

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sustainable Fashion and Traditional Craft: The Role of Experiential Learning in Shaping Designers and Promoting Cultural Sustainability in Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to investigate the transformative role of experiential learning in sustainable fashion education, with a particular focus on cultural sustainability. We examine how an immersive learning experience impacts young Chinese designers' understanding of cultural preservation and sustainable design practices. Eight participants took part in a 10-day immersive program in Kyrgyzstan, engaging in traditional craft practices and local cultural activities while maintaining a daily journal throughout the program. Reflective thematic analysis of the journals identified three core themes: (1) expanding the role of designers from product creators to cultural custodians; (2) fusing tradition and innovation for cultural and sustainable impact and (3) redefining the designer's role in community development, transitioning from observers to advocates. Experiential learning was found to enhance students' ecological and cultural awareness, social responsibility and respect for traditional practices. Additionally, the program also benefits local communities by raising awareness of the value of cultural heritage and creating opportunities for dialogue between designers and local artisans. Post-program tracking revealed that all participants incorporated Central Asian traditional elements into commercial collections within 2 years. Among them, four participants won international design awards and showcased their fashion works at five national or international exhibitions, demonstrating the program's lasting impact. These findings underline the value of integrating experiential methodologies into sustainable fashion education, offering insights for addressing cultural and environmental challenges while empowering designers.

1 | Introduction

The fashion industry faces significant sustainability challenges, with increasing pressure to address environmental impacts, resource depletion and social responsibility (McKinsey and Company 2024). Designers play a crucial role in determining the sustainability of fashion products as they make key decisions about materials, production methods and design strategies,

which significantly impact the lifecycle and ecological footprint of fashion items (Gwilt and Rissanen 2011; Fletcher 2014; Murzyn-Kupisz and Hołuj 2021). In response to these challenges, there is a growing need for designers who not only understand but also actively prioritise sustainability in their practice. Fostering designers' awareness and understanding of sustainability is therefore of paramount importance to achieve industry-wide transformation.

Current fashion design education, however, faces several challenges in effectively cultivating sustainable mindsets. Traditional teaching methods tend to prioritise theoretical knowledge and market-driven skills (Dormer 1997; Grose 2013; Faerm 2015), which may not provide students with a deep, multidimensional understanding of sustainability. As a result, students often narrowly interpret sustainability as an environmental issue, neglecting its social and cultural dimensions, thereby struggling to develop the holistic understanding required for sustainable practices. Recent discourse on sustainable development and fashion highlights that cultural sustainability is a critical pillar of sustainability (Williams et al. 2019). Sustainable fashion seeks to minimise the environmental and social impacts of fashion production by focusing on responsible resource use, ethical production practices and extended product lifecycles (Fletcher 2010). Increasingly, scholars argue that sustainable fashion should also embrace cultural preservation—maintaining the heritage, craft knowledge and identity of communities—as part of its mandate (Brown and Vacca 2022; Williams 2013). In other words, cultural sustainability (the safeguarding of traditional crafts and local identity) can be pursued through the lens of sustainable fashion. UNESCO has likewise emphasised that culture is at the part of sustainable development, urging inclusive approaches that protect heritage while advancing social well-being (OECD 2008). Within this context, sustainable fashion education can be defined as a systemic pedagogical framework that addresses the entire fashion value chain. It is centred on apparel but also encompasses the broader fashion industry, extending from material sourcing and design ideation to production, brand communication and public engagement. This framework integrates environmental responsibility and cultural preservation as its principal priorities. It encourages students to critically examine how design decisions, production practices and brand communication strategies, including retail presentation, events and visual storytelling, collectively shape both the ecological impact and the cultural meaning of fashion. In this way, sustainable fashion education prepares graduates not only to design products responsibly but also to contribute to fashion systems that support environmental integrity and cultural continuity. Therefore, this study adopts the following perspective: by exploring cultural preservation through sustainable fashion education, the ability to understand and respect traditional culture is key to future designers fulfilling their dual responsibilities towards the environment and culture.

This context calls for a closer examination of how educational practice can engage with both environmental responsibility and cultural awareness. Experiential learning has been increasingly recognised as a powerful approach in sustainability education, especially within fashion design, as it enables students to engage directly with real-world projects and cultural contexts, thereby deepening their understanding of sustainable practices (Williams 2013). Research suggests that hands-on engagement, rather than theoretical instruction alone, fosters deeper learning and a stronger connection to the cultural dimensions of craftsmanship, which is essential for developing a sense of responsibility and respect for traditional practices (Brown and Vacca 2022). Such immersive experiences are especially effective in guiding future designers to comprehend the full extent of their role in sustainability, extending beyond merely ‘shaping material goods for sale’ (Grose 2013, 134–147) or making aesthetic decisions

(Faerm 2015) to encompass broader social and cultural impacts (Williams 2013). Moreover, the integration of traditional crafts and cultural heritage into fashion education has become one of the core strategies in sustainable development. Engaging with traditional handicrafts not only helps preserve cultural heritage but also provides locally grounded pathways for community-based sustainable development (Brown and Vacca 2022). This is particularly significant in regions such as Central Asia, where cultural traditions and craftsmanship hold both social and economic value, and are seen as having the potential to drive positive change within local communities (Ellis and Lo 2019; Karshiev 2023).

Therefore, Central Asia—particularly Kyrgyzstan offers a well-suited context for this study, with its centuries-old textile traditions, such as felt-making and embroidery, which remain central to its cultural identity (UNESCO 2017). These crafts are not only artistic expressions but also closely embedded in community life, with ongoing efforts to revitalise and apply them in support of sustainable development (Doroshenko 2024). Meanwhile, the fashion industry constitutes a key sector of their national economy and has experienced notable growth in recent years (Tilekeyev et al. 2020). This coexistence of tradition and industrial modernity provides a grounded context for exploring how sustainable fashion education can respond to both cultural and economic imperatives. Based on these conditions, Kyrgyzstan was selected as the implementation site for this study. By focusing on its traditional culture and craftsmanship, we aim to examine how sustainable fashion education can support community development and cultural continuity.

To address these aims, this study adopts an experiential learning approach. We propose that by immersing students in real-world applications of sustainability and cultural engagement, experiential learning can deepen their understanding of value-oriented thinking and social responsibility. Through direct interaction with the social and cultural contexts of design, students are encouraged to broaden their perspectives beyond aesthetics and market trends, and to recognise the socio-cultural functions embedded within design practice. The study is guided by three main objectives: (1) to evaluate how experiential learning affects students’ understanding of ecological responsibility within sustainable fashion; (2) to investigate whether hands-on engagement with traditional craftsmanship enhances students’ respect for cultural heritage; and (3) to explore how immersive experiences in sustainability influence students’ views on their roles in community development. A qualitative case study approach was employed to examine the outcomes of an experiential learning program conducted in Kyrgyzstan, where students were immersed in traditional craft practices over a 10-day period. The participants were a diverse group of Chinese university students from various design majors closely connected to the fashion industry, including fashion design, product design and visual communication design. Through activities such as participating in felt-making workshops, observing local artisans, visiting traditional costume studios, interviewing local fashion designers and engaging in community events, the students gained a first-hand understanding of sustainable fashion practices in the real world. By analysing daily diary entries and reflections, the study investigates how experiential engagement shaped their sustainability mindsets and benefited local communities. Ultimately,

this paper seeks to clarify the relationship between sustainable fashion education and cultural sustainability, highlighting the role of experiential learning in fostering designers' dual capacities for environmental awareness and cultural sensitivity.

1.1 | Traditional Craftsmanship in Sustainable Fashion: Balancing Heritage and Ecology

In sustainable fashion, the integration of traditional craftsmanship and culture not only promotes respect for cultural diversity but is also crucial for advancing sustainability. Traditional craftsmanship, rooted in local resources and manual production, aligns with sustainable fashion's objectives of valuing materials and extending product lifecycles (Pavione et al. 2016). By utilising natural materials and traditional craftsmanship it reduces environmental impact while enhancing the cultural and social value of fashion products (Brown and Vacca 2022). Thus, through its ecological and cultural sustainability, traditional craftsmanship makes a valuable contribution to sustainable fashion.

However, the integration of traditional craftsmanship must go beyond surface-level cultural appropriation. When traditional designs or cultural elements are used without proper acknowledgment or fair compensation, it can lead to exploitation rather than respect for the source culture (Slade and Jansen 2020; Hamilton 2021). In such cases, cultural elements are often commodified to meet market demands for exotic aesthetics, which undermine the authenticity and integrity of the culture it draws from. To prevent this, adopting fair trade practices is essential in sustainable fashion (Deo 2018). Fair trade ensures that artisans receive adequate recognition and compensation (Root 2014), reinforcing the ethical foundation needed for true cultural respect and sustainability within the industry. Collaborations between designers and artisans, when grounded in ethical practice, have shown tangible benefits for local communities. In Pakistan's Swat Valley, for example, a project that connected traditional craftspeople with international fashion markets not only helped sustain a regional embroidery heritage but also improved the economic well-being of participating artisans (Deo 2018). These examples illustrate that sustainable fashion must extend beyond environmental concerns to include the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and equitable recognition of community-held cultural knowledge.

Additionally, from a broader perspective, sustainable development encompasses environmental, economic and cultural sustainability (Hosagrahar 2023; OECD 2008). Fashion, as part of cultural production, sits at the intersection of these domains. Traditional craftsmanship embodies a form of ecological wisdom—using local resources prudently and creating long-lasting products—which fosters a balance among economic, social and environmental growth (Brown and Vacca 2022). This holistic approach supports sustainable fashion's aim to integrate cultural and ecological sustainability, providing both theoretical and practical foundations for the long-term advancement of the fashion industry (Williams et al. 2019). By incorporating cultural diversity and traditional craftsmanship, sustainable fashion might achieve a dual goal of cultural preservation and environmental sustainability.

1.2 | Experiential Learning's Influence on Designers' Responsibility and Cultural Respect

Experiential Learning theory, introduced by David Kolb in 1984, emphasises the deepening of understanding through active participation and reflection (Morris 2020). This model posits that learning is a dynamic process in which learners primarily engage through concrete experiences and reflective observation, followed by active experimentation to progressively internalise knowledge. Similarly, Dewey's theory of 'learning by doing' reinforces the value of experiential learning by asserting that learners internalise knowledge through authentic, practice-based activities (Davidova 2020; Dewey 1997). In fashion education, experiential learning is particularly significant, as it provides students with hands-on engagement in real-world processes rather than abstract concepts, allowing them to develop a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between design, culture, society and the environment (Williams 2013; Agarwal 2021). However, current fashion education often relies heavily on traditional, theoretical approaches that prioritise market-driven skills (Dormer 1997; Grose 2013; Faerm 2015), which might fail to effectively instil a comprehensive understanding of sustainability, particularly its cultural and social dimensions. Students may graduate proficient in garment construction or trend analysis yet lack insight into how design decisions affect communities or ecosystems.

Experiential learning addresses these shortcomings by actively involving students in immersive real-world scenarios (Beck et al. 2017). Beyond skill development, experiential learning serves as a pathway for designers to recognise their social responsibilities. By engaging directly in craft practices, designers gain a renewed understanding of their roles within cultural contexts. Giddens' theory of 'reflexive modernization' (2013) suggests that individuals redefine their roles through self-reflection and practice, a process that is crucial for designers as it helps them to realise their role in cultural preservation and social responsibility. Through such experiences, designers come to view their work not merely as a response to market demands but as a means to foster community development and support cultural transmission (Williams 2013). Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital further explains how experiential learning may assist designers in accumulating cultural capital through collaboration with communities, thereby gaining greater social recognition and a sense of responsibility (Bourdieu 2002[2008]). This collaborative relationship enhances designers' respect for local cultures and gradually enables them to see their design work as a tool for community empowerment (Brown and Vacca 2022). This transformation from theoretical understanding to applied responsibility makes experiential learning a key driver for fostering social responsibility among designers.

Moreover, immersive experiences can evoke emotional responses that are often absent in traditional classroom settings. Integrating specific experiential activities into teaching can stimulate the development of emotional, social and cognitive abilities (Bonesso et al. 2015), which contribute to a deeper emotional and cognitive understanding of sustainability. Unlike traditional education, which focuses on market demands and aesthetics, immersive learning allows students to build emotional connections with cultural heritage and communities

TABLE 1 | 10-day immersive program activities.

Day	Activities
Day 1	Museum Visit: Private museum with collections of traditional jewellery, textiles and garments. Cultural Exchange: Joint welcome dinner with Kyrgyz and Chinese students.
Day 2	Excursion: Ala Archa National Park, focusing on natural ecology and material culture as inspiration for sustainable fashion design. Cultural Exchange: Evening joint dinner.
Day 3	University Visit: Kyrgyz State Technical University, graduation exhibition on patchwork and resource-saving design. Discussion: Pathways for integrating traditional crafts into contemporary sustainable fashion design. Brand Research I: Streetwear fashion brand in Bishkek.
Day 4	University Visit: Issyk-Kul State University. Workshop: Felt-making techniques, including the production of felt fabric and its combination with woven and lightweight fabrics to create hats, brooches, scarves and garment components. Cultural Exchange: Evening joint dinner.
Day 5	Hands-on Activity: Building a traditional yurt to understand its structural and ecological value. Museum Visit: Cholpon-Ata Petroglyph Museum. Museum Visit: Ethnographic Costume Museum, exploring historical motifs and garment elements as inspiration for sustainable fashion design. Sightseeing: Issyk-Kul Lake.
Day 6	University Visit: Osh State University, static exhibition of traditional garments with an emphasis on resource-saving structural design. Faculty Workshop: Strategies for extending the lifecycle of garments.
Day 7	Heritage Site Visit: Sulaiman-Too Sacred Mountain, exploring cultural symbols as fashion inspiration. Market Research: Jayma Bazaar in Osh, survey of handcrafted garments and fabrics.
Day 8	Museum Visit: National History Museum of Kyrgyzstan, with a focus on the traditional costume collection. Brand Research II: Integrated fashion lifestyle brand, including apparel, accessories and carpets.
Day 9	Studio Visit: Renowned local fashion designer's studio, focusing on sustainable practices through material choices and the modernisation of traditional crafts. Brand Research III: High-end bespoke atelier. Cultural Exchange: Evening joint dinner.

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Day	Activities
Day 10	Fashion Show: Local runway event highlighting patchwork as a method of reuse and sustainability. Faculty Workshop: Discussion on how student graduation works can be commercialised through campus shops to promote sustainable fashion education. Cultural Exchange: Joint farewell dinner.

(Williams 2013). This emotional engagement is vital because sustainability concerns not only technical solutions but also values and attitudes (OECD 2008). Such experiences foster both cognitive and affective growth, encouraging empathy and cultural respect, which are critical for developing a genuine commitment to sustainability (Brown and Vacca 2022). By fostering such personal transformations, fashion education can cultivate designers who are deeply committed to cultural heritage, community well-being and sustainable practices.

1.3 | The Present Study

The present study aims to explore the impact of experiential learning on young designers' understanding of sustainability through a 10-day immersive program (see Table 1). The study's structure was guided by the experiential learning framework as described by Ng et al. (2009), which views experiential learning as 'a holistic process of adapting to the world, involving the integrated functioning of the whole person—thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving—as well as the interaction between the person and the environment' (p. 513). Based on this theoretical framework, the program was designed to facilitate a comprehensive immersion, engaging participants across multiple dimensions—cognitive, emotional, perceptual, behavioural and environmental interaction.

At the beginning of the immersive experience, participants were introduced to the broader cultural context of the local community. This included visits to museums that provided insights into the historical, linguistic and customary aspects of the local culture. Participants also experienced the distinctive features of traditional clothing and explored local natural landscapes, which offered an initial and direct understanding of the region's cultural and natural heritage. Throughout each day, participants also had opportunities to engage with local cuisine, which added a sensory dimension to their cultural understanding. As the program progressed, the learning experiences became more hands-on and interactive. Students attended workshops on traditional craftsmanship—observing and practicing techniques such as felt-making and textile patterning. They visited the studios of prominent local fashion designers and discussed how traditional motifs and methods can be integrated into contemporary fashion design. In these activities, students not only observed cultural practices but also saw how sustainable fashion principles were applied. Studio visits demonstrated how local designers employed natural materials and resource-efficient

techniques, while also modernising traditional elements and incorporating them into apparel design. This process showed how cultural heritage, when reinterpreted in design, increases the perceived and emotional value of garments, encouraging consumers to retain them for longer and thereby extending their lifecycle. The workshops reinforced this perspective by illustrating how textile crafts such as felting and embroidery can be transformed into clothing and accessories—including garments, hats, bags and jewellery—embedding emotional and cultural significance that supports durability.

They also participated in local cultural events, such as traditional fashion shows and craft fairs, to see how heritage is marketed in a modern context. Each of these activities was intentionally linked to sustainable fashion practices. For example, the felting workshop highlighted how local wool is used without chemical processing, and studio visits illustrated how slow, handmade processes contrast with fast fashion mass production and how traditional techniques are being embraced by younger generations and applied within the local market. Together, these learning experiences emphasised that sustainability in fashion is not only about environmental responsibility but also about cultural preservation, product longevity and the enhancement of value through design.

Interaction with local peers was another key aspect of the program. Through collaboration with five universities in Kyrgyzstan, local design students participated in workshops and site visits alongside the visiting group. These exchanges encouraged mutual reflection and helped participants compare perspectives, deepening cross-cultural understanding. Daily conversations with instructors and Kyrgyz peers allowed students to process their experiences as they unfolded. Importantly, many of these peer connections continued beyond the program, laying the foundation for longer-term international dialogue. This reflective and relational dimension ensured that the learning extended beyond the moment, with the potential for lasting impact.

These activities were designed to stimulate the different dimensions of learning as described by Ng et al. (2009): cognitive (understanding cultural heritage and sustainability), emotional (developing empathy and respect), perceptual (sensory engagement with local culture), behavioural (adapting design practices based on new insights) and environmental interaction (engaging with both the natural and cultural environment). Through this holistic approach, the study aimed to encourage participants to re-evaluate their role as designers, considering cultural and ecological responsibilities as integral components of their work.

2 | Method

2.1 | Design

This research employs a case study methodology to explore the impacts of experiential learning on fashion design students' sustainability awareness, understanding of traditional crafts and community engagement in Central Asia. Given the relatively small participant pool, the case study approach allows

TABLE 2 | Demographic details of the participants.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Field of study in BA
Male participant 1	Male	23	Han	Architecture Design
Male participant 2	Male	27	Zhuang	Furniture Design
Male participant 3	Male	24	Han	Digital Media
Male participant 4	Male	23	Han	Civil Engineering
Female participant 1	Female	24	Han	Industrial Design
Female participant 2	Female	23	Han	Fashion Design
Female participant 3	Female	23	Han	Integrated Innovation Design
Female participant 4	Female	23	Han	Furniture Design

for in-depth exploration of individual experiences during a 10-day immersive learning program in Kyrgyzstan. The program was conducted under the supervision of the first author's university and adhered to educational and ethical standards, with informed consent obtained from all participants.

2.2 | Participants

The participant group consisted of 8 students from the first author's university. Student participants were recruited through a formal project announcement by the school, where interested students voluntarily registered. Selection was carried out via a mutual choice process to ensure alignment with the research objectives, prioritising students who could meaningfully reflect on the impact of experiential learning on their development as young designers. The final sample included 7 Han Chinese and 1 Zhuang ethnicity aged between 23 and 27. Their academic backgrounds spanned fashion design, industrial design, civil engineering and digital media. Although participants came from different academic backgrounds, this composition was intentional and appropriate for the aims of the project. The fashion industry functions as an interdisciplinary system (McCartney and Tynan 2021) in which apparel design is closely connected with accessory design, textile development, product design and spatial and display design. Each of these fields plays a role in shaping how fashion products are created, presented, and brought to the public. Bringing together students from these varied design backgrounds reflected the collaborative nature of the fashion industry; this diversity offered valuable insight into how students from various fields engage with sustainability, enriching the inquiry with broader and more nuanced perspectives (Table 2).

2.3 | Data Collection

Data were collected from Day 1 to Day 10, through structured self-reports maintained by the students during their time in Kyrgyzstan. Each student submitted a self-reported diary that documented their experiences, reflections and evolving insights into sustainable design and traditional crafts. A total of 77 diaries were collected by the end of the program. This method ensured that data were collected systematically and captured both immediate reactions and the cumulative effect of the immersive experience on students' understanding of sustainability.

The daily prompts asked students to reflect on the following:

1. Describe one experience from today that gave you a new perspective on design or traditional craftsmanship. What happened? Please provide details.
2. How does this experience relate to the concept of sustainable development?
3. What were your feelings about today's experience?
4. If there is anything else, you'd like to share, feel free to add your thoughts.

2.4 | Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), a widely recognised method in qualitative research that emphasises researchers' reflexivity and flexibility in the analytical process (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2021). RTA is grounded in the 'Big Q' qualitative research tradition (Kidder and Fine 1987), which allows researchers to engage deeply with complex data while adapting their analytical approach to align with the study's objectives and context. This method was particularly suitable for this study as it allows researchers to focus on the individual as the source of meaning, capturing the evolution in their understandings of the cultural and environmental aspects of sustainability—key focuses of experiential learning in fashion education (Williams 2013). The reflective aspect of RTA further focuses on the researchers' role as fashion design educators, thereby acknowledging personal biases and assumptions about the data and the construction of the themes. In this study, the implementation of RTA involved three critical dimensions. First, an essentialist approach to language was adopted, assuming that participants' words directly reflect their experiences, thoughts and emotions. This approach focuses on faithfully capturing participants' narratives without deconstructing their language through a critical lens. Second, the study primarily employed a deductive approach to theory, guided by existing frameworks and concepts while incorporating inductive reasoning to identify emergent themes that were not pre-defined. This combination ensured that the analysis was both theory-driven and open to new insights arising from the data. Finally, semantic coding was utilised to focus on explicitly expressed patterns in the diary content rather than probing deeply into latent or hidden meanings. This strategy prioritised the content of participants' reflections, maintaining a balance between theoretical alignment and the authenticity of participants' voices.

The process of theme generation began with the first author conducting an initial open-coding phase. During this stage, all participants' reflections were read through to identify preliminary patterns, marking phrases and concepts directly related to experiential learning, sustainability and traditional craftsmanship. After completing this initial review, the first author grouped related codes into potential themes, such as 'ecological responsibility', 'cultural respect', and 'community engagement'. These themes were then discussed with the second-author, who provided feedback and suggested additional themes based on her interpretations of the data.

Following this, the authors collaboratively engaged in focused coding, where each author re-examined the data to validate and refine the identified themes. The involvement of multiple researchers in the coding process helped to mitigate potential biases by introducing diverse perspectives. The core themes that emerged from this stage were subsequently refined through iterative discussions among the authors, who examined each theme's relevance and coherence within the context of the study's aims. Additionally, to enhance the credibility of the findings, member checking was performed, where selected participants reviewed the themes and confirmed that they accurately represented their experiences and insights (Moules 2017). Given the bilingual nature of this study, careful translation and back-translation between English and Chinese were also required during the research process to ensure that the meanings reflected by the participants were accurately conveyed. This rigorous process ensured that the themes not only captured surface-level patterns but also reflected deeper shifts in participants' perspectives, thereby aligning with the study's goal of understanding the transformative potential of experiential learning in sustainable fashion education.

3 | Results

Through the thematic analysis of student diaries during the 10-day immersive learning experience in Kyrgyzstan, three key themes emerged that reflect the evolution of students' perspectives on sustainable fashion, traditional culture and community development. These themes highlight the significant impact of experiential learning on enhancing the sense of responsibility in future designers and their understanding of cultural sustainability and community development.

3.1 | Expanding the Role of Designers: From Product Creators to Cultural Custodians

At the start of the immersion, most students viewed their role as designers primarily through the lens of product creation and market trends. For instance, on day 1, Male participant 4 noted that his main responsibility 'as a designer is to create products that people want and need.' Similarly, Female participant 2 reflected on day 2 that she considered herself as 'someone who can translate current fashion trends into appealing designs.' In these early reflections, students predominantly focused on aesthetics and consumer appeal, seeing their role primarily as creators of desirable products.

However, after several days of interaction with and learning from local artisans and observing the craftsmanship of traditional handcrafts, their understanding broadened to encompass a cultural responsibility. By day 5, Male participant 1 began to reflect:

I believe that sustainable development is not only about protecting the ecological environment, but also about the sustainable preservation of distinctive regional cultures. By integrating traditional design elements into people's everyday activities, we can promote the sustainable development of traditional culture. As a designer, it's not just about creating things. We are part of a bigger picture, and preserving the stories behind these crafts is just as important as the products themselves.

(Male participant 1)

This sentiment is shared by others, for example, on day 6, Male participant 4 deepened this reflection and noted that, 'as a designer, [his] job is not just to create beautiful things but to ensure that [he] can contribute to preserving the culture that inspires those designs'.

By the end of the immersion, students demonstrated a profound understanding of their expanded role as designers. On day 8, Male participant 1 acknowledged that 'designers have a responsibility not just to innovate but to respect the traditions that give their work depth. It's not just about trends but about continuity.' By using the word 'continuity,' he frames fashion design within a timeline that connects past, present and future, rather than just the next season's trend. Female 2 echoed this sentiment on day 9, reflecting that '[she] now see that as a designer, [her] role is to protect and elevate the cultural stories embedded in every design we create'.

These findings demonstrate a significant shift in participants' cultural understanding and cognition. Students came to recognise that their role as designers extends beyond merely extracting aesthetic elements—they also bear the responsibility of preserving and promoting the culture underlying these elements. Through their engagement with local Kyrgyz artisans, participants became aware of how design can serve as a medium to not only innovate but also safeguard cultural integrity. This understanding moves beyond the traditional perception of designers as market-driven creators (Grose 2013; Faerm 2015) and suggests that students experienced an expansion of their role: from designers primarily concerned with form and function to designers who are also cultural advocates.

3.2 | Fusing Tradition and Innovation: For Cultural and Sustainable Impact

At the start of the immersion, most students viewed sustainability primarily through an environmental lens. For instance, on Day 3, Male participant 2 noted that sustainability in fashion was mostly about 'using eco-friendly materials and

reducing waste'. Similarly, on Day 4, Male participant 3 reflected that 'sustainable design is about minimizing the environmental impact of the materials we use'. These reflections show that students initially held a narrow view of sustainability, focused almost exclusively on ecological impact—materials, waste, pollution, etc. Cultural or social dimensions of sustainability did not yet feature in their thinking, which is unsurprising given common sustainable fashion curricula emphasise environmental issues.

As students gained hands-on experience with traditional Kyrgyz crafts, their understanding of sustainable fashion evolved to include cultural dimensions. By Day 5, Male participant 2 noted:

Sustainability isn't just about using eco-friendly materials. It's about sustaining the practices and knowledge that have been passed down for generations.

(Male participant 2)

On Day 6, Male 3 also reflected on the integration of traditional craftsmanship:

Blending traditional craftsmanship with contemporary design isn't just about creating something new—it's about keeping these traditions alive in a modern context.

(Male participant 3)

These reflections show a growing awareness that aligns with Williams (2013), who argued that sustainability in design must encompass both environmental and cultural dimensions. By Day 8, students had begun to develop a more comprehensive understanding of sustainability, recognising the cultural aspects of sustainable fashion. Male participant 1 stated that 'to truly achieve sustainability in fashion, we need to protect and promote the traditions that give depth to our work. It's about cultural sustainability as much as environmental sustainability'. This unprompted use of the term 'cultural sustainability' suggests that the concept had become more personally meaningful and intellectually integrated for him. He articulated a connection between two dimensions that had previously remained separate in his thinking: environmental sustainability (such as using natural dyes and organic fibres) and cultural sustainability (such as preserving traditional dyeing techniques and patterns). Through this experience, he began to understand that sustainable fashion is not defined by environmental or cultural efforts in isolation, but rather by the integration of both—a perspective that reflects a more holistic understanding of what sustainability in fashion entails. Drawing on this new perspective, one participant noted that innovation should respect cultural heritage:

Innovation in design should not come at the cost of losing the cultural essence of these crafts. We must find ways to respect and sustain both.

(Male participant 3)

This evolving understanding aligns with Murzyn-Kupisz and Hołuj (2021) assertion that designers must strike a balance between innovation and cultural preservation. By preserving cultural heritage while pursuing modern innovation, designers can ensure that the integrity of traditional practices is maintained. Rissanen's perspective highlights the importance of balancing both, a point echoed by our participants as they reflected on their evolving role as designers in integrating cultural and environmental sustainability.

Moreover, Female participant 4 elaborated on this concept, emphasising the role of tradition in fostering sustainable practices. She explained:

Traditional crafts and modern design are not mutually exclusive; rather, through design, tradition can be fused to create something innovative—products that carry new cultural value and narratives. I believe this approach can potentially open up market opportunities. Therefore, designers should focus on preserving and applying traditional elements, going beyond superficial notions of sustainability to consider whether the entire process achieves sustainability from a broader perspective. I think design must first be grounded in a deep understanding of life, culture, tradition, and firsthand experiences.

(Female participant 4)

This statement reflects a more mature understanding of sustainable fashion. The participant emphasised that sustainability in design is not solely about material choices, but must also be rooted in cultural context. By embedding cultural narratives into design, products gain emotional resonance and distinct market value, while also contributing to heritage preservation. Her critique of 'superficial sustainability' stems from firsthand experiences within local communities and traditional craft settings. These experiences led her to recognise that cultural knowledge is not an optional layer in sustainable design, but a central element that gives it depth and relevance.

More broadly, students' perspectives evolved from initially viewing tradition and innovation as oppositional, to recognising their potential for integration. They came to understand that cultural heritage offers depth to innovation, while innovation, in turn, keeps tradition dynamic and relevant. In the context of sustainable fashion, this synthesis becomes a critical pathway for meaningful transformation.

3.3 | Redefining the Designer's Role in Community Development: Transitioning From Observers to Advocates

In the initial days, students approached their participation in the Kyrgyz community as external observers. On Day 1, Female participant 2 described the community as 'a fascinating cultural landscape' but admitted that 'as an outsider, it's difficult to see how design could play a role here'. Male participant 4 on Day 2

wrote that he 'feel[s] like [he] is just here to learn, not to impact the community directly'. These statements indicate that at first, participants did not immediately connect their presence or their design skills with any potential benefit to the community. They saw value in learning from the community, but not necessarily in giving back. This may be a common attitude of visitors to short-term cultural programmes—to observe respectfully but to maintain a distance in terms of impact or responsibility.

However, as students became more immersed in the community's daily life through various experiential activities, they began to recognise how their direct engagement could foster a deeper understanding of cultural values. On Day 4, Male participant 4 described his emotional reaction to some of these cultural experiences:

Horseback riding, falconry, archery—these are key markers of their cultural identity, along with music performances, instruments, and unique playing styles. When I heard their distinctive ethnic music by the campfire, at the foot of the mountains and by the lake, it evoked a deep sense of emotion, truly understanding the value and meaning of cultural identity.

(Male participant 4)

This reflection highlights that it was through direct experiential activities—such as participating in local customs, listening to traditional music and observing community traditions—that the students began to develop a genuine emotional connection with the community's heritage. These immersive experiences were crucial in transforming their roles from passive learners to advocates for cultural preservation and community support.

On Day 5, Female participant 1 reflected that 'it's not enough to appreciate the craftsmanship here—we have to think about how our designs can create real economic opportunities for these communities'. Similarly, on Day 6, Male participant 2 echoed this sentiment, writing that 'design is a tool for empowerment. It can bring economic growth to communities if they integrate the traditions into the global market'. These reflections illustrate how students, through their hands-on experiences, began to see design as a means of not only appreciating cultural elements but also contributing to community development. As some scholars have argued, designers should play a critical role in both local and global development by promoting cultural continuity and fostering economic vitality, thereby contributing to community resilience (Faerm 2015; Murzyn-Kupisz and Hołuj 2021). The students' reflections suggest that through their design efforts, they could create opportunities for local artisans to access global markets while maintaining their cultural distinctiveness. This shift—from cultural appropriation to a more responsible form of cultural engagement—supports not only the sustainable development of the local economy but also avoids the superficial use of traditional elements (Brown and Vacca 2022).

By Day 8, students started taking a more proactive stance, seeing themselves not just as observers but as advocates for community development. Female participant 2 on Day 9 wrote, 'Our designs

should not only respect and celebrate the culture but also help these communities thrive by opening new markets for their crafts'. Her understanding of the role of the designer became deeper and her horizons expanded significantly compared to her initial focus on trends. This reflection suggests how immersive experiences in the community cultivated a sense of responsibility among the students to use their design skills for the benefit of the community.

Female 4 further elaborated:

I believe these experiences have deepened my understanding of sustainability. I see sustainability as closely linked to locality—sustainability becomes truly 'sustainable' only when local elements are incorporated, truly benefiting communities and future generations.

(Female participant 4)

Her statement emphasised a key point: design cannot be called truly sustainable if it does not have a positive impact on local communities. By incorporating local materials, patterns, labour and knowledge systems into the design process, sustainable fashion practices can be rooted in specific social and cultural contexts, thereby providing strong support for community continuity and intergenerational well-being.

An important finding was that the immersive learning experience significantly enhanced the students' sense of social responsibility. Initially, students saw themselves as external observers focused primarily on the technical and fashion trends aspects of design. However, as they engaged further in the experiential learning process, they recognised the critical role that design could play in cultural preservation and community development. This aligns with Manzini's (2015) theory, which posits that design can act as a catalyst for social innovation, driving positive change in underserved communities. In this study, students gradually came to view design as a tool for economic empowerment, helping marginalised communities maintain their cultural identity while participating in the global market. The transition from being mere observers to active advocates also supports Boud et al. (1985) perspective on experiential learning. They argued that deep engagement and reflection on immersive experiences lead to a more profound understanding and active commitment, which is evident in the students' evolving views. As the program drew to a close, students began proposing ways to maintain long-term engagement with the local community. For example, some students planned to promote the felt-making studio they had visited by featuring it on their personal Instagram account to increase its online visibility. Other students intended to incorporate the studio's wool craftsmanship into their collection and invite the artisans to contribute to sample development. These ideas were not part of the original project requirements but emerged organically from students' firsthand experiences and growing familiarity with the community context. They suggest that even a short-term exchange can initiate relationships with long-term potential, opening up possibilities for continued collaboration in future design work. By recognising their ability to influence community well-being, students embraced a more participatory and supportive role, moving from passive learners to proactive advocates of sustainable community development.

4 | Discussion

This study offers significant insights into the transformative potential of experiential learning in sustainable fashion education, particularly in reshaping students' understanding of cultural preservation, community development and sustainable fashion design. Through a 10-day immersive experience, students engaged deeply with local artisans, traditional crafts and cultural activities, documenting their reflections in daily journals. The thematic analysis of these journals identified three key themes: the evolution of designers from product creators to cultural custodians, the integration of traditional craftsmanship with sustainability, and the shift from passive observers to active contributors to community development. These findings demonstrate that experiential learning not only reinforces existing theories but also enhances designers' sense of responsibility, encouraging them to consider the broader impact of their work on communities and cultural heritage.

The implications of these themes extend beyond individual learning experiences to highlight critical areas for the advancement of sustainable fashion education. Traditional education models often emphasise market-driven skills and theoretical knowledge (Dormer 1997), which can limit students' understanding of sustainability as a multifaceted concept. Experiential learning, as demonstrated in this study, bridges this gap by immersing students in the ecological and cultural dimensions of sustainability. This approach fosters a holistic perspective that integrates environmental, cultural and social considerations. For example, students transitioned from perceiving sustainability as solely an environmental concern to embracing its cultural and societal aspects. This transformation highlights the importance of incorporating practice-based, immersive experiences into design curricula. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital underscores this approach, emphasising that engaging with and preserving cultural heritage is not only an academic endeavour but also a means to generate societal and individual value (Bourdieu 2002). By embedding such practices into design education, educators can inspire future designers to advocate for cultural preservation and foster socially meaningful innovation in the fashion industry.

The benefits of experiential learning extend beyond the classroom to make meaningful contributions to the communities involved. Through direct interaction with Kyrgyz artisans, students recognised that design is not only a medium for creative expression but also a practical tool for community empowerment. They observed how traditional crafts preserve cultural memory while sustaining community identity and resilience. This deep engagement transformed students from passive observers to active participants, enabling them to appreciate the role of design in fostering economic growth and cultural preservation. Students learned that sustainable design requires more than superficial adoption of cultural elements; it necessitates a deeper understanding of cultural context and community needs. This perspective aligns with arguments by scholars who emphasise that designers can play a vital role in promoting cultural continuity and economic vitality, thereby contributing to community resilience (Faerm 2015; Murzyn-Kupisz and Hołuj 2021). The shift from observation to advocacy highlighted in this study underscores the dual benefits of experiential learning: enriching students' understanding of sustainability while injecting new energy and opportunities into local communities.

Another notable outcome of our study was the lasting impact on participants, demonstrating the long-term value of experiential learning in fashion design education. Unlike a typical programme that ends in the classroom, the relationships and insights generated by this immersive learning continued to develop long after the event. In the months following the programme, the Chinese students continued to connect with Kyrgyz artisans. About a year later, some Kyrgyz designers and university faculty were invited to visit Chinese universities, during which a design exhibition and a series of cultural and craft exchanges were organised, further deepening the collaboration. The students involved in the project have continued this experience in subsequent fashion designs, incorporating Central Asian motifs and traditional craftsmanship into their collections, some of which have been co-produced by Kyrgyz artisans, and have been exhibited and awarded at international sustainable fashion exhibitions and design awards (see Table 3).

Beyond our specific context, a key question is how fashion education elsewhere can adopt similar experiential models, especially in resource-constrained settings. Experiential, culture-integrated learning does not necessarily require expensive international field trips. While our project took students abroad, the core principles can be applied in any locale by partnering with local communities or cultural practitioners. Design programs can collaborate with nearby artisan communities, indigenous groups or even local history museums to create immersive projects. For example, universities in urban areas might engage students with immigrant craft communities in their city, providing cross-cultural exposure without leaving the country. What matters is designing an experience that is hands-on, socially engaged and culturally rich. Research on education supports this approach: even local collaborative projects can effectively bridge classroom and real-world learning, yielding high student engagement and learning outcomes (Beck et al. 2017).

The experiential and reflective nature of such encounters is often emphasised as essential for internalising sustainability values, while the integration of cultural heritage into design projects can provide students with a deeper sense of purpose and direction in their work (Murzyn-Kupisz and Hołuj 2021). Educators should thus consider embedding community-focused design challenges into curricula—such as working with a traditional craft cooperative to develop sustainable product lines or addressing a social issue through co-design with community members. These approaches can instil the same sense of responsibility and empathy we observed, without prohibitive costs. Our findings contribute evidence that when students see the real-world impact of design on people's lives, it motivates them far more than hypothetical exercises. Therefore, making sustainability education experiential and community-connected should be a goal for fashion programs globally, reflecting the idea that sustainability in fashion means promoting the well-being of people, communities and the environment alike (Sharpe et al. 2022).

In conclusion, this study finds that experiential learning not only broadens students' design perspectives but also enhances their cultural and social responsibility. Students gradually came to understand that design is not merely a tool to meet market demands but also a powerful means of fostering cultural preservation and community development. This multidimensional understanding drives a shift in design education from traditional technical training to a more comprehensive approach that incorporates social, cultural and environmental factors. While this study underscores the role of experiential learning in cultivating sustainable design practices and enhancing community development, and provides insights for advancing sustainable fashion education, it also has certain limitations. Future research could explore the applicability and impact of experiential learning in diverse cultural and economic settings, particularly in fostering sustainable community development. Longitudinal studies

TABLE 3 | Awards, related exhibitions and design works.

Award/exhibition	Work
MUSE Design Awards—Fashion Design—Recycle/Sustainable Fashion—Silver Award	Transformable Inflation Waistcoat
European Product Design Award (EPDA)-Eco Design/Sustainable: Outdoor Products—Gold Award	Transformable Inflation Waistcoat
National Youth Designer Competition—First Prize	Detachable and Reconfigurable Multifunctional Outdoor Clothing
National Youth Designer Competition—Second Prize	Ze and Shan—Digital Garment Design Inspired by Traditional Mythical Beasts
National Social Science Fund Major Project—Special Invitational Exhibition	'FEARLESS JOURNEY' Transformable Clothing Collection (8 garments)
2024 Moss International Design Innovation Exhibition	Transformable Outdoor Conceptual Garment Design (2 sets)
'Technology Empowering Traditional Culture'—2024 PBL Project Showcase	'FEARLESS JOURNEY' Transformable Clothing Collection (8 garments)
Innovative Horizons: A Showcase of Design Excellence. International Design Invitation Exhibition	Transformable Outdoor Conceptual Garment Design (2 sets)
SUSFUTURE 2024 'From Tradition to Future—A Journey of Sustainable' International Design Invitation Exhibition	'FEARLESS JOURNEY' Transformable Clothing Collection (15 garments) and Eight Conceptual Fashion Videos

could also examine how immersive experiences influence students' professional practices over time, especially their ability to balance cultural preservation and innovation. Further research into long-term collaborations between designers and communities could provide deeper insights into how participatory design fosters mutual growth.

5 | Reflexivity

The focus of this study reflects the interdisciplinary background of the researcher, combining expertise in sustainable fashion design, experience as a fashion educator, and a scholarly foundation in positive psychology. This unique blend of professional and academic perspectives naturally led to an interest in the intersection of sustainability, teaching methodologies and the role of design in supporting community development. As a sustainable fashion researcher, the researcher explored how design education could deepen students' understanding of sustainability principles. As an educator, there was a natural inclination to examine experiential learning as a pedagogical tool. Additionally, the researcher's grounding in positive psychology brought attention to the ways design could contribute to cultural preservation and community empowerment. Together, these perspectives formed the foundation for investigating how experiential learning could bridge these areas, ultimately benefiting students, communities and sustainable development.

Given positioning, the study adopted qualitative methods suited to capturing participants' reflections and transformative learning experiences. Data were collected through reflective journals and field observations during a 10-day immersive learning program in Kyrgyzstan, emphasising the multidimensional engagement of students with the local community, culture and environment. The use of thematic analysis allowed for a systematic exploration of patterns within the data, particularly focusing on how experiential activities influenced participants' perceptions of sustainability and cultural identity. The choice of these methods was informed by the researcher's interdisciplinary background, which values both psychological insights into well-being and the sociological dimensions of community development.

However, it is important to acknowledge the potential biases introduced by this positioning. The reflective practices primarily involved the first author who conceptualised and led the study design and analysis, leveraging her interdisciplinary expertise. The researcher's focus on sustainability and positive psychology may have influenced the framing of the research questions and the interpretation of the data, particularly in prioritising themes of cultural preservation and community empowerment. Furthermore, as an external observer, there was a risk of misinterpreting or oversimplifying certain cultural nuances within the Kyrgyz context. To address these potential biases, reflexivity was embedded throughout the research process. Regular reflective journaling helped critically evaluate the influence of personal assumptions and disciplinary training on the analysis. Peer debriefing sessions also provided alternative perspectives and challenged initial interpretations to ensure a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of the data. While reflexivity cannot eliminate all subjectivity, it enhances transparency and

rigour, ensuring that the findings reflect both the participants' lived experiences and the researcher's critical self-awareness.

Author Contributions

An Liu conceived and planned the study, contributed to data coding, interpreted the findings and wrote the manuscript. Xuanlin Li facilitated data collection and conducted the primary data coding. Both authors provided critical feedback and contributed to the manuscript's revision.

Ethics Statement

This study was approved by Beijing Normal University and conducted under its supervision, adhering to established educational and ethical standards. All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Raw data are not available for this study, in order to ensure participant anonymity.

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