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Affective Fashion Trends: Aesthetic and Digital Affects from Nostalgia to AR

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Abstract

Responding to the digitalization of the fashion industry, technological innovation, the acceleration of trends, the article identifies a tendency toward affect and discusses the potential of affective fashion trends. Selected cases are examined: from the pandemic-born nostalgia aesthetic on TikTok, and ASMR videos, to digital fashion and the use of augmented reality to push the boundaries between human body and adornment. Through an analysis grounded in a multi-disciplinary theoretical framework, we identify a shift in the cultural *Zeitgeist* toward emotions, feelings, sensations, and bodily experience. We stress the need for an affective, rather than purely visual perspective on aesthetics and argue

experience and questions of embodiment and materiality.

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for the potential of technology as a vehicle for affect in fashion and popular culture more broadly.

KEYWORDS: affect, augmented reality, fashion trends, digital fashion, aesthetics

Introduction: a fast-changing industry and the acceleration of trends

It is undeniable that Covid-19 brought rapid and lasting changes to an industry like fashion, which is already traditionally fast-moving. Production, mediation, diffusion, and consumption were all profoundly affected at an international level. This has prompted urgent studies into a multitude of emerging issues and opportunities, bridging cultural, sociological, economic, political and market research. For example, recent work has addressed perceptions of luxury (Loranger and Roeraas 2023, and Cristini and Woodside 2023); a move toward increasing sustainability (Brydges, Retamal, and Hanlon 2020 and Chakraborty and Sadachar 2023); and ethical responsibility (Khan and Richards 2021). A steep digital acceleration has also been identified as one of the biggest byproducts of the pandemic on the fashion industry, as online purchases became the norm during lockdown: in 2020 online apparel sales in the United Kingdom grew to 55 percent of all sales, jumping almost 20 percentage points from 2019 (Coppola 2023). Although brick and mortar retail did better when shops opened back up in 2021, data suggests that online shopping is now the norm and will continue to expand (*ibid.*). The turn to technology did not only touch the consumer experience, but also affected design processes and the fashion industry more broadly. Citing Matthew Drinkwater, head of the Fashion Innovation Agency (FIA), Choi (2022) highlights how COVID-19 has pushed brands toward digitalization and experimentation with virtual and immersive technologies.

While analyzing the raising adoption of digital and virtual technologies in fashion design, production, retailing and consumption, Casciani, Chkanikova, and Pal (2022) draws attention to the factor of speed. She argues that the digital shift in the fashion industry opens up a “[d]ematerialization of the supply chain with respect to improving resource efficiency and compressing, eliminating, and shortening various business activities” (Casciani, Chkanikova, and Pal 2022, 790). Moreover, such optimization in key areas from prototyping, production and communication with stakeholders, wholesale, and marketing, or even the exchange of ideas more broadly, is identified by Casciani et al. as an opportunity for further development, meaning that the fashion acceleration linked to industry 4.0 transformations has just begun. The debate about whether faster digital means equal fast fashion, or can

instead offer more sustainable options, is still an ongoing one (e.g. Brydges, Retamal, and Hanlon 2020; Casciani, Chkanikova, and Pal 2022; George, Merrill, and Schillebeeckx 2021; Sayem 2022). However, a general acceleration of fashion trends has been acknowledged both in the academic discourse (e.g. Kim, Fiore and Kim 2021; Shi et al. 2021; Zhao, Li, and Sun 2021) and the popular one. Shi et al. (2021) talk about how “[c]urrent fashion trends are changing faster and more dynamically than ever” (Shi et al. 2021, 2382). With myriads of fashion images being created and circulated on social media, “fast-fashion companies such as ZARA and H&M feel the need to constantly release product lines and shorten the typical seasonal calendar to meet consumers’ fast-changing tastes and preferences” (ibid.). The issue is also a topic of conversation in the popular press. Articles such as “Why are fashion cycles getting shorter?” (Hampson 2022) and “Is anybody else tired of how fast fashion trends move?” (May 2021) feature in popular publications such as *Stylist* and *The Independent*. In *Stylist*, May also quotes content creator Ari claiming that “fashion trends used to cycle every 20 years, and now, due to social media, influencers and fast fashion, we see new aesthetics every month” (May 2021). If the acceleration of trends is currently seen as connected to the opportunities offered by Web 2.0, like the increasing number of content creators and the emphasis on interaction and content sharing on social media, it is safe to assume that Web 3.0 technologies, such as AI (artificial intelligence) and the metaverse, will be able fuel more change in a similar direction. In fact, research is also being conducted to explore the potential of Machine Learning (Han, Kim, and Ahn 2022; Getman et al. 2021, Chen and Lu 2021) and Artificial Intelligence (Shi et al. 2021; Caglayan et al. 2020) as trend forecasting tools, in order to keep up with the fast-evolving current scenario.

Reflecting on the digitalization of fashion and the spread of new technologies, and taking the acceleration of trends into account, we explore the idea of affective trends as the possible future of fashion. In other words, the article proposes to put affect, feelings, sensations, and emotions at the center of critical discussions about fashion trends. While the ‘affective turn’ (Clough 2007) in cultural studies has put these concepts at the forefront of contemporary research and theory, the theoretical conceptualization and the empirical application of affect present several challenges. Partly because of the abstract and unstable nature of affect itself, but also due of its rapid spread in diverse academic fields, affect theory comprises an evolving mix of epistemological and ontological strands and definitions. In the fashion field, an interesting and diverse use of this subject matter has been made for instance by Wissinger (2007), who conducted an empirical study of flows of affective labor in the modeling profession, Seely (2013) who analyses human-nonhuman becoming in contemporary fashion, Ruggeroni (2017) who reflects on feelings that emerge from body-clothes assemblages, Sampson

who focuses on material objects, exploring attachment to footwear (Sampson 2020) and the emotional ambivalence associated with stains (Sampson 2023), Van Tienhoven and Smelik (2021) who use affective analysis to understand the embodied and emotional side of fashion, and Shinkle (2023) who writes about fashion photography's dependence on feelings of boredom.

Influenced by the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1988), which in turn borrows from the philosophy of Spinoza (2002), our conception of affect concentrates on questions of the body and embodiment, where the body is a transformative entity to be understood in terms of its capacity to affect and be affected, "or the augmentation or diminution of a body's capacity to act, to engage, and to connect" (Clough 2007, 2).

Moreover, it must be recognized that affect is not simply concerned with feelings, and as such, its understanding should not be conflated with that of emotions. Instead, feelings and sensations can be identified as bodily expressions emerging from the body's affective encounters, rather than seeing them simply as affect itself (Massumi 2002). In a book that offers an overview of theoretical perspectives and traditions on affect, Seigworth and Gregg (2010) write:

Affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon. Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation as well as the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities. That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 1)

In this regard, when thinking about affect, we must not see the body as a single and stable entity and concentrate simply on the emotions it feels. Instead, a key focus must be placed on the body's ongoing becoming and transformational processes, as well as on those forces and intensities that fuel such movements. This is especially interesting in a fashion context, as fashion is first and foremost concerned with the body (Entwistle 2000, 1). While on the one hand, the fluid concept of affect is crucial to understanding the transformational relationship between body, dress, and adornment, on the other hand it also extends to the more abstract embodied intensity of the aesthetic experience.

The article argues that, while the panorama of aesthetic trends becomes increasingly chaotic, with both cyclical and seasonal styles less discernible, we need to rethink what constitutes a fashion trend. It will also be argued that new developments in the virtual and digital realms have a promising potential for generating cutting-edge fashion, where

popularity is determined by how garments and accessories make one feel, and what they allow the body to do, rather than what they look like. The article will first discuss the pandemic-born tendency toward nostalgic consumption (Gammon and Ramshaw 2021; Khair and Malhas 2023), identifying it as a first small but significant shift toward affect as a leading factor in determining what is popular in visual culture. Moving the attention to new technologies, we will then discuss recent research and significant real-world cases, which suggest that digital and virtual innovation can be used in fashion to respond to lingering affects and create new emotional and sensuous experiences. Rather than negating human warmth, it will be argued that emerging technologies linked to extended reality (XR) can open up interesting pathways for affective design. The article will pay particular attention to Augmented Reality (AR), discussing its privileged relationship with both the tangible and the abstract, and the promises it holds for the shaping of affective fashion trends.

Aiming to lay the conceptual foundation for broader empirical research, the article takes a theoretical approach. From a methodological perspective, echoing Knudsen and Stage (2015) view that the immediacy of social media textual production can make them particularly interesting for affect research (13) the analysis concentrates on social media content filtered through the medium of digital devices: a small-scale digital ethnography has been carried out, collecting social media data using the hashtag #nostalgia and the word nostalgia for searches, and analyzing mostly visual content but, where relevant, also sound and text. Patterns emerging from this analysis are discussed with reference to theory and other research and integrated with empirical data from a focus group previously conducted by one of the authors (Liu 2023).

Linking fashion, affect, aesthetics and emotion

The connection between the emotional sphere and contemporary fashion industry is a widely acknowledged one. As discussed in a previous article (Crepax 2018b), fashion can be seen as largely relying on promises of self and life-improvement. The phrase “selling dreams” is commonly used to talk about the fashion industry, which “construct[s] emotional narratives of hopes and fantasies by promoting consumer goods, while offering glimpses into the ‘perfect’ lifestyles of ‘perfect’ people (Crepax 2018b, 463). In the age of social media, as noted by de Perthuis and Findlay (2019), in spite of changes in communication and representation, fashion still holds its promissory role, and the fashion ideal remains an aspirational one. Moreover, it is interesting to note that fashion communication on social media has been observed to rely on emotional intensity, where audiences are directly and indirectly engaged in affective interactions (Crepax 2018b). Because the fashion discourse creates promises of positive emotions and happiness, fashion objects end

up becoming key elements in intricate networks of affect and emotions. As such, while this article maintains that affect is playing an increasingly significant and distinctive role in fashion, it is hard to argue that the relationship is a new one, born out of the contemporary cultural milieu.

Even outside of the fashion sphere, interpretations of modern consumption see it as heavily involved with affects (Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2017). For instance, semiotician Berger (2010) entitled his book on consumerist culture *The Objects of Affection*, drawing attention to our sensuous relationship with material goods, while sociologist Illouz (2007; 1997) rejected rationalist interpretations of capitalism, highlighting how emotions and intimate life have become inseparably intertwined with capitalist practices and values, and coining the term 'emotional capitalism'. Illouz (2017) argues that emotional branding, which turns consumers into emotional entities is now the norm. Contemporary capitalism relies heavily on the commodification and management of emotions and emotions are increasingly commodified, to the extent that we are now witnessing a broad-spectrum "intensification of emotional life" (Illouz 2017). For instance, Kaplan (2017) talks about the affective sexualization of space in business cards advertising prostitution, Gilon (2017) discusses the commodification of fear in horror films, and Benger Alaluf (2017) explores the strategies employed by Club Med resorts to manage the emotional experiences of their clientele, turning relaxation into a commodity. Moreover, discussing theoretical debates on consumer culture, sociologist Featherstone (2007, 43) explores how consumer culture evokes feelings of satisfaction and emotional pleasure through status-driven consumption and symbolic associations with dreams and desires: "consumer culture uses images, signs and symbolic goods which summon up dreams, desires and fantasies which suggest romantic authenticity and emotional fulfilment" (Featherstone 2007, 56). This is evident in fashion, where purchases are notoriously driven by 'wants', rather than 'needs'. Items like the latest designer bag or new collection pieces are intensely coveted, leading to the term 'fashion victim.' Berger (2010) also highlights fashion's role in consumer society, emphasizing its basis in dissatisfaction and desire. While, across all sectors of consumption, "it is the job of advertisers and marketers to find ways of manufacturing desire and of translating things we desire into things we feel we need" (Berger 2010, 52), Berger argues that fashion works precisely by fueling such desire new products promising pleasure, wellbeing and envy.

Fashion holds a special role in affect due to its connection to both aesthetics and the body. Before Kant, the first philosophy of aesthetics emerged through the work of Baumgarten, initially in the context of poetry (Baumgarten 1735) and eventually in a separate volume entitled *Aesthetica* (Baumgarten 1750). Despite regarding it as an inferior discipline, secondary to logic, (Townsend 1998), Baumgarten identified aesthetics as "the science of sensible cognition", drawing attention to

feelings of pleasure, and the emotional and sensuous effects of beauty, rather than focusing on visuality. In fact, the term aesthetics derives from *aisthēsis* (αἴσθησις), an Ancient Greek concept for sensorial perception and emotional sensation, as opposed to intellection and rational understanding. More recent cultural theory has stressed the emotional component of aesthetics instead of just the visual one. For instance, discussing glamor in a capitalist context, Thrift calls aesthetic pleasure an ‘affective force’, responsible for much of capitalism’s magical power. He states: “it is a force that generates sensory and emotional gratification. It is a force that shared capacity and commonality. It is a force that produces enjoyment” (Thrift 2008, 10). Thus, the fashion industry, relying on aesthetic appeal, is inherently affective. Additionally, fashion’s adornment of the visceral, sensuous human body further emphasizes its symbiosis with the affective realm. Fashion, as aesthetics worn on the body, has always been inherently affective.

On the one hand, as we have briefly seen, fashion cannot be separated from questions of affect, and practices of consumptions have also been largely explained with reference to the elicitation of feelings. On the other hand, however, the two have recently been intertwining in fresh new ways, which will be examined in this section of the article and the following ones.

The nostalgia wave: Affection as an aesthetic trend

First of all, an interesting phenomenon linked to feelings of nostalgia emerged with the Covid-19 pandemic in the period of the lockdowns. It is generally acknowledged that fashion trends are primarily visual and aesthetic, with styles and designs fluctuating based on their visual appeal. In fact, predictions of fashionable colors play a key role in trend forecasting: for instance, leading trend forecasters like WGSN and Coloro use digital coding to predict color trends for the next five seasons (Smith 2022). While less common, fashion trends based on texture and touch, or a combination of touch and vision, also exist; moreover, in the history of fashion trends it is possible to observe how they are often matched by an olfactory counterpart in the form of fashionable smells and perfume (Crepax 2018a). The olfactory component has already been identified for its role in bringing a sensuous and emotional dimension to fashion trends. In fact, “besides being linked to fashion through the development of trends, smells also have a pivotal significance that emerges from their affective quality” (Crepax 2018a, 335). Nevertheless, in the past few years, we have seen the emergence of a trend that appeals directly to affect, without relying on a specific visual aesthetic, or needing the vehicle of smell: that is the trend of nostalgia.

Even before the Covid-19, nostalgia had already been a key concept in marketing and consumer insight. Nevertheless, reports from companies such as Deloitte (2020), WGSN (2021), and Canvas8 (2022) all

identify a link between pandemic times and a spike in feelings of nostalgia and melancholia, with Walters, Senior Strategist at WGSN Fashion commenting that “the pandemic has caused consumers to favor the familiar. They have this comforting, rose-tinted view of the past” (WGSN 2021). The phenomenon has also been observed in academic research from different fields, where nostalgia is defined as “a wistful affection for the past” (Huang, Chang, et al. 2023); “returning to one’s earlier days, characterized by associations of warmth, familiarity, trust, safety, belonging, and a sense of protection” (Barauskaitė, Gineikienė, and Fennis 2022) and “bittersweet and sentimental longing for the past, commonly for affectionate, idealized and personally meaningful memories” (Faul and De Brigard 2022). In these studies, nostalgia is also identified as an emotional response characterized by dissatisfaction with the present situation, loneliness and a negative mood.

Identifying nostalgia as a ‘social and collective feeling’, López Millán (2023) analyses the Dark Academia aesthetic trend, and stresses the role that social media play in fueling nostalgia: “we find that it is effectively constructed in online networks of affective communities, as social media serves as a means of virtual access to the past, both real and imagined” (López Millán 2023). Niemeyer and Siebert (2023) notice how the relationship between nostalgia and social networks has intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, while Conner (2023) pinpoints the #nostalgia-coreaesthetic on Tiktok as a prominent case, exploring its performative and emotive affordances. Examples of the nostalgia trend can be easily observed on the platform. For instances, on Tiktok, the account *nostalgia* (@nostalg1ac0re) is followed by 538.1k people and counts 38.2 million likes (accessed: 2 August 2023). As of April 2023, 71% of Tiktok’s users are between 18 and 34 years old, and more than half of these are younger than 24 years old. It should also be noted that, because teenagers under 18 are not accounted for, the figures are expected to skew even more toward the younger generations (Datareportal 2023). The TikToks published on *nostalgia* are all ‘POV’ videos, where POV stands for ‘point of view’ and is used to indicate immersive videos that the viewer is supposed to experience in first person, as if living the depicted scenario first hand. Most of the POVs posted on *nostalgia* start with a title intended to set the scene (e.g. “pov: it’s the first day of summer break in 2011”, “pov: it’s 2008 and you’re going to a check up at the dentist” or “pov: it’s a Friday evening in 2012”) and consist in series of pictures with background music matching the theme of the POV. Both the titles and the selection of pictures evoke memories from mundane moments of everyday life, such as going to McDonalds or playing games on the family computer. While this is an aesthetic trend, more than a proper fashion trend, de Perthuis and Findlay (2019) talk about how “what is not-fashion becomes backdrop, prop or novelty in service of fashion” (221) and argue that on social media, more or less constructed versions the ‘familiar’, the

‘relatable’ and the ‘everyday’ become important tools in driving popularity. Because TikTok users are often very young, most of these scenarios are linked to childhood and teenager life. Moreover, rather than representing any actual memory of a specific day in someone’s life, the videos can be interpreted more along the lines of Weber (1949) ideal types of memories, that is mental constructs that abstract from observable reality, reproducing selected elements, without pointing to any case in particular, while still being representative of what they describe. As we are about to see through an example, the POV format enhances immersion, with image choices being both vague enough to be broadly relatable and emotionally compelling at the same time.

A popular video on the account, with 395.1k views and 59k likes as of 2 August 2023, is entitled “pov: it’s a summer evening in 2011” (@nostalg1ac0re 2023). The images (Figure 1) show: (1) a night scene of a wading pool with inflatable toys, (2) concrete stairs with greenery and

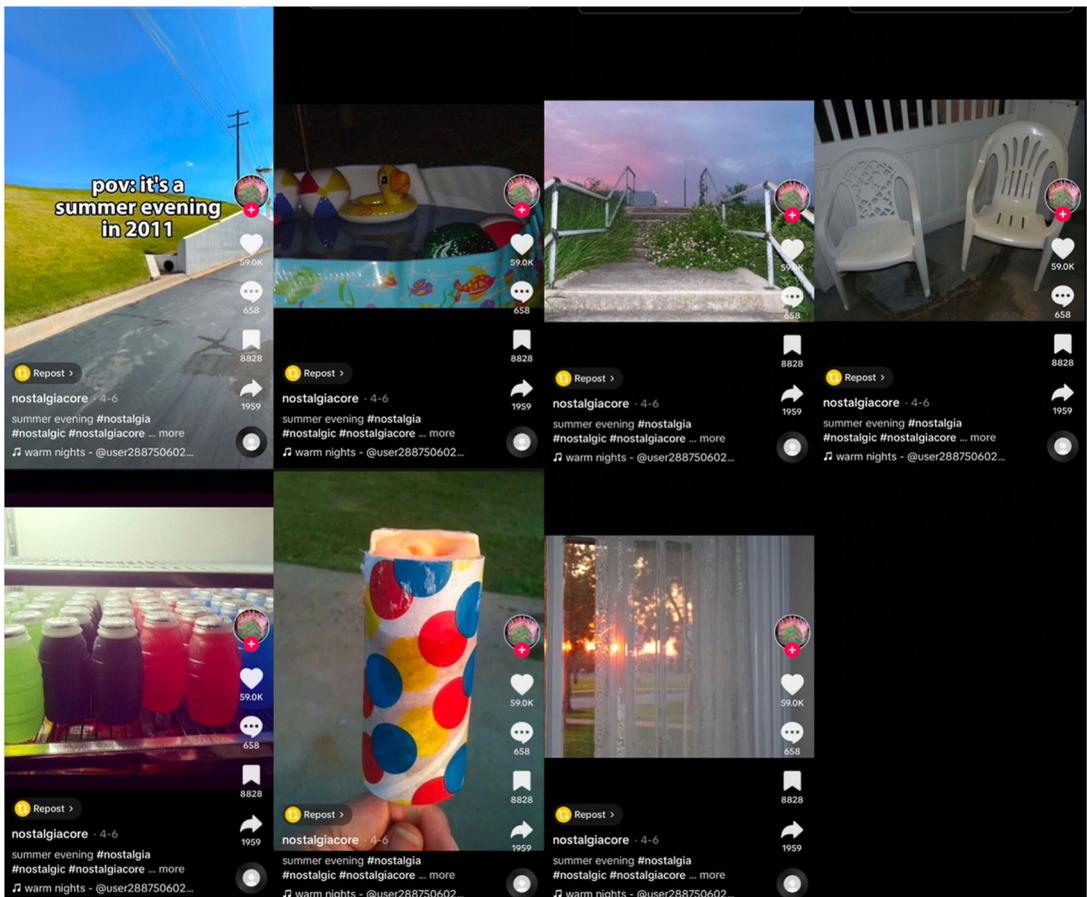


Figure 1
Screenshots from @nostalg1ac0re (2023).

a pink-and-blue sunset, (3) two white plastic chairs, (4) a fridge shelf with various Little Hug Fruit Barrels, (5) a hand holding an open pushup ice cream with pavement and grass in the background, and (6) a warm sunset seen from inside a house through lace curtains. Except for the ice cream hand, the images lack people, making them more widely relatable; as no real people are shown, they could be anyone's memories. To add to this feeling, all the depicted objects are very ordinary, common, and unremarkable; most people are familiar with them, and they could be anyone's possessions. Moreover, the empty settings also heighten their emotional charge; with no human figure drawing attention to themselves, they appear to be more pregnant with meaning. Stressing that TikTok itself is a platform which relies on "the endless circulation of relatable content", Blanco Borelli and Moore (2021) finds that POV videos often evoke nostalgia for things that used to be taken for granted, while creating, at the same time, a collective (emotional) experience in real life. As evidence of the video's affective and nostalgic power, the two most-liked comments left to the post read "I miss it. please help me go back. please." and "Don't be sad because its' all over. be happy because it happened and you will always remember." By clicking on the hashtag *#nostalgia* under the post, thousands of similar videos, posted by other accounts, appear. The account Nostalgic Aesthetics (@nostalgicfeels90) counts 219.5k followers and 6.5 million likes as of 2 August 2023. It publishes POV videos with soft background music, very similar to those found on @nostalg1ac0re, only some of the posts include sections of very short videos, instead of still pictures. Figure 2 shows screenshots from one of the posts (@nostalgicfeels90 2023). Again, we see atmospheric and evocative yet extremely ordinary scenarios with no people in them. By comparing Figure 1 and Figure 2, it is immediately apparent that, although they can be said to be part to the same 'TikTok aesthetic', the commonality between the two posts is not primarily a visual one, but rather an affective one.

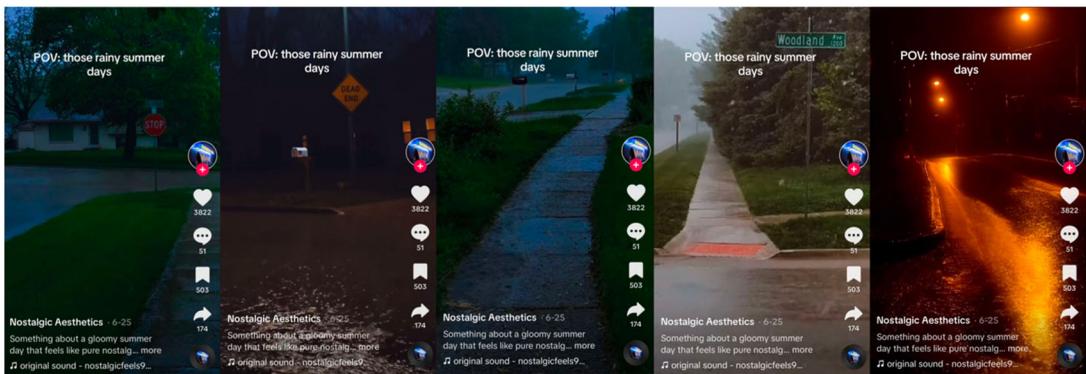


Figure 2
Screenshots from @nostalgicfeels90 (2023).

Interestingly, in fact, the nostalgia trend is not linked to any specific visual styles even when it comes to fashion. It should be noted here that inspiration as a form of gratification and the search for inspiration, not focused on specific items, have been identified as central to the circulation of fashion on social media platforms (Siregar et al. 2023). Moreover, Wilson (2021) applies a Deleuzian framework of affect to the study of social media, reflecting on how trending themes, conversations and interaction with different kind of content can be seen as responses to assemblages that emerge by engaging with materials on social media. In this regard, she also highlights that, in order to understand the act of viewing images on social media, it is not enough to describe what these images represent; attention needs to be paid to what these images to in relation to the viewer. Rather than assuming that social media content is simply seen and read, it is crucial to consider how the viewer is changed through the encounter.

Figure 3 shows a collage of fashion-related TikToks found using “nostalgia” as a search word. Compared to the videos exemplified by Figure 1 and Figure 2, while many of these are still POVs, human

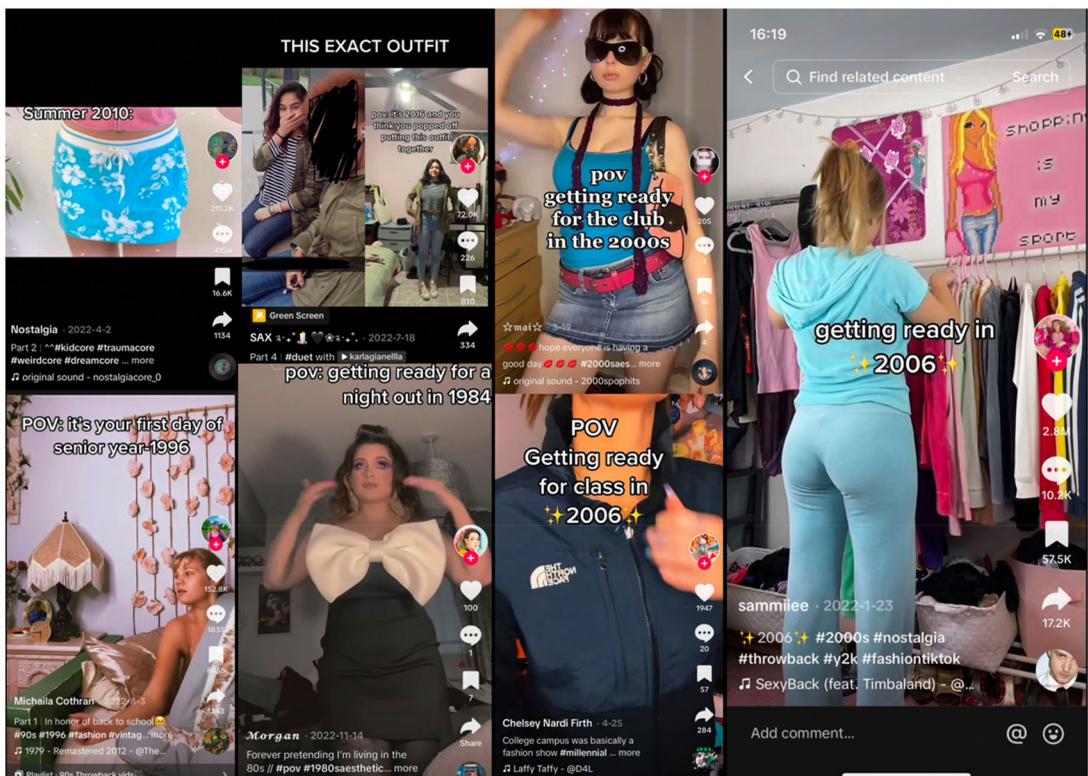


Figure 3

Screenshots from @chelsey_firth (2023), @aquar1uzm4i (2023), @michaila.cothran (2022), @morganfalconer_ (2022), @nostalgiaore_00 (2022), @saxkem (2022) and @samanthamoweryxx (2022).

figures are often shown wearing the clothes. On the one hand this may make it harder for viewers to identify in first person with what is being shown, which might also account for the much lower number of views and likes that these videos get, on the other hand, the choice of clothes associated with distinctive past, rather than current trends aligns such videos with the Nostalgia trend and its dimensions of relatability and immersion. This is also evidenced by comments such as “I HAD THE SAME OUTFIT IN 2015/2016 I SWEAR” (@ saxkem 2022). Some of the fashion-focused nostalgia TikTok are melancholic, others are ironic or dreamy. Moreover, as Figure 3 shows, they depict a very broad range of different styles, often including vintage looks from different eras. Khair and Malhas’s (2023) research shows that vintage fashion trends increased significantly during the pandemic, as people yearned for the ‘good old days’ and searched through family wardrobes for old clothes from relatives, which held great affective value. On the one hand, the fashion press notes that the internet-driven nostalgia trend is influencing consumer wear in real life (e.g. Kirkpatrick 2022). On the other, we argue that nostalgia is particularly intriguing as affective trend in the visual realms of fashion and popular culture. Rather than focusing on a specific style or aesthetic, it is feeling and emotions that drive the nostalgia trend. At the same time its manifestation is markedly visual. In this sense, the ‘nostalgia aesthetic’ aligns with Baumgarten’s perspective on aesthetics, where the visual conflates with the sensual and the affective.

The visceral potential of technology-mediated affect in fashion

The subject of this article imposes special attention to be paid to the relationship between affective forces and technology. Naturally, affective matters are generally viewed as pertaining to the human body, with artificial technologies and machines lacking instead any kind of emotional warmth. That is not to say that technology has nothing to do with the sensuous domain of the feeling body, in fact, it is a much-discussed topic in affect theory. Blackman (2012) draws attention to a particularly useful approach associated with the work of Clough, Manning and Massumi, drawing on seminal theories by Deleuze and Guattari, Spinoza, Whitehead and Bergson, where the conceptualization of affect is pushed beyond the idea of ‘body-as-organism’ into a ‘post-biological’ discourse. Rather than concentrating simply on the human body, this perspective invites to consider assemblages and processes of becoming where bodies encounter other bodies, and the human meets the non-human in mutually transformative manners. These ideas are further explored in Blackman (2012) and Gregg and Seigworth (2010) with respect to a variety of fields including neuroscience, anthropology, psychology, politics, and geography. Nevertheless, their application to

the study of fashion, and fashion trends in particular, needs further scrutiny.

In our ocularcentric society, saturated by vision and visuality, affective fashion trends could be able to stand out of the myriad of visual trends which today live concurrently (Boardman et al. 2020), escaping the traditional fashion cycles. As previously noted, technological change plays a significant role in the evolving landscape of the fashion industry. This section and the following one will examine examples where technology becomes a vehicle for affect in fashion. We argue that technological innovation holds immense untapped potential for generating affective fashion trends, and in many instances, this potential is already being realized.

The previous sections have started to address evolving relationship between affect, fashion, and the cultural *Zeitgeist*, identifying in nostalgia a first major affective trend. A further affective internet-born trend in contemporary popular is that of ASMR, an acronym for autonomous sensory meridian response. ASMR videos started gaining popularity on Instagram and YouTube in the 2010s and consist in mixtures of visual, audio, and mental triggers which translate into an intense sensorial experience for the viewer, characterized by a pleasurable tingling sensation and positive feelings of wellbeing and relaxation (del Campo and Kehle 2016). The affective quality of ASMR has also been discussed with reference to how they create a form of “distant intimacy” (Andersen 2015) or ‘technologised intimacy’ (Harper 2020), where emotional and sensual connection is aroused by stimulating bodily responses without the need for any actual physical proximity. According to Harper (2020): “in ASMR, the intimacy is intensified through the primacy of the body: the sensuality and physicality of the content being created and consumed, and the centrality of its visceral, carnal effects” (Harper 2020: 96). Moreover, Andersen (2015) maintains that although in ASMR, intimacy and pleasure are mediated by technology and enabled by computers, they still allow affect to circulate, generating bodily sensations and holding emotional value. We can thus interpret ASMR as both an affective trend and a further example of how contemporary everyday technology can function as an interesting vehicle for affect.

The trend of ASMR has also spread to fashion. For instance, we can find an example in Prada’s Fall/Winter 2021 campaign entitled ‘Feels like Prada’. The caption to the video (Prada 2021), published on Youtube, uses the language of affect:

Feelings - emotions and senses, intimacy and tactility. The #PradaFW21 campaign ... is an exploration of the evocation of feeling. To feel has connotations both sensorial and emotional - rather than intellectual discourse, it is about instinct, spontaneity. The campaign as a whole is a proposition, a proposal - positing a

vision of a brand, intentionally multi-faceted, to reflect its complex and ever-transforming nature. It is that which—always - #FeelsLikePrada.

The video showcases Prada's products through close ups of hands sensually caressing different textures, with their sounds isolated and amplified to produce 'ASMR triggers'. A further fashion-focused example is provided by Conde Nast's LOVE Magazine, which in 2020 published a video entitled "Dinner is Served: ASMR and fashion collide in this all-you-can-whisper visual banquet" (LOVE Magazine 2020). Here, luxuriously dressed models feast on a highly aestheticized sugary banquet, whispering short sentences, as camera and microphone accentuate the more visceral side of eating: slurping, chewing, close ups of teeth crunching through sugar glaze, tongues licking fingers, honey dribbling down lips and chins. Through the ASMR experience, mediated by technology, the bodies of the models meet the bodies of viewers, in remote yet intimate encounters, eliciting real feelings and physical sensations. In this sense, the bodies of both models and viewers contribute to the success of the experience. They both need to be active, in an affective way, in order for the video to work.

Like the 'nostalgia aesthetic' trend, ASMR highlights affect's under-explored potential in fashion trends. Compared to the nostalgia trend, ASMR fashion videos have a deeper dimension, as they arouse not only an emotional response but also a sensorial experience, generating intimacy and complex affect circulation. Furthermore, while both trends benefit from the internet, ASMR's reliance on high-quality video and sound makes it more technologically advanced than simpler TikTok videos. This makes the case of ASMR especially interesting in terms of a technology-mediated affect with a strong bodily component. Nevertheless, ASMR lacks the aesthetic quality that the nostalgia trend possesses. As we have seen, both vary widely in style. However, the nostalgia trend still makes of the visual a key component of the affective experience. In fact, the trend is also frequently called the 'nostalgia aesthetic'. In contrast, while ASMR fashion videos use visual elements, they do not solely aim to evoke emotions as they need to reflect the brand/magazine's artistic direction. As examples showed, ASMR has indeed reached fashion. Nevertheless, as it is, it is not an affective fashion trend itself but rather an affective tool to amplify the impact and reach of fashion trends with their own aesthetic.

Affect and extended reality: Creating fashion for the Post-biological body

So far, the article has addressed the intersection of affect and technology in contemporary culture and fashion. New manifestations appear to signal a shift toward affect in consumer culture and the *Zeitgeist*,

surpassing mere affective marketing and emotional consumption. We will now examine how extended reality technologies offer significant potential for future affective fashion trends. Extended reality (XR) is an umbrella term that includes augmented reality (AR), mixed reality (MR) and virtual reality (VR), that is all those technologies that merge the physical and the virtual, bridging the human and the machine, in immersive and interactive ways. VR creates fully virtual experiences with simulated vision, while MR, though often ambiguously defined, combines elements of both VR and AR. AR overlays virtual elements onto the physical world, blending the virtual with the real. In other words, VR focuses on virtual simulation, while AR more heavily relies on embodiment and the physical environment. When applied to fashion and to the creation of garments and accessories, XR can merge with bodies generating affective assemblages where human bodies become entangled with both technology and fashion objects. As Blackman (2012) stresses, from a post-biological perspective of affect, we witness the fading of distinctions between “the organic and inorganic, material and immaterial, and living and non-living where, rather than talk of bodies, we might talk of human/machine assemblages” (Blackman 2012, 5). Fashion, worn on the body, transforms both the body and the garment through their interaction, giving fashion an intrinsic connection to affect (Seely 2013; Ruggerone 2017). This makes the affective encounters between body and technology particularly intriguing in the fashion context.

In recent years, the phenomenon of digital fashion, or virtual 3D fashion, has steadily gained prominence in the media academia and popular culture (Särmäkari 2023). In simple terms, AR allows users to virtually try on clothes, superimposing them on their bodies on screen, or digitalizing clothes into people’s real-world space; the same can be done with objects or any ornamental effect. Examples include platform *Zero10*, which allows users to try on AR fashion through digital dressing, and digital fashion boutique *DressX*, which offers digital-only designer garments for sale. Both companies have attracted collaborations with big names in fashion, including Tommy Hilfiger, Farfetch, Dior and Dolce & Gabbana. Before brands started launching their own AR experiences, several labels, including Gucci and Prada, adopted Snapchat’s AR function to show key pieces realistically rendered in 3D, while in 2022, Burberry employed AR to promote its Lola bag, with a true-to-scale 3D model of the bag to position in real life scenarios (Benissan 2022). Large international events like Digital Fashion Week and Metaverse Fashion Week promote the digitalization of fashion, paving the way for affective examples. AR dressing creates intimate virtual spaces where garments and bodies merge through technology in mutually-transformative encounters. Ceasing to be separate entities, digital fashion finds embodiment, while the dressed body can experience both fashion and itself beyond the limits of physical reality. Lee and Xu (2019) argue that, although the aspect of affect is too often overlooked,

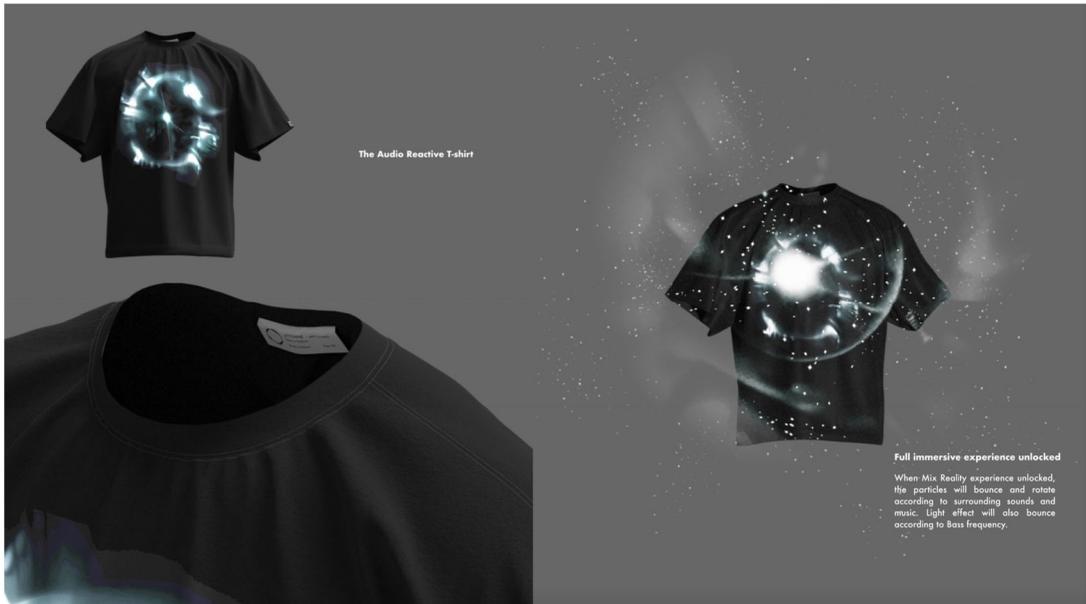


Figure 4
AR-enhanced t-shirt created by Morchen Liu for Lettonne.

Virtual Fitting Rooms, which mostly adopt AR technologies, have been recognized for their potential to provide affective experiences for consumers. Discussing the findings of a research into digital fashion, Särmäkari also draws attention to the sensuous quality of virtual 3D fashion by stating: “the simulation made me feel the goosebumps from chiffon falling on the body. Seemingly, the element of motion makes the digital garment behavior relatable” (Särmäkari 2023, 99–100). Moreover, Casciani, Chkanikova, and Pal (2022) briefly address how AR technology can create sonic and haptic digital experiences that stimulate the sensory realm, enhancing the imaginative and immersive aspects of fashion (781). An example is offered by Liu (2023) who discussed a prototype of an AR enhanced t-shirt with a focus group composed of four Level 4 and Level 5 university students: the t-shirt, designed by Liu for the multidisciplinary fashion house Lettonne (see Figure 4), is black and features a design inspired by cymatics and the visualization of sound vibrations. In mixed reality, the design comes to life, as light particles project around the wearer in a bouncing and rotating motion, synchronized with surrounding sounds and music. Kerruish (2019) also draws attention to the senses of taste and smell, arguing that they have been paid less attention in XR experiences, compared to visual, aural and haptic dimensions, yet hold great promise for evoking emotion through bodily perception.

In this scenario of augmented fashion, hybrids of digital and physical gain a particular affective potential when the boundaries between the

two are pushed and rethought in innovative ways. An interesting example is offered by the work of augmented reality artist Piper ZY. On the artists' Instagram account (@piper_zy), we see examples of her AR accessories, which, as she explains in captions and comments, are meant to be seen through AR glasses, enhancing, and complementing physical reality. What makes Piper's pieces especially interesting is the way in which, rather than merely standing side by side with tangible fashion, or adding layers with details or decorations to it, they fuse with both objects and human bodies, giving birth to assemblages of technology, fashion, and bodies. The affective quality of extended reality work at the intersection of the corporeal and the digital is also analyzed through a Deleuzian framework by Petrey (2022). Petrey argues that technological assemblages, where we see a virtual embodiment of the corporeal, the sensory and the cognitive, reveal the collapse of the subject/object relationship, which enables the emergence of new affective flows and narratives of subjectivity. This aligns with what can be observed in Piper ZY's work. Figure 5 collects screenshots from Instagram (@piper_zy) showing from left to right, top to bottom: (a) a set of see-through rings which appear to expose phalanges, (b) a ring which makes two tiny hearts fluctuate where bones, tendons, skin and

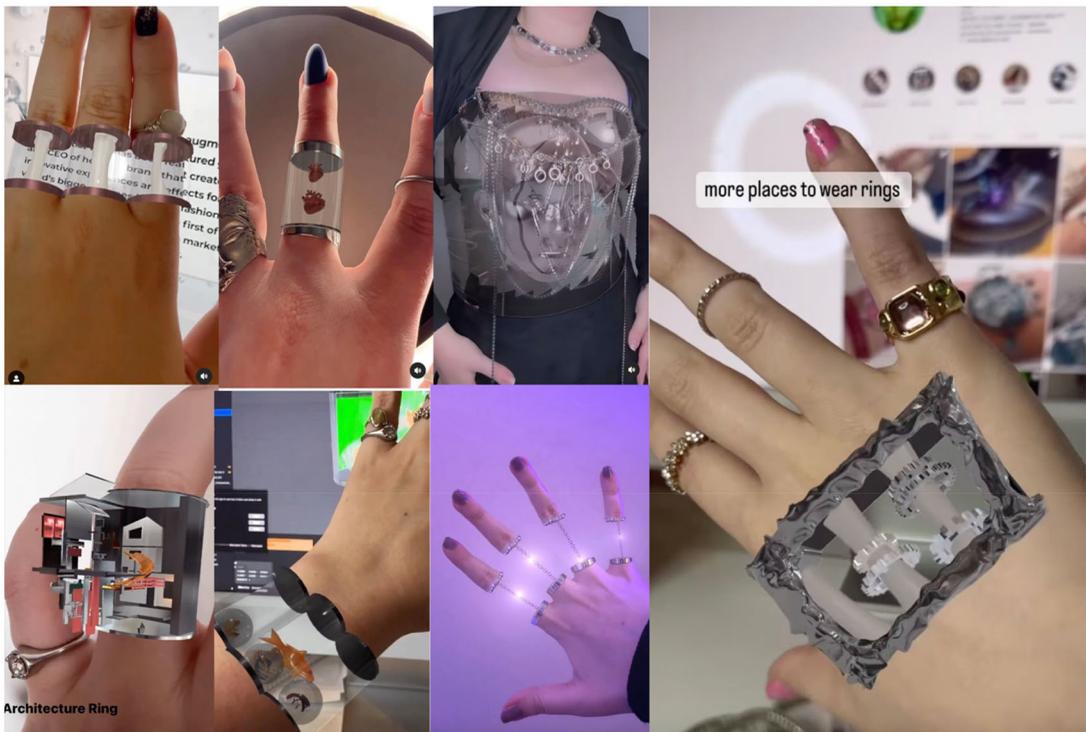


Figure 5
Screenshots from Piper ZY @piper_zy on Instagram (accessed 27 August 2023).

so on should be, (c) a translucent corset with a moving head and metallic decorations moving inside the model's torso, (d) another ring which makes tiny architecture emerge from the finger, (e) a bracelet with a wrist section as a transparent fish tank with a goldfish, (f) rings that replace part of the fingers with metallic chains, (g) rings worn on the metacarpal bones, visible through a rectangular 'window' on the hand.

The selected examples, as well as other work by the artist, illustrate how AR fashion and accessories are not simply worn on the body, but merge with its anatomy, transforming the conception of both finger and ring, torso, and corset, subject and object. Seigworth and Gregg state that "with affect, a body is as much outside itself as in itself-webbed in its relations until ultimately such firm distinctions cease to matter" (2010, 3). In fact, what we witness is a blurring of the subject and object relationship, through which the distinction between fashion-as-object and body-as-subject collapses. Through technology, the body becomes fashion, and fashion becomes body, giving rise to a post-biological assemblage, where elements should only be understood in the moving context of their encounters. It should be noted here that, although this is not apparent from [Figure 5](#), Piper ZY's work is always captured in the form of videos, drawing attention to the dynamic interactions central to affective encounters. Moreover, while this is not explicitly explored by Piper ZY, her AR work also has a large potential for the evocation of feelings, emotions, and sensations emerging from such affective flux. For instance, it could be explored how visceral reactions linked to bodily transformations relate to questions of identity and body image, while the experience wearing tiny architectures of childhood/dream homes, or moving representation of living/deceased pets, could give rise to interesting emotional engagements. Illouz, Gilon, and Shachak (2014) argue that technology-mediated emotions blur the line between private and public, becoming becoming instruments for self-presentation and interpersonal relations. In fashion, clothing's role in shaping and communicating identity is crucial. This idea is also echoed by data collected by Liu (2023), where participants saw music-reactive t-shirts as mood-sharing tools, sparking social interactions, and something to be worn at parties or festivals, but not at home, since not sharing the experience with others would be 'boring'. Choufan (2021) underlines that the act of "sharing", typical of a digitalized experience of fashion, fosters emotional intimacy between peers, and cites examples that show how digital fashion is often intended to be flaunted to friends or on social media, rather than enjoyed by oneself. Liu's (2023) focus group also mentions "showing off" as a key purpose of the AR t-shirt. Choufan (2021) notes that the emotional bond between subject and fashion-object is diminishing in the digital age, as clothes are sometimes worn just for a share on social media, or with digital fashion, never even physically possessed, touched, or felt on the body. Piper ZY's creations, affectively blending subject and fashion-object, present an

intriguing case. Responsive and interactive AR fashion, capable of engaging with one's senses and emotions, also holds significant promise in this regard and needs further research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the article argues that as the world of cyclical fashion and traditional trends is changing rapidly, affective trends might develop into the future of fashion. While no paradigmatic examples have been found yet, the cultural *Zeitgeist* and new technological developments can be interpreted as laying the foundations for the spread of affective fashion. Emotions, feelings and sensations have been found to be at the core of key cases in contemporary popular culture, as style and purely-visual aesthetics give way to affective aesthetic experience. Moreover, technological developments that are commonly heralded as the future of fashion have been interpreted for their potential as vehicles of affect in the encounters and assemblages between the human and the non-human.

Considering the potential of affective technologies in fashion trends is not simply a conversation concerned with fashion diffusion and the end of fashion cycles as we know them. As a matter of fact, affective fashion trends that rely on body-technology assemblages may also open up interesting avenues toward greater sustainability and therapeutic fashion. As the need for new trends is growing faster and faster, leading to shorter fashion cycles, affective trends might represent an escape from the whirlwind of traditional trends, offering a more sustainable alternative. The environmental impact and sustainable potential of the application of XR technologies in different sectors of the fashion industry is currently being studied (Casciani, Chkanikova, and Pal 2022; Sina and Wu 2023; Nobile et al. 2021; Venturini and Columbano 2023). Similarly, the connection between XR and issues of wellbeing and mental health is already object of promising developments. See for example XR therapeutics (xrtherapeutics.co.uk) or projects such as Tillotson's (2008), which uses responsive smart fabrics to offer emotional support through scents, beginning to highlight the therapeutic potential of affective design that employs new technologies. However, much further research is needed in all these areas. More attention also needs to be paid to questions of accessibility and other social and ethical implications, taking into account the differences between different technologies. For instance, although they highlight that the question is far more complex, fashion theorists discussed how the participatory nature of social media allows consumers to participate in shaping fashion trends, products and the market more broadly, through their phones (Skjulstad 2018 and de Perthuis and Findlay 2019), while concerns have been raised with regard to the accessibility of more complex technologies which require the use of often expensive specialist equipment and/or

software (Casciani, Chkanikova, and Pal 2022; Huang, Ball, et al. 2023).

It should also be noted that, today, the capacity to experience AR still relies on often very expensive devices, leading to sociological questions about who can benefit from it, as well as deeper considerations about the medium's 'immediacy' (Bolter and Grusin 1999) and how the technology filters the very flow of affect it allows to circulate. While the identified gaps and issues will guide the next steps in our research, the present article puts together separate cases in contemporary fashion and popular culture, pointing to a lurking tendency toward technology-enabled affects, and possibly fashion trends for the post-biological body.

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