

From Waste to Wardrobe: Exploring Textile Upcycling from a Local Perspective

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As societal consciousness surrounding environmental sustainability grows, there is a pressing need to explore strategies for mitigating the wasteful disposal of garments. Upcycling is known as a process that adds value to old or used products, distinguishing it from recycling and down-cycling, which often results in a reduction in the product value (Vadicherla et al., 2017). According to Aus et al. (2021), fashion and textile designers are increasingly experimenting with upcycling as a means of reducing the use of virgin resources needed for garment production. Upcycling presents an opportunity for designers to lead the way in using the many tons of textile waste generated to meet the ongoing demand for new fashion (Han et al., 2017). Despite the potential benefits of upcycling for the textile and fashion industry, there are still significant limitations to its widespread adoption. The lack of available data on the amount of textile waste generated during garment production, as well as the varied shapes and sizes of upcycling materials, pose significant design challenges (Aus et al., 2021). As stated by Gwilt and Rissanen (2010), there are practical challenges to creating standardized sets or series of garments using reclaimed materials, due to the irregularity of material supplies and unpredictable quantities. Thus, upcycling remains an area for further development in order to fully realize the benefits in supporting a sustainable and responsible fashion industry.

The research presented in this paper explores upcycling methods and some of the things that add value to repurposed garments used by local makers in Edmonton, Alberta Canada. Through this work, we identify specific techniques, materials, challenges, and opportunities faced in the process.

Methodology, Methods & Participants: Applying a phenomenological theoretical framework (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016), this research explores the subjective experiences of three upcycling designers located in Edmonton, Canada. The study adopts an in-depth interview approach utilizing a semi-structured interview format (Bernard, 2018), complemented by mapping activities (IDEO, n.d), which provide an exploration of the participants' perspectives, beliefs, and values towards upcycling. Additionally, the research seeks to gain insights into the participants' experiences with specific upcycling techniques, materials, and challenges. The interviews, which lasted around 90 minutes each, were recorded and subsequently transcribed to facilitate analysis. Thematic analysis was then performed using inductive coding techniques to identify recurring themes and patterns (Woodall, 2016). Based on the themes that emerged from the data analysis, a comparison was conducted to identify similarities and differences in the perspectives of the participants. Our participants were all female makers who actively engage in

creative industries and have strong educational backgrounds in art, design, and fashion with backgrounds in costume design and product development. They also have extensive experience in textile-based object creation through sewing and diverse approaches, such as felting and dyeing. Their diverse expertise and experiences enriched bring key insights to the process of upcycling by repurposing garments.

Common Ground: All of our participants share a deep commitment to promoting sustainability and are passionate about reusing or upcycling materials. They each sought inspiration from natural materials and vintage textiles, resulting in unique aesthetic appeal for their creations. Additionally, they emphasized the importance of resourcefulness and the economic necessity of using high-quality materials in their upcycling process. These participants shared common ground in their creative process, including material selection, idea generation, pattern adaptation, sewing techniques, and experimentation. By employing techniques such as steam, heat, pressure, and stitching, they each were able to manipulate materials in different ways to achieve their desired outcomes.

Challenges with Upcycling and Overcome Strategies: Challenges identified by our makers included: working with flawed materials (e.g., stains, odors, or inconsistencies); cost-value balance; and level of flexibility in the design process. Our participants valued the time invested in making something, and the material cost and quality naturally related to the final cost for the piece they created. They also shared a common challenge in determining the appropriate value for their upcycled garments; they even expressed a moral dilemma in assigning a monetary value to these products, noting the difficulty in striking a balance between perceived value and the time and effort invested in their creations. Moreover, they discovered that the expansion of flexibility in the design process can generate novel concepts for upcycling.

In addition to discussing the challenges of upcycling, the participants shared their strategies for overcoming these obstacles. In response to the defective materials issue, our participants suggested several approaches. These included repairing the material's surface by patching it or re-sewing pockets in the damaged areas. If the material is deemed unfit for reuse in garment production, alternative options such as using it to stuff other upcycled objects like an ottoman were also advocated. Furthermore, our participants suggested a value-based pricing approach to address the cost-value balance. This approach involved educating consumers about the historical background of the raw materials used in the product and highlighting the distinctive features of upcycling post-consumer waste. To effectively communicate the product's story and align with the target customer's preferences and willingness to pay, a handwritten card was included with the product. This approach aimed to accurately convey the hidden narrative behind the product and provide a compelling reason for customers to pay the proposed price. To address the concern regarding the level of flexibility in the design process, one participant emphasizes, "Quick change techniques can be used in the upcycling process which is usually popular in costume design. This technique revolves around the creation of new designs that feature concealed zippers, snap closures, and Velcro, along with the integration of quick-release layers." There are various circumstances in everyday life that may require one to change quickly, such as unexpected stains on clothing and unforeseen events. In certain emergency or hazardous

situations, such as being followed or experiencing a medical emergency, quick changes may be necessary to avoid exposing oneself to danger.

Discussions: The study focused on understanding the factors that inspire designers and makers in Edmonton to pursue the upcycling of post-consumer waste. Along with examining their creative approach, the obstacles they face and the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges have been investigated. The findings of the current study are consistent with and further support those of Gwilt (2020) and Aus et al. (2021) who consider the challenges of sourcing and dealing with the flawed materials required for upcycling as well as the significance of flexibility from the designer. In contrast to prior research, our study centered on examining the challenge of defining the worth of upcycled products, and how the implementation of cross-border design strategies can provide opportunities for resolving this issue within the realm of upcycling from a local perspective. These findings offer essential insights into the effectiveness of upcycling initiatives and inform future efforts to promote and support sustainable fashion practices. To broaden the scope of knowledge on the subject, it is recommended that further studies investigate the varying attitudes towards upcycling among designers across different genders. Additionally, since the study only focused on the local region as well as a small number of participants, caution needs to be exercised when generalizing the findings to other regions.

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