Types and Expressions of Signatures in Fashion Brands: Focusing on Emerging Korean Designer Brands

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Introduction

Today, a signature functions as more than a logo or name—it is a strategic element that conveys a brand's identity, sensibility, and values across industries (Foroudi, 2018; Okonkwo, 2007). Emerging designer brands have been noted for expressing their unique identities through creative works and specialized fashion products, thereby establishing distinctive signatures. These signatures include both visible elements—like styles and displays—and intangible aspects such as philosophy and storytelling (Aaker, 2018). As the concept of a signature evolves to encompass a brand's personality and beliefs, it becomes crucial—especially for early-stage brands—to examine how signatures communicate brand differentiation and core values. This study explores general signature types through article-based content analysis and investigates their forms and meanings in emerging Korean designer brands through in-depth interviews.

Research Method

This study employed a combination of article-based qualitative content analysis and in-depth interviews. To examine the overall types of signatures used in fashion brands, we conducted a content analysis of media articles. Articles were collected through Google search from the years 2020 to 2024, a period marked by a sharp increase in signature-related content, and a total of 684 non-duplicate articles were selected for analysis. To further explore how emerging designer brands utilize signatures, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 emerging Korean designer brands. The sample was selected using a combination of judgment sampling and snowball sampling methods. Based on the Korean Designer Brand Growth Stages, emerging designer brands were defined as those in operation for more than 3 years but less than 8 years, corresponding to a phase between the formative and early high-growth stages. The collected data were analyzed following Giorgi's (1994) qualitative data analysis procedure, and the software Atlas.ti was used to organize and code both the article content and interview transcripts.

Results & Discussion

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The article analysis identified six general types of signatures commonly found in fashion brands: 1) design based on sensory sensibility, 2) strategically constructed designer/brand identity, 3) brand practices carried by cultural and spatial experiences, 4) craftsmanship and custom production, 5) reinterpretation of existing designs, and 6) text-centered visual symbolism. In contrast, the in-depth interviews with emerging designer brands revealed five key signature types: 1) design expression evolving from designer and brand identity 2) production emphasizing practicality and craftsmanship, 3) brand experiences based on spaces, 4) visual narrative symbolism, and 5) limited-edition items. Based on these findings, several distinctive features of signature expression in emerging designer brands can be identified. First, rather than using signatures as mere repetitions of specific products, emerging designers employed them as vehicles for conveying non-product aspects such as personal beliefs, philosophies, and aesthetic values. Second, signatures were not fixed constructs, but fluid and dynamic forms that evolved through interaction with consumers, particularly via spatial experiences and symbolic cues. Lastly, the signatures of emerging designer brands emerged not as static visual symbols, but as creative practices continuously refined and transformed through engagement with the broader sociocultural environment.

Table 1. Types and Expressions of Signatures in Fashion brands and Emerging Korean Designer

Category	Fashion Brands	Emerging Designer Brands
Types of Signatures	• Design based on sensory sensibility • Strategically constructed designer/brand identity • Brand practices carried by cultural and spatial experiences • Craftsmanship and custom production • Reinterpretation of existing designs • Text-centered visual symbolism	• Design expression evolving from designer and brand identity • Production emphasizing practicality and craftsmanship • Brand experiences based on spaces • Visual narrative symbolism • Limited-edition items
Expression Characteristics	• Used as fixed repetitive elements representing the brand • Tools for enhancing visual identity and marketing	• Mediums for values beyond products. • Evolve through user & space interaction

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Implications	• More fixed and visually symbolic in nature • Focused on strategic marketing and brand image reinforcement	• Signatures as evolving creative practices shaped by sociocultural context and consumer interaction

Conclusion

This study identified general signature types in fashion brands through qualitative content analysis and examined the types and expressive characteristics of signatures in emerging Korean designer brands via in-depth interviews. The findings reveal that signatures act as multifaceted mediators that communicate a brand's philosophy, identity, values, and practices, while also engaging consumers. Rather than viewing the signature as a fixed stylistic element, it should be understood as a dynamic structure reflecting brand uniqueness. This expanded perspective contributes academically by systematizing signature types in emerging brands and highlighting their distinct features, while offering practical implications by positioning the signature as a key strategic tool for brand development.

References

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