What is Fallout Fashion

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2003, selling her collections in TOPSHOP and independent retailers across the UK and Europe before

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What is ‘fallout fashion’, where does it comes from and why is it such an issue for the global fashion supply chain?

This short essay will look to outline the recent growth of this waste stream, as well as sketch out some of the barriers that have hindered its re-use. The essay concludes by arguing that if we choose to embrace this waste as a creative resource it could offer additional product cycles within the supply chain that could add value to the textile industry and contribute to the development of a circular economy.

The fashion industry has an incredibly complicated supply chain employing more than 300 million people (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017:36). The result of this is a fragmented and disjointed system where many stakeholders work in isolation. As mass production has grown, with volumes doubling over the past 15 years (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017:36), so has the gap between the design and manufacturing process. This is because demand for ever-cheaper production has pushed manufacturing further afield to developing countries. The result of this is an inefficient and unsustainable industry, where a holistic understanding of the supply chain has diminished, and issues of waste have become exasperated by the volumes of cheap products being produced. (Moreton and Simpson, 2016:8) This has led to complex issues arising around mass production and consumption, with waste being an increasing problem to deal with along each stage of the extended supply chain, estimated to have a value of more than USD 100 billion worth of materials each year (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017:20).

With the increasing rates of overproduction of clothing in the fashion industry, there is also a rise in the quantities of preconsumer (virgin) waste being underutilised.

Reet Aus states that waste comes from many different streams of the supply chain including ‘leftovers from stores and company product development, defective returned goods and outsourced garment shipments’ (2011:49). Within a textile manufacturing facility waste occurs at any point in the production line of the textile and clothing sector (Mutha, Li, Hu et al.:1066). This virgin material waste is called ‘rejects’, ‘left-overs’, ‘cabbage stock’ or ‘fallout’ (Aus, Gunawardhana, Baker 2017:2, 2, 2).

This waste or ‘fallout’ can consist of parts of the garment, or in some cases, the whole product that didn’t reach the strict quality checks at the end of the production line. Often this can be due to minimal issues such as incorrect labelling, size errors, or faults in the stitch lines. Wastage can occur at any point and requires additional processes to get it back into the manufacturing process. As manufacturers have increasingly tight margins they find it more efficient financially to discard errors, maintaining consistent production speed, rather than slow up the automated manufacturing lines (Gunawardhana 2017:4).

Significantly, there are few verified statistics from this waste stream, however, research does suggest fallout is between 3-5% of all production (Aus, Gunawardhana 2017:5, 5), adding up to many millions of tonnes a year.

According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, of the 53 million tonnes of textiles that are produced annually, 12% of this material resource is lost through production (Figure 1), totalling 6.36 million tonnes a year (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017:37).

Keith and Siles suggest that 15% of pre-consumer waste is disposed of by manufacturers in the fashion industry (2015:1053), which seems to highlight that data about leftovers retrieved from factories is inaccurate (Reverse Resources 2017:6). Drawing exact conclusions on wastage figures are challenging, but do highlight a significant virgin waste resource that is currently not utilised in any great volume.

To add complexity to the issue, traditionally many manufacturing facilities sold seconds on to local markets to remove the waste from the facility, while receiving income from the otherwise redundant product. However, as we have become increasingly global, brands are concerned about devaluing their reputation and consequently have placed strict brand protection on the stock (Gunawardhana 2017:2:1) This has halted the re-sale of fallout and has resulted in more waste overall. Consequently, many manufacturing facilities have been forced to dump or incinerate fallout as a brand protection strategy (Cassidy and Han 2013:155), resulting in many cases of whole garments with only very minor errors being destroyed. Much of the incineration can take place in situ and is unregulated, posing further human and environmental risk factors. This perhaps explains why it is so difficult to gain data and therefore an exact understanding of the volumes of fallout currently produced.

To foster change, both the manufacturing facilities and brands must start to recognise and acknowledge this fallout waste stream and revalue it as a resource - identifying and enabling new methods to reutilise it. They will need to work on the problem together.

Brands need to understand the consequences of their processing methods and have greater accountability for the fallout along the production line. By understanding the impact that brand protection restrictions have on the manufacturers and the systemic issues it has created, greater awareness can help highlight the issues around fallout which can then start to be tackled out in the open. By enabling manufacturers greater flexibility with the fallout, novel systems could potentially be developed separately from the primary production line, to utilise this material. The significance of this would result in less virgin material required for production overall, less waste incinerated or dumped in landfill facilities and potential revenue created from fallout. This critical moment in time has further reinforced the conviction that understanding, utilising, and resolving some of these problems are more important than ever.

As issues with mass production systems have come under the spotlight during Covid-19, we are beginning to understand the opportunities ahead for remodelling the way we view fashion supply chains to create a sustainable fashion and textile industry for the future.

This research forms part of my wider PhD research that seeks to create methods of remanufacture for whole product fallout from the production line. Coming from an industry background, I have been able to use my experience as a practicing designer, to work on design solutions that could minimise the amount of waste ‘fallout’ seen, offering alternative routes for this currently redundant material resource.

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