The Trousers *and* Research Methodology *for* Oppressive Design

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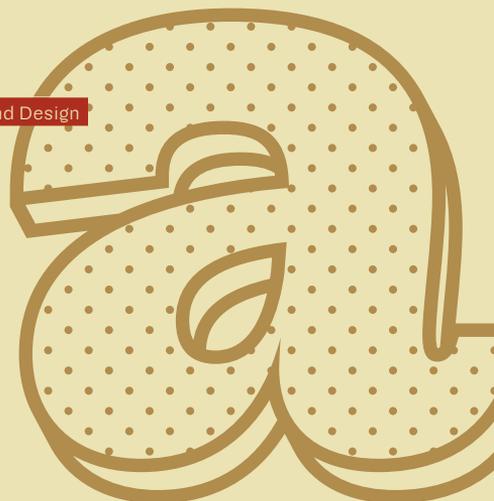
As clothing represents social, political, and performative values pertaining to gender, it is not surprising that they also serve as oppressive designed objects. One of the most significant symbols of gender power relations were the trousers that women were banned from wearing in the West as a daily fashion item until the second half of the 20th century. This article presents the history of trousers via a new research methodology for studying oppressive design. This methodology is built on Michel Foucault's approach to genealogical research and Bruno Latour's ideas about the social agency of objects. Just as Foucault revealed the history of norms, ideas, discourses, and values, which are abstract yet powerful entities, this methodology focuses on identifying the moment in which oppressive objects first entered into daily common use, becoming a new natural and oppressive 'truth' that shaped the worldview of its users. This approach builds on Latour's argument that objects serve as mediating devices of values and discourses between individuals, and the idea that genealogical research concerning their use might expose their socio-historical function and powerful involvement in shaping and policing power relations over time.

Keywords
Trousers
Genealogical research
Actor-network theory
Michel Foucault
Bruno Latour

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The Trousers and Research Methodology for Oppressive Design

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In 2013, women in Paris were officially granted the right to wear trousers. For 213 years, since November 7th, 1800, it has been technically illegal for a woman to wear trousers in the city without a police permit.[1] Although this by-law was not enforced for many years, it continued to appear in the statute books and remained in force.[2] In spite of the French Revolution call for 'freedom of dress', which aimed to erase signs of rank, status, gender, and the legal encumbrances of the Old Regime, the revolutionaries maintained and even emphasized gender differentiation. Indeed, this historical moment marked a profound transformation, which John Carl Flügel called 'The Great Masculine Renunciation', as "Men gave up their right to all the brighter, gayer, more elaborate and more varied forms of ornamentation, leaving these entirely to the use of women. (…) Man abandoned his claim to be considered beautiful" (Flügel, 1969, p. 111).

Fashion became even more feminized in the 19th century, when the expression of sexual differences through clothing was more important than that of social order (Steele, 1989). One of the finest examples of this new gender politics, as I will elaborate below, is the transformation of men's trousers. Following the Revolution, they came to be characterized by somber colors and different lengths in order to express class differences, while women were banned from wearing them at all, thus casting them as the ultimate symbol of women's struggle for freedom and equal rights (Perrot, 1994, p. 31).

Fashion is known to express identity, social status, subjectivity, individuality, gender, and body politics. In their article 'Cloth and the Organization of Human Experience', Schneider and Weiner make the point that cloth is a "critical object in social exchange, an objectification of ritual intent, and an instrument of political power" (1986, p. 178). As the prohibition of wearing trousers created gender power relations, it is important to relate them to the way Butler theorized gender.[3] For Butler, the body itself is not something that naturally occurs, but is made through interactions constrained by social practice and existing power structures (Butler, 1990, as cited in Wissinger, 2015, p. 286). Her work moved the focus of fashion analysis from the sociological role of clothes of creating, signifying, and monitoring identities to the role of clothes of fashioning the body itself (Wissinger, 2015, p. 286). As such, Butler brought fashion into conversations about bodies,

1   The fact that this law was abolished only in 2013 should not come as a surprise. Female senators in the US were banned from wearing trousers on the senate floor until 1993, and British Airways began permitting trousers for its female staff in 2016. Even today, a particular form of dress may be used as a social control mechanism. In 2010, France banned wearing full face coverings and thus actively controlling Muslim women as it both constrains and enables mobility in urban spaces. The 2022 protests in Iran have also raised debates about the state controlling women's bodies and how they should be dressed.

2   The law was last applied in the 1920s when Violette Morris was banned from the French team in the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam (although she won two gold medals and one silver medal at the 1921 and 1922 Women's World Games organized by Alice Milliat), as her license was not renewed by the *Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale* for insisting on wearing trousers.

3   Butler argues that gender, as an objective natural thing, does not exist in and of itself. Gender, according to Butler, is by no means tied to material and biological bodily facts but is solely and completely a social construction, a fiction, one that, therefore, is open to change and contestation (Wissinger, 2015).

as a form of discourse in which the clothed body is an utterance reflecting existing power relations. Following her work, Shahnaz Suterwalla showed how fashion is used by women as a tool in the feminist struggle:

> Countercultural dress that used the body as the critical site of resistance since the 1960s has refashioned the personal and the political as well as the personal as the political. In particular, it is through style as anti-fashion, as a rebuke to the fashion system, that evidence of the productive operations of dress in creating difference becomes pronounced. Oppositional dress has challenged power hierarchies to expose issues of class, race and gender, of history itself. (2012, p. 267)

Clothing thus represents social, political, and performative values pertaining to gender (Braizaz, 2019, pp. 60–62; Crane, 2000, pp. 16–19). Yet, like norms, discourses, and values, which are invisible entities that are difficult to notice, the significant social power of everyday objects (such as trousers) stems mostly from our lack of attention to their invisible yet implicit power as influential social agencies. Hence, the goal of this article is to propose a research methodology that reveals the origins of daily artifacts, and the norms and values that were inscribed in them when created. This enables us to identify their social agencies and their powerful impact on the construction of contemporary power relations. As a case study, this article will show how trousers became an oppressive object in Western societies, that shaped the political discourse, norms, and power relations between men and women.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR OPPRESSIVE DESIGN

Theoretical Framework

In order to elucidate the political dimension of design objects, I would like to propose a methodological framework that relies on the actor-network theory (ANT), formulated by sociologist Bruno Latour. This theory views objects as epistemically equal to human subjects. Latour explains that:

> The twin mistake of the materialists and the sociologists is to start with essence, those of subjects *or* those of objects. That starting point renders impossible our measurement of the mediating role of techniques. Neither subject nor object (nor their goals) are fixed (…) Essence is existence and existence is action. (Latour, 2009, p. 159)

As material structures were always part of human society, ANT theory asserts that these nonhumans make it possible to manage the social flow and add something that is of sociological relevance to a chain of events. Thus, the role of these objects falls under the general sociological rubric of *action* and *agency* (Latour, 2005, pp.

64–86). Moreover, ANT attempts to pluralize what it means to speak of agency, and thus does not invoke only causal agency: "there might exist many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer in-existence: things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on" (Latour, 2004, p. 226). As an example, Latour presents how our collective has outsourced some of its regulating principles, some of its politics, and some of its morality, to machines (such as the automobile seatbelt) that force us to act according to a social norm or mediate a moral norm (Fallan, 2008, p. 92). Latour, thus, explains that objects have an agency that exerts a kind of pressure on all our activities in ways of which we are not aware. Latour, therefore, argues: "Each artifact has its script, its 'affordance', its potential to take hold of passersby and force them to a play role in its story" (1994, p. 31).

Nonhumans, of course, do not have agency by *themselves* as they are not subjective—they do not see, think, or feel, and they do not have emotions. However, objects mediate rules and information of the social and physical world, as well as actions that humans have in mind. Those are translated into objects by designers, who create them and imbue them with a 'program of action' and agency that makes them act in the place of people and constitute social order. Thus, according to Latour's ANT, nonhumans that were traditionally overlooked in sociological analyses of the social world—due to the subject-object dichotomy that has ruled modern thinking—take their rightful place as fully-fledged mediating actors in associations, relations, and networks, and thus also in everyday politics.

Latour (1987) states that, in order to understand the agency of objects in society, we must understand how objects evolve. While sociologists believe that objects emerge from mental structures and scientists believe that objects emerge from materialistic concerns, Latour claims that objects are actually the end result of a long process of negotiation between the material world, historical associations, and people who attribute names, social meanings, and relationships to things. He thus claims that the way to identify the logic and signification of an object is not through studying the relationship between things, but rather through studying the process of an *object becoming* (Latour, 1987, p. 21).

The study of an object's agency through an examination of its process of becoming also builds on Michel Foucault's combination of sociology and the history of ideas, which presented new ways of thinking about historical research. Foucault was not interested in artifacts per se (except for his research regarding the Panopticon), but rather examined how norms, values, and shared ideas are formed in society, constituting themselves as a general 'truth'. In other words, he studied the process of *norms coming into being*. Foucault, who was interested in the concepts of power and government throughout history, saw norms as formed in the interaction between diverse mechanisms of knowledge and power,

and examined the behavior of subjects in relation to them (1988, p. 279). It was the intersection of knowledge and power what rendered these norms invisible, while producing a new language, values, and governmental rationalities through the employment of a new social discourse. This new social discourse was conventionally accepted by all, constituting itself as 'truth' that became oppressive by disseminating hegemonic norms.

Building on the integration of Latour and Foucault's insights, the current methodology attempts to diagnose the historical moments in which knowledge and power meet to create foundational designed objects—such as trousers—that were implicitly inscribed with new ideologies and values pertaining to the politics of gender. Thus, parallel to Foucault's argument that new norms and values created new discourses that constructed structures of power, one can observe how new objects that are inscribed with norms and values were constituted as common practices, and created new discourses and a new 'truth'. Just like norms, the agency within these objects reshaped the identity and behaviors of their users. These objects police human behavior and sometimes become oppressive (racist, sexist, ableist) by disseminating hegemonic norms. Therefore, oppressive things, according to Liao and Huebner, do exactly what norms do: they make the lives of the oppressed people, materially, socially, and psychologically worse when they define what is 'normal' and what is not 'normal' (2021, p. 97).

This methodology entails an ontological and epistemological challenge to the way we research objects. Latour's work ontologically challenged the nature of objects, while Foucault epistemologically challenged the basis of the modern form of knowledge. Both theories, although not discussing clothes, lead us to produce a new kind of knowledge about fashion. Joanne Entwistle, for example, presents an analysis of fashion through ANT as a complex assemblage of an heterogeneous range of actors—human and non-human—that are in interaction in order to create particular sorts of goods labeled as fashion (2015, p. 275). Foucault's work also provides us with a critical framework to analyze how clothing is implicated in power relations, as he saw the body as critical to how power works (Tynan, 2015, pp. 184–185). Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallaro (1998), for example, used Foucault's framework to discuss control, subjection, discipline, and transgression in relation to the dressed body. Joanne Entwistle has shown how the discursive practice of a dress makes the body meaningful in a range of social and institutional contexts (2000, 2001).

Methodology at Work

Following Foucault's genealogical research methodology, which inquiries into the institutional mechanisms of power, the people, and the rules that shaped it, the proposed methodology analyzes the unwritten system of regulations that were

part of the production of objects, which later organize and disseminate norms and values (Krarup, 2021, pp. 3–5). When applied to the history of fashion, the researcher should ask where, why, by whom, and for what were these clothes first created. Who did they serve? What ideology did they contain and propagate? In what way did this clothing impact the construction of power relations and the creation of meaningful social systems?

This methodology is related to a geographical location but not to a historical period, as Foucault did not limit his research to a specific time, but rather searched for foundational, outstanding historical events that shaped new discourses and the behavioral patterns of regimes of power. He referred to it as 'effective history', which presented history as a series of archaeological shifts, epistemic breaks, and knowledge ruptures (Foucault, 1977, pp. 153–155).

Thus, in order to research the way trousers shape and police Western gender power relations, we must go back to the period when trousers were invented and became widely used (mid-14th century) and to the location (Western Europe). Moreover, as fashion is a social system, it encompasses, as discussed by Roland Barthes, three levels of representation: *real clothing* (clothing as a material and technological artifact), *image clothing* (clothing as image), and *written clothing* (fashion as discourse) (1990, pp. 3–5). And so, the methodology entails researching:

1) *Real clothing,* such as the 14th century hose that can be seen in archives of fashion museums in France and Italy.
2) *Image clothing,* such as illuminated manuscripts of the late Medieval period like the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (1410), or in frescos and portraits in which fashion is described. These images created fashion icons and disseminated new knowledge concerning changing trends, fashionable clothes and colors, and garments worn by different social classes.
3) *Written clothing,* as manifested in words of clerical preaching and sumptuary laws, as well as through the dissemination of books on morality and etiquette.

This historical research is integrated into current sociological research about the history of trousers in the 20th-21st century.

THE ORIGIN OF THE TROUSERS IN EUROPE AND ITS SYMBOLIC POWER RELATIONS

The advent of the trousers coincided with the domestication of horses ca. 3,500–3,000 BCE (Mayor, 2016, p. 197). From that moment on, they were charged with symbolic meaning, as their design was focused on activity and mobility, on extending one's range of action and increasing independence. Yet, whereas the design of trousers related to their concrete function, a critical analysis in the spirit of the proposed methodology centers on the formation of the discourse that shaped the

trousers as a symbol of power, and the creation of gender hierarchies. Because there are significant cross-cultural differences regarding the relationship between gender and clothing, and different kinds of trousers in different societies (such as Turkish *Salvar*, Indian *Shalwar*, Chinese *Ku*, Japanese *Hakama*, and Inuit *Garliik*), this study is limited to Europe. It thus takes us back to the birth of fashion in France and Italy in the 14th century, which gave rise to new 'truths', including a new visual form of gender identity and related politics of gender.

Until the 14th century, clothing did not serve to provide personal 'identity', but was rather used to identify people belonging to different groups and to differentiate them into social classes (Riello, 2020, p. 12). Different classes wore different types of clothes, furs, and jewelry in order to represent their status, yet all classes, including both men and women, wore the same *houppelande* or robes resembling tunics, whose loose cut covered the entire body and obscured its curves. This basic attire was sometimes supplemented by a long, colorful, sleeveless tunic with numerous folds. A similar tunic was worn by both men and women with no significant gender differentiation, and without changing the basic cut of European clothing, which covered the entire body. Although changes in European dress obviously took place since the demise of the Roman Empire, they were mainly concerned with fabric, rather than with the cut.

During the medieval period, gender-related differences were hardly given expression by means of dress. They were largely made visible by means of hairstyles (women sometimes wore braids and colorful ribbons) and accessories (for instance, noblemen carried weapons and money pouches that hung from leather belts, while noblewomen wore hats) (Piponnier & Mane, 1997, pp. 77–78).

In the early 14th century, however, new cuts and styles reconstructed both the male and the female body, while differentiating them. Noblewomen began wearing tighter dresses with an emphasized waist and deep décolletage, with a sleeveless overcoat (Ribeiro, 1986, p. 43). Despite the exposure of their breasts by the low necklines, women continued to wear long dresses that carefully hid their legs. In the mid-14th century, noblemen's clothes also underwent a significant change. They started wearing a short, tight tunic that revealed the shape of the body and figure, a hugging hose, and padded jackets, which were belted to form a pleated effect covering the genital area (Ribeiro, 1986, pp. 44–46).

This fashion became more extreme by the end of the 14th century, when men's tunics became so short that they revealed their genital area, and the hose was so tight that it was almost impossible to kneel in it (Ribeiro, 1986, p. 45) (Figure 1). According to the *Eulogium Historiarum* (1362), the hose was often made with each leg in a different color and was called *mi-parti* (Turner, 2019, p. 48). For the first time, European noblemen dared to expose their bodies. Since the point

of reference was military armor that was redesigned in the early 14th century, the hose that had a new emphasis on the legs presented men as a symbol of power (Boucher, 1987, pp. 194–198).

Figure 4: Male wearing short tunics and the hose, beginning of the 15th century. 'Dagobert visitant le chantier de la construction de Saint-Denis', by Robinet Testard. Illuminated manuscript. *Les Grandes Chroniques de France*. France, Poitiers, 15th Century. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits Français 2609, Grandes Chroniques de France, folio 60 v°. RCB 10089.a. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org

And so, during the 14th century, when noblemen's and noblewomen's clothing became increasingly differentiated, clothes came to act as a form of separating and gendering 'femininity' and 'masculinity' by means of materials, colors, and forms. Thus, the performance of gender through clothes was not based on biological or physiological differences between men and women, but as shown by Butler, on social elements (Riello, 2020, pp. 53–57). Once this process of gender distinction or 'great differentiation' began, there was no way back.

During the 15th and 16th centuries, these two binary forms of performing gender continued to diverge aesthetically, reinforcing gender stereotypes. This process was already emphasized in the early 1460s when the codpiece was introduced as part of the trousers. It acted as a symbolic substitute for a real

penis (made from a bundle of cloth), providing proof of masculinity in the most blatant of manners (Fisher, 2016, pp. 102–103) (Figure 2). This new 'accessory' helped, of course, to bolster the symbolic power of trousers.

Figure 2: Man wearing the cod-piece. Portrait of Pietro Maria Rossi - Count of San Secondo, by Parmigianino, 1535–1538. Oil on panel, 133 x 98 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org

The fact that legs became a symbol of masculine power (while women's legs were hidden) is demonstrated by a 1701 portrait of Louis XIV in his coronation robes. In order to underscore the king's power, he is presented wearing high heels, showing off his legs, which were considered to represent the body and power of the state (Figure 3). During the 18th century, noblemen gradually discarded breeches and colored hoses. The legs of elite men were highlighted in close-fitting white hose and skin-tight breeches, presenting them as a symbol of power that upheld the social order (Lemire, 2016, p. 6).

Figure 3: Legs as a symbol of power. Portrait of Louis XIV, by Hyacinthe Rigaud, after 1701. Oil on canvas, 289.6 × 159.1 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Gift of J. Paul Getty. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program. Source: https://www.getty.edu

Thus, the return to the birth of fashion reveals how political values were woven into clothes, becoming a new and natural 'truth' that regimented the power relations between men and women. These power relations were shaped by men, since they were largely in control of financial means and legislation, and could dictate the rules of fashion and their multiple meanings. Specifically, there were Sumptuary laws that subjected the human body to the practices and strategies of control of the ruling authorities, including the control of women by men. Women, of course, were never involved in the creation of regulations, which mainly pertained to them.

From the 14th to the 19th century, women did not wear trousers. The first women's trousers to come into vogue in the mid-19th century were the bloomer, called after American women's rights activist Amelia Bloomer (although created by Elizabeth Smith Miller), which highlighted the freedom of movement (Reilly, 2021, p. 88).[4] From that point on, few attempts to introduce women's trousers were made. In 1911, designer Paul Poiret appropriated Turkish harem trousers for women with reference to the bloomer. During World War I, many women who were engaged in physical labor started wearing men's trousers for the first time.

In 1918, as the war was coming to an end, Levi's introduced a line of women's garments called 'Freedom-Alls', which were one-piece garments consisting of a tunic connected to balloon trousers. Fashion designers Coco Chanel and Madeleine Vionnet had suggested, since 1920, soft and baggy trousers for dinner, but few women dared to wear them. A few movie stars like Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Katharine Hepburn had worn trousers in their movies, but they were protected by the glamour of Hollywood, and their trousers added an aura of mystery and exoticism (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013, p. 113). During World War II, women were again called upon to help in factories and other labor-intensive jobs. Denim-clad women became a symbol of war effort, exemplified by the American image of Rosie the Riveter. However, despite these attempts to introduce women's trousers, women who wore them at the time (except for limited activities such as cycling and horse riding) were perceived and labeled as unfeminine.

It was not until the turbulent 1960s that feminists who looked at fashion as a trap for women rejected traditional female dresses. At the time, Yves Saint Laurent created one of the most revolutionary fashion items of the 20th century—'Le Smoking'—a softer and looser interpretation of a tailored man's suit for women. This item caused a sensation when introduced in his 1967 collection. It allegedly manifested women's power and their new social role. However, this item was more about high fashion than a serious contribution to women's liberation. It was an appropriation of male social performance, which corresponds to 'gender imitation', in Butler´s terminology (1991, p. 22), and thus does not liberate women who wear it, but oppresses them to socially accepted gender categories. It

4 The first woman to wear trousers was Henriette d'Angeville when climbing the Mont Blanc in 1838 (Gorguet Ballesteros, 2017).

maintains traditional power relations while doing so. Nevertheless, this piece led to what was known later in the 1980s as 'power dressing', which opened a new space for the construction of a new kind of feminine subject, as presented later by Hillary Clinton and Angela Merkel in their trousers suits (Entwistle, 2020, p. 288).

This feminist struggle for equal rights by way of trousers seems to underscore Simmel's argument that fashion is a force of emancipation (1957, p. 551). However, while the trousers became a symbol of equal rights, they did not free women. In fact, the contrary is true. By the end of the 20th century, women's trousers became highly feminine, differing in cuts from men's trousers. Some of them became very tight, in a way that is reminiscent of the corset, and caused some health problems like the 'skinny jeans syndrome'. These new trousers trapped women again in traditional feminine gender performance that polices and shapes their movements. In his article 'Lumbar Thought', Eco explains how tight jeans not only police his movements but also prevent him from thinking clearly. He argues that women's garments—high heels, girdles, brassieres, pantyhoses, tight sweaters—are conceived to impose a demeanor, and even worse: "society has imposed armors on women, forcing them to neglect the exercise of thought" (Eco, 1986, pp. 192–193).

Along with skinny jeans, gendered design continues to constitute an oppressive practice today. Gendered toys, for example, teach children the social meaning of being a boy or a girl. Consumer objects for adults (such as different razors for men or women) are guiding the gender performance of adults (where men are tough and women are soft), and their confirmation of a gender hierarchy. Caroline Criado Perez has shown how many objects were designed with men in mind, including the safety equipment in cars (such as crush dummies based on the male body, and seatbelts that were not designed to accommodate female breasts), which made it nearly 45 percent likelier for women to be seriously injured, and 17 percent likelier to die in car crashes (2019, pp. 186–191). These design examples reveal how gender politics were invisibly woven into different products—from trousers to car seatbelts—to create power structures and an oppressive reality that is perceived as 'truth'.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article presents a research methodology for oppressive design, which is based on a discussion of the political-social values and discourses that are encoded in, and reproduced through, the affordances of design objects. This occurs as a designer's work is created in the context of clearly defined and established cultural, socioeconomic, and political systems. These fields of power, as explained by Foucault, are mediated by language, norms, values, and discursive orders, and translated by designers into material and visual products. Consequently, following La-

tour, the paper presented how these design objects actively influence their users. Anne-Marie Willis explains: "We design our world, while our world acts back on us and designs us" (2006, p. 70). These theoretical issues are demonstrated via fashion design. By integrating Butler and Latour's theories, the paper presents how imbued values in clothing dictate social gender roles and become oppressive.

In order to expose those imbued yet invisible values and the power of design, the article suggests applying Foucault's genealogical methodology to material objects. In the same manner that Foucault discovers the power of discourse, revealing the values inscribed in design objects when coming into use might enable us to identify the systems of knowledge upon which power is predicated, as well as their political, social, and psychological impact on our daily life. This new information is important to establish the practice of Design Justice as proposed by Costanza-Chock (2018), who explains that the emergence of 'values in design' is an important shift in design thinking and practice. Consequently, designers will be able to evaluate and choose what to encode in designed objects in order to liberate the object from being oppressive. In the context of trousers, this kind of justice can be seen today in items designed by gender-fluid fashion brands such as Telfar, Eckhaus Latta, Hood by Air, and Gypsy Sport, as well as street fashion like the Japanese *jendaresu-kei* (genderless style) tribe. These new genderqueer clothes underscore the understanding of oppression and aim to direct us to gender emancipation using the power of fashion design.

This methodology has its limitations, as historical texts and images do not always provide information regarding where, why, by whom, and for what were objects first created. Who did they serve? Moreover, many European historical texts were dedicated to the upper class, and did not present the work of artisans. In the context of this research, for example, even the event titled 'birth of fashion' is an elusive historical mark amongst fashion scholars. The methodology also indicates another limitation—the way it deals with a specific geographic area and does not refer to global history. For example, fashion was, of course, born in different places around the world with different values.

The research also opens new questions for further investigation such as applying this methodology to different design histories around the world. It also proposes to investigate the different subject-object relations beyond the influence of object materiality as proposed by Latour. In the context of gender and fashion, it directs us to research the power of clothing to actively create social discourse, and more specifically, the different ways in which new genderqueer clothes implement an active change in contemporary gender discourse and power relations. **D**

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