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Adil Boughlala, Vera van Nuenen, Anneke Smelik

Digital Fashion Between Pictorial and Tactile Practices

Abstract

This paper presents an intergenerational dialogue between a senior fashion theorist and two early-career researchers, exploring emerging perspectives on digital fashion and theory. In addition to their academic work, the two early-career researchers also edit *WETWARE Magazine*, an experimental publication dedicated to digital fashion. The authors examine how digital fashion functions primarily as a pictorial practice—rooted in image-making, screen cultures, and visual aesthetics—while simultaneously challenging traditional definitions of fashion as material, tactile, and body-bound. This dialogue positions digital fashion within a broader shift toward fashion’s increasing visibility, shaped by platforms such as social media, immersive VR/AR, gaming environments, NFTs, and virtual archives. The authors explore how digital garments are created to be circulated, seen, and experienced visually rather than worn physically. Drawing on posthumanism, new materialism, and visual culture, the authors highlight how digital fashion blurs boundaries between object and image, presence and simulation, fashion and media.

Key themes include the nature of digital garments; the evolution of fashion as a screen-based, image-driven practice; the role of visual tactility in simulating material qualities; and the emotional attachments formed around intangible yet culturally potent fashion objects. The dialogue addresses the paradox of digital fashion’s ephemerality within a hyper-material consumer society and its entanglement with infrastructures of display and mediation. The authors underscore the current trends and changes in fashion by linking digital fashion to pictorial and medial practices, both screen-based and printed, while interrogating the position of digital fashion within the broader scope of fashion studies and contemporary fashion discourse.

Dieser Beitrag präsentiert einen generationsübergreifenden Dialog zwischen einer seniores Modetheoretikerin und zwei Nachwuchsforschende, in

welchem aufkommende Perspektiven auf digitale Mode und deren Theorie erkundet werden. Neben ihrer akademischen Arbeit geben die beiden Nachwuchsforscher auch das Magazin *WETWARE* heraus, eine experimentelle Publikation, die sich der digitalen Moden widmet. Die Autoren untersuchen, wie digitale Mode in erster Linie als bildliche Praxis funktioniert – verwurzelt in Bildgestaltung, Bildschirmkulturen und visueller Ästhetik – und gleichzeitig traditionelle Definitionen von Mode als materiell, taktil und körpergebunden in Frage stellt. Dieser Dialog positioniert digitale Mode innerhalb eines umfassenderen Wandels hin zu einer zunehmenden Visualität von Mode, die durch Plattformen wie soziale Medien, immersive VR/AR, Gaming-Umgebungen, NFTs und virtuelle Archive geprägt ist. Die Autoren ergründen, wie digitale Kleidungsstücke geschaffen werden, um visuell verbreitet, gesehen und erlebt, anstatt physisch getragen zu werden. Ausgehend von Posthumanismus, Neumaterialismus und visueller Kultur zeigen die Autoren, wie digitale Mode die Grenzen zwischen Objekt und Bild, Präsenz und Simulation, und Mode und Medien verwischt.

Zu den zentralen Themen dieses Beitrags gehören die Natur digitaler Kleidungsstücke; die Evolution von Mode als bildschirmbasierte, bildgetriebene Praxis; die Rolle von visueller Taktilität bei der Simulation von Materialeigenschaften; sowie die emotionalen Bindungen, die zu immateriellen, aber kulturell bedeutsamen Modeobjekten entstehen. Der Dialog befasst sich mit dem Paradoxon der Vergänglichkeit digitaler Mode in einer hypermaterialistischen Konsumgesellschaft und ihrer Verflechtung mit Infrastrukturen der Darstellung und Vermittlung. Die Autoren betonen die aktuellen Trends und Veränderungen in der Mode, indem sie digitale Mode mit bildlichen und medialen Praktiken, sowohl bildschirmbasierten als auch gedruckten, in Verbindung bringen, und gleichzeitig die Position von digitaler Mode im weiteren Rahmen der Modetheorie und des zeitgenössischen Modediskurses hinterfragen.

Keywords: digital fashion, fashion media, ephemerality, tactility, materiality, posthuman, phigital

Introduction

This article differs from the usual academic style by discussing the topic of digital fashion as a dialogue between a senior fashion theorist and two younger colleagues. Invited by the editor of this special issue, Swantje Martach, we welcomed the opportunity to explore the pictorial practices of digital fashion. The dialogue is conducted between Anneke Smelik, professor emerita of Visual Culture

concerned with posthuman fashion, new materialism, and sustainability, and co-editor of the academic journal *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*; and her former students Adil Boughlala and Vera van Nuenen, now early-career researchers as well as founders and editors of a new journal, *WETWARE Magazine*. This dialogue takes place across generations: Smelik is a digital immigrant boomer—in fact, she is generally a late adopter of new technologies, despite her theoretical musings on cyborgs and the posthuman—while Boughlala and Van Nuenen are digital natives who enjoy curating their social media presence and customizing avatars. Both share an interest in all things digital culture and fashion magazines, though their differing experiences occasionally lead to distinct perspectives.

In this dialogue we wonder what digital fashion is, in what ways it is ephemeral, and whether it can be in some way tactile. We ask: how does digital fashion waver between ‘fashion’ and ‘image’? We examine if and how technological advancements have reshaped the nature of fashion and the fashion image. We also discuss how digital fashion can be distinguished from material fashion—or perhaps if that is altogether the wrong question to ask. This dialogic and exploratory format reflects the post-critical approach of this special issue: rather than merely diagnosing problems, we aim to generate insights and foreground the lived, theorized, and practiced entanglements of digital fashion across generational and interdisciplinary lines.

Surely, the young researchers throw around terms, practices, and designs that slightly freak out the senior researcher—from in-game collectibles and *NFTs* to immersive *VR/AR* and the Metaverse. For all three of us, digital fashion, as a pictorial practice of clothing, raises pressing questions about materiality, tactility, and emotional attachment. Trained in cultural and fashion studies, we adopt an interdisciplinary approach in order to discuss the field-spanning and broader cultural and technological implications of the interplay between the physical and digital dimensions of digital fashion. By exploring digital fashion’s relation to screen-based and printed pictorial practices, we will reveal emerging trends and shifts. We also consider the position of digital fashion within broader fashion studies and contemporary discourse.

1. Printed pixels: Digital fashion in *WETWARE Magazine*

Anneke Smelik: In January 2025, you launched the first issue of your magazine on digital fashion, *WETWARE*. I am quite fascinated. What inspired you and what is your aim with this magazine?

Adil Boughlala: *WETWARE Magazine* is a zine project that emerged from Vera’s and my shared interest in digital fashion, (niche) fashion magazines, and

academic research. While digital fashion took online spaces by storm at the time, academia remained far behind (it still does), and in our own personal circles, it was unheard of. The aspiration to foster a local zine culture in Nijmegen (where we studied and where Anneke taught) as well as bring digital fashion and its designers into the focus of academia is what started *WETWARE*.

Vera van Nuenen: Nicely said Adil. *WETWARE* is about understanding how digital fashion (re)shapes our norms and values and vice versa: We combine fashion editorials with academic research and collaborate with digital fashion designers for spreads of fashion photography. Through cultural theory, we dive into the digital fashion world, exploring its nuances through an interdisciplinary approach. From the intersection of technology and style to the social implications of digitalization, our diverse perspectives aim to unravel the complexities of this evolving landscape. Using digital fashion as a cultural lens, we explore how it shapes, constructs, or decomposes society. Through *WETWARE*, we encourage thinking about and engaging with digital fashion for the sake of pushing existing power, ethical and cultural boundaries of dominant fashion structures.

Anneke Smelik: I was surprised that I could buy a physical copy of it (Fig. 1), whereas I expected a digital magazine. What is the reasoning behind this choice?



Fig. 1: *WETWARE* Magazine: Issue One, 2025, image by Adil Boughlala and Vera van Nuenen.

Vera van Nuenen: We chose not to create a digital magazine because we wanted to explore digital fashion beyond its usual online confines. By placing digital design in a physical environment, we allow it to be seen, felt, and engaged with in a different way. Digital fashion is typically communicated through digital formats, but to critically reflect on it, we believe it must be taken out of its comfortable digital space. A printed magazine makes digital fashion tangible, reaching a different audience while breaking free from traditional communication structures. We value the *magazine* as a tool for interaction—something to browse, feel, cut, cherish, and collect. Unlike fleeting online images, a magazine occupies physical space more permanently. Digital fashion imagery often lacks this permanence, remaining in niche digital bubbles. With *WETWARE*, we give digital fashion a lasting, tactile presence outside the digital sphere and ensure its imagery and ideas have a place to stay. At the same time, this translation from one medium to another may affectively alter the reception of digital fashion.

Adil Boughlala: There is also a playful irony between the tactile and the pictorial in magazines. This makes digital fashion such an interesting entry point that enables us to explore how recent developments of fashion are increasingly driven by image-based practices.

Anneke Smelik: I am also curious why you chose this intriguing title, *WETWARE*. Digital fashion seems to me the opposite of the ‘fleshy wetware’ of a physical body or the materiality of clothes worn on the body. Was the title meant to be provocative? Years ago, I wrote quite a bit about the wetware of the cyborg in sci-fi cinema, critiquing the desired ‘flight from the flesh’ in posthuman fantasy (SMELIK 2008).

Adil Boughlala: Our title references Rudy Rucker’s 1988 sci-fi novel *Wetware*, which speculates the merging of humans with biocybernetic technology. In cyberpunk slang, “wetware” refers to the human brain or mind as a computing element, already hinting at a posthuman reconfiguration of the body as both organic and machinic. We adopt the concept to describe how the digital intertwines with the human body and mind; the concept represents to us the wearer’s physicality as well as the potential for transformation through digital fashion. *WETWARE* frames the body as an active interface for digital fashion, where movement, proportions, and physical traits shape the interaction with digital garments by influencing their fit, flow, and responsiveness, even when physically detached.

Vera van Nuenen: The term adds a critical stance to *WETWARE*’s debate regarding digital fashion. In the context of digital fashion, it highlights and takes

into question the contrast between physical and digital, human and cyborg, mind and computer. Although the term does not apply literally, the word ‘wet’ evokes liquidity and is meant by us as hybridity and the blurring of boundaries: digital fashion as something in constant flux, which is a recurring topic in our magazine.

2. Digital fashion: Fashion or image?

Anneke Smelik: If I understand you correctly, you suggest that digital culture is not as immaterial as it appears. I will come back to the issue of im/materiality later, but for now, I want to confess that I find digital fashion a difficult phenomenon to grasp. I have visited several exhibitions on digital fashion, and I have seen the images online, yet I still do not get how you can ‘own’ digital fashion and how it works. I mean: what purpose does it have?

Adil Boughlala: It is important to acknowledge the field’s diversity and the range of technologies it encompasses. In the article that you and I co-authored, “Tracing the History of Digital Fashion” (2024), we defined digital fashion as digitally created clothing, accessories, and cosmetics, consumed and engaged within digital or virtual spaces. This includes everything from videogame skins to virtual influencer applications, superimposed images, Augmented Reality filters, NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens), AI-generated images, and digital twins of physical items (also known as *phygital* fashion). These categories are not rigid but occasionally overlap. Audiences vary as well: Gamers who purchase skins do not necessarily collect NFTs or use superimposed images. Digital fashion exists on avatar bodies or as standalone virtual objects, free from the physical limitations of fabric—even if it simulates the physicality of fabric. This intangibility can confuse those unfamiliar with digital culture, but despite lacking a tangible form (aside from the devices displaying it), digital fashion is very real. It challenges conventional notions of materiality by showing that fashion can be experienced, owned, and interacted with beyond the physical world.

Vera van Nuenen: Even as a digital native, I find digital fashion a complex and evolving phenomenon shaped by rapid technological innovation and broader societal shifts. Generational differences are particularly relevant in this context. At 26, I fall between Millennials and Gen Z, both shaped by digital revolution in different ways. The rise of social media has extended identity expression into the digital sphere, yet the platforms themselves differ across generations. Millennials may be more accustomed to Instagram or Facebook or older Dutch platforms like Hyves and Habbo Hotel; Gen Z engages heavily with TikTok; and Gen Alpha

navigates virtual environments like Roblox with ease. These digital spaces have become integral to how younger generations construct and perform identity. For prior generations like you, Anneke, digital self-expression likely holds less cultural weight, as it did not shape your formative years. For us, however, engaging with online trends and expressing oneself virtually with digital fashion have become defining aspects of contemporary identity expression.

Anneke Smelik: *[laughs]* Indeed, I recently set up an Instagram profile and I am deeply embarrassed to share anything private with the world. My professional identity is expressed much more through my academic publications, which I dutifully enter on my website. I maintain a strict division between my public, professorial identity, and my private life—also online.

Adil Boughlala: These generational differences also make the purpose of digital fashion apparent. Does it matter if an object exists only on a screen? Does ownership only hold value when it pertains to a physical object? For many Millennials and members of Gen Z like myself, caring for digital objects and cultivating a digital presence comes almost as naturally as engaging with the physical world. Our lives increasingly unfold in digital environments, where virtual possessions carry emotional, social, and economic significance. Unlike earlier generations, who may see ownership as something inherently tied to physicality, we have grown up with the perception that digital belongings can be just as meaningful. Whether it is customizing avatars in games or curating a personal aesthetic online, digital possessions play a crucial role in selfhood, self-expression, and social interaction.

Anneke Smelik: Thank you for your explanation. And yes, I recognize that I am of a different generation, and that owning digital fashion would be quite meaningless for me since my identity is formed elsewhere. But I wonder: is digital fashion anything beyond the image? This is a knotty issue because material fashion also comes to us primarily through images. Today, images are produced and circulated at a scale and a speed unimaginable even just a few years ago. Ubiquitous streaming services, readily accessible through our smartphones, deliver a constant stream of visual content that flows directly into the intimacy of our homes. Images are no longer static but dynamic—perhaps even ‘liquid’, as Zygmunt Bauman (2011) might suggest. That is why I like the title of your journal, *WETWARE!*

This is quite different from the material clothes that we wear on our bodies. As you know, I have offered theoretical avenues for rethinking fashion through new materialism, arguing for a return to matter and materiality in fashion studies (SMELIK 2018). I recently co-edited a special issue on ‘Fibers’ (PAYNE/SMELIK 2024), focusing on the very materiality of fibers that we wear on our skin: silk can

warm or cool in diverse weather circumstances; cotton receives our sweat; wool provides warmth but can prickle our skin; and polyester makes us sweat. You can imagine how weirdly alien it feels for me to now think of fashion as entirely virtual! So, again: does digital fashion exceed its materiality as an image?

Vera van Nuenen: That depends on how you look at it. Like material fashion, visual representation plays a central role in expressing identity. However, digital fashion often exists exclusively within the digital realm, without a corresponding physical counterpart. This raises a critical question: can an image be fashion? My background in analogue photography taught me how images transform depending on their medium. Physical photographs bear imperfections and tactile qualities, whereas digital images can be endlessly manipulated. For digital fashion, the image frequently constitutes the garment itself, thereby blurring the distinction between representation and object. Unlike material fashion, where images serve as a secondary medium, digital fashion challenges traditional hierarchies in which imagery functions merely as a secondary means of dissemination, making us reconsider whether fashion must be worn physically or if its purpose is already fulfilled through visual representation.

Adil Boughlala: I see both your points. But because digital fashion is so multifaceted, I would suggest that it resists binary definitions. It cannot be neatly categorized as either fashion or image, not even when it includes moving images such as videos and 3D renders. Instead, digital fashion exists at the intersection of both image and fashion, as *image-fashion*. NFTs, for instance, function mainly as static image files (like a PNG or JPG) owned via the blockchain. But in immersive contexts like Extended Reality (VR/AR), digital garments move in 360-degree environments and adorn (avatar) bodies in real-time. Whether static or animated, the form is intentional and shaped by purpose and use. Ultimately, digital fashion operates instead as a visual art form, a tool for self-expression, and a gateway to digital experiences. Beyond its aesthetic qualities, it also redefines ownership, identity, and engagement in digital spaces.

Anneke Smelik: Sorry to interrupt, but this still begs the question of how digital fashion challenges traditional perceptions of fashion as a primary tactile, physical experience. Also, I really disagree with a perceived hierarchy between the image and material clothes. I may even have introduced the perspective of new materialism because I believe the visual has held so much priority over the material. Just think of how important *imago* is in the practice of dressing.

Adil Boughlala: That is a fair point. I would argue that rather than replacing touch, digital fashion expands fashion experiences with new forms of

interaction—through swiping, scrolling, clicking, uploading, and customizing. These actions may not involve touch in the traditional sense, but they still shape how fashion is experienced, owned, and shared. What makes digital fashion even more distinct is that interaction happens on-screen, often in highly immersive and participatory environments like social media, gaming platforms, or virtual worlds. In these spaces, fashion becomes dynamic, responsive, and interactive—qualities we once associated only with physical presence and movement. So, similar to digital fashion as both fashion and image, I believe it is best to move away from the physical-digital dichotomy and instead embrace a hybrid, *phygital* understanding. Nick Rees-Roberts describes fashion as a “coexistence of material object and digital image” (2018: 2), which captures how even physical fashion increasingly circulates digitally, through social media, live streams, and film. Digital fashion takes this further, operating as a blend of digital and physical, existing in an in-between space that merges pictorial and tactile practices, as well as physical and digital bodies and identities. In doing so, it challenges conventional fashion narratives, redefining our understanding of clothing, identity, and materiality.

3. Fashioning the (digital) self

Anneke Smelik: I am interested in this new idea of shaping identity through digital fashion. One of the fundamental insights of new materialism is the entanglement of subject and object. People and clothes are not distinct entities but form “hybrid agencies” as Tim Ingold (2016: 69) describes, mutually shaping one another within what he terms the “meshwork of things” (2012: 437). This raises the question of (non-anthropomorphic) agency in digital fashion. We are not dealing with ‘things’ or ‘objects’, but with something ephemeral floating in virtual space. Maybe a Deleuzian perspective would be helpful; perhaps digital fashion is the ultimate idea of a body-without-organs indicating a process of incessive becoming (SMELIK 2025). I mean, digital fashion is by definition rhizomatic and endlessly folding upon itself, is it not?

Vera van Nuenen: Absolutely. Digital fashion is rhizomatic; it exists across multiple definitions, media, and interconnected platforms. What unites these varied forms is their ephemerality, a fleeting quality that both reinforces and challenges traditional values within the fashion system. Marco Pecorari (2021) argues that digital fashion is not just an extension of self-expression, but a disruptive force that compels us to reconsider the very foundations of fashion culture. This raises critical questions about its impermanence: Where is digital fashion stored, archived, and ‘lived’? As digital fashion technologies evolve rapidly, they mirror

the steep acceleration of our hyper-materialized culture, leaving behind virtual artifacts that exist only in the cloud, intangible and ever-changing. This constant process of becoming opens new creative possibilities while simultaneously deconstructing established notions of materiality, consumerism, and permanence.

Adil Boughlala: Interesting that Deleuze comes up, because I drew on his work in my essay for *WETWARE* to argue that digital fashion can facilitate the actualization of the body-without-organs through the avatar. I want to add to Vera's point that ephemerality also presents an interesting paradox: while intangible and fleeting, digital fashion *thrives* within a hyper-material online consumer culture. It centers on the desire to own the non-physical, which informs how digital fashion functions as a tool for self-expression. Drawing on Russell W. Belk's reconceptualization of the *extended self*, digital fashion functions as a form of digital possession, an extension of the self and of identity in digital environments. This is evident in how people collect digital fashion like streetwear or as a subcultural practice, which MINDY MEISSEN discusses in her chapter in *Digital Fashion* (2024). A prime example she engages with is *RTFKT*, the Nike-acquired digital sneaker brand, whose limited-edition virtual sneakers have become coveted status symbols. Unlike physical sneakers, they do not degrade and can be endlessly 'worn' in AR/VR or showcased online. This paradox between digital fashion as a tool of self-possession and as a site of posthuman becoming underscores the tension between Belk's extended self and Deleuze's body-without-organs. Rather than resolving this, digital fashion thrives within it, operating both as a commodity for identity expression and as a medium for deterritorialized embodiment.

Vera van Nuenen: That is fascinating—especially the idea of digital fashion as digital possession. It suggests that even in the immateriality of the digital realm, we remain entangled in systems of ownership and identity.

Adil Boughlala: I would like to return to Anneke's point about the entanglement of subject and object. A phrase I often encounter in online digital fashion spaces is: "Digital fashion is made with both humans and avatars in mind." I am not sure of its exact origin, but it addresses an important shift in how fashion is perceived: no longer as only a physically embodied, tactile experience of dressing human bodies, but also as an evolving pictorial practice extending into other, digital, even other-than-human forms such as avatars and AI-generated bodies. Digital fashion exists mostly, if not exclusively, for digital purposes within virtual environments, untethered from the material constraints of physical clothing. This opens up questions about the role of digital fashion beyond aesthetics and

commerce. Like physical fashion, digital fashion can serve as a cultural lens or a critical practice through which we can conceptually interrogate broader societal issues such as identity, embodiment, agency, and even relations and boundaries between human and non-human entities, including machines. Anneke, given your expertise in posthumanism and new materialism, how can these frameworks help us understand the entanglements of digital fashion, particularly in relation to materiality, non-human agency, and the blurring of boundaries between the digital and the physical?

Anneke Smelik: I have mostly pushed to put new materialism within a posthumanist framework, because it clarifies how technology shapes the relationship between fashion and image (SMELIK 2021). Posthuman theory advocates for a rigorous non-anthropocentric perspective. By decentering the human subject, posthumanism enables a deeper understanding of fashion as a materially co-produced phenomenon within a complex network of interconnected human and non-human actors (BRAIDOTTI 2013). The term ‘posthuman’ reflects the idea that humans are inherently entangled with the broader material and technologically mediated world. But posthumanism also challenges binary thinking by recognizing a nature-culture continuum, blurring distinctions between humans and their many non-human counterparts. In the effort of undoing binary oppositions, I concur with Charlotte Brachtendorf who writes in her dissertation that there is not such a steep divide between an immaterial, digital culture on the one hand and a textile, material culture on the other (2025: 5). You probably would agree with her when she writes that digital fashion “...is far from immaterial. It materializes both in the simulation of textile garments and the devices that display it.” (233).

Adil Boughlala: Thank you for placing it in that context. I agree with Brachtendorf’s point that digital fashion is indeed far from immaterial. Her observation, that it materializes both in the simulation of textiles and in the devices that display them, is a key one. It aligns with my view of digital fashion as embedded in a network of technological, visual, and material practices. Technology does not just enable digital garments; it fundamentally shapes how they are created, communicated, and experienced. Whether as NFT, AR wearable, video game skin, or editorial representation, each format has material conditions that influence how fashion is *felt* and *understood*. So, rather than separate from material culture, digital fashion is an expression of it, shaped through and with technology. This echoes the posthumanist idea of entanglement between humans and non-humans, where fashion emerges through the interplay of bodies, images, media, and machines.

Vera van Nuenen: Your posthumanist framing adds another complex layer: viewing digital fashion as emerging from the interplay of bodies, images, media, and machines disrupts traditional human-centered narratives. It is no longer just about human wearers and physical fabrics, but also about interfaces, algorithms, and virtual interactions. In this sense, digital fashion does not exist outside material culture, but rather reconfigures what materiality means in a technologically mediated world. This raises further questions like: how does digital fashion function when it becomes purely visual?

4. Visual tactility: Fashion beyond touch

Adil Boughlala: That is a fascinating question, Vera. It makes me reflect on how digital technologies have shaped not only our sense of materiality by simulating texture and movement, but also the way we access and engage with fashion imagery in the first place. I sometimes feel like I am taking the accessibility and immediacy of digital media for granted. Anneke, how have digital technologies changed the way you experience fashion and visual media?

Anneke Smelik: It is striking how the reception and experience of fashion has changed through advancing technologies—and how fast it happened. In the past—not so long ago at all—we had to go to a bookshop and buy the latest fashion magazine like *VOGUE*, or the many other titles that were then still around, to keep up with the newest trends in fashion. Fashion magazines were the gatekeepers. Only a select few could attend fashion shows. In fact, for my classes only fifteen years ago, I literally cut and pasted magazine images to create slides. And it was even more work to find televised images of fashion shows and capture them on video or DVD (yes, I know, obsolete technologies!). It was not until brands and designers began streaming their shows online that we could finally ‘attend’ them. By now, we are flooded with images online as I mentioned earlier; but please do remember that this is really a very recent phenomenon. I think I am trying to say several things here: also in the past, we consumed fashion through imagery which means that the relation between material fashion and the visual image has always been intricate. And the advancement of the digital has been incredibly fast. Of course, new questions arise: now that access is no longer an issue, perhaps the overwhelming availability of fashion images is a problem. I guess this shapes new opportunities, for more creativity, co-creation, or a more playful formation of identity in the virtual world.

Vera van Nuenen: Certainly, visual imagery has always been there. We recently presented *WETWARE* at the *International Library of Fashion Research* in Oslo, which

holds over 10.000 printed materials and 200.000 diapositives of fashion shows. It is impressive how much history and cultural relevance is stored in printed matter. This shows how important visual imagery communication was and still is nowadays. While printed imagery feels like a curated filter through which we understand fashion, the digital realm presents both a challenge and an opportunity, as you say. It challenges us to navigate the overwhelming influx of content, but it also empowers us to engage with fashion in once unimaginable ways. The key is to bring back some of the curatorial depth to online spaces, making digital fashion more meaningful and less noise-driven.

Adil Boughlala: Agreed. What you are both describing shows how the digital has accelerated and expanded fashion's visual dimension. What interests me is how digital fashion continues ongoing conceptual shifts in how we understand fashion as a communicative tool, something we can trace through fashion scholarship over the past two decades. In the early 2000s, Malcolm Barnard (2002) defined fashion as fundamentally 'worn', simultaneously operating as a non-verbal form of communication in itself. Joanne Entwistle framed it as an 'embodied practice' deeply rooted in the physicality of dressing the body (2023). In the 2010s, Agnès Rocamora highlighted how social media and the Internet turned fashion into 'screen-ready', instantly accessible content tailored for digital/screen consumption (paving the way for digital fashion!) (2017). More recently, Liryo Choufan introduced the idea of fashion as something 'shared', mediated through visual and textual exchanges across platforms (2022). These shifts suggest that fashion is increasingly created for collective digital experience, not just for personal expression, something which also characterizes digital fashion. Fashion has thus always existed between the pictorial and the tactile, but the digital turn has deepened their interplay, blending digital and physical experiences.

Vera van Nuenen: That makes me wonder: does the contrast between the pictorial and tactile experience suggest that the digital "flattens" fashion, reducing it from a multidimensional form to a two-dimensional representation, where textures become pixels and codes?

Adil Boughlala: When people claim that the digital 'flattens' fashion, are they not really pointing to the absence of touch? There is a clear difference between swiping a screen and feeling silk between your fingers. While I understand the concern that digitized or digital-born fashion may lose sensory richness, this critique is perhaps rooted in a 'tactile bias'; one that privileges physical touch and the embodiment of dress as the primary mode of experiencing fashion. Fashion is undoubtedly embodied, but it is also multi-sensory. Laura Marks's concept of *haptic visuality* (2002)—or what I prefer to call *visual tactility*, an oxymoron I

personally enjoy—helps reframe digital fashion not as the absence of touch, but as an invitation to experience texture and materiality through vision. Digital designers invest heavily in the visual communication of texture and movement: how digital fabric catches light, folds, drapes, and responds to gravity, is precisely what allows digital garments to evoke a sense of tangibility. This does not flatten fashion but asks for a different perspective on materiality. The digital turn invites us to reconsider sensory engagement with fashion, where the eye begins to feel, translating texture, weight, and movement into a new kind of sensory experience. Digital garments can be explored from all angles, zoomed into, and appreciated in ways the physical world often does not allow, thus reimagining tactility, and offering new ways to see, sense, and affectively engage with fashion beyond touch.

Anneke Smelik: Funny that you should say there is a ‘tactile bias’; I have never heard of that! Coming from Cultural Studies, I have grown up with the intellectual critique of privileging the textual over the visual in poststructuralist theory; and later in Media Studies with the critique of privileging the visual over the tactile. The goal of new materialism is precisely to counter such a bias by bringing back a focus on the senses, affect and bodily experience. I am sorry, but I am not yet convinced that digital fashion can in fact reimagine tactility beyond touch!

Adil Boughlala: I understand your hesitation. Still, I would argue that digital fashion does not replace tactile experience; it *reconfigures* it. Different from the fibers you mentioned earlier, digital fashion activates, through visual cues, a different kind of sensory engagement, where sight evokes the sensation of touch by mimicking how fabric would behave on the body. Instead of wool that keeps us warm but also itches, digital fashion simulates something that *looks* warm and *looks* itchy. Of course, I am only talking about screen-based digital fashion here—formats we cannot ‘touch’ beyond the device itself.

5. The significance of digital fashion

Anneke Smelik: Who exactly engages with digital fashion then, and why?

Adil Boughlala: It is clear that digital natives—Millennials, Gen Z, and Gen Alpha—dominate the online spaces where digital fashion thrives. Whether they are gamers, NFT collectors, or fashion enthusiasts, their engagement with digital fashion varies. But what unites them is the ability to value fashion beyond the physical garment, even as a static image. This digital immersion and literacy

allows them to engage with digital fashion not as a passing trend, but as part of how they experience culture and identity. This is also where emotional attachment to and the notion of ownership of digital objects—or the illusion thereof if you disagree with owning the intangible—comes into play. What is your take on that, Vera?

Vera van Nuenen: The connection between digital fashion and digital natives is evident: Without technological knowledge, digital fashion can seem complex and thus inaccessible. NFTs and other digital garments seem rare and exclusive, functioning more as collectible assets than sentimental pieces. Their value stems not from physical existence but from the scarcity and cultural significance of their digital form. Unlike physical fashion, which gains emotional meaning through wear and personal memories, digital fashion remains purely virtual. As a result, its worth is shaped not only by rarity and artistic expression, but also by the understanding of a digitally native generation.

Adil Boughlala: I am not sure I agree that digital fashion lacks sentimentality, which you seem to imply. If you ask me, virtual experiences and objects can hold just as much personal significance.

Anneke Smelik: Hearing you both talk about the emotional weight of digital fashion makes me wonder: have you ever bought any yourselves? I genuinely cannot wrap my head around the idea of buying digital fashion—it feels completely unreal to me.

Adil Boughlala: *[laughs]* I have! I first encountered digital fashion as a child through gaming, but my deeper engagement began while writing my undergraduate thesis on NFT fashion. I fondly remember my first purchase: the “Dragon” garment by The Fabricant and Stephy Fung, a piece I co-created (Fig. 2). By co-creating, I mean that I individualized the garment by selecting its colours and digital fabric—resulting in a unique combination that can only be owned by one person.

The minting process (the act of purchase) was not just a simple transaction, but a highly immersive, story-driven and carefully curated experience that connected me to the brand’s ethos. It signified being part of a story, a community, and a vision for the future of fashion, at least that is what it felt like to me. That moment marked my ‘entry’ into digital fashion, not just as a consumer, but also as a researcher. I realized studying digital fashion requires more than theory alone; it calls for hands-on, participatory experience in its native digital spaces.



Fig. 2: „Dragon“ from The Fabricant x Stephy Fung’s Season 02 Zodiac Collection (The Fabricant Studio, NFT #21), NFT image and video, minted by Adil Boughlala, 2022.

Vera van Nuenen: I have not purchased any digital fashion pieces yet—and this almost feels like a confession. Like Adil, I believe that truly understanding digital fashion requires immersion, but the fact that it exists purely in virtual space has made me hesitant to spend money on it. I still prefer expressing my individuality physically rather than online. That said, I am fascinated by designers like Taskin Goec, Sarah Mayer, Nina Doll, and Harriet Davey—whose pieces I would love to own someday. “Arcadiancore” from Taskin (Fig. 3) speaks to me because of its dystopian, eerie and fluid design, unconstrained by the wearer’s body. It takes you out of reality. Anneke, let us check in later and see what our first digital fashion pieces turn out to be.

Anneke Smelik: Well, I honestly do not think I will ever buy digital fashion, but I am happy to see what you will buy and co-create in the future! Hearing how both of you relate to digital fashion has deepened my understanding of how these practices are shaped by generational experiences and technological contexts. It is clear that digital fashion offers new modes of engagement that move beyond the traditional notions of wearing or owning clothing. I am particularly intrigued by how this engagement is largely visual, rooted in its pictorial nature and embedded within the constant flow of images in today’s culture. While digital fashion builds on fashion’s historical connection to the image, it also introduces new visual practices shaped by emerging technologies. Clearly, digital fashion is a hybrid form—situated between image and object, presence and absence, the visual and the tactile. It is ephemeral yet collectible, immaterial yet grounded in material infrastructures, and intricately tied to questions of



Fig. 3: „Arcadiancore“ by Taskin Goec, digital fashion image, Instagram @ taskingoc, 2025.

identity, embodiment, and technological mediation. Rather than replacing the physical, digital fashion expands fashion’s expressive language, offering new avenues for creativity, ownership, and cultural expression within digital spaces.

Thank you so much for this productive dialogue; I really learned a lot from it!

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Biographies

Adil Boughlala is a Netherlands-based researcher interested in fashion, visual media, and digital culture, particularly their intersections and the cultural

implications they produce. He graduated with distinction from the Research Master's programme in Art and Visual Culture at Radboud University Nijmegen. During his studies, he gained international experience as a visiting research student at ModaCult, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. His peer-reviewed articles include "Tracing the History of Digital Fashion" (with Anneke Smelik) in *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* (2024) and "Consuming Digital Fashion in Online Communities" (with Silvia Mazzucotelli Salice) in *Fashion Highlight Journal* (2024). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6254-4404>

Vera van Nuenen is a researcher in art, culture, and fashion, focusing on the evolving dynamics of fashion in the digital age. She critically examines how technology influences our relationship with clothing, identity, and cultural expression in the context of contemporary societal issues. Her research explores the significance of visual communication in fashion, the role of fashion printed materials, and the deconstruction of traditional values within the fashion system. Vera holds a Master's degree in Art & Society from Utrecht University and is particularly interested in fashion printed matter. She also gained experience in Fashion Journalism at Central Saint Martins.

Anneke Smelik is Professor Emerita of Visual Culture at the Radboud University Nijmegen. She has published widely in the fields of fashion, cinema, popular culture and cultural memory. Her most recent (co-edited) publications are the second and expanded edition of *Thinking Through Fashion. A Guide to Key Theorists* (London: Bloomsbury, 2025); *The Four Elements of Fashion* (Venice: Bembo, 2025); and a special issue on 'Fashion's Fibres as Planetary Flows' for *Fashion Highlight Journal* (2024). She is co-editor of the journal *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*.