

(HOFF) Human Oriented Fast-Fashion Archive Framework

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Abstract

Fast fashion in the 21st century necessitates a re-evaluation of our conceptualization of fashion, which significantly diverges from the industrial practices of the 20th century fashion industry. This shift is influenced by various mediators such as the internet and social media platforms which have enabled new kinds of engagement with fast fashion, not only through the production and consumption of fast fashion but by how it is positioned within the ever evolving cultural sphere. Fast fashion today is characterized by short-term consumption, exploitative labor practices, and increased amounts of environmental waste. Traditional archival methodologies struggle to accommodate this complexity, signaling an urgent need for adaptable, latent variable frameworks that can engage with the temporal and spatial fluidity of fast fashion objects. Additionally, while fast fashion is a prominent subject of discourse among scholars interested in fashion studies and environmental justice, it is not a particularly prominent topic in archival or information theory. To address this, we propose a new framework for understanding fast fashion - the "phantasmagorical cultural object" (PCO). Drawing on scholarship in fashion archiving, eco-criticism, and computer vision, we develop this framework to take the first steps in constructing an archival practice capable of addressing the interconnectedness of fast fashion garments with social, cultural, and economic processes.

KEYWORDS

Fashion, Fast Fashion, Archiving, Labor, Digital Archives, Preservation, Cultural Production

1 | INTRODUCTION

Fast fashion is a term used to describe the production and marketing practices employed by most major fashion retailers in the West today. Through these practices, fashion retailers seek to inculcate consumer behaviors that encourage short-term consumption. This is a multi-step process, which involves:

- Outsourcing garment creation to countries in the Global South to take advantage of cheap labor costs Taplin (2014).
- Reducing production costs by relying on cheap fabrics, including cotton and polyesters Aponte et al. (2024).
- Shortening trend cycles to encourage repeat consumer purchasing Nassimbem et al. (2023).
- Manufacturing an overabundance of garments and styles at low prices, resulting in short garment life cycles Wojdyla & Chi (2024).
- Creating inter-regional dependency by exporting used garments from Western markets to countries in the Global South Bick et al. (2018).

- Creating large amounts of environmental waste, both in the production process and through unused products Company (2023).

Fast fashion offers high returns for fashion retailers, at high human and environmental cost. For consumers, fast fashion fulfills a need for self-expression, participates in identity-formation, and is reinforced through cultural pressures of advertising and marketing. Scholarship surrounding fast fashion has ballooned in recent years as it has become the dominant business practice of retailers like Zara, H&M, and Primark and more recently online retailers like Shien, Temu, and Asos Aponte et al. (2024).

Literature on fast fashion tends to focus on three main subjects: the environmental and human costs of fast fashion Aponte et al. (2024); Bick et al. (2018); Teerakapibal & Schlegelmilch (2024), the ways consumers react to and participate in fast fashion Bhardwaj & Fairhurst (2010); Cachon & Swinney (2011); Kuang et al. (2024); Nassimbem et al. (2023); Taplin (2014); Wojdyla & Chi (2024), and how to articulate an alternative business model to fast fashion Bogdan et al. (2025); Hall (2018); Pătruț (2024). Scholarship in this latter category often uses terms such as "slow" or "sustainable" fashion.

However, there is a noticeable lack of literature regarding the interaction between fast fashion and the information professions. The information professions, for their part, have also not engaged with what fast fashion might have to offer, except in the realm of interface design Kuang et al. (2024). A noticeable point of contact could be archiving. Archiving creates spaces for collective memory-building Ernst & Parikka (2013); De Kosnik (2016), and offers a chance for different documents to be preserved for future generations, relating human experiences in the present to those in the future. Developing an archival practice around fast fashion would provide information professionals with a unique opportunity to re-contextualize fast fashion, placing it at the center of a global web of relationships and sharing the stories of those affected by its exploitative production practices. This allows archivists to begin contributing to the collective memory of fast fashion while it is still the dominant business practice of the fashion industry. This paper will deal with what it would mean to archive fast fashion; what it would look like, and who it would serve. It does not outline exactly how to build an archive of fast fashion. The authors of this paper are not fashion industry experts, nor do they consider themselves adequately positioned to decide what should and should not be preserved of the current exploitative production model. Instead, we want to create a theoretical framework that can bridge the gap between fast fashion and archival practice, laying the foundation for a potential digital resource in the future. Critical to this framework is to re-conceptualize fast fashion as a "phantasmagorical cultural object" (PCO). "Phantasmagorical" captures how garments participate in the "phantasmagoria of modernity", a concept in de-colonial theory first applied to fashion by Angela Jansen M. A. Jansen (2020). The "phantasmagoria of modernity", first articulated by Walter Benjamin and elaborated by Ronaldo Vázquez, describes how the cultural messages encoded into commodities cannot be separated from their economic value, containing within them the ability to connect consumers to larger cultural and social messaging Vázquez (2010). We additionally draw on the scholarship of Joanne Entwistle to inform the concept of "cultural object", which, for us, captures how garments are mobilized by consumers and retailers of fast fashion to play roles in processes of self-articulation and identity-forming Entwistle (2023).

By articulating fast fashion as a PCO, we are able to develop an archival practice that accounts for the multiplicity of contexts that inform the reception of fast fashion garments, but also how systems of meaning and labor produce them. This re-framing extends the scope of archival inquiry into domains of affective labor, distributed authorship, and global inequality, offering a model for critical engagement with ephemeral cultural objects under conditions of late capitalism.

We hope to show that this task can be mobilized to highlight the abusiveness of the current system and can support the work of those who continue to call out the environmental and human costs of the fashion industry.

2 | BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

2.1 | Why Fast Fashion?

A potential archive of fast fashion needs to build off of the pre-existing practice of fashion archiving, rethinking the ways traditional archival methods of material and non-material things, plays a role in the way we preserve memory and time. Fashion archiving has a relatively short history compared to other forms of archiving. Emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, fashion archiving suffered from marginalization, as fashion garments were often deemed of secondary status to other forms of cultural production, such as books, artworks, and other media Almond (2020).

When it did occur, fashion archiving took place most often in museums, where it helped to contextualize cultural movements and record cultural traditions Peirson-Smith & Peirson-Smith (2020). Fashion archiving grew in prominence as the fashion industry grew in esteem and prominence, with major fashion houses creating their own archives of products to inspire future works Peirson-Smith & Peirson-Smith (2020). Fashion archiving today takes many forms, including the aforementioned in-house archives for major fashion houses, fashion educational archives, and fashion collections at major museums and galleries. Fashion archivists are also reconsidering the role of consumers in creating fashion trends, arguing that while retailers control access to garments, style can be reclaimed by consumers Takahashi et al. (2021). Some of the most prominent physical fashion archives are the Fashion Institute of Technology's fashion collection in New York City, the Westminster Menswear Archive in Harrow, England, and the Yorkshire Fashion Archive at the University of Leeds Peirson-Smith & Peirson-Smith (2020). Prominent digital archives include the Fashion Research Library Olsen (2020), Archive Fashion for the World *Archive Fashion for the World* (2023), the Vogue Archive *Explore the Complete Vogue Archive* (2023), the Zay Initiative Initiative (2023), and the Virtual Fashion Archive *The Virtual Fashion Archive – A Collection of Garments Brought to Life in New Digital Dimensions* (2023).

Fashion archives play valuable roles within the fashion industry. They are often a valuable source of inspiration, not only for garment design and vocabulary, but also for aspects of garment construction and technique. Educationally, fashion students learn from archival pieces and incorporate insights into their own creations Almond (2020). Fashion archives are also critical in creating new trends and styles. Major luxury brands, such as Dior and Ferragamo, regularly draw on their brand archives to develop revival lines Magazine (2023); Ng (2023). Additionally, museums like the Met collaborate with brands to include archival pieces in fashion exhibitions and programming, whose effects percolate throughout the fashion ecosystem The Costume Institute, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (2024).

2.2 | Archival Questions

With this context in mind, what would it mean to archive fast fashion? An effective archive of fast fashion would have to answer a variety of questions, including:

- Is it valuable to archive something ephemeral?
- Is it valuable to archive something that is produced by a fundamentally exploitative system?
- Is a fast fashion archive generating waste?
- How can we alter our archival methods when the focus of preservation is on a phenomenon rather than a specific object?
- What could specifically a fast fashion archive offer users?
- Who would these users be?

Regarding the first question, ephemerality could be a strength. Ephemerality is a critical component of fast fashion through the creation of low-quality garments with short life cycles, and it is also a condition of much modern consumer culture through the practice of planned obsolescence Bisschop et al. (2022). The preservation of something deeply ephemeral could act as a point of departure for other archivists constructing plans to preserve the documents of our current moment. In fact, reckoning with the extreme ephemerality of archival objects is already a core component of various forms of archival practice, including the archiving of print ephemera Brownson (2023); Smith (2020), the archiving of dance and other performing arts Bench & Elswit (2022); López Arnaiz (2022) and the more recent practice of web archiving De Kosnik (2016).

Regarding the second question, it could be helpful to consider the relationship between fast fashion and other economic exchanges between the Global North and South. To some extent, the economic transaction which lies at the core of the fast fashion industry - the export of garments from the Global South in exchange for meager payment by the Global North - mirrors the historical commodity trades which sat at the heart of historical European colonial enterprises. Examples of these commodity exchanges include the trade in sugar, rubber, and spices, among others Knight (2013); Dejung (2018); Chaudhuri et al. (2018). Fast fashion, if it is to be understood as a process whose dynamics mirror something of those historical processes, differs in that garments do not change in form upon entering the Global North - they are not immediately rendered invisible by further industrial processing. Garments are not cooked (usually) or reworked into finished products. They are sold to the consumer in the Global North as they are intended to be used, and can immediately participate in the embodiment of their users. This facet of fast fashion means that garments themselves have the potential capacity to speak to both the dynamics of the entire system of fast fashion as well as the personal dynamics of their users. Additionally, for most in the Global North, the labor expended in the creation of fast fashion garments is rendered so invisible that the garments themselves constitute the only record that *some* humans were involved in the production of the garments they choose to wear. As a result, preserving

and documenting fast fashion garments is critical to understanding fast fashion as a whole.

Regarding the third question, a fast fashion archive can address these concerns in two major ways. Firstly, it can actively highlight the human contribution in the creation of fast fashion garments. As ecocritical scholars, such as Ted Dawson, Natalie Pollard, and Zhou Xiaojing, tell us, understanding the people and power dynamics that underlie digital infrastructure is critical in reevaluating the environmental costs of digital scholarship Dawson (2021); Pollard (2024); Xiaojing (2015).

Secondly, it can choose to be non-encyclopedic. This means that it would not seek to include any and all fast fashion items. This would be accomplished through articulating acquisition standards that privilege the ability of a fast fashion item to draw out stories about the phenomenon more broadly. As the case study will outline below, drawing stories out of fast fashion items can prove difficult. While it might seem counterproductive to preemptively limit the size of an archive of a phenomenon so global and so great in scale as fast fashion, archivists have always engaged with the question of "what *should* be preserved?" and are often engaged in reappraisal and de-accessioning projects, abandoning some objects in favor of others over the stories that can be told Huggard & Jackson (2019).

Regarding the fourth question, conceptualizing archiving fast fashion as an exercise in archiving processes as opposed to particular objects provides the archive expansiveness and flexibility with regard to the materials it could incorporate. For instance, to consider the dynamics of fast fashion reception, the archive could incorporate a particular fast fashion garment, social media discourse about it, as well as promotional materials from different brands. The archive does not, as a result, have to, as a traditional fashion archive might, place heavy emphasis on the specific characteristics of a particular garment (its stitching and dimensions, for example). To consider the dynamics of fast fashion production, the archive could link to journalism and legal documents relating to the financial activities of major retailers, embedding these resources within the record for a particular garment.

Regarding the fifth question, a fast fashion archive would offer a unique chance to highlight the particularities of fast fashion. This means that users could learn about the global networks of relationships that produce cheap, ready-to-use garments, the role that fast fashion played and continues to play in cultural discourse and practices of self-expression, and, potentially, serve as a place to platform the voices of those exploited by the systems of production for fast fashion garments.

Regarding the sixth question, a fast fashion archive could prove valuable for researchers interested in fashion and popular culture. A fast fashion archive would probably be less useful for the traditional demographic of fashion archives: fashion researchers, designers, and students. For this demographic, the cheap manufacturing of fast fashion garments renders an archive less well-positioned to offer creative inspiration and examples of technical skill. A fast fashion archive, as we describe it, has more relevance for researchers interested in popular culture, environmental justice, and consumer behavior patterns. For these groups, a fast fashion archive embeds garments in cultural conversations and

economic processes, offering data to sustain a more complete analysis of the phenomenon of fast fashion. If successful, a fast fashion archive could have wider usage outside of an academic or research context, in its ability to tell complex stories about a phenomenon which most people in the Global North and Global South have come in contact with in one way or another.

3 | THE PCO FRAMEWORK

Our framework adopts a latent variable approach that defines a set of broad, interrelated components to reflect the variable dimensions of the fast fashion phenomenon. Rather than operating as a rigid schema, the model is intentionally adaptive and its structure and emphasis shift according to specific research or archival contexts. These components are not confined by their labels but are shaped by the attributes and relationships they articulate. They function less as prescriptive categories and more as indicators of the underlying mechanisms and operational logics of fast fashion. This flexibility allows the model to support a range of analytical objectives while retaining conceptual coherence.

To address the multifaceted nature of fast fashion across both digital and material domains, we introduce the concept of the Phantasmagorical Cultural Object (PCO) as an interpretive framework. This conceptualization embraces the heterogeneity of fast fashion as a cultural and economic system, one that intersects with aesthetic trends, industrial processes, consumer behaviors, and algorithmically mediated representations. Drawing on Jansen's A. M. Jansen (2020) critique of fashion as a phantasmagoria of modernity, the model positions garments not as isolated artifacts, but as entities entangled in complex socio-technical assemblages.

As a latent variable framework, the PCO reveals abstract cultural dynamics through observable layers material, spatial, temporal, cultural, and labor-based. This approach aligns with Smelik's Smelik (2018) call for new materialist perspectives that foreground the entanglement of bodies, fibers, garments, and technologies. In doing so, the PCO framework offers a flexible but rigorous means of interpreting fast fashion's systemic and representational intricacies.

As a means of *operationalizing this framework*, we apply a case-study approach centered on the deconstruction of a single garment Wojdyla & Chi (2024). This method enables a structured analysis of the material and symbolic attributes of the garment, situating them within broader networks of fast fashion production and reception Kuang et al. (2024). The garment functions as an analytical node, linking formal design elements with abstract components such as branding logic's, aesthetic regimes, and social valuation. This approach highlights how the experiential and affective dimensions of fashion are co-produced by globalized labor systems Taplin (2014) and consumer-facing visual cultures, particularly in the age of digital platforms that reconfigure traditional production networks Kuang et al. (2024).

The archival methodology proposed here does not primarily aim to preserve the physical object, but rather to account for the processes embedded in its life cycle. As Peirson-Smith argues, fashion archives play a critical role in "preserving, curating, and narrating fashion" through the collection of both material and "textual cultural objects in various forms to portray and contextualize the lived social experience" Peirson-Smith & Peirson-Smith (2020). Our methodology encompasses both the obscured labor of production often unrecorded in supply chain documentation Bick et al. (2018), and the cultural inscriptions the object accrues through use and representation. A central challenge of this model is the archival representation of labor in the absence of named authorship. In contexts where contributors to garment production remain anonymous or undocumented, we pose critical questions regarding how archives might ethically acknowledge such contributions Brownson (2023), especially when fashion items traverse digital and physical spaces as part of the globalized fast fashion industry Elias (2024):

- How can the material presence of labor be registered without explicit attribution?
- How might auxiliary metadata social, economic, geographic function as a proxy for the absent human contribution?
- To what extent can these layers be systematized within an archival schema that foregrounds process over product?

Fast fashion is uniquely situated within contemporary social practices in that its temporality and disposability differentiate it from more traditional modes of fashion production and consumption. While fashion has historically been examined through the lens of symbolic form or sociocultural semiotics, the PCO framework prioritizes the imbrication of materiality, affect, and production. This orientation resonates with the work of Entwistle, who in *The Fashioned Body* articulates fashion as a cultural practice inscribed on and through the body. Her account underscores the interdependency of corporeal experience and social structure, particularly as it relates to the mediation of identity via clothing. Within the accelerated temporalities of fast fashion, these processes are intensified, generating new forms of embodiment and social differentiation Entwistle (2023).

3.1 | What is the PCO?

To support a structured archival representation of fast fashion (PCO's), we propose a framework that captures the relational attributes embedded within a garment's life cycle. The mechanisms of fast fashion are rooted not only in the physical production and consumption of clothing but also in temporally dynamic systems of labor, marketing, identity construction, and environmental externalities.

This model builds on prior work in fashion ontology and attribute segmentation, such as the taxonomy presented in Fashionpedia, which organizes clothing types, components, and localized attributes through expert-driven annotation Jia et al. (2020). While such taxonomies provide a valuable categorical structure, our framework expands this

foundation by emphasizing how garments function within broader socio-cultural and representational systems.

To articulate this complexity, we adopt the term *phantasmagoria* to describe fast fashion. The phrase "fast fashion" alone does not adequately capture the layered processes that shape a garment's journey from conceptualization to disposal. Unlike in the 20th century, garments today are stripped of stable value due to accelerated consumption cycles and heightened layers of mediation that were not as pervasive in prior eras. Jansen underscores this condition in *Fashion and the Phantasmagoria of Modernity*, where she argues that modernity itself operates as a form of phantasmagoria, a process in which the garment acquires an almost illusory or magical quality through its repeated appearance across mediated formats before it is ever materially encountered by a wearer M. A. Jansen (2020). This process displaces labor from view: the visual and affective appeal of the garment conceals the economic and material systems underpinning its production M. A. Jansen (2020). As a result, fast fashion objects exist primarily in a state of representation and simulation, never fully conveying the conditions of their making.

In existing archival frameworks notions of authenticity, provenance, and evidence are central this presents a methodological challenge. If archival value is often linked to an object's ability to substantiate a historical or material truth, then fast fashion's ontological instability makes it difficult to fix its significance in archival terms. Consequently, we argue that fast fashion should not be defined by discrete garments, but rather by the relational systems of circulation, production, and obsolescence in which they are embedded. Moreover, the concept of the Phantasmagorical Cultural Object is not exclusive to fast fashion; it may also be extended to emerging categories of fashion production. In particular, this framework is applicable to fashion artifacts that originate within computational environments such as garments designed and rendered entirely within 3D digital spaces Smelik (2018).

As digital fashion gains momentum particularly within CGI-based platforms these objects further destabilize conventional understandings of materiality, authorship, and temporality in fashion systems. Anneke Smelik addresses this shift, arguing that technological innovation is reshaping the landscape of fashion through the lens of new materialism. In this view, fashion is no longer anchored exclusively to the human body or identity, but is increasingly entangled with non-human agencies, including digital technologies and ecological systems. This repositioning signals a broader epistemological turn in which fashion emerges not solely as a cultural expression of the human subject, but as part of a post-human material ecology Smelik (2018).

One of the central challenges in describing PCOs, particularly within the context of fast fashion, lies in the limitations of current cataloging practices. As noted in the *Costume Core Metadata for Historic Clothing*, fashion objects are often reduced to two-dimensional representations when documented, flattening their complexity into static visual records Kirkland (2019). However, in the case of PCOs whose existence spans multiple dimensions of representation and interaction this reduction proves insufficient.

By proposing a new terminology, we aim to develop an alternative framework for understanding these cultural objects, one that accounts for their increasing complexity and the ways in which they are becoming normalized within contemporary consumer culture. To apprehend this complexity, it is necessary to focus on the attributes that define and situate the object within a given system. These attributes are not static; rather, they are contingent on the modes of engagement and the temporal conditions under which the object is encountered. As such, the meaning and function of these objects shift depending on the context of their circulation and use, revealing a dynamic interplay between material form, cultural value, and temporal experience Riello (2011).

4 | PCO LAYERS

To facilitate a deeper understanding of the framework, each layer is conceptualized as a latent variable representing broadly defined, recurring attributes embedded within the mechanisms of the PCO. While these attributes may be associated with predefined classifications, they are not constrained by them. Instead, they function relationally, intersecting across multiple layers and hierarchies. This flexible structure reflects the complexity of archiving fast fashion objects, which are shaped by culturally specific, temporally contingent, and spatially dynamic conditions. These contextual factors influence how garments are valued and situated within the broader fast fashion system (Aponte et al., 2024; Peirson-Smith & Peirson-Smith, 2020). The framework does not attempt to forecast the future of fast fashion. Rather, it acknowledges that while such systems evolve unpredictably, certain recurring attributes serve as fixed reference points. These anchors enable the distribution of metadata and classification across multiple axes. Without this distributed model, layered information such as provenance, materiality, or cultural significance may become difficult to trace or integrate as additional context emerges (Almond, 2020; Smith, 2020).

It is also designed to accommodate large-scale collections derived from shared origins or entities. When such items are input together, the framework supports the identification of overarching connections while allowing for item-level specificity such as when a garment participates in a distinct cultural phenomenon or style movement (Bincsik et al., 2012; *Explore the Complete Vogue Archive*, 2023). This enables a non-linear approach to archival input: objects may be cataloged individually, in batches, or as segmented datasets, all while preserving their PCO attributes and interrelations.

As a result, the framework remains intentionally open and extensible. It supports richly layered description without depending on rigid vocabularies or fixed taxonomies that may limit accessibility or hinder discovery. It positions the archivist as an interpretive agent, empowered to define how PCO's are represented and structured. Attribute definitions can be adapted to align with preservation goals and collection contexts, ensuring responsiveness to both the evolving nature of fast fashion and the dynamic structure of PCO's (De Kosnik, 2016; Ernst & Parikka, 2013).

4.1 | Material Layer

The **Material layer** encompasses both the tangible and intangible attributes that contribute to the manifestation of the Phantasmagorical Cultural Object (PCO). *Materiality*, in this context, is understood as an interplay between physical composition such as fibers, fabrics, and synthetics and the broader economic, aesthetic, technological, and environmental processes that give rise to the object (Smelik, 2018; Bick et al., 2018). Importantly, this layer is not confined to the visible or tactile; it also includes immaterial dimensions such as surface effects, digital renderings, and ephemeral design intentions calibrated for rapid obsolescence or trend cycles (Bisschop et al., 2022).

Smelik's conceptualization of new materialism challenges the conventional hierarchy in which material form is seen as the foundational presence of fashion objects. Instead, *materiality* is positioned as an effect of cultural and systemic processes that may precede or transcend the physical garment (Smelik, 2018). Within the framework of the PCO, *materiality* is intrinsically linked to human agency not merely in terms of production labor but in the systems of valuation, representation, and mediation that surround and sustain the object. By drawing attention to the unseen or overlooked facets of material formation, this layer enables a more nuanced mapping of how the PCO operates across visible and invisible thresholds of fashion's production and consumption logics (Aponte et al., 2024; Choi, 2013).

4.2 | Cultural Layer

The **cultural layer** captures the nuances of the symbolic, aesthetic, and social meanings through which the PCO circulates. As objects are mediated by various platforms both digital and non-digital the values generated around them are in constant flux. This layer encompasses trends, rituals, identities, aesthetics, media narratives, and more. It considers how meaning is assigned, reinterpreted, or contested through the PCO's presence and dissemination (A. M. Jansen, 2020; Vázquez, 2010).

Unlike traditional notions of value in archival theory where worth is typically assessed based on intrinsic qualities or historical significance this layer acknowledges that *value* is often designated by those engaging in preservation. Here, *value* is shaped by emergent cultural phenomena and mediated forms of recognition, providing a more accurate and dynamic understanding of how *value* fluctuates in the fast fashion ecosystem (Peirson-Smith & Peirson-Smith, 2020; Wojdyla & Chi, 2024). *Cultural value* in this context is operationalized: trends are not solely driven by the intrinsic worth of an object, but by mechanisms of exposure, circulation, and performative engagement (Ng, 2023).

While it is not always possible to define what constitutes a specific trend or aesthetic movement, this layer is designed to help frame and interpret such phenomena. It incorporates the surrounding elements that contribute to the cultural positioning of the PCO, enabling a more situated understanding of how meaning and relevance are constructed over time (Almond, 2020; ?).

4.3 | Labor Layer

Within this layer, we identify the role of **labor** and human intervention under the term *human contribution*. This encompasses a wide range of involvement, from consumer-level engagements to high-level creative direction for example, the work of art directors who shape and curate specific fashion aesthetics. At its core, any form of human input even when mediated by or embedded within technological systems constitutes a *human contribution*. This layer underscores that no matter how advanced or automated the systems appear, they remain products of human design, intention, and oversight (Taplin, 2014; Guarino, 2024).

We explicitly phrase **labor** as *human contribution* to emphasize that some form of human involvement is present across the entire life cycle of the PCO: its creation, distribution, engagement, and eventual disposal. This terminology allows for the acknowledgment of both visible and undocumented forms of *labor*. For instance, if a garment was manufactured in Bangladesh, we might note: "*Human contribution was undocumented but is recognized; the contribution is attributed to labor in the region of Bangladesh*" (Bick et al., 2018; Suutari, 2025). In cases where specific identities are unknown, the phrasing accommodates recognition without attribution.

Furthermore, when exploitative **labor practices** are implicated such as those involving third-party manufacturers of H&M garments for acknowledgment even in the absence of formal documentation. For example, while two legal documents may not explicitly reference exploitative **labor**, they may indicate its presence through references to structural failures or fatal events, thereby linking these conditions to the PCO's production context (H&M, 2024; Hub, 2025). These connections inform how descriptions are formed: the phrase "*human contribution undocumented but recognized, associated with exploitative labor conditions in Bangladesh*" allows such complexities to be retained in archival language.

This layer also recognizes companies and organizations as *human contributors* insofar as they are composed of individuals across a range of roles and hierarchies. Although a corporation is an institutional entity, it is operated, shaped, and made accountable through human actions. Acknowledging contributions at all levels whether managerial, technical, creative, or manual is essential. This recognition extends to hierarchical considerations, emphasizing that participation is not monolithic but layered. By accounting for the **labor** involved, the framework creates a record that traces the network of human effort behind the materialization of the PCO. In doing so, it makes visible the often-invisible relationships that structure production and clarifies the multiple levels of connection, responsibility, and authorship embedded within fast fashion systems (Bincsik et al., 2012; Cachon & Swinney, 2011).

4.4 | Temporal Layer

In this layer, time is not positioned as a fixed or central axis but is instead understood as relative dependent on how it is situated by the PCO.

Temporality in fast fashion operates unevenly, particularly when comparing the rapid cycles of digital engagement with the slower processes of physical acquisition and material production. Online trends, viral aesthetics, and media-mediated cycles often outpace the manufacturing, shipping, and physical consumption of the objects themselves (Kuang et al., 2024; Teerakapibal & Schlegelmilch, 2024).

This layer recognizes that time is interpreted and experienced in multiple ways, and these temporal variations influence how we understand trends, cultural phenomena, and the life cycle of the PCO. For example, the disposal of an object does not signify the end of its cultural or symbolic impact; its effects may persist, reappear, or be rematerialized in other forms digitally, affectively, or socially (Almond, 2020; Smith, 2020).

The temporal layer, therefore, positions time as variable, contextual, and multi-scalar. It considers not only when an object is accessed, acquired, or discarded, but how it is embedded within systems of mediation that shape its visibility, desirability, and relevance across time (Pollard, 2024; De Kosnik, 2016).

4.5 | Spatial Layer

In this layer, we understand that the PCO exists across multiple spatial geographies both physical and digital. A garment may be produced in one or more countries, designed in another, and constructed from materials sourced globally. As such, the spatial positioning of a fashion object is inherently uneven and fragmented (Kuang et al., 2024; Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010).

For consumers, especially those navigating algorithmically curated digital platforms, the experience of fashion becomes bifurcated: garments appear place-less yet omnipresent. This disjunction reflects the phantasmagorical quality of the PCO fashion objects appear to transcend physical location, even as their material realities remain rooted in specific sites of labor and production. The spaces in which the PCO circulates are often obscured or distorted, contributing to fashion's illusion of magic, immediacy, and seamless global availability (Almond, 2020; ?).

While environmental factors can be addressed within this framework, they are not confined to a single layer. Instead, they operate conditionally emerging through the interconnections both within and across layers. Because environmental impact is diffuse, extensive, and difficult to delimit, it is not defined as a discrete or standalone component. Rather, it is treated as a relational condition that becomes legible through the dynamic interactions among material, cultural, labor, temporal, and spatial elements. This approach avoids positioning the environment as a constant or universally recurring factor and instead allows its significance to emerge contextually, shaped by the specific configurations of each PCO.

4.6 | Implementation Details

Although this framework is primarily theoretical, its practical implementation especially as a latent variable model would be most effectively realized through custom-developed software. In this system, the PCO layers would act as dynamic variables, capable of being invoked and applied in context-specific manners. For example, when a user uploads or interacts with a digital object like a photo within the user interface, the system could encourage them to annotate or categorize it using the five defined layers.

These layers would operate iteratively: users could log multiple instances of a single layer such as different material elements like fabric type, source of raw materials, or durability features. Each instance would be recorded in a structured log, fostering a detailed and adaptable documentation approach. Consequently, the framework facilitates the creation of in-depth descriptions by acknowledging that each attribute can be repeatedly and contextually applied across various dimensions of an object. This systematic approach transforms the abstract logic of the PCO into a practical, modular tool for archival and analytical purposes.

5 | CASE STUDY

The PCO framework provides a conceptual structure for organizing fast fashion garment information by teasing out the interaction of material, cultural, temporal, and labor-based attributes. To apply this framework to archival practice, we must first examine the types of information that digital records of fast fashion garments contain, as well as the classes of external or related resources that could be incorporated to offer users greater contextual depth. This information is summarized in the following section.

To summarize, the Material Layer is constituted by two classes of information: information about fabric type (type of fabric, ratio of materials), and information about work (patterns, designs, stitching, garment form and components). This information is presumed to be most often acquired directly from an online listing of the product (should it continue to exist or be preserved through web archiving). Additionally, the terms used in this layer can be referenced to additional fashion dictionaries or metadata schema, such as *Costume Core*.

The Cultural Layer is constituted by a wider range of information: style metadata (some companies, like Shein, provide users with information about where a garment should be used in product descriptions Shein (2025)), social media records (such as the item's presence in haul videos, online discourse about a garment, or influencers promoting the garment), and published articles (should they exist). This information is intended to help users understand the role the garment played in the lives of consumers, and how the garment was discussed. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be a clear way to ensure the preservation of the resources necessary to populate this layer, as social media resources often disappear with account deactivations and algorithm changes.

The Labor Layer is constituted by information about the manufacturing process. This is the hardest to substantiate, but the most critical in contextualizing the role of a garment within the economic system of fast fashion. This information would take the form of information about country of origin, supplier, and, if possible, place of manufacture. For some garments, this is a feasible prospect. H&M, for example, provides information about suppliers directly H&M (2024). Additionally, some manufacturers can be located through resources like Open Supply Hub Hub (2025). Where information about the garment's direct manufacture could not be identified, statements such as "Source of human contribution could not be identified. Retailer x sources from countries a, b, c..." could be provided.

The Temporal Layer is constituted by information about date of manufacture and information about its extended cultural relevance. Practically, this information is similar to that used to construct the Cultural Layer. This could include the date of manufacture, the date of any promotional materials or ad campaigns, as well as any information about how long the trend cycle it was a part of lasted for.

The Spatial Layer is constituted by information about the different spaces the garment inhabited. This could include, like the Temporal Layer, information about ad campaigns and promotional materials, as well as relevant information about stores and retail contexts. The garment's digital footprint must also be considered here what digital spaces did the garment inhabit? Similarly to the Cultural Layer, information about the social media reception of the garment would be critical.

Considering a case study will provide a first look into what fast fashion archiving could be. For this case study, not all elements of the PCO framework could be invoked, but it showcases how the framework lends itself to organizing fast fashion garment information. At this stage in the development process, we are unable to create a standardized encoding system that could define all of the possible fields necessary to describe any and all possible fast fashion garments. As a result, the following case study adheres to the categories and descriptions of the original source records (retailers or third-party resources). Were this framework to be further developed, a crosswalk could be developed that would help standardize description across the archive.

5.1 | The Puff-Sleeved Velour Dress

The H&M Puff-Sleeved Velour Dress (Figure 1) is a typical fast fashion item. Produced by the company H&M, it exhibits many of the core features of fast fashion garments - inexpensive price point, synthetic fiber usage, and a lack of craftsmanship or extensive work ?. This garment is also interesting due to the cultural discourse it produced among sections of the LGBTQ+ community in 2021, which prompted discussions around the role of fast fashion in the UK drag scene.



FIGURE 1 The H&M Puff-Sleeved Velour Dress.

5.1.1 | Material Layer

For the material layer, the following information could be provided in a table format:

Attribute	Details
Name	Puff-Sleeved Velour Dress
Retailer	H&M
Description	Short, fitted dress in crinkled velour with a stand-up collar and concealed zip at the back. Long puff sleeves with reinforced organza shoulder sections and a pleat at the cuffs for added width ?.
Garment Metadata	Length: Short; Sleeve Length: Long Sleeve; Fit: Slim Fit; Collar: Stand Collar; Sleeve Style: Puff Sleeve; Description: Pink, Solid; Category: H&M EDITION
Material	Polyester, elastane

TABLE 1 Material Layer Information for the Puff-Sleeved Velour Dress.

Additionally, style terms, such as "crinkled velour" and "organza", as well as fabric types, such as polyester and elastane (a compound made from petroleum) could be linked to in outside fashion dictionaries.

5.1.2 | Cultural Layer

For the Cultural Layer, the archive would have to describe the cultural significance of the garment. To start with, velour has a history in fashion dating back to the 1960s and '70s Lo (2018). In 2021, this specific

H&M velour dress made its mark on history when drag performer Joe Black wore it on the runway of *RuPaul's Drag Race UK: Season 2* during a musical performance in episode 5. In a critique session at the end of the episode, RuPaul, host and judge of the show, famously told Black, “don’t waste my time, I don’t want to see any f***** H&M,” contributing to Black’s elimination from the season Damshenas (2021); H&M (2025). The remark instantly went viral within the *Drag Race* fandom, and garnered news articles from LGBTQ+-focused news outlets in the UK Damshenas (2021). At the same time, it spawned social media discourse about whether or not RuPaul was overly critical of Black when queens do not universally come in with extensive financial resources and invest large amounts of time and money to succeed on the show Wise-Tourist (2021). As a result, the following resources could be provided:

- Resources describing velour’s significance to fashion, such as Stephanie Lo’s comprehensive 2018 resource on velour on the *Contrado* blog Lo (2018).
- Resources describing similar garments worn by fashion influencers at the time Rach (2018).
- Articles describing the fallout from the *Drag Race* incident Hender-son (2021); Damshenas (2021); Beacon (2021).
- Social media posts discussing the garment’s appearance on *Drag Race* ashmarie_33 (2021); Black & Green (2021); @moremojo (2024).

5.1.3 | Labor Layer

The Labor Layer is the most difficult to identify. Most H&M garments actually list their supplier information, but this garment has unfortunately been wiped from all of H&M’s product listings save the H&M Greece website. This listing unfortunately did not contain supplier information ?. For the purposes of this paper, we can consider what this layer might look like with another velour garment, the 2025 “MAMA Velour Dress with Low-Cut Back” H&M (2025). For this garment, the Labor Layer would contain the following information in a table format:

Attribute	Details
Country	Cambodia
Supplier	DAKOTA IND. CO. LTD.
Factory Address	Vanco Industrial Company Ltd (Cambodia) Nation Road #4, Phum Chork, Sangkat Beik Chan, Srok Angsneur, 999094, Kandal
Number of Workers	2501-3000
Resources	Website, news articles (if available) DAKOTA Industrial Co. (2025).

TABLE 2 Factory and Supplier Information

5.1.4 | Temporal Layer

The Temporal Layer is less visible in this garment, as it is unclear exactly when this garment was created. However, it can be situated within a period from 2018–2021, when puff sleeve dresses appear to have been more in vogue. As a defining moment within *RuPaul’s Drag Race UK Season 2*, the dress continues to live on as a representation of that season and the discussions surrounding fast fashion in the drag space. In this regard, the Temporal Layer could be represented by a date of manufacture, relevance, or through having this temporal information be represented in highlighting the chronology of the sources informing the Cultural Layer.

5.1.5 | Spatial Layer

The Spatial Layer is also hard to draw out. Similarly to the Labor Layer, without information about place of manufacture, it is harder to trace the garment’s journey through space. Digitally, the way the garment traveled through online *Drag Race* fan spaces is more clear. The spatial life of the garment could be extended here through ad campaigns (which we were unable to locate here), and additional social media posts situating the garment in other spatial contexts.

5.1.6 | Interface Design Considerations

While it is not within this paper’s scope to discuss possible interface design or the technical architecture of a potential fast fashion archive, the *Fashion History Timeline* provides a useful example of how to enrich fashion pieces with information about cultural context. In the March 2025 post entitled “1883 – Charles Frederick Worth, red silk satin and velvet dinner dress,” the post is structured into images of the garment alongside two sections of text, entitled “About the Look” and “About the Context,” describing the construction of the garment and the culturally specific resonances of its design, respectively. For the latter, the post explains the significance of pleated designs, the color red, bustles, and trains in mid-Victorian English high society, conveying to the reader how to read the garment as its users may have O’Rourke (2025). Such posts provide a starting point when considering how to structure a user interface a fast fashion archive could be organized following the PCO framework into the relevant layers. Information from each layer could be provided in prose summaries and bullet-point lists formatted around the image.

5.1.7 | Implications and Limitations

This case study underscores significant gaps in documentation, particularly within the Labor Layer, where details about the conditions and contributions behind garment production remain elusive (Bick et al., 2018; Taplin, 2014; Kuang et al., 2024). Simultaneously, it highlights the potential of fast fashion garments to convey cultural narratives and

to hold particular resonance for specific consumer communities (Wojdyla & Chi, 2024; Cachon & Swinney, 2011; Nassimbem et al., 2023). Moreover, such garments can serve as entry points for interrogating the broader economic structures underpinning their production (Taplin, 2014; Bogdan et al., 2025; Choi, 2013). While not intended to be representative of all fast fashion items, this case points to the broader potential for individual garments to yield distinct and valuable insights within an archival framework.

6 | CONCLUSION

Fast fashion continues to inform consumption and production patterns in the fashion industry. Rising protectionism is revealing the economic vulnerabilities of a globalized supply chain Wong (2025). In the future, the status of fast fashion could change. As of yet, little thought has been expended in considering why, how, or what it would mean to preserve the traces of fast fashion. At the same time, fast fashion's global scale and complexity forces us to reevaluate existing fashion archival practices. Through the framework of the "phantasmagorical cultural object", we can begin to draw out the complexities of the fast fashion system, integrating an understanding of a consumer experience informed by digital technologies. This paper constitutes a first attempt at creating a new archival infrastructure by applying the PCO framework. This framework additionally allowed us to bring in questions of environmental and economic justice while also teasing out the cultural valences of fast fashion garments for consumers.

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