Refugee Camps Stories

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Introduction/Concept/Context: The global crisis of refugees and forced migration has become a significant issue in recent years. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, over 100 million people have been forcibly displaced since May 2022, with children making up about half of the refugee population (UNHCR, n.d.). Though refugee camps serve as temporary facilities to provide protection and support, many refugee children have lived in refugee camps since birth and have never seen the outside world (Harlow, 2019). Despite the right to education as acknowledged in global agreements, refugee camps often lack proper educational resources and face numerous challenges (Piper et al., 2020). Therefore, there is an urgent need to invest in quality education for children in refugee camps. Research studies have explored educational strategies to support learning in refugee camps, such as using art-based methods to understand children's needs and create a conducive learning environment (Huss et al., 2021). To encourage more comprehensive research and activities to support refugee children's education in camps, a wearable art piece was created to inspire the effort.

As defined by Adams (2000), wearable art is "a clothing item that uses a variety of techniques and mediums to express the artists ideas of their life and the world around them" (p. 56). Researchers in textile and apparel have explored wearable art that tackle social issues (An, et al., 2020; Hahn & Collier, 2022). Yet, few apparel and textile researchers have explored how to use garments to address social issues while providing research knowledge for the viewers to promote positive changes. Previous studies by the researcher have focused on techniques such as modularity or upcycling to create wearable art pieces that address social issues (Chen, 2019; Chen, 2020). The purposes of this wearable art piece are twofold: 1) to explore innovative ways of creating modular designs using upcycled and unconventional materials to address social issues, and 2) to provide insight and knowledge to people to gain a deeper understanding of and support for refugee children in their educational pursuits.

Aesthetics: The inspiration behind this wearable art piece is the global refugee crisis and the educational challenges faced by refugee children. The ensemble consists of two pieces created from a secondhand dome tent, adorned with embroidery details. The modular cape is crafted using the grey and blue tarp sections of the tent. The color palette on the cape transitions from grey to blue, symbolizing the current situation of refugee children (grey) and their aspirations for a better future through education (blue) in a new country. The cape features modules in the shape of children's silhouettes surrounding a polygon, representing a scene of studying. The rough texture of the tarp materials used for the modules signifies the hardships endured by refugee children on their migratory journey. As for the dress, it is made from the body portions, the black and white polyester, of the tent, accentuated with black embroidery details to complement the cape. The embroidery details included quotes from published scientific literature supporting refugee children education and drawings developed by the researcher. The embroidery technique employed allows for intricate visual designs using thread, serving as an artistic means to secure and enhance materials of various types and sizes (Haar, 2004).

Process, Technique and Execution: The process began with cleaning and disassembling the secondhand dome tent. The grey and blue tarp materials that formed the base of the tent were selected for the cape due to their color and texture, aligning with the inspiration. The polyester materials from the

body of the tent, which had a smooth texture and interesting construction details like zippers, buckles, and flat felled seams, were kept intact to create the dress.

To create the cape, a modular system based on a polygon shape developed by the researcher (Chen & Lapolla, 2020) was employed. Children's body-shaped silhouettes were designed on the polygon shape using Adobe Illustrator and arranged in a circular pattern to symbolize a scene of studying. Functional cutouts were added to each of the six body outlines. Next, a laser cutter was used to cut out the modules in four different scales on the grey and blue tarp materials based on a method developed by the researcher's for creating fitted modular garments (Chen, 2019). These modular shapes were then joined together through the cutouts to form the cape, with smaller shapes on the neck and gradually larger shapes on the hood and sleeve hems. Modules made from blue polyester mesh, taken from the body of the tent, were also added to enhance the visual effect of the gradient color palette on the cape.

For the dress, the repurposing method known as intentional pattern-making (Irick & Eike, 2017) was referenced. This method involves taking apart old clothes and creating new designs using the fabric available, while using existing shapes and space efficiently. Due to the unconventional shape and construction details from the dome tent, instead of dismantling the tent, the whole body of the tent was draped on a dress form in various ways to test design ideas. A floor-length dress with a train was eventually chosen as the silhouette. The draping process involved analyzing the available materials and existing construction details from the tent to preserve its characteristics and achieve the desired new look. For example, the zipper for the tent opening was utilized as the closure of the dress on the center back. Next, embroidery details were added to the dress, incorporating direct quotes from 10 selected publications on educational research in refugee camps. The researcher also developed outline drawings to capture the essence of these publications. Both the quotes and the drawings were printed on sheets of wash-away embroidery stabilizer before stitched using a quilting machine on the front of the dress. Additionally, the names of the 10 largest refugee camps in the world were stitched on the back train. Once the desired stitching was added, the stabilizer was washed away. The dress was then sewn together with a upcycled lining fabric to complete the look. A short video of the design process is available to view here or via this link https://youtu.be/1KIgCBask6I

Cohesion: In this wearable art, the modular cape conveys meaningful messages using shapes, colors, and textures derived from upcycled tent materials. While a cape design was used, the modules could be transformed into different looks, symbolizing the unpredictable education environment in refugee camps. When combined with the dress, direct quotes, and representative drawings embroidered on the dress depict the educational experiences of refugee children in camps. The two-piece ensemble serves to amplify real voices and research knowledge from refugee camps worldwide. Further, the references of the publications were digitally printed on the backside of the stripes hanging from the cape. Through the techniques of modularity, upcycling, and embroidery, the initial research purposes have been achieved.

Design Contribution: This wearable art piece ventures into innovative approaches to create upcycled modular designs while addressing social issues in refugee camps. It showcases the journey of real experiences and research from refugee camps worldwide, offering valuable insights to support the education of refugee children during their transition to new communities. Additionally, the method employed to repurpose the tent contributes to the existing knowledge of intentional pattern-making (Irick & Eike, 2017) by exploring unconventional materials and reusing construction details for new designs. Future studies will further explore additional methods of creating modular wearable art pieces addressing social issues, with the goal of developing a new design framework.

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