Sourcing Fabrics for New Designs from Post-Consumer Textiles

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The purpose of this paper is to identify two reasons for upcycling or redesigning garments beyond sustainability; the first reason is to source fabrics that are otherwise unavailable through retail fabric outlets. The designer / author for this study utilized garments purchased from second-hand and thrift stores as source materials for a group of womens tops. The purpose for using post-consumer clothing was to source unique materials the designer was unable to find at retail fabric merchants, both online and traditional brick and mortar. While the garments presented could be classified as redesigned or upcycled, that was not the primary reason for recycling garments. Upcycling is a term applied to using discarded items and creating something new from them, increasing the value of the items (Janigo and Wu, 2015). Sourcing post-consumer textiles via thrift stores and using them to create new apparel is redesigning. Janigo and Wu (2015) stated that redesign is akin to upcycling because it creates a new object from discarded ones, therefore adding value to the new object. The process of redesign goes beyond typical alterations for fit adjustments or repairs and mending of garments, both of which generally affect very little change on the original garment appearance.

Much has been published regarding upcycling and redesign of apparel with a focus on sustainable purposes. History has shown that such a practice is not new. In the eighteenth century a man's coat might be cut from a woman's dress (Baumgarten, 1998) while paisley shawls were redesigned into vests or dressed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Welters, et al, 2017). Indeed, post-consumer textiles are plentiful (Claudio, 2007 and) and a discarded garment may have more than half its lifetime potential remaining (Han, et al, 2015). Thus, a designer sourcing materials from post-consumer textiles can find fabrics of sufficient quality from which to make new apparel.

The designer's objective was to produce white tops featuring varieties of embroidered cotton eyelet and similar embroidered cottons. While mixing many different fabrics within one garment could be overwhelming, the designer limited the complexity of each garment by keeping color uniform. By applying Michaelson's and Chattaraman's (2017) findings that "designers may want to moderate the atypicality of the designs they create by using strategies that 'balance' the atypical (e.g. seam placement) with the typical (e.g. shape and silhouette) within one design," for zero-waste design, the designer was intentional to make the tops look new and familiar to a ready-to-wear customer, instead of appearing redesigned or upcycled.

Since the thrift store items were being purchased as base materials and not as garments to be reused, the material was the primary reason for purchase. This aligns with the first part of the definition of deconstructed R-T-W, to "utilize PCR [post-consumer recycled] clothing as the base material," (Young, et al, 2004). White embroidered cotton eyelet has experienced several years of popularity in womenswear, specifically in the "boho" trend (Bickham, 2015) and has

been a staple in girls dresses as well as home textiles. For those reasons, the designer could find sufficient varieties of materials and sufficient amounts. Consistency of materials used to produce the tops was important to the designer, specifically with regards to color. White cotton eyelets can vary in brightness, but they provided a larger sample of consistent source materials than other colors. Black garments were also purchased and matched according to their darkness level. The outlying white and black garments that did not match other garments in brightness / darkness were bleached and dyed various colors.

Another reason to adopt the approach of using post-consumer textiles as source materials for desconstructed R-T-W is the low cost. A large skirt, for example, may have two yards of materials within it and cost just a fraction of what a retail fabric store would charge for a two-yard length of similar material. Time, of course, becomes the larger investment both in searching for source materials in thrift stores and also in deconstructing the garments for use in new designs. The designer did not set out to emphasize original garment features, unlike many designers practicing upcycling or redesign. Chan (2017), for example, maintained the lapels and pockets of mens tailored jackets while Orzada (2017) presented a jacket made from recycled denim jeans featuring the intact waistband around the neck. The amount of time required for deconstruction in typical upcycling was decreased in this designer's process; instead, the necessary amount of material was often cut straight from the source garment without the need for ripping apart seams.

This study provides relevant insights into uses of post-consumer textiles as source materials for creating new garments. Beyond sustainable practices of upcycling or redesign, there are the benefits of low cost and a broader variety of fabrics available. The same approach can be applied to sourcing zippers, buttons, or specialty notions like cord pulls; can cost be drastically reduced, for example, when purchasing three zippers for a fleece jacket. The cost for one long front separating zipper and two matching pocket zippers could be more than the fabric, when purchased at a retail fabric outlet. Meanwhile, an entire second-hand jacket with said zippers can sell for the cost of one zipper. An additional benefit of this study is the example provided of three redesigned or deconstructed R-T-W garments that have a typical aesthetic appearance which more consumers prefer (Michaelson and Chattaraman, 2017).

Details of one top made from four different garments.

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