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*A Design Exploration of the Contemporary
Anti-Fashion Paradox: Taste, Rebellion, and
Digital Distortion*

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2026

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Thesis Declaration

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A Design Exploration of the Contemporary Anti-Fashion Paradox: Taste, Rebellion, and Digital Distortion

Abstract

Fashion rebellion manifests differently in the age of mass information and algorithmic influence. This thesis examines the paradox of anti-fashion, exploring how digital platforms simultaneously enable personal expression while accelerating the commodification of rebellion within the fashion system.

Drawing on fashion theory and cultural studies on status and taste, the research considers how constant social media exposure shapes taste, influences decision-making, and distorts self-image. The research aims to reveal that anti-fashion is not solely about avant-garde aesthetics, fashion rebellion and deconstruction, but also about the designer's intention, authenticity, and resistance to external pressures like consumer expectations.

The design component investigates these ideas through a metaphorical design language informed by the four stages of a caterpillar's metamorphosis. Victorian mourning wear is also examined as a historical reference as a symbol for the 'death' of traditional anti-fashion and its rebirth within contemporary culture. Draping experiments, fabric manipulations, and print development translate the forms, colours, and textures of the caterpillar and mourning garments into material explorations that reflect transformation and adaptation in contemporary society.

The final design outcome synthesizes research, material experimentation, and print development into two looks, each corresponding to one stage of the caterpillar's lifecycle. These works articulate an alternative vision of anti-fashion which is rooted in cyclical transformation, creative intention, and the negotiation between individuality and systemic influence. The thesis demonstrates how anti-fashion can continue to function as a tool of self-expression and resistance, even in a culture where rebellion is rapidly absorbed, commodified, and normalized.

Introduction

In contemporary fashion culture, rebellion no longer exists at the margins. In an era defined by mass information, accelerated image circulation, and algorithmic curation, styles once rooted in resistance are rapidly absorbed, aestheticized, and redistributed as consumable trends. Anti-fashion was initially positioned by theorists and practitioners such as Dick Hebdige, and later writers engaging with Bourdieu, as a rejection of dominant fashion systems; however, it has increasingly been absorbed into digital culture, functioning today as little more than a social media hashtag. This shift raises important questions about authenticity, autonomy, and the possibility of resistance in a culture where visibility often takes precedence over intention.

This thesis investigates the paradox of anti-fashion within algorithmic visual culture, asking whether anti-fashion can still function as a meaningful form of self-expression or resistance when rebellion itself has become an even more marketable aesthetic due to the speed of internet trends. Drawing on fashion theory and cultural studies literature on taste and class, the research examines how taste is socially constructed and increasingly shaped by digital platforms, how identity is performed through images, and how subcultural styles are rapidly commodified through processes of visibility and repetition. Key theoretical frameworks from Pierre

Bourdieu, Dick Hebdige, Guy Debord, Erving Goffman, and Judith Butler provide critical lenses through which fashion is understood as a system of distinction, performance, and spectacle.

The thesis argues that anti-fashion is no longer just about avant-garde aesthetics, deconstruction, or visual opposition to mainstream fashion. As such, it proposes that anti-fashion today should operate as an intentional and reflexive practice that is concerned with authorship, awareness of media influence, and resistance to external pressures rather than purely visual difference. In this context, it challenges fashion to become a site where individuals negotiate identity, belonging, and validation within algorithmic environments that reward conformity disguised as individuality.

This research is supported by a practice-led design investigation alongside theoretical analysis. The design component employs a process-driven methodology that positions the making itself as a mode of research. A metaphoric framework based on the four stages of a silkworm's life cycle: birth, consumption, cocooning, and rebirth, informs the design, structures, and the conceptual and material development of a collection. Victorian mourning garments here are not seen as a symbol of literal death, but rather as a traditional, anti-fashion representation of the "death of fashion" and its recurring metaphor in contemporary culture. Through draping, material experimentation, print development, and iterative prototyping, the design work translates abstract theoretical concerns into embodied, tactile dress forms.

This thesis positions fashion design as both a critical and speculative practice. By integrating theory, digital observation, and material experimentation, it seeks to contribute to contemporary fashion discourse by reframing anti-fashion as an ongoing negotiation between individuality and systemic influence. In doing so, it explores how fashion can continue to offer space for intention, agency, and self-definition even within a culture shaped by algorithms, spectacle, and accelerated consumption.

1. Context Review

1.1 Fashion's Hierarchy: Taste, Class, and Elite Culture

For many, the terms “fashion,” “clothing,” and “dress” are used interchangeably, with “fashion” often understood simply as another word for what people wear. Within fashion theory; however, these concepts are differentiated, each carrying its own specific definition and analytical function. Clothing refers to basic material objects, for example, a pair of jeans, and serves the functional purpose of coverage, protection, and modesty. “Dress” refers to the social and cultural practice of how people wear and style clothing. Fashion operates as a dynamic system that creates, circulates, and transforms the meanings attached to dress (Kawamura 1). Clothes and dress are therefore part of a sophisticated form of communication that conveys information about class, taste, knowledge, and social belonging through those who share the cultural codes. As Malcolm Barnard writes, “fashion is best understood as a system of signs, a signifying system, through which social meanings are constructed and communicated” (8).

A Bottega Veneta woven leather bag communicates differently from a Hermès Birkin bag, not merely through price point, but through the distinct cultural knowledge required to recognize the former’s subtlety versus the latter’s recognizability. This distinction between knowing and not knowing, between coded and explicit luxury, reveals fashion’s role in what Pierre Bourdieu termed cultural capital: a form of knowledge that functions as social currency.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital reveals how knowledge itself becomes a form of wealth that can be accumulated, displayed, and converted into social advantage. In fashion, this ability becomes evident when, across the room, you can recognize that a person is wearing a Comme des Garçons silhouette. You understand why some vintage pieces are gaining popularity and others are being ignored, and why identifying the hidden rules of “good taste” is crucial for social belonging. No one is born with this knowledge; rather, it is learned through exposure, education, and social

positioning. As Bourdieu states in “Forms of Capital,” “Cultural capital can be acquired, to a varying extent, depending on the period, the society, and the social class, in the absence of any deliberate inculcation, and therefore quite unconsciously” (245).

Fashion plays a key role in signifying cultural capital and has long operated through established hierarchies of taste, such as luxury fashion houses, editors of Vogue, major runway shows, and now influencers. These are the gatekeepers who have the power to decide what is fashionable and what is not, acting as cultural arbitrators through use of exclusive social, economic, and institutional lenses to filter aesthetics. As Yuniya Kawamura notes in Fashion-ology, these institutional structures are part of the “fashion system,” a network of cultural production and legitimation that determines which styles gain visibility and prestige (1). However, over the last two decades, the majority of people’s lives have been moved into a digital environment, like online banking, communication, and shopping. Gatekeeping has become increasingly decentralized from its traditional gatekeeper. In Sitra’s report Gatekeeping in the Digital Age, “algorithmic systems and platform dynamics increasingly influence who gets visibility and whose voices are marginalized” (Björk et al.). In this context, the power to define fashion has partially shifted from institutions to platforms and personalities, influencers, stylists, and micro-celebrities who gain cultural capital through virality and aesthetic fluency.

Atle Hauge (2006) argues in *Gatekeepers and Knowledge Diffusion in the Fashion Industry* that gatekeepers not only control access to networks and markets but also function as knowledge filters, determining which aesthetics and ideas are widely disseminated through algorithms. While fashion elites such as magazines and runway institutions still hold influence, contemporary influencers now also occupy a position of significant cultural authority. Some fashion influencers, who perceive their taste as superior and deliberately withhold the sources of their clothing, have emerged as the “new-age gatekeepers” and contemporary “fashion elite.”

Typing ‘Gatekeep final boss’ into TikTok reveals countless videos of users refusing to disclose where they source their clothing, driven by the concern that others might replicate their style. It is gatekeeping framed as self-defense, a way to keep their look from being diluted in an environment where trends spread instantly and imitation is inevitable. The question of who decides what is fashionable now involves not just institutions or tastemakers but also data-driven systems that prioritize visibility over intention or innovation.

The fashion elite often position their taste as superior to that of others. For example, one TikTok user posted a video of themselves walking down the street with the caption, “That superior feeling being the best dressed on the street” (katemarkman). Meanwhile, taste is not only a matter of personal preference; it operates as a marker of social class. As Pierre Bourdieu argues in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, taste operates as “an acquired disposition to differentiate and appreciate,” shaped by one’s cultural background, education, and social position (6). In this way, taste becomes a symbolic force, a way of expressing belonging to or exclusion from a particular social group.

In fashion, taste distinguishes between those who can decode a runway archive piece and those who cannot. For instance, recognizing the understated design of an undercover SS03 “Scab” collection versus the conspicuous branding of a Balenciaga logo hoodie is less about aesthetic preference and more about cultural knowledge. This form of knowing is consistent with what Bourdieu calls cultural capital, the specific knowledge and experiences that enable individuals to navigate the realm of elite culture.

Taste also reinforces status boundaries. Those with economic capital may purchase high-end fashion, but without the cultural capital to style or contextualize it “correctly,” their attempts may be dismissed as nouveau riche or inauthentic. On the other hand, people without big budgets but with a sharp cultural eye often turn to secondhand or recycled pieces that still carry an elite fashion vibe. It’s a way to gain style credibility without

buying into luxury's price tag something Otto von Busch calls "engaged." fashion design," where creative reuse and upcycling open up fashion's cultural capital to more people (von Busch 45).

This dynamic is further amplified in the age of social media, where platforms like TikTok and Instagram push performative aesthetics because they align with what the majority of users prefer, optimizing for engagement and visual appeal over authenticity (Zhang). However, many successful creators, such as TikTok user Wisdom Kaye, demonstrate a deep understanding of the codes of taste, drawing on fashion history, subcultures, and diverse stylistic references to resonate with their audiences. In this way, even in the seemingly democratized world of digital fashion, taste remains a subtle but powerful marker of status.

1.2 Anti-Fashion: Resistance, Subcultures, and the Trap of Commodification.

If fashion taste functions as a form of cultural capital, then anti-fashion emerges as a challenge to this system. It formed as an aesthetic and ideological rejection of dominant norms and of the traditional gatekeepers who use taste as a tool of distinction to shape the hierarchies of fashion. Anti-fashion appears to embrace an unconventional, imperfect aesthetic that resists the authorities, usually under a political movement. From famous anti-fashion movements like Punk to avant-garde designers like Martin Margiela, anti-fashion has historically positioned itself in opposition to capitalist spectacle, superficial beauty, and mass production.

As Lidewij Edelkoort argues in her *Anti-Fashion Manifesto*, fashion's emotional and creative collapse has necessitated a new form of dress rooted in authenticity, craft, and slowness (Edelkoort). However, in today's algorithm-driven visual culture, even this resistance is vulnerable to commodification. What once functioned as critique is now rapidly aestheticized, stylized, and reabsorbed into the fashion system.

Historically, anti-fashion movements are not mainstream but are often active on the edge of the picture; they reject not only popular aesthetics but also the consumerist logic of fashion. As Dick Hebdige has argued, subcultures use clothing as a form of "intentional communication" to symbolize protest against mainstream values (2). However, this type of protest is often short-lived. Hebdige calls this "recuperation," in which rebellious styles are absorbed and repackaged by the system they oppose, explaining how anti-fashion frequently becomes part of the "fashion" system itself. As shown in Fig. 1, the theatrical costume exemplifies anti-fashion's subversive aesthetic, highlighting rebellion performed visually and consumed as spectacle.

"Punk" designs on the runway in Paris, with their distressed, stained shirts in some high-end designer's collection, were sold to consumers back for ten times the original price. Anti-fashion, in this sense, was never immune to the processes of commodification. Instead, it became a visual aesthetic

rapidly adopted by fashion houses and fast fashion, selling itself on the promise of authenticity but hollowing out its original intent. As shown in Fig. 2, the exaggerated silhouettes and deconstructed tailoring reflect anti-fashion principles translated into high fashion.



Fig. 1. Costumed figure at a dark carnival-style event. Photograph by Derek Ridgers, *The Dark Carnival: Portraits from the Endless Night*, 1 Feb. 2016.



Fig. 2. Model wearing Vivienne Westwood Fall/Winter 2020 design. Photograph by Andreas Konthaler for Vivienne Westwood.

As I have discussed, resistance to the mainstream has been recuperated historically, and the present day is no exception. Since the pandemic, platforms like TikTok and Instagram have hyper-exposed fashion and made it accessible to the point that there is a micro trend every week. These trends are aesthetically pleasing to viewers and easily accessible to consumers. Like the fashion cycle itself, eventually people will tire of a trend and start a new one. As Alexandra Jones reports for the Evening Standard, mismatched, ill-fitting, ‘ugly’ clothes are in; this generation is sick of getting sold perfect clothes (Jones). People online have started posting “ugly” and “weird” outfits since Covid; in 2021, a girl posted a video of her outfit that got 2 million views. She used a keyboard as a top in that video; everybody became obsessed (Magdalen). It demonstrates that many people are tired of perfectly curated fashion, with models who are tall, skinny, and have a lethal “face card,” and want more exciting, new, and absurd stuff. That girl wearing a keyboard as a top may not realize that her outfit has effectively become a form of anti-fashion in the digital age. As this video went viral, more and more creators began posting “ugly” fashion, which eventually became a trend on TikTok. Just a year after, JW Anderson showcased a collection featuring computers and keyboards in the Spring/Summer 2023 season at London Fashion Week. A model walked down the runway with a dress made with all keyboard keys and a pair of distressed crystal shorts. Since then, people have termed this “ugly core.”

The big-name designers have long taken inspiration from anti-fashion movements, as subculture is not new. As Dick Hebdige states, “The challenge of the subculture is thus simultaneously rendered trivial and banal, or incorporated: either rendered ‘harmless’ through conversion or else made to appear ‘meaningless’ through ridicule” (Hebdige 94). Like the keyboard that made it to the runway less than a year ago, we know this will happen eventually, but the acceleration of this process through digital platforms is staggering. The immediacy of social media flattens the subversive potential of anti-fashion by making it hyper-visible and instantly aestheticized. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram do not just circulate anti-fashion; they curate it into a “core,” an aesthetic, which becomes a spectacle. As Guy Debord argues, “Everything that was directly lived has

receded into a representation” (12). Anti-fashion becomes just another trend optimized for views, engagement, and reproduction. What once acted as a critique of fashion’s dominant structures now exists within the same feedback loop of trend, virality, and eventual commodification. Ironically, in the process of resisting fashion, anti-fashion becomes a highly legible code, the new visual uniform for those trying not to look like everyone else.

This cycle reveals a deep contradiction of anti-fashion: rebellion itself becomes an aesthetic, which then becomes a trend, and finally a spectacle. When the subcultural style gains visibility, it begins to lose its power to oppose the thing it stands against. Anti-fashion does not just exist on the edge; it is captured, circulated, and diluted within the same structures it once resisted. As Debord warned, the spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (12). In this case, anti-fashion is not just seen; it is performed, consumed, and measured in clicks and shares. Subversive looks become costumes; authenticity becomes branding. What once signified resistance now signifies fashionability. Even irony becomes part of it. Oversized silhouettes, intentionally ugly aesthetics, or mismatched thrifted pieces that you could DIY and deconstruct into a new piece once used to reject polish and status are now sold back to consumers as carefully curated rebellion, like Maison Margiela and so on. The contradiction is that in trying to escape fashion, anti-fashion becomes fashion, only faster, more algorithmic, and more self-aware. Its success is also its failure. As soon as a look is recognized as cool because it’s not trying to be cool, it enters the cycle of validation and repetition that defines trend culture. This paradox is crucial to understanding how anti-fashion has transformed from critique to commodity, the new uniform.

1.3 Digital Uniforms: Belonging and Performance on Visual Platforms

TikTok, Instagram, and Rednote (Xiaohongshu) have become the primary platforms through which fashion trends are created, circulated, and consumed. Unlike traditional fashion media, magazines, or seasonal runways, which operated on cycles that spread relatively slowly compared to the digital platforms, these platforms thrive on speed, novelty, and repetition. Their algorithms don’t just reflect what people wear; they actively curate and amplify specific looks, turning them into dominant visual codes, which is how the trend starts. Trends spread rapidly through online engagement, and as we know, they are extremely fast. Instagram privileges polished imagery and aspirational aesthetics; many accounts are beautifully curated with images, but this imagery is often superficial; with no narrative to decipher the imagery given to the audience, it simplifies the imagery to just a photo on visual appeal and does not invite further engagement. Xiaohongshu (known internationally as RedNote) functions as a hybrid social ecommerce ecosystem, seamlessly merging content discovery and direct purchasing within one platform (“The Rise of Xiaohongshu”). It has become a lucrative space for influencer participation, especially through live-streaming features that reward content creators with real direct income (“The Fashion Exec’s Guide to Chinese Social Media Platforms”).

Within these ecosystems, aesthetic cores are the most important organizing principle. Every style, no matter how niche, is quickly labeled a “core,” categorizing it into a visual box. This taxonomy makes it easier to describe a certain look, and, for consumers, it simplifies the process of searching for inspiration and purchasing the necessary pieces online. Platforms and e-commerce algorithms thrive on these neatly packaged aesthetics because they streamline recommendation systems: once a user engages with one post under clean girl or indie sleaze, the platform knows exactly what to show them next. Just like Schwartz said in *The Cut*, “In naming aesthetics, you appoint yourself art historian of the mundane stuff that populates your life” (Schwartz). There is “clean girl aesthetic,” “indie sleaze,” and “blokecore”; you could even call a singer “core.” When

the singer Sade went viral on TikTok, she became a “core” with her long black hair and red lips as the signature. Viewers loved her aesthetic and posted admiring videos under her songs. However, the story behind her and her songs is the most beautiful part about her; trends on these digital platforms just thrive on the first 15-second dopamine hit without bothering to introduce her or her art since trends just thrive on the “vibe” she gives off.

On digital platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Rednote (Xiaohongshu), the participation in trends and aesthetic cores is not neutral. It is a performance shaped by the platform’s reward system. These spaces are not just for people to showcase their personal style anymore; they are stages where outfits are carefully curated for likes and shares and also for the desire for the algorithm to push their content to more people. Erving Goffman’s concept of the “front stage” explains this phenomenon: online fashion operates as a visible script for identity, with each post functioning as a performance designed to achieve a desired impression (Goffman 22). Within this system, belonging becomes measurable. Engagement with the videos replaces in-person validation, creating an environment where fitting into a recognizable aesthetic core is rewarded with visibility, or “clout”: the credibility of external validation from social engagement. This leads to what could be called performative belonging: the act of aligning oneself with an aesthetic not solely for personal expression but to signal membership in a digital community that exists primarily in visual form. However, the line between authentic self-expression and “clout chasing” or self-branding is blurry. An outfit might genuinely reflect the wearer’s personal style, but once it is packaged, hashtagged, and posted, it enters a space where its value is determined by engagement rather than meaning. In Debord’s terms, the lived experience of style recedes, and what remains is its image that are circulated, liked, and consumed as part of the spectacle (12).

Debord’s concept of the spectacle offers a critical lens for understanding how aesthetic cores and digital uniforms operate in digital culture. In the spectacle, the object or the event itself is less relevant than its mediated

image (Debord 12). With fashion, a significant spectacle in the 21st century, this means that the “anti-fashion” hashtag people use for avant-garde, deconstructed, and upcycled garments can be consumed, circulated, and celebrated without engaging with the political or cultural reality it originally represented. The act of dressing becomes secondary to the act of documenting; the performance is directed at the camera and the feed, not the street or the everyday social encounter. The term “performative personality” went viral on TikTok in 2025, establishing that self-curation can exist almost entirely within the aesthetic boundaries of a chosen core. These personalities are fluent in the visual language of the style of choice, often more invested in maintaining this fluency than in experimenting or deviating from it. The most famous one is the person who holds an iced matcha, a tote bag, a carabiner keychain on the belt loop, and a book in hand. The result is an identity that is hyper-visible yet fragile, dependent on continuous production of content to remain legible. The images signal authenticity and intelligence, but in their repetition and algorithmic packaging, they become part of the same spectacle they claim to resist.

Finally, in this environment, everything becomes a core, the new uniform of the digital age. Even those who claim to resist participation are inevitably framed within it. Their rejection is labeled “anti-fashion,” carefully packaged, and it becomes another aesthetic category available for consumption. But is it truly resistance, or simply a different uniform performing the same function? When rebellion itself is codified, hashtagged, and circulated, it ceases to exist outside the system that it becomes part of the spectacle it set out to oppose.

1.4 The Tabi Phenomenon: from Avant-Garde to Algorithm

If fashion is one of your “hearted” categories online, you may have seen images of this shoe showing up on your social media feed. These are the Maison Margiela Tabi shoes with their distinctive split-toe design, a silhouette that challenges conventional Western footwear aesthetics. It was designed by Martin Margiela, a Belgian fashion designer known for deconstructed, avant-garde designs (in the late 1980s and 1990s) that challenge traditional fashion norms. Based on the traditional Japanese Tabi sock boot, the design has remained iconic since 1988 for its polarizing challenge to conventional fashion norms.



Fig. 3. Maison Martin Margiela Spring/Summer 1989 runway look. Maison Martin Margiela, 1989.



Fig. 4. Woodblock print by Utagawa Toyokuni III (Kunisada), ca. 1830–1840. Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Dr. Alvin E. Friedman-Kien, 2004.112.32.



Fig. 5. Scaffolding worker at a construction site. Photograph by Matsuda Tadao, originally published in Japanese, 1 May 2017.

The original “tabi” shape is from Japan. In the 15th century, Japan had been importing cotton from China and using this for socks with a split toe to be worn with wooden thonged sandals called “Geta.” During the 20th century, due to the industrialization of Japan, the use of rubber in production had increased. Shojiro Ishibashi, the founder of the jika-tabi, took the tabi sock’s shape and made it into a shoe for outdoor working. The Tabi became the modern Japanese work shoe for mainly construction workers (Park).

Since the Tabi shoe has an unconventional shape, those less interested in fashion or art would perhaps not find it interesting or appealing. However, on social media platforms like TikTok, videos and images can be curated with accompanying audio. Some people began posting pictures with their Tabi boots,, which are not regular pictures of just a shoe but rather involve placement of cash, credit cards, wine glasses, and cigarettes between the toes, giving Tabi instant exposure. The influence of these videos or images keeps growing, and some people have developed an obsession with these shoes. One TikTok user uploaded a video in 2023, describing a date she went on with a man, and the man ended up stealing her Tabi Mary Janes. That video has had more than 2,180,000 views to date. Since the story went viral, a woman reached out to this TikTok user, saying her friend was dating that man and he just gifted her friend a pair of Tabi, and it turned out they belonged to the TikTok user. It is a crazy story, but it is a remarkable illustration of Tabi’s transformation of cultural value through social media virality.



Fig.6. @margielatab1. “Maison Margiela Tabi boots in archival presentation.” Instagram, 1 July 2023

The “Tabi burglar” incident was what thrust the tabi shoe silhouette into the mainstream. The niche cult following of the shoe was brought to light and introduced to a different and wider audience. Searches for the Tabi following this sensation increased dramatically among several secondhand fashion platforms. According to the Business of Fashion, “searches for Tabis on Depop have increased 110 percent and 40 percent on Lyst over 2022. In the month of September, searches on Lyst more than doubled” (“The Meteoric Rise of the Tabi”).

This specific internet trend demonstrates how easily influenced public opinions on fashion are. The internet algorithm fundamentally disrupted a subcultural mechanism whereby a silhouette that was once considered generally absurd became precisely what the platform’s algorithm amplified. Therefore, an influx of people posting images holding wine glasses and cigarettes inserted between the tabi toe of their tabi shoes flooded the internet, the incentive being participation in a simple fashion trend that is heavily promoted on social media. What is being seen here is social media algorithms rapidly promoting trends, thus curating subcultures almost formed purely from social media algorithms. What was once a niche category of fashion with a barrier of entry, for example, the necessity to understand the history and cultural relevance of the shoe, has transformed into an entry-level quirky social media trend.

Once an avant-garde fashion piece has become commodified, it loses its edge, and the larger audience begins to accept it without understanding its cultural significance . Because of this, there has been tension between the early adopters and the newcomers. Social media battles have begun as the early adopters of tabis are openly sharing their negative feelings about the growth in popularity of the shoe. TikTok videos surfaced online with captions such as, “How I walk knowing that I got my first pair of tabi before Gen Z was even born” (katemarkman). This is the gatekeeping mechanism. Gatekeeping is a form of diplomacy in the politics of competing for superiority to gain cultural status.

The fashion writer Fougy states in their analysis of contemporary fashion elitism that the barriers to certain fashion communities have evolved beyond simple economic access: “Elitism by its very nature isn’t strictly based on one’s income or status but is rather a state of mind” (Fougy). Therefore, under this scenario, the fashion piece does not necessarily need to be Tabi shoes; it could be any other brand or clothing item. These articles of clothing or accessories work as a “fashion ticket” to show others you are one of them and inside the fashion gate. Ultimately, it is not about which brand you wear; it is about how niche you are and how much fashion knowledge others assume you have. Like Fougy said, “At the end of the day, fashion isn’t limited to the clothes themselves but is heavily intertwined with the people involved.” (Fougy)

From Japanese workwear to the TikTok viral trend, Tabi’s journey reveals fashion’s most persistent paradox: the moment a rebellious aesthetic gains widespread adoption, it loses its rebellious edge. Martin Margiela used Tabi’s silhouette to challenge conventional beauty standards. After being marketed within capitalist systems, it has become exactly what it originally opposed—a mass-market symbol of belonging. Yet, that is a result we could have predicted by following the journey of other rebellious aesthetics, like punk. Punk has been gentrified by the fashion industry repeatedly. A denim jacket with studs from a fast fashion brand can be sold as punk aesthetic and is completely opposite to the ethos of punks.

The fashion industry has always co-opted underground/rebellious aesthetics and then churned out a more profitable version through mass production and industrialization. However, in the age of algorithms, the speed of this process has accelerated. This algorithmic acceleration strips away the cultural value and design significance. When we search “Tabi” on social media now, we don’t see Margiela’s critique of Western beauty standards and the connection to Japanese craft traditions anymore; we just see split-toe shoes with a wineglass inserted inside of them with the comment section filled with “need dat’.

1.5 Post-Digital Consumption: The Death of Anti-Fashion

Post-Covid, the digital presentation of fashion is hyper-accelerated; clothes are an emotional blanket for comfort rather than merely covering the body. When trends emerge and collapse in the span of weeks, fashion's value shifts from long-term style identity to immediate psychological impact. People increasingly dress for emotional comfort; the act of choosing what to wear is not only for aesthetic appeal but also as a way to manage mood, anxiety, and uncertainty. Recent research shows that clothing can act as a psychological buffer against existential fears, supporting emotional resilience during stressful times (Gruber et al.).

The Covid-19 pandemic has been framed as a significant cultural and social turning point, accelerating changes in how people dress, shop, and interact with fashion systems (Crewe). Given the term's prevalence in the media over the past few years, its relevance in people's everyday lives cannot be overlooked. Mental health took a turn for the worse in the years following Covid, with global cases of anxiety and depression rising by approximately 25 percent in the first year of the pandemic (World Health Organization). Whether it was the change in lifestyle or the bleak current events, coping mechanisms became necessary for some. A common coping mechanism for many is consumerism. Consumerism became fashion's direct link to Covid, as online retail sales surged dramatically during the pandemic, with U.S. e-commerce growing by 43% in 2020 alone (U.S. Census Bureau).

With less to do and more to think about, escapism became a vital coping mechanism during covid. Consumers bought more and more clothing with less function for them as social environments were either closed or soon to be reopened. Fashion is something an individual can control when all else fails. Research by Dubler and Gurel from 1984 found that higher levels of depression correlated with increased participant engagement in using clothing to enhance appearance and mood, suggesting that fashion purchases and wearing garments can provide genuine emotional uplift. Consumerist bad habits incurred during covid have lasted, and today we can still see them in some of the products popular in 2025.

The craze for Labubu dolls (Fig.7), adorable yet slightly menacing plush toys from Pop Mart, has captured the same energy that defines anti-fashion: emotional resonance, community, and resistance to polished norms. Though not fashion items, Labubus have been styled as bag charms and photographed in influencer feeds, transforming them into accessory symbols of escapism (BoF). The Atlantic identifies their "ugly-cute" charm and surprise-blind-box model as enabling a "kidulthood" trend, where adults publicly embrace childlike aesthetics that reject mature seriousness (Trapp). Collectors describe personal joy and creative identity in their Labubu collections, which serve emotional and social functions analogous to fashion communities (Bellaiche). Indeed, New York Magazine and Business of Fashion note that Labubus have evolved into cultural signifiers comparable to fashion accessories, playfully worn, widely recognized, and emotionally potent markers of identity.



Fig. 7. POP MART Labubu "Time to Chill" vinyl plush doll. POP MART, 2025. Pop Mart LABUBU Time to Chill Vinyl Plush Doll

Algorithmic feeds are designed to prioritize content that evokes emotional responses such as joy, nostalgia, jealousy, or anger, because these emotions tend to increase user engagement. A study of Twitter's engagement-based algorithms found that they over-amplified divisive or emotional posts, regardless of users' expressed preferences (Milli et al.) This mechanism isn't unique to toys; fashion trends operate in the same way. Viral micro-trends like the Miu Miu miniskirt revival or the wedge sneaker resurgence of the early 2010s spread not just because of their design quality but because they tap into a collective emotional state, post-pandemic nostalgia, irony, and even a thrill of exclusivity (Liu). In these cases, the visual artifact becomes secondary to the emotional loop: see, want, acquire, display, repeat.

With the constant churn of platform-driven novelty, consumers are experiencing what can be described as trend fatigue, which is a sense of exhaustion from the relentless stream of micro-trends vying for attention (Newberry). Information overload, driven by algorithmic feeds, means that audiences are simultaneously bombarded with new styles and shown their rapid obsolescence. Now, people post TikTok videos like "What trend do you hate the most?" or "If you all love fashion, why do you all look the same?" These videos directly critique the homogenizing effect of trend cycles. Yet even the act of resisting trends is quickly commodified; whether this is through ironic dressing, adopting so-called "anti-fashion" styles, or simply quitting fashion, these are swiftly absorbed back into the system as sellable aesthetics. As Hebdige notes, subcultural styles are often "rendered harmless" through incorporation (94). This has left many participants feeling trapped in a cycle where resistance itself has become a marketing tool. Algorithmic feeds are designed to prioritize content that evokes emotional responses such as joy, nostalgia, jealousy, or anger, because these emotions tend to increase user engagement. The result is when rebellion and conformity become the same aesthetic product, packaged and resold as the next "core," a paradox of the digital era.

Given the relentless pace of trend cycles and the algorithm's ability to commodify even acts of resistance, people may say that anti-fashion is

dead. Its ethos hollowed out, repackaged, and sold back to us as another trend. That once radical act of rejecting mainstream fashion now circulates as stylized content, stripped of its political or cultural edge. However, at the same time, there remains hope through conscious consumers and designers with rooted, value-driven practice. There are two examples, Norlha and Willy Chavarria, that illustrate that anti-fashion can survive when rooted in deep cultural integrity, ethical production, and community connection. Anti-fashion, to them, is not achieved through design alone but rather through action and practice.

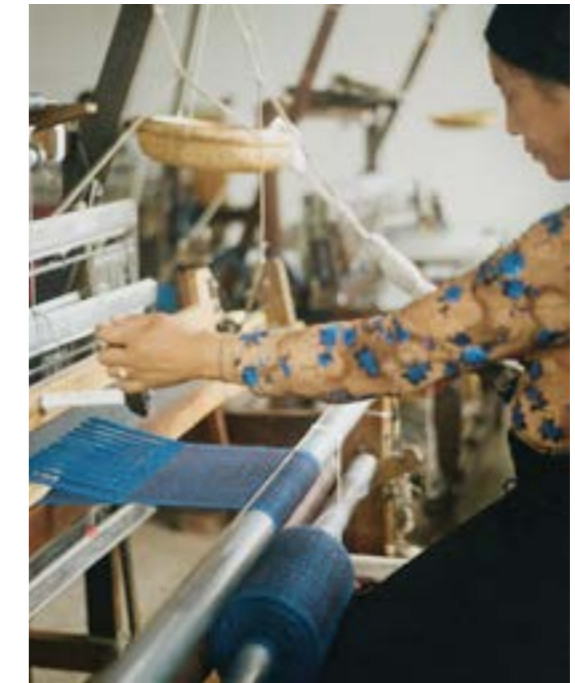


Fig. 8. Norlha artisans weaving yak khullu textiles from Norlha's Family of Artisans. Photograph from Norlha, Norlha Atelier



Fig. 9. Look from Willy Chavarria Huron Spring/Summer 2026 collection. Photograph by Willy Chavarria, Spring/Summer 2026.

Norlha is a Tibetan slow fashion brand. They started in 2007, working with yak wool (khullu) and rejecting disposable contemporary fashion by focusing on community, fair labor, and the longevity of materials. Clothing is not a seasonal and disposable item in this fashion house, but a lasting object embedded in local traditions and the authenticity of the community (Phelps). Their store and headquarters in a village called Ritoma in China is more than a store; it is a cultural portal that creates economic resilience and supports long-term livelihoods for the community. They teach the villagers how to weave and hire most of the workers locally. This approach resists capitalism's quest for eternal novelty and instead offers a model where fashion is a cultural vehicle rather than an endless flow of products.

Willy Chavarria perfectly demonstrates how fashion can embody anti-fashion values through emotional authenticity and cultural depth. Chavarria doesn't follow trends but rather introspectively creates by reflecting on his identity and heritage as a queer Latin designer with working-class roots, embedding deeply personal narratives into his collections (Hurtado). As Chicana feminist scholar Aída Hurtado reflects in *ReVista*, she was so moved by Chavarria's "Deep Cut" collection that she "cried for a day," describing his designs as emotionally profound and reminiscent of liberation rooted in visible bodies made invisible by dominant beauty standards (Hurtado). His Spring/Summer 2026 collection, showcased at Paris Fashion Week, embodies how anti-fashion persists through integrity and emotional resistance. *Harper's Bazaar* describes the show as "singularly, powerfully political," noting that Chavarria even dispatched his invitations styled like immigration summons, only to reveal inside that they read "Right to Exist: Presentation of Humanity" (Freestone). The opening moment featured 35 models kneeling on the ground in an immersive act of protest directly embedded in sartorial performance. Chavarria resists the commoditization of trends by anchoring his designs in life stories and political urgency. His clothes become a letter for resistance that carries the messages of truth that are woven into the garment. It helps the audience to realize that fashion is not just something superficial but something inherent in human nature that gives you a voice.

So, in the digital era, anti-fashion is no longer confined to dark, deconstructed garments or the visual codes of subcultural rebellion, but rather it has evolved into a discipline or practice of self-definition. The deliberate act of standing for oneself and remaining true to one's values amid a culture of algorithmic imitation and rapid commodification can somewhat come off as futile. Yet, it is the conscious refusal to conform to the endless churn of trends that defines more resilient interpretations of contemporary anti-fashion. The definition is less about rejecting fashion entirely but rather shifting to reclaiming agency within it. This is a trend reversal that almost comes full circle. In this way, anti-fashion persists not as a fixed aesthetic but as an ongoing negotiation between individuality and spectacle. Social media as a constant stream of information creates a more implicated definition of anti-fashion that is subconsciously agreed upon by the society.

2. New Zealand Fashion Week Diary

Following an invitation to participate in a runway show (Ahua) at New Zealand Fashion Week, I was running around in circles with my ideas of anti-fashion. I felt like if I designed anything, it would be the opposite of my claimed intention, leaving me in a conundrum. I could not work out how to design something as anti-fashion.

Feeling stuck, I arranged an interview with the former brand manager at Willy Chavarria. We had a great conversation, and one thing that changed my view on the brand and my own project was his response to my question of whether the brand is building the community or empowering the working class and minorities by rejecting commodification. In my view, he does not follow prevailing trends in order to design for consumer preference; instead, his work prioritizes the articulation of the ideas and concepts he seeks to convey. He said the brand does not reject commodification. His comments shocked me, as Willy Chavarria presents himself as authentic in sending a powerful message to the fashion world, gaining a high fashion ticket by representing the Latin American and working-class culture.

However, he said it is just one way of marketing; for this marketing, the tool is authenticity. After this conversation, I felt conflicted; on the one hand, Willy Chavarria, I believe, is genuinely committed to serving and representing their gay community, and yet they use this as part of their marketing. After this conversation, I felt conflicted as to whether Willy Chavarria is misleading consumers or if its authentic, community-driven marketing is designed to boost sales.

Nevertheless, the brand is successful in both its commercial endeavors and its community-oriented messaging. Perhaps authenticity in branding is acceptable if there is a positive influence. For me, as a consumer, I got the message that you can still have your own voice even though it is small, so I guess there is nothing wrong with using authenticity in branding as long as you are serving your community through representing your community. That was a pivot point for my design direction. After the conversation with the brand manager, it opened the door for my design. I felt free and that I

could design whatever I liked as long as I stayed true to myself and created with intention and social consciousness, making things that I am proud of. As Bruggeman argues in *Dissolving the Ego of Fashion*, “Critiquing the ego will only enhance the egoic system, so an affirmative and alternative approach is essential here. Instead of starting from resistance, we need to start from awareness and dance with fashion’s ego to carefully affirm alternatives (9).”

With that in mind, I went to Auckland and attended the Ahua show at NZFW. Ahua is a fashion runway show funded by young designers in 2023 to protest against NZFW for lack of representation of minorities and the queer community, so most people that are involved are volunteering, including make-up and hair artists and models. It made me realize that if you are “nobody,” fashion is an unpaid job. Precarity and unpaid labor in the fashion industry are ongoing problems, but they are more brutal when you have absolutely zero name recognition or even have to pay from your own pocket to work on someone else’s project. Your opinion and work have no value until you gain fashion capital.

Before the show I was asked to send a profile picture and bio to introduce myself. I didn’t like this idea as I prefer people to focus on my work instead of me. However, I didn’t realize how important marketing is for a runway show in order to sell tickets. Previous shows with poor marketing barely sold any tickets, meaning Ahua volunteers had to give out free tickets to fill up seats. This again proves how vital social media is in this day and age. I did send in a profile picture and my bio.

I initially questioned the emphasis on promotion, but after my runway show, its value became clear through organic social media sharing. This online validation made me feel good, as I received many “likes” and new followers. Perhaps this is why some people become obsessed with fashion. It is not about the clothes but the validation. After I had a taste of the “Fashion Elite” treatment, I started to rethink; maybe ego and delusions are effective motivations that we need to survive in the fashion industry. I needed to stay vigilant and aware of the influence of “Fashion” with its

illusion of status throughout this fashion week. Clothes were not the thing I enjoyed the most, but the connection and friends I made during the week were. I felt I was a part of a community.

This experience helped me figure out what my anti-fashion stance is. For me, fashion is an experience, and anti-fashion is the reflection of the experience that allows for more careful and conscious changes, like when you choose a brand that pays their workers fairly or think about what message you want to deliver to the world as a designer.

3. Methods and Processes

3.1 Methodology: Design Through Process

The methodology used in this study is “design through process,” evolving the design through continuous cycles of draping, material testing, sketching, and print development, shaping the design through iterative making, experimentation, and reflection. Each stage of making informs the next, allowing unexpected discoveries to alter the direction of both the conceptual and material investigation. This method positions practice as research, using hands-on experimentation to explore themes of anti-fashion, transformation, and adaptation, and to translate theoretical insights into embodied, visual, and tactile forms.

I started making it during the writing of my literature review. I began experimenting with small samples using liquid latex. The first few samples were an absolute mess; they were thin, sticky, and always clumping into a ball if I wasn’t paying attention. Then I started adding layers of the latex: first five, then ten. With more layers, the latex became visibly stronger and more durable. That felt like a success, so I tried fusing fabric inside to see what would happen. The result was glossy, but stretching caused the latex to lose its elasticity, and pulling too hard made it crack.

In the next stage, I embedded prints and handwriting between layers, and from there, I kept developing the material, experimenting with different underlayers, adding beads, and manipulating surfaces. These processes showed me the potential of the latex material.

But working without design intention eventually led me into another corner; I started asking myself, “Why do I want to make a collection?” Why this material? I wanted everything to be intentional, to be something that provokes thought.

With that in mind, I continued sketching but liked none of the results. It felt like creative constipation, forced and unfulfilling. It made me realize how many designers in the industry are pressured to create endlessly: 15 collections a year, 50+ looks per show. It’s unsustainable, and it breaks

people. That made me determined to create something meaningful, something that reflects where I am right now as a young fashion designer full of the conflicts of fashion that I have discussed: authenticity versus commerciality.

Through extensive sampling and the development of full-scale prototypes, my research began to draw unexpectedly from a childhood fascination with silkworms. Growing up in China, I was closely exposed to silkworm cultivation, and we all had silkworms for ‘pets’ as children. I hold the vivid memory of their rhythmic sound while feeding as a lasting sensory imprint. Studying and designing in Aotearoa later created a physical and cultural distance from this experience, prompting me to revisit it as a source of direction for my design because it grounded me to some intrinsic memory from my childhood and culture. This contrast between place, memory, and my present context allowed the silkworm to emerge not only as a material reference but also as a conceptual anchor connecting personal history with my current design practice.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

The silkworm drove my design process, with the life cycle becoming a metaphor for my journey through fashion, each stage reflecting a different attitude and helping me to understand my own exploration into the role of anti-fashion in the digital age. My final two design outcomes embody the following:

Look 1: Consume - overload, mimicry, trend-chasing
Look 2: Reflect, Reborn, Moth - spectacle or resistance



Fig. 10. *Sensory hairs near the head of a monarch caterpillar as discussed in a study of caterpillar hearing.* From Andy Davis, "An In-Depth Look at the Recent Paper on Monarch Caterpillar Hearing (with Images)," *MonarchScience.org*, 13 Dec. 2019, updated 22 Mar. 2022.



Fig.11. Malaika. "Unique Colorful Moths With Beautiful Patterns That Are Too Majestic." *Defused*, 31 July 2021

Now my drawings began to make more sense. I started taking different elements from the stages of a silkworm's life cycle and applying them to my sketches. It felt promising, but I wanted to do more than simply represent the life cycle of the silkworm. But how?

Working with the logistical timeframes, I questioned, "How do you ensure quality within a limited time frame?"

In today's capitalist world, the fashion industry mostly pushes speed and consumption over quality. That's why people often joke, "Oh, this shoe's quality is too good to be authentic." It's a joke, but it also reflects reality: garment quality is declining compared to clothes from decades ago, when clothing was made to last. People love vintage and secondhand clothing, but will today's garments survive long enough to ever be called vintage?

This is a question everyone in the industry should reflect on. Through this project, I hope to raise awareness of this issue not just within the industry but also among everyday consumers.

Anti-fashion, anti what? The meaning shifts over time. I believe that in today's society, fashion has become democratic, but democracy often comes with sacrifices like fast fashion. It gives a chance for everyone to enjoy fashion and clothes because it doesn't cost much to purchase since it is poorly made, in turn creating mass waste that we cannot afford. What we can do is minimize the damage. From my perspective, that is what anti-fashion means today: being aware of the problems with trends, buying better, buying less, and designing with intention.

With that in mind, I went back to the start of my project, refining the structures and the design aims, informed by the silkworm metaphor. I asked myself, "What am I critiquing?" If anti-fashion is a paradox, how can I design for a paradox? A paradox is unsolvable that's why it's called a paradox. Unless... you go around the paradox.

After my meeting with an ex-brand manager, Andrew, from Willy Chavarria, a label I really admire, this became the pivot point of my project.

I asked Andrew, "How does your brand resist commodification when social media so often turns radical ideas into consumable aesthetics almost instantly?"

His answer shocked me: "We don't. Because that is how you keep the business running. At the end of the day, this is a business, and we need to make money."

That response turned my view of fashion in a new direction. I realized commodification isn't always a bad thing, especially when it's almost impossible to avoid. If fashion is the system, then commodification is the mechanism. And you can never defeat the system, so why not make the system work for you? It helped me get out of the corner I had been stuck in, where I was trying so hard to prove a paradox that can never be solved. Instead, it gave me a detour, a way to go around the paradox but still reach the same destination.

Since freeing myself from that limitation, I've reviewed my designs and aims all over again. My mindset shifted from "everything I design will be everything I stand against" to "everything I design will be everything I stand for." I want to make the system work for me, to get its attention, and then use that space to show what I stand for. I want to be the one that is conscious of what I buy and what I create. I returned to the silkworm metaphor in my designs, making prototypes and samples for each stage of the silkworm's life. I created 30 for each stage, finally selecting two from each to carry forward into further development.

3.3 Material Practice

I revisited 19th-century Victorian mourning wear, as my garment research reflected the “Death of Anti-Fashion” . Men often wore long wool jackets with an extra piece of fabric added to their hats and an armband. Women typically wore long black dresses and hats with veils that could cover their faces. The hats came in many styles and often revealed whether the wearer came from a wealthy family or not. I was really fascinated by them.

With the metaphor of the caterpillar transforming into a moth, I brought color into the language of anti-fashion. This approach reflects my own aesthetic interest while challenging the conventions of “traditional anti-fashion” through the use of color and pattern.

As I refined my samples and material investigation, I evaluated how each material behaved structurally and visually in relation to my design intentions. This stage allowed me to identify the limitations of certain fabrics and adjust my approach accordingly, ensuring that the final outcomes aligned with both the conceptual direction and the practical requirements of the garment. I used scuba knit to construct the spikes, as the fabric’s soft texture and inherent structure allowed it to hold its shape without additional fusing. This rigidity comes from the spring-like filament embedded between its two layers; however, this also presented a challenge, as cutting into the material caused the filaments to shed. Despite its structure, the fabric’s softness limited its movement when applied to the body.



Fig.12



Fig.13



Fig.14



Fig.15

Figs. 12-17. Sample 1-6. Created and photographed by the author, 2025.

For the base, I fused calico to create a more stable foundation that aligned more closely with my initial drawings. I also incorporated wadding to add volume and support, enabling the base to maintain its intended form.



Fig.16



Fig.17

In this sample, I fused the spikes to the fabric to create more texture and used double-sided fusing so the pattern appeared on both sides. It had strong movement on the body and a striking visual even when flat. For the base, I tested using only wadding to compare the effect. While it added softness and volume, it lacked the textured structure in my drawings, so future development will combine both wadding and fusing.

I developed my own fabric prints based on the life cycle of the caterpillar. I started by creating a series of watercolor paintings on paper, which I then scanned and digitized. From there, I layered and manipulated the elements, exploring shifts in color and form to generate prints variations. I drew inspiration from the caterpillar's spikes and colors, which I see as a defense mechanism shaped by natural selection, highlighting how powerful and inherently beautiful these elements are.

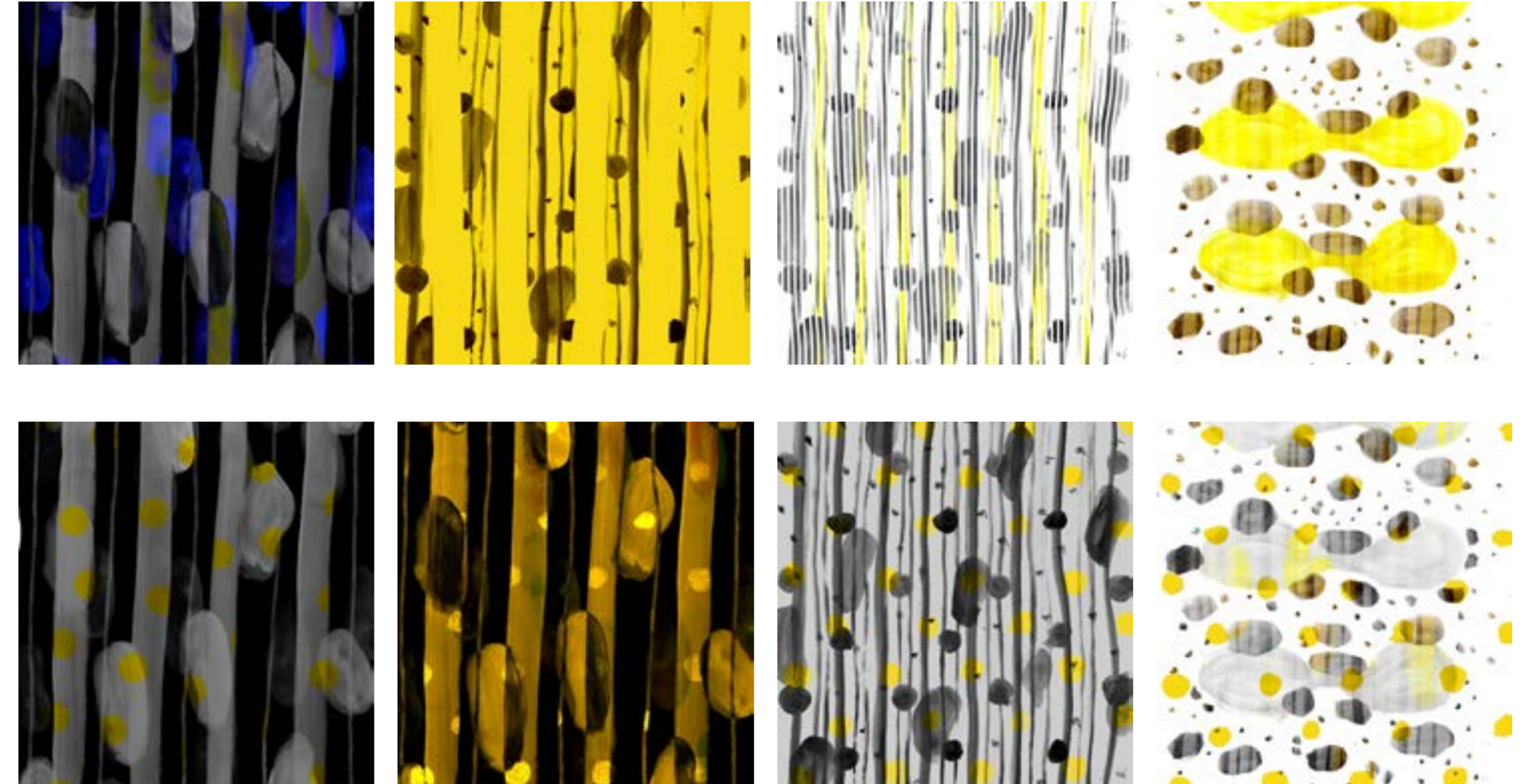


Fig. 18. Prints. Illustration by the author, 2025.

Look 1: Consume - Overload, Mimicry, Trend-Chasing

The first look, Caterpillar, is a heavily padded shirt that deliberately resists fitting the body, featuring a cut-out opening at the front, paired with a hat that rests on the head rather than conforming to it. This intentional misalignment emphasizes a condition in which fashion and trends are pursued without being fully embodied or understood, reducing the act of dressing to mere participation rather than meaningful engagement.

The cut-out holes reference leaves consumed by a caterpillar, positioning the garment itself as a consumable object. In this way, the piece frames fashion as something that is continually worn, consumed, and discarded, mirroring the uncritical cycle of trend consumption rather than personal expression.



Fig. 19. Look 1. Illustration by the author, 2025.

Look 2: Reflect, Reborn, Moth - Spectacle or Resistance

The second look represents the Moth stage, a phase that follows reflection and self-recognition. In contrast to the previous look, this stage is defined by acceptance and reconciliation with the self. The garment becomes fitted to the body, with the dress draped directly on the model to correspond precisely to her proportions. As a result, the clothing no longer merely sits on the body but is actively worn and embodied.

All elements of this look are detachable and can be reconfigured in multiple ways. This modularity reinforces the idea that identity does not need to be fixed within specific stylistic categories or constantly reshaped in response to trends. Instead, the wearer retains agency, using the same elements to express different appearances while remaining fundamentally themselves. At this stage, style becomes adaptive rather than imitative, emphasizing continuity of self over conformity to external fashion cycles.



Fig. 20. Look 2. Illustration by the author, 2025.

3.5 Garment Development and Construction



In my first toile, I realized the garment needed a larger body to heighten the contrast between the form and the wearer, reinforcing the idea of the piece sitting on the body rather than being worn. This adjustment also prompted a redesign of the neckline; adding a collar stand and enlarging the collar will strengthen the overall proportion and further emphasize that contrast.

For the second toile, I fused the sleeves so they could stand independently, creating the illusion that when the hands emerge from the front, the garment resembles a creature rather than a human. I experimented with placing spikes on the holes to see which arrangement worked best.

The dent in the back naturally occurred due to the sleeve being too stiff to naturally fall on the shoulder, enhancing the concept of the garment sitting on the body rather than being worn.

Fig. 21. Look 1 Sample. Photograph by the author, 2025.



For the second look's toile, I draped directly onto the model's body, as the garment is intended to function as a "second skin," conforming precisely to the contours of the wearer. This approach emphasizes the intimate relationship between body and garment, foregrounding comfort and authenticity in self-presentation. By closely following the individual's form, the piece allows the wearer to inhabit the design with ease while maintaining a sense of personal identity.

Furthermore, its adaptable surface enables the addition of accessories, facilitating transformation into multiple stylistic expressions without compromising the integrity of the base silhouette.

Fig. 22. Look 2 Sample. Photograph by the author, 2025.

3.6 Photo Shoot

After finishing the garments, it was time for the final examination of a collection that is not ready-to-wear. This moment can determine whether a collection is successful, but it is also a time when I get to reach out to people I am not familiar with and create opportunities to build connections.

I organized the shoot through my social media, calling out for a photographer, makeup artist, and model whom I had not worked with before. After the shoot, we built a strong connection as a team and accomplished something meaningful together. With the model, photographer, and makeup artist, I simply ran through my idea for the collection and what it is about, along with my inspirations and references. I didn't specify a particular look or lighting; instead, I encouraged them to interpret the collection brief in their own way. Everyone was excited to take part in a shoot where they had creative control .

The shoot started at 9am, and everyone arrived on time. I made coffee, brought snacks, and put on music, and the vibe was set. Everyone moved into their roles, makeup, lighting setup, and styling; everything went as planned. Throughout the shoot, we encouraged each other and collectively developed new ideas. To create a "vibe," there was also a lot of taping and pinning happening behind the clothes. This kind of construction is often invisible in final images and is a key reason why online shopping has such high return rates. What is being sold is not always the product itself, but the image of it.

I could not have completed this photoshoot without every single person involved. The makeup, hair, and styling complemented the collection deeply. As the designer, my role focused on the garments and overall creative direction, but completing the shoot and ensuring everything ran smoothly relied on many people working behind the scenes, most of whom are never visible on social media. Maybe consuming fashion is individual, but creating fashion is collective.



Fig. 23. Look 1 final. Photograph by the author, 2025.



Fig. 24. Look 2 final variations. Photograph by the author, 2025.

Design Outcome



Fig. 25. A Design Exploration Of The Contemporary Anti-Fashion Paradox: Taste, Rebellion, and Digital Distortion. Photograph by Jas Sabrine, 2026.



Fig. 26. A Design Exploration Of The Contemporary Anti-Fashion Paradox: Taste, Rebellion, and Digital Distortion. Photograph by Jas Sabrine, 2026.

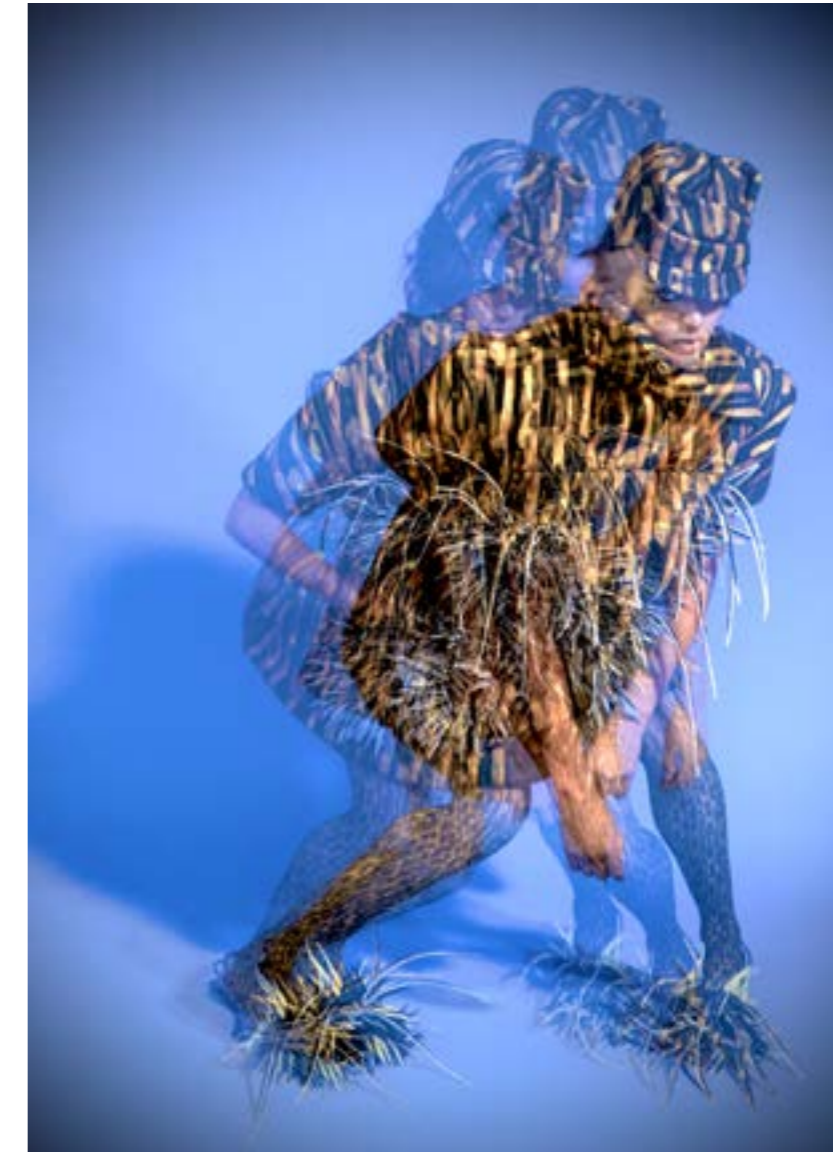


Fig. 27. A Design Exploration Of The Contemporary Anti-Fashion Paradox: Taste, Rebellion, and Digital Distortion. Photograph by Jas Sabrine, 2026.



Fig. 28. A Design Exploration Of The Contemporary Anti-Fashion Paradox: Taste, Rebellion, and Digital Distortion. Photograph by Jas Sabrina, 2026.



Fig. 29. A Design Exploration Of The Contemporary Anti-Fashion Paradox: Taste, Rebellion, and Digital Distortion. Photograph by Jas Sabrina, 2026.



Fig. 30. A Design Exploration Of The Contemporary Anti-Fashion Paradox: Taste, Rebellion, and Digital Distortion. Photograph by Jas Sabrina, 2026.



Fig. 31. A Design Exploration Of The Contemporary Anti-Fashion Paradox: Taste, Rebellion, and Digital Distortion. Photograph by Jas Sabrina, 2026.



Fig. 32. A Design Exploration Of The Contemporary Anti-Fashion Paradox: Taste, Rebellion, and Digital Distortion. Photograph by Jas Sabrine, 2026.



Fig. 33 A Design Exploration Of The Contemporary Anti-Fashion Paradox: Taste, Rebellion, and Digital Distortion. Photograph by Jas Sabrine, 2026.

Conclusion

This project examined how anti-fashion has shifted within algorithmic visual culture, where rebellion is rapidly aestheticized, circulated, and commodified. Using theories of cultural capital, spectacle, subculture, and performance, the research demonstrates how digital platforms reshape taste, accelerate commodification, and turn identity into a visible, measurable act. In this environment, anti-fashion is no longer the sign of resistance to the fashion system; instead, it frequently reappears as a style that is defined by algorithmic legibility rather than oppositional intent. Through case studies such as digital aesthetic “cores” and the Tabi phenomenon, this thesis has shown how subcultural and avant-garde symbols rapidly lose specificity once they become hyper-visible. As Hebdige and Debord suggest, rebellion is not erased but transformed; it is rendered consumable through circulation, repetition, and spectacle. This creates a paradox: the desire to resist conformity actually gives rise to new patterns of conformity, causing contemporary fashion lovers to constantly struggle between individuality and systemic influence.

In response to this condition, the design component operates not as a solution to the paradox of anti-fashion, but as a negotiation with it. Using the silkworm life cycle as a conceptual framework, the collection materializes stages of consumption, reflection, and rebirth, mirroring an individual’s journey through fashion in the digital age. Victorian mourning wear functions as a historical metaphor for the “death” of traditional anti-fashion while also enabling its reimagining through transformation rather than rejection. Together, these references allow the garments to articulate themes of loss, adaptation, and cyclical renewal.

The strengths of the design outcome lie in its integration of theory, material experimentation, and process. It demonstrates the importance of the design journey is important, even if the process does not work out, because it might advance the expressive and structural potential of the

design while maintaining conceptual clarity. The project contributes to contemporary fashion by reframing anti-fashion not as a fixed visual style, but as an intentional and reflexive design practice. Rather than positioning resistance as an escape from fashion systems, the work acknowledges commodification as inevitable and instead explores how authorship, agency, and meaning can still be asserted within it. This marks a significant evolution in my own design practice. Through a design through process methodology, my approach shifted from outcome-driven production toward a more reflexive, research-led practice. Iterative making, material failure, and critical reflection became essential tools for seeking knowledge, allowing concepts to emerge through practice rather than being imposed. This process fostered a deeper awareness of how theory, lived experience, and material experimentation inform one another. Importantly, reflexivity became central to my practice, particularly in acknowledging my position within the very fashion system I critique. Rather than attempting to resolve the paradox of anti-fashion, I learned to design alongside it and embrace contradiction as a productive space for inquiry.

The project opens up future opportunities for continued exploration of fashion as a critical and speculative practice. The material and methodological approaches developed here could be extended into slow design, community-based production, or post-consumerist models that prioritize longevity and emotional attachment over novelty. Conceptually, the framework of metaphoric design offers potential for demonstrating complex concepts in a visually understandable outcome for more people.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that in an era where rebellion is rapidly normalized and circulated as content, anti-fashion must be understood not as a stable aesthetic but as an ongoing practice of intention and awareness. It persists not through visual extremity alone, but through reflective authorship, ethical positioning, and conscious negotiation with systemic forces. Through both critical analysis and design practice, this project demonstrates how fashion can continue to function as a

meaningful tool for self-expression and resistance, even within a culture dominated by spectacle, acceleration, and algorithmic control. It delivers a reflective message for individuals who are acutely aware of their position within these systems: external validation cannot resolve internal uncertainty. Instead, agency in dress requires self-awareness, intentional choice, and the confidence to assert one’s own values.

Glossary

Anti-Fashion

wRejection of mainstream fashion in favor of individuality and nonconformity.

Algorithm

A system that determines what content users see on digital platforms based on engagement and behavior.

Aesthetic

A set of visual or artistic principles defining style, taste, or beauty.

Blokecore

A UK-inspired aesthetic rooted in working-class, lad culture and casual sportswear.

Capitalist Spectacle

Guy Debord's concept describing how consumer culture uses images and media to sustain capitalism.

Clean Girl

A minimalist, polished aesthetic emphasizing simplicity, wellness, and effortlessness.

Clout Chasing

Seeking visibility or status by aligning with trends or influential figures.

Cultural Arbitrators

People or institutions that shape and legitimize cultural taste and value.

Cultural Capital

Knowledge and cultural competencies that provide social advantage.

Deconstructed

A design approach that disrupts traditional forms through fragmentation or exposure.

Digital Platforms

Online spaces for creating, sharing, and consuming content.

Distressed

Intentionally worn or damaged design to create a rugged or lived-in look.

Face Card

A slang term referring to perceived attractiveness or presence.

Fashion Elitism

The belief that fashion value belongs to a select, exclusive group.

Fashion Ticket

Access or invitation to exclusive fashion spaces or events.

Gentrified

The transformation of areas that displaces lower-income communities.

Gatekeeper

An entity that controls access to opportunities, information, or visibility.

Hashtagged

Tagged with keywords to categorize and increase visibility on social media.

Indie Sleaze

A 2000s-inspired aesthetic blending grunge, excess, and carefree rebellion.

Influencer

An individual who shapes consumer behavior through online presence.

Instagram

A visual social media platform centered on images, video, and lifestyle culture.

Labubu Dolls

Designer collectible figures by Lu Yu, known for surreal, playful aesthetics.

Micro-Celebrities

Online figures with niche but dedicated followings.

Micro-Trends

Short-lived trends that rise and fall rapidly online.

Performative Personality

A curated self-presentation designed for visibility or approval.

Pop Mart

A Chinese company producing artist-designed collectible toys and blind boxes.

Rednote (Xiaohongshu)

A Chinese lifestyle platform blending social media and e-commerce.

Recuperation

The absorption of countercultural ideas into mainstream commercial culture.

Tabi Shoes

Split-toe footwear rooted in Japanese tradition and popularized in avant-garde fashion.

TikTok

A short-form video platform driven by viral trends and algorithmic feeds.

Upcycled

Reusing existing materials to create new fashion products.

Ugly Core

An aesthetic embracing intentional awkwardness and anti-beauty ideals.

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