

Future fit, socially responsible fashion designers: The role of fashion education

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Abstract

The multifaceted and complex phenomena of ethics and accountability have relevance for the current discourse of fashion design. This is evident in the choice of materials used, the conditions under which clothing is produced, as well as how designers think about and implement the practice of fashion. Fashion practice has environmental and ethical impacts that ultimately connect human wellbeing and society with sustainable practice.

In this paper, the scope of ethics in design is positioned within the context of social responsibility in fashion design practice and fashion education. The author borrows Sterling's (2011) future fit framework for teaching and learning for sustainability in higher education and applies this notion to fashion design practice and education. Future fit fashion designers reflect dedication, responsibility and moral duty. However, evidence suggests that fashion students seldom engage in ecological thinking and socially responsible practices in design, instead succumbing to the notions of design for seasonal fashion trends, and egotistical and financial desires (Szenasy 2009, pp. 170-171). In order to develop more socially responsible fashion practice, the role of fashion education perhaps requires a shift towards fostering future fit, socially responsible fashion designers in support of ethics and accountability in design as opposed to design for personal indulgence. This paper responds to this challenge in a two-fold manner.

First, the author theoretically contextualizes social responsibility in fashion design praxis. Adopting a desktop method, the author draws on theoretical perspectives on the constructs of sustainability, environment and ethics in the practice of fashion design. Linking these theoretical constructs to the educational context, the paper explores the role of fashion education in fostering future fit, socially responsible fashion designers.

Thereafter, the author pursues a qualitative research design employing questionnaires so as to gather data from fashion design students at a South African Higher Education Institution. The questionnaires aim to obtain the perspectives of fashion students in relation to: 1) how fashion education can create a culture and awareness of social responsibility in design and 2) the fashion curriculum content and didactics required to cultivate future fit, socially responsible fashion designers. Theoretical contextualization may provide significant evidence but fashion students are important stakeholders in the educational context as they constitute the 'next generation' of fashion designers. As such, the perspectives of fashion students are taken into account through empirical data collection. To analyse the questionnaire data, content analysis is used to categorize raw data into themes.

This paper is relevant to the fields of both fashion design practice and design education. In an attempt to foster more socially responsible, future fit fashion designers, this paper makes a significant and valuable academic contribution pertaining to social responsibility in fashion design and fashion education. Given these contributions, the paper aligns with the overarching theme of ethics and accountability in design.

Keywords: social responsibility, fashion design, fashion education

Introduction

Ethics and accountability are multifaceted, complex phenomena that have relevance for the current discourse of fashion design. Social responsibility in fashion design is one aspect of ethics and accountability that has gained increasing awareness. This is relevant to the practice of fashion design in terms of the choice of materials used, the conditions under which clothing is produced, as well as how designers think about and implement fashion practice. Fashion practice has environmental and ethical impacts that ultimately connect human wellbeing and society with sustainable practice. Fashion designers can reflect dedication, responsibility and moral duty in their work, or they can be indifferent to social responsibility and sustainability.

Fashion education is crucial in fostering a 'next generation' of future fit designers with a sense of dedication to social responsibility and sustainability. The author borrows the notion of the future fit designer from Sterling's (2011) future fit framework for teaching and learning for sustainability in higher education and applies this notion to fashion design education and practice. Evidence suggests that fashion students seldom engage in ecological thinking and socially responsible practices in design, instead succumbing to notions of design for seasonal fashion trends, and egotistical and financial desires (Szenasy 2009, pp. 170-171). In South Africa, fashion education appears to focus principally on job-related practical skills training and professional industry knowledge where theoretical aspects fundamentally comprise of "trade theory" (Smal & Lavelle 2013, pp. 197). Fashion education may give some consideration to social responsibility in praxis, but further emphasis could be beneficial in fostering future fit, socially responsible fashion designers in support of ethics and accountability in design and socially responsible practice. This paper responds to this challenge in a two-fold manner.

Firstly, the paper theoretically contextualizes social responsibility in fashion design praxis. Such theoretical contextualization serves as an important input within the educational context. However, fashion students constitute a 'next generation' of designers and are, as such, important stakeholders in this endeavor. For this reason, this paper also gathers empirical evidence from fashion design students in relation to: 1) how fashion education can create a culture and awareness of social responsibility in design, and 2) the fashion curriculum content and didactics that may be required to cultivate future fit, socially responsible fashion designers.

I argue that the scope and awareness of social responsibility in fashion practice may improve if fashion education can enhance its role in fostering future fit, socially responsible fashion designers and if curriculum content and didactics give further consideration to socially responsible practice.

This paper is structured such that it begins with a theoretical discussion of social responsibility in fashion practice elucidating the concepts of sustainability, environment, ethics and user needs. Thereafter, gaps in the educational context in both international and local contexts are discussed. Following this, the author delineates the research design and methods employed, and discuss the research results under three themes: i) participants' perspectives on social responsibility, ii) creating a culture of social responsibility and iii) recommendations for fashion education in terms of curriculum and didactics. The paper concludes with discussion of a way forward for fashion design education.

Social responsibility in fashion design: A literature survey

This section theoretically positions social responsibility in fashion design practice by reviewing the literature on issues such as sustainability, environmental concerns, ethical issues and user needs. Each of these is discussed in turn below.

Sustainability

Questions of sustainability impact upon the ecological cultivation of textile fibres and the materials produced in terms of their renewability, biodegradability, recyclability, production and processing, as well as in the consumption of water and energy, and generation of chemicals and waste (Fletcher 2008; Black 2011; Fletcher & Grose 2012).

Fletcher and Grose (2012, pp. 44-48) call attention to the emergent debates in design-for-sustainability. They argue for waste reduction by incorporating surplus pieces of materials into patchwork clothing and recycling discarded materials into new yarns. Additionally, Black (2011, pp. 11, 14) observes that the current focus of fashion design and sustainability coincides with commercial factors since society now consumes “one third more clothing than even four years ago”. The increased demand by consumers for low-cost, fast fashion promotes a “vicious cycle” because fashion is becoming disposable due to growing consumption (Black 2011, pp. 14).

Although discussion of sustainability often pertains to environmental concerns, human wellbeing remains at its core because people are the locus behind the practice of fashion design. Social issues pose key sustainability dilemmas (Fletcher 2008; Jenkyn Jones 2011), bringing about significant challenges in terms of the environment and human wellbeing. Fashion design practice gives consideration to human wellbeing and, as such, this discussion now proceeds to consideration of environmental and ethical issues and user needs.

Environmental issues

To materialize fashion products, enormous amounts of chemicals, energy and resources are consumed in service of processing textile fibers and materials, and washing and dyeing (Fletcher 2008; Jenkyn Jones 2011; Fletcher & Grose 2012). Fletcher and Grose (2012, pp. 13) argue that fashion practice has to find ways of responding to calls to reduce carbon emissions. In doing so, environmental factors and human wellbeing come into play as sustainable practices in fashion production may lend themselves to a healthier society.

The use of organic cotton is one way to respond to the interplay between environmental and social challenges. The differentiation between organic and conventional cotton cultivation lies in the use of “chemical pesticides, fertilizers, insecticides and herbicides ... and in soil quality” (Black 2011, pp. 115). Such chemicals, in mainstream cotton cultivation, are both harmful to the environment and present health risks to farmers. In contrast, organic cotton agriculture bans the use of synthetic chemicals, reducing health risks and carbon emissions (Jenkyn Jones 2011, pp. 34).

Renewability poses further possibilities for sustainability and human welfare. Fletcher and Grose (2012, pp. 16) highlight two key priorities in renewability debates. These scholars argue for the use and reuse of clothing and the utilization of low-impact renewable fibers. With new Sustainable Manufacturing and Reuse/Recycling Technologies (SMART), pulping and felting of worn fibers from old clothing are applied in order to develop new fibers (Jenkyn Jones 2011, pp. 35). Further possibilities, such as nanotechnology, fabricate new fibers such as vegetable leather to produce clothing (Jenkyn Jones 2011, pp. 35).

As can be seen, there are various possibilities that can be pursued in order to address environmental concerns, but ethical considerations are equally relevant to fashion design practice.

Ethical issues

Ethical fashion is “clothing that takes into consideration the impact of production and trade on the environment and on the people behind the clothes we wear. At its core, it rests on the principles of sustainability and responsibility” (Intel cited in Tseñlon 2011, pp. 5). Unethical fashion practices present the industry with various challenges. In the late 1980s, the manufacture of fashion products saw a shift from local production to outsourcing to lower-wage countries (Jenkyn Jones 2011, pp. 33). Fletcher (2008, pp. 57) argues that the growing demand for lower labour costs left manufacturers competing for market position which placed downward pressure on labour rights and ethical working conditions. Scholars (such as McIntyre & Ramstad 2011; Ross 2011) concur that exploitative labour

and the “sweatshop system” constitute unethical practice within the fashion industry. To certify ethical working conditions, several agencies such as the Asian Floor Wage Alliance, the Fair Trade Foundation and Labour Behind the Label were founded (Jenkyn Jones 2011; Black 2011). With the establishment of these organisations, a shift towards ethical fashion production is evident.

User needs

Fletcher and Grose (2012, pp. 132-133, 144) draw a clear distinction between designing fashion with users and for users. Designing with users is what these scholars refer to as co-design where users and designers are active, engaged and collaborative participants in design activities. In opposition, design for users addresses specific user needs.

Drawing from the South African context, the 2015 Nedbank Cup Football Fan Fashion Challenge positioned both co-design and user needs at the core of design practice. This challenge brought together collaborative participation between 16 football super fans, each representing one of the 16 teams competing in the 2015 Nedbank Cup, 16 South African fashion designers and 16 fashion design students from three selected local higher education institutions (Nedbank n.d.; Alzheimers 2015). By way of a selection process, each football super fan was affiliated with a designer and a fashion student to collaborate, engage and co-design football inspired products to address the specific user needs of the super fans (Nedbank n.d., Alzheimers 2015). These user needs included, amongst others, colours, iconography and elaborate head accessories that represented the respective football team (Nedbank n.d.). This example is one example of the juncture between designer, user and fashion education.

Educational context of fashion education

International scholars agree that design students tend to design for themselves with little or no consideration of user needs and that fashion design students lack ability with regard to ecological thinking and socially responsible design. Newstetter and McCracken (2001, pp. 67) affirm that “design students do not place their designs in the context of the environment in which the design will reside. They ‘arrogantly’ ignore the constraints of the user (whether that is a machine or a person). They often design for themselves”. At the Parsons School of Design in New York, Szenasy (2009, pp. 170-171) found that fashion design students’ initially rebuffed “ecological thinking” about values, responsibility and good intentions in favour of being “slaves to seasonal trends and fickle consumers ... [who] need to figure out how to make money, how to become stars”. Subsequent to a semester of alternative curriculum content, pedagogical approaches and developing a culture and awareness of alternate frames of references such as responsibility, moral duty, and obligation to human wellbeing, these fashion design students began to see responsibility, sustainability and duty in design through a different lens (Szenasy 2009, pp. 171-173).

In South Africa, the higher education curriculum for fashion education is vocational in scope focusing principally on job-related practical skills training and professional industry knowledge where theoretical aspects primarily comprise of “trade theory with focus on the chronology of dress” within historical paradigms (Smal & Lavelle 2013, pp. 197). Considering this, fashion education in South Africa may have shifted its current scope towards social responsibility in fashion design practice but further consideration in this regard may well be needed.

Research design and methods

This research was conducted at the Department of Fashion Design at a South African Higher Education institution. Permission was granted from the Department of Fashion Design to conduct this research but no ethical clearance was sought at an institutional level. For that reason, the name of the institution will not be mentioned. At this particular department, a number of initiatives and integrated student projects underpinned by a philosophy of social responsibility in fashion design praxis are implemented. Academics at this particular department are responsible for curriculum development and facilitation of teaching and learning but student reflections are important

considerations and provide significant input for educational refinement. Given the limitations of scope for this particular paper, student opinions alone are considered herein. However, in a follow-up paper, further research will be reported upon which considers the perspectives of academics regarding this discussion.

A qualitative research paradigm was deployed in which questionnaires with open-ended questions were used to collect data from a purposive sample of participants at a South African Higher Education Institution. The participants included 1st, 2nd and 3rd year fashion design students. Students are important stakeholders in fashion education, and their perspectives can provide evidence for educational enhancement. This is in opposition to the view that academics' viewpoints are the relevant inputs for curriculum content and teaching and learning. Although the sample included students across three years of study, the intention was to obtain students' general opinions and not to compare these opinions across levels of expertise, knowledge or to gain advice on curriculum content and delivery. Of 91 fashion design students, 51 volunteered their participation after receiving verbal and written information regarding the scope of the research.

The questionnaires were constructed and administered by the author so as to obtain the perspectives of fashion design students in relation to three core questions, namely: 1) participants' perspectives of social responsibility, 2) how fashion design education can create a culture and awareness of social responsibility in design, and 3) recommendations for improved fashion design curriculum content and didactics to cultivate future fit, socially responsible fashion designers. To analyse the data from the questionnaires, the author adapted Merriam's (2009, pp. 178-191) step-by-step process of qualitative analysis. Table 1 illustrates the author's process of content analysis.

Author's Analytical Process
Digitization of questionnaire hard copies
Repeated reading of questionnaires
Development of tentative themes, based on the three core questions
Assignment of a discrete colour to each theme
Colour-coding of raw data by highlighting extracts from participants' questionnaires
Determination of patterns in the data
Re-reading of highlighted extracts in order to ensure accuracy
Placement of highlighted extracts into respective themes
Re-reading highlighted extracts under the respective themes and clustering extracts with a view to preparing the discussion.
Finalization of themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants' perspectives on social responsibility • Creating a culture of social responsibility • Recommendations for fashion design education curriculum and didactics

Table 1: Content analysis process followed

Findings and discussion

Discussion of the findings takes into account student perspectives on this matter and is presented under the three emergent themes: 1) participants' perspectives on social responsibility, 2) creating a culture of social responsibility and 3) recommendations for fashion design education in terms of curriculum and didactics. Since qualitative research focuses on interpretation of multiple realities, to support interpretations and to differentiate between researcher and student voices, evidence from the raw data is italicized both in the main text and in tabular representations.

Participants' perspectives of social responsibility

The findings suggest that social responsibility was underpinned by environmental factors and that design practice and production methods should exercise an ethos of environmental consciousness. Students' words, such as *using environmentally conscious methods of clothing production that have less effect on the environment* along with *designing with the environment and humans in mind*, support this interpretation. The need to design for human wellbeing with less effect on the environment aligns with Jenkyn Jones's (2011, pp. 34) argument for organic cotton cultivation which could reduce health risks and environmental challenges. Improved sustainability of resources, reducing carbon footprint and environmental protection were students' conceptions of environmentally friendly practices in design and production. This is illustrated in table 2. These findings are in line with environmental arguments put forward by scholars such as Fletcher (2008), Fletcher and Grose (2012) and Jenkyn Jones (2011) as were described in the literature survey.

Finding the methods to improve sustainability of resources
Using natural materials and recycling
Responsibility to adhere to the needs of the environment
Lowering your carbon footprint

Table 2: Students' rationale for environmentally friendly practices

Design for social good, societal problem solving and ameliorating living conditions appeared as key social responsibility considerations. The findings demonstrated that knowledge and skills training initiatives for underprivileged community members presented opportunities for societal enhancement. Students reflected that *giving back to the community with the skills and knowledge by providing training skills to woman - to provide for their families* [in order to] *improve the standard of living*. Locally produced goods that relied upon indigenous skills and enhanced employment opportunities for economic sustainability appeared as another dimension of social responsibility. Students were of the opinion that *fashion has importance for job creation and economy by employ[ing] local people*. This finding supports the South African case of Wear Only ZA (ZA is an acronym for South Africa) (WOZA). A number of Cape Town fashion designers, under the auspices of the WOZA campaign, promote the ideology of locally-designed and produced clothing, using local skills and resources where the design and production occurs partially or completely in South Africa (WOZA 2011 n.d.). Initiatives such as WOZA have the potential to contribute to job creation, growth of human capital in terms of skills development and the capacity to improve society's living standards.

Creating a culture of social responsibility

Enthusiasm for creating a culture of social responsibility and elevate levels of awareness was apparent. Students suggested a *dedicated day, in the institution's* academic planning for socially engaging *community projects that could benefit communities in need*. These suggestions appear to materialize at the London College of Fashion (n.d.) given that students and academics work "with charities and foundations in schools and prisons offering fashion education and opportunity and raising social awareness". Socially responsible design campaigns such as *recycling clothing drives, re-using to re-invent* new design solutions and an *eco-friendly fashion show* were further student propositions. Eco fashion shows are in line with international trends with New Zealand hosting an eco-fashion week and Vancouver hosting its 9th show (Eco Fashion Week n.d.; New Zealand Eco Fashion Week n.d.). Some students were of the opinion that such proposals may well come to fruition if jointly supported by all academic staff, curriculum content and teaching and learning.

Zest and motivation for joint social responsibility amongst academic staff were noted as a concern. Students were of the opinion that some academic staff did not place ample emphasis on social responsibility in teaching and learning. If this is the case, it raises concern as to how it may be possible for fashion design education to create a more profound awareness of the notion of shared social responsibility and value. In support of this latter statement, a number of student reflections are presented in Table 3 below.

Combined effort with all lecturers
If all lecturers are more concerned about it perhaps the students would be to
Issue is not stressed enough
Teaching should be encouraging and place emphasis for students to be socially responsible
Lecturers to give more opportunity to understand the importance of social responsibility

Table 3: Students' reflections on academic staff

The scope of fashion education and didactics could perhaps be underscored by the ethos of design for social change, *responsibility; community engagement* and *active participation with users* as opposed to notions of *popular culture, consumerism, trends* and the *vanity associated with fashion*. *Deeper understanding of user needs, user environments* and social problem-solution co-evolution may well enhance the current culture and awareness of social responsibility. Design for social good, community engagement and sustainability appear as the ethos in education at international institutions such as the London College of Fashion (n.d.) and Royal College of Art (n.d.).

Recommendations for fashion design education curriculum and didactics

This theme explores how current fashion design education curricula and didactics may be improved so as to develop more socially responsible agents. Perhaps a more integrated approach to curriculum content with design projects concentrating on indigenous contexts and local social problem solving coupled with a research driven approach may deepen understanding and support investigation into social problems for application to tangible fashion solutions. Table 4 foregrounds students' evidence for recommended curriculum content.

Curriculum that focuses on more local contexts
Need for projects that pertain to real existing problems specifically on social problem solving
Modules that teach us how to identify and investigate social problems and apply those into fashion solutions
Research that involve socially responsible projects
A social responsibility factor incorporated into all projects in the curriculum

Table 4: Recommended curriculum content

The current scope of problem solving appears to be more *theoretically* orientated but it is necessary to consider the possibility that more *opportunity for practical application in society* could shift the scope towards social problem solving. Perhaps *more community based projects with solving real world social problems* and human-centeredness could be the cornerstone for future curriculum projects.

Proposed curriculum content for fashion design programmes may include topical issues such as *sustainable design management*, the broader scope of sustainable design and production methodologies, and environmentally and ethically sound design, production and business practices. Embracing *a green culture in learning material* could possibly *allow them to be more socially responsible* and might enhance socially responsible fashion design practices. Content on *eco-friendliness and sustainability, social responsibility* and *green design from design, manufacturing and*

businesses strategies, with more content on fair labor practices are students' inputs that may perhaps enhance socially responsible fashion practices. Students' also advocated the need to revisit the current textile studies content. Students' proposals such as the need to *include content on environmentally friendly textiles*, and the suggestion that students may *learn more if curriculum content provides alternative ethical and eco-friendly textiles* endorse these findings.

Teaching and learning could perhaps allow for further self-growth and exploration. Students were of the opinion that current practices allowed for limited self-growth and exploration. *Expectations of perfection* in fashion solutions and the culture of moulding to fit stereotypical boxes were noted limitations that may hinder exploration. Students were also of the view that teaching and learning methodologies could foster more cohesion between studio space and real world settings.

Opportunities for *community engagement and interaction with tangible users in real world social contexts* may also possibly enrich teaching and learning. *Physical interaction with people and users may enable a deeper understanding of design problems to foster more socially responsible learning*. Table 5 below highlights students' views regarding teaching and learning.

Opportunities for students to explore and not fit into the same box
Not attempting to control the students and giving self-control
Place less emphasis on perfection
More integrated programs
Teaching could support real life situational case study
Teaching that allows for interaction with the social environment and users
Teaching that creates more engagement with communities and working with people from the outside
Teaching that allows for engagement with the real world

Table 5: Ratifications for teaching and learning

Conclusion

Theoretically and empirically, design for social good, social problem solving and human and environmental wellbeing appeared as key social responsibility considerations. However, a heightened and shared culture of social responsibility may be required at an educational level. Students' were enthusiastic about creating a culture of social responsibility and elevated levels of awareness but it may be possible that some academic staff do not sufficiently emphasize the importance of social responsibility in teaching and learning.

Fashion education may have repositioned itself from being a predominately vocational field of study scope to adopting a stance in favour of design for social change, human-centeredness, responsibility, community engagement and active participation with users but this could be intensified and should be seen as the predominant vehicle through which to better position students as future fit, socially responsible designers in a changing world. An integrated research approach to curriculum content and design projects with a core focus on indigenous contexts and local social problem solving is perhaps one way to develop such an ethos. Theory directed towards socially responsible practice in fashion design could be another means. The contribution of this paper may deepen thinking in this regard, but further research is required so as to align the argument of this paper with the perceptions of academics regarding this phenomenon.

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