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Advances in Fashion and Design Research II

Proceedings of the 6th International
Fashion and Design Congress,
CIMODE 2023, October 4–6, 2023,
Mexico City, Mexico

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Sustainability in Fashion and Design



Weaving Diversity with Critical Thinking Approach: Exploring Geopolitics of Fashion of Second-Hand Clothing and Sustainable Literacy

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Abstract. Over 4 trillion dollars and 4.1 trillion kilograms of second-hand clothes are exported worldwide (United Nations 2017). People use a garment an average of seven times, purchase five times more clothing than in 1980, and produce 100 trillion garments yearly, with 20% of the total remaining unsold (Thomas 2019). These figures depict an unsustainable system when considering its repercussions in terms of overproduction, environmental impact, and social consequences. Specifically, it is essential to observe and understand the Fashion System from a diverse perspective (Pierce 1903), which can shed new light on current problems. The exploration focuses on whether it is possible to construct a Fashion System that operates and establishes new relationships internally and among its actors, fostering equitable, ethical, sustainable, and horizontal relations. Analysis tools are provided to future creative talents so that, through comprehensive and systemic education, they can consider proposing solutions for an industry and ecosystem that owe a debt to the environment, ethics, labor laws, and social issues. To accomplish this, the circuit of second-hand clothing, specifically the importation of used clothing through the port of Iquique, the Free Trade Zone ZOFRI, is examined.

Keywords: Geopolitics of Fashion · Second-hand clothes · Actor Network Theory

1 Introduction

This research aims to observe and conceptualize the Fashion System as a whole, adopting a transdisciplinary, global systemic perspective that does not separate its operational and production modes from its narratives and influence on the masses as a cultural product. The Grounded Theory by Glaser and Strauss (1967) serves as a starting point, seeking a fresh perspective where “scientific truth” emerges from the act of observation. In this approach, individuals involved in a joint observation project produce an ongoing interpretation of meanings, viewing empirical reality as a result.“ (Suddaby 2006).

First of all, the Fashion System is analysed through the lens of popular geopolitics, examining concepts such as soft power and colonialism, which delineate the intricate

network system through which the Fashion System has historically unfolded across the globe and disseminated narratives from the fashion hubs and creative centers to the rest of the world and its consumers. To observe the Fashion System as a complex assemblage, Latour's (2022) Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is adopted, recognizing the implication of an interwoven network of human and non-human actors and overlapping markets whose purpose is to sell fashion items (Entwistle in Rocamora and Smelik 2022).

In the case of second-hand clothing, the media discourse (vintage, sustainable, “*on-trend*”) starkly contrasts the mechanisms, markets, and networks underpinning this pre-owned ecosystem. In other words, the positioning, establishment, and significance given to second-hand clothing differ paradoxically from the reality of what is actually happening “behind the scenes” along its production chain.

As an example and case study, the second-hand clothing system in Chile, specifically in Iquique – Alto Hospicio, is examined, along with the issue of excessive stock of such garments arriving from the Global North: more than 130,000 tons annually arrive in Chile in 2022 and 2021, 60% which end up in illegal landfills like Alto Hospicio, resulting in environmental, legal, and social repercussions. The methodology employed involves empirical observation and tracking of actors following the approach of Latour and Callon to understand and identify the links, connections, and networks formed among the actors by tracing the journey of the garments and observing “how products complete their journey, are selected, displayed, sold, and the qualities they assume throughout this process” (Entwistle in Rocamora and Smelik 2022: 393).

Finally, in the conclusions, the study explores ways to reimagine the fashion ecosystem, moving away from binary approaches such as North/South, center/periphery, wealthy/low-income countries, colonialism/decolonialism, which have dominated Fashion System analyses and supported the existing system. Instead, it advocates for alternative perspectives (systemic, interdisciplinary) capable of generating new solutions (O'Connor and McDermott 1998). By doing so, this investigation aims to articulate, investigate, and open doors to alternative forms of relationships and networks that embrace and validate the diversity and uniqueness of all actors, thus creating more equitable, horizontal, and inclusive fashion ecosystems.

2 Literature Review

The existing literature considers the Fashion System from various perspectives, with the most common ones being: fashion history (Yiping, Naldini, Riello, Soldati), sociology of fashion, or fashion as a social phenomenon (Simmel, Barthes, Ruocco, Baldini, Wilde), cultural perspective as a consumer object (Veneziani, Brooks), its representation and relationship with the media (Kawamura), identity and the appearance it gives to individuals (Bovone), gender (Butler), its connection with politics (Marquetti), or as a productive and industrial system (Thomas).

However, when thinking about the new generations of creative talents and considering Peirce's Pragmatism, if the goal is to explore new ways in which the Fashion system could unfold and adapt to the demands of sustainability, clean production, social justice, and ethics in the 21st century, it is necessary to try to understand fashion from new approaches capable of offering diverse perspectives beyond those previously executed, which have only perpetuated an unequal and dependent system (Brooks 2015).

To achieve this, it is necessary to think in new systemic and transdisciplinary terms to comprehend and uncover, beyond the visible facade of fashion and its meanings, all those connections, contradictory elements, and even paradoxes that intersect with its narrative.

Thinking of fashion as an ecosystem, a complex network of interconnected connections and subsystems within it, which deploys its networks globally, establishing a dense fabric of relationships, assemblages, and connections (Latour) that are not always considered or evident when observed separately from different angles of the social sciences and design. In this way, beyond its aesthetic visibility on runways and its narrative as a cultural product (Entwistle in Rocamora and Smelik 2022), its entire machinery and mechanism emerge, positioning it as a powerful industry with Soft Power, similar to other cultural industries. To achieve this, from a transdisciplinary perspective, geopolitics serves as a conceptual framework of reference.

2.1 Popular Geopolitics and Soft Power

Understanding geopolitics as “the study of power relationships and strategies established by different actors, primarily states, but also others, with spatial implications” (Méndez 2011: 11), it offers itself as an interpretative resource to explain how the Fashion System extends, influences, conquers, and embeds itself in diverse territories and identities, thousands of kilometers away from major fashion capitals like Milan, Paris, London, and New York.

The next item is about whether it is possible to understand the Fashion System in its geopolitical dimension as a tool of Soft Power (Nye 2021), which acts by colonizing through cultural and commercial characteristics (Aspers and Lise 2006) and the development of brands and trends (Popovic 2017). According to Joseph Nye, soft power is “the ability to influence the behavior of others and get the outcomes you want” (Nye 2021), a description that is relevant to apply to the oblique Fashion System. It influences collective behavior by dictating trends, and styles, assigning meanings and values to garments and collections, just like other cultural industries such as music or film, capable of seducing and co-opting audiences, managing to install and colonize certain discourses in territories and markets distant from dissemination centers (Atlas of Culture 2021).

Considering that information and culture are two strategies used by geopolitics since World War II (Mattelart 2002), conceptualized as “popular geopolitics,” meaning “everyday geopolitical discourse in which citizens are immersed” (Dittmer and Boss 2019: 15), through mass media (Dittmer and Boss 2019), fashion, understood as the need for everyday clothing and identity construction, communicates global policies to its audiences (McFarlane and Hay 2003: 213 in Sullivan and Lee 2018), as well as other forms of popular culture. Through the discourses provided by the media, fashion manages to “generate meanings and realities for audience consumption, shaping their geopolitical imaginaries in both domestic and international realms” (Mawdsley 2008: 516 in Sullivan and Lee 2018). Everything we know about the world beyond our immediate experience comes to us through different media, which, in the words of Dittmer and Boss, even colonize our personal experiences.

Taking this information into account, one can understand that the narrative surrounding the use of second-hand clothing, which is portrayed as sustainable, fashionable, ecological, circular, “cool,” and vintage for younger generations, is exported from developed centers along with bales of clothing to territories like Latin America and effectively colonizes them. However, this green ideological discourse of saving the planet and the world by using second-hand clothing completely opposes the local reality. In practice, these pre-owned garments predominantly turn into tons of waste, leading to pollution, the emergence of illegal parallel markets, a substantial carbon footprint, precarious labor conditions, and the destruction of local manufacturing companies. “Clothing production is only half the story. The other half is the enormous market for used clothing that reaches Africa, Asia, and South America, from the richest to the least developed countries, worth 4 trillion dollars and tens of billions of garments” (Brooks 2015).

The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) highlights this through its figures where the largest exporters of used clothing are the United States (16.1%), China (13.7%), the United Kingdom (7.46%) - the global north – and the largest importers are Ghana (4.13%), Pakistan (4.48%), and the United Arab Emirates (3.34%) – the global south. Chile is the largest importer (3.01%) and exporter of used clothing in the region, ranking fourth globally.

2.2 Colonialism/Dependency

Colonialism was born from mercantilism, and its underlying principle was to conquer a place, preferably one with resources desired by the colonizer, and impose colonial administration, “it was possible to restrict to whom the colonized could sell their resources (thereby lowering the cost by lowering the demand for the resources) and simultaneously monopolize the supplying of markets in the colony”. (Dittmer and Boss 2019: 75). This concept can equally be applied today when considering the outsourcing of textile manufacturing from centers to peripheral countries, where cheap labor constitutes the desired resources for the modern colonizer. As Andrew Brooks points out in the book “Clothing Poverty,” to understand the relationship between clothing and poverty, one must first look at the manufacturing and sale of clothing and, secondly, examine how and why unequal geographic relations have emerged in the production and consumption of garments. To do this, he reviews the history of clothing and capitalism, highlighting how dynamics established during colonial times between producer centers/the Global North and peripheries/the Global South have laid the groundwork for an unequal and dependent system of relationships. “The textile and clothing sectors have played a leading role in making different regions of the world, some impoverished and others rich” (Brooks 2015: p. 104), with the Global South providing raw materials (such as cotton from Africa and India) and cheap labor for garment production, later compounded by protectionist practices perpetuated by European markets to this day, while simultaneously promoting a contradictory discourse of free trade to the rest of the world. All of this is made possible by an economic paradigm like capitalism that constantly seeks to expand and maximize profits, “a system that finds its main socially accepted goal in the pursuit of profit” (Brooks 2015: 63).

To this equation, the industrialization of emerging countries in the ‘50s, following decolonization in Africa and Asia, adds another factor. After the rise of mass consumption

and improved living standards post-World War II in the USA and Europe, these areas presented themselves as good source of cheap labor. “Clothing was one of the first manufacturing industries to expand and increase wage levels in Europe and the USA,” eventually becoming unable to compete with the cheap labor of countries like China or South Korea (Brooks 2015: 98).

3 Methodology

3.1 ANT. Actors and Networks

Given the preceding information and the complexity of the Fashion System, the approach will consider the systemic nature of the industry and utilize Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to gain a comprehensive understanding of its magnitude. In addition, from this perspective, as Joanne Entwistle points out, ANT can be applied to the field of fashion because it “presents itself as a hybrid of nature/culture” (Entwistle in Rocamora and Smelik 2022: 387), allowing for an encompassing understanding of the Fashion System in all its dimensions.

“Although fashion appears to us – in businesses, in our wardrobe, Etc. - already complete and finished, it represents the final realization of a complex intervention in the natural world and is entangled in a network of actors worldwide, both human and non-human (from water and chemicals used to cultivate cotton at one end of the process, to hangers and other devices for displaying clothing).” (Ibid 387).

From this perspective, actors are not only people but also objects, artifacts, and even technologies, all of which are “involved in creating or assembling the world and shaping the way the world becomes one” (Entwistle in Rocamora and Smelik 2022: 388). The focus lies on generating relationships rather than interpreting causality. The inclusion encompasses the entire Fashion System, covering its production, consumption, design, and hybrid culture/nature practices, effectively treating it as a system. According to Latour, “Science does not observe a world of independent objects from a neutral and objective distance; instead, it assembles objects of a particular type, and these assemblages actively construct and stage the world they describe” (Entwistle in Rocamora and Smelik 2022: 385).

Therefore, the aim is to observe and follow the actors, tracking their actions, movements, and the objects they engage with in specific assemblages. “In this way of thinking, fashion is not a ‘thing’ but a complex ensemble of a heterogeneous range of actors. In fact, following Callon, we can think of it as a set of overlapping markets that bring together many diverse actors – human and non-human – to sell particular types of goods labeled as ‘fashion’ or ‘trendy’” (Entwistle in Rocamora and Smelik 2022: 392); in this case study, mainly second-hand clothing associated with sustainability, a green agenda, using vintage items, and saving the planet.

4 Case

4.1 Second-Hand Clothes in Chile

In 2021, the global used clothing trade amounted to \$5.17 billion. The United States was the leading exporter, with \$834 million, while Ghana was the primary importer, with \$214 million. These exports experienced a 31% growth between 2020 and 2021 (OECD 2021).

Considering the imported amounts of used clothing in Chile, we can observe a growing market. As indicated, and according to data from the OECD, Chile represents “the importer with the highest growth in import value.” Furthermore, in 2021, Chile imported \$156 million worth of used clothing, experiencing a growth of \$78.7 million. Additionally, Guatemala (\$56.4 million) and Malaysia (\$55.3 million) followed in imports for the same year.

In the South American context, Chile is the largest importer of used clothing, accounting for 81.7% in 2021, with continuous import growth. In particular 1995, Chile imported 2.19% of the world’s used clothing (which constituted 70.8% of the total in the region). More specifically, by 2021, this percentage had risen to 3.01% of the global total and 81.7% of the regional total.

Until the 1980s in Chile, used clothing consisted mainly of remnants donated by the wealthier classes to the less fortunate. This issue could occur directly to household service personnel, families with lower purchasing power, or through charitable institutions such as Rotary, Lions Club, Red Cross, Etc. This situation creates a disparity between the upper class, who followed current fashion trends, and the lower class, who wore outdated styles. The first used clothing store dates back to 1976, advertised as a means to alleviate the budget constraints of specific sectors unable to afford new garments (Montalva 2015 in Calvo and Williams 2022: 3).

Currently, the colonization of cultural and commercial characteristics is taking place (Aspers and Lise 2006), and through the development of brands and trends (Popovic 2017), Chile has embraced and adopted the discourses exported by the global north regarding the “value” of used clothing.

Wearing a second-hand branded garment from the global north advertised as “American clothing”-is perceived as a contribution to the protection of the planet (saving water, energy, fewer crops) and therefore becomes a trend among younger generations and Generation Z. Used clothing ceases to be a poorly regarded garment, someone else’s discard, and becomes “circular fashion,” “vintage,” that is, an exclusive and hard-to-find piece rescued from the past. More specifically, a value attributed to a fashion product that, as will be seen, is far from being one.

In Chile, there are no official figures regarding the number of stores that sell this type of clothing. However, several stores adhering to this aesthetic and messaging have emerged in recent years, generating new economic circuits. These include chains of used clothing stores such as Orange Blue, Nostalgic, Bow!, as well as individual stores like Ecoropero, I love Vintage, or platforms like Ropera, which brings together 150 used clothing stores. Additionally, there is a parallel circuit of used clothing through charity shops like Coaniquem and Debra and informal markets such as street fairs, home sales, micro-enterprises, and websites (fardo.cl, mercadolibre.cl).

When analyzing how, why, and from where second-hand clothing enters Chile, it becomes evident that the network supporting this market reveals the paradox of wearing such garments concerning the attributed meaning, especially considering how this system perpetuates the logic of center/periphery, north/south divisions, wealth/poverty, clean production/pollution. Brooks emphasizes that understanding second-hand clothing necessitates considering fast fashion; the two go hand in hand. It is precisely the overproduction of low-quality fast fashion garments, with numerous seasons within a year and only five weeks for production, that generates tons of excess clothing that becomes obsolete within months, either due to its poor quality, lack of sales, and ends up in charities, resale markets, and landfills. Entwistle emphasizes that although fashion encompasses various markets such as high fashion, designer labels, fast fashion, and second-hand, which may appear “relatively disconnected,” they interconnect in different ways within a circuit that can be summarized as follows:

1. High fashion from centers like Paris, London, and Milan (the global North), sold at exclusive stores at high prices, is then copied and disseminated in 2. Fast fashion stores, and simultaneously, designers may produce collections for 3. Large department stores at lower prices (both in the Global North and South). Moreover, the second-hand market follows fashion trends “with exclusive second-hand businesses selling vintage designer items” (Entwistle in Rocamora and Smelik 2022: 392,393).

The circuit continues as the clothing from department stores and fast fashion either deteriorates or goes out of style in less than a year and continues its journey towards 4. Charities and NGOs in the Global North and 5. What is not sold or donated are either exported directly to the Global South or via reselling countries like Pakistan to 6. Countries in the Global South such as Chile. From there, it goes to 7. Importers and distributors of used clothing in Chile, who 8. in turn, trade with formal and informal resellers, who sell to 9. End-users either discard the remaining clothing in illegal landfills, where it is burned or buried.

4.2 300 Hectares of Textile Waste in the Atacama Desert

In July 2022, a research trip was made to Iquique, which included visits and interviews to gather information about the circuit followed by used clothing that enters Chile and, as widely reported in the international press, ends up mainly in the illegal landfill at Paso La Mula, Alto Hospicio, with mountains of burned garments. The researcher collected information by visiting various places such as the customs office, the Free Trade Zone, used clothing importers and distributors (Zofri Importers Association), the largest illegal landfill, and speaking with people like Manuela Medina, who takes care of it, as well as regional authorities such as Sebastián Vergara, municipal councilor, Andrea León, environmental coordinator of the Municipality of Alto Hospicio, Jaime Soto, planning manager of Zofri, Zona Franca Iquique, and popular markets like La Quebradilla in Alto Hospicio. Every piece of information was recorded:

1. In 2021, Chile received 156,707 tons of used clothing (Central Bank 2022), three times more than in 2020, and it is estimated that 60%, which means about 93,000 tons end up in clandestine landfills in Atacama. In this territory, the **textile waste** occupies an estimated 300 ha, which, due to the lack of relevant legislation, ends up

being burned in the middle of the desert, causing damage to the local ecosystems. More specifically, in this respect, the Department of Environment of the Municipality of Alto Hospicio estimates that 60% of imported clothing is waste or disposable.

2. The imported used clothing enters Chile mainly through the port of Iquique (free trade zone), originating from the United States, Canada, and Europe as the primary sources (Customs 2023). In other words, the imported bales of clothing have a significant carbon footprint associated with their transportation, coming from distant origins, unlike, for example, used garments manufactured in Chile.
3. Considering the highly permissive and primarily administrative nature of **Chilean legislation**, in contrast to neighbouring countries such as Bolivia, Peru, and Argentina, which either prohibit or regulate this type of import, it becomes evident that Chile emerges as the dominant importer and exporter of used clothing in the region. Being Iquique a “free trade zone,” it allows for “all kinds of goods, whether or not included in the list of prohibited imports, except for weapons or their parts and ammunition and other species that go against morals, good customs, health...” (art. 7, DFL 341 of 1977, DFL 2 2001). Specifically regarding used clothing, it regulates the sanitization of these imports, but understanding it as “...any process of washing with dry or wet heat or fumigation that guarantees the hygiene of the product and the elimination of viable sanitary vectors” (Health Decree 2389, 1995). Next, they only require a sanitization certificate from the country of origin, which indicates the procedure to which it was subjected, specifying “fumigation with formaldehyde, methyl bromide, or other fumigants with similar effects” (Decree 2389). Notably, important to say that formaldehyde (NIH, 2023) associates formaldehyde with cancer, and methyl bromide (Ministry of the Environment, 2015) links methyl bromide to cancer, other illnesses, and damage to the ozone layer, which is why Chile ceased its use as a fumigant for agriculture.
4. **Importers** bring containers with an average capacity of 22 tons and an average value of \$25,000. From the total received used clothing, bales of 45, 40, 23, and 20 kg are prepared, which are commercialized in different modalities, depending on the type of garment and quality. For example, it was observed in an interview with the Zofri Users Association bales shipped from Pakistan to Chile was classified under the category “articles of apparel,” tariff code 63.09; however, they could have also been imported under code 63.10 (rags, cords, of textile material, waste, and unserviceable articles).
5. These bales are sold sealed to **distributor-resellers** or opened, and new bales are prepared according to the type of garment or quality (only jeans, only dresses; quality A, B, C) also for commercialization. The reseller, in turn, sells in their own business or resells to unregulated micro-entrepreneurs, such as open-air market vendors, through home sales, websites, Etc.
6. Once the garments distribute throughout this circuit, a significant number of bales remain unsold, estimated to be 300 hectares of clothing (Municipality of Alto Hospicio). Tons of garments find their way to the **De Paso La Mula landfill**, where they incinerate, and individuals with fewer resources collect some pieces for sale or personal use. The precise manner in which these tons of clothing reach the landfill is unknown, but it is believed that the same importers dispose of these excesses by transporting them in trucks.

5 Conclusions

Observing the Fashion System as a whole is necessary to assess the impact of second-hand clothing, the networks that sustain it, and its social, environmental, and commercial repercussions. The media narrative that propels it globally, with a discourse that is often far from reality, should not separate it, especially in countries in the Global South like Chile.

The second-hand clothing market and the surplus of used garments ending up in landfills are directly related to the overproduction of fast fashion. And following Brooks, one can only be understood by the other. Similarly, permissive legislations in countries like Chile, enabled through bilateral free trade agreements (e.g., with the United States), perpetuate unequal power models in which the periphery takes care of the textile waste from the Global North, damaging their ecosystems and undermining labor security through precarious and often informal market networks.

In the 21st century, commercial systems continue to reflect colonialist ideologies, where more powerful countries use smaller countries literally as textile dumping grounds, which is sustained in part thanks to the dominance of a global capitalist free market system in which profits take precedence. This system disregards the cost of cheap labor in third countries like China, with limited legal regulation to protect workers. Establishing other types of agreements, systems, and fashion circuits that are more ethical, sustainable, and equitable for all countries and stakeholders is possible. In that case, achieving it can only be done through research considering systemic perspectives, new viewpoints, and holistic global approaches. This research should provide space for participation by all stakeholders, acknowledging their local and specific realities rather than relying solely on the media narratives that drive the fashion industry.

Lastly, there are arguments for conducting research from an Actor-Network Theory (ANT) perspective, which emphasizes the inclusion and visibility of all actors in the fashion ecosystem as integral and essential parts rather than solely considering their commercial and economic weight in the global context. This knowledge will be crucial for nurturing creative talents who need to weave new networks and connections to generate an ethical and sustainable Fashion System for the entire globe. Hence, there is a need to continue researching tools and critical thinking to expand the scope of knowledge.

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