

“IT’S HARD TO MANAGE EVERYTHING”: LABOUR PRECARITY AND THE GAP BETWEEN SUSTAINABLE IDEALS AND EVERYDAY REALITIES IN TWO PORTUGUESE SUSTAINABLE FASHION BRANDS

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This article, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the studios of two Portuguese sustainable fashion brands, analyses the working conditions of the entrepreneurs and designers of these companies, from the establishment of their businesses to the end of the fieldwork, as well as those of their interns and workers. The aim is to show that, although they claim to provide dignified working conditions – a core value of sustainable fashion – the lack of economic capital, combined with a self-exploitative *habitus*, results in a highly precarious labour context for these entrepreneurs and, in some cases, for their workers. This situation not only highlights the constraints preventing them from realizing the ideals they advocate, it also shows that, if the Portuguese state fails to implement policies that support these small sustainable fashion brands economically, they will continue to operate under precarious conditions. This may jeopardize their reputation with consumers and consequently their survival, as, despite their efforts, these brands still rely on self-exploitation to ensure the continuity of their businesses.

Keywords: sustainable fashion, labour precarity, Portuguese fashion industry, ethnography

INTRODUCTION

Although the fashion industry plays a crucial role in the global economy, generating trillions of euros and employing thousands of people (Siegle 2011), including in the Portu-

guese economy, where it has created 128,089 jobs and accounts for 1.3% of the national GDP (GEE 2024), it is undeniable that this sector has negative environmental¹ and social impacts.

On the social level, this industry has been associated with labour conditions characterized by physical and psychological violence, precarity and injustice (McRobbie 2016; Nathan et al. 2022). However, after the collapse of Rana Plaza in 2013 in Bangladesh, a factory that manufactured clothing for global fast-fashion brands² and that exposed the inhumane conditions faced by workers in this industry, sustainable fashion brands began to emerge in the Global North, including in Portugal (Horton 2018; Loureiro et al. 2018).

These brands claim to seek to restore the connection between fashion and nature, focusing on reducing the environmental impact of their production and respecting natural rhythms (Fletcher 2013). In addition, they express a desire to foster relationships with those involved in their production chains, providing them with dignified working conditions and fair wages (Fletcher and Grose 2012). They also emphasize prioritizing national or local production (Joergens 2006) to reduce their carbon footprint and to control the working conditions of those involved in their production activities.

Essentially, these brands seem to want to demonstrate that, in their operations, they are not exclusively focused on maximizing profits and minimizing costs, despite this being a common practice in the fashion industry (Nathan et al. 2022). Instead, they take into account the three pillars of sustainability: environmental, social, and economic (ESG). The environmental pillar focuses on minimizing negative impacts on the environment and preserving natural resources (Hansmann et al. 2012). The social pillar involves promoting equity, social justice and the well-being of workers (Domingues and Remoaldo 2012). And the economic pillar is tasked with promoting sustainable growth and long-term economic prosperity (ibid.).

However, on the one hand research conducted by Godinho (2017) with Spanish seamstresses and the Inside Out³ research carried out by Fashion Revolution⁴ Portugal with workers in the Portuguese textile industry revealed psychological violence, arbitrary dismissals and other violations of labour and human rights. These forms of abuse have previously been identified by social science research among workers in the fashion industry in the Global South (Mezzadri 2018; Prentice et al. 2018), but they also occur in Europe, affecting workers beyond the factory floor (Madeiro 2023). On the other hand, there is

¹ Like high water consumption, pollution of water resources (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2017), carbon dioxide emissions (Apparel Impact Institute 2023), the continuous extraction of raw materials without considering their regeneration times, and the disposal of textile waste (Nathan et al. 2022).

² Fashion brands that have production and consumption models that are characterized by the rapid creation and distribution of clothing at reduced prices.

³ The results of this research were never formally published; however, Fashion Revolution Portugal shared them with interested parties during Fashion Revolution Week 2023 and in an interview given to CNN Portugal.

⁴ A global non-profit movement whose objective is to reform the fashion industry, emphasizing the need for transparency throughout the production chain.

McRobbie's (2016) research with entrepreneurs of small German fashion brands, which demonstrates that precarity is structural to the fashion industry. This process begins with unpaid internships during higher education and persists when designers attempt to overcome precarity by creating their own brands. Taking all this into account, it becomes evident that there is a need to analyse critically the working conditions that sustainable fashion brands offer those involved in their production chains. After all, if violations of labour and human rights also occur in the Global North, and if precarity is structural to the industry, to what extent can these companies realize the ideals they claim to uphold?

This article, based on ethnographic research I conducted between 2022 and 2023 in the studios of two Portuguese sustainable fashion microenterprises I call *Raw* and *Reconnected*,⁵ focuses on analysing the working conditions faced primarily by the entrepreneurs and designers of these brands from the founding of their businesses until the end of the fieldwork. However, because their working conditions directly shape the experiences of their interns and workers, the article also considers the working conditions of these groups. The aim is to demonstrate that, despite their claims regarding fair working conditions, the lack of economic capital, combined with a self-exploitative *habitus*, results in a highly precarious labour context for these entrepreneurs and, in some cases, for those working in their studios. This situation not only highlights the constraints that prevent these brands from putting the values of sustainable fashion into practice; it also indicates that, as long as the Portuguese state fails to provide policies that support these small sustainable fashion brands economically, they will continue to operate under precarious conditions. Such a scenario may jeopardize their reputation with consumers and, consequently, their survival, because even though they are doing the best they can, they still operate through self-exploitation and continue to compromise the well-being of those around them to ensure the continuity of their businesses.

METHODOLOGY

The data presented in this article come from my PhD research, which focused on the description and analysis of the discourses and practices of Portuguese sustainable fashion brands. In this article, I focus specifically on the fieldwork I carried out at the *Raw* studio between April and June 2022, and at the *Reconnected* studio between December 2022 and January 2023. In both companies, I used participant observation, a technique employed by anthropology since its foundation (Burgess 2002), with the aim of understanding, experiencing and describing my interlocutors' daily life, challenges and aspirations. This technique allowed me on the one hand to observe and follow the creative process, pattern design, cutting and garment construction. On the other hand, it provided an opportunity to understand the daily work dynamics of the brand entrepreneurs, interns and workers

⁵ This research was funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) through the PhD fellowship 07211.BD.2021

and to interact with them, as well as comprehending the difficulties they face in producing sustainable clothing.

In parallel with this, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the brand entrepreneurs, as well as those working with them, with the aim of exploring, among other issues, their professional trajectories, daily work routines, the working conditions offered to them, and the nature and dynamics of the relationships established among the interlocutors. All interviews were conducted in person at locations chosen by the interlocutors themselves, and they were recorded with their informed consent. Subsequently, they were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis (Bernard 2006).

It is important to note that, by my choice, and not at the request of the interlocutors, all names presented are fictitious. Likewise, in respect of the anonymity of the brands, entrepreneurs, their workers and interns, no information regarding the locations of the studios is disclosed.

NEOLIBERALISM, LABOUR PRECARITY AND THE SELF-ENTERPRISING SUBJECT

Before focusing on the daily management of the analysed brands and the precarious working conditions to which those working with them are subjected, it is first important to reflect on what is understood by labour precarity and the context that allowed its emergence and expansion to the present day.

Neoliberalism, by shaping the development of a global market economy founded on competitiveness and individualism, has profoundly altered relationships between the state, the market and labour (Harvey 2005; Standing 2013). The implementation of neoliberal policies by both states and corporations has produced significant consequences, including the deregulation and restructuring of labour relations (Matos et al. 2011) and reductions in worker protection systems. Ong (2006) describes this reconfiguration as an exception to neoliberalism, in which certain groups, primarily the owners of the means of production, are protected and benefit, while others, like workers, are exposed to precarity and the loss of rights. Organizations operating under a neoliberal logic subject workers to a multiplicity of flexible and unstable labour relations, characterized first by temporary and informal employment contracts that allow for greater flexibility in dismissals, and secondly by insecure incomes (Feng 2021). The latter disrupt the organization of their daily lives and prevent them from securing their futures with the minimum safety and predictability (Lazar and Sanchez 2019).

These unstable working conditions exclude people from the benefits of the capitalist system, thereby increasing social inequalities (Matos et al. 2011) and contributing to the deterioration of mental health. This is because the constant adaptation to change and struggle for survival leads individuals to states of stress, anger, anxiety, self-exploitation

and depression (Council of the European Union 2023): precisely what characterizes labour precarity.

In Portugal, labour precarity has become structural and widespread since the time of the Troika.⁶ According to Estanque et al. (2013), around 30% of work was precarious at that time. Although this value is currently lower, Eurostat data (2024) show that, in the first quarter of 2023, 17.2% of employment in Portugal was based on precarious contractual arrangements, namely short-term or fixed-term contracts, temporary agency work and other unstable forms of employment characterized by low wages, limited job security and reduced access to social protection. By the first quarter of 2024, this percentage had risen to 17.8%, placing Portugal third among European Union countries with the highest proportion of workers in such precarious conditions (European Commission 2018). These figures indicate that labour precarity remains a significant concern in the country, with a tendency to persist over time.

Although anyone can be subject to labour precarity, Standing (2013) argues that young people are particularly prone to these labour arrangements, since neoliberalism has transformed the school system to become a consistent part of the market society, pushing education towards the formation of “human capital” and preparation for the labour market. As Ong explains, neoliberal ideology promotes the conception of the self as an entrepreneur, encouraging individuals to accumulate experiences, enhance skills and demonstrate their value, thus becoming “self-enterprising subjects” (Ong 2006: 14), active agents in shaping their own lives and careers.

This logic encourages young people to undertake multiple internships (De Peuter 2014), as these are understood as a rite of passage (Frenette 2015), an investment in their career and a form of putting one’s hopes in labour (Hawzen and King-White 2022). Thus they promise valuable experience and access to networks, allowing young people to pursue continuous improvements to their skills and, consequently, achieve the long-desired entry into the labour market (Hora 2020).

It is estimated that annually 3.7 million young people in the European Union undertake internships as their first professional experience. In Portugal, a survey conducted in 2023 with a thousand young people revealed that, of this total, 75% had already completed at least one internship after finishing their undergraduate degree (Tribunal de Contas Europeu 2024).

⁶ This refers to the year 2011, when the Portuguese government, with the aim of achieving financial stability and reformulating the country’s economic structure (which had been severely affected by the global financial crisis of 2008) requested intervention from the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission and the European Central Bank, a triad that became known as the Troika (Neves and Reis 2019). These institutions granted Portugal an economic and financial assistance programme amounting to €78 billion. This was conditional on the implementation of a strict economic adjustment plan, which included severe austerity measures such as reductions in education spending, changes to the pension system and labour market flexibilization, particularly through the promotion of informal and temporary employment contracts, which came to exceed the number of permanent contracts (ibid.).

As internships are understood as essential for building a professional career to provide credentials that attest to one's skills (Hawzen and King-White 2022) and, consequently, one's success in the labour market (Frenette 2015), young people compete fiercely with each other for these opportunities, whether paid or unpaid⁷ (McRobbie 2016). In the fashion industry, this situation is particularly visible, as beyond labour exploitation in terms of wages, these young people must become "flex workers" (De Peuter 2014: 266), meaning they are expected to perform any task requested of them, often even taking responsibility for duties that do not belong to them, and to work beyond established hours without receiving appropriate compensation for this extra work. Consequently, they also face the necessity of prioritizing their professional lives over their personal lives (Lingo and Tepper 2013). To sustain themselves financially, some rely on support from their family, while others take on multiple jobs, including work as consultants and freelancers, becoming "busy creatives" (McRobbie 2016: 63). However, due to the impossibility of fully exercising their creativity in these internships and of escaping the precarity they face, some, with the support of family and friends, decide to create their own brands, becoming self-employed (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). It is precisely within this context of constrained creativity and the desire to contribute to more sustainable fashions that the entrepreneurs of the two brands analysed here decided to start their respective businesses.

FOUNDING AND MANAGING A BRAND: BUSY CREATIVES AND SELF-EXPLOITATION

Raw is a sustainable fashion brand that produces clothing using fabrics⁸ sourced from factories in northern Portugal. These fabrics consist of natural fibres (cotton, linen, wool), alternatives (organic cotton, hemp, lyocell, tencel, bamboo) and recycled fibers. It has adopted production practices based on the zero-waste design method⁹ and a multifunctional approach.¹⁰ It was founded in 2007 by Andreia, a forty-year-old Portuguese woman, as part of her master's thesis on textile waste. However, it was only in 2010, after completing

⁷ It should be noted that in Portugal, following the implementation of the Decent Work Agenda in July 2023, aimed at combating the precarity faced by young people entering the labour market (Eportugalgov 2023), all professional internships became remunerated at a minimum of 80% of the national minimum wage (amounting to €870). The grants provided by the Institute for Employment and Professional Training (IEFP) for university graduates were set at €960.

⁸ It is worth noting that the entrepreneur of Raw, like that of Reconnected, produces garments both with fabrics made to her own specifications and with fabrics ordered, to their manufacturers, by other clients who ultimately did not purchase the initially ordered yardage. In this way, manufacturers, in order not to lose money and to reduce the environmental impact of their production, end up selling the remaining fabrics, referred to as deadstock, at a lower price to other interested clients.

⁹ This refers to a design method of which the objective is to reduce fabric waste during the cutting phase. For this purpose, the garment pattern is designed to not produce any waste when placed on the fabric chosen.

¹⁰ This is an approach that produces garments that can be worn in four different ways, thereby preventing aesthetic fatigue among consumers and, consequently, their disposal.

multiple unpaid internships in fashion design and, above all, after saving some money from her work as a university lecturer in fashion design that Andreia resigned from her job and officially registered Raw as a brand.

The limited economic capital available to Andreia at the outset of her business posed several challenges in establishing both the brand and her career as a designer. To save money, she set up her studio in her home garage and took on multiple roles within the brand. In addition to being the entrepreneur, she also worked as the designer responsible for the creative process of the collections, pattern drafting and the making of some garments. She also managed accounting, marketing, sales and customer service, logistics and distribution, production management, inventory management and partnership coordination. Moreover, similar to what McRobbie (2016) observed in the German context, Andreia was also compelled to forgo her own remuneration, since, due to the limited volume of sales, all available financial resources were directed toward covering production costs and reinvestment in the brand through the development of new collections.

In this way, it becomes evident that the lack of economic resources available to Andreia at the beginning of her brand led her to self-exploitation, not only because she was unable to remunerate herself, but also because such financial constraints prevented her from hiring other people essential to the functioning of the brand, thereby forcing her to become a multitasker. Despite her efforts to consolidate the business, fieldwork revealed that these economic constraints and the resulting labour precariousness to which this entrepreneur was subjected continue to persist. Although Raw's entrepreneur is currently able, due to increased sales and the fact that her sole expenses consist of production costs, to draw the national minimum wage (€870), she still lacks sufficient economic capital to employ additional workers, remaining, as I observed, responsible for a broad spectrum of functions within the brand. Besides that, due to the rising cost of living in the country, particularly for housing and essential goods (Santos et al. 2023), Andreia relies on financial support from her husband to avoid significant economic constraints. This situation appears to be common among fashion designers, as noted by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) in their research on creative industries. However, as observed during fieldwork, the pursuit of additional income, which would reduce her dependence on her husband to cover personal expenses, leads this entrepreneur to become a "busy creative" (McRobbie 2016: 63), balancing the numerous responsibilities of her brand with participation in a multidisciplinary project and collaboration with the CEO of another fashion brand.

An interesting point to consider here is that, although her situation illustrates the phenomenon of self-exploitation observed among fashion designers who choose to found their own brands (McRobbie 2016), this entrepreneur never described her own labour conditions as precarious, nor did she claim to be self-exploiting. This lack of acknowledgment of her self-exploitation may be related to the fact that, as noted earlier, young designers are trained from their very first internships to work long hours – often for only symbolic

compensation, or in some cases for none at all – to be flexible with their time, and to prioritize their professional lives over their personal lives (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011).

Thus, it is possible to suggest that, by being socialized within the social field of fashion industry internships, these young individuals acquire and develop a *habitus* (Bourdieu 2010) that guides their perceptions, thoughts and ways of acting. Consequently, when they establish their own brands, they have already internalized and accepted the norms and precarious labour conditions as a natural and indispensable part of building a career within this industry; therefore, by self-employing, they end up reproducing the same *habitus*.

Reconnected is another sustainable fashion brand that produces garments from fabrics consisting of natural, synthetic, alternative and recycled fibres; it also manufactures in northern Portugal. The firm was founded in 2017 by Nazaré, a thirty-year-old Portuguese woman, while she was in the first year of her master's degree in fashion design. At the time, her engagement with the national textile industry made her realize that few brands were produced locally, which contributed to the devaluation of the sector's technical and artisanal know-how. Aiming to counter this trend and believing that the unpaid internships she had completed at other brands had provided her with sufficient skills, she sought financial support from her grandfather to establish Reconnected and rent a studio and shop in Lisbon.

Although initially, like Andreia, she had to perform a wide range of tasks within her business, the location of Reconnected's facilities in the capital city resulted in a sufficient volume of clothing sales, which allows Nazaré, unlike Andreia, to earn €814 for her work, an amount above the national minimum wage at the time (€557), and freeing her from financial dependence on her family. Even so, as she did not have the financial means to hire workers essential to the operation of the brand, Nazaré sought out and applied for some programmes that could assist her in this regard. Thus, she applied to the Entrepreneurship and Self-Employment Support Program Empreende XXI – launched by the Institute of Employment and Professional Training (IEFP) – as well as the collaborative project *Small but Perfect*,¹¹ created by Fashion Revolution and co-financed by the COSME program of the European Commission. She was therefore able not only to hire two workers – a business developer and a marketer – permanently, but also to continue drawing her salary without any constraints. Nonetheless, since these supports ended at the close of 2021, Reconnected has faced a critical financial phase from 2022, necessitating some cost reductions.

According to McRobbie (2016), to avoid bankruptcy, small fashion brands continuously require capital injections. In this cost-reduction process, Reconnected's studio and shop, located in Lisbon, where the monthly rent was around €1,300, were relocated to another area within the Lisbon metropolitan region. This move allowed the rent to be reduced to

¹¹ The aim of this project is to provide financial support to micro- and small or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), enabling them to overcome financial barriers in developing more sustainable, innovative and resilient business models.

€600 and eliminated the designer's commuting costs to the studio. However, even this proved insufficient to alleviate her financial difficulties completely, and so Nazaré, unwilling to dismiss the workers she had hired – who were essential for reducing her own self-exploitation in terms of workload – decided to forego her own remuneration for several months. Later, precisely while I was conducting fieldwork, the brand's situation improved slightly, allowing Nazaré to draw €400 for her personal expenses. Nevertheless, as she herself mentioned, this is only possible because she can rely on financial support from her partner.

Considering the previous descriptions, it is possible to understand that, although these entrepreneurs have different trajectories regarding remuneration, both continue, as at the beginning of their brands, to face financial difficulties and consequently to rely on the financial support of family members. Nonetheless, the level of self-exploitation to which Andreia is currently subjected is higher than in the case of Nazaré, as her lack of knowledge regarding financial support programs for young entrepreneurs prevents her from hiring specialized workers. As I observed in the field, this gap is then compensated by the internal economy fostered by neoliberalism (Frenette 2015; Standing 2013).

According to Wolfigram and AhMens (2022), the exploitation of young people's passion and aspirations by companies allows them to reduce their costs in hiring human capital, as interns are recruited for free or at a low cost to fill positions and perform tasks that would otherwise be carried out by workers with proper salary compensation. In Andreia's case, the internship proposals she receives annually from students enrolled in the Erasmus program have played an important role in assisting with task execution and Raw's operations. Nonetheless, and perhaps because she feels uncomfortable having to use unpaid labour – something that goes against the principles of sustainable fashion – I often perceived, on the part of this entrepreneur, a need to justify this position:

Since I cannot pay them, I never considered looking for them [...], they are the ones who approach me [...]. I have also done unpaid internships; it is part of the learning process, the initial path of a fashion designer, which is why I accept it.

Such words demonstrate that the same neoliberal ideas and discourses that pushed this designer into labour precarity and trapped her in this situation are also legitimized and reproduced by her. In the context of creative industries, as Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) note, this reproduction is common and results precisely from prolonged exposure to precarity. According to the authors, over time, individuals working in these industries tend to internalize and naturalize the discourses that initially oppressed them, eventually reproducing them as if they were normal or inevitable. In this sense, by accepting interns, Raw's entrepreneur is not only integrating them into an already precarious system but also contributing to the transmission and legitimization of this *habitus*. As will be demonstrated below, these young people not only learn the profession but are also subjected to working conditions marked by intense physical strain and emotional exhaustion.

ENTREPRENEUR, INTERNS AND THE FLEX WORKER TRAP

When I began fieldwork at Andreia's studio, the entrepreneur was working with two interns. One of them was Júlia, a 23-year-old Portuguese graduate who, after completing her degree in marketing, started searching for employment opportunities on digital platforms. It was through *LinkedIn* that she came across Andreia's internship offer in the field of digital marketing. Although undertaking an internship had not initially been one of her career plans, she decided to apply due to the proximity of the workplace to her residence and because the position was remunerated.

The working conditions offered were that Júlia would work five days per week, totalling 36 hours, with a lunch break ranging from one hour to one and a half hours. As for the salary and entitlement to holidays, since the internship offer resulted from support that the IEFP was providing to small businesses at the time, the salary of €750 was determined by this institution rather than by Andreia. Although interns are not formally entitled to holidays under IEFP regulations, Andreia reached an agreement with Júlia that she could extend the internship for an additional 22 days beyond the original end date, thereby enabling her to enjoy that period as if it were a holiday.

As the person responsible for digital marketing, Júlia was in charge of developing the brand's digital marketing strategy, aligning it with the monthly objectives set by Andreia. She was also responsible for drafting and sending newsletters¹² to clients, managing the brand's social media platforms, and maintaining and updating its website. In addition, she conducted meetings with potential marketplaces and both national and international retailers interested in reselling Raw's clothing.

The other intern of Raw's was Luca, a 22-year-old German student who was pursuing a degree in fashion design at a German university when she decided to undertake an internship. Through her application to the Erasmus programme, she gained access to a list compiled by other students who had already completed internships, and it was there that she first learned about Raw. After researching some information about the brand and sending an email to Andreia proposing a three-month internship, a Zoom meeting was scheduled with Raw's designer, which ultimately resulted in her placement being expected. Regarding working conditions, she was offered terms like Júlia's, except for remuneration and the holiday period, which, given that Luca was undertaking the internship under the Erasmus program, were not included.

As the person responsible for the brand design area, Luca was tasked with activities that included the development of mood boards,¹³ the creation of patterns, assisting in the se-

¹² The purpose of the newsletter is to keep subscribers updated on collection launches, promotions and events in which the brands are participating. It may also include images, information, or even exclusive videos offering behind-the-scenes insights into the creative, production and manufacturing processes.

¹³ A visual representation of ideas, usually elaborated on the computer, which may consist of images, texts and samples of objects.

lection of colours for the new collection, and the production of the respective prototypes. In addition, she was responsible for producing scrunchies,¹⁴ assisting with the organization of photoshoots, sewing labels on to garments and ironing the finished pieces.

Beyond these tasks, during fieldwork I was able to observe how the interns, like Andreia, were involved in a wide range of activities. Owing to her condition as a “busy creative” (McRobbie 2016: 63), which resulted in a lack of time to carry out and reconcile all the tasks at hand, and under the pretext that such activities would be beneficial for the interns’ learning, Andreia assigned Luca responsibilities such as taking orders to the post office, purchasing production materials at a local haberdashery and even being required to act as a model in a video shoot. Júlia, in turn, was also led to volunteer for tasks outside her formal role, including assisting Luca in creating mood boards for photoshoots, organizing the photoshoots themselves, and creating and publishing content for the sustainable fashion brand of one of Andreia’s friends.

Drawing on research with interns in the music industry (Frenette 2015) and the sports industry (Hawzen and King-White 2022), these authors argue that the need and anxiety of young interns to demonstrate their value and understand how they can contribute to organizations leads them to become “flex workers” (De Peuter 2014: 266). In the case of the Raw interns, Júlia’s desire to remain with the company after the end of her internship meant that, although she expressed some discomfort in certain situations, such as working for another brand without any remuneration and outside her working hours (since the entrepreneur of that brand did not take this into account) she was always willing to carry out any tasks requested of her. As for Luca, because she wanted Andreia to write her a letter of recommendation at the end of the internship, to serve as proof of her skills and as an advantage for a highly competitive internship in the Netherlands, the intern, although extremely uncomfortable with having to act as a model, ultimately did so without raising any objections with Andreia.

Thus, it becomes evident that neoliberal ideas of internships as a pathway into the labour market (De Peuter 2014), serving as credentials of skills and personal abilities (Hawzen and King-White 2022) – combined with the fact that Luca and Júlia were embedded in an organizational context and environment in which their superior normalized self-exploitation as an integral part of work and the internship experience – result in these young interns also internalizing, consenting to and participating in their own labour precarity through self-exploitation. However, as Skujina and Loots (2020) note, the labour flexibility demanded of interns has led these individuals to experience significant levels of anxiety and stress.

¹⁴ Hair ties.

ANXIETY, THE INSECURITIES OF INTERNSHIPS AND THE FIRST WORK EXPERIENCE

In the field, I observed that Andreia's situation as a "busy creative" (McRobbie 2016: 63) led the interns to experience and endure high levels of stress, anxiety and insecurity. Specifically, in the case of Luca, Andreia's lack of time to carry out her duties as the brand's designer resulted in her assigning the intern the responsibility for designing all the patterns for the new collection, without any guidance or supervision on her part. As I observed, this situation ultimately left Luca visibly anxious and insecure. In her own words:

I spent the whole week making patterns, and she [Andreia] didn't come to check them. I know she's very busy, but I didn't receive proper guidance at university! If they turn out wrong, the responsibility will fall on me [...] I'm almost crying from stress.

This insecurity regarding her performance and Andreia's difficulty in managing all her responsibilities was also reported to me by Júlia. Specifically, she told me that, after several months without any online sales, they had received three orders in August. Nevertheless, as Andreia was occupied with other projects, and since she was responsible for handling these shipments, the stipulated deadline was missed. This situation left the intern very nervous, because when there were no orders, she felt she was not doing a good job; and when orders finally arrived, setbacks occurred that could jeopardize future sales. The pressure that Júlia placed on herself to demonstrate her professional value led her to believe that she was not meeting the designer's expectations:

Imagine, I always feel that there is a great expectation from her [Andreia] regarding what I should achieve [...] It's true that we could accomplish a bit more, but she mustn't forget that this is my first year in digital marketing. I had no prior experience in this [...]. With so much going on for her, Raw is falling behind, and I don't know what will happen soon.

All these work experiences to which these interns are subjected allow us to reflect on and question Raw's organizational culture. Schein (1984) defines organizational culture as the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group invents, discovers, develops, or learns, using them to cope with external adaptation and internal integration problems. When these assumptions function effectively, they are taught to new members of the organization as the correct way to perceive, think and act. As Akpa et al. (2021) emphasize, in order to identify an organization's culture it is necessary to look not only at its mission and vision, but also at how the organization operates in its daily life and at the behaviours of its members. It is therefore possible to assert that the lack of economic capital of Andreia's brand and the entire resulting context leads to the organizational culture being learned and put into to practice as a norm by the members of Raw, that is, the culture of self-exploitation. Although this has negative consequences for the physical and emotional well-being of its members, this culture is what has kept the company running.

This ultimately exposes the existence of a discrepancy between Raw's discourse, which claims to aim at contributing to fairer and more dignified working conditions within the

fashion industry, and the labour practices implemented by the brand's entrepreneur, which contradict these values. Indeed, Andreia's desire to establish a brand that challenges her own experiences within the industry appears, in practice, to be undermined by her lack of capital, something that the entrepreneur herself seems not to realize, perhaps because she is absorbed in the illusion of entrepreneurship.

"WE ARE MOVING FORWARD WITH THE ATTEMPT TO SELL THE COMPANY"

As I mentioned earlier, through financial support programs, Nazaré hired two workers, which allowed her to focus exclusively on the design and production management of the collections. One of these workers is Laura, a 29-year-old Portuguese woman, who initially performed marketing functions at Reconnected, namely conducting market research, defining marketing strategies, contacting influencers and managing the brand's social media accounts.

Laura's working conditions stipulated that she would work eight hours a day, five days a week, with a one-hour lunch break and two additional ten-minute breaks, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. In terms of remuneration, her salary was €950, with entitlement to the 13th and 14th months, 22 days of holidays, plus her birthday off. It should be noted that these conditions had remained unchanged since Laura assumed her position; however, in 2020, Nazaré decided to provide her with company-paid health insurance, followed by a percentage of the brand's shares in 2021.

Yet, in 2022, Laura proposed to Nazaré that they find someone else to take over her marketing duties, as she wanted to develop the brand's business-to-business (B2B) side. This meant assuming responsibility for transactions between Reconnected and other companies, including securing stores to resell the products, recruiting sales agents, and managing partnerships with other sustainable brands. At the time I was conducting fieldwork at the Reconnected studio, Laura was the brand's business developer, and Clara, a thirty-year-old Portuguese woman, had been hired to take on Laura's previous responsibilities.

In addition to handling these tasks, Clara was also responsible for editing and producing videos for the brand's social media platforms and often participated in photoshoots as a model. Regarding her working conditions, they were identical to those offered to Laura except for her remuneration, which was €870, and a percentage of the brand's shares.

It is worth mentioning that, as in Raw's studio, during my time at Reconnected's studio I also observed Laura and Clara performing tasks beyond those formally assigned to them, such as attending to customers both in person and online; preparing, shipping, tracking and invoicing orders; and preparing the products and materials needed for participation in national and international fairs. However, unlike at Raw, where carrying out this wide range

of tasks created an emotionally exhausting work environment for the interns, this was not the case at Reconnected.

In an organizational context, Hughes and Wearing (2021) conclude that companies' concern with adopting practices that do not sacrifice the well-being of their workers for the sake of profit leads workers to feel valued and to develop a sense of belonging and commitment to the organization. This may be through involving them in strategic decision-making, actively listening to their needs, aligning their personal goals with organizational objectives, valuing their skills and encouraging the development of new ones, and fostering mutual respect. Consequently, this results in a better work environment, greater motivation and job satisfaction, ultimately enhancing productivity, profits and the company's reputation (ibid.).

At Reconnected's studio, I was able to observe the implementation of many of these ethical practices by Nazaré. It was common to see the entrepreneur seeking input from her workers on design and production decisions for the collections, such as advice on how certain pieces could be designed, or even which fabrics should be selected to maximize consumer comfort. I also witnessed that all pieces chosen for national and international markets required the approval of all three team members, as did the selection of models for the photoshoots. All this behaviour of Nazaré created, in Laura's words, "a super relaxed work environment, without pressure, super innovative", where, as Clara added, "we share everything and help each other out". Thus, even considering the size of the company – which requires all three to perform tasks beyond their formal responsibilities – because they feel valued and a part of the company and can see how their contributions are important to the brand, these women end up carrying out any task that arises voluntarily and with complete satisfaction.

Although this entire work context may suggest that Nazaré demonstrates greater effort or commitment than Raw's entrepreneur regarding the alignment of the brand's values, its organizational culture, and social policies and practices that consider the well-being of her workers, this does not stem from a difference in individual attitudes, but from the availability of financial capital. Thus, it becomes evident that success in securing entrepreneurship support is decisive for these women to provide dignified working conditions both for themselves and for their workers and interns.

Unfortunately, the initial capital boost provided by these state supports is not always sufficient, as the evolution of the Reconnected brand has shown; this placed the entrepreneur in a dilemma between acting according to her ethics and ensuring the viability and survival of her business.

After completing my fieldwork at Reconnected's studio, and while waiting for a positive response to conduct fieldwork in the factories that are part of the brand's supply chain to follow the production of the new collection, I contacted Nazaré. After a month of waiting, I received an email from her stating that the brand was out of money and that she would be proceeding with its sale. She would not even produce the winter collection. When I

contacted Laura and then Clara for a better understanding of the situation they were in, I discovered that they had been dismissed from Reconnected – Clara in August and Laura in November – precisely because of the company's financial situation. I tried to contact Nazaré again but received no further responses. Nevertheless, an analysis of Reconnected's social media revealed that the company is still operational, with Nazaré remaining as designer and entrepreneur.

CONCLUSION

Given everything discussed so far, it is possible to assert that the sustainable fashion brands I have analysed here are run by women who are seeking to escape the precarious working conditions of the fashion industry yet end up reproducing them due to their economic fragility. Their desire to transform the Portuguese textile industry is shaped by a *habitus* of self-exploitation, acquired and normalized during their early professional experiences, which structures the labour environments of both the entrepreneurs themselves and, in the case of Raw, their interns. Although socialized within an industry where unethical labour relations are intrinsic (Nathan et al. 2022), what truly prevents them from aligning their values with ethical practices is their lack of resources. The scarcity of economic capital compels these entrepreneurs to rely on self-exploitation and, in some cases, to reproduce precarious conditions for those who work with them, even when they strive to act ethically.

However, this situation is not unique to sustainable fashion. The dynamics analysed here reflect a broader pattern found across other cultural and creative industries, where self-entrepreneurship, a passion for work and the promise of self-realization operate as mechanisms that legitimize precarity and self-exploitation (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). As in design, music or media, the ideal of “doing what you love” is mobilized in sustainable fashion to justify long working hours, low or non-existent wages and the acceptance of unstable conditions as if they were an inevitable stage of professional success. The problem therefore lies not in individual choices alone, but in a structural framework that cuts across different entrepreneurial fields under neoliberalism.

In this sense, the findings point to a central tension between, on the one hand, the growing demands for sustainability, transparency and social responsibility – put forward by consumers, civil-society organizations and European Union policies – and, on the other hand, the absence of effective economic instruments that would allow small brands to realize these ideals without resorting to the precarization of labour. Directives such as the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive,¹⁵ the Corporate Sustainability Reporting

¹⁵ Directive approved in 2024 which obliges companies to identify, assess and remedy the negative impacts of their operations in supply chains (Bright and Duarte 2024), and to mitigate, cease, prevent and remedy them if identified.

Directive,¹⁶ and the European Taxonomy¹⁷ establish ambitious standards, but they are largely designed for medium and large-scale enterprises, leaving microenterprises in a vulnerable position, exposed to unequal competition with large groups and without the financial capacity to comply fully with these requirements.

Thus, the situation of these brands is a matter not merely of ethical coherence, but also of political economy. Without tax incentives, structural subsidies, or sustained funding mechanisms specifically targeted at small sustainable and creative projects, these initiatives remain dependent on self-exploitation to survive. The environmental tax on fast fashion implemented¹⁸ in France in 2025 illustrates that it is possible to intervene in the market to correct asymmetries and support more responsible production models (Jornal de Notícias 2024). In Portugal, the absence of such policies severely limits the ability of sustainable fashion microenterprises – and of small creative businesses more broadly – to provide truly dignified and stable working conditions.

It can therefore be concluded that, as long as the Portuguese state and the European Union do not create material economic conditions that make ethics economically viable, sustainability will remain, for many microenterprises, more a discursive ideal than a practical reality. Under these terms, the goal of the brands analysed here to contribute to a more sustainable fashion industry will remain profoundly constrained.

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¹⁶ Directive approved in 2023 that requires companies to provide, in their annual reports, information on the measures adopted to mitigate and remedy these impacts (Bright and Duarte 2024).

¹⁷ A classification system aimed at providing a common language for investors and companies to assess whether their activities are environmentally sustainable, serving as a criterion for investment in certain economic activities (European Parliament 2020).

¹⁸ From 2025 onwards, the French government began financially penalizing brands that produce clothing in countries with more lenient environmental regulations but sell them in markets where, due to environmental standards, they could hardly be manufactured, using the revenues collected to provide financial support to brands that produce sustainable clothing (Jornal de Notícias 2024).

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"TEŠKO JE UPRAVLJATI SVIME": PREKARNOST RADA I JAZ IZMEĐU ODRŽIVIH IDEALA I SVAKODNEVNE STVARNOSTI U DVA PORTUGALSKA BRENDA ODRŽIVE MODE

U ovome se članku, temeljenom na etnografskom terenskom istraživanju provedenom u studijima dvaju portugalskih brendova održive mode, analiziraju radni uvjeti poduzetnika i dizajnera tih poduzeća od njihova osnivanja do završetka terenskog istraživanja, kao i uvjeti u kojima djeluju njihovi pripravnici i radnici. Cilj je pokazati da – premda tvrde da pružaju dostojanstvene radne uvjete kao temeljnu vrijednost održive mode – nedostatak ekonomskog kapitala u kombinaciji s habitusom samoeksploatacije rezultira izrazito prekarnim radnim okruženjem za te poduzetnike, a u nekim slučajevima i za njihove radnike. Ta situacija ne samo da ističe ograničenja koja ih sprječavaju u ostvarenju zagovaranih ideala već i pokazuje da će, ako portugalska država ne provede politike koje ekonomski podupiru te male brendove održive mode, oni nastaviti poslovati u prekarnim uvjetima. To može ugroziti njihov ugled kod potrošača te, posljedično, njihov opstanak jer se, unatoč svojim naporima, ti brendovi i dalje oslanjaju na samoeksploataciju kako bi osigurali nastavak poslovanja.

Ključne riječi: održiva moda, prekarnost rada, portugalska modna industrija, etnografija