

Multi-wear sustainable bridal: A co-design process with lead users

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The bridal market is arriving at a point where alternative wedding dresses have market potential. The wedding gown in western culture, while a special garment, is wasteful in the sense that it is unlikely to be worn again. This lovely gown perfectly tailored to the bride's body is worn once and will likely never be worn again unless sold for another wedding (Drycleaning Institute, 2013). Few papers have addressed sustainable wedding dresses by upcycling them into different wedding dresses (Karkazian, 2016), and designing wedding dresses with zero-waste techniques (Schaefer & Navarro, 2013). However, with these approaches, the dress would probably still be worn only once. Another solution might be to work with brides identified as "lead users" to design dresses they would *want* to wear on more occasions beyond their wedding. Lead Users are consumers with ability to largely contribute to innovation through a collaborative design environment (Morris & Ashdown, 2018). The purpose of this design research project is to better understand potential for a marketable bridal collection that is focused on sustainability by identifying and engaging "lead users" likely to adopt these styles.

In an article by Hayes (2019) from the *Sourcing Journal*, modern brides do not want over the top dresses with expensive fabrics like lace or silk organza. She also discusses how color, new silhouettes and trends such as wedding separates are changing the way designers need to think about wedding dresses. In 2017 Mintel (Sender, 2017) came out with a report on trendy and affordable bridal apparel informing the reader that London based Topshop and Missguided each came out with lines of bridal wear. Sender (2017) discusses part of the reason is that brides and grooms are covering more of their wedding costs rather than the bride's parents paying for the whole wedding. Also, the western culture wedding is becoming less formal. According to The Knot 2017 Real Weddings Study, as nontraditional venues and cultural traditions grow in popularity over 50% of weddings are now outdoors (Couples spend an average, 2018).

Upon receiving IRB approval, the designer recruited participants through Facebook wedding chat groups as well as convenience and snowball sampling of women engaged, recently married (less than 5 years) or in a bridal party. In the initial survey participants were given multi-choice questions containing different bridal dresses and asked to pick those most closely reflecting their taste in wedding dresses. They were then asked open response questions about concern for sustainability of a wedding dress, intentions to wear the dress again, openness to wearing it again, and what features of wedding dresses they liked. They had the option to upload favorite wedding dresses from the internet and to provide their email for a follow up survey for feedback of design's ideas. A total of 39 participants completed the initial survey.

The resulting generative data from the survey was analyzed through a three-phase approach suggested by Sleeswijk Visser et al. (2005) which is (a) fixate on the data, (b) search and be surprised, and (c) find patterns to create an overall view. Based on responses, participants were categorized in 3 groups in terms of sustainability values towards their wedding dresses, Low, Medium, and High. The Low group included individuals that did not care about sustainability or against the idea of wearing a wedding dress again. The Medium group had interest in sustainability but may not commit to sustainable practices. The High group had a lot of interest in sustainability and wanted to make choices in their wedding dress that would increase sustainability. For the follow up survey of design feedback, 15 participants categorized as Medium and High were identified as “lead users” with interest in sustainable bridal and wanted to continue the project. The second survey consisted of images of the designer’s detail samples and initial sketches for sustainable wedding dresses. The dresses were designed to be worn as a wedding dress and for other occasions. To make this possible some looks had removable elements such as layers of a skirt or belts. Participants were asked what designs and samples they liked and disliked. Six of the dresses from the initial sketches were colored using pale pink, yellow or purple based on previous participant opinions from the initial survey. There were short descriptions included with these sketches if there were removable elements to the dress that would make them easier to wear on additional occasions. In addition to getting survey feedback from customers, a current designer in the bridal market consulted in other areas to help understand elements of the production process. She was able to speak to the market for sustainable bridal dresses as well as talk about waste issues in the bridal industry. She explained that waste often occurs specifically when needing to match lace or directional fabric resulting in much of this being thrown out. These conversations brought further awareness to complex issues that need to be solved to develop sustainable wedding dresses that lead users might likely adopt.

Findings from this research confirmed market potential for opportunities in untraditional, sustainable bridal with possibilities to be worn again. Lead users from the second survey agreed on several favorite concept sketches by the designer and were noted as valuable assets to the design process. Additional positive support was received for these concepts from the current designer in the bridal market. As a follow up, the current designer in the bridal market provided insight regarding how to create specific garment details with more efficient use of fabric. This also helped provide the designer with additional ideas and revisions to strengthen the sustainable bridal collection. While some participants had differing thoughts about wedding dresses being worn again, there were ideas of multi-wear for bridesmaids’ gowns and the mother-of-the-bride/groom dress. This illustrates several implications for the bridal industry. Designers and retailers in the bridal industry may benefit from finding ways to further engage lead users in the development process that provide valuable insight for shifts in the market.

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