Designing Difference: Open Innovation in Fashion

Unpacking Collaborative Strategies: Leveraging existing ties, Product Exposure, and Entrepreneur Exposure

Student Name: Jacopo Subissati

Student Number: 734781

Supervisor: Dr. Marlen Komorowski

Master Media Studies - Media & Creative Industries

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Erasmus University Rotterdam

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ABSTRACT

The fashion industry is in an era of rapid change, rising competition, and increasing complexity regarding differentiation. In the context of external pressure for differentiation, innovation has emerged as a critical strategic lever, not only for survival and relevance but also for brand definition and cultural capital expansion. The present thesis investigates how fashion firms generate product innovation through external collaboration. While little research has been undertaken on this form of collaboration within the fashion field, this study applies the Open Innovation (OI) model applied by Butticè et al. (2023) to high-end fashion. The research employed a qualitative design. More specifically, data were gathered through seven expert interviews. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis, and both the interviews and the analysis were built around the OI model by using the three mechanisms to create ties to foster innovation: leveraging existing ties, product exposure, and entrepreneur exposure. The evidence suggests that fashion firms employ external partnerships not merely as a marketing strategy, but as a key mechanism to bring innovation within the firms' boundaries. Key findings confirm and extend the OI model, and they also underline the drawbacks and the risks involved in partnership projects.

Furthermore, the thesis provides significant contributions to practice through providing an understanding of the role that partnerships play in enhancing innovation capabilities. Different companies could benefit from the findings and insights discussed in the present dissertation. However, the study is not without limitations. The sample size, European-centric nature, the focus on a specific type of partnership, and the lack of consumer perspectives are just some of the study's limitations, which cannot be underestimated. Building on these limitations, recommendations for future research include a wider and more globally distributed sample, the inclusion of the consumer perspective, and a deeper exploration of long-term impacts. Such studies could enrich the understanding of how innovation unfolds over time and across cultural contexts, ultimately equipping fashion firms with actionable insights for designing more resilient and future-oriented collaborative innovation strategies.

KEYWORDS: Innovation, Fashion, External Partnerships, Open Innovation, Co-Branding

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Market Conditions and the Turn Toward Innovation

According to The State of Fashion (2025, p. 7), the annual fashion report provided by Business of Fashion (BoF) and McKinsey & Company, the global fashion market in 2025 is defined by its volatility, complexity, and the need for strategic adaptation. According to the McKinsey Fashion Growth forecast, the international fashion market is expected to experience a low single-digit growth in 2025, underlying a structural deceleration following the post-pandemic boom (BoF & McKinsey, 2025, p. 10). This stagnation is indicative of a general slowdown within the industry. Indeed, due to the region's slow recovery and continuous pressure from the expense of living, the luxury sector is predicted to grow by only 1 to 3 percent in North America and from 1 to 2 percent in Europe (BoF & McKinsey, 2025, p. 6). On the other hand, China's anticipated 4-6 percent growth suggests that consumers in key Asian markets are feeling more optimistic (BoF & McKinsey, 2025, p. 6). However, as the report states, although several markets continue to show resilience, the general outlook in most regions is cautious. According to the report's 2025 Executive Survey, a survey answered by industry top leaders, *"uncertainty"* is the most frequently stated feeling. More specifically, only 20% of respondents expected market conditions to improve, 41% predicted stability, and 39% anticipated a decline. Notably, the main concerns have changed regarding the 2024 survey: 70% of respondents named consumer confidence the most significant threat, indicating continued market-wide economic volatility. In contrast, while interest rates fall internationally, CEOs are less inclined to cite inflation as a top issue, indicating that it is not as much a threat as it once was (BoF & McKinsey, 2025, p. 8).

As Gazzola et al. (2020, p. 2) argue, the fashion industry operates in an extremely reactive system, where exogenous shocks and unstable patterns of demand quickly influence supply chain planning and consumer purchasing behavior. Similarly, Samuels (2024, p. 2) states that the globalized organization of the fashion system, combined with the rapid pace of trend rotation and volatile macroeconomic conditions, makes the industry vulnerable to systemic risk. Moreover, changing consumer needs are making these risks more complicated (Xiang, 2021, p. 2773). Xiang (2021, p. 2773) points out that fashion consumption is not motivated by price or purpose anymore but by a mix of social and psychological aspirations. In times of uncertainty, these aspirations become precarious, as consumers seek security, self-expression, and identity under economic constraints (Xiang, 2021, p. 2774). In response to the market's persistent uncertainties, fashion executives see differentiation as a key strategy and innovation, such as new product designs, as a crucial tool to foster it (BoF & McKinsey, 2025, p. 6).

As product life cycles shrink and consumer expectations become more dynamic, fashion firms are

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subject to growing pressure to produce novelty at an ever-increasing rate. While traditional models of innovation have been centered on internally generated development, this increasingly fluid environment asks for more flexible and outward-looking approaches. Notably, as argued by Butticè et al. (2023, p. 850), contemporary fashion firms are now compelled to move beyond closed innovation practices and explore the potential of external partnerships as an innovation-oriented tool.

1.2 Researcher Motivation

The researcher's interest in this topic originated first and foremost from a long-standing interest in fashion, not merely as an aesthetic and cultural domain, but also as a complex industry that is shaped by managerial, economic, and social considerations.

Moreover, over the academic year, the researcher developed an increasing interest in the innovation topic, reading different theoretical literature and empirical research on how firms within the creative field generate new ideas, products, and processes. Building on these interests, the thesis combines these two topics by creating a research focus that examines how fashion firms create innovation through external partnerships, particularly co-branding. Attention was placed on product-level innovation since it is a tangible outcome of creative and strategic decisions. At the same time, expansion in co-branding strategies across the fashion industry emerged as a fascinating phenomenon, which warranted further examination.

1.3 Research Gap and Question

While existing studies have examined how fashion firms communicate their identity or expand their consumer base by partnering with co-branding strategies (Helmig et al., 2008, p. 119; Luck et al., 2014, p. 265; Quamina et al., 2023, p. 12), comparatively little emphasis has been given to how such partnerships drive product innovation. As Zeng et al. (2023, p. 1) explain, many studies have focused on product innovation from different viewpoints. However, there is still a gap in understanding how fashion firms strategically structure and manage external partnerships to drive innovation. Building on this, the present thesis aims to fill this gap. The research question guiding this study is:

How do fashion firms utilize external collaborations to drive product innovation?

This question underscores the importance of examining not only the outcomes of external partnerships but also the strategic, organizational, and creative decisions that underpin them. By focusing on the how, the research adopts a process-oriented approach that aims to identify the processes by which co-branding strategies are initiated, maintained, and converted into innovative products. In doing so, the study follows Butticè et al. (2023, p. 851)'s idea that fashion firms should break away from traditional closed innovation models to open strategies in which external actors contribute to innovative outcomes.

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1.4 Relevance and Contribution

The societal relevance of this study lies in its potential to help fashion companies, as well as fashion freelancers and emerging designers, in approaching collaborative strategies. As Zeng et al. (2023, p. 1) pointed out, the fashion industry is a context shaped by rapid market changes and continuous shifts in consumer needs. Therefore, according to the author, understanding how partnership strategies can create innovation is crucial for fashion companies. By looking into how companies employ external partnerships for innovation, this study gives insights that help businesses refine their innovation plans, reduce development time, and quickly adapt to new trends. External partnerships also allow brands to try out new technologies, materials, and design methods, leading to more robust and forward-thinking product developments (Butticè et al., 2023, p. 850).

However, the present thesis does not exclusively analyze the positive aspects of collaborations with external actors. It also underlines the negative aspects and critical issues that may be encountered. Through a 360-degree view, the study allows companies to understand what the pros are, but also the issues that are crucial to pay attention to.

Moreover, the study's contribution to innovation theory makes it academically relevant. This study broadens our knowledge of how the fashion industry handles innovation processes. The thesis uses the expanded Open Innovation model proposed by Butticè et al. (2023, p. 850), which applies the OI model to the fashion industry. Although the framework is extremely valuable, it is still largely conceptual. This study provides empirical insights into the practical application of external partnership strategies and the creation of these partnerships, offering both theoretical foundations and practical guidance for innovation within the fashion industry.

1.5 Method Overview and Chapter Outlines

This study uses a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews with experts to examine how fashion companies employ external partnerships to promote product innovation. The choice of using qualitative methods is rooted in the possibility to examine intricate and socially embedded phenomena like innovation (Creswell, 2013, p. 32; Bryman, 2012, p. 380). More specifically, semi-structured interviews offer both structure and flexibility, allowing participants to share their experiences while allowing the researcher to follow up on pertinent leads that come up during the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27; Bryman, 2012, p. 471). The interview guide was built around the Open Innovation framework proposed by Butticè et al. (2023, p. 850). As will be explained in the literature review section, the model describes three primary approaches through which fashion engages with external partners. These mechanisms informed the thematic structuring of the interviews. By doing this, according to Yin (2014, p. 190), it has been possible to provide

theoretical allegiance consistency. The respondents were purposively selected through expert sampling, which is ideal for choosing participants with a high level of expertise in a certain field (Douglas, 2022, p. 418). Participants included three fashion designers, two brand managers, and two marketing managers. The selection criteria were two: at least three years of experience in the fashion field and first-hand experience on a co-branding fashion project. Moreover, the inclusion of different roles enabled triangulation and enriched the analysis with more than one view on the phenomenon (Bryman, 2012, p. 392). Recruitment was conducted through LinkedIn and industry referrals. The interviews took place in person. They were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted in Italian, and they were transcribed in Italian. They were then analyzed through thematic analysis, a general, flexible method for identifying patterns within qualitative studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The codes were named in English, and the needed quotes were translated.

The research held trustworthiness by employing Shenton's (2004, p. 64) operationalization of the four qualities described by Guba & Lincoln: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Reflective measures such as journaling and bracketing were further employed to contain the risk of researcher bias (Berger, 2015, p. 222).

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 sets out the literature review, outlining key theoretical foundations related to the concept of innovation, external partnerships, and the Open Innovation framework. Chapter 3 discusses research methodology in detail, such as sampling strategy, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 outlines the empirical research findings and discusses them. Finally, Chapter 5 presents the conclusion of the study by summarizing key findings, listing limitations, and providing recommendations for future research and industry applications.

The findings show that fashion companies use partnerships not only as an operational tool, but also to come up with new ideas based on trust, a shared identity, and symbolic value.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review aims to explore the intricate intersection between two closely connected worlds: the fashion environment and the innovation context. Specifically, it examines how fashion companies foster innovation through the usage of external partnerships.

The primary purpose of this chapter is to set the conceptual and theoretical foundations needed for an effective understanding of innovation in this field. Nevertheless, the review will explain the theoretical framework used within the context of the thesis, underlying exactly how the model will be employed for investigating the phenomenon of interest.

The selection of the literature review was conducted through a multi-faceted search strategy. This entailed a careful manual search of academic sites using precise and well-defined keywords, such as external partnerships, fashion, and innovation. Moreover, to further maximize the number of academic references and to speed up the research process, SciSpace AI, a research assistant, was employed to search for relevant scholarly papers otherwise overlooked.

Finally, moving to the chapter's structure, the review begins with conceptualizing the definition and the types of innovation. It will then focus on a specific type of innovation: product innovation. The theoretical framework then moves on to collaborative innovation, with a description of how partnerships enable new value creation. The chapter will then close with the explicit presentation of the theoretical framework used for the research.

2.1 The Concept of Innovation

2.1.1 Why is it important to define innovation?

Understanding what "innovation" actually means is key to applying the concept within the fashion sector. While extensively used in managerial practice and academic literature, innovation remains a multidimensional term. Indeed, as Baregheh et al. (2009, p. 1324) point out, innovation has been defined from different perspectives in numerous disciplines, including economics, business, engineering, and sociology.

This ambiguity is not only theoretical but also practical. According to Garcia & Calantone (2002, p. 112), this inconsistency in the terminology and typology of innovation has generated confusion in research and managerial settings. For example, an innovation that is considered "*radical*" by one scholar might be classified as "*incremental*" by another one. For this reason, according to the authors, clearly defining how innovation is identified and applied in a given study is crucial to enabling conceptual accuracy and analytical coherence.

Damanpour & Schneider (2006, p. 216) further emphasize that innovation is by nature

multidimensional, and its definition and operationalization depend on the context. More specifically, in some settings, innovation is associated with product development, in others, with process improvement, structural reorganization, or cultural change. These various interpretations call attention to the need for context-specific definitions (Damanpour & Schneider, 2006, p. 217).

From the perspective of these challenges, the following sections review the commonly used definitions and typologies of innovation to establish the conceptual foundation adopted in this thesis. The aim is to develop a clear conceptual lens through which it will be possible to understand how innovation operates in the fashion industry.

2.1.2 Innovation: A Multifaceted Definition

Innovation, as already discussed in the previous section, has been defined and conceptualized in different ways. To develop a solid theoretical foundation for this thesis, definitions of innovation that are specific to the creative industries, like fashion, along with those that are cross-sector, should be taken into account. Sector-specific perspectives highlight significant differences in how innovation is perceived and operationalized in practice, even though general definitions aid in creating a strong baseline. For this reason, this sub-chapter starts by defining innovation from a general perspective and continues by going deeper into the industry-specific definitions. Building on this, it then concludes by stating how innovation is understood in the context of this thesis.

The Oslo Manual (OECD & Eurostat, 2018, p. 46) defines innovation as "the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service), or process, a new marketing method, or a new organizational method in business practices, workplace organization or external relations." According to the manual, this definition is often adopted in policy and business contexts and provides a broad framework to categorize types of innovation. Mainly, innovation can be defined as the application of one or more types of innovations, such as process and product innovation (OECD & Eurostat, 2018, p. 46). Crossan and Apaydin (2010, p. 1155) further extend this concept, defining innovation as the "production or adoption, assimilation, and exploitation of a value-added novelty." According to the authors, their definition emphasizes innovation as a process, rather than just an outcome, underlining the key role of organizational capability to absorb and apply new ideas. Similarly, Baregheh et al. (2009, p. 1334) emphasize the value of an integrative definition that can be applied across various organizational and disciplinary contexts and define innovation as a "multi-stage process whereby organizations transform ideas into new/improved products, services, or processes." Their definition underlines the operational and strategic dimensions of innovation, emphasizing its capacity to be adaptable to different industries. Taken together, these definitions point out that innovation cannot be seen as a static or singular concept but as a multidimensional and dynamic process that evolves depending on the context of innovation and the objective of the

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organization.

However, it is crucial to underline that the innovation concept can be completely different across industries. Notably, within creative industries, such as fashion, innovation has been conceptualized differently from conventional technological or Research and Development (R&D) oriented models (Wijngaarden et al., 2019, p. 397). Standard indicators used, for example, in R&D or tech contexts, are normally not capable of recognizing the more symbolic, aesthetic, and experiential types of novelty that characterize creative production (Wohl, 2022, p. 2). Creative sectors thus rely on what is defined by Gohoungodji & Amar (2023, p. 2686) as a *"creative innovation mode"*, whereby artistic creativity, cultural significance, and continuous adaptation drive innovation. Similarly, Miles and Green (2008, p. 6) argue that innovation in creative industries is *"hidden"* as it takes the form of intangible, collective, and culture-enacted novelty, which cannot be grasped using a classical measurement framework.

Within this thesis, innovation is conceptualized as a hybrid model: a multidimensional, collaborative, and continuously developing strategic process that enhances value in the development of new or improved products through interaction with external partners, while explicitly incorporating symbolic, aesthetic, and cultural novelties characteristic of the fashion field.

2.1.3 Types of Innovation

According to Garcia & Calantone (2002, p. 124), there are multiple ways to classify innovations. To address this complexity, Baregheh et al. (2011, p. 73) propose an innovation-type mapping tool that synthesizes and integrates existing frameworks to enhance innovation research transparency. Their empirical research seeks to organize the dispersed vocabulary of innovation types and offers a visual model. As mentioned by the authors (2011, p. 74), the proposed framework is built on Francis and Bessant's (2005) four categories of innovation:

1. Product innovation: Changes in what the organization offers, both products and services
2. Process Innovation: Changes in how the offerings are created, distributed, and delivered
3. Position Innovation: Improvements to the way offerings are presented or brought to market
4. Paradigm Innovation: Changes to the basic principles that drive corporate operations.

Starting from this model, the authors developed their map on much previous research, consolidating earlier binary typologies and integrative models into a more comprehensive and consistent model.

However, according to the nature of this study, the present thesis will focus on a specific innovation type: product innovation. This category, as the framework recognizes, incorporates three distinct but interconnected forms: product innovation, described as the creation or significant improvement of

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physical products; service innovations, described as new or evolved intangible products that deliver value in the form of service innovations; and hybrid innovations, or product-service systems that integrate physical products and service into a single combined solution that respond to complex consumer needs. All these forms fit under the general category of product innovation because they all reflect what a company is bringing to the market, whether it be something tangible, intangible, or a combination of both.

In addition to categorizing innovation by type, other researchers have also addressed the degree of change that innovations represent, mainly with the distinction between radical and incremental innovation. Different studies treated radical and incremental innovation as a distinct category of innovation (Garcia & Calantone, 2002, p. 120). However, Baregheh et al. (2011, p. 74) propose a more fluid interpretation. In their research, these terms are considered attributes that apply across all innovation categories. This perspective is particularly relevant to the topic of this thesis because it acknowledges that product innovation can move from minimal adjustments to radical changes. It offers a more sophisticated approach to analyzing the variety of innovations produced through external partnerships in the fashion industry, emphasizing that the innovation level may differ based on the nature of the partnership and the firm's goals.

2.2 Product Innovation in Fashion

In the fashion industry, product innovation is broadly perceived as the driving force behind competitive advantage. Indeed, Shen et al. (2016, p. 259) highlighted the crucial role of product innovation in the industry's development and expansion, defining it as *"the engine of fashion."*

Several studies focused on different ways to enhance product innovation within the fashion context. Some studies have focused on the role of technology in fostering product innovation. For example, Davis et al. (2020, p. 188) studied the integration of 3D software to increase accuracy and efficiency in the conventional design process. Moreover, Fu & Liu (2019, p. 159) investigated the impact of big data on fostering innovation, providing useful insights that guide production and design. Furthermore, Barile & Sugiyama (2020, p. 217) examined wearable and smart clothing as prime examples of how fashion and technology can converge to create functional and well-designed products.

Another branch of study has focused on product innovation from the material innovation viewpoint. Bai et al. (2015, p. 872), in their empirical research, explored the integration of electronic components with polymeric optical fibers to produce responsive and interactive textiles that enhance user interaction. Similarly, Chan et al. (2017, p. 35) studied the usage of bacterial cellulose cultivation to create clothing in desired shapes, finding a way to drastically reduce textile waste.

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Moreover, a study on *"Janus Sleepwear"* (Glovinsky & Zavrel, 2018, p. 62) found a bidirectional thermoregulating textile that enables users to subconsciously manage body temperature while sleeping.

Another research by Rieple et al. (2015, p. 148) focused on the role of individuals within the context of product innovation. The authors explored how geographical, institutional, and social factors impact designers' creative processes and business strategies. Their findings underlined the importance of local settings in forming creative thinking, pointing out the link between these factors and personal creativity.

Finally, other research has examined the role of cooperation with different users. Morrison and Ashdown (2018, p. 195) investigated the role of consumers as active participants in fostering product innovation. More specifically, the authors introduced the concept of "Lead Users", defining them as creative consumers who help solve specific design issues. Similarly, in their empirical research, Baker et al. (2019, p. 13) studied the role of *"tween fashion consumers."* Precisely, the research focused on how young girls, aged 8-12, can influence child fashion trends, providing insights valuable for businesses targeting niche markets. Furthermore, Shen et al. (2016, p. 263) investigated the role of design outsourcing, comparing two strategies: Original Equipment Manufacturing (OEM), in which the supplier only handles the creation process, and Original Design Manufacturing (ODM), where the supplier works on both design and production. The study pointed out that while ODM helps brands reduce costs, it often holds back innovation, as suppliers are not incentivized to invest money in design.

This literature review on product innovation within the fashion environment provides a theoretical context for the field. Meanwhile, it highlights a lack of research on how fashion brands achieve product innovation through external partnerships with other brands and designers.

2.3 Collaborative Innovation in Fashion: The Role of Co-Branding

This sub-chapter explores the concept of co-branding. In the context of this thesis, co-branding is considered a specific form of collaborative innovation, particularly relevant for generating both symbolic value and product innovation within the fashion sector. Moreover, identifying collaborative innovation in a specific way, such as co-branding, helps to give more context and to be more specific within the settings of both the thesis and the interviews.

The section starts by defining co-branding and draws on theoretical and empirical literature. It then exemplifies the theories through practice case studies. In doing so, it describes not only the advantages of co-branding but also its disadvantages.

Helmig et al. (2008, p. 360) define co-branding as "a long-term brand alliance in which a single product is branded by two different brand names." According to the authors, this strategy is recognized for enhancing product visibility, conveying value through brand association, and leveraging mutual credibility to foster consumer preference. Within the fashion context, Francombe (2024, para. 2) notes that co-branding is now "expected rather than exceptional," reflecting the widespread adoption of this strategy in fashion settings. Miller (2022, para. 3) further emphasizes this shift, arguing that these partnerships are "built into seasonal calendars as long-term value creation strategies," illustrating their transition from marketing experiments to well-established brand strategy.

The reason why this practice has become so ingrained in fashion companies can be found in literature contexts. Indeed, Helmig et al. (2008, p. 362) underline that co-branding allows brands to reach new target segments, rejuvenate brand image, and promote product innovation through outside inputs. A fascinating example of co-branding is Moncler Genius, a project launched by Moncler in 2018. The project invites external designers, brands, and artists to reinterpret and redesign Moncler's heritage product through distinct creative lenses (Moncler, n.d.). Rather than adhering strictly to the conventional seasonal calendar, the project adds a stream of smaller, more frequent releases, enhancing Moncler's capability to respond to evolving consumer preferences (Moncler, n.d.). As Remo Ruffini, Moncler's Chairman and CEO, explained, "We have chosen designers that differ greatly from each other as we have always spoken to different generations" (Moncler Genius Report, 2016). This strategy reflects Moncler's use of co-branding not merely for commercial expansion, but as a mechanism of continuous design innovation. Helmig et al. (2008, p. 366) point out that successful co-branding strategies are made through the distinctive contribution of both brands, supporting and not obscuring the other's identity. This theory is perfectly reflected in Ruffini's words, where he describes the Genius project as "a mosaic of differences and extraordinary individuality," combining "varied voices and approaches…with highly distinctive languages, all brought together in a single design process conceived by Moncler" (Moncler Genius Report, 2016). Although Moncler Genius is a noteworthy example, it is not the only brand to use this strategy. In recent years, several fashion houses have adopted co-branding strategies. For example, in February 2022, Alessandro Michele, then creative director of Gucci, partnered with Adidas and launched his interpretation of Adidas classics at Gucci's fall 2022 Exquisite runway show (Cardini, 2022, para. 3). Similarly, in 2018, Burberry and Vivienne Westwood worked together to create a collection that combined traditional British tailoring with punk heritage (NewBold, 2018, para. 2). Another landmark example is the 2017 partnership between Supreme and Louis Vuitton, which resulted in a capsule collection that blended high fashion and streetwear standards (Leitch, 2017, para. 2). These are just some examples among many.

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Quamina et al. (2023, p. 8), in their empirical research, examined consumer responses to such co-branding partnerships. The authors found that co-branded products are perceived more favourably compared to traditional downward extensions, especially in terms of perceived prestige, quality, and desirability. Significantly, their research demonstrates that even status-conscious customers react positively to well-managed partnerships, suggesting that effective co-branding can increase market reach without sacrificing exclusivity (Quamina et al., 2023, p. 9). These findings provide empirical validation of Helmig et al.'s (2008, p. 366) statement that co-branding success relies upon brand fit as well as reinforcing value reciprocally.

However, it is important to underline that co-branding also entails reputational risks that must be carefully managed. Possible risks, such as partner misalignment, consumer confusion, and brand equity imbalance, should be taken into consideration (Helmig et al., 2008, p. 370). Drawing from empirical research by Luck et al. (2014, p. 49), the difficulties inherent in such collaborations are clearly illustrated by the 2011 Missoni for Target Partnership. Despite its commercial success, generating over $100 million in earned media, boosting sales of Missoni's primary line by 10%, the campaign triggered consumer discontent due to product shortages, order cancellations, and excessively high resale prices (Luck et al., 2014, p. 50).

In the context of this thesis, co-branding is approached as a form of collaborative innovation that firms foster product innovation. This thesis aims to highlight its frequently disregarded role in promoting product innovation, even though much literature highlights its advantages in branding and marketing strategies.

2.4 Open Innovation Framework

2.4.1 Open Innovation: A General Overview

The concept of Open Innovation (OI) was introduced by Henry Chesbrough, who argued that firms should not only rely on internal research and development (R&D) but also extend their innovation processes to external knowledge (Chesbrough, 2003, in Bogers et al., 2018, p. 17). The growing specialization across industries, the multifaceted nature of innovation processes, and the diffusion of knowledge beyond corporate boundaries have contributed to the development of this framework (Dahlander & Gann, 2010, p.700).

Early empirical applications of OI were mostly focused on technology-based industries, where R&D effort was aimed at enhancing product features, reducing cost, and shortening time-to-market (Chesbrough & Crowther, 2006, p. 229). According to Dahlander & Gann (2010, p. 701), the framework gained popularity as it allowed businesses to share product development risks, access a wider range of ideas, and commercialize underused internal expertise through spin-offs or licensing.

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The model evolved, and it was later formalized into a structural framework built on three main knowledge flows: outside-in (inbound), which integrates external ideas; inside-out (outbound), which shares internal ideas with other actors; and coupled process, which combine both flows (Gassman & Enkel, 2004, p. 2). While the outbound mode involves externalizing internal technologies through licensing or joint ventures, firms in the inbound mode tap into sources including universities, start-ups, or crowds to increase their innovation potential (Dahlander & Gann, 2010, p. 704). Often associated with co-development alliances and strategic alliances, coupled innovation combines both methods and reflects the increasing relevance of networks in innovation environments (Enkel et al., 2009, p. 312).

However, different scholars have expressed concerns about the universality of this model. For instance, Trott & Hartmann (2009, p. 719) argue that OI simply repackages long-standing collaborative practices under a new label, suggesting that its novelty might be overstated. Similarly, Christensen et al. (2005, in Hossain et al., 2016, p. 13) asked whether the model could be expanded outside of high-tech fields.

OI's application to creative sectors has therefore needed adaptation. In creative fields, innovation is not solely technological, yet symbolic, aesthetic, and culturally situated (Townley et al., 2009, p. 940). Products are valued not only for their utility but also for their ability to communicate meaning and gain social legitimacy among tastemakers, distributors, and consumers (Townley et al., 2009, p. 944). Therefore, conventional measures of R&D intensity or patent output are inadequate to assess invention in such settings (Klaß, 2020, p. 193). Furthermore, challenging the linear logic of mainstream OI models, creative industries frequently run under conditions of uncertainty, project-based work, and fragmented value chains (Wasko & Rothmann, 2014, p. 67). Wasko & Rothmann (2014, p. 69) underlined the need to contextualize OI within industry dynamics by showing how creative organizations may use their innovative capacity to reinforce rather than break from problematic strategic paths.

Researchers have thus demanded sector-specific adaptations of the OI framework that reflect the dual economic and cultural character of innovation in these fields (Klaß, 2020, p. 195; Bogers et al., 2017, p. 7). As Klaß (2020, p. 195) underlines, creative sectors need innovative models considering reputation, cultural capital, and aesthetic value as main inputs to the innovation process. This shift in perspective has resulted in the creation of a customized model, like the one suggested by Butticè et al. (2023, p. 852) for the fashion industry, which will be discussed in the following section.

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2.4.2 Open Innovation in High-End Fashion

Research by Butticè et al. (2023, p. 849) explored how new companies in high-end fashion use the Open Innovation (OI) framework by creating network connections to develop symbolic value propositions. The authors outlined three main strategies for network tie formation: using existing ties, product exposure, and entrepreneur exposure (Butticè et al., 2023, p. 850). According to them, these methods help companies reach out to others to become more visible, get resources, and build trust in a highly uncertain market. These strategies are specific to the high-end fashion (HEF) industry, where social interpretation, brand narratives, and cultural legitimacy determine market value along with product functionality (Butticè et al., 2023, p. 850). As a result, in contrast to high-tech industries, tie formation in HEF is focused on open-ended experimentation and symbolic alignment rather than efficiency.

Butticè et al. (2023, p 852) first underlined a crucial shift in applying the OI model to fashion firms. Indeed, as already discussed, the OI framework has been widely used in high-tech industries where the value proposition includes enhanced product/service features, availability, and lower prices (Chandler et al., 2017, p. 236). For this reason, Townley & Gulledge (2015, p. 125) claimed that the usage of OI in high-tech ventures is hardly applicable to other industries. Butticè et al. (2023, p 850) bridge this gap by modifying the OI model for the symbolic economy of fashion, demonstrating that network ties in this setting function as tools for co-constructing cultural meaning and market identity in addition to providing access to resources.

Returning to the framework, the first strategy for network tie formation is leveraging existing ties. This method involves companies using the networks they already have to establish early connections. Although this strategy could be helpful in a business's starting phase, it may limit long-term opportunities if the network does not align with the company's wider innovation aims. Furthermore, depending excessively on known contacts might result in network redundancy, which might limit access to new resources and different viewpoints (Butticè et al., 2023, p. 865).

The second method, product exposure, is about companies displaying their products at events, like fashion weeks or runway shows, to attract stakeholders, including suppliers and distributors. This helps firms enhance their brand awareness and establish business relationships based on shared styles and creative ideas (Butticè et al., 2023, p. 865). Product exposure also enables unplanned connections to occur, particularly in event-driven settings such as runways, where symbolic alignment and visibility are more important than planned negotiation (Butticè et al., 2023, p. 865). According to the authors, these interactions are crucial for designers to test their creative vision and have feedback, attract collaborators, and increase the perceived value of their collections.

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Finally, the third method is entrepreneur exposure. This strategy focuses on designers and creative leaders collaborating with established companies to build their reputations and fit into the existing industry structures. Entrepreneur exposure emphasizes working with external creative talents as the primary driver of innovation (Butticè et al., 2023, p. 867). Moreover, through co-designing capsule collections, designers and brands not only gain symbolic value but also extend their network ties to high-quality suppliers and recognized firms. Butticè et al. (2023, p. 864) stated that "collaborating with recognized brands with strong identities gives meaning to products", underlining the role of external designers, creative directors, and freelance talents who help to construct what the cultural and symbolic value of a brand's product is. These partnerships not only increase legitimacy but also assist in solving the conflict that exists in Open Innovation studies between value capture and value creation. A strong relationship with a reputable partner can boost a product's reputation, enhance consumer perception, and open up business prospects without sacrificing the integrity of the brand (Butticè et al., 2023, p. 864).

This framework is particularly relevant within the context of this research because it provides a theoretical lens and a structured approach to understanding how fashion firms drive innovation through strategic external partnerships. It will be employed during the study's data collection and analysis stages. The semi-structured interview guide has been structured according to the three mechanisms suggested by Butticè et al. (2023, p. 864): leveraging existing ties, product exposure, and entrepreneur exposure. This enables participants to reflect on their collaborative practices in a targeted way. These same mechanisms will be applied as thematic codes to organize and interpret the interview data. By doing this, the framework makes it possible to investigate how product innovation and symbolic value occur from outside partnerships in the fashion industry in a consistent and rigorous manner.

Whereas previous research has covered co-branding considerably from branding and consumer perspectives (Helmig et al., 2008, p. 370; Quamina et al., 2023, p. 9), the role of co-branding as a systematic process to facilitate product innovation has received relatively limited attention. Likewise, even though Open Innovation has been widely applied in the tech industry, its applicability in the fashion industry, studied by Butticè et al. (2023), remains to be explored empirically.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines and describes the research design and the methodological framework employed to examine how fashion companies foster product innovation through external partnerships. The study incorporates a qualitative design based on semi-structured expert interviews. This methodological choice reflects the understanding that innovation within this sector is a complex, relational, and context-sensitive process.

The chapter is structured to provide a comprehensive and transparent overview of the research process, which improves the study's legitimacy, coherence, and academic rigor.

The section begins by justifying the choice of a qualitative research design. After outlining the justification for the methods, it outlines the positionality of the researcher and the reflexive measures taken to avoid potential biases. The chapter then moves to a description of the sampling strategy and the selection criteria for the participants. Next, it presents how the Open Innovation (OI) framework by Butticè et al. (2023, p. 850) is operationalized. The OI model has been employed as the theoretical foundation for both interview design and thematic analysis. The methods for conducting, recording, and transcribing the interviews are then explained, along with the development and evaluation of the interview. Following this, the methodology describes the six analytical steps that have been used to interpret the data. Finally, using established qualitative criteria, such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, the discussion concludes by outlining ethical considerations and the measures taken to ensure methodological trustworthiness.

3.1 Justification for the methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate how external partnerships contribute to product innovation within fashion companies. When researching complex, socially constructed phenomena, qualitative inquiry is particularly suitable as the aim is to comprehend meanings and processes rather than test variables (Creswell, 2013, p. 32). Product innovation in the fashion industry is intricately linked to cultural judgment, aesthetic negotiation, and symbolic communication, aspects that, according to Bryman (2012, p. 380), call for interpretative and adaptable research methodologies. By employing a qualitative approach, the researcher can also gain insight into how social interaction and embedded knowledge shape the perspective and articulated responses of participants during the study. Indeed, as Bryman (2012, p. 399) notes, qualitative research seeks to gather rich, in-depth accounts of social life and places emphasis on comprehending the world through the participant's perspective.

The study implements a semi-structured approach as its data collection method to gather these perspectives. This model offers a structured yet flexible format, by giving the researcher the

possibility to track dominant themes while allowing participants to expound their unique personal experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27). In exploratory research, where the researcher needs to ask both consistent questions and follow new themes that emerge, semi-structured interviews are an appropriate method (Bryman, 2012, p. 471). Roulston (2010, p. 17) further emphasizes the suitability of the method. According to the author, this methodology enables respondents to consider complex procedures and internal decision-making, and for this reason, it is particularly beneficial when examining professional knowledge.

Additionally, the semi-structured interview facilitates a co-constructive process in which the researcher and participant interact to create meaning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 123). This is highly relevant within an innovation context, where informal practices, creative instincts, and collaborative dynamics are key elements. This methodology's adaptability ensures alignment with the study's conceptual framework and research objective while enabling in-depth engagement with such themes.

3.2 Researcher reflexivity

In qualitative studies, the role of the researcher is strictly linked to the knowledge production process (Creswell, 2013, p. 216). The researcher's previous experience in the fashion field brings with it pros and drawbacks. It improved the contextual understanding and made it easier to reach informed participants, but as Berger (2015, p. 221) suggests, it also requires careful reflexive practice to prevent possible biases.

To address these issues, the researcher used a reflexive journal approach. According to Berger (2015, p. 222), a reflective journal is a diary in which the researcher notes personal expectations, emotional reactions, and interpretative decisions. According to the author, journaling can help make a clear distinction between the researcher's voice and the participant's voice. Furthermore, when interpreting participants' motivations and decision-making processes, bracketing techniques were used to minimize the intrusion of personal assumptions (Creswell, 2013, p. 216).

Through different strategies, the researcher aimed to increase the study's credibility. All these initiatives were made to guarantee that only the participants' experience, and not the researcher's biases, influenced the results.

3.3 Sampling Strategy and Participant Selection

The study employed a purposive sampling strategy. According to Douglas (2022, p. 417), purposive sampling is a non-probability strategy that is used to specifically choose the best data sources for achieving the study's objective.

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In the context of purposive sampling, the researcher can select study participants, including homogeneous, maximum variation, expert, selective, and typical case sampling (Douglas, 2022, p. 418). For this research, the present paper employed expert sampling, which, as Douglas (2022, p. 418) states, means "finding individuals with a very good understanding of the phenomenon." The justification for that method is "the better matching of the sample to aims and objectives of the research, thus improving the rigor of the study and trustworthiness of the data and results" (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 652).

The sample includes marketing managers, brand managers, and fashion designers. More specifically, it incorporates: two brand managers, three designers, and two marketing managers. The decision to include more designers is rooted in the direct relationship between designers and product innovation. Marketing and brand managers were included to have a complete overview of the phenomenon. This combination also enables triangulation between managerial and creative perspectives, offering a deeper understanding of how external partnerships lead to innovation. Notably, as explained by Bryman (2012, p. 392), including different points of view improves the validity and the depth of qualitative findings.

The selection criteria were built on two main points. First, participants to be considered experts had to have at least three years of experience in the field. Second, the participants had to be directly involved in co-branding practices. The interviewee's codes, roles, and description can be found in Table 1.

LinkedIn outreach and referrals from industry contacts were used to find participants. This strategy conforms with Suri's (2011, p. 68) suggestions to reach knowledgeable participants in a specialized field by using both criterion-based and snowball sampling. Seven participants were included in the final sample. The size complies with university guidelines and qualitative research standards that value depth over breadth. Furthermore, according to Bryman (2012, p. 420), saturation is a more significant threshold than numerical adequacy within qualitative research.

Table 1. Interviewee codes, roles, and descriptions,

Interviewee Code	Role	Professional Context
Brand Manager 1	Curator / Brand Manager	Edoardo – Background in marketing with experience in Nike, We Are Social, and On. He has extensive experience in managing branding

		partnerships and specialized in connecting storytelling and brand activation.
Brand Manager 2	Brand Manager	Works at a leading international outdoor brand known for its performance-driven products with a fashion-forward identity. Responsible for translating the brand's DNA into a more lifestyle-oriented project. Has several experiences in the context of co-branding partnerships.
Marketing Manager 1	Marketing and Sales	Works at a multinational sportswear company, focusing on sales and strategic partnerships. Previously managed product and special partnerships in a famous skateboarding lifestyle brand.
Marketing Manager 2	Marketing Manager	Works for a global fashion company; progressed internally from intern to senior role and now leads international campaign and branding efforts. Involved in different co-branding strategies.
Designer 1	Accessory Designer	Designs bags and sneakers for a big Italian fashion brand, focusing on research and creative development. Involved in different

		partnerships.
Designer 2	Menswear Designer	Works on product development for the men's main line of a globally recognized luxury brand known for its high-performance and fashion forward collection. Also runs an independent design project focused on personal collections.
Designer 3	Visual and Product Designer	Works for a well-known sportswear brand that is expanding into lifestyle fashion. Plays a key role in the early stages of product development. Has several experiences in co-branding works and partnerships.

3.4 Operationalization of the Open Innovation Framework

The interview structure was directly informed by the Open Innovation (OI) framework proposed by Butticè et al. (2023, p. 851), which identifies three main strategies for incorporating outside input into product development: leveraging existing ties, product exposure, and entrepreneur exposure. These categories guaranteed theoretical coherence throughout data collection and guided the creation of the interview thematic blocks.

The framework describes "Leveraging existing ties" as the usage of established previous connections as a basis for creating innovation. Building on this, participants were questioned regarding the importance of continuity in partnership, the impact of past collaborations, and the ways that familiarity and trust affect innovation outcomes.

"Product exposure" indicates how events, such as fashion runways, pop-up stores, and capsule drops, increase the opportunity for partnerships. Participants were asked to consider how brand staging,

event-based interactions, and visibility during these types of circumstances play a part in creating new alliances.

Finally, "Entrepreneur exposure" entails interacting with external agents who were previously unknown. Finding new talent, creative scouting, and the creative process that brings product innovation were the main topics of the interview questions.

The questionnaires were built differently depending on the participant's role, to guarantee relevance and adaptability. While brand managers and marketing managers were questioned about strategic alignment, brand identity, and target responses to the innovation, designers were encouraged to consider creative negotiation and aesthetic coherence. This structure conformed to Yin's (2014, p. 190) recommendation of aligning data collection with the key theoretical framework while retaining space for open-ended exploration. Through the guide's alignment to the OI model, each interview yielded responses immediately linked to the theory under investigation, while also allowing for deeper investigation.

3.5 Interview Development and Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. All the interviews were conducted within two weeks and scheduled on different days. The interview lasted approximately 1 hour, depending on the availability and flow of the conversation. Before each interview, all the participants were informed about the interview topics, the voluntary nature of the interview, and the procedure for data management and data storage. Each participant was also asked if they wanted to preserve their anonymity or not. Informed consent was obtained and recorded verbally before the beginning of the interviews.

The interview structure was guided by the Problem-Centered Expert Interview Model by Döringer (2021, p. 265). It combines an introductory narrative phase, a theory-driven guide, and flexible and exploratory follow-ups to elicit both explicit and implicit expertise. Following this model, each interview began with an open question regarding the interviewee's professional experience, aiming to establish context and understand their perspective (Döringer, 2021, p. 271). Then, the interview guide embraced open-ended narrative questions, through which the respondents were asked to report on or describe their ideation processes or a recent project, thereby collecting personal meanings and perceptions about the practice of innovation. In the third stage, theory-informed questions by the interviewer that were associated with key concepts of the study (e.g., collaboration, co-branding, existing ties, exposure) were utilized through procedures such as general and specific probing or mirroring, depending on the flow of the conversation as it developed (Döringer, 2021, p. 272). The coupling of thematic focus with open-endedness and flexibility allowed for the achievement of

context-specific, experiential understanding.

Although the same themes were posed to all participants, the semi-structured design allowed for flexibility to change the phrasing and the topic of interest of questions to accommodate the flow of the conversation and the participant's expertise in specific topics. This flexible yet focused design aligns with DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree's (2006, p. 316) suggestion for a balance between thematic structure and conversational freedom in semi-structured interviews.

As a test for effectiveness and clarity, the interview guide was piloted with two professionals working in the fashion industry, though they were not considered subject-matter experts. The piloting process allowed the researcher to solve question ambiguity, adjust the timing, and consolidate themes. According to Majid et al. (2017, p. 1075), piloting interviews is crucial in revealing ambiguities and enhancing the quality of the interviews. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded. In line with Bird's (2005, p. 228) suggestions, recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcription incorporated paralinguistic elements, like pauses, emphasis, and tone, to preserve contextual cues in transcription. Before the analysis, the accuracy of the transcript was double-checked line by line. The transcription and the analysis were done in Italian, the original language, and only the quotes needed for the results and discussion section were translated.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a useful method for "identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes)" within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The analysis followed the six-step framework provided by Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 87):

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts.
2. Initial coding to identify significant features related to fashion, branding, and differentiation.
3. Collation of codes into potential themes.
4. Review and refine themes to ensure coherence and relevance to the research questions.
5. Definition and naming of final themes to provide a clear narrative.
6. Integration of themes into the study's findings, supported by illustrative quotes from participants.

Coding was done using ATLAS.ti software. In the first round of analysis, the codes generated were 112. After a second review, similar codes were merged, resulting in a total of 63. These codes were then grouped into four overarching themes: Concept of innovation, leveraging existing ties, product exposure, and entrepreneur exposure.

3.7 Trustworthiness and Rigour

To establish rigor for this research, trustworthiness was ensured through the model proposed by Shenton (2004, p. 64), which operationalizes Guba & Lincoln's four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria provide a systematic basis for assessing qualitative research beyond traditional measures of reliability and validity.

Credibility concerns trust in the findings' validity. In this study, it was fostered through expert sampling, triangulation of perspectives, member checking, and reflexive practice. These practices helped ensure that the findings reflected participants' actual experiences and ideas.

Transferability involves the extent to which findings can be applied in other contexts. Although qualitative research does not strive for generalizability, this study provides detailed descriptions of the roles of the participants, brand positioning, collaboration format, and innovation context, allowing readers to assess the study's applicability to other industries.

Dependability relates to the stability and transparency of the process. This was ensured by meticulously recording every step, including the creation of the interview guide, data gathering, coding techniques, and analytical choices. The interview guide pilot further reinforces this point.

Confirmability emphasizes objectivity and the traceability of findings in original data. Building on this, all analytical interpretations were based on quotes from participants, and the aforementioned reflexive journal was kept to support this. By asking participants to check and validate the interpretations, confirmability was also improved. By following these four principles, the study offers a clear, credible, and methodologically rigorous structure

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The present study followed the ethical guidelines provided by Erasmus University. All the participants were informed about the aim of the interview, their rights, and the procedures for handling data and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained verbally and was recorded before the beginning of the interviews. Pseudonyms were assigned to the participants who requested anonymity, and identifying information from transcripts and quoted text was removed. For participants who did not request anonymity, identifying references were left with their informed consent. Electronic files, such as recordings and transcripts, were stored in a device protected by a password that only the researcher could access. These practices align with the ethical procedures outlined by Israel & Hay (2006, p. 61) for data protection and participant confidentiality. Finally, participants were warned they had the right to choose not to answer a question or withdraw from participation in the research at any time. These steps were taken to provide a setting that was

respectful and safe for a free and open discussion.

4. RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings of the present thesis, based on the analysis of the seven interviews conducted. As presented in the methodology, the interviews included experts from the fashion field. This chapter aims to offer a thematic explanation of how external partnerships support product innovation within the fashion context. The study groups its findings into four key categories using the Open Innovation model by Butticè et al. (2023, p. 850). Each category corresponds either to one of the strategies described by the framework, specifically relying on existing ties, product exposure, and entrepreneur exposure, or it represents a cross-cutting theme that was inductively derived from the data gathered. The analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 79) six-step thematic analysis process. The coding process was built around the Open Innovation framework. However, the coding also allowed for the identification of new themes and new insights. For example, one of the emerging themes was related to the concept of innovation and how the participants conceptualize it. For this reason, the chapter opens with a transversal section that examines how the interviewees define and perceive innovation within the fashion industry. By doing this, it provides a necessary interpretative lens through which the following themes can be understood.

Moving to the structure, this chapter follows a thematic structure rather than a chronological order of interviews. Throughout the chapter, the participants' quotes are used to point out key aspects and to provide a grounded description of the investigated phenomena. To maintain confidentiality and allow for analytical clarity, these quotes are attributed using predefined identities like Designer 1, Brand Manager 1, or Marketing Manager 2, as described in Table 1 presented in the methodology. All quotes were translated from Italian to English and have been rendered with full fidelity to the original wording to maintain the participants' voices intact. The thematic sections are outlined below.

First, section 4.1 discusses the way in which innovation is understood by the interviewed experts, focusing on symbolic, cultural, and multidimensional faces that foster this concept. Second, section 4.2 deals with the concept of leveraging existing ties, emphasizing the role played by established relationships in generating or constraining innovation. Moving to section 4.3, it explores the way product exposure, through events and pop-ups, for example, is used as a mechanism to create a relationship for product improvement. Finally, section 4.4 investigates entrepreneur exposure by looking at how collaborating with external partner expertise fuels creativity and learning.

Collectively, these findings aim to offer a comprehensive account of how innovation emerges from external partnerships within the fashion context.

4.1 The Concept of Innovation

Across the interviews, the concept of innovation was not presented as a fixed definition but as a shared vision: a way of dealing with creativity, market relevance, and brand image. Rather than linking the concept with the revolutionized newness of unimaginable forms, the interviewees defined innovation by building on concepts like reinterpretation, symbolic coherence, and openness to creative exchange. Three frequent sub-themes that underlie how fashion designers, marketers, and brand managers think about innovation are derived from this analysis: 1) Innovation as redesigning something that already exists, 2) innovation as cultural and narrative coherence, and 3) innovation as openness to contamination.

4.1.1 Innovation as Reinterpretation

Throughout the interviews, there was a consistent and insistent theme: the concept of innovation as reinterpretation. According to the interviewees, innovation rarely means creating something completely new. Instead, it is more a process of transformation. Taking what already exists, reworking it, and re-presenting it in a way that appeals to contemporary sensibilities. Such a general perception accords with a cultural logic by which novelty is not quantified by technological innovation but by symbolic renewal. Designer 1 expressed this opinion quite eloquently, stating that:

> *In my field, which is fashion, I think more or less everything has already been done in some way. So, the only way I see innovation is a crash between two worlds that might seem distant from each other, and therefore, in our field, it (innovation) always starts from something that itself is not new.*

This quote highlights the idea that innovation is essentially re-invention. Instead of starting from scratch, Designer 1 presents innovation as the creative reworking of preexisting elements through contrast and reinterpretation. Similarly, Designer 3 described innovation as the ability to: "Recirculate something that maybe no longer works, modify it, make it contemporary, and communicate it in the right way." In this idea, the concept of innovation is rooted in the process of reworking and recontextualizing past references. This logic can also be applied at a strategic brand level, where reinterpretation becomes a component of positioning and storytelling. Brand Manager 2, perfectly explained this with an example:

> *Nike does not reintroduce its past products exactly as they were, but reinvents them. It is all about telling their story through a different, more current language, connecting them to today's trends. In that way, the vintage shoe becomes something fresh again, something that speaks to a different audience.*

What matters here is not the usage of different materials or the redesign of a shoe, but the symbolic
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repositioning, the ability to trigger cultural memory in ways that are seen as contemporary and relevant. These examples demonstrate a generic professional understanding of innovation as reinterpretation: an activity rooted in cultural literacy and stylistic awareness rather than technological innovation. This interpretation underpins Baregheh et al.'s (2009, p. 73) argument that innovation in creative fields is a transformation process where existing things are re-styled to build new value. However, interviewees take this point even further, pointing out that in fashion, the novel is usually already embedded in the old. It is not so much the novelty of references but rather their negotiation that creates innovation.

4.1.2 Narrative as a Vehicle for Coherent Innovation

Interviewees, as just discussed, emphasized the importance of experimentation. However, they also stressed that innovations need to align with cultural positioning and brand identity. According to the results, this alignment is usually built and achieved through narrative. Indeed, storytelling within this context can be seen as a mechanism of coherence that ensures consistency between innovation and the brand identity. Experts believe that innovation must have considerable significance and relevance within the symbolic context of a brand's presence, rather than being a superficial pursuit of novelty. This concept was expressed from a variety of viewpoints, demonstrating that consistency is not a constraint, but a necessity for innovation to be understood and valued.

Designer 3 provided a clear explanation of this, citing the methodology used by Virgil Abloh, a pioneering fashion designer known for merging streetwear and luxury fashion. According to Designer 3:

He (Virgil) started from the identity of the product, used it as a reference point, and from there transformed it completely. He gave it a new tone, a different vibe, but without losing coherence. He kept the original silhouette, changed the colors, used materials he had already tested on other products, and innovated.

What emerged from this perspective is that innovation happens not by abandoning the past, but by communicating it in a new, appealing form. Innovation in this context refers to developing within the confines of what already exists rather than breaking away from it. The focus is on working within the brand's language, not outside of it, and combining variation and continuity. This point aligns with Brand Manager 1's idea on brand coherence, who stated that:

A communication innovation, in today's market, is entirely comparable to product innovation. Indeed, it is easy to find examples where communication has completely replaced the impact of the product itself in terms of brand positioning. A plain white T-shirt can have a completely different aura depending on the channel it is sold through and the way it is presented.

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This view clearly explains how storytelling can redefine and give meaning even to the most basic products.

Another sub-theme that emerged within the context of innovation and played a key role in defining it was the role of narrative. According to Brand Manager 2:

Innovation does not just mean putting out a new shoe with some super advanced technologies. Often, it is much more about how you tell the story behind that shoe, how you manage to make the brand reach people who may not have considered it before.

This viewpoint reinterprets innovation as a narrative process. When presented attractively, even minor product changes can have a profound impact. Related to this, Brand Manager 1 stated: "There are cases where communication was better than the product, and for a short time, those products worked. Communication weighs just as much as the product, sometimes even more."

From this perspective, communication cannot be considered separate from innovation; it is a part of how innovation is perceived, and this concept cannot be underestimated.

Taken together, these observations converged into a shared logic: fashion innovation is not disruptive per se in many cases. Instead, it becomes meaningful when it communicates the brand's symbolic identity and is presented with a clear purpose. Through their perspectives, interviewees described innovation as a culturally sensitive move that is founded on recombining known elements, rather than radically reinventing. This interpretation supports Klaß's (2020, p. 195) theory that innovation in the symbolic market is achieved through the negotiations of meaning and conformity to cultural norms. In this case, innovation maintains identity rather than undermines it by revitalizing the familiar in ways that are both genuine and pertinent.

4.1.3 Innovation as Creative Contamination.

A third sub-theme that emerged from the interviews positions innovation as a byproduct of contamination, a spark that is catalyzed through the collision of ideas, aesthetics, and outlook. More specifically, innovation was not seen as a bounded, linear act, but rather as something that emerges from relational dynamics, cross-referencing, and hybrid inspiration. Brand Manager 2 described this insightfully, pointing to how innovation is often generated from exposure to difference:

That difference pushes you to think outside the box, to loosen your grip on that rigidity that limits you, and to try new things you would not have even considered otherwise. For me, that is the point: if you always surround yourself with people who think like you, you end up in a bubble that does not let you grow.

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This statement highlights how tensions, such as moving out of homogeneous environments and into symbolic conflict, trigger innovative creativity. According to this perspective, innovation is a challenge rather than an oasis of comfort.

A similar vision was described by Designer 1 through the metaphor of clashing references. For the designer, fashion innovation comes from a clash between two distinguished worlds.

In our field, innovation always starts from something that is not new itself. To make it new, you compare it and confront it with something else. For example, putting together military uniforms with classic ballet. That clash could lead to innovation.

This quote suggests how symbolic value is being generated through recombination. The collision of structure and softness, functionality and beauty, generates tension that creates new aesthetic signification. Innovation, in this case, is in relation, not isolation.
This argument is also evident in Designer's 2 words, who envisioned innovation not technologically, but as an act of daily enrichment: "Innovation to me… the very first thing that comes to mind is: making something that makes your daily life richer."

More general in its reference, this quote encapsulates a broader sensitivity: innovation does not have to be revolutionary or dramatic. It can also be a small shift that comes from an insight, a new combination, a moment of cultural understanding that changes the everyday. Taken together, these concepts underline that innovation is created by the embrace of different people, different styles, and different cultures. Based on Butticè et al.'s (2023, p. 850) Open Innovation model, this kind of innovation depends on exposure to outside influences, symbolic contamination, and the innovative force of deliberate friction.

In conclusion, these three dimensions, reinterpretation, narrative coherence, and creative contaminations, are key in illustrating how fashion innovation is not a linear process but a rich web of interconnections. In the following parts of this results section, it will demonstrate how these same dimensions are translated into actual actions through external collaboration and partnership strategies.

4.2 Leveraging existing ties

The initial strategic pillar of the Open Innovation (OI) approach applied within this thesis concerns the use of existing ties. As explained by Butticè et al. (2023, p. 850), fashion collaborations tend to develop from already existing relationships, making the exchange between creative and operational processes faster and smoother. It is not only about convenience. Indeed, these alliances are relational capital that can actively contribute to product innovation. Yet, as the authors state, although

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established relationships certainly enable trust, alignment, and reduce negotiating time, they can also hinder the creative process.

The next three sections discuss the importance of existing ties and their pivotal role, the threat posed by closed networks, and the role of trust within this type of relationship. By doing this, the thesis aims to give a balanced view of how established relationships are both enablers and constraints within the innovation process.

4.2.1 Existing Ties: Their Importance and Their Use as a Strategic Shortcut

One of the key findings that emerged from the interviews concerns the central role played by pre-existing relationships in stimulating innovation. Consistent with the Open Innovation (OI) model, all interviewees uniformly expressed that existing ties play a crucial role in the context of partnerships. Moreover, they serve as facilitators, allowing for greater effectiveness in creative and operational processes. Echoing this sentiment, Brand Manager 2 articulated: "Relations are the fuel of everything."

Respondents recognized that prior acquaintance with a company, a brand, or a designer intrinsically fuels the desire to collaborate. As Brand Manager 1 explained: "If you already know a company or if a brand is already a friend of another, then there will always be the desire to write a piece of history together."

This point was further reinforced by Marketing Manager 1, who stated: "In my opinion, existing ties are one of the most important things, because rarely do partnerships arise only for a commercial thing. And if it's like this, that's where they lose their true nature."

The significance of existing connections was also highlighted by Designer 3, who affirmed: "Knowing people and already having a link to create collaboration is crucial. [...] In my experience, everything stemmed from the fact that we knew interesting people and we wanted to experiment."

Similarly, Marketing Manager 2 confirmed: "Obviously, pre-existing relationships have an impact when we talk about collaborations. Very often, when we worked on collaborations, it was because our manager knew other companies and considered them interesting."

Beyond their inherent importance, existing ties were also described as a powerful shortcut in innovation processes. More specifically, these ties can be seen as a strategic tool that enables firms to facilitate operations and speed up processes. Brand Manager 1 placed significant emphasis on this point. According to the interviewee:

Existing ties are important because they abolish the interlocutory phase [...] At a strategic level,

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working with people with whom you already have a relationship cuts a lot of points. It is always better if the relationship is informal and direct.

The expert then explained this point with a practical example from his own experience:

In the first calls, there's a lot of politics…then the first time we do a shooting together, we become brothers, and we become much more direct, so the goal, at least in the creative field, is to try to solidify knowledge that isn't yet solid, and so, it's important that the relationship is as informal and as direct as possible.

A perfect practical example was given by Designer 1, who emphasized how having established relationships with suppliers minimized uncertainty and facilitated logistics:

We were launching a bag, and we needed leather…and we knew that the supplier we had used the previous season had it. So, we did not look for anyone else because we already knew the price, the process, everything.

This operational advantage was not exclusive to the design side. Similarly, Brand Manager 2 emphasized how working with known partners helps manage complexities and uncertainties: "This type of relationship makes a difference when you find yourself having to solve problems or having to push for something that is not yet clear to everyone."

Overall, these results confirm the OI's emphasis on the value and the importance of pre-existing ties within innovation processes. However, the present results also expand on the existing framework. Indeed, what emerged from the interviews is a further nuance: existing ties do not merely facilitate access to external resources but play an active role in making the entire creative and operational process more fluid and immediate. In conclusion, building on these results, it is possible to argue that existing ties not only enable collaboration but also make it rapid and efficient. Nevertheless, some potential drawbacks should not be underestimated. For this reason, the next section will analyze the cons of leveraging existing ties.

4.2.2 The Threat of Closed Networks

According to Butticè et al. (2023, p. 850), while established relationships yield valuable returns in the context of innovation, they also carry the risks of over-reliance on closed networks. This concept was consistently reflected throughout the interviews. For instance, Brand Manager 1 stated: "As humans, we always want to do things with our friends."

However, the interviewee also warned that this trend, especially among small brands, can be creatively limiting: "When you always collaborate with people in your circle, you're always

speaking to the same niche, and that niche is small. That's when it turns into a sort of provincialism."

His comment underscores a paradox: the networks, so helpful during an early stage of a brand, could also constrain its vision. This idea was further reinforced by Brand Manager 2, who discussed how local or too familiar settings could be counterproductive: "When relations get too close or too stable over time, they may turn into a constraint. Especially in small environments, people tend to always approach the same familiar name."

Brand Manager 2 further explained that these trends reduce exposure to new ideas and minimize the creative tension that fuels innovation: "After a time, it becomes a limitation because you don't open up new doors anymore, you don't confront yourself with new ideas or with people capable of bringing new perspectives."

The same issue was also reported from a creative perspective. Designer 1 referred to the risk of working with the same people again and again: "You end up building a network that is more or less always the same…and thus, you end up doing the same things. The product itself never changes."

Although familiarity can be advantageous, Designer 1 knew that overreliance on known collaborators reduces creativity and the willingness to try out new things. Designer 2 shared the value of stepping outside comfort zones in the same way, stating: "It's great to work with the same people if it works, but you need to experiment more. Otherwise, you're where you are and that contributes nothing to your artistic or personal process."

Marketing Manager 2 substantiated this statement from a business perspective, asserting that although known relationships are useful, limiting them to only known ones kills creativity:

"Of course, established relationships are useful when we are making partnership decisions. But limiting them to that precludes the creative process. We live in a world without limits. You can't seal yourself off like that."

Generally, these observations confirmed the view of the OI framework. According to the results, as much as established relationships spur innovation, repeated reliance on the same partners can ultimately lead to stagnation. However, if collaboration is considered as a long-term strategy, what sustains them over time is not familiarity, but trust. The role of trust was another common theme that emerged from the interviews, and it was described as what allows collaborators to take risks, navigate uncertainty, and bet on common outcomes. For these reasons, the next section will look closer at the role of trust, analyzing how it functions as a catalyst in partnerships.

4.2.3 The Role of Trust

Another recurring theme that emerged during the interviews was the recognition of trust as an essential tool in creating innovation with existing contacts. As already explained, existing ties may provide structural benefits; however, it is the building of trust that allows such relationships to work effectively and sustain creative productivity over time.

Different participants clarified that trust is not an innate quality but a structure that is developed over time through shared experiences and congruence in interpersonal relations. For instance, Designer 2 elaborated on the process of gradual development, stating: "Trust is not immediate. First, I look for a kind of harmony with the other person […] real trust only begins after collaboration has occurred."

What is being implied here is that even among close relationships, trust must be built, negotiated, and sustained. The thesis decided to start with this quote for a precise reason. This definition gives us a starting point by clearly explaining where trust between partners grows.
However, while all respondents recognized the fundamental significance of trust, they differed in their reasons for its significance. Some pointed to its emotional aspects, whereas others identified its functional and strategic significance. This range of views confirmed that trust is not merely a matter of social etiquette, but rather a multifaceted condition in facilitating continuity, depth, and innovation in cooperative relationships.

If the reason why trust is significant differed around the sample, a common pattern was the role of trust in managing uncertainty. Notably, different interviewees commented on this notion. For instance, Designer 3 claimed that it is trust that enables the formation of long and significant partnerships. He resonated: "If you want to build something long-term, then trust is essential. If it is a one-off, then you do it and it is done. But if you want something durable, then you must have trust."

This concept was supported by Marketing Manager 2, who linked trust directly to the handling of major projects and the responsibility that is inherent in partnerships: "When you're working with big budgets or dealing with prestige brands, trust is a high priority. It is important to be sure that the parties involved are committed and operate with integrity."

In this regard, trust functions as a double safeguard, playing both creative and functional roles. It allows partners to take risks, commit to shared goals, and work well under pressure. As such, trust transforms a mere affiliation into a strong alliance.

In conclusion, the interviews confirmed that the use of existing ties can considerably boost innovation. Such an approach would also have quite concrete benefits, such as the acceleration of the processes or less bureaucracy. Partners working in such settings can quickly move to the stage of

implementing and executing their plans without participating in any formalities. Certainly, the research findings also give some indications on why a firm should be very careful with the possibility of becoming so dependent on this strategy. Indeed, this closed network may result in creative stagnation. Furthermore, as established throughout this subsection, trust is a pivotal element that underpins the relationships between collaborators and, consequently, their incomes. It is not only a matter of mere acquaintance that can change, but also the presence of mutual trust plays a significant role. Notably, the establishment of trust makes it possible to tolerate risks, minimize uncertainty, and secure continuity as the ultimate result.

4.3 Product Exposure

According to Butticè et al. (2023, p. 850), product exposure refers to the capacity to utilize fashion events to showcase products and activate networks to drive innovation. This strategy emphasizes the value of being visible, not as a target to reach, but as a means to establish quality relations with creative partners and industry stakeholders. The interview provided empirical support for the framework: interviewees articulated the role of certain types of events, such as runways or pop-ups, as a strong tool to get in touch with the externals. Specifically, according to the respondents, these physical experiences are touchpoints for cultural connection and community building.

However, sometimes events also have drawbacks that cannot go unnoticed. Notably, most of the interviewees' perspectives presented recurring issues and limitations in event strategies. The subsequent sub-sections discuss these dynamics based on two common general themes derived from the data analysis.

4.3.1 Product Exposure: Events as Enablers of External Partnerships

The first recurring theme that emerged within the context of product exposure during the analysis was the perception of physical events as a tool to foster external partnerships. Specifically, events were not only seen as promotional tools or consumer experiences, but also as relational infrastructures where it is possible to create new connections; occasions where designers, creative professionals, producers, and potential partners can get in touch. Building on this perspective, product exposure is not valuable in itself, but it becomes a strategic way to create relationships that may eventually result in innovation processes. These concepts perfectly describe Butticè et al.'s (2023, p. 850) belief that events work as a space where connections can grow.

This idea was clearly and explicitly expressed by Brand Manager 1, who described events as a tangible way to translate abstract brand narratives into interactional moments, where people can anchor social and professional exchanges:

We are in a period where you think it is all digital, but it's not, because the relationships and

especially the affection must be perceived as real, especially if we talk about design, fashion, architecture, or everything that is perceived as very intimate. So physical contact, like pop-ups, events, or any kind of activity that is not digital, right now, is a key. Of course, it has to go complementary with online strategies. Brands must find areas to preside. So, whether it's clubbing, whether it's outdoors, whether it's the art of having coffee together, what is crucial is to give a real and physical space to your brand.

This statement clearly underlines the idea that product exposure acts as a vehicle to establish a connection between individuals, not only between a product and an audience. These interactions, while they may sometimes seem casual, often lay the groundwork for future innovation. Marketing Manager 1 further strengthens this point by also giving a practical example from their experience:

Nine times out of ten, someone is hired or a partnership happens because of the black book they have. When we worked with [Brand Name], it was because someone who knew the artist personally introduced us during an event.

Designer 3 offered a complementary perspective and explained the role of events in attracting new partners: "It is more about positioning for me: you do a strong event, you communicate a certain image, and maybe someone will write to you afterward because they see a fit with their vision."

This perspective reinforces the strategic function of events in enabling professional connections. However, Designer 3's view complements the picture by giving a different perspective. According to him, the real role of events is to position a brand. This positioning, in turn, allows the brand to establish certain relationships and initiate certain collaborations.

In sum, the interview indicated that events serve not only as mere product exposure but as relational devices that facilitate connections that might foster innovation. To this extent, the product exposure strategy, as delineated by Butticè et al. (2023, p. 851), acquires empirical relevance: when brands use physical presence to establish quality professional relationships, innovation becomes a relational byproduct. Yet, as will be illustrated in the next sub-section, sometimes these practices are built in ways that can undermine their efficacy.

4.3.2 Product Exposure: Structural Limitations of Events

While, as discussed in the previous section, events can promote external partnerships, an overriding theme that emerged throughout the interviews was that they don't always serve this purpose. Indeed, instead of being spaces for substantive exchange or for meeting people, events are increasingly characterized as performative exercises in visibility, and they are more motivated by promotion and brand recognition than by the desire to establish meaningful connections.

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Their effectiveness in creating contacts to foster external collaborations depends on the types of events. This dynamic was perfectly clarified by Brand Manager 1, who stated: "In B2C Events […] network is not part of this scheme, at least not directly. For this reason, B2B events beat B2C events 100 to 1 in networking."

In other words, B2C events in fashion, while they might be a useful instrument to get in touch with partners, are incapable of generating meaningful connections. The reason can be attributed to the superficiality of the design of these events. Indeed, almost all the interviewees commented on the lack of depth that occurs in fashion events. For example, Marketing Manager 1 stated: "I don't know. Personally… if you ask me… one (event) out of ten is useful. Because, for real, now everybody does a runway, or an event."

This statement not only points out what seems to be a redundancy, but it also suggests that most of the event formats are becoming less relevant. Designer 2 expanded this idea. According to him, the criticism is based on the idea that events have become mere performances meant to show off social status and group membership, and that takes away from the real purpose of the event. He commented:

Today, I was talking to my brand's PR person. Yesterday she was at the opening of this kind of exhibition… but they went to this house…but it was more about image, you know? I mean, they went there just to celebrate. But more than celebrating…it is not even celebrating itself, it's really just to confirm their presence. To show you are part of that world, and you go there. But then, the event itself, no one cares about it. In these cases, events make no sense.

Brand Manager 2 also agreed with this view, commenting:

Look, I find those parties where everyone stands there and does the usual 'Hello, nice to meet you' and then everyone goes their separate ways, a big waste of time. It's always the same old reheated soup, isn't it?

Similarly, Designer 2 stated:

Everything about fashion week, such as events, parties, and after parties, is almost useless except for advertising. Eighty percent of the people who attend these events are just people who need to say that they are part of that context.

The most stinging of the criticism came from Marketing Manager 2, who described events as nothing more than vain spectacles:

I believe that most events in the fashion world are just a front tool […] most of the people are idiots

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who go to the event to make stories (Instagram) and to establish themselves in that context, these types of events don't actually serve to communicate or meet people

These perspectives underline that in a landscape where events are more and more seen as status symbols than meaningful moments, their ability to foster innovation by creating networks is not only questioned but often outright rejected.

Cumulatively, the interview data both support and detail the OI framework within the context of product exposure. While events are instrumental in relational terms, their true impact lies not in visibility alone, but in the deliberate intentionality and relational design they manifest. The data suggest that innovation is not fueled by visibility per se, but by making possible contexts from which actual, goal-oriented interaction can emerge. To this extent, then, the model is extended: product exposure is a key driver of innovation only when based on situational relevance and strategic openness. At the same time, respondents' frequent complaints also resonate with an oversaturation of events lacking content, highlighting a critical gap. This reflects an urgent need for more selective, context-sensitive formats capable of re-legitimating events as genuine facilitators of collaborative innovation.

4.4 Entrepreneur exposure

As previously discussed in the literature review, the last mechanism to foster innovation according to the Open Innovation (OI) framework applied to the fashion field by Butticè et al. (2023, p. 850) is entrepreneur exposure. This concept refers to the ability of a designer or a creative entrepreneur to immerse themselves directly in contexts that stimulate exchange with an external environment.

At the heart of this exchange, there is a specific goal: creating new connections to facilitate innovation processes. Nevertheless, the outcomes that emerged from the interview data convey a richer, more complex understanding of the phenomenon, expressed in two related yet distinct trajectories. In one trajectory, designers define exposure as a context of learning, identity formation, and method exchange. These relational patterns often emerge as the design evolves, leading to innovative solutions that can have a tangible impact on concrete product outcomes. This understanding aligns with the initial idea of the OI model, which identifies cognitive and collaborative procedures as being central to innovation generation.

In contrast, managers develop a concept of entrepreneurial visibility based on reputation and strategic design. Under this approach, the public visibility of designers becomes a narrative mechanism that reinforces brand positioning and helps in creating ties that might blur into product innovation. The designer becomes "a human brand," with the ability to authenticate collaborations, create media buzz, and align with outside stakeholders.

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This chapter thus provides a comprehensive conceptual explanation of entrepreneur exposure, which is explored on two fronts: the first dimension refers to the experience-based aspects, which are tied to designer professional and artistic advancement fueled by interactions with external stakeholders; the second dimension is symbolic, whereby the designer as a reputational and narrative asset provides visibility and product-based opportunities through strategic collaborator partnerships.

4.4.1 Entrepreneurial Exposure as Creative Learning

The first sub-theme found within the context of entrepreneur exposure is about the designers' experiential background. All the designers underlined the crucial role of collaborative settings for creative and personal growth. This perspective perfectly reflects the OI model's assumption that external exposure works as a driver for knowledge creation, creative inspiration, and constructive interactions. Exposure, according to the interviewees, moves beyond functionality. Indeed, it is often described in terms of transformation and personal development.

Collaborative projects can be described as a dialogic exchange in which each member shares their own set of individual references, tools, and perspectives. Through such an exchange, the members enrich each other and become reflective. This enables them to identify solutions or approaches that they might otherwise not explore within their own stylistic or organizational context. As Designer 1 explained:

If a brand doesn't have expertise in, let's say, one particular area, the collaboration makes up the shortfall. One knows about the material or the sportswear, the other knows about fashion sensibility. That's where the interesting stuff comes in.

Designer 2 further echoed this point, stating: "When I am working with somebody who has another background, I think differently. I learn new stuff, and so do they."

Beyond technical and aesthetic value, collaboration also acts as an incentive to reflect and develop methodologies. Designer 3 described how interaction with new workflows or principles of production pushes them to re-evaluate and adapt their developmental assumptions: "Working with others forces you to recognize limitations and find creative solutions. Even if an idea doesn't pan out, there are still valuable lessons to learn."

These real-life examples show that the designers can work within limits, make the right compromises, and maintain a consistent identity across different projects. Designers state that such interactions are mentally and emotionally stimulating, which shows how often creativity happens when people talk to each other instead of being alone. Because of this, exposure goes beyond just being relational to include emotional elements. It creates a space where curiosity, resilience, and the

ability to turn problems into new ideas can all grow. Such interactivity is especially significant in the fashion industry, where collaborations are usually fast-moving, high-risk, and set against highly competitive market conditions.

In many cases, the creative outcomes of such interactions find their fullest expression in product innovation. While not always earth-shattering, this kind of innovation often emerges as a result of subtle transformations such as innovative contours, new materials, new features, or unique reinterpretations that emerge when different minds meet. These integrated solutions fill gaps in the designer's understanding while simultaneously complementing the portfolio of the brand with unexpected visual or technical characteristics. Therefore, this process not only generates personal and professional growth but also encourages discussion about ideas and provides the basis for product innovations that emerge from the combination of various creative activities.

4.4.2 Designer Identity in Innovation Processes

Alongside the educational benefits imparted by entrepreneurial exposure, evidence gathered through interviewing provides equally valuable insight: the designer is also a reputational and symbolic asset in collaborative, co-branded alliances. According to this understanding, the designer is more than simply the goods-producing entity; rather, their identity, aesthetic, and established status are determining influences on cooperation and mutual visibility among the involved brands. Throughout the interviews, different examples were discussed. For Instance, Brand Manager 1 explained:

Let's take a specific example: Yeezy for GAP. I mean, Yeezy put Gap on the charts, gave them the green light to say, 'Okay. Gap is cool again.' But it wasn't because the Yeezy Gap product was cool, because it was the perfect hoodie, or whatever. It was because Kanye West said, 'Okay, Gap is now cool again, and boom.

In other words, the product's aesthetic content took second place to the symbolic meaning assigned to the designer figure. The collaboration was successful because it leveraged the designer-entrepreneur's personal branding and media exposure. It shows that the celebrity status of the designer is not marginal; instead, it is being strategically used by brands as a means to create buzz, cultural relevance, and consumer engagement. This claim was further explained in the context of other significant collaborations. Marketing Manager 2, while they were speaking about Nike and Off-White's partnership, expressed his viewpoint by stating: "In this case, the designer figure, Virgil Abloh, overshadowed the brand. Virgil is an icon."

As such, the increase in value does not simply stem from the intersection of two brand identities; instead, it is the impact of one person whose artistry is the integrative factor within otherwise separate fields. Designer 3 agreed and, using the same example, he added: "It's not Nike x Off-

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White… It's Virgil x Nike. We have to figure out what Virgil did. He revolutionized everything."

The example of the partnership between Clint, founder of the brand Corteiz, and Nike provided another useful insight. As stated by Marketing Manager 1: "Clint is the perfect Nike consumer. Clint is ideal. He even brought along photos of himself wearing the shoes. […] You're connecting two realities which are very much like one another."

Here, blending personal narrative with brand identity is the basis of the cultural relevance embedded within the collaboration. The designer plays mainly the role of facilitator, not so much in terms of visibility, but because he can speak towards the crucial crossroads of brand values, communal participation, and design sensibility. All these examples, when taken as a whole, challenge the original conceptualization of entrepreneur exposure by Butticè et al. (2023, p. 850) and turn the focus towards the relational and cognitive interactions between external stakeholders and creative entrepreneurs. While these are still important aspects, the present research proposes a broader framework: entrepreneur exposure should also include designers' symbolic capital, creative legitimacy, and social visibility. In developing co-branding models, it is often the designer's identity, made up of their narrative, intended public, and communication approach, that generates recognition and fosters credibility.

It is worth pointing out, however, that the phenomenon under discussion is not purely fueled by fame or notoriety. Instead, it is the combination of public exposure and genuine creativity that allows designers to position themselves as "activators" of innovation. It is this strategic deployment of symbolic capital that allows brands to navigate new media contexts, appeal to varied demographics, and, in many cases, inspire product innovation through strategies of hybridization, reinterpretation, or access to new networks. The entrepreneurial role shifts from being simply interactive to being marked by purposeful positioning; a designer, recognized for their creative genius, can not only be a participant but also serve as a facilitator, granting access, establishing trust, and creating resonance between different markets and audiences.

This research's interconnected breakthroughs, experiential learning, and symbolic positioning not only confirm but also significantly expand the understanding of entrepreneurial exposure in Open Innovation. While the earlier model emphasized the importance of outside interaction in knowledge generation and creative synergy, this research clarifies how designers simultaneously assume the roles of both learners and narrators on behalf of brands. Their exposure, aesthetic legitimacy, and narrative coherence are crucial for attracting and fostering collaborations that enable innovation. In this context, the designer emerges as both agent and vector: a relational fulcrum fostering inspiration and symbolic value. These results underscore the need to rethink the fashion innovation ecosystem as constructs shaped not only by competencies and networks but also by the intentional interplay of

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identity, authorship, and public perception.

5. CONCLUSION

The fashion sector, known for its unstable and dynamic nature, is currently facing an environment of unprecedented volatility and complexity. As emphasized by the industry report provided by Business of Fashion and McKinsey & Company (2025), success in this landscape hinges not merely on trend adoption but on strategic adaptation and a relentless pursuit of differentiation. In light of these dynamics, innovation has emerged as a key enabler of securing and sustaining a competitive edge. Driven by these observations, the present thesis aims to address a gap within the current academic literature, specifically seeking to understand:

> *"How do fashion firms utilize external collaborations to drive product innovation?"*

Through a qualitative approach, rooted in the expert insights of industry professionals, this research has clarified the intricate, multi-faceted processes by which outside partnerships drive innovation, reflecting a significant shift from traditional, often inward-facing models of development to more responsive, interconnected, and strategically open approaches. This final chapter is structured in three main sections. First, key findings and contributions of the study are presented. Then, the limitations are discussed. Finally, the chapter ends with suggestions for future research.

5.1 Key Findings and Contributions

The research reveals that fashion firms strategically utilize collaborations to foster product innovation by actively engaging three core Open Innovation strategies: leveraging existing ties, product exposure, and entrepreneur exposure.

This process highlights symbolic, aesthetic, and cultural novelties, confirming and expanding scholarly approaches that view innovation as a transformational process whereby existing components are recast and combined to create new value (Baregheh et al., 2009; Klaß, 2020). Notably, the participants defined their understanding of innovation through three interconnected core lenses: the reinterpretation of existing forms, the instrumental role that narrative plays as the medium for coherent innovation, and the generative power of creative combination stemming from diverse interactions. Within fashion settings, this expanded understanding stresses that novelty often does not emerge from invention *ex nihilo*, but instead through conscious negotiation, strategic remaking, and re-contextualization of existing references, infused with present meaning and symbolic value.

This research builds on the theoretical foundation established in Butticè et al. (2023, p. 850)'s Open Innovation framework, specifically adapted for the high-end fashion industry. It has provided key empirical evidence for the appropriateness of the framework, revealing how external partnerships convert the concept of innovation into product outcomes. Each of the three strategies for creating

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network ties has been empirically explored through research findings.

Firstly, respondents validated the leveraging existing ties mechanism as foundational and indispensable to achieving innovation. The interviewee sample described pre-existing relationships not merely as conveniences, but they referred to these as "fuel" and "strategic shortcuts", which streamline and speed up creative and operational efforts. Existing ties substantially shorten bureaucracy and allow collaborators to communicate directly and informally, as noted by Brand Manager 1's reference to removing the "interlocutory phase." Nevertheless, while established relationships provide demonstrated efficiencies and a common bond, the results also underline the risk of over-relying on closed networks. This tendency, especially from niche or smaller brands, leads to stagnation and the type of "provincialism", hence limiting exposure to new ideas and growth through an over-reliance on a narrow niche. Consequently, the study highlights that the basic factor that promotes vibrant and innovative collaboration is trust. The participants demonstrated how trust represents the authentic spark that helps collaborators tackle inherent ambiguity, venture into controlled risks, and provide continuity and depth for long-term creativity. This nuanced comprehension goes beyond structural benefits, highlighting the role of trust as an intersubjective construct that evolves from experience over time, thereby underscoring the critical role that it plays in the success of complex, high-risk projects.

Secondly, product exposure has been shown to hold significance that extends beyond elementary advertising initiatives. Empirical results show that these material experiences are vital relational scaffolds, providing indispensable points of contact for cultural relations and community building. These events yield unique opportunities for designers, creative experts, producers, and potential partners to come together, thus fostering the organic growth of meaningful external collaborations. This insight strongly supports the argument put forth by Butticè et al. (2023, p. 856) that events effectively enable the extension of networks and deepening of relationships. However, this study also detected the intrinsic structural constraints inherent in events that are mainly staged as a performative spectacle of visibility and not as a platform for quality interactions. When events are geared toward spectacle and status signaling instead of facilitating sincere engagement, they can be described as "a big waste of time", according to Brand Manager 2. This results in failing to develop meaningful relationships, an observation reiterated consistently across the interviews. This finding highlights a fundamental flaw in current industry practices and emphasizes that the true impact of product exposure in stimulating innovation is not just about visibility, but about intentional and relational design, and thus inspires innovation only if grounded in contextual applicability and strategic openness that enables sincere, goal-oriented interactions.

Lastly, entrepreneur exposure was identified as a particularly rich and multi-dimensional aspect, not

only confirming the original OI model, but enlarging it. Concerning designers themselves, exposure is a rich place for creative learning and professional development, and encourages and produces adaptive ways of working through dialogic exchange of diverse backgrounds and expertise. This aligns with the OI model about sourcing and integrating external knowledge to produce innovation. At the same time, and more strategically and managerially oriented, the designer's identity itself can also represent a key reputational and symbolic resource in terms of collaborative or co-branding alliances. The examples provided by the interviewees illustrated how a designer's distinct aesthetic, established status, and personal story can easily become a powerful tool to authenticate partnerships or collaborations. The examples of Kanye West for GAP and Virgil Abloh for Nike's Off-White show that designers' symbolic capital can, in some instances, supersede the product's formal aesthetic, augmenting perceived value and brand relevance. This expands the notion of entrepreneur exposure, reinforcing that a designer's symbolic capital is an indispensable facilitator for engaging and sustaining collaborations that can affect product innovation.

In summary, in addition to providing strong empirical validation of the Open Innovation framework, this thesis has contributed to the theoretical literature on Open Innovation. In this study, the nuanced exploration of innovation as retelling, narrative coherence, and creative contagion created a robust analysis of the interconnectedness of existing ties, product exposure, and entrepreneur exposure. As such, this thesis offers an improved and more nuanced understanding of how contemporary fashion firms effectively manage collaborations and connections from an open innovation perspective. This approach enables them to continually redefine and renew the symbolic, aesthetic, and functional value of their product, while maintaining their relevance and competitive edge in a fast-paced global environment.

5.2 Research Limitations

While the present research provides empirical findings, certain limitations must be acknowledged to contextualize the applicability of the research.

The most immediate limitation relates to the qualitative nature of the research, and thus, the findings are based on only seven experts. While purposive sampling promoted depth and relevance, due to the small participant sample, the findings are not generalizable. The findings presented reflect specific professional experiences and are therefore useful for conceptual refinement rather than empirical universality.

Further, the sample is geographically clustered in Europe. This focus was beneficial in eliminating contextual noise. However, it may also introduce regional bias. The institutional and cultural differences, as well as market differences in how innovation in fashion is approached in other parts

of the world, such as in Asia or Latin America, may differ and entirely reshape the approach to collaborative innovation.

Another limitation lies in the selected portion of the fashion industry: high-end and streetwear brands. While it was methodologically in line with the Open Innovation (OI) framework adapted for high-end fashion, the research does not account for the different processes that may exist in fast fashion or mass-market brands, where the conflicting priorities of efficiency, speed, and cost differ.

Additionally, the study reflects on three different perspectives: brand managers, marketing managers, and designers. However, this approach disregarded the consumers' perspective on how users understand, assess, and perceive co-branded innovation.

Lastly, the work centers exclusively on co-branding as the primary form of external partnerships. Although focusing on this specific type of partnership was helpful in giving specific context to the interview and tracking a clear line within this thesis, other forms of partnerships, such as alliances with tech firms or cultural organizations, have not been considered.

5.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could aim to address these limitations and provide a wider, more segmented analysis. The sample could be extended to include a more diverse range of markets and companies, which might provide a way of testing the strength of the findings and the generalizability of the OI framework. Similarly, taking a consumer perspective would facilitate a richer understanding of collaborative innovation. Qualitative methodologies, such as ethnography, in-depth interviews with consumers, or even a mixed-method study using both interviews and quantitative survey data, could provide a more nuanced understanding.

In addition, new studies could examine a variety of partnerships that are not limited to co-branding and may include partners from different industry sectors, for instance, tech companies. These initiatives may offer aspects of partnership that extend beyond purely commercial ideology and may provide more informative social and cultural insights about innovation. Using longitudinal designs would allow scholars to document collaborations over a period, and capture processes to observe how partnerships develop and shift, how trust is created or eroded, and whether learning occurs iteratively over multiple projects. This is especially pertinent to fashion given its ever-changing dynamic.

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APPENDIX A - Interview Guide

Designer Interview Guide

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself from a professional perspective?

2. How are you involved in product development/ creation?

3. Can you walk me through your creative process? How do you typically approach a new design or collection?

4. How would you personally define innovation in fashion? Can you share an example of what innovation looks like from your perspective?

5. How important are collaborations (like a co-branding strategy) in the context of product innovation?

6. When thinking about product innovation, what kind of collaborations tend to be the most inspiring or impactful for you?

7. In your view, what makes a co-branding strategy successful?

8. When collaborating on new products, do you usually reach out to people you've worked with before, or do you actively look for new collaborators? Why?

9. Can you tell me about a time when an existing relationship helped you develop something innovative?

10. Do you feel more creatively free when working with people you know well? Why or why not?

11. Do you ever share your ideas or designs with people outside your team? Like friends, family, other designers, etc..

12. Have you ever changed a design or creative direction based on external feedback? Can you tell me about that experience?

13. Do you consider events (like fashion weeks, showroom presentations, or pop-ups) important in your work?

14. Are they useful for showing your products, building relationships, or getting feedback? How do they influence your creative or strategic decisions?

15. When you work with external collaborators, how do they influence your work or creative

process?

16. Have you ever worked with someone who brought a completely different perspective or challenged the way you normally approach design? What impact did that have?

17. How do you manage the balance between staying true to your own creative identity and adapting to ideas introduced by collaborators?

18. What usually motivates you to engage in external collaborations? Is it about creative inspiration, gaining visibility, commercial value, or something else?

19. What do you find most valuable or rewarding when collaborating with external partners?

20. And what are some of the main challenges you face when collaborating externally? For example, have you ever experienced creative differences, mismatched expectations, or practical difficulties?

21. In your opinion, do you think collaborations with external creatives or partners will become more important in the future of fashion? Why or why not?

22. Looking ahead, is there a specific type of partner, brand, or creative field you would like to collaborate with?

Manager Interview Guide

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself from a professional perspective?

2. How are you involved in product development, brand strategy, or innovation in your current or past roles?

3. From your perspective, what does innovation mean when it comes to developing new fashion products or experiences?

4. Could you share an example of a recent project that you consider innovative?

5. How important are external collaborations, such as co-branding strategies, in your approach to product or brand innovation?

6. In your experience, what types of collaborations tend to be the most effective or meaningful for driving innovation?

7. What, in your view, makes a co-branding or external collaboration strategy successful?

8. How do you approach a co-branding project? What differs from a normal project?

9. When developing or managing new products or campaigns, do you usually rely on existing partners, or do you seek out new collaborators? Why?

10. Can you describe a case where a long-standing (it might be with a supplier, external designer, etc) relationship contributed to a successful innovation or campaign?

11. How do trusted, long-term relationships shape the way you co-create or manage collaboration projects?

12. Can you recall a moment where feedback from outside your immediate team (such as the market, press, or collaborators) influenced the direction of a project?

13. Do you see events (like brand launches, fashion weeks, trade fairs, or pop-ups) as useful opportunities for product exposure or feedback? If yes, how do these moments shape your strategic decisions?

14. When working with external creatives or partners, how do they influence your way of working?

15. Have you collaborated with someone who brought a new perspective or challenged your usual way of working? What was the result?

16. How do you manage the balance between maintaining a clear brand identity and integrating ideas from outside collaborators? (While, for example, you're working in a co-branding partnership)

17. Could the co-branding strategy you craft and manage lead to product innovation?

19. If you have experienced a successful co-branding strategy, can you tell me how this influenced the product innovation?

19. What usually motivates companies to engage in external collaborations? (creativity, growth, visibility, experimentation, or something else)

20. What do you find most valuable or exciting in working with external partners?

21. In your opinion, what are the challenges in the context of external partnerships? (creative alignment, communication between brands, etc.)

22. Do you think that external collabs and co-branding strategy will become more important to fashion innovation?

23. Are there any specific partners you would collaborate with in the future?

APPENDIX B – Code Book

Theme	Theme Description	Example Codes	Data Extracts
Concept of Innovation	How innovation in defined, perceived, narrated, and constructed.	/ Innovation as a crash / Innovation as reintroduction / Definition of innovation / Example of Innovation	*"In our field, innovation always starts from something that is not new itself."* – Designer 1 *"Innovation to me… the very first thing that comes to mind is: making something that makes your daily life richer."* – Designer 2
Leveraging Existing Ties	How firms utilize their network and pre-existing relationships to enable collaborations and how it is connected to product innovation.	/ Pros of existing ties / Cons of existing ties / Example of using existing ties / Role of trust	*"Relations are the fuel of everything."* - Brand Manager 2 *"If you want to build something long-term, then trust is essential."* – Designer 3
Product Exposure	The role of events, such as runways or pop-up stores, in initiating partnerships	/ When events are useful / When events are not useful / B2B VS B2C Events / Why events are important	*"So physical contact, like pop-ups, events, or any kind of activity that is not digital, right now, is a key"* – Brand Manager 1 *"Everything about fashion week, such as events, parties, and after parties, is almost useless except for advertising."* – Designer 2
Entrepreneur Exposure	The symbolic role of designer or artists in building relationships and how partnerships contribute to a designer's growth	/ What a designer learns from a partner / The symbolic role of a designer / Example of challenges / How a partner should	*"In this case, the designer figure, Virgil Abloh, overshadowed the brand. Virgil is an icon."* – Marketing Manager 2 *"Clint is the perfect Nike consumer. Clint is ideal. He even brought along*

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		be	*photos of himself wearing the shoes. [...] You're connecting two realities which are very much like one another."* – Marketing Manager 1

APPENDIX C – List of participants

Interviewee Code	Role	Professional Context
Brand Manager 1	Curator / Brand Manager	Edoardo – Background in marketing with experience in Nike, We Are Social, and On. He has extensive experience in managing branding partnerships and specialized in connecting storytelling and brand activation.
Brand Manager 2	Brand Manager	Works at a leading international outdoor brand known for its performance-driven products with a fashion-forward identity. Responsible for translating the brand's DNA into a more lifestyle-oriented project. Has several experiences in the context of co-branding partnerships.
Marketing Manager 1	Marketing and Sales	Works at a multinational sportswear company, focusing on sales and strategic partnerships. Previously managed product and special partnerships in a famous skateboarding lifestyle brand.
Marketing Manager 2	Marketing Manager	Works for a global fashion company; progressed internally from intern to senior role and now leads

		international campaign and branding efforts. Involved in different co-branding strategies.
Designer 1	Accessory Designer	Designs bags and sneakers for a big Italian fashion brand, focusing on research and creative development. Involved in different partnerships.
Designer 2	Menswear Designer	Works on product development for the men's main line of a globally recognized luxury brand known for its high-performance and fashion forward collection. Also runs an independent design project focused on personal collections.
Designer 3	Visual and Product Designer	Works for a well-known sportswear brand that is expanding into lifestyle fashion. Plays a key role in the early stages of product development. Has several experiences in co-branding works and partnerships.

APPENDIX D – AI Statement

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use included:

1. Generated content is limited strictly to content that is not assessed, such as the thesis title and chapter titles.

Prompt:

"Can you give me ten possible titles for the thesis/chapter?"

2. Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections. The thesis improved the quality of the text through AI, such as Grammarly, Gemini, and ChatGPT, in order to enhance better flow and academic phrasing.

Prompt:

"Can you check if there are any errors in this sentence?"

3. Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books. Particularly, SciSpace has been used to maximize the number of academic references.

Prompt:

"Can you help me find papers for this topic?"