

The Goodwill Label Research Project

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Abstract

'I make no apologies for being a large volume retailer.

We bring sustainable fashion to our customers at a price they can afford.'

Paul Marchant, CEO Primark.

The above statement closed the 2021 Textile Exchange conference. It stood in stark contrast to the opening keynote by economic anthropologist, Jason Hickel, which re-set the context for the fashion industry's 30-year-long efforts to curb its impacts and realigned them to help limit global warming to 1.5 degrees by 2030. The stance from Primark's leader signaled that, despite the science, the fashion sector would resist this reset and would remain unyielding to deep systemic change.

Yet, Marchant's statement also delivered a blunt and well-founded critique of the current sustainable fashion movement; its expense, its privileged market, and its inaccessibility to lower income-level customers. How to bring the dream of sustainable fashion to reality for all, remains a challenging conundrum.

The fashion sector produces way more product than anyone has interest to buy, and way more than can be processed by existing industrial or biological systems. 'Of all discarded goods, only 20% reaches the stores and only 15% are resold. From the 80% of goods which don't reach stores, 50-70% make their way overseas. Taking Ghana as an example, approximately 40% of imported clothing ends up in a landfill dump within two weeks' (Makov et al., in process).

Business models in the fashion sector are slow to adapt to this 'real world' condition. Efforts made so far include: subscription models, clothing repair services, lending/leasing, rent to buy, systematized repurposing, made-to-order and wearer sized services and branded re-commerce. Of all these models, branded re-commerce seems to offer the most promise, comprising approximately 7% of the current apparel market and projected to be 12% by 2030 (Kinsey and Co. 2020). Yet, the production of new goods also continues to grow each year. 'At its current pace, (the fashion sector) is on track to overshoot the global budget associated with limiting global rise in temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius by more than 50% by 2030. Displacing the production and sales of new items with the sales of used items is necessary to reduce the overall environmental footprint of the brand' (Cohen 2022).

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Research issue: Ethics on buying: consumer behavior

Forum for the Future notes the imperative to ‘create and share new narratives based on sharing and abundance to enable the critical shifts needed for business to adopt a just and regenerative mindset’ (Forum for the Future 2021). This project deploys a label:

- to identify secondhand purchases
- as a social probe to ‘actively seek engagement beyond conventional voices’ in these new narratives.

The Goodwill label research concept is based on the premise that everyday people may be willing to publicly indicate their secondhand purchases and that this coding could be leveraged as a potent tool to challenge the power of brands in perpetuating the ‘culture of the new’.

Building on previous research conducted in collaboration with anthropologist Sydney Martin (Grose, Martin 2017), the following questions guide this stage:

- Could a label be deployed to speed the uptake of resale purchases by economically diverse customers?
- What latent emotional associations with second hand may hinder or may be leveraged to enable this goal?
- Can garments be activated to directly engage the broader public?

Methodology used to involve participants in the workshop

Thus far, the project has deployed ethnography, photography, woven label prototyping, label placement prototyping, image scenarios and social media (via #goodwilllabelstories). Situated close to the check-out registers in Goodwill stores, Grose has invited customers to provide input on the concept after they have made their purchase. When participants opt to label their garment, Grose sews in the label, free of charge.

This GFC workshop will deploy ethnography and photography (of participants) via zoom, as well as post conference photography of labeled garments conducted by participants themselves.

Three questions will lead the discussions in the workshop breakout sessions:

Would you opt to label your thrifted garment on the outside after purchase?

Why?

Why not?

Workshop participants will also have the option to sew a label into a Goodwill thrifted item. These participants will receive a label via mail and will be asked to photograph the garment and themselves with the garment, to contribute to the project’s ongoing research files.

Results expected and achieved at the conference

The relevance of this research to theory and practice is multifold:

Within California, the project has shown the potential to further speed a ‘bend’ away from the ‘culture of the new’ (Grose, Martin 2017) by ‘visually outing’ secondhand purchases and thereby ‘activating’ the garments as well as their wearers. ‘I LOVE it! (holding up the labeled garment). I LOVE Goodwill and want to promote

(it)!', exclaimed one participant. 'It's an indicator of community (with shared values)', noted another. In this way, the small act of labeling a thrift garment makes a big counter-cultural statement and suggests the labels potential to 'build capacity (of the everyday public) to self-manage and initiate change' (Forum for the Future 2021).

This project is primarily centered around everyday people's reaction to putting the Goodwill label on their garment and as such, GFC 2022 participants attending this workshop will themselves become subjects of this research. In addition, GFC offers a unique opportunity to gather the insights of globally acclaimed academics and practitioners, to provide additional theoretical and practical context for this ongoing project. For example, thus far, conversations with Goodwill's legal team indicate that as an art/research project Goodwill Label Research falls into the domain of 'fair use' of the label on already branded garments. Insights from international legal scholars will be particularly helpful to inform the project's capacity to scale internationally.

Keywords: overproduction, consumption, ethics, aesthetics, diversity.

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