

Ancient Fertility Ritual Artifacts as Culture-Oriented Product Designs in Global Digital Business: The Venus of Willendorf in an eBay Case Study

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Abstract - Fertility ritual artifacts have been embedded in human history since the early Stone Age, associated with wishes for human, animal, and agricultural fertility. In the modern context, these artifacts extend beyond their historical and academic value, transforming into culture-oriented product designs disseminated through today's global digital e-commerce platforms. This transformation intersects multiple disciplines, including archaeology, anthropology, business studies, integrated design, digital technology etc. The aim of this study is to investigate how ancient fertility ritual artifacts are transformed into culture-oriented product designs within today's global digital business. The research pursues two objectives: (1) to identify the tangible and intangible aspects of ancient fertility ritual artifacts, and (2) to examine how these aspects are integrated into culture-oriented product designs through a multidisciplinary approach within contemporary business practices. A qualitative visual ethnographic method was adopted, using the eBay ecommerce platform as a case study and the Venus of Willendorf as the sample artifact for data collection. Findings indicate that ancient fertility artifacts have been transformed into diverse product categories that preserve key conceptual features while incorporating modern design adaptations linked to tangible aspects of the digitized marketplace. At the same time, intangible concepts such as fertility, femininity, motherhood, protection, prosperity, and goddess symbolism remain central in these reinterpretations. Collectively, this study demonstrates how prehistoric symbolism continues to inspire design innovation within global consumer culture.

Keywords: Fertility ritual artifacts, Culture-oriented product designs, Global digital business, Venus of Willendorf

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I. Introduction

Fertility beliefs embedded in ritual practices have played a significant role throughout human history and are recognized as a distinctive form of ritual expression. These beliefs are often represented through symbolic figurative artifacts, which appear from the early Stone Age to the modern era across diverse cultures worldwide. Such figurines are studied within archaeological anthropology, where they are identified as ancient artifacts and examined as material traces of past societies. They provide crucial insights into the cultures, values, and rituals of early human communities (Nedumaran & Suresh, 2022). Today, these artifacts are preserved in archaeological museums, storage facilities, and laboratories etc. Beyond their historical and academic importance, they have also been reinterpreted as culture-oriented product designs within the global business context.

Culture-oriented product design in a global business context transforms ancient artifacts into modern products that reflect the historical values and cultural identity of a community. This process connects human action with cultural meaning and consists of two main components as an intangible thought process and a tangible physical process (Kommonen, 2004). The transformation of ancient artifacts into culture-oriented product designs contributes to multiple disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology (Lewis et al., 2013), business studies (Wright, 2024), product design (Gumulya, 2022), digital technology (Xu & Chen, 2024) etc. demonstrating both its contemporary relevance and its ability to enhance product identity while meeting consumer needs in today's global market.

Among these multiple disciplines, anthropology plays a significant role in transforming artifacts into culture-oriented product designs, and the present research is framed around three sub-branches of anthropology: archaeological anthropology (Singh, 2022), applied anthropology (Gray, 2010), and digital anthropology (Aouragh, 2018). It further draws on business anthropology (Baba, 2012) and design anthropology (Gregory, 2018) as its sub-branches, illustrated in Diagram 01.

Applied anthropology addresses practical cultural and social challenges, bridging historical understanding with present needs to create positive changes (Kedia & Bennett, 2005) and business anthropology as a subbranch of applied anthropology, explores the relationship between culture and commerce, particularly through the design of culturally meaningful products. Relation to that, Design anthropology as a subbranch of business anthropology, focuses on transforming traditional artifacts into modern designs through iterative processes that preserve intangible cultural beliefs (Srivastava, 2024). Unlike linear design models, it operates across temporal dimensions, employing ethnographic methods to inform stakeholder-driven solutions. This fosters collaboration between designers and anthropologists (Bowen, 2009). Related to the rapid digitalization process created emergence of digital anthropology and reflects the growing importance of digital contexts in cultural production, concerned with human interaction in digital spaces. This field expands the reach of business anthropology and supports the development of culturally inspired products and

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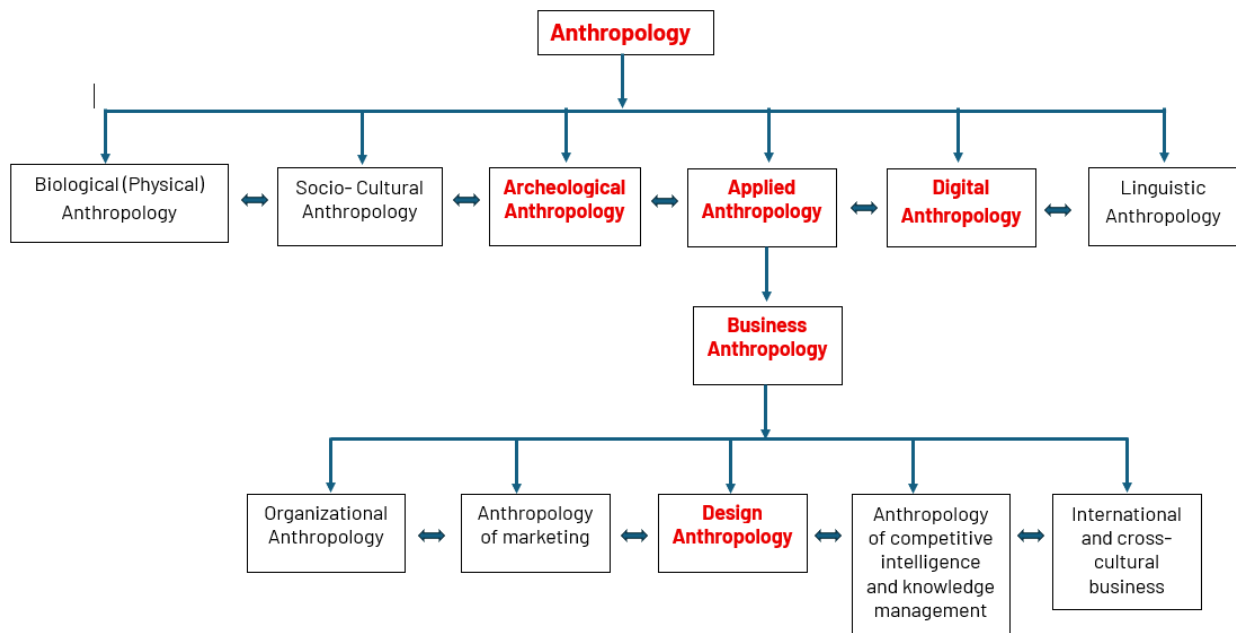
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services within over a billion websites and ecommerce platforms globally (Kumar & Ogunmola, 2020). Among these ecommerce platforms, Amazon, Etsy, eBay, and AliExpress have become significant arenas for the digital reinterpretation of ancient artifacts and selling a diverse range of product designs inspired by ancient fertility ritual artifacts have been revealing how those traditional symbols are recontextualized within modern consumer culture in digital business context.

Diagram 01

Illustrates multiple interrelated branches of anthropology that contribute to the transformation of ancient archaeological artifacts into culture-oriented product designs within a business context.



Note: Created by the Author

Despite the proliferation of such culture-oriented product designs has been explored in various industries, academic attention to the interdisciplinary processes that support their creation remains limited and little research examines how these prehistoric ritual artifacts are commercialized through digital platforms. Therefore, as an attempt to fulfil this research gap, the aim of this study is to investigate how ancient archaeological artifacts are transformed into culture-oriented product designs inspired by fertility ritual artifacts within today’s global digital business landscapes. To achieve this aim, the study has two objectives: (1) to identify the tangible and intangible aspects of ancient fertility ritual artifacts, and (2) to examine how these aspects are integrated to create culture-oriented product designs through a multidisciplinary approach in contemporary business practices.

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To address the research aim and objectives, it is essential to explore existing academic work across multiple disciplines. Accordingly, the following literature review examines prior research in fields such as archaeology, anthropology, digital business, and product design. This review provides a foundation for the present study by identifying key concepts, frameworks, and gaps in current scholarship that support the interdisciplinary approach of this research.

II. Literature Review

The literature review is organized into three stages. The first stage focuses on the nature of artifacts, particularly ancient fertility ritual figurines, and explores their tangible and intangible aspects aligning with Objective One. The second and third stages address Objective Two by examining how these artifacts are transformed into culture-oriented product designs through multidisciplinary approaches, and how these designs are marketed in the digital era.

A. Tangible and Intangible Aspects of Ancient Fertility Ritual Artifacts

Artifacts are generally defined as human-made objects associated with specific cultural periods or practices (Friedman, 2007). Ritual artifacts reflect belief systems and symbolic meanings, serving both practical and spiritual purposes (Dhall, n.d.). Turner defines ritual as “prescribed formal behaviour” related to mystical beliefs and powers (Barrett, 2015, p. 403). Within this context, archaeological findings have shown that fertility beliefs have historically been expressed mainly through figurative artifacts.

These ancient fertility artifacts, combining tangible features and intangible meanings, represent a unique category of ritual figurines. One of the earliest known examples is the Venus of Tan Tan (over 300,000 years old), made of quartz and displaying exaggerated bodily features interpreted as symbols of fertility or femininity (Shears, 2023).

The tangible characteristics of these figurines typically include steatopygia, emphasized sexual features, and nudity (Guttuso, 2022). They are generally small (around 10 cm), portable, and emphasize reproductive features while de-emphasizing others such as the head or limbs (Morris-Kay, 2010). Notable subsequent examples of Venus figurines, originating from different Stone Age cultures (Aurignacian, Gravettian period and Magdalenian) display varying tangible features (steatopygia to highly stylized thin figures) while continuing to embody the same intangible concept of fertility.

Intangible elements associated with these artifacts include beliefs related to human, animal, and agricultural fertility (Anati, 1986; University of Oxford), enhanced femininity, sexuality (University College London, 2002), motherhood, safe delivery and pregnancy (Lesure, 2011), goddess worship (Rose, 2024), spiritual protection and good fortune. Such symbolic meanings vary across civilizations, offering diverse cultural perspectives.

Literally, these ancient fertility artifacts were used as amulets (Guttuso, 2022), pendants

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(University of Bordeaux, 2023), toys (Nandagopal, 2006), cult vessels (Ghorbani, 2018), therianthropes (Sharma, 2007), hermaphroditic vessels, and phallic figures (Marshall, 1931) etc. These archaeological findings illustrate how ancient people believed in fertility-related concepts and expressed those intangible beliefs by materializing them into physical objects. Although the forms and functions of these artifacts varied, they were all rooted in the same core belief and ritual practices.

Building on this understanding, the following section explores how these tangible and intangible aspects of ancient fertility artifacts are reinterpreted and adapted into culture-oriented product designs. This transition highlights the connection between past ritual practices and their modern applications within contemporary business contexts.

B. Transforming Archaeological Fertility Ritual Artifacts into Culture-Oriented Product Designs: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Business Practices

The transformation of ancient fertility ritual artifacts into culture-oriented product designs is informed by interdisciplinary approaches, particularly business, design and anthropology which bridge the gap between archaeological heritage and the demands of global markets.

Business anthropology, as a subfield of applied anthropology, promotes culturally informed business practices by analysing how cultural meanings influence consumer behaviour and market trends. In relation to this, the literature identifies five types of business anthropology. Jordan (2019) outlines three categories: Organizational Anthropology, Anthropology of Marketing and Consumer Behaviour, and Design Anthropology. Additionally, Tian (2010) identifies two more: Competitive Intelligence and Knowledge Management, and International and Cross-Cultural Business.

Among these types, Design anthropology is most relevant to this study, combining anthropological insights with design practice to create human-centered, culturally grounded products. It emphasizes collaboration between anthropologists and designers, integrating ethnographic and archaeological knowledge into design processes (Lenskjold, 2011). Further, academic frameworks illustrate various ways of anthropology and design intersects as (Murphy, 2016) Anthropology of Design (studying design as a cultural practice), Anthropology for Design (using ethnographic research to inform design), Design for Anthropology (applying design tools to anthropological work), Anthropology with Design (integrating both disciplines through collaboration), Anthropology through Design (using design to engage with socio-cultural issues).

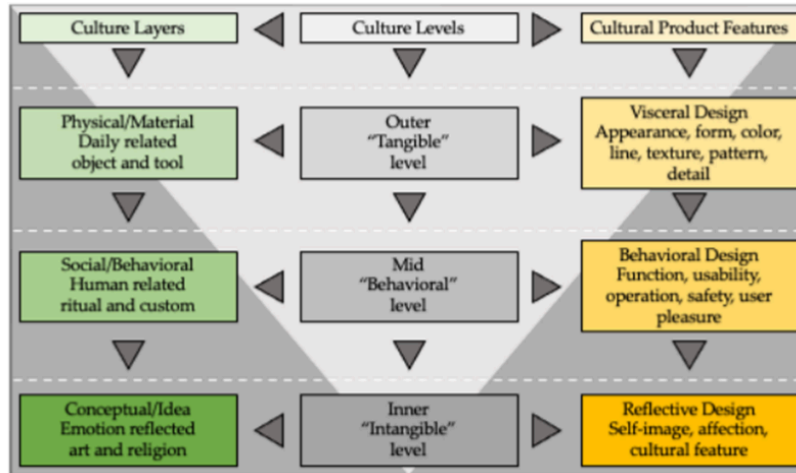
These approaches support the development of culturally sensitive, localized products that resonate in global markets (Lin et al., 2007) and moreover, one of models like cultural layers framework highlight: Tangible, Intangible, and Behavioural layers which are applying to reimagine ancient artifacts into culture-oriented product designs in contemporary global business context as illustrated in diagram 2.

Diagram 2- *Three layers and levels of cultural objects (Sun et al, 2022, p.6).*

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Note: This Diagram from Sun, S., Wu, I. W., & Lin, R. (2022). Transforming “ritual cultural features” into “modern product forms”: A case study of ancient Chinese ritual vessels. *Religions*, 13(517), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060517>

As cultural value increasingly drives product identity, designers are encouraged to act locally while thinking globally, leveraging culture as a competitive advantage in the design industry. Building on this frameworks and approaches linked with design disciplines, it is equally important to consider how culture-oriented product designs, once created, enter and interact with the present global digital marketplace.

C. Marketing Culture-Oriented Product Designs in the Digital Age: A Digital Anthropology Perspective

The rapid digitalization of global business has shifted cultural production into online spaces, where self-expression and commerce increasingly intersect. Digital anthropology has emerged to study these changes, treating the internet as an extension of social and cultural life (Srivastava, 2024). Within this context, e-commerce platforms serve as critical venues for marketing and distributing culture-oriented product designs. These platforms use integrated systems for online sales, payment, and logistics (Galli, 2021). Globally, there are approximately 32.7 million e-commerce stores, with significant markets in the U.S., China, Japan, Germany, and the U.K. (Brandt, 2025; Foot, 2025).

In the digital era, business practices increasingly draw on multidisciplinary frameworks and models to revitalize and transform ancient, museum-preserved artifacts into culture-oriented consumer products adapted for the global market (Sun et al., 2022). These products retain distinct cultural identities, reflecting both tangible and intangible elements of heritage. However, a gap remains in current research regarding how these models can be systematically used to incorporate cultural elements both in material and non-material into contemporary design practices (Moalosi et al., 2010).

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This study addresses the identified research gap by investigating how ancient fertility ritual artifacts are reinterpreted as culture-oriented product designs in the digital age, using interdisciplinary insights to bridge the past and present. The literature review established the conceptual foundation for this investigation by examining the tangible and intangible aspects of ancient fertility ritual artifacts (Objective One) and exploring their transformation into culture-oriented product designs through approaches drawn from anthropology, archaeology, business, design, and digital anthropology (Objective Two). It highlighted the symbolic cultural significance of these artifacts, demonstrated their adaptation within global digital marketplaces, these insights now inform the methodology section, which outlines how the study examines real-world examples to address this gap and achieve the research aim.

III. Methodology

To investigate the research aim, this study adopts a qualitative research approach, using visual ethnography as the primary method. Traditionally, visual ethnography is used in fieldwork to document, analyse, and interpret visual data through photographs, videos, artwork, and other visual materials embedded with cultural meanings and representations (Scott, 2018). However, this research focuses on culture-oriented product designs marketed on digital e-commerce platforms and applied digital ethnographic methods to collect data from digital environments. A case study strategy was employed for primary data collection, focusing on the eBay e-commerce platform. A selected sample of artifact-inspired product listings was collected between July 25 and 29, 2025. Additionally, product descriptions were analysed to extract relevant information from the platform. This primary data is supported by a literature review, serving as a secondary data source. The overall methodology is structured into three key stages, each aligned with the two research objectives

Stage 01 – Selection of Case Study and Sample Artifact for Visual Data Collection

The first stage focused on identifying a suitable case study and sample artifacts for visual analysis. As highlighted in the literature review, culture-oriented product designs inspired by ancient artifacts are increasingly featured on global e-commerce platforms. To determine the most appropriate platform for this study, a literature-based review was conducted, including data from a preliminary platform survey by Statista (2025), which reported the most visited global retail websites between January and May 2022. The top nine platforms identified were: Amazon.com, eBay.com, Walmart.com, AliExpress.com, Etsy.com, Amazon.de, Rakuten.co.jp, Homedepot.com, and Target.com.

Thereafter, the keyword search “Ancient Fertility” was used to collect visual data from the identified platforms through observational browsing. Irrelevant search results such as supplements, crystals, and cosmetics were excluded, narrowing the dataset to product designs clearly inspired by ancient fertility ritual artifacts. This filtering process revealed the highest number of relevant listings on eBay.com (1,044 items), followed by Etsy.com (456 items) and

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Amazon.com (132 items). These three platforms were examined further, and the products were classified by civilizations based on chronology. Prehistoric fertility artifacts emerged as the oldest category (Scarre, 2018). Within this context, two figurines the Venus of Willendorf and the Venus of Dolní Věstonice appeared most frequently reproduced across all three platforms. Given its symbolic significance, widespread reproduction, and status as one of the oldest known fertility figures, the Venus of Willendorf was selected as the sample artifact for further analysis. eBay.com, having the highest number of relevant listings, was chosen as the case study platform for in-depth investigation of culture-oriented products based on ancient fertility ritual artifacts.

Stage 2: Literature Review of the selected Sample Artifact: Venus of Willendorf

Addressing Objective One, this stage involved an in-depth literature review of the Venus of Willendorf, applying the Archaeological Artifact Analysis System (Djindjian, 2018) to identify both tangible (identification and classification, time and space, culture identification, chronology, spatial analysis, identifying raw material sources and manufacturing system, Inter site spatial analysis) and intangible aspects (an anthropological study -artefact as a functional, social, individual, hierarchical, tribal, environmental, symbolic signature), identifying distribution networks (artefact exchange and trading subsystem studies) of the figurine.

This review confirmed the Venus of Willendorf as a prehistoric fertility artifact and established a foundational understanding of its physical characteristics and symbolic value. These findings provided the conceptual and practical basis for analysing its reinterpretation in contemporary product design.

Stage 3: Visual Analysis of the Transformation of Fertility Ritual Artifacts into Culture-Oriented Product Designs: A Case Study of the eBay Digital Platform

This last stage addressing Objective Two, involved a digital ethnographic analysis of culture-oriented product designs inspired by fertility ritual artifacts on eBay. The analysis applied the framework of the three layers and levels of cultural objects focusing on: Tangible level, Intangible level and Behavioural level (discussed in Diagram 2). The analysis was limited to Venus figurine inspired products, excluding unrelated fertility icons, erotic objects, or duplicated etc. and data were collected and categorized through a three-step process.

First, all relevant product visuals inspired by ancient fertility artifacts were compiled from the eBay platform. Second, the images were organized into two main categories: Category 1, consisting of products directly modelled on the Venus of Willendorf, and Category 2, comprising products inspired by the basic form structure of prehistoric Venus figurines. Each category was further sub-categorized based on functional use, such as jewellery, sculpture, or decorative items etc. Finally, a visual mapping process was undertaken by developing a data/image board to systematically organize the collected visuals and support thematic analysis of design transformation and cultural representation.

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This multi-stage methodology, combining digital ethnography with artifact analysis, directly addresses the research objectives by examining how ancient symbolic objects are reimagined and commodified in modern product design. The next section presents the findings of this visual analysis process.

IV. Discussion

The study proposes a cross-disciplinary model for integrating anthropological heritage into global product design through digital platforms and this section presents a comparative analysis of the original Venus of Willendorf figure and its modern reinterpretations as culture-oriented product designs. Using the Archaeological Artifact Analysis System (Djindjian, 2018) and the three layers and levels of cultural objects framework (Sun et al., 2022), the analysis explores both tangible aspects such as chronology and context, materials, function and usage (Behavioral), scale and sizes, production methods, external form and intangible dimensions, including conceptualization, beliefs systems, symbolism and cultural reinterpretation. The aim is to understand how the concept of ancient fertility ritual figurines has persisted and evolved from the past to the present within global digital consumer culture through culture-oriented product designs.

A. Tangible Dimensions: Continuities and Adaptations

Tangible dimensions analysed through following subtopics.

1. Chronology and Context

The Venus of Willendorf, estimated at approximately 30,000 years old, originates from the Upper Palaeolithic Aurignacian period and was excavated in Austria in 1908 (Weber et al., 2022). As an artifact embedded in ritual and symbolic contexts, it represents one of the earliest examples of material culture linked to fertility beliefs. In contrast, contemporary product designs based on this figure are temporally detached reinterpretations, produced and consumed in a modern, digitalized, and commercial context, yet continue to reference prehistoric themes of fertility and femininity.

2. Materials

The original figurine was carved from oolitic limestone, likely transported from northern Italy, signifying long-distance material movement even in prehistoric times. In contrast, modern Venus-inspired products use a wide array of materials including ceramic, resin, plastic, metal alloys, stone, fabric, and polymer etc. often combining textures and colours for enhanced aesthetic and functional appeal. This diversity reflects industrial and artisanal production methods tailored to consumer preferences.

3. Function and Usage

Historically, the Venus of Willendorf likely served ritualistic or symbolic purposes as a portable object. In modern reinterpretations, functionality is greatly expanded. Products range from replicas and statues to jewellery, candles, bookmarks, clothing prints, perfume bottles, and home décor etc. This functional diversification demonstrates the adaptability of symbolic forms to serve both decorative and practical roles in contemporary life through contemporary materials, formats, sizes, purposes etc. Moreover, within the eBay ecommerce platform, some brand identities have

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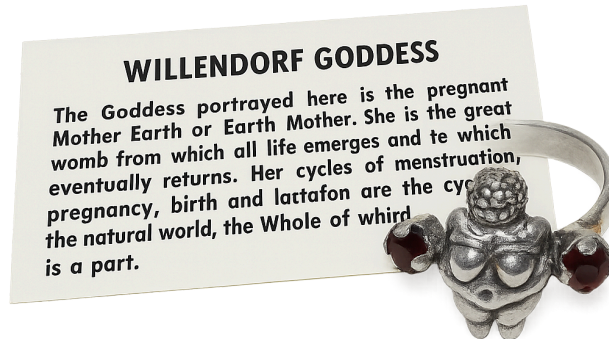
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been developed around the concept of fertility, drawing inspiration from Venus figures to create two-dimensional symbolic icons. These icons are then applied across a wide variety of printed products, including clothing for babies, children, and adults, as well as items such as pill boxes, pillow covers, tattoos, ice scrapers, business card holders, wallets, pet t-shirts, door hangers, bunting flags, and more



Figure 01
Original Venus of Willendorf



WILLENDORF GODDESS
The Goddess portrayed here is the pregnant Mother Earth or Earth Mother. She is the great womb from which all life emerges and to which eventually returns. Her cycles of menstruation, pregnancy, birth and lactation are the cycles of the natural world, the Whole of which is a part.

Figure 2
Venus of Willendorf inspired Jewelry (ring)



Figure 3
Stylized Venus figures inspired symbolic 2D Tattoo

Figure 01- Note: This is an original Venus of Willendorf figure from Weber, et al. (2022). The microstructure and the origin of Venus from Willendorf. *Scientific Reports*, 12, 2926. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-06799-z>

Figure 02- Note: This figure from eBay ecommerce Platform.
"<https://www.ebay.com/itm/388856991425>

Figure 03- Note: This figure from eBay ecommerce Platform.
"<https://www.ebay.com/itm/197657355300>

4. Scale and Sizes

Modern reproductions generally respect the original size of the Venus, measuring approximately 4.33 inches (110 mm) in height. However, it has been observed that some replicas vary slightly in size, typically ranging from 4 to 5 inches. More broadly, statues inspired by the Venus figure are produced in sizes ranging from 1.5 inches to 8.5 inches. Jewellery items tend to be smaller, usually between 1 and 3 inches, while some artistic drawings can reach up to 10 inches in height. Based on a visual analysis of product descriptions on the eBay platform, most three-dimensional, fertility-themed product designs fall within the 1 inch to 8.5 inch range. This distinct pattern in the scaling is one of uniqueness of fertility ritual artifacts continuing from ancient to modern period. This scaling flexibility shows how designers negotiate between historical authenticity and modern utility.

5. Production Methods

While the original artifact was meticulously hand-carved and painted with red ochre, contemporary versions employ diverse production methods such as 3D printing, casting, sewing, engraving, and digital modelling etc. reflecting the integration of craft and mass production technologies, allowing widespread access to products rooted in ancient symbolism.

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6. External Form

Contemporary designs vary from faithful replicas to highly stylized abstractions. Many maintain the original's exaggerated female features: such as a large belly, prominent thighs, buttocks and breasts without nipples as well as a clearly defined vulva and lacking anatomical precision and the distinctive head covering interpreted as a woven headdress and minimal facial details. Others reinterpret the form with minimalism, floral embellishments, spiral motifs or stylized body proportions (either thin or full-figured), blending tradition with new aesthetic sensibilities. Across designs, symbolic elements remain central, though visual execution reflects varied cultural, artistic, and commercial priorities.

Figure 4

Reinterpreted Venus of Willendorf sculpture



Note: This figure from eBay ecommerce Platform. <https://www.ebay.com/itm/123473618653>

B. Intangible Dimensions: Symbolism and Cultural Meaning

The Venus of Willendorf has long been associated with themes of fertility, femininity, motherhood, and divine protection. Alternative interpretations suggest that it may have functioned as a ritual object, a good-luck totem, or even an erotic stimulant. Collectively, these perspectives highlight its role as a shared cultural symbol embodying the themes of reproduction, survival, and the divine feminine (Weber et al., 2022). These symbolic meanings established through archaeological and anthropological interpretations are central to its enduring cultural relevance (Witcombe, 2016).

Modern product descriptions and visual data confirmed that these associations persist in commercial contexts, and all items are marketed as fertility icons or goddess figures, emphasizing their links to divine femininity, motherhood, prosperity, protection, healing, and abundance. Such representations demonstrate the continuity of symbolic meaning while also adapting to contemporary values and spiritual practices, such as New Age beliefs and personalized rituals.

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V. Conclusion

These reinterpretations of culture oriented-product designs inspired by the outer forms of ancient fertility figurine and the Venus of Willendorf demonstrate how ancient belief systems are recontextualized within digital consumer aesthetics, forming new semiotic meanings that link cultural heritage with contemporary consumer identity, shaped by interdisciplinary approaches. These modern adaptations span diverse product categories, including home decors, jewellery and accessories, fashion and apparel, spiritual or ritual objects, educational and collectable items, novelty gifts, and even pet-related products etc. Collectively, the findings illustrate how ancient ritual artifacts are not only preserved but actively transformed within contemporary consumer culture bridging prehistoric symbolism with modern lifestyle and aesthetic values. This ongoing evolution highlights the enduring relevance and adaptability of ancient iconography within the globalized and digitized marketplace.

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