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SHARED EMOTIONAL VALUES IN SUSTAINABLE CLOTHING DESIGN APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

Recent sustainable initiatives in fashion companies are framing design practices that challenge the traditional role of clothing designers. This preliminary study aims to open discussion on challenging traditional clothing design, through an exploration of the shared emotional values between user and designers, when designing for longevity.

KEY WORDS

Sustainable clothing design; longevity; shared emotional values; user-involvement; design challenges

INTRODUCTION

Extending the useful life of products has been classified as one of the key principles when designing for circularity within fashion (The Great Recovery Report 2016; 14, Brismar, 2016). Recent sustainable initiatives to this direction are framing design practices that stand in contrast to and challenge the traditional role of designers (Fletcher 2013; Niinimäki 2011; Riisberg et al. 2015). In doing so, this article is a reflection on the changing role of clothing designers in their attempt at being drivers of values geared towards extending garment lifespans. I Made This (Finland) and Unmade (United Kingdom) are two such companies engaged in minimizing waste, prolonging garment lifespans and increasing user-garment attachments through innovative garment design and user involvement. Looking through the lens of these companies’ design practices of zero-waste design and production on demand, this preliminary study will begin by illustrating the meeting point of design drive and user centred values. How each of these values are being defined, at what point do they crossover and what are the implications of this shared value framework on garment longevity, are the underlying themes of the discussion that is to follow.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In trying to set future paths for a more sustainable garment industry, the user may be considered as an important partner in making change. Short-term use is one of the characteristics resulting in overconsumption of clothing (Armstrong et. al 2014). It is, therefore, highly relevant to focus on the users’ garment attachment as an approach to address future consumption. “The user’s positive emotions towards a product offer possibilities to create commitment and bonding to this product, which will be cherished and taken care of. Accordingly, emotions play an important role, not only in consumption but also in the commitment process.” (Niinimäki 2011; 58). Identity construction, aesthetic needs, ideological inclinations and personal memories are some of the forms that user emotions translate into (Niinimäki 2011). Niinimäki and Koskinen (2011) propose a framework to embed an empathic approach to the design process by taking into consideration these various levels of user emotions. They argue that a satisfying use experience can be achieved when meeting the user expectations for quality, functionality as well as aesthetical dimensions (ibid.; 182). This can then create, what the authors refer to as, ‘emotional value’ and add to user garment attachment. Furthermore, it is suggested that value leading to sustainable consumption can be created in the design and production phase when oriented towards the future (Niinimäki 2011; 61).

Recent years has seen an increased production in research investigating innovative sustainable business thinking and looking towards opportunities to design for more sustainable consumption in the garment industry (for an overview, see for example Fletcher and Grose, 2012; Fletcher and Tham, 2015; Gardetti and Torres, 2013). Within this, the new role of the designer has also been discussed. According to Walker (2007) sustainability in itself...
“challenges and calls for new and alternative models to become accepted, validated, and desirable codes or practices.” (Marchand and Walker 2007; 3). This creatively challenging design approach is backed up by ecologically driven values in sustainable systems; e.g. design approaches for minimizing waste. The practice allows for re-defining the meaning of new and durable through novel designs. Additionally, it is also proposed that through user involvement, the product is allowed to have the opportunity of gaining more value in the eyes of the user thus, leading to greater user-product attachment (Ibid: 6). In trying to understand the many levels where value is influenced, Niinimäki also emphasizes on catering to the users ideological values. (Niinimäki 2015; 4). For consumers with an interest of the social and environmental impacts of products, addressing these aspects can possibly add value to the consumer and the relation shared with their garments (Armstrong et. al 2014).

However, at what point do these two sets of values (emotional and ecological) interlock with one another, and what subsequent challenges may arise in that space are questions remaining to be addressed. The following sections will then be introducing the two companies chosen for this task and will take the discussion on elongating garment life spans through a further understanding of shared emotional values forward.

RESEARCH APPROACH

For the purpose of this study two small scale clothing companies, I Made This and Unmade, were selected to explore the intersection of ecological values driven by design and emotional values centred at the user and its intentional impact on users’ garment attachment. Both companies reflect design practices that aim to minimize waste by different production approaches, and offer their users to be involved in the design and styling choices of the clothing.

In studying the companies, desktop research was supplemented with in-depth interviews conducted at the design studios in the surroundings of the companies work and production. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured form with the intention to let the companies (designers) narrate their stories while leaving space for related subjects that might come up. The collected data was then analysed from three aspects: sustainable garment awareness, user involvement and garment attachment for longevity. Details of which are given in the upcoming sections.

COMPANY DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Unmade a London based start-up company specializes in on-demand production of knitted scarves, t-shirts and sweaters for both genders. The company provides customers with the options to creatively interact in the making of their garments when placing orders online. By which, the information about the customised garment is sent to the knitting machine in the manufacturing studio. All garments are fully fashioned made of high quality fibres (e.g. extra fine merino and pima cotton). The style options vary in colours and jacquards designed of the Unmade team and collaborative designers.

I Made This (IMT) is an independent Helsinki based zero-waste design practitioners’ company. Troubled by the alarming culture of the current fashion industry, IMT began its ready to wear line in 2012. Since inception, the collection has consisted of clothing items made from scrap and left over fabric purchased from an out of business local fabric store. Using the limited materials, digital and silk screen prints have been used to create an unconventional line of one-size, multi-purpose and comfortable t-shirts, dresses, jackets, and trousers. Each item in the two collections is unique in both its’ print, style and design.

Sustainable Garment Awareness

Production methods used by both companies are based on principles of sufficiency and elimination of waste (Walker 2007). On average one piece of clothing contributes to approximately 15-20% of wasted cloth at the fabric cutting stage (Rissanen 2013). Zero-waste design practice aims at eliminating this waste through creative pattern cutting techniques. Patterns are determined before the fabric is cut and the width of the fabric is integrated fully within the pattern or used throughout a collection (Mills 2013; 104). Whereas, conventional garment patterns are produced only after garments have been designed and cut. Through zero-waste design all the pieces of the cloth are adjusted to be used in the garment by merging pattern making and cutting with fashion design. Thus, by
using up all of the fabric needed for the garment, waste is eliminated by injecting it back into the design of the garment (Rissanen 2013).

The principles of circular fashion (Brimar, 2016) can be seen being employed in I Made This limited clothing line. Designed and cut solely by IMT the garments are made either by using the fabric in its entirety to form geometric necklines or by reusing the left over cut outs in decorations for the shirts or accessories. This technique not only eliminates waste but allows designers to innovatively use limited materials. “I like to challenge myself and narrow it down, that’s why I like using left over materials because you can’t do whatever you want but you have to make something out of what you have and I like that. It spurs my creativity more.” (IMT, interview). Referring to a two-sided jacket (figure 1), black on one and grey on the other side, IMT explains: “the material I used is used for making bed sheets and I made a jacket out of it.”

Similarly, Unmade’s practice of knitting fully fashioned garments on demand allows for reduction in waste. “Things aren’t made until they are wanted which means there is no wastage. Because it is so expensive at the moment with other processes to actually make these designs; to iterate and manufacture, people (designer/producers) have to make hundreds of them (garments){…}a lot of them aren’t wanted in the first place, and they just become landfill. So we just make things only when they are wanted” (Unmade, interview).

Production is driven by demand and based entirely on the orders received (figure 2). By which, Unmade challenges the idea of storing clothing in stock, and no unwanted garment is disposed. For the purpose of manufacturing, the company has developed a software system to ease every part of the garment making and to address customer experience of play with personal aesthetics while also fulfilling ideological visions (Niinimäki 2013).
All production (knitting, linking and stitching) takes place in London where knitwear experts work in house with the designers. Social media is used to provide for transparency whilst building customer relations. The company meets consumer expectations of providers of information on production process and implicated partners (figure 3). “The more we talk to people, the more engaged they become. So it only improves things for us. If they feel like they have got everything then they feel more involved in the company as well” (Unmade, interview).

User Involvement: The Style of the Garment

The two companies allow users to participate in the clothing style at different levels for customisation; IMT engages them in the use phase whereas, Unmade does so at the point of purchase. Both companies have the opportunity to achieve deep customer satisfaction through personal aesthetic preferences (Niinimäki 2013). Clothing from IMT is created in ways that let the users’ body give form to the garment. Among IMT’s collection is a unique dress that can be used as a blouse if pulled up. It comes with a hoody which when pulled forward can be converted into a lower layered neckline (figure 4). In this way, the user is offered various options of wearing the same garment in different ways. “I like that everybody wears things differently and the same piece of clothing will not look the same on different people” (IMT, interview).

Additionally, the flexibility offered by IMT’s one size garments not only allows the user to individualize the products but also use the garment even when body shape changes to get more out of their usage. “I wanted to make a dress for someone who is a bit bigger, and that also look nice on someone who is skinny and could wear it too.” (IMT interview). Kirsi Laitala (2014), argues that such designs are emotionally durable as they; “improve the physical and technical robustness of the clothing while also addressing the emotional and expressive quality they can provide to the consumers” (Ibid.; 11).

When placing an order for an Unmade knitted item, it is for the user to decide how it is made with the possibility to make a one of a kind garment. Every piece in the knitwear collection can be customised from options on shapes, jacquards and colours designed by Unmade. The online shop allows users to creatively interact with the virtual version of the clothing and play with the jacquard, patterns and colour hues by e.g. dragging the cursor around (figure 5, Unmade 2016a). “We have looked into new way for people to make sure that it (the design) is individual
to them, as for example the striped one, where they can use their name for an individual pattern, and move up and down and things like that, which is really important to us” (Unmade, interview).

Users in both cases are seen as integral to clothing design which is also reflected in the names of the companies. IMT explains: “I really like the idea that everybody who is wearing my design will wear it their own way. I don’t want to own it, I want the person who buys my design to own it and say: ‘I made this’”. The name Unmade is based on the company’s concept that the knitted garments are not made until the user has been involved. On social media Unmade is even using the hashtag; #unmadebyyou (Unmade 2016b), in their way of communicating the user involvement approach.

### Garment Attachment for Longevity

In the perspective of clothing use time and longevity, IMT offers users multiple options for wearing garments, which gives the possibility to foster more use. The longer the clothing is used the closer the user gets to the product and a nurturing relationship is formed (Niinimäki 2015). Correspondingly, Unmade offer the users the ability to personalize their preferences in co-creatively made knitwear. This involvement, at the design stage, elevates garment appeal and allows users to bond with garments that are one of its kind (Armstrong et. al 2014).

Satisfying use and creating customer relations by promoting clothing attachment are core values to both companies. “I like the idea of having one jacket or dress and getting more out of it{…}The more you get out of something the longer you keep.” (IMT interview). Similarly, inside every Unmade knitwear the company sends a personal message for the customer to cherish the shared making of the garment.

### DISCUSSION: CHALLENGING THE DESIGN PRACTICE

As seen, designers in both companies are adapting to new methods that challenge the traditional comprehension of design practices. Looking towards Unmade’s design approach, they are not only involving the users but also inviting other artists and designers to collaborate on the design choices provided. Unmade expresses; “The external (designer) get their own label. We like the fact that we are in-between the product and the designers, and the customer and the designer. Which is where we like to sit. The idea that you can’t make the whole logo without everyone having their part in it.” The online interface requires software qualification and at the same time knowledge of knitwear technology. Likewise, producing on demand challenges design thinking and logistics that can handle customised orders and new ways of doing business. In this way, a new role for the designer is being scripted as a facilitator that mediates between stakeholders with different expertise (Fletcher and Grose 2012).

Operating on several levels of aesthetic and ethical values may result in a rather complex design approach. Unmade explains; “As we do this everyday, it is very easy to be at our point, and forget all the steps. All of our customers haven’t been there. So we have to take them along in a way that they can understand, that is really open and intuitive{…}meanwhile we are also trying to make sure that they (the knitwear) won’t look ugly on anyone, because you know, it might be the coolest concept in the world, but everyone still wants to wear a nice jumper. And also if we want designers to work with us, we don’t want no one to take their design, and make it ugly or unaesthetic, so having those barriers and parameters of what people can do is really important, and also if you give like people complete choice over everything it is just so overwhelming.” Understanding the design concept of the product is important for the user to participate and interact, and in the end obtain user satisfaction.
(Walker 2007). Thus, the communication of values around these new design approaches will be a second task to consider in building strong and longer lasting garment-user relations.

Additionally, to make clothes that apply to zero-waste design, necessitate a certain level of skill polishing when finding a balance between aesthetics and ecological ethos. IMT’s distinct designs not only challenge conventional design practices but are a testament to the principles of minimalism and circularity both in production and use. IMT explains; “It is very difficult to have zero-waste if you keep having different sizes because the width doesn’t change. If you are going to have 5 different sizes it is going to be very difficult to not waste the material{...}Even if you are using geometric shapes you still have to measure and see how you are going to use the whole width of the fabric{...}Zero-waste in general is difficult you can’t just make anything you want.” Therefore, when trying to create garments driven by ecological values of waste minimization and extended garment life, while also meeting the aesthetic, functional and physiological needs of users, a high level of dexterity is demanded on the part of the designer (Niinimäki 2013; 84).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The contribution of this paper is aimed at drawing attention towards novel approaches to designing for garment longevity. Borrowing from both ends of the design and user-centred design spectrum, are companies working towards the establishment of alternative design approaches. It is within this space that garments have become a common embodiment and carriers of designers’ ecologically driven values while also reflecting users’ aesthetically emotional values. User involvement initiated through creative and open-ended design practices empower users into opening doors of attachment with their garments. In this new platform the designer has become the provider of values (emotional and ecological) that the user is in search of. However, not all users may have the creativity or desire to be engaged in such an open-ended design approach. For future work, insights on the user perspective may benefit to further strengthen the knowledge on not only shared emotional values but also the negotiations that may arise between these actors (the user and the designer in relation to the garments) that are creating emotional value dependence on each other.

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