

## **Inspired by Design: Developing Grassroots Fashion Sustainability Cases on Underrepresented Groups to Spur Equity, Creativity and Action**

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### **Abstract**

**Background:** In 2018, while working on a new course in a program specialization in Fashion Innovation and Sustainability, Vladimira Steffek and Rossie Kadiyska, found that there is a lack of teachable cases related to sustainability. They decided to create their own library collection of real, live, local sustainability cases that are inspired by the diverse population of the Greater Toronto Area and the institutional alumni pool. Those cases were to be used in the classroom for teaching sustainable fashion through action based learning. The professors also wanted to inspire students to dream big for sustainable fashion solutions and become inspired to change the world of fashion.

An overview of the literature indicates that advanced cases are being particularly useful for applying various thinking processes and utilizing existing knowledge to new situations (Sparks, R. J., & Langford, J. 2012, Paul 2012), and those cases help enhance complex cognitive abilities in learners (Weil et al., 2001). Due to its global focus, a leading publisher of creative case studies Bloomsbury Publishing had indicated a limited interest and motivation in developing Canadian-specific cases. A lack of such case studies has proven to be an opportunity to craft a made-to-measure (tailored) local case study addressing the issues of both brick-and-mortar and global (online) markets in (sustainable) fashion.

**Objectives:** The objectives of the project were to tap into the power of local people to inspire students and give them confidence that they could be agents of change for sustainability. By writing cases of local heroes of sustainability (fashion, design, production), the researchers wanted to use the power of locality for transformational learning in sustainable fashion using grassroots examples.

Furthermore, the researchers wanted this library to become an institutional source of equity, diversity and inclusion materials that could be shared and used in other classrooms.

**Methods:** The authors used four criteria when developing the cases: locality, fashion related, underrepresented societal groups and sustainability. Case subjects have been found either through personal networks or through institutional alumni pool. In four out of the six cases, the case subjects were former students from the program coming from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds.

**Results:** As of today, there are six cases being written. The cases are on a black entrepreneur, sustainable denim entrepreneur, an Indian immigrant in Canada, two indigenous entrepreneurs, a furniture and fashion decor entrepreneur, an Iranian start-up entrepreneur in Canada.

Two of those are approved for publication for Bloomsbury Fashion, one is sent for approval, two final ones are in draft form ready to be sent to the publisher.

Out of those six cases, four have been taught in the classroom using system design thinking. Three of those times, the cases were taught in collaborative international settings with international institutions - collaborative online international projects (COILs). Two of those cases were the used in subsequent cohort classes and in one of the iteration, the case was used in parallel with a partner institution local case.

During the writing of those cases, the researchers have coached and trained seven research assistants, two of which have found jobs with the case subjects and related network contacts.

**Conclusion:** Using locally inspired sustainability cases of real life companies have been a source for inspiration and dreaming big for a more sustainable fashion world. The collection of cases created so far has been serving as a tool for inspiration and dreaming big for a more sustainable future. Those cases are used also as a general EDI open resource for teaching in other than fashion disciplines (arts, design, entrepreneurship, marketing, advertising, etc). The collection has been helpful to nurture a new generation of research talents in sustainability and sustainable system design thinking while creating a more varied and equitable representation within the business case materials collections.

**Keywords:** sustainability, immersive experience, virtual fashion, e-commerce, communication.

**DOI:** 10.57649/GFC.978-989-54263

**ISBN:** 978-989-54263-3-1

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