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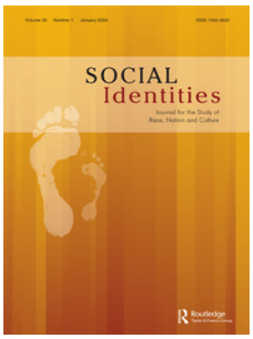

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Consuming and retailing fashion: South Asian diaspora negotiating clothing practices, identities and community making in Glasgow

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ABSTRACT
This article explores South Asian diasporic fashion retail spaces and sartorial practices in Glasgow. Drawing on ten months of ethnographic research, it investigates how fashion and clothing contribute to identity construction, community building, and cultural blending among British South Asians. Utilising patchwork ethnography and city walking, the article presents the lived experiences of shopkeepers and consumers, demonstrating the interplay of gender, migration, spaces, and religion in sartorial practices. The findings reveal that fashion and sartorial practices are not merely about personal expression but also about negotiating hybrid and multiple identities and fostering community solidarity amidst the challenges of migration and cultural preservation. The article also contributes to the broader discourse on transnational fashion, advocating for a decolonial perspective that addresses ethical, moral, and environmental sustainability within diverse fashion systems.

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Identity; community; South Asian diaspora; fashion; consumption; gender

Introduction

Fashion has evolved into a prominent aspect of identity creation and maintenance. Numerous studies reveal that fashion and dress play vital roles in shaping individual and collective identities, acting as embodied practices that contribute significantly to the presentation of self and group affiliations (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 285; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Thus, sartorial practices encode desires, aspirations, and differences.

This article draws from our ten-month ethnographic research conducted in Glasgow's Southside, particularly Cathcart Road, a hub for South Asian stores frequented by the British South Asian diaspora. It explores the South Asian fashion retail sphere, encompassing stores, clothing, accessories, shopkeepers, and consumers. The study investigates the exchange and blending of cultural materials, examining the construction and presentation of hybrid and/or multiple identities. The article illustrates the utilisation of

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different forms of dress and fashion in creating and displaying public identities, highlighting the bodily articulation of gender, migration, religion, and community-making within the South Asian diaspora's lived practices of fashion and clothing in Glasgow.

Sartorial practices are fundamental in signifying systems and conveying belonging and non-belonging. With multiple layers of meaning, they reflect religious practices, racial and ethnic identities, as well as markers of caste and class, especially within the South Asian diaspora context (see Dasgupta & Mahn, 2023; Hopkins, 2004; Qureshi & Moores, 1999; Raghuram et al., 2003). Whilst fashion has historically been conceptualised as specific to certain 'cultural and geographical coteries', Western Europe and America; there is a growing body of scholarship exploring the historical and contemporary fashion systems of the Global South (Belfanti, 2008; Riello, 2019; Sandhu, 2022). This article contributes to the scholarship on transnational South Asian fashion practices within the South Asian diaspora, expanding the discourse on non-Western fashion cultures (e.g. Craik, 2020; Pereira-Ares, 2018; Ranavaade, 2024; Sandhu, 2020).

Similar to other contexts, clothing functions as a visual indicator of social status and cultural capital, intricately linked with forms of social belonging and exclusion (Bourdieu, 2010). Studies on the South Asian diaspora in various settings highlight the role of clothing in articulating social belonging and displaying specific taste regimes (Dwyer, 1999; Reddy, 2018; Shankar, 2008). The multiplicity of fashion choices, encompassing both mainstream or 'western' and South Asian styles, coupled with the increasing availability of South Asian fashion products abroad, has led to evolving perceptions of wearing 'South Asian' attire. This dynamic contributes to individuals' choices in adopting a complete 'western' or South Asian look or creating a 'hybrid' appearance by blending items from different fashion systems (also see Volpe et al., 2023).

The discussions in this article stem from our research on fashion consumption and clothing practices within the South Asian Muslim communities of Glasgow, UK. It is important to note that while our discussion does not exclusively centre on religion, it is acknowledged that religion plays a significant role, given its importance for many research participants. Our focus is not on investigating religious expressions through the embodied practice of fashion and dress, but rather recognising the impact of religion on everyday lives. We consider religion in the examination of embodied practices and materials of fashion and dress, aligning with McGuire's perspective (2008). Our attention is directed towards the lived experiences of British South Asians, acknowledging their divisions by nationality, religion, and language but also recognising their unity through shared popular culture, cuisine, music, and customs (Werbner, 2004, p. 897).

The article begins with a detailed discussion of our methodological approach, focusing on the use of patchwork ethnography and city walking to gather rich and diverse data. Following this, we provide an overview of Glasgow, our primary field site, highlighting its historical and contemporary significance to the South Asian diaspora. We then move into an in-depth analysis of the South Asian fashion retail sphere in Glasgow's Southside, particularly Cathcart Road, and critically evaluate sustainability within the South Asian fashion system. Following this, we examine the blending and exchange of cultural materials and the construction of multiple identities. This is covered in two sections, including the narratives featuring key informants, Zeenat and Miriam, which illustrate the role of fashion in community building and sustainability practices. Our research demonstrates that the sartorial practices within Glasgow's South Asian diaspora are not

only a means of identity creation and expression but also play a critical role in fostering community making as well as unmaking. This exploration sheds light on how these practices negotiate the complexities of migration, gender, religion, and belonging, ultimately contributing to the broader discourse on transnational fashion systems. and addressing sustainability within the fashion industry.

Methodology: patchworks and city walking

This research employed three primary methods: (i) individual interviews, (ii) participant observations, and (iii) visual ethnography (involving the gathering and analysis of imagery, such as photographs, videos, and fashion catalogues). The fieldwork spanned over ten months, from March to December 2022, commencing with the observation of South Asian clothing styles in Glasgow's city centre – exploring streets, cafés, restaurants, and shopping malls. The focus then shifted to Glasgow's Southside neighbourhood, predominantly inhabited by the South Asian diaspora since the 1960s and, more recently, impacted by gentrification and an influx of migrants from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Peach, 2006; Remali et al., 2019).

Cathcart Road in the Southside emerged as a central location for South Asian fashion, hosting numerous stores. The research involved visits to these stores, browsing style catalogues, observing individuals trying on clothes, engaging in conversations with shoppers, shop owners, and salespeople, as well as personal experiences of trying on and purchasing clothes (see Figure 1). Photographs were taken of clothing and accessories in stores and shop windows. South Asian fashion brands' catalogues,

Figure 1. Stores selling South Asian clothes and fabrics on Glasgow's Cathcart Road. Photo by the authors, 11 September 2022.

Figure 2. Product catalogues in a South Asian store on Glasgow's Cathcart Road. Photo by the authors, 11 September 2022.

a common presence in most stores on Cathcart Road, were also browsed and photographed (see Figure 2). Additionally, the research included a visit to Glasgow Mela on Sunday, 26 June 2022.

The article draws insights from this extensive data, including interviews with two shop owners, Zeenat and Miriam, introduced in two separate sections further below. The interviews took place in the informants' workplaces – fashion retail stores on Cathcart Road – after obtaining their informed consent. Conducted in English, the interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using narrative analysis, which offers insights into people's accounts and personal stories (Earthy & Cronin, 2008).

Günel et al. (2020) highlight the evolving landscape of fieldwork due to the pandemic and neoliberal working conditions, necessitating a reevaluation of traditional methods to

maintain work-life balance. They propose patchwork ethnography as a response to these challenges, emphasising short-term fieldwork and the fragmentary nature of data collection. Building on this, Dasgupta advocates for queer patchworks, not only addressing the demands of fieldwork realities but also responding to the disruptions and the need for creative interpretation in ethnographic writing (Dasgupta, 2022). Taking inspiration from these perspectives and aligning with assemblage thinking, this article employs patchwork ethnography as a critical lens to observe how connections and relations are established, interrupted, and modified within the new realities of the present (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987). Embracing assemblage thinking and its mode of inquiry, this article centralises the non-uniform and contested lived experiences of our participants.

In the execution of this research, we spent intermittent periods on Cathcart Road for a few hours almost every day over a week, repeating this process after a few months. During these visits, we established meaningful connections with several retailers, maintaining contact with them through Instagram and WhatsApp until in-depth interviews were conducted. Our affective encounters with them allowed us to reflect on shared heritage and the precarities faced as migrants, considering factors such as class, gender, ethnic, and religious identities. These shared realities formed a foundation from which we could address and understand the concerns shared with us.

Additionally, we employed walking as a creative methodology, inspired by O'Neill and Roberts' (2020) work. This approach involves reflecting on the act of walking through various South Asian cultural spaces, actively moving, interacting, and experiencing the spaces we traverse. It allowed us to engage with the environment and the people we encountered during these walks, contributing to a richer understanding of the cultural context. Writing about walking as 'knowing', they note, 'it has sensate, kinaesthetic and performative attributes which make it particularly insightful for means of biographical, ethnographic, phenomenological and psycho-social research' (O'Neill & Roberts, 2020, p. 4).

Many of the individuals we connected with for this project worked within the time constraints of the retail sector. Given their hectic schedules, instead of agreeing to in-depth interviews, they allowed us to walk with them or engage in short conversations. This unconventional approach proved beneficial in enriching our project. Understandably, South Asian migrants often approached interactions with researchers cautiously due to concerns about potential exploitation. To address this, we were sensitive to how we were perceived. By frequently meeting in informal settings within the neighbourhoods where our participants shopped, ate, and worked, we were able to build relationships. These brief conversations conducted outside, sometimes influenced by COVID-19 protocols, provided valuable insights.

We are also aware of our own identities and power differentials in this research. The second author is a non-practicing Muslim of Turkish origin whilst the first author is a non-Muslim of South Asian origin. We are not naturally the type of consumers visiting the spaces we set out to investigate. We are aware of these limitations. Whilst the second author was able to enter several spaces due to being a woman coming from a Muslim majority country, the first author was able to have conversation in Hindi and Urdu with several respondents who took part in this study. We mention our religion, gender and ethnicity here not to foreground any of these but rather to explain how our 'shared identity' gave us access to our participants in different

ways. What you will read in the following sections is the collaborative work of us and our informants.

Glasgow: immigration and sartorial identities

Glasgow, once hailed as the 'second city of the Empire' (MacKenzie, 1999), shares a significant historical connection with imperial commerce, much like London. As a crucial hub linked intimately with British colonial expansion, Glasgow earned the moniker 'workshop of the empire' due to its substantial contributions to materials for Britain's imperial endeavours. The city's abundance of raw materials, including iron and coal, played a pivotal role in its prominence within the shipbuilding trade, firmly establishing itself in the broader context of imperial commerce. However, the close association with imperial trade, while prosperous in the nineteenth century, ultimately contributed to the collapse of Glasgow's trade and manufacturing base with the decline of the British Empire. Notably, there has been a strategic silence surrounding Glasgow's history, particularly concerning slavery and its economic gains through the exploitation of people, which has only recently come under scrutiny.

The selection of Glasgow for this study was strategic. The city is home to one of the largest ethnically minoritized South Asian migrant communities, exhibiting diverse levels of affluence and social class. Similar to other parts of the United Kingdom, this community faces challenges of disproportionality and segregation. Scotland's distinct policy positions on immigration and social integration, often diverging sharply from Westminster, make it a valuable location to explore the South Asian experience.[1] Additionally, Glasgow boasts a rich history in textile, weaving, and dressmaking, with numerous Scottish designers, apparel manufacturers, and retailers based in the city.

On a typical summer afternoon in Glasgow, the weather transitioned from sunny to a light drizzle as we headed to *Glasgow Mela*, an annual celebration of South Asian heritage held in Kelvingrove Park. After a hiatus of nearly three years due to the global pandemic, the mela had returned, funded by Glasgow Life, a registered charity organising cultural events for the city council. Despite the rain intensifying throughout the day, the festival area teemed with activity as people gathered around the two event stages and numerous clothing and food vendors.

Upon entering the Glasgow Mela festival, a friend – a long-time Glasweg-Asian – offered a brief introduction to the festival's context and left us to explore. Shee humorously mentioned, 'I am not coming in. All the aunties are there, and I don't want to be interrogated by them'. Our encounter with South Asian aunty hospitality at the festival area was swift. Making our way to the Hamara Stage to listen to Sufi songs, a few aunties kindly ushered us forward for a better hearing experience. One of them complimented us on the clothes we were wearing. As Khubchandani (2023) points out, South Asian aunty figures can embody systems of kinship and care with their rich knowledge base, but they can also function as gatekeepers, participating in surveillance and discipline, reinforcing a heteropatriarchal order.

As we approached the stage, a group of young South Asians, many of Muslim origin, were swaying to the rhythm of the Sufi song 'Mast Qalandar' (Breathing in Ecstasy of Qalandari). The diverse audience encompassed various generations of South Asian men and women, as well as non-South Asians. The front lines of the stage were animated

Figure 3. Young Muslim women singing along with the Qawwali musicians at the Glasgow Mela 2022. Photo by the authors, 26 June 2022.

by young Scottish individuals of South Asian origin, passionately singing, clapping, and dancing along with the Qawwali singers (see Figure 3), showcasing the hybridity of cultural materials and the continuity of traditions across generations.

Navigating through the bustling crowds towards the main stage, we encountered around two dozen vendors selling vibrant South Asian clothing and jewellery. Stopping by a few stalls, we engaged in conversations with the owners, who eagerly showcased the 'latest fashion' and enticed us to explore their colourful clothing offerings (see Figure 4). Overhearing families discussing what clothes to buy and for what occasions added an intriguing intergenerational dimension. It provided a captivating snapshot of fashion consumption choices being made, with a diversity of blended and hybrid fashion styles welcoming us at every turn.

The festival patrons displayed a mix of heritages, with the majority having South Asian roots. While some religious markers like sindoor worn by Hindu women and the hijab worn by Muslim women were distinguishable, what struck us was the striking diversity in everyone's attire, often featuring hybrid styles. It was not uncommon to see men

Figure 4. The Glasgow Mela 2022. Photo by the authors, 26 June 2022.

combining a Nehru jacket with jeans and a shawl. Festival-goers spanned different generations, many attending with their families. Engaging in conversations with visitors, we noticed that despite the torrential rain, a significant number adorned ethnic wear beneath thick jackets and waterproof coats, with several sporting national colours, proudly displaying the Indian tricolour and the Pakistani green from their respective national flags. This sartorial exploration revealed that while some dress choices aimed to assert a national and ethnic identity at a South Asian festival, there was also a political desire to present South Asian clothing as a symbol of liberalisation, challenging traditional binaries of tradition and modernity, especially within a sometimes-hostile migrant context. As one older individual, swaying to the qawwali music, poignantly remarked, 'Who would have thought we would one day be able to have such large festivals celebrating our culture and heritage in a city that has often been so hostile to people of colour'. Her comment underscores the complex interplay between identities, cultures, and belonging that permeates the festival atmosphere. It highlights the celebration of South Asian heritage at such a large scale in Glasgow as a significant shift in the public visibility of cultural diversities. In this respect, sartorial choices of festivalgoers served not only as expressions of personal, ethnic, and national identities but also as acts of resilience and resistance against historical and contemporary forms of exclusion. This observation takes us to explore the South Asian fashion retail scene of Glasgow, where similar themes of identity, resilience and resistance are evident.

Transnational fashion retailing in Glasgow and sustainability in the South Asian fashion sphere

Clothes and accessories showcased and sold along Glasgow's Cathcart Road predominantly feature designs and craftsmanship from South Asia. These items, such as salwar kameezes, saris, kurtas, and lehengas, are mainly produced by Pakistani brands and designers but also include a range of home-designed items manufactured by migrant women managing retail outlets. The majority of outfits are ready-made or semi-stitched, although some are sold as unsewn pieces. Prices can range from £20 to £80 on average, with wedding wear sometimes reaching or exceeding £1000.

Whilst regional and ethno-religious distinctions in clothing may persist in South Asia, diasporic practices exhibit much more fluidity and boundary-blurring (see, e.g. Ameeriar, 2017; Reddy, 2018; Wilton, 2012). A prime example of this is the salwar kameez, often referred to as the Punjabi suit. Comprising a dress (kameez) and trousers (salwar), the style, length, and width can vary according to contemporary fashions. It can be worn with a dupatta (shawl) depending on the occasion and the wearer's preference (Bhachu, 2005, p. 133). Traditionally worn by women in North India and Pakistan and labelled as Muslim women's attire, the salwar kameez gained popularity for its modesty and functionality, replacing saris for many Indian women in the workforce and adopted by non-Muslim college girls and unmarried educated women in 1980s Indian public spheres (Bhachu, 2005; Tarlo, 1996).

In the British context, Bhachu (2004a) notes that the salwar kameez, once stereotypically associated with 'low-status immigrant women', underwent a transformation in the late 1990s. It became associated with celebrities and fashionable women, including figures like Lady Diana and Emma Thompson, and appeared on British Fashion Week catwalks (Bhachu, 2004a, p. 44). As a result, the salwar kameez, a versatile and fashionable garment, is worn by women of diverse backgrounds, spanning religion, age, employment status, both in the subcontinent and diaspora. Its adaptability allows wearers to pair it with different clothing items, such as wearing a kameez with leggings and jeans, suitable for various occasions from casual to formal (Bonfanti, 2021). According to narratives from our research informants, the dress's versatility and functionality make it a significant wardrobe staple among South Asian migrant women in Glasgow.

Despite the majority of stores and owners being of Pakistani Muslim origin, none exclusively sell items from 'modest' fashion brands or manufacturers. Instead, these stores cater to British South Asians of diverse national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Casual conversations with shopkeepers along Glasgow's Cathcart Road revealed interesting nuances. In our discussions with shopkeepers, a notable observation emerged regarding the colour preferences of women based on their ethno-religious backgrounds. Several shop owners and salespeople, including Zeenat, who will be introduced in the next section, stated Hindus tend to favour bright and bold colours such as pink, red, and yellow, while Muslims often opt for lighter and pastel tones like salmon, light steel blue, and rosy brown. The preference for lighter tones among Muslim women may stem from Islamic principles of modesty, emphasising that a woman's attire should not draw undue attention, particularly from men (see Alimen, 2018; Siraj, 2011).

However, it is essential to acknowledge that clothing choices, including forms, colours, and styles, are influenced by a complex interplay of factors beyond religious

considerations. Occasions for wearing the attire, adherence to cultural norms and gendered expectations, as well as life cycle changes like childbirth, employment, and ageing, all play significant roles.

Moreover, mainstream and South Asian fashion trends emerge as significant factors influencing women's choices in colour, forms, and embroideries. For instance, a retail worker's acknowledgment that her casual salwar kameez – comprising a plain white top with vibrant flower embroideries around the neckline and plain white trousers – was from the previous season and completely sold out highlights the impact of these trends on women's preferences.

During our extensive fieldwork, a prominent trend we observed was the prevalence of clothing items made from synthetic or synthetic-mix fabrics and materials, including embroidery threads (see Figures 5 and 6). Most individuals, whether retailers or shoppers, we encountered did not perceive this as problematic, often considering them as authentic and genuinely crafted with materials suitable for high-temperature climates in South Asia. Synthetic sarees and salwar kameezes gained popularity in 1980s India due to their affordability and ease of care, becoming a symbol of social differentiation. Wearing such garments allowed individuals to distance themselves from the perceived backward associations of local dress, aligning with a more 'progressive' image (Tarlo, 1996, p. 324). However, since then, there has been significant scholarly and public criticism of the fashion industry's use of harmful materials, citing concerns related to environmental sustainability and health impacts (Balasaraswathi & Rathinamoorty, 2022). Although clothing items made from natural fabrics, especially cotton, were available, they were limited in numbers and styles. Additionally, features like stitches and embroideries on natural fabrics often signalled lower quality and disposability. For instance, a salwar kameez purchased for £45 from one of the Cathcart Road stores during our fieldwork was made of pure cotton (see Figure 5). After just two washes, the stitches and lace unravelled, leading to its disintegration despite careful adherence to provided care instructions (see Figure 7). Another item, a lehenga purchased at an affordable price of £40, also experienced issues, with sequins and print dyes coming off from the first wear, indicating a lack of durability and quality (see Figures 6 and 8).

Our observations and experiences with South Asian fashion items sold on Cathcart Road suggest the prevalence of a disposable fashion business model. This model, akin to the criticised global fast fashion industry dominated by 'western' players, offers fashionable yet low-durability clothes made from relatively cheaper materials and sold at affordable prices. These clothes, designed for short-term use, contribute to environmental concerns, potentially ending up in landfills, with studies and media highlighting the likelihood of such disposal in locations outside the 'developed' world (Wohlgemuth, 2022).

The majority of consumers of South Asian fashion products on Glasgow's Cathcart Road are of South Asian origin. Essentially, these transnational fashions are predominantly retailed and consumed by 'transmigrant' British individuals who move 'back and forth between the West and the Rest' (Werbner, 2004, p. 896). This raises questions about spatial and sociocultural distance arguments, as well as global/local consumer identities in this particular case. Spatial and social distance, with the former related to physical distance and the latter to who is affected and the perceived proximity to those experiencing an event, influence consumers' ethical and moral concerns regarding global supply chain

Figure 5. Salwar kameezes made of 100% cotton fabric with synthetic laces and ribbons. Note the style name, 'Byzantine'. Photo by the authors, 11 June 2022.

and manufacturing practices (Stringer et al., 2022, p. 721). Therefore, a fashion consumer may be indifferent to or unable to connect with sweatshop conditions and environmentally harmful practices in a geographically distant place due to spatial and social distance.

Some scholars distinguish between two consumer identities – local and global. Consumers with global identities are seen as more connected to global issues, while those with local identities relate more to their immediate environment, circumstances, and traditions. The notion is that consumers with a global identity would be more inclined towards environmental sustainability initiatives (Arnett, 2002; Salnikova et al., 2022).

Figure 6. One of the author's trying on a lehenga. Note the beauty parlour at the back, which is a common feature of many South Asian fashion stores on Glasgow's Cathcart Road. Photo by the authors, 25 June 2022.

Despite most consumers of South Asian fashions in Glasgow aligning with 'global identities', their lack of interest in and awareness of the social, environmental, and ethical impacts of these fashion items highlight the need for raising consumer awareness and knowledge, particularly in a context where sustainability has become a frequent topic in public discourse.

The investigation of the South Asian fashion retail sphere in Glasgow reveals a complex interplay of cultural, economic, and environmental factors. The blending of traditional and contemporary styles, the challenges of maintaining quality and sustainability, and the

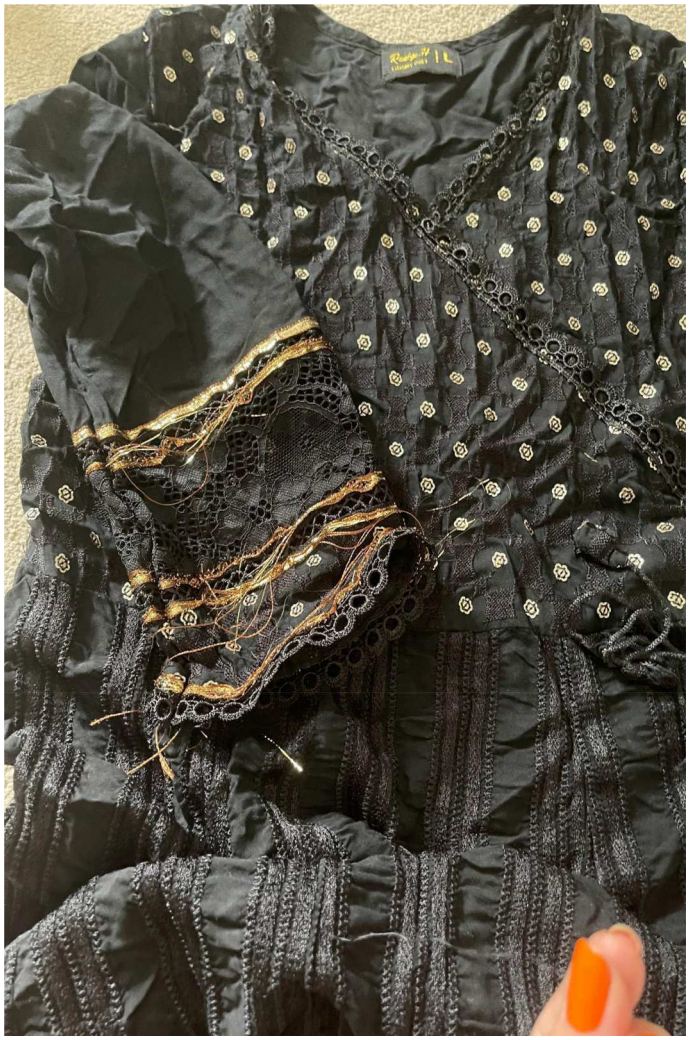

Figure 7. The salwar kameez after two washes. Photo by the authors, 17 October 2022.

nuanced consumer identities all contribute to a rich tapestry of diasporic fashion practices. To further illustrate these dynamics, we now turn to the personal stories of our informants, Zeenat and Miriam. Their lived experiences provide a deeper insight into how these macro trends manifest in individual lives and practices, thus highlighting the personal and communal dimensions of fashion within the South Asian diaspora.

Zeenat: sartorial and spatial belonging

Zeenat, in her late twenties, recently obtained a master's degree in pharmacy and concurrently works at her mother's South Asian clothing store in Glasgow's Southside. She shared with us that South Asian dressing holds a personal and intimate significance for her. Zeenat reserves dressing up for family gatherings, functions, and religious events. She said, 'I don't consciously not wear ethnic clothing. They are modest but just that I

Figure 8. The sequins and print dye of the lehenga started coming off from the first wear. Photo by the authors, 13 September 2022.

think of them as special and not necessarily for mixed public wearing'. Zeenat explained that she wears South Asian clothing while with fellow South Asians or in South Asian spaces, such as the Cathcart neighbourhood in Glasgow. She noted that a few weeks before the interview, she had to stop by her mother's South Asian clothing store to collect some items on her way back home. However, since she was returning from a meeting with her university friends, she was dressed in 'western' outfits – a sweatshirt and jeans. Zeenat mentioned that this made her feel awkward, especially being in a South Asian neighbourhood and surrounded by South Asian people in a store selling South Asian fashion products. She expressed her belief that she wasn't dressed appropriately for the particular setting. Additionally, she shared an incident from a few days before the interview when her brother hosted a wedding party. On this occasion, she extended an invitation to her non-South-Asian friends from the university. It was the first time they had seen her in South Asian clothing, and she described feeling a sense of 'strangeness'. It wasn't due to receiving negative verbal comments or non-verbal cues from her friends, but rather because she wasn't accustomed to being in South Asian dress around individuals who weren't of South Asian descent.

Dress in South Asia, as anywhere else, plays an important role; it instigates change, questions national identities, and asserts power (Tarlo, 1996).[2] Contemporary studies on fashion and clothing practices in South Asia and of South Asian diaspora point out that western clothing is often associated with the contaminating forces of a heterogeneous, hyper-sexualised colonial (western) modernity whilst South Asian clothes are often linked to chastity, purity, and tradition (Begum et al., 2018; Begum & Dasgupta, 2015). However, Zeenat's evaluation and adoption of western or South Asian dress do not emanate from this traditional dichotomy but her code-switching practice for different social contexts.

For women, everyday clothing practices are shaped by a multiplicity of moral codes of dress, closely linked to (heteronormative) religious, familial, and community expectations (Liechty, 1995). Social expectations of how one should dress and behave are frequently framed by the recurring themes of social class and gender. Many of our interlocutors, like Zeenat, discussed 'code-switching' and appearance management techniques to dress differently for familial domains or social scenes, switching between traditional clothes for familial events and festivals and western clothing for school or the workplace due to ease of wear (Bhachu, 2005).

Spatial practices are significantly influenced by religious rules, and spaces, as well as spatialities, play a crucial role in shaping bodily practices. Consequently, they contribute to the formation of religious subjectivities (Alimen, 2018; Gökarıksel, 2009; Secor, 2002). However, the spatial practices of South Asian Muslims in Glasgow are not solely aligned with Islamic rules; they are also shaped by South Asian cultural traditions and community building. Zeenat's habitual practice of wearing South Asian outfits in the neighbourhood and the store has allowed her to develop a strong sense of belonging to her ancestral background, fostering a feeling of fitting in and being part of the community. On the other hand, wearing Western-style dress constructs a different facet of her identity. Thus, her clothing choices are constantly influenced by spaces and spatialities, involving audience segregation and specific performances for distinct audiences (see also Alimen, 2018; Endelstein & Ryan, 2013; Jenkinson, 2020).

Among other insights, Zeenat shared interesting observations about the South Asian fashion scene in Glasgow. She expressed a lack of concern regarding whether South Asian fashion achieved mainstream success. When questioned about mainstream success, she was critical, emphasising the rich local economy in Southside, where a significant South Asian population, especially those of Pakistani origin, resides and forms the primary clientele. Zeenat argued that attempting to shift to the city centre and adapting their style for a Western or mainstream consumer base wouldn't necessarily guarantee success. To support her point, she cited examples of stores like Khaadi that opened in the city centre but eventually closed due to poor business. Zeenat's perspective highlights the importance of the local economy, suggesting that success does not necessarily hinge on mainstream inclusion. In many ways, she rejects the idea of being part of a diversity initiative as a measure of success. Instead, her narrative highlights the significance of community and cultural preservation, as demonstrated by Basu and Werbner (2009) in their discussion of how British South Asian women create and sustain ethnic enclave economies. Thus, building communities of resistance and resilience over rhetorical inclusion is an important feature of decoloniality. As Sara Ahmed (2012) reminds us: 'diversity is often used as shorthand for inclusion, as the [happy point] of intersectionality, a point where lines meet. When intersectionality becomes a [happy point,] the feminist of colour critique is obscured' (p. 14).

On the flip side, numerous mainstream or 'western' fashion brands adopt or adapt cultural products, including materials and forms, often without regard for the local or traditional meanings and uses of these products. This practice has garnered significant public and scholarly criticism, sparking ongoing discussions on cultural appropriation/appreciation (see, e.g. Pham, 2022). Zeenat cited examples of mainstream brands like ASOS and Zara, which have ventured into South Asian fashion, terming it as 'cringe'. According to her, these brands' offerings of South Asian attire or designs are not authentic

and lack an understanding of the cultural specificities related to religion and gender in clothing design. To illustrate her point, she shared a catalogue commonly used by her clients for made-to-order clothes, featuring items like sleeveless tops (Figure 9). She said:

> Many of our women want to wear Asian clothes in a modest setting. Not necessarily wearing a hijab but wanting to cover their arms. This might be because of the presence of elders or men. When customers come to my shop, they would pick these styles available and then ask us to add some sleeves on them.

Zeenat's criticism of mainstream fast fashion brands like Zara highlights a key parallel with the broader discussions on fast fashion. Just as the global fast fashion industry is critiqued

Figure 9. Samples of dresses for celebratory occasions, presented in the store where Zeenat works. Photo by the authors, 27 June 2022.

for its low-durability, mass-produced items that often disregard the cultural and ethical implications of their designs, Zeenat's comment demonstrates that these brands also fail to capture the cultural nuances and functional needs of South Asian fashion consumers. This lack of cultural competence in design reflects a broader pattern of how (fast) fashion prioritises market expansion over genuine cultural understanding and consumer needs and demands. According to Zeenat, mainstream brands must comprehend the cultural contexts of their target consumers, understanding the meanings and practices associated with South Asian fashion items. This underscores the importance of awareness and knowledge of diverse cultural contexts, emphasising the need for inclusivity and diversity in fashion education and among the design teams of fashion brands.

It would also be useful to draw on Vanita Reddy's (2016) work here. Reddy argues that fashion in the diaspora can become a part of neoliberal selfhood, meaning that a specific articulation starts to happen in how South Asian women use their sartorial practices in discursive ways to signal mobility, pleasure, desire, consumption, labour, and commodification as practices of belonging in the diaspora.[3] Zeenat demonstrates how a sense of belonging is created through retail and consumption practices of her customers. Clothing in this instance is used to create forms of hybrid and race-ed identities. Customers we spoke to at Zeenat's shop agreed with such a viewpoint noting that wearing certain kinds of clothes not only helped construct a sense of self but also helped distinguish their national and class identity within the diverse neighbourhoods of Glasgow Southside. One customer, Salma, tells us that by adding sleeves to a popular designer sample meant they could wear something 'celebrities were … but remain respectable', indicating a desire to be part of a global fashion consumption imaginary but also foregrounding it within national/religious specificities of the space they are inhabiting.

Miriam: fashion as gendered community making

Miriam, in her late twenties, recently immigrated to Scotland from Pakistan three years ago after marrying a Scottish man of Pakistani origin, who was working as a food delivery person at the time of the interview. After working in a beauty salon for two years, Miriam opened her South Asian clothing store on Cathcart Road in April 2021. She explained that the shop served as a means to connect with her roots and engage with people from her community.

Miriam predominantly sourced merchandise from her home country, Pakistan, focusing on women's traditional South Asian styles, with a limited selection of tops and dresses in mainstream styles. Unlike many other South Asian clothing stores in the area, she opted not to use the 'catalogue' system. In this system, a store typically provides a pile of catalogues showcasing the latest styles from Pakistani clothing brands/wholesalers, allowing customers to choose items that can be sewn to their measure, usually by an in-house tailor.

Upon opening her store, Miriam began designing some of her creations, offering them at cost price to establish her brand (Figure 10). She received encouragement from customers and fellow entrepreneurs who were pursuing similar paths. This underscores what Lizzie Harrison recognised in the 'Transition Town movement': 'fashion practices within the community contribute to resilience through the skilled actions of making and using clothing and the creation of identity, and they further contribute to a shared language

to engage people in social activities … ' (Harrison, 2014, p. 245). Regardless of the extent of sustainability in her own designs, Miriam's fashion retail space, creative skills, and connections in her home country, Pakistan, enable her, as a newcomer to Glasgow's South Asian community, to develop a creative entrepreneur identity, gain visibility, and establish a presence in this diasporic sociocultural sphere. As demonstrated in previous studies focusing on women fashion entrepreneurs in social contexts shaped by gendered social norms and expectations derived from traditions and religious interpretations (e.g. Alimen, 2018; Bhachu, 2004b), the fashion arena provides Miriam with an opportunity not only to make financial gains but also to shape her identity and exercise agency.

Miriam's store, competing with over two dozen others selling South Asian clothes and fabrics, was relatively small. Similar to most other shops in the area, the backroom doubled as a beauty parlour where South Asian women presumably sought beauty treatments, from facials to eyebrow threading to simple haircuts. Miriam's clientele was almost exclusively women, and during our visits, we observed that most women would enter the store accompanied by a female companion, usually their mothers, sisters, or friends. Male presence was almost non-existent – we only saw Miriam's husband once, addressing some electrical issues one early evening.

Similar to Zeenat, Miriam refrains from wearing South Asian clothing in 'mixed' spaces, such as when shopping in high-street stores or dining in restaurants. However, she proudly and happily dresses in South Asian styles when in the 'South Asian' social sphere. Miriam emphasised that, especially as a shop owner, she is expected by the

Figure 10. Miriam's own designs. Photo by the authors, 30 June 2022.

clientele to be adorned in South Asian styles. In doing so, she not only communicates her cultural 'roots' but also demonstrates her knowledge of South Asian fashions. This knowledge, according to Miriam, is particularly crucial when serving non-South-Asian customers, often those engaged or married to British South Asian men. Since these women may have limited knowledge of South Asian fashions, described as 'South Asian fashion and clothing habitus' in a Bourdieusian sense (Bourdieu, 2010) – encompassing what is currently in vogue and how to wear it – Miriam's expertise becomes indispensable. She expressed satisfaction that her assistance was highly welcomed, with her suggestions often taken on board. During our visits to her store, Miriam adeptly engaged with customers negotiating prices. Friendly, but firm, she swiftly tried to push back – *Nahin Nahin nuksan ho jaega* (No, no, I shall make a loss) she said in Urdu to one customer and swiftly turned to the next customer, a new bride, commending her on her salwar kameez choice – *bahut achha lag raha hain* (This is looking very nice on you).

Miriam fostered a community of South Asian women, creating bonds of sisterhood within a temporal setting. During one of our visits, while one author tried on some clothes, the other engaged in conversation with the customers. Within minutes, a camaraderie had formed. Everyone in the store offered comments on the clothes being tried, discussing suitable colours and styles. The author engaging with customers, although an uncommon male presence, wasn't questioned, and the customers comfortably shifted to Hindi upon discovering his language proficiency. One older woman, Rahmat aunty, enthusiastically shared her purpose for being there, expressing how she was assisting her daughter-in-law in transitioning from western wear to more ethnic clothing. When asked about the type of ethnic wear they were seeking, Saima, the daughter-in-law, explained her preference for flowery dresses suitable for the weather. They even discussed patterns with us, and Saima mentioned her plan to return with her future sister-in-law to explore clothing options suitable for both. According to Saima, while there was a significant intergenerational knowledge exchange regarding wearing the 'right' ethnic clothes, she also trusted her peers more. Rahmat, moving around the store with an air of knowledge, provided feedback to other customers and expressed her willingness to introduce the author to other 'sisters'. These stores, we realised, weren't just places to shop; they evolved into spaces of solidarity, fostering socialisation and the exchange of information and opinions.

Miriam mentioned that most stores selling South Asian fashions on and around Cathcart Road had been open for decades, passed down from one generation to another. Consequently, she found it challenging to build a clientele base and sustain her business, stating, 'People just walk by my store and go to the one where their grandmothers and mothers have shopped'. Despite creating a sense of belonging and community within the South Asian diaspora, Miriam decided to close her store, selling all merchandise at a 70% discount. This decision underlines the economic realities and competitive pressures that small business owners experience in ethnically concentrated retail environments. Miriam's story not only reflects the challenges of entrepreneurship within this niche market but also points to the resilience and adaptability required to navigate such spaces. This shift from personal entrepreneurial struggle to broader community dynamics will form the base for our concluding discussion on the intersection of fashion, identity, and sustainability in the South Asian diaspora.

Conclusion

This article draws from our ten-month patchwork ethnography in Glasgow, investigating the South Asian fashion retail scene and sartorial practices. Our exploration ranged from chance encounters in shops with business owners, salespeople, and customers to conducting lengthy interviews with participants, strolling through South Asian neighbourhoods, and attending community events. By examining the South Asian fashion retail scene and diasporic fashion practices, we demonstrate the significant role of dress and diverse fashion systems in expressing and negotiating multiple identities. Our fieldwork illustrates how fashion functions, for retailers and consumers, as a medium for both personal expression and community resilience in the South Asian diasporic context of Glasgow.

Our study contributes to existing research on transnational fashions and the South Asian diaspora, aligning with Werbner's (2004) argument that within the British Pakistani community, participants actively engage in two diasporic public spheres – the religious and the ethnic, constructed, among other things, through fashion consumption. Our research also aligns with the notion that practices of fashion consumption within the South Asian diaspora contribute to a broader process of cultural citizenship (Miller, 2007). British Asian retailing exemplifies how fashion cultures are integral to processes of migration, transnationalism, and settlement (Dwyer, 2010, p. 150) and our research demonstrates the role British South Asian fashion retailing and consumption play in forming identities, exercising agency, and providing a sense of community and belonging.

Throughout our journey, we witnessed instances of South Asian solidarity and sisterhood in the various spaces we inhabited. Thus, fashion consumption as a spatial practice contributes to community building among South Asian retailers and consumers, and to micro forms of resistance, including entrepreneurship. The lived experiences of two fashion retailers, Zeenat and Miriam, that we investigated in this article highlight the multifaceted role of fashion in negotiating cultural belonging and resisting fast fashion's homogenising tendencies. This exploration not only underscores the cultural richness and diversity within the South Asian diaspora but also emphasises the critical need for a more inclusive and culturally aware fashion industry.

Despite the continued dominance of Eurocentric fashion globally, there is a growing body of research exploring fashion systems in other regions, both historically and in contemporary contexts. This research builds upon previous studies that have examined fashion systems beyond the Western European and American spheres, highlighting the significance of diverse fashion practices across different cultural and geographical contexts. On the other hand, our exploration of the South Asian fashion system not solely points out its stylistic aspects but also highlights the prevalence of 'fast fashion' business model, raising sustainability concerns.

Incorporating Spivak's critique of postcolonial studies (1999), a decolonial perspective on fashion should comprehensively address both the production and consumption facets as manifestations of sociocultural and economic power structures. This approach aims to acknowledge imbalances within the global fashion hierarchy, scrutinising historical and contemporary fashion systems along with the associated unequal power relations. These include authoritative cultural discourses and exploitative design/production practices.[4] Based on our fieldwork findings, we assert that a decolonial perspective on fashion,

beyond acknowledging the 'plurality of epistemologies in regard to fashioning the body', must encompass ethical, moral, and environmental considerations in the examination of diverse fashion systems. This involves scrutinising practices such as business models, worker welfare, and supply chains, which may perpetuate societal and global inequalities within transnational creative and cultural industries (Dasgupta & Clini, 2024; Dasgupta et al., 2024; Jansen, 2020, p. 817). Consequently, recognising the transformative

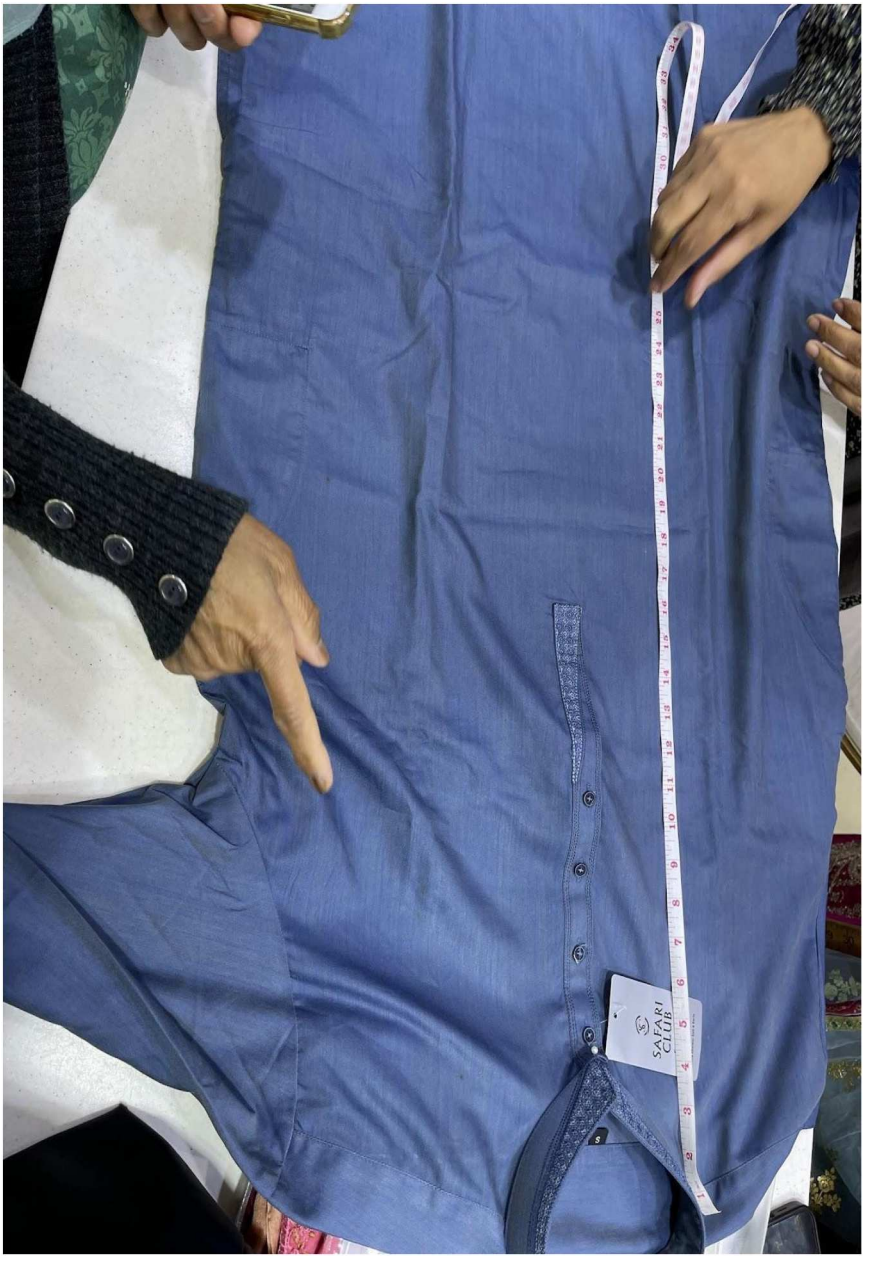

Figure 11. Aunt Munira having the kurta she picked for her son measured to ensure it is the right size for him. Photo by the authors, 19 November 2022.

influence of consumers, especially regular/frequent shoppers and opinion leaders/influencers, and fostering awareness among them regarding South Asian fashion, can contribute significantly to promoting ethical, moral, and environmentally sustainable practices within the South Asian fashion system.

This article notably lacks the perspectives of men, not due to a lack of effort in seeking their voices. Despite our attempts in various stores, we encountered few male shoppers, and none were willing to participate in interviews. It became evident that South Asian Muslim men were infrequently present in these fashion stores; instead, mothers and wives took on the role of purchasers for their sons and husbands. During a conversation with Munira aunty in one store, she affirmed her son's trust in her judgement by handing a slip of paper to the shop assistant, who promptly began measuring the selected kurta for her son (Figure 11). Munira aunty continued to engage in Urdu with the assistant, discussing the ideal colours for her son as we left the store …

Notes

1. A report from Migration Policy Scotland, titled *Scotland's Migration Futures: Challenges, Opportunities, Options* (2021) notes that Scotland's view on migration diverges significantly from Westminster's restrictionist position. Lawmakers in Scotland have consistently desired to retain and attract more migrants. However, it should be noted that Scotland has no individual control over migration, as this authority is reserved by Westminster, leaving Scotland in an advisory capacity. Public attitudes toward migration in Scotland are also notably different, with the public generally supporting increased migration.
2. The impact of colonialism upon dress in South Asia has been twofold. On the one hand, dress became a site of protest when Gandhi promoted a return to homespun khadi against the British clothes, and on the other hand, dress also became a strong signification of religion, caste, and class. The Gandhian Swadesi (self-rule) independence movement propagating the boycotting of the consumption of the 'western' and the adoption of the 'local', e.g. fabrics and dress forms, has left an ongoing and gendered legacy as well as paving the way for the dichotomous meanings attached to traditional and western clothes.
3. Even though Reddy's work is focused on Indian women in the United States and there are specificities around the articulation of South Asian nationhoods, such as Indian and Pakistani, through gender and fashion among the South Asian diaspora; we think, there are similarities in practices displaying belonging.
4. Spivak criticises 'postcolonial studies' becoming a 'substantial sub disciplinary ghetto'. She discusses that the concentration on the representation of the colonised places colonialism/imperialism in the distant past rather than dealing with the very operating principles of imperialism itself as a discursive power structure constituting an economic and cultural restructuring imposing hierarchies and changing the global economic pattern.

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