

# DISRUPTION AND SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH SUSTAINABLE FASHION DESIGN

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## INTRODUCTION

Aotearoa New Zealand's geographical isolation from potential global markets and its sparse population distribution requires antipodean designers to be more visible and creative online than those positioned closer to their intended target markets. This paper discusses the online observation of several successful fashion graduates from the authors' own fashion school at The School of Design, Otago Polytechnic. Claire Warburton, Tara Viggo, Sharn Blackwell, Anna Ross, Jessie Wong and Julia Palm utilise social media platforms to inform and communicate with their customers. Through observation of these graduates' social media, web-based communications, online business models and marketing strategies, a growing sense of authentic voices using fashion as a platform for political and social change has been detected. Utilising the social and collaborative nature of modern online technologies has enabled these designers to connect with customers through skilled management of promotional platforms.

While studying at Otago Polytechnic, fashion students are supported and encouraged to find an individual voice and a unique approach to design, along with integrating sustainable principles into their process. Post-graduation, these innovative designers have consciously participated as change agents for the future of the fashion industry by communicating directly and authentically to their audience. Real-time and immediate feedback creates a valuable platform for sharing and discussing important issues. The State of Fashion 2021 report, issued by the Business of Fashion (BOF), indicates that a growth in digital consumption, triggered in part by the Covid-19 global pandemic, requires designers to digitally innovate in communication and service provision in order to add value to their business (The Business of Fashion (BoF), 2021).

Recent international trends have suggested that several of the big players in fashion and beauty have been moving away from social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook because of the cost involved per click, although this is not obvious to an online viewer. Start-up and emerging designers with fewer followers than more established brands can absorb this cost. It appears that the big brands favour advertising placements rather than telling stories, engaging intimately with their customers, or growing communities (Lieber, 2019). The digital reach, impression and engagement with customers comes at a cost when your focus is on advertising placement rather than an authentic customer experience.

Influenced by the negative impacts of the fashion and textile industry globally on environmental and ethical issues, and encouraged by world-renowned designers such as Stella McCartney and Vivienne Westwood, these emerging designers are not afraid to promote positive change and political agendas within the fashion industry, and the supply chains with which they engage.

## FASHION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN CONTEXT

The beginnings of social activation through fashion could in part be attributed to British fashion designer Katharine Hamnett, who in 1989 attracted media attention by making a statement in a collection, *Clean Up or Die*, as a reaction to research undertaken by her own design team on the devastating effects of the fashion industry, both socially and on the environment (Hamnett, 2018). Today Hamnett works with various organisations that certify sustainable compliance and promote ethics within the garment industry, including Fair Wear Foundation and the Fashion Revolution campaign (Fair Wear Foundation, 2021).

British luxury fashion designer Stella McCartney is an industry leader in the development of vegan leather products and upcycled fabrications, reducing the environmental impact of tanning and the manufacturing of traditional leather goods. At the forefront of sustainable fashion and textile innovation, McCartney states: "We are agents of Change. We challenge and push boundaries to make luxurious products in a way that is fit for the world we live in today and the future: beautiful and sustainable. No compromises" (State of Fashion, 2021).

Fashion activist and internationally recognised designer Vivienne Westwood utilises multiple channels to communicate her political messages directly to her audience, including a YouTube channel with 15.3k subscribers and regular Instagram posts. In her book *Get a Life: The Diaries of Vivienne Westwood*, Westwood states: "I want to warn people of the danger we're in from climate change. I talk about fashion to alleviate the hard focus which nevertheless we must apply to save the world" (Westwood, 2016).

The Ethical Fashion Guide annual report, prepared by Baptist World Aid Australia and Tearfund Aotearoa/ New Zealand, highlights inconsistencies in the fashion supply chain and their impact on human rights within the manufacturing sector (Baptist World Aid Australia, n.d.). In the report, medium to large Trans-Tasman fashion businesses, put under the microscope in a yearly audit, are rated from A+ to F on transparency, systems in place to mitigate labour exploitation, and environmental impact within their supply chains. This report is widely circulated and highlights current ethical and unsustainable issues within the fashion and textile industry. Mobile apps such as Good On You, that rate and promote ethical clothing brands worldwide, and movements such as Fashion Revolution and Who Made Your Clothes? are also influencing emerging designers and the consumer (Good on You, n.d.; Fashion Revolution, n.d.).

A recently established organisation, Mindful Fashion New Zealand, is creating an industry collective to utilise the 'power of many' in order to share resources, fund initiatives and research better sustainable practices within supply chains. Members include designers, suppliers, manufacturers, retailers and educational institutions (Mindful Fashion NZ, n.d.).

## METHODOLOGY

The designer case studies explored in this article were selected from Bachelor of Design (Fashion) graduates of Otago Polytechnic who, within five years of graduation, had created business models and an online marketing presence that focused on sustainable futures in the fashion industry through authentic communication with their customers. To maintain an air of objectivity, the authors have chosen a 'desktop-only' methodology as a novel yet effective approach that models our research subjects' behaviours. Sometimes referred to as "secondary data collection without fieldwork" (Rush et al., 2009), desktop research is widely used by market researchers and trend forecasters to obtain the most up-to-date and relevant information available online. Ready access to authenticated databases and information drawn from professional industry sites have enabled desktop research to become a valid methodology within academia, while social media platforms give access to real-time data direct from the source.

## DESKTOP RESEARCH CASE STUDIES

The Otago Polytechnic graduate designers discussed below all engage with sustainable practices and principles across a range of models including upcycling, ethical practices, slow fashion and conscious systems with consideration for materials selection, low waste and a transparent supply chain. They all have a particular area of interest and concern that is promoted as part of their online presence and business model.

### **The materialist: Claire Warburton, Asmuss Clothing, @asmussclothing, 2004 graduate**

Asmuss is a London (UK)-based clothing company started in 2017 by sisters Claire and Fiona Warburton from Aotearoa New Zealand. Both avid travellers who return home frequently, the sisters saw a gap in the market for stylish, functional, eco-friendly adventure and travel clothing for women. Before Asmuss, Claire Warburton spent several years in the mainstream fashion industry refining her skills in the design and technical side of garment production (Asmuss, n.d.–1). Designed for versatility, Asmuss prides itself on producing ‘common sense’ sustainable garments with a focus on high-tech eco-fabrications and easy-wear, easy-care clothing. Asmuss has incorporated a range of innovative, hi-tech fabrications into their brand including Tencel and recycled polyester fabrics produced in an OEKO-TEX STeP certification textile mill in Portugal; a thermal-regulating technology, 37.5®, blended with an ethically sourced wool; a OEKO-TEX 100-certified EVO® woven fabric made from castor bean oil and produced in a Swedish mill; Green Soul Technology and OEKO-TEX polyester made from post-consumer waste; nylon and elastane fabrics made from pre-consumer industrial waste from an Italian mill; and a knit fleece made from wool and recycled polyester. Trims include responsibly sourced YKK Natulon® zips made from post-consumer waste.

Asmuss collaborate with several mills producing fabrics certified by OEKO-TEX, a group of international textile research and testing certification institutes in Europe and Japan. This use of technology enhances the function of Asmuss products, resulting in rapid dry, odour control, thermal regulation, water repellence, anti-bacterial, UVA/B resistance, moisture wicking and 4-way stretch for comfort (37.5: Performance-enhancing Materials, n.d.; Asmuss, n.d.–2).

While on their frequent travels, the Asmuss team road-test each garment for functionality and wearability. Well-considered sustainable practices have been fully integrated throughout the supply and manufacturing chain and are reflected in consumer care instructions. Their ‘Care for the earth and don’t over-wash this garment’ slogan aims at saving time, money and the environment. Trans-seasonal design, short-run ethically manufactured, low-impact production and distribution, and an emphasis on fabric care all add to the minimisation of the brand’s carbon footprint. The brand encourages realistic sizing, with real-life models and no retouching of promotional imagery, with an emphasis on fun and adventure and consideration for the environment and other cultures when travelling. Connecting with customers post-purchase, Asmuss offer a repair and return service for pre-loved garments. Facebook and Instagram connect Asmuss with their community of travellers through advice on fabric care, environmental concerns and travel-logging imagery alongside product placement (Asmuss, n.d.–3).

### **The conscientious objector: Tara Viggo, Paper Theory, @paper\_theory, 2005 graduate**

Tara Viggo is a freelance pattern cutter-based in London, UK, a slow fashion advocate and a sustainable fashion futures promoter. Viggo has worked for several UK-based fast fashion labels, but found that the existing manufacturing supply chain was incompatible with her commitment to waste reduction, ethics and fairness in the fashion industry. She decided to opt out of consuming fast fashion after realising that she herself was a part of unsustainable work practices. Viggo now chooses to work with designers who use accredited factories and transparent supply chains.

Established in response to a resurgence of home sewers using the internet as a source for dress patterns and inspiration, Paper Theory began life in 2017 (iD Dunedin Fashion, 2019). An online, direct-to-customer platform, Paper Theory produces original downloadable, printable pattern files for the home sewer at a reasonable cost. User support includes full sewing and fabrication instructions plus a website, YouTube channel and blog, where Viggo promotes the concept

of slow fashion. Devotees attend regular construction workshops at the Paper Theory studio in London, as well as engage with online resources. With consideration for individual fit and a wide selection of sizing available, Viggo supports inclusiveness and encourages the making of stylish garments with longevity.

Positive community engagement is at the heart of Viggo's business philosophy, further demonstrated through the support and tutoring she offers through Fashion Awareness Direct Ltd, a charitable organisation that provides garment industry instruction to 16-19-year-olds with the aim of helping them gain employment in the apparel industry (White, 2018).

### **The upcycler: Sharn Blackwell, Mushama & Me, @mushamaandme, 2007 graduate**

Mushama is Albanian for raincoat. From a chance discovery of a patterned fabric in an Albanian market, Sharn Blackwell's first Mushama & Me collection of brightly patterned raincoats, made from upcycled waterproof tablecloths, was born (Etsy, 2019). After graduating in 2007, Blackwell travelled extensively before settling in Amsterdam, where in 2012 she was inspired to design raincoats for European cyclists. Amsterdam is one of the wettest cities in Europe and a gap in the market had emerged for fun, colourful, patterned raincoats worn while cycling. Enabled through a good supply of recycled fabrics, pre-loved vintage laminated tablecloths and shower curtains sourced in the second-hand market in Amsterdam, the business grew. An eco-conscious label with a focus on upcycling and minimisation of waste, Mushama & Me raincoats literally took on a new life. Initially sold in local markets, a brand was born from the discarded.

On returning to Aotearoa New Zealand in 2015, Blackwell found that a guaranteed supply of pre-laminated fabrics was not available there, leading her to develop a waterproofing process that involved coating found fabrics with a micro layer of bonded PVC (Homestyle, 2019). Blackwell began making a small range of different styles of raincoat using unique fabrics, with lengths created by patch-working several fabrics together and carefully cutting around imperfections. To achieve waste minimisation, offcuts from the cutting room became baby accessories and bike seat covers. However, realising that the laminating process required to waterproof fabrics was unsustainable long-term, Blackwell decided to investigate a more sustainable way forward and is no longer using this process (Nadia, 2017).

Adding value to discarded fabrics by creating a new trend in children's wear is at the core of Blackwell's sustainable practice. A zero-waste philosophy is realised by upcycling discarded textiles from op-shops, giving new life to patterned bedsheets, duvets and tablecloths, with only the smallest of scraps going to landfill (Mushama & Me, 2019). Quietly promoting Mushama & Me via Facebook and Instagram, Blackwell is building a community of like-minded, eco-conscious parents eager to promote ethical apparel practices to others. With an awareness of the current unsustainable practices within the fashion industry Blackwell supports the Fashion Revolution movement and is subtly raising awareness by refocussing her supply chain and making practices (Mushama & Me, n.d.).

Recently, Blackwell has wound down the Mushama & Me side of her business, putting her creative energy into prolonging the life of existing garments, alongside facilitating make-and-mend workshops through a new venture, Make and Mend NZ (Make & Mend, 2021).

### **The ethicist: Anna Ross, Kester Black, @kesterblack, 2008 graduate**

Currently based in Wanaka, Aotearoa New Zealand, after starting her business in Melbourne, Anna Ross has created a sustainable and inclusive business model while utilising multiple channels to engage with her customers. Using social media to promote her ethically made, cruelty-free, vegan and water-permeable ranges of nail polish and certified organic lipsticks, she aims to educate her target market about ethical practice through her blog, website, Facebook and Instagram (Kester Black Australia, n.d.). An early adopter of Instagram marketing, Kester Black has had a highly polished presence on this platform since 2014; the brand's ever-changing styling and imagery, updated at least daily, incorporates product placement with inspirational imagery and interesting stories. With a handful of ethical accreditations to its name, and awarded a Certified B Corp rating in 2016, Kester Black was the first cosmetics company in the world to receive this particular fair-trade certification.

Ross commits 2 percent of the income derived from Kester Black to charity, a business model that successfully combines a triple bottom line philosophy with social enterprise and financial sustainability. In 2016 Ross was awarded the Young Australian Businesswoman of the Year; was nominated again in 2017 and supports various charities through the i=Change program (Kester Black New Zealand, n.d.).

Kester Black products are available for sale both online and internationally at a variety of retail outlets including boutiques, cafes, department stores, design stores, spas and beauty salons worldwide. The brand gains extra online exposure from the social media presence provided by these retail opportunities, thereby enhancing the company's profile and ethical message (McCauley, 2017).

### **The transparent maker: Jessie Wong, Yu Mei, @Yumeibrand, 2014 graduate**

Based in the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand, Jessie Wong graduated with an already established business that she had developed while studying. Another social media and multichannel natural, Wong has successfully grown a leather goods label in the highly competitive and emerging Aotearoa New Zealand luxury market place, using Instagram as a platform to tell multiple stories and to personalise the Yu Mei experience. Originally using New Zealand-grown deer nappa, and promoting a transparent supply chain, Yu Mei's "land to luxury" story focusses on the health and wellbeing of the animals and humans involved in the making of a Yu Mei accessory and the traceability of materials. Wong says: "I want to grow Yu Mei into a socially responsible label and increase consumer awareness on how the products and garments they choose to buy are made" (NZ Apparel, 2016).

During 2016 New Zealand Fashion Week, Yu Mei disrupted the traditional fashion show format by staging an installation for buyers, media and supporters. Demonstrating how a Yu Mei bag is made from start to finish in a workroom setting, Wong highlighted the brand's philosophy of "quality and the hand of the maker over quantity," and what makes her bags and accessories desirable to a younger luxury target market and worth the investment (Sly, 2016).

Wong continues to interact with buyers and customers in intimate social settings as part of her sales strategy, and continues to put growing relationships at the heart of her business. The Yu Mei retail space was introduced in Wellington towards the end of 2018 as an experimental 'lounge-style' store, where label devotees are hosted and treated in a luxurious setting while considering their next purchase. Since then, Wong has had multiple pop-up stores and has recently opened a second Yu Mei Lounge retail store in Auckland, alongside the original Wellington store. Yu Mei also invites their 'community' to join Club Yu Mei, a digital club which provides members with insight into what inspires the team, events such as archive sales, and digital runway presentations. As part of the label's commitment to the concept of circularity, customers can exchange old bags for a credit towards a new purchase, thereby extending the life of a pre-loved item given a new lease on life and returned to the marketplace (Yu Mei, n.d.). Wong and her team are continually innovating and growing their range of products, while engaging on a personal level with customers through multiple channels.

### **The anti-fashion fashionista: Julia Palm, JPalm, @\_jpalm\_, 2015 graduate**

Since graduation, Julia Palm has experienced a bohemian lifestyle in New York and Stockholm and currently resides in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand. Operating collaboratively within an art/fashion crossover, JPalm promotes a slow fashion model through customised and one-of-a-kind clothing and accessories as part of a project-based design process. Essentially a maker first, Palm utilises mixed-media materials and handcrafted textile manipulation to produce a range of original high-fashion garments in her *NEITHER.project* workroom. Palm supports diversity and acceptance of 'other;' her season-less fashion making, with longevity in mind, appeals to her devoted following of post-punk millennials disillusioned with fast fashion.

Imagery is at the heart of Palm's narrative and powerful messages, disseminated through visual media via Instagram, present young, cool anti-establishment types photographed in subversive B&W scenarios. Palm creates inclusive, unique digital and face-to-face experiences, including collaborative events such as pop-up retail, installations and exhibitions. Palm works closely with other designers, artists, filmmakers and musicians, using the internet and social media to promote, sell and deliver final concepts and products (Parsons-King, 2017; JPALM, n.d.).

In 2020 JPalm's vlog submission gained national recognition when it was awarded runner-up in the Hnry independent earner competition (Hnry, 2020). The financial support gained from the Hnry award was used strategically to launch a JPalm range of premium socks, further growing brand allegiance as an affordable product accessible to a wider range of customers wanting to engage with the JPalm brand.

## CONCLUSION: SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH DESIGN

Through observation of this group of Otago Polytechnic fashion graduates, a common thread has emerged. Similarities within their *modus operandi* suggest that these designers are each building an authentic community of practice and inclusive business models, with customer connections, supply chain transparency and sustainable principles as core values. They have a focus on developing and maintaining an economically viable business alongside promotion of ethical and environmental concerns; giving back to the community; and collaborating with like-minded people concerned about the future of the fashion industry and sustainability politics. These graduates based outside Aotearoa New Zealand have access to new technologies and customers that enhance their business models, while our antipodean designers can utilise multiple digital platforms to connect with wider communities.

The global fashion supply chain has been moving toward a more transparent and circular model as designers, manufacturers and consumers come to see the positive impacts of embedding sustainable processes and practices, both socially and environmentally. Internationally, fashion designers are becoming more aware of sustainable models, ethics, social impacts and economics, incorporating these principles into their own design practice as a core value. The designers showcased in this desktop observatory have chosen to engage with their community of practice, suppliers and customers in an inclusive, collaborative and transparent way. The promotion of sustainable ideals and social change alongside viable economics allows these designers to confidently challenge the status quo within a dynamic and competitive fashion industry.

**Tracy Kennedy** and **Tania Allan Ross** are principal lecturers in the School of Design at Otago Polytechnic. Tracy and Tania work collaboratively on a range of projects and have a particular interest in the future direction of graduates from the Bachelor of Design (Fashion) programme and their engagement with the changing face of the global fashion and textile industries.

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