

Exploring Indonesia's Artisanal Fashion Potential

A Case Study of Meraki Studios

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Abstract

As a country rich in natural and human resources, Indonesia has the potential to develop artisanal fashion. Hand skills and mastery of traditional techniques originating from various local wisdom in Indonesia are some supporting factors for developing local artisan products. Since ancient times, people in Indonesia have used production aspects involving artisan hand skills to make functional, commercial, and non-commercial products. Artisanal fashion is considered by many as a sustainable approach in the fashion industry due to its ethical and low environmental impact. However, the study of artisan fashion products has not been widely discussed in the academic realm. This study focuses on understanding artisan fashion products through local fashion brand Meraki Studios case studies. The approach used in this research is descriptive qualitative, which is done by collecting data through observations, interviews, and literature studies regarding the meaning of artisanal fashion, the practice of artisanal fashion, and how Meraki Studios' practice in artisanal fashion is applied in their design and production process.

Keywords

Artisan, Fashion, Hand-Skill

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INTRODUCTION

In the fashion industry, the term "artisan" is gaining traction worldwide, particularly among local brands that prioritize ethical and sustainable fashion. This approach involves the use of hand skills, both modern and traditional, as part of the design process, taking into consideration local expertise and available resources [1]. While more meticulously applied than in couture clothing, these techniques are integrated into the design and production process. This contrasts with the fast fashion industry, which churns clothes at low prices, encouraging consumers to constantly update their wardrobes based on the latest trends. On the other hand, artisanal fashion emphasizes the various production aspects that require skilled hands, offering a distinct alternative to mass production.

Fashion products that involved hand skills in their production aspects had developed before the Industrial Revolution. However, the majority was dominated by haute couture clothing, non-commercial clothing, or as a hobby for the DIY movement. Production aspects in the present fashion industry are developing towards a more sustainable practice to lower negative social and environmental impact [2]. Artisanal fashion is considered part of a slow fashion movement, and sustainable practices have been shown in its production aspects. Slow fashion, similar to artisanal fashion, has transparent production systems that require fewer mediators between local artisans and consumers and that value local resources and distributors [3]. Artisanal fashion brands implement ethical practices in their collaboration with local artisans, usually based in a community, and inspirations are drawn from the region's nature, history, or culture [4].

In a business context, the primary motivation for designers is not only about commercial aspects but also how to create products that have artistic value and interpret personal emotions. Nonetheless, artisanal fashion has the potential to become a business model for small and medium enterprises that can benefit not only the designer but also help drive the regional economy. Furthermore, artisanal fashion is a business model in which designers work independently and are involved in their products' design, production, marketing, and branding [5]. This business model allows designers to own a brand while working on other creative projects. Current developments in technology and information make it easy for designers to use a business model like this because various sales and payment platforms allow designers to market their products globally [5]. Business models on a small scale and focus on utilizing natural and human resources are currently being carried out, especially by designers who have recently graduated from universities and intend to start a business.

Appreciation of artisanal products shows that consumers are increasingly selective in choosing products and are starting to consider quality over quantity [5]. However, the research found that most consumers in Indonesia lack knowledge of sustainable products, which has an impact on their purchase intentions [6]. As a country rich in natural and human resources, Indonesia has the potential to develop artisanal fashion. Locality and tradition are trends that often occur in the Indonesian fashion scene, and designers tend to implement them in their designs [1]. Hand skills and mastery of traditional techniques originating from various local pearls of wisdom in Indonesia are the supporting factors for developing local artisanal products. Since ancient times, people in Indonesia have used manual production aspects to make functional, commercial, and non-commercial products. However, implementing it has yet to be widely discussed in the academic realm. This study focuses on understanding the artisans and techniques used by small and medium-scale fashion brands in Indonesia. The approach used in this study is descriptive qualitative, with data collection through online observation, interviews, and literature studies regarding the meaning of artisans, the relationship between artisans and fashion, and how hand skills are applied in making products. Furthermore, a case study was conducted on a local fashion brand in Indonesia, namely Meraki Studios, to study the application of hand skills in the design and production aspects of the artisanal fashion process.

ARTISANAL IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

Artisan is a term referring to a skilled craftsperson who produces handmade items using traditional aspects. Artisanal is an adjective derived from "artisan." It describes products made by artisans using traditional aspects and high-quality materials. When something is described as artisanal, it emphasizes the craftsmanship, authenticity, and attention to detail involved in its production. In clothing production, the term artisanal is defined as the practice of sewing clothes by hand, as in the period before the Industrial Revolution in the mid-19th century. The term artisanal refers to more than just the technique of sewing clothes by hand. However, it relates to products made with high quality in limited quantities and involves the craftsmanship of the artisan or designer [1]. Conventionally, the scope of the artisanal fashion production system is between mass production and limited production systems because it involves the use of machines and manual expertise in the production stages. Some local fashion brands choose to apply hand skills, both modern and traditional, as part of the design process based on the principles of ethical fashion or sustainable fashion. However, hand skills are applied less carefully than in couture clothing but as part of the design or production aspects by considering local expertise and available resources. In marketing, artisanal fashion relates to something made with skilled hands, has a limited quantity, is of high quality, uses local resources, and is equipped with a story about its origin and production process. A brand does this to increase the selling value of its fashion products, even though it does not fully implement designs or production aspects following the context of artisanal fashion.

Long-term thinking necessitates rethinking conventional moral norms and the development of a new thinking culture that understands the complexities of the present and future worlds. As a result, art looks to be especially valuable for long-term sustainability [5]. This statement aligns with the practice of artisans in the fashion industry, which is argued to be sustainable in their production aspects. Currently, the fashion industry can be identified based on two production aspects: haute couture and mass production. In the production aspects, both significantly differ in quality, quantity, and selling price. Furthermore, the two production aspects each produce fashion products representing different status symbols for their users. The Haute Couture aspect embodies clothing that the public believes is of the highest value in the fashion hierarchy in a minimal quantity and high quality. This differs from fashion products with mass production aspects used daily by the public. Clothing created using the Haute couture aspects can be considered a work of art, with careful planning and careful application of hand skills to every detail of the garment. The application of artisanal skills is one of the characteristics of artisanal fashion products. Artisanal fashion is demonstrated by hand skills using craft aspects such as hand sewing, knitting, embroidery, or traditional dyeing techniques as part of the production aspects.

Artisanal fashion is synonymous with haute couture clothing, and from a historical perspective, it existed before the Industrial Revolution in Europe in the mid-19th century [1]. In the period before the Industrial Revolution, clothing made with the application of artisanal skills could only be enjoyed by the upper middle class and the royal family. These hand skills cover how to sew clothes and apply decorative aspects to clothes to produce an aesthetic visual appearance. The public can only wear clothing according to its function or make various decorative clothing details themselves if they can. The Industrial Revolution also brought significant changes to the fashion industry, especially with innovations that made producing raw materials for clothing in textiles and threads faster. There is a view that the Industrial Revolution and its innovations have had a detrimental impact on artisans because of the acceleration in the production process of clothing and other fashion products. Artisans' application of hand skills, which takes a long time for a fashion product, can be accelerated with the help of machines. However, using machines reduces the representation of Haute couture clothing, which is known for carefully applying hand skills in the sewing process and manufacturing decorative clothing details. However, there is an opinion that the existence of the Industrial Revolution and its innovations increased the value of Haute couture clothing due to the application of artisanal skills that machines cannot duplicate.

Between the two contrasting production aspects, there is a space that utilizes both production aspects. Based on the production aspects, artisanal fashion has historically developed from the production aspects of Haute couture. However, by adapting the innovation and speed of work to a mass production system, sewing clothes or making basic materials used by artisans becomes easier to obtain. The ease and availability of these essential materials give designers or fashion brands more time to apply their hands-on skills in their designs or production aspects. Based on Aako's research

[7], artisanal fashion is an idea about skills in using materials as part of the decorative and structural aspects of fashion products. The word artisanal itself refers to something made by hand, the central aspect of the artisanal aspects of fashion products. The artisanal aspect in question is a variety of hand-skilled techniques applied as decorative and structural aspects of fashion products, such as weaving, embroidery, knitting, dyeing, and other textile manipulation techniques. Hand skills applied in artisanal aspects can be in the form of traditional aspects that are characteristic of particular cultures or those modified due to innovation or the creative aspects of the designer. Furthermore, collaborations between designers in specific skills usually happen in a community of people with similar aims and interests [8].

IDENTIFYING ASPECTS OF ARTISANAL FASHION

Artisanal fashion has several main aspects: skill, materiality, small batch production, dedication of time, provenance, sharing skills, and quality [1]. Therefore, various aspects of the artisanal fashion aspects are described as follows:



Figure 1. Artisanal Fashion Aspects by Author

1. Skills are at the heart of the artisanal aspects and are directly related to the design process. Designers will only be able to realize the vision of the designs made if they have good skills in the design process, including how to create concepts, plan materials, and carry out clothing construction from making patterns, prototypes, and final products. In addition to applying hand skills, mastery of good skills is evidence of the quality of fashion products produced by designers.
2. Materiality is one of the essential aspects of artisanal fashion because it includes the use of textiles and other materials in clothing. The structure and design on the surface of the textile can be part of the design process because several designers have a specific visual appearance that they want to achieve by collaborating with artisans who are experts in that field.
3. Small batch production refers to the aspects of production and the quantity of products produced in an artisanal fashion. Designers in small and medium-scale industries have human resources different from those in the fashion industry, which manufactures large quantities of mass products. Therefore, the majority will use the services of vendors who can accept production on a small scale due to limited costs for production. Even so, designers with medium to upper brands will prefer to carry out the production process on a small scale because, in an artisanal fashion, the limited number of products produced gives the perception that the product is more valuable than fast fashion products. Furthermore, another purpose of small batch production in artisanal fashion is to produce products in limited quantities or editions, which can consist of five to twenty products. These limited editions and quantities may be made in the same size or in specific sizes that do not always follow fashion industry standards. However, small batch production allows space in the production process to apply hand skills to fashion products that previously could not be done in mass production.
4. Dedicating time to artisanal fashion gives designers flexibility and time to apply artisanal aspects in design and production. As a result, designers can focus on product quality and hand skills applied to products to maintain product quality. Furthermore, designers can adjust the time

needed in each stage according to the needs and working duration of each production process in a more flexible and not system-bound manner as in mass production.

5. Artisanal fashion is tied to the story behind each design, including the origins of the materials used, who makes the product, and how the production process works. In artisanal fashion, natural resources and human resources are fundamental parts of the story-telling process of a fashion brand regarding its products. These things are essential for artisanal fashion because the design process focuses on the final product and how the product has an image following the principles or style of the fashion brand. Generally, artisanal fashion brands present their designers and talk about the production team, which consists of various artisans who are experts in their respective fields.
6. An artisan is shown by his or her skill in applying the hand skills learned from previous artisans. Mastery of hand skills in artisanal fashion has a broader scope because the skills learned by designers and artisans can come from educational institutions or places of apprenticeship. In artisanal fashion, there is space for designers to apply the hand skills they have mastered or collaborate with artisans who are experts in specific fields. Therefore, in an artisanal fashion, designers can act as artisans simultaneously or collaborate with other artisans based on concepts that designers have created.
7. Artisanal fashion products are generally of higher quality than mass fashion products. However, quality in artisanal fashion can include the precision and rigor applied to the design and production processes. In artisanal fashion products, the quality provided is not only about the perfection of the product, but in some cases, imperfections such as different colors or clothing details that have minor differences can be unique to an artisanal fashion product.

Sustainability is a key concept actively incorporated in many global development programs that focus on better design practices to reduce environmental impact [9]. Artisanal fashion has shown similar characteristics in its practice with sustainable design. The following are some of Kirsi Niinimäki's [10] principles and views regarding sustainable design in fashion:

1. Ecological Principles: Encourage using environmentally friendly materials in the fashion industry, such as recycled, organic, or biodegradable materials. Recommend reducing waste and using renewable energy in fashion production and processes.
2. Social Principles: consider social aspects in the fashion industry by paying attention to workers' rights, decent working conditions, and fair wages throughout the supply chain. Advocate for local community involvement and collaboration with stakeholders to create positive change.
3. Economic Principles: encourage the adoption of sustainable business fashion in the fashion industry. This involves considering better production planning, slowing down production cycles, and promoting thoughtful and responsible consumption patterns.

DISCUSSION

Meraki Studios is a fashion brand that carries out the design and production process with a studio concept. The designer of Meraki Studios explained in an interview that the studio concept provides a more flexible creative space than fast fashion brands or other small-scale fashion brands. Both designers have experience working in batik and printmaking studios, which is the basis of the creative process at Meraki Studios. Their works are born through explorations carried out in the studio. Initially, they tried various techniques such as batik and tie-dye, but these later developed into screen printing and block printing, which were more economical and straightforward. Screen and block printing are more popular with the young market because the visuals align with their tastes. On the other hand, batik has limited color and production constraints in large quantities, especially with production locations in Pekalongan. Apart from that, batik samples often differ from the results vendors produce.

Products initially focused on batik were re-evaluated and divided into motifs and manual coloring. Motifs evolved into block printing, while manual coloring became more abstract and modern, not limited to evening use. Motif development is faster because it is easier to apply. Visually, they still maintain elements of the batik motif but with a more straightforward approach, using only one color and motifs inspired by stripes and patterns. Even though it received a positive response in the market, the trend shifted towards shirts with bold colors, such as the Hawaiian Shirt, which uses digital printing. However, Meraki still carries a monotonous concept, with visual variations through block prints of only 12-36 pieces.



Figure 2.
Kelabang Shirt
Olive by
Meraki Studios



Figure 3.
Perdu Blouse
Yellow by
Meraki Studios

Because it has its roots in the studio, Meraki Studios focuses on creating works and can also provide collaboration through workshops related to block printing or other techniques. In the future, they plan to develop new products through more dynamic exploration but maintain products the target market likes according to their preferences. Regarding trends, they monitor regularly but do not have a particular process for forecasting trends at the beginning of the creative process. Sometimes, they conduct small experiments with products on a small scale and measure the market response to them. Their creative process depends on existing trends and is inspired by incidental everyday events. For example, they can get inspiration from finding unused fabric waste when visiting vendors, even though they still refer to existing trends.

In fashion production, shirts became the most popular product, initially only in one color in limited quantities. Over time, they developed this product into three colors with certain color restrictions. Apart from shirts, they also developed sarong trousers and kebaya blouses but still produced them in small quantities or a dozen. There was a time when they mainly produced plain clothes without block printing details because the production process was more straightforward and based on suggestions from several vendors. However, products that are still in demand have detailed motifs. Therefore, they try to provide detailed motifs with block prints on these plain clothing products. In general, their production process is carried out in limited quantities to gauge market interest, and if the response is positive, they place repeat orders.

In terms of production, they found that block printing and screen-printing techniques were more efficient because they could be done alone or with the help of apprentices. This differs from batik, which requires vendors and strict supervision during production. However, the aesthetic aspects and satisfaction in creating work are addressed because products that sell well remain Meraki Studios' primary focus in their business. Inspiration for work can come from various sources, including trends, social media, and Pinterest, as well as an interest in visuals from nature, art, and photography. Meraki Studios values art more than design, focusing more on visual expression and technical exploration in their products.

Sustainability has been extensively discussed as a key concept in the global fashion industry for the last decade as an effort to develop a better practice in the future [11]. In the sustainable fashion context, Meraki Studios stated in an interview that they are aware of sustainable practices in the fashion industry. Sustainable fashion practices, generally understood by local brands such as Meraki Studios, are limited to eco-friendly materials. However, eco-friendly textiles or materials will increase production costs and affect the final price point. In the interview, Meraki Studios described production practices that are similar to the principles of sustainable fashion. The brand might not use eco-friendly materials. However, implementing small-batch production is similar to economic and social principles in sustainable fashion [10]. In their small batch production, Meraki Studios continues to use synthetic dyes because they consider the final result to be of good quality and durability. Apart from that, they never use 100% natural materials due to production cost considerations, so they constantly mix the materials with polyester. They also try to work with local vendors because they have good personal relationships. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of building relationships with craftsmen and artisans because designers have a clear vision of the final product, and there needs to be a personal approach to match the artistic vision. Basic things, such as each artisan's coloring aspects and hand strokes, greatly influence the final product. Furthermore, if different artisans do a collection, the final result will be different, especially for repeat-order products.

Meraki Studios is a fashion brand whose creative and production processes align with artisanal values. The designer's involvement in skill and their knowledge of material and construction has a significant role in the brand's success and identity. Materiality became an essential aspect of the creative process, in which designers with different skills will work together in the exploration process. Collaboration with other artisans or designers is also possible in the exploration process. Regarding quantity, Meraki Studios limits its production to small batches and will continue to add the quantity along the season. This limitation ensures the product is made of the best quality, often collaborating with local vendors or artisans in another set of skills to ensure less deadstock, which often happens in the fast fashion industry. Furthermore, the brand focuses on classic pieces such as kimono outerwear, shirts, blouses, and tunics in their collection, treating garments as a canvas for their artwork. There are limited choices in sizing, and clothes can often be categorized as genderless due to their fluidity in style, color, and artwork.

In the fast-fashion industry, time for research, design, and production until the final product is dedicated to a tight schedule and often follows an international fashion timeline. However, artisan fashion brands, such as Meraki Studios, have a flexibility that allows the designers to optimize their creative process. The flexibility in time benefits the brand as customers are willing to wait for their latest collection to arrive. This working system, however, does not imply that the brand can launch its latest collection at any given time. As flexible as it is, there is still a fixed timeline for the brand to launch its collection at least twice a year with the addition of a special themed or collaborated mini collection. Artisanal fashion brands have different ways of launching their latest collection or collaboration. Fast fashion is usually straightforward in its ad campaign. However, artisanal fashion brands are experts in narrating their creative process until the final product. This narrative or story is a part of their values in a brand identity, which determines customers' purchase intention and differentiates them from other artisanal fashion brands. In the narrative or storytelling, the brand needs to inform the creative design process of the consumer as a part of educating them about the product. The aim of artisanal brands such as Meraki Studios is not only about selling fashion products for the product but also creating a brand identity with its values to create a loyal customer.

Artisanal fashion brands' narrative or storytelling process also focuses on the collaborations between designers or artisans in different craftsmanship. Furthermore, some artisanal fashion brands also focus on narrating the story of people behind the production process to create awareness and raise social values of the product itself. Meraki Studios may still need to reach this storytelling stage, as other artisanal fashion brands such as Sodagaran or Sukkhacitta; however, they currently focus on creating an identity through material exploration and craft techniques such as clothing artwork. Creating high-quality products is a must in the fashion industry, and Meraki Studios also prevails by this standard. The brand ensured quality; however, some exceptions exist when applying craft techniques or surface design to textiles. Imperfections or minor defects might occur because most of its processes are handmade by artisans or designers. The brand also informs customers through their product information on minor defects, thus branding it as a one-of-a-kind product or an artisan's signature mark.

CONCLUSION

Artisanal fashion lies at the intersection of fashion and craftsmanship: its framework is partly contemporary and partly traditional. Although these basics may seem different conceptually and practically, artisanal fashion takes elements from both. Artisanal fashion can also be equated with slow fashion: Some of its foundations are in the same field, and artisanal fashion production practices are identified as slow fashion. In other words, slow fashion describes a type of fashion philosophically and includes traditional craft techniques as one of its features. At the same time, the artisanal approach takes artisanship in contemporary fashion as a starting point, highlighting the artisanal aspect in more detail. Artisanal fashion may not be directly related to fashion sustainability, as it cannot ensure better production regarding ethical and environmental issues, and the responsibility for action still lies with the particular company itself. However, because it operates in a similar environment to slow fashion, it carries the same potential.

Artisanal fashion provides space for local Indonesian brands with small and medium scales to develop creativity while meeting consumer demand for fashion products with the application of hand skills. Creativity, defined from a Western perspective, is the ability to produce new works of high quality accepted by society. Quality work is original, unpredictable, and different from previous work. Works accepted by society follow the problems faced and functional or fulfilling needs. Creativity can occur in all fields of application, including visual arts, literature, music, business, science, education, and everyday life. Along with the times, the art of handicrafts has also developed and influenced the fashion industry. Mass clothing production is becoming more popular, but artisanal fashion is still an alternative for those who want high-quality and unique clothing.

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