

## **Trash-Couture – Can textile recycling of pre-consumer waste be made circular?**

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### **Abstract**

**Background:** The textile and garment industry has exponentially grown, with the production of clothing alone having doubled between 2000 and 2015 (WRAP, 2020), yet, the actual use of these garments and more specifically the wear-time has dramatically declined by approximately 36% (EMF, 2017). The United Kingdom (UK) has seen the highest amount of clothing consumption, compared with its European counterparts, thereby consuming an average of 26.7kg per capita (EAC, 2019). This has various consequences, as not only approximately 57% of garments end up in landfill (Common Objective, 2018), but also “hundreds of thousands of tones of fabric are wasted at the design and production stage before clothing reaches the customer” (ibid). To reiterate this further, it is estimated that as much as 15% of fabric is wasted during the pattern cutting stage, with scraps falling onto the shop floor (ibid). These 15% are only part of one stage of the creation process and does not include fabric swatches used to showcase colour or prototypes, not only of garments that may go into production, but also those that never see the shopfloor (Pre-Loved Podcast, 2021).

Although the UK imports a lot of its clothing, we have seen an increase of re-locating factories back to the UK – in 2015 this estimated an increase of 7.6% of companies producing textiles in the UK (Bearne, 2018). This increase is partially driven by superfast fashion companies, such as Boohoo or Misguided, who are headquartered in the UK and seek to produce fashion close by to be able to react quickly to market demands (Bearne, 2018; Hammer, 2020).

Here is, where some of the challenges emerge – not only are there supply chain issues and a lack of transparency (Duncan, 2020), but also an increase in production implies an increase in waste, which has environmental consequences. The latter aspect is the focus of this paper.

**Research Gap:** Increased pre-consumer textile waste, which is waste that occurs within the supply chain and thus, prior to consumers being involved, is an issue that is further enhanced with more garments being produced. Seeing as the UK has seen an increase in textile and garment manufacturing in the UK and is also one of the countries with highest per capita consumption, there is a need to explore whether there are opportunities to reduce pre-consumer waste and re-distribute in a more circular manner.

A key aspect that emerges is that circular solutions cannot be addressed in isolation, but should perhaps be addressed as a stakeholder approach, as such, it is vital to understand how stakeholders, some of which may be competitors, can work together to develop a more circular economy (e.g. Henninger et al., 2016; Koszewska, 2018; Kazancoglu et al., 2020).

This research seeks to address this gap, by exploring how pre-consumer waste could be reduced, thereby focusing on stakeholder engagement to develop a more circular approach to textile recycling. In the USA we have seen the emergence of FABSCRAP, a New York based company that is specialized in re-distributing pre-consumer textile waste, thereby diverting waste materials from landfilling. This research explores whether the idea of FABSCRAP would work in a more localized area and how key stakeholders can address the issue of textile recycling and more generally textile waste. In doing this, we address the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the biggest sources of pre-consumer textile waste?

RQ2: What are the biggest concerns when it comes to discarding pre-consumer waste?

RQ3: What are potential opportunities and drawbacks to developing a more circular approach to 'waste' distribution?

**Methodology:** This research uses a qualitative approach to explore the major sources of textile waste and what potential solutions could look like that address a more circular approach to textile recycling. A database of key stakeholder was created to identify key players in the textile (recycling) industry, these include fashion retailers and manufacturers, charities, recyclers, local authorities, co-operatives.

This is an on-going research project, which seeks to conduct 25 semi-structured interviews with these key stakeholders, which will be analyzed using a grounded approach as suggested by Easterby-Smith et al. (2015). The approach allows for patterns and themes to emerge organically, whilst at the same time can also be guided by theory.

**Conclusion:** As alluded to, this research project is currently on-going, yet there are various key contributions that are expected. In terms of theoretical contributions, this research seeks to foster the debate surrounding stakeholder engagement. Practically, we will explore the potential to facilitate a more circular approach to pre-consumer waste distribution.

**Keywords:** textile recycling, pre-consumer waste, stakeholder engagement, UK, textile industry

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