

Fashion Futuring  
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Title: The Wearer as Designer: Approaches to Leather Production, Design, and Cultural Value.

Subtitle: An examination of how a specific sub-group of craftspeople within the leather industry, is pushing social and ethical material boundaries, by adopting a nurture and preserve ethos. Investigating whether blurring the relationship between consumer and attire may influence a new relationship toward dress and offer opportunity for re-defining current customary fashion consumption, to assess if there is merit in a broader approach to dress - the wearer as designer philosophy.

Abstract: This research interrogates the potentiality of leather as a material, emphasising the need to re-align thinking by highlighting approaches to leather production, design, and value, as a point for cultural discussion. Italian leather specifically is responsible: the tanning industry can consider itself a precursor of circular economy: it utilises a scrap as raw material and values its own residues through cutting edge technology. Life Cycle Analysis (LCA) is currently the most complete methodology to assess the potential impact of a product along its life cycle. As in all manufacturing activities, processes carried out in tanneries generate an impact on the environment, the extent of which is minimised through specific treatments. Water plays an important role in the tanning processes, but it is not widely known that measures have been adopted to optimise consumption and reduce inefficiencies. This study aims to shift attention toward these new industry production methods and, push ethical boundaries by examining craftsmanship from a specific sub-group, where a nurture and preserve ethos is celebrated. Highlighting individual artisans who subscribe to, or are central to, a distinct area of leather production, specifically, the craft of restoration, customisation, and repair. To examine and assess whether this knowledge, if applied to garment, may offer plural networks a fresh approach to existing leather fashion, one which may encourage a more ethical consumer behaviour and sustainable way of seeing attire.

Keywords: Leather, Ethical, Flexible, Durable, Nurture

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Introduction and Research Issue: Leather has had a bad rap, and this study serves to emphasise the value in re-aligning thinking, and highlighting new approaches to leather production, value, and significance, as a starting point for cultural discussion. There is a common misconception that leather, and the tanning industry is not ethical or environmentally conscious, often regarded with very high-water consumption. This study seeks to oppose this myth by highlighting current industry sustainability initiatives, and emphasising leather as a flexible, natural material, whose durable properties mean, if cared for, it can last a lifetime and therefore is one of the most ethical fashion materials available.

From a fashion perspective, it is important to recognise the environmental value of ethically produced leather within the circular economy. Case studies and profiles of companies (Blum 2021) central to this movement, such as Patagonia, Veja, Christopher Raeburn, and Stella McCartney are useful to provide viewpoint, however, this research provides focus to misled assumptions around real leather specifically. The study considers circularity, whilst devolving stagnant beliefs to develop new thinking. Leather is circular beyond any other material. It can be repaired, restored, and enjoyed for a lifetime, and passed down through generations. Thus, making leather craft the ultimate upcycling activity, turning an industry's trash into treasure. And so, focussing on leather fashion means durability, longevity, and flexibility, encouraging an ethos of nurture and preservation beyond any other material. The theory is that recognising the value in materials could alter consumer behaviour, challenge current consumer habits and the fast fashion industry. Approaching our garments as experiences offers the wearer the power to breathe new life into their wardrobes (Bravo, 2020). Using existing garments which have meaning, ritual and value elevates them far beyond what fast fashion can offer. Siegle (2011) is clear in her expose of the fashion industry, that a sharp rethink is necessary, further re-enforced by Barber (2022) whose book is a stark reminder that every item consumed remains on the planet.

However, to create a sustainable leather fashion system, a paradigm shift is required to acknowledge and disseminate the potentiality of leather, and an examination of the way it is represented is key. Organisations like *The Sustainable Leather Foundation* ([www.sustainableleatherfoundation.org](http://www.sustainableleatherfoundation.org), founded 2020) have environmental, social and governance responsibility at its core, and are working to reduce water use by tanners. Whilst *Lineapelle Fair* ([lineapelle-fair.it](http://lineapelle-fair.it) launched 1981), the most qualified international exhibition of leather offers insight into trends, design and manufacture innovation and represents the sub-groups who harness the value and flexibility of leather as a material. Leather's long lifespan and the fact it needs very little care, means that once manufactured the carbon footprint of leather clothing is much smaller than alternative materials. Wearing leather is not harmful to animals. Cowhides are by-products of the meat and dairy industries, meaning no cows are killed for them. If unsold, hides are simply thrown away, becoming part of the larger waste problem (@chooserealleather, 2023).

Therefore, the principle of this study is, to align this knowledge with an awareness of specific artisan handcraft techniques, to develop, and strengthen the current leather fashion landscape ethically and sustainably. The beauty of real leather's durability is that it can be repaired, restored, altered, enjoyed for a lifetime. This research examines whether looking to a specific sub-group of artisans within the leather handcraft industry could offer a more sustainable, long-term outcome. Therefore, the study led to immersing myself within a sub-group of sport shoe craftspeople, where elevating, personalising, restoring, and coveting leather footwear plays a significant part. The research and potential outcome aim to offer knowledge mapping, and a blueprint to demonstrate how leather craft restore and repair techniques can be transferred to garment and offered to plural networks and the wider fashion industry. To advance ethical consumer behaviour and support the environment, aligning with leather organisations responsibility governance. Through interacting with the sub-group, it became clear that there was a real sense of community and comradery. The subscribers and artisans were passionate, and truly cared about their vintage/ second-hand/ used footwear. Preserving their attire, repairing, restoring, customising their trainers was the goal. Interviews with artisans from the trainer sub-group, provide support to the principle, just as observations at trainer festivals, retail outlets and action research via workshops were undergone to bolster recognition of the skill and craft involved, in addition to heightening the value of community, nurture and preservation as key. Ultimately, it is hoped that examining this specific sub-group of artisans and craftspeople within the trainer community will provide a blueprint. Looking to those who readily provide quiet activism against disposable fast fashion by breathing new life into used sports shoes, hopes to unearth and

reframe the benefits of such a flexible, durable, and valuable material as real leather to alter consumer behaviour and challenge the fast fashion industry.

Interactions and knowledge exchange within the sub-group, aim to highlight the leather craft techniques and processes which too can be applied to leather garment in the same way. This act of sharing practice and the requirement to lavish care and attention on the clothes one already owns can only bring positive environmental impact as well as personal reward (Orsola de Castro, 2021). Encouraging nurture and inspiring the value of attire from both a material and emotional durability perspective will promote the power of memories attached to our attire, and the reality that our clothes do not need to be fixed as the item we originally bought. The fact that our clothes can be altered, improved, and made unique aids this research in addressing broader questions about the embodied experience of the wearer as designer and the effect adaptable/ repairable leather fashion may have on the way we see our existing wardrobes.

This study seeks to alter perception through outlining the sustainability of tanneries and offering a new way of seeing leather as a fashion material which is flexible, and worth nurturing. Research aims to offer a new paradigm of fashion culture, by adopting footwear craftsmanship techniques from artisans within the industry, and applying this to garment, to develop a blueprint for new ways of thinking, seeing, and doing fashion. By establishing flexible techniques at consumer-level, leather fashion items can offer endless options and longevity, to adapt to the wearers needs and mood on any given day or occasion. Thus, creating commodity exchange, heightening an objects value. This creative freedom in how we see existing leather fashion extends and deconstructs the norm. Amplifying emotional and material durability, shifting, and cultivating an object whose 'cultural biography' (Kopytoff, 1986, pp64) outlives the present and improves with age. This research seeks to assess whether, if we approach our clothes as experiences rather than things, a flexible, sustainable approach to deconstructing/ constructing our clothes, may give the wearer power to breathe new life into their fashion. Take design ownership, construct meaning, ritual, and value on individual terms. Interrogating whether the significance of fashion is transformed, due to an established realisation of the value the emotional, non-monetary substance our clothes possess once worn. They can become priceless and irreplaceable to the owner, disrupting the conventional hierarchy of our value systems. Elevating objects far beyond what fast fashion can offer.

This research is concerned with revaluing existing leather garments, as fashion can hold connection like no other object. Described by Chapman (2015) as emotional durability, a bond

between consumers and their material things, with meaning at its centre. He examines consumers' experiences within object relationships and the role of possessions in our lives. Objects relate to people and place, and witness a continuous, systematic narrative of events. They become a personal record of lived experiences and gather their own history. Earlier research by Kopytoff describes the narratives we collect around our possessions as a "cultural biography" (1986, p64) made up of events he calls "singularisations" (1986, p73). He examines the process of commodity exchange to understand how changes in context can shift the meaning of these singularisations, and how this relates to an object's value. This research considers each aspect of material innovation, technique, and process, in relation to our wardrobes and current fashion landscape, by highlighting that ownership, dress, tactile contact, maintenance, and repair may play a far greater part in our relationship with attire, than commerce, consumption, and exchange. By considering the unspoken intimacies we have with the things we own, and wear and the connections they make to events in time and place. Material artefacts can come to hold a place within our psyche like nothing else, fusing materiality, ethics, culture, and identity. Acknowledging that garments produce a multi-sensory experience, which both mediate and create our experience of the world, supports this theory. Tactile experience of our garments binds us to them. As we use clothes, they become records of our experiences, archives of the experience of wearing. Worn things are the outcome of our 'being in the world'; they are a mediating layer at the confluence of environment and bodily self. As such, our used garments hold a particular place in our networks of things, at once intimate and public, visible and on display (Spivack, 2021). Through use, garments and wearers become entwined. If garments and shoes can affect us, then our relationship to and awareness of garment production, maintenance, wearing, cleaning, and repair should be embodied within our practice and things (Sampson, 2020). Whilst embracing this notion, this study seeks to emphasise the ways that material culture exists outside of the body but can more readily become part of it; that we as users can become makers. We can take control of design and the use of fashion, so that garments develop over time to become integral parts of ourselves. Approaching our garments as experiences offers the wearer the power to breathe new life into their wardrobes. Material frontiers provide invaluable design impulses for researchers, designers, educators, and students alike. Treating materials as an active source of design information and inviting the making of tacit knowledge through direct material handling, re-establishes/ establishes an intrinsic relationship between material, maker, and user which sees a connectedness emerge which drives new interpretations of materiality (Lefteri, 2014).

This research challenges the status quo, examining a specific sub-group who readily restore, repair, and upcycle leather footwear. A community of like-minded individuals, keen to own

or acquire the most vintage unique '1 of 1' trainers possible. An example of best practice, this sub-group embrace the used, second-hand, handed down. They share knowledge and passion for the fashion item, putting it at the most coveted position in terms of their wardrobe, dressing the 'feet upwards' every day. It is hoped that by adopting the values, and material, techniques, and processes of this specific sub-group and creating new plural networks of subscribers who seek to consume/ rework fashion differently, will develop an actualised possibility for re-alignment and new thinking around leather, production, consumption, and value as a starting point for cultural discussion. In turn challenging the fashion industry in terms of ethical, sustainable, environmental, and social aspects by presenting a new slow, flexible, and creative philosophy. One where the consumer/ user takes ownership and material and emotional durability become key to encouraging a nurture 'not buy new' thinking. Chapman identifies mutual evolution (Chapman, 2015, pp24) as a key feature of emotional durability. The development of a deep relationship through craft and the ability to alter a garment by restoration, customisation and repair are ways in which clothes can evolve. Sennett (2008) asks "what the process of making ... reveals to us about ourselves" (Sennett, 2008, pp8) and Marx also identifies the value of making as an attribute to our emotional well-being (Trainer, 2017). Therefore, the purpose of this research is to position restoration, customisation, and repair as ways to cultivate mutual evolution of product and owner. To promote that investing in extending a products life will increase durability of the relationship, as well as providing a solution to the environmental crisis we are facing. To consider that, elevating, nurturing, and preserving our attire allows us more control over our appearance and identity construction and acknowledge that this in turn proposes greater influence over dressing choices, appearance, and ready-to-wear consumption. Providing almost unlimited possibilities to individuals, instead of purchasing fashion from a pre-existing offering, will allow us to possess clothing that better reflects our personality.

**Methodology:** This study has an emphasis on material culture and ethnographic approaches which reflect on the practical research experience. The enquiry aims to establish if fresh perspectives on circular leather production, examination of a specific sub-group, and heightened awareness of the durability and flexible design opportunity of leather, may encourage the construction of plural networks who challenge the current fast fashion landscape and consumer behaviour. Research design within the study includes interviews, participant observation, and action research.

Current research undertaken at Lineapelle Fair (NYC, January 2020), the most qualified international exhibition of leather, accessories, components, fabrics, synthetics, and models,

altered perception on the sustainability of tanneries. By offering a new way of seeing leather as a fashion material which is ethical, flexible, customisable, and worth nurturing, this industry dialogue reinforced the importance of material value, and highlighted specific sub-groups who subscribed to the philosophy of nurture and preserve. Findings guided the investigation into footwear craftsmanship techniques, and processes, specifically integral to the sports shoe. Entering a group of people with a shared identity at trainer festivals, workshops, and retail outlets, allowed the exploration, experience, and recording of specific leather handcraft, techniques, and process. Workshop participation (leather embossing, engraving, and hand-making a leather casual shoe) embedded skills and knowledge, and encouraged design discussion, with artisans within the field. This led to semi-structured interviews, which supported understanding of practice, concepts, opinion, and experience, integral to the sub-group. 'Making' gives the researcher the ability to alter or enhance their experience of the research subject in a manner that would not be possible through observation alone (Sampson, 2020). Galvanising an understanding of the flexible, ethical, creative, and emotional durability of footwear via interactions with the trainer community and using this experience as a blueprint gives authenticity to the study. On the topic of creative and emotional durability, a field which is underrepresented within academia, more attention has been paid to aspects of history and sensory elements of fashion rather than physical attributes. Chapman says, "object meaning ...is a relatively untouched" area of research (2015, pp43). Steele (1998) claims that scholars have ignored the potential of objects as primary sources of data, preferring written sources and images. Whilst Mida & Kim (2015) draw attention to the lack of research using objects, adding significance to this study.

Observation, particularly participant observation, has been used as a tool to collect data about people, processes, and cultures which immerse the researcher into the sub-culture of restoration, customisation, and conversion of trainers from both a subscriber and craftsperson perspective. This interaction naturally led to fundamental semi-structured interviews with three key craftspeople within the field. To gain credible qualitative data and examine said relationships, a long-term approach was taken to foster trust and develop networks where research subjects were as aware and as committed to the potential of the study as the researcher. Strong bonds, trust and relationships were formed over the duration of the study, meaning each interview was open, trustworthy, and highly fruitful - to the point, that due to this interaction and knowledge, a new strand of research was realised - Sole-Zine [Figs. 1, 2, 3] a poster-zine research output dedicated to archiving and recording 'British Trainer Culture'.

Using ethnography, adapting methods of material research, and studying a specific creative sub-group, has impacted value systems to the point of re-alignment, transferring skills and knowledge from one leather object (trainers) to another (garment). The resulting framework reflects on how skills and knowledge from a footwear context if transferred to garment, could offer a new way of seeing leather fashion in a more ethical, sustainable, and enduring way at wearer/ consumer level. This new knowledge when applied to networks and spaces inspires the 'material turn' approach of de-centering the human, and re-centering matter and the materiality of objects, technologies, and bodies (A. Rocamora, & A. Smelik, 2015). This sub-group highlights how the wearer/ consumer can become the creator of the object of enquiry, and how to bolster the potentiality of the material (leather). A blueprint for new ways of thinking, seeing, and doing fashion, is created: - one by which the wearer/ consumer nurtures, preserves, and adds value to leather fashion. Making this an important methodology within a fashion context, reinforcing the development of a more sustainable alternative wearer/ consumer product relationship – the wearer as designer philosophy.

Results and Conclusions: This study set out to explore the hypothesis that adopting new ways of seeing leather and leather fashion could alter wearer/ consumer behaviour and develop a desire to nurture and preserve. The research demonstrates that by highlighting individual artisans who subscribe to, or are central to, a distinct area of leather production, specifically, the craft of restoration, customisation, and repair and harnessing the material and emotional durability with the clothes we own, it may be possible to disrupt wearer/ consumer value systems. That this knowledge if applied to garment could offer plural networks a fresh approach to existing leather fashion, which may encourage a more ethical consumer behaviour and sustainable way of seeing attire. In turn moving garments with low exchange value outside normal commodity categorisation to an area of great importance.

Through ethnographic approaches this research has recorded an open inventive, collaborative knowledge transfer of a specific material and craft of fashion via a specific sub-group. By promoting current circularity and sustainable initiatives adopted by tanneries and highlighting the durability of leather as a material that can be restored, altered, and handed down to generations, the fast fashion industry is challenged on ethical, environmental, and social aspects, presenting a slow creative leather fashion philosophy. One where the user has an elevated sense of ownership and in-turn, belongings are cherished. Participant observation and subsequent interviews and analysis, validate the concept that objects gather their own histories and their interaction with the surrounding social context provides a cultural biography worth appreciating. In this scenario craftspeople extend their talent to



create compelling ethical and inspired narratives within the trainers they craft, and restore, to heighten desire for unique items and in-turn inspire consumer responsibility. Establishing that fashion is about authentic experiences and freedom. These shared ideas and practices gained strength throughout the study.

The resulting enquiry encourages a new generation to reconsider their relationship with leather and leather fashion. To look at their existing wardrobes with a fresh perspective. To conclude, these findings could trigger plural networks to redefine current customary behaviour, challenge the fast fashion industry and nurture and preserve a material which if cared for could last a lifetime. Placing the subject within arenas for larger debate, raising awareness to bridge gaps within the field, and forming fundamental requirement for future progress within this area. In this context, these deductions could be used to enrich theories of fashion and material culture, as well as provide efficient and sustainable options for fashion within the leather industry. As confirmed, creative and emotional durability has the potential to influence consumer-product relationships, creating an alternative that withstands pressure from capitalist industry to buy new clothes and therefore, reduce consumption. Academically, this research could influence a new generation of designer/ consumer to push social boundaries and blur the relationship between the wearer, design, and attire. Achieving total ownership of fashion, changing wearer/ consumer paradigms, and creating an adaptable circular fashion system with a wearer as designer philosophy.

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- Figure (1): Sole-Zine Volume (02) Restore
- Figure (2): Sole-Zine Volume (03) Conversion
- Figure (3): Sole-Zine Volume (04) Custom