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What is the role of the designer/maker in the 21st Century and how might this role change in the next 10 years?

This essay will be focusing on independent fashion designers, and how, in the 21st century they are required to be more than designers of fashion. Traditionally the role involves design skills and expertise in the ability to draw the initial stages of their clothing in various layouts and angles; and create visuals of their designs around the human form. Further, fashion designers need a vast knowledge of pattern making and garment sewing, which are essential in their roles; alongside an extensive understanding of different materials and fabrics. As most fashion designers work alongside a team of people, the ability to communicate effectively is essential within a design role. For contemporary independent fashion designers who do not typically work as part of a larger team, their role also involves being a multi-faceted artist/designer to keep up with the ever-changing demands of design; including socioeconomic factors, advancements in technology, and understanding business strategies and marketing. With these requirements in today's fashion industry, there is little possibility for independent fashion designers to be able to focus solely on one aspect of their design. As well as the traditional fashion design role of drawing designs, an independent fashion designer (IFD) is defined as someone who not only designs fashion but also makes, sells and markets. As such this essay will explore how independent fashion designers (IFDs) will situate themselves in this multi-faceted role in the near future.

Firstly, the IFD role involves keeping up with emerging trends. Research into consumer wants and needs are crucial to any fashion designer. As sellers, IFDs have to consider their target audience and their demographics. They also need to have an understanding of their consumers' lifestyle choices and an awareness of cultural appropriation and those from diverse communities. For example, trends such as non-gendered clothing items are now becoming more prevalent in mainstream fashion. Large high-street clothing chain UNIQLO have created a range of 'Genderless' clothing (Fig.1). "Our LifeWear is Made for All, and while our clothing is largely categorised into women's and men's, we are working to create more pieces that can be worn by people of all gender expressions and aren't confined by traditional binary gender" (UNIQLO, 2022).



Fig.1 UNIQLO LifeWear Genderless Clothing, 2022.

However, creating such pieces can present challenges for fashion designers, especially when it comes to sizing. "Sizing can be a significant issue. Traditional men and women sizes are manufactured differently and have different numeric designations. This can be confusing in the gender-neutral world" (V.MORA, 2022). Women's sizing is usually based on chest, waist and hip measurements culminating in a general size such as size 10, whereas men's clothing is based on a measurement system, with different sizes for the neck, waist and inner leg.

A solution to this problem for IFDs could be found by using technology to match body types to personal size recommendations. Size-less commerce company WAIR do this by working alongside online clothing brands, offering virtual fitting room technology, which has a growing database of 3D body scans taken from real people across the world. This provides the shopper with the body scan that best matches their specific body dimensions (WAIR, 2022). This could change the traditional approach to sizing in the industry for IFDs, making the standard sizing guide obsolete, in line with current trends for genderless clothing.

Another way for an IFD to anticipate trends is through social media. Large social media platform TikTok has amassed 2.05 billion users as of 2024 (Demand Sage, 2024) and has become known for dictating certain fashion trends amongst its followers. The world leaders of consumer trend forecasting; Worth Global Style Network (WGSN) stated that: “The #Britishcore TikTok trend is driving a fresh emphasis on quintessential English style, inspired by nostalgic country pursuits. It combines aspects of Clubhouse and Modern Academia aesthetics, which resonate globally, broadening this trend’s allure” (Jacobs, et al. 2024). (Fig.2). By using a consumer trend forecaster such as WGSN, the IFD can use this information to ensure their collections are appealing to their target audience. The IFD is also able to make the appropriate decisions regarding colour trends, fabric types, patterns and styles, while strategically releasing collections to the market at the best possible time, allowing them to increase their chances of profitable success.



Fig.2 Nostalgic country club aesthetic for Grove A/W 24/25, 2024.

As social media platforms have become so integrated with promoting a brand, independent fashion designers also have the role of being social media and marketing experts. Today, IFDs are having to market their brand, use social media, build their own website, photograph their own work, build networks, and communicate within the industry. Ekhlassi, et al. (2018) explain that, “social media platforms have become a powerful marketing tool for brands in order to reach new audiences and engage with them” (p. 118). This suggests that independent fashion designers must be able to act in the role of social media marketer and have a strong social media presence for their brand to succeed. Further, “creative content is a vital part of social media marketing strategies, as innovative content can attract more users and improve brand health” (Ekhlassi, et al. 2018 p. 118). An example of a fashion designer who uses these skills is Aimee Smale, who founded the London based online clothing brand; Odd Muse. The brand uses its social media and website to drive online sales. Smale began designing clothes in her childhood bedroom in Essex, and would send the designs to be made by an external company (Fig.3). Once completed, she took her own photographs of herself modelling her clothes (Fig.4), and used them to launch her website.



Fig.3 Odd Muse humble beginnings, 2020.



Fig.4 Aimee Smale modelling dress, 2024.

“Since its launch in 2020, Odd Muse has reached heights Aimee never anticipated, with expanding offices, and global reach, going from herself to an entire team, producing sell-out collections, fashion week shows and welcoming new muses” (Odd Muse, 2024). This shows that her online strategy has been working effectively. Beginning in the United Kingdom from her own bedroom, the brand has not only cracked the Middle Eastern market, but it also opened its flagship store in Convent Garden in 2023 (Odd Muse, 2024). Amongst this huge success, Smale still models the clothes for her brand and promotes herself on social media; officially adopting TikTok as the marketing strategy that has launched the brand from a small independent designer to a booming online business.

Smale markets the brand as ‘slow fashion’, appealing to the market who want high quality, luxury garments at an accessible price point. This has positively impacted the success of the brand. Her marketing strategy has led to Odd Muse becoming the “epitome of investment fashion, marking the brand's sartorial empowerment” (Odd Muse, 2024). This is seen as more environmentally aware than fast fashion, as the higher quality clothes are intended to last. “Most high-quality clothes come with clear care instructions, ensuring that you can maintain their pristine condition for a long time. While you might spend a bit more upfront, the longevity and ease of care associated with high-quality clothes make them a more economical choice in the long run” (Brook-Smith, 2023). During a podcast with Ben Gallagher, Smale discusses sustainability within her brand, “we don’t like to hold too much stock. We always try and buy tight to what we need...” (Gallagher, 2024). By using a pre-order system and only buying the fabric needed for each order, it avoids wasting materials and reducing excess fabrics that will end up in landfill.

This understanding of environmental sustainability within their design practice is an important role for today’s independent fashion designer, with the overwhelming threat that ‘fast-fashion’ poses on the environment. Fast fashion contributes to 10% of total global carbon emissions due to its rapid, over-production of clothing; while 36% of the industry’s global pollution is caused by the dyeing and finishing of fabrics (Maiti, 2024). IFDs must now look to an alternative, or perhaps more thoughtful approach to designing and making within their practice. “We leave aside the old model of product-and-waste, and its dour offspring

‘efficiency’, and embrace the challenge of being not efficient but *effective* with respect to a rich mix of considerations and desires” (Braungart and McDonough, 2009 p. 72).

By implementing a more effective practice, IFDs have the potential to not only reduce the negative impacts that clothing production has on the environment, but there could also be a reduction in the exploitation of factory workers in developing countries. An example of a sustainable brand is Work Shy; a Welsh clothing company based in Cardiff, and founded by IFD; Demi Amber Watkins. The brand makes made-to-order workwear from organic cotton, using hand dyed and hand finished fabrics. “The dyes are low impact and eco-friendly, so it gives our clothing a unique look and feel, as unlike heavy chemical dyes, our dyes will soften and mature with wear. This gives that authentic French workwear appeal” (Reid, 2019). In doing this, they are using sustainable practice as part of their aesthetic.



Fig.5 Work Shy green jacket, 2021.

Unfortunately, environmentally friendly clothing can often be too expensive for a lot of consumers, leading to an increase in fast fashion sales that end up in landfills after a few wears due to low quality; leading to a cycle of buying, throwing away and replacing. However, sustainable clothing does not have to be expensive. Children’s clothing brand Petit Pli, focus on clothing that grows with children. In an effort to reduce the amount of money

that is spent on buying new clothes for growing children, Petit Pli founder Ryan Mario Yasin created a sustainable garment that would 'grow' with his nephew, while also reducing water and carbon footprints (Fig.6).

Applying ground-breaking material qualities that enforce durability, while offering free repairs on garments, Petit Pli's 'Clothes That Grow' has gone on to win multiple awards by revolutionising childrenswear (Petit Pli, 2024).

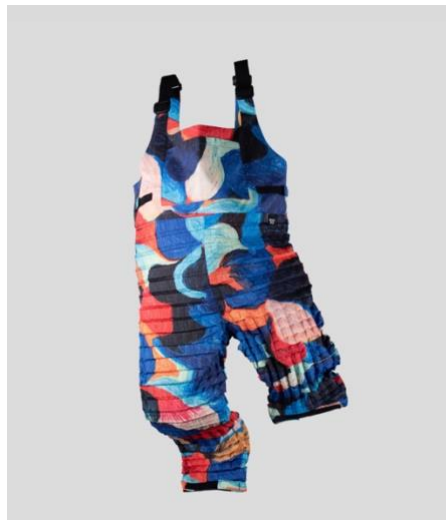


Fig.6 Petit Pli Pocket Dungarees, 2024.

Clothing brand Petit Pli works alongside a team of aeronautical and design engineers, as well as collaborating with Paris-based digital designer Arnaud Pfeffer to help develop their unique and sustainable materials (Petit Pli, 2024). To match this success, other IFDs must now also consider the addition of new technology within their design process. Design software such as CAD, Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator are now standard tools within the design industry. Although these types of softwares are used to save time by allowing quick and easy modifications, to effectively use these tools at an advanced level requires a considerable amount of learning hours; and a further skill required to be a fashion designer. For IFDs who work alone, or within a very small team, this accumulation of essential skills is now becoming a prerequisite for fashion design.

Compared to the traditional role of a fashion designer, the expectations placed on contemporary, and independent fashion designers has increased exponentially, with multi-faceted roles in design and business (Aakko & Niinimäki, 2018). IFDs are expected to push creative boundaries and design unique and innovative clothing, while trying to compete in a saturated market alongside large high-street and online brands such as ASOS, Zara and Shien as well as fast expanding eCommerce company Temu; an online marketplace that connects shoppers with third-party sellers who sell products, including on-trend clothing at questionably low prices (Walsh, et al. 2024). Alongside this, IFDs have to keep up to date on compliance laws regarding product safety, environmental impact and workplace regulations. IFDs could also face rising costs in production and supply chain issues, such as shipping delays and material shortages, which can negatively impact their collection release times, thus having a financial impact on their business. The future for IFDs is a role where they must navigate the fashion world facing extreme pressures, while trying to remain authentic to their brand's ethos.

When being asked about her work life balance and if her role as an IFD has taken its toll on her mental health, Odd Muse founder Aimee Smale, stated that, "at the end of last year I was experiencing chronic stress and I couldn't enjoy life. The growth of my business has come at a cost to me, mentally" (Gallagher, 2024). This reinforces the immense pressures that IFDs experience when trying to create their own successful brand, while wanting to have total creative control. Talking about the future of Odd Muse, Smale goes on to say "I never went into this for money. I just want slow and steady growth". After risking her house savings to bring her passion to life, Odd Muse reached a turn-over of £20M in 2024 and has an expected target of £50M for 2025 (Gallagher, 2024). However, Smale does not want to hit that target, explaining "As an entrepreneur, its innate to want to grow and grow and grow. But it has taken over my life and now I want it to stay as it is. I know my company can hit these targets, but at what point do I say 'I'm happy'?" Smale illustrates how the business side of her brand has taken her away from the more creative aspects of her role, "My favourite thing to do is design the clothes. I love sketching and all the creative side of things. Ideally, if the business could grow and run and I could just do the designs and social content, that would be a dream". To maintain the creative aspect of her role, Smale made the

decision to hire a managing director to take control of the company's business operations, leaving her with more freedom to pursue her creative direction.

With the future role of an independent fashion designer becoming that of an entrepreneur, and with the burdens of running a business only managed by one person, or a small team of people, there is growing potential for mental and physical burnout within small to medium enterprises such as Odd Muse and Work Shy; which could see these businesses decline. As fast fashion becomes harder to compete with, popular independent brands such as The Vampire's Wife; a London based clothing brand founded by Susie Cave in 2014 (Mac Donnell, 2024), have been forced to close down their businesses due to financial losses, as consumers continue to buy low quality clothing to keep up with trends. While these independent fashion brands have managed to accumulate a loyal fan base, this alone is not enough for the role of an IFD to thrive in mainstream consumerism.

For independent fashion designers to succeed in the future, it is crucial that consumers address their attitude towards mass-produced clothing and their motives for buying garments that they only intend to wear for a short period of time. Although initially making such changes can be challenging, investing in high quality, sustainable clothing items over time can feel rewarding; with an intentional approach to taking care of the clothes we own. By making conscientious decisions when purchasing clothing, and opting not to buy into fast fashion, this could increase the demand for IFDs and allow consumers to explore and appreciate the innovative, sustainable and unique designs from the passions of creators and designers.

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Fig.6 '*Pocket Dungarees.*' *Petit Pli.* (2024). [image] Available at: <https://shop.petitpli.com/products/clothes-that-grow-pocket-dungarees?variant=44806855917793> (Accessed 13th December. 2024).

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