

Fair*faktur*

Design

Toolkit

Table of contents

About this toolkit	4
1. Aesthetic approach	6
1.1 Creative identity	7
2. Trend research	12
2.1 Relevance	13
2.2 Trend dimensions	14
2.3 Research strategy	16
2.4 Fashion trend resources	22
3. Creative process	34
3.1 Finding inspiration	35
3.2 Inspiration board	37
3.3 Canva	100
3.4 Image composition	102
4. From idea to product	44
4.1 Overall design process and important considerations	45
4.2 Sketching and technical drawings	47
4.3 Product specifications and material selection	49
4.4 Pattern making and grading	51
4.5 Prototyping, fitting and samples	53
4.6 Manufacturing and creative techniques	57
4.7 After-sales analysis	62

About this toolkit

This publication is part of a comprehensive set of toolkits for artisans, handicrafts organisations and Fair Trade producers in the textile and fashion industry. The toolkits have been developed for capacity building in the topics of market access and analysis, fashion design and communication to help small organisations build a strong business and realise their market potential.

This present issue is intended to support the improvement of product development processes and to strengthen design skills in order to create products tailored to the target audience and thus contribute to strong market performance. It introduces the essentials of the design process from research to the creative process and practical implementation. You will learn how to conduct trend research, gather inspiration to take your creative process to the next level, and get a full guide on the implementation, from sketching, pattern making and prototyping to data analysis for design.

This toolkit mainly addresses you as designers, product development executives and all of you who are included in the design process, including general managers with strategic decision power.

It serves as a guideline, providing instructions and tools for various business cases through a modular structure so that you can focus on the content relevant to your individual situation. It also includes examples, practical exercises and further references, all of which can be recognised by the symbols explained in the following.

All toolkits contain a lot of information on various topics and activities. We therefore recommend reading and working through the individual chapters one by one. It can also be helpful to distribute them among the relevant team members. If you want to work through all of the toolkits in order to gain a holistic understanding, we recommend the following order based on the content structure: Communications, Market Access & Analysis, Design. Of course, many of the topics are interrelated. You will therefore also find links between the toolkits.



Definition

Explanation of specific terms for better understanding.



Exercise

Possibility of practical application of the theory learned.



Example

Fictional illustration of the practical implementation.



Additional info

More in-depth insights on the topic.



Key takeaways

Highlight of the most important aspects.



Resource

Reference to further useful information or tools.

1. Aesthetic approach

1.1 Creative identity

To get things started, the very first step is to define your own creative identity and the aesthetic of your products and designs.



The creative identity reflects your overall stylistic and aesthetic concept that defines you as a brand. It is closely linked to your brand identity and encompasses the influences on your design process. It captures how you express this externally through your creative approach.



Hand embroidery is our cultural identity and cross-stitch is our strength. So we are trying to use as much of these designs as possible, so that we can carry our culture into the design.¹

Your creative identity is the underlying aesthetic approach that is closely linked to your product design and therefore also your external appearance. It should be consistent with your visual identity, as it influences how you are perceived by (potential) customers and affects your brand image. On the other hand, understanding your creative identity can also help you understand your unique value proposition and reinforce your brand identity.

Either way, it is important to clearly capture your creative identity and communicate it consistently through your design and all collections. This will help aligning your product offer with the needs of your target group. This is an essential step that deserves attention and a strategic approach in a reciprocal exchange with the branding process.

You may want to do this in your team, together with designers, long-standing artisans, marketers and anyone involved in branding and creative product development. At the beginning, take a moment to think about the following questions.

¹Own research:
Interview with
Fair Trade artisan
producer



What skills are you as a brand and your artisans particularly good at?

What techniques do you master and what machines or tools do you have access to?

What materials do you preferably use and have access to?

What is your cultural heritage and how does this influence your work?

Where do you usually gather your inspiration?

What is your general stylistic approach and preference?

What do you want to transport through your designs?

What are the most important aspects of your brand identity and your key values?



Example: Fictional brand Ajala Threads

The fictional brand Ajala Threads in our example is very well known for their skills in fine accurate handcraft with an outstanding finish, their eye for detail and a very creative design approach. The artisans have particular expertise in hand weaving and hand printing making use of natural premium materials, mainly cotton but also the special regional Kosa Silk.

In the product development the brand gets inspired by the surrounding nature which is characterised by waterfalls, cliffs and lush forests. The regional influence of Hinduism and religious traditions is also very present in the creative identity. Moreover, local cultural heritage and crafts like wall paintings, wood carving and bamboo weaving are also influencing Ajala Threads' designs. This can be seen in the choice of colours, patterns, shapes and more details.

However, as the stylistic approach is more contemporary, the brand is blending the traditional and cultural heritage with a modern style. The inspiration is transferred into timeless designs and high-quality products that are in line with the brand identity. With its designs, Ajala Threads wants to transport the stories behind the products and convey its key

values of appreciation and authenticity. This is why the brand chooses to integrate the heritage while at the same time adapting it to the target group.

The aim is to create a feeling of empowerment and uniqueness and to support the personal expression of those wearing the brand's clothing. These aspects characterise the creative identity of Ajala Threads and is guiding in their creative work and design. (Examples how this is put into practice can be seen in the chapter about the creative process)



2. Trend research

2.1 Relevance

Fashion design is not just a creative process but also a matter of research. If you want to be successful as a business, you need to know what works well in the market and what your (potential) customers want. Generally, for marketing, but particularly for product development, it is important to identify your target group and understand their needs and wishes. So the first essential step in the design process is to conduct a target group analysis (as described in the Market Access Toolkit). As part of this, trend research plays an essential role in understanding consumer behaviour and demands, and developing a long-term perspective on this.

In general, trend research deals with the holistic observation and analysis of societal conditions, structures and changes in order to identify and interpret patterns, and forecast future developments in society. Trend research cannot deliver precise or guaranteed predictions about the future, but it helps recognising and understanding the underlying processes of societal change to provide a prognosis. This allows to prepare for and adjust to prospective developments. Trend research at a societal level is a complex process in which many different dimensions are taken into account.

In a business context, trend research focuses on identifying future consumption habits and product preferences. However, it is not simply about following fleeting fashion trends, but about understanding consumer behaviour and market changes. This makes it possible to adjust marketing activities and, in particular, product development and design to future customer demands. Researching and understanding trends is important to increase the visibility and desirability of your products and successfully perform on the market.

2.2

Trend dimensions



Trends are general developments, tendencies or changes in society, which are observable over a certain time and can show on various levels and dimensions.

Trends mirror what is socially relevant and accordingly also include new developments in markets or changes in consumption habits. In terms of fashion, trends describe the most mainstream and popular aesthetic preferences, styles and designs.

When researching trends, it is important to not only focus on product characteristics, designs and short-term aesthetic preferences, but to research general consumer preferences, as well in order to anticipate long-term market changes and adapt product development activities and the overall business strategy.

Societal trends can be defined as all general developments and tendencies of environmental, technological, economic, political, social and cultural nature. This can refer to circumstances

and situations, attitudes and value orientations, as well as behaviour and lifestyle of people. They can be of medium-term relevance or have very long-term, fundamental and global effects. The latter are also referred to as megatrends, a key term you can search for. Societal trends are often reflected in consumption trends.

Consumption trends describe market-related tendencies and include the behaviour and preferences of consumers with regard to aspects such as demanded products, frequency of consumption, budget and price sensitivity, sales channels, information behaviour and communication channels, as well as many other aspects that influence purchasing behaviour, business and markets. They are often identified through market and opinion research.

Fashion trends are shorter-term and more superficial trends that relate to product preferences and styles. They can encompass all aspects of design ranging from an overall aesthetic and theme to colours or patterns, from textures and fabrics to shapes and silhouettes, from sewing techniques and details to functions and features.

Fashion trends can be rooted in general societal developments and act as an expression of the very same. Fashion trends are often enforced by fashion designers and brands whose product development is influenced by trend research institutes. These in turn base their predictions on societal developments. This creates a cycle that develops and intensifies over a few years until it slowly dies down and is overlaid by other, new trends. Big, emerging fashion trends are often of novel character with widespread cultural significance. However, some trends also reappear predictably in a regular pattern, often tied to cultural or seasonal events such as the omnipresent appearance of flowers in the spring season or knitwear in winter.

2.3

Research strategy

Trend research serves to adapt to new challenges at an early stage in order to position a business for the long term. It is therefore important to establish a strategic process and take a continuous and holistic view of societal trends. Trend research is a professional field that requires specific expertise, as it involves complex processes and analyses of various aspects. However, this toolkit contains a guideline including useful methods, resources and tools that help you to implement trend research on a small scale, even with limited financial and time capacities. With a systematic approach, you will be able to effectively identify and integrate the trends relevant to your business and your target group.

How to implement a strategic trend-research process

1 Appoint responsibilities

First, put together a team of people who will be responsible for the ongoing trend research process and will ensure that the results are continuously fed into product development, other relevant departments and all strategic decisions.

It is helpful to involve staff from both, more analytical and creative backgrounds, as they will most likely bring different perspectives and skills. You will need people who are able to analyse the data, but also those who know how to translate the results of the analysis into product development. The team might include designers who have a sense for the fashion industry, but also people from the sales, marketing or service departments who deal with consumer demands on a daily basis.

If you are a small business, you can of course also appoint only one person with this task. In this case, it is advisable to nonetheless gather insights from different positions and departments.

2 Establish mindset and routines

Training the right mindset for trend research is essential as ultimately, fashion design means creating products for others. This requires doing thorough research rather than taking decisions based on assumptions. As a team, you have to remain agile and responsive to changing market dynamics by regularly evaluating and iterating your products based on trend research insights. Approach trends with an open mind and cultivate empathy for your target group to consider and anticipate their preferences. However, also keep in mind that the trends you are adopting need to be in line with your brand identity and contribute to your brand image and strategic marketing objectives.

Start by analysing long-term and more general developments at a societal level, as they set the general direction and form the basis for longer-term strategic decisions on a business level. Shorter-term trends, including fashion trends, should be analysed more regularly as they change more quickly. It is recommended to define cycles in which the more long-term, holistic trend analysis and the more short-term, product-related trend research are carried out. The interval between these cycles depends on your sector and the general dynamics of current social developments.

In general, it is recommended to begin with broad research and then focus on more specific aspects later on. Take into account topics that may only be relevant to your own business at second glance, in order to not miss out on any important developments. By further structuring the initial findings, you can focus on the more relevant tendencies. It can be useful to divide the research into more general and business-specific, long-term and short-term trends. You should analyse the possible scenarios and impacts, including the particular influence on your sector and business. On this basis, you can filter out the most relevant trends and also prioritise your actions to counter the trends and integrate them into your activities.

Ultimately, the aim is to recognise developments and understand what this means for your business. Establishing these routines for the continuous observation and analysis of trends helps to reduce the overall effort for this research as it makes the process more effective and efficient.

3 Document and share

It is important to structure and analyse your results in order to make strategic decisions based on the trend research. The more you document this work, the better. This way you can also learn from it in the long term, as you may be able to recognise patterns that simplify your processes and predictions. It allows you to understand the processes and gain experience in trend research over time, which also makes it easier to train prospective team members in the implementation of these processes. Comprehensive documentation will help you to easily share and clearly communicate the most important insights to other departments, whose work depends on these results.



Trend research and analysis

1. Identification: Research and gather current and long-term trends, both on a general societal level and more specifically in the niche of your business.
2. Evaluation: Examine what potential scenarios or effects these trends might generally have and also consider how this will impact your business in particular.
3. Prioritisation: Filter the trends with regard to those that have the most relevance for your business in terms of their effects.
4. Reaction: Reflect how you can counter these trends and integrate them into your activities in order to reinforce the positive effects and mitigate the negative ones. Also consider how you should prioritise your actions.



What trends can be observed on an overall societal level and with particular regard to your business, both in the long and short term?

Which (potential) scenarios and effects will these trends have and how will this affect your business?

Which of these trends and effects have the biggest significance for your business?

How can you react to these trends and which actions should be taken first?



Example: Fictional brand Ajala Threads

An example for a general societal trend would be the environmental crisis including climate change and resource depletion, which results in changes in politics which also influences the economy. In combination with the shift in social values towards a focus on non-material values, this leads to a rise in sustainable lifestyles, which also influences consumption behaviour, as can be seen in the following.

In line with the rise in sustainable lifestyles, a trend in consumer behaviour is the increasing demand for ethical, fair and environmentally friendly products. This is a chance for Ajala Threads as an ecologically sustainable, handcrafted and Fair Trade business. On the other hand, with the rise of fast fashion, the number of garments purchased per person per year has increased exponentially, while the total budget spent on fashion has decreased, suggesting that people are spending less and less money on clothing, which represents a contrary development. A potential reaction to this could be to narrow the target group and focus the marketing on the niche, both in terms of sales and communication channels. To counter this trend, the brand can focus its communication on the need for sustainability and emphasise the sustainable benefits of its products to reach the right audience.



So right now it feels like the world is an absolute mess. So maybe the words we should be using are words like: 'Bring peace into your home with this blanket on your sofa.' Because people are desperate for peace. 'Bring nature into your home with this green coloured pillow on your sofa.' Because people are desperate for nature.²

²Own research: Interview with Fair Trade artisan producer

2.4

Fashion trend resources

In fashion design, it is of particular importance to understand the aesthetic preferences of your target group, which are also influenced by trends.

There are various sources and tools that you can make use of for your fashion trend research. This includes relevant reports from specialised trend forecasting institutes or fashion media, but also the use of online tools. This also focuses on free resources as we know that the budget for this can be tight in a small business.

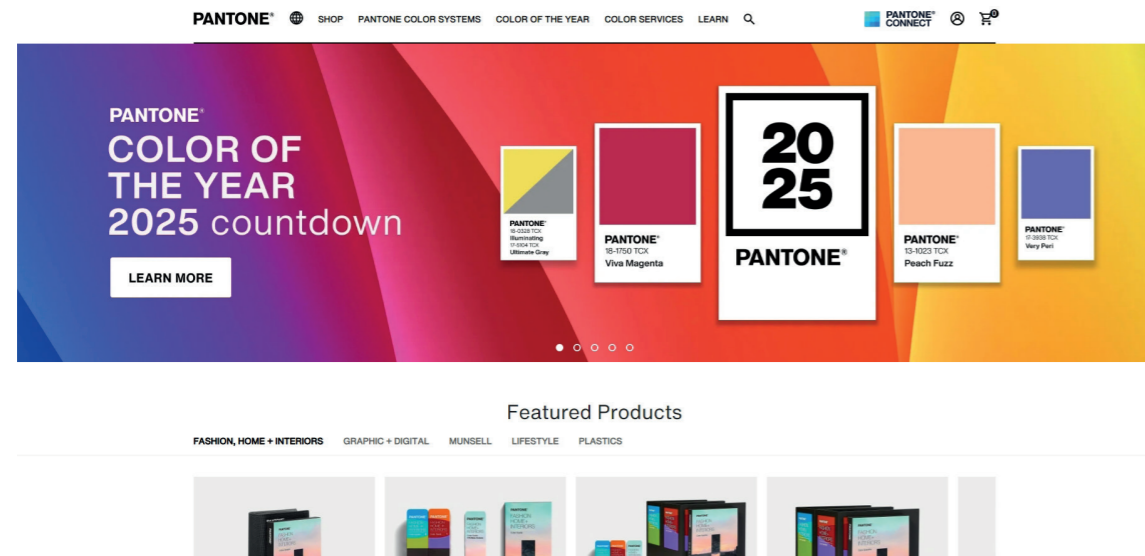


Trend forecasting institutes

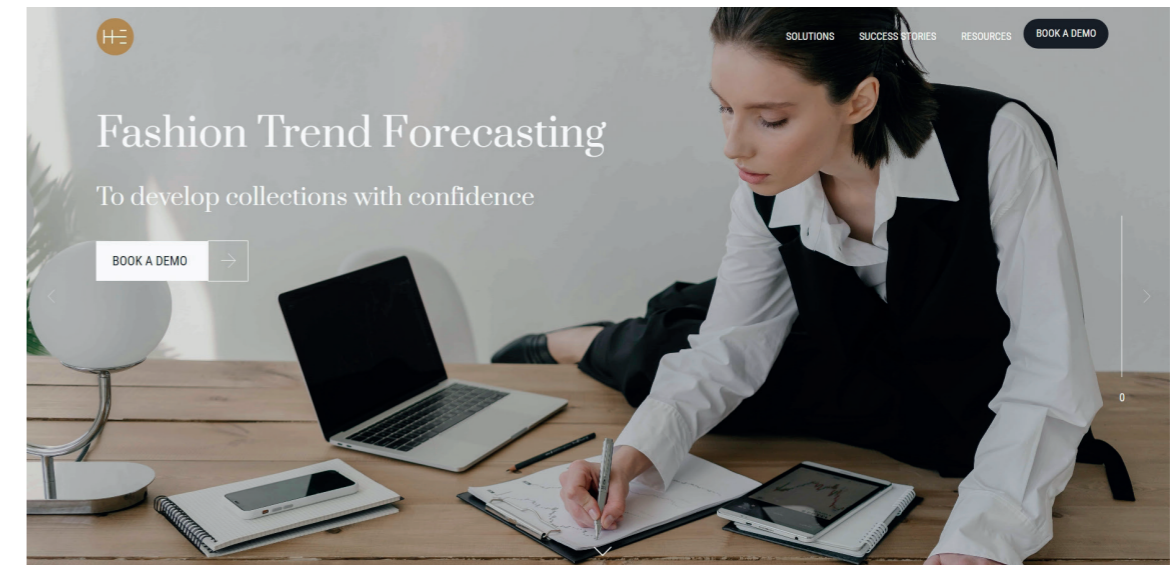
Some of the most important trend forecasting institutes include [WGSN](#), [Trendbible](#), [Trendstop](#), and [Trend Union](#), all of which provide free or low budget resources such as blogs, social media, newsletters or reports in addition to paid services.

The screenshot shows the WGSN website with a navigation bar at the top containing 'WGSN', 'Consumer Insight', 'Product Design', 'Trading', 'Blog', 'Resources', 'About', 'Contact', 'Get demo', and 'Log in'. Below the navigation bar, there are three article cards. The first card is titled '40% of Gen Z turn to resale to find the styles they're looking for' and includes a sub-header 'The global secondhand apparel market is set to grow three times faster* than the global apparel market, with Gen Z leading adoption. Coupled with the cost-of-living crisis, Gen Z will continue to power the thrift movement in search of more affordable alternatives in the year ahead.' The second card is titled 'Overproduction case study: women's skinny jeans' and includes a sub-header 'Overproduction remains one of the fashion industry's biggest problems, but it doesn't have to be this way. To help brands solve this problem, WGSN has teamed up with OCS&C to reveal how more accurate forecasting can be used to tackle overproduction head on.' The third card is titled 'Paris Fashion Week Trends Autumn/Winter 24' and includes a sub-header 'As the Autumn/Winter 2024 catwalk season comes to a close, discover the top three need-to-know trends from Paris Fashion Week that will last beyond the runway highlighted by WGSN experts.' At the bottom of the page, there is a footer with the text 'Let's talk. contactus@wgsn.com'.

Also Pantone, the leading company for colour systems used in various sectors including fashion designs, is a great resource for colour trends as they regularly announce a colour of the year which acts as an important reference for the creative scene.



Heuritech offers insights into market and consumer data and fashion trend predictions based on AI and visual recognition technology, a forecasting model and the largest dataset on fashion. It also offers free resources such as market reports and a blog.



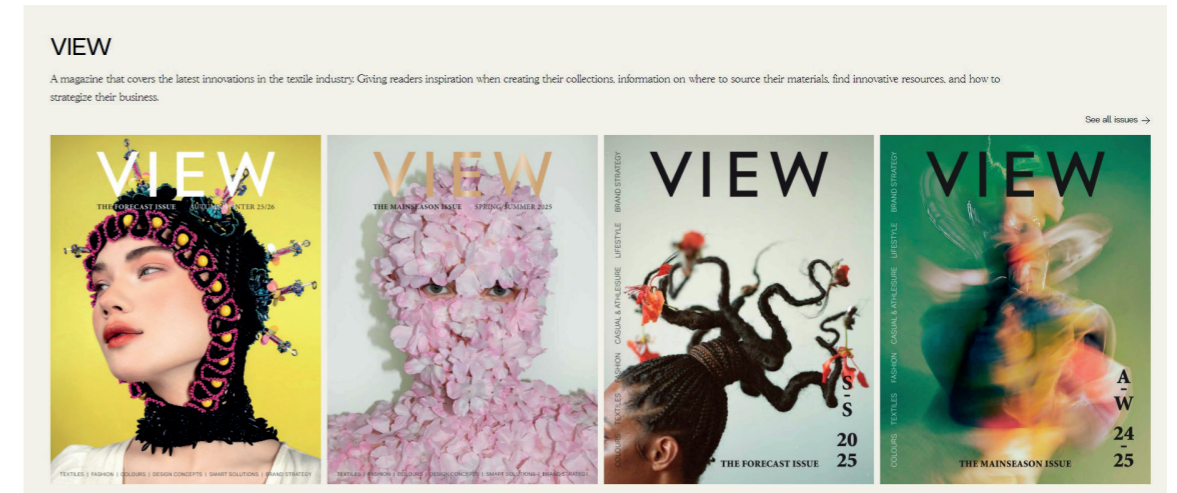


Relevant media

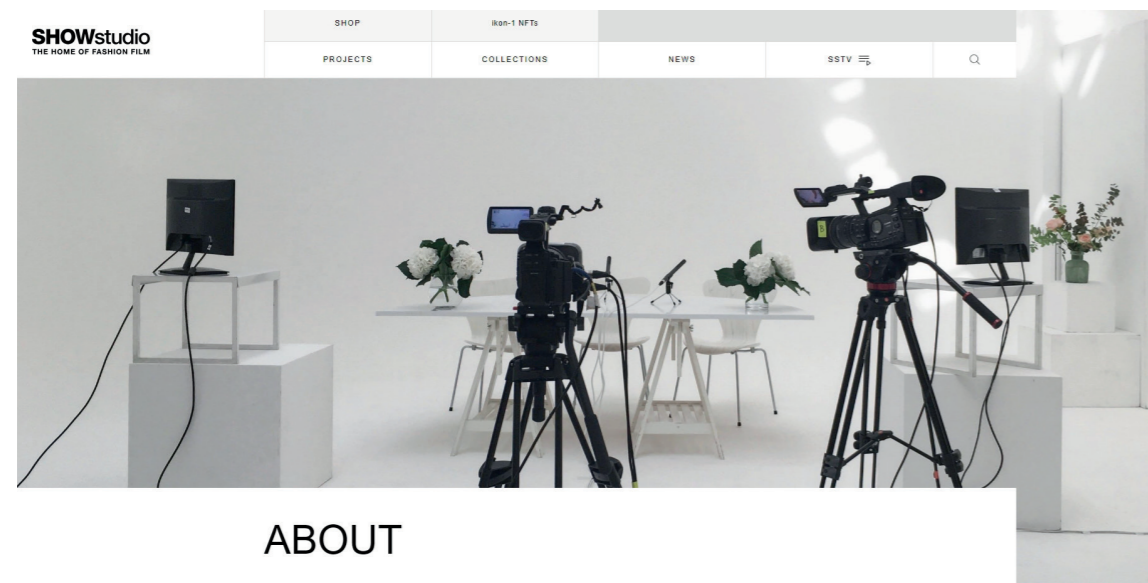
One of the most important industry media is Business of Fashion, a platform offering independent industry news and journalism, business advice and online learning, as well as industry events. It is one of the most important and recognised reference sources in the industry. BoF also publishes analyses and reports, including the yearly “The State of Fashion” report together with McKinsey.



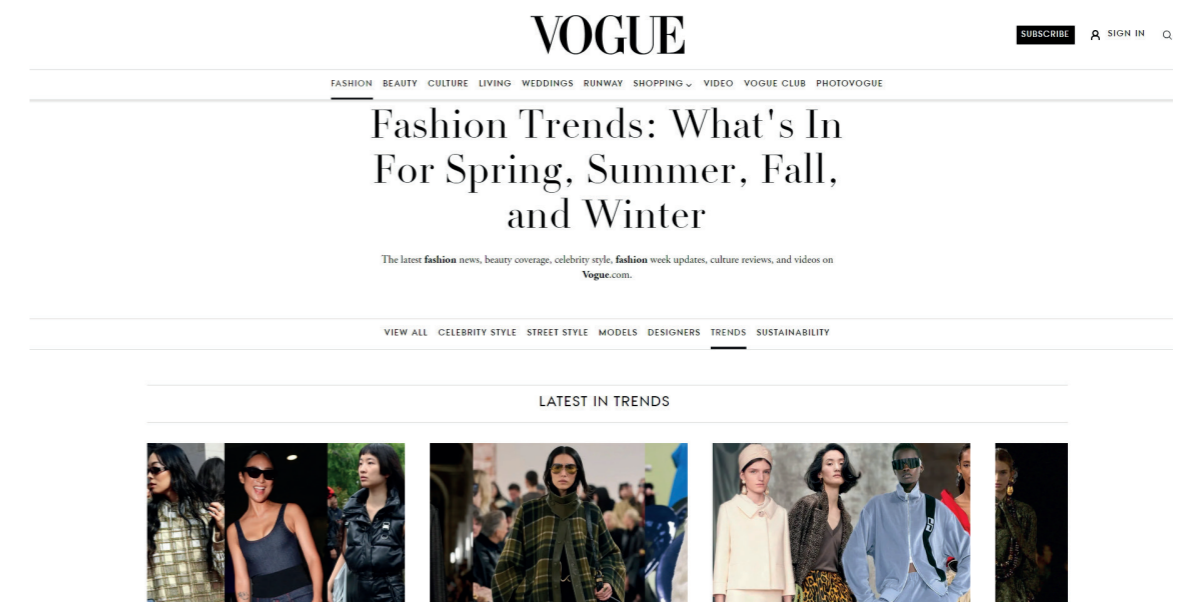
View Publications offers a range of publications in the field of fashion design and trends, including handbooks for design and inspiration, colour planners and magazines on industry innovations.



[SHOWstudio](#) is an award-winning fashion website communicating fashion online via film and image as the main medium. This includes live broadcasts from catwalk shows or fashion shoots and lookbooks, allowing instant access to the previously closed world of high fashion.



Of course, fashion magazines (both online and in print) represent an important resource, as they always report from fashion shows and on current trends in fashion or design. They are a reliable and important resource for trend insights. Some of the most important fashion magazines include [Vogue issues from various countries](#).



A little insider tip on the side: Don't just focus on your niche but expand your view and check what's on trend in similar sectors such as graphic design, interior or art. Also check the national media from those countries whose markets you are targeting.

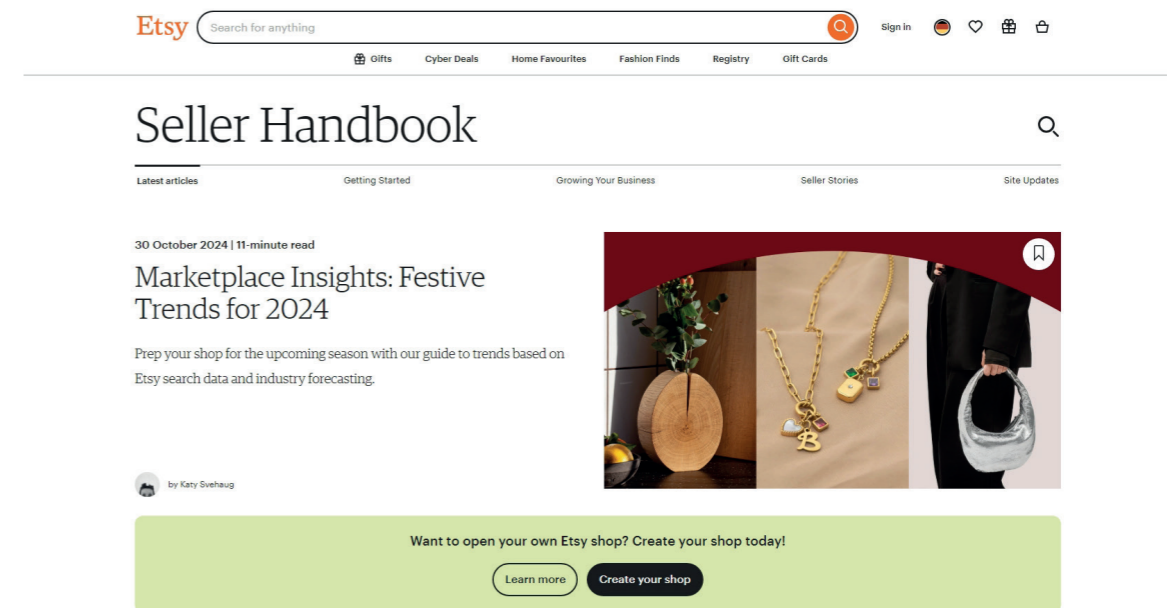


Creative online platforms

The online application Pinterest, a globally used visual search engine for the collection of imagery, publishes a yearly trend prediction based on their user behaviour.



Also [Etsy](#), the popular online marketplace for direct sales of handmade products from small businesses, publishes regular trend reports.





Digital tools

You can use [ChatGPT](#) for trend research. The tool does not provide a trend prediction in itself, but collects and structures information on upcoming trends that is available online.

For your trend research, you can also make use of [Google Trends](#), a free tool that allows you to explore the popularity of topics and terms in online searches. This analysis of user search behaviour can provide insights into general trends. Whilst the information on general trending search topics is very broad, the tool can also be used to compare the popularity of specific search terms in different regions too, which can help to understand what people are interested in across various markets. More information can be found in the Communication Toolkit.

You can conduct your own trend research on social media platforms such as [Instagram](#) or [Pinterest](#). This allows you to document and analyse current fashion trends and aesthetic preferences by searching for trending images and evaluating the results. Start by collecting extensive image material with the help of keywords centred around fashion trends or specific product types. Later, you can analyse the image collection and check what is repeated or similar to identify emerging trends.

3. Creative process

3.1 Finding inspiration

If you are new to fashion and currently in the phase of founding a label from scratch, this chapter is particularly relevant for you. If you are a long-standing expert in this industry and know the creative process, don't skip this chapter yet. Hopefully there is some new inspiration in it for you, too.

While it is important to attract your target group by picking up on their aesthetic preferences and current trends, it is also essential to stay true to your brand and creative identity. So your task is to create new products and collections integrating customer demands, while at the same time consistently conveying your creative identity and your distinct aesthetic throughout all collections and designs.

There are endless sources of inspiration for the design process. Think about what influences you as a brand. This can be your handicraft skills or your cultural or regional heritage. You can be inspired by your surroundings or actively search for inspiration in magazines, on social media and websites curating design imagery and

content. You can pick up current societal developments or look back in history. You might also look at other brands with a similar aesthetic, but of course respect their creative copyrights.

Where you draw your inspiration from is highly individual. Just make sure to stay true to your creative identity. Most importantly: Look around carefully, think creatively and be open-minded for all kinds of inspiration that might come your way.



Sources for design inspiration

- Fashion trends
- Societal trends
- History
- Cultural heritage
- Nature
- Architecture
- Design
- Art
- Crafts
- Photography
- Film
- Books
- Magazines
- Other brands
- And much more



Example: Fictional brand Ajala Threads

Ajala Threads integrates its distinct creative identity, inspiration from its surroundings, and contemporary trends to unique designs that are both on-brand and in style.

Ajala Threads gets inspired by nature and local culture in terms of colourways used for the designs and fabrics. For this reason, typical colour palettes in their collection include shades of grey and green, as well as red, orange and pink tones.

The brand also transfers the cultural heritage of wall painting, bamboo weaving and wood carving into fashion design by capturing it in patterns (abstract geometric prints), manufacturing techniques (woven fabrics) and design elements (intricate details such as stitching or embellishment).

Ajala Threads also gets inspired by contemporary themes and current trends in modern art and fashion or street style, picking the aesthetic that is in line with the brand's creative identity and design approach.

3.2 Inspiration board

An inspiration board is a tool to curate and structure inspiration for a design project. It can include a mix of images, motifs, objects and other elements combined into a collage to visually communicate the overall concept and aesthetic of your fashion collection. Thus, your inspiration board can be centred around themes, vibes and stories, focus on a certain trend, material and colour, or be a blend of all this.

As you can tell, since the inspiration board is a tool for the creative process, there is neither one right way to do it, nor are there rules to stick to. However, there is a clear goal that your inspiration board should serve: It should illustrate and convey the overall aesthetic and theme of the design concept.

The fashion inspiration board helps to maintain consistency and focus throughout the entire product development process. It serves as a tool to structure inspiration and refine creative concepts. While you may believe your ideas are robust in your mind, selecting

and arranging visual references on an inspiration board provides the clarity necessary before delving into the actual design process. During the collection development it helps to reflect the implementation of the creative vision and the design concept.

Beyond being a tool for creative processes, the fashion inspiration board also supports effective communication. By collecting all inspiration in one place, it helps to capture and clearly convey the design aesthetic and theme. As a common visual reference of the design concept, it ensures that all team members share the same vision. In this way, it strongly supports the marketing of a collection from product development to communication and advertising, which ultimately contributes to the success of the brand and business.

Example of an inspiration/mood board³

How to create an inspiration board

1 Set a framework and determine your goal

In the first step you should ask yourself the following questions: What do you want to convey? What is the overall theme or story you are trying to communicate? What is the general aesthetic you want to express? What are the trends or particular products you want to pick up on?

Set an overall framework to focus on in the next steps. Make sure to align this with your creative identity.

³Sarah Engler

2 Gather inspiration and collect material

Now, gather all the inspiration that you can get and collect all kinds of material and visual references to be used on your inspiration board. It can include fashion-related or more abstract references – anything that inspires you.

Depending on the format of the inspiration board, various elements can be included. This can cover specific fabric samples and colour swatches or components like buttons and ties, as well as photos or sketches of particular fashion designs. Moreover, you can collect any other objects and materials, such as natural elements or little utensils. Often inspirational images or texts are used to convey a specific theme. You can take your own photos, magazine clippings or pictures from social media and online sources.

Not everything you collect will be included in the end, however you can filter the selection later. This step is for gathering ideas. For more potential sources of inspiration, check the corresponding chapter again.

3 Curate elements and arrange a collage

Once you have collected enough inspirational material, you can create your inspiration board. Before you start, you have to curate a selection of elements to be used. Choose what most accurately reflects your vision to avoid cluttering.

Now you can start arranging your visual references in a collage. This can be done digitally (with the help of image-editing software or graphic design tools) or physically (on a large board or poster). Both ways have their advantages, however the physical format better conveys tactile and haptic elements that are of particular importance in fashion design.

To create a harmonious and expressive composition, proceed as follows: First, add the references that set the general direction for the theme you want to express. Then add more and more elements to go further into detail and to enhance the concept.

You can group similar items such as images or fabric swatches together to create a distinct impression. Instead, you can also arrange all elements and visual references in a more balanced way. Generally, the layout is completely up to you, as long as the board conveys a clear theme and aesthetic.

As part of this, the colour palette of the collection is also determined as it often sets the tone of the entire concept. Select around 3-5 shades, consisting of dominant primary colours as the core of your concept, and complementing or contrasting accent colours.



[Coolors](#) and [Mycolor.space](#) are online tools for creating and collecting matching colour palettes randomly or based on input. [Khroma](#) is a similar tool that generates limitless colour palettes based on personalised algorithms and allows you to structure them.

4 Review the result and share with the team

After arranging everything, take a step back and have another look. Generally, there is no right or wrong way to create an inspiration board. However, if, with a little distance, something does not quite resonate with you, adjust the layout or swap out some materials to see if this creates a better result. Inspiration boards can also adapt over time, so don't hesitate to adapt it again as your vision becomes clearer or changes. Conscious curation and editing are key!

Review critically if the essence of your concept is clearly captured. You can also include your team to check whether the inspiration board expresses what you're aiming to convey (see additional information in the following) and adjust based on the results, if necessary.

Once you have the final result, share your inspiration board with all team members who are working on the marketing and product development, be it in design, sales or communications. Everyone who is involved in creating and promoting the collection should grasp and internalise the key theme to be transported.



Decoding and interpreting the concept of an inspiration board

In case you are only just implementing the use of inspiration boards in your design process, the following tips can also help you to evaluate your first drafts internally. Ask other team members to interpret your board and review whether their interpretation aligns with your original idea and the theme you want to convey.

Moreover, this guide on decoding an inspiration board is useful for B2B business. It is often common for buyers to provide such a board for production. If you are not used to working with this, it can be difficult to understand the desired overall concept or theme of the collection and develop the right style for the products to meet the buyers' requirements. Interpreting an inspiration board is about extracting the key visual, thematic and emotional cues that will determine the direction of the creative process and the design language.

This entire process is best done in a group of people, for example with your creative design and product development team. The more impressions and interpretations are gathered and discussed, the easier it is to filter out the most important themes that overlap in all your perspectives and to identify the overall concept and aesthetic of the inspiration board. Follow this guideline for interpretation:

1. Capture the overall vibe by analysing your first impression. Try to capture the emotional tone that the board conveys through the predominant colours, motifs and other elements. Think about what associations it creates and the feeling it evokes in you. For example, does it seem calm or energetic, serious or playful, warm or cool?
2. Extract the overall narrative by identifying recurring themes, motifs or symbols on the panel. Even if there is a wide range of impressions, try to find the common threads that unite them. These central elements could tell a story and give you an indication of the lifestyle the inspiration board is targeting. For example, does it contain recurring elements that relate to themes such as nature, travelling or urban life?
3. Contextualise specific references to historical, cultural or geographical influences, such as images of particular places, traditions, eras or movements. Determine their significance by researching their background. This can help you understand where the inspiration comes from and what the underlying message might be. For example, does it contain references to a particular time period and what were those years about?

4. Examine the aesthetics and style of all images and design elements included in the inspiration board. Identify the common thread that runs through all the images and describe this dominant design language. For example, are they more minimalist or artistic, linear or abstract, contemporary or historical?
5. Identify any visual elements that contain specific cues for the design, including patterns (bold or delicate, clean or intricate), shapes (geometric or organic, sharp or round), textures (soft or rough, cosy or sleek) and colours (bold or muted, light or dark, harmonious or contrasting). Identify the repetitive elements and consider what they convey both technically and emotionally. This applies not only to fashion or design images, but to all visual references. For example, does the board contain images of landscapes that convey warm and earthy colours, wavy and organic shapes and a sense of soft textures, or rather photos of cities and skyscrapers with sharp lines, dark and cool tones and hard surfaces?
6. Analyse any fashion images that feature specific garments or designs, as these will give you the clearest idea of the design vision. Look at silhouettes, colours, fabrics, materials, sewing techniques, and other details to identify the overall design language. For example, is it more functional, elegant, casual or extravagant?

7. Write down all your thoughts, ideas and answers from each step. Then try to capture them in a few key terms in your own choice of words. You can also summarise in a few sentences what you think this inspiration board conveys and expresses. Then try to convert this into fashion and design-related concepts. Translate the aesthetic and emotional language of the board into practical design ideas. For example, a theme of freedom could be reflected in flowing, lightweight garments. A theme of positive energy can be expressed in bright and colourful clothing.

Additional tip: You can also use ChatGPT to gather further inspiration. Simply upload an image of the board and ask the tool to interpret it with a prompt like this: "Can you please describe the aesthetics and overall concept of this inspiration board?". You can even go one step further and request recommendations on how to translate this concept into a fashion collection. Of course, don't forget to take your target market and target group into account. This tool should only serve as inspiration and help you understand the overall concept. For more information on the appropriate use of ChatGPT, please refer to the Communications Toolkit.

4. From idea to product

4.1 Overall design process and important considerations

So how do we get from the inspiration to the final product? Design does not just include the creative search for ideas and drawing fashion sketches. Instead, it encompasses the whole product development aiming to bring the ideas to life. The design process, especially for fashion items, is usually a long and continuous process that involves several steps and iterations. It can be understood as a kind of cycle: You start, learn, adapt and develop further, then start again in the next season.

Particularly in the initial phases, when gathering inspiration and developing ideas, it is not unusual to revise, filter, critically review and refine them again. After all, in the end, the creative ideas must be able to be put into practice and sold well to the relevant target group. A common mistake in fashion design is not adapting your designs to the target group: This applies both to the purely aesthetic dimension, which is commonly understood as the design of the product, but also to more technical characteristics that are only visible at second glance, such as the materials and quality of craftsmanship.

For this reason, even in later phases of the process, the designs need to be challenged repeatedly. Selected materials, for example, must be tested for their quality, availability and suitability for the design. Prototypes should be tested for their fit, finish and durability in a quality control process. A common mistake is to disregard the functionality and manufacturing requirements of the garments. Especially in higher-priced segments, consumers expect a good fit, high-quality feel, decent craftsmanship and durability of the products.

At the same time, while completely ignoring the customer's demands can negatively influence your sales, over-adaptation will result in poor performance as well due to an unclear position on the market, risking to dilute the brand identity and creative identity. So, keep in mind: Customer demands must be balanced with your most important brand characteristics. Creativity must be balanced with marketability.

To create a successful collection, you not only need to know your target group's aesthetic preferences and other purchasing decision factors. You also have to consider their buying power and price sensitivity, as the budget has a significant impact on the design options in terms of processing complexity and material selection. The maximum sales price must already be taken into account when calculating the production costs and therefore in the design of the product.

It is essential for an effective design process that you plan the allocated time and financial resources as precisely as possible. The fashion business and the design process are complex. It can be helpful to follow a structured plan and adhere to some basic guidelines. Thus, in this chapter we want to address the relevant steps and useful tips and tools on putting design into practice.

Of course, in reality, the whole process is more iterative and intertwined, so you often don't tick off one step after the other, but instead go back and forth a few times, as all phases in the process and the associated decisions are interdependent.



A successful design process...

- ...considers the target group's aesthetic preferences
- ...stays true to the brand identity and creative identity
- ...considers the target group's purchasing decision factors
- ...balances creativity with marketability
- ...considers functional characteristics as part of design
- ...critically challenges results and includes multiple iterations
- ...considers finance and time plans

4.2 Sketching and technical drawings

After conducting trend research and gathering design inspiration, always based on and in line with your target group research, it is time to put your ideas on paper through design sketches. You can start by making a few different sketches to visually capture ideas and experiment with different designs. At the beginning, experiment with various product groups, styles, shapes, colours, patterns, and further detailed design elements to create a complete and visually coherent collection.

More precise designs are then created for the final collection to clearly visualise certain details of the garments which influence the overall perception of the design. Above all, the proportions of the garment should be depicted realistically. This helps to better understand the fit of the garment. Fabrics should also be shown in the right colour and texture, as the structure and the behaviour of the fabric influence the fit. Design details such as patterns and prints, embellishments and applications, and other elements (buttons, pockets, belts) should also be drawn in detail. The latter in particular should be depicted correctly, as they fulfil not only an aesthetic but also a functional role.

In addition to the artistic sketch, a detailed technical drawing is required in which the functional details are accurately depicted. It helps to understand how the different parts of a garment fit together. This is important for the manufacturing process to ensure that the finished product ultimately matches the visual idea. The technical drawing shows the design in flat views (from the front, back and possibly from the side). The precise, scaled drawings show the exact construction and indicate how the elements will actually be sewn together to achieve the desired look and fit. They also include specific details such as buttonholes, zips, pockets, darts or special sewing techniques.

Nowadays, with everything going digital, it also makes sense to create fashion sketches and technical drawings digitally. This enables faster and simpler revisions on the one hand and optimised communication with customers on the other. See here an overview of various software for this purpose.



Software	Use/ Function	Pros	Cost
Adobe Illustrator	Vector graphics and illustrations, technical sketches on a more advanced level	Industry standard	Subscription model starting at around \$28/month for single desktop version
Affinity Designer	Vector graphics and illustrations, fashion drawings and technical sketches	Flexible, wide range of design tools	Starting at around \$20 for tablet, \$75 for desktop; soon to be free for non-profits
FashionDraw	Fashion illustrations, technical sketches	Intended for fashion design specifically, a wide range of tools and templates (brushes, textures, fashion figures,...)	Basic version for free, \$3.99/month for all features, \$39.99 for the life-time purchase
Repsketch	Community-based software for technical sketches based on templates (vector graphics)	Wide range of templates (tech packs, technical sketches, patterns, garment components), includes video tutorials	Free basic version

4.3 Product specifications and material selection

The product specifications summarise all the technical information that is needed to produce a garment exactly according to the original design. They serve as a guide to the requirements that must be met in order to ensure the quality of the final product – and therefore represent an important link between the creative phase and the manufacturing phase in the product development process. In addition to the technical drawings already described, they also include further details and descriptions.

Firstly, they include the exact measurements for the different body parts and each individual part of the garment, such as the chest width or arm length. If the garment is produced in various sizes, a table giving the exact measurements for each size, is also included. In addition, the dimensional tolerances are defined to determine how much deviation is acceptable. This can vary depending on the function of the garment. For example, an exact fit is much more important for a figure-hugging blouse than for an oversized shirt.

Further instructions for production, which are included in the specifications, cover all necessary manufacturing details,

including the placement of seams and the width of seam allowances, certain sewing techniques and stitch types or other special features. If the garment has a pattern or embellishment, this is also described in detail, including the technique (e.g. print, embroidery), dimensions and placement. They also include instructions for the sequence of processing steps to be followed.

The product specifications also contain a precise description of the required materials. Often, specific suppliers or material numbers are included to ensure that exactly the right fabric or component is used in production. Precise specifications are also given for the colours to be used, often based on internationally valid colour systems (such as Pantone).

The selection of materials, including fabric and other components is based on how they match the sketches, transporting the look and fit of the design, supporting both the aesthetic and functionality of the garment. Fabrics are chosen for their fibre composition, haptics and feel, behaviour and special properties (such as stretch or breathability), as well as optical structure and precise colour nuances.

The components, including but not limited to yarns, buttons or zippers, and buckles or cords, are also selected for their appearance and functionality. For the choice of materials, all samples must be tested not only for their suitability for the design but also for their quality. Take into account both your individual requirements (such as ecological certifications) and market standards (a common example is the use of zippers from the market leader YKK). Also, the availability of materials in the right quantity and at the right time must always be considered, as there are often tight deadlines in the design and production process.

The detailed definition of all product specifications is essential to ensure that the design of the garment is realised exactly and that production runs smoothly. They provide clear instructions for manufacturing and ensure consistency, quality and efficiency in production.



Product specifications include...

- detailed measurements
- deviation tolerance
- sewing techniques
- manufacturing details
- fabrics
- components
- colour codes

4.4 Pattern making and grading

To bring your design to life and turn your sketch into a real product, the next important step is to create a pattern, which forms the basis for manufacturing. To create a good pattern that ensures a good fit for the garment, there are a few things to consider.

First and foremost, it is crucial to take exact measurements. A standardised size chart can be used for this if the garment is intended for a wider target group. It is important to pay attention to the local sizing systems of the target market. Depending on the desired style, cut and fit of the design (e.g. rather tight or rather wide), the measurements of the pattern should also be adjusted accordingly.

If a garment is offered in different sizes, the pattern must also be adapted. However, not all parts of the garment must or can always be adjusted in the same scale. In this so-called pattern grading, meaning the enlargement and downsizing of the pattern, specific body proportions must therefore be taken into account so that the fit of the garment remains unchanged in every size.

The chosen material or rather the material behaviour must also be taken into account. Flowing fabrics behave differently to stiff fabrics. This affects how the fabric falls, which must be considered in the pattern. Elasticity must also be taken into account. With very stretchy materials, the pattern can be smaller, while firm fabrics require more allowance to ensure that the garment offers freedom of movement, especially in certain parts of the body such as the shoulders or hips.

A seam allowance of typically 1-1,5 cm must be included in the pattern for each seam, depending on the fabric and design. Elements such as darts, pleats or ruffles that require an additional allowance must also be included so that they are taken into account when cutting the fabric. Other applications and techniques that require additional material or seams should also be marked. Markings for further details such as buttonholes, zips or pockets must also be clearly visible on the pattern.

The patterns should contain clear instructions for making the garment, including the sequence of steps. To avoid mistakes when sewing, it is recommended that all pattern pieces are clearly labelled and numbered. When cutting the fabric, it is important that the grain line, which is crucial for the correct drape of the fabric, is also marked on all pattern pieces. The layout should also be as efficient as possible in order to minimise fabric waste. Clearly visible lines and markings as well as legible instructions are essential to make both cutting and sewing easier.



A good pattern takes into account...

- exact measurements
- body proportions
- material behaviour
- seam allowance
- details
- sewing techniques
- instructions and order

Pattern making plays a major role in the success of the final product and contributes significantly to the creation of a well-fitting and functional garment. Taking body proportions and material behaviour into account requires technical knowledge, professional expertise and precision. It is therefore always advisable to work with professional pattern makers. Alternatively, you can also buy ready-made patterns online and customise them if necessary. There are numerous international suppliers of patterns, however, please note that they do not equal the target market in a sense that the patterns offered do not necessarily correspond to the preferences of consumers in this market.



Professional pattern suppliers in the German market

[burda style](#)
[selfmade](#)
[makerist](#)
[Schnittmuster-Berlin](#)

4.5 Prototyping, fitting and samples

Based on the pattern and product specifications, a prototype is made to test the design in reality. The very first prototype is usually made from cheap material to check whether the cut and details correspond to the original ideas. In order to achieve a representative result, this cheap material for the prototype should nevertheless be very similar to the final fabric (in terms of structure and weight, material behaviour and fabric drape). In the next step, necessary changes or improvements are identified and adapted accordingly in order to further refine the design.

The prototype then undergoes so-called fitting tests. This is an important step to ensure that a garment not only looks good, but is also comfortable and functional. The pattern is adjusted to a model and corrected if necessary to optimise the fit and proportions. If this step requires several passes, it is necessary to always test the prototype with exactly the same measurements in order to revise it. Often the patterns are also tested in different sizes to check the scaling and ensure that the garment has the desired proportions and fit in each size.

Part of the process is also to test and adjust individual parts and elements of the design or pattern such as collars, pockets or special sleeves, and decorative elements such as applications, special finishing techniques for the fabric, or visible seams and topstitch should be trialled, assessed and compared. As inspiration for the manufacturing and the pattern, it can be helpful to take high-quality items of clothing as a template and check how these elements have been realised in order to recreate the techniques.

Once the prototype is satisfactory, the final sample is manufactured. This corresponds exactly to the final product for sale in all details (fabric, seams, other elements). The main purpose is to fully visualise the design and also to carefully check the fit, proportions and comfort in relation to the material behaviour. If necessary, the design is optimised again. At the very end, the final sample is used for a quality control before the garments go into final production. As soon as this sample is approved, the production process begins.

Digital prototyping



I think, the lead time to make the sampling is taking a lot of time, usually two to three months. So we are really losing the time to make the order, when it comes to the whole process. I think, the major first 50% of the time, we are taking only to make the samples, which leads to a shorter time for the order. So, I think, if we can improve the sampling phase right now, it will really make a huge difference.⁴

If your business is facing similar problems with process times, then digital 3D prototyping could be particularly relevant for you as an alternative to real-life prototyping. It describes the process of creating a digital yet highly realistic version of a garment instead of producing a physical prototype by hand.

This has many advantages, most notably the reduced time and financial investment. It simplifies the prototyping phase as you can experiment with different fabrics, colours or further details, and all iterations can be efficiently realised digitally. For this reason, it speeds up the entire product development process and reduces overall costs due to less material usage. This also makes digital prototyping interesting from a sustainability perspective, as it drastically minimises textile waste from the physical sampling process.

Stress maps tests in the software help to accurately evaluate the pattern and cut of a garment to ensure a better fit. This is particularly relevant as a good fit represents one of the most important buying factors for the end customer. You can also share your virtual prototypes with business customers and partners to get feedback and make detailed adjustments according to their needs and requests. In this context, digital prototyping of garments helps designers, especially at an early stage of the design process, to better visualise their ideas and clearly convey the intended look and design to a buyer.

⁴Own research:
Interview with
Fair Trade artisan
producer



How to implement digital prototyping

1. Choose specific software: Decide which software serves your needs and purpose as a business best and take your time to learn how to use it. Have a look at the following table to get an overview of options.
2. Create a digital avatar: Create an avatar by defining the main parameters like height and relevant body measurements.
3. Create a 3D pattern: Then start by importing a 2D pattern and putting it together to fit on the digital avatar and generate a 3D pattern.
4. Customise pattern: Now customise it by adding the fabric and other details.
5. Test and iterate: Test the fit with stress maps in the software and adjust the pattern if needed. You can also iterate design details.



Software	Use/ Function	Pros	Cost
CLO3D	Design software to get 3D renderings from 2D patterns and export patterns	Intuitive and simple, includes video tutorials	Upon request
Browzwear VStitcher	3D virtual prototyping solution to convert 2D patterns into 3D models	Industry's leading software, includes video tutorials	Upon request
Adobe Substance 3D	Generate ultra-realistic virtual materials, either by adjusting templates, converting real resources or by creating from scratch	Can be integrated with 3D prototyping software	Subscription based starting from \$38/month
NewArc	AI tool to visualise ideas by turning sketches into images	Low threshold alternative to virtual prototyping for the early phases of the design process	Subscription based starting from \$19/month; limited free version available

4.6 Manufacturing and creative techniques

While you are the experts at traditional highly skilled artisanal techniques such as hand-weaving and hand-embroidery, for inspirational purposes we want to present some more creative design and crafting techniques that easily give a garment a special twist without the need for highly specialised tools, machines or skills. This collection of ideas does not include manufacturing techniques in the narrow sense, but rather small design elements and details, mainly fabric manipulation methods.

One option is gathering, ruffling or smocking fabric, either in whole or only in certain parts of the garment to create an even more interesting effect. Gathers are folds made at regular intervals in a piece of fabric, which can be pulled to create fullness. Ruffles are gathers sewn to fabric and drawn up by means of a drawstring, creating even more texture and softness. Smocking secures the folds of fabric through decorative or invisible stitching on a piece of cloth.



Photo: Design by Isabell Schröter

A related technique is the creation of pleats or tucks. Tucks are folds in the fabric which are sewn from end to end, while pleats describe measured folds at one end of the fabric. Their purpose is to add texture, volume and movement to a piece of fabric.



Photo: Design by Lisa Krause

Quilting is a method of stitching layers of fabric together with a layer of padding in between. The stitches are usually based on a pattern or design.



Photo: Design by Sophia Wameling

Ribbons and ties are an easy but effective method to add interesting details to a garment. They can serve a solely decorative but also functional purpose.



Photo: Design by Milla Schunk

Appliqués both from fabric pieces stitched or sewn onto other fabrics are a great way to add texture and interesting details and also upcycle leftover fabrics.



Photo: Design by Melisa Tasev

Appliqués can also elevate the design of knitwear as an alternative to developing new knitting patterns.



Photo: Design by Laura Abbondandolo

Patchwork describes the technique of combining different pieces of fabric in various designs, colours and textures, either by sewing them together or layering them onto each other. This creates interesting and unique designs and is also a great method for upcycling.



Photo: Design by Mario van den Broek

Combining different colours of wool in knitting can create interesting patterns or imitate colour gradients.



Photo: Design by Celina Hertzprung

4.7

After-sales analysis

Even if it's not what you might initially think of as a design process, analysing data related to your product performance is also part of the process. Ultimately, product development in fashion is not just about being creative, but also about designing products that people like to buy and wear. That's why it's also important to take a closer look at these aspects by analysing available data including sales figures, returns and customer feedback. You should learn from your experiences, mistakes and successes. If something doesn't perform well, focus your critical eye to understand why. If something works well, stick with it and establish these designs. For a comprehensive analysis, look at your data and ask yourself the following questions to be answered:



- Which items were in high demand?
- Which items did not sell well?
- What can we learn from this?
- Which items were returned how often – and why?
- Derived from this: Which product groups, materials, styles, colours and patterns were particularly popular and which were not?
- Which of these aspects should we transfer to new designs and in what form?
- Can some of the strong-performing products be incorporated into the next collection?
- What adjustments might be necessary?
- Which designs or product features should we not repeat?
- What quantities should be produced in what sizes and how much material do we need for this?
- Was there specific feedback from customers?



Collecting customer feedback

B2C-Sales

Depending on the purpose, you can collect customer feedback in different ways. You can encourage your customers to provide specific feedback on particular items bought by setting up review areas on your website and sending out after-sales emails with links to a survey or review system. You can also collect feedback for returns to gain important insights. In addition, you can document and analyse more general feedback through comments, messages or short polls on your social media channels. You can also develop a full survey and share it with your target audience via newsletters or other channels. Think about whose feedback you want to collect and who you want to reach and choose the right method for this. You can find a more detailed guide to conducting a full customer survey in the Market Access Toolkit.

B2B-Sales

In the B2B sector, you can also ask your partners for feedback, not only from their point of view, but also from the insights they have received from their end customers' reviews. You can conduct a survey with your buyers to get their professional feedback on your designs. This can be done after sales but also during the product development

process to evaluate the marketability of a particular design in advance. You can ask them for their professional opinion on whether they would buy the product and how likely they think it is to succeed, as well as asking for open feedback on the reasons why. You can also request more general information such as their buying criteria or overall recommendations. To develop a survey with B2B partners, you can also refer to the guide in the Market Access Toolkit. However, there are some specific aspects to consider in the professional context.

- **Shortness:** The survey must be brief in order to motivate as many participants as possible to complete it. This is particularly important, as time is usually limited in business.
- **Standardisation:** A standardised version of the survey allows long-term benchmarking by regularly re-evaluating the same survey
- **Data protection:** Guarantee anonymisation and trustworthy handling of the results, as most companies have strict rules for the protection of internal business information.



Sales figures and product features

In general, it can be said that there are certain product groups that are easier to sell and that there are specific product features that influence marketability. Based on the experience of our project partners from the manufacturing industry, the following conclusions can be summarised:

Neutral styles (e.g. classic shapes in subtle colours) tend to appeal to a wider audience than extravagant designs. Garments that require a very precise fit (e.g. a blazer) are more difficult to sell than those that are more flexible in terms of size (e.g. a wide skirt). Particularly in online retail, such details (such as sizes or specific colours) are more difficult to display, which increases the risk of returns. Size-flexible garments or accessories also reduce the complexity of demand forecasting and the associated risk of overstocking.

The details of a design not only have an impact on sales figures, but logically also on the production process. In general, the more details (colours, materials, components, decorative elements, cutting techniques) a product has, the more complex production becomes. The higher the production costs, the higher the sales price. Of course, this is not generally negative, but it does increase the financial risk.

As a basic principle, it is always important to keep an eye on the budget and price sensitivity of your target group. Also consider the individual willingness to pay rather than just the production costs. Some product groups can realise a significantly higher price than others whose production process is comparable in terms of effort and complexity (e.g. dresses vs. blouses). While it is essential to stay in the feasible price segment depending on the brand positioning and target group, it is always advisable to market products in different price ranges (lower, middle, upper) within this segment for psychological reasons.

In terms of design and range of styles, it is also advisable to offer a balanced assortment including basic products that are easy to produce and sell, as well as some showpieces for marketing purposes.

To summarise, the more universal the products are, be it in terms of gender, size or style, the easier they are to sell as they are accessible to a wider target group. However, you must not lose yourself and must harmonise marketability with your brand identity and creative approach.

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