Redefining Authenticity: A Philosophy for the Future of Fashion

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to reconsider our cultural - and industry wide - reliance upon authentic identity in terms of fashion. Clothing has come to signify our personal beliefs and values, allowing for incessant (but acceptable, even honourable) consumption and change. Inadvertently, the shaky foundations of chasing 'authentic' identity have destabilised environmental pursuits in fashion, fostering individualistic ideologies which dissolve existing community relationships. The contemporary fashion system finds itself at a crossroad between sustainable development and continued capitalist growth. Cultural beliefs, particularly in the global north, centred on discovering an essential 'true self' have bled into consumer desires and our cultural relations with clothing. Consequently, expressing identity through personal style is rewarded as an outward display of the authentic self. Yet, the search for and conclusion of our authentic desires is not an uninfluenced journey, especially amidst the post-modern world of advertising. Authentic style and desires may be less personal, and more tied to external socio-cultural positioning, than previously thought. Trend cycles accelerate with no pause in sight, spurred on through the instantaneousness of the internet and modern technologies, redirecting the goalpost for authentic fashion at each turn. Nowadays, authenticity can easily be mistaken for performativity, as it is based upon self-idealisation instead of autonomy and pushes one towards commodity consumption.

In this paper we argue that re-assessing our cultural necessity for normative authenticity is vital towards re-directing fashion's development towards a less exploitative and pollutant path. Moreover, by contesting the notion of authenticity in personal style, we can help deconstruct individualistic approaches to fashion identity which only encourage consumptive behaviours and hinder active engagement with sustainable and ethical fashion.

Keywords: Fashion theory, authenticity, sustainability, cultural philosophy, consumerism

INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry, and its cultural positioning, is built upon shaky foundations of 'authentic' identity, that have destabilised environmental pursuits, fostering individualistic ideologies which dissolve existing community relationships. Cultural beliefs, particularly in the global north, centred on discovering an essential 'true self' have bled into consumer desires and our relations with clothing. Consequently, expressing identity has been equated to material goods – in fashion, style is rewarded as an outward display of the authentic self. However, the definition and use of the word authentic has greatly changed over time, reaching a distorted, contradictory phase in the post-modern context. Philosophically questioning our assumptions on what 'authenticity' is, and how its current definition may limit us, can help challenge modes of fashion participation – eventually limiting overconsumption through community consciousness.

Authenticity as a value has been a pillar of western morals since 18th century Romanticism and solidified cultural beliefs in an essentially true self which bled into perceptions of personal style (Laermans, 2018: 1-38). Authenticity, according to the consumer studies scholar Jonatan Sodergren "is part of the ongoing search for meaning and belonging in life" (2021: 647). Rather than its older connotation of sincerity and autonomous action, authenticity is currently seen as choice worthy in itself (Varga & Guignon, 2020). Some academics theorise that authenticity does not depend on accurate nor sincere depictions at all, and instead acts to create an idealised reality (Freathy & Thomas, 2014: 178-194). As such, authenticity becomes a perfect match for the fashion system, in which we are seduced into consumerism through idealised realities over and over.

By denying and unlearning the concept of an essentialised self that we must strive towards within our style, deeper connections to identity and personal fashion can be explored, alongside developing more respect for the process and impact of clothing production. Authenticity can, furthermore, escape the cage of idealisation and may once again rest in the power of the individuals' goals, rather than the goals of corporate growth. Consumptive, normative desires fed through external pressures, which entice the subject towards over-consumptive practises, can then be redirected. Performativity through idealised fashion identities can be transformed into productive desires for sustainable change. By use of theory, post-representational thought, cooperation, and a future strategy based on community desires – rather than short-sighted, self-idealised ones – this paper will re-define our concept of 'authentic' selves. And hence, allowing the fashion sphere to be more honest with itself, and realistic with its aims to curb consumerism and fight for a sustainable future.

THE FASHIONED 'AUTHENTIC SELF'

Unpacking the current state of the fashion system is a fundamental task the whole

industry must face in order to survive. Part of that task must include undertaking a philosophical perspective when assessing normative assumptions which affect the development of the fashion industry. To begin understanding our distorted cultural and behavioural beliefs attached to forms of fashion consumption, a logical starting point is the seminal 1975 book *Disciple and Punish* by the infamous philosopher Michel Foucault. One of the most culturally relevant theories taken from the book has been his metaphor for the modern 'disciplinary society' through the model of the panopticon – a structure where prisoners are kept in constant observation, without the chance to check if they are being watched, resulting in behavioural adjustments out of fear of punishment if caught. The intent of Foucault was to point out that power dynamics at play outside of the theoretical model, and within our societies, mirror the prison and limit our possibilities – therefore, the 'disciplinary society' was coined.

This contention is certainly paralleled in the way rich consumer societies relate to fashion consumption, with certain arbitrary fashion 'rules' (or trends) in place for the subject to be considered against, creating a landscape of limited possibilities once again. Within the world of clothing there is no need to fear the fashion police, or outright punishment like in the panopticon; however, non-conformity and exclusion remain, and punishment has shifted into social pressure to live up to one's 'true self' – especially in style. Clothing has become a mediator between us as individuals and how we are perceived and treated by the surrounding environment, fashion has become an identity symbol, yet the terms keep on changing. Furthermore, the critical issue of cognitive interference due to surveillance and said pressure, which was brought to light, is precisely the responsible force for the continuation of myths such as the 'true self' which the industry uses to its advantage (Onitiu 2022: 1751). Understanding the superstructure we are in allows responsible citizens to no longer remain 'impartial spectators' (Smith, 1759). We can challenge deeply held beliefs which connect self-expression to material consumption and take back behavioural agency.

Whilst, according to popular culture, our clothes are meant to symbolize who we are, the reality seen within the panoptic framework is not so. Instead, one is pre-emptively scared of judgement and exclusion, and has a relative set of rules or expectations to abide to (dependent on location and time, trend-wise) when dressing. If consumers were encouraged to really make their own personal choices, rules and trends might not be in place, never mind followed at such extremes. This undercuts the concept of acting 'authentically' or possessing an 'authentic style', showing that style subjectivity (or personal taste) is influenced by surrounding society. It also highlights the naturalness of a deeper normative assumption – that of possessing an essential, core, 'true self'.

The neoliberal zeitgeist has inoculated fashion with its individualistic ideology, promoting clothing choices as true self-expression, yet (contradictorily) advocating for

constant, curated change of these. Can it be true that, despite there always being fashionable ideals to strive towards, and others to stray away from, consumers' fashion identities have the potential to be 'authentic'? The idealised reality which informs the authenticity of the individual's style, is based on psychological essentialism – the social tendency to ascribe 'true' essences to people and objects (Newman, 2016: 7). Authentic style is judged through the prism of essentialism, meaning its 'authenticity' is both socially constructed and evaluated in terms of how closely it embodies an unobservable valued essence over any inherent properties (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010: 839). By judging authenticity based on culturally valued essences, we fall into a logical fallacy whereby being fashionably authentic does not mean being oneself but leaning into normative desires, stereotypes, and trends – undermining the whole 'freeing' point of fashion together with self-identity.

Adding to the conversion on the 'disciplinary society' which the fashion industry finds itself in, is the extra layer of technological development since the time of Foucault's writing. Now the prisoners (or us, the citizen/consumers) in the model are no longer being watched *only* by invisible overseers (unilateral surveillance), but *also* by each other (lateral surveillance), simultaneously increasing self-surveillance – all due to the birth of the Internet and the naturalisation of social networking sites (Lovink, 2016). The mutation of Foucault's original model into what we are currently experiencing can be explained through the insights of another French theorist, the philosophical epistemologist Gilles Deleuze. He noted a shift from the society of discipline to the 'society of control', where in the former mode the 'signature or number' defined the individual, in the latter 'society of control' the code of the individual (referring to their behaviours, habits, or actual code) defined them (1992).

With increased surveillance and tracking technologies, most of which people agree to participate in, corporations are making use of the immense power and profit to be found in data collection. Fashion is no bystander in these societal changes, with the industry having become highly digitised from the start, the rate of trend cycles aligns with the increased insights brands have at their disposal to make real-time production decisions – furthering consumption habits. Surplus code or 'big data' generated by the average user is systematically sold to those buyers who want the power to influence behaviour in return for profit (Galič, Timan, & Koops, 2017: 25). This new economic era has been called 'Surveillance Capitalism' (Zuboff, 2015). By understanding how surveillance has changed from a disciplinary power to a power of control, we can begin the journey of interpreting how personal fashion identity is shaped through self-regulation under a normative system. Rules and expectations around identity break down previously held assumptions on 'authenticity' and 'true selves', showing a clear mismatch in ideology. As the formation of identity in the era of commodity fetishism becomes synonymous with consumption, sincere and autonomous identity pursuits are lost in translation. Moreover, sincere and autonomous decisions in personal style are therefore clearly suppressed by our

current normative ideologies, and problems which carry further social and environmental consequences down the line, which must be addressed in full before any truthfully sustainable changes can last within the industry.

NORMATIVE AUTHENTICITY'S INFLUENCE ON FASHION PRODUCTION & CONSUMPTION

Under Deleuze's society of control one can see those everyday choices or behaviours (such as how one chooses to dress) can be influenced and restricted by expectations from the surveillant surrounding world. Given the expansion of the Internet and social media, the realm for observing and being observed has exploded, with the fashion industry following suit. There is a cultural and economic importance in sustaining growth and change no matter its impact, and the capitalist 'society of control' demands this for the fashion industry too. As we know, fast-fashion brands are at the helm of this model, producing tens of thousands of new articles a day by utilizing big data analytics to inform new styles (Matsakis, Tobin, & Chen, 2021). In the current scenario we face, 'authentic', individual identity is a cultural signifier; which contractively, saturates the citizen/consumers with the need to continuously 'improve' and grow, particularly through commodity consumption, and place our needs above others (Bolin, 2022; Orphanides, Nyhagen, & Keightley, 2022: 829). The contemporary relevance of displays of 'authenticity' in style is symbolic of the cult of its ideology in modern consumerist societies.

Preceding societal influences over consumer behaviour, we find influences in perceptions of Self, as outlined previously, yet more so we find deep influences and control over subjective desires. The modern fashion industry uses contemporary surveillance technology which feeds off prediction models to push new desires, which become trends. Social networking sites have created a new landscape for observation and surveillance, filtering users through tailored algorithms (Lovink, 2016), which the contemporary fashion industry uses to its benefit, consequently limiting unbiased decision making. This disconnect is precisely what has driven fashion towards ever-quickening, and ever-changing cycles, all in the name of personal self-expression. Consequently, global garment consumption per capita has increased around 60 percent since the start of the century, largely due to the rise of fast – and ultrafast – fashion in parallel with social media (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Big players in the industry such as Shein gained a massive clientele during the pandemic and are at the forefront of optimising big data to accurately trend forecast – demonstrable in the daily output of up to 10,000 new styles (Matsakis, Tobin, & Chen, 2021; McKinsey & Company, 2023). Thoroughly examining the normative cultural understanding of the 'authentic self' is, therefore, vital work in changing the fashion system towards a more equitable social and environmental future. Critically deconstructing desire formations through philosophical theory is one key step forward in this regard, and may help each participant in the system unlearn core untruths.

Contemporary neoliberal culture commands the citizen to become a participating consumer in society, to gain 'freedom' through continuous change – re-affirming the conditions necessary for clothing micro-trends and over-consumption to proliferate. At the core of this growing and impending need to consume is a complex system of desires relating to our identity and goal of 'authenticity'. Thereby, fashion identity is a concept whose result depends heavily upon the desires imparted on the individual through the controlled landscape they find themselves within. As the formation of identity in the era of commodity fetishism becomes synonymous with consumption, the felt surveillance structure purposefully interferes in traditional forms of supply and demand, utilising big data to sway social/consumerist behaviour. The ideology works fantastically well for a society with nothing left to want or lack, the need for change just for the sake of it is what keeps bringing the modern subject back (Bovone, 2012: 74). The match is superficially perfect: with fashion branded as an ever-changing, identity-building, innovative pursuit – the industry has been successfully imbued with neoliberal proclivities for constant change.

Fashion's contradictory nature, where one must keep up yet always be 'authentically' themselves, is a system so internalised it is almost bizarre to acknowledge its disassociation from reality. Interestingly, Jacques Lacan – a 20th century psychoanalyst who furthered the realm of continental philosophy through his post-structuralist theory – focused on the system of desiring and its morphing into extreme forms. His term *jouissance* is particularly valuable to this discussion, since he distinguishes this as an evolved desire 'beyond the pleasure principle', which has become a 'backhanded enjoyment' (Lacan, Jacques-Alain Miller and Sheridan, 1994). A key distinction between desire and jouissance is the passing through a stage of anxiety – the state of digital surveillance, together with demand to personally continue 'innovating', certainly creates an anxiety in the public to keep up. Fashion operates as a sort of concentrated and physical manifestation of *jouissance*, with the desire of remaining 'on trend' and 'in style', which constantly shifts, leaving consumers infinitely chasing the new trend, and as such, chasing backhanded desire.

The marketability of authenticity and the social benefits of aligning within part of the digitised fashion system, is internalised by the 'controlled', self-commodified, branded participant (Lee, 2022). Thus 'authenticity', in its truly autonomous sense, remains on the sidelines under such an environment of observation – replaced by performativity motivated by self-promotion. Alongside the personal benefits to being perceived as 'authentic', its corporate use in terms of branding has been hugely exploited (Sodergren, 2021). One recent example relevant to popular fashion and music highlighted this duality and challenge between authentic choices and performativity, within a performer credited for her raw self-expression. This would be the British musician Charlie XCX, and her 2024 album 'Brat', whose music video for the song 'Guess' features mountains of lingerie littering the streets. The visual shock intended

from the enormous amount of fabric was offset by the closing frame of the video reading: "Unworn undergarments to be donated to survivors of domestic violence through *I Support The Girls*", a period poverty charity. This some-what cynical touch is excusable, although also demonstrated a clear intent to brand herself in an authentically responsible manner. Nevertheless, the artist went on collaborate with one of the biggest players in fast-fashion, H&M, for a A/W'24 campaign.

Simple contradictions like these are ubiquitous and all too easy to point out, yet they help give a bigger audience a chance to question their assumptions on corporate, brand, and self-branded 'authenticities'. In essence, this awakening to the mythologisation of identity building pursuits can help us redirect energies – desires and behaviours – into more productive realties, rather than contradictory and consumptive ones.

UNLEARNING THE 'AUTHENTIC' NARRATIVE FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Considering the previous analysis on desire production and external influences on the 'authentic' ideal, one can reiterate the fact that fashion consumption has reached an ambiguous, even contradictive, state of being. Citizen-consumers in the West have been softly and unnoticeably indoctrinated with the belief in the right to constantly improve, change and evolve in material goods, to then attempt to reach or capture the 'true self' (in vain). This systemically creates a consumptive notion of desire, which demands commodity consumption for self-fulfilment, co-opting the powerful nature of human desire. Part of unlearning these self-imposed boundaries and expectations, is redirecting the energy of desiring into new, radical, and productive forms instead.

As seen, tackling the assumptions relating to our inner and outer identity may have the potential to influence our expressions of desires once more, moving fashion towards a more conscious and responsible path. Re-directing our social concept of desire can thus challenge patterns of consumption turning them less negative, more experiential and based on localised real needs, rather than ideals. Desire has been historically, and still is, widely perceived as the antonym to reason – seen as an excessive and abnormal force to be supressed (Gao, 2013). Within this framing, past thinkers such as Freud or Lacan attributed suppressed desire as a force which inherently came from a 'lack'; of object, person, or otherwise. This cultural perception of desire as a deep 'lack' has infiltrated and is supremely relevant to the system of fashion, where one is often pressured through social forces to feel as though they are lacking material objects to be fulfilled. The technological consumer capitalist context has reinforced the internalisation of so-called 'lacks' in its citizens, successfully affirming within us the negative idea of desire (Kozinets, Patterson, & Ashman, 2017: 659). A 'backhanded desire' based upon vain pursuits of authentic identity through material consumption, is thus the one form of (fashion) desire showcased through mainstream media.

This in turn, created a representational, negative, and incomplete understanding of desire, which post-structuralist philosophers Deleuze and Guattari critiqued throughout their writings. To them, desire is an expansive, random network of connections, producing flows of active realities, with no object nor fixed subject (Gao, 2013). They posit their philosophical concept of desire as being a historically productive force, behind any and every action in life, not resulting from a 'lack' but rather operating as an actualising, creative energy. Desire to Deleuze and Guattari is action made real, "Desire is not bolstered by needs, but rather the contrary; needs are derived from desire: they are counterproducts within the real that desire produces" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983). The conclusive issue remains that in fashion, reactive forces, targeted at profit and production, have gained surveilled influence over authentic desires, thus producing widespread over-consumptive needs. Adopting a Deleuzo-Guattarian view on desire as a pre-personal force behind each connection in life – from plant moving to face light, to skin touching fabric – can move the cultural relationship with fashion towards a more experiential and less idealistic end.

Desires to live up to one's expected 'authentic self', by maintaining an understandable and representational identity through clothing, is noticeably based on socially manufactured individualistic desires of self-idealising natures. The term 'authentic' is removed from its initial meaning, and as consumers we are sold its cultural cachet in innumerable variations, cycle through fashion cycle. In practice, virtual influence of trending fashion styles calls upon their algorithmic audiences to perform their 'authentic' identities in tandem. In other words, the exchange or communication value of our fashion identities becomes more important than their usefulness in self-development (Dean, 2008: 47). Political theorist and post-structuralist academic Jodi Dean calls this phenomenon 'communicative capitalism', described as a paradigm in which political beliefs are expressed through media contributions rather than collective action (Dean, 2005: 55). This in turn depoliticises the action, paralleled in the way the ideological belief of essentialised 'authenticity' is also achieved through communicative media contributions, and reflexively, maintaining an ongoing relationship with the changing 'language' of fashion, through consumption.

Faced with the myth of 'authenticity', questioning subjective identity, and desire formation, one can feel dizzy with the new sight gained by the philosophical analysis on our fashion system. However, learning to value and prioritize realized desires based on experience and community, rather than socially embedded assumed desires, is a powerful tool in liberating citizens to think for themselves and practise life in more ethical manners. By using non-representational, post-structuralist critique on the core values the fashion system exudes, we have the chance to redirect pre-personal desires moulded by the world around us into actions that contribute rather than deplete. Moreover, considering growing calls for degrowth strategies in sustainable development, one must not overlook the psychological work entailed for the

consumerist masses. Degrowth begins at questioning, within each of us, the root behaviours and their precursors which call for illogical contradictive relations with fashion.

One significant venue for this change is within the sphere of higher education fashion studies and vocations, which place the study of Fashion Theory on the sidelines of the field in terms of cultural relevance. In fact, we believe that critical culture theories dedicated to the world of fashion are fundamental in creating a sustained change in the industry. Students and staff know too well of fashion's contradictory, two-dimensional nature, voicing this through the condemnation of 'fast-fashion', trend cycles, 'cultural appropriation', or 'greenwashing'. However, as institutions tasked with the formation of fashion professionals intended to be capable of sustaining an increasingly precarious mode of production – more must be done to provide a theoretical framework for professionals to critically evaluate their actions' impact. At the Amsterdam Fashion Institute (AMFI), such theoretical discussions on the wider system of clothing have been re-introduced into the mandatory curriculum. Now, prospective students will be expected to engage in critical analysis of the industry, hopefully to unlearn nonsensical ideas, breaking the links which have been limiting meaningful change in the industry, and simultaneously freeing identities from surveilled normative 'authentic' displays. And more generally, we must imbue our modern cultural understandings of fashion production and consumption with philosophical perspectives to drive more lasting, rewarding, and sustainable change.

CONCLUSION

Addressing the ideological infrastructure of fashion, it becomes clear that the cultural concept of 'authenticity' has been co-opted by the forces of capital, manifesting an endless cycle of consumption based on the false ideals of the 'true self'. The post-panoptic surveillance structure immanent at the intersection of fashion and social media, coupled with the societal obsession with self-expression through fashion, has shaped a narrow version of authenticity, opposite to its original connotations. By critically engaging with philosophical perspectives, particularly post-structuralist thinkers like Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari, we can begin to unlearn dominant narratives which link personal identity and worth to material consumption.

The current negative, consumptive cycle of desire, driven by the essentialist notions of the self, result in a contradictive state where the more we strive for authenticity in our fashion choices, the more we are led astray from expressing, true, autonomous identity. Instead, caught in the need for social approval, citizens perpetuate the cycle of consumption which leads to their simultaneous demise. Lacan's concept of *jouissance* suggests desires have been fully absorbed into our neoliberal context, and as subjects we find it hard to remove the concept from its expected consumptive end. The pursuit of 'authenticity' in fashion, from brands and people, causes a craving never

truly satisfied, therefore, in desperate need of reassessing.

Lacan's critique opens the door to the reimagining of how we are engaging with clothing and fashion, desires do not have reason to be negatively perceived, argue Deleuze and Guattari. Recognising the positive, and unlimited, actionable potential of desire – of true, autonomously (rather than reactively imposed) experienced desires – gives a glance towards a fashion system built on more realistic needs. As citizen-consumers we can shift our understanding of desire as a force rooted in lack to one that is creative and productive, prioritising localised experiences and connections over material acquisition to comprise identity.

An important struggle in this regard shall be in the realm of fashion education, transformation to the industry means we must have all the tools at our disposal as working professionals. Current abilities are limited by assumptions which have yet to be culturally dismantled, clouding sustainable pursuits. To tackle the future ahead of us, we must pick up and become familiar with a new set of tools, tailored to the post-modern age, using philosophical theories to question deeper what values hold true. Grounding fashion practice in a more nuanced, ethical understanding of identity and desire, can help envision a future where clothes become a tool for personal and collective growth. Redefining what is authentic to us by unlearning widespread fallacies, will reclaim mainstream fashion as space for true, autonomous self-expression, birthed through a perspective upon meaningful connections to community, action, and the environment.

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