

Collaborative and Sustainable Practices in Fashion Design Education

Orrapavadee Serewiwattana, Bangkok University, Thailand

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Abstract

The fashion industry is under increasing pressure to adopt sustainable practices, creating an urgent need to reimagine how we educate the next generation of designers. This study investigates how the integration of collaborative methods and sustainability-focused strategies within fashion design education can address these pressing challenges. Through interdisciplinary projects embedded in the undergraduate curriculum—including partnerships with a local department store and hands-on sustainability workshops—students engaged in collaborative problem-solving using upcycled materials from The Mall Group’s promotional displays. By applying creative design thinking and innovative production techniques, they transformed discarded materials into trend-conscious, market-ready fashion pieces. The outcomes demonstrated not only a heightened awareness of sustainability but also improvements in teamwork, individual creativity, and design capability. The findings underscore the transformative potential of sustainability-driven, collaborative education in fostering ethical awareness, adaptability, and innovation among future fashion professionals.

Keywords: sustainable fashion, design education, collaboration, experiential learning, Thailand

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Introduction

The fashion industry is a major contributor to environmental degradation, largely due to overproduction, textile waste, and unsustainable consumption patterns. With fast fashion compounding these challenges, design education must evolve to equip students with both creative competencies and an ethical understanding of sustainability.

At Bangkok University, the fashion design program has taken steps to embed sustainable and collaborative practices into its curriculum. This case study outlines a series of semester-based projects developed through industry collaboration, designed to help students develop practical skills while addressing real-world environmental concerns.

Background and Literature Review

Sustainability in fashion education increasingly emphasizes experiential learning. Gwilt (2014) argues that understanding material lifecycle and ethical practices is essential for responsible design. Fletcher and Tham (2019) encourage the integration of “Earth Logic” principles, calling for a shift from growth-oriented models toward sustainable thinking.

Collaboration with industry partners enhances learning by mimicking real-world conditions and requiring creative negotiation and problem-solving (McQuillan, 2021). Niinimäki (2020) highlights the importance of circular economy thinking, where designers must coordinate with stakeholders to implement sustainable solutions.

In Southeast Asia, research on integrating collaboration and sustainability in design education remains limited. This study offers insights from the Thai context, showing how local partnerships can enrich sustainable fashion education.

Methodology

This research adopts a **qualitative case study** approach to examine how collaborative and sustainable practices were implemented and experienced within the undergraduate fashion design program at Bangkok University. The purpose of the study was to understand how experiential, industry-linked projects influenced student learning, engagement, and sustainability awareness, and how these collaborations could serve as a replicable model in design education.

The case study focused on two academic years of project-based learning activities involving second- and third-year fashion students. These students participated in a series of sustainability-themed assignments that were integrated into core design modules. The main initiatives included the *Reborn Bag Project*—a design challenge in which students repurposed waste materials—and a collaborative workshop co-hosted with The Mall Group, where students were mentored by professionals and worked with post-consumer waste, including promotional banners, defective textiles, and leftover merchandising materials.

Data Collection

Multiple qualitative data sources were used to capture a comprehensive picture of the teaching and learning process:

1. ***Student reflective journals and presentations*** – After completing the projects, students submitted individual reflection reports describing their learning process, design decisions, challenges faced, and takeaways about sustainability and teamwork.
2. ***Design process documentation*** – Students were required to maintain sketchbooks and visual process boards, capturing the development of their ideas from concept to final prototype.
3. ***Project outcomes*** – Physical outputs such as fashion prototypes (e.g., bags, garments, accessories) were documented and analyzed for creativity, feasibility, sustainability, and alignment with industry themes.
4. ***Industry partner feedback*** – Feedback sessions and interviews were conducted with mentors and managers from The Mall Group and participating textile companies. These sessions evaluated student performance, innovation, and practical readiness from an industry perspective.
5. ***Instructor observations and peer evaluations*** – Teachers recorded classroom engagement, group dynamics, and student performance throughout the project phases, while peer reviews provided insight into team collaboration and communication.

Analytical Approach

All qualitative data were coded and analyzed thematically. NVivo software was used to assist in categorizing responses across five key dimensions: (1) sustainability awareness, (2) creativity and innovation, (3) collaboration and teamwork, (4) industry engagement, and (5) perceived skill development. This allowed for triangulation of data and identification of recurring patterns and insights.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained through the university's internal review process. Informed consent was secured from all student participants and industry collaborators. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity in reporting, and images of student work were used only with explicit permission.

Limitations

While the case study provides in-depth insight, the findings are context-specific and not intended to be generalized across all design programs. However, the model presented offers transferable principles for similar institutions seeking to embed sustainability and collaboration into their curricula.

Project Implementation and Key Results

Collaborative projects provided students with practical, sustainability-oriented experience in fashion design. Three core initiatives formed the basis of this case study:

The Reborn Bag Project

Students repurposed materials such as discarded banners and textile scraps to design and produce bags. The goal was to challenge students to creatively problem-solve under material constraints. Techniques such as natural dyeing and mixed-media embellishments were

introduced. Selected works were exhibited at Bangkok Design Week and at The Mall Department Store.

Industry Workshops and Mentoring

Outstanding student designs were further developed in collaboration with professionals from The Mall Group. These sessions focused on refining prototypes and preparing designs for public display or potential market entry. Students gained insight into production feasibility and consumer expectations.

Surface Design and Sustainability Sessions

Students explored surface techniques such as botanical dyeing and upcycling methods, connecting classroom theory with practice. These sessions emphasized sustainability and expanded students' technical repertoire.

Student reflections consistently showed increased engagement and motivation. Many expressed a greater awareness of fashion's environmental impact and valued the chance to collaborate with real industry professionals. Industry feedback highlighted student creativity and the effective use of limited resources, reinforcing the value of continuing the partnership.

Model Highlights

The Bangkok University model for sustainable fashion education includes:

- Repeatable semester projects with evolving themes and materials
- Collaborative structure involving students and industry partners
- Scalable and adaptable for various class sizes and levels
- Evolving content based on feedback from both students and professionals

This dynamic structure supports ongoing innovation and the meaningful integration of sustainability into design education.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates that collaborative, sustainability-focused fashion education can effectively prepare students for the ethical and environmental challenges of the modern industry. The projects not only enhanced creativity but also gave students practical experience in working with repurposed materials, developing market-ready designs, and engaging with professional mentors.

The model developed at Bangkok University is adaptable, collaborative, and grounded in real-world learning. It strengthens academia-industry relationships and provides students with tools to become responsible designers. As sustainability continues to reshape the global fashion landscape, this approach serves as a promising framework for other institutions.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

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Contact email: orrapavadee.s@bu.ac.th