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This research proposal will investigate the impact and meaning behind the psychology of colour, self-expression, and trends within the fashion industry. The role of trends within fashion has always interested me, why does the consumer allow a fashion designer or brand to tell them what is 'in fashion,' and what they should be wearing in a particular season. Could our self-expression be manipulated and forced by advertised trends? Are we truly attracted to something because it is what we want, or are we being herded like sheep towards what the fashion industry wants us to be attracted to? Is the consumer emotionally attracted to certain colours? Do these colours evoke feelings, and why do we have colour preferences? I have chosen these three words because, as a designer, I must consider trends and colour forecasts, which influence my colour palettes and design themes. Through the knowledge accumulated through my research into these three key words, I will form a question for my independent inquiry.

Psychology of colour

Colour psychology studies how colours influence human behaviour, mood, and emotions. It explores the psychological and emotional responses that different colours evoke in individuals. Within fashion, colours are used to induce emotional responses and shape public perception.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a German writer and philosopher, explored the emotional impact of colour. In his book *Theory of Colours* (1810, pp.60-63), he proposed that colours have inherent emotional qualities and could evoke feelings. For example, he associated red with passion and aggression, blue with calmness and serenity and yellow with excitement and cheerfulness. In fashion, these associations may influence colour choices for garments to stimulate a desired emotional response from the consumer. For example, a designer may produce a red dress hoping to elicit confidence and glamour, which would be best suited for evening wear. In contrast, a yellow dress emulating feelings of happiness and joy may be better suited to a summer day dress.

Contemporary colour psychologist Angela Wright discusses in her book *The beginner's guide to colour psychology* (1995), that there is a direct correlation between colours and

personality traits. Wright's Colour Affects System suggests that colours have universal psychological effects, stating that people have innate responses to colours based on their emotional and psychological traits (p.18). This theory has been widely used in fashion branding to align colour palettes with target consumer demographics.

Fig 1: Group 1-Spring

Fig 2: Group 2-Summer

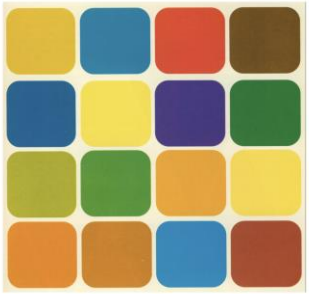

Fig 3: Group 3-Autumn

Fig 4: Group 4-Winter

Throughout her book, Wright explores her research on the unconscious effects of colour and colour categorisation. Determining how people perceive and respond to colours. Associating personalities with seasonal colour groups and implying characteristic traits to groups of colours rather than individual hues. Wright proposed that there are four main categories: Type 1 personalities and Group 1 colours, seasonally linked to Spring, Type 2 personalities and Group 2 colours, seasonally linked to Summer', Autumn and Winter consecutively follow the same pattern. Wright attached emotional traits to each of these groups, for example, people reflecting Type 1 (Spring) personalities were categorised as 'warm, friendly and extrovert' (pp 35-59). The corresponding colour groups are demonstrated in figures 1-4 for reference.

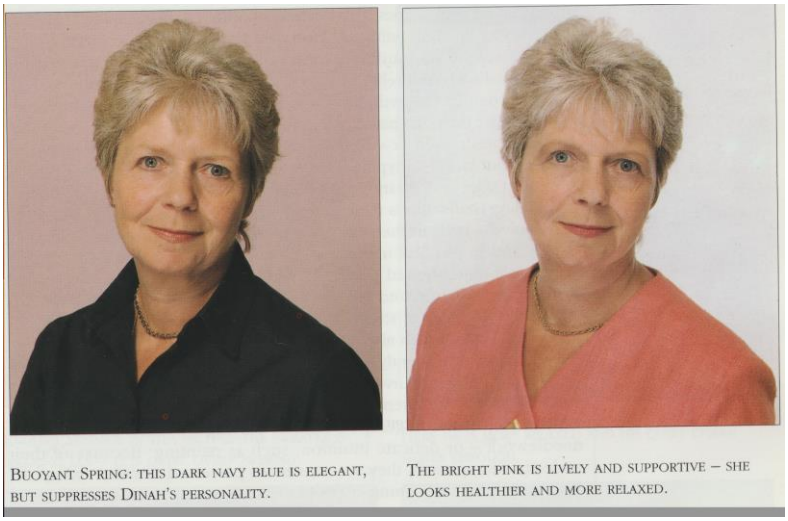

Fig 5: In these two images, Wright is demonstrating how matching your personality type to your colour group benefits your emotional state.

Wright theorised that surrounding yourself with colours that conflict with your natural pattern could have a negative impact, as a person may not feel their authentic selves, they would be feeling the unconscious effects of colour. To identify your 'true colour group', Wright developed a series of questions, which confirmed your personality type and therefore your colour group. Wright then argued that if a person wore clothing within their colour group, it was more flattering, better suited, and even made them emotionally calmer and happier. Her theory is visible in figure 5, showing a woman wearing her complimentary colour and her opposed colour (pp.60-67). However, through her studies Wright realised that there are no wrong colours as such, a person just responds better to some colours than others. This is such an interesting study and could help to explain why

some people are drawn to and feel more comfortable wearing certain coloured clothing. A similar practice popular in today's market is *Colour Me,* a company which offers colour analysis consultations to identify the most flattering shades for individuals. Like Wright's theory, *Colour Me* operates on the belief that specific colours can enhance both the emotional and physical perception of a person.

Figure 6: WGSN Spring/Summer 2026 Colour Forecast

Figure 7: WGSN Autumn/Winter 2026 Colour Forecast

Worth Global Style Network (WGSN) is a global leader in trend forecasting and market analysis, when looking at their colour forecasts for 2026, there are definite similarities between Wright's seasonal colour groups and the WGSN seasonal colour themes, demonstrating how the fashion industry uses Wrights colour affect theory to create targeted seasonal campaigns. For example, a Spring/Summer collection may feature warm hues to encourage a sense of joy and adventure, appealing to the consumers desires for holidays and sunny days out.

Self-expression.

The Oxford English Dictionary (2010, pp 4173) definition of self-expression is, 'the expression of one's feelings, thoughts, or ideas, especially in writing, art, music or dance'. Fashion is a potent medium for self-expression, through colour, clothing, accessories and overall style, individuals articulate their identities, beliefs, and emotions. From the transcendent avant-garde to everyday streetwear, clothing choices are rarely unplanned, they are loaded with meaning and shaped by social, cultural, and psychological connotations.

Roland Barthes, a key figure in semiotics, proposed in *The Fashion System* (1967, pp.33-41) that fashion can be read like a text. Through his study of French fashion magazines, he argued that clothing can communicate messages and that fashion operates within a coded

system of signs. Therefore, the clothes we choose act as signifiers of personal identity, social status, and gender. Barthes' theory creates an understanding of how fashion can be a form of self-expression. Within the fashion industry brands and designers can use this ideology to enforce a particular image through their collections or to create designs to suit a desired style.

In the *Psychology of Fashion* (2018, p.56), Carolyn Mair discusses how clothing is an integral part of our identity and allows us to 'present the self in the most favourable way'. However, social, cultural, and economic factors can influence the consumers ability to fully express themselves through fashion.For example, a woman may wish to convey her character and self through clothing, but may be restricted by religious constraints. In the book *Subcultures* (1988), media theorist and sociologist Dick Hebdiges, expresses how styles can be used as an intentional form of communication. Whereby subcultures will use fashion to express themselves and challenge societal norms. Hebdige refers to "Style as bricolage" (p.102), giving objects new meaning through the way in which you present them. Focusing on the punk subculture, Hedbige expresses how punks incorporated everyday objects to build and form their 'punk' styles, for example using safety pins and chains as jewellery and accessories, giving these objects a new redefined association and meaning (pp.100-117). This theory exemplifies Mair (2018, p.63) where she states that 'fashion provides a visual and readily available vehicle for negotiating self-identity and self-expression'.

The current LGBTQ+ movement has radically influenced fashion, acting as a powerful tool for self-expression and visibility within communities. Challenging traditional gender norms and embracing androgyny, non-binary identities, and fluidity. Figure 8 is the leading image for a Vogue report entitled *'The future is genderless'* (2020), which debates and questions the divide between women's and men's fashion, for example, questioning how an average pair of jeans could be genderfied and labelled male or female. This revelation in self-expression has played a pivotal role in reshaping mainstream fashion trends and increasing the acceptance of gender-neutral clothing. Designers have been inspired to blur gender lines, experiment with new forms of expression and push boundaries.

Figure 8: The future of retail is genderless, Vogue

Designers are fully aware of the power they hold when creating collections. They want their clothes to be perceived in a particular way. Through their work, they can impart their self-expression onto the consumer, moulding and creating desired emotions and perceptions through clothing. In Georg Simmel's piece *Fashion* in *The International Quarterly 10* (1904), he comments on the power of fashion, stating that even the 'most ugly and repugnant things that are sometimes in Vogue are desirous' purely because the commodity that is Vogue advertises it as such (p. 134). Fashion designers can also use their social standing and status as an effective means to address social and environmental issues, thus using their power in differently. Bethany Williams, winner of the 2021 British Fashion Council/Vogue Fashion Fund, integrates social activism into her fashion work. *Vanity Fair's article*, *'Bethany Williams Sees the Transformative Power of Fashion'* writes how Williams was honoured for 'the way she seamlessly integrates innovative design techniques, philanthropy, and advocacy into her eponymous brand' (2021). Williams collaborates with communities and charities to create sustainable collections that reflect topical social issues within the UK. Working alongside the Vauxhall Food Bank, Tesco and local tradespeople, her current collection 'Breadline' seeks to highlight and find solutions to the 'hidden hunger' crisis in the UK (2025). In stark contrast to Simmel's materialistic idea of the power of fashion, using brand names to create desire and sell products, Williams shows us the power of fashion through committed humanitarian beliefs. Using her platform for good, helping communities, charities and implementing a positive change

within the fashion industry. Despite the different views of Simmel and William's both ascertain the persuasive influence of self-expression within the fashion world.

Figure 9: Fall 1992. S&M- Versace's bondage silhouettes have inspired countless imitators, but none hold a candle to the original.

Reka Buckley and Stephen Gundle's work, *Flash Trash* (2000, pp.331-347) delves into the life of Gianni Versace and the theory and practice of glamour. Versace, a worldwide name in the fashion world was known for his extravagant glamour and glitz. Versace sold a lifestyle through his collections. Versace's clients were the rich and famous, who sought to make a statement of wealth and luxury by wearing his clothes. It has been said 'that Versace sold sex and glamour with the gusto of the most garrulous second-hand car dealer,' Jasper Conran commented, that 'the Versace woman dresses for men,' and that 'Versace girls make a career of sex' (Conran in *Flash Trash,* p.344, 200). Versace's S&M 1992 collection, see figure 9, exemplifies Conran's opinion. This is a prime example of Versace's desires being emulated through his fashion designs, as well as the consumer's personal self-expression, displaying how fashion is a powerful tool for self-expression for both designer and consumer.

Trends

Defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2010, p.4861), 'Trend is a general direction in which something is developing or changing, a fashion, or a topic that is the subject of many posts on a social media application within a short period of time'. In terms of fashion, a trend is a distinct collection, characterised by a specific style, cut, colour or pattern. Shaped by particular social and cultural influences, and is popular for a defined period.

Trends are at the heart of the fashion industry, influencing and changing the direction of styles, dictating colours and materials that will dominate the market for the desired

season. From high fashion runways to high street stores, trends shape how clothing is produced, marketed, and consumed. As well as the garments, themselves the ever-increasing issues of sustainability, ethical implications, and environmental factors are also trending within the fashion industry. McKinsey & Company (2020, pp. 16-17) echo this, stating a consumer shift putting sustainability first. The consumer is influencing the trends of the fashion industry by demanding a transformational change at an industrial level and a push for the use of sustainable materials.

Georg Simmel (1904, p.133) inferred that 'fashion is the imitation of a given example and satisfies the demand for social adaptation', expressing that the consumer needs trends. The consumer needs to be told what they should be wearing, allowing them to comply with social expectations. Simmel also implies that through this desire to comply, fashion functions through a process of imitation and differentiation. Whereby, the upper classes are the first to adopt the newest trends to distinguish themselves, these trends are then in turn imitated by the lower classes, thus prompting the elite to move on to the next new trend. This concept known as the 'trickle-down' theory, still influences fashion cycles today. It can be viewed on the High Street, where cheaper shops such as Primark sell designer copies of garments at a far lower price after their debut in the luxury high-end market.

The fashion economy is driven by trends, creating continual demand for new products. However, with the expansion of social media as an advertising tool and the ever-increasing consumer demand, trend cycles have shortened dramatically beyond the traditional four

seasons, as noted by McKinsey and Company (2020, p.79), in turn putting pressure on designers who are feeling the tension between creativity and commercial viability.

Fashion trends have played a significant role in shaping societal norms, identities, and behaviours. Trends can function as powerful tools of communication, cultural expression and social stratification, dividing social classes.

Fashion mirrors societal shifts, allowing topical self-expression through fashion. This can be exemplified in previous historical societal shifts, such as the 'peace and love' fashion movement. In the 1960s and 70's there was a social movement that rejected the traditional norms, celebrating peace, love, and alternative lifestyles, primarily associated with the hippie culture. This movement influenced clothing trends leaving a lasting impact on fashion and culture.

A current societal shift that is affecting fashion trends, is the controversial queer movement. Whilst some people see this as a long overdue positive force to adopt inclusivity and self-expression, others view it as a threat to traditional gender norms.

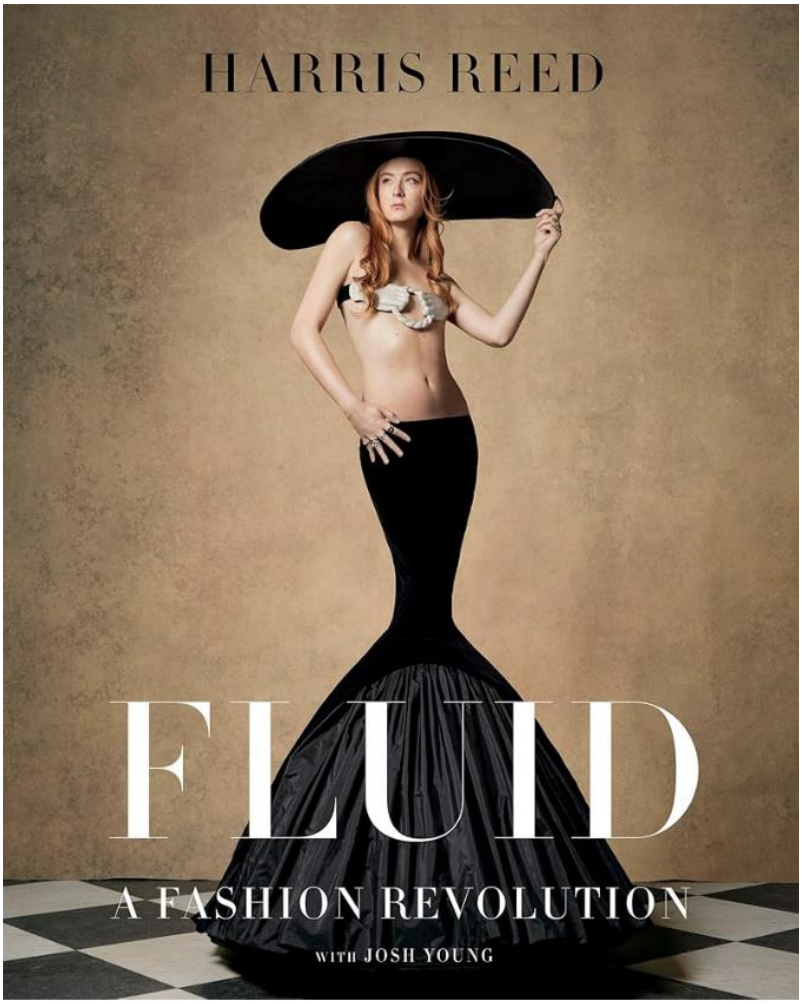

Figure 10: Fluid, a fashion revolution, Harris Reed. (2015)

Queer designers such as Harris Reed are leading this trend, gaining recognition and promoting styles that defy gender norms, see figure 10. Reed (2025) describes fashion as 'truly revolutionary, playing a huge role in pushing the world to be a more expressive and accepting place'. He uses his platforms to share his values and to help those seeking acceptance and self-love. This movement is gradually trickling from designers to fashion houses and retailers. Unisex fashion collections are growing, and brands such as Eckhaus Latta are blurring the lines between men's and women's clothing, challenging traditional

categories. Celebrities such as Harry Styles are embracing fluid fashion, helping to normalise fluid expression. This 'Trend' is an exciting, influential and pivotal moment for fashion.

Conclusion

In summary, the three key words I have researched and analysed demonstrate three principal driving factors that influence designers in the fashion industry. These three balanced elements are fundamental to sustaining a successful design process. However, the demand for fast fashion and the urge for shorter fashion cycles are putting too much pressure on designers. McKinsey and Company (2020) recognise that the demand for pace places a huge financial and creative burden on brands. This has led me to question why the demand for new collections is so high, particularly in a climate where sustainability is such a prevalent factor.

Through my research, I understand the principles behind Wright's colour affect theory, and it is clearly visible how this logic is used to produce seasonal colour collections; however, I do find myself querying the importance of matching personalities and colour groups. I would like to further investigate the relevance of this theory and the degree to which it affects emotional response.

My research has led me to conclude that self-expression through fashion is a form of art. Designers create collections considering societal, cultural and environmental factors,

aligning with current popular trends. In response, consumers carefully curate a collection of garments and accessories, selecting pieces that reflect their personality traits, social identity and values. The result is an emotionally resonant and expressive form of art, that communicates far more than aesthetics alone.

My research has led me to the question: What are the mechanisms behind the formation of fashion trends, and why do they resonate differently across various social and cultural groups? This will be my initial question for my independent inquiry; however, this may evolve as my research has created several questions regarding, psychological factors that influence the creation and reception of design trends and what accounts for the selective appeal of trends among individuals. These further questions will aid my research and will be integrated within my independent inquiry.

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Figures

Figure 1:

Group 1- Spring Colour Collection

Wright, A. (1995) *The Beginners guide to Colour Psychology*. London: Kyle Cathie Ltd.

Figure 2:

Group 2- Summer Colour Collection

Wright, A. (1995) *The Beginners guide to Colour Psychology*. London: Kyle Cathie Ltd.

Figure 3:

Group 3- Autumn Colour Collection

Wright, A. (1995) *The Beginners guide to Colour Psychology*. London: Kyle Cathie Ltd.

Figure 4:

Group 4- Winter Colour Collection

Wright, A. (1995) *The Beginner's guide to Colour Psychology*. London: Kyle Cathie Ltd.

Figure 5:

Individual Variations

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Figure 6:

WGSN Spring Summer 2026 Colour Forecast

https://www.wgsn.com/fashion/article/6638f6be0304f94cfe6354a9#page2

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Harris Reed: Fluid

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