

“Re-Tale”

Proposing A Fifth Principle in The Sustainable Fashion Retail Story

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Abstract

The fashion industry has long been in a battle to improve its sustainability, as well as its environmental protection efforts. In this conceptual paper, we unpack the different stories of sustainability and environmental challenges in this specific industry – which is very much driven by fast fashion. We contrast developing (South Africa) and developed (Sweden) markets’ approaches to fashion sustainability, to uncover and understand

broad overlapping dimensions of sustainability, and differences. The aim of this paper is to stimulate thinking and conversations about sustainable practices in developing nations as well as in developed nations. The review of the stories and the contexts presented suggests the need to shift the focus to the developing market’s consumer, and concludes with the proposal of including a fifth principle of sustainability: Reframing fashion.

Introduction

At the start of 2023, the global fashion industry is still under the magnifying glass about impacting the environment negatively, and it is argued that numerous stakeholders and customers will increasingly question and investigate how fashion brands convey their sustainability credentials (McKinsey, 2022). The general facts are that the size of the fashion industry was valued at around 1.5 trillion U.S. dollars in 2021 and is predicted to reach 2 trillion dollars by 2026 (Statista, 2022). Early 2021 till mid 2022 saw robust growth in the industry. However, hyperinflation and depressed customer sentiments impacted the growth rate from the second half of 2022 and is likely to continue in 2023 (McKinsey, 2022). Nevertheless, the luxury fashion category has continued to do well, as wealthy consumers are less affected by the economic challenges and conspicuous consumption¹ is therefore expected to grow.

The South African fashion industry offers one of the largest fashion markets in Africa, accounting for more than 45% of the continent's total spending on clothing and footwear (Fitch Report, 2022). The good news is that South African consumers are increasingly focused on local fashion brands with the country's apparel industry growing at an average of 5.2% over the past five years (Fitch Report, 2022). South Africa's market for luxury fashion is growing mainly due to the growing middle-income consumer segment (Saruchera and Mthombeni, 2023). However, South African consumers are becoming conscious of sustainable and ethical fashion options (Taljaard and Sonnenberg, 2019).

In another context that is advanced in terms of sustainable fashion consumption, Sweden is the leader in sustainable fashion consumption (Gupta, Gwozdz and Gentry, 2019). Sweden has tackled sustainable fashion from the manufacturing side with a fashion pact to request companies to reduce environmental impact and on the other hand has implemented various campaigns and initiatives that encourage consumers to think about the environmental impact of their purchases (Brydges, 2021). These include choosing items from sustainable material, buying second-hand clothing, and avoiding excessive packaging. The Swedish consumer is therefore well-informed about

various principles and the consequences of their fashion consumption.

From the above, we argue that the story of South African fashion consumption is still very much a story of consumerism and that some best practices of Sweden may be applicable. Moreover, a strong South African consumer narrative is that of conspicuous consumption and the display of abundance – in a time where the abundance of natural resources is not a truth for most countries (Ahmed, Asghar, Malik and Nawaz, 2020). In many instances, the guidelines to industry and consumers for sustainability are the four principles of sustainability: Reducing consumption, reusing items or material, recycling materials, and recovering energy from waste (David, Thangavel and Sankriti, 2019).

In this paper, we offer a critical dialectical engagement with existing literature on sustainable fashion in the South African and Swedish contexts with the aim to present the story/tale of the application of principles of sustainability to support thinking and conversation about these important aspects. This conceptual paper commences with an overview of the general tale of sustainable fashion with the issues of fast fashion consumption as a main theme. The paper then continues to offer two contexts for sustainable fashion practice (South Africa and Sweden) and concludes with a recommendation of a fifth R in the four principles of sustainable fashion particularly applicable to South Africa.

A general review of sustainable fashion

In this review of scholarship, we offer the facts on sustainable fashion to illustrate the story it tells. We apply our own critical voice to comment on the story and present relevant themes around sustainable fashion relating to some of the commonly referred to principles of sustainability.

The three Ps and the four Rs of sustainability

Sustainability as an overall concept is proposed to consist of three dimensions or pillars, i.e. economic (profit), environment (planet), and social (people) (Silvius, Schipper, Planko, Van den Brink and Köhler,

2012), and were first documented around 1987 by Barbier (Purvis, Mao and Robinson, 2019). The three pillars are, however, argued to be vague in terms of how to effectively operationalise the concepts. This model is also critiqued for being more applicable to a developed market context, and the pillars' complex historical origins suggests that the concept remains context-specific, as well as ontologically open. For this reason, it should be clearly described in terms of how it is understood (Purvis et al., 2019). To position this within the purpose of this article, the authors lean towards the Brundtland definition about sustainable development, which states that sustainable development is '*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In terms of this definition, the authors extend sustainable development to the context of specifically fashion, by supporting the idea of focusing on the needs of the current fashion industry, in a manner that will not compromise the needs of the future. The authors therefore focus on the specific factors of reducing, reusing, recycling, and recovering – as the principles applicable to the fashion industry. The four principles focus on reduction of consumption of fashion, reusing garments or leftover materials, recycling, and then reusing existing garments and/or materials and thereby also recovering energy from materials previously considered waste (David et al., 2019). The adoption of a circular business model, in the context of the three sustainability principles, may potentially support all three of these pillars in different ways. Renewed business models (e.g. a circular approach) rooted in these four principles may support the economic pillar (profit), and the social aspect (people) through growth using a new model that may lead to further job creation. The reduction in consumption, recycling, reusing and recovering are principles that, if applied innovatively during the manufacturing process, may assist the environmental pillar (planet). The three pillars are unpacked and integrated with the fashion industry's current state and challenges in greater detail in the following sections.

The sustainable fashion tale from the environment's perspective

There are several factors that present challenges on the environmental impact of the fashion industry:

petrochemical products are used to produce modern textiles and the industry is therefore estimated to be responsible for up to 10% of the global carbon dioxide output (Dottle and Gu, 2022). In comparison, the aviation industry is responsible for an estimated 2% of global carbon dioxide output (World Economic Forum, 2016). The fashion industry is also responsible for a fifth of the plastic produced globally, with polyester (a type of plastic derived from oil) having overtaken cotton as the predominant input for textile production (Dottle and Gu, 2022). Polyester is not biodegradable, and together with other synthetic products also requires a lot of energy to manufacture (Palacios-Mateo, van der Meer and Seide, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2016).

Manufacturing practices regarded as unsustainable include polluting coastal areas with wastewater that contains dyes that pollutes water (Muposhi, Nyagadza and Mafini, 2021). On the other hand, even a natural fibre like cotton uses a very large amount of water to produce fashion (La Rosa and Grammatikos, 2019). Water as a source of life is a scarce resource in most countries (Hofste, Reig and Schleifer, 2019). Although one needs to acknowledge that some fibres are more environmentally friendly, and strides have been made in the fashion industry to reduce the negative environmental impact with some interventions (Nasir, Wee, Aris, Abdullah and Ismail, 2022), we agree with Taljaard and Sonnenberg (2019) who point out that the 'tale' of the environment and fashion consumption has always been a contentious one. In the bigger scheme of things, it is also about the volume of fashion that is consumed, and the manufacturing will not stop if the demand from the retailers and ultimately the consumers is constant! It is therefore our opinion that fashion is ultimately no hero from an environmental point of view – but that the socio-economic perspective of fashion might dictate the impact.

The social-economic tale from a human perspective

The story about sustainable fashion that is more positive usually takes on a socio-economic perspective. In this regard, the emphasis is on the contribution of fashion in terms of job creation, economic growth (Goyal, Esposito and Kapoor, 2018; Le Roux, 2022), and of course the basic need for clothing: people need to cover their bodies and protect them against the elements. A critical question that we ask, however,

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is ‘how the character “fashion” in such a heroic tale holds up against the anti-hero, when the tale is told from the environmental perspective?’

Most authors on sustainable fashion agree that apart from the environmental damage contributed by textile and clothing production, there are also the challenges presented relating to labour, disposal, retail (models on turnaround), and consumerism (Niinimäki, Peters, Dahlbo, Perry, Rissanen and Gwilt, 2020; Pedersen, Gwozdz and Hvass, 2018). These themes are unpacked in the following paragraphs.

Labour practices include aspects such as factory working conditions, wages for workers, and workers’ rights. The fashion industry is considered not vocal enough on labour practices and working conditions in factories which are aspects of sustainability from the socio-economic perspective (Cernansky, 2021).

Disposal or recycling of fashion has been embraced successfully mostly by large international fashion brands, achieving this by moving from a linear to a circular business model where nothing is wasted – everything is reused, repurposed, and recycled (Williams, 2022). In this regard, there seems to be an effort to improve current fashion systems to enhance sustainability in terms of manufacturing practices as well as disposal of clothing products. Up to this point we are therefore optimistic about the manufacturing practices in the fashion industry that show some

improvement over the past years. A logical question might therefore be: ‘What is the real issue and why is the fashion industry still an anti-hero in the sustainable fashion story?’

Fashion retailers find themselves in a position where they must balance people, the planet, and profit. This balancing act can be difficult because on the one end the fashion buyers are considered the gatekeepers of consumer choice, and their selection of the product mix dictates the scope, as well as the type of consumer targeted by a company, thereby influencing a company’s bottom-line and future opportunities (Zhong and Mitra, 2020). On the other end, there is the constant pressure created by consumers who insist on buying the latest fashion worn by fashion icons and other influencers. The fashion retailer’s tale is therefore a tale of meeting demands in a world where the customer is ultimately king. This phenomenon is consumerism (Panizzut, Rafi-ul-Shan, Amar, Sher, Mazhar and Klemeš, 2021) and in this tale the consumer seemingly drives the demand for the latest fashion and is ultimately the villain.

Consumers seem to be ficker and more demanding regarding a faster fashion turnaround (Zhong and Mitra, 2020). This continued pressure for a faster turn-around has sustainability implications, of which a major concern includes people not wearing their clothes for as long as they did in the past. This pushes up the rate of clothing production, which in turn results in tons of excess inventory and waste (Oshri, 2019). This phenomenon is commonly known as fast fashion.

Fast fashion

Fast fashion encourages consumers to buy and wear new fashion and to throw away the old (Choi, Cai and Shen, 2019). It is built on the fabrication of hyper trends, convincing consumers to accumulate more than is needed, and this is further fuelled by offering clothing that is not long lasting, therefore creating the need to buy more regularly (Bédard, 2016). This business model gradually emerged because of the lowering of trade barriers between countries – eliminating or reducing quotas, tariffs, and subsidies between nations (Majaski, 2022). Fast fashion from a consumer’s perspective

therefore creates the opposite situation of reducing and reusing clothing. Instead, this story is about avoiding looking 'so yesterday' at all costs.

The fast fashion story has its roots in 1947 after World War II, where an agreement known as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was signed by 23 countries, and by the 1990s had grown to include 125 countries. This agreement was further refined over time and led to the creation of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1995 (Majaski, 2022). The intention of this agreement was to boost economic recovery. This economic recovery involved the creation of opportunities for fashion brands to source the production of clothing in countries with lower labour costs, in turn providing brands with financial incentives, and consumers with the opportunity to buy more clothes, yet spend less (Bédard, 2016). The result of this story is that the consumer today is conditioned to want cheap things and suffers from a constant drive for the new (Corrigall, 2022). Unfortunately, this fast fashion business model means fast production, followed by rapid waste disposal (Muposhi et al., 2021), the use of more energy, and this has over time turned into problematic consequences for the environment. The implementing of sustainable practices has therefore become more important over the years (Osheri, 2019).

From the above, it is evident that a story of fast fashion leaves little space for the reduce principle of sustainability, particularly with reference to consumerism. To tame the monster that was created by consumerism and retail models such as fast fashion, some sustainable practices have emerged, particularly from the manufacturing side. However, as with any tale, the context matters. The next section therefore offers some important themes in various contexts and what one may learn from both.

The Emergence of Sustainable Fashion Practices in Different Contexts

Some of the world's most renowned fast fashion brands like H&M, Zara, Uniqlo, Stella McCartney and Adidas (Choi et al., 2019; Williams, 2022) have embarked on a new business model, known as the Circular Economy in order, to address fashion sustainability issues. The focus of this business model is to change the traditional supply chain from a linear to a circular

chain. This new circular structure is targeted at eliminating any potential waste in the supply chain by repurposing, recycling, or reusing items (Williams, 2022). As Africa is one of the continents that is largely fuelling the current and future growth of the fashion industry (Zhong and Mitra, 2020; Williams, 2022), many of these international fashion brands have entered this market, preferring to do so via South Africa, which has been considered the gateway to the rest of Africa for a number of years now (SAAI, 2012).

There are, however, differences in how developed, emerging, and developing nations view and implement sustainable fashion practices (Cao, Scudder and Dickson, 2017), as well as the aspects and level of importance assigned to different sustainability practices (Euromonitor, 2022a; Euromonitor, 2022b). As argued by Purvis et al. (2019), the original three pillars of sustainability are not always as applicable to developing as developed markets. Sustainable fashion is a growing trend in developed economies (Cao, Scudder and Dickson, 2017), with a good example being the Swedish fashion brand H&M – currently one of the world leaders in the use of sustainable materials (Fashion Network, 2018) and having a sustainable fashion strategy in place since 2009 (Choi et al., 2019). Like other international brands, H&M entered the African continent in 2015 with its first stores opening in Cape Town and Johannesburg in South Africa (Douglas, 2015). Even though this brand is perceived as one of the leaders in sustainable fashion, it finds itself operating in an emerging market (South Africa) where sustainability seems to remain a niche (Cao, Scudder and Dickson, 2017) and where unsustainable manufacturing practices are more prevalent (Muposhi, Nyagadza and Mafini, 2021). These two countries have therefore been identified to serve as examples of sustainable practices and principles in two contexts to explore and contrast. Sweden represents the developed context and South Africa represents the emerging context, and a comparison of the two countries' approaches to sustainability may enlighten us with potential solutions to sustainability that may be shared or adapted.

Sustainability in the South African context

Stakeholders in South Africa are specifically calling on the large retail players to commit to a greater focus on social inclusion, the empowerment of females, as

well as a focus on environmental protection. Retailers targeting the mid- to higher-income bracket are especially expected to grow their focus on both sustainability, as well as 'glocalisation' (Euromonitor, 2022a). Examples of this include brands such as Adidas having dedicated store spaces for eco-friendly ranges like PrimeBlue, which has been designed in conjunction with the Parley Ocean Plastic programme, as well as spaces dedicated to designs produced by both South African artists and influencers. Similarly, the Foschini Group is investing heavily in local manufacturing, with a goal of producing 30 million local apparel pieces by 2026 – thereby greatly contributing to its long-term sustainability plan, as well as the acceleration of economic growth by creating employment (Euromonitor, 2022a).

South Africa is also seeing a growing second-hand clothing market, commonly known as 'thriftling'. Where thrifting was previously associated with bargain hunters and fashionistas, there are now several online stores where buyers can either sell or acquire second-hand clothes (Corrigall, 2022). The market for repurposing or upcycling garments arguably remains small, with one designer commenting that supply seems to be a challenge, therefore not making upcycling a viable business model. A potential solution could be to put agreements in place with large retailers to obtain their overflow garments (Shempers in Corrigall, 2022). One could argue that in a country where opportunities for jobs are much-needed, this area could offer such opportunities if explored and driven by consumer demand.

As far as applying the principles of sustainability is concerned, we commend the efforts to create consciousness on sustainable fashion in South Africa but offer a caveat that it is not yet enough. One might argue that in South Africa, the recover principle of sustainability probably causes a smaller issue from an environmental perspective simply because South Africa has a major energy crisis relating to electricity (Aliyu, Modu and Tan, 2018). There are rolling blackouts that might in the long run affect the environment in a less harmful way, but the balance between people, profit and the planet is not there, causing one to ask how sustainable it is in any case? In addition, we also must acknowledge the contention between implementing sustainable practices around reducing, re-using and recycling in an emerging

country where growth is the main aim. Growth from the socio-economic perspective often translates to creating more in strategic plans. The problem with 'more', of course, is that conspicuous consumption is likely to be one of those growing/more aspects as confirmed by the statistics on South African fashion consumption (Fitch Report, 2022). One then needs to look at an example in a developed context that is a leader on sustainable fashion to compare the application of sustainability principle.

Sustainability in the Swedish context

The Swedish market has an established consciousness of sustainability principles and is therefore very focused on ethical and environmental aspects (Gupta, Gwozdz and Gentry, 2019). In addition, it has a strong focus on workers' rights, as well as the reduction of waste and carbon emissions. Examples of initiatives driving these focus areas includes the launch of an application called 'Coop', a growing market for second-hand clothing, as well as existing garment recycling initiatives (Euromonitor, 2022b). Coop is a sustainability declaration tool (application or app), specifically designed to inform and educate consumers, so that they may engage in more sustainable purchasing decisions.

The market for second-hand clothing is growing in four ways: Direct re-selling of second-hand clothes, repairing and customising of second-hand clothes, the renting of clothing and clothing recycling. Polarn O Pyret is a brand that launched second-hand stores in Sweden, Norway, and Finland – customers hand in and are compensated for the old clothes, which the store sells on to new customers (Euromonitor, 2022b). Gina Tricot, in collaboration with Repamera, take in consumers' old denim jeans, and repair and customise and re-sell them. A brand called 'Newbie' offers the opportunity to rent children's clothing via a company called Hyber. In 2020, H&M launched a concept called 'Loop' where consumers are encouraged to bring their old clothing in store, where the garments are cleaned and shredded into fibres, followed by being spun into yarn and then knitted into new fashion items (Euromonitor, 2022b).

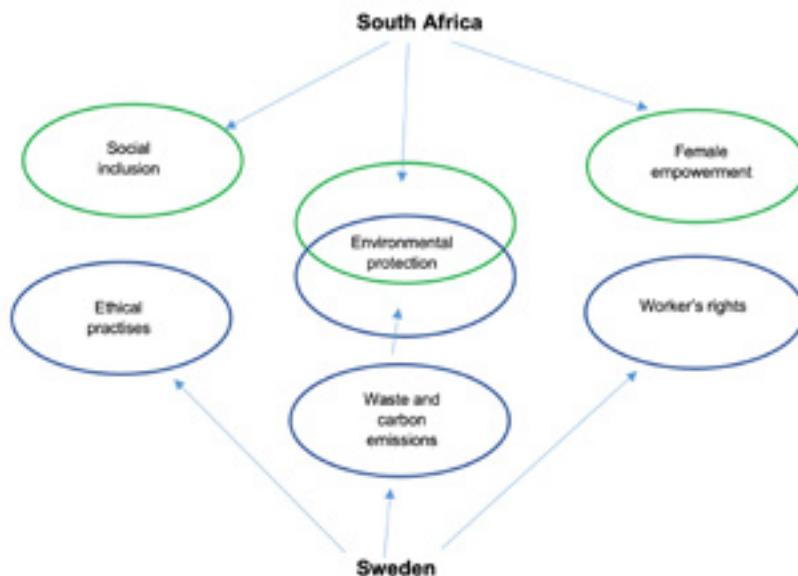
The examples from the Swedish fashion retail story offer a strong tale of the application of the principles of sustainability. There is the consciousness

for the consumer perspective, as well as from a manufacturing and retailing perspective (socio-economic). The result seems to be more sustainable practices around fashion consumption with reduced manufacturing due to the second-hand clothing market, reuse of materials, products and packaging, recycling of material and products, as well as some reduction of consumption with a combination of efforts such as the renting of clothes. Some themes are overlapping with the South African context and others differ.

Comparing themes on sustainable fashion: South Africa and Sweden

Albeit not an extensive review, Figure 1 presents some initial proposed sustainable focus areas for each country as identified or deduced from the discussions above. These focus areas are broad and contain dimensions that may be relevant to the principles of sustainability.

Figure 1: Sustainable focus SA vs Sweden



Source: The authors)

From Figure 1, it is evident that there is a shared theme on sustainable fashion for the protection

of the environment. This suggests an area to find a connection between the developed and emerging markets' outlook on sustainable responsibilities. The countries have different economic and socio-economic backgrounds, and therefore its consumers experience different challenges and needs. Operating by incorporating ethical practices, protecting workers' rights, and reducing waste and carbon emissions (Swedish) are all imperative to ensure that a holistic sustainability approach to fashion production is exercised (these address the economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainability), but the importance of social inclusion and women's empowerment (South Africa) is very much reflective of South Africa's challenges, suggesting that the country is not necessarily in a 'holistic sustainable fashion practices' space yet. South Africans are especially cost-sensitive, and even though many buyers may want to support more sustainable products, they often simply cannot afford it, if these are at a price differential to other less sustainable options. The mid to higher income South African consumers are more concerned with sustainable practices, whilst the mass market remains price sensitive (Euromonitor, 2022a; McKinsey, 2022).

Coming from a heritage of racial exclusion from the economy with the Apartheid system only ending in the early 1990s, the country today still struggles to empower previously disadvantaged individuals and is experiencing a massive unemployment crisis (Lubinga, 2020). The need for a focus on social upliftment and inclusion from the fashion industry is therefore a logical theme. Similarly, the country has a lot of

challenges with low-income and unemployed females (Msimanga and Sekhampu, 2020) – explaining the need for female empowerment. The two countries' needs in terms of sustainability can almost be

contrasted as being at different levels of the Maslow hierarchy of needs. Consequently, the satisfaction of these needs is motivated either from an external force or an internal force. In this regard, the Swedish consumers seem to be driven internally due to the governance of sustainable practices over years.

Fashion brands from developed countries could therefore take a dual approach with their sustainability practices – focusing on growing a holistic awareness of sustainability and best international practice, whilst also demonstrating commitment and sensitivity to country-specific sustainability needs. Implementing such initiatives might, however, be easier said than done, as much of the success of any business remains at the mercy of the economic principles of supply and demand.

With specific regard to the South African market, one can argue that as much as the sustainable aspects for the South African market exists, the drive for sustainability remains limited in practice (Cao, Scudder and Dickson, 2017). As much as the fashion supply chain (from retail buyers, to the retailer, all the way to the manufacturer) exerts its own extent of influence on consumers' levels of consumption, a change in consumer needs and expectations may offer a strong starting point for a country such as South Africa to gradually exert pressure backwards on the supply chain – forcing it to adapt and change. Therefore, the consumers who keep to the same unsustainable practices become the culprits in an unsustainable fashion system.

The South African consumers are described as cost conscious (McKinsey, 2022), conditioned to want cheap things, and their keen support of fast fashion shows with a big uptake in purchases from companies such as Shein, that have recently overtaken Zara in terms of the speed and pace of the release of new collections (Corrigall, 2022). This situation can be extremely challenging to change. We argue for a call to gradually move the emerging consumer from fast to appreciation and slow fashion, by driving and applying the unique African heritage of storytelling (Bailey, 2022). In this regard, every garment – like every consumer – has a story and these tales should be honoured. The argument is that if the tale of a garment and the person who wears the

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garment is honoured, such unique tales may counter the conspicuous consumption in a fast fashion retail context.

Conclusion

In this paper, we argued that the application of all four principles of sustainability in the fast fashion retail model is very challenging in an emerging context where more and growth might be viewed as synonyms in relation to strategies that enhance socio-economic growth and upliftment. We have also offered a few of the most prominent themes in sustainable fashion in South Africa, illustrating that a reducing principle is usually applied to the context of the manufacturing of clothing while it could be like in Sweden from a manufacturing, retailing and consumer perspective. South Africa can therefore work with Sweden to learn from their practices, particularly on the retail of fashion, to apply principles of sustainability on another level as well. The very thought of reducing consumption for the sake of the planet particularly in an emerging context could seem daunting due to the socio-economic story that needs to be balanced with regard to how the people and the profit enables survival and the improvement of an unequal society. Nevertheless, we have faith in the storytelling culture of Africa, and specifically South Africa, and call upon the storytelling fashion influencers to offer a new focus on the tale we tell in terms of our clothing/fashion. In this regard, the storytelling can be shared with

Sweden in collaborative fashion design or upcycle projects with South Africa.

The four principles of sustainability seem simple and pockets of application to reduce, reuse, recycle, and recover may be evident in the South African context. Nevertheless, we argue that consumers have the ability and the power to **reframe** the meaning of their clothing and for that matter the fashion that they consume. Both South African and Swedish consumers may benefit from the aspects around reframing their viewpoints on fashion products. To reframe what fashion could and should not be in the South African context also means to 're-tell' the tale of the role that retailers play as well as their direct influence on what consumers wear, the same may apply in Sweden. The title of this paper contains the word 're-tale' as opposed to retail; with this term we wish to propose that reframing (in a re-told story of fashion) is explored by fashion influencers to guide consumers to honour every story of every garment, be it a new garment, a repurposed or a thrifted garment. The uniqueness of our stories might best be captured by a mix of old and new and retailers need to consider a larger buy in mending/repairing (repurposing), reusing, and reselling those garments that are usually viewed as 'last season'. Influencers of Sweden and South Africa may consider collaborating on the reframing of fashion.

It is an idealistic viewpoint, we admit, but we end this paper with the following food for thought: would it not be nice for all people and the planet if fast fashion becomes 'so last season'?

Notes

1. Conspicuous consumption is the practice of spending money on luxury goods or services to show off one's affluence and success (Hammad, Muster, El-Bassiouny and Schaefer, 2019).

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