of car culture in defining both access and experience. In Bahrain, *indoore* culture (see Chapter 5) extends to the drive to the mall, where going around in a car is in itself – the car being another form of dress – a rampant social activity. Featherstone, Thrift, and Urry (2005) explore the accelerating culture of the car in the modern world by applying cultural theory to a space conventionally cast as a non-place. Featherstone (2004) examines the material culture of the car, where the automobile is "part of intimate and personal life, as something subjected to a great variety of cultural uses, practices and coding" (p. 5). Featherstone sees car culture as one that includes habitual performances and specifically as a "motorized landscape [that] contributes to our sense of place" (ibid) and at times national identity.

Fully exploring "the car as a cultural process" (Featherstone, 2004, p. 6) lies beyond the aims of this study but it is possible to identify cultural attributes that are shared between fashion space experience and automobility experience. Both may be defined as material cultures, born out of urban design decisions in the Gulf, which have prioritised the car and socially stratified inhabitants based on consumer category. Both material cultures

include elements of *indoore* as an embodied social response to occupying these spaces, a sense of sharing space or communal activity beyond transactional consumerism. Also, both contain within them the thrill of being seen in (such as being seen in a mall or a nice car) as well as the embodied experience of wearing (such as the thrill of speeding in a car or walking around in a new garment). A collision of these experiences emerges in overlooked social moments, for instance, observing a friend as they approach you, while they park and then walk to the mall entrance, clothed by their car and garment to the observer. Other examples, such as sliding down windows to chat with a friend as you slow the car down when meeting in a public place, or loitering by your parked car, all denote this doubly clothed experience. Perhaps what differs is that the car is both *garment* and *fashion space* as it is a worn extension of the body and is a site of social activity in the *indoore* sense. While women drive themselves in Bahrain, their neighbours in Saudi Arabia were granted the same rights in 2018. Examining circumstances where women choose to drive and those when they rely on being driven by hired drivers adds a unique understanding to the role of labour within automobility culture. For some, being driven is a privilege due to the added layer of service, while for many, to be behind the steering wheel is the ultimate power. This is seen both in debates amongst women themselves in Saudi Arabia since they were granted the right to drive, as well as in what is socially practised in a place like Bahrain, where women have always had the right to drive but some refrain from doing so either because it is not deemed socially acceptable by their families or as a sign of signalling status, or both. These experiences of embodiment, space, and body-within-space in both fashion spaces and cars inform what is currently valued within material culture in Bahrain. Notions of being seen, social interaction, displays of novelty, self-expression, thrill, and sense of community are vital in the design of future fashion space.

While this discussion and Figure 6.3 have focused on public spaces, private spaces such as the home are also important fashion spaces in the Gulf – where activities range from casual family visits to gatherings of friends, to more formal *majlis* gatherings. The workplace too is another space where women are increasingly expressing themselves through fashion choices in the public sphere. However, the evolution in the role of the home as a fashion space is particularly distinctive in the Gulf. The house has historically also been a site of making and even of purchase, Ghalia explains that in the 1960s the "*dallala* [female fabric seller] would come house to house to sell fabrics, then we would go to the tailor around the corner to get them made [into outfits]" (interview with maternal grandmother, R06, 2018). Today, many local brands sell through social media channels

such as Instagram and WhatsApp (see Chapter 2), allowing you to try the outfit at home. The role of the home in transitioning towards fashion sustainability and seeing it as part of the blended lifecycle is vital. First, in that it determines accessibility to other fashion locales through physical proximity – as the discussion around Figure 6.3 indicates – and second as a potential site for all stages of the fashion lifecycle. This understanding of the home as a site for fashion production, communication and consumption is a unique trajectory for the modern Gulf, enabled by the way social media is used, how local businesses are run today and notions of privacy and gendered space. Particularly for women who may be economically or socially excluded from public fashion spaces in the Gulf, it is vital to recognise the home as fashion locale while simultaneously making all locales accessible.

When considering the built environment and its interactions with fashion experience in Bahrain, in addition to what is there and what can be experienced, what is absent is also relevant (as Chapter 4 explains, this approach is of particular importance for the Gulf). For instance, the vastness of the automobility culture is highly interlinked with Gulf cities that neglect walkability. While the weather during the summer months constrains outdoor activity for half of the year, in the other half walkability has not been seriously considered – beyond a limited scope of retail projects. Absence also links back to the void of citizen voices in shaping public and communal space, discussed earlier in this chapter. As one participant surmised: "people love to shop because it's something to do, it's an activity. If shopping is always going to be an activity, it [fashion consumption] is not going to change..." and she added: "don't just go shopping because it's something to do, because you have nothing else to do" (R18, 2018). The same interviewee discussed Saudi tourism in Bahrain, explaining that Saudis bolster the retail market in Bahrain. Even though the same brands are found locally in Saudi, they are attracted to the more liberal social experience of Bahrain. This exemplifies that even between the capitalist monarchies of the Gulf, social experiences vary, and despite limited civic participation in decisions such as urban planning, social patterns within this built environment emerge through the agency of different groups.

6.4 Conclusion

Exploring the phenomenological experience within fashion spaces in Bahrain allows for a re-imagining of how malls and other fashion spaces can be de-linked from consumption or promote sustainability in behaviour. This study makes four recommendations that focus on material and spatial aspects for the transition towards

fashion sustainability in Bahrain. I have selected this sub-set of the recommendations to emphasise how the bult environment or experiences-in-space can be considered when transitioning towards the goal of fashion sustainability.

A transition comprising this study's recommendations such as "developing infrastructure for disposal, re-use, and recycling" and "changing patterns of consumption and care" requires an understanding of the phenomenological experience in space. Perhaps recycling infrastructure and material circularity can be encouraged by placing textile recycling bins in malls – making the act of recycling itself an existential, *seen*, community activity. Or perhaps the experience of recycling may be digitised through visibility on social media platforms, where one is seen virtually by others, or embodied by another form of garment – the social media profile. While recycling for plastic, metals, and glass does exist on a limited scale, some with recycling spots already within malls (R18, 2018), it is not infrastructurally widespread, accessible, or mandated yet for those three materials. For a future where textiles, among other materials, are successfully recycled, both political willingness and urban infrastructure determine the success of this course of action.

Two other recommendations relating to labour can also be approached with a phenomenological outlook. Namely, the recommendations of "Transforming into a society that values manual labour and making" and "Protecting local labour and developing Bahraini capabilities" may be enabled by planning for smaller or more dispersed malls, accessible to those within villages and smaller towns such as craftspeople, and the re-introduction of the tailor and cobbler to more elite public domains. A heightened blurring of lifecycle stages in the souk as an example for a future localised mall, as well as including the home as a fashion space, allows for all stages of the lifecycle at the level of the neighbourhood. Perhaps the future of the mall includes prototypes and fittings in-store, such as *brovas*. Perhaps stores transition to including in-house tailors for fixes, customisations, and re-modelling. Perhaps designer workshops, and makers of trims, accessories, and bio-degradable packaging, are all located within the mall. Instead of a post-mall Gulf, in this way the mall remains a public space with an expanded richness of experience through services and relationships.

Table 6. 2 Material and spatial considerations for fashion sustainability recommendations in Bahrain
(Author's own, 2025)

Recommendation	Material and spatial considerations
Developing infrastructure for disposal, re-use, and recycling	• Accessability, experience, and visibility (incl. virtual visibility)
Changing patterns of consumption and care	• Pervasiveness of consumerist material culture and "othering" of its rejection • Experience of automobolity culture, cars as both "dress" and "fashion space" • Improving accessibility to different age-groups and marginalized groups (e.g. smaller and more dispersed malls) • Consider city planning and its link to consumerist lifestyles (e.g. invest in non-consumerist public space)
Transforming into a society that values manual labour and "making" Protecting local labour and developing Bahraini capabilities	• Learning from "blurred lifecycle" model for the use of public spaces such as the mall (e.g. re-introducing "elements of the souk" to the mall) • Proximity to making (e.g. seeing tailoring activity in the mall) may change relationship to the consumption of clothing

Table 6.2 relates the recommendations (in Figure 6.2) derived from visioning (see Figure 6.1) to material and spatial considerations discussed in this chapter. While the mall may be steered towards more conscious behaviours, enhanced relationships, and a closer physical proximity, a larger cultural change towards fashion sustainability and its impact on Gulf identity is discussed in the next chapter.

7 Discussion: Perceptions, identity and education from a Gulf fashion context

7.1 Introduction

From the Delphi study conducted for this thesis, the most prevalent visions for fashion sustainability in Bahrain included "a cultural transition: changing relationships to consumption", "a maker society with empowered labour", and "de-centralisation, de-globalisation, and growth of local production". These three visions of the future paint a marked departure from Bahrain's fashion industry today, defined by a high rate of consumption and reliance on global imports. This chapter asks, in light of these visions: What is the current self-perception within the Gulf with regards to its fashion? How does the current fashion system and its dynamics reflect on notions of identity? What is the future of this identity, guided by the visioning conducted in this study?

This chapter engages with two main points of discussion to answer these questions. The first (Section 7.2) is an anticipatory discussion on fashion and identity in a post-colonial and future-looking, post-oil context. Building on Chapter 2, where I discussed the Gulf's post-colonial and neo-colonial attributes, this section uses results from the Delphi study and interviews to reflect on how fashion identity is inextricably tied to these post-colonial and neo-colonial attributes. Both post-coloniality and neo-coloniality manifest cognitively, economically, and as lived experience. For instance, the section discusses how post-coloniality in the Gulf is seen in the hegemony of Western cultural capital in fashion in the Gulf, a theme highly prevalent in the answers of research participants.

The second point of discussion in this chapter (Section 7.3) includes reflections on fashion sustainability education in the Gulf, with a particular focus on how the arts and creative fields are taught today – a theme heavily discussed by Delphi participants and local fashion designers (see Chapter 5). This chapter lays out how vocational education towards fashion sustainability in Bahrain is not sufficient for a transformative shift towards fashion sustainability – it is only one piece of the puzzle. To enable designers to create novel and more sustainable ways of engaging with local fashion systems, artistic and creative education in Bahrain and the Gulf needs an overhaul. Designers need not only the tools to create technically, but a theoretically-informed arts education, where they are enabled to critically engage in creative fields as well as a professionalised environment – with associations, fair wages and employment practices – for design and creative work.

While Chapters 5 and 6 took an empirical and comprehensive approach to laying out and dissecting results of this study, this chapter differs in that it is a discussion of two key

topics that have emerged from the research — Gulf fashion identity and education as it pertains to fashion sustainability in the region. In doing so, the chapter brings in the relevant literature introduced in earlier chapters and relates it to findings from the Delphi study, interviews and participant observation. This chapter critically engages perceptions of identity, cultural production, and creative education in the Gulf. The discussion in this chapter looks to replace the privilege of consumer choice with the privilege of imagination for the Gulf citizen. It also requires a radical questioning of the ways in which modern cultural capital dictates the success of certain imaginations over others.

7.2 Reflections on a current and future Gulf fashion identity

7.2.1 Reconciling historicised identity and consumerism with a modern Gulf self-perception

To approach questions of identity within this chapter, I consider that the collective identity of Gulf nationals in the past century has been fortified by a political and social dominance due to oil wealth, as Chapter 2 explained. Cognitively, on the individual and collective level, the question of how to reconcile sustainability thinking with legacies of oil development in the Gulf is a herculean task. Such a reconciliation is intricately wound with notions of the self – or how a person views themselves, their society, and identity.

Once such example from Bahraini society is within a podcast episode by Minwar, a series run by a group of Bahrainis looking to answer key societal and philosophical questions. In episode 8 (minute 28 - 32, 2020), the host, interviewing Bahraini environmentalist and independent consultant Tariq Al-Olaimy, probes at this tension of sustainability and the Gulf identity by stating "but you know, the price of oil determines what our incomes are". Al-Olaimy responds that "holding the acknowledgement that fossil fuels brought rise to our development in the region, that can never be discounted" but adds that we need to collectively acknowledge a "genocide of nature" and that "it's also the point where we also need to transition and have a just transition". He nods to the material impacts of oil development, saying "from that, our education systems, health systems, the abundance, the affluence…" have been enabled. Breaking down this cognitive dissonance goes back to identity. Identity, in this sense, is inextricably linked to both material reality but also in how a society relates to and contends with its past. He adds "many of our parents and families worked in these industries as well" and that as a society we require "the deep acknowledgement for the care and time they put into it, because they believed that's what enabled development [at the time]". Throughout this section, the results of this study are used to reflect on this notion of identity and both individual and societal self-perceptions.

A majority of Delphi participants (88%) and interviewees underlined consumerism as a prevalent facet or cultural factor of Gulf fashion identity. Within consumerism, nuanced discussions emerged on mall culture, Instagram culture, and the decline in sharing culture – a practice of sharing garments particularly among women of the same household or historically even within the same neighbourhoods (see Chapter 5). Today, fast fashion chains and trend-led decision-making prevails:

> People tend to buy baskets of clothing at a time... We stock every single day with at least one new look, the idea is to always show the customer something new, so within a week the shop looks different, so they keep on coming… (store manager of local branch of leading global fast fashion chain, R11, 2018).

A high awareness of consumerism was prevalent in almost all interviewee narratives. Below, a woman in her late 80s reminisces on the availability of clothing in her youth and today:

> As a girl, I never went to the market myself, of course. At times I did, secretly, but I was told off by my father. My father would buy the family ready-made-clothing.
>
> I had around four pieces of clothing. Yes, four. Maybe the very rich had six. But we [in the household] all had four. That was enough…
>
> We mended things at home and made simple things. But we mostly just bought things at the market. For special occasions, like a neighbourhood wedding, we would get it [a garment] made. But those were very few, every few years or so. Then you can get things decorated too and embellished…
>
> Today, clothing is plastic ... These materials are not real! And everyone has everything [available to them] ... Ours [fabrics] were real... (Interview with Medina Al-Anzoor, R01, 2018).

Two other interviewees commented on local consumption habits; the first, a local environmental activist lamented the overlap of changing demographics and consumption patterns, and the latter shared their take on a holiday wardrobe:

> We have a mixture of population explosion and a consumption problem. We consume a lot, and there is a lot of us. We also import people, there are more people coming into the country, and we are living the wrong way...
>
> Advertisements are killing us, they're suffocating us. "Buy here, buy there!". We need to put a cap on the amount of advertising being put out (local environmental activist, R09, 2018).
>
> I am guilty of buying a lot. You know, sometimes I buy a few things for a holiday, and I just throw them away at the end of the holiday…(local fashion designer, R05, 2018).

An embeddedness of consumerism within Bahrain's modern culture was prevalent among participants, tied to the idea that the Gulf region grew at a fast pace in the oil era. The Bahraini environmental activist quotes above show not only a concern for consumerism, but for the rapid changes in the demographics of Bahrain due to what she sees as the

import of labour – likely to refer to both white-collar Euro-Americans and blue-collar Asian workers. An inability to develop non-oil local industries, except for financial services which is dominated by white collar euro-Americans, has been a longstanding criticism and self-criticism of many Gulf states (see Chapter 2). However, beyond critiques of the Gulf as a rentier economy (Beblawi, 1987; Hertog, 2011; Hameed, 2020; Sim, 2020; Walker, 2023), research is scarce on what values a Gulf society envisions for itself in a post-oil existence. With 88% of Delphi participants in this study envisioning a post-material Bahrain – with less fashion consumerism and a shift away from a predominantly consumer society – it is vital to envision the values and self-perceptions of this projected Gulf individual or society.

The first direct impact of a consumerist fashion lifestyle in the Gulf appears environmentally and materially: high waste per capita and a high flow of wealth towards imported goods. During visioning, a participant imagined that "the true costs of resources and labour would be accounted for, removing the incentive to abuse low labour, energy, and water costs" (independent fashion advisor, P01, 2018). In environmental studies and economics, these "true costs" are referred to as externalities, which measure environmental or social harm or degradation often unaccounted for as a financial cost.

When addressing externalities, which group bears the cost of these environmental and social harms is often a topic of debate. A leading economist in Bahrain confirmed this point of debate for Bahrain:

> This is basically quite simple but there has to be clarity on who bears the cost. The government could mandate [a tax] but this would not be popular. Involving the private sector could be more sustainable but would require a pricing / fine structure and some regulation. It is not easy to convince people to pay for something that they are not used to paying for. Could perhaps trial some pilots in gated communities (economic advisor and civil servant, P09, 2020).

An environmental researcher believes that those that profit the most from the status quo should bear the cost of transition. She explained that while the private sector – in particular local retailers and agents for international brands – are consequently the obvious choice to bear the cost of transition, the logic extends to the capitalist states of the Gulf themselves (P16, 2018).

When cost is passed on to the consumer, interview participants saw it as a deterrent to participating in more sustainable fashion choices. A fashion buyer and retailer expressed that "consumers are simply not willing to pay the sustainability premium" (R04, 2018). Consumer price-sensitivity has been utilised by the Bahraini government in coordination

with the UN to encourage the up-take of solar energy. Subsidising solar energy has proven effective in increasing its uptake, amid efforts to transition away from electric power (R18, 2018). The co-founder of body that supports local designers re-iterated the impact of subsidies and price-incentives, saying that for a majority, behaviour change in the Gulf is the most effective "when it hits them in the pockets" (R08, 2018). An environmental activist highlighted economic incentives as well, saying "I truly believe that people respond to something that is affordable. They also want options. It has to be affordable and easy to find" (R09, 2018). In this context, I recommend that in the short-term subsidies are a useful tool to encourage more sustainably produced garments as well as to promote local sustainability initiatives. For Bahrain, this could be under the remit of funding bodies like Tamkeen which have often extended government support to scale SMEs, particularly those with social impact.

Beyond tangible impacts on the environment, the rest of this chapter focuses on intangible impacts of the Gulf's highly consumerist society on the self – namely, internalised values and perceptions of the Gulf individual and society. A discussion of this study's results in light of what it says about the Gulf identity reveals perceptions that may hinder fashion sustainability and which price incentives cannot fix.

A research participant argued that one such impact is the cognitive dissonance of the average Gulf consumer. With a disconnect from making, the Bahraini consumer (like many in a highly globalised world) is:

> often disconnected from this part of the garment life. This [disconnect] is a reflection of almost everything when it comes to the Bahraini public and the life they lead. There is a disconnect as to where their food comes from, how their houses are built etc… (environment researcher, P16, 2018).

Even in the case when clothing has been made locally in Bahrain, it is often through imported labour, and local craft is on the decline, surviving mostly due to government efforts to preserve heritage. The Gulf citizen does not see themselves, or their society, as that of a maker society. This impact on self-perception, a learned cultural helplessness, amounts to the relinquishing of making as an act one associates with its own society and peoples. Remaining sections of this chapter dig deeper into this self-perception as receiver, rather than maker of both product and culture. A disconnect from making echoes another disconnect, as Al-Olaimy (2020) posits in his podcast on the Gulf and climate change; "we are nature" and continues, "there is often dissonance where there is that separation [between humans and nature] and the biggest and the largest thing we can do is to see ourselves as part of that system".

7.2.2 A non-maker society, Western = better in an overly globalised fashion system

Dissociating *making* cognitively from one's own society and peoples is prevalent in the answers of both interviews and Delphi participants and exacerbates both the de-valuing of labour and ideas of cultural Western hegemony. In Chapter 3, the concept of *'uqdat al-khawaja* – an Arabic term translating to "the complex of the overlord" – was unpacked in the context of the Gulf postcolonial experience. Subsequently, I situate the concept against the work of cultural theorists to relay the Gulf's preference for Western commodities, mannerisms, and aesthetics which are perpetuated into the modern day. Later in the section, I discuss how local agents (such as regulating bodies, governments, etc) have played a role in limiting creativity in the Arab world. I conclude that to take a post-colonial position in design must affirm *two* culpabilities on local cultural production; the first is a direct remnant of colonialism and the latter includes local systems that may have been built as forms of resistance (Salem, 2020) to colonialism, such as an authoritarian cultural nationalism of post-colonial states.

The results of this study confirm a belief in the superiority of not only Western brands, but the deferment of the notion of making and the muscle of creativity to the West. A Delphi participant quipped that compared to Western luxury brands "some locally produced garments are highly priced and so consumers are discouraged to make the purchase and perhaps don't have full trust in local productions of fashion" (program specialist at sustainable development government body, P07, 2018). This lack of trust in local production is further partnered by the globalised ease of modern-day online purchasing, as "online exacerbates the problem of fast fashion (ibid)".

An analogy between fashion and language – both of which are tools of expression – is useful to understand why a lack of trust in local production is culturally deterministic. In Chapter 3, (namely Section 3.5.4, *Who gets to design? Post-colonial dynamics of design culture*), cultural theorists like Sabry, Gramsci, Fanon and Bhabha were introduced to contextualise how transitions towards sustainability can happen for the post-colonial subject. For instance, Franz Fanon (1986) says "to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (pp. 17–18). If fashion may be considered a language that communicates meaning and to wear it becomes *to speak* in that language, then research participants' lack of trust in local production of fashion becomes to not trust in the weight of one's own culture and its productions. Fanon extends this precise analogy of language and dress, quoting Westermann and equating the co-

opting of European language by colonialist subjects to "the wearing of European clothes, whether rags or the most up-to-date style" (1986, p. 25).

Referred to by research participants as "global trends", "foreign brands", "European brand-names" or "big foreign fashion houses", the cultural capital of Western fashion looms large. A participant said, "global trend following, and brand loyalty are two main drivers of fashion consumption; local brands do not have a large base" (economic advisor and civil servant, P09, 2018). In a chapter of *Thinking Through Fashion* (2016), Agnes Rocamora dissects Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, defining cultural capital as a "set of cultural resources, whether embodied, in bodily manners for instance, objectified, such as in books or works of art, or institutionalised, in diplomas for instance, which allows one to gain social power and distinction" (p.240). Another participant confirmed "production happens abroad, and individuals are passive consumers that highly care about appearances, both physical and social" (P16, 2018). While this shows the participant's superficial reading of fashion as one that is only related to appearance and consumption – for instance it dismisses local styling, social systems around fashion and attempts at local production – it speaks to the self-perception of Bahraini society as one that is a receiver of global fashion trends and products, and not a contributor.

Taking into account both the self-perception of the post-colonial Gulf citizen as a non-maker and the modern Gulf's state as a creativity regulator (Moran, 2010), these results also affirm the progression of creativity discourse into systems thinking where "creativity cannot be separated from the societal and cultural contexts in which it arises" (Hennessey, 2017; p. 343, see Chapter 3 for discussion of creativity). For the purposes of fashion sustainability, these results affirm both a cognitive (self-limitation) and societal (regulatory) hindrance towards locally derived sustainability systems.

It is crucial to note that this cognitive impact I mean to emphasise here is that which is linked to making and production, as opposed to an aesthetic appropriation. The latter, an everyday mimicry due to a modern-day globalised fashion industry, is arguably in itself always a re-appropriation (Bhabha, 2004) in that it takes on its own form by being replicated. In a material sense, however, *'uqdat al khawaja* in design in an Arab context is a cognitive state that becomes material affirmation of Western cultural capital and hegemony in the Gulf and Arab world. This notion of cultural hegemony was explored in Chapter 3, where I analyse post-colonial literature to underscore that both economic class and a cultural or ideological solidarity contribute to the proliferation of this hegemony. For fashion in Bahrain, this means that when research participants say they do not trust

local production, it is both a proximity to the Western ideal in a cognitive sense, but also the upholding of class politics where the elite seek to be part of the historical bloc of Western cultural production, by virtue of both a cultural and economic solidarity in the Gramscian sense (see Section 3.5.4). A Bahraini environment researcher said:

> The elite group only consumes clothes that are of well-known foreign brands which cost an arm and a leg. The garment is only worn a handful of times due to the mentality of 'others cannot see you wearing that dress again'. Fashion in this group always follows trends and seeks the latest collection. The elite group do not shop at thrift shops and see that their good deeds end at giving their clothes to the poor as a means for disposal, with no consideration as to what actually happens to clothing once it is out of their sight and possession (environment researcher, P16, 2019).

While this participant's description may resonate with a class analysis of fashion in any modern society – which is precisely Gramsci's point – three things become clear for the Gulf context. One, that Bahrain's consumer culture is steered by a global, largely Western fashion industry. Second, this makes a local counter-culture, such as an organically grown fashion sustainability movement based on local visions and ideals, fundamentally difficult to realise. Third, and as introduced earlier, authoritarianism further constrains the translation of intellectual creativity into its material development. A research participant illuminated that since "consumer culture in Bahrain is strongly driven by foreign cultures, influencers and trends… [this] also brings challenges in creating a counter local movement and culture around sustainable fashion" (co-founder of social and environmental consultancy, P03, 2018). With an eerie resonance, Sara Salem says:

> Because this bourgeoisie must answer to global capital rather than to social forces within its own society, radical movements within these societies are constrained in their ability to bargain with capital and the state elite more broadly. This political position stems from the fact that this class is reliant on foreign rents rather than investing in productive activities; in other words, it continues to be economically dependent even after colonialism officially ends (Salem, 2020, p. 13).

In this sense, the Gulf consumer's instinct to participate in fashion more sustainably surfaces as an inclination to once more buy into a Western product; a global fashion trend of sustainability rather than to enact sustainability as a movement concerned with others locally. A research participant went as far to suggest "since we live in a community that has a lot of [a] following mindset, the appreciation of celebrities, brands… we should benefit from this by marketing campaigns" (P15, 2019). This light green approach is balanced by another's dark green approach to sustainability (see Chapter 3 for discussion of these two terms), with another participant arguing:

> Consumers in Bahrain can't buy themselves into a sustainable lifestyle. And similarly, they can't buy themselves out of an unsustainable lifestyle. This is a capitalist model around sustainability that has not shown to be effective in addressing the core issues of

many other consumer products and movements, such as food (co-founder of social and environmental consultancy, P03, 2018).

As such, Gulf society finds itself in a double bind, where it cannot *buy* itself into fashion sustainability, and ultimately the route towards a new system then requires a shift in the means of making, a shift in the flow of material and economic flow and change of a cognitive mindset. Perhaps it is through this shift that a proliferation of local brand, or *markah* (see Chapter 5), may be achieved. Aside from economic and material flows, which are vital as means of cultural production and form the focus of discussion throughout this chapter, a shift towards fashion sustainability must also consider the Gulf's unique fashion language, learnings and practices, relationships and stories (discussed in Chapters 5 and 6).

7.2.3 A disposable or ever-renewing Gulf self

In addition to the cognitive impacts of viewing one's own society as a non-maker outlined in previous sections, I dissect in this section an additional aspect of self-perception through the view of clothing as disposable in the Gulf. While accelerating rates of garment disposal have become a universal facet of the modern relationship to fast fashion, it is important to examine its nuances in terms of identity formation and expression in the Gulf.

In Chapter 2, the development of consumerism as a part of modern Gulf society was discussed, enabled by media messaging and as a departure from traditional values (Mourtada-Sabbah et al., 2008). A Delphi participant stated: "nowadays, people are looking for fast fashion and want to keep up with the constant emerging fashion trends" (program specialist at sustainable development government body, P07, 2018). Another said that: "[In] the Gulf, there is a high culture of either using actual disposable products, or treating clothing like it is disposable, especially if fast fashion" (sustainability analyst and civil servant, P06, 2018). The results of this study, while confirming consumerism in fashion in the Gulf is part of a globalised consumer model, also implore that there may be aspects to this consumerism which are unique. Put differently, this section asks: what do the textiles and clothing worn by Gulf citizens, made in poorer Asian countries – many of which form a diaspora of local migrant labour within the Gulf – in styles that often mimic Western fashion styles, say about the Gulf identity?

Delphi study participants, identifying consumerism as the biggest theme within fashion sustainability in Bahrain, envisioned a future where "people will gravitate towards simpler and more practical designs, rather than trend-led" (economic advisor and civil

servant, P09, 2018). Perhaps trend-led fast fashion in the Gulf is a response to a colonial anxious repetition (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 70, 74, 101); an anxious response to the colonial gaze from the point of view of the post-colonial consumer. In post-colonial studies, and particularly an application of Bhabha's work as explained in Chapter 3, anxious repetition refers to how the colonial perspective anxiously repeats stereotypical attributes of the colonised other (Bhabha, 1994; Mondal, 2014). In this context, fast fashion consumption in the Gulf may be seen as a form of repetitive response to this colonial gaze. If the colonial gaze is that of the other as innately and fixedly degenerate or barbaric (Mondal, 2014), then fast fashion in the post-colonial context is the anxious response of "I am ever-changing, non-fixed, and if need be disposable to be completely renewed and constantly refashioned".

Dissecting research participants' perception of consumerism as a facet of Gulf identity, Chapter 2 established that materialistic values become more prominent in the lives of individuals when they have a history of unmet needs, creating a constant need to compare oneself with others (Kasser, 2003). Some participants in this study see this everchanging self as a problem to be solved on the individual level as well; "shifting mindsets towards sustainable consumption patterns is a main issue that needs addressing because a lot is in the hands of the consumer" (program specialist at sustainable development government body, P07, 2018). A dark green perspective begs that we question consumerism rather than the consumer; bridging this notion to Bhabha's anxious repetition, I see consumerism in the Gulf as an issue related to collective identity, rather than the individual. Kasser (2003), introduced in Chapter 2, posits that a family environment that poorly satisfy needs for security tends to drive individuals to adopting a value system that prioritises wealth and possessions. Kasser finds that parents of materialistic teenagers are unlikely to listen to their perspectives, acknowledge their feelings or give them choices, tend to use punitive measures for misbehaviour, and display an inconsistency in how rules are applied. Extending the metaphor of the family to paternalistic societies and authoritarian governance in the Gulf may shed light on its collective materialism. While Kasser looks at the root causes for individual materialism (and acknowledges cultural circumstance), expanding that understanding to authoritarian post-colonial societies may further explain the everchanging and non-fixed exterior of the Gulf consumer.

Gulf consumerism is then a response to authoritarianism, a post-colonial anxious response and fulfils the idea of an internalised "voyeuristic gaze" (Smelik, 2009, p. 179). Similar to how global fashion leans towards Western standards which may be internalised as a

desire for a "thin and yet strong and well-formed body" (Smelik, 2009, p. 183), in the case of the authoritarian and post-colonial, a restless attachment exists to affirming a well-kept and ever-renewing fashionable image. Then the Gulf consumer, who may seem "too concerned with public image" (program specialist at sustainable development government body, P07, 2018) and "motivated by fashion consciousness" (economic advisor and civil servant, P09, 2018), who believes the "recurrent wearing of a specific outfit is discouraged due to concern over public image" (ibid), may be responding anxiously to both the fixed gaze of post-colonialism and authoritarian governance locally. In response to "you are slow, underdeveloped, backwards" and "I shall be making decisions on your behalf", the Gulf national through an ever-changing wardrobe, a high social value on how one and others are dressed, establishes "in fact I am fast, ever-changing, and quite the decision-maker – of my own wardrobe". Of course, this scrutiny of Gulf identity takes place within a wider context of the region participating in a globalist material culture that emphasises physical appearance and shopping, both of which manifest as forms of personal creativity and freedom.

Thus, a consumerist mindset in Bahrain may be – in addition to the globalised forces of fashion – a form of developing a disposable or ever-renewing exterior shell as a response to an internalised colonial gaze, and a social freedom in the face of local authoritarianism. In this way, a "culture of either using actual disposable products, or treating clothing like it is disposable, especially if fast fashion" (environment researcher, P16, 2018) becomes socio-political expression, where "fashion bears witness to the bad faith in capitalism's claim to progress" (Geczy and Karaminas, 2016, p. 84). Whether this expression is designated as resistance to the fixed gaze of the colonial subject, or a coping mechanism taking space in the bubbles of social freedom within authoritarianism – or both – informs that the onus of the fast fashion model should not fall on the post-colonial individual. In line with Chapter 2's discussion of fashion and sports as proxies for socio-political expression in the Gulf, where particularly for women fashion consumerism may be seen as a form of resistance, what remains is reconciling that response – of donning the ever-changing and disposable exterior – with ecological disregard.

Contending with ecological disregard requires a look into how Gulf citizens see themselves as connected or disconnected to nature. The discussion in this chapter so far has focused on a disconnect from making on the individual and societal level, as well as the treatment of one's exterior shell as disposable in the Gulf. This consumerist fashion lifestyle serves to distance the Gulf self from nature, and its natural relationships. One

participant explained her future vision as "a connected society, what I mean by that is that it is constantly flowing in union with nature" (environment researcher, P16, 2018). Introduced in Chapter 3, Bookchin (2003) posits that human domination and destruction of nature follows social domination between humans themselves. In this sense, a disconnect from nature is not only post-colonial in the sense that it has been exported from European capitalists to become heavily embodied in Gulf societies, but also as a chronological trajectory that defines modernity itself in these states. In this sense, dismantling coloniality in fashion and design disciplines requires an undoing of this relationship or mis-relationship with nature, to allow for a *post*-post-colonial relationship between the Gulf – both person and society – with nature.

A look into the self-perceptions when it comes to fashion consumption in the Gulf reveals impacts related to identity, which are beyond environmental. A reliance on Western production and disengagement from *making* for most Gulf natives births an ever-renewed "image-oriented" (various participants: P06, P07, 2018) self. This self is also catered to by Western brands. It is renewed with each purchase, disposable when worn out or no longer wanted, an assertion of renewal where not much else – such as political or economic change – is materially steered by the individual or society. Of course, the ability to act on this escapism or proximity to cultural capital varies depending on one's class and access to fashion trends, and in terms of means of production exacerbates the local hegemony of the upper class.

7.3 Reflections on fashion sustainability education in the Gulf

7.3.1 Vocational skills, design philosophy, and the privilege of fantasy

An environmental civil servant in Bahrain envisioned a future where "fast fashion will be a thing of the past" (P12, 2019). The founder of a local up-cycling business chipped in that "consumers tend to follow fashion trends; given affordable sustainable choices and alternatives, they are likely to opt into sustainability as a trend as well" (P15, 2019). These participants are referring to how fast fashion and Western trends dominate the fashion cycle. Coupled with a lack of trust in local production, it becomes important to separate an aesthetic mimicry from a preference for the foreign-made. This is captured in the statement of a civil servant who stated that while "custom tailoring is very popular and widely spread, many copy big brands" (sustainability analyst and civil servant, P06, 2018). This section argues that post-colonial Gulf consumerism needs a *philosophical* re-arrangement to end its proliferation of neo-colonialism through the modern-day consumer model. The task for a *post*-post-colonial design education system then becomes much

larger than problematising instances of mimicry. Rather, it is about two things: the first is the Gulf's material economy and its implications on marginalised peoples, and the second is designing from lived experience (see Chapters 5 and 6). The question we should ask isn't "why do we mimic?", but rather "if our lived experience is different, then why can't we design from our own contexts?" This section argues that while research participants consistently underscored the need for a technical fashion sustainability education, a more transformative approach lies in contesting the status quo of design culture at a large in the Gulf.

In Chapter 3, Bhabha's notion of post-colonial mimicry was introduced to explore the idea of creative autonomy in Bahrain and the Gulf. I explained that in the case of fashion in the Gulf, mimicry of the post-colonialised of the colonial is neither original nor is it identical. For fashion particularly, this mimicry is enabled by a corporatised global supply chain that delivers fast fashion trends to the doorsteps of the post-colonial citizen. Within this context, the way that something is styled, the social practices around it and lived experiences can themselves be a re-appropriation. This notion of mimicry as a re-assertion, a response, or some might claim anti-colonial resistance is at odds with epistemic change.

Perhaps for fashion sustainability in post-colonial geographies, both views are useful – mimicry and epistemic change. Designers have to contend with epistemological change, building from within their own fashion ontologies (as Chapters 5 and 6), while starting from a status quo that is quite *mimicked*; a world of globalised Western fashion aesthetics and ways of production. In this sense, and to face global contemporaneity, Spivak underscores the importance of an "aesthetic education" or "an epistemological change that will rearrange desires" (Spivak, 2012, p. 2). The rest of this section explores design education in Bahrain, including barriers to vocational learning and the importance of imagination beyond technical knowledge for the Gulf designer.

In the research participants' visions of the future, they saw local designers as agents of change, "pushing for more awareness regarding sustainability issues and mind-set change" (director of sustainability at large local retailer, P04, 2018), and that designers are in need of an "education on the benefits of sustainable textiles – in terms of environmental impact, quality, authenticity, and durability to consumers" (ibid). These suggestions allude to the technical aspect of sustainability, while an education that centres sustainability thinking in design must also contend with social systems, local practice and overcoming perceptions of Western superiority. For designers to truly be able to

"rearrange desires" (Spivak, 2012, p. 2), education takes on a broader and epistemic meaning, one that goes beyond a vocational training of designers.

In this case, a re-arrangement of desires does not mean training the mimicry out of local designers, but reveals that the desire for a close-ness to the Western in fashion exacerbates the neo-coloniality of other groups, such as marginalised workers in dire working conditions in South Asian countries. This exacerbation of the neo-coloniality happens both within the Gulf's own geography and abroad; through imported labour and in countries where clothing is made. It is important to identify this as a systems issue, rather than a desire for Western proximity on the individual level.

When asked about the barriers and opportunities towards fashion sustainability in Bahrain, 13 out 16 participants in the Delphi study cited themes related to education and awareness, making it the second highest ranked recommendation (see Section 6.2). Under the theme of "education and awareness", Delphi participants stressed both the awareness of the general consumer and the local education of fashion designers. For consumers, this awareness includes knowledge on the impact of consumption decisions, as well as how to care for and extend the lifetime of clothing. Achieving mass awareness was suggested through government campaigns (environment and sustainable development academic, P11, 2019), school curriculums (various participants: P03, P05, P15, 2019), extracurriculars and social clubs (various participants: P02, P15, 2019) – such as municipal and community centres – as well as harnessing the impact of social media influencers (various participants: P05, P15, 2019). However, changes in managing means of production and labour are more likely to create long-term material and cultural change, as a focus on consumer awareness "risks being largely generational" (economic advisor and civil servant, P09, 2020) and more limited in scope.

For designers, the research participants underscored a need for both a sustainability education within design, and technical skills more generally. A participant that works with emerging designers said: "budding designers who want to establish their labels are often oblivious to the impact of sustainability and how to incorporate into their collections" (independent fashion advisor, P01, 2018). Another, a local craft entrepreneur, added: "fast fashion way too prevalent. But also, there is a lack of knowledge and awareness regarding the nature of industry even among local aspiring fashion designers" (P15, 2019). These results are in line with what designers themselves say with regards to desiring an education on fashion sustainability (see Chapter 5) and speak to how business models beyond fast fashion remain hard to scale in Bahrain.

While the majority of participants stressed a vocational education, perhaps through mandatory or elective courses (various participants: P02, P10, P15, 2020), others stressed the importance of fostering a local, modernised design culture (various participants: P01, P02, P09, P13, P15, 2020). This modernised design culture, in the participants' perspective, requires an artistic, critically engaged creative education in addition to vocational skills. This aim towards a creative or artistic education is in line with participants' over-arching vision of "an empowered maker society" (see Section 6.2). A craft-maker and local entrepreneur stressed that "prioritising a merger of environmental awareness with art" must be on par with the current prioritisation of STEM in order to develop design and sustainability solutions from within Bahrain's context (P15, 2019). He stressed that a lack of a practical or vocational education in Bahrain, and a general de-prioritisation of an art education, must be tackled to create "active art engagement" among students and future creators. He added that: "cultural creation should be a part of art curriculums in schools and universities. This could include a theoretical component (heritage and local design knowledge) and practical know-how to enhance local vocational skills" (P15, 2020). He envisioned a future of "imaginary minds", where making is prioritised through vocational training in schools, an encouragement of an arts education, and most importantly imagination. This "active art engagement" in education, as he called it, resonates with the literature where Davison (2017) underscores imagination in tackling technical issues:

> Scientific and technological responses to climate change are by no means deserving of dismissal: far from it. They are, however, only part of the solution, and they can be received as much in a spirit of fantasy as of imagination. Fantasy would seize upon them as a "magic bullet", lying just around the corner, absolving us from the sort of action now that would require a substantial change of life, not least in the form of restraint. That, as we have seen, demands imagination (Davison, 2017, p. 10).

Bahrain, similarly to its Arab neighbours, has an education system that prioritises STEM (P15, 2019), with a lack of formal design education. When it exists, such as vocational trainings and support to craft SMEs, it is ad-hoc support for technical skills rather than a critical enquiry into notions of design. Design culture in Bahrain is therefore highly tied to trade, making, or execution, rather than theoretical reflection or critique. A civil servant in SME funding said: "I strongly believe that vocational training is being supported by different entities in the country to support local capabilities" (P14, 2020). Even with government support for vocational skills, research participants were quick to identify a lack of such skills among Bahrainis as a problem. A high-ranking civil servant in an environmental body stated: "for the industry to be sustainable and socially just, capacity Building of Bahraini nationals, and technology transfer to Bahrain based investment

within the textile Business should be achieved" (P08, 2018). Another, an economist and civil servant, acknowledged that "labour in the sector is heavily dominated by low-cost expatriate labour" (economic advisor and civil servant, P09, 2018), and a third identified a "low number of skilled individuals in the textile and embroidery industry in Bahrain" (program specialist at sustainable development government body, P07, 2018). It appears that while vocational training and craft-making are supported through funding programmes and the provision of sales opportunities – such as markets and marketing support – design is not necessarily professionalised in Bahrain, consistent with the Arab region more generally. Dana Abdulla (2019) identities that a lack of professional design associations regionally renders design a *trade*, such as printing services, rather than professional career choice:

> Representation is an issue within the entire Arab region where only two design associations claim to represent designers region-wide; the Lebanese Graphic Design Syndicate (est. 1976) and AIGA Middle East (est. 2013). These are both based in Beirut but have contributed very little to design in Lebanon or regionally. Moreover, the international affiliation of the American AIGA, and the use of English in all its communication materials is problematic. It piggy backs on a brand and excludes designers working in Arabic (Abdulla, 2019, p. 217).

A prominent economic advisor to government in Bahrain and civil servant suggested to "encourage top fashion and art schools to open in Bahrain, to attract students from across the GCC" (P05, 2018) to promote the growth of a local-made fashion industry. While similar projects in the UAE have been met with success, such as the Dubai Institute of Design and Innovation (a collaboration between MIT and Parsons) and Heriot-Watt University Dubai, this may exacerbate the problems Abdulla alludes to, in terms of a design education that excludes an Arabic design education and "piggy backs on brand" (Abdulla, 2019, p. 217). Abdulla explains that design education in the Arab region does not encourage alternative ways of thinking about design. She also gives the example of university admissions in Jordan, where similarly to Bahrain (various participants: P02, P15, 2019; Lightfoot, 2014), "design sits at the bottom of the academic hierarchy alongside fine arts and Islamic studies" (Abdulla, 2019, p. 217). Often, this encourages mostly students with lower scores and academic performance to consider design as a career or practice. Lower admission standards further brands design and design students as societal rejects, occupying a non-professionalised and non-critical field. Therefore, instead of simply teaching vocational skills and fashion sustainability techniques, these problems in design education must be addressed to make way for a design culture driven by a localised societal imagination and creative autonomy.

Transforming design culture requires a political willingness; a Bahraini senior environment and heritage academic said: "dealing with students and curriculum change is a strategic move, however, anything curriculum-related is rather hard to implement" (P02, 2020). In the wider Arab context, a lack of creative autonomy has also been linked to a lack of serious research funding as well as authoritarianism and an absence of academic freedom (Abdulla, 2019). Education curriculums in Bahrain, like the wider Gulf, are often centralised or at least partly centralised, such as in private schools that have blended government-set and independently-set (and government approved) curriculums. In Bahrain and the Gulf, a paradox of authoritarian governance with the desire to foster Western education discourse that promotes creativity and openness is prevalent, even at the level of conflicting pressures arising in schools tasked with enacting such reforms (Lightfoot, 2014). Regardless, a top-down political willingness is crucial; a civil servant working with SMEs affirmed that: "policy has a direct and very powerful effect on industry practices. For example, rule of law towards industrial practices has shown to be effective in Bahrain" (P13, 2020). Thus, combating the stigma towards artistic professions both societally and more important structurally – in terms of funding, professional associations, and the allowance for creative autonomy – becomes crucial to the proliferation of a local design education.

A dual lack of professionalisation and valuation of design makes it "difficult to attract and retain talent" in fashion in Bahrain (economic advisor and civil servant, P09, 2018) and causes inconsistences in the product or service delivery of local brands, ultimately making the most successful retailers "passive distributors" of foreign brands (ibid). However, taking the macro-environment into account instead of simply scrutinising the competency of small businesses shows that mass production in Bahrain has been historically driven by foreign business interests rather than for the local economy (various participants: P01, P09, 2018). Therefore, while it is believed that there is a "lack of designers who can bring crafts products to the contemporary market" (economic advisor and civil servant, P09, 2018), it is more likely true that the Gulf's contemporary market model crowds out local designers, imports low-wage labour, and de-professionalises design, designating it to mere manual labour that is then underpaid. In this way, this section's discussion of creative education in Bahrain confirms the duality of post-coloniality and neo-coloniality in the Gulf (see Chapter 2) from a design perspective. It is post-colonial in that it is bereft of its design autonomy due to its modern-day internal and macro-policies, and neo-colonial in that it engages in "trade routes and exploitation similar to dynamics established 150 years ago" (co-founder of social and environmental

consultancy, P03, 2018) both with imported local labour and clothing makers in their countries of origin.

Fostering "imaginary minds" (P15, 2020) in the local arts may then be seen as a systems issue, where art careers are not professionalised and design practice itself is under-valued. A participant explained:

> the local garment industry has declined dramatically since the expiry of the trade preferences provisions agreed for the first decade of the US free trade agreement. Not much seems to have been done to re-engineer the sector. Companies with greater value addition, whether thanks to clear brands of more valuable end products, have done better but there are significant sustainability questions for garment manufacturing (director at funding body for small to medium business, P9, 2018).

This emphasises that while a technical fashion sustainability education is a recommended outcome of this study, contesting the status quo of design culture in the Gulf is a more important lever for the education of designers. Thus, the prevalent perception of a lack of Bahraini capabilities among research participants is a response to economic macro-decisions; building these capabilities is a political and transformative move. A civil servant re-affirmed that for fashion, this is a global strategy as well as a local one:

> We need to consider; what is tying this strategic move together on a national level? Internationally? First, this is a global conversation, and second it is not prioritized locally. No one is owning this strategy on a local level (economic advisor and civil servant, P13, 2018).

7.3.2 Two-way cultural permeabilities in design: fashion with a small f, markah with a small m

If design and creative fields were taught critically in Bahrain, funded, professionalised and accredited, and creative autonomy endorsed, then design solutions can stem from lived experience. Design then would be a practical response to ongoing debates that society faces. An economic advisor and civil servant said: "there are opportunities to create a new value proposition underpinned by local identities and production if this can be done in a way that consumers accept as value for money" (P09, 2020). This societal prioritisation of design allows for its establishment as a discipline that responds to ongoing issues in a way that critically historicises and engages lived experience. Abdulla (2019) recognises this as a shift towards epistemic pluriversality as opposed to a universal set of design solutions. This epistemic pluriversality for Bahrain would include a critical understanding of Arab designers' own history, and an acceptance of certain degrees of mimicry and reproduction. This conversation and ability to self-reflect should be at the cornerstone of any Arab design discourse. Such an epistemic turn when it comes to design studies in the Arab context, in line with decolonising design discourse (see Chapter 3),

would also constitute an acknowledgement of present-day practice as a merger of Western and Arab design, as well as hold a place for subaltern groups in the Gulf and their contributions to design. This merger, a status quo that starts from a position of high mimicry, may also build on the Western design toolkit in instances where those within the Western episteme have themselves began to question the philosophy of Western design. This includes methods such as Transition Design and its visioning and back-casting (used in this study), Fuel4Design's *future philosophical pills* (2021), and developing discourse on localised design literacy (Bravo and Bohemia, 2020; Goldman et al., 2020). In these philosophies, design is seen as a central process of creating meaning and transformation for a given society. Thus, by fostering critical design education in Bahrain, the Gulf, and wider Arab region, the local imaginative creative may be able to build upon their own globalised design-society relationships (Dilnot, 1982).

On duality, or holding both the globalised or Western within what is local, a merger and acceptance of these identities for design education in the region is crucial. Abdulla emphasises that design modules are often taught in complete separation to Islamic Art or heritage arts. She asks, "Is Arabic or Islamic so alien that it requires its own special study even among the people who are Arabs and Muslims themselves?" (Abdulla, 2019, p. 219). This resonates with the designers that say they are relegated to designing clothing for the traditional market only, because they are not included within the space of cultural capital that foreign brands hold for non-traditional garments (see Section 5.4). A civil servant working in funding craft communities emphasised that it is "especially in cultural seasons, consumers show more faith and reliance on Bahraini designers than international ones" (P14, 2020). While this split on which group holds the cultural capital for which season may seem daunting, perhaps it can also be promising that within fashion in the Gulf there are seasons where a clean-cut supremacy of European brands is not the case. It is these subtleties, or dualities within the status-quo, that fashion sustainability in the Gulf must emerge from. Perhaps then the design launch-pad for the Gulf's future is a gradient which includes unquestionably large-looming, re-appropriated, Western styles *and* the traditional, but includes within it local definitions of sustainability, local ways of making, a reformed relationship with local labour, support for local creative autonomy, and an acknowledgement of the relationships around dress that make them more long-lasting.

Nader El-Bizri (introduced in Chapter 3 and further discussed in Chapter 6) discusses a revival of *falsafa* or a philosophical renaissance for the Arab world. He sees that the

binary of East versus West no longer holds even dialectically in the age of globalised processes and technologies, and this makes way for one solution for the post-colonial and neo-colonial Arab thought – the revival of *falsafa*. El-Bizri (2010, 2019) sees the revival of *falsafa* as a contemporary methodology where concepts are rethought existentially from the vantage point of lived and embodied experience and confirms Sabry's approach (Chapter 3, 6) in his understanding of the self and other as one that does not stem from relativities and oppositions. This methodology, or in this specific case an education that spurs imagination, can be a budding ground not only for localised theories of design, but a post-colonial renaissance defined by its relation to visual perception, place, and embodiment (El-Bizri, 2019). Through re-engaging existentially and from the Gulf perspective, a future identity may be envisioned. For fashion this means a rationality when it comes to sustainability using local lived experience, accepting the duality of local aesthetics and fashion, while questioning the cultural capital of European fashion, or how to increase the cultural capital of local *markah* (brand) – which currently in itself seems like a paradox as long as *markah* refers to the designer clout of European brands.

7.4 Conclusion

While previous chapters (3, 5, 6) discussed language, social practice and space within a fashion sustainability context for Bahrain, this chapter sheds light on identity, self-perception and cognitive experience. In doing so, this chapter takes on implications for fashion sustainability in post-colonial context, contending with the cultural capital of Western fashion. Throughout the chapter, I used the results of the Delphi study and interviews to reflect first on the Gulf fashion identity and second the creative education system, incorporating theoretical frameworks from cultural theorists. The discussion of these two topics reveals that for fashion sustainability in the Gulf, relocating the drivers of design to locality is essential. This relocation requires a political disruptiveness, a change in the way that the Gulf individual and collective can create their own culture and must be informed by lived experience. A heightened creative self-sufficiency in the Gulf may on a cognitive level be an act of sovereignty for the post-colonial self; a cognitive shift to associating one's society with creation, or seeing oneself as a maker, as opposed to a consumer of the Western. Perhaps beyond a material sustainability, this is also an imagined cognitive "sustainability" for a *post*-post-colonial world.

In the next chapter, the conclusion of this thesis, I revisit and reflect on this study's main contributions to knowledge, including how findings relating to post-colonial fashion contexts, like those uncovered in this chapter, may apply to contexts beyond the Gulf.

8 Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

Like many countries of the Gulf, Bahrain aspires to diversify to a post-oil economy for economic and environmental reasons. This research shares findings on fashion sustainability within Bahrain, with lessons that may be extrapolated to the Gulf, or to regions that have seen hyper-growth in past decades or those that predominantly rely on an import of clothing often despite a history of local craft. Moreover, in its discussion of fashion sustainability, and wider design for sustainability discourse, this research establishes that an ontological inquiry into local fashion epistemes is necessary for the development of localised views of fashion sustainability.

The aim of this study is to examine how the Bahraini cultural context shapes fashion sustainability locally. Its two objectives are: first, to analyse Bahrain's fashion industry using Design for Sustainability (DfS) frameworks, including fashion's limitations as a transformative design field in Bahrain; and second, to explore how Bahrain's local fashion epistemes and ontologies can contribute to DfS by studying fashion sustainability in a post-colonial and neo-colonial context. The key contributions from this research stem from these objectives. In this chapter, I outline key contributions to the fields of fashion studies, DfS and Gulf cultural studies. Subsequently, I summarise implications for Bahrain, namely how insights from this thesis could be applied to Bahrain. Lastly, I conclude with a discussion of further areas of research that could use this thesis as a departing point.

8.2 Key contributions to fields of knowledge

The first and primary field this research contributes to is fashion studies. While the short-list of recommendations for Bahrain in Chapter 6 are specific to the country — and one can argue relevant to the wider Gulf due to cultural and economic similarities — they also have resonance with other postcolonial geographies where fashion as craft has been replaced by globalised imports, with regions of high and rapid economic growth and those with low labour rights and protections. Through examining the Bahraini, Gulf ontology (building on local epistemes), I make the argument for a "blurred lifecycle" approach to fashion (see Chapter 5), where I contest the distinct stages of the lifecycle as often discussed in the field. Building on the stages of *source*, *make*, *use* and *last* (Gwilt and Rissanen, 2011), commonly used when discussing sustainability in fashion, I explore

the value derived from fashion spaces, tailoring culture as well as sharing and donation cultures prevalent in the Gulf. Through contrasting these insights with Western perspectives on sustainability in fashion, I introduce a blurred lifecycle model where – for instance in the experience of tailoring – *use* can overlap with *make*. This blurring of these stages in the Bahraini and Gulf fashion experience challenges the conventional separation in Western discourse of the lifecycle stages as distinctly *source*, *make*, *use* and *last*. For instance, a continued and deep relationship with a friendly neighbourhood tailor is not captured in conventional, Western, fashion lifecycle models. Such a relationship is also often overlooked as part of the modern fashion experience. In the Bahraini and Gulf experience, such a relationship is part of the *use* of fashion.

The research also contributes to the field of fashion studies through critically confronting its structural inequalities that emerge from its underpinning political economy — one embedded in neo-colonialism through the labour relations the global North maintains with the global South. An insight emerging from this research is the positioning of the Gulf as both post-colonial and neo-colonial. This has implications for the design politics of the region. Without critically examining its design and consumption, Gulf society is positioned to proliferate the dominance of the West when it comes to development discourse (see Chapter 2 and 3). Understanding the Gulf as both post-colonial and neo-colonial means to critically trace its role as an arm of Western neo-imperialism in the wider Arab region. A Gulf-steered sustainability must be steered by local reason and epistemes, cultural practices and ontology. Understanding the Gulf's role in the wider global order from a fashion perspective does not imply that the production of fashion alone can dismantle such a political order. This finding, while specific to the Gulf, contributes to the field of fashion studies in that it asserts the limits of fashion as a transformative practice — for a sustainability that includes societal and politically transformative change, fashion as a design discipline must engage politically transformative practices.

The second discipline to which this research contributes is Design for Sustainability. As a field, DfS has often focused on social, technological, and more recently a systems perspective. However, concepts in the field are often practised within a culturally Western domain, without an exploration of political, ontological, and phenomenological inquiry. Within design theory, explorations such as design justice, decolonising design, and design politics have questioned the power, politics, and status quo of the design field (see Chapter 4). This study applies that thinking, from the design discipline, to DfS research after

identifying a gap in the field which I have termed "a needed bridge to poltics" throughout Chapter 3. As such, I put forward an approach that is embedded within local epistemes to map an ontological understanding of fashion in Bahrain, and of what fashion sustainability locally could look like. In doing so, this research begins to lay the groundwork of how the DfS discipline can integrate theories of post-colonial identity, neo-imperial reality, and local ontological understanding. The contribution to the DfS field is in the bridging of theoretical work on design theory and design activism, such as the work of Fry (2011), Escobar (2017), Ansari (2018), Boehnert (2018), Costanza-Chock (2020) to the current conversations in DfS — where I identity the need for a bridge to politics. Through engaging the work of design theorists that look at design pluriversally, I insist that an epistemic and ontological understanding is necessary before prescribing solutions towards sustainability.

A third area to which this research contributes is Gulf studies. While the field often focuses on a political and historicised understanding of the Gulf and its power dynamics, there is a lack of literature on the Gulf's place within the global sustainability movement (as discussed in Chapter 3). A key idea in the discussion of sustainability thinking in the Gulf is that discourse and practice are often constrained to the "light green" philosophy – namely, individual action and green consumerism – whereas the Gulf requires a shift towards "dark green" sustainability – one that centres radical, collective change – for meaningful change (see Chapter 3).

An insight that is pertinent to Gulf studies is the positioning of the Gulf as both post-colonial and neo-colonial. This has implications for the design politics of the region. Without critically examining its design and consumption, Gulf society is positioned to proliferate the dominance of the West when it comes to development discourse (see Chapter 2 and 3). Understanding the Gulf as both post-colonial and neo-colonial means to critically trace its role as an arm of Western neo-imperialism in the wider Arab region. A Gulf-steered sustainability must be steered by local reason and epistemes, cultural practices and ontology. Understanding the Gulf's role in the wider global order from a fashion perspective does not imply that the production of fashion alone can dismantle such a political order (as stated above, when discussing political economy within Fashion Studies). However, this understanding makes design for sustainability solutions that emerge *inherently* political and underscores the role of local identity and cultural production for the Gulf in a post-colonial, and aspirationally post-oil, world (see Chapter 7).

Additionally, this study contributes to the field of Gulf studies by defining its fashion culture and the material culture of consumerism in Gulf. This includes my classification of Bahraini dress into three categories – traditional, semi-traditional and global or Western dress (Chapter 2) – and the mapping of relevant themes, such as informal systems of sharing and donation culture in Bahrain to the fashion lifecycle (Chapter 5). This inquiry into Bahrain's fashion system reveals both new classifications and also what is uniquely valued in the Gulf experience, such as practices of *brova* and *indoore*, and how they differ from a Western experience of fashion.

8.3 Implications and applications of the research

In addition to the contributions to knowledge above, this research has practical applications for fashion sustainability in Bahrain. These pertain specifically to the contributions in knowledge to design for sustainability — they are a result of applying the epistemological and ontological inquiry that I argue is necessary in the field of DfS. The first practical application is the need to transition *culturally* in Bahrain — such as through policies, community activities, and social routines — towards fashion sustainability, in a way beyond individual actions (e.g., such as sustainable fashion purchases) and towards socially transformative practices. A cultural transition towards fashion sustainability can also be enabled by the exploration, promotion and investment in non-consumerist facets of Gulf identity. While this research theoretically explores social practices and material cultures, impacting culture on the ground requires a re-arrangement of societal values and priorities around these less acknowledged social and cultural facets. For instance, this can be in the form of government or independent community incentives that discuss social practices, ways of re-connecting with nature from a local point of view and collective thinking on the values of the future.

The second key practical implication for fashion sustainability in Bahrain is that to grow local production in a way that responds to needs locally, there must be greater empowerment of labour within the fashion industry. This does not require Bahrain to completely detach from the globalised fashion supply chain, which would be difficult for any nation or region to achieve in the modern-age. A maker society that is protected, paid fair wages and is technically capable would be able to shoulder the remit of a material sustainability within fashion locally. Investing in an empowered maker society also allows both local creatives and individuals to "support the weight of a civilization" (Fanon, 1986, p. 18), by supporting their creative and cultural production, as opposed to overly relying on imports. Such an investment in cultural production is likely to succeed

further if supplemented with a critical lens to design discourse and practice – one that authentically builds on current practice and use of fashion as described in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, as opposed to a hegemonic unified cultural image often proliferated through heritagisation efforts. For instance, this includes funding and prioritising art and creative studies and allowing for blended art curriculums that overcome the academic and intellectual separation of local and Western creativity and discourse. Only then can the subtleties of local sub-groups and their cultures (see Chapter 2) influence design.

While a cultural transition and radical shifts to labour locally are long-term, dark green goals (see Chapter 3) for Bahrain and its fashion system, a more immediate investment in public infrastructure can help lay the foundation for long-term change. This study's results point to a vital need to develop public infrastructure for disposal, re-use, and recycling in Bahrain (see Chapters 5 and 6), forming the technical under-belly of a material transition to less textile waste in landfill. Technically, such a system in the modern day would still have material and energy constraints – Chapter 5 discussed these limits to material recovery from recycling and energy gains from waste-to-energy (WtE). Particularly when considering Bahrain's status as primarily an importer of clothing, recycling, re-use, and material recovery become even more crucial to explore alongside WtE.

Introducing end-of-life infrastructure can build on the social currency of charity organisations and community centres that already act as sorters of material waste through dealing with large flows of donations and finding the right parties to receive them. Engaging the public on these efforts would require clarity in what is recycled and clear metrics on the destiny of all types of waste, including textiles. In tandem, efforts to support community gatekeepers, often women that anonymously match donations to those in need, must be approached with care and privacy. A large part of the success of these gatekeepers and community agents is the privacy in which they operate, often through WhatsApp communications and their knowledge of local families within their neighbourhoods and communities.

8.4 Possibilities for future research

Using this research as a departing point, I see several areas relating to both practice and theory that could be explored further. The first research area is derived from the key limitation of this research, which lies in the difficulty of accessing and involving lower-wage migrant workers within Bahrain in the research. While I interviewed one salesperson and a tailor for this research, this constituted a limited perspective compared

to the number of perspectives of Bahrainis. Speaking with domestic workers was particularly difficult due to access and clarity of consent under the Kafala system. For future research, engaging individuals in these roles would provide a more complete picture of practices associated with the labour of taking care of garments at home, including the processes of washing, steaming, starching and mending clothing. This is particularly important under the Kafala setup in the Gulf, where domestic workers are the hidden back-bone a for the very visible, overly starched thobe or perfectly steamed abaya.

Another key theoretical area that could be explored further using this research is the study of fashion spaces as part urban infrastructure in the Gulf. In particular, examining these spaces in a way that explores the lived experiences and practices of Gulf inhabitants, especially those socially marginalised. Chapters 5 – 7 discussed these spaces, including their accessibility, environmental impacts, and the experiences within them. However, further exploration from within the field of urban studies can bridge the theoretical discussion within this thesis with more practical applications. Notable researchers paving the way in this sub-field from a Gulf perspective include Yasser AlSheshtawy, Rana AlMutawa, Lulu AlMana and Rend AlBeiruti (see Chapter 6).

While more extensive work within the field of urban studies is needed for concrete recommendations on how malls and public infrastructure is built in Bahrain, this research poses a qualitative context for such an undertaking. One example, derived from the idea of the blurred lifecycle, is the potential mix of elements of traditional souks within malls, such as embedded tailoring and mending services amidst the sales of new clothing. Another is adopting smaller and less centralised mall structures, making these spaces more accessible to craftspeople and buyers alike. A third example of expanded use of the mall is integrating digitally enabled donation and charity centres, making donations convenient as part of everyday excursions. This approach to the mall's use and built environment aims to bring closer the processes of making, mending and re-use to the Gulf's main fashion locale. Beyond the mall itself, sanctioning space for public life that is not tied to commercial value is vital for the Gulf. From an urban studies perspective, how to build these spaces, where to create them and ensuring compatibility with the climate and seasons of the Gulf, could be further explored.

Another area for theoretical exploration is tackling the inequity of fashion spaces, which falls within the domain of fashion studies and political fashion discourse. Contemplating the Gulf mall – or the Gulf High Street – of the future involves envisioning spaces that incorporate mending, tailoring, and cater to various social classes. However, achieving

social class inclusion remains a key challenge. While different genders and ethnic affiliations already intermingle in many areas, bridging the affordability gap and class segregation between the souk and the mall requires more global and political solutions. This challenge is not unique to the Gulf. Rather, it necessitates an examination within the broader context of the fashion industry and literature, of the modern fashion system as "a child of capitalism" (Wilson, 2003, p. 13). When tackling this inequity from within the domain of wider fashion discourse, the Gulf experience can lend countless applied examples. For the Gulf, further exploration of these fashion spaces and their social arrangements should include not only the mall itself, but other fashion locales, including souks, standalone discount stores, designer pop-ups, independent stores, tailors, abaya shops, and social media as a digital form of the "mall".

8.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this research contributes to three fields: fashion studies, Design for Sustainability (DfS), and Gulf studies. Within fashion studies, it introduces the "blurred lifecycle" approach, which challenges the conventional segmentation of the fashion lifecycle through an in-depth discussion of Gulf-specific practices like tailoring, sharing, and donation. It also critiques structural inequalities within the fashion system rooted in political economy, positioning the Gulf as both post-colonial and neo-colonial — and puts forward the tension of transforming towards fashion sustainability when the industry relies on global neo-colonial politics.

For DfS, this study bridges gaps between design theory, activism, and sustainability, emphasizing the need for culturally and politically embedded approaches. It highlights the importance of integrating post-colonial identity and local ontological understanding into sustainability practices – as is currently argued in the design field at a large — thereby broadening the scope of DfS beyond Western frameworks.

Finally, this research adds to Gulf studies a mapping of Bahrain's unique fashion culture and material consumerism, offering insights into informal sharing systems, donation practices, and distinctive dress classifications — such as the distinction between "traditional" and "semi-traditional". By linking these findings to broader global sustainability discourses, the study underscores the Gulf's role in shaping alternative, locally-rooted sustainability paradigms. The research identifies that for a transition towards fashion sustainability in Bahrain, two changes are crucial: a cultural transition and fostering local production through an empowered labour force and a creative maker

society. This involves protecting workers, paying fair wages, and investing in technical capabilities.

Using this research as a departure point, areas for further exploration include the practices and working conditions of domestic and migrant workers in Bahrain and an exploration of fashion spaces and urban infrastructure from an urban studies perspective.

While this research shares findings on fashion sustainability within Bahrain, my hope is that its lessons may be extrapolated to regions globally that have seen hyper-growth in past decades or those that predominantly rely on an import of clothing despite a history of local craft. Moreover, my hope is that this research establishes that ontological inquiry into fashion is crucial for the development of localised views of fashion sustainability.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Research Participant Project Background and Consent

university of the arts london
london college of fashion

Information Sheet for Participation in BFS Research Project
Thank you for your participation!

Thank you for your time and for your contribution to the future of sustainability in Bahrain and the Gulf.

Purpose of the Bahrain Fashion Sustainability (BFS) study

- To investigate the current state of the Bahraini fashion industry against key design for sustainability frameworks, particularly design for sustainability across the product lifecycle
- To examine how Bahrain's social and cultural context plays a role in determining barriers and opportunities towards sustainability in fashion

Background on Bahrain Fashion Sustainability (BFS):

Like many countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Bahrain now needs to diversify to a post-oil economy for economic and environmental reasons. This project explores possible roles the fashion industry may play in that shift.

Current sustainability research in fashion has not focused on the Arab world, or on its conjunction with gender and consumption in the region. This study aims to address this gap.

The study focuses on the fashion industry in Bahrain. Bahrain's garment sector consists of large exports ($908M) and imports ($480M), and a smaller locally produced and consumed segment.

In other sectors, growing sustainability criteria are emerging—such as hazardous waste management and environmental impact assessments for construction—all of which denote a promising direction for environmental policy.

What is meant by "sustainability"?

One of the most frequently cited definitions of sustainable development, coined by the Brundtland Report in 1987 is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

Why are we looking at sustainability within fashion?

As Bahrain and its GCC neighbors transition to a post-oil economy, shifting towards sustainability across sectors is becoming a priority.

The multi-faceted changes necessitated by a focus on sustainability beg the question of how this will impact the fashion industry materially, environmentally, and socially.

What are my rights as a participant?

Participation is voluntary and you may discontinue participation at any time and withdraw from the process, without prejudice. If you decide to take part in this research, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

ual: university
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london
london college
of fashion

What will happen to the results of the interview?

The results of this project will be used in doctoral research and may also be used for additional or subsequent research and reproduced in different formats in the future.

At the end of the project, all voice recordings will be destroyed and only transcripts will be kept. The transcripts and data will be held anonymously, apart from demographic info, unless you have willingly signed on to the use of your name and work title.

Who is conducting the research?

The Bahrain Fashion Sustainability (BFS) project is led by Rawan Maki, a Bahraini PhD candidate at London College of Fashion, University of Arts London, supervised by Professor Kate Fletcher and Professor Reina Lewis.

For further information, please contact:

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Consent for Participation in Research Interview

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Rawan Maki, a researcher at the London College of Fashion. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about the fashion industry in Bahrain and the potential towards sustainability.

At the end of the study, voice recordings will be destroyed, and only a transcribed interview script will remain. These transcripts may, in future, be lodged in a university library or research archive for other researchers to access, but will be held anonymously, unless I opt into using my name and title for the study.

☐ My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

☐ I agree to being voice-recorded for the duration of the interview. I also consent to the researcher taking notes throughout the duration. My voice will not be used or reproduced, as voice-recordings will be used for transcribing the interview for the study and then destroyed.

☐ I would like to **opt in to my name and title being used for the purposes of this study**. (If not, an alias will be used).

☐ I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

☐ I have been given a copy of this consent form.

I consent to the use of my contributions during the interview for the following purposes (please indicate):

Private research .... YES/NO   Educational use.................................YES/NO

Broadcasting (including the internet) .... YES/NO   Publishing.. YES/NO

Displays and exhibitions ….....…..........YES/NO   Institutional deposit (archive/ library) ...... YES/NO

Any special terms or conditions? (please specify) _____

Participant

_____   _____   _____

Full Name   Signature   Date

Researcher

_____   _____   _____

Full Name   Signature   Date

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Appendix B. Delphi Study

Delphi Participant Profiles

	Participant Description	Participant Category	In-text Reference
1	Independent fashion advisor	Industry / Retail	P01
2	Senior academic and advisor on environment and heritage	Academic	P02
3	Co-founder of social and environmental consultancy	Social/ Environmental Activist, Independent Consultant	P03
4	Director of sustainability at large local retailer	Industry / Retail	P04
5	Economic advisor and senior civil servant at government body	Civil Servant / Gov. Entity	P05
6	Sustainability analyst at environmental government body	Civil Servant / Gov. Entity	P06
7	Program specialist at sustainable development government body	Civil Servant / Gov. Entity	P07
8	Senior civil servant at environmental government body	Civil Servant / Gov. Entity	P08
9	Economic advisor and civil servant	Civil Servant / Gov. Entity	P09
10	Environmental activist and documentary photographer	Social / Environmental Activist	P10
11	Mid-level academic in environment and sustainable development	Academic	P11
12	Renewable energy researcher at local chapter of global sustainable development NGO	Non-Governmental Organization	P12
13	Director at funding body for small to medium business	Civil Servant / Gov. Entity	P13
14	Manager at funding body for small to medium business	Civil Servant / Gov. Entity	P14
15	Co-founder of local fashion upcycling business	Industry / Retail	P15
16	Environmental activist and junior academic in biology	Social / Environmental Activist, Academic	P16

Delphi Round 1 Questionnaire (conducted September to December 2018)

<u>Introduction</u>

Thank you for participating in the Bahrain Fashion Sustainability (BFS) project.

This part of the project consists of two rounds, the first of which will be completed by the end of September, and the second of which will be completed by the end of October. In total, the study will take 3 hours (max.) of your time, over these two months.

You are among 12 other experts who will also be sharing their thoughts and creative vision. For each round, you will be asked to answer open ended questions where you be asked to offer ideas, make connections, and give your expert opinion. At the end of each round, all input will be consolidated, and shared. At this point, you will be able to make additions or changes to your first answer. This round of "adjustments" is to facilitate conversation and reach consensus throughout the study, therefore you are given the ability to build on the answers of others, as well as your own. You will remain anonymous throughout the duration of this study.

The part of the project in which you are about to participate in follows previous data gathering completed in 2018 in which interviews were conducted with 18 individuals in Bahrain, as well as a workshop with 22 fashion designers. This previous work brought to light several emerging themes which are summarized on the next page.

Before answering the current questions Round 1, please read the recap of these emerging themes. You are encouraged to reach out to me with any questions at this stage if needed on the background of the study. Similarly, if any of the research questions are unclear, kindly reach out as well. Please see a complete timeline of your requested participation below.

- Sept 15 - 27: Respond to Round 1 (1 hr max.)
- Oct 4 - Oct 8: Read compiled answers and submit any adjustments (0.5 hrs max.)
- Oct 13 - 17: Respond to Round 2 (1 hr max.)
- Oct 27 - Oct 31: Read compiled answers and submit any adjustments (0.5 hrs max.)

Your expertise in your field has qualified you for this study, with the review of the emerging themes on the next page to guide your analysis. Prior knowledge of fashion sustainability specifically is not required, as this research is considered foundational in creating knowledge for fashion sustainability in Bahrain. For that reason, your creativity and knowledge are both highly valued, and you are encouraged to be as imaginative as you'd like during the exercises.

 Thank you very much for your time and participation!

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Emerging themes from my research so far:

Below is a summary of emerging themes, with some open-ended questions that you can use as a point of departure for your contributions to this study.

A. Consumer culture

The majority of interviewees in the previous data gathering underlined consumerism as a dominant cultural feature, including mentions of "mall culture", "Instagram culture", and a decline in "sharing culture"—a practice of sharing garments among women of the same household, or at times neighborhood.

Men's participation in fast fashion has been on the rise in the region in the past decade, with women still forming most of their customer base, as women also tend to be the ones to buy for their families. Peak sales seasons are before Eid and before the New Year, and online sales are also on the rise—fast fashion brands are heavily investing in online sales in the region.

What role do you think the consumer can play in fashion sustainability in Bahrain? What opportunities and barriers are there with regards to consumers?

B. Traditional, craft, & heritage garments

Bahrain has a long history of textile weaving and embroidery (alongside other crafts like pottery making, basket-making, and bead making) that is on the decline. The decline of textile weaving and embroidery in Bahrain are partly due to Bahrain entering the globalized economy for clothing as well as the preservation of some craft communities over others.

How can Bahraini craft continue to play a role in the future of fashion in Bahrain? What are the factors hindering craft? Who are the main players involved in craft proliferation and preservation?

C. Perceptions of "green" as expensive

Cost is often seen as a deterrent to considering more sustainable options – in the world of fashion and beyond. A prominent Bahraini fashion buyer and retailer expressed that "Consumers are simply not willing to pay the 'sustainability premium'". Perceptions of sustainably made products as more expensive remain even when sustainably made options are equally priced.

In Bahrain, price-sensitivity has been utilized by the government to subsidize and increase the uptake of solar energy, and slowly de-subsidize electric power.

What can be done to improve sustainability in fashion in Bahrain in a way that is affordable to the consumer? What can be done to remove the stigma of a "sustainability premium"? Whose role is it to lead a transition towards sustainability, ensuring that sustainability is offered to those across income and social brackets?

D. Traceability

Traceability is the ability to know the history, source, and conditions of origin and production of the products we buy. Global fast fashion chains which have low traceability (H&M, Zara, Mango, GAP, Topshop, etc) are abundant in Bahrain, while the local market itself is generally fragmented, with little knowledge about where materials have been imported from and the conditions under which they were made. This was echoed both

during the workshop, as well as during one-on-one interviews with local fashion designers and tailors.

What can be done to improve traceability in Bahrain, both in terms of the environmental and social impact of fashion? Which stakeholders would be involved? What would an increase in traceability look like?

E.   Government strategy

The government is currently enacting several sustainability strategies: waste management, UN SDG implementation, and energy-saving strategies (such as NREAP) under the Ministry of Energy are all underway. More generally, GCC governments are forming their own strategies towards sustainability as well.

What role can government (central, regional, municipality) play on the path to fashion sustainability? What can be done by government actors to improve the environmental, social, or ethical impact of fashion in Bahrain?

 Round 1 of Questionnaire (this should take you approximately 1 hour)

Part I: Mapping the fashion sustainability problem

Please fill in the brainstorm area on the next page with issues relating to fashion sustainability in Bahrain. Fashion sustainability issues are those related to the environmental, social, or ethical impact of fashion. Your brainstorm may involve factors that hinder or promote fashion sustainability.

The brainstorm categories are split into phases of life of a garment as well as agents involved across the life of a garment. See below for a broad definition of what each category of brainstorm may include. Please feel free to see the structure below as a guideline only and write any other comments you have down. You may use additional pieces of paper if needed.

Fashion sustainability brainstorm framework

Life-stages of Garment

Production — Includes making and sourcing of textiles, garment production, acquisition, or import

Consumption — Includes consumer behavior, from point of purchase to wearing, care (washing, drying, mending), and re-use

Disposal — Includes end-of-life of garment: disposal and recycling

Agents

- **Government:** Governing bodies or policy-makers
- **Consumers:** Individuals that buy and use clothing, as well as re-use or dispose at end of life
- **Producers:** Business owners involved in textile or garment-making
- **Retailers:** Business owners involved in sales or distribution of garments
- **Labour:** incl. labour across the value chain such as weavers, factory workers, tailors, salespeople, and domestic workers that wash and care for clothing

Use the space below to brainstorm issues relating to fashion sustainability in Bahrain, your annotations and links between issues are encouraged

Life-stages of Garment

Production

Consumption

Disposal

Agents
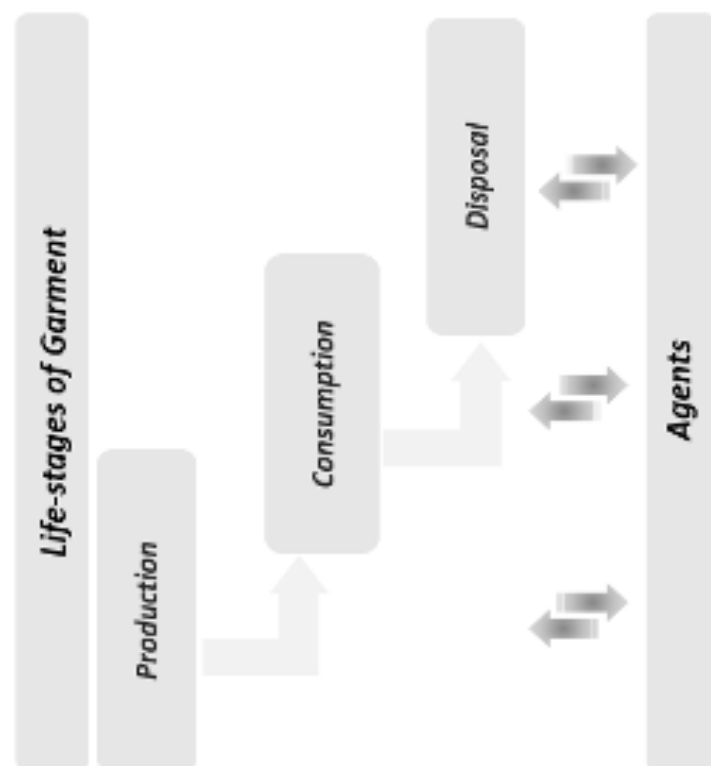
Part II: Visioning: Imagining 2040 in terms of fashion sustainability

Describe below what the year 2040 would ideally look like in terms of fashion sustainability in Bahrain. In this ideal state, environmental, social, and ethical concerns have priority over all else.

To envision how far the year 2040 is: by then, a child born today would have completed their college education. Consider the changes in Bahrain since the year 2000; the increase in population, rise of malls, and increase in consumer culture. In 20 years, climate change will be more palpable, the value of water will be higher due to its scarcity, and oil reserves will be minimal.

During this exercise, it helps to:

(a) Envision different stakeholders (such as the consumer, worker, or the environment) in the fashion sector and how their day-to-day ideal situation would look like
  (i)   How do groups interact? Are relationships different? Is clothing different? Are people different? Is the environment different?
(b) Review your brainstorm on Part I and imagine a state in which these issues are resolved. What would the resolution of these issues do for the different groups involved, as well as the environment?

It is the year 2040,

environmental, social, and ethical concerns have priority over all else,

the fashion sector looks like:

Thank you!

Appendix C. Analysis of Delphi Results

Excerpt from Excel, Indexing of Delphi Round 1 themes

(showing 4 out of 350 data rows indexed into L3, L2 and L1 themes; each row corresponds to a quote)

Participant Code	Question	Index Category (L1)	Theme (L2)	Sub-theme / Idea (L3)	Quote
P01	Q1	Production	Mass production	Mass production in Bahrain has been driven by foreign business interests rather than local economy	Formal production from a manufacturing perspective rose and fell with the FTA agreement between Bahrain and US, hence there is no effective support base for mass-based manufacturing
P01	Q1	Production	Mass production	Does it make sense to make Bahrain a hub for any kind of mass production / export of clothing? (incl. env, social, and size constraints of Bahrain as a small island)	However, given the immense consumer base in Bahrain and the region, remote production, shipping and distribution to various retail and brands will not give economic sense.
P01	Q1	Production	Emerging designers	Budding designers are gaining share, driven by consumer demand for new and unique styles in the digital age	Given that majority of the population is based on youth (over 60% of the GCC are between 0-35) who are highly connected, fashion conscious and tech savvy means that their demands for fashion change drastically disrupting current models. Producers need to respond rapidly and budding designers are gaining popularity over retail.
P01	Q1	Supply & consumer options	Lack of sustainable fabric suppliers	Most emerging designers contend with fragmented local shops which do not source sustainably, so their options are limited	Forums need to be more inclusive of the supplier side to develop it further and consumers will need to build things up.
P01	Q1	Education & Awareness	Education	Emerging designers do not have a fashion sustainability education (Bahrain Fashion Incubator trying to change that)	Budding designers who want to establish their labels are often oblivious to the impact of sustainability and how to incorporate into their collections. However, the formation of the Fashion Incubator in Bahrain is trying to change that perspective

Delphi L1 themes and thematic count (on excel)

Count of Index Category (L1)

Row Labels	P01	P02	P03	P04	P05	P06	P07	P08	P09	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	P16	Grand Total
Care	2		1			1	2										6
Consumption	4		2	8		6	4	3	6	4		6	1	3	11	19	77
Design	1		5	2	2		1		2	1						1	15
Design & Production	1			3		1	2			2		1	1		1		12
Disposal & Re-use	4			1	2		2	2	4	2	3	6			4	1	31
Education & Awareness	2	1	1	2	2		2	1	1	1	1	1		1	5		21
Global vs. local value chains	1	1	1	5	1				1	1		2	5		1	1	20
Labour			2				4	1		1			5				13
Materials	1	1	1	3		2	1	1	3	2	1	2					18
Models of working		1	1		6		2		1		1		8	8	1		28
Policy	1		8	2	1	3	1	1	1	1	2	4			3		28
Production	3	1	1	3	3			2	2	1	3	3			9	4	35
Resources	1			1							2	2					6
Strategy and transition				3				2	1	1	1			1	11	1	21
Supply & consumer options	1			1			1										3
Traceability			2		3										5		10
Women		1															1
Grand Total	22	6	25	35	20	13	22	13	22	19	11	26	20	13	51	27	345

Delphi Round 2: Results shared with participants alongside Round 2 Questionnaire

16 participants, ranging from governance, strategy, NGOs, retailers, academics, sustainability experts and environmental activists, **identified a range of areas for improvement towards fashion sustainability** in Bahrain

% of participants identified opportunities to improve or barriers towards fashion sustainability (n=16)

Area	%
Consumption	88%
Education & Awareness	81%
Disposal & Re-use	75%
Production	69%
Global vs. local value chains	63%
Materials	63%
Policy	63%
Design	50%
Models of working	50%
Design & Production	44%
Strategy and transition	44%
Labour	38%
Care	25%
Resources	25%
Supply & consumer options	19%
Traceability	19%
Women	6%

75%+ of you identified **consumer culture, accessibility, awareness,** as well as a **lack of systems** in place for **disposal & re-use** of clothing as the **most significant barriers towards fashion sustainability** in Bahrain

% of participants identified opportunities to improve or barriers towards fashion sustainability

Chart values: Consumption 88%, Education & Awareness 81%, Disposal & Re-use 75% (axis: 0%, 25%, 50%, 75%, 100%)

Topic	Theme
Consumption	**Consumer Culture:** identified as one of the major hindrances towards fashion sustainability, with inclinations towards "passive" consumption of fast, new trends of imported global brands
	Consumer segments: divided by traditional and non-traditional clothing, as well different socioeconomic levels in Bahrain which means that there is a vast difference in disposable income and access to alternatives
	Consumer Preferences: defined by a high sense of fashion consciousness, trend-driven purchasing, and the co-existence of modern traditional clothing alongside western styles
	Incentives & Ethics: Lack of incentive system for conscious consumption, and lack of environmental interest or link to consumption by the average consumer
	Slow fashion & post-materialism: Strong vision among participants to see slower consumption, more conscious decision-making, and a higher sense of appreciation for slow-moving, high-quality consumption
	Re-use, donations, and recycling: low amount of clothing re-use on a systematic level; exceptions include traditions of in-family sharing and "donation culture"
	Consumer model & alternatives: potential to explore alternative consumption models, such as "maintenance" contracts for clothing and sharing economy (e.g. tech-enabled garment-swapping, monthly "new garment" subscriptions, etc.)
	Traditional clothing: Opportunity to modify practices related to traditional clothing, which each Bahraini owns several pieces of (at the least for special occasions), and many wear daily (less fast-moving than fast fashion)
Education & Awareness	**Awareness:** knowledge on the impact of consumption decisions, as well as how to care for and extend lifetime of clothing will be crucial for behavioral change
	Education & school activities: embed sustainability and conscious thinking in curriculum and educational activities, as well as high investment in "imaginative", art, and creative thinking to spur future solutions for sustainability
	Weaving & handicrafts: lack of mandatory vocational and art education in Bahrain which can be tackled to create "active art engagement" among students, prompting solutions for a larger scale of craft and alternative ways of making
Disposal & Re-use	**Re-use, donations, and recycling:** Throw-away culture is large, with no recycling or secondhand markets; a small amount of re-use that happens outside a commercial structure through donation culture
	Systems: Currently, landfill is the only option for textile waste; lack of waste sorting infrastructure and recycling systems
	Secondhand Clothing: Lack of notable secondhand outlets, availability of very cheap clothing (for low income households) and affordable high street (middle income) crowds out secondhand market; Collection points for clothing available, run by charities, with contents donated to charity and leftovers shipped as export or taken to landfill
	Waste innovation: Lack of technical solutions to dispose or recycle textile waste locally, with Bahrain's small scale limiting circularity initiatives or private innovation
	Awareness: knowledge on how to use systems for recycling or re-use will be crucial for maximum societal participation

Majority of participants identified following areas for improvement: new and old ways of **production**, **value chain** complexities, local or regional potential for **materials**, and an increase in **incentivizing policies**

% of participants identified opportunities to improve or barriers towards fashion sustainability (n=16)

	Production	Global vs. local value chains	Materials	Policy
%	69%	63%	63%	63%

Topic	Theme
Production	*New ways: low-impact production, localism, and circularity as potential ways of producing sustainably that consider local culture, resources, constraints, and knowledge. Circularity combined with low-impact practices may complement consumer culture of desiring "new-ness" while prioritizing low impact.*
	Old ways: weaving, handicrafts emerged as practices that could be preserved, harnessed, and perhaps modernized, for Bahrain's future in terms of "making"; social agents (youth centers, SME funding, ministries, and NGOs) play a large role in organizing with these communities and ensuring their commercial success, preservation, and growth.
Global vs. local value chains	*Enmeshment within global value chain: Currently, Bahrain imports large amounts of clothing, and trends (except for traditional garb) are largely set by global fashion trends; change can come from the example of large, global fashion houses in conjunction with the support of local designers.*
	Tailored, bespoke, and local designers: Large precedent of tailor-made and bespoke local clothing, within souks and neighborhoods. While locally-made clothing has declined in the face of imported RTW, the roots culturally and infrastructurally are present for revival or investment in growth of these fragmented, local makers.
Materials	*Localism and natural vs. synthetic innovation: naturally grown fibre has limited potential locally, exacerbated by water scarcity; local production of fibres may look to synthetics that have low-impact or recycling of existing textiles*
	Sourcing, recycling, and "regionalism": majority of textiles imported, with fibres imported for local weaving, this presents opportunities for regional models (within Arab world) where organic production of fibres can take place in other countries (Egypt, Tunisia, etc) and weaving of fabric or textile recycling could take place in Bahrain (or GCC).
Policy	*Regulations: Labour and environmental legislations generally exist, but infractions not always effectively penalized. Legislation to cover wider infractions such as textile dumping, provided systems for textile recycling, and ensure accessibility to these systems to smaller designers, makers, and consumers as well as bigger producers.*
	Incentives: Currently, lack of incentives for sustainability across value chain; incentivize sustainability R&D and SMEs
	Traceability and data: Move towards open source data on sustainability and transparency measures for both brands and consumers; enact import policies that prioritize ethical and sustainable practice; link local CR renewals to mandatory transparency indices (human rights, supply chain, environmental)

~40% to 50% participants mentioned themes related to **design and production, models of working, transition, and labour...**

% of participants identified opportunities to improve or barriers towards fashion sustainability (n=16)

Bar chart values: 50%, 50%, 44%, 44%, 44%, 38% across categories: Design, Models of working, Design & Production, Strategy and transition, Labour

Topic	Theme
Design	*Traditional clothing and made-to-measure:* Focus on sustainability measures and innovation in traditional clothing sector (in addition to non-traditional) for mass impact, and promote made-to-measure or bespoke tailoring as opposed to mass consumption
	Smart design & design for low impact: harness tech to design for climate, wellbeing, durability, minimal washing, and up-cycling at end of life, while minimizing environmental impact
	Localism: Design with local materials and culture, as well as local "relationships" (with space, people, community) and wellbeing in mind
Models of working	*Hubs and ecosystems of support:* Establish collaborative models for makers such as hubs, financial support, and labs to support transition; examples of Tamkeen's support for social enterprise and Bahrain Fashion Incubator's nurturing of designers as precedent
	Retail: Create incentives for both producers and consumers (e.g. for purchasing consciously, proper care, mending, recycling), and enable stocking of sustainably and ethically made clothing in shopping malls and high-traffic commercial areas
	Nurturing working families: Monitor and support families working in fashion industry locally using a multi-stakeholder "local body"
Design & Production	*Decentralization & growth of local industry:* local designers should be supported to grow and in tandem stir local production, including local craftmanship, labour, and the creation of low-impact factories, ultimately shifting away from imported mass goods
	Capabilities: participation of Bahrainis in a growing local sustainable fashion industry would require capabilities across different levels of the value chain, and otherwise ensuring safe conditions and fair wages for any immigrant labour
Strategy and transition	*Government strategy:* Comprehensive national strategy for fashion sustainability encouraging practice and craft, NGOs, funding bodies, local innovation, environmental preservation, social equity and wellbeing, and long-term infrastructure goals
	Agents: co-architecting and management of transition should include government (MOE, MLSD, MPs, municipalities, MOIC, Supreme Council of Environment), NGOs (UNEP, UNIDO, youth societies), commercial entities (investors, importers, large-scale producers); one learning from the current implementation of SDG goals is that employees across government entities need to have conviction of goals, perhaps best achieved through co-creation as opposed to delegating implementation
	Cultural transitions: from fast to slow, changing relationships with clothing from "things to be consumed" to "experiences" (strong precedent in traditional contexts, where clothing is associated with experience rather than ownership and disposal)
Labour	*Local labour protection and wages:* ensure labour safety (living and working conditions), pay, as well as social empowerment (communities, legal representation, etc); currently labour costs in Bahrain are higher than Asian countries hence lack of large-scale production (except for FTA conditions)
	Local capabilities: Clothing made locally relies on usually low-paid expatriate labour; Bahraini labour limited to communities of individuals in textile, craft & embroidery as well as business-owners of fabric importers, tailoring, mending, and bespoke shops
	Participation in global value chains: As a largely importing country when it comes to clothing, incentives and legislation—based on value chain ethics and transparency—for commercial entities bringing garments into Bahrain may be effective (see point on "Traceability and data" under "Policy")

...additional areas mentioned by participants include **care for clothing, resource considerations, and traceability**

% of participants identified opportunities to improve or barriers towards fashion sustainability (n=16)

Care — 25%
Resources — 25%
Supply & consumer options — 19%
Traceability — 19%
Women — 6%

Topic	Theme
Care	*Washing & Resources:* Electricity and water subsidies as well as low labour costs may encourage people to over-wash as "true costs" are hidden for water use, labour, electricity, and environmental costs
	Domestic workers: In most households, the individual doing the washing and drying is a domestic worker, so initiatives should include their learning an garment care (e.g. following the current washing instructions, temperatures, different fabric types) as well as ensuring their wellbeing
	Mending and extending of life of garments: Decline in mending culture as well as individual upcycling in the past two generations due to the availability of affordable and diverse styles; increase in disposal mentalities; counteract by re-introducing mending skills to younger generation, as well as promoting reliance of neighborhood tailors and cobblers for alterations and bigger mends
Resources	*True Costs:* Prioritize subsidies of renewable energy and incorporate complete environmental externalities to non-renewable resources; (precedent exists with Bahrain's Sustainable Energy Centre's plans for subsidies of both renewable energy and energy efficiency, endorsed in Jan 2017 by the cabinet with proposed policies and targets)
	Climate Change: In the coming years, impact of climate change and resource constraints should strongly impact priorities and requirements in fashion (e.g. types of textiles used, consumer behavior to become more conscious); a transition towards zero-waste due to palpable necessity, where water and energy will be scarce
Supply & Consumer options	*Fabric suppliers:* Local designers contend with a fragmented local supplier market, which sources from various Asian countries, at times in accordance to contracts and trade patterns that emerged decades ago; so sustainably-made and ethically sourced options are limited (with exception of local textile weaving, which is more expensive and forms a very small portion of local textile sales; today local weaving uses imported yarns, while historically it was spun locally with fibres travelling shorter geographical distance)
	Presence of sustainable and ethical brands: in tandem with the encouragement of extending life of garment (care and mending), tailoring locally, and buying secondhand, for new purchases: the prevalence of sustainable brands is low and constrained to niche or "upper class" consumer patterns.
Traceability	*Decolonizing the fashion industry:* Trade routes, power dynamics, and commercial interests in the global fashion industry are, today, similar to dynamics established 150 years ago; Bahrain participates as an importer and consumer of mass global fashion, with a small local industry. Traceability efforts could therefore be in line with global efforts towards traceability in the industry.
	Data accessibility & monitoring: Lack of access to data (local and international) to make informed decisions on both a sourcing and consumption level; vital to create accessible designer and consumer-facing platform for metrics on source, impact (incl. longevity and recyclability), and waste. Could utilize block-chain for platform; data can be collected through local surveys and retailers, potential agents to be involved: municipalities, MOIC, Supreme council of environment, UNEP.
Women	*Social Inclusion:* as transition strategies are set, women's participation should be safeguarded and promoted across local value chain of fashion design and production; this intersects with socially enabling craft-makers, small and artisanal businesses in Bahrain, as well as many home-businesses and part-time workers; Tamkeen has a precedent in supporting women-owned business and home-businesses (including incubation, financial support, knowledge-sharing, and entrepreneurial skill-building)

Delphi Round 2: Questionnaire (conducted September 2019 to February 2020)

BFS Study Questionnaire Round 2

Thank you for your time and participation in Round 1 of the Bahrain Fashion Sustainability (BFS) study! This second round includes ranking the ideas that emerged through Round 1.

Before beginning, kindly read through the results of Round 1, if you have not had a chance to do so already. This will allow you to familiarize yourself with what other participants have contributed on the emerging issues around fashion sustainability in Bahrain.

Please complete this survey and return via email by Thursday, February 20th.

Part I. Prioritizing scenarios

Below you will see six visions for Bahrain in terms of fashion sustainability. Please rank the scenarios A-F based on their desirability for Bahrain, marking them 1 – 6; "1" denoting the most desirable scenario.

Note that the scenarios are not mutually exclusive. For instance, scenario (A)'s culture change, could happen in tandem with scenario (C)'s regional circular ecosystem.

In the column titled "Comments": Please provide any notes on the scenario presented or its sub-points. For instance, you may choose to comment on why you gave a high or low rating for an overall scenario, or if you find one of the sub-points particularly very desirable or not desirable, or very feasible or unfeasible.

Please highlight or underline any sub-points in the description that you find highly preferable.

Scenario	Rank (1-6)	Description	Comments (optional)
(A) A cultural transition: changing relationships to consumption		i. Consumers have developed a slower, more conscious relationship to clothing. ii. Consumers are also more engaged in creation, through a more active art education locally, increased mending and care of clothing, and relating to clothing as "experiences" as opposed to objects. iii. Consumer actions reflect the "true costs" behind making of clothing, in terms of labour and resources.	

(B) Decentralization, de-globalization, and growth of local production		i. Local design and production are vastly supported, allowing Bahrain to become more self-reliant in terms of fashion production. ii. Local production focuses on low-impact and circularity (including clear and effective systems for re-use, recycling, and disposal). iii. Since natural fibres are scarce locally, synthetic, low impact fibres are pioneered locally.	
(C) A regional circular ecosystem		i. The MENA region has created a circular system, which enables high level of choice for consumer due to the scale of the region, while creating MENA-wide recycling, re-use, and innovation hubs. ii. Each country in the region plays a significant role in the circular fashion ecosystem; e.g. Egypt and Tunisia for sustainable fibres and textile making, Levant for garment manufacturing, and the GCC for pioneering business of fashion, marketing and export. iii. Recycling infrastructure is shared across countries and location of recycling facilities in countries with highest population densities; making sure all countries have access to facilities. iv. Community hubs exist throughout the region to advance local innovations, ways of working, and share learnings across hubs to solve complexities and reduce the impact of the system.	
(D) Bahrain as a hub for green growth		i. Bahrain is a hub for low-impact material development in the region, integrating design sustainability into its curriculums and creating well-funded research centers for sustainable fashion ii. Local materials (e.g. palm leaf derivations) as well as synthetic innovations are spear-headed locally, likely with international partnerships, attracting talent to work at centers while enhancing and growing unique local capabilities.	

(E) A digitally transparent global future		i. Bahrain is part of a global, sustainability minded, and digitally enabled fashion economy. ii. Consumers are highly enabled to access information on brands, global brands have a high degree of transparency. iii. Bahrain remains to be predominantly an importer of clothing, but consumers have complete information on clothing's impact on people and the environment, and brands are held accountable by globally enforced ethical and environmental standards. iv. Gig economy innovations, such as the sharing of clothing, e.g. receiving clothes for a few months through a subscription service that subsequently "rents" clothing to others.	
(F) A "maker" society with empowered labour		i. "Making" is prioritized through vocational training in schools, encouragement of learnings the arts, imaginative disciplines through education ii. Workers, weavers, and makers in Bahrain are empowered; well-compensated, and working in safe conditions iii. Support for makers in the fashion system is a priority with a large amount of investment in their skills (in both older, traditional methods and newer, more innovative ways of making) iv. "Making" becomes a more desirable vocation in Bahrain, associated with higher wages and creativity, creating a surge in local Bahraini talent across making of trims, clothing, textiles, and mending	

Part II. Ranking courses of action

In addition to grand visions and scenarios, Round 1 of the study brought forward several courses of action towards fashion sustainability.

Kindly rate the courses of action below based on the following:

> **Impact of action:** *the potential scale this action could have in Bahrain. How much impact, both direct and indirect, can this action have on Bahrain fashion's ecosystem?*
> *(1 denotes low impact, 5 denotes high impact).*

Feasibility to act: *the ability or likelihood of carrying out changes on this facet of fashion sustainability in Bahrain. How feasible is this action for Bahrain?*
(1 denotes low feasibility, 5 denotes high feasibility).

For instance, if we were to rate changing design practices in Bahrain, you may give a score for average impact (3 out of 5), as a lot of clothing is currently imported, but it might be quite feasible (5 out 5) through structural changes and support to designers.

Course of action	Impact of action *(rate out of 5)*	Feasibility of action *(rate out of 5)*	Rationale for scores *(optional)*
Changing patterns of consumption and care: create initiatives and incentive structures to culturally transform consumption culture, increase longevity of clothing through care and mending, and make more conscious consumption decisions			
Investing in education and awareness: embed conscious thinking into curriculums and school activities, and implement awareness campaigns on the impact of fashion sustainability			
Enacting comprehensive policies that support the transition: incentivize local ways of making and consuming sustainably (e.g. R&D and SMEs), by working with existing agents (such as ministries, municipalities, NGOs, funding bodies, and commercial entities) & enforce regulations on textile dumping (provided systems for textile recycling) and restrictions on imports based on sustainability scores			

Developing infrastructure for disposal, re-use, and recycling: ensure that each neighborhood has access to recycling collection, and create recycling infrastructure for textiles as well as encouragement of re-use across all consumer segments (to create formal secondhand markets)	259		
Reduce reliance on the global value chain: invest in local design and production, to reduce amounts of imported clothing and enable local ways making across traditional and contemporary wear segments; ensure access to consumers across different income brackets			
Investing in local material innovation: develop low-impact, circular materials from either locally available resources (e.g. palm leaf) or synthetics			
Transforming into a society that values manual labour and "making": embed vocational skills into education, support local makers, and move towards higher compensation of "makers" in society			

Protecting local labour and developing Bahraini capabilities: enhance conditions for local labour working in tailoring, mending, and all forms of making; increase wages associated with fashion labour, and invest in capabilities of local Bahraini workforce			
Creating pathways for traceability for garments made locally and abroad: increase transparency on origins of clothing across segments (luxury, mass, souk, etc), for instance through digital or printed "on-tag" scores that reflect sustainability and impact for both imports and locally made clothing			

Thank you!

Delphi Round 2: Analysis of results

n=14

I. Prioritizing scenarios

	Scenario	Rating	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	P16
A	A cultural transition: changing relationships to consumption	2.2	2	1	5		2	2		4	1	1	1	3	1	1	2	4
B	Decentralization, de-globalization, and growth of local production	2.9	1	6	1		2	6		4	2	2	2	4	4	1	3	2
C	A regional circular ecosystem	3.5	1	4	2		4	5		3	5	6	4	1	5	3	5	1
D	Bahrain as a hub for green growth	3.1	2	3	4		1	3		3	5	1	3	5	2	2	4	5
E	A digitally transparent global future	4.4	3	5	6		1	1		5	4	4	6	6	3	5	6	6
F	A "maker" society with empowered labour	2.9	1	2	3		2	4		5	3	2	5	2	6	2	1	3

Delphi Round 2: Analysis of results (continued)

n=14

II. Ranking courses of action

#	Course of Action	Rating		P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	P16
1	Changing patterns of consumption and care	4.1	Impact	5	5	4		2	5		3	5	5	5	4	5	4	3	4
		3.0	Feasibility	3	4	3		3	2		3	3	2	4	5	2	4	3	1
2	Investing in education and awareness	3.9	Impact	5	5	3		3	3		4	4	4	3	5	3	5	3	5
		3.9	Feasibility	4	4	5		2	5		3	4	4	4	5	2	4	4	5
3	Enacting comprehensive policies that support the transition:	4.0	Impact	4	4	5		1	3		4	4	5	4	5	4	3	5	5
		2.9	Feasibility	2	5	2		3	2		3	3	3	3	4	4	2	3	1
4	Developing infrastructure for disposal, re-use, and recycling	4.3	Impact	5	5	4		2	5		5	4	3	4	5	3	5	5	5
		3.5	Feasibility	3	3	3		3	5		3	3	4	4	3	4	5	5	1
5	Reduce reliance on the global value chain	3.6	Impact	5	4	4		3	3		3	3	3	3	2	4	4	4	5
		3.1	Feasibility	5	4	3		4	3		3	2	2	3	2	2	4	3	3
6	Investing in local material innovation	3.3	Impact	5	3	3		3	4		3	3	4	3	2	4	5	2	2
		3.1	Feasibility	3	4	3		2	3		3	2	5	4	3	3	3	2	3
7	Transforming into a society that values manual labour and "making"	3.9	Impact	3	4	3		3	5		3	4	5	2	5	3	5	4	5
		3.2	Feasibility	2	3	2		3	4		3	2	5	3	3	4	5	3	3
8	Protecting local labour and developing Bahraini capabilities	3.9	Impact	4	5	5		2	4		4	3	5	3	5	3	5	2	5
		3.1	Feasibility	3	5	3		2	3		3	1	3	3	5	2	5	2	3
9	Creating pathways for traceability for garments made locally and abroad	3.4	Impact	3	4	4		2	3		3	4	3	4	1	4	3	5	5
		3.4	Feasibility	2	4	2		2	5		4	2	3	3	5	3	4	3.5	5

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Appendix D. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-Structured Interview Participant Profiles

	Participant Description	Participant Category	In-text Reference	Date conducted
1	Homemaker and seamstress, my paternal grandmother	Grandmother	R01	05-Dec-18
2	Member 1 of Fashion Revolution Bahrain	Social / Environmental Activist	R02	09-Dec-18
3	Member 2 of Fashion Revolution Bahrain	Social / Environmental Activist	R03	09-Dec-18
4	Founder of local fashion business, including import of global sustainable lines	Business Owner / Retail Executive	R04	10-Dec-18
5	Fashion Designer	Fashion Designer	R05	11-Dec-18
6	Homemaker and seamstress, my maternal grandmother	Grandmother	R06	11-Dec-18
7	Co-founder, of social and environmental strategy consultancy	Consultant / Environmental Activist	R07	11-Dec-18
8	Co-founder, body that supports local fashion business	Consultant / Business Owner	R08	12-Dec-18
9	Social and environmental activist, ex- civil servant	Environmental Activist	R09	12-Dec-18
10	Founder, regional fashion brand based in Bahrain	Fashion Designer	R10	15-Dec-18
11	Department Manager at global fast fashion Brand	Salesperson	R11	15-Dec-18
12	Head tailor at neighbourhood *khayaat* (tailor)	Tailor	R12	16-Dec-18
13	Fashion designer and founder of local tailoring business	Fashion Designer	R13	16-Dec-18
14	Co-founder of fashion and textile waste upcycling business	Social / Environmental Activist / Business Owner	R14	17-Dec-18
15	Documentary photographer and social / environmental activist	Social / Environmental Activist	R15	17-Dec-18
16	Prominent weaver	Weaver	R16	18-Dec-18
17	Civil Servant 1 at local UN chapter	Civil Servant / Gov. Entity, Sustainable Development	R17	18-Dec-18

18	Civil Servant 2 at local UN chapter	Civil Servant / Gov. Entity, Sustainable Development	R18	18-Dec-18
19	Chief Sustainability Officer at large GCC retail group	Retail Executive	R19	13-May-19

Semi-structured Interview Questions

[Interview Prompt, Read by Rawan]

Hello, thank you for your time. My name is Rawan Maki, I am a Bahraini student undertaking research for my PhD on the issue of social and environmental responsibility in the fashion industry in Bahrain. My university is the London College of Fashion. As part of my research, we are conducting interviews with people to learn more about the issues and topics in fashion related to social and environmental responsibility. These interviews look at the current practices within the fashion industry as well as to the past.

The interview will consist of 8 questions and should take around 45 mins – hour of your time in total. If you feel like you cannot answer a question, please feel comfortable telling me and we will move on to the next one.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may discontinue participation at any time and withdraw from the interview. You will be given this information sheet to keep, with information about the project, and be asked to sign a consent form.

Rawan to give participant a copy of both the info and consent sheets]

I will read through the consent sheet now, please let me know if you have any questions or if any of the statements are not clear.

[Rawan to read consent sheet clauses and get verbal approval]

Thank you for your consent

Before we start, would you be able to share with me:

      a. Where you were born: _____
      b. Your age: Under 18, 18 – 25, 26 – 35, 36 – 45, 46 – 65, 65+
      c. Your ethnic affiliation: _____
      d. How long you have lived in Bahrain: _____
      e. Your education level, no formal schooling, elementary school, high school, university, vocational school, other _____
      f. Your work background: _____

QUESTIONS FOR ACTIVISTS AND BUSINESSPEOPLE

    (1) Can you tell me about your current role and your remit with regards to environmental and social issues?
    [probing questions if needed]
        a. What kind of people do you work with?
        b. How do you keep yourself informed of sustainability topics within your specific field?
        c. Are there any specific events, activities, or roles that you undertake?
    (2) What does sustainability mean to you?

(3) What are the sustainability issues that are currently the most pressing in Bahrain? In the GCC?

(4) What kind of sustainability projects are currently taking place in Bahrain? This can be any project relating to materials, packaging, energy, food, consumption patterns, and so on…

[categories for reference if needed]: Products (e.g. packaging, architecture, material selection, etc), service, behaviour (e.g. generating self-reliance, etc) overall system (e.g. connecting artisans to foreign shops, creating a zero-waste system, etc), national or corporate strategy (e.g. investing in renewables, energy efficiency)

(5) In terms of clothing, what do you think are the most pressing environmental, social, and cultural issues in Bahrain?

[probing questions if needed]

      a. How do you think these issues have changed over the past decades? (Please be specific with decades if you are able to reference them)

      b. What, if anything, could be done about each of these issues?

(6) Is there anything else you would like to add on the issue of clothing and sustainability in Bahrain?

(7) Is there anybody you recommend I reach out to on this topic?

QUESTIONS FOR TAILORS

(1) When did you start tailoring and how did you learn?

(2) Who are your main customers? Describe your relationship with them.

[probing questions if needed]

      a. Are they repeating?

      b. How do they come your way?

(3) Please talk me through what you do on a typical work day.

[probing questions if needed]

      a. Who are the people you interact with?

      b. What is the process of how your shop runs?

      c. What systems do you use (computers, accounting, stock management, etc)?

      d. What is the main service you offer people (mending, pattern-making, sales, etc)?

(4) What are the main materials you work with, and where do they come from?

[probing questions if needed]

      a. Does it differ for fabrics, trims, etc?

      b. How often do you receive new materials?

(5) Do you think the tailoring process in Bahrain changed in any way in the past decades (50s, 60s, 70s, so on)– for example due to technology, the way people live, the amount of time it takes to make a garment? How so?

(6) Tell me about any trends in tailoring you have seen currently and in the past?

[probing questions if needed]

      a. What kind of tailored garments are the most popular nowadays?

      b. What kind of tailored garments were the most popular in the 50s, 60s, and 70s?

(7) Is there any waste or scraps from tailoring? What do you do with it?

(8) Have your customers changed over time?

(9) What do you think the future holds for tailoring in Bahrain?

QUESTIONS FOR SALESPEOPLE

(1)   When did your start working as a salesperson?
(2)   Who are your main customers? Describe your relationship with them.
[probing questions if needed]
- a. Are they repeating?
- b. How do they come your way?
(3)   Walk me through a typical workday and its activities.
[probing questions if needed]
- a. Who are the people you interact with?
- b. What is the process of how your shop runs?
- c. What systems do you use (computers, accounting, stock management, etc)?
(4)   Where do the clothes in the shop come from? How often do you receive new stock?
(5)   In the last week, can you think of 2 particular people who purchased items? How many items did they each buy?
[probing questions if needed]
- a. Does this fluctuate by person (age, gender, etc)?
- b. What patterns affect people's buying behaviour, if any (social holidays, seasonal, etc)?
(6)   Have patterns of consumption in Bahrain changed in any way in the past decades (50s, 60s, 70s, so on)? How so?
[probing questions if needed]
- a. Has the demographic of buyers changed (for example heads of families vs teenagers buying their own clothing?)
- b. Have costs gone up or down on average?
- c. Do people buy clothing more or less regularly?
(7)   What do you think the future holds for retail clothing in Bahrain?

QUESTIONS FOR GRANDMOTHERS

(1)   Can you describe where you lived in the 1950s? How many people lived there?
(2)   Tell me about clothing styles when you were growing up, in the 1950s.
[probing questions if needed]
- a. What was the everyday clothing?
- b. Did people in different areas of Bahrain dress differently?
- c. What kind of materials were your clothes made from?
(3)   Describe to me the cycle of clothing in your household when you were growing up, in the 1950s.
[probing questions if needed]
- a. How was the responsibility for clothes organised in your household?
- b. How did the clothing come into your possession?
     - i. If your clothing was made, where did the materials come from?
- c. Would your clothes have been able to fit in this suitcase [show suitcase]?
- d. How often did new clothes come into your wardrobe?
- e. How often did they go out of the wardrobe? What would happen to them after that?
- f. What did you do to keep them in condition?
(4)   How many stores were there for you to buy clothes from when you were growing up?
(5)   What about now? Do you shop, tailor, or make your own clothes?

(6)   What is better about clothing today? What was better in the 50s / 60s?
[probing questions if needed]
- a.   Are the materials different?
- b.   What do you think of the big retail shops and malls now?
- c.   Do you remember the emergence of foreign shops and malls? When was the first time you went to one?

(7)   Can you tell me the traditional names for some of these garments? [Show photos of 10 traditional garments from Ch2 to fact-check names]

QUESTIONS FOR WEAVERS

(1)   When did you start weaving? How did you learn how to weave?
(2)   Please walk me through how it is done step by step.
[probing questions if needed]
- a.   What is the process?
- b.   What materials are used? (e.g. cotton, gold thread, etc)
- c.   Where do the materials come from? How do they come into your possession?
- d.   What is the final product?
- e.   How long does it take to make a certain pattern or piece?
- f.   What are the different types of weaving?

(3)   We've talked about the inputs and process of weaving. Are there any outputs other than the main woven textile, such as remains or left-overs from the process? What usually happens to these?
(4)   Has the process and craft of weaving changed in any way in the past decades (50s, 60s, 70s, so on)? How so? (e.g. in terms of process, materials, duration, etc)
(5)   Who are your main customers? Have they changed over time?
(6)   Has the interest in woven products changed over the past decades (50s, 60s, 70s, and so on)?
[probing questions if needed]
- a.   What kind of woven garments are the most popular nowadays?
- b.   What kind of woven garments were the most popular in the 50s, 60s, and 70s?
- c.   Do you think that the new generation is learning the craft of weaving?
- d.   What can be done to pass on the craft of weaving?

(7)   What do you think of foreign clothing shops and malls in Bahrain?
(8)   What is better about clothing today? What was better in the 50s / 60s?

Appendix E. Workshop with local Fashion Designers in Bahrain

Pre-Workshop Message and Survey
Message to Attendees (shared through Bahrain Fashion Incubator, co-organiser of workshop)

Please bring with you: an item that represents sustainability to you. You will be sharing what the object is, and what about it denotes sustainability to you. This can be any item that is easily accessible to you!

Pre-Workshop Participant Survey (administered through a survey monkey survey, link shared by Bahrain Fashion Incubator with its designers. Information was collected the week before the workshop, with a deadline of Dec 1, 2018 to fill in the survey.)

- Name:
- Age:
- Profession:
- What do you think are the key benefits of the fashion industry today? [open ended question]
- What do you think are the main problems with the fashion industry today? [open ended question]
- How do you define sustainability? [open ended questions]
- Describe the Bahraini fashion industry with 3 words [open ended questions]
- Have you heard of sustainability in fashion previously (Y/N)?
- Have you heard of the term fast fashion (Y/N)?

Activity 1

Activity prompt (shown on projector in workshop room)

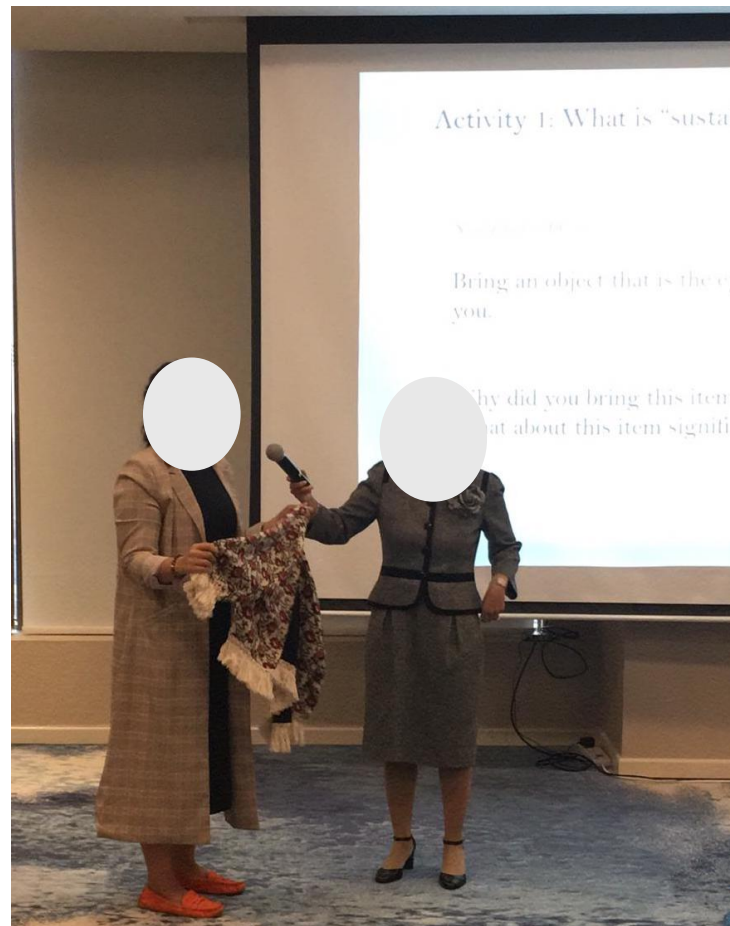### Activity 1: What is "sustainability" to you?

Sustainable Objects

Bring an object that is the epitome of sustainability to you.

Why did you bring this item?
What about this item signifies sustainability to you?

Images from Activity 1: Participants share items that signify sustainability to them
(Images taken by members of Fashion Revolution Bahrain, 2018)

Activity 2

Activity prompt (shown on projector in workshop room)

Activity 2: Prioritizing sustainability issues

What issues matter the most to YOU when it comes to the social and environmental aspects of clothing in Bahrain?

*Please **use your three buttons** to **vote** on the different issues. We will assign a color to priority 1, priority 2, and priority 3 colors.*

A – Environmental impact of clothing production (toxins, CO2 release, off-cuts, etc)
B – Energy and water use throughout clothing value chain
C – Worker's rights and wellbeing
D – Preserving craft and traditional methods
E – Consumer behavior (purchasing, materialism, etc)
F – Designer learning on fashion sustainability techniques
G – Availability of sustainably produced fabric, trims, and resources
H – Waste from disposal and systems for re-cycling of clothing
I – Social or community engagement in transitioning to sustainability
J – Diminishing resources

Images from Activity 2: Participants discuss and rank sustainability issues within groups

(Images taken by members of Fashion Revolution Bahrain, 2018)

A
B
C
D
E
F
G
H
I
J
K

Ahmed

Ahmed F

because of Women evening wear

Activity 3

Activity prompt (shown on projector in workshop room)

Activity 3: A Focus on Bahrain

In your group:

- Look at the images

- Identify **some of the changes that have happened to and around garments**, their **production** and **consumption** over the last 50 years in Bahrain. (Feel free to use the images as starting points only)

- Perhaps consider: social, technological, material, technical, cultural, geographical, consumption, use and maintenance…


Activity 3: A Focus on Bahrain

Part 3

Let's all re-group.

Share some of your findings with the other groups

Let's discuss some of the **implications for sustainability** of these findings or stories of change.
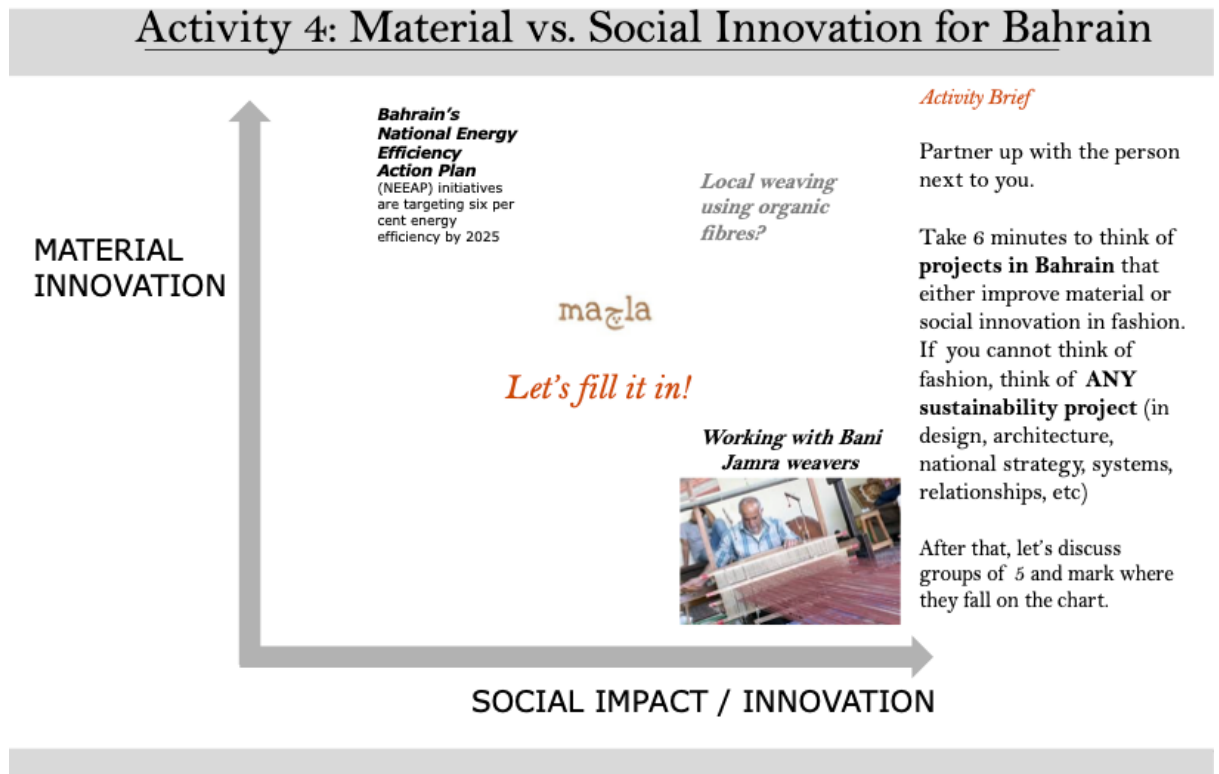
Images from Activity 3: Participants discuss changes relating to fashion in Bahrain since the 1950s and sustainability implications

(Images taken by members of Fashion Revolution Bahrain, 2018)
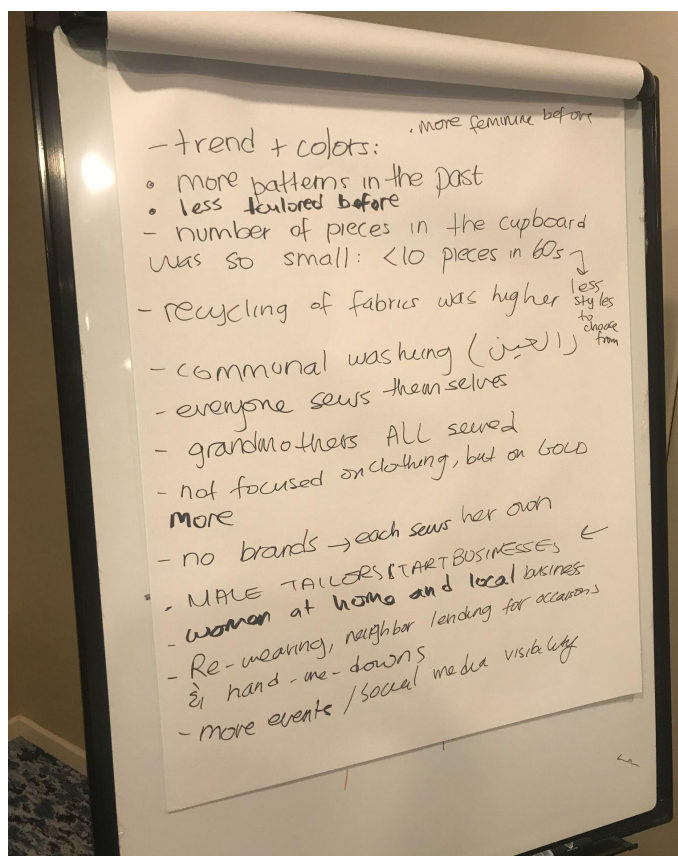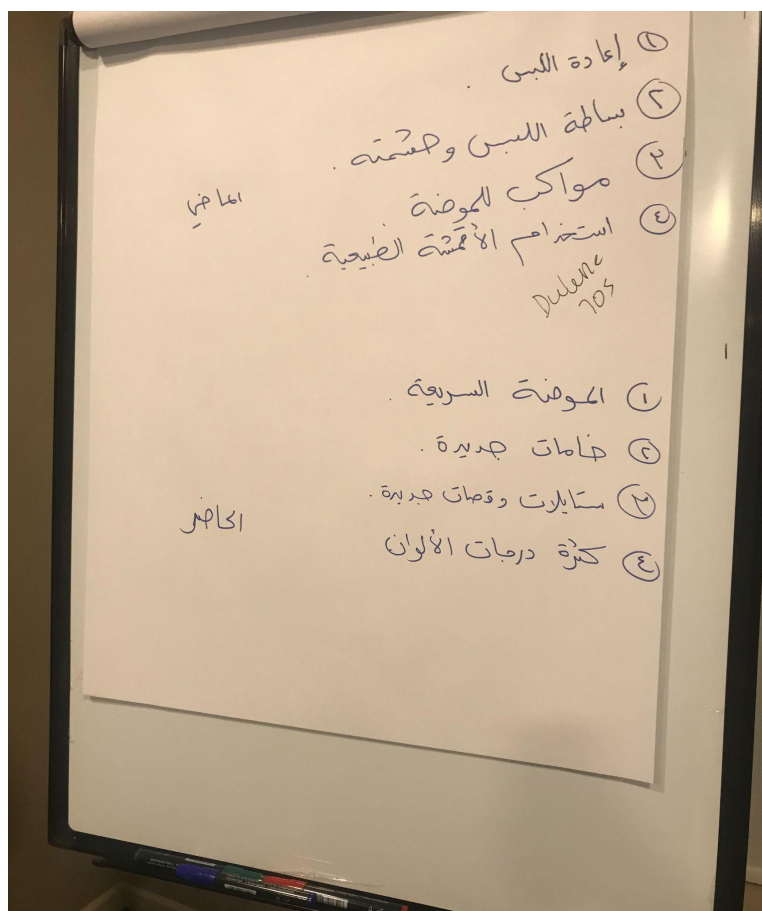
Activity 4

Activity prompt (shown on projector in workshop room)

Images from Activity 4: Participants discuss material vs social innovation of sustainability and heritage projects in Bahrain

(Images taken by members of Fashion Revolution Bahrain, 2018)