EDITORIAL

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On the issue of sustainability in fashion studies

ABSTRACT

In recent years sustainability has been at the forefront of some of the most stimulating reflections on fashion. It is also the main topic of the second issue of the International Journal of Fashion Studies. *This had not been planned and is the fortuitous result of the peer reviewing process. But this coincidence is symptomatic of a significant trend in contemporary fashion studies. This editorial gives an overview of the current state of studies on sustainable fashion and identifies some of the most pressing issues.*

Sustainability is the main topic of the second issue of the *International Journal of Fashion Studies*. This had not been planned. It is the fortuitous result of the peer reviewing process. Indeed, we had decided to assemble the issue according to the order of approval for publication. It is just a coincidence that four

of the six articles in this issue deal with sustainable fashion. At the same time, this coincidence is symptomatic of a significant trend in contemporary fashion studies.

In recent years sustainability has been at the forefront of some of the most stimulating reflections on fashion. Early debates on the topic date back to the mid-1990s, when the issue of child exploitation by some Nike suppliers rose to attention (Khurana and Ricchetti 2014). From that moment on, non-governmental organizations such as Greenpeace and Clean Clothes Campaigns urged fashion and luxury brands to move towards more sustainable business models and practices. However, sustainability in fashion is difficult to achieve because of the complexity of the textile supply chain, both with regards to the production of material goods and to that of immaterial content and brand values. From the cultivation of fibres, through to weaving, tailoring, sewing and retail practices, each phase is exposed to significant risks, whether it be damage to the environment or to the health and welfare of workers. Sustainability then is an issue that concerns a product's whole life cycle, from its production, to its maintenance and disposal. Similarly, attention to sustainability should be at the heart of the production of immaterial contents; questions must be addressed regarding the pervasive endurance of the many homogenizing and stereotyping visions of beauty, health and success that are typical of mainstream models of western fashion. A sustainable imaginary must be produced that does not conflict with principles of equality, fairness and humanity.

In fact the strategies adopted by businesses and institutions to face the issue of sustainability in fashion can be categorized into two groups, which are distinguishable on an analytical plane only: those based on sustainable *technological innovation* and those that approach *design* as a factor of *social change*. The former are focused on the improvement that can be obtained through the application of innovative procedures and/or technologies at the different stages of the supply chain: the cultivation and treatment of fibres, the extraction and creation of yarns from unprecedented sources, dyeing and finishing, transportation, etc. The latter pay attention to the whole social context where sustainability is expected to take place and intervene on it in order to facilitate social and cultural change: using sustainable fabrics in the mainstream collections, simplifying maintenance procedures such as cleaning or ironing, lengthening the fashion cycle of products, widening visions of beauty and fashionable styles.

According to some experts, an excessive focus on the role of technological innovation may shift attention away from the idea that sustainable clothing depends on the shared responsibility of all stakeholders (instead of individuals), including not only industrial managers and entrepreneurs but also retailers, policy makers, consumers, etc. (Welters 2008). In that respect, an approach focused on design as a possible answer to emergent issues about the sustainability of the different moments of the supply chain seems to be more fruitful. It draws attention to the fact that sustainability also concerns the cultural dimension of fashion products, that is, it is not just about the material production of goods and their own materiality but it also concerns their symbolic production and immaterial content (Fletcher 2008). More generally, over the last ten years most of the scholars and professionals working on the issue of sustainability, both from a technological and a design perspective, have acknowledged that an approach that privileges only one of the two strategies is biased (see for instance Blevis 2007; Robèrt et al. 2002). Research and

studies on the life cycle of the products have indeed shown that textile and clothing production, as well as fashion design and communication, involve practices, procedures and materials that can affect the product's sustainability at all the stages of its life. Since researchers began conceiving the supply, retail and consumption chain in terms of a product's life cycle, and not as a mere sum of separated activities, they have been able to argue that technological improvements produce effects on the entire chain that have to be designed in order to be managed. At the same time, nonetheless, designing new products, as well as new ways of using the existing ones, frequently requires technological innovation.

THE FIELD OF DESIGN

Kate Fletcher, with her seminal 2008 book *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles. Design Journeys*, is one of the first consultants/scholars to have proposed a holistic approach to the issue of sustainability in the fashion sector, based on the assumption that designing a product means keeping in mind its whole life cycle, from materials to production procedures and the practices of disposal that follow use and consumption. This is a complex process, and it has been necessary to develop various instruments able to monitor the sustainability of different measures. Thus, there is a diversity of protocols allowing for the assessment of a product's sustainability, that is, for the evaluation of the extent to which its material and intangible content as well as production are sustainable. Some studies have allowed comparison of the methodologies and the power of assessment of the most frequently applied tools (Finnveden et al. 2009), but the labyrinth of labels and certifications (Jucker 2012) makes it difficult for business people and consumers alike to make informed decisions.

Scholars and professionals who are addressing these issues from many different disciplinary perspectives agree that the main obstacle to the diffusion of sustainable production and consumption resides in the adoption of mass and standardized processes. These imply a reduction of the diversity of materials, skills and forms of knowledge (raw materials, modes of growing fibres, production procedures, cultural models, etc.) that would necessarily be involved in the sustainable creation of a product[1]. Consequently, this causes also an impoverishment of clothing cultures as a whole (Blackburn 2009). The interdisciplinary agreement that the spread of sustainability in fashion needs a sophistication of the clothing cultures entails also agreement that the inclusion of sustainable performance in the materials would strengthen the aesthetic of the collections and the intangible value of fashion products and brands. As some studies in the last ten years have shown, there are significant segments of the fashion system that have addressed, or at least started to address, this cultural change.

Sandy Black, for instance, has discussed the historical and cultural parameters linked to the emergence of a new, composite and sophisticated aesthetics in luxury sustainable fashion. In her book *Eco-Chic: The Fashion Paradox* (2008) she shows that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century in Great Britain, some high street British brands and retailers had started considering environmental and social sustainability both in the collections on offer and in their communication with customers. Designer and fashion scholar Sass Brown (2010) argues that by 2010 sustainable fashion design had attained a 'mature' level, that is, a positive set of attitudes and dispositions towards sustainability compatible with high aesthetic expectations. She contends that

1. It is difficult to provide references on this specific point, since the agreement on the importance of preserving diversity as condition needed in order to achieve sustainability crosses all the disciplines, from biology to agriculture, from social sciences to engineering. It works as an already taken for granted framework that guides people who are in charge of producing knowledge or policies for the transition to sustainability. As Elinor Ostrom claims in a higly influential article (Ostrom 2009), indeed, working for sustainability requires to understand how the social ecological systems are complex and composed of multiple subsystems and variables that make any of them diverse and working according to specific and varied rules. The loss of diversities, due to the standardization process, causes damages that threaten the sustainable working of the social ecological system.

the excessively naturalist and anti-consumerist aesthetic and values of previous fashion seasons is on the wane. Moreover, Brown underlines that the attitude of western fashion designers that take their inspiration from non-western aesthetics and craft traditions is gradually changing. While this has tended up to now to manifest itself in a one-way absorption of such aesthetics into western design, in the last ten years an actual partnership or dialogue with designers and craftsmen from other countries and traditions has become more usual. In the sustainable fashion sector projects have been developed where collaboration, including international, is explicitly recognized, and collections are the product of exchanges between competences and knowledges developed in different social and geographical contexts. Worth mentioning, among many other experiences, is the ITC (International Trade Center), a joint body of the United Nations and the World Trade Organization based in Geneva (Switzerland), that in the last fifteen years has promoted many projects, under the Ethical Fashion Initiative, run by Simone Cipriani. The initiative has involved brands and fashion designers such as Carmina Campus, Vivienne Westwood and Stella McCartney in designing and producing specific collections based on a collaboration with artisans (often women) in small African communities. The projects, organised on a multiannual basis, are aimed at developing local handcraft skills, transferring procedures and patterns of working and promoting creativity and design ability (Menkes 2012).

THE FIELD OF TECHNOLOGY

The life cycle perspective has also been adopted in studies conducted within the fields of research on technology and management (BSR 2009, Muthu 2014), confirming that a body of shared knowledge and attitudes toward the issue of sustainability in the fashion system is growing. In this framework most relevant are the topics of clothing maintenance and of the lengthening of the garment's life and uses (Fletcher 2012). Several scholars have recently focused on other stages of the life cycle, related to the supply and distribution chain, considering, among other topics: the burden of materials on the general environmental impact of the apparel industry (van der Velden, Patel and Vogtländer 2014); the role of a carbon print taxation scheme on the logistics of the fast fashion industry (Choi 2013); a comparison between companies of different sizes in the adoption of sustainable policies (Caniato, Caridi, Crippa and Moretto 2012); the role that the issue of sustainability exerts on the organization and business models of fashion retailers (De Brito, Carbone and Blanquart 2008); the advantages in terms of the sustainability of organisational models based on collaborative networks of companies operating at the different stages of the apparel supply chain (MacCarthy and Jayarathne 2012).

All these studies, and many others that cannot be cited here for want of space, show how scholars and professionals are increasingly interested in accumulating specific knowledge that can inform the practices and policies of fashion companies at any stage of the fashion chain, as well as increase the skills of the fashion retailers and the most influential fashion brands as ultimate controllers of the sustainability performances of the fashion system. Many scholars have acknowledged that the awareness of consumers about the complexity of the clothing supply chain has vastly increased in the last ten years (New 2010; Sisco 2012). According to them, consumers know that besides the workers' rights and common environmental issues, the sustainability of a clothing item depends on several factors, such as fibers, yarns, dyeing processes, transportation. Lacking

a direct access to the needed knowledge, consumers expect from the retailers and brands they rely on the monitoring of the chain's sustainability. As a consequence, the major fashion retailers, as well as some of the most influential fashion brands have focused their attention on the issue of sustainability, not only as far as the nearest links of their supply chain are concerned, but also taking responsibility for the most distant parties' compliance with norms of sustainability. However aware of the many different dimensions of sustainability that can be enacted, consumers usually see their retailers and brands as the guarantors of the sustainability they expect to be embraced. The reputation of retailers and brands is then strictly linked to the sustainability policies they undertake.

Furthermore, the increase of consumers' awareness is also producing changes in the cultural models that shape their practices and ideologies of use. Having materials that get dirty less easily and that are more hygienic for a longer period of time, as well as using more efficient detergents made with less dangerous chemical substances (Fletcher 2008: 75), represent important objectives from the point of view of environmental safeguarding. In terms of sustainable consumption practices, an interesting trend is a shift away from the idea of possessing goods to that of privileging their use – through sharing, barter, rent, etc. The development of collaborative practices of maintenance, such as, for instance, the sharing of washing machines in resident buildings, or the redefinition of the cultural standards, meanings and values of personal hygiene (Shove 2003), are also important contributions to the development of sustainable practices in the fashion, textile and clothing industry. The practices of re-use, exchange or barter, be they carried out in local contexts, where people are related by friendship or share cultural interests, or facilitated by dedicated digital platforms, increase the real possibilities of giving a new life to garments and accessories, relocated in the wardrobes of new owners (Airaghi 2013). Do-it-yourself (DIY) practices supported by digital platforms (Gauntlett 2011) play similar functions. Halfway between lengthening a product's life cycle and reducing waste are 'from the cradle to the cradle' practices, which refers to the recycling or upcycling into new products of those products that have reached the end of their life cycle but are not destined to waste (Braungart, McDonough and Bollinger 2007; McDonough and Braungart 2002).

Finally, a recent approach to sustainability in fashion insists on the possibility for fashion production to foster social sustainability by leveraging the special link that connects creativity and social inclusion (Santagata 2010). The idea that in the production of material culture, craftsmanship implies equality has influential roots in recent sociological theory. Richard Sennett (2008: 268–85), for instance, argues that good craftsmanship implies good citizenship, because the rhythm and routine pertaining to the learning of a creative job draw on the experience of play, and teach craftsmen to govern themselves and so to become good 'citizens'. Thus, with regards to the textile and clothing industry, Hazel Clark (2008) and Carla Lunghi (2012), among others, have looked into the role played by creativity in craft to support the social inclusion of people with disabilities or other social diseases.

Issue 2 of the *International Journal of Fashion Studies* brings together four contributions to the broad and varied field of study of sustainability in fashion. They all shed light on national experiences of sustainable fashion, thereby joining existing studies about sustainability in fashion in various national settings (see, for instance, Lueg, Clemmensen and Pedersen 2013; Pedersen and Gwodzd 2014; Ricchetti and Frisa 2012; Wolf 2011). Thus, Christine Eifler presents a research project carried out among highly educated women in

Germany to investigate the way they see sustainable clothing in comparison with conventional clothing, Alicja Raciniewska gives an overview of ethical fashion in Poland and Alice Payne discusses fashion brands' response to sustainability in Australia. Finally, Carla Lunghi presents her research about fashion production in jail, interpreting this as a form of social sustainability where the concern for a low production impact meets a commitment to the social inclusion of marginalized people.

The issue then moves on to two further articles that are not dealing with sustainability. Christoph-Simon Masuch and Kate Hefferon's contribution is a rare instance of a psychological analysis of everyday clothing practices, whilst Erica de Greef discusses her own curatorial approach to an exhibition of South African fashion designer Clive Rundle.

TOWARDS THE FUTURE

It is worth underlining that an interest for fashion sustainability has progressively and constantly increased over the last ten years among fashion scholars. In this period the range of different themes and processes addressed by scholars and professionals belonging to different disciplines, and the breadth of approaches as well as the geographical horizon considered have widened. The web of references, theories and methodologies has become more extensive, which may also make their encounter more arduous. This is why the *International Journal of Fashion Studies* wishes to support all efforts aimed at consolidating the sharing of insights and promoting dialogues on sustainable fashion, whether it be in the journal itself, on its Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/fashionstudies) or on its blog (http://internationaljournaloffashionstudies.com). In that context, we also wish to outline some analytical and empirical dimensions of research on sustainability which, we feel, need particular attention.

- As the literature on sustainable fashion becomes ever more rich, analytical discussions that bring into critical dialogue the main interpretative approaches and methodologies are needed, because they can support the development of future research.
- Secondly, the study of consumption practices should overcome the radical individualistic perspective that considers the consumer as an isolated monad acting according to her or his information and preferences. Research on sustainable consumption has shown that the information-action gap is far from being surpassed and that consumers' sustainable practices and behaviours cannot be explained through their levels of information or indeed their sharing of values. More exploration is needed to understand the causes and dynamics fostering consumers' attitudes towards sustainability in general, and sustainable fashion in particular (Bellotti and Mora 2014; Carfagna et al. 2014; Shove, Pantzar and Watson 2012; Spaargaren 2013).
- Finally, particular attention should be given to the cultural dimension of sustainability. Initially the study of sustainability in fashion was focused on the environmental and social effects involved in the use of materials and in production processes. At a later stage the sustainable practices of consumers were considered, together with the related issue of the sustainability of products' use and waste. However, more studies of the possible constitution of a sustainable fashion imaginary are needed. When the field of fashion still promotes highly divisive ideals in terms of, for instance, body

aesthetics, class, race or sexuality, how can an imaginary that embraces plurality, tolerance, inclusion and multiculturalism be built and sustained? How can practices of consumption, production and representation feed this imaginary and sustain its consolidation? In other words, how can fashion be culturally and socially sustainable?[2] In that respect, studies on topics such as modest fashion (Lewis 2013), critical fashion blogging (see for instance the blog of Minh-Ha T. Pham, accessible at: http://ofanotherfashion.tumblr.com), colonial and postcolonial fashion (Hendrickson 1996) or plus-size fashion (Canina and Volonté 2014) constitute invaluable impetus for further research into the decentring of fashion away from its hegemonic values and towards a more inclusive and plural fashion imaginary.

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