



Transnational tomorrows today:

Graduate student futures
and imaginaries for art education

Guest Editors:
Anita Sinner, Kazuyo Nakamura
and Elly Yazdanpanah

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ABOUT THE e-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

IRAN

A PERSONAL NARRATION OF A SEWING STUDIO:

A FOCUS ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN'S SELF-CONFIDENCE IN SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

Waste from the clothing industry accounts for a significant amount of waste dumped or incinerated every year in landfills in Iran. Today, population growth, lifestyle changes, the prevalence of consumerism, and approaches such as fast fashion and lack of textile waste management, especially in developing countries, have turned these wastes into a severe threat to the environment. In this article, I describe an experience gained from working in the fashion industry designing cloths, as well as my academic studies, to explore the pedagogical values embedded within this experience. In addition, by describing my experiences from my mother's sewing workshops and their impact on my choice of work method in my studio, to explain how, as a designer and creator, I took a step of training and teaching my audience and myself toward sustainable design and production and changing lifestyle through creating and designing.

KEYWORDS

fashion; clothing waste, sustainable design, lifestyle; Iranian women

INTRODUCTION

With the growing population of the world, increasing consumerism and changing lifestyles in different societies has resulted in the increasing use of textiles. The massive volume of these materials has created complex environmental problems in the world, and specifically, waste from the clothing industry accounts for the bulk of production waste annually, with large quantities of this waste dumped or incinerated every year in landfills. In 2012, the global production of waste was estimated at 82 million tons (Hassanzadeh Amin et al. 2015). The adverse effects of the clothing industry, especially the new industrial trend that has emerged in the production of clothing, commonly referred to as fast fashion (rapid and uncontrolled production of clothing), causes a host of environmental concerns, from air pollution, depletion of water resources, and cheap labour, to the use and release of harmful chemicals and the increase in textile waste.

Another result of this rapid trend is an increase in the volume of used and second-hand clothing; the effects of which have also been examined in two ways. One is the diversion of these garments to the waste stream, which impacts the volume of waste and related environmental pressures, and the other is the export of these garments to developing countries and the trade of second-hand clothing, which can have negative economic and environmental consequences for developing countries (Sunhilde & Simona 2014). Waste reduction includes all methods, activities, and techniques that consider the prevention, elimination, or reduction of waste at the point of origin. Waste reuse and recycling are important factors in waste management methods (Monfared 2008).

In light of these global issues, the purpose of this article is to emphasize the role of women in the cycle of the clothing industry as both consumers and producers in confronting consumerism and rapid fashion, and in the reduction of waste through personal experience. In my opinion, women are the first target group of the fashion market, and the current issues can be rooted in women's lifestyles today. This mode of everyday life is akin to a style that may have been imposed on society by large industries for economic purposes which does not address individuality. It paints all community members with the same brush,

in effect they behave in the same fashion, but I choose to move beyond that notion and attend to the role of individual self-confidence and reliance as a means to overcome this socially imposed waste.

THE STORY OF MY MOTHER'S SEWING STUDIO

Spending time in my mother's studio, in which a small basket full of pieces of colored cloth reminds me of childhood, and playing with these cloths formed a large part of my early years, I see clearly how years later, her studio had a profound effect on my career path and the creation of my artworks. The first dress I sewed was for my doll, which I made with my mother's help.

Before my mother's studio became a more extensive workspace, women would order custom-made clothes. There was no option of mass orders in the market. The waste pieces of fabric did not take up much space, for there was little left, and after a while, most of them came into use in some other ways. Fabrics were recycled and only replaced based on need. My mother used them to sew kitchen potholders and gloves, and even for parts of new clothes like pocket liners. Iranian grandmothers had a long-standing custom to sew 'forty pieces'; making them into functional artworks, such as sheets, duvets, and handles, all were sewn together by attaching countless very small pieces of fabric. Forty pieces is a type of traditional Iranian embroidery known by the names such as Landareduzi, Khatamiduzi, and patchwork (Saba 2000).

Today I still like the feel of the forty pieces - a world full of seemingly unrelated colors and roles that come together and are turned into a useful fibre arts object. My grandmother has sewed many of these forty pieces (see Figure 1). She also taught me to sew several models. Depending on the available facilities, they were sewn using delicate fabrics by hand or by sewing machine. They are called forty pieces because of the large number of pieces of fabric used, and because the number forty in Iranian literature is significant, and has been adopted frequently (CGIE.org.ir 2022).



Figure 1.

Author, Forty pieces kitchen potholders, 2022.

In today's fashion industry, there is not even an opportunity to turn those pieces of cloth upside down and look at them for what they might become, because of the management of the industry and practice of large batch orders. I lament that now my mother works full time and the dumpsters take up much of the space and fill so quickly that they have to be taken out of the studio as soon as possible. For example, the waste from cutting winter clothes has the largest volume and it is also heavier, to the extent that the remaining fabrics of even one sewn garment are noticeable (see Figure 2). All of these were still small pieces of colored fabric for me a few years ago. They were lovely to behold. My sadness was that I did not have the opportunity to use them. However, the way I look has changed through experience, learning, studying and researching. What has become the main concern for me is the emergence of dense mounds of unusable pieces of fabric in every production studio. What can we do in this contemporary practice of wastefulness?



Figure 2.

Author, 2022. Spoilage of fabrics related to a winter dress.

Awareness of the environmental hazards and the sheer volume of textile waste sent to landfills every year in Iran occupies my mind. While studying industrial design at university, these and related university courses took me to investigate further. Unbelievably, I realized that the clothing industry is the second largest polluter of the environment (BBC News 2017). Expanding globally, more than 64 million tons of textile waste are produced globally in just one year, and only about 15.9% of textile waste is recycled (Ucar & Wang 2011).

During my childhood, the pieces of cloth that came out of my mother's workshop had a different fate each time (see Figure 3). Furniture manufacturers used it as fibers inside sofas and mattresses. Some fabrics were purchased to produce a type of wallpaper under the Belka¹ brand. Some were turned into decorative and functional weaves by local women artists. There was still a significant percentage left unused that we were unaware of their fate, and it should be noted that our studio was just a small one in a small

¹ Belka is a suitable alternative to paint and wallpaper, a kind of cellulose coating with natural fibers of cellulose cotton, which is crushed by special devices in very fine dimensions and then thoroughly mixed with a certain amount of cellulose resin and decorative stones.



Figure 3.

Author, 2022, Spoilage of fabrics related to the daily cutting of batch production (200 pieces).

town in Iran, meaning this practice could be extrapolated nationally, and then globally, and that has a profound environmental impact.

I discovered the problem was much more complicated than it seemed, and still, all the ideas and activities to prevent the production of textile waste and to use the waste produced remain the domain of innovation, experimentation and individual effort. More alternative uses are coming into play, for example, Ucar and Wang (2011) tested wool waste to use it as a reinforcement in cementitious composites. In a study conducted by Farzi et al. (2012), the pulp was prepared from the fibers of cotton cloth waste in laboratory conditions. Hassanzadeh et al. (2015) also used cotton-polyester fabric to produce biogas. Examining the chemical properties and behavior of industrial cotton textiles wastes, Vilela et al. (2016) concluded that these materials could be used to produce briquette. Its use as a 'fuel' can increase its life cycle and the economic value of waste. However, in my opinion, perhaps the leading solutions exist in the stages and steps before the mass production of waste. Maybe a more expansive yet individualistic solution is needed because not all types of fabrics can be recycled and reused. I believe that a solution based on community awareness and education could be more comprehensive and

effective in preventing waste generation. Monfared (2008) articulated that based on global ranking, waste management has been defined four type: prevention, reduction, recycling, and disposal. Prevention of waste generation or zero waste is an ideal goal, and waste is the worst option in waste management.

THE STORY OF MY SEWING STUDIO

An unimaginable picture of the earth's future came to my mind by watching the bulky packages of cut pieces that were supposed to enter the landfill, and ultimately nature. The clothes that enter the market quickly and may never even be worn and then join the cut pieces of cloth and the discarded old clothes as waste. I researched about the fast fashion and its impact that often changes seasonally and, in some cases, brands that change weekly. The demand for change and keeping up with the fashion industry is growing daily, and it is a global phenomenon. This is the reason for the increase in the consumption of cheap, low-quality products. Sometimes people throw away their clothes to harmonize with fashion, and of course, due to the low quality of the product, it cannot be used for long (BBC News 2017). This phenomenon lead to anti-design and anti-production movements, both of which are very understandable and reasonable because anti-design is the answer to how modern design is based on the consumption of as many goods as possible. The design has been turned into an implement to guide people into rapid consuming rather than encouraging them to maximize the social and cultural potential to improve lifestyles to create healthier lives.

All of these realities and the level of awareness that I gained in my studies and education drive me to literally run away from the path that my mother followed in the late years of her career: to make a living via a mass production studio. Instead, I continue to seek to find new possibilities. In addition, my field and study was the world of design and clothing, where I tried to fulfill my mission and responsibility towards the environment, attempting to sew with as little waste by designing and developing more efficient and creative methods. I tried to implement my mother's original small-scale studio pattern, an approach in which all spoilage is reduced to a small basket all the way around, and eventually, most of those throw-aways are used in the

creation of something new and useful. To promote my small studio work, to connect with a wide range of individuals, and to convey my view on women's clothing and its relationship with lifestyle, I created an Instagram profile. I adopted this social media platform to share my experience with other women by presenting my designs as artworks (see Figure 4). Through this pedagogical sharing, I ask women to be themselves. It is a simple slogan that is also a call to action. In my opinion, this call includes various aspects of sustainability to improve our individual and collective lives and lifestyles; and to improve the environment beyond.

This slogan was inspired by one of the university design projects where I became acquainted with the concept of sustainable and slow design. Sustainable design is a general title that emphasizes human and social values, conservation of natural resources and the environment, improving the quality of life, and considering the limitations of specific groups in the design of products, systems, and spaces. Some of the features of sustainable design in the field of the textile industry can be listed as follows: paying attention to the local and regional culture of the target group; production planning to use minimum energy resources and raw materials; and using recycled raw materials (Hakimi Tehrani 2012: 138).

Slow design features are in many ways similar to sustainable design. In this way, increasing the time of the design process is important, as this adds to the volume of research and reflection on the subject of design, while at the same time refraining from fashionism. By slowing down, we can attend to production and consumption to develop the quality of each article of clothing; the tendency to local, regional, and individual design instead of global design; the preservation of natural resources; and the prevention of environmental degradation (Hakimi Tehrani 2012).

Regarding these operating definitions, I consider sustainability in two ways that reinforce my the slogan (you can be yourself): first, reforming the way of life of women in developing countries by encouraging them to be themselves, refusing to become different through global and unstable fashion and helping to build self-confidence in them by paying attention to the Indigenous and regional cultures of Iran. Second, modifying the consumption

pattern by relying on personal and domestic products in the clothing industry concerning the use of recycled and discarded fabrics from the beginning of the production cycle.

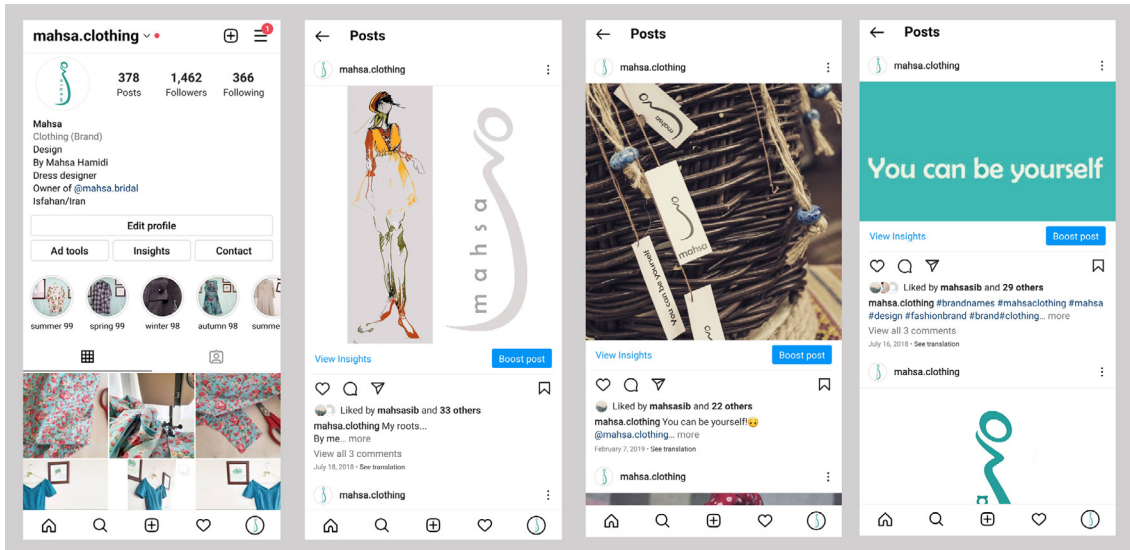


Figure 4.
Author, 2022, Instagram page @mahsa.clothing.

I emphasize the importance of creating clothes inspired by Iran's Indigenous and regional culture for several reasons. First, the design and innovation of clothing in the history of Iran is very rich and significant, and each cultural group has unique clothing with distinct names (different languages) and meaningful designs. Unfortunately, most of the styles except for the clothes of limited tribes such as nomads and villagers around the country have now been forgotten. These clothes have either a decorative and theatrical aspect or can only be seen on the bodies of the elders and the elderly of these tribes. There is an opportunity for Iranian women to reclaim their histories through such design. Second, the contemporary Iranian women's clothing is an amalgam of the Islamic veil, modern global fashion, and the lost Iranian identity that sometimes overrides each other when placed in a combination: Nike sneakers are worn with a black chador, a variety of Islamic hijabs are combined with the latest models of face makeup and nails of the day, and floral coats try to fill the gap of happy Iranian shirts - something that is not very tangible in men's clothing which is neither Indigenous nor global.

In the recent decades, the desire of the individual or the coercion of the law to wear the hijab in society on the one hand, and the desire to be global and updated on the other hand have been and are two forces that, in my opinion, deprive the Iranian women of who they truly are. In this situation, it is necessary to pay attention to the Indigenous and regional culture which was previously mentioned as one of the characteristics of sustainable design. The third issue is the clothing industry at large, which uses this particular design space to increase consumerism by creating false needs, new models, and design trends. As a result of the prevalence of consumerism in the clothing industry, production increases. Consequently, it increases waste on the one hand and consumed and unused clothing on the other. As a designer, this is ethically problematic for me.

Moving in a more environmentally friendly and sustainable direction, we can reduce the fever of fast fashion created in the consumer, and at the same time offer viable alternatives. Through implementing this idea, we can move more fully to be ourselves than ever, with unique, repaired, or altered clothing, moreover, we can walk on the path to respect for the earth and ourselves.

By relying on individualized creation, in addition to helping to form a unique taste and identity, consumers develop a sense of belonging with their cloths. Much like a symbiotic relationship, body and unique clothing together reduce the desire for what large companies have injected and marketed. In such circumstances, there is a disruption in production and consequently a waste reduction.

In my studio practice, I design comfortable and relatively simple clothes for casual and formal wear. The design is done with women's participation, therefore, their taste and what I called 'being yourself' emerge in the process of making. I strive to remove the current trends as elements in making, and direct them in the process of design towards the importance of durability of clothing and its long-term use. This collaboration not only gives the user a greater sense of confidence and comfort, but also reduces the frequency of cutting new fabric and the subsequent creation of discards, and in general, prolongs the life cycle of the garment. In addition to this, from the waste basket

of cloths in my studio, I design and sew extra fabric accessories (clothing accessories or items for home appliances) and share them with my followers as part of the sewing process. Gradually, the followers themselves bring some extra pieces of fabric into my studio and begin to sew with their own idea and use the cloth again. Depending on what season, time, or situation we were in, the accessories change according to need and application. For example, during the pandemic, the need for a mask led to extra pieces of fabric from cutting outfits to sewing the mask (Figures 5 and 6). Therefore, this issue, and the fact that cloth masks are washable, also prevented the repeated use of disposable masks en masse.



Figure 5.
Author, 2021, produced clothes (Outfits).

Part of this philosophy for economizing in fashion involves maximizing the potential of each piece of fabric. Pieces that are not large enough to be used alone for a particular outfit, but are too large for small accessories such as masks, need to be effectively repurposed. These pieces of fabric could be combined with the second and third pieces of fabric and designed for other clothes, always working on a sliding scale from large to small items. It may take time to find a suitable second fabric and may need to stay on the shelf of the studio for weeks or months, but eventually they will be used.



Figure 6.
Author, 2021, Masks produced from discarded fabrics in Figure 5.



Figure 7.
Author, 2022, The dress.



Figure 8.
Author, 2022. Pieces of dress fabric in a skirt.

Sometimes, it depends on the woman who comes and the clothes they are seeking, much as it has for centuries in traditional tailor shops. In Figure 7, an autumn woolen pinafore dress is designed for one of my clients, and the rest of the fabric is used to sew a skirt and hairpin for her eight-year-old daughter (see Figure 8). Also, the cream-colored fabric combined with the original fabric is the remnant of another clothing cut. What attracts the attention and satisfaction of my clients in such works is the specialty and uniqueness of the clothes. The limitations of using a discarded fabric make the result different. It conveys a valuable feeling when my audience reacts to their clothes with the words: 'How special it is', 'I think there is no other like this', 'I did not think anything could be done with these fabrics', and, 'How good it is that there is nothing like it anywhere'.

Part of my work is dedicated to wedding dresses, and I have worked with three bridal houses in this field. My Instagram profile includes wedding dresses and accessories (see Figure 9). Cutting wedding dresses is more wasteful than other types of dresses. Besides, discarded pieces or pieces of fabric have a more limited use than other fabrics if they are to be reused and returned to the production cycle. In this regard, my focus is more on repairing existing clothes and renting clothes than sewing new ones, however, repairing wedding dresses also produces a degree of waste and spoilage. For instance, I was asked to replace the top layer of the damaged skirt. In this case, the damaged layer was discarded, and a piece of new fabric was cut and sewn to replace this part. Throwing away the damaged, thin layer of the skirt reduced the waste volume by about 90% instead of throwing away an entire wedding dress. In addition, repairing dresses made it easier to apply the bride's taste to the details of the dress. That way, they could be themselves on one of the most important days of their lives. This is a most promising step for me.

Therefore, rental wedding dresses have much potential as a growth area. The brides wanted their dresses to be unique, and at the same time, they may not want to invest in a new or custom dress. I take pride in being able to personalize rental dresses for them and help them to apply their taste and preferences of the clothes, sometimes with minor alterations only.

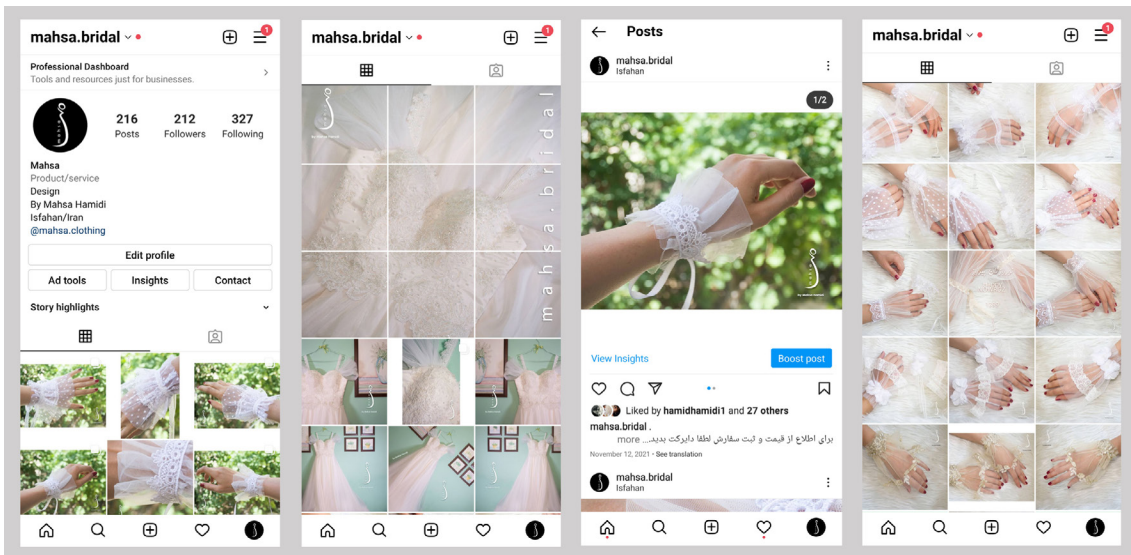


Figure 9.
Author, 2020, Instagram page @mahsa.bridal.



Figure 10.
Author, 2021, Changing the model of the wedding dress (sleeve design) - (Photo by the author).

In Figure 10, the sleeves were designed and added at the customer's request and sewn from the waste of the skirt and lace.

To handle cut fabrics from repairing, I created some wedding accessories, like wristbands, which is one of my most popular designs (see Figure 11). In designing and creating these wristbands, I used discarded wedding dresses, sewing residues and wastes of any wedding dress, which usually includes lace ribbons, pearls, crystals, fabric flowers, and other bridal decorations, in addition to lace and guipure fabrics. These residues are not large enough to be used for a new outfit, but they are effective in making accessories such as wristbands.



Figure 11.

Author, 2021, Bridal lace wristbands made from discarded fabrics.

The design of the wristbands is quite flexible, in my opinion. From a fashion point of view, they are created based on the prevailing fashion of newly sewn clothes because their raw materials were from the same clothes. Also, this model of accessory, in terms of design and form, can be inclined towards bracelets or gloves and be designed according to the woman's personal style.

In addition, the design is not limited to wristbands. Veils, anklets, and decorations related to wedding ceremonies, especially unique decor designed in Iran under the name of wedding table, all can be designed and made by tailoring and making new wedding dresses. So, they can be used many times, and not only have the wastes been used, but the purchase and consumption of new raw materials have been avoided. In this way, I learned from my mother and grandmother

how to use pieces of cloth. The idea of creating forty pieces as a long-standing tradition and colored pieces of my mother's old cloth, each of which became an item to use, inspired me to create these pieces from scraps of fabric.

By minimizing my studio waste, I learned and make an effort to teach women how to wear sustainably: to be themselves, and help my clients experiment with possibilities, and in the process, distance themselves from contemporary consumerism lifestyles that prevail in Iran today. My studio is just a small design house in a small town with a small basket full of pieces of colored fabric that are a project yet to be imagined. I believe I have an ethical obligation to think of my small basket full of colorful fabric. This may be just a small step, but it is more fruitful to be smaller, and more continuously engaged in fashion as a pedagogical action that affect our lifestyle in long term.

Finally, it is our lifestyle as human beings that can destroy or rebuild the earth. Perhaps the best definition of a good lifestyle is to choose to be ourselves and stay away from the hustle and bustle of consumerism that encourages us to compete with others, and the fleeting ideals of society. By slowing down global mass production, we can avoid the volume of residue and waste that is a contemporary crisis of nature.

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