

*Sustainability, Aesthetics, and Value Proposals and Practices of Colombian
Slow Fashion Brands*

Daniela Ordoñez-Suárez, Industrial University of Santander, Colombia
Miguel Enrique Higuera-Marín, Industrial University of Santander, Colombia
Carolina Raigoza-Díaz, Industrial University of Santander, Colombia

The European Conference on Arts, Design & Education 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The Slow Fashion model emerged as a sustainable approach in the fashion industry through characteristics like localism, equity, authenticity, exclusivity, and functionality. The objective of this study was to identify proposals, and practices of Colombian brands, in terms of brand identity, aesthetics and timelessness, sustainability, and communication strategies. For this purpose, we chose a qualitative approach by observation and analysis of the information that brands provide on their social networks and official websites. The study included 38 Colombian slow fashion brands of women's casual-wear clothing, and whose prices do not exceed US\$90. The results include aesthetic proposals inspired by visual elements of the country's flagship cities, as well as the construction of a style brand identity through artistic expressions and collaborations with Colombian illustrators for their prints. Aesthetics meets social sustainability by applying manual and artisanal techniques together with indigenous and artisan communities, and mothers who are heads of households. Also, these strategies provide a timeless character due to their cultural recognition. On the other hand, environmental sustainability is approached from technical factors such as the material, and the management and use of textile waste. Overall, this study allowed us to identify the diversity of approaches influenced by the sociocultural context of the brands, in addition to visualizing opportunities for the intervention of the design discipline in the strategies for communication of the value proposition. Further research could analyze local consumers' perceptions, needs, and criteria to opt for purchasing Slow Fashion brands.

Keywords: Slow Fashion, Design, Colombia, Timelessness, Brand Identity

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Introduction

The fashion industry has sought to reinvent its models and practices to minimize the environmental and social impact that has cataloged it as the second most polluting on the planet (Villeiman, 2019). For this reason, the Slow Fashion movement arises, which despite the literal meaning of the term does not exactly refer to speed. This movement implies a philosophy of meeting the needs of stakeholders and promoting variety in practices for production and consumption. Likewise, slow fashion contemplates values such as transparency, awareness, and concern for the impact that the industry or brands can generate on resources, allies, and communities (Fletcher, 2008). This means an opportunity to design diverse products that blend with experiences, rather than globalized styles that can be perceived as standardized (Fletcher, 2010).

So then, Slow Fashion according to Jung & Jin, (2014), is based on five pillars: equity, authenticity, exclusivity, functionality, and localism. The equity seeks to make the products affordable for all users under fair working conditions for the employees. Authenticity involves the use of artisanal and high-quality processes that print a character of exclusivity and a high emotional value. This, combined with localism, implies support for local businesses and the use of resources from the region. Finally, functionality is related to the design of useful, versatile, and durable products, which provide a positive use experience.

In Colombia, the fashion industry is a very important sector of the economy. The fashion system encompasses approximately 14000 companies, which include raw material production and clothing. In addition, by January 2022, Colombian households invested about COP \$2.38 billion in fashion products such as clothing, accessories, and footwear. Export figures for these items reached US\$583 million by 2021 and are projected to reach US\$602 million by 2022 (INEXMODA et al., 2022). This shows the potential of the Colombian fashion industry to configure products and business models, as well as to propose strategies for sustainability and responsibility in the sector.

Additionally, the fashion system in Colombia employs around 600,000 people, among whom are women heads of household. Also, most of the workers and artisans have their workshops in their homes (Marca País Colombia, 2020). In fact, 80% of the garments of Colombian brands are produced locally in these satellite workshops in which up to two thousand products are made every week (Fashion Revolution, 2022).

That's why, various national brands and designers have chosen to join Slow Fashion and models for the circular economy, to respond to the needs of the environment, the consumer, and the industry (PROCOLOMBIA, 2021). This is through proposals and innovation that include the choice of materials or textiles recovered or of less impact, the use of manual techniques, short production series, or initiatives to motivate the consumption of national products. One of them is *Vístete de Colombia* (Dress up in Colombia), which seeks to support more than one and a half million people who work in the country's Fashion System. Thus, it brings together more than 590 Colombian brands and designers who are supported through the exhibition, interaction, and training. Additionally, this collective includes artisan communities that benefit by allowing them to profit from their products through alliances and exhibition or dissemination of their work (Vístete de Colombia, 2020).

The concept of Slow Fashion is based on sustainability and social responsibility. In addition, it usually includes in its practices and policies the use of environmentally friendly fibers and textiles, innovation in production processes to reduce waste and encourage more responsible consumption (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013). Since this is an emerging and diverse movement, studies have been carried out to provide a clear definition, concerning other concepts such as ecological fashion or corporate social responsibility. Thus, it must be seen from a holistic perspective and not only from the point of view of the frequencies and quantities of production, costs, and the use of classics.

The philosophy of the Slow Fashion model is oriented to a small to medium scale production, to the generation of confidence in the consumer, to provide the opportunity to the user to express their style and individuality, as well as to take advantage of the diversity in the design proposals and to promote localism (Fletcher & Grose, 2012). This last factor is crucial to understand the strategies and dynamics of this movement, given the differences in which each context addresses and configures its proposals. The sociocultural text exerts influence on the criteria and habits of purchase, in addition to the interpretation of symbols (Chapman, 2021). Additionally, each country has its aesthetic expressions and knowledge of traditional crafts that represent resources for the configuration of products and their experiences.

Therefore, this study had the purpose of identifying proposals, models, or practices of Colombian brands such as Slow Fashion. This is in terms of brand identity, aesthetic proposals, timelessness, strategies for sustainability, and communication and interaction with the community. To do this, a qualitative approach was used through the observation of the statements and contents that these brands share through their digital channels like social networks and official websites. The visualization of these aspects can guide the work of design around the configuration of business models, practices, and strategies of interaction, design, and sustainability. In addition, to identify a new possibility for research around sustainability in fashion, Slow Fashion, and the role of the consumer.

Materials and methods

Social networks and digital platforms play a very important role in the interaction with the consumer and in their experience with brands and products. The content displayed through these channels and the possibility of interconnection and globalization exert an influence on interests and purchasing decisions (Chapman, 2021). E-commerce has represented an increasingly used channel for sales in Colombia, and clothing is one of the best-selling categories by this medium (BlakSip, 2020). Through a qualitative approach, we proceeded to observe the statements, descriptions, and audiovisual content of a public nature shared through social networks like Facebook and Instagram, as well as on official websites and virtual stores.

In total, 38 brands of women's clothing, cataloged as Slow Fashion with origin and operation in Colombia were included. These brands design and produce their garments and include in their portfolio the universe of Casual-Wear clothing. This is characterized by its versatility, freedom, and comfort for the development of different activities amid different climatic conditions and scenarios of use (Cooper et al., 2013). Therefore, it is one of the favorites among consumers and provide various possibilities considering the different climates throughout the national territory. Of these, 23 have a face-to-face point of sale, and the remaining 15 carry out their commercial activity purely digitally. In addition, 18 of the

brands have coverage for domestic shipments and the others market their products internationally.

The aspects that were investigated were, in the first place, the description of the brand identity. According to Orozco & Ferré Pavia, (2012), brand DNA includes the conceptualization of individuality or the differential factor, brand objectives and values, as well as value proposition. Next, the characteristics of the products marketed were studied, such as the description of the type of materials used, conceptualization, aesthetic identity, trends, and timelessness. In terms of sustainability, content referring to both environmental and social sustainability was sought, considering the description of processes and materials, as well as their relationship with stakeholders. Likewise, the existence of additional services to the commercialization of clothing was analyzed, such as personalization or recovery of materials; as well as approaches and campaigns for the invitation to responsible consumption and use; and communication and interaction strategies with the consumer. This is to identify the different proposals of processes, practices, and strategies of the brands around Slow Fashion, and their values. The aspects included in each of these factors are described below in Figure 1.

Brydges, (2018); and Legere & Kang, (2020) mention timelessness as a strategy to raise the value perceived by customers in the cost-benefit ratio, since a greater investment in a garment with a longer life expectancy could contribute to the motivation of customers to buy responsibly and to be more interested in movements such as slow and sustainable fashion. It should be noted that this concept is still considered ambiguous and many of the characteristics considered timeless fall on the perception of users. Even though design and timeless aesthetics are commonly related to minimalism and the classic, it still lacks a definition of design codes for it. However, as cited in Pin & Shin, (2020), there are four established timeless design strategies like simple appearance, product efficiency by removing unnecessary elements, selection of durable materials, and, the generation of a pleasant user experience. In this sense, this study analyzed the approach and the proposal of the timelessness of the brands from the aesthetic and emotional attributes, the description of the role of trends during the conceptualization of garments, the product portfolio, and the creation of experiences for the consumer.

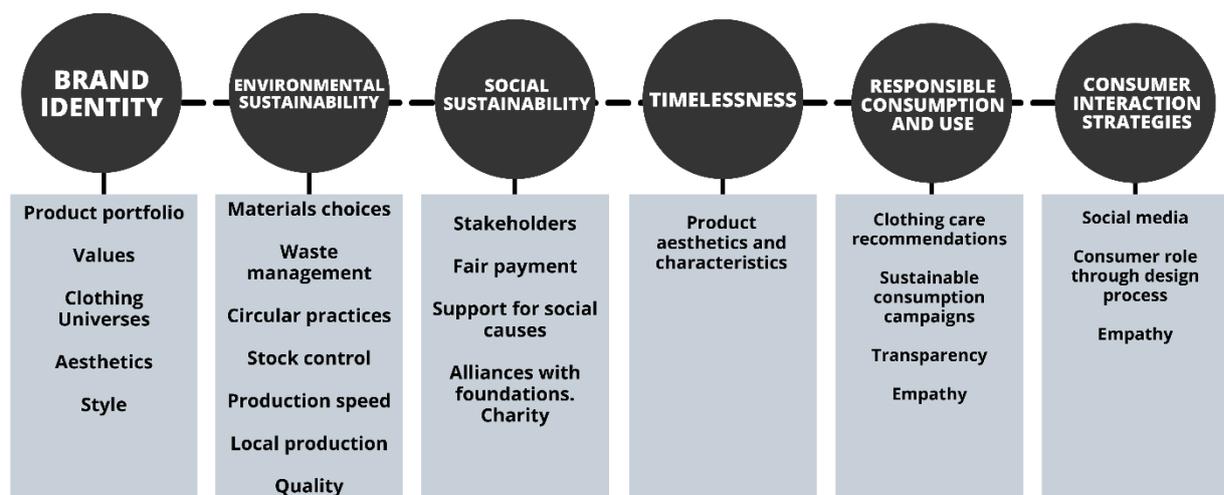


Figure 1: Aspects for which it was investigated¹

¹ Source: own elaboration

Results

The brands studied propose a wide diversity in terms of product typology, wardrobe style, and practices to address environmental and social sustainability. In the first place, several of these companies offer in their product portfolio different universes of clothing with different purposes of use, like casual, comfy, or formal wear. Others specialize in certain types of pieces like dresses or urban garments. In addition, the target audience included in these brands corresponds to several types of consumer profiles, such as male users, children, or unisex garments, who are usually of legal age and are allowed to decide their purchase habits.

It is noteworthy that digital channels, especially social networks, are crucial for commercial activity and the communication of brand practices and attributes of their products. However, not all of them make specific statements about their brand values, collaborators, or suppliers. Despite this, environmental and social sustainability is a criterion repeatedly mentioned as one of the main objectives of these business proposals. In addition, localism in terms of production, origin, and impact of its employees and raw materials is highlighted as part of the values of garments, as well as a way for social sustainability and the invitation to responsible consumption.

Brand identity

First, it was observed that the values and foundations of the identity of the brands studied revolve around sustainability, localism or declaration of origin and national operation, timelessness, and exclusivity. Sustainability and localism are related to other concepts like social and environmental responsibility, which are combined with proposals based on the exclusivity of manual and artisanal work, as well as on an aesthetic and design inspired by the natural, cultural and climatic diversity of the country. This is how brand concepts oriented to comfort, freshness, and rest arise, with design codes inspired by a holiday environment, or a minimalist and natural lifestyle, which in turn seeks to enhance the value of clothing, design, and national techniques.

On the other hand, several of these brands seek to make visible causes and social movements such as equality and inclusion. Feminism and female empowerment are frequently mentioned within the brand identity through campaigns, graphic elements in communication channels and garments, as well as in the inspiration concepts of collections, within which you can find tributes to influential women and representatives of these causes.

Finally, the quality and functionality of the products are highlighted as values and value propositions of the brands. This, through a detailed confection and with textiles of high durability, which are used in timeless, versatile, and functional designs, under the premise of lasting over time and being suitable for the different activities and occasions of the day to day. The values and attributes that were identified in the observation are illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Brand identity and attributes

Sustainability strategies

Sustainability is approached from its social and environmental pillars, although not all the brands studied specify strategies for both approaches. The efforts identified are more oriented to the environmental component through different practices like the use of materials and processes of lower impact, circular economy, responsible consumption, sustainable marketing, and alliances for the protection of fauna and flora. The social component is included in the 38 brands through fair hiring and local production. Additionally, other of these brands choose to partner with different organizations in favor of the well-being of communities in Colombia.

The most recurrent strategy for the social sustainability of these brands is the use of ecological materials. Eighteen of these brands produce their garments with natural or biodegradable fibers such as cotton, linen, hemp, or even banana fiber. The latter is used by one of the brands to reinforce its concept of the collection inspired by the banana plantations of Colombia which in turn looks for highlighting the values of the country such as its biodiversity and culture. For this, the brand generated an alliance with a sustainable textile company that is dedicated to recovering the waste of banana trees in Colombia, while generating employment for farmers in the region.

Fourteen brands opt for the circular economy by using materials derived from consumer waste such as PET, recovered and processed textile fibers, which can be synthetic or natural such as cotton. On the other hand, thirteen of the brands use synthetic materials such as polyester under the premise of quality and durability. Sometimes, durable materials are used exclusively in basic, classic, or wardrobe bottom garments, with the aim that they can be used for an extended time due to their functionality, while the natural fibers are chosen for fashion garments or with greater detail in their preparation.

The circular economy is present in five of the brands through the upcycling technique. One of them bases its identity and value proposition on this alternative in alliance with other clothing and textile companies to reuse materials considered waste like scrap or damaged products. Three of them make use of the material waste of their own in production to design and make exclusive or limited-edition garments, or, for the realization of elements such as labels, belts, or buttons. Likewise, these materials are donated to other emerging local brands which produce accessories to support their commercial activity. Another brand recovers garments that users have in disuse to intervene them from the dyeing and printing with natural elements, either to extend their use by the owner of the garment, or, for resale directly from the brand. Likewise, there is the practice of granting incentives such as discounts to consumers who donate or return their disused garments, either for recycling, donation, or intervention.

In respect of processes, the 38 brands allude to slow production and stock control to avoid greater use of resources and generation of waste. To do this, we opt for a production model on request or short series for each reference, which contributes to the construction of the exclusivity attribute. Additionally, these practices are combined with timelessness and quality to offer durable products on a smaller scale and durability, to slow down the productive practices of the fashion system in general.

Additionally, dyeing, and stamping processes are approached in a way that consumes as little water as possible and produces less pollution in the soil and water sources. Therefore, digital stamping techniques are used to allow brands to design their own prints under conditions of less impact and with the capacity for series production. Minimalism-based brands choose to maintain the natural qualities of the textiles they use, especially when it comes to organic fibers, or, to use manual techniques that takes advantage of natural elements for dyeing. This is the case of two of the brand proposals, whose concepts of value proposition are natural inspiration, through the use of natural dyes from plants, oxidized pieces, and even organic waste and kitchen spices like turmeric. This in turn uses natural fiber textiles and rainwater collection for the process that seeks to reduce water consume.

Manual and artisanal processes are repeatedly mentioned in both environmental and social sustainability strategies. From the environmental point of view, it essentially seeks to reduce energy use and avoid mass production, as well as to guarantee the quality and control of clothing. These include weaving on a loom, manual embroidery on yarn, mustache or gimp, block printing for printing, knitting, macramé, or Wayuu. These techniques are combined with social sustainability by working together with indigenous communities, artisans, mothers heads of households, and even former combatants of armed groups, especially the FARC. In this sense, most brands that communicate social strategies highlight the value of localism by employing artisans and collaborators from their region.

Part of the artisan communities are from regions such as Santander, La Guajira, Cundinamarca, and Risaralda, which know traditional weaving techniques and motifs and the transformation of natural fibers such as fique. The participation of these actors allows to make visible and recognize the work of these groups, and to print these design codes in new garments that have the attributes of exclusivity and timelessness, associated with cultural and symbolic elements. Likewise, one of these brands is dedicated to working with former combatants of the FARC armed forces, linked to a cooperative in favor of supporting the reintegration into civilian life after the Peace Agreements in Colombia. This brand is based on the slow and local production model and aims to give visibility to the Agreements and

their impact on people who now seek to orient their life projects to the Fashion System. In addition, they design aesthetic elements such as prints with political content for demonstrating its support and defense of the Peace Accords, through techniques such as screen printing.

These brands with a social focus make emphasis on fair and ethical hiring conditions in terms of salaries, cultural recognition and transparency with the audience. Three of these brands are part of the Fashion Revolution collective that seeks to make visible the collaborators responsible to produce the garments under the I Made Your Clothes emblem. In addition, two of these brands include internships to support the ventures of their employees through training in technical and professional studies, or investment support for their workshops and businesses.

On the other hand, sixteen of the brands describe alliances with academic entities, foundations, artists, or other local brands. This to contribute to social and environmental causes through donations and destination of profits, providing visibility and promotion to emerging brands, promoting environments and co-creation activities. In environmental terms, twelve of these brands have allies for research and consumers around sustainability in the fashion industry. This is through studies of the environmental impacts of the productive practices of the brands, as well as strategies for their mitigation from manufacturing and consumption. Others provide financial support to foundations or institutions dedicated to the preservation of ecosystems such as the Amazon rainforest or the Colombian paramos, which are crucial in the country's water supply. Others allocate profits derived from collections designed in conjunction with conservation entities of species such as the tigrillo. One of these strategies includes directing a percentage of garment resale profits that users return to the brand to reforestation activities.

The social alliances observed in eleven of these brands include work with foundations and emerging brands. These include two aimed at supporting ex-combatants, one directly as described above, and the second through the allocation of profits. Others provide financial support to institutions for the protection of territory and ancestral knowledge, as well as the provision of services to indigenous communities and children in Colombia. On the other hand, collaborations with local brands of greater and lesser scale, as well as graphic artists and illustrators seek to print emotional values such as the exclusivity of limited editions, as well as support for national talent through exposure to the public.

Finally, participation in collectives and movements for inclusion, diversity, and female empowerment is enunciated by three of these brands with a social focus. These include participation in workshops and conferences in which there are expert and influential personalities in these movements. Likewise, one of these brands directs its social efforts to support mental health through donations and financial support.

Timelessness

Timelessness is an attribute addressed by the 38 brands observed from different approaches such as differentiation in the portfolio of products (wardrobe basics and fashion pieces), minimalism, exclusivity or limited editions, artistic interventions, recognizable and exclusive aesthetic identity of the brand, and the application of Colombian artisanal or ancestral techniques. Thirty-four of the brands describe their proposal of timelessness from very diverse design codes and with different objectives.

First, the minimalism addressed by eight of the brands is based on the use of design codes such as wide silhouettes, solid and neutral colors, as well as pastels and earthy, which avoid the use of additional elements such as closures, flights, belts, or closures. It is related to comfort as a fundamental part of the functionality of the garments, under the purposes of designing garments suitable for different body types, versatile at occasions and scenarios of use, and that provides freedom of movement and freshness. One of these brands, for example, bases its proposal on the design of silhouettes, prints, and campaigns on the concept of vacations for each day. To do this, it uses as some tourist sites in the country such as the Caribbean region as inspiration to configure silhouettes suitable for a time of enjoyment in that location, as well as graphic elements such as fauna, flora, architecture, and culture, which will be used in the creation of figurative prints.

Later, there are the classics or wardrobe basics, which are versatile garments widely known and used, such as jeans or leather jackets. In this sense, timelessness is built from nostalgia and retro aesthetics, offering silhouettes recognized by users as from times of yesteryear, with the use of colors, materials, and prints that represent the character of topicality. Likewise, one of the brands declares a differentiation in the product portfolio, maintaining in its permanent stock basic garments made with high quality durable materials. In addition, multifunctionality is addressed through the freedom of assembly and use of garments, and two of the brands go back to double-sided garments. One of these brands proposes its timelessness through pattern making that allows adapting to different sizes, in such a way that it can be used despite changes in the size of the user.

Another focus is on the construction of an aesthetic identity or recognizable style. This involves the construction of design codes that are repeatedly included in the design of garments and that identifies them as part of the brand, and, to its consumer, as part of a community. Some of these elements are both abstract and figurative prints and manual techniques. The conceptualization of these prints includes Storytelling and inspiration from indigenous elements of Colombia such as the representation of Palenquera communities, indigenous, and aspects of popular culture. It also alludes to species of animals and plants native to the country such as birds or the wax palm or even, issues of empowerment, inclusion, unisex garments, and political issues. Part of the added value of these aesthetic attributes is the artistic and exclusive value when performed by the creative directors of the brand, or, in collaboration with recognized and emerging artists and illustrators from the country who identify with the concept of the brand. These are combined with flagship garments that allow the positioning of these companies and that are relaunched with variations in colors and prints.

Services

Of the 38 brands included, four offer additional services to the marketing of garments and the guarantee. These are essentially around personalization and mass customization. In one of the cases, the brand offers a basic silhouette of reference, which the consumer can intervene when choosing between various options of print, color, texture, or material, as well as the arrangement of these elements in the garment. In the remaining three, this customization corresponds to the size under the model of production on the measure. However, no concepts of co-creation with the consumer were identified in terms of aesthetics and clothing.

Communication strategies and interaction with the public

Together, social networks represent the main channel of interaction and dissemination of information about these brands. Through them, audiovisual content is shared to communicate the identity of the brand and its collections, style and advertising guides, phrases, and content alluding to support for causes and social movements, as well as transparency and visibility of processes and stakeholders. The official websites are used by the 38 brands to describe their products and carry out marketing processes. However, eight of them do not make use of this channel to communicate their concept and brand identity, or information about their processes and collaborators.

In terms of responsible consumption and use, these brands make general or specific recommendations for care and maintenance. Eight of them seek to motivate their audience towards awareness of the impact of consumption habits on the environment. Therefore, they propose campaigns in favor of recycling, extended use, or recovery of garments for reuse. One of these refers to conscious consumption directly inviting users to establish purchasing criteria such as the underlying processes and their impact, materials, durability, and the role that the garment will have in their wardrobe, so that it is used for a considerable time, to raise awareness about the generation of waste and accelerated or impulsive consumption.

Additionally, eighteen of these brands inform the consumer about the impact of the production processes of the fashion industry on the environment and society. Likewise, they communicate the actions undertaken with the purpose of contributing in a positive way to the communities and the mitigation of climate change. Three brands submit periodic reports through their official websites through blogs or manifestos on the reduction of resource consumption and waste generation, or the goals achieved through collaborations for social causes. Through these, it seeks to achieve transparency with the consumer, while making visible these criteria that represent an added value in brands.

Finally, brands use blogs to share information about lifestyle (recommendations, brands, products, and habits), according to their concept. These include recommendations for sustainable habits such as care and washing of clothes, reuse of waste from consumption or recycling, as well as instructions and campaigns for planting plants in association with reforestation. One of these brands seeks to make visible emblematic places of Colombia to motivate ecotourism and highlight the importance of the country's natural treasures for their care and conservation.

Conclusions

The present study allowed us to identify, in the first place, the emphasis of Slow Fashion brands on actions for environmental and social sustainability. This is shown repeatedly in the brand identity, description of products, production strategies and services, as well as interaction with other actors such as brands, suppliers, and consumers. The proposals for timelessness are varied and correspond to the identity, capacity, and objectives of each of the brands. For this reason, a subsequent study could investigate consumers' considerations around the aesthetics of timeless design, considering the diversity of styles and universes of clothing, as well as the climates of the regions of Colombia. In addition, to identify the attributes and purchasing criteria of Colombian consumers when deciding, or not, to buy from a certain brand such as Slow Fashion. These aspects could mean inputs for product

design, processes, and communication strategies in favor of transparency and customer loyalty.

Given the limitation of the study due to the lack of access to information on several of the brands, a joint investigation could be carried out with these actors around the challenges and values of the brands, in addition to the characteristics they have identified of consumers in the Colombian context. This is to configure strategies that strengthen the practices and visibility of Slow Fashion in Colombia, to contribute to sustainability in the country's fashion system.

Finally, it was observed that the services offered for personalization are not explored by most of the brands studied. Thus, an opportunity was identified for the design of services around techniques already applied by brands such as restoration, repair, or remodeling (upcycling). This is from the fundamentals of Slow Fashion and the needs of the fashion consumer in Colombia.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the university Universidad Industrial de Santander (UIS), for providing the setting and the necessary resources to carry out and present this study. Also, they thank the participation of the Ph.D. (c) Carolina Raigosa Díaz and the university Unidades Tecnológicas de Santander, for the guidance in this research.

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Contact email: daniela2208478@correo.uis.edu.co