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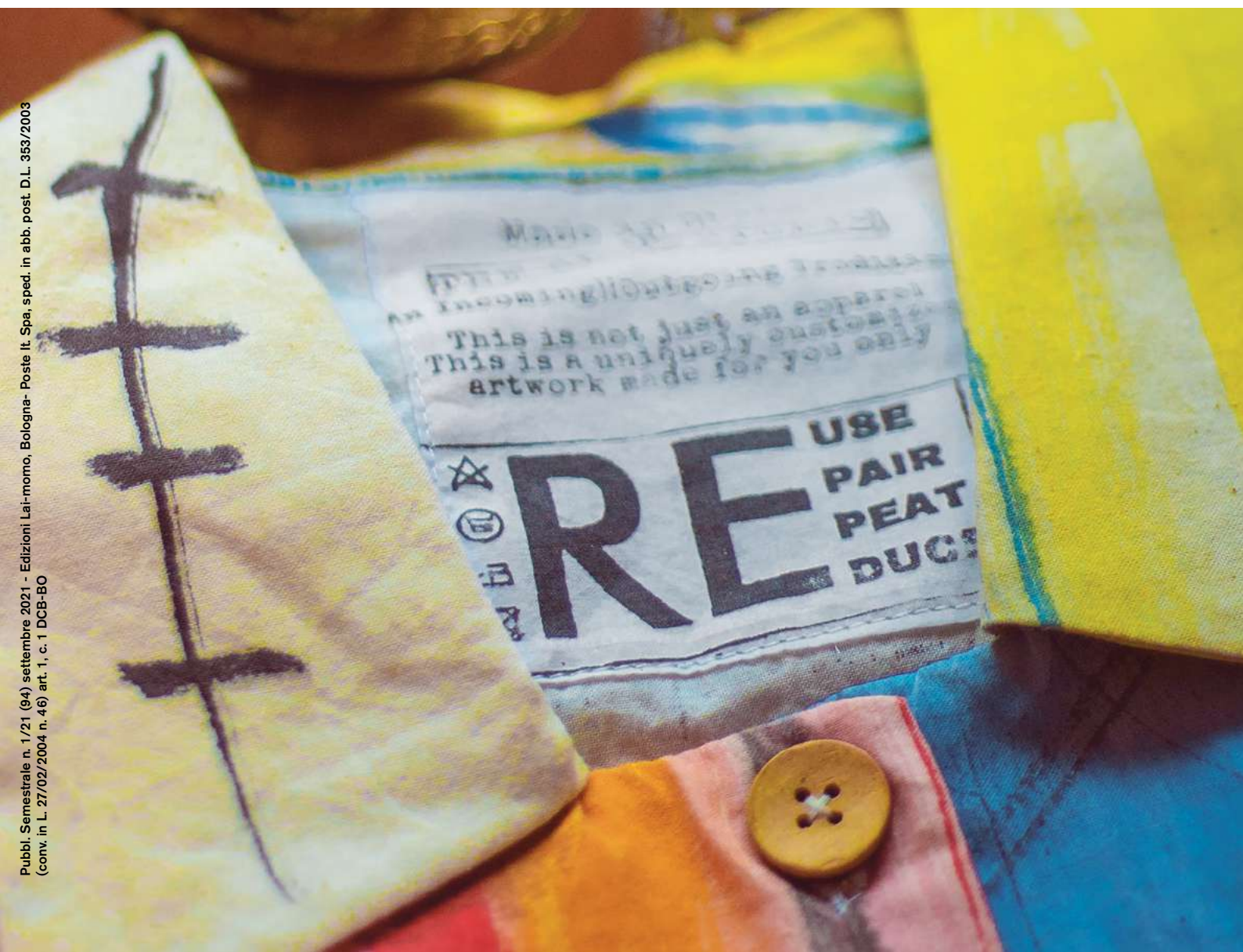


Transition to a Circular, Sustainable,
and Equitable Fashion Industry
in a Global North/South Perspective

Waste Management, Plastic Pollution
and Circular Economy.
Constraints and Challenges
in the Case of Mozambique

Dopo la deforestazione:
agricoltura familiare, tutela ambientale
e pratiche di economia circolare
nella foresta Mau (Kenya)

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Detail of garment label by the upcycling
Ghanaian brand Slum Studio, based in Accra.
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Photo by Tora San Traoré

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DOSSIER

Tutela ambientale, rifiuti ed economia circolare in Africa

Transition to a Circular, Sustainable, and Equitable Fashion Industry: The Case of Second-hand Clothing Trade in African Countries

The fashion industry, throughout the clothing supply chain, reflects in many ways the power relations between countries of the Global North and the Global South.

A possible solution – as argued by the authors of this article – may come from the adoption of circular economy principles on a global scale.

by Piergiuseppe Morone, Gülşah Yılan and Ana G. Encino

With ever growing attention up to now, extensive research has shown that practices in the global fashion industry have become a major constraint to achieve sustainability. In recent years, some studies have exposed several issues associated with this sector, including unsustainable use of natural resources, unethical labour practices, greenhouse emissions and post-consumption waste generation (European Commission 2020). Many environmental problems have been linked to the overproduction/overconsumption of garments. As an example, the fashion industry is responsible for 8-10% of global emissions of CO₂ (Niinimäki et al. 2020), and textile production is a big water consumer, reaching 93 billion cubic metres annually (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2017). Additionally, clothing consumption has increased rapidly due to the *fast-fashion* phenomenon, which encourages the *purchase-discard* model. In a few decades, the amount of clothing items bought in the EU has increased by 40% (Šajn 2019), whilst garments utilisation has decreased: more than half of the items are worn only once before being discarded by consumers (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2017; Global Fashion Agenda & The Boston Consulting Group 2017), leading to large volumes of unwanted items. For all the above-mentioned reasons, the fashion industry is considered unsustainable and, as a response,

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several alternatives for making its practices more environmentally friendly and socially responsible have emerged in the last decades. One such alternative is the circular economy (CE), which represents a sustainable pathway to growth, providing the economic system with an alternative cyclical flow model (Korhonen, Honkasalo & Seppälä 2018). One of the principles of this model is to preserve the value of materials as much as possible, either by extending the life of products, or by reintegrating them into the system for re-use (den Hollander, Bakker & Hultink 2017). To this end, the circularity notion offers the fashion industry a chance to go forward by significantly limiting waste production from landfilling or incinerating (D'Adamo & Lupi 2021). Even though CE strategies have helped to improve the fashion industry's environmental performance (Global Fashion Agenda 2020), many issues remain unattended. Since the fashion supply chain is one of the most complex ones, many activities linked with the design, manufacture, consumption and disposal of fashion items occurring on a global scale cause unforeseen and less explored problems. For instance, the design and consumption of clothes occur mostly in developed countries (mainly the U.S., the U.K. and the European Union), whilst production and some end-of-life activities take place principally in developing countries, originating problems such as pollution

shifting and unethical practices. These asymmetries in the fashion industry also reflect some of the power relations between countries of the Global North and the Global South throughout the different stages of the supply chain. Many scholars have investigated the relationship between environmental sustainability and CE in the fashion sector. Also, some initiatives have emerged, such as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, by developing circular textile strategies and the Global Fashion Agenda, aiming to foster the fashion industry’s sustainability throughout the value chain. However, a very limited number of studies mention the relationship between social sustainability and CE (Jia et al. 2020). Moreover, most of the existing research focuses on the Global North, underlining an opportunity for further research into the end-of-life stage of garments and waste management within the fashion supply chains of other regions (Rotimi, Topple & Hopkins 2021). One of the principles of CE is to optimise the use of resources by circulating products and materials at the highest utility at all times (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2013). Hence, to extend the lifespan of garments through new use cycles, the second-hand trade has become a recurring practice with the aim of reducing their negative impact on the environment. However, by keeping the focus on the environmental performance, other issues in the second-hand sector have been overlooked. Specifically, in the case of the African countries, where some challenges have emerged as a result of these practices. In 2016, Sub-Saharan Africa imported 20% of the world’s second-hand clothing, a considerably larger amount than any other region in the world (Guo, Choi & Zhang 2021). Nowadays, African countries are leading imports of second-hand clothing, importing more than 30% of global used clothing (Observatory of Economic Complexity 2021), although the amount of imported used clothes is considerably larger than the official statistics (Brooks 2015). With very few regulations, the second-hand clothing market has become a relevant activity. Nonetheless, the understanding of the environmental and social impacts of these activities remains limited. Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to analyse problems associated with the fashion industry from a global perspective under a CE approach with a special focus on the second-hand clothing sector in the African context, particularly looking into the interactions between the Global South and the Global North within the fashion sector. First, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to analyse the available studies on the topic. After the studies were identified, their findings were discussed in detail to highlight the main issues detected. Finally, some novel insights were offered to overcome the barriers to the transition to a circular, sustainable, and equitable fashion industry from this perspective.

Context of analysis

Reports by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2017) and UNEP (2018) mention that only 1% of the textile materials have end-of-life control and a significant amount of waste is landfilled, often in inadequate locations, without treatment. As indicated by the Global Fashion Agenda report, a change in the linear “take, make, waste” economic model would help to solve the problem of unsold goods (also known as deadstock), which is

TITLE	AUTHORS	YEAR	SCOPE OF THE STUDY	ASPECTS OF SUSTAINABILITY			
				ENVIRONMENTAL	SOCIAL, CULTURAL & ETHICAL	ECONOMIC	POLITICAL
Second-hand Clothing Imports in Least-Developed-Countries: The Collapse of Local Clothing Manufacturing and Remedial Measures	Guo, et al.	2021	It explores the benefits of import tariff on second-hand items in least-developed-countries. It suggests other models better than the import tariff on the basis of risks and main characteristics of markets in LDP.			✓	
Expanding Kenya's Domestic Textiles and Apparel Industry: Lessons from Rwanda's Secondhand Clothing Market	Opiri & Andayi	2020	It outlines lessons from Rwanda's textile industry for boosting Kenya's domestic textiles and apparel industries by making them competitive and profitable compared to second-hand clothing markets.			✓	✓
Fashion, its Sacrifice Zone, and Sustainability	Niessen	2020	It discusses the concept of fashion from a decolonial perspective. It also suggests to include "Other" perspectives on fashion in order to eliminate the "sacrifice zone of fashion", to achieve sustainability.		✓		
Transforming Sustainable Fashion in a Decolonial Context: The Case of Redress in Hong Kong	Peirson-Smith & Craik	2020	It approaches the issue of sustainable fashion from a decolonial perspective focusing on attempts to reverse the mixed messages, counter-productive interventions, and often contradictory efforts to transform garment production and the fashion system into a more sustainable and ethical industry.		✓		
The Global Politics of African Industrial Policy: the Case of the Used Clothing Ban in Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda	Wolff	2020	It explores the extent to which political settlements theory can explain variation in commitment to the used clothing ban in Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda.				✓
Clothing Sustainability and Upcycling in Ghana	James & Kent	2019	It assesses opportunities for the upcycling of waste clothing through design workshops. By using case studies, it explores the potential of a design-led approach for upcycling textile waste.	✓	✓	✓	
A Study on Relevance of Second Hand Clothing Retailing in Ethiopia	Khurana & Tadesse	2019	It highlights the relevance of second-hand clothing in the Ethiopian textile and apparel value chain by investigating its potential and establishing a link to sustainability from a consumption point of view.	✓	✓	✓	
Developing a National Programme for Textiles and Clothing Recovery	Bukhari et al.	2018	It examines the French national programme for post-consumer textile waste. Through a case study, the paper highlights the benefits of using EPR (extended producer responsibility) programs. Additionally, it highlights further issues related to the "reuse" stream in African markets.	✓	✓		✓
The Impact of Second Hand Clothes and Shoes in East Africa	Katende-Magezi	2017	It reviews the effects of used clothing and shoes imports within East Africa region by analyzing the implications of ban on second-hand clothing imports implemented by Heads of States in the EAC Community and it examines practical approaches for implementing the ban.	✓		✓	✓
International Trade in Secondhand Clothing: Managing Information Asymmetry between West African and British Traders	Abimbola	2012	It explores the conditions of international trade in second-hand clothes between Britain and Africa. An empirical description of international network of trade activities is provided. It also explores how the commercial problem of quality assurance is resolved through relationships of trust and cooperation between the importer and the exporter.		✓		✓
Stretching Global Production Networks: The International Second-hand Clothing Trade	Brooks	2013	It stretches the Global Production Networks (GPN) by analyzing the second-hand trade network from the Global North to Africa. Through case studies, the difficulties of the complex webs of networks are discussed. It concludes on how important is to consider the back-end of the global economy and explore how profit is accumulated from the trade in low-value commodities from North to South.		✓	✓	✓
Riches from Rags or Persistent Poverty? The Working Lives of Secondhand Clothing Vendors in Maputo, Mozambique	Brooks	2012	It investigates the work of self-employed market vendors of imported second-hand clothes in Mozambique. It analyzes the profitability of the second-hand clothing trade and how value of these items is negotiated through the cultural perception of clothing and the material aspects of garments.		✓	✓	
Unravelling the Relationships between Used-Clothing Imports and the Decline of African Clothing Industries	Brooks & Simon	2012	The used-clothing trade is explored in detail and a broad range of cultural and local economic processes are investigated.		✓	✓	
Other People's Clothes? The International Secondhand Clothing Trade and Dress Practices in Zambia	Hansen	2000	It explores the different dynamics of second-hand clothing trade across Africa and how this has an impact on the clothing consumption practices. It also analyzes the growing import of second-hand clothing since the 1980s.		✓	✓	

Table 1: List of published studies identifying key issues and main areas of concern. Authors' elaboration

responsible for 73% of garments ending up in landfills and is projected to grow further, reaching 81% by 2030 (Global Fashion Agenda & The Boston Consulting Group 2017). However, advanced research is needed to boost the transition to a more circular, sustainable, and equitable fashion industry considering the global interactions within the sector. Therefore, this study aims at highlighting the interactions between the Global North and the Global South via analyses of a set of published studies, specifically identifying key issues arising in the African context and pinpointing the main areas of concern (see Table 1).

The selected studies address the problem from the environmental, economic, political and social, cultural and ethical points of view. However, only a few studies looking at the topic from a social, cultural and ethical angle were identified. Hence, our analysis also helps to highlight the asymmetric amount of research carried out on the environment, compared to that focusing on ethical aspects within the fashion sector. The end-of-life stage of products is crucial for material recovery and waste reduction. The donation of used items is a recurring practice that yields some environmental ben-

efits. However, due to the rapid increase in the amount of discarded items in the last decades, the recirculation of this type of goods has grown complex. In the case of Africa, only a few studies have been conducted to understand second-hand/reuse and closed loops in the clothing sector (Paras, Pal & Ekwall 2018). The main problems analysed in these investigations (see Table 1) focus on four main clusters: (1) environmental, (2) economic, (3) political and (4) social, cultural and ethical. These aspects are, however, strongly interrelated, which makes it difficult to set clear boundaries among them.

Studies on the *environmental* impact focus specifically on deadstock (unsold and unworn clothing) that end up in landfills, since there is no sufficient infrastructure to recover the material value of textiles (Bukhari, Carrasco-Gallego & Ponce-Cueto 2018; Katende-Magezi 2017; Abimbola 2015). A novel approach is presented by James & Kent (2019) in a case study on upcycling activities in Ghana through a design-led approach, which illustrates the importance of circular design for reducing environmental externalities. In relation to the *economic* aspects, issues associated with material flows, specifically second-hand trade imports and their impact on local textile industries, are discussed (Guo, Choi & Zhang 2021; Opiri & Andayi 2020). Brooks & Simon (2012) establish a negative correlation between the prices of clothes provided by local textile industries and the second-hand imports, concluding that locally-produced clothes are generally more expensive than second-hand ones. Concerning the *political* aspects, some authors explore the effects of international trade bans and import regulations (Opiri & Andayi 2020; Wolff 2020). These studies conclude that the motivations behind these regulations are twofold. On one hand, they allow people to have access to better quality clothes. On the other, they boost the local industry against the second-hand market.

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A holistic approach to the handling of textile waste should be implemented adopting a circular economy (CE) perspective especially for environmentally-sensitive regions that often happen to be developing countries and emerging economies. Otherwise, so-called reuse practices cannot go beyond pollution shifting, which raises environmental inequality debates.

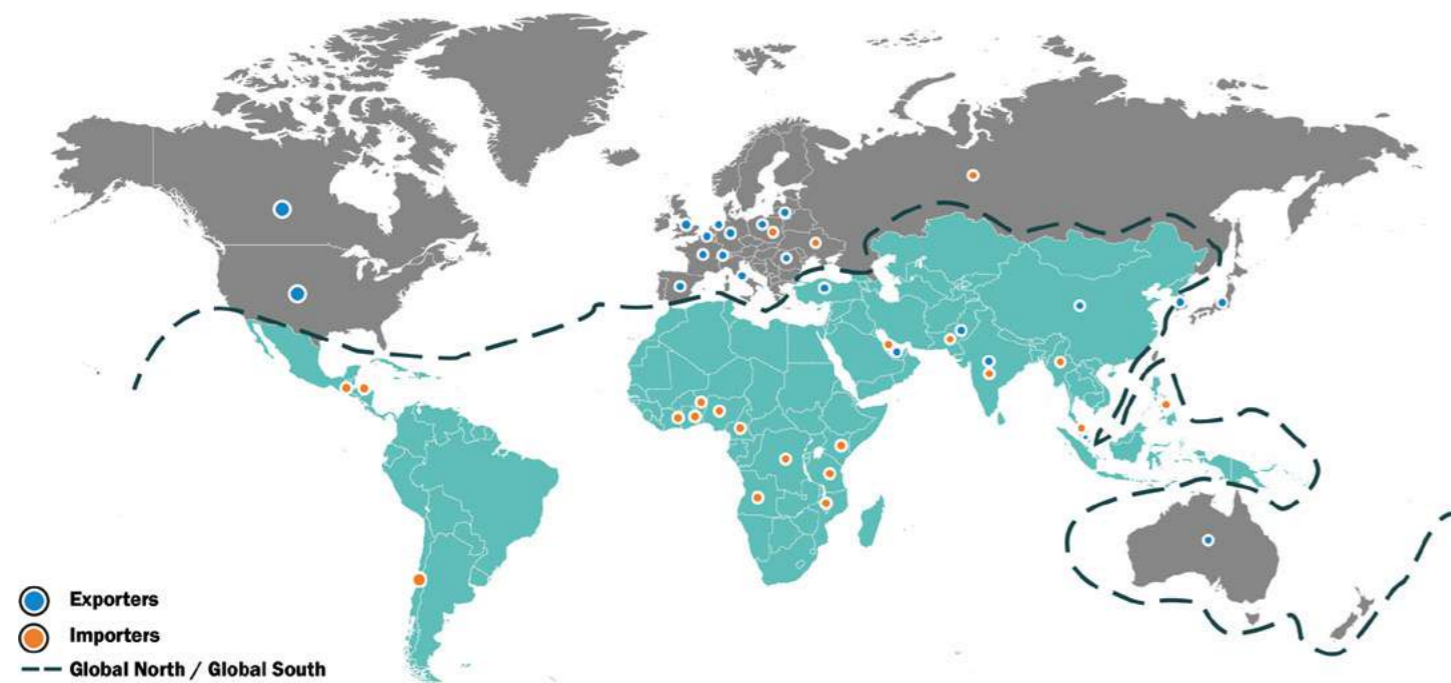
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Finally, not evaluated as comprehensively as the other aspects, some studies identify issues regarding the *social, cultural and ethical aspects* of the second-hand economy in Africa, which are also the main focus of this study. The complex interactions among these aspects make them difficult to address in a straightforward way. Some studies focus specifically on the *global fashion* concept and its impact on the perception and consumption of local items of clothing (Niessen 2020; Hansen 2000; Peirson-Smith & Craik 2020).¹ However, some problems remain unattended, due to their challenging nature. Consequently, research has mainly focused on the implementation of a simplistic

approach, instead of adopting a more comprehensive perspective of circularity.

Discussions

Among others, reuse and recycling can be considered as alternative solutions to reduce the textile waste sent to landfill, the production of virgin materials, and energy consumption, resulting in a lower environmental impact (Shirvanimoghaddam et al. 2020). From an environmental point of view, reuse is always more beneficial than recycling, and also, reuse and recycling create lower environmental impact, compared to incineration and landfilling in general (Sandin & Peters 2018). Some studies mention that reuse and recycling are



Main used clothing importer/exporter countries in 2019 (USD). Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity. Authors' elaboration using © Free Vector Maps. com



Imported bales of second-hand clothing inside a storage unit. Image courtesy of The Or Foundation

more advantageous options not only for the environment, but also for society (Bubicz et al. 2021). Despite the reuse of textiles is classified as an environmentally beneficial option, as in the case of second-hand trade, a UNEP report (2020) indicates that this activity can also lead to negative socio-economic impacts. However, some studies highlight the positive effects of the second-hand trade from the Global North to the Global South, arguing that it is beneficial for both parties, as new business opportunities are created in both exporting and importing countries for sorting and trading activities, while giving local people the chance to access affordable clothes (Watson et al. 2016). Yet, in a long-term perspective, the import of second-hand clothing poses a threat to local producers (Leal Filho et al. 2019; Wetengere 2018) especially in the African countries (Mhango & Niehm 2005), because locally-produced clothes are more expensive and cannot compete with the cheaper second-hand ones (Brooks & Simon 2012). Moreover, this second-hand clothing trade is both illegal and unethical in some regions (Norris 2010). Some studies provide successful examples of implementing an international trade ban, making their domestic industry more competitive and profitable than the second-hand trade (Opiri and Andayi 2020). From an ethical point of view, swapping second-hand clothes is regarded as a way of promoting sustainability

while protecting “community values” (Camacho-Otero, Petersen & Boks 2020). However, donated clothing items are generally of low quality - a fact that might imply the receivers do not deserve to wear good quality clothes (Rotimi, Topple & Hopkins 2021). Although the import/export dynamics are different from region to region, some studies identify the main actors involved in this process (Abimbola 2012; Brooks 2015; Wolff 2020). For the export, charitable institutions and private companies collect and classify the clothes. In countries from the Global North, the best quality second-hand items are sold in charity shops or other second-hand stores in the country in which they were donated. The remaining items are exported and sold in secondary markets in Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe (Rotimi, Topple & Hopkins 2021). Usually, clothes are shipped in bales of 45 kg, appearing as black boxes with no information about their content. They are bought by importers in Africa, who sell the items in bales to middlemen until they reach the final retailers. Another negative aspect of this trade activity is the information asymmetry (Abimbola 2012) between the exporter (the Global North) and the importer (the Global South). Since the importer has no control over the quality of imported items and bales cannot be opened prior to purchase, some of them might become waste just after being imported. On the other hand, negative effects also arise due to the



Retailers at the market classifying unsold items to send them to landfill. Image courtesy of The Or Foundation

growing movement to recycle and reuse textiles, particularly in the European market, where used clothing is collected and exported overseas (Niinimäki et al. 2020). In some respects, the current practice of exporting clothes from the Global North to the rest of the world may be regarded as a “reuse” approach. Yet, some local initiatives, such as *Dead White Man's Clothes*,² indicate that 40% of the clothing traded at the largest used clothing market in Ghana ends up in landfill almost immediately, due to a lack of appropriate waste management facilities (Watson et al. 2016). This initiative, among others, stands as an important example of ongoing efforts to understand the impacts of the second-hand trade in Africa, with a specific focus on the largest used clothing market in Ghana (and probably in West Africa). Moreover, imported second-hand clothing often ends up as deadstock (not used in the first place), which stands in contradiction to the reuse principle, by definition. The deadstock mainly consists of single-use garments that are manufactured for specific cases and cannot be sold afterwards, for example, celebration party T-shirts, marathon sports gears, etc. Since importers buy the garments as a black box, they have no control over the accumulation of textile

waste. Thus, a holistic approach to the handling of textile waste should be implemented adopting a circular economy (CE) perspective especially for environmentally-sensitive regions that often happen to be developing countries and emerging economies (Wiesmeth 2020). Otherwise, so-called reuse practices cannot go beyond pollution shifting (Mair, Druckman & Jackson 2016), which raises environmental inequality debates (Shao, Liu & Tian 2021). In response to the lack of practices adopting environmental and social sustainability principles, the ethical fashion concept offers a key solution. It adopts a cradle-to-cradle perspective aiming to produce ethically-sourced garments. It implements good working standards and conditions and provides a sustainable business model in the clothes' country of origin, while also minimizing the environmental impacts (Joergens 2006). The loss of cultural diversity deserves a special focus among the ethical concerns. The shift to “global fashion” undermines indigenous dress traditions by causing craft markets to decline (Niessen 2020). In order to support their family, the high-skilled “craftswomen” that make indigenous clothes become “garment workers” in factories or sweatshops producing for the global market

(Niessen 2020). Adopting an ethical fashion perspective allows designers to rely on ethnic identities and native cultures as a source of inspiration and branding via integrating craftspeople and artisans into the design process. Hence, they become collaborators of the designer, rather than labourers (Mukherjee 2015).

The above-mentioned issues highlight the need for a transition to a more circular industry. Implementing CE practices into the fashion industry requires an interdisciplinary approach embracing a range of life cycle perspectives with new thinking and new tools (Goldsworthy & Ellams 2019). Among others is the circular fashion concept, which envisions a system where waste and pollution are eliminated, products and materials are kept in use for as long as possible - including through reusing and recycling - and natural systems are regenerated (Iablaco 2020). Another novel insight is “design for the circular economy” (Charter 2018), which is a preventive and proactive measure that presents a multi-stakeholder and interdisciplinary approach to support designers in evaluating design concepts, taking into account not just “product spheres,” but also business models, service dimensions, disposal, etc.

Most of the research in the fashion industry and CE has been developed in the Global North. However, such approaches considered as *circular* and *sustainable* might fail to take into account the issues caused by the export of textile waste to countries that have no infrastructure to upcycle or even recycle these items. Research on the topic refers to the global impacts of the fashion industry, but only a few investigations discuss how much of these impacts are generated in the different zones of the planet. Thus, our research highlights the need for transition to a circular, sustainable, and equitable fashion industry in a Global North/South perspective.

Conclusion

Due to the issues associated with the overproduction/overconsumption in the fashion industry, public attention and awareness regarding the environmental, sociocultural, economic, ethical and political problems have increased in the last decade. For this reason, the purpose of our study was to analyse problems associated with the fashion industry from a global perspective via a CE approach specifically regarding the second-hand clothing sector in the African continent. By analysing the interactions between the Global South and the Global North through second-hand clothing activities, four clusters of issues were identified relating to environmental, economic, political and social, and cultural and ethical spheres. Our study revealed that mainstream research has mainly focused on the implementation of simplistic approaches instead of adopting a more comprehensive perspective of circularity, triggering a debate on what we shall refer to as “circular washing” practices. Regarding the supply chain and product design, improvements can be made by including an Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) approach to allow collaboration between consumers, producers, and retailers (Jia et al. 2020;

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Rotimi, Topple & Hopkins 2021). Thus, a circular design approach can help to prevent issues associated with waste generation. After all, to start the transition to a circular fashion industry it is necessary to embrace a “planetary justice” perspective that brings the

concepts of environmental justice, climate justice, global justice, intergenerational justice, social justice, and justice for non-humans together (Hickey & Robeyns 2020).

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NOTES

- 1 - His study does not focus on the African context, it discusses the issue of *global fashion* from a decolonial perspective.
2 - <https://deadwhitemansclothes.org/intro>.

ABSTRACT

ENG

This paper focuses on the problems in the fashion industry from a global perspective under a circular economy (CE) approach with a special focus on African countries. Particular attention is paid to the issues of environmental problem shifting in the second-hand clothing sector. The adoption of circular economy principles on a global scale is offered as a possible solution to achieve an effective transition to a circular, sustainable, and equitable fashion industry.

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La transizione verso un'industria della moda circolare, sostenibile ed equa: il caso del commercio di vestiti di seconda mano nei paesi africani

L'industria della moda rispecchia alcuni dei rapporti di potere tra i paesi del Nord e del Sud globale, e lo fa su diversi piani, che si possono individuare lungo la catena di distribuzione dei capi di abbigliamento. In particolare, possiamo osservare una distribuzione ineguale delle attività, che vede i paesi in via di sviluppo nel ruolo di principali produttori di tessuti e capi e quelli avanzati come principali consumatori; un altro fenomeno a cui prestare attenzione è lo sfruttamento lavorativo dei minori nei paesi in via di sviluppo per aumentare la produttività, abbattere i costi e soddisfare la domanda dei consumatori del Nord del mondo. Infatti, da un lato i flussi di materiali (*import/export*) e le pratiche di produzione non etiche, e dall'altro la gestione dei rifiuti collegati con le rimanenze e l'invenduto caratterizzano spesso la fase di design, produzione, consumo e smaltimento dei tessuti. Parallelamente, il concetto egemonico di *global fashion* ha influito sulla percezione e sul consumo di articoli di vestiario locali. Questo articolo analizza i problemi connessi all'industria della moda da una prospettiva globale e con un approccio basato sull'economia circolare, concentrandosi specialmente sui paesi africani e con un'attenzione particolare al tema del *pollution shifting* (trasferimento dell'inquinamento) nel settore dei vestiti di seconda mano. In primo luogo gli autori riportano un'ampia rassegna della letteratura su questo ambito. Una volta identificati gli studi disponibili sull'argomento, i risultati sono presentati e discussi in dettaglio, per sottolineare le principali questioni rilevate da un punto di vista ambientale, economico, politico, sociale, culturale ed etico. L'articolo offre quindi alcuni nuovi spunti su come superare gli ostacoli alla transizione verso un'industria della moda circolare, sostenibile ed equa. Una soluzione chiave potrebbe essere quella di adottare i principi dell'economia circolare su scala globale, senza limitarsi al miglioramento delle performance ambientali dei capi di abbigliamento, ma affrontando anche altre questioni legate ad aspetti non materiali dei tessuti, in modo da completare una transizione effettiva verso un'industria della moda circolare, sostenibile ed etica. È necessario perciò stabilire nuove modalità di cooperazione tra il Nord e il Sud globali, che includano gli aspetti etici e che evitino un approccio alla circolarità nel settore della moda basato sul *greenwashing*.