

T-EXTINCTION: A co-created fashion and textiles sustainability awareness project that takes a long-time approach

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Abstract

Climate change activism and the widespread acknowledgement of the polluting impact of Fashion and Textiles industries inspired this novel co-creation sustainability awareness project that takes a long time approach.

Promoting long time, cathedral style thinking contrasts sharply with current fast fashion practice. Saltmarsh and Pembroke (2018) of the Long Time Project state, “Short termism is rapidly becoming an existential threat to humanity” while Fletcher (2010) proposes slow culture as an opportunity to develop systems change within the fashion sector.

At De Montfort University, the UN SDGs are embedded within the Fashion and Textiles curricula. This project started as an opportunity to co-create an extra-curricular community response. Inspired by the long time approach, Fashion Buying academics and students set themselves the challenge to identify products or processes that would be extinct or taboo in the year 2090. Named T-Extinction, a project was launched in 2019 to get academics and students alike thinking. T-Extinction proved to be an innovative sustainability awareness strategy providing a conduit for staff and students to share their skills and learn from each other. For 2021-22 Textile Design students and academics are now taking on the T-Extinction challenge, which resonates with the local industry and textile heritage in Leicester.

This paper outlines the aim and approach taken in the running of the project. Co-creation was key, with student led graphic design input and a dedicated social media account incorporated to promote T-Extinction ahead of a co-created physical exhibition featuring a range of responses from denim products, hosiery, trainers and sizing which went on display in March 2021. Student engagement is evaluated by reviewing the influence of sustainable development and co-creation within design practice.

Introduction

Stark warnings about the climate emergency have been increasingly articulated and the recent COP 26 Climate Conference in Glasgow finished with an agreed set of ambitious measures to reduce CO2 emissions to keep to within a global temperature rise of 1.5 degrees (COP26, 2021). The enormity, severity and the timespan of the challenge was articulated during the conference by leaders including U.S. President, Joe Biden, who stated,

There's no more time to hang back or sit on the fence or argue amongst ourselves. This is a challenge of our collective lifetimes. The existential threat, threat to human existence as we know it, and every day we delay the cost of inaction increases. So let this be the moment that we answer history's call here in Glasgow.

With the time frame for action noted by UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson,

The people who will judge us are children not yet born and their children, . . ." and we are now coming center stage before a vast and uncountable audience of posterity, and we must not fluff our lines or miss our cue, because if we fail they will not forgive us.

The Fashion and Textiles industry is recognised as a key contributor to climate change, often quoted as being the second most polluting global industry. With an output of 15 billion garments per year, the USD 2.5 trillion industry employs 430 million people globally in both a complex and in many parts opaque value chain (Srivastava, 2021).

There is a plethora of contributing factors to the negative impact which include:

- the voracious demand for low cost fast fashion products,
- water pollution caused by production processes across the value chain,
- the high level of water consumption for crops such as cotton,
- the release of microfibres from synthetic fabrics into the air and water supply,
- limited recycling technologies for mixed fibre fabrics and garments,
- the vast amounts of textile waste destined for landfill,
- fair pay and working conditions for workers across the value chain.

Recent years have seen much activity to innovate to combat these issues with a myriad of sustainability initiatives developed. Payne (2017) collates these against a taming and rewilding framework, where she notes technologies to tame and minimise damage to the earth's resources exist alongside projects that rewild and return to a more localised artisanal approach. This is exemplified by the School of Fashion and Textiles at De Montfort University, a recent the winner of a Green Gown Award for Next Generation Learning and Skills and recognised for its integrated approach comprising curricular change, co-curricular opportunities, innovative research into new materials and community engagement to address the challenges of the textile industry, locally in Leicester, nationally and internationally (Sustainability Exchange, 2021).

The scale of the industry means that potential solutions to positively impact the environmental

and social challenges are significant. Across the industry the immediacy of the challenge is the focus of many of the initiatives. This paper in contrast, considers the challenge over a greater time span, by using a long-time approach, stakeholders are asked to consider the world in the future, project themselves to a time when the initiatives and actions that are being put in place over their careers will have had time to have an impact. Careers, where design, communication, buying and management professionals will have the opportunity to influence, with a sustainability focus, design decisions for thousands of garments.

Inspired by climate activism and the group Extinction Rebellion, an extracurricular co-creation project at De Montfort University has been developed to encourage long-time thinking. Named, T-Extinction and with a new theme each year, students and staff from different departments are invited to consider the world in the year 2090 through a sustainability lens. The year, chosen to represent a time in the lives of current students when they might reflect on their careers. The paper presents the long-time approach as a theoretical framework and details each T-Extinction theme along with key findings both from a sustainability and pedagogic perspective. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the approach and ideas for future work.

The long-time approach

In 2019, Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teenage climate activist referred to the need for cathedral thinking to develop effective solutions for combat the climate emergency in her speech to World Economic Forum, (The Guardian, 2019). Cathedral thinking is a key aspect of the long-time approach to problem-solving. By considering a problem over at least the life span of a long living human, a unique perspective is brought to a problem and its solutions. Krznaric (2020), comments that the long-time approach enables humility, and encourages a desire to leave a legacy that will be remembered well by posterity with an overriding goal to strive for a thriving planet. Key techniques include consideration of the impact by the seventh generation ahead and cathedral thinking, which involves planning projects beyond a human's lifetime.

Similarly, the Long Time project publicises this approach (Saltmarshe and Pembroke, 2018). Their wide range of projects and initiatives and toolkit to engage the public imagination, along with a recent collaboration with the Royal Society of Arts and was the inspiration behind the T-Extinction concept.

T-Extinction Theme 1: Sustainability awareness

The first T-Extinction theme focussed on sustainability awareness, with the premise to consider what Fashion and Textile product or process would be extinct by the year 2090. Commencing late Summer of 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic it was a response to what was happening in the world, the climate emergency and activism that was taking place. The first project was run with BA Fashion Buying students, strategically their influence as professionals within the fashion system was viewed as considerable and was viewed as an exciting new extra-curricular journey for students and academics to consider sustainability from a different perspective. A poster (figure 1) and competition brief was set and open to all years of study, with winning

responses from seven first year students. Three academics from across School brought a breadth of specialisms to the team and combined with the students to create a diverse mix of skills and experience.



Figure 1. T-Extinction Poster

Many of the co-creation opportunities centred around the responses and showcasing. The initial idea for a physical exhibition postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, led to a social media campaign and a student inspired instagram account. Student and academic T- Extinction responses demonstrated extensive thinking from products that were envisaged to be extinct such as sequins, denim, rubber soles, nylon tights through to the fast fashion product category and current processes for sizing, buying and disposal. The full set of responses are shown in figure 2.



Figure 2: T-Extinction Theme 1 Responses

Posts on Instagram enabled the project to reach a wider audience and when lockdowns eased a physical exhibition was curated and featured on the Instagram feed. The thought-provoking imagery created by each respondent had a visual impact both at scale for the physical exhibition and as a social media post. Further dissemination of the project was extended nationally through articles and conference papers, with the novel approach being featured by Fashion United.

T-Extinction Theme 2: Endangered craft

An original aim of the T-Extinction project was to take the framework and pass to a new department and/or institution on an annual basis. On passing the 'baton' to the Textile department there was a desire to maintain the co-creation and community spirit of the T-Extinction but create relevance to textile specialisms, encouraging a broader approach to creativity and sustainability. The Textile department developed the context of the project across the practical skills taught in the department, pedagogical learning from teaching online due to the pandemic and the strategic direction of the new Vice Chancellor, Professor Katie Normington.

The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown had meant a review of how to teach practical courses online. A different approach was needed for skills that could be developed within the home environment without access to workshops and equipment. The resulting work, innovative and creativity of the students led to a review of how to capture experimentation and innovation away from modules, assessment, learning outcomes in the new academic year.

Combining this with a consideration of the roots of the School of Fashion and Textiles based in Leicester is a multi-cultural city renowned for the production of textiles. The BA Textile Design, as a practical creative course, develops designers in the context of a global textile market. Part of the ethos of the course is the to consider the development of traditional craft for contemporary textiles, learning through live projects with industry and the practitioner expertise of academic team. This approach was echoed in the inaugural speech of De Montfort University's Vice Chancellor.

The roots of DMU are in Leicester School of Art, established in 1870. From that period until the formation of DMU in 1992 (...the institution) sought to bring together technology and craft' (Normington, 2021)

When creating the brief for the T-Extinction project for the Textile students, the literature was reviewed relating to policies and research. The idea of craft skills associated with longevity links in with 'The Long-Term Project' focused on finding ways to care about their long-term future. Valuing craft in household items that were used every day as an alternative to using mass produced items that may be changed and replaced often creating landfill. Craft items are valued for the time and skill taken to create them. Klamer et al (2019) speak of craft as an heirloom, a view which fits the 'cathedral view' of the T-extinction project, creating the opposite to fast fashion. This view is echoed in the article 'Craft, Innovation and Creativity';

...those characteristics associated with craft – slow evolution, material quality, skill, diligent but not mindless copying to achieve refinement – that constitute the basis, not just of recognized craft, but also of leading artists' and designers' works. They enable innovation by building on established and proven ideas and by refining and honing them with each iteration (Niedderer and Townsend, 2014)

The Craft Research Journal describes the role of craft as

...rooted in its flexible nature as a conduit from design at one end to art at the other. It gains its strength from its at times experimental, at times developmental nature, which enables craft to explore and challenge technology, to question and develop cultural and social practices, and to interrogate philosophical and human values. (Niedderer and Townsend, 2021)

International recognition and support of craft, is also noted in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention of the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003.

This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (UNESCO, 2021)

This agreement to formally recognise traditional craft as part of the UK cultural heritage was not ratified by the United Kingdom (UK). As a consequently, crafts are not included within any government remit for support and promotion. In the meantime, an all-party parliamentary

group for craft (APPG) has been formed in 2018. (Craft APPG, 2021), while the Heritage Crafts Association, an UNESCO accredited NGO for Intangible Cultural Heritage, has compiled The Red List of critically endangered crafts. (Heritagecrafts.org.uk. 2021) The students and academics wanted the T-extinction project to go beyond the creation of product, and instead to consider the sustainability in terms of the longevity of the product. Many students had learnt skills from the older generations, or their projects were influenced by cultural heritage. The ethos of this T-Extinction theme, emphasizing the connection between traditional maker practices and expertise with sustainability are noted by Walker et al (2019) who state:

...our investigations illustrate the potential for design and creativity to contribute to the sustainment of these crafts and reveal connections to contemporary understandings of sustainability, including synergies with place, community, and what is felt to be mindful of responsibility to past, present and future generations.

From this review of literature, on how craft is viewed, a brief was written inviting students to join in creative practice. Specifically, students and academics were asked to respond to the following statement:

Many traditional British Crafts are in danger of becoming extinct by 2090. T- Extinction, this year, wants to highlight this situation by considering craft processes and re-inventing them for the contemporary market to ensure the skills are saved Your challenge is to identify an endangered craft where you can see the potential to re- create the process but in a new sustainable context.

Through co-creation, the students and academics have used the Heritage Crafts Red List of Endangered Crafts to choose craft areas to explore. Through discussion the cohort of students and academics have decided to document their ideas through photographs and journals, At the time of writing, ideas have been shared and inspired ready to start development on samples. This project will be documented to inform developing skills in textiles and how craft techniques can inform pedagogic and contemporary practice. Links with Heritage Crafts Association have been made for advice and information on the endangered crafts and ways to promote the stories of the craft and project creation to a wider audience to create a connection with craft, with physical and digital showcasing to follow.

Discussion and evaluation

The outcomes of T-Extinction are both specific to the initial project and the concept's wider potential. The initial learning from the first T-Extinction project is twofold.

The team of students and staff developed an enhanced understanding the UN SDGs and a passion for sustainability, with the resulting responses covering a broad spectrum of products and processes provided a series of thought provoking imagery. The responses aligning to the 'taming' aspect of Payne's sustainable fashion framework (Payne, 2017).

Co-creation can be seen as a key element of the original T-Extinction concept, in addition to discussing the subject matter, this aspect has highlighted the potential of intergenerational working. Students and staff have had the opportunity to co-create with peers and lecturers. Students are developing team working skills, independent thought, confidence, organisational skills to meet deadlines and researching skills. One of the student contributors when referring to T-Extinction states 'it is joyful to look at practical ways of moving forward in the right direction'.

The benefits of intergenerational working have been exemplified by the showcasing aspect, where student respondents instigated the social media response with a social media plan and strategy, imparted their knowledge to older staff members who were not as familiar with the in-depth use of these communication tools. The value of this intergenerational working is seen as a key finding from the first project contributing further to the long-time approach.

Through transferring the T-Extinction 'baton' from one department to another within the School has extended the reach of the concept further and is creating momentum internally and within the wider community. Using the long-time approach concept, is proving successful with a second project that is considering endangered craft, The brief aligning to the rewilding context of the aligning to the e rewilding aspect of Payne's sustainable fashion framework (Payne, 2017).

It can be seen from the first two T-Extinction projects that the long-time approach resonates with students and academics alike and provides interesting outcomes that have the potential to reach a wide audience. Co-creation and the intergenerational nature of the approach are resonating with the student and academic team.

There is great potential to develop the project further, to work with themes to address sustainability challenges of niche products areas offered by the School of Fashion and Textiles such as lingerie, swimwear and footwear provides further opportunities not only to impact the thinking today, but throughout the careers of the next generation of industry professionals.

Conclusions

By challenging the next generation of designers, communicators, buyers and managers while they are students, with critical questions about the sustainability of products and processes, a long-time approach provides the opportunity for these future professionals to consider the impact of their individual actions, reinforcing the call for action.

The extra-curricular nature of the project provides the opportunity to build a sense of community and a maker culture away from the rigors of a module brief. Anecdotally students report that co-creation provides an open forum for ideas and experimentation, making the design process more transparent. This is an interesting area for further investigation to inform practical teaching as we come out of the pandemic.

With the co-creation ethos, and through the transfer of the project from one department to another has provided the opportunity for more students and academics to become involved,

building momentum through maintaining a focus on previous work and the importance of the approach.

Highlighting endangered craft through this approach provide visibility for red list of heritage crafts, and highlighted a variety of techniques that have enriched the practical process. Further exposure will take place through showcasing activity.

The annual themes provide an opportunity to focus on different areas of challenge and by developing and highlighting these challenges new insights are developed.

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