

## Global perspectives and translations of consuming clothing waste in the present

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**Keywords:** clothing waste; second hand clothing; sustainable design; consumerism.

**Abstract:** The mass consumption of clothing has resulted in collection charities such as Oxfam exporting unwanted second hand clothing to markets in the Sub-Saharan region. This is a trade that is seen as supporting sustainable solutions to unwanted clothing but offers ‘both opportunity’ and ‘danger’ to local communities (Haggblade, 2007). The research explores the second hand clothing trade in Ghana, which evidences this danger and challenges the notion of opportunity.

The second hand clothing market whilst benefitting local communities in Africa has also impacted upon local textile production. From our conversations around these issues, a collaborative project idea emerged entitled ‘Return to Sender’. The project aims to highlight and challenge the effects of the second hand clothing market upon local heritage in Africa. A shared perspective through global design stories can encourage designers to understand the consequences of design but at the time same enable them to have the power to impact and drive change of consumer habits. The current and future perspectives of purchasing clothing and re-use is explored, regarding how this could then influence and change the global second hand clothing markets.

This paper also explores the potential of sustainable outcomes through focusing design in the present, rather than the future. In order to understand a global world we need to see the world as it is to solve the problems and in turn prevent problems in the future. We need an approach that is not engrained into a system but something that promotes creativity and openness to change.

### Introduction

This paper has developed through an ongoing conversation between three academics, who have collaborated to evolve thinking and experience; using a shared approach to develop an understanding of global perspectives on second hand clothing, sustainability and consumerism. Design is used as a central focus and presents the conversations and exchange of shared knowledge on sustainable clothing design practice and the global concerns in relation to clothing waste.

Over the last 15 years fashion has become faster and cheaper (Black, 2008). With the use of online purchasing, fashion clothes can now be accessed by the consumer at any time. The rise of digital technology has created a culture where owning and accessing makes it possible

to buy 24-7. This has developed a mind-set of a need for more; all of the time.

### *Second hand clothing in the UK*

It is evident that sustainable practice is emerging in the UK through second-hand clothing markets together with fashion retailers and charity initiatives being introduced. This still raises questions upon its sustainability long term; how much of this unwanted clothing is actually worn and more importantly what impact does it have on emerging fashion manufacturing companies within local communities? UK designers are educated to design and develop new innovative, creative clothing ranges and retailers use marketing strategies to encourage consumer purchasing. New clothes are designed that are positional and will shortly become obsolete. (Brooks, 2015). Changes to the way the UK supplies, uses and disposes of clothing could reduce the

carbon, water, and waste footprints of clothing consumption by 10-20% each year (WRAP, 2012).

Many UK retailers are now adopting sustainable business initiatives; Marks and Spencer's (n/d) (Shwopping) and Hennes & Mauritz (n/d) (Conscious Collection) both support clothing charities such as Oxfam. Much is still unknown about how sustainable this practice is and emerging evidence is indicating that donating unwanted clothing to charities can be damaging by preventing growth in new business for African fashion companies due to high volumes of unwanted clothing being donated. Although new initiatives are being set up to account for the growing waste, this also demonstrates how fast fashion over-produces clothing which fuels the turnover of over-consumption. Econmodo (n/d) reported 80% of stuff we own is used less than once a month. (<http://en.ecomondo.com>). In 2013 a study by WRAP into consumer second hand shopping, identified 27% would have bought them new if they could not find them second hand. A report in 2011 by Mintel produced a survey, showing 44% of participants intended to decrease the amount of stuff they buy.

#### *Designing for disassembly and re-use for innovative enterprise*

Through questioning different design and re-distribution approaches consideration to the importance of encouraging design students to explore new and existing methods that encourage the longevity of clothing became evident. Highlighting opportunities that could be utilized within the design process and end use, considering new ways of working that are sustainable for designers, industry and charities.

#### *Industry*

Niche companies such as Junky Styling in the UK have developed a sustainable business model of a wardrobe surgery consultation/procedure/result ([www.junkystyling.co.uk](http://www.junkystyling.co.uk)). Designer Christopher Raeburn produces garments by reworking unused and vintage military garments into contemporary outerwear ([www.christopherraeburn.co.uk](http://www.christopherraeburn.co.uk)).

The company Re-Shirt; have re-invented re-distribution of a t-shirt, using technology and the social aspects of fashion to embed the wearer's life of the garment. This embodies a perceived value of the garment and builds upon a

connection to a wider like-minded community. They describe Re-Shirt as "a way of keeping valuable cotton resources in circulation, providing information related to the cotton backstory, based on the idea of artefacts embodying historical narrative, adding tangible value and meaning to an existing T-shirt through the intangible value of storytelling. (Atlier, 2008).

#### *Charities*

Good examples of a workable business models with second hand clothing donation include the Oxfam project in Senegal called Frip Ethique (n/d), designed to provide employment and generate a profit from unwanted clothing. This is then invested in livelihood programs run by Oxfam in West Africa. It involves local women, who sort and sell clothes donated to Oxfam to local market traders. The profits are also invested in Oxfam's work fighting poverty in Senegal. TRAIID also demonstrates different approaches to making change within how to provide solutions for second hand clothing waste, utilizing opportunities for conversation, collaboration and learning to instigate change. An example of this can be seen within their project initiative with Fabrication which uses Upcycling Workshops to add value through creativity and design, stating "items too damaged for re use present an opportunity for transformation". They take inspiration from 'Cradle to Cradle' thinking, to "imagine a garment circulating through many owners in its lifetime." ([www.traid.org.uk](http://www.traid.org.uk)).

The key insights gained from these examples demonstrate the relevance of focus being directed to create easily the replacement of things by customizing, fixing and repairing in a bespoke and user specific way. Customising and mending design to exact needs in order to repurpose and in-turn not create waste; encouraging and enabling the longevity of a product.

#### *Second hand clothing in Ghana*

The economy continues to play a major role in influencing the buying patterns of the receiving nations of second hand clothing. Poverty has been a contributing factor in creating the explosion in the second-hand clothes sales in sub-Saharan Africa. A single parent with two children under the age of 10 who is a final year student on the Bachelor of Technology in Fashion and Textiles stated:

*"I have two children and have to pay school fees for them and myself because their father does not support in their welfare. I have to work full-time as well as study. The reason why I am on the course is that my current job is not in fashion, I work as a customer service assistant for a telecommunications company. I feel I have no future in that and fashion will be good for me as I can work for myself and teach with my qualifications, so that I can take better care of my family. So you see, why won't I buy second-hand clothes? I can dress myself and my family very well for little money, I can get my size and not have to worry about alterations, and people will not look at me and judge me for being a single mum and children will not be laughed at for not dressing well. Even if we have no food to eat, no one will know but if we don't have clothes to wear will be found out that we are poor."*

When two Ghanaian male youths were asked to state what the average life span of clothing item was, they replied with the following responses: (Langevan and Gough, 2012).

*"I have two ways of looking at this, firstly, life in Accra is very tough and therefore I must wear my shirt for example until it fades out and the fabric loses its strength. Even after this stage, I can pass it on to a distant family member in a rural area and it will be "new" for him. When seen as new for the distant relative, he will wear it for some time before he uses the much worn out shirt as "working gear".*

*"I have different clothes for different occasions being formal and informal wear. In the case of my formalwear which I may wear for church and parties for example, when it becomes old for me, I will then begin to use it as casual wear for college or for work before I pass it on or mend holes in them as a fashion statement."*

The irony of the findings was that even within Ghana, the notion of one man's food is another man's poison applies. When these second-hand garments have been used by the wearer, it has further beneficial uses from an urban setting to a rural area. In addition, the fashion student may wish to use the torn, over used garment for a fashion project to promote sustainable fashion.

As the conversation evolves into education and knowledge sharing, the dissatisfaction of Ghanaians towards the growing decline of the

African fashion industry has become poignant.(Hanson, 2000). The question asked is, can this ever stop? How would this impact on the masses who detests the effect on fashion design and entrepreneurship and yet, these very people depend on the SHC to survive? It has therefore become a necessary evil in Ghana.

### **Fashion entrepreneurship: the future of fashion in Africa**

The findings revealed that although a vast majority of fashion students buy second-hand clothes, they would be happier to have the skills of entrepreneurship incorporated into the education curriculum to support the sustainability of their future practices as designers in Africa. Though opportunities for entrepreneurship education have declined severely in Ghana, Langevang and Gough argue that education is the answer to "individual social success."

Fashion entrepreneurship education is key in transforming the thinking of the future fashion generation in Ghana and Sub-Saharan Africa.

### **Pre-pilot project**

As a pilot concept to test ideas, the fashion students from Accra Polytechnic worked on the 'Think Green' Project using items such as brown pattern paper, second-hand curtains and bed sheets to re-design outfits. Students were given a pile of 'waste' to look through and select to re-design something new. One group chose old zips from used, torn garments and re-designed a mini collection of outfits using different coloured second-hand zips.

### ***The Return to Sender Project Concept***

From the conversations and discussions on fast fashion and second hand clothing in the UK and Ghana, a collaborative project idea emerged entitled 'Return to Sender'.

The aim of the collaborative design project is to investigate global approaches to exploring design for disassembly and re-use for innovative entrepreneurship. The concept of the project was based on the Oxfam Flip

Ethique model. The aim of the project was to encourage UK design students and Ghanaian design students to re-design and develop garments for first and second life, challenging a more sustainable design approach. Ghanaian

Students will utilise the second hand clothing, using their heritage and design individuality. These garments will be sent back to the UK where students will design how this continuation could be incorporated from a first design stage, to consider different contexts and needs. Clothing will be used as conversation starters between two countries, creating global dialogue that considers impact and builds future understanding for sustainable measures within global transition.

By each student understanding the phases and lifecycles that clothing passes through, a shared narrative allows the opportunity to combine design thoughts and action to determine positive change.

### **Project brief - return to sender**

The project was set as a collaborative design project for UK and Ghanaian Fashion design students. Six fashion design students, three from Ghana and three from the United Kingdom were selected to allow shared thinking and approaches to design and produce clothing that is long lasting. For the benefit of ethics, consideration was given to the Ghanaian students due to limited resources available to them. An allowance was given to each student for their transportation and other expenses. The project aims to explore sustainable design methods that could be developed to change the model of the second hand clothing industry in both the UK and Ghana. The second hand clothing industry whilst seen as a sustainable approach to eliminating clothing waste has many unsustainable features and damaging effects.

The project provides selected students a unique and engaging learning opportunity, and it allows designers to share their knowledge and experience of design processes in different nations.

### **The project brief**

The project brief encompasses three stages: Stage 1 - Ghanaian students were required to purchase a second-hand clothing item, not worth more than £2.00 in pound equivalent. They then set out to re-design their selected pieces by recording the entire creative/design process. The students up cycle /customise/ reassemble the second hand clothing utilising their heritage and long view to create continuation of life for each garment. This would

make the purchase of second hand clothing more desirable. Through the design process students use second hand clothing and materials identifying problems, exploring ideas for superior re-purposing and making suggestions for change to be included for first design. UK students use this knowledge and practice to design transformable garment concepts, using the inspiration from how these second hand garments have been re-contextualized, to incorporate a built in longevity for future life at first life stage.

Stage 2 - This stage requires UK students to film their design process. They talk through the process and highlight examples of sustainable practice. Reflection on expectations as to what happens to garments once they are no longer worn will also be considered.

Stage 3 - Digital dialogue - on completion of stage 1 and 2, a global conversation between the students to discuss their findings and a skill sharing of ideas is to take place via social media.

This would open up an opportunity for dialogue for all students to consider garments as conversation starters, to share perspectives and build a language of sustainability for now and the future. This first would be achieved through the social media platforms Instagram and Facebook, to initiate sharing individual and personal use stories of clothing visually.

We decided to use visual methodologies in the form of video diaries that recorded the process and conversations. As this offers all students a confident medium for communication via smart phones, use of film apps and social network. For us as researchers it presents the opportunity to analyse the findings using visual and audio forms. Using these methods also creates pedagogy possibilities to use Schon's theory for students learning, enabling the ability to reflect in action and upon action of the experience.

### ***Methods of communication***

On a study conducted with 150 Ghanaian fashion students, it was discovered that 90% depended on external family support for the payment of their fees as they were in fulltime education. Though these students had little disposable income, the study established that over 85% of the students owned a smart mobile phone and had data to correspond worldwide



and through social media. Over 90% had a Facebook account and 30% were competent with video conferencing.

As academics, the central underlining view in the research is to promote education and training for the advancement of student's future prospects. It was agreed between both sets of students that communicating through video conferencing would create new knowledge for the Ghanaians and enhance communication skills for the UK students. Skills can be therefore transferred across the globe. The conclusion is a video conversation between six fashion students.

## Conclusions

This paper draws attention to current opportunities that do and could exist within education and industry to make a sustainable change globally. Using the current issues and turning these around through conversation and design possibilities. As Walker (2011) argues, the conventions of design that we have become used to, that are linked to mass production, intensive resource use, and disrespectful human relations, need to change. In order to begin developing alternative approaches to our existing production systems and material culture, we need design work that is experimental, probing and iterative. (Cross, 2006) refers to this as designedly ways of thinking. This paper and project continues these lines of thought, bringing research and action into the process of designing. The project is in the early stages of progress and is on – going.

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