

Analysis of the Availability of Second-hand Clothing as the Raw Materials for Repurposing

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Keywords: repurposing, second-hand clothing

Historically, the nature of the fashion industry has not lent itself to sustainable practices. This is evident in fast fashion companies where new styles are constantly being introduced, enticing consumers to discard their still functional, yet out-of-style apparel. This leads to an increase in the consumption of apparel and textiles, while still functional garments become prematurely obsolete. This has also been referred to as a "throwaway culture," where disposability drives the economy (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009). According to the Council for Textile Recycling (2018), textiles account for 3.8 billion pounds of the solid waste stream, or about 5% of the total landfill waste – much of which is recyclable. Consumers primarily recycle clothing and textiles through donation to a thrift/charity store, followed by passing along to friends and reuse (Domina & Koch, 1999). Most of this clothing is still functional and has simply been disposed because it is no longer fashionable or does not fit. Therefore, the fabric itself is still in good condition. However, because much of second-hand clothing is considered to be no longer fashionable, this deters consumers from making these purchases. Young, Jirousek and Ashdown (2004) found that repurposing second-hand clothing eliminated the negative social stigma associated with wearing second-hand clothing. In addition, Dunn (2008) suggested that a system needed to be developed to produce products using repurposed apparel. Currently there is no standardized method of producing repurposed apparel. Producing repurposed apparel can be very time-consuming, and because of high labor costs requires a high selling price to be profitable. Developing a standardized system for production could potentially lower labor costs and make repurposed apparel more affordable to the consumer.

However, before a system can be developed, it needs to be known the types of second-hand clothing and textiles available for repurposing. Research suggested that there is an inverse relationship between the quantity of merchandise available and the value of that merchandise, as well as the need for end-use markets to be developed to create demand for the high volume, low value goods (Domina & Koch, 1997; Hawley, 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine a merchandise category which has a need to be repurposed and to identify the characteristics of this category. Category was determined through phone interviews with store managers of six thrift stores in three metropolitan areas in one Midwest state. Two well-known, national thrift store chains were chosen and each of the chains had existing locations in the three metropolitan areas. Merchandise category was identified based on the phone interviews results and physical counts of the identified category was conducted at each of the six stores. The number of items available was documented, as well as the sizes, fiber content, colors and dimensions of fabric available for repurposing. Results show that end markets need to be developed for men's and women's slacks and jackets and that polyester, cotton, cotton/spandex and wool were the most documented fiber types. Repurposed design illustrations provide visual examples for best utilizing fabric available.

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Sustainability in Fashion: Regent's University London & ITAA Joint Conference Proceedings

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