

# Chapter 30

## TechCouturism, an Alternative Showcase for New Fashion Designers

**Cristiano Carciani**

*Universidad del Turabo, Puerto Rico*

**Luca Bagnaschino**

*Universidad del Turabo, Puerto Rico*

### ABSTRACT

*In the age of the new millennium a global phenomenon has emerged where many products and designers have explored the infinite possibilities of the fashion and technology interaction. The digital means of the communication industry coined a varied and interchangeable array of terminologies, such as wearables, fashion technology, and wearable devices, without considering evident conceptual and purpose differences between the artifacts. The authors recognize the creative and widespread communication potential of this trend and understand the importance of defining precise characteristics of a distinguishable technology-fashion integration. After analyzing the case studies of Hussein Chalayan, CuteCircuit and Iris van Herpen, the authors suggest the neologism TechCouturism as an ideological movement that reconciles technology and the combination of textile crafts and design typical of haute couture. Finally, research on the topic has come to recognize the term TechCouturism as a marketing means for innovative and creative talents searching for acknowledgement among multiple competitors.*

### INTRODUCTION

At a time when the traditional fashion industry grants a limited space for innovation and concerns loom over the frenetic pace of the commercial productions - some avant-garde designers like Jean Paul Gaultier announced the closure of his prêt-à-porter line in September 2014 (Lidbury, 2014) - the creation of one-of-a-kind pieces combining new technologies with the centennial traditions of haute couture seems to offer an excellent opportunity to young high-skilled fashion designers. Indeed, *fashion technology* is

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an emerging direction in the fashion industry that has been briefly explored and accessible to new and creative talents.

The uniqueness of the first designed pieces in the collections of designers such as Hussein Chalayan, CuteCircuit and Iris van Herpen has been fundamental in acquiring global attention toward their creations. In addition, a general public interest in technology and electronics has further contributed to their success on these collections, and especially through social networks media. Online tools have offered free and functional platforms in benefit of these designers that have proposed innovation that is interesting and applicable with current multidisciplinary trends. The consequential global attention obtained throughout these efforts allowed these designers to establish a greater commercial and profitable production for their collections.

There is a term that has been barely used and whose meaning seems befitting for the integration between haute couture as a traditional handcraft and the innovative contributions of technology. The term *TechCouture* concisely summarizes the relation between the value of design and tradition with an avant-garde experimentation of materials, means and techniques.

*TechCouturism*<sup>1</sup>, as a new trend in fashion design, can be a valuable marketing strategy for designers eager to stand out among multiple competitors in the international community and for a globalized society.

This chapter intends to clarify concepts and define the characteristics of fashion technology according to the actual tendencies and achievements that have developed in the industry related to the topic. The “Background” section provides a brief history of the designer, its role in the fashion industry during the last two centuries and the influence of today’s technologies in the fashion design industry. The “What is Fashion Technology?” section clarifies the concept of integration between technology and fashion by providing a theoretical framework that analyzes the vague terminology to finally propose a precise classification. Moreover, this section present three case studies in fashion technology designers such as Hussein Chalayan, CuteCircuit and Iris van Herpen. In the third section “Solutions and Recommendations”, the designers’ professional approaches are analyzed whereas the concept of TechCouturism is introduced and further explained. The sections “Future Research Directions” and “Conclusion” finalize the chapter evidencing how TechCouturism represents an opportunity for new fashion designers to achieve a role in the fashion industry<sup>2</sup>.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Mixing Form and Function: The Birth of the Designer**

For centuries, the arts and handcrafts have developed as two distinct and independent activities with well-defined purposes and specific processes. This disconnection has constantly highlighted the difficulties in combining the two concepts by form and function into a single creation. On the first hand, the artist preferred the development of form over function in his works thus achieving aesthetical results rather than an eventual practical utility. On the other hand, the artisan focused his attention on the function over the form so his pieces would be mostly appreciated for the practical features with less attention to the aesthetical side (unless it was a matter of basic object decoration).

All the scientific and technological findings of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century deeply contributed to the progression of the Industrial Revolution, during which manufacturing processes changed after the use of machines, the introduction of the labor divisions and the production line system. This also led to a

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