

## Communicating material characteristics in a digital age: Three case studies in independent fashion

Alexandra Tuite, Queensland University of Technology, School of Design  
Creative Industries Faculty  
alex.tuite@qut.edu.au

### Abstract

This article focuses on the intersection of the material and the digital in the independent fashion sector, with a focus on ways in which digital media and contemporary communication tools are being used to unite them. It explores the tension between the opportunities provided to small business in the contemporary media landscape and its use in a sector closely associated with a nostalgic valorisation of material qualities related to nature, artisanship and luxury. It further examines ways in which the communication of material characteristics through technological platforms contributes symbolic value to independent fashion as a cultural product. Thematic analysis was conducted of online texts and images related to three contemporary American independent labels in a three-year period (2014–2017). The study finds that instead of being viewed as a threat to the independent fashion sector's driving ethos, technology has been embraced as a tool allowing independent fashion producers to amplify their voices as they challenge existing fashion paradigms.

### Keywords

independent fashion, independent cultural production, fashion communication, digital media, mediatization

## 1 Introduction

Los Angeles-based independent fashion designer Jesse Kamm runs a small business with a big online presence. An internet search for her eponymous label returns results in the first two pages for her business website, her Instagram profile, stockist pages and interviews with bloggers, media outlets and retailers. Kamm has over 70 000 followers on Instagram, with whom she shares content on an almost daily basis. Posts range from updates about new styles and product launches to images, videos and stories of her family, home and office. Interviews profile her tastes in clothing and passion for surfing, share images of her self-made furniture and offer insight into her design philosophies. Information about the label and opportunities to purchase items produced by Kamm are readily available and abundant, though Kamm employs just a handful of staff and had still been working from a home studio until mid-way through 2017.

Technology has amplified the voices of independent fashion businesses. Though on the one hand it is acknowledged that this creates global competition in the sector, it is argued on the other that contemporary technologies are empowering and provide new opportunities for small-scale designers to engage with a broader audience (Webster, 2016). It has simultaneously been argued that production in the independent fashion sector may rely on an industry niche emphasising material concerns related to garment construction, provenance, textile quality and fit (Leslie, Brail, & Hunt, 2014; Molloy & Larner, 2013). This article focuses on the intersection of the material and the digital in the independent fashion sector, with a focus on ways in which digital media and contemporary communication tools are being used to unite them. It explores the tension between the opportunities provided to small business in the contemporary media landscape and its use in a sector closely associated with a nostalgic valorisation of material qualities related to nature, ar-



tianship and luxury. It further examines ways in which the communication of material characteristics through technological platforms contributes symbolic value to independent fashion as a cultural product.

## 2 Defining independent fashion

Independent fashion is a broad term lacking definition. The term is often linked to a business structure or economic status. For example, in his study of branded fashion retailers, Aspers describes independent retailers as “private shops” (2010). However, financial independence is a nuanced concept. For example, does part-ownership or the financial involvement of a business partner or personal partner disqualify a business as being considered “independent”?

Others have suggested that independence is strongly connected with an attitude that expresses itself aesthetically, ideologically or in some combination of both. Australian fashion curator and historian Danielle Whitfield writes that independent fashion is situated at the intersection of “art, craft and fashion” and writes that it may be provocative or radical (2010). Leslie, Brail, and Hunt’s (2014) study of the independent fashion sector in Toronto highlighted the importance of authenticity for those businesses and their emphasis on cultural values associated with sustainable or “slow” fashion, including high quality, reduced consumption, ethical production and localized supply chains. Other researchers have suggested that independent fashion businesses emphasize a local perspective, but also actively oppose the mainstream (Cuba, 2015). Together, these studies suggest that the perceived creative control of the designer or business owner – and the resulting independence of attitude of the business – is what is important, rather than a financial arrangement or formal business structure.

Research into independent cultural production in music and film seems to support this perspective. In independent cultures in these fields a distinct authorial voice, perceived as direct and unfiltered,

is highly prized (Dolan, 2010; Hesmondhalgh, 1999; Newman, 2009, 2011; Reilly, 2007). Importantly, research also suggests that independent cultures can be elitist given their drive to exclude mainstream practices and connect with a narrow, knowledgeable audience that possesses the requisite amounts of what Bourdieu would term cultural capital (Hesmondhalgh, 1999; Newman, 2011). The role played by the consumer in identifying and categorizing independent culture is central and divisions between “mainstream” and “independent” are created and mapped not only by producers but by networked participants (Newman, 2011). It is also important to acknowledge that independent businesses may not be entirely separate from the mainstream models they oppose, but rather operate from within the same broader system (Crewe, Gregson, & Brooks, 2003; Gauntlett, 2011).

For the purposes of this study, independent fashion businesses are classified as those in which the designer-owners have a prominent presence and could be perceived to have creative control. They are also businesses that offer products demonstrating an attitude of independence from the perceived dominant characteristics of mainstream fashion models in the early twenty-first century (rapid turnover of styles, overconsumption, opaque supply chains and unpredictable quality).

## 3 Technology and fashion consumption

Technology has provided new ways for participants in cultural fields to connect and consume. In fashion, technology and social media platforms such as Instagram play an increasingly central role in the industry, facilitating the literal and figurative consumption of fashion on a newly wide-ranging scale. Online shopping has been embraced by consumers following a tentative start, and businesses such as Asos, Net-a-Porter, Matchesfashion.com, Amazon, Yoox, Shopbop, Garmentory and Farfetch continue to be globally influen-

tial. Large traditionally bricks and mortar retailers such as department stores, luxury brands or chain stores continue to build their online presences. Consumers can shop using websites or apps, and some retailers use widgets to allow consumers to purchase goods through social media platforms like Facebook or the photo-sharing app Instagram.

Instagram has become highly influential since its launch in 2010 and bloggers with large numbers of followers are paid to wear clothing by labels they promote; models or celebrities are sometimes said to be selected for work based on the size of their Instagram following (Gallagher, 2016; Hope, 2016). It has also been suggested that fashion retail store design is being influenced by Instagram photography tropes such as posing in front of walls for “outfit of the day” photos (McDowell, 2017). Rocamora suggests that digital media has become so deeply embedded in contemporary life that it may actually shape the practices of fashion industry participants, including in instances such as those listed above (2017). She draws on the concept of mediatization to consider this. For example, Rocamora discusses the way in which fashion parades are increasingly focused on social media content development, particularly as bloggers have become influential participants in the industry. Rocamora also cites the example of one of (UK luxury brand) Burberry’s stores whose “digital-first” design reflects that of its website and features digital multimedia offerings such as fitting room mirrors that suggest complementary items for purchase or provide additional product information (Cartner-Morley, 2012; Rocamora, 2017).

The material aspects of clothing remain relevant and physical connections with consumers are important communication channels and sales tools. Free shipping and free returns is a common offer for many large retailers and some small ones too, as they work to overcome one of the key challenges of selling clothing online: it needs to be worn on the body and, by extension, needs to fit and feel a particular way. Businesses with significant

online presences draw on physical initiatives for a multi-faceted and holistic approach to sales. Net-a-Porter offers a print magazine available at newsagents and by subscription. Matchesfashion.com is the online arm of a chain of pre-existing London boutiques, where private shopping and styling services are offered. Retailers or designers without permanent physical retail presence may also create pop-up events or host travelling trunk shows so that consumers can see, touch and try on their clothing. This is a popular practice for independent fashion businesses too. They may offer a limited pop-up experience in a store with a similar audience or may operate a stall at a high-end craft and design market. However, they struggle to compete with the scale and scope of activities undertaken by larger businesses and digital workarounds are important, where they may collaborate with other creative businesses on videos or blog posts that showcase their clothing in a range of lifestyle situations and aesthetic settings.

#### **4 DIY, independent and alternative: Making things outside of mainstream models of production**

As technology and online shopping have flourished, some consumers are drawn instead to what they perceive to be more authentic products such as handmade, small-batch or artisanal goods. As Luckman writes, “when you are a ‘digital native’, analogue is new” (2013, p. 50). Luckman’s study of the contemporary craft movement and the rise of online craft marketplace Etsy suggests that handmade, artisanal goods have acquired new meaning in a culture in which most goods are mass-produced. She also suggests that participants in the independent (she uses the terms “indie”) crafts sector position it as an alternative to “mainstream consumer culture”, noting that this continues a trajectory originating from the British Arts and Crafts movement at the turn of the nineteenth century through to the counter-culture movements of the 1960s and 1970s (2013, p. 264).

Importantly though – as Luckman's focus on the online craft marketplace Etsy would suggest – this is not occurring in isolation from technology, but rather in tandem with it. The contemporary fashion industry has been characterized as prioritizing speed, overconsumption and low prices (Webster, 2016). It has been suggested that the contrasting position put forward by small fashion businesses offering artisanal services and high quality at mid-range price points and who take advantage of technology to do so, enables them to carve out a niche in which they can survive, and even flourish (Webster, 2016). Relatedly, Anderson argues that technology allows makers to be both local and global and “artisanal and innovative”; he calls the makers movement a new industrial revolution (2012, p. 16). “DIY” culture and the makers movement have been closely linked to “indie” or independent movements and research has shown that technology is being used to highlight the voices of these cultures and connect their participants in a newly amplified way. Brent Luvaas says the concept of DIY is a central proposition in independent cultural fields and credits the internet with making it more popular and more widely accessible since the 1990s (2012).

David Gauntlett discusses connections between making, DIY and craft. He notes the complexities of the word craft, which is sometimes used as an antonym for art; art being perceived as more superior, more elite (2011). After detailed exploration, he defines craft as “the careful, thoughtful process of making something with the hands” (2011, p. 80). He argues that products made using digital tools or for online consumption qualify equally as craft, because of the making process behind them. In fact, Gauntlett suggests that the internet offers the potential to challenge dominant models of consumerism because it allows alternative voices and independent cultures to not only create, but “be effectively heard” (2011, p. 231).

Regardless of classification as DIY, indie or maker, what these cultures appear to share is an attitude towards production and consumption (and most likely, nota-

bly, a combination of the two) fuelled by a desire for products and connections with consumer communities not available in the mainstream. It is not a rejection of capitalism or its drive towards consumption, but rather a way to operate within that system in what participants perceive to be a more authentic way. In addition, contemporary technologies are allowing the voices of these independent communities to be more globally audible than ever before, and to provide potentially powerful alternatives to dominant or traditional models of consumerism.

## 5 Method

For this study, a thematic analysis was conducted of images and texts describing the work of three independent fashion labels: Shaina Mote, Jesse Kamm and Elizabeth Suzann. The data sources were texts and images produced by the designers themselves, by retailers who stock their products and by fashion journalists. Materials cover an approximately three-year period (2014–2017). The designers chosen were purposively selected because they advocate for an understanding of the materials from which their clothing is made and the impact of those materials on the wearer's experience of their designs. Additionally, they each have a self-declared interest in high quality, natural or hard-wearing materials. Selecting designers who have located themselves in secondary fashion cities (Los Angeles and Nashville) rather than the established fashion center of New York is also deliberate. Though their businesses differ in size and age and embody different lifestyles, these designers share what could generally be termed a minimalist aesthetic sensibility and in the case of Kamm and Mote share stockists.

This study has limited generalizability. A focus on American designers provided a broad range of data, but risks a geographic bias particularly important to note given that country's historical association with the types of textiles used by the contemporary designers in question. The history of American fashion highlights a tradition

of hard-wearing natural textiles. For instance, Claire McCardell, described as “the most important American ready-to-wear designer of the twentieth century”, often used linen and cotton and advocated for clothing that was practical and comfortable as well as feminine (Steele, 1991). However, this study is not intended to be an exhaustive one, and represents a pilot study for a larger project aiming to provide a more detailed examination of consumption in the independent fashion sector. Instead, it is hoped that this study will initiate discussion about how fashion’s material characteristics are expressed through technology, and the central role the material qualities of clothing play in attributing symbolic value in the independent fashion sector.

## 6 Shaina Mote

In Japan, there is great respect for the process and how things are built. It was fascinating to observe the impact of time on the creative process. For instance, the brush and broom maker’s family has perfected their product over the course of three generations (sic). When you hold their items in your hands, you feel where each curve has been carefully considered and designed with specific purpose. (Shaina Mote qtd in The Dreslyn, 2015)

Shaina Mote is based in Los Angeles and creates clothing that can be worn in multiple ways. She worked in various roles in the fashion industry before starting her own label, including as a vintage buyer and pattern maker. Her website lists the textiles she uses and their provenance. For instance, the tencel used by the label is described as being made from “sustainably harvested eucalyptus trees” and the wool they use “comes from a family-run mill in Italy that has been weaving cloth for decades” (Shaina Mote, n.d.). Her clothing ranges in price from around USD 300–500. Her website states that “the Shaina Mote woman eschews the reign of the trend in favor of timeless self-expression” (Shaina Mote, n.d.). Mote’s work is described by *Vogue.com* as not being “outwardly crafty”,

but nonetheless showing “a definite hand to pieces like the almost-textural, mottled coloring of a sweater inspired by [textile artist Anni] Albers’s sketches” (K. Anderson, 2015); a retailer writes that her pieces are characterized by “fine tailoring and high-end construction; all hand made in the USA” (Need Supply, n.d.).

In interviews and profiles such as these, Mote and her work are often connected with ideals associated with maker culture. “Maker” has become a popular catch-all term in the worlds of fashion, design and food in recent years, and is associated with values including authenticity, quality and a rejection of the perceived toxicity of mainstream materialism. It primarily seeks to highlight the presence of the maker and promotes handmade, artisanal products over mass-produced ones. These types of products offer a “reprise” from contemporary life and suggest a nostalgia for times gone by (Luckman, 2013, p. 254). A tactile, hands-on approach is also reported as extending to other areas of these designers’ businesses and lives, further consolidating the portrayal of highly personal and hands-on work practices of a “maker” deeply connected to her craft. Rocamora suggests this type of practice is part of a process of “transubstantiation” in her analysis of Bourdieu’s writings on fashion, writing that “the way designers decorate their houses, their life and lifestyle [...] enter the objects of material production to invest them with symbolic value and become an integral part of the fashion these designers produce” (Rocamora, 2002, p. 350). For instance, Mote describes the décor of her home to Austin-based boutique Kickpleat in a profile from which readers can click through to purchase Mote’s garments:

My home is very laid back and typically smells like Palo Santo wood or Copal. I am starting a mini collection of Brahms Mount cotton blankets – I love the idea that they are handwoven in the US. My boyfriend and I have made a lot of the furniture together. Our space is very wabi sabi, (a lot of natural wood), neutral in tone with a solid collection of plants. (Kickpleat, n.d.)

In this instance, the aesthetic is one that relies not on items of great monetary value, but items aligned with maker culture, including handmade or personalized pieces and earthy, natural materials. However, what is suggested is not an unfiltered natural world, but a selective, curated vision of what nature can provide. Another profile of Mote by a fashion journalist notes that: “Art is a perennial inspiration [...] and for Fall she looked to a desert landscape and Donald Judd’s Marfa, Texas, studio, which lent the collection its palette of neutrals and a muted red” (K. Anderson, 2016). For the uninitiated, the details may seem boring or monotonous, but for those in the know they reflect carefully appraised detail and imagery drawn from the natural world and merged with references from the world of high art.

Mote’s website features a clean, minimal design in which the neutral toned clothing is photographed on a pale background. She features a film – also shared on *Vogue.com* – in which her clothing is seen on a cellist in addition to models; they stand under a blue sky at the Chateau Marmont hotel in Los Angeles while birds chirp and sheer fabrics sway in a gentle breeze (“Shaina Mote Fall 2017: Video Fashion Week,” 2017). There are numerous cues here for consumers who can read them: a water glass placed by the cellist suggests purity and health; the inclusion of a cellist links independent fashion with high culture fields like classical music; and the framing of the Chateau Marmont together with billowy, sheer and feminine fabrics brings to mind Sofia Coppola’s films (known for her feminine stylistic devices) rather than grittier Hollywood stories of drug overdoses or wild parties. This type of multimedia marketing tool relies on multiple, overlapping practices that depend heavily on the idea of hypertextuality Rocamora discusses (Rocamora, 2012). Elements related to the video are connected in a web of meaning in which *who* is doing the sharing (*Vogue* and Shaina Mote), *where* it is being shared (websites and social media) and *what* is being shared are equally important. *Vogue.com* has a dedicated video series entitled

“Vogue Video Fashion Week” in which they share “ready-to-wear concept films curated by *Vogue.com* editors” (“Video Fashion Week,” n. d.). It could certainly be argued that print media’s thirst for online content has driven this trend, though these types of shareable, click-friendly videos have become increasingly common for independents like Mote as consumers seek online content that extends the consumption experience.

## 7 Jesse Kamm

I remember something Thoreau wrote that resonated so deeply with me about how a man who mends his own clothing and builds his own dwelling is a contented man. I think this is why I am so content in my life. I feel like I don’t need that much stuff [...] In our modern society we’ve lost that ability to enjoy home [economics] or wood shop. Nobody has those skills anymore. We’re out of touch with things that are basic and important. (Jesse Kamm qtd in Hartman, 2015)

Jesse Kamm is a Los Angeles-based fashion designer who focuses on menswear-inspired tailored clothing in natural fibers. She describes the textiles she uses as “fine and sturdy... because I want the pieces to last a very long time” (Jesse Kamm, n. d.). She is best-known for her 1970s-inspired high waisted sailor pants, known as “Kamm Pants”. These are available in a range of colors, including denim and some limited-edition colors. She is “committed to making everything in the USA, because it is important to me to support my community” (Apiece Apart, 2015). Her designs are sold through Kamm’s website and by international independent fashion boutiques. Her clothing ranges in price from around USD 300–600.

As suggested by the above quote, from Kamm to a *New York Times* fashion writer, as a designer she promotes a simple lifestyle and is often portrayed as possessing a “can-do” DIY attitude. This attitude is supported visually by the designer, a lanky former model, who shares images on her Instagram account of herself wearing her

designs as well as the house she and her husband built in Panama, where they go on annual surfing holidays. She occasionally shows her own sparsely furnished interiors (noting Donald Judd as a source of inspiration) and they are sometimes used as incidental accompaniments to a photograph of a sunset or other natural phenomena. Suggestions of a DIY or maker culture ethos in texts and images recall all that the ethos suggests - authenticity, quality, provenance - but could also be seen here to invoke nostalgic pastoral ideals. There is a sense of an idealized lifestyle in which vast spaces, outdoor living, good health, honest work and independence from industrialized life feature strongly.

Participants in the independent fashion sector often refer to the places in which these businesses are based, which in this case is outside the US fashion industry's commercial center of New York. Provenance is important. By noting Kamm's location in Los Angeles, her creative independence is already suggested. Kamm's studio is located "at the top of a quiet LA mountain, after the winding steep streets and amongst the urban wilderness" (Makinson, n. d.). She tells one journalist that "I don't feel like I'm in 'fashion.' I mean I do, but I feel like this is just a craft and it's been fulfilling me for almost ten years and I love it and I love that other people love it, but I don't live and die by it" (Makinson, n. d.). By describing what she does as a craft, Kamm aligns herself with other makers, rather than with the fashion industry. A *Vogue.com* journalist writes:

[Kamm is] the go-to designer for a community of L.A. Eastsiders (think Brooklyn with palm trees), creative types such as photographer Hilary Walsh, jewelry designer Annie Costello Brown, and textile designer Heather Taylor, who appreciate how her pared-back aesthetic translates into versatility. 'I can wear Jesse Kamm to a wedding or the farmer's market,' explains Taylor. (Crowley, 2014)

Statements such as these and their inclusion of references to other creatives serves to validate and further celebrate the work of these designers. They elevate them and

contribute symbolic value to these garments for in-the-know consumers.

Los Angeles facilitates the referencing of ideals and values that are surprisingly pastoral given its sprawling urban environment, notorious smog and the municipal struggles of any large city. This is not the Los Angeles of Hollywood trivialities, riots or packed highways. Instead, it is a version of that city in which a thriving maker culture is foregrounded and where there are palm trees, beaches, healthy eating, outdoor lifestyles and mid-century modernism. California also carries strong connotations of counter-cultural traditions. A *New York Times* article about the resurgence of artisan craft fairs describes Los Angeles as the home of "California-style spirituality," where "the look and language of spiritual seeking... goes back to the origins of the state" (Hartman, 2014). Kamm sunbathes and discusses her passion for surfing during one interview (Makinson, n. d.). She is described by *Vogue.com* as recalling a memory "over a mid-morning snack of dried apricots at her Mount Washington studio, flashing a grin that emphasizes both her Joni Mitchell cheekbones and Midwestern bonhomie" (Crowley, 2014). The accompanying image shows Kamm and 18 friends and creative colleagues wearing her designs, standing outdoors in dappled sunlight. The colors are neutral, except for some muted watermelon pink and lime, and their stances are strong.

The lifestyles portrayed are not unlike the sunny, unreal world inhabited by Barthes' "woman of fashion", unburdened by everyday concerns and trivialities (Barthes, 1990). This kind of communication could be dismissed as trivial marketing hype or a fashion version of the over-the-top language found in the television satire *Portlandia*, with its parody of hipster culture (Armisen et al., 2011). However, this would be too readily dismissive of independent business enterprises being run by women - many of them from home while also balancing family commitments - that have been successful over a number of years in spite of global economic instability. Instead, it may be more useful to

think of this fantastical language as exactly the point. It is fashion, after all, and though they provide products outside of the mainstream system these designers still participate in it by producing and selling fashionable clothing. These interviews and product descriptions are used to communicate with like-minded producers and consumers and not to engage with individuals outside of that circle. There is a sense that sector participants are speaking with one another in something of an echo chamber, mediated through technology. Just as the fictional characters of *Portlandia* may share an unspoken understanding that organic chicken is preferable or that jewelry should be locally handmade, consumers interested in purchasing clothing from Kamm or her stockists identify with the lifestyle (however idealized) she embodies and recognize the cues about it in texts and images as they are passed through various communication channels.

## 8 Elizabeth Suzann

I don't want to make anything I can't take a nap in. (Pape, 2016a)

In contrast to the glamour of Shaina Mote's Chateau Marmont cellist or Jesse Kamm's "Joni Mitchell cheekbones," the Elizabeth Suzann label by Nashville-based designer Elizabeth Pape seeks to offer clothing fit for the challenges of quotidian life and her label provides an emphasis on lived experience when talking about fashion's material characteristics. Pape began her business selling on the online craft marketplace Etsy and at craft fairs including the Renegade Craft Fair in Chicago and the Porter Flea Market in Nashville. Her business has an online-only, direct-to-consumer model and clothing is made to order in her own warehouse. The brand's website says they use "only the highest quality, natural fiber cloth [which is] significantly more durable, feels better against your skin, and gets softer with each wear" (Elizabeth Suzann, n.d.-g). A dedicated page on her website lists every textile used and its qualities,

including its provenance and how long it takes to biodegrade (Elizabeth Suzann, n.d.-e). Clothing available on the site ranges from around USD 150–400.

Pape is active on social media, particularly Instagram, and actively seeks consumer feedback on her work. Her designs are mostly cut to stand away from the body and she produces them in neutral colors in wool, silk and cotton. Instagram photos reflect this and often show a product at close range, with a description of the item and a suggested outfit or a benefit of that textile. Through various digital platforms, Elizabeth Suzann clothing is portrayed as being hard-working, versatile clothing that can be worn on a variety of occasions. The label's blog is a critical online tool used for communicating detailed information with consumers about product launches and changes to garment designs as well as demonstrating ideas for how to wear the clothing. There are also profiles of staff members and features on Pape. One blog post on the brand's website shares Pape's experience of her clothing as she packs a selection of her designs for a family holiday (Pape, 2016b). The post explores in close detail what she wore at which occasion and not only how she looked, but how she felt in each outfit. She admits to wearing the same outfit several days in a row and notes her height, weight and size. Another post provides tips for mothers and "moms-to-be" on which items from her collections would best suit them: they are advised that black is great for hiding stains, linen is durable and stain-resistant and pockets are crucial. Another post offers ten ways to style six items and create a versatile travel wardrobe, noting that "you can pack only these pieces, and easily dress for any occasion on a week-long adventure" (Pape, 2015). Claire McCardell designed a six-piece travel wardrobe in the 1930s - hers in "denim and black butcher cloth" (Steele, 1991, p. 104) - and Pape could be seen as carrying on in the American fashion tradition of easy-to-wear sportswear separates cut from sturdy textiles. Says Pape in one post, "comfort, versatility, ease of mobility, and washability - those are the essentials" (Pape, 2017).

This is not the imagined, idealized world that Kamm or Mote's consumers may inhabit, but one that expresses alternative desires: in this case, an easy, uncluttered wardrobe. The subtext of many of Pape's blog posts and social media posts is one of a well-constructed wardrobe that avoids potential complications in moments of what Sophie Woodward calls "assemblage"; it is a vision of the streamlined wardrobe as significant achievement (Woodward, 2007). This reflects a broader interest in contemporary culture with ideas of minimalism and reduced consumption, seen in documentaries like that of bloggers "The Minimalists" or in books like Marie Kondo's "The Life Changing Magic of Tidying" (d'Avella, 2015; Kondo, 2015). Like reflecting on times gone by as being more "simple" and hence more desirable, wistful references to minimalism, reduced consumption or slower lifestyles may seem ignorant of the realities of those for whom material abundance is unattainable. Nonetheless, it reflects the anxieties of affluent cultures and what appears to be fetishized here is an ease of living. Many popular fashion blogs or stories by fashion journalists offer advice on how to minimize one's wardrobe, how to develop a personal style "uniform", how to build a "capsule wardrobe" or how to free oneself from the time and energy spent on deciding what to wear each day (Collings, 2015; Kahl, 2015; Lau, 2015; Rector, n. d.; Vazquez, 2015). While the notion of a uniform is a complex one with broad social and cultural applications (Craik, 2005), in this context it refers to a repetition of dressing representing the discovery of one's own personal style and a kind of self-affirming self-discipline.

Pape often mentions the idea of "wardrobe building" and her designs are not trend-driven. The simplicity and timelessness of Pape's designs is conveyed through descriptions of the fabrics and their hardworking qualities. The Patti Shell is made of "washed linen knit [...] cool and slinky like soft, fibrous chain mail" (Elizabeth Suzann, n. d.-f). The silk crepe she uses is "meant to be worn, not coddled" (Elizabeth Suzann, n. d.-a). She envisions a longline linen vest being "covered in

paint, dust, chalk, well-worn and used, paired with trusty denim and clogs on an artist like long-time favorite Eva Hesse" (Elizabeth Suzann, n. d.-c). A wool dress description reads: "the wool/alpaca blend is incredibly soft and warm, and light on the skin. It strikes me as something my favorite strange artists from the 1970's would wear on a chilly desert night in Marfa" (Elizabeth Suzann, n. d.-b). Product images on the website show models captured in movement: arms held above heads, with legs kicked out or caught mid-stride; one campaign shows the model in socks, with minimal makeup and hair styling.

The quality of the fabric is often linked with longevity and a sense of style that is "beyond" fashion. Designers like Mote, Kamm and Pape construct a version of fashionability whose allure is drawn from a rejection of popular trends and the perceived ills of mainstream fashion. Sustainability is not the primary focus, rather the focus is on buying fewer, better things to which one can form a lasting attachment. "Slow has never been this chic," writes one *New York Times* fashion writer in a profile of designers including Pape (Phelan, 2017). There is a suggestion that wearing timeless designs like these offers freedom from the dictates of fashion while still rendering the wearer fashionable. These pieces are, in many ways, "anti-fashion" in the way that Elizabeth Wilson uses the term: elegance that never draws attention to itself; simplicity that is "understated" (Wilson, 1985, p. 183). In a way, this type of clothing also represents what Wilson calls "oppositional fashion," which actively opposes the mainstream. Further consolidating this is the fact that Pape has eschewed seasonal collections for a set of three core ones: the signature collection, cold weather collection and warm weather collection. Additionally, of the three labels examined for this study, Pape's is the only one to offer an extended sizing range. The label has previously run a "diversity campaign" in which women of various sizes, shapes and ethnicities from around the United States were flown to Nashville to participate in a photo shoot for the website (Elizabeth Suzann, n. d.-d). Photographing these wom-

en wearing the label's designs allows consumers to see the clothing on bodies that more closely resemble their own.

Timeless designs that reject traditional collections or industry cycles allow the consumer to picture themselves in the garments and to consider how they would fit in to their lifestyles. It recalls the process Findlay writes about when she suggests that in moments when particular items of clothing appeal to us they may "offer the possibility of metamorphosis in their wearing" (Findlay, 2016). As Findlay writes, this imagining can occur through both the worn and unworn garment: through both the imagined self and the sensory experience of clothing. Woodward writes, following Hansen and Tarlo, that "clothing is not defined by what it has been in the past, but what it can be in the future" (Woodward, 2007, p. 13). The loading of these items of clothing with symbolic value makes them desirable tools through which independent fashion labels can encourage consumers to enact their desired futures, whether highly idealized like Mote's and Kamm's or grounded in (elevated) daily experiences like Pape's.

## 9 Conclusion

Independent fashion producers are communicating with a broader range of consumers than ever before, facilitated by advances in technology and the use of contemporary digital media tools. Though these high-tech, rapid and globalized methods of communication could be seen to be at odds with the priorities of the sector related to nostalgia, small-scale production, and handmade or artisanal products, some labels have embraced these new opportunities and found ways to use technology to promote these aspects of their work. Images, interviews, social media posts, videos and blog posts are used to suggest luxury, individuality, vitality and creativity related to material qualities, and these are positioned in opposition to the speed, low quality and anonymously produced garments associated with the mainstream system. The ever-present hand of

the maker in the garment's construction is shown through intimate Instagram posts or personalized videos; the good health and good vibes sewn into every piece are demonstrated using references to fellow creative producers and images of nature; and beautiful, natural, high quality fabrics that will find a home in the wearer's wardrobe for years to come are shown in blog posts with holiday snapshots or are worn by musicians and artists and captured in ethereal short fashion films. Rather than being seen as a threat to the independent fashion sector's ethos, technology has been embraced as a tool allowing independent fashion producers to amplify their voices as they challenge existing fashion paradigms. Future research could identify and trace commercial outcomes for these designers that are directly linked to their digital communication methods; it would also be beneficial to better understand how the various communication channels available to independent cultural producers may be used to complement one another.

Extending on this aspect, future research into the ways in which these (often very small) businesses gain, use and share the skills required to use contemporary communication tools would offer valuable insight into the nature of entrepreneurial work in the creative industries. This suggested area for future research is further indicated by findings in this study that support Rocamora's assertion that fashion producers and consumers are adopting new methods of consuming and retailing fashion at the same time as they are adopting technology and digital media (2017). In the independent fashion sector, material characteristics are used as a way of separating the sector from the mainstream and independent fashion labels have found new ways to convey these symbolic values using multimedia technology. Some uses could be seen as reflecting a mediatization process, for example Shaina Mote's video or Elizabeth Pape's bloggable packing lists or diversity campaign models. Others, like musings on where one might wear a Jesse Kamm dress or sharing images of the designer's home, are more reflective of

mediation rather than mediatization. This suggests that producers in the independent fashion sector are flexible and willing to adapt to new technology and changing modes of communication, despite the nostalgic focus on nature, artisanship and material luxuries at the core of the sector's driving ethos.

## References

- Anderson, C. (2012). *Makers: The new industrial revolution*. New York: Crown Business.
- Anderson, K. (September 28, 2015). Serenity now: Inside the Spring lineup of a rising talent on the L.A. scene. Retrieved from <http://www.vogue.com/13354230/shaina-mote-spring-2016-collection/>
- Anderson, K. (2016). These are your tranquil fall wardrobe staples. Retrieved from <http://www.vogue.com/article/shaina-mote-fall-2016-collection>
- Apiece Apart. (2015). Apiece Apart woman: Jesse Kamm. Retrieved from <https://www.apieceapart.com/jesse-kamm>
- Armisen, F., Brownstein, C., Krisel, J., MacLachlan, K., Cress, D., Independent Film, C., & Video Service, C. (2011). *Portlandia: Season one*. Toronto, Canada: Video Services Corp.
- Aspers, P. (2010). *Orderly fashion: A sociology of markets*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Barthes, R. (1990). *The fashion system*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cartner-Morley, J. (September 12, 2012). Burberry designs flagship London shop to resemble its website. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2012/sep/12/burberry-london-shop-website>
- Collings, K. (April 26, 2015). The capsule wardrobe: How to reduce your closet to 37 pieces. Retrieved from <http://www.whowhatwear.com.au/how-to-capsule-wardrobe>
- Craik, J. (2005). *Uniforms exposed: from conformity to transgression*. Oxford: Berg.
- Crewe, L., Gregson, N., & Brooks, K. (2003). The discursivities of difference: Retro retailers and the ambiguities of 'the alternative'. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 3(1), 61–82. doi:10.1177/1469540503003001931
- Crowley, E. (April 15, 2014). The modern look of Boho that's sweeping LA. Retrieved from <http://www.vogue.com/866377/the-modern-look-of-boho-thats-sweeping-la/>
- Cuba, L. (2015). Surge Peruano, surge! Towards a cartography of independent fashion design in Peru. *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture*, 3(1), 51–62. doi:10.1386/fspc.3.1.51\_1
- d'Avella, M. (Director). (2015). *Minimalism: A documentary about the important things*. San Francisco, CA The Video Project.
- Dolan, E. I. (2010). '... This little ukulele tells the truth': Indie pop and kitsch authenticity. *Popular Music*, 29(3), 457–469. doi:10.1017/S0261143010000437
- Elizabeth Suzann. (n. d.-a). Artist Dress in Silk Crepe. Retrieved from <https://elizabethsuzann.com/products/artist-dress-silk-crepe>
- Elizabeth Suzann. (n. d.-b). Billie Sweater Dress. Retrieved from <https://elizabethsuzann.com/collections/wool/products/billie-sweater-dress-textured-wool-alpaca-loam?variant=30810736012>
- Elizabeth Suzann. (n. d.-c). Clyde Vest in Mid Weight Linen. Retrieved from <https://elizabethsuzann.com/products/clyde-vest-midweight-linen>
- Elizabeth Suzann. (n. d.-d). Diversity Campaign. Retrieved from <https://elizabethsuzann.com/pages/diversity-campaign>
- Elizabeth Suzann. (n. d.-e). Our Fabrics. Retrieved from <https://elizabethsuzann.com/pages/our-fabrics>
- Elizabeth Suzann. (n. d.-f). Patti Shell. Retrieved from <https://elizabethsuzann.com/collections/all-products/products/patti-shell-sheer-linen-knit-flax?variant=607514558489>
- Elizabeth Suzann. (n. d.-g). Vision. Retrieved from <https://elizabethsuzann.com/pages/vision>
- Findlay, R. (2016). 'Such stuff as dreams are made on': Encountering clothes, imagining selves. *Cultural Studies Review*, 22(1), 78. doi:10.5130/csr.v21i1.4913
- Gallagher, S. (April 16, 2016). Calvin Klein says the current state of the fashion industry is disappointing. Retrieved from <https://www.harpersbazaar.com.au/fashion/calvin-klein-kendall-jenner-3591>
- Gauntlett, D. (2011). *Making is connecting: The social meaning of creativity from DIY and*

- knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0. Malden, MA; Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Hartman, E. (May 13, 2014). Observed | At the Echo Park Craft Fair, California-style spirituality rises once again. Retrieved from [http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/13/echo-park-craft-fair-california-style-spirituality-rises-again/?\\_r=0](http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/13/echo-park-craft-fair-california-style-spirituality-rises-again/?_r=0)
- Hartman, E. (September 1, 2015). Jesse Kamm's laid-back approach to life — and looks. *T Magazine*. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/01/t-magazine/jesse-kamm-fashion-designer-style-rules.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/01/t-magazine/jesse-kamm-fashion-designer-style-rules.html?_r=0)
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (1999). Indie: The institutional politics and aesthetics of a popular music genre. *Cultural Studies*, 13(1), 34–61. doi:10.1080/095023899335365
- Hope, K. (2016). How social media is transforming the fashion industry. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-35483480>
- Jesse Kamm. (n. d.). Bio. Retrieved from <https://jessekamm.world/bio-2/>
- Kahl, M. (April 3, 2015). Why I wear the exact same thing to work every day. Retrieved from <http://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a10441/why-i-wear-the-same-thing-to-work-everday/>
- Kickpleat. (n. d.). Meet the designer: Shaina Mote. Retrieved from <http://www.kickpleat.com/pages/meet-the-designer-shaina-mote>
- Kondo, M. (2015). *The life-changing magic of tidying : A simple, effective way to banish clutter forever*. London, UK: Ebury.
- Lau, M. (September 16, 2015). Building a capsule wardrobe from scratch – part one. Retrieved from <http://www.vogue.com.au/blogs/spy+style/building+a+capsule+wardrobe+from+scratch+r+part+one,37413>
- Leslie, D., Brail, S., & Hunt, M. (2014). Crafting an antidote to fast fashion: The case of Toronto's independent fashion design sector: Crafting an antidote to fast fashion. *Growth and Change*, 45(2), 222–239. doi:10.1111/grow.12041
- Luckman, S. (2013). The aura of the analogue in a digital age: Women's crafts, creative markets and home-based labour after Etsy. *Cultural Studies Review*, 19(1), 249.270. doi:10.5130/csr.v19i1.2585
- Luvaas, B. (2012). *DIY Style: Fashion, Music and Global Digital Cultures*. London: Berg.
- Makinson, J. (n. d.). Jesse Kamm. Retrieved from <http://issuemagazine.com/jesse-kamm/>
- McDowell, M. (2017). In the age of Instagram, Murals take on new meaning. Retrieved from <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/intelligence/in-the-age-of-instagram-murals-take-on-new-meaning>
- Molloy, M., & Lerner, W. (2013). *Fashioning globalisation: New Zealand design, working women and the cultural economy* (Vol. 1). Malden, MA; Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Need Supply. (n. d.). Shaina Mote. Retrieved from <https://needsupply.com/womens/brands/shaina-mote>
- Newman, M. Z. (2009). Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative. *Cinema Journal*, 48(3), 16–34. doi:10.1353/cj.0.0112
- Newman, M. Z. (2011). *Indie: an American film culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pape, E. (2015). Traveling light. Retrieved from <https://elizabethsuzann.com/blogs/stories/19181043-traveling-light>
- Pape, E. (2016a). Three outfits, day to night. Retrieved from <https://elizabethsuzann.com/blogs/stories/a-versatile-wardrobe-three-signature-outfits-day-to-night>
- Pape, E. (2016b). Traveling with signature. Retrieved from <https://elizabethsuzann.com/blogs/stories/travelingwiththesignaturecollection>
- Pape, E. (2017). For mothers and moms-to-be. Retrieved from <https://elizabethsuzann.com/blogs/stories/for-mothers-and-moms-to-be>
- Phelan, H. (2017). What is slow fashion? Let's Explore. (Style Desk) (Elizabeth Suzann, Dear Frances, AYR and The Library). *The New York Times*, p. D3. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/11/fashion/what-is-slow-fashion.html>
- Rector, C. (n. d.). Retrieved from <http://www.un-fancy.com/>
- Reilly, I. (2007). *Empire of dirt: The aesthetics and rituals of British indie music* (Vol. 40, pp. 397–398). Malden, USA: Blackwell Publishing Inc.

- Rocamora, A. (2002). Fields of fashion: Critical insights into Bourdieu's sociology of culture. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 2(3), 341–362. doi:10.1177/146954050200200303
- Rocamora, A. (2012). Hypertextuality and remediation in the fashion media: The case of fashion blogs. *Journalism Practice*, 6(1), 92. doi:10.1080/17512786.2011.622914
- Rocamora, A. (2017). Mediatization and digital media in the field of fashion. *Fashion Theory*, 21(5), 505–522. doi:10.1080/1362704X.2016.1173349
- Shaina Mote. (n. d.). About. Retrieved from <http://www.shainamote.com/pages/about>
- Shaina Mote Fall 2017: Video fashion week. (2017). Retrieved from <https://video.vogue.com/watch/video-fashion-week-shaina-mote-fall-2017>
- Steele, V. (1991). *Women of fashion: Twentieth-century designers*. New York: Rizzoli International.
- The Dreslyn. (2015). Studio visit: An intimate look in the space and mind of Shaina Mote. Retrieved from <https://www.the-dreslyn.com/theblog/studio-visit-shaina-mote/>
- Vazquez, L. (2015). How to create a capsule wardrobe (and simplify your life). Retrieved from <http://www.today.com/style/how-create-capsule-wardrobe-t34931>
- Video Fashion Week. (n. d.). Retrieved from <https://video.vogue.com/series/video-fashion-week>
- Webster, K. (2016). Fusion of artisan and virtual: Fashion's new world opportunities. In A. Vecchi & C. Buckley (Eds.), *Handbook of research on global fashion management and merchandising* (pp. 346–372).
- Whitfield, D. (2010). Independent Australian Fashion. In M. Maynard (Ed.), *Berg Encyclopedia of world dress and fashion: Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Wilson, E. (1985). *Adorned in dreams: Fashion and modernity*. London: Virago.
- Woodward, S. (2007). *Why women wear what they wear* (Vol. English). Oxford: Berg.

