

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

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### Introduction

The pace of fashion cycles has increased enormously over recent decades, with the advent of fast and faster fashion since the late 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<sup>1</sup>, the 2017 UN Sustainable Development Goals and accelerated by the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic<sup>2</sup>. The urgency for action was again reinforced by the Sixth IPCC report in 2021, named as ‘a code red for humanity’ by the UN Secretary-General.<sup>3</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> century (Fletcher 2008, Fletcher & Tham 2012, Black 2008, 2012). Calls for a long-overdue reset of the fashion industry system increased dramatically in response to the Covid-19 crisis (BOF and McKinsey & Co. 2020a, 2020b; BOF 2020; BFC and CFDA 2020; Open Letter 2020) and this momentum has continued (PEC 2022).

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 £35 billion in 2019 pre-pandemic - larger than the automotive and aerospace sectors combined (BFC 2020). The UK's designer fashion sector comprises a high proportion of micro and small enterprises<sup>4</sup> (MSEs), independent businesses characterised by Jill Geoghegan, editor of fashion trade journal *Drapers*, as “the lifeblood of the fashion industry in the UK and Ireland”(Warrington 2022) and the focus of this research. Many design-led sustainable fashion MSEs 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.

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<sup>1</sup> At the 2015 Paris Climate Conference (Conference of the Parties COP21) 189 signatories agreed to limit global warming to 1.5°-2° and publish targets for reduction of their greenhouse gas emissions see <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/climate-and-environment/2015-paris-climate-conference-cop21/cop21-the-paris-agreement-in-four-key-points/> (accessed 10.1.21). The 2021 conference COP26 held in the UK reconfirmed this target.

<sup>2</sup> “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.” BOF and McKinsey & Co. (2020a: pp. 8, 18).

<sup>3</sup> Statement made by UN Secretary-General António Guterres 9.08.2021 on the publication of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report. See [www.un.org/en/delegate/global-warming-'unequivocally'-human-driven-ipcc](http://www.un.org/en/delegate/global-warming-'unequivocally'-human-driven-ipcc) (accessed 8.10.22).

<sup>4</sup> EU Document 32003H0361 (2003) defines micro businesses as having 0 to 9 employees, small 10 -49 employees, medium 50-249 employees, as used by the UK Office for National Statistics. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32003H0361>

This chapter presents empirical findings researched before and during the pandemic period, from the AHRC-funded project Rethinking Fashion Design Entrepreneurship: Fostering Sustainable Practices (FSP). The FSP project structured its research across the four pillars of sustainability: social, environmental, economic and cultural. Whilst the fashion industry has been severely affected by the pandemic<sup>5</sup>, we examine how sustainability-motivated fashion entrepreneurs can offer alternative models and practices of resilience and prosperity, 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 in-person and online interviews with 27 design-led fashion MSEs to investigate their visions, values, capabilities and business models for sustainable fashion. To identify these sustainability-focused businesses, an initial survey of 200 UK-based fashion MSEs (not necessarily sustainability-focused) was conducted, to collect details of their business, purpose and values, their challenges, their current sustainable practices and visions for success. Based on the screening of this information, 45 MSEs with existing sustainable motivation and practices were selected for the qualitative research and first semi-structured interviews. Subsequently 27 businesses were selected for longitudinal study where further interviews with designers/founders and key personnel from each business were conducted. Figures 1 & 2 indicate the size and longevity of these 27 businesses.

Figure 10.1 Turnover of 27 MSEs in FSP longitudinal study

**INSERT Figure 10.1**

Figure 10.2 Number of years in business of 27 MSEs in FSP longitudinal study

**INSERT FIGURE 10.2**

## Findings

This section discusses some of the themes that emerged from analysis of our cases in relation to the four research strands that structured 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

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<sup>5</sup> Eurostat 2020: 'Volume of retail trade sales July 2020 compared to February 2020' shows Textile, Clothes, and Footwear sales fell by 22% from February to July 2020, far more than any other sector, the next largest fall was automotive fuel at 9%. (Accessed 16.1.21)  
[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/images/1/13/Retail\\_sales\\_June2020-03.jpg](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/images/1/13/Retail_sales_June2020-03.jpg)

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<sup>6</sup>. In 2020 the PayUpFashion campaign<sup>7</sup> helped garment workers by recouping payments lost to cancelled orders during the pandemic.

This theme foregrounds the designer-entrepreneurs' visions and values with respect to the social aspects of fashion business (research strand 1). The case study enterprises put social and environmental purposes 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) and menswear and womenswear brand Bethany Williams (Figure 5), and 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 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. Both businesses have been recognised with awards, and Bethany Williams' work as a social enterprise was showcased in an exhibition at the Design Museum London in 2022.

### **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 increased their direct-to-consumer engagement activities, capitalising on their existing relationships nurtured through social media narratives (such as Instagram Stories),

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<sup>6</sup> 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)

<sup>7</sup> See <https://payupfashion.com>

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 London is a business that upcycles broken jewellery, creating new pieces from old, and 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) a series that has continued. Similarly, womenswear designer Phoebe English offered a series of talks on developing a collection, respecting planetary boundaries (@phoebeenglish 17.12.20), and physically showcased her studio processes to the public at the British Library (@phoebeenglish 16.09.21). The wearable technology company Cute Circuit, creators of unique 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). As businesses were able to open again post pandemic, face-to-face activities such as Raeburn’s monthly public Lab tours resumed. Raeburn has continued to close its online shopping site on Black Friday, instead instigating in 2022 Buy Back Friday where customers could trade in garments (@raeburn\_design 23.11.22). These and many other MSE 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. They aim to innovate beyond the creation of products, to create new ways of doing business whilst still providing delight and rewarding experience. For such purpose-led businesses, economic growth is not the end in itself, and not the only measure of success, but 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 business 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 were certified BCorp businesses (an internationally recognised certification for social and environmental standards in business), which is rare in the fashion sector. Elvis & Kresse were the first fashion-related business 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 this study, and Riz Boardshorts, makers of a single product, men’s beach shorts, using recycled ocean plastics. Since the completion of the FSP project, more fashion businesses are seeking BCorp certification, including Raeburn; Birdsong achieved their BCorp accreditation in April 2022, and womenswear brand Deploy achieved theirs in May 2022 (see Chapter 13) .

### **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 runs of digitally printed sports teamwear). Through their innovative software developments, Unmade is 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 opportunities and recognition for fashion and textile designers. 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 profit is shared with those contributing to each design.

Figure 10.3: NuW sharing community (left); Elvis & Kresse bags made from waste fire hose. Photos courtesy the designers.

### **INSERT FIGURE 10.3**

Figure 10.4: Away to Mars co-created designs; Birdsong wrap dress; Raeburn menswear. Photos courtesy the designers

### **INSERT FIGURE 10.4**

Figure 10.5: Bethany Williams All Our Children collection; EDN Network produced scrubs for NHS staff . Photos courtesy the designer.

## INSERT FIGURE 10.5

### **Agility to address sustainability in relation to pandemic challenges**

In relation to the first research strand, our findings show that the capabilities designer-entrepreneurs exhibit include responsiveness to change and willingness to explore, adapt, seize opportunity and take risks. They also include 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 industry and business 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 increasing supply chain resilience during crises. 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” (protective clothing) for NHS workers during the first wave of the pandemic and again in early 2021 as pressures once more increased (Figure 5 right).

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 personal protective equipment (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 delivered 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 Awards (UK Parliament 2020; Vogue 2020); an acknowledgment to the commitment of the group whilst caring for the workers and ensuring the survival of their businesses.

### **Conclusions**

These innovative sustainable fashion 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 with appreciation for social and cultural values identified by the 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 behavioural 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, demonstrate designer-entrepreneurs' transparent working practices and non-conventional measures of business 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 evident amongst the case studies. The implications for the wider industry are clear: the 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 actual demand-driven fashion by manufacturing products to order or in small batches can create a renewed relationship between consumers and their clothes, giving them lasting pleasure underpinned by quality, transparency and social justice.

As the Covid-19 crisis triggered a wider discourse in a re-assessment of values, foregrounding green renewal, new quality-of-life indicators (Harvey 2020) and implementation of a well-being economy (Wellbeing Economy Alliance 2017; OECD 2020), purpose-driven fashion MSEs 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 sustainable fashion business is and what it can be in future, presenting viable pathways to building towards a sustainable prosperity for all involved.

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