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Fostering Sustainable Practices? The case of micro and small designer fashion enterprises

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Abstract

The UK designer fashion sector, largely made up of micro and small enterprises, is a significant part of the UK’s creative industries, and widely recognized for its fashion influence beyond the UK. This paper presents findings from the Rethinking Fashion Design Entrepreneurship: Fostering Sustainable Practices project, working with innovative fashion micro and small enterprises (MSEs) in the UK. With their strong sense of values and purpose, contributing to community alongside maintaining financial viability, these MSEs provide examples of best practice to foster sustainability. Whilst the fashion industry has been severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, our investigation revealed some fashion design entrepreneurs showing exceptional resilience, despite facing financial challenges. Such small and agile enterprises exemplify a redefinition of what fashion business is and can be in future, presenting viable pathways to recovery post-pandemic, and building towards a sustainable prosperity.

Introduction

The pace of fashion cycles has increased enormously over recent decades, with the advent of fast and faster fashion since the 1990s; this high throughput and high waste model is unsustainable and no longer acceptable in the context of depleted and finite planetary resources, exacerbated by the current climate emergency (Steffen et al 2015). The transition to sustainability is now an imperative for all sectors including fashion, as captured in the 2015 Paris Agreement\(^1\), the 2017 UN Sustainable Development Goals and accelerated by the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic\(^2\). Although pioneers of sustainable fashion have been active since the 1980s, the industry as a whole has been slow to embed sustainability principles, with initiatives in evidence from the early 21st century (Fletcher 2008, 2016).


\(^2\) “The crisis is a catalyst that will shock the industry into change – now is the time to get ready for a post-coronavirus world. … The pandemic will bring values around sustainability into sharp focus, intensifying discussions and further polarising views around materialism, over-consumption and irresponsible business practices.” Business of Fashion & McKinsey Co. (April 2020). The State of Fashion 2020: Coronavirus Update, pp. 8 + 18

The UK is known for its successful creative industries and many of its fashion designers are widely acknowledged as creative influencers on the world stage. The fashion industry is an important contributor to the UK economy with GVA of £32.3 billion pre-pandemic - larger than the automotive and aerospace sectors combined (BFC 2018). The UK's designer fashion sector comprises a high proportion of micro and small enterprises⁴ (MSEs), which are the focus of this study. Design-led sustainable fashion micro and small enterprises provide pioneering alternative visions for a broader understanding of prosperity in business and represent a key focus for sustainability transitions (including reduced production and consumption) as the UK seeks to meet its Net Zero aspirations by 2050.

This paper presents empirical findings researched before and during the pandemic period, from the AHRC-funded project Rethinking Fashion Design Entrepreneurship: Fostering Sustainable Practices (FSP)⁵. The FSP project structured its research across the four pillars of sustainability and flourishing - social, environmental, economic and cultural. Whilst the fashion industry has been severely affected by the pandemic⁶, we examine how sustainability-motivated fashion entrepreneurs can offer alternative models and practices and how they are seeking to influence the wider industry in which they are embedded.

**Methodology**
The project team conducted a longitudinal study from June 2019 to November 2020 via interviews with 27 design-led fashion MSEs to investigate their visions, values, capabilities and business models for sustainable fashion. To identify suitable businesses, an initial survey of 200 UK-based fashion MSEs collected details of their business, purpose and values, the challenges and benefits, their sustainable practices and visions for success. Based on this information, 45 MSEs were selected for the qualitative research, with 27 cases selected for longitudinal semi-structured interviews with designers/founders and key personnel from each business. Figures 1 & 2 indicate the size and longevity of these businesses.

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⁵ Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Grant no AH/R006539/1 Rethinking Fashion Design Entrepreneurship: Fostering Sustainable Practices led by Centre for Sustainable Fashion (a University of the Arts London research centre, based at London College of Fashion), in collaboration with Middlesex University Centre for Enterprise and Economic Development Research, and the Open University Design department (Oct 2018-March 2021).

⁶ Eurostat 2020: ‘Volume of retail trade sales July 2020 compared to February 2020’ shows Textile, Clothes, and Footwear sales fell by 22% from Feb to July 2020, far more than any other sector, the next largest fall was automotive fuel at 9%. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/images/1/13/Retail_sales_June2020-03.jpg
Findings
This section discusses some of the themes that emerged from analysis of our cases in relation to the four research strands that structure the FSP project: 1) designer visions, values, capabilities and processes, 2) business networks and collaborative ecosystems, 3) working practices, roles and trajectories, and 4) entrepreneurship and business models fostering sustainable prosperity. Key emerging themes discussed below are: Fashion as a tool for social change, Consumer engagement and education, Business models for transformation and Digital technology as an enabler of sustainability. We also discuss examples of designer/entrepreneur agility in response to the pandemic.

In relation to designer roles and business trajectories (strand 3) our interviews revealed that most designers/entrepreneurs had previously worked for other (larger) businesses in the fashion or media industries. Some founders were motivated to develop their own enterprise in response to observing social or environmental injustices (e.g. clothes sharing platform NuW, footwear designer Alexander White). The traditional role of the fashion designer in an industrial context - as conceiver of aesthetic concepts and fashion products - has evolved to become just one of many roles for the designer/entrepreneur in an MSE. These include facilitating connections, building community,
engaging directly with customers and public, teaching, advocacy and public speaking, experimenting with new ways of working and undertaking special projects and consultancy with major brands, institutions or charitable organisations, thus providing additional sources of income to spread financial risk.

The designers/entrepreneurs in this study aim to transform fashion’s current business model away from one that stimulates rampant consumerism. Instead, being in control of smaller enterprises, they avoid overproduction and overconsumption and contribute to social justice and inclusion, achieved through the way they work as well as by what is made.

**Fashion as a tool for social change**

The onslaught of the pandemic and the cancellation of orders by major fashion industry players further exposed the fault lines endemic within the mainstream fashion sector, with its complex supply chains, pervasive practices of environmental degradation and exploitation of employees. These damaging practices were exemplified by the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh that galvanised demands for transparency and accountability across the global garment making sector to redress social injustices.

This theme foregrounds the designer/entrepreneurs’ visions and values with respect to social aspects of fashion business (research strand 1). The case study enterprises put social and environmental purpose at the top of their agenda, a few setting out to be a social enterprise from the start (e.g. accessories brand Elvis & Kresse (Figure 3), womenswear brand Birdsong (Figure 4)), others aiming to engage with specific communities to impart skills and create empowerment, operating fair and transparent working practices. Some have built up their businesses with the prime purpose of utilising fashion as a tool for social change - providing decent work, training and skills through making, and educating consumers and the public. For example, both Birdsong and Bethany Williams (menswear and womenswear label) work with local disadvantaged communities, in collaboration with charities, to create their products and raise awareness, offering fair employment and living wages, creative satisfaction, and enhanced self-worth. Birdsong’s first priority when the pandemic hit was to ensure the safety of their workers and that there would be work for them to come back to. A specific fund was set up through crowdsourcing to support Birdsong employees who found themselves in difficulty.

**Consumer engagement and communication**

Our findings under this theme relate to entrepreneurs’ practices towards fostering sustainable behaviours (research strands 3 and 4). Particularly in response to the Covid-19 crisis, many of the cases have increased their direct-to-consumer engagement activities, capitalising on their existing relationships nurtured through social media narratives (such as Instagram Stories), online sales and public-facing physical events and workshops. New online activities offer support and opportunities for learning craft skills in lockdown circumstances. For example, several businesses including Raeburn (womenswear and menswear brand (Figure 4)) and Sabinna (womenswear brand) created do-it-yourself pattern kits for anyone to make accessories at home and post images on Instagram – in Raeburn’s case for their ‘offcut animals’ series and in Sabinna’s case for their DIY kits to make hair bands, masks and simple crafted jewellery, building on Sabinna’s strong use of hand craft. ReAdorn is a business that upcycles broken jewellery, creating new pieces from old, and now offers kits for customers to assemble a unique piece of upcycled jewellery at home.

Repairing services are increasingly offered by brands. Raeburn’s studio team gave online repair workshops and started a campaign that declared Buy Nothing, Repair Globally on Black Friday 2020; founder Christopher Raeburn developed a series of Instagram Live conversations with individuals from the fashion and sustainability community (e.g. @raeburn_design 8.11.20). Similarly, womenswear designer Phoebe English offered a series of talks on developing a collection, respecting planetary boundaries (@phoebeenglish 17.12.20); the wearable technology company Cute Circuit, creators of experiential garments and couture showpieces, developed weekly Instagram Live sessions, opening up their creative processes in the studio, and educating their audience about aspects of fashion, culture and technology (e.g. @CuteCircuit 5.02.21). These and many other MSE

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7 The campaigning organisation Fashion Revolution was set up in direct response to the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh, and has activated consumer- and industry-facing campaigns globally in more than 90 countries. See [www.fashionrevolution.org](http://www.fashionrevolution.org)
engagement activities serve to educate the public, demystify creative process and enhance appreciation of fashion’s intrinsic and cultural value, fostering more sustainable behaviours.

**Business models for transformation**

The fourth research strand encompassed examination of the business models developed by our case study businesses, including service providers and consultancies. In order to disrupt the unsustainable status quo of the established fashion sector where overproduction is the norm, many MSEs have adopted a transformative approach to their business to innovate beyond the creation of products, to create new ways of doing business whilst still providing delight and rewarding experience. Although economic growth is not the end in itself, and not the only measure of success, it is important for an enterprise to have a viable business in order to realise its social and ecological aims and communicate its values and purpose.

Elvis & Kresse for example only use rescued waste materials as inputs for their luxury bags and homewares (Figure 3 right), therefore the more that is sold, the more waste is diverted from landfill, and as a social enterprise, the more profit share can be donated to charitable causes. Co-founder Kresse Wesling says: “We are profitable, and we’re growing, and we meet all the traditional metrics that they [the fashion industry] would define as success, but we do it in a completely different way and for completely different motivations...” Many businesses however, aim to remain small but viable, rejecting the pressure for constant growth that support organisations and investors often demand.

Several of the cases are shifting away from selling wholesale towards a greater focus on direct-to-consumer business. For example, Raeburn decided on “a radical shift in our way of thinking and making” towards “making less and making better” (@raeburn_design, 22.01.21), operating a system of limited edition and small batch production and “rapid replenishment” of stock for wholesale customers.

Three of the businesses in the FSP cohort are certified BCorps businesses (an internationally recognised certification for social and environmental standards), which is rare in the fashion sector. Elvis & Kresse were the first in the UK to obtain this certification in 2015; two others awarded in 2018 are outdoor and surfwear brand Finisterre, one of the longest established and largest MSEs in our study, and Riz Boardshorts, makers of a single product, men’s beach shorts, using recycled ocean plastics.

**Digital technology as an enabler of sustainability and collaboration**

Some of the more disruptive business models for sustainability amongst MSEs, aiming to reduce production and consumption, involve the integration of different forms of technology, from innovative apps for sharing and swapping of clothes (NuW Figure 3 left) or managing your wardrobe (Save Your Wardrobe), to software or online systems for designing and producing small batch runs of clothing or knitwear (Unmade, Away to Mars).

Unmade is a digital innovator founded in 2013, aiming to radically shift the fashion supply chain to pure on-demand manufacturing - on a mass scale -- through its digital end-to-end software system for industrial manufacturing processes (currently tested with customised knitwear, trainers and small run digitally printed sports teamwear). Through their innovative software developments Unmade are achieving small batch and individual item customisation but with large volume efficiencies and price points, enabling the production of only what is needed.

Fashion womenswear brand Away to Mars, founded in 2016 (Figure 4 left), has developed an innovative co-creative online model and platform for design, that is inclusive and non-hierarchical, offering opportunity and recognition for the fashion designer. Diverse international communities are invited to respond to online creative briefs, and after several rounds of open voting combined with data analysis, the most successful concepts are developed into prototypes for manufacturing. Unusually, a percentage of profits is shared with those contributing to each design.
Agility to address sustainability in relation to pandemic challenges

In relation to the first research strand, our findings show the capabilities designer/entrepreneurs exhibit include responsiveness to change and willingness to explore, adapt, seize opportunity and take risks; connecting people and building networks; communicating to diverse audiences; building teams and managing relationships with a wide range of stakeholders - all in addition to having practical skills.

The onset of the pandemic brought to the fore many of the agile qualities of MSEs, including the ability to be flexible and responsive in rapidly changing circumstances; their small and flat organisational structures enabling rapid deployment of people and resources; in-house production facilities enabling fast prototyping, plus strong networks and relationships with suppliers and manufacturing partners. For example, direct knowledge and experience of making (in a craft sense) in their own studios and manufacturing (within both small workshop and factory settings) enabled a group of designers to quickly collaborate and mobilise their making teams to create much needed
‘scrubs’ for NHS workers during the first wave of the pandemic and again in early 2021 as pressures once more increased.

Pheobe English and Bethany Williams (two MSEs in the FSP study), together with Holly Fulton and Cozette McCreery, all London-based fashion designers, set up the Emergency Designer Network (EDN) in March 2020, acting extremely rapidly and nimbly to help overcome problems with PPE supplies. Using their own trusted networks, the EDN put together teams and raised funds through crowdsourcing and other donations to provide materials and pay workers. With the assistance of the Make it British organisation and lobby group Fashion Roundtable, 150 factories and individual makers went into production locally and across the UK to deliver 5-7000 reusable sets of PPE weekly to hospitals. The EDN volunteer activities were recognised in the UK Parliament and honoured in the 2020 British Fashion Awards⁸, an acknowledgment to the commitment of the group whilst caring for the workers and ensuring the survival of their businesses.

Conclusions
These innovative MSEs examine new ways of doing business in fashion that tackle the major issues of overproduction and overconsumption, and value the contribution of different skills and disciplines. The collaborative and interdisciplinary mindset of many enterprises enables a new focus on sufficiency and appreciation of social and cultural value by consumers, even when struggling during the pandemic.

Our findings show these fashion design MSEs often have relationship-based, direct-to-consumer business models – which enables them to educate customers about sustainable fashion, teach sustainability-related skills and encourage behaviour change through experiential opportunities, resulting in an informed and loyal customer base. Their business practices also rely on strong relationships, especially with local suppliers, collaborators and manufacturing partners to deliver sampling and/or production. These relationships are driven by a desire to improve social equity and contribute to local job creation, for example, by paying the living wage to those making clothes, and by providing skills training and employment for disadvantaged groups. These instances of best practice, including public education through clear messaging and engagement opportunities, evidence designer/entrepreneurs’ transparent working practices and non-traditional measures of success.

The cases demonstrate a new ethic in design wherein the role of designer/entrepreneur is expanded from a focus on sales and profit to a wider prosperity and an economy that values people and their creativity in achieving business ambitions, and contributing to community alongside maintaining financial viability.

A culture of sufficiency is clearly evident amongst the case studies. The implications for the wider industry are clear – urgent adoption of circular material flows and an end to speculative and wasteful overproduction are essential if Net Zero targets are to be met. A move to demand-driven fashion, manufacturing products to order or in small batches can create a renewed relationship for consumers with their clothes, giving lasting pleasure underpinned by quality, transparency and social justice.

As the Covid-19 crisis has triggered a wider discourse in a re-assessment of values, foregrounding green renewal, new quality-of-life indicators and well-being economy⁹, fashion MSEs can provide exemplars of future prosperity that value diversity, balance human and environmental well-being and benefit both local and global communities through their positive influence and relationship-building skills, based on transparency and trust, that extends to supply chains further afield. Such smaller, agile, purpose-led enterprises exemplify a redefinition of what fashion business is and what it can be in future, presenting viable pathways to building forward towards a sustainable prosperity.

References

BFC (British Fashion Council) 2018: London Fashion Week Facts and Figures Sept 2018  