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Scenarios: Strategic Tools for a Reflective Fashion

Elisabetta Cianfanelli
Università degli Studi di Firenze
Orcid id 0000-0003-0241-1826

Maria Claudia Coppola
Università degli Studi di Firenze
Orcid id 0000-0003-3776-9860

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Abstract
Future has always been an essential dimension to fashion. However, recent practices in trend forecasting seemed to pull the future itself away from fashion, generating a tricky paradox where external issues – given by global challenges – and internal tensions – outlined by relentless market rhythms – clashed feeding fashion's unsustainability.
The pandemic event marked a point from which the next steps towards the future have to be thought of carefully. Thus, fashion firms need to develop new approaches to tackle global challenges, heightening their awareness of change and sharpening their visions thanks to a more reflective attitude towards distant futures.
By analyzing how the fashion industry has been mastering the short-term horizons lately, the contribution aims to investigate the role and the responsibilities of forecasting practices in fashion, especially when it is intended to inform and give consistency to marketing strategies. Broadening the interpretation of forecasting through the lens of future studies, the paper aims to further the discussion on the potential paradigm shift to a fashion forecasting, where scenarios as tools to re-direct and re-tune social and environmental sustainability could offer support in the construction of new systemic strategies while building social narratives.

1. We Went Way Too Far

The pandemic has disrupted society and markets, forcing governance models and industrial systems to face an urgent transformation. Such urgency resonates particularly in the fashion industry, in which several topic moments - ranging from Alessandro Michele (2020)'s digital diaries and his "we went way too far" confession to the open letters from fashion designers all over the world - unveiled a shared awareness about the ills of fashion system, exacerbated by the health emergency and its humanitarian, ecological and economic consequences (Niinimäki et al., 2020). However, while the shock suffered by the fashion system is enormous, the call for a more sustainable fashion appears to be still mainly addressed with an industry and user-focused approach, examining narrow questions regarding how industry may shift practices or how users may engage with fashion differently.

Indeed, several scholars have advocated the need for more sustainable fashion even before current times (Birtwistle & Moore, 2007). Despite its limited reaches, the trend for a fairer fashion was gradually supported by many forms of activism – ranging from the "fashion revolution" (Ditty, 2015) to the *Anti-Fashion Manifesto* (Edelkoort, 2015) –, aimed at raising awareness about the necessary reformulation of fashion's industrial models. The growing interest in what is addressed as "sustainable fashion" implies the need to deal with a broader, systemic issue which cannot be genuinely achieved without a systemic understanding (Tham, 2015) and taking into account recent radical shifts in consumers' expectations towards a more transparent and responsible fashion (Amed et al., 2020).

Therefore, beyond the activistic agendas shared by both fashion designers and consumers, addressing the common goal of sustainability means coping with a high degree of complexity. In this sense, longer-term approaches should be preferred in place of short-term and overly deterministic ones in order to heal the interplay between society and markets. In other words, addressing the core issues of fashion's unsustainable production and consumption rather than its symptoms calls for a shift in focus towards the meaning of future in fashion and the activities, the *futuring* that goes with it.

Today, sustainable, responsible and transparent fashion gains strength and depth, becoming more and more pressing as the pandemic harshly shortened the time span for such transformation. Narrow questions to be answered in quick times: fashion – as well as many other human activities – is going through a process of paradigm shift that appears to be extremely hard since it seems to be "stuck in a self-reinforcing cycle of short-term thinking" (Fisher, 2020, p. 10): actually, short-term thinking showed to be the most efficient way to respond to a world shaped by turbulence, uncertainty, novelty and (Ramirez & Wilkinson, 2016). This framework appears to be quite significant for the fashion system, whose constant and natural exposure to contradicting demands led it towards anticipatory and forecasting approaches to manage the most immediate dimensions of future, so that it progressively shrunk into a near-time reality (Frohm & Tucholke, 2020). Recently fashion has undoubtedly been mastering forecasting as one of its core strategies in terms of optimization and risk management (Lantz, 2018).

Today such practices turn to be in a critical spotlight, generating a tricky paradox, in which external issues – given by global challenges – and internal tensions – outlined by relentless market rhythms – clash, pulling future *tout court* away from fashion.

Nevertheless, as long as uncertainty surrounds almost every aspect of life and work, favoring the rise of dynamism and new opportunities, fashion firms need to develop new approaches to tackle this very uncertainty, heightening their awareness of change and sharpening their visions thanks to a more reflective attitude towards distant futures.

This contribution aims to investigate the role and the responsibilities of forecasting practices in fashion, especially when it is intended to inform and give consistency to marketing strategies. By broadening the interpretation of forecasting through the lens of future studies, this paper aims to further the discussion on the potential paradigm shift of future thinking through scenarios as tools to re-imagine, re-direct and re-tune social and environmental sustainability, offering support in the construction of new systemic strategies while building social narratives.

2. Fast Action is not Reaction

Fashion's need to respond to increasingly volatile desires and needs slowly led marketing to engage vigorously in its processes, not without side effects (Edelkoort, 2015) on the whole system - here understood as both an industry and a force of change and creativity.

Managing everchanging desires led to a natural focus in trend forecasting, which quickly became a widespread practice to

achieve an anticipatory and, thus, a more competitive positioning. Such behavior kept fashion designers from focusing on broader horizons, thus disregarding creative narrative building. If from a commercial perspective this meant having strategic cycles too focused on short time frames, from an artistic perspective fashion designers lost their aura and their top-down influence.

Traditionally, fashion trend forecasting was done by fashion designers themselves through a human-based process (DuBreuil & Lu, 2020), where the artistic, cultural and societal viewpoints on current events were the main way to sense or predict future trends and create something original and unique. Creativity was at the core of such processes, but it would soon be looked at as " 'opinionated guesswork' due to designers' tendencies to rely on their 'gut feel' to predict trends" (Frohm & Tucholke, 2020, p. 1). The growing unreliability of inspiration-led practices established another dedicated profession, trend forecasters: in fact, they slowly acted as tastemakers and cultural intermediaries (Lantz, 2018), assisting fashion designers with more structured techniques based on the increasing availability of data inputs about commercial trends and consumers' behaviors. Here, latest technological evolution exerted massive pressure, offering powerful tools to enhance trend forecasting practices: new technologies facilitated trend information gathering (Silva et al., 2019; Park et al., 2016), impacting even on how trend information would have been generated and used. As the efforts gradually headed towards more accurate predictions, the fashion system seemed to gradually lose interest in longer-term forecasts: keeping up

marketspace – enhanced by digital capitalism – was mandatory to survive and until pre-Covid-19 era the fashion system gained more profitable knowledge from short or micro-trend forecasting. By exerting their highly influential power with both clients and consumers, trend forecasters soon became fashion's *insurance companies*, leading to the establishment of giant agencies – WGSN, for example – in the field offering an essential support to fashion systems to anticipate trends in a fast-changing world, where fast reaction means survival.

Even though fashion is naturally "forward-thinking" and traditionally depicted as an experimental agent of change, its recent focus was actually much more restricted to a product-side innovation (Ünay & Zehir, 2012). Indeed, trend forecasting practices have been traditionally used to inspire design novelty (Evans, 2004; Cachon & Swinney, 2011; Abecassis-Moeda, 2016) within the development of fashion products. However, the extremely compressed timelines destined to materialize new concepts and visions translate into a collection of items aimed at selling the newest trends themselves. Hence, full circle: trend forecasters track new needs, fashion systems intercept them developing new products and just a few moments after the release trend forecasters track down new needs.

Today trend forecasting is perceived to be an essential service for fashion companies, as it is a useful driver for commercial competition in the fast-paced fashion market. The extreme production-consumption rhythms and the relationship between technology and demand management deepened to the point that the interest is no more "particularly in trend forecasting,

but rather in demand forecasting" (Frohm & Tucholke, 2020, p. 7) often linked to self-fulfilling prophecies (Lantz, 2018). Such shifts have been lately submitted to serious criticism, as the forecasting discipline marked itself with an inherent unsustainability: clothes live more than trends, in a way that in times of climate change the forced obsolescence of fashion products collides against the pillars of sustainability.

This resonates particularly with some studies accurately reported by Frohm and Tucholke (2020), which have already questioned trend forecasting as a limited and self-referential practice, causing several issues on entire ecosystems. Micro-trend forecasting or even demand forecasting assess the domination of marketing and commercial departments in fashion systems: the short-term approach in trend forecasting aims solely at-risk reduction as long as it has been strictly applied in marketing strategies, resulting in the thickening of fashion management myopia. Indeed, the role of trend forecasting is so influential that it can significantly determine the future of fashion (Blaszczyk & Wubs, 2018), but it needs to reconsider the need to focus on value creation more than product creation, focusing on building narratives imbued with singular and original views on society and its future shapes. Even though sustainability has been recognized as a trend itself (Frohm & Tucholke, 2020), it should be treated as a cultural paradigm shift in which trend forecasting engages in promoting ethical and more responsible values. Thus, trend forecasting as a discipline will probably need to shift to something else, starting from acknowledging its responsibility in the cycle of creation-destruction of trends and its relation to sustainability.

3. Transitioning through Scenario Thinking

Today the future in fashion appears to be split in two: on one side, fashion designers and their imagination remain the most powerful source to tell stories and build narratives through self-expression, even though they would not find place in the current fast-paced market; on the other side trend forecasting is not sufficiently consistent to draw longer-term strategies nor narratives, but it excels in responding reactively to fashion's fast-changing market.

It is worth underlining that trend forecasting is not the exclusive dimension talking about the future within fashion: as stated before, the future itself is an essential dimension in the whole fashion process. The dreaming pulse about what will happen in society has always been and still remains the core inspiration to fashion designers: by expressing their statements, fashion designers would talk about societal ups and downs, ills and treasures, allowing people to seize the future through their products and creations.

Such dimension is extremely close to speculative thinking, which today gains popularity as the pandemic event marked a point from which the next steps towards the future have to be thought of carefully. Speculative thinking is usually found in fiction and draws upon the need to explore realities of different natures: if trend forecaster needs to reflect on their responsibility about the un-sustainability of their practices (Frohm & Tucholke, 2020), such responsibility must align with current global challenges, advocating sustainability *tout court* as a core driver of change. However, as long as fashion undergoes the commodification perspective, it is perceived as inherently

incompatible with sustainability. This resonates with what de-sign theorist Tony Fry (2009) calls "de-futuring": coming from capitalistic environments, both design and fashion engaged in the articulated machinery of production-consumption cycles, producing the un-sustainability of this world, thus depriving it of future. Conversely, assuming "sustain-ability" (Fry, 2009) as a paradigm shift, would mean acquiring new skills to support people, social life, cultures, imaginaries and the environment, thus achieving the *futuring* effect, the creation of the future for a recovering world. Fry (2009) also points out that future cannot be understood as a reality independent of our existence: future cannot be known, but futures can be built, approached through the actions made in the present. This has been quite clear for trend forecasters, who lately ended up in exerting influence to sell the trend itself as a way to gain control over the future. However, they failed in promoting sustainability, engulfed by the market-driven machinery (Tham, 2010).

There are some approaches coming from future studies that could help fashion in "re-directing" (Fry, 2009) futures, that means challenging established ways of thinking, working and making combined with the production of both new designed objects and new design practices (Vaccari & Vanni, 2020). Thus, the practice of futuring can be understood as a way for fashion designers and forecasters together to explore alterna-tive scenarios for the future.

Scenarios are key tools to this contribution, as they seem to be the balance and connecting point between creativity-inspired future approaches and market-driven future approaches.

A framing is needed here: scenarios – scrolling through the several definitions from future studies literature – can be outlined as stories constructed around how specific drivers of change will move in certain directions (Bradfield et al., 2005), resulting in a number of narratives usually divergent from each other. Here divergency offers a meaningful foundation since divergent techniques pertaining to strategic foresight practices – such as scenarios – do not aim to result in predictions: in contrast with trend forecasting aims, the ultimate purpose of scenarios "is not to be right, but to be ready" (Phillips, 2019, p. 22) to tackle those futures. In this sense, scenarios challenge the constraints imposed by present structures, mental models and behavioral patterns, adopting an exploratory and anticipatory attitude (Godet, 2000). As a result, the greater the variety of inputs converging into the process, the better the narrations' adherence to the whole system: such operations will require the deep engagement of as many actors as possible to achieve successful results. This kind of practice facilitates genuinely holistic thinking about possible futures, combined with reflexivity, flexibility and democratic engagement with the values (in)forming those futures.

Literature offers few examples through which it is possible to read a growing interest in such tools: *Fashion Futures 2030* was an inspiring project led by London College of Fashion in collaboration with the Centre for Sustainable Fashion in 2019. The aim of the project was depicting what the world and its fashion might look like in the next ten years: by adopting two critical trends – care for sustainability issues and technological advancement – the project adopted the orthogonal matrix

method to explore four different scenarios resulting from the intersection of the selected trends. The four narratives (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4) talk about the relationship between fashion, nature and human action in not-so-distant futures, opening space for further discussions and reflections about alternative paths of action and development for fashion.

It is clear how such narratives could benefit from the original human-based forecasting, generating values, hopes and fears into visions about the future. This resonates with the perspective considering scenarios as strategic conversations (Van der Heijden, 2011), which are the expression of a collective vision not just on the "content of the future," but, practically, on its foundational values, aspirations, and expectations, enabling participants to negotiate their interests. In fact, the *Fashion Futures 2030* experience was firstly presented as a co-design workshop at Copenhagen Fashion Summit (2019), proving how scenarios could be effective tools, whose adoption in fashion could foster a "re-directed" imaginative design, product development, long-term strategy building and personal development in understanding and raising awareness on the climate emergency and social injustice, brought to life in recognisable and understandable ways by storytelling media.

4. Participated Values to Get Unstuck

As long as scenarios seem to play a central role in upcoming practices of narrative building in fashion, they gain equal emphasis from a management-strategic perspective too.

The need for long-term-oriented forecasting instead of a product-oriented one intercepts a remarkable metamorphosis, in which trend forecasting enriches with scenario approaches.
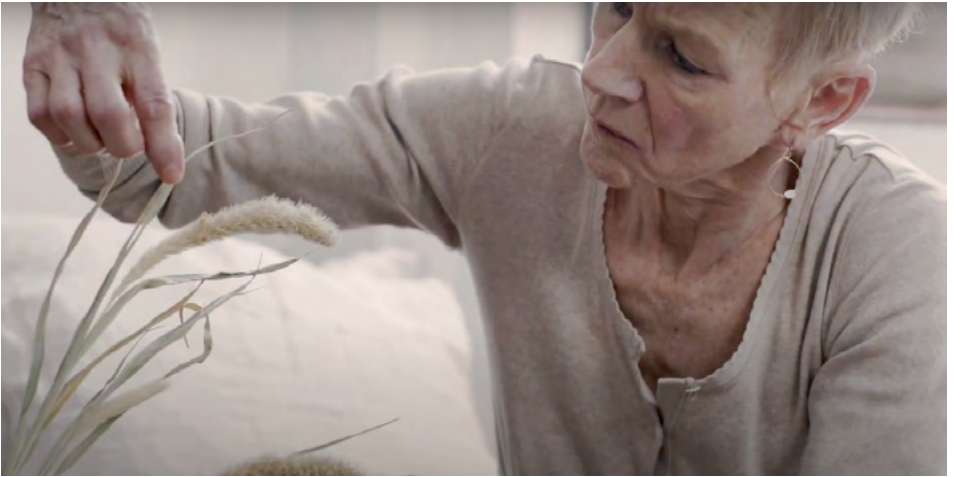
Figure 1. *Fashion Futures 2030 Scenario 1 – Living with Less*. In the first scenario clothing is treasured and kept for a long time, as well as passed down within family and friend groups. London College of Fashion, 2019.

Figure 2. *Fashion Futures 2030 Scenario 2 – A story from Hyper Hype*. In *Hyper Hype* fashion is fast, frivolous and cheap. New styles are released every day via digital runway shows and adverts by multi-brand conglomerates. London College of Fashion, 2019.

Figure 3. *Fashion Futures 2030 Scenario 3 – A story from Safety Race.* This narrative talks about a fashion driven by identity politics, heavily flavored by ethnic traditions to overcome environmental collapse. London College of Fashion, 2019.

Figure 4. *Fashion Futures 2030 Scenario 4 – A story from Chaos Embrace.* In this last scenario everyday fashion is centered around well-crafted, utilitarian garments that are kept and worn for long periods of time. London College of Fashion, 2019.

As Van der Heijden (2011) notes, "the ultimate purpose of scenarios is to create a more adaptable organization, which first recognizes change and uncertainty, and secondly uses it creatively to its advantage". To do so, scenarios need to be informed by both statistical data and different perspectives coming from all over the system, so that it could be possible to build several points of views and, thus, develop a holistic interpretation of such data and mathematical trends. For this reason, scenarios are increasingly believed to be the tools par-excellence of future techniques since they naturally encourage collective participation (Andreescu et al., 2013). In fact, since scenarios are tools which stem from a grounded necessity of collaboration – among decision-makers, designers, stakeholders, shareholders, and experts from various fields (Schwartz, 2012) –, they are at the same time able to promote the conditions to encourage that same collaboration by triggering heterogeneous discussions about alternative paths of development (Godet, 2000; Andreescu et al., 2013).

Thanks to designers channeling creativity towards a human-centered perspective made of negotiated values, fashion stakeholders could express their own creativity, applying tacit and explicit knowledge not only in product strategies but also in the development of larger-scale programs. Thus, the fashion industry – along with its rich and plural ecosystem – is offered a new viable path to innovation by encouraging the participation in strategy formulation by all the players in the supply chain, from manufacturers to designers, from suppliers to logistic providers and, last but not least, to consumers. This framework recalls Tham's (2015) hypotheses about trend

forecasting next shift, placing it in a tighter collaboration among trend forecasters and fashion designers in order to promote attitudinal changes where fashion and sustainability converge into the generation of new competitive knowledge: as a consequence, scenario thinking is a process about learning, negotiation, and sharing of new values producing new meanings.

In these terms, scenario thinking implies a proactive approach, which stands out as an antidote to reactive approaches. According to Kahane's (2012) theory about "transformative scenario planning," actors could engage even with greater levels of complexity thanks to its foundational processes. Specifically, the scholar distinguishes between adaptive attitudes, which ask actors to force a transformation over a given situation, and transformative attitudes, where actors transform a situation by mainly transforming themselves: working together "cooperatively and creatively to get unstuck and to move forward" (Kahane, 2012, p. 18), participants might be able to take action individually in their sector, but only if they collectively align towards a shared direction of change.

> […] by proxy. It must start in the individual. Yet, we cannot be holistic on our own. We must imagine together […] in a place for risky and playful exploration, [... where] an agile dance between micro and macro perspectives, and operational and strategic design take place. Scenarios then rank in fashion forecasting as strategic tools that can synergize products, systems, and even narrative paradigms. (Tham's, 2015)

5. Towards a Fashion Forecasting

Today fashion appears in need to imbue its industrial paradigms with more consistent visions about what will come after the pandemic in terms of social narratives and lifestyles to achieve a fast action rather than a quick market-driven reaction to address emergency and sustainability issues. Such "future-thinking" would benefit from an interpretation of fashion future as a way forward to shape and envision a better world, stemming from an ethical dimension that slowly translates into a moral obligation for fashion itself. Thus, fashion thinking could entwine with *futuring* practices in order to embrace all the layers of reality to overcome the global challenges of the XXI century.

Scenarios for fashion thinking seem to respond to the need of a new mythopoesis, which offers an alternative to dominant narratives deriving from current commercial framework. By assuming the "what if" posture, fashion could return in the realm of metaphors, launching an epistemological leap into a new mission for fashion. Scenarios satisfy the need to explore possible futures and develop critical views about its various shapes. Future-making practices in fashion would stem from a constructive turbulence, where scenario narratives do not run out in simple nor linear projections, but they draw articulated fictions and frictions to inspire and provoke fabulous narratives about human *happenings* and *becomings*.

Scenarios articulate as multifaceted tools able to connect and reconcile trend forecasting practices informed by mathematical models and data science with the much more imaginative

and creative practices typical of traditional techniques aimed at pre-sensing societal needs and desires. Potentially, big data tools could outline some fashion forecasts, reveal patterns, trends, and predictions in consumer preferences by leveraging the breadth and huge data available today even from alternative sources like social media. Such information will give powerful insights, starting from which a human interpretation is mandatory for them to make sense. Here, the quantitative dimension of scenarios meets its qualitative counterpart, relying on human-based forecasting practices to envision such data and the trend-scenarios outlined with a filter of interpretation – that could be compliant or consolidating, provoking, or warning. Thus, would lead to the building of new narratives, in which fashion designers could position their product strategy and upcoming creations, while consumers would engage in a coherent present, wearing products imbued with values and meaning.

An evolution of trend forecasting is thus achieved, as it embraces a broader dimension of future by drawing information from different sources, engaging with new actors and raising awareness on the dangers of an unsustainable world.
The contribution has been showing how forecasting practices have been seen under a different light depending on the *object* which was meant to be forecasted: from the classic *trend* forecasting to the *micro-trend* forecasting, down to the *demand* forecasting. This step is fundamental because it makes evident how vision in fashion – and the space for it to unfold properly – shrunk dramatically, in a way that it would have been almost impossible to face moments of emergency or

prepare for multi-layered global challenges. Thus, it would be worth promoting a *fashion forecasting*, which consists in an active practice of reimagining dressing and clothing as a tool of radical expression, resistance, and future building.

Even though fashion forecasting as an approach is receiving increasing attention in the field of fashion design under different designations, a more structured development of such approaches is still lacking in literature. However, some workshops – similar to the one previously reported – seem to embrace this theoretical and operational path to collaboratively construct an imaginative garment that confronts the issues shaking the world right now. Despite the limited literature, fashion forecasting could provide a great contribution in re-directing and re-tuning social and cultural interpretative models, in which sustainability – as a social, economic and environmental goal – drives a shift in the future forms of fashion thinking and making, dressing and stating.

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