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# Women and garments in conflict: Exclusivity and exclusion in fashion design in Ecuador

## *Mujeres y prendas en conflicto: exclusividad y exclusión del diseño de modas en Ecuador*

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***Abstract***
*This research analyzes the strategies employed by fashion designers in Ecuador to position themselves in the national market, despite the arrival of large fast fashion chains in the country over the past few decades. It also examines the forms of "feminine duty" promoted through their proposals. A qualitative methodology was used, based on semi-structured interviews that gathered testimonies from fashion designers and workers creating garments for their own brands, as well as from women experts in the garment industry. Participant observation was also conducted in design workshops, photographic productions, and catwalks where national clothing collections were showcased. The findings are expressed in two dimensions. On one hand, the Ecuadorian fashion industry employs the following positioning strategies: (i) constant professionalization, attention to quality, and customization of the garments produced; (ii) collaboration through design societies; and (iii) the exhibition and promotion of their creations. On the other hand, the designs aim to define the lifestyle and image that fashion consumers should conform to establishing an imaginary shaped by gender and class stereotypes that often fail to reflect the bodily diversity of most Ecuadorian women.*

***Keywords***
*Fashion, production, stereotypes, gender, social class, Ecuador.*

**Resumen**
Esta investigación analiza las estrategias que emplean diseñadores y diseñadoras de moda en el Ecuador para posicionarse en el mercado nacional, pese a la llegada de grandes cadenas de moda rápida que han ingresado al país en las últimas décadas, indagando además sobre las formas de "deber ser femenino" que promueven a través de sus propuestas. Para ello se utilizó una metodología cualitativa basada en entrevistas semiestructuradas en las cuales se recabaron los testimonios de diseñadoras de moda y obreras que laboran para sus propias marcas, así como de mujeres expertas en la comercialización de prendas que se dedican a esta industria. De igual forma, se realizó observación participante en talleres de diseño, así como en producciones fotográficas y pasarelas en las cuales se presentaron colecciones nacionales. Los resultados obtenidos se expresan en dos dimensiones: por un lado, se evidencia que la industria de la moda ecuatoriana utiliza como estrategias de posicionamiento (i) la constante profesionalización, calidad y personalización de las prendas que produce; (ii) la participación en sociedades de diseño; (iii) así como la exhibición y difusión de sus creaciones. Por otro lado, se constata que los diseños creados apuntan a definir el estilo de vida y el tipo de imagen al que deberían ajustarse las consumidoras de moda, mediante el establecimiento de un imaginario basado en estereotipos de género y clase, los cuales no siempre corresponden a la diversidad corporal de la mayoría de las mujeres ecuatorianas.

**Palabras clave**
Moda, producción, estereotipos, género, clase social, Ecuador.

# Introduction

Fashion is a constantly changing social phenomenon that consists of establishing social relationships based on cohesion and distinction through social

style (Entwistle, 2002). In other words, people use certain types of clothing as a way of positioning themselves in the world, showing their identity and a type of discourse through the signs they wear. For this reason, an ideal of "how one should be" has also been imposed on men and women when it comes to these purchases.

The history of fashion dates back to the mid-19th century, when the concept of the "couturier" originated with its pioneer Fredrick Worth, known as the father of "haute couture" (Viste la calle, 2011). Worth marked a turning point in the history of fashion, since in the past the French aristocracy went to a seamstress or tailor to have their clothes made. However, with the arrival of the English couturier, the "designer label" was introduced in clothing, which added value to a product by transforming it into something exclusively made by an artist. As the English designer's work was known among the upper classes, he began to produce collections that were shown once a year in his office, also known as *Maison.*

Frederick Worth's work was followed by Paul Poiret, known as the creator of the pencil skirt, as well as Gabrielle Chanel, the pioneer of the three-quarter-length black dress and tailored suits for women (Erner, 2004). Fashion has a long history of renowned figures who have introduced new ways of dressing through their designs, including Christian Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, Franco Moschino, and Vivienne Westwood, who are representatives of *haute couture,* understood as the creation of exclusive garments that are never repeated (Vaca Eguez, 2019a, p. 27).

With globalization, the names of many of these designers have become the most luxurious fashion brands circulating worldwide, turning into an important industry by promoting the consumption of certain material goods as a way to satisfy people's needs. In addition to the aforementioned luxury brands that cater to a very specific market with high purchasing power, there are also business groups dedicated to ready-to-wear fashion or *Prêt-à-porter*, "an expression of French origin that translates as 'ready to wear' and refers to mass-produced fashion garments with patterns that are repeated depending on the demand" (Vidal Miranda, 2018, p. 5), which have more affordable prices due to cheap labor based on subcontracting and a decrease in the quality of raw materials. Among these are companies such as Inditex, Mango, Hennes & Mauritz, also known as H&M, among others.

However, the level of consumption and circulation of symbols through fashion in recent years has grown so rapidly that the world is now in a mo-

ment of real-time fast fashion production, as is the case with SHEIN: "a Chinese cross-border company that is a pioneer in reducing the total clothing production time to three weeks" (Bunster *et al. and* 2021, p. 84). This phenomenon means that by 2023, the industry will be valued at $1.74 trillion, making it one of the fastest-growing business models globally (Statista, 2024).

The growth of fashion trends has spread throughout the world, and Latin America is no exception. Faced with such a globalized landscape, each country has tried to come up with its own design proposals as a way of generating identity. In the case of Ecuador, fashion has been a constant form of distinction between social classes. According to Cifuentes (cited in Pontón, 2019), this has been the case since the late 19th century, when elite women were influenced by Parisian fashion and completely changed the way they dressed. Thus, "fashion in Ecuador took on the face of modern expression and became a force that destroyed traditional codes of life and behavior" (Pontón, 2019, p. 67).

However, as such, the fashion industry with its own Ecuadorian stamp began to emerge in the 1980s in the city of Guayaquil with the appearance of designers who were responsible for making dresses tailored to their clients, although they did not have a business with expansion prospects as such. It was not until the mid-1990s that fashion design began to emerge through new designers who started to showcase their creations. However, to date, this activity faces several obstacles that have prevented it from projecting itself and competing as an industry with large transnational business conglomerates. In this regard, it is necessary to understand what strategies are used by fashion designers in Ecuador to position in the market despite the large fast fashion chains that exist in the country, and what forms of "feminine ideals" do these designers promote through their creations?

## Theoretical framework

For Entwistle (2002), people are clothed bodies willing to coexist in society and, therefore, their consumption and aesthetics respond to a social function. Thus, fashion deserves to be critically reflected upon, not as a frivolous industry, but as a complex network that responds to mandates governed by social class and gender. Seid (2018) understands social classes as multidimensional spaces in which social powers converge, such as: economic po-

sition, acquired knowledge, and group membership ties. In Bourdieu's terms (2000), distinction coexists in these three dimensions, defined as:

> Determining how cultivated disposition and cultural competence, learned through the nature of the goods consumed and the way of consuming them, vary according to the categories of the agents and according to the fields to which they apply, from the most legitimate fields, such as painting or music, to the freest, such as clothing, furniture, or cooking (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 11).

As for Simmel *et al*. (1988), these powers, according to their accumulation, place human beings on social stratification, where body image represents the visible symbol of the place to which one belongs, and fashion is a crucial tool that serves to distinguish, but at the same time to generate social cohesion.

In the world of fashion, there are two forms of consumption. Günter Wiswede (cited in Martínez Barreiro, 2006) points out that one of them is the *trickle-down effect,* a mechanism that spreads fashion and lifestyles drop by drop according to social status, with the upper classes being the first to consume what is considered exclusive. For Gilles Lipovetsky (2002), this vertical way of generating trends is no longer as enduring, and he mentions a second form of consumption based on globalization and the constant circulation of information, where fashion trends do not take as long to reach all sectors of society, which he calls the "democratization of fashion," in which consumerism is even greater because both women and men are constantly confronted with novelty and the ephemeral nature of fast fashion.

According to Laura Zambrini (2024): "clothing and textile trades carry symbolic gender burdens to the detriment of women, which have had (and continue to have) a strong impact in Latin America since the importation of dominant aesthetic models" (Zambrini, 2024 p. 107). It is because the world is conceived and organized in a binary fashion through sex-gender divisions, in which gender operates as an inescapable condition that provides certain qualities to men and women, which in the case of women are referred to as femininity (De Beauvoir, 1999). This is also affirmed by Judith Butler when she points out that gender "is conditioned by mandatory norms that define it in one sense or another (generally within a binary framework) and therefore the reproduction of gender is always a negotiation of power" (Butler, 2009, p. 322).

In fashion, this gender imposition occurs directly on bodies, which play a fundamental role as active agents that make certain decisions and choose

to mold and project themselves in a certain way, with the aim of fitting into the norm (Csordas, 1995). This process occurs in the pre-production, production, distribution, and consumption phases, where women are agents who must fulfill a certain role in the chain, becoming working bodies, bodies for display and consumption, and bodies that consume content.

## Studies on fashion

Fashion is a phenomenon that has been studied from various disciplines. On the one hand, history (Gallard, 2021) has described how clothing has been a symbol in each stage of humanity; on the other hand, semiotics has come to understand it as a system of signs and a discourse (Barthes and Roche, 2003). However, it is from sociology that fashion has been thought of as a social phenomenon, i.e. and "a particular system of dressing that is found under certain social circumstances" (Enwistle, 2002, p. 56), in which social class, gender, and age operate, both in their relations of production and consumption, and therefore make it a "hybrid subject" of study (Leopold, 1992).

From feminist theories, authors such as Judy Attfield (1989), Cheryl Buckley (1989), and Pat Kirkham (2000) highlighted the invisible place of women within the design industry, with the male point of view predominating in creations. In this context, studies on sexuality (Foucault, 2002) and gender as a social construct (Stolke, 2004) provided tools for thinking about how women's bodies have been seen as objects of consumption and desire, which must adopt norms such as clothing and beauty products in order to be validated by men.

In Latin America, the relationship between women's bodies and fashion has been studied by authors such as Mariluz Esteban (2013) and Patricia Soley Beltrán (2010), who analyzed the experiences of models within the industry, identifying them as subjects who are aware of the commodification of their bodies in this activity. However, they decide to coexist in these spaces because it is their way of sustaining their material living conditions.

Silvia Ventosa Muñoz (2023) conducts a study on gender inequalities and new identities within the social history of fashion, identifying that, currently, a growing number of designers and companies are raising the issue of gender as the essence of the brand or as a marketing strategy, creating *agender* or unisex collections. This shows that we are facing undefined bodies that

wear equally undefined clothing, and this phenomenon is becoming increasingly prevalent, to the point of becoming a *leitmotif* of contemporary fashion.

Along the same lines, Laura Zambrini (2019) from Latin America has also focused her research on analyzing the history of clothing design from a gender perspective, highlighting the regulation of sexuality that this aesthetic practice of wearing clothes has imposed on the lives of women and men in the region.

For his part, Jorge Jr. Leite (2019) studies the power relationship between gender, body, and clothing and whether there is the possibility of social change within the industry, finding that in the development of trends it is possible to move toward a fluid identity that downplays gender binarism. However, this author also identifies that fashion will always be disciplinary and normative, since its objective is to generate need in consumers.

In Ecuador, María Ángela Cifuentes (1999) is one of the first authors to study this phenomenon, analyzing how Ecuadorian women revealed criteria of modern femininity through fashion in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, showing that it became a force that destroyed the traditional codes of life and behavior of that time, because "in a visual culture, fashion is a direct resource for personal representation; it facilitates the configuration of emblems of beauty, liberality, and modernity" (Cifuentes, 1999, p. 17).

On the other hand, Jenny Pontón (2019), who conducts a critical study on the representation of the female body in the country's advertising industry, reveals that advertising is precisely an essential part of the dissemination and massification of fashion, since advertisements create the need to dress according to the trends imposed by brands, disciplining the physicality of women in particular due to their gender.

Finally, Juan Carlos Guamán (2024) proposes a more current view of the construction of masculinity and femininity from the fashion design carried out by several Ecuadorian brands, concluding that currently the dynamics between clothing and gender disruptions must be addressed from a diverse perspective, including in the management and administration of fashion brands, since it is not possible to homogenize clothing under a rigid identity. To all these debates on fashion and gender, this study will contribute by demonstrating, from a feminist perspective, that gender performativity is embedded in all the production processes of this industry, despite the new proposals that are emerging in clothing. This triggers a total disconnect between what the market offers and what the diversity of women in Ecuador are and require.

## Methodology

This theoretical approach to fashion is combined in this article with a qualitative methodology that collects information through two methods: semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The former were conducted with renowned designers in the country, including the figure with the longest career, who contributed her historical perspective on the Ecuadorian context to this research. Members of a fashion company that experienced considerable growth between 2016 and 2019 were also interviewed. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this company had to significantly reduce its production. In addition, testimonies were collected from several women seamstresses who have worked for these brands.

Likewise, with the aim of gathering information from all the agents involved in the issue under study, interviews were also conducted with three professionals in the field: a director of fashion events, a professor of fashion design at a renowned institute in the country, and a businesswoman dedicated to the marketing of imported clothing. Participant observation was also carried out in various fashion spaces and settings, including clothing workshops, fashion shows, sewing courses, and photo shoots for collections.

This research focuses its fieldwork on the period between 2017 and 2018, as during these years a group of fashion designers emerged who generated new proposals, as well as spaces for dissemination and development for the industry in the country. However, in order to contrast the data obtained with the current vision of the sector, the testimony of a businesswoman active in the industry was also incorporated. The study was limited to the city of Quito, as it is the country's capital and a benchmark for cosmopolitan influence in clothing, with the idea that in the future, this research could extend to other cities in the country, incorporating a comparative approach to gender and fashion at the national level.

The selection of informants was carried out using the snowball technique, which, according to Baltar and Gorjup (2012), consists of inserting oneself into a given context and establishing contacts, so that one informant leads to another, thus generating a progressive growth in the collection of data for the research. In order to protect the identity of both the interviewees and the brands that collaborated in this study, their names have been replaced by pseudonyms throughout the article.

## Fashion design and exclusivity in Ecuador's proposals

As mentioned, Ecuadorian fashion design emerged in the early 1980s, but it began to take center stage ten years later. Malena, one of the pioneers of the local industry, pointed out that:

> We started out as a group of friends who wanted to show our work. In Quito, people began to talk about designer fashion in the 1990s, and we began our participation by dressing candidates in beauty pageants such as Miss Ecuador. (Interview with Malena, September 5, 2017)

However, fashion design was not part of empirical training or technical trade. As Guillaume Erner (2000) states, being a designer means training as a "creator of differences" (Enner, 2000, p. 34), i.e. and professionals who project a lifestyle through their collections. Therefore, being a designer in the country means having a complete educational background. In the city of Quito, academic offerings began in 1991 at the Fashion Design Institute (DISMOD), the Equinoctial Technological University, later at the La Metro Design Institute, and then at the University of San Francisco de Quito (Vaca Eguez, 2019a). Although the degree program was exclusive in its early days, interest in training in this field grew over the years, as stated by Carmen, director of the fashion design program at La Metro: "Before, very few students chose this program. There were classes of ten people, but then everything changed, and we started offering two classes of 20 people each" (interview with Carmen, November 9, 2017).

However, these programs are offered at private educational institutions and are attended by people who have the purchasing power to acquire the materials and support their professional training for a period of no less than three years. In the case of the participants in this study, some of them have also studied abroad at renowned institutes, especially in New York. This is how professionalization has become one of the strategies that allows designers to create their own collections, which are imbued with their own concept as a form of brand identity.

Another of the market positioning strategies of Ecuadorian fashion is to work with quality materials and practically personalized production, taking care of every detail. According to the information collected for this study, it was evident that having their own workshop and infrastructure is very complex for those engaged in this activity in the country, since it requires capi-

tal to have a physical workspace, purchase machinery, and hire staff. Therefore, of the three designers and the fashion company studied, only two of them have their own workshop for creating and manufacturing. In the case of Sara, for example, she inherited her grandmother's workshop, which is located on the ground floor of a family building. It is an apartment converted into a workshop that is divided into two parts. The front part consists of a display area and offices where the designer meets with her clients, and the back part is where the manufacturing area is located, with cutting tables, sewing machines, and a mannequin on which the fabrics are fitted (field notes, January 22, 2018).

The Mística brand, meanwhile, had a workshop with a large space divided into areas for design, cutting, sublimation, manufacturing, labeling, and packaging of garments. Therefore, around 15 women and two men worked there, one in charge of the company's administration and the other responsible for cutting and sublimating garments (field notes, January 29, 2018). However, with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered a global economic crisis, the brand weakened, reducing its production to a minimum, as well as its distribution.

In the case of designers Mariana and Juliana, setting up their own workshop has been more complicated due to their lack of access to bank credit, which has been denied to them because of their limited experience, their youth, and the fact that their productive activity is not considered profitable. "They consider us young people who do not have the solvency to pay the debt, and they also think that fashion is like a hobby for us" (field notes, Thursday, February 8, 2018).

According to Carmen Diana Deere (2021), this happens because there is still a strong gender bias when it comes to supporting women's financial autonomy through granting loans, as they have historically not been considered economic subjects. Despite the changes that have taken place over time, their professionalization and productive capacity are still in doubt. For this reason, Mariana and Juliana have resorted to subcontracting, which consists of taking their design ideas to artisan workshops located in homes or small sewing shops dedicated to clothing alterations. In this regard, Juliana points out:

> I made things at home and also went to the seamstress. I paid her per piece and told her what I wanted to do, and she helped me because I didn't know much about pattern making. I've known her for about two or three years, and she's excellent. She made me her priority and sometimes worked until late

making my things. Her name is Gladys, and she works on orders for some brands. She also makes formal dresses and alterations, and her workshop is in her home, where she works with her daughter. (Interview with Juliana, February 5, 2018)

**Figure 1**
*Clothing workshops*

Photo: María de María Dolores Vaca (2018).

Consequently, in the clothing production stage, as well as in the design professionalization stage, the industry faces a sharp sexual division of labor, which consists of assigning the type of job according to people's gender and operates across all social classes (Narotzky, 2003). In this case, dressmaking has traditionally been conceived as a woman's job because it is associated with self-care, establishing a feminization of this activity, which in many cases has been imposed on women's lives. As several of the interviewees stated, the skill of sewing was a requirement in their homes as a natural characteristic of being a woman:

> I didn't like sewing, but my mom wanted me to be a seamstress and made me learn. I went to the academy, but I didn't finish because I didn't have enough money. (interview with Consuelo, January 22, 2018)

> I'm studying fashion design. Well, now I really like it, because before it wasn't my strength, I didn't like it, and my mom forced me because she had a *Sin-*

> *ger* sewing machine and told me that this profession would give me money. (interview with Luciana, January 23, 2018)

It can be observed the family pressure on young women to learn sewing, an activity that, beyond being considered feminine, can become a source of income for both those who limit themselves to being workers and those who manage to become professionals. In Sara's case, the influence of her grandmother—who founded a dressmaking institute—was essential, as her family had always been in the clothing business; therefore, she was expected to become the next generation to continue the legacy. However, this is not the case for men interested in becoming fashion designers, since, as explained above, this activity has historically been associated with women due to the naturalization of the binary division of labor, according to which men must apparently perform tasks that require physical strength and public visibility in order to achieve status and social recognition (Pateman, 1996). In this regard, Carmen states that:

> men are in the minority in the classrooms, with only five male graduates out of the total number of students in this degree program. And they often have to face stigmatization and prejudice that belittles their masculinity for pursuing a degree program that is pigeonholed as feminine. (interview with Carmen, November 9, 2017)

In this sense, those who dedicate themselves to fashion design face rigid gender stereotypes in their work. In the case of men, as pointed out by Zurián *et al.* (2023), they often face constant questioning about their sexual orientation and masculinity, while in the case of women, there is a double disadvantage: on the one hand, the feminization of the profession as a reproductive issue. On the other hand, there are glass ceilings or invisible barriers (limited access to credit, devaluation of the profession, among others) that prevent them from positioning themselves competitively in the world of work (Galeana de Valadés, 2013). These gender biases reduce the competitiveness of fashion design and, therefore, its ability to establish itself as a fundamental part of the country's productive world.

## Proposals for distinction in Ecuadorian fashion design

According to Vigarello (2005), historically, beauty was the first form of recognition and validation for women. In this sense, Pontón (2019) expla-

ins that the beginnings of fashion in Ecuador responded to a modern need for social distinction and to represent what was considered beautiful through clothing. For this reason, *haute couture* prevailed as a form of production in the country, as there was greater demand from women belonging to the upper class in the cities of Quito and Guayaquil. These women attended various social events—including beauty pageants—and did not want to look like everyone else, i.e. and they sought to distinguish themselves from others (Bourdieu, 2000). As Simmel (1999) argues, fashion seeks both integration within the circle of social equals and distancing from those considered inferior, so, according to the author, fashion unites and differentiates at the same time.

**Figure 2**
*Reference to haute couture design in Ecuador in the early 2000s*

Photo: El Universo (2024).

According to Burneo (2023), this trend of distinction through fashion constituted a code of civility that was always orchestrated from a male perspective. Historically, women of the Ecuadorian bourgeoisie based their dress

styles on images from Ecuadorian magazines (La Revista Ecuatoriana, Revista de Quito, and El Sastre Quiteño), whose editorial lines were directed by men who established the guidelines and styles that women were expected to follow (Burneo, 2023, p. 21). For this reason, fashion implicitly reflects a male gaze on female physicality (Berger, 2000).

Over the decades and with the advance of globalization, Ecuadorian society has maintained that it needs to comply with standards of beauty and distinction through the adoption of various mechanisms, fashion being one of the main ones. Malena says that:

> (...) for many years, the fashion that arrived in Ecuador corresponded to the importation of international brands, especially from the United States and Europe, and then, starting in the 1980s, fashion from Brazil and Colombia also began to arrive in the country. So, these trends were usually replicated by copying models from foreign magazines or what were known as "figurines" (patterns); there was no national industry. (interview with Malena, September 17, 2017)

Although in the 1990s, with the professionalization of fashion design, there was greater local production, especially in *haute couture*, this trend was affected in the second decade of the 2000s with the arrival of multinational textile manufacturing and distribution companies, including Punto Fa, with its Mango brand, and Industria de Diseño Textil (Inditex), with its Zara, Stradivarius, Bershka, and Pull&Bear brands, among others. This led to a transformation in local design proposals, and the already established *haute couture* was joined by *prêt-à-porter* or "ready-to-wear," a mechanism for the mass production of casual clothing. In this way, Ecuadorian fashion design adapted to the *street style* trend and began to offer more urban collections for women and men, characterized by a mix of formal and informal styles, combining elegant garments with sports shoes. This style became socially accepted in various social interaction spaces (Vaca Eguez, 2019b).

In this context, fashion design proposals in Ecuador attempt to curb the mass and uniform consumption of imported ready-to-wear fashion, in which apparently "everyone is able to consume everything" (Lipovetsky, 2002), in order to return to differentiation based on the quality of garments with aesthetic appeal, capturing a specific audience interested in marking the social stratum to which they belong through their image and way of dressing. For this reason, in the testimonies collected, one of the designers stated:

**Figure 3**
*Street style reference from Ecuadorian fashion design*

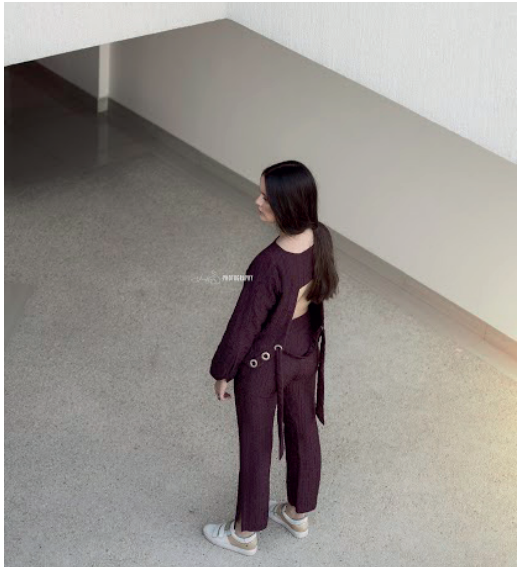

Photo: Catalog by designer Juliana (2018).

> You have to do something different, something that not everyone will have when you go to a meeting, otherwise customers will go somewhere else to buy. Sometimes this is what being a designer is all about, being so exclusive (...) and it's such meticulous work that's why it's difficult, that's why I think the price of my clothes is fair. (interview with Sara, January 23, 2018)

For its part, the company Mística, whose hallmark is to make fashion a showcase for art, prints the works of renowned Ecuadorian artists on its designs, targeting consumers with high cultural capital, which promotes the idea of wearing clothes with purpose. For Nadia, one of the artists collaborating with the brand:

> Bringing art into clothing means taking it out of museums and making it visible, thus giving fashion more status and meaning, provided, of course, that the customer is knowledgeable and passionate about this world. (interview with Nadia, January 31, 2018)

As Bourdieu (2000) rightly points out, these behaviors, both in the creation and consumption of fashion, respond to the need to demonstrate a cultivated disposition, i.e. and through what one acquires and consumes daily to accessorize oneself, eat, and even read, one shows how much knowledge one has acquired. Therefore, knowing about fashion means being a "cultured body" that knows exactly what it wants to demonstrate when wearing a garment.

## Design societies

Although the previous section explained that fashion design in Ecuador is characterized by attempts to organize consumption for a specific sector of the country—since its creators do not want to be seen as stores that produce clothing without a concept behind it—these brands cannot act alone given the wide range of products available on the market. Therefore, it is essential that they operate under a principle of social cohesion (Simmel *et al. and* 1988), understood in the industry as the ability to work in groups through partnerships. Thus, in the early 2000s, the Society of Ecuadorian Fashion Designers and Creators (Sadicme) was founded with the aim of bringing together and promoting national design (El Universo, 2006).

Over the years, these societies have transformed into multi-brand *ateliers*,[1] where the collections of between 15 and 20 national designers are exhibited, with the vision of providing customers with complete consumer experience. In these spaces, not only clothes can be found, but also accessories, skin care products, jewelry, and shoes. Currently, there are several multi-brand fashion societies, including *The Designers Society* Piso Rosá and Vintage, which are located in shopping malls and residential areas in the country's major cities.

However, it is once again clear that not all brands that exist in Ecuadorian society are accepted into these associations, precisely to maintain the criterion of exclusivity. In this regard, Malena comments: "The association remains as a closed circuit in which only those with experience and recognition are accepted" (interview with Malena, September 5, 2017). This shows that unity and collaboration in fashion can only be forged between upper-middle-class and upper-class peers. For this reason, several fashion ventures have had to demonstrate that they have a concept, promote a clear brand image, use durable materials, and have a high production capacity to supply stores. This shows

1 These are studios where artists or painters work and exhibit their work.

that there is still a desire to mark distinction (Bourdieu, 2000) and differentiation in equality (Simmel, 1999) in the world of Ecuadorian fashion design.

*The feminine ideal for which designs are created*

Ecuador is facing a scenario that promotes novelty and creativity in the way people dress, due to the advance of globalization, which has allowed the entry of large fashion chains that set the standards for what is worn and consumed in clothing. In the case of the designers who participated in this study, their inspiration when creating is based on:

> Thinking about the context in which women are living, how they can look feminine, and how to make them comfortable. Because women are living in a special moment in history, a moment in which they work, are professionals, manage their money, are entrepreneurs, but also mothers. (field notes, Thursday, April 19, 2018)

According to this vision, this special moment that women are experiencing is not only about accessing to rights and the historical achievements they have made, but also about how this should be projected through how they look, or what Iris Marion Young has identified as hiding women's interests behind a "beautiful" body (Young, 2005). Here, the feminine "should be" reappears (Muñiz, 2014), and fashion plays a crucial role because it is responsible for sending a message with subtle but effective indications of how an independent and autonomous woman should be represented according to the market. This is paradoxical because these categories, which originated in gender studies as tools to promote radical change in the structures of subordination with which women live (León, 1997), have now been completely emptied of content by capitalism, transforming them into a new aesthetic standard to follow.

This shows that Ecuadorian fashion, in a sense, is being permeated by the achievements of the feminist struggle. However, this remains a simple market strategy, covering up practices of domination in terms of body, gender, and class. The authors Pineda *et al. (*2024) call this commercial trend of certain brands that take advantage of the feminist cause for corporate gain "*purple washing*," i.e. and the commodification of feminism for the purpose of selling.

Women interested in following fashion trends produced in Ecuador are those who belong to the upper classes and can allocate considerable income specifically to their personal grooming. The designers described their target audience as follows:

> Juliana: When designing, I thought of a woman who is not too dressed up or pompous, a young and casual woman, I would say between 20 and 30 years old. My ideal customer is someone who appreciates slightly more timeless design and quality, and that's why it costs more because it's worth it. (Personal communication, Monday, February 5, 2018).

> Mariana: I have all kinds of customers, for example, the person who buys a $500 dress at a mall and also the college student who is looking for a top from an independent brand at a fair, so I try to make clothes for both types of women. (Personal communication, Monday, January 22, 2018).

> Margarita: Usually, more daring people who dress differently buy our clothes. The woman who wears my brand has a strong personality and is not afraid to try new things. (Personal communication with Mística manager, Monday, January 29, 2018).

The designers' testimonies refer to the fact that this industry is aimed at "productive bodies," i.e. and economically active women who keep up with fashion trends because of their concern for satisfying what Bourdieu (2000) calls luxury tastes. It is interesting to note that this analysis concludes that there is a time limit for women to be interested in designer fashion today, which also reveals a generational bias in the image of the target audience for this industry. Therefore, when addressing the issue of the body in the research, the interviewees seemed somewhat uncomfortable when giving their opinions. Amid laughter and silence, some testimonies said:

> I know it's not right to criticize the body, but if you ask me, I do prefer a skinny girl because everything looks good on them. That's why I make quite a few small sizes for both sale and the fashion show. And if someone larger comes in, we make something custom for them. (personal communication with Sara, Thursday, February 1, 2018)

For their part, the rest of the designers did not make a direct reference to what their client's body should look like, but their comments subtly pointed to the primacy of slimness, which is why in some conversations they stated:

> As a company, we make clothes that fit all body types. We mainly sew for young people, but of course also for older women, who are physically larger. (Personal communication with Soledad, Monday, February 19, 2018).

> I wouldn't define a perfect body for the world, but sometimes there is a perfect body for the design, and there are things that look perfect on women. I've seen it happen in *fittings*.[2]

Naturalized concepts of the "ideal body" in terms of age and slimness continue to be replicated by design professionals to their clients, who, through catalogs, photographs on social media, and the videos they consume, are aware of how they should look if they want to be part of the fashion system and, in this sense, make their own choices to fit into this representation. For this reason, women continue to be pursued by what Pontón (2019) calls aesthetic biocapitalism, as "a commercial biopolitics that manages and disciplines the bodies and lives of women in late modernity" (Pontón, 2019, p. 7), in this case the market internalizing itself in bodies through tastes in clothing.

**Figure 4**
*Mística photographic production*

Photo: Mística brand catalog.

2 Tests carried out on a model's body prior to an event or fashion photo shoot.

The photographic productions created by the brands studied constitute a marketing strategy to generate precisely these tastes in clothing, through images of models who set the trends of the moment, not only in terms of fashion but also in terms of the physical appearance of the bodies that wear them, even though these do not reflect the diversity of most women in the country.

Thus, reality is completely different from what is defined as the feminine ideal, since, although the customer base of these local brands is made up of young professional women, they are also diverse in terms of body type and purchasing power; in other words, they are bodies with their own life stories. This limited view of customer diversity has led to a disconnect between what is being sold and who can actually afford the fashion produced in the country. In this regard, Ana, a Colombian fashion entrepreneur, stated that in Ecuadorian design:

> They must segment the market and study the needs of their customers, which are determined by variables such as climate, age, and tastes, among others. Above all, people from the highlands and the coast have different physical characteristics; women from the coast have much wider hips and are larger in size. Therefore, they should have stores where they can offer a product that meets the needs of the market. (personal communication, July 16, 2024)

Although there is still a tendency to label women's bodies according to age and size, it is clearly necessary to break down certain structures and analyze customers' needs according to their body types, contexts, and incomes. This will make Ecuadorian fashion a profitable business and meet the real needs of the population. However, photographs and catalogs are not the only resources used to project the ideal feminine image in the fashion world, as fashion shows are also a means of exhibition and validation in which it is possible to show directly how clothes fit the female body.

Thus, in organizing fashion shows, designers seek to create an image of exclusivity for their designs, which is achieved through two key moments of classification in which gender biases in terms of age and body type are most strongly expressed (Pineda, 2020). On the one hand, in the days leading up to the show, strict logistical preparations are made through the rigorous selection of models, designs, makeup, hairstyles, venue, music, lighting, invitations, among other things. This is followed by continuous rehearsals to ensure that the event matches the experience that the designers want to convey to the public.

On the other hand, at the moment of the catwalk, details are finalized before the staging, which is known as *backstage*. This is the most intense moment of work, where the outfits are prepared according to the order of appearance, the models are prepared and produced, defects in the garments are corrected, and the costume changes for each collection are made. It is at these moments that gender performativity (Butler, 2009) is more evident, as models with very specific characteristics are chosen to promote the rigid stereotype of women that they project in their creations. In the words of Patricia Soley Beltrán (2012), models become emblematic bodies of desirability carefully constructed through social conventions. In this regard, the study participants noted:

> Mariana: Personally, I like the girls who model my collections to have neutral features, such as straight hair, small noses and mouths, and above all, to be thin, because that way I make people focus on my clothes and not on any exotic features the model may have. (personal communication, Thursday, February 15, 2018)

> Sara: I always ask for flat girls everywhere, because it makes the clothes look better. And in my experience, most designers ask for that. It also depends on what I want to show in the collection. Let's say I had a super sweet collection in pastel colors, A person with super hard or pronounced features cannot wear it. (personal communication, Thursday, February 1, 2018)

The fashion show is a communication spectacle that reinforces the ideal of femininity for which fashion is produced in the country, legitimizing not only the design proposals, but mainly the type of woman who should wear them. To fit into the garments on display, buyers face the challenge of adapting to the age and body standards for which they are designed. In this sense, although designers claim to work with models with neutral characteristics, they are far from being display mannequins and, in reality, are the bearers of the ideal of the empowered woman promoted by the Ecuadorian fashion market. Therefore, by pigeonholing itself into a rigid type of femininity that does not represent the diversity of potential consumers, the fashion industry is unable to expand or consolidate itself in the country, as it is exclusive in terms of age and female body type.

**Figure 5**
*Moments before the runway show*


Photo: María Dolores Vaca (2018).

## Conclusions

It was found that Ecuadorian designers use constant professionalization, attention to detail in the production of their garments, and streetwear proposals based on quality and creativity as positioning strategies against large fashion conglomerates, as well as promoting their products at exclusive events.

Despite this, the brands studied have not been able to reach their full potential because there is still strong class and gender oppression on those who engage in this activity, since the feminization of this work creates economic barriers that prevent the growth of production and international projection of Ecuadorian creations.

Both designers' associations and fashion shows are highly restrictive and vertical spaces in which only the work of those who have managed to enter these circles is disseminated. This has revealed that in the Ecuadorian fashion industry, exclusivity is synonymous with exclusion, and therefore, bu-

sinesses cannot grow when they depend on the functioning of secret societies, whose strategy is based on inserting already recognized designers who make proposals aimed at a segment of young professional women with economic solvency and certain physical characteristics, whom they project as "empowered," but as a mere marketing strategy.

This trend, known as *purple washing,* is being used in Ecuador in some markets, such as fashion*,* and attempts to include feminist achievements in the area of consumption. However, this is not done in a way that encourages public reflection on issues such as women's autonomy and development, but rather it seeks to sell more by trying to improve the discriminatory image that has characterized the fashion industry.

In this sense, hegemonic criteria continue to be used in the creation of collections, feeding an unattainable image of womanhood, which is constructed according to criteria that are completely dissociated from the Ecuadorian reality and the diverse context of women. Women's autonomy is a process marked by a history of resistance and is far from being a stereotype to which consumers must adapt by disciplining their bodies and dressing in certain ways. Considering that customers are people with full decision-making capacity, the fashion industry no longer faces passive recipients of content. The lack of a deep understanding of the contexts of Ecuadorian women has led to a total disconnection between what the market offers and what users are and require. Therefore, if local fashion brands want to stand out and be visible, they cannot continue to use the same strategies that are constantly being questioned by promoting a single type of femininity, since there are no labels or recipes for being a woman.

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## Interviews

Interview with Ana, fashion entrepreneur, July 16, 2024.
Interview with Carmen, director of the fashion design program, November 9, 2017.
Interview with Consuelo, seamstress at a fashion design workshop, January 22, 2018.
Interview with Juliana, fashion designer, February 5, 2018.
Interview with Luciana, seamstress and design student, January 23, 2018.
Interview with Margarita, brand manager, January 29, 2018.

Interview with Malena, fashion designer, September 17, 2017.
Interview with Mariana, fashion designer, January 22 and February 15, 2018.
Interview with Nadia, visual artist, January 31, 2018.
Interview with Sara, fashion designer, January 23, January 30, and February 1, 2018.
Interview with Soledad, fashion designer, February 19, 2018.

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| María Dolores Vaca-Eguez | Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualization, Original draft writing, Writing and editing and editing. |
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