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Beyond a Western ‘Sustainability’ in Design: Fashion Practice in Bahrain

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As the countries of the Arab Gulf transition to a post-oil economy, shifting towards sustainability across sectors is becoming a priority. Design for Sustainability (DfS) has developed predominantly within a Western context, influencing the way in which sustainability theory has been applied to fashion studies. This paper, as part of looking at non-Western approaches to fashion sustainability, explores barriers towards fashion sustainability in Bahrain, with a focus on the social practice surrounding fashion in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf region.

With a focus on lived experience and a local definition for fashion sustainability, this paper uses results from multi-method PhD research. Methods include a Delphi study with activists, businesspeople, and policymakers, a workshop with local designers, as well as a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews to capture under-represented viewpoints; Bahraini women and non-Bahraini labour. Since the research focuses on the social, material, behavioral and structural transitions required to move towards fashion sustainability, it engages numerous stakeholders in the Arab country, including government, social activists, consultants, designers, craft communities, and consumers.

This paper will present an overview of methods used for local data collection as well as emerging themes on fashion sustainability for Bahrain and the Arab Gulf.

In its findings, emerging themes suggest that differences in fashion ontology and everyday lived experience impact what could be considered true “sustainability innovation” in the case of the Arab Gulf—as it does for other non-Western contexts. In particular, social practices, a strong local tailoring sector, and the niche role of local bespoke designers are within the local status quo, while they may be classified as “innovation” in the context of Western sustainability discourse.