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Conceptualizing Australian First Nations Fashion, Art and Style

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Abstract

Decolonial scholars call for fashion definitions and perspectives from all cultures, and this article responds to these requests. Numerous theories and positions have inspired and shaped this conceptual model, including valuable insight from First Nations scholars who have explored fashion theories that integrate First Nations philosophies and ontologies. This First Nations fashion, art and style conceptual model explores the practice and outlines the themes of Culture, Expression, and Self-determination. First Nations fashion, art and style, as a term, acknowledges the holistic practice and industry, which includes fashion design, style, and the intersection of art via textiles and garments. The *Cultural*

art, and style.
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element within the model explores the continuation of cultural practice through design and dress and how it can contribute to cultural well-being. The *Expression* element describes contemporary cultural and intersectional identity forms through traditional and modern garments. The *Self-determination* component explores the autonomy of First Nations fashion practices and how First Nations people self-determine their fashion brands via cultural, financial, and environmental sustainability. This article concludes with recommendations for further theoretical and empirical research on First Nations fashion, art and style.

KEYWORDS: fashion, style, First Nations, Australia, decolonization

Introduction

Decolonial fashion scholars critique the long-standing study of fashion and dress as Eurocentric and explore how individuals, communities and cultures value clothing and adornment (Baizerman, Eicher, and Cerny 1993; Bedford 2020; Craik 2020; de Greef 2020; Eicher 1995; Entwistle 2000; Gaugele and Titton 2019; Jansen 2020; Maynard 2004; Niessen 2022; Riello and McNeil 2010; Taylor 2002; Tulloch 2010). These scholars query the cultural, social, and political appropriateness of fashion terminology, calling for definitions and perspectives from all cultures and lived experiences (Bedford 2020; Craik 2020; de Greef 2020; Jansen 2020; Maynard 2004; Niessen 2022; Ottmann 2020; Tulloch 2010). Specifically, positions from African diasporic and First Nations communities provide exceptional insight into the decolonizing of fashion and relevant definitions and practices (Harwood 2021; Indigenous Fashion Arts 2022; Kramer, Mills, and Ottmann 2021; Kucheran 2023; Kucheran, Clark, and Lezama 2022; Metcalfe 2010; Mills 2018; Ottmann 2020; Tulloch 2010).

Scholar Tulloch (2010) examined some African diasporic fashions and practices and identified relevant terminology to explain and represent historical and contemporary experiences and influences on style. For Tulloch (2010), a definition of fashion-style dress for African diasporic communities encompasses language and punctuation that demonstrate interrelation and connectedness (Tulloch 2010). Dress incorporates “fashion, style, production, consumption, textiles, and beauty regimes,” and style describes the assemblage of clothing and adornment (accessories, hairstyles, makeup), whether current or trendy (Tulloch 2010, 279).

Canadian Métis scholar Ottmann (2020) identified a theory of Indigenous dress by analyzing the enforcement of Western clothing in Indian Residential Schools. Ottmann (2020) describes Indigenous Dress Theory as a symbiotic relationship with Indigenous standpoints, ontologies, epistemologies, and identities, namely connection to the land and

animals. Ottmann emphasized fashion, art and dress as interrelated terms, elaborating that one term cannot wholly explain Canadian First Nations fashion and dress contexts (Kramer, Mills, and Ottmann 2021).

Australian First Nations writer Harwood (2021) explored First Nations concepts of fashion and style through examples of Western-enforced clothing practices and the resulting styles worn by First Nations peoples. Harwood (2021) described First Nations fashion as First Nations designed, conceived, or made garments and adornments that are marketed and sold to consumers. Separately, First Nations style is explained as the assemblage of garments and adornments on First Nations people (whether existent or fictitious) and inspired by various personal, cultural, economic, religious, and environmental intersectional factors (Harwood 2021).

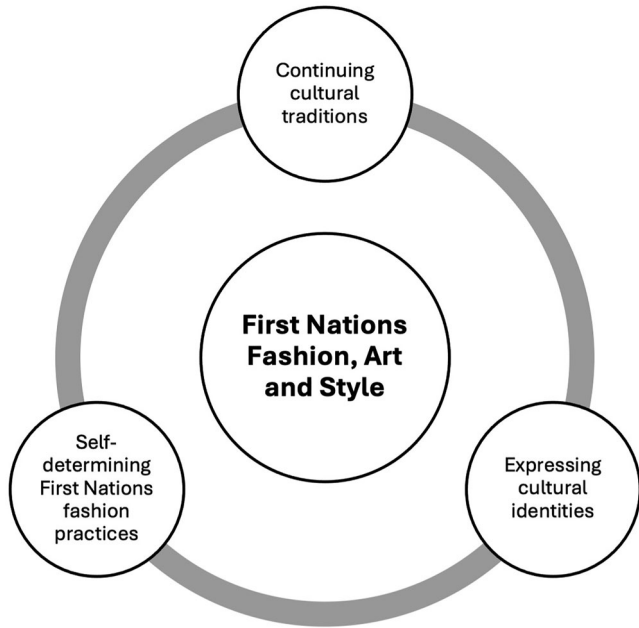
Australian First Nations and non-Indigenous scholars Clark and McNeil (2023) identified Australian First Nations fashion and dress practices within significant historical moments and addressed the need for a First Nations fashion terminology. They described First Nations fashion, art, and style as intersecting factors of fashion design, style, textiles, and art garments (Clark and McNeil 2023). They noted the popularity of the term Fashion within the Australian First Nation fashion design industry since the late 1970s (Boling 1978) and the relevance of “style” to describe the traditional and modern ways of assembling fashions (Clark and McNeil 2023). They apply “art” to acknowledge its significant overlap in fashion, such as textile designs and museum garments (Clark 2024a; Clark and McNeil 2023). This First Nations fashion, art and style description, shaped from the above definitions (Harwood 2021; Ottmann 2020; Tulloch 2010), will be the basis for this article.

Numerous First Nations fashion researchers are informed by First Nations positions, standpoints and values (Clark and McNeil 2023; Harwood 2021; Ottmann 2020). This conceptual model of First Nations fashion, art and style follows the theories of Indigenous positions and First Nations perspectives on Decolonization and Social and Emotional Well-being. Indigenous positions discuss, advocate, and self-determine cultural worldviews and methodologies against Western-centric research, particularly when advocating and explaining cultural research methods (Foley 2003; Martin 2008; Nakata 2007). Decolonization from First Nations positions attempts to dismantle and heal from colonization and empower and advocate the self-determination of cultural practices (Laenui 2000; Muller 2014; Smith 2012). First Nations social and emotional well-being frameworks explore the impact and recovery of First Nations people’s historical and contemporary distress (Gee et al. 2014; Sutherland and Adams 2019).

This conceptual model of First Nations fashion, art and style (see Figure 1) articulates the theoretical basis and cultural standpoints from which historical and contemporary examples and stories intertwine.

Figure 1

A conceptual model of First Nations fashion, art and style.



The first element explores the continuation of cultural practice through design and dress and how it can contribute to cultural well-being. The second element describes contemporary cultural and intersectional identity forms through traditional and modern garments. The third element explores the autonomy of First Nations fashion practices and how First Nations people self-determine their fashion brands via cultural, financial, and environmental sustainability.

Continuing cultural traditions

First Nations peoples deeply connect to their ancestral home, termed Country, which transcends the landscape to a holistic belief system of interconnection and reciprocity with all beings (Kinnane 2005; Weir, Stacey, and Youngetob 2011). Country is a form of knowledge and stories connected to First Nations people's identity (Kinnane 2005; Weir, Stacey, and Youngetob 2011). In Canada, First Nations clothing and adornment practices are described as spiritually connected and intertwined, for instance, the transfer of energy between animal and plant materials and the makers and wearers (Ottmann 2020). First Nations clothing and adornment continue to represent cultural practices, connection to the Country, the environment, and sustainability (Collins 2019; Jones 2010).

First Nations peoples in Australia lived in multifaceted and diverse groups, numbering around 500 Nations (countries) (Sherwood 2013) and were involved in the trade of materials over vast and distinct areas (Balme and O'Connor 2019). Clothing and adornment were crafted from natural materials to break down and return to the environment (Clark 2023a). These items produced from plant and animal materials included cloaks, shoes, head ornaments, jewelry and bags (Akerman 2005; Gilligan 2008; Jones 2010). Shoes were crafted from animal materials of skins, furs, feathers, human hair, and plant materials of bark (Akerman 2005). First Nations people living in colder regions made cloaks from animal skins and plants such as possum fur and sea grass (Figure 2).

First Nations clothing and adornment told stories. Cloaks were highly personal and individualized to the person, family, community, and Country. They utilized symbols representing a person's milestones, clans, Country, and totems (Couzens and Darroch 2012; Maynard 2022; Riley 2016). The design of fit and functionality of animal cloaks



Figure 2

Kerry & Co and Fred Kruger. Group outside a bark shelter with possum skin cloaks, Box 6: Australian Indigenous Ministries pictorial material: various historical photographs, ca. 1860–1909. Photograph [out of copyright]. Use of Courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales].

were straightforward; the designs and symbols on the skin side reflected the person's identity and the fur provided warmth and protection (Couzens and Darroch 2012; Riley 2016). Highly prized shells for adornment were often traded, inscribed with geometric and figurative designs (Akerman and Stanton 1994) that described and identified families, groups, places, flora, fauna and stories (Collins 2019). Temporary body alterations included painting all or parts of the body in simple or intricate designs for ceremonial and decorative occasions (Australian Museum 2018; Morphy 2011). Permanent body modifications included scarring the body with symbols communicating identity, status, memorial or celebration and nose piercing and teeth removal to reflect milestones or status change (Jones 2010).

The effects of colonization following the invasion of Australia in 1788 were evident in the removal of cultural clothing and enforcement of Western garments (Hayman 2015; Maynard 2002). Clothing was used to control, and many First Nations peoples were only allowed access to town areas if they wore Western clothes (Maynard 2002). For many, blankets replaced cultural cloaks due to a scarcity of native animal skins, the criminalization of cloak-making, and government-issued blankets used as a tool of social control (Maynard 2002; Riley 2021; Riley 2005). Sydney Eora personality Cora Gooseberry was noted as a figure often clad in a government-allocated blanket, headscarf and clay pipe (Barani n.d.). To further cause division and assign First Nations people as "leaders," governors and landholders endowed First Nations peoples with breastplates (Troy 1993). Cora Gooseberry was gifted two breastplates, one decorated with two fish, a coronet crown and the title "Gooseberry, Queen of Sydney to South Head" (National Museum of Australia n.d.-a). Despite these colonial enforcements, there were many instances of First Nations people resisting through cultural outfits or creating traditional clothing and adornment.

In the late 1700s in Sydney, Eora Cameragal woman Barangaroo refused to wear Western garments and continued her cultural practice of wearing a bone through her nose (Karskens 2014). There are reports of her sitting unclothed but culturally adorned at the governor's table (Karskens 2010). Comparably, several of Sydney's First Nations people kept their hair traditionally gummed and dreadlocked, albeit while wearing Western colonial clothing (Karskens 2011). Cultural wear was often subtle and worn as an adornment with Western wear. In colonial photographs from the mid-1800s, Tasmanian Palawa women Truganini, Bessy Clarke, and Mary Ann wore intricate cultural headpieces, some made from shells (Bellanta 2023). Other Tasmanian First Nations women were described wearing their cultural necklaces, constructed of iridescent shells, with their Western Victorian-era dresses (Bellanta 2023). In the same period, a group from Coranderrk Reserve attended a Governor's reception in Melbourne wearing possum skin cloaks draped over their finest Western garments (Clark 2014; Kleinert 2010).

These cultural clothing and adornment practices were never conquered and continue to be worn and made today (Western Australian Museum 2017). Possum and kangaroo skin cloaks, now primarily ceremonial, retain the tradition of unique symbols and designs and contribute to healing and reclaiming cultural practice (Couzens and Darroch 2012; Maynard 2022; Riley 2016). In Tasmania, shellwork is a significant tradition (Nicol 2019) and has expanded into museums and galleries (Western Australian Museum 2017). On the runway, specifically, the 2023 *Country to Couture* show, hosted by Indigenous Fashion Projects, Wiradjuri, Gangulu, and Yorta Yorta fashion designer Lillardia Briggs-Houston showcased a headdress inspired by traditional making techniques (Waterhouse 2023) (Figure 3). In photography, the artist Michael Jalaru Torres (Djugun/Yawuru/Jabbir Jabbir/Goonyandi/Ngarluma) explored modern practices of scarification, showcasing their meanings, designs, and rituals (Tan and Bremer 2018).

Figure 3

Marley Morgan. Shell headpiece from Lillardia Briggs-Houston's Walumarra collection, 2023. Photograph [Use of image courtesy of Marley Morgan].



Cultural practice through fashion and style is significantly connected to sustainability, with designers, artists and wearers incorporating environmental practices using secondhand materials and recycled fabrics. Ginny's Girl Gang celebrates the culture and cares for the Country by embellishing secondhand clothing (Ginnys Girl Gang 2024). Creative Director and Founder Liandra Gaykamangu (Yolngu) of the label Liandra uses fabric from recycled marine waste in their swimwear (Liandra 2024). Cassie Leatham's (Taungurung/Dja Dja Wurrung) recent *Yanggardi* collection advocated Country and climate change at the 2024 *PayPal Melbourne Fashion Festival* (Marouchtchak 2024). Leatham created the garments by sourcing scrap fabrics from designers and solar dyeing them with ocher from the Country in clay pots (Marouchtchak 2024). Charlotte Bedford (Wiradjuri) creates garments from upcycled and dyed doilies and tablecloths, telling stories of culture and Country (Huntington 2022).

The history of First Nations fashion, art and style tells a story of tradition, colonization and cultural survival (Bellanta 2023; Couzens and Darroch 2012; Harwood 2021; Hayman 2015; Maynard 2002; Riley 2016). For a period, First Nations people were forced to wear Western garments and relinquish their cultural practice through clothing and adornment. Their cultural practice through fashion, art and style has never ceased; it has adapted and responded to the times. Many First Nations designers, artists and people, prioritize cultural and environmental sustainability and express contemporary forms of cultural identity (Cook 2022; Couzens and Darroch 2012; Riley 2016). Identity for First Nations peoples is complex and shaped by intersecting factors, including cultural Nations and groups, colonial legacies, gender, sexuality, disability, and wealth (Kowal and Paradies 2017; Shay and Sarra 2021).

Expressing cultural identities

Eurocentric policies saw clothing and adornment banned, discouraged, or replaced throughout colonization (Hayman 2015; Maynard 2002). These sustained efforts of control through clothing and adornment profoundly impacted many First Nations peoples' cultural practices and identities. Yet, the resistance of many First Nations peoples in continuing their cultural practice and identity and forging contemporary forms of self are evident in traditional and modern garments. Storytelling and expression are core elements of First Nations culture (Geia, Hayes, and Usher 2013), and First Nations peoples have been covertly and overtly telling stories within their fashion and style since colonization.

In the early colonial days of Sydney, several First Nations people wore overt Western clothing to communicate resistance and shape new appearances. Military jackets were often sported by resistance fighters or worn open to emphasize adornment scars in colonial environments

(Karskens 2011, 19). These military red coats were frequently seized after soldiers discarded them. There were also instances of First Nations men receiving “full sets of naval or military officers uniforms” when identified by the European settlers as “chiefs” (Wilcox 2010, 195) (Figure 4). A century later, in the 1920s, Anthony Martin Fernando, a First Nations man from Sydney, challenged and protested the conditions and treatment of First Nations communities by attaching tiny toy skeletons to his cloak outside of Australia House in London. In doing this, he chanted, “This is all that Australia has left of my people” (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2022).



Figure 4

Augustus Earle. Bungaree, Views in New South Wales and Van Diemens Land: Australian scrap book 1830. Print [out of copyright. Use of Courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales].

As the policies of segregation, protection, and assimilation forced First Nations people to wear institutionalized Western wear, garments became subtle and covert. Ottmann describes the strategic use of institutional uniforms in the eradication of cultural identity, explaining that “[a]s dress was rooted within Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, dress too needed to be changed in order for children to be “civilized” (2020, 20). For First Nations peoples forced to live on controlled reserves, missions, and stations, their clothing was often non-descript and used as a form of payment, with movement in and out dependent on the well-kept attire and cleanliness of the clothes (Martínez 2007; Maynard 2002). In some cases, First Nations people requested more clothing (Nelson, Smith, and Grimshaw 2002); in others, First Nations girls and women made clothing for the residents (Scrimgeour 2006). One example, at Victoria’s Coranderrk Reserve in 1881, saw twenty-two men walk to Melbourne to protest the imminent closure of the Reserve. Their outfits of choice reflected and communicated their strategic dissent; the majority wore their best clothes, while two wore their standard Government garments (Nanni and James 2013, 27).

These well-kept forms of style continued into the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with First Nations people wearing their best outfits to significant events, meetings, rallies, and protests. At the *1938 Day of Mourning*, the Aborigines Progressives Association (APA) encouraged members to wear formal black clothing “as a symbolic sign of mourning” at their gathering in Sydney (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2023). The *1938 Day of Mourning* was a protest to the 150th anniversary of the landing of the First Fleet on January 26, 1938 (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2023). When campaigning and speaking to non-Indigenous audiences on First Nations rights, Faith Bandler, a South Sea Islander/Scottish Indian woman, described wearing white day gloves as a strategic tactic (National Museum of Australia n.d.-b). In the *1967 Referendum* campaign, 90.77 percent of the Australian public voted “Yes” to have First Nations people counted in the census and allow the Commonwealth to make laws for them (National Museum of Australia n.d.-b). Other forms of strategic protest through “respectable” clothing involved First Nations peoples intentionally wearing creased and disordered outfits (Harwood 2021).

By the end of the 1960s, First Nations outfits and styles transformed and aligned with the radical civil rights and Black Panther Party protest movements (Cato 1971; Clark 2023b). On the bicentenary of Captain James Cook’s landing in Sydney on 29 April 1970, the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders protested the occasion as a day of mourning (State Library of New South Wales n.d.). This was the largest national First Nations protest, and attendees wore black clothes, black armbands, and red headbands to symbolize mourning and bloodshed (State Library of New South Wales n.d.).

Inscribed on their headbands were First Nations motifs and art and a breastplate saying, “discarded Government Property,” worn by the Quandamooka poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal, previously known as Kath Walker (State Library of New South Wales n.d.). Other attendees wore necklaces displaying small cultural implements, such as shields or black power-style emblems on chains (State Library of New South Wales n.d.).

By the 1970s, First Nations clothing started mass incorporating political art, slogans, and cultural motifs, heralded by the creation of the Aboriginal flag in 1971 and increased land rights protests (Clark 2023b). By the 1982 *Brisbane Commonwealth Games*, clothing featuring the Aboriginal flag colors of black, red and yellow became ubiquitous (Brisbane Times 2012; Clark 2023b) (Figure 5). For instance, the Aboriginal flag was worn uniquely as a head scarf and top by the now-politician Linda Burney (Wiradjuri) in the film *Australia Daze: World’s Oldest Living Culture* (Bridgeman n.d.). This film showed parts of the 1988 protest against the bicentennial celebrations on *Australia Day* (Bridgeman n.d.). Other attendees at this event wore a range of clothing featuring the Aboriginal flag, slogans and logos, red headbands and cultural body paint (Maynard 2006).

Today, the First Nations style embodies cultural design or modern symbolism to resist and heal from colonization (the Torres Strait Islander flag proudly emerged in 1992). The style is intersectional and worn by everyone, including First Nations musicians, actors, artists, political leaders and everyday people. It is worn casually, professionally, and formally, ranging from flag-based designs to political or cultural slogans and First Nations brand attire. For some First Nations women, celebrating culture through First Nations style is a way they engage in activism (Clark et al. Forthcoming; Clark et al. 2022). First Nations style at the *Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras* parade showcases various outfits, including sequined Aboriginal flag gowns and specially designed textiles made into garments (Bishop n.d.). First Nations artists are also creating fashions and outfits that speak to contemporary forms of self. Kamilaroi/Gamilaraay artist Dennis Golding creates capes to celebrate the superhero, superpowers, and First Nations identity, often facilitating young First Nations people to make their own (Blogg 2024).

Storytelling and expression through fashion, art, and style are essential for First Nations people’s well-being as they provide a channel through which to communicate. While colonial policies created a momentary loss of cultural wear for some, many formed new ways to express their identity. First Nations style continues to be a way to express and communicate cultural pride, revitalization, and healing from colonization (Clark et al. Forthcoming; Clark et al. 2022). This historical and revitalizing journey of cultural practice and self-expression through fashion, art, and style demonstrates self-determination and autonomy for First Nations people.

Figure 5

Opening of Australia's Parliament House—two demonstrators standing beneath protest signs for Aboriginal land rights attached to the side wall of the forecourt, 1988. Photograph [Use of Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia].



Self-determining First Nations fashion practices

Before colonization, clothing and adornment were guided and self-determined by the environment, trade, and storytelling. Following the early colonial period, several First Nations peoples undertook the slave labor of goods or sold their wares to tourists. Today, First Nations designers and artists want viable economic opportunities and the ability to work in Country or from their hometowns (McIlwraith 2023). They also want the chance to showcase in fashion shows and have safety in the intellectual property rights of their designs and stories. In the burgeoning First Nations fashion industry, self-determination for First Nations designers and artists encompasses and assists with cultural, ecological and financial sustainability.

From the mid-1800s to early 1900s, various First Nations people prepared cultural implements, hats, bags, baskets, jewelry, and rugs for intercolonial and international exhibitions and tourist trades (Clark 2023a; Maryborough Chronicle and Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser 1888). These were made in various styles and materials, from traditional or introduced materials to cultural or Western methods (Clark 2023a; Maryborough Chronicle and Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser 1888). In the mid-1800s, Palawa Tasmanian women, such as Truganini, continued the practice of shell necklace making and wearing, eventually trading with non-Indigenous settlers and visitors (Bellanta 2023; Harman 2018). The same occurred at Victoria's Coranderrk Reserve, where baskets and bags, among others, were sold on-site or stocked by a Melbourne CBD shop (Clark 2015). By the late 1800s, Sydney's La Perouse Mission shell baskets were featured in London and at the Sydney Royal Easter Show (Nugent 2013). From 1907, the state of Queensland presented First Nations-made dresses, petticoats, coats, and hats from the various missions and reserves (Scott and Laurie 2007) (Figure 6).

Decades later, the 1930s heralded the establishment of First Nations art and designs on textiles and garments, first from non-Indigenous artists who appropriated them and then by First Nations women within the missions and reserves (Clark 2023a). This early work included



Figure 6

Aboriginal display at the Brisbane Exhibition, 1914. Photograph [out of copyright. Use of image courtesy of the State Library of Queensland].

traditional weaving styles used in the production of bags and cultural designs on linens and scarves (Tamura 1985; The Herald 1941; The Sun 1941). By the 1950s, children's art from the Carrolup Native settlement in Western Australia was declared a unique textile and garment design (The Newcastle Sun 1951). In the mid-century, several First Nations people were adequately paid for their labor, including the women who made clothing and accessories in and out of the institutions (Keen 2010). For example, First Nations women from Coffs Harbor in New South Wales started mass-producing fashions from designs created by their non-Indigenous art teacher (Dawn Magazine 1967).

By the late 1960s, First Nations fashion design was transformed, with the Tiwi Island (Northern Territory) art hubs Bima Wear and Tiwi Design launching garments and cultural textiles (Bima Wear n.d.; Tiwi Design n.d.). Soon after, other arts and crafts centers joined the textile and fashion business (Hamby and Kirk 2014; Maynard 2000) (Figure 7). Eventually, First Nations fashion shows materialized locally in the 1970s (Boling 1978) and internationally (for example, an exhibition of garments at the *Parisian Au Printemps Department Store* in 1987) in the 1980s (Bancroft 2023). By the start of the new millennium, Robyn Caughlan (Darug/Darkinjung) (in collaboration with Benjamin Mach) was the first First Nations designer to present at *Australian Fashion Week* (Sydney Morning Herald 2003).

Today, there are numerous First Nations designers and artists of various label sizes and design esthetics. They have the support of several First Nations fashion bodies who advocate within the industry, manage fashion shows, assist with training, and guide funding opportunities (First Nations Fashion and Design 2024; Global Indigenous Management n.d.; Indigenous Fashion Projects 2022a; Mob in Fashion n.d.). These bodies, along with First Nation fashion labels and industry experts, frequently call out continuous cultural appropriations and ensure intellectual protocols are adhered to (Cook 2022; Indigenous Fashion Projects 2022b; Janke 2021). There is a sustained promotion of First Nations agencies that register First Nations artists, designers, and labels (Supply Nation 2023), and some labels provide ally fashions to non-Indigenous customers. These strategies aim to further educate Australian and global communities on cultural appropriation and appreciation of differences.

Within the wider fashion and arts sector, there are financial opportunities for First Nations designers and artists to have greater autonomy (Cook 2022). The Australian Government allocates several funding programs for First Nations peoples working in the textile design and fashion sector (Cook 2022; Creative Australia 2024; The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts n.d.). Commercial partnerships also provide collaborative opportunities (Cook 2022). Yet, while there are successful collaborations with non-Indigenous commercial partners, this can often involve taking on extra work to teach cultural safety protocols (Cook 2022). There are



Figure 7

Bert Wiedemann. Bima Wear: Tiwi Design, 1983. Photograph. [Use of image courtesy of Library & Archives NT. Attribution International 4.0 (CC by 4.0)].

also complications in obtaining sector funding, such as short-term or high-risk backing and the needed funds for designers to show their collections on the runway (Cook 2022). The ideal goal, of course, is to self-sustain the business and reach economic safety. Denni Francisco’s (Wiradjuri) label Ngali demonstrates self-determination through crowd-funding exercises to sustain its business model and expand collaborations with First Nations artists (Blogg 2023).

For many designers and artists, the opportunity of funding or economic sustainability allows autonomy to work and live on Country or in their hometown (McNeil and Clark 2023). Art centers producing fashions in rural and regional areas are prime examples (Cook 2022). Some art centers have continued making clothing, textiles, and adornments since the earlier period of the missions and reserves (Bima Wear n.d.; Ernabella Arts n.d.; Yarrabah Arts and Cultural Precinct 2021). For instance, in 1910, Queensland’s Yarrabah Mission (now Yarrabah Arts & Cultural Precinct) exhibited dresses, jackets, shirts and “sulus (garments worn by the native lads)” (The Maitland Daily Mercury 1910). They now experiment with fashion to tell stories of their experiences. At the 2019 Cairns Indigenous Art Fair *Buwal-Barra fashion show*, the Djunggal Yarrabah Elders Group recreated three types of

dresses worn in the mission (Clark 2024b). Fashion Designer Lillardia Briggs-Houston (Wiradjuri/Gangulu/Yorta Yorta) also lives and works on Country in regional New South Wales. She hopes to establish “a First Nations not-for-profit textiles and fashion house on Country” to advocate and support training opportunities and pathways for future regional and remote fashion designers (Country Road 2024).

The First Nations fashion industry has evolved from traditional clothing and adornment to unpaid and underpaid labor to its current form of economic, environmental, and cultural autonomy. Yet, while First Nations designers and artists have self-determination in some respects, there are also fundamental barriers and issues. For those living in the Country or away from city or regional training facilities, it means leaving home to study and potentially experiencing financial and well-being hardships (Cook 2022; McNeil and Clark 2023). Substantial funds are required to establish a label, and there are risks with obtaining funding and commercial partnerships. It is through further advocacy by industry, First Nations designers and artists, and tertiary institutions that change can slowly occur.

Conclusion

Decolonial scholar’s call for fashion definitions and perspectives from all cultures, and this article provides further insight into the practice of Australian First Nations fashion, art and style. Utilizing Clark and McNeil (2023) description of First Nations fashion, art and style, the practice involves First Nations fashion designers, artists creating textiles and garments, and everyday people styled in cultural garb. A conceptual model of First Nations fashion, art, and style outlines the components of culture, expression, and self-determination to explain its purpose and philosophy. These three parts correlate, allowing First Nations people’s histories and experiences to weave together.

Culture asserts the continuation of cultural practice through fashion, art and style and how it can contribute to well-being. Cultural clothing and adornment are significantly connected to the environment, Country and sustainable practices. While cultural practice through clothing and adornment is often described as traditional, it continues to be made and worn by many. This practice has continued since colonization through the covert or overt ways that First Nations people wear their cultural gear as a form of resistance and rebellion.

Expression describes how First Nations people use fashion design, art, and style to communicate their modern selves, whether as cultural pride or intersectional identities. As a result of colonization, new forms of cultural expression emerged and adapted to the changes. Intersectional identities of First Nations peoples indicate that there is no one way to communicate individuality and cultural belonging.

Self-determination explains the history and foundation of the First Nations fashion industry and the need for First Nations peoples’

autonomy. From the historical experiences of unpaid and underpaid labor, today's First Nations fashion industry is undergoing improved economic, environmental, and cultural independence. There are necessary developments, including greater access for First Nations people to undertake fashion design training and safety in cultural intellectual property rights for designers and artists.

This conceptual model attempts to stimulate and influence further insight and research into First Nations fashion, art, and style. Inspiration was found through many relevant theories and standpoints from fashion and First Nations contexts, which helped transform this exploratory framework. This conceptual model has thus helped to provide a foundation for further theoretical research into First Nations fashion, art and style. Given the brevity of this model, theoretical additions are essential in further understanding the practice. For example, a complex theory could be developed from this exploratory model, particularly one that explains and details the links between historical and contemporary First Nations style and the First Nations fashion industry.

Empirical research is also required, especially insights into the First Nations fashion industry and the contribution of First Nations style to cultural practice, identity, and well-being. Future research questions could ask how First Nations style contributes to decolonization and How First Nations fashion design contributes to cultural practice and well-being. Lastly, industry advocacy from researchers is necessary to assist in changes that improve fashion funding, training and pathway access. For example, Cook's (2022) paper, "First Nations First: Targeted Investment to Grow a Dynamic and Sustainable First Nations Fashion Sector," provides and advocates policy recommendations. As Cook's (2022) paper focuses on the First Nations fashion industry, there is a need for policy recommendations that platform First Nations style and its connection to well-being and cultural practice.

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