



A critical approach to sustainable fashion: Practices of clothing designers in the Kallio neighborhood of Helsinki

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Abstract

This article takes the idea of a critical approach to sustainable fashion and applies it to the practices of clothing designers and seamstresses in the Kallio neighborhood of Helsinki, Finland. These practices are described by the umbrella term “sustainable fashion.” The main questions are how do clothing designers and seamstresses practice sustainable fashion, what challenges do they face, and how do they interpret these challenges. The article offers an empirical definition of “sustainable fashion,” discusses innovative practices of sustainable fashion design in an urban context, considers the tensions within this production concept, and examines ways in which designers address and resolve such tensions. The article contributes to the discussion of a critical approach to fashion, sustainability, and entrepreneurialism in contemporary urban culture.

Keywords

Finland, small-scale entrepreneurship, sustainability, sustainable fashion, urban culture, clothing designers

Introduction

This article takes the idea of a critical approach to sustainable fashion and applies it to the practices of clothing designers and seamstresses in the Kallio neighborhood of Helsinki, Finland. Sustainable fashion is a concept that has recently attracted the attention of scholars and others in society; indeed, a cultural shift

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to sustainable fashion is clearly underway (Root, 2008: 419). Sustainability is a complex phenomenon for which there is no single, general definition. Sustainability in fashion means that

there is no harm done to people or the planet, and that a thing or process, once put into action, can enhance the well-being of the people who interact with it and the environment it is developed and used within. (Hethorn and Ulasewicz, 2008: xiii)

Sustainability thus refers to balancing human activities vis-à-vis the natural environment for the purpose of reducing the harm on both human beings and the environment caused by these activities.

One of the most powerful conceptualizations of sustainable fashion is based on the “cradle-to-cradle” principle (McDonough and Braungart, 2009). This principle assumes that producers approach material objects from the point of view of a lifecycle and demonstrate care about the environment and human well-being. “Lifecycle thinking” insists that multiple cycles of using a product are possible (Niinimäki, 2013: 18). The “cradle-to-cradle” concept has appeared in opposition to the “cradle to the grave” principle, a linear, one-way model, which holds that things that are made of valuable resources, shaped into products, sold, and used are eventually disposed of and end their lives in a landfill (McDonough and Braungart, 2009: 27).

In Finland, the concept of sustainable fashion has recently gained popularity among independent seamstresses and clothing designers, who are registering their micro-enterprises and opening studios that offer a critical approach to the production and consumption of clothing, meanwhile criticizing the dominant patterns in the fashion industry, such as polluting the environment, producing enormous amounts of waste, and exploiting people. The emergence of designers who follow the concept of sustainability is connected to a wider urban regeneration, given that their studios are located in a district of the city of Helsinki – a former working-class area called Kallio – populated by young creatives. The main questions addressed in this article are how do clothing designers and seamstresses in Kallio practice sustainable fashion, what challenges do they face, and how do they interpret these challenges.

Literature review

In the design literature, scholars largely consider sustainable fashion from a practical point of view. The term “sustainable fashion” is used as an umbrella category for many practices (Gwilt and Rissanen, 2011; see also Aus, 2011; Fletcher, 2014; Hethorn and Ulasewicz, 2008; Niinimäki, 2013). Aakko and Koskennurmi-Sivonen (2013) summarize such practices and describe them systematically in the following categories: taking and returning resources (cradle-to-cradle principle, functional design according to human needs and ecological principles, slow fashion), sourcing materials (choosing environmentally friendly fibers, assessing the lifecycle of the materials, recycling the

materials), treatment of fabrics (choosing less harmful “finishing processes” that include bleaching, dyeing, printing, and so on, using safer nanotechnologies), the production methods (patternmaking with waste reduction, handcrafting, use of transparent supply chains), societal implications (social responsibility of the designers, activism, participatory design), saving resources (energy efficiency, reducing harm from laundering, repairing garments, leasing clothing, using local resources), information transparency (use of eco-labels and cause-related marketing), and enhancing attachment and appreciation of sustainable fashion (through aesthetics, individuality, quality, and the spirituality of things). This literature often has a didactic purpose and can be useful for revealing a multiplicity of practices in fashion design that are being employed to reduce the harmful consequences of the fashion industry.

In the social sciences, sustainable fashion appears to be resistant to fast fashion (Clark, 2008). It represents one of the forms of anti-consumption (Joy et al., 2012) or alternative consumption, such as eco-consumption, green consumption, ethical consumption, and political consumption (cf. Littler, 2009), and is a form of cultural economy (*Culture Unbound*, 2014: vol. 6, theme 5). Scholars have studied digital forms of sustainable consumption (online peer-to-peer exchange) (Eden, 2017), the peculiarities of “green consumer” narratives of young people (Autio et al., 2009), and motives for anti-consumption (Portwood-Stacer, 2012). Conceptualization and empirical examples of change to more sustainable practices have also been addressed (Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014). The social science literature, however, focuses mainly on consumption and sometimes on policy rather than on the production of sustainable fashion.

In the area of production, a number of articles have been devoted to clothing designers as producers, cultural intermediaries, a creative class, and a creative mass (e.g. Arvidsson and Niessen, 2015; Bourdieu, 1993; Bourdieu and Delsaut, 1975; Entwistle, 2009; McRobbie, 1998, 2013; Skov, 2002). The connection between cities and entrepreneurialism has been discussed in the literature on urban regeneration and urban development (Florida, 2004; Molotch, 2002), as well as in the literature on fashion, clothing production, and fashion geography (Crewe, 2013; Reimer, 2009). Among the relevant literature for our research is the scholarship at the intersection of a specific city, fashion entrepreneurship, and sustainability. McRobbie (2013) studies the growth of the small-scale and independent fashion sector in Berlin from the point of view of neoliberal governmentality and emphasizes the important role of an “environmentally aware fashion sector, which plays a key role in urban regeneration” and in keeping a city alive (p. 985). Weinberg (2012) explores how textile designers in Brooklyn, New York, explain the growing practice of local and handmade production of textiles. Through these practices, textile designers transmit their knowledge and their skills in this craft, support environmental sustainability, and elevate the societal value of textiles, which are often seen as gendered (female) and of low capital value. Crewe (2013) discusses “slow luxury” as a form of slow fashion directed at custom tailoring suits in the United Kingdom. “Critical fashion,” that is, politically

motivated, small-scale production as another alternative to fast fashion used by designers, has been studied in Italy by D'Ovidio and Pradel (2013). Critical fashion in this case is an emic category used by designers "to differentiate their products from those produced by the majority of fashion houses, which commonly exploit people at all stages of production and do not operate environmentally friendly policies" (D'Ovidio and Pradel, 2013: 72). This literature, however, focuses mostly on social and institutional issues related to the designers' work and does not explore thoroughly and critically the practices of sustainable fashion.

A critical approach to sustainable fashion

This article combines both socio-cultural and practical aspects of sustainable fashion and offers a critical assessment of practices of sustainable clothing designers in the context of creatives and their role in an urban culture. Unlike D'Ovidio and Pradel, who introduced the notion of "critical fashion" and treated it as an emic category, our research elevates a critical approach to fashion to the methodological level. Sustainable fashion itself is a critical concept; it questions the functioning of the fashion industry and patterns of consumption. Nevertheless, there is a need to discuss the challenges that independent clothing designers face in trying to be sustainable.

The tradition of critical discourse in fashion studies is strong, but in relation to the topic being researched, attention is mostly paid to the institutional organization of creative labor, which can also be considered as a part of sustainability. For instance, Elzenbaumer and Giuliani (2014: 454) observe systematic, precarious working conditions of fashion designers who have unstable working contracts, do freelance work, have an unsatisfying relation between working hours and pay, a tendency to work in isolation, the necessity to be supported by the family, and complete unawareness of designers' rights as workers. McRobbie (2013) emphasizes that, for these designers, most of whom are women, an independent label and entrepreneurship are the "means of avoiding unemployment, thus allowing a sense of status and a meaningful life" (p. 994).

As for criticism of practices related to sustainability in fashion industry, scholars mention "greenwash" (Thomas, 2008: 528), which means the deceptive use of an eco-agenda in marketing strategies. This phenomenon, which is yet to be addressed in detail, refers mostly to corporations that make efforts to clean up their reputation because of social pressure or for the purpose of financial gain. We would not apply this term to the independent clothing designers and seamstresses whom we interviewed, because sustainability for them is a matter of choice based on their personal values rather than a strategy for gaining profit. At the same time, the designers can use sustainability as a marketing tool; however, they prefer to reflect upon compromises that they make rather than to cover up fraudulent practices.

Below, we first discuss methodology, data, and sources. Then, we proceed to the role played by small-scale sustainable brands in the local culture of the Kallio neighborhood. Thereafter, we discuss the peculiarities of sustainable fashion in the practices of the Kallio designers.

Methodology and methods

Methodologically, this study is an ethnographic study based on in-depth interviews and observations. To begin with, the authors have been observing the urban culture of Kallio since 2011 as locals (those who live and/or work there); however, the active part of the research began in the fall of 2014 and is still in progress.¹ In the process of observation, we identified studios of clothing designers and seamstresses located in the district. Using “ethnographic gaze” as an “information-hungry way of looking” (Madden, 2010: 99; Zukin, 1995), we also tried to identify innovative practices that have appeared recently among the clothing designers and seamstresses and in the culture of the neighborhood in general. By “practices,” we mean the ways individuals do things in a particular urban context. We also take into account how designers interpret their own actions.

Second, we conducted in-depth interviews, focusing on the careers and practices of designers and seamstresses in the neighborhood. The interviews were carried out in the designers’ own studios, where we observed their routines. The observations targeted sustainable fashion design as a “grounded market-making process” (Hansson and Brembeck, 2015: 91). We began by knocking on the doors of studios and asking for an interview. Usually, the designers agreed to be interviewed within 1 week. Initially, we limited our sample to designers with studios in Kallio and to those under 35 years of age (these include designers who recently started a business and are in the process of establishing themselves in the market). In the course of the research, we found that sustainable fashion has spread beyond Kallio, so we decided to include interviews with two designers located outside the Kallio district and are older. We conducted six interviews² with designers and seamstresses in Kallio and three interviews elsewhere (namely, the Helsinki neighborhoods of Valilla, Itäkeskus, and Katajanokka).³

In addition, as a method of dissemination, we used videography and produced a research-based film (Belk and Kozinets, 2005). The film (available at <https://vimeo.com/175921956>) is a form of dissemination and a means of reaching a wider audience. The film also popularizes practices of sustainable fashion and enhances the sense of community among the designers as well as their critical thinking on sustainable practices.

Results

Context: Clothing designers in the Kallio neighborhood of Helsinki

This study of clothing designers’ practices is being conducted in Kallio, a neighborhood in the city of Helsinki. As the capital of Finland, Helsinki ranks high as a creative city (cf. Florida, 2004), and the city’s creative branding is centered first and foremost around design (Mustonen, 2010: 13). A concentration of businesses related to clothing design can be found in several districts in Helsinki. In the city center, there is the so-called Design District.⁴ The Kallio district is also known as a place for up and coming creative entrepreneurs. Slightly removed from the city

center, yet still in close proximity, this district is more affordable for designers who have recently started their businesses than the more expensive and central Design District.

Kallio has unique features in the city of Helsinki which nevertheless similar to neighborhoods in many cities around the world.⁵ First, it is a former working-class area which has recently been populated by young creatives. The number of artists and industrial designers residing in Kallio is among the highest in Helsinki (along with the more centrally located districts of Ullanlinna and Kampinmalmi) (Mustonen, 2010: 19), while the largest number of Helsinki residents under 35 resides in this area (Mustonen, 2010: 31).

Second, it has a media image of being a “sizzling sector” of Helsinki⁶ and the reputation of a “cool” place to live and work. This media image adds to the attraction of the locale for young designers, who perceive it as bohemian, trendy, and with good vibes. The creatives choose former working-class districts because of anti-bourgeois sentiments that these two groups share.

Third, Kallio is known for being in the process of gentrifying. On one hand, old buildings from the first part of the 20th century are home to many small businesses, such as cafés and bars, shops, and hairdresser salons. Since Kallio is a former working-class district, the size of the apartments and the rental spaces are small. Therefore, rents are lower than in the center of the city, making this neighborhood attractive to younger people who depend on low rents for financial stability. At the same time, a number of institutions that take care of the poor are located in Kallio, which hinders gentrification. This makes Kallio a socially inclusive and egalitarian place, as described in one of the interviews:

When people are coming out of town [meaning the city center – O.G., D.M.], Kallio is the place where they come. You see people on the streets, like workers, lower-class people. Not [the kind of] folks living in Kruununhaka or Töölö or Eira [more upscale neighborhoods in the city center – O.G., D.M.]. This was [originally] a working-class area. Kallio is seen as [having] an influx of different people coming in. And everyone is accepted. Even now, like, you see a granny walking with a dog next to some drunk. The granny is not afraid, and the drunk just lets her pass. Nowadays you see lots of kids here. Immigrants come here; this is the place where there is an asylum center. . . . But the thing is, I don't think Kallio will ever get all cleaned up. You will always see drunks here. There are institutions that take care of them. It's cool that Kallio will never be totally cleaned up. It might be our favorite thing here that people do not want to get rid of these groups. (Tiina, owner of the brand “I Made This”)

Clothing designers and seamstresses in Kallio largely comprise young women in their late 20s and early 30s, many of whom are married and have children. There are not many men among the Kallio designers with studios by comparison with the city center, which is more expensive, glamorous, and prestigious. In general, there are fewer men in this low-paid and unstable sector, which emphasizes women's status as a disadvantaged group in the field of design. The designers in Kallio have

diverse educational backgrounds, ranging from professional schools to universities in Finland or abroad. However, there are not many graduates from the most prestigious design university in Finland, Aalto University, whose students are encouraged to seek jobs on the international market rather than establish their own businesses locally.⁷ To use the distinction between craft and the fashion industry, designers in Kallio belong to the field of crafts, that is, the small-scale production of goods based on the designers' skills and implemented under their control. These are small businesses, consisting of 1–2 people, who are nevertheless well represented in the digital world and who make significant contributions to the city's fashion scene and increase its diversity. The designers are evidence of a so-called "craft renaissance," which means a return to the skilled production of clothing in a new context using new practices (Crewe, 2013: 201). The designers create a market that can be called the "sustainable clothing design market," which combines small-scale designers, production spaces, particular practices, and meanings, with sustainable values being this market's main values.

Sustainable fashion in Kallio

Sustainable fashion is fueled by small-scale enterprises; as Ulasewicz (2008) states, "a new entrepreneurial revolution growing in the twenty-first century is pushing sustainable fashion forward" (pp. 33–34). She also emphasizes that designers today have to be proactive "social entrepreneurs" and must be able "to persuade, enlighten, touch hearts, shift perceptions, articulate new meanings, and move new concepts through the fashion system" (Ulasewicz, 2008: 33–34). There is thus an obvious intersection between small-scale business in clothing and the idea of sustainability. To be socially and environmentally responsible is a very common attitude among Kallio's young clothing designers. There is also a strong anti-commercial and anti-fashion industry ethos among the designers. The young creatives oppose the fashion industry, which is aimed at growth and cannot be sustainable:

I do not like the fashion industry . . . I do not like the fast pace, the cycles, [the idea] that everybody buys more. [The fact] that fashion designers who work there are completely burned out way too early. I do not like the beauty ideals that the fashion industry promotes... also anti-ecological values. In many ways, it's an evil industry, and it is not about making people feel better about themselves. (Tiina)

Kallio, and Finland in general, is an excellent setting for sustainable fashion. On one hand, the Finns have a long tradition of caring about nature and the environment. The ideas of sustainable (green, eco) consumption and "environmental transition" have been recognized as a necessity in Finland. From as early as kindergarten, children are taught to separate garbage according to rules of responsible disposal. In school, children learn about environmental challenges and are made aware of environmental issues (cf. Heinonen and Autio, 2013: 78). The discourse on sustainable consumption is often prominent in the national media. This discourse also seems to

be at the forefront of the identity of the young designers who are working in Kallio. In fact, every single Kallio designer we interviewed addressed the idea of sustainability. This means that the designers use the idea of sustainability as “contextual knowledge” (Aspers, 2006) and as a basis for their identity. They also act as a “community [with] shared values” (D’Ovidio and Pradel, 2013: 73). The principle of sustainability is accepted to the extent that Suvi, the founder and owner of the brand Lumoan, emphasizes that to be sustainable is in fact not enough, at least on the current Finnish market. “There should be something else, some added value,” she says, for which sustainability is just a basis.

On the other hand, sustainable fashion is part of a hipster ethos, which has grown vigorously in Kallio, with its attention to the past, the Finnish heritage, and authenticity. The authenticity of Kallio, a former working-class area, is based on living simply and close to nature. The working-class heritage has been rethought and has produced a new, slightly shabby, image. Besides fashion design studios, other small-scale businesses contribute to sustainable consumption in Kallio. Among them are second-hand and vintage stores, fair-trade stores, organic cosmetic stores, organic hair dressing salons, Cleaning Day (an event aimed at celebrating recycling through clothing exchange, which transforms the city into a giant second-hand market), and Restaurant Day (an event during which anyone can sell their own home-made food on city streets and in parks).

Sustainable fashion in the practices of clothing designers

Among the clothing designers in Kallio, we identified the following concepts, which together comprise sets of practices aimed at sustainability: slow fashion, upcycling, trashion, and zero waste. These are emic categories, meaning that the designers identified and explained them during the interviews. In the sections below, we first identify the practices as they are defined in the scholarly literature, and then we examine the practices of clothing designers and their explanations of the issues and the pressures they face.

Slow fashion. Slow fashion appeared as a reaction to the fast fashion of transnational corporations with their growth-obsessed activity. Slow fashion refers to fashion based on small-scale production, traditional craft techniques, local resources, and local markets. Slow fashion is not only a description of the speed of the production process but also pre-supposes a long-term relationship between the consumer and the material objects (Fletcher, 2014: 204; see also Clark, 2008).

In the interviews with the designers, the most common interpretation of slow fashion involved time and referred to a redefinition of the fashion cycle, the quantity of garments produced, the pace of change in the collections during the year, and even the trendiness of the garments:

Well, we do not want to follow the steps of big companies, which are bringing out their collections several times a year. We do not want to do this. We make a collection,

not even a collection, but new products, two-three-four times a year, but there is always some new color or model... If we create something that is very good, then we want to maintain it... We do not follow any trends. Lumoan has a specific design. When you see our clothes on the street, you can easily recognize them. So I think that slow fashion is something timeless. Something that we do not produce hundreds of times just for a new collection. (Suvi)

The designers follow their own production rhythms because they “do not want to follow the steps of big companies” (Suvi), “do not want to feel rushed” (Tiina), and because it is “environmentally wise” to do so (Paula, Remake EcoDesign and MEM). They are reluctant to use the word “collection” and instead often endeavor to produce “timeless” garments to support the longer life and use of things.

Upcycling. Upcycling is the practice of converting materials into something with greater value in a second life (cf. Murray, 2002; Aus, 2011; Emgin, 2012). Upcycling is a variation on recycling, which refers to the reuse of material for the purpose of waste reduction. Upcycling pre-supposes that designers invest creativity in their products and act as “entrepreneurs of taste” by adding design ideas for the purpose of creating a new garment from an old one.

Upcycling, which is growing in popularity, appeared in our interviews in several forms, with repair being one of them. In the case of repair, an outfit is not necessarily deconstructed or reconstructed into a new garment. The boundary between repair as simple mending, such as when a seamstress fixes the length of a pair of jeans, and repair as upcycling by adding the value of design is similar to the difference between the utilitarian and the symbolic. Janica, a seamstress and designer at Ompelimo Ruusu, and Viktoria, the owner of Soul Sisters, are delighted to do both if these will prevent their clients from supporting the industrialized fashion industry. Janica says,

I like doing this. And I like the fact that people are coming here [to the studio]. They just do not immediately buy a new piece. They often ask, “Can you do anything about this?” and I am very happy [to help them].

Janica explains that her clients often bring in used garments: it can be their old H&M dress or “granny’s stuff,” which they want to have mended or use in a modified way. Ellu, the owner of the atelier Nästa, supports such an approach and talks in a similar way about her clients in Kallio:

And this is a good place; people consume in an ethical and ecological way... They do not spend too much money on clothes; [they] prefer vintage, second hand and repair services. [They are] people who think when they use clothes, they think ethically.

Another form of upcycling is to use scrap materials from factories with the idea of reducing waste. Maiju, the owner of brand Kisskiss, upcycles tights that she gets from a hosiery factory in northern Finland. She uses skin-color tights, which

otherwise would be burned, dyes them with eco-friendly pigments in bright colors and then paints designs on them using Japanese kimono techniques. Like Suvi, Maiju avoids calling different series of her tights as “collections.” Instead, she divides them into topics with various themes. Sometimes, Maiju engages her customers and followers in the design process, thus extending their role from merely consumers to co-creators and potentially reducing the number of unwanted things.

Yet another form of upcycling pre-supposes the production of a new garment from an old one that has been deconstructed. Designer Paula, the owner of the MEM brand, constructs her collection from used jeans and T-shirts, which she turns into edgy, modern garments. The sustainability of her collection is achieved not only by using recycled materials but also because Paula tries to build a sustainable system of production, “a whole new paradigm of production.” She uses local materials (received from the Reuse Centre in Helsinki and from the second-hand chain stores UFF) and produces her collection locally with the help of several seamstresses in a work space called Remake EcoDesign in Kallio.

Trashion. The term “trashion” – a combination of “trash” and “fashion” – unites innovative thinking with environmental concerns. It refers to producing garments from used materials which are in fashion. Some authors treat trashion as a form of upcycling (e.g. Emgin, 2012: 64).

Trashion was discussed in the interviews in two ways. One is the production of a unique showpiece. It is this approach that the owner of the brand called Trashion, Outi les Pyy, who is also a blogger, uses to inform consumers about environmental concerns. Through the word “trashion,” designers add the value of “fashionability” to sustainable clothes, not rejecting fashion, but redefining the used garments with this new term:

Trashion for me is fashionable recycled fashion. When I started writing my blog in 2007, many recycling designers I saw were quite craft-like, and they did not appeal to a fashion-oriented person like me. So, I figured that we needed a better word for the recycled fashion genre. And I found that trashion was being used by another brand in Finland, which was doing recycled fashion, and I called them up to ask if it was registered or not. And they said it was just a word they used. So I took this as part of the name for my blog, and I started writing about it online, and I found that many of my friends were doing the same thing. It spread all over the world in a couple of years. I'm sure I'm not the only one using it, but it has gotten a very nice response. (Outi, Remake EcoDesign and Trashion)

The company that Outi mentions is Plan B, a brand in the Reuse Center of Finland. Initially, Plan B produced a line that consisted of showpieces and made-to-order unique garments that could be seen in the media and in competitions. Currently, it focuses on garments for regular customers made from reused fabric, which is the second way of producing trashion.

Zero waste. “Zero waste” is a concept of production that means avoiding leftovers and putting leftovers back into production. Zero waste is based on the “cradle-to-cradle” principle, meaning when a commodity is approached from the viewpoint of the lifecycle with the idea that waste is not a “dark side” of the commodity, but rather that a garment can continue to be useful, and “nothing useful should be wasted” (Murray, 2002: 18).

Designers can utilize pre-consumer waste (leftovers from production, sales leftovers, returned goods) and post-consumer waste (used clothes) (cf. Aus, 2011). Both types of waste are widely used in upcycling and trashion. Among the designers in Kallio, Tiina, the owner of the brand “I Made This,” utilizes this principle by producing her line from fabric leftovers and from 100% recycled textiles bought from the Finnish company “Pure Waste.” Another way to apply the “zero waste” principle is to take note of the waste potential of the garments manufactured by the designers. To minimize waste, designers use biodegradable fabrics, which can be returned to the soil without causing additional damage to nature. They also recycle pieces from their old collections, as in the case of Mr. Serious, a toy cat produced by Ivanda, the owner of the Kike Rigu brand, out of a sweater from a past season.

We have discussed four concepts of sustainable fashion used in the Kallio district: slow fashion, upcycling, trashion, and zero waste. Besides these, several other practices emerged from the interviews as aspects of larger concepts: the use of organic materials and materials with eco-certificates, recycling, repairing, mending, and co-creation. Why these practices are used, whereas others, although described in the literature, are not used is a question of the peculiarities of the local sustainable clothing design market and a matter of choice on the part of a particular designer. Such choice in turn is based on the merging of aesthetics and the techniques of sustainable production to which each designer has access. One of the biggest problems of sustainable fashion is that designers are often self-taught in the area of sustainable production of clothes. They have to educate themselves, a process that requires time and effort as well as practice.

Compromises. As our interviews show, sustainable designers have to make compromises. In this section, we discuss such compromises and how the designers interpret them.

The first compromise, which appeared in the interview with Suvi, who practices slow fashion, implies the use of local resources and local production. Sometimes designers produce their goods in Finland. However, outsourcing is a common strategy, and the majority of the designers we interviewed produce their clothes in Estonia, with one of them producing her goods in Portugal. The main reasons for outsourcing are the lack of opportunities for clothing production in Finland and the cheaper labor force abroad. The designers did not see any conflict between outsourcing and sustainability, because, according to them, Estonia “is still local,” “we are almost like relatives [to the Estonians]” (Tiina); also outsourcing “creates jobs” (Ivanda). Portugal belongs to the European Union and, in that sense, can be

considered “local.” Thus, in the interviews, locale appears to be a relative category. Belonging to the European Union guarantees that the factories are not sweatshops, that there are proper working conditions, and that fair salaries are paid to the workers. To some extent, the designers follow the logic of the fashion industry, which they criticize, and which contributes to the inequalities, the global division of labor, and the creation of a hierarchy whereby the richer countries act as consumers, while the poorer countries are the producers of the clothing. “This is not black and white,” says Ivanda. She continues,

If you produce everything in Europe, it is nice... Then, again, you have to find some kind of compromise. I do not feel like, if you do not make it 100 percent yourself, then it is a bad thing... It depends on the situation. There are not enough factories in Finland. The Baltic countries are cheaper, and there are still some factories [there].

The second tension, which appeared in Paula’s interview, concerns the use of unpaid or low-paid labor because of the financial challenges faced by the creative workers, who struggle to produce a constant money flow to pay taxes, bills, and salaries. The financial struggles of creative workers have been well documented (for instance, see Arvidsson et al., 2010), as has the use of unpaid labor in the fashion industry (Elzenbaumer and Giuliani, 2014). Paula’s company (and many similar companies in Finland) uses the unpaid labor of interns, which brings into question the concept of sustainability with its values of social responsibility and fairness. Paula explains that many students in Helsinki are interested in acquiring skills in upcycling as a way to deal with recycled or used materials, and there are not many places where they can acquire such experience; in that way, the designers are helping the interns to acquire such experience. The use of interns also alleviates the self-exploitation of the designers who have an enormous workload (not only designing and sewing but also managing the company, organizing production, taking care of public relations, marketing, and so on).

The third issue appeared in Tiina’s interview; she was vocal about how she has to negotiate the values of sustainability, the zero-waste principle, and design aesthetics with the needs of her clients. In so doing, she has had to change her designs:

I understand that there should be a compromise. I have been making these clothes for three years now. I started being very strict with zero waste. Then I realized that aesthetics matters more than zero waste, and I want to have round forms – it means that the material has leftovers. (Tiina)

Ivanda reveals another issue related to negotiating clients’ needs and the fabrics that she uses. She uses eco-friendly materials in the production of dresses and leggings with digital prints of her own, and she has found that polyester is more ecological in the sense that the overall ecological footprint of polyester is lower (although in production it is higher) than the footprint of cotton. However, Ivanda has also discovered that polyester does not work as well as she expected for her

clients. The customers were hesitant about how this synthetic material felt against their skin, accepting polyester for leggings, but not for dresses. Consumers believe that sustainable fashion has to be made of natural materials, which can in fact be less sustainable than polyester. Therefore, the designers not only have to negotiate sustainability vis-à-vis aesthetics and clients' demands, but they also have to educate consumers on what is sustainable.

The last tension that appeared in the interviews relates to the uniqueness of garments made from used materials. In the interview with Irina, the founder and designer of Plan B, she talked about the difficulty of producing and selling her unique garments manufactured from used materials. She emphasizes that working with used materials requires sufficient time and effort (because of cleaning, ironing, and other tasks necessary to prepare used clothing for new uses). These efforts can be harmful to nature; also all such efforts make a garment more expensive. That is why Plan B was forced to move from the production of unique designs to the production of garments with simple designs, often from rolls of old fabric. Moreover, the uniqueness of the pieces made it difficult for the brand to work for regular retailers, who normally want to order more than one copy of a particular garment.

The question thus arises, "Should the practices of the designers be called sustainable fashion? Or do these compromises downplay the idea of sustainability?" The designers acknowledge this problem. However, their opinion is that there is hardly any such a thing as being "100 percent sustainable." We would agree with this point of view and argue that it is more important to bring the idea of sustainability to the market, to create an alternative niche, to educate consumers, and to develop practices of sustainable production that are innovative and can bring about future changes with long-lasting positive effect.

At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge a number of problems that challenges sustainability in the designers' practices and consider how to overcome them. First, practices of sustainable fashion can be in conflict with the logic of a market economy. Therefore, the designers should keep searching for business models that will allow them to be both sustainable and profitable. Second, there is a need for education and training in the production of sustainable fashion. In this regard, the designers should be proactive in self-teaching. It would also be helpful to share the knowledge and skills they acquire with other members of the design community. Third, the discourse on sustainable fashion should be broader. Local designers have limited access to mainstream media. However, they could blog about sustainability and also use the power of local bloggers. One such blogger in Finland, Outi les Pyy, a critical promoter of sustainable fashion, was among our interviewees. Fourth, more efforts are needed to educate consumers, who could then support the designers financially by purchasing their products; blogging could help with this. In general, designers should be aware of the limitations of their approach and acknowledge these: by making one aspect of their design sustainable, they compromise other things. Therefore, sustainable fashion has to be considered a work-in-progress in which there is constant need of a critical eye.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to give a critical assessment of the phenomenon of sustainable fashion in practices of young clothing designers in the Helsinki neighborhood of Kallio, Finland. Several conclusions can be drawn from our investigation.

Sustainable fashion is a concept shared by the clothing designers in Kallio. The empirical definition of sustainable fashion is as follows: a fashion production which is locally embedded, slow in terms of production cycles, with a quantity of produced goods that corresponds to demand and without overproduction. It utilizes eco-friendly and qualitative materials, yet it is not cheap, the idea being to stimulate prolonged use of the clothing.

Although the Kallio designers are trying to be sustainable, this path requires additional effort and commitment from them: “There has never yet been, nor is there now, a sustainable business or a sustainable fashion on this planet. And no one should ever pretend – in setting out for a place – that you’ve actually gotten there” (Hethorn and Ulasewicz, 2008: ix). In daily life, the designers have to negotiate sustainability vis-à-vis economic and aesthetic issues, along with the demands of their clients and the resources available to them on the market, meanwhile taking into account their personal knowledge and skills. There is no certain stable model among the designers for how to be sustainable in practice, and the understanding of sustainability is always a process or a work-in-progress. Sustainable fashion appears in several concepts and sets of practices, among which are slow fashion, upcycling, trashion, and zero waste. The significance of these practices is that they push the idea to slow the pace of fashion, to increase the value of local production and products, to prolong the lifecycle of things, to increase the value of timeless garments, to reduce the amount of waste, and, in general, to reduce the harm to the environment, as well as to educate people to practice environmentally friendly consumption.

The concept of sustainable fashion can be considered a strategy among designers to compete on the clothing market by creating alternatives to the fast fashion clothing market. Despite the fact that the practices discussed above have a very strong anti-commercial ethos, the designers still participate in production. The business of the local designers that stems from the practices of sustainable fashion, however, does not have significant turnover. Nevertheless, the main impact is ideologically strong, because sustainable fashion creates and supports a discourse that could influence consumer patterns and habits and create opportunities for consumers to be more eco-friendly. Another impact is social, that is, the role of small-scale entrepreneurs in supporting the economy in times of austerity and the role of clothing designers in the life of the local community. In times of austerity, small-scale entrepreneurship creates jobs, especially for young people, and provides opportunities for new products on the market. As for the community, it is enhanced in several ways. First, as cultural entrepreneurs, clothing designers commit to the production of a symbolic culture and reinforce the attractiveness of a neighborhood involving various social groups. Fashion designers, among

other entrepreneurs, create space for the exchange of ideas and knowledge. Through work and retail spaces organized by the designers and available to consumers, the designers contribute to the development of their neighborhood as a vital, vibrant, and lively place. They also create a unique cityscape, which offers an alternative to the ubiquitous transnational corporations. Last but not least, adding new products and being entrepreneurs of taste, the designers diversify the faces of fashion in the city.

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Notes

1. This article is part of a larger research project that is exploring the careers of fashion designers in Finland.
2. This research is based on face-to-face interviews and has been conducted according to the principles of professional sociological ethics. Permission to record and use transcribed interviews, as well as to use the video was obtained from each interviewee.
3. For our analysis, we chose only those interviews related to the topic and goal of this particular article. At the same time, other interviews from our larger research project on fashion designers in Finland allowed us to understand the context and practices of fashion designers in Kallio vis-à-vis practices of other designers in Helsinki.
4. Design District Helsinki: <http://www.designdistrict.fi/> (accessed 26 December 2014).
5. For instance, Wedding in the borough of Mitte, Berlin; Florentin in Tel Aviv; Williamsburg in the New York City borough of Brooklyn; Leith in Edinburg, among others.
6. "Sizzling in Helsinki," *New York Times*, Travel section; see <http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2013/03/31/travel/20130331-SURFACING.html> (accessed 26 December 2014).
7. Tuomas Laitinen, Helsinki's Fashion Healthy Wealth Bubble; see <http://metalmagazine.eu/en/post/interview/tuomas-laitinen-helsinki-fashions-healthy-wealthy-bubble> (accessed 17 July 2015).

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