Available on: https://gjefm.ep-journals.org/ E-ISSN: 3117-6771, P-ISSN: 3117-6763

Global Journal of Education, Finance and Management

Volume: 02 Issue: 06 June-2026

Fashion Literacy: A Conceptual Framework

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Published Date: June 10, 2026 **DOI: 10.65150/EP-gjefm/V2E6/2026-06**

ABSTRACT: The global fashion industry occupies a paradoxical position in contemporary life: it is one of the most culturally pervasive systems of meaning-making through which individuals construct identity and communicate social belonging, yet it is also one of the most environmentally and socially damaging sectors of the modern economy. Addressing this paradox requires not only systemic reform but a fundamental transformation in how individuals understand, evaluate, and act within the fashion system, capacities that, taken together, constitute a form of literacy. This article develops a conceptual framework for fashion literacy by bringing into sustained dialogue two bodies of scholarship that have rarely converged: the sociocultural and multiliteracy traditions in literacy studies, and the social, cultural, and sustainability-oriented theories of fashion. The article argues that literacy, understood as a situated, ideologically inflected, and culturally embedded social practice, provides the appropriate theoretical foundation for conceptualizing fashion competency in its full cultural, aesthetic, environmental, and ethical dimensions. Building on and extending the most influential prior frameworks for fashion literacy, it proposes a working definition of the construction as a situated, reflexive, and critical social practice encompassing three interrelated dimensions: knowledge of the fashion system and its environmental and social implications, attitudes and values oriented towards responsible and sustainable consumption, and practices across the full garment lifecycle. The framework is distinguished from prior formulations by its applicability to the general consumer population, its explicit integration of the sustainability imperative, and its grounding in the critical and transformative dimensions of the multiliteracy tradition. Implications for education, empirical research, and sustainability policy are discussed.

KEYWORDS: fashion literacy, sustainable consumption, sociocultural literacy, fashion and sustainability

1. INTRODUCTION

The global fashion industry stands at an extraordinary crossroads. On one side lies an enterprise of immense economic reach, valued at over USD 1.3 trillion and employing more than 300 million people across its value chain (Geneva Environment Network, 2023); on the other, a mounting body of evidence positions this same industry as one of the most environmentally and socially damaging sectors in the modern world. Over the past two decades, global fibre production has nearly doubled, reaching 116 million tonnes in 2022 and projected to climb to 147 million tonnes by 2030 should current trajectories persist (Textile Exchange, as cited in Geneva Environment Network, 2023). The consequences are stark: the industry is responsible for approximately 92 million tonnes of solid waste per year and the consumption of 79 trillion litres of water annually (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Furthermore, according to the United Nations Environment Programme, fashion accounts for roughly 10% of global carbon emissions, surpassing the combined output of all international flights and maritime shipping (UNEP, as cited in Earth.Org, 2023). Against this backdrop, the garment purchased and discarded as a mere fashion statement is simultaneously an act with measurable planetary consequences, a reality that most consumers are ill-equipped to apprehend. It is this gap, between everyday clothing behaviour and its systemic implications, that motivates the present inquiry.

To address this gap, however, it is insufficient to frame the problem solely in environmental or economic terms. Fashion, as numerous scholars have argued, is a phenomenon that exceeds the domain of material objects. It functions as a system of codes and a form of cultural practice through which individuals construct identity, communicate social belonging, express aesthetic sensibilities, and negotiate relationships with the wider world (Barthes, 1985; Davis, 1994; Simmel, 1957; Wilson, 2001). Clothing choices convey messages about personal values, social position, gender and age, operating as a form of non-verbal language embedded in the rhythms of daily life (Davis, 1994). In this sense, engaging with fashion, selecting, purchasing, wearing and disposing of clothing, is not merely a consumer transaction but a complex, multi-layered practice that implicates knowledge, attitudes, and values. It requires, in a word, a form of *literacy*: the capacity to decode, evaluate, and act meaningfully within a culturally saturated system of meaning.

The concept of literacy has undergone substantial theoretical evolution over the past four decades. Long understood as the basic ability to read and write, the term has progressively expanded to encompass a far broader range of competencies and practices. Contemporary scholarship conceives of literacy as a social and cultural practice that is situated, dynamic, and inseparable from the ideological and institutional contexts in which it is enacted (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Baynham, 1995; Kress, 1994). From this perspective, literacy is not a fixed skill possessed by the individual but a shifting capacity that is continually reshaped by social interaction, technological change, and cultural transformation (Breivik &

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Gee, 1989; Chang, 1997). The turn towards *multiliteracies*, theorised by the New London Group (1996) and subsequently elaborated by Cope and Kalantzis (2000), extended this reconceptualisation further, arguing that the proliferation of communication channels and the intensification of cultural and linguistic diversity demanded a pedagogy capable of engaging with multiple, simultaneous forms of meaning-making, linguistic, visual, spatial, gestural, and multimodal. Within this expanded framework, the capacity to navigate systems of codes that structure daily cultural life, including those of fashion and consumption, constitutes a legitimate and socially consequential domain of literacy.

It is within this theoretical horizon that the concept of *fashion literacy* acquires both analytical precision and practical urgency. Fashion literacy, as proposed by Chiu et al. (2014), encompasses three interrelated dimensions: cultural cultivation (including the recognition and management of aesthetic sensibility, dignity, and elegance), fashion awareness (the openness to new trends and the capacity to evaluate them critically), and professional competence (the knowledge and skills required to interpret and apply fashion information in contextually appropriate ways). Crucially, this framework positions fashion literacy not simply as the product of formal education or professional training, but as a general competency available to any individual who engages reflectively with the fashion system. The way a person chooses to dress, the criteria by which they select and manage clothing, and the degree to which they understand the broader implications of those choices for the environment, for society and for their own values, all constitute dimensions of this literacy (Chiu et al., 2014; Davetas, 2008).

The urgency of developing fashion literacy has been compounded by the rise of the sustainability imperative. The fast fashion model, characterised by accelerated production cycles, declining garment quality, and the normalisation of disposable consumption, has generated environmental and social costs of a scale and complexity that individual consumers are rarely equipped to evaluate (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Busalim et al., 2022). Addressing these costs requires not only systemic reform at the level of industry and regulation, but a fundamental transformation in consumer knowledge, attitudes and values (Daukantienė, 2023; Vladimirova et al., 2023). Education for sustainable development, in this context, is widely recognised as a critical lever (Glasser et al., 2005; New London Group, 1996), and fashion literacy, understood as the capacity to engage knowledgeably and responsibly with the fashion system in light of its ecological and social dimensions, represents one of its most concrete and immediate applications.

Despite the growing theoretical and empirical interest in both sustainable fashion and literacy studies, the intersection between them remains undertheorised. The existing literature on sustainable fashion consumption tends to focus on behavioural intentions, attitudinal barriers, or market-level interventions (Busalim et al., 2022; Hong et al., 2024), while literacy scholarship, even in its multiliteracy variants, has rarely engaged systematically with fashion as a domain of practice. Conversely, the emergent literature on fashion literacy (Chiu et al., 2014) has developed primarily in the context of professional and vocational training, without fully engaging with the richer theoretical resources offered by sociocultural literacy studies or with the specific challenges posed by sustainability. The present article seeks to address this gap by developing a consolidated conceptual framework for fashion literacy that draws on both traditions. In doing so, it aims to provide a theoretically grounded, operationalisable construct that can serve as a foundation for curriculum development, empirical research, and policy formation in the field of sustainable fashion education.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations of literacy, tracing its evolution from foundational definitions to the multiliteracy paradigm and situating fashion within that framework. Section 3 examines fashion as a semiotic system and cultural practice, drawing on social theory and cultural studies. Section 4 synthesises these two lines of inquiry to propose a working definition of fashion literacy and articulate its key dimensions. Section 5 discusses the implications of this framework for education and research, with particular attention to sustainable development. Section 6 offers concluding remarks and identifies future research directions.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: THE CONCEPT OF LITERACY

Any attempt to develop a rigorous conceptual framework for fashion literacy must begin with a careful account of what literacy itself means, and, crucially, of how the term has been radically rethought over the past half-century. For much of the twentieth century, literacy was understood in what Street (1984) termed the *autonomous* model: a set of neutral, transferable, and context-independent cognitive skills whose acquisition was presumed to yield predictable social and cognitive benefits regardless of the circumstances in which it occurred. This view treated reading and writing as technologies of the mind (Goody, 1968) operating above the fray of culture and power, and it shaped educational policy and practice across the globe. The inadequacy of this model, however, has been extensively documented. As Street (1984, 2003) argued, what counts as literacy is never neutral: it is always already shaped by the institutional, cultural, and ideological contexts that give it meaning. Treating literacy as autonomous, in other words, conceals the power relations embedded in the determination of whose literate practices are recognized, valued, and rewarded, and whose are marginalized or dismissed. Papen (2023) recently affirmed that this critique remains as valid as ever, noting that the New Literacy Studies' foundational challenge to cognitive accounts of literacy has only grown more pertinent as the range of communication contexts in which people must navigate expands.

The theoretical response to the autonomous model was the emergence, in the 1980s and 1990s, of what came to be called the New Literacy Studies (NLS). Drawing on social anthropology, educational research, and cultural theory, scholars including Street (1984), Heath (1983), and Barton and Hamilton (1998) argued for an *ideological* model of literacy that foregrounded the social and cultural embeddedness of literate practice. Within this framework, literacy is understood not as a single, universal competency but as a plurality of contextually situated practices, what Barton and Hamilton (1998) conceptualized as *literacy practices* and *literacy events*: the observable activities in which written texts play an integral role, and the broader social practices, including values, attitudes, and feelings, that shape how people engage with those texts. Literacy, in this account, is a social institution: it is patterned by social structures and power relations, differentially distributed across domains of life, and inseparable from the identities that individuals bring to it and construct through it. Baynham (1995) similarly emphasised that literacy cannot be studied as an abstract skill but must always be examined in relation to the specific social contexts in which it is practised, and Kress (1994) extended this insight into the domain of representation, arguing that literacy describes the dimension of human communication concerned with the production of culturally and socially situated meanings through writing and related graphic and visual systems. These foundational positions have

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continued to generate productive scholarship: the model they propose has been enriched by subsequent work on affect, materiality, and multi-sited communication practices (Papen, 2023), and retains considerable purchase in understanding literacy in non-traditional domains such as consumer culture and fashion.

A further and particularly significant development came with the proposal for a pedagogy of multiliteracies, formulated by the New London Group (1996) in their seminal manifesto published in the *Harvard Educational Review*. The New London Group, a collective of literacy scholars including Cope, Kalantzis, Kress, Fairclough, and Gee, identified two major challenges confronting literacy education: the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of contemporary societies, and the rapid proliferation and transformation of communication channels associated with digital and multimodal media. Against this backdrop, they argued that a literacy pedagogy centred exclusively on standard, monolingual, monocultural written language was structurally inadequate, both for preparing learners for participation in the social and working life of diverse globalised societies, and for developing the critical capacities needed to navigate a world saturated with competing modes of meaning-making. Their concept of multiliteracies proposed that literacy pedagogy must engage with the full range of semiotic modes, linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and multimodal, through which meaning is constructed and communicated in contemporary social life. Revisiting the multiliteracies framework more than a decade later, Cope and Kalantzis (2009) updated and refined its conceptual architecture, identifying four knowledge processes, experiencing, conceptualising, analysing, and applying, as the pedagogical coordinates of transformative literacy education. In a retrospective intellectual biography, Kalantzis and Cope (2023) reflected on the enduring influence of the multiliteracies idea, noting that it has been taken up and extended across a wide range of educational and disciplinary contexts, from digital media literacy to sustainability education.

The multiliteracies framework has, moreover, contributed to a broader cultural legitimisation of domain-specific literacies, that is, of the idea that competent and reflective engagement with particular systems of codes and cultural practices constitutes a genuine form of literacy. Ong (1987) had already pointed in this direction, observing that the term literacy is used in multiple and varied ways to refer to systems of codes and cultures in everyday life with which individuals become familiar through a process of becoming literate within them. Breivik and Gee (1989) extended this to define literacy as the capacity to understand and communicate with the external world, a capacity that must continually be transformed to fit different times, places, and social, economic, and technological contexts. Webster's College Dictionary (1990, as cited in Chiu et al., 2014) articulated three dimensions of the term: it can denote the quality or precondition of being educated; the precondition of cultural cultivation; and knowledge within a specific domain or subject, such as fashion. Yeomans (1991, as cited in Chiu et al., 2014) widened this further, proposing that in its extended sense literacy is not a single capacity but a complex of competencies and skills. Chang (1997) defined literacy as the fundamental capacity of an individual to communicate and interact with the external world, people, events, and objects, in a manner that is both correct and effective, noting that the meaning of correctness itself implies objective judgement and that levels of literacy are therefore variable and subject to the influence of knowledge, skills, and affect. Kouba, Champagne, and Pischitelli (1998, as cited in the source research) went further still, arguing that literacy encompasses not only listening, speaking, reading and writing, but also the capacity to use language to understand context and to construct concepts and meanings through thought. Taken together, these perspectives converge on an understanding of literacy that is expansive, pluralistic, and fundamentally tied to the conditions of social and cultural life, an understanding that renders the concept directly applicable to domains of everyday cultural practice such as fashion.

Synthesising these strands, literacy emerges from the contemporary theoretical literature as a social and cultural practice that is simultaneously individual and collective, local and global, stable and dynamic. It encapsulates the ideological assumptions and power dynamics of the society within which it develops (Street, 1984; Barton & Hamilton, 1998), and it is continuously reshaped by social, environmental, and technological transformations (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2023). These transformations, most notably the dominance of cultural diversity in contemporary societies, the rapid evolution of digital technology, and the growing prevalence of multimodal texts, generate ever-increasing demands for competencies that extend beyond what any single, narrowly defined literacy can provide. It is precisely this generative excess, this capacity of literacy to proliferate and diversify in response to new communicative environments and social challenges, that provides the theoretical foundation for the concept of fashion literacy. For fashion, as will be argued in the sections that follow, constitutes one such environment: a complex, multimodal, culturally saturated system of codes and meanings that demands precisely the kind of situated, reflective, and critically oriented competency that the sociocultural and multiliteracy traditions describe.

Crucially, the relationship between literacy and fashion does not merely reflect a metaphorical extension of the term. Rather, it arises necessarily from the conditions of contemporary social life. As Elsasser and John-Steiner (1977) observed in one of the earliest explicitly sociocultural accounts of literacy, the competencies that constitute literacy are those that enable individuals to examine critically and process theoretically their own political and cultural experience. In a world in which the fashion system is implicated in global environmental crises, labour exploitation, cultural identity formation, and the perpetuation of unsustainable consumption patterns, the capacity to engage critically with fashion, to understand its codes, evaluate its implications, and act responsibly within it, becomes an instance of precisely that kind of political and cultural self-examination. The multiliteracies framework (New London Group, 1996) provides the theoretical scaffolding for this claim by demonstrating that the negotiation of meaning within culturally diverse and technologically mediated systems is central to the civic, working, and personal lives of contemporary individuals. Fashion, as subsequent sections of this article will demonstrate, is one such system, and fashion literacy, accordingly, is one of the genuinely consequential multiliteracies of our time.

3. FASHION AS A SEMIOTIC SYSTEM AND CULTURAL PRACTICE

The relationship between clothing and culture is as old as human society itself, yet fashion, understood as the dynamic, historically specific system through which clothing becomes a vehicle for social distinction, aesthetic expression, and individual identity, is a distinctly modern phenomenon. Across different stages of civilisation, garments have served functions far exceeding the merely practical: in imperial and aristocratic societies, dress was a codified marker of rank, profession, and moral standing, its conventions enforced by sumptuary laws designed to preserve hierarchical distinctions between social strata (Simmel, 1957; Wilson, 2001). It was only with the emergence of modern individualism, the

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dissolution of rigid estate-based orders, and the rise of industrial capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that fashion, in the contemporary sense of the term, became possible, a system in which clothing choices are no longer the fixed sign of one's inherited position but an open, competitive arena for the performance and negotiation of identity. As Davetas (2008) observed, fashion is born at the moment when appearance and clothing cease to reveal economic or class origins and cease to reflect the social image of the wearer: when the dressed person is apprehended not through the age or class classification of their garment but through its individualisation and their personal expression of it. It is this moment, the moment at which clothing is liberated from social groups and becomes the province of individual composition and creativity, that marks the historical emergence of fashion as a specifically modern cultural form.

The most influential theoretical account of fashion as a structured system of meaning was provided by Roland Barthes in *The Fashion System* (1967/1985), in which he analysed the language of fashion magazines as a semiotic structure analogous to natural language, governed by its own grammar of codes, distinctions, and rhetorical operations. For Barthes, fashion does not merely reflect or describe the social world; it actively constitutes it, transforming the arbitrary signs of clothing into apparently natural and self-evident meanings. The garment is never simply a material object but a sign: it signifies, it communicates, it produces meanings that are culturally specific and ideologically loaded. Barthes' semiotic framework has been enormously productive in fashion studies, generating subsequent analyses of how clothing encodes meanings related to gender, age, class, nationality, sexuality, and subculture (Davis, 1994; Molazadeh, 2023). Davis (1994) extended this line of inquiry by examining what he termed the 'subcodes' of fashion: the sets of shared, culturally specific conventions through which garments communicate identity attributes, not through fixed, dictionary-like meanings, but through fluid, context-dependent associations that are always liable to misreading, ambiguity, and contested interpretation. For Davis (1994), the chief difficulty in understanding fashion lies precisely in this instability: the meanings produced by dress are not fully determinate but shot through with ambivalence, oscillating between competing and sometimes contradictory identity claims. Contemporary scholarship has both built on and complicated the Barthesian inheritance: Molazadeh (2023) demonstrated that the full range of Barthes' five codes, hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic, and cultural, is operative within the fashion system, while acknowledging that the postmodern turn in fashion studies has shifted scholarly attention from representation to embodiment, from structural codes to lived, materialised, and performative practices.

A parallel and equally influential theoretical tradition approaches fashion not through semiotics but through social theory, attending to the structural tensions and social functions that animate the fashion system as a whole. Georg Simmel's foundational essay "Fashion", first published in 1904 and widely reprinted, identified the driving force of fashion as a fundamental dialectic of human sociality: the simultaneous desire for belonging and differentiation, for conformity and individuality. Fashion, Simmel (1957) argued, represents one of the many forms of life through which individuals seek to combine the tendency towards social equalisation with the desire for individual differentiation and change. It achieves this through the mechanism of imitation: the lower social strata adopt the styles of the upper, whereupon the latter abandon them in favour of new distinctions, thereby setting the cycle of fashion in perpetual motion. This trickle-down model has been substantially revised and critiqued in subsequent scholarship, notably by Davis (1994) and Entwistle (2023), who have pointed to the increasingly complex, multi-directional, and consumer-driven character of contemporary fashion dynamics, yet Simmel's central insight, that fashion is fundamentally a mechanism for the social management of identity, sameness, and difference, retains its analytical power. Gjoni (2025) recently affirmed this view, arguing that fashion functions as a visual language deeply embedded in cultural narratives that simultaneously reinforce inclusion and exclusion within social groups, serving as an instrument not merely of aesthetic expression but of social power and resistance.

A significant development in the theoretical understanding of fashion came with Entwistle's (2023) argument that fashion must be understood not as an abstract system of signs or a set of structural social forces, but as an *embodied practice*, a situated, bodily activity that is embedded within the social world and constitutive of microsocial order. Where Barthes had treated the fashion system primarily as a textual and rhetorical structure, and Simmel as a macro-sociological mechanism, Entwistle insisted on the lived, phenomenological dimension of dress: the experience of choosing, wearing, and feeling clothing on and through the body. Dress, she argued, operates dialectically: it works on the body, imbuing it with social meaning, while the body is simultaneously a dynamic field that gives life and fullness to dress (Entwistle, 2000). This dialectic between material garment and embodied self means that fashion is never merely a matter of surface appearance but is always already bound up with questions of identity, selfhood, and social belonging. The third edition of *The Fashioned Body* (Entwistle, 2023) extended this framework to address the diversity of contemporary fashion practices, including the intersecting dimensions of gender, class, race, and sexuality, as well as the emergent challenges of digital fashion and sustainability, developments that have fundamentally altered both the production and the meaning-making practices of the global fashion system. Wilson (2001) similarly argued that clothing constitutes one of the most fundamental fields of social expression and aesthetics, a universal form of expressive communication, a kind of identity and culture, a position amply corroborated by subsequent empirical and theoretical research.

The concept of fashion, it is important to note, cannot be confined to its narrowest referent, the garment, the outfit, the seasonal collection. In its broader theoretical elaboration, fashion encompasses a whole way of life: a set of attitudes towards the self and the world that extends from clothing and appearance into lifestyle, consumption, taste, and aesthetic sensibility more generally (Chiu et al., 2014; Finkelstein, 1996). Chiu et al. (2014) proposed a broader definition of fashion that includes not only skin care, makeup, hairstyles, dress, and accessories but also attitudes towards food, shelter, transportation, education, leisure, and even body language. In this expanded conception, fashion is not merely an object or a set of objects but a complex of knowledge, values, and practices through which individuals orient themselves towards the world and project themselves into social space. Finkelstein (1996) captured this complexity in her characterization of fashion as a *hybrid phenomenon* situated at the intersection of economics and art, psychology and commerce, creativity and banality, functioning simultaneously as a social, economic, and aesthetic force. Schor (2002) similarly described fashion as a vital part of human experience, an observation that underlines its centrality not as a superficial or trivial domain but as one of the primary arenas in which human beings make meaning, construct identity, and negotiate belonging. It is this recognition, that fashion is a complex, multi-layered, and consequential domain of social and cultural life, that grounds the theoretical case for fashion literacy as a serious and necessary competency.

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The social role of fashion, as it is enacted at the level of the individual, is deeply connected to questions of identity formation, cultural participation, and, increasingly, ethical and environmental responsibility. Clothing choices transmit messages to one's social environment, communicating dimensions of personal and social identity, values, attitudes, affiliations, and aspirations, that are both deliberate and unconscious, both individual and collectively shaped (Davis, 1994; Simmel, 1957; Wilson, 2001). They position the individual within social categories of gender, age, profession, and cultural belonging, and they are themselves positioned within broader systems of production, distribution, and consumption that carry significant environmental and social costs (Entwistle, 2023; Niinimäki et al., 2020). The way a person manages their clothing, how they acquire it, how long they keep it, how they dispose of it, reflects and reproduces a culture of daily life with respect to environmental protection, whether or not the individual is consciously aware of that relationship. This is precisely the point at which the social analysis of fashion intersects with the educational agenda of fashion literacy: for if clothing is indeed a form of cultural practice laden with social meanings and environmental consequences, then the development of the capacity to navigate that practice knowingly, critically, and responsibly constitutes a genuine and urgent educational task. The sections that follow take up this task by proposing a working definition and operational framework for fashion literacy as a construct that is both theoretically grounded in the traditions reviewed above and practically oriented towards the challenges of sustainable development.

4. FASHION LITERACY: TOWARDS A WORKING DEFINITION AND FRAMEWORK

The preceding sections have established two complementary theoretical foundations. On the one hand, literacy scholarship, particularly in its sociocultural and multiliteracy variants, has progressively expanded the concept of literacy to encompass any domain of social and cultural practice that involves the acquisition and exercise of a structured competency for meaningful engagement with a system of codes (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). On the other hand, the social theory and cultural studies of fashion have demonstrated that dress and clothing constitute precisely such a system: a dynamic, multimodal, semiotic structure through which individuals construct identity, communicate values, and participate in social life, while simultaneously producing consequences of considerable environmental and social magnitude (Barthes, 1985; Davis, 1994; Entwistle, 2023; Niinimäki et al., 2020). The question that naturally arises from this convergence is not whether fashion constitutes a domain of literacy, but rather how that literacy should be defined and operationalised in a way that is theoretically coherent, practically applicable, and adequate to the urgency of the sustainability challenges that the contemporary fashion system presents. This section takes up that question directly, proposing a working definition of fashion literacy and articulating the dimensions of an operational framework that can serve as a foundation for empirical research and educational practice.

The most systematically developed empirical account of fashion literacy to date remains that of Chiu et al. (2014), who, drawing on expert interviews and exploratory factor analysis, identified three core dimensions of the construct: *cultural cultivation*, *fashion sensitivity*, and *professional skills*. Cultural cultivation encompasses the recognition and management of aesthetic sensibility, dignity, generosity, and elegance, the broad cultural and interpersonal competencies that enable an individual to navigate the fashion system with discernment and grace. Fashion sensitivity refers to the capacity to recognise and evaluate fashion as a dynamic cultural form: the openness to new and unconventional aesthetic expressions, the interest in fashion as a field of meaning, and the ability to appraise its significance within a broader cultural context. Professional skills, as defined by Chiu et al. (2014), include the knowledge and competencies associated with formal fashion education, aesthetic theory, professional manuals, and multi-dimensional aesthetic awareness, and are more specialised in character than the first two dimensions. Taken together, these three dimensions constitute fashion literacy as the mastery of the capacity to communicate effectively with the world through fashion, to enjoy the interaction it affords, and to resolve problems that arise within it (Chiu et al., 2014). This framework represents a genuine advance in the operationalisation of the concept; yet it was developed primarily with reference to fashion design students in Taiwan, and its orientation is largely vocational and aesthetic. The framework proposed in the present article builds on the foundations laid by Chiu et al. (2014) while extending them in two significant directions: towards the general consumer population, and towards the dimensions of environmental knowledge, ecological values, and sustainable practice that have become theoretically indispensable in any adequate account of fashion competency in the contemporary world.

The first dimension of the extended framework concerns *knowledge*: the informational and cognitive base that equips individuals to understand what the fashion system is and what it does, both culturally and environmentally. At the most basic level, this involves familiarity with the codes and conventions of dress, including the semiotic relationships between garments, occasions, social positions, and aesthetic traditions (Barthes, 1985; Davis, 1994). At a deeper level, it encompasses knowledge of the material realities of the fashion industry: the scale and character of its environmental footprint, its contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, water consumption, and textile waste, its labour practices, and its relationship to the Sustainable Development Goals (Niinimäki et al., 2020; UNECE, 2018). Recent empirical research has consistently identified knowledge, including both general environmental knowledge and sector-specific knowledge of the fashion industry's impacts, as a significant predictor of sustainable consumption intentions and behaviours, though it is rarely sufficient alone to close the well-documented attitude-behaviour gap (Hong et al., 2024; Wilbourn et al., 2024; Schiaroli et al., 2025). Fashion literacy, in its knowledge dimension, thus encompasses both the cultural and the ecological: an understanding of fashion as a meaning-making system and as a material force with real-world consequences.

The second dimension concerns *attitudes and values*: the orientations, beliefs, and commitments through which individuals relate to fashion as a cultural practice and to its broader implications. This dimension is the most complex of the three, because it spans a wide range of evaluative and affective stances, from aesthetic preference and personal style to environmental concern, ethical responsibility, and social reflexivity. As Chiu et al. (2014) noted, the culturally cultivated individual brings to the fashion system not merely knowledge but an orientation of care: care for the dignity and elegance of their own presentation, care for the aesthetic quality of what they choose to wear, and, in its extended sense, care for the values that their consumption choices enact in the world. In the context of sustainable development, this dimension encompasses what the literature variously describes as environmental concern, biospheric values, and pro-environmental attitudes (Hong et al., 2024), but also, and crucially, the reflexive awareness that one's own consumption practices are not merely personal but socially and politically consequential.

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Simmel (1957) observed that fashion is a mechanism through which individuals simultaneously express social belonging and individual distinction; a fashion-literate individual, in the extended sense proposed here, is one who is capable of critically examining the social pressures that the fashion system exerts, including the pressure to overconsume, and of arriving at a values-based position from which to resist, redirect, or engage with those pressures deliberately. This critical, reflexive dimension aligns closely with the ideological model of literacy as described by Street (1984, 2003) and with Elsasser and John-Steiner's (1977) characterisation of literacy as the capacity to examine critically and process theoretically one's own cultural and political experience.

The third dimension concerns *practices*: the observable, behavioural manifestation of fashion literacy in the choices individuals make in the course of their daily engagement with the fashion system. These practices range across the full lifecycle of the garment: how, why, and from whom clothing is purchased; how it is worn, maintained, and cared for over time; and how it is ultimately disposed of, whether through landfill, resale, donation, repair, or recycling. Each of these choices has both a semiotic and a material dimension: it is simultaneously a communicative act within the fashion system and a concrete intervention in the material flows of the fashion industry. The criteria by which a person selects a garment, price, brand, aesthetic, ecological certification, country of origin, material, reflect a literacy that is partly cultural, partly ethical, and partly ecological (Chiu et al., 2014; Wilbourn et al., 2024). The methods by which they manage their clothing over time, the frequency of washing, the use of repair services, the tendency to dispose of garments after minimal use, similarly reflect a set of competencies and dispositions that are directly implicated in the sustainability of the fashion system as a whole (Schiaroli et al., 2025). Contemporary research has demonstrated that practices in this domain are shaped by the interplay of knowledge, attitudes, norms, identity, and structural constraints, and that interventions aimed at changing them require engaging with all of these dimensions rather than privileging any one (Busalim et al., 2022; Hong et al., 2024).

Drawing on the foregoing analysis, and situating the construct within the multiliteracies framework (New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009), it is now possible to propose a working definition of fashion literacy adequate to the theoretical and practical demands of the present moment. Fashion literacy is defined here as *a situated, reflexive, and critical social practice through which individuals develop and exercise the knowledge, attitudes, and competencies required to engage meaningfully, responsibly, and effectively with the fashion system in all its cultural, social, aesthetic, and environmental dimensions.* Several features of this definition warrant emphasis. First, fashion literacy is *situated*: like all literacies in the sociocultural tradition, it is not a context-independent skill but a practice whose forms and norms are shaped by the specific social, cultural, and institutional environments in which it is enacted (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Baynham, 1995). Second, it is *reflexive*: it involves not merely the acquisition of information or the performance of competencies, but the capacity for self-examination with respect to one's own values, assumptions, and practices, the capacity, as Elsasser and John-Steiner (1977) would have it, to process theoretically the cultural experience of dress. Third, it is *critical*: it involves the ability to identify and interrogate the power relations, ideological assumptions, and material consequences embedded in the fashion system, including those associated with overconsumption, environmental exploitation, and labour injustice. And fourth, it is *multi-dimensional*: it encompasses knowledge, attitudes, and practices across the cultural, social, aesthetic, and environmental registers of fashion, resisting any reduction to a single competency or domain.

A working definition of this kind is not merely of theoretical interest: it is the foundation for an empirical and educational programme. Within the multiliteracies framework, literacy is always both described and enacted, it is a practice that is simultaneously constituted by and constitutive of the social environments in which it occurs (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2023). Fashion literacy, accordingly, is not an abstract competency but a set of measurables, observable, and teachable dispositions and behaviours. At the level of knowledge, it can be assessed through individuals' understanding of the fashion industry's environmental impact, their familiarity with the codes and conventions of sustainable consumption, and their awareness of the structural relationships between personal clothing choices and global sustainability challenges. At the level of attitudes and values, it can be assessed through orientations towards environmental responsibility, aesthetic reflexivity, and ethical consumption. At the level of practices, it can be assessed through the criteria and patterns of clothing purchase, management, and disposal. Taken together, these three dimensions constitute a comprehensive, theoretically grounded, and empirically tractable framework for the study and cultivation of fashion literacy, one that, as the following sections argue, has significant implications for the fields of education, consumer research, and sustainable development policy.

5. DISCUSSION

The conceptual framework developed in the preceding sections brings together two bodies of scholarship, the sociocultural theory of literacy and the cultural and social theory of fashion, that have rarely been placed in sustained dialogue with one another. The result is a construct, fashion literacy, that is at once theoretically grounded and practically consequential. Three contributions of this framework merit particular emphasis in the context of the wider scholarly and policy debate on sustainable consumption and education for sustainable development. The first is the relational and situated character of the construct: by defining fashion literacy as a social practice rather than an individual skill, the framework resists the reductionism of approaches that locate the problem of unsustainable fashion consumption purely in the knowledge deficits or motivational failures of individual consumers (Busalim et al., 2022; Hong et al., 2024). Fashion literacy, in the account developed here, is shaped by institutional, cultural, and social contexts that simultaneously enable and constrain the possibilities for reflective and responsible engagement with the fashion system. This means that interventions aimed at developing fashion literacy cannot be limited to information campaigns or attitude-change programmes directed at individuals; they must also attend to the educational, institutional, and structural environments in which fashion literacy is, or is not, cultivated, particularly because literacy can influence how sustainability and climate-related issues are understood within public and policy contexts (Kotsis, 2024a).

The second contribution concerns the relationship between knowledge, attitudes, and practices, and the long-standing problem of the attitude-behaviour gap in sustainable consumption research. A substantial empirical literature has established that positive environmental attitudes and knowledge of environmental risks are, on their own, poor predictors of sustainable behaviour (Busalim et al., 2022; Hong et al., 2024; Schiaroli et al., 2025). Consumers frequently report strong concern for environmental issues while continuing to engage in highly unsustainable patterns of

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clothing purchase and disposal, a disconnect that has been attributed variously to social norms, convenience, price, identity considerations, and the sheer structural difficulty of acting sustainably in a market dominated by fast fashion (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Vladimirova et al., 2023). The fashion literacy framework proposed here addresses this gap not by adding further information to the knowledge dimension, but by insisting on the centrality of *critical reflexivity* as a constitutive feature of literacy itself. Drawing on Street's (1984) ideological model and the multiliteracy tradition (New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009), the framework positions the capacity to examine and interrogate one's own values, habits, and social pressures, rather than merely to know about environmental problems, as the core of what makes fashion literacy genuinely transformative. This is consistent with the growing body of work in sustainability education that distinguishes between a transmissive approach, in which learners receive information about sustainability challenges, and a transformative approach, in which they develop the competencies to act as agents of change within those challenges (Glasser et al., 2005; Li & Sindhuphak, 2024; Houghton et al., 2024).

The third and perhaps most practically urgent contribution of the framework concerns its implications for education. The case for integrating fashion literacy into educational curricula at all levels, from compulsory schooling through to higher education, rests on several converging lines of argument (Kotsis, 2026a), especially since literacy-oriented approaches in science and sustainability education have been shown to provide a useful basis for developing future teachers' understanding of complex environmental issues (Stylos et al., 2023). First, as the analysis of the fashion-SDG nexus has demonstrated (UNECE, 2018; Kotsis, 2026b), the environmental and social costs of the current fashion system are of a scale and urgency that demands coordinated societal responses, of which education is an indispensable component. Second, the evidence from empirical research consistently indicates that educational interventions can meaningfully shape both the knowledge and the behavioural dimensions of sustainable fashion consumption, particularly when they are designed to engage learners actively and experientially rather than passively and informationally (Wood et al., 2023; Zabidi & Jamaludin, 2024). Third, and most fundamentally, the multiliteracies framework (New London Group, 1996; Kalantzis & Cope, 2023) establishes a principled theoretical basis for the claim that literacy education must engage with the full range of culturally significant meaning-making practices in which learners participate, and in a world where fashion is one of the most pervasive of those practices, its exclusion from educational curricula constitutes a significant pedagogical lacuna. As Glasser et al. (2005) argued in the context of higher education for sustainability, educational institutions are called to re-examine their missions and restructure their priorities in response to the ecological and social challenges of the present: integrating fashion literacy into curriculum frameworks is one concrete and overdue expression of that imperative.

Despite growing awareness of these imperatives, the integration of sustainability into fashion education remains partial, uneven, and insufficiently theorised. Recent literature has confirmed that while interest in sustainable fashion education has grown substantially over the past decade, most existing programmes and studies remain narrowly focused on specific components, materials innovation, circular economy principles, or particular vocational competencies, without offering comprehensive frameworks that span the full range of sustainability dimensions (Daukantienė, 2023; Zabidi & Jamaludin, 2024). The fashion literacy framework developed in this article addresses this gap by providing a multi-dimensional construct that is applicable across educational levels and contexts, and that integrates the cultural, social, aesthetic, environmental, and ethical dimensions of fashion into a coherent pedagogical object. The call for holistic and cross-disciplinary approaches to fashion sustainability education, advanced by scholars including Barry and Christel (2023) and Li and Sindhuphak (2024), is both theoretically justified by the multiliteracies tradition and practically supported by emerging evidence of the effectiveness of inquiry-based, integrative, project-based, and experiential pedagogies in this domain (Kotsis, 2026c; Wood et al., 2023). The framework proposed here is designed to serve as a foundation for such approaches: by defining fashion literacy as situated, reflexive, critical, and multi-dimensional, it provides curriculum designers, researchers, and policymakers with a theoretically coherent and operationalizable basis for the development and evaluation of educational programmes. More broadly, literacy-based approaches are also valuable for strengthening informed political reasoning and policy decision-making in response to complex social and sustainability challenges (Kotsis, 2024b).

Beyond its implications for curriculum and pedagogy, the fashion literacy framework advanced in this article constitutes a programme for empirical research. The three-dimensional structure of the framework, knowledge, attitudes and values, practices, maps naturally onto a set of measurable variables that can be assessed through survey instruments, qualitative inquiry, and experimental or quasi-experimental educational research designs. The need for such empirical grounding is underlined by the paucity of existing empirical work on fashion literacy as a construct: while Chiu et al. (2014) provided a pioneering operationalisation, their framework was limited to a specific vocational and cultural context. Such findings underscore both the feasibility and the importance of empirical investigation of fashion literacy as a socially and demographically differentiated competency, and they point towards a rich agenda for future research: longitudinal studies of fashion literacy development through educational interventions; cross-cultural comparisons of fashion literacy levels and their determinants; and mixed-methods investigations of the processes through which knowledge, attitudes, and practices interact and mutually reinforce or undermine each other in the domain of sustainable fashion.

Several limitations of the framework proposed in this article should be acknowledged. First, as a conceptual contribution, it does not itself provide direct empirical evidence for the validity or predictive power of the fashion literacy construct: that work remains to be done, and its outcomes may well require revision or refinement of the framework. Second, the framework has been developed primarily in dialogue with Western European and North American theoretical traditions and empirical contexts; its applicability in non-Western settings, where the semiotic codes of fashion, the social functions of dress, and the structural conditions of the fashion industry may differ substantially from those assumed in the framework, requires careful investigation (Gjoni, 2025; Li & Sindhuphak, 2024). Third, the framework's emphasis on critical reflexivity as the core of fashion literacy makes a significant demand on educational systems and individual learners: developing the capacity to examine and interrogate one's own cultural practices and values is a complex, time-consuming, and institutionally demanding pedagogical undertaking, and the conditions under which this capacity can be effectively cultivated are not yet well understood. These limitations do not diminish the theoretical contribution of the framework, but they do underscore the importance of sustained empirical and educational research as the next phase in the programme it inaugurates.

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6. CONCLUSION

This article has developed a conceptual framework for fashion literacy by bringing into sustained dialogue two bodies of scholarship that have rarely been placed in direct conversation: the sociocultural and multiliteracy traditions in literacy studies, and the cultural, semiotic, and social-theoretical traditions in fashion studies. The argument has proceeded in four main steps. First, the concept of literacy was traced from its origins in the autonomous model of a context-independent cognitive skill to its reconceptualisation, in the New Literacy Studies and the multiliteracies framework, as a situated, ideologically embedded, and pluralistic social practice (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1984; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Second, fashion was examined as a complex semiotic system and cultural practice: a domain of daily life in which individuals construct identity, communicate values, and participate in the social world through the codes, conventions, and material realities of dress (Barthes, 1985; Davis, 1994; Entwistle, 2023; Simmel, 1957; Wilson, 2001). Third, these two theoretical strands were synthesised to produce a working definition of fashion literacy as a situated, reflexive, and critical social practice through which individuals develop and exercise the knowledge, attitudes, and competencies required to engage meaningfully, responsibly, and effectively with the fashion system in all its cultural, social, aesthetic, and environmental dimensions. Fourth, the implications of this framework were explored with respect to the attitude-behaviour gap in sustainable consumption research, the agenda for fashion sustainability education, and the programme of empirical research that the framework inaugurates.

The working definition proposed in this article represents a substantive advance on the existing literature in several respects. It is, to the authors' knowledge, the first account of fashion literacy to be grounded explicitly and systematically in the sociocultural theory of literacy and the multiliteracies framework, and in doing so it situates the construct within a broader theoretical tradition that has the conceptual resources to explain both the complexity of fashion as a meaning-making system and the social and institutional conditions under which fashion competency can be acquired, developed, and transformed. It is the first account to define fashion literacy as explicitly *critical* in character, to position the reflexive interrogation of one's own values, habits, and social environment as constitutive of the competency, rather than as an optional supplement to informational knowledge about fashion. And it is the first account to integrate the environmental and sustainability dimensions of fashion engagement as fully internal to the definition of fashion literacy, rather than treating them as external desiderata to be added to an otherwise aesthetic or vocational construct. In each of these respects, the framework extends and enriches the pioneering empirical work of Chiu et al. (2014), whose three-dimensional model, cultural cultivation, fashion sensitivity, professional skills, provided an indispensable foundation for the present analysis while leaving open the theoretical and practical questions that this article has sought to address.

The framework proposed here opens a number of directions for future empirical research. Most immediately, it calls for the development and validation of measurement instruments adequate to the three-dimensional structure of the construct, instruments capable of capturing not only the informational and behavioural dimensions of fashion literacy but also the attitudinal and reflexive dimensions that the framework identifies as central. Such instruments would need to be sensitive to the social and demographic factors, including gender, age, educational level, occupational status, and cultural background, that shape the development and expression of fashion literacy in different populations and contexts. Recent quantitative work, provides preliminary evidence that fashion literacy, as operationalized through knowledge, criteria for eco-friendly consumption, sustainable clothing management, awareness of fashion's social role, and views on the transformative potential of sustainability education, is indeed socially and demographically differentiated in theoretically meaningful ways (Faludi, 2025; Schiaroli et al., 2025). Cross-cultural research that examines how fashion literacy is constituted and distributed across different national and cultural contexts represents a particularly important direction, given that both the semiotic codes of fashion and the structural conditions of the fashion industry vary substantially across regions of the global economy (Gjoni, 2025; Li & Sindhuphak, 2024). Longitudinal research on the development of fashion literacy through educational interventions, and on the pathways through which changes in knowledge and attitudes are or are not translated into changed practices, also represents a high-priority direction, one that bears directly on the most persistent and theoretically challenging problem in the field, namely the attitude-behaviour gap (Busalim et al., 2022; Hong et al., 2024; Vladimirova et al., 2023).

The implications for education and policy are equally significant. The fashion literacy framework provides curriculum designers, educators, and policymakers with a theoretically coherent and empirically tractable basis for the development, implementation, and evaluation of educational programmes aimed at cultivating responsible and reflective engagement with the fashion system (Kotsis, 2026a). Such programmes, as the Discussion has argued, need to be holistic and cross-disciplinary in design, transformative rather than merely transmissive in pedagogical orientation, and attentive to the structural and institutional conditions that enable or constrain the development of fashion literacy at different levels of the education system (Daukantienė, 2023; Glasser et al., 2005; Li & Sindhuphak, 2024; Wood et al., 2023). The case for introducing fashion literacy as a dimension of sustainability education within compulsory schooling is, on the analysis presented in this article, both theoretically strong and practically urgent: the environmental and social costs of the current fashion system are of a scale that demands coordinated societal responses, and education, understood in the transformative sense articulated by the multiliteracies tradition and the Education for Sustainable Development literature, is an indispensable component of any such response (Kalantzis & Cope, 2023; New London Group, 1996; UNECE, 2018).

The way people choose to dress is, ultimately, never merely a matter of personal aesthetic preference. It is a practice saturated with social meaning, cultural history, and material consequence, a practice that both reflects and reproduces the values, knowledge, and habits of the societies in which it takes place. In a historical moment in which the fashion system is implicated in some of the most pressing ecological and social challenges confronting humanity, the development of the capacity to engage with that system knowingly, reflexively, and responsibly is not a luxury but a necessity. Fashion literacy, as developed in this article, names that capacity and provides the theoretical and operational framework through which it can be studied, cultivated, and assessed. It is offered here as a contribution to the growing interdisciplinary conversation between literacy studies, fashion studies, consumer behaviour research, and sustainability education, a conversation whose urgency is matched only by its potential to generate the kinds of knowledge that can support meaningful change.

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Funding: This research received no external funding.
Declarations: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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