

UPCYCLING TEXTILE WASTE FOR YOUTH SKILL DEVELOPMENT: A SUSTAINABLE APPROACH TO FASHION EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In this study, the use of discarded clothing as the source of innovative skills acquisition for Nigerian fashion students is examined. The increasing amounts of fabric waste and unemployment among youth require creative thinking in the area of skills development. Discarded materials transform into practical items like tote bags, cushion covers, small stitched objects, and household decorations; not only theoretical knowledge but also practical skills are imparted to the learners. Knowledge acquisition occurs through practical activities, observations, interactions, and note-taking in the context of a workshop environment, where production is emphasized. The outcome results from practical experience gained in terms of visual, auditory, and tactile perceptions. In the present study, fashion teachers, students, learners, as well as creators who practice sustainable fashion design, are selected carefully as research participants. Creative repurposing of fabric scraps enhances creativity, improves practical skills, builds entrepreneurial capabilities, and develops environmentally-friendly behaviors among young fashion designers. Youngsters acquire real-life competencies through green fashion techniques, thus unlocking opportunities for financial independence and smart material decisions in contemporary classrooms. Innovative instruction of discarded clothing helps to increase the effectiveness of learning-by-doing, reduces landfill waste, promotes expertise that ensures career success among schools in Nigeria.

Keywords: Sustainable Fashion, Textile Waste, Upcycling, Skill Development, Fashion Education

Introduction

The accumulation of waste occurs wherever scraps are disposed of – tailors cut garments, clothing is piled up, but nature suffers. The need for new fashion trends is on the rise among Nigerians, but the rate of garbage disposal exceeds the capacity of existing facilities. Garment factories dispose of bags containing unused material, without any thoughts of recycling or repurposing. Youthful workers are idle, while machinery lies unused, and employment opportunities evaporate even before they arise.

Modern education on fashion no longer focuses on the traditional methods of clothing creation. While the previous generation was content with disregarding garbage, nowadays, students learn how to transform remnants of fabrics into valuable items. Creativity is extremely significant in current times, together with eco-friendliness and resourcefulness. As for transforming the remains of textiles into a brand-new item, this occupation brings to life something that would otherwise end up in the trash bin. The remains of fabrics are being used to create tote bags, soft pillows, jewelry, quilting patterns, and wall decorations. Not only does such activity prevent waste from accumulating in the landfill, but it also grants children an invaluable skillset that they will be able to use throughout their lives. This way, they receive training in problem-solving skills without the need to use fresh materials. They learn

to plan their work and pay close attention to details. Finally, they discover the art of recognizing opportunities in places where others see only trash.

Understanding sustainable clothing is becoming increasingly important due to social and environmental issues. Educational institutions such as schools and vocational centers are beginning to incorporate eco-friendliness in their curriculum rather than making it an additional lesson. Being involved in the process with the use of discarded materials enables learners to engage in practical learning, address actual problems, be creative, and innovate. Involving discarded material in design education equips learners with employable skills; skills that could translate into self-employment, and eventually, contribute to community building.

Despite the increasing prevalence of discussions concerning eco-fashion globally, the majority of fashion colleges in Nigeria hardly address fabric waste management or creative ways of recycling used materials. While the primary attention is placed on the conventional production of garments, little effort is made to discover innovative techniques of giving an old fabric a second life by applying design principles. Lacking empirical evidence that informs education on sustainable practices, eco-principles remain underutilized within the educational sphere. This gap is evident, indicating the necessity for further investigation into environmentally conscious strategies integrated into education.

Sustainable Fashion and Textile Waste Management

The rapid expansion of fashion around the globe has been detrimental to the environment due to constant production of fabrics, excessive consumption of clothing, but insufficient disposal of the waste created during such processes. According to Gwilt in 2020, pollution caused by the clothes is a result of immense amounts of waste generated by the process of clothes production and later on when the clothes are disposed of. This includes fabric waste, cuttings, faulty clothing pieces, as well as old clothing. Such waste typically ends up buried in landfills or burned. Due to the increasing amount of textile waste produced yearly, the need for better management of the use of resources has become critical.

However, due to worries about damage from clothing production processes, the opposite direction emerged – sustainable fashion. According to Fletcher & Grose, this type of production promotes ethical design choices: environmentally-friendly, socially responsible manufacturing processes, recycling, repurposing and rethinking old products. The process of giving a second life to waste is possible through an innovative concept of upcycling, which transforms leftover materials into something that can be used again but in a new form. Unlike conventional recycling, this process preserves the quality of products, at the same time inspiring creative approaches in clothing design (McDonough & Braungart, 2002).

Increased urbanization and clothing production contribute to the rise in waste generation in Nigeria, particularly in areas of activity and education for tailors. However, the process of fabric management development remains underdeveloped in almost all local design schools. According to the findings reported by Oloyede and Akinjare (2021), sustainable practices have only begun to develop within the educational framework of these institutions, which usually lack relevant knowledge concerning waste recycling in design classes.

Fashion Education and Skill Acquisition

Learning fashion enables students to be able to develop skills and generate unique ideas since it involves producing goods and establishing small-scale enterprises. Skills-based training emphasizes learning practical knowledge that will enable individuals to earn a living, participate in the economy, and seek employment. The importance of skill acquisition in Nigeria has become increasingly significant over time; the increase in unemployment coincided with young adults becoming empowered in disciplines such as fabric production, according to Okoro (2018).

Experiential learning is becoming increasingly relevant in vocational training and fashion education because it focuses on practical applications rather than purely theoretical knowledge. As per Kolb (1984), learning occurs when individuals engage, reflect, experiment, and then implement their ideas. In fashion education, engaging with the materials directly, such as using scrap fabrics to create new designs, promotes skills, imagination, and confidence about establishing one's own business within workshop classes where experimentation determines results.

While fashion education molds impressionable young minds, it also encourages entrepreneurial activities by allowing learners to develop practical skills, which become a means of earning a living via entrepreneurship. The research conducted by Adebayo and Oke (2020) highlights the shift towards fashion trades by Nigerian youth due to the unavailability of traditional career options. With the introduction of eco-friendly approaches into these programs, even more opportunities emerge – not only financially but environmentally as well.

Upcycling as a Pedagogical and Creative Practice

Today, upcycling is being recognized not only as an environmentally friendly method for product creation but also as a pedagogical tool used in art and fashion education programs. Being practice-oriented, the process encourages critical thinking since the student has to transform the existing material, creating a functional and visually appealing item. Rather than melting the material like standard recycling does, the idea is to construct something innovative based on the available resources. In the case under discussion, Sung made this point in 2015.

The process of converting discarded materials into useful objects within classroom settings promotes creativity since the learners are engaged in practical work. Developing the ability to create items from scraps of material teaches students to experiment and test various options. Working with limited amounts of cloth and attempting to convert it into useful products stimulates creativity and forces one to think of novel approaches rather than relying on established ways. According to Earley and Goldsworthy, sustainability education can lead to changing perspectives on the manufacturing process. Exploration of innovative applications in existing objects boosts creativity of manufacturing processes. Utilizing discarded textiles in design classes allows students to experiment with affordable and accessible resources. In this case, they use fewer expensive materials but continue to test new approaches and consider future consequences. And what follows? They begin to envision ways to enter the domain of small-scale production and sales in the context of the increased popularity of handcrafted items.

Upcycling-based learning contributes not only to practical skills formation but also helps develop the awareness of ecological implications and responsibilities towards the community. As Armstrong et al. note, incorporating sustainable fashion principles into education helps students understand their role in clothes production and purchase process that may be destructive to nature. Interaction with abandoned textile items promotes the formation of responsible attitudes regarding the environment as a common good and the emergence of environmentally-oriented mindsets. Due to the nature of interaction with second-hand material, protective practices appear gradually.

Methodology

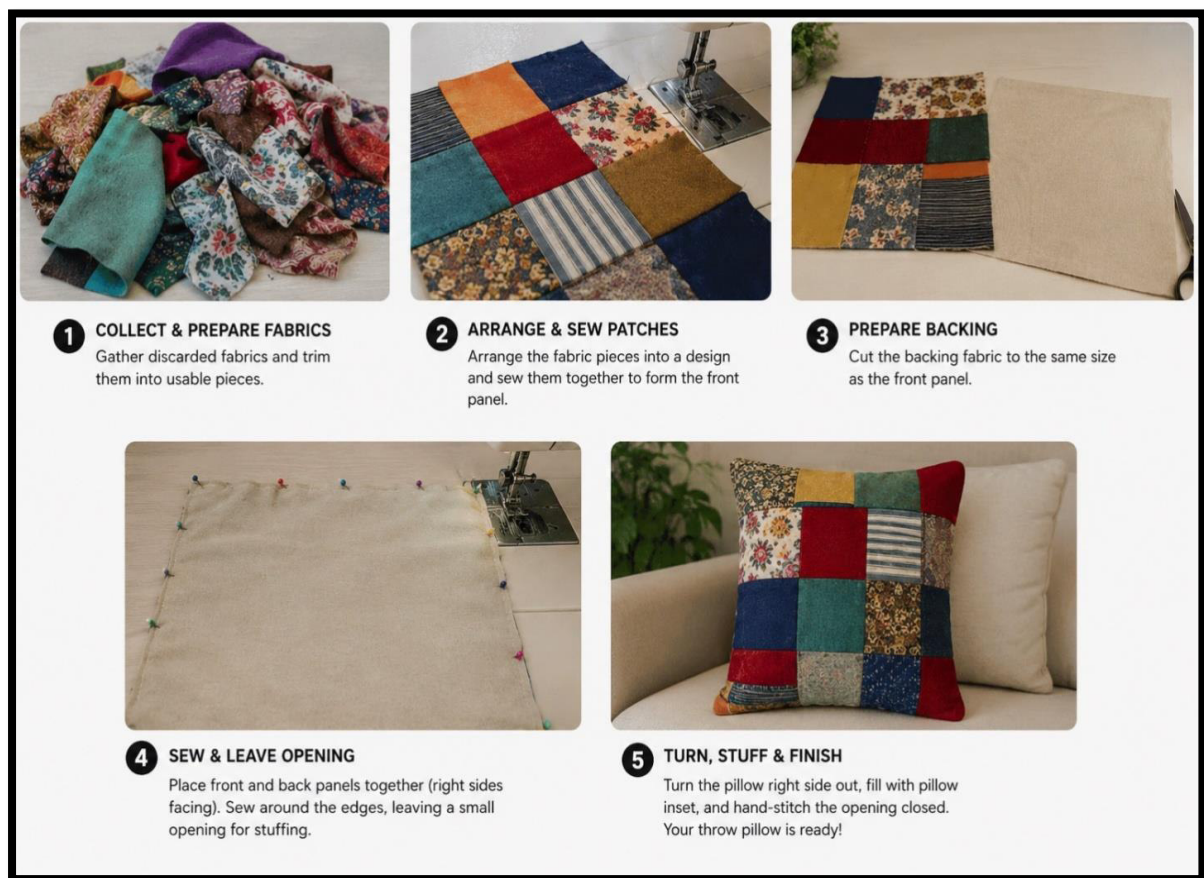


Plate 1-5: Step-by-step process showing the transformation of discarded textile materials into a functional throw pillow through fabric selection, patchwork arrangement, stitching, assembly, and finishing during sustainable fashion training activities.

Source: Researcher's creative studio process, 2026.

An analysis of the process by which these old fabrics are recycled was what informed this study, which emphasized youth education about recycling in the growing fashion industry of Nigeria. The project took place within designated learning centers in Lagos city, areas in which the act of sewing is a common occurrence. Instructors who teach clothing design were involved in this, along with students learning to apply the craft and portfolio-building students. Those who were actively involved in the use of recycled fabrics were targeted for inclusion in the study.

A detailed examination of what was happening within the studio provided insight on converting unused pieces of cloth into useful products such as tote bags, cushion covers, or clothing. Information gathered from interviews conducted with both tutors and students involved in the creative process highlighted some observations and experiences that they gained throughout the process in relation to sustainable fashion and acquisition of new skills. The use of photographs and videos enabled a documentation of all the steps taken, including the types of textures used and outcomes achieved. As opposed to statistical data, meanings were obtained through the classification of observations based on themes related to resourcefulness, creativity, entrepreneurship, environmental conservation, and empowerment of youth. A careful observation of the workshops conducted offered insights into the patterns of decision-making, techniques utilized, and challenges experienced during production. Some aspects highlighted often had a connection to self-development and achievements, which resulted from the use of repurposed materials. Visuals captured using photography played a critical role in supplementing information obtained from verbal descriptions. Insights were developed through a careful analysis of common trends within various conversations and activities observed without engaging in experiments.

Results and Discussion

What is interesting to note is that the reuse of fabric scraps allowed young Nigerians not only to learn new skills but also to get acquainted with sustainable fashion. In some sewing classes, scientists observed how remnants of cut garments were recycled into something useful, such as shopping bags, cushion covers, wallet patches, decorative items, and even accessories. Some students used coarse and fine fabrics, intense colors, and faded patterns to create fashionable items that could be both functional and marketable. What was once considered waste became educational materials with a potential for entrepreneurship.



Plate 6: Throw pillows created from discarded textile materials during practical upcycling activities in fashion education. **Source:** www.eunicon.com.



Plate 7: Assorted bags produced from waste fabric remnants as part of practical sustainable fashion training and entrepreneurial skill development. **Source:** <https://uneeka.com/>



Plate 8: Belts creatively produced from discarded textile materials through sustainable fashion upcycling techniques. **Source:** www.lacreativemama.com

Further reflection reveals that the acquisition of skills in textile upcycling was gained through actual practice. The skills range from cutting pieces of old materials to stitching them together, patch-making, weaving textiles, edge-making, and designing among others. Through engaging in the aforementioned activities, participants were able to acquire skills that could be applied in fashion design or setting up ventures such as fashion design. In interviews with the participants, the findings were that engaging in actions had improved their confidence, led to innovation, and assisted in solving any challenges they were facing. Creating something useful out of old materials provided an opportunity for them to make mistakes, try different solutions, which eventually helped them form a perspective on sustainable fashion. The findings are consistent with the theory by Kolb of 1984 on experiential learning.

Another important finding from the study is the way in which repurposing old fabrics into new products made it possible for young individuals to see potential in doing business and developing economic confidence. As most of the raw materials were acquired from fabric remnants available in sewing studios and design studios, the production of these goods did not involve a lot of capital expenditure. This means that trainees could create valuable products that do not involve much cost, sell easily within the locality, and help small businesses thrive. The creation of tote bags, decorative household items, and fashion accessories provides access to customers who appreciate handcrafted, environmentally conscious products. This finding is consistent with the findings of Adebayo & Oke (2020).

While there were obvious benefits, implementing upcycling of textile waste in fashion education was not without difficulties. Not all learners could readily acquire current technologies, while educational institutions rarely supported sustainable endeavors. In addition to this, the long-standing notion that recycled equaled inexpensive was a barrier to accepting reimagined outfits. However, there was hope that increasing awareness, practical training, and valuing sustainability would eventually change the perception.

Recycling used textile waste into novel design possibilities in the Nigerian fashion classroom is a promising prospect. Hands-on learning through reusing develops practical skills and stimulates innovative thinking. With the potential of old materials lying in using them as means of development, youth find motivation and inspiration. By introducing the practice of mindful creation, the educational system instills awareness of environmental surroundings. Creative thinking is enriched when driven by the desire for positive change in reality.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Further investigation into recycling old textiles can prove to be beneficial to young people who study fashion in Nigeria. Besides being an excellent source for acquiring new practical skills, it also serves as a platform for establishing entrepreneurial activities and conservation efforts. Involvement in creative recycling allows learners to hone their stitching, layering, repurposing, and crafting abilities, as well as develop critical thinking and innovation. Transforming old clothes into useful household items such as bags, pillowcases,

and accessories reduces pollution and encourages mindful practices. Through the creative approach to handling waste, classrooms transform leftover materials into sources of awareness and inspiration.

In light of the findings of this study, it is essential that fashion classes at all levels of education in Nigeria, including secondary school, vocational training centers, and colleges, embrace practices of sustainability and the recycling of waste material to create new clothing. Learning cannot be limited to theoretical teachings but should also provide students practical insights into sustainable fashion and eco-friendly techniques such as upcycling fabric for reuse. The government, educational institutions, and organizations within the arts community can support young designers engaged in sustainable fashion through workshops, exhibitions, financial assistance, and entrepreneurship programs. The significance of used clothes must be made known to the public to acknowledge their worth.

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