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Stimulating learning about textiles with fast fashion in urban and rural settings

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ABSTRACT

It is important for students who plan to work in the fashion industry to understand fast-fashion and its implications. A constructivist approach to teaching where an instructor starts with students' experiences has been useful to teach fashion subjects. The purposes of this paper were to: 1) present and assess a teaching activity guided by constructivist theory where students were required to analyze quality of a garment made pre and another made post fast fashion, and 2) compare and contrast knowledge of fast fashion and quality among students given their rural versus urban experiences. Two textiles classes in rural ($n = 37$) and urban ($n = 32$) regions of the United States completed the fast fashion activity. Results from the assessment surveys suggested the activity provided "first hand" experiences with apparel quality and fast fashion. Furthermore, rural and urban students differed in perceptions and understanding of fast fashion.

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1. Introduction

University students today were born in an era of fast fashion, which produces cheap, often poorly made, and trendy apparel. As a result, many students may not readily understand components of a high-quality garment (e.g. silk lining, durable stitching, and padding). The availability of garments at different quality levels with similar appearances has had interesting implications for the industry. For example, a high-end designer might lose income to companies that make cheap copies and, thus, might eventually lower quality expectations. In another example, the customer who purchases the cheaper garment will likely have to spend more money to replace it and have more waste than the customer who buys the higher quality version. Rose Marie Bravo, CBE Retail Consultant, former CEO, and Vice Chairman of Burberry Group, coined the term *domestic luxury* to describe designer labels made in conjunction with fast-fashion retailers such as H&M, Target, and Top Shop, who bring so-called luxury to the masses (Beauty, 2004; The glossy posse, 2011). For example, H&M has presented high-street collaborations with Isabel Marant, Maison Martin Margiela, and Comme des Garçons that have sold out within hours but decreased the reputation and sales of high luxury designers (Alexander, 2013). Even though H&M's collaboration with many of these designers is extremely popular, consumers have noted that the quality of these garments is less than

superior compared to other retailers' offerings. A *Sunday Times* survey revealed that consumers are dissatisfied with the quality and value of H&M merchandise: 'Shoppers ranked H&M as the second lowest performer for quality but placed it second ... on the list of stores most likely to shop at' (Dowling, 2012, p. 5). More and more consumers are interested in fast fashion as a way to keep up with fashion trends. However, due to their lower quality, consumers also replace these fast fashion garments more frequently than other types of garments (U.S. 'Fast Fashion' Trend, 2011).

Understanding implications of fast fashion are important for future professionals who work with apparel and textiles. It is difficult to teach these implications due to how widespread fast-fashion retailers are, resulting in a student population unaware of quality apparel. Given students' lack of experience with quality apparel, formulating teaching exercises that start with students' knowledge is critical. In addition, apparel and textile university programmes are offered at varied locations, such as from rural towns to urban areas and around the world. Students from different regions come to the classroom with varied backgrounds with different expectations of the value of dress; though, with today's technological capabilities, these differences may be disappearing (Lichter & Brown, 2014).

To address these differences in background, the authors looked for a theory useful for developing an in-class activity. They found it in constructivist theory,

which is the notion that students learn by experiencing and reflection. Students bring their past knowledge to the present classroom, experience a lesson, reflect on it, and integrate it with their prior knowledge (Mayo, 2010). Building knowledge from existing knowledge, or a constructivist approach to teach, has been used in apparel and textiles courses (e.g. Yaoyuneyong & Thornton, 2011) and has been found to increase student learning and motivation. Given the importance of fast fashion and the success of a constructivist approach, the authors developed an activity to teach students about fast fashion and apparel quality. The purpose of this paper is to present and assess this constructivist activity in which students were required to analyse two garments – one garment made before and another made after the development of fast fashion – to assist students in understanding quality features of textiles.

2. Literature review

2.1. Constructivist theory

In constructivist theory, learners build upon experiences based on variables such as personality, personal experience, existing knowledge, and behaviour (Mayo, 2010). Considering interactions between the student and his/her context is relevant to constructivist theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1968). The idea that learning varies in different environments (e.g. rural and urban) is important, given that the environment influences the student's experience upon which he/she builds further knowledge (Bandura & Walters, 1963; Mayo, 2006).

Constructivist theory is broad, having several models that outline concepts, including the classic independent model of learning by Piaget (1973) where individuals construct knowledge through individual experiences. Another model is social model or assisted discovery by Vygotsky and Cole (1978) with an emphasis on social interaction to assist learning. A more recent constructivist learning model by Mayo (2010) shows learning in a circular pattern from (1) concrete or personal experience of a phenomenon; (2) to reflection on that experience; (3) to learning through abstract conceptualisation; and (4) to constructing knowledge or integrating existing knowledge. The cycle then repeats, with newly acquired knowledge becoming part of existing knowledge.

Overall, constructivist learning is focused on the student where the student explores and the instructor guides. Constructivists stress active learning to extract meaning using conceptual and critical thinking skills. In constructivist learning, the instructor supports student ideas asking the student to test and apply ideas and to compare new ideas with established ones.

Engagement can be stimulated in many ways, such as simply asking open-ended questions that are tailored to the students' various backgrounds (Hintikka, 2007; Mayo, 2010). Mayo (2010) suggested students start with general concepts and then move to specific ideas with the goal of integrating previous with new knowledge. Actual objects can be used to stimulate meaning in a lesson using a constructivist orientation. Using objects to teach enhances personal connections to a lesson, resulting in constructivist learning (Jeffery-Clay, 1998). Specifically, handling objects can provide a tangible link between the past and present. Objects make the past more real, ensuring memorable and rewarding experiences (Sparks, 2010).

2.2. Constructivist learning in the apparel and textiles field

A constructivist approach has been analysed in the apparel and textiles field, and it has been found to be a successful approach to stimulating student learning. Yaoyuneyong and Thornton (2011) used constructivist theory to teach textiles to students by incorporating peer-assisted learning with social dialogue activities so students could 'construct' their own experiences while interacting with the environment. Two groups were examined: one group was taught using a constructivist approach; the other, using a traditional approach. The authors concluded that the constructivist approach allowed students to learn about each other, and students were 'far more' engaged than the comparison group. Students in the constructivist group also demonstrated motivation to learn, exhibited problem-solving and collaborative skills, outperformed others on exams, and had a positive perception of the course.

Problem-based learning (PBL) or asking students to solve a problem is a constructivist approach that has been analysed in teaching apparel and textiles topics. PBL exercises related to teaching textiles include students examining experiments to learn about textiles science and students coordinating a sustainable fashion show (Farr, Ownbey, Branson, Cao, & Starr, 2005; Gam & Banning, 2011). These authors found PBL helped students learn, and students exhibited a high degree of motivation, engagement, and creative thinking.

Learning with artefacts has been noted to be constructivist in approach. Falk and Dierking (1992) suggested that learning with objects provides stimuli to change meanings of experiences. Jeffery-Clay (1998) noted creating an environment where the learner interacts with objects allows learners to look for links to their past. Marcketti (2011) discussed the importance of a constructivist approach that incorporates exercises in artefact analysis. She found the approach helped students

imagine a historic time period and how a garment was worn, and it stimulated discussion and interest in apparel history beyond a fashion history course.

2.3. Fast fashion and textile quality

Fast fashion and its implications are important concepts to understand for students who plan to work in the fashion industry. The main strategy of fast fashion is to quickly make low-priced apparel and accessories to 'entice consumers to consistently update their wardrobe' (Much, 2014, p. 1). Fast fashion is a popular trend reported in consumer and trade publications such as *Women's Wear Daily* (e.g. Bravo, 2014) and *Forbes Magazine* (e.g. Rosenblum, 2015). Shoppers enjoy keeping up with many fashion trends due to fast fashion as opposed to buying one quality garment. Fast fashion retailers continue to report success and increased profits, but consumers have noted the quality of the merchandise is less than superior. A *Sunday Times* survey revealed consumers are dissatisfied with the quality and value of H&M merchandise – 'shoppers ranked H&M as the second lowest performer for quality merchandise'. At the same time these consumers placed H&M 'as second on the list of stores most likely to shop at' (Dowling, 2012; U.S. 'Fast Fashion' Trend, 2011).

However, there are very few relevant academic studies that have actually investigated quality of fast-fashion garments, such as consumer perceptions of garment features, durability, and cost. Most literature on fast fashion focuses on sustainability of the fashion industry, pollution, fair trade, and impacts on the supply chain.

A contribution to research on fast fashion and apparel quality was made by Cortez, Tu, Anh, Ng, and Vegafria (2014) who analysed fast fashion garments of four retailers: Fast Retailing, Inc., The Gap, H&M, and ZARA, which the authors dubbed the *fast fashion quadrangle or FFQ*. They defined fast fashion as 'designs that move swiftly from runway to stores in order to capture the latest trends' (Cortez et al., 2014, p. 1). Cortez et al. (2014) analysed the differences among the FFQ retailers' performances and their internal factors, such as inventory management, use of staff design, and marketing, as well as external factors, such as concerns over sweatshops, increasing manufacturing costs, weather, and real estate. The authors concluded fast fashion has stimulated fierce competition among fast-fashion firms, encouraging growth and dominance in different areas. For example, ZARA leads in network sales in more than 77 countries; the Gap runs the most stores (3246), and H&M makes the largest profits (exceeding 18.8 billion dollars).

Cachon and Swinney (2011) researched two major components of fast fashion delivery: (1) quick response and (2) enhanced designs. Quick response is the technique used to keep inventory adjusted to meet consumer needs. Enhanced design is a highly fashionable or trendy product design. Both quick response and enhanced designs lead apparel away from quality and value to one of timing. The focus becomes making a garment as fast as possible, rather than taking the time to figure out how to make the best-quality garment. Any delays in new product delivery can stall the process contributing to slow moving stock and declining profits.

Gallaughier (2008) studied fast-fashion retailer ZARA as the forerunner of inventory management. The author found, using a mixed strategy, that ZARA released new fashion designs every 4–5 weeks by employing over 200 young designers creating 11,000 designs every year. Consumers sought these new designs as they were produced in limited supply, creating the demand for fast-fashion apparel. Costs were kept down as fabrics were purchased in only four colours and delayed in dyeing to keep abreast of colour trends. ZARA implemented *just-in-time* manufacturing to optimise quantities and sizes needed for customer sales, and the company effectively used *lean production* reducing costs and increasing flexibility.

3. Research questions

A constructivist teaching approach engages students and enhances their learning because it starts with what is already familiar to the students. This approach works particularly well if tangible objects and material are used (Marcketti, 2011), and it has been found to be a successful strategy to teach lessons related to history of fashion, textile science, and sustainable fashion (Farr et al., 2005; Gam & Banning, 2011; Marcketti, 2011). The research on fast fashion and apparel quality has been limited to examining the production of fast fashion that results in inexpensive and low-quality garments (e.g. Gallaughier, 2008). This research examined the loss of textile quality and fast fashion. A hands-on learning activity was introduced and assessed to teach students about fast fashion and quality. The activity has a constructivist approach and was implemented in classes at two contrasting geographic regions. The research questions were the following.

- (1) How will university students at varied geographic locations conceptualise *apparel quality* after participating in an activity founded in constructivist theory that prompts analysis of two garments (one made

before and one made after the development of fast fashion)?

- (2) How will university students at varied geographic locations conceptualise *fast fashion* after participating in an activity founded in constructivist theory that prompts analysis of two garments (one made before and one made after the development of fast fashion)?

4. Methods

4.1. Learning activity and instrumentation

Two textiles classes participated in a learning activity. One class was located in a rural Midwestern region where high-end labels and fast fashion are scarce; the other class was located in a major Northeastern city where both high-end labels and fast fashion are in abundance. In each programme's curriculum, the textile course is taken prior to other fashion courses and is the first course related to apparel quality. The activity for this research was completed early in the semester so students could explore textiles with basic knowledge, yet without the influence of the course content that would follow. By the time the activity was implemented, students had been introduced to and tested on basic concepts of performance and physical properties of textiles (e.g. fibre, yarn, weave, knit, durability, elongation, etc.).

Instructors completed an identical lesson in 2-hour-long lab sessions that focused on textiles and fast fashion. Students were required to compare and contrast a garment made prior to fast fashion with a fast-fashion garment. Students analysed the two 2-piece garments (top and skirt) and/or dresses for approximately 30–60 minutes. Several steps were taken to ensure that both classes would compare and contrast the garments in the same

manner. First, the garments were introduced to students without labels so no extended inferences could be made, such as designer, quality, or retailer where the garment was sold. Although different garments were shown to groups in the varying regions, the same brands were used. The first garment was a St. John's knit outfit that was worn in the late 1980s or early 1990s and was part of either a university or personal collection. The outfit was produced well before fast fashion became prominent in the industry (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). St. John's knit garments are high quality, fit well (Eng, 2013), and currently retail for \$795–\$1795 (St. John, 2016). The second garment was purchased at fast fashion retailer H&M. Garments at H&M sell for \$19.99–\$49.99 (H&M, 2016). The garments from St. John's and H&M were similar in end use (professional setting), style (top and skirt), and fabric (knits) (see Figure 1). Knit fabrics are commonly worn today and they are the fabric of choice in many sectors of the industry (Lutero, 2014), though fabrics other than knit could have been chosen for the activity.

The instrument used for data collection consisted of two parts. For the first part, students independently completed a questionnaire with open-ended questions to prompt comparison of the two garments. These questions follow. (1) Examine the garment presented given its physical and performance features. For each garment, how would you describe these features? (2) Assess the quality of Garment 1 and Garment 2 (high, medium, and low). Given the physical and performance properties (stitching, lining, and/or finishes) of the garment, explain your answer. (3) Which garment has the higher quality? Explain your answer. For the second part, students were asked to discuss their findings as a small group.

Afterwards, the instructor informed students about the garments (made before or after the development of fast fashion, label information, etc.) and presented a mini-lecture about fast fashion. As a final activity, students were prompted to discuss the impact of fast fashion on the quality of textiles.

4.2. Pre- and post-activity survey

To answer the research questions, questionnaires were distributed before and after the learning activity. Both questionnaires had semi-structured questions, which were used to prompt the kinds of in-depth answers needed to understand the students' experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The pre-activity questionnaire also included demographic questions (i.e. age, gender, length of time living in the university's town or city, and the amount of money spent on clothing per month).



Figure 1. Example set of garments for the learning activity (pre-fast fashion-left; post-fast fashion-right).

Pre-activity questions included the following. (1) Identify as many physical and performance properties of textiles for apparel that come to mind (i.e. durability, elasticity). (2) How do you classify garments prior to or after the development of fast fashion? (3) In your mind, how would you define quality of apparel? and (4) What garment features most impact decisions to purchase apparel?

The post-activity questionnaire included questions 1 and 2 for comparison to pre-activity responses, as well as the following new questions. (1) What did you learn from this activity? Explain your answer. (2) Discuss the pros and cons of seeing two garments from different historical periods. (3) Did the activity assist in understanding textiles for apparel? If so, how?

4.3. Data collection

The pre- and post-activity questionnaires were analysed qualitatively for themes about student learning, as well as for comparisons in themes given rural and urban participants. The pre-activity questions prompted perceptions of fast fashion and quality. The two authors of this paper, having experience teaching textiles, independently analysed questionnaire responses for repeated themes and then discussed results until agreement was reached (van Manen, 1990). Qualitative methods have been proven successful to capture the essence of 'an experience' (van Manen, 1990). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), using a semi-structured interview allows the researcher to ask participants the 'same series of pre-established questions with a limited set of response categories' (p. 649). Where needed, frequency and percentage of students per theme were calculated. van Manen (1990) refers to this process as the line-by-line approach. To maintain anonymity, participants did not provide any self-identifying information and participant surveys were coded.

For reliability purposes, both authors read and coded participants' answers to check for consistency in responses. To calculate inter-coder reliability, the following formula was used, resulting in 91%.

Inter-coder Reliability

$$= \frac{\text{The of Agreements} - \text{The of Disagreements}}{\text{The of Agreements}},$$

Inter-coder Reliability

$$= \frac{468 - 41}{468} = \frac{427}{468} = .912393 \text{ or } 91\%.$$

A University's Institutional Review Board determined the study was appropriate for exemption (protocol # 948606-1).

5. Results

Sixty-nine students enrolled in undergraduate fashion programmes participated in the activity: 37 in a rural area and 32 in an urban area. The following section answers each research question. The summary begins with what students learned by participating in the learning activity and then follows with an analysis of their understanding of concepts. This information is further detailed by their learning environment, rural or urban.

5.1. Learning from the activity

When asked about learning from the activity with the question 'Did the teaching strategy assist in understanding textiles for apparel?' all 69 students resounded with a 'yes'. In response to the question 'How would you change the teaching strategy?' several students indicated no change was needed ($n = 12$; 17%) and some students requested having more or a different mix of garments available for comparison ($n = 26$; 38%). Eleven ($n = 11$; 16%) students requested changes in procedure, such as changing questions or adding details about the garment textiles.

Results indicated three primary themes of learning from the activity. (1) Students learned there are substantial quality difference in garments made before versus after the development of fast fashion ($n = 49$; 71%). (2) Students learned how to assess the quality of textiles for apparel using physical and performance features of a garment ($n = 26$; 38%). (3) The activity provided first-hand 'real' experience ($n = 41$; 59%). The following is an account of each of these themes.

5.1.1. Garments made before and after the development of fast fashion

Pre-activity responses revealed only 19 students (30%) discussed fast fashion accurately by indicating it involved price and quality. In post-activity responses to the same question, nearly all students ($n = 67$, 97.9%) discussed price and quality. When asked what they learned, both groups said they gained an understanding of differences between pre- and post-development of fast fashion garments. For example, the students noted the fabric of the St. John's dresses were sturdier and, in contrast, described the fabric of the H&M garment as 'weak'. A student said she learned 'the definition of fast fashion and differences in quality' (R6). Another commented learning 'more about quality of a garment and garment performance pre to post fast fashion' (R21).

The activity similarly prompted students' reflection on their current environment and appreciation of apparel within its historical context. A student said they

'learned fast fashion is a new term and that I grew up with it' (R18). The older style of the pre-fast fashion garment was noted by students, but it made students appreciate the comparison of the past and the present: 'We can see different qualities of the garment; how things used to be made versus how [they are made] today' (R8). Another student said, 'Yes I have a better understanding of textiles and how it affects the styles and items we wear today' (R20). An urban student (U5) said she learned 'which textiles are better quality and quality of apparel made today is not as good as the past'. Students in both the rural and the urban groups indicated personal disappointment with the loss of quality. It was a primary consideration when asked about the cons of seeing two garments from different decades. A student stated: 'It is so sad to see how cheap things are in stores like H&M, Forever21, etc. ...' (U7).

5.1.2. Assessing quality

All students gained insight into the primary point of the lesson, which was how to assess quality of textiles for apparel. A student (R22) said she learned 'how to analyse garments by physical and performance properties and determine how to classify a garment's quality'. Another student (U23) said, 'I learned how to pay attention to the garment and look at the same details, the dye, and finish'. They discussed learning intrinsic physical features of textiles. A student said, 'Yes, this activity reminded me of what characteristics woven and non-wovens have'. (R11), and another commented that the activity 'helped to identify which textiles have what properties'. (R22).

Other students discussed performance characteristics and said they learned 'how to distinguish higher quality from lower' quality and how durability can vary in textiles. A student said, 'Physical and performance properties have everything to do with textiles to make specific garments' (R10). Another student (U11) said, 'I learned that fabrics make a big difference in how long it will last'. Urban students discussed learning of how to look past fabric appearance when assessing garment quality. A student (U26) said, 'I learned which textiles is better quality. The second garment was more trendy/current, but will not withstand as many years as the first garment'.

Students gained an understanding of what determined quality extrinsically as well. A student in the rural group noted, 'Not all garments are made with durability in mind as opposed to time or brand' (R11). Students also seemed to make the connection between textiles and the entire product. A student said seeing two garments from different periods 'helps you realise just how important it is in choosing specific textiles for

your garments. Different characteristics can impact success of your garment' (R3). Another student (U15) said, 'Great activity to learn and understand fabrics and garments in terms of what we learned in class'.

In addition, a comparison of pre- and post-activity responses to the question 'Identify as many physical and performance properties of textiles for apparel that come to mind (i.e. durability, elasticity)' revealed the influence of the activity on students' responses. While the list of features was similar pre- to post-activity, with a wide range of textile properties noted, the post-activity responses (1) were more focused on characteristics relating to the garments observed (e.g. durability: pre, $n = 34$; post, $n = 45$) and (2) included a higher number of physical and performance features ($n = 64$). Post-activity responses also (3) included characteristics related to the whole product (e.g. sew-ability).

5.1.3. Firsthand experience

Students ($n = 42$; 61%) appreciated comparing actual garments, which allowed them to understand garment quality and to apply what they learned in a textiles class. Students said they gained a 'firsthand' experience of changes in fashion through the years. One student said, 'It enabled me to see the garment constructions, and to witness firsthand how garment style and quality has changed' (U22). The activity was hands-on and students said they could see the differences between the garments: 'We can see different qualities of the garment; how things used to be made versus how today' (R23). Another student said, when asked if the activity helped her understand textiles for apparel, 'Yes, it was hands-on and helped me to realize how to analyze quality of garments' (U13). Furthermore, students expressed an appreciation of seeing a garment they would not otherwise have seen: '... it was cool being able to see differences between physical features of two garments.

Table 1. Length of time in region and amount spent monthly on clothing, rural and urban participants.

| | Rural ($N = 37$) <i>n</i> / <i>%</i> | Urban ($n = 32$) <i>n</i> / <i>%</i> | Total ($N = 69$) <i>n</i> / <i>%</i> |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Length in Indiana/NYC | | | |
| 1–2 years | 5/13.5 | 7/21.9 | 12/17.4 |
| 2–5 years | 1/ 2.7 | 11/34.4 | 12/17.4 |
| 10+ years | 31/83.8 | 13/40.6 | 34/49.3 |
| Did not respond | 0/0 | 1/ 3.10 | 1/1.4 |
| How much spent on clothing each month | | | |
| US\$0–50 | 27/73.0 | 2/6.3 | 29/42.0 |
| 50–99 | 6/16.2 | 1/3.1 | 7/10.1 |
| 100–199 | 0/0 | 10/31.3 | 10/14.5 |
| 200–499 | 2/5.4 | 13/40.4 | 15/21.7 |
| 500–999 | 0/0 | 3/9.3 | 3/4.3 |
| 1000–1999 | 0 | 1/3.1 | 1/1.4 |
| 2000–2500 | 0 | 1/3.1 | 1/1.4 |
| No response | 2/5.4 | 1/3.1 | 1/1.4 |

Interesting to see older garment not used to experiencing' (R1).

5.2. Differences given geographic location

Differences in responses emerged between rural and urban students in understanding fast-fashion and apparel quality. As shown in Table 1, the majority of students in the rural group lived there over 10 years ($n = 27$; 73.0%). The majority of urban students either lived in the region for 2–5 years ($n = 11$; 34.4%) or over 10 years ($n = 10$; 40.6%). Only two (6.3%) of the urban students spent less than \$100 per month on clothing, with most spending \$100–500 ($n = 23$; 71.7%) and one spending as much as \$2000 ($n = 1$; 3.1%). In contrast, nearly all ($n = 36$; 97.3%) of the rural group spent less than \$100 per month, and the maximum amount was \$200 ($n = 2$; 5.4%).

With regard to the pre-activity question 'How do you classify garments prior to or after the development of fast fashion?' students in the urban area ($n = 27$; 84.3%) and the rural area ($n = 5$; 13.5%) did not respond to the stated question. These students instead tended to discuss how textiles are categorised in general. The students in the urban area who did answer the question accurately described fast fashion as cheap, quick to make, and low quality. These responses were also found among some of the rural group. However, the majority of the rural group of students made inaccurate descriptions of clothing made before and after the development of fast fashion. Common errors were fast fashion meant the garment was not homemade or was made from natural fibres ($n = 5$; 13.5%). The most common misunderstanding was that fast fashion was prior to mass production ($n = 10$; 27.0%). Two rural students stated the opposite of the truth: that fast fashion was higher quality and more durable than apparel made before the development of fast fashion. Other students accurately described parts of the definition of fast fashion, but did not detail the entire concept, such as fit/size and variety. Post-activity

questionnaire responses were accurate among both groups, describing fast fashion as lower quality.

The groups defined quality in a similar manner, with textiles used and garment construction as the most common topics in their responses (see Table 2). A difference was that the rural group noted durability ($n = 26$; 70.3%) and garment construction ($n = 17$; 45.9%) as being important, while the urban group emphasised textiles used ($n = 23$; 71.8%).

With regard to considerations in purchasing apparel, a common response was price point ($N = 39$; 42.0%) for both rural ($n = 29$; 78.4%) and urban ($n = 10$; 31.2%) participants. Fit was another important consideration ($N = 34$; 49.3%). For the rural group it was the most important ($n = 29$; 78.4%), while it ranked first for the urban group ($n = 12$; 37.5%). Trendiness was the next most common feature ($N = 17$; 24.6%). The urban group ($n = 8$; 25%) and the rural group ($n = 9$; 24.3%) were about equal in their consideration of brand and trendiness of the garment. Another common consideration was the textiles used ($N = 15$; 21.7%). The urban group thought textiles used were important ($n = 10$; 31.3%), while textiles were less important for the rural group ($n = 5$; 13.5%).

Responses from both groups, though in smaller number, referred to physical properties (urban $n = 3$; 9.4%; rural $n = 3$; 8.1%) and where the garment was made (urban $n = 3$; 9.4%; rural $n = 1$; 2.7%). Additional considerations were named by the rural group; these included quality and care ($n = 6$; 16.2%), aesthetics (colour, shape, decoration) ($n = 4$; 10.8%), durability ($n = 3$; 8.1%), texture ($n = 3$; 8.1%), and personal feelings ($n = 2$; 4.1%).

6. Discussion

Overall this learning activity was successful in inspiring further understanding of textiles for apparel. Students were able to see firsthand garments made in two different eras. Students gained a stronger understanding of fast fashion, price, and appreciation of quality garments. They also were able to assess quality beyond what is trendy. The success of a constructivist approach and the engagement it produced supports previous studies (e.g. Yaoyuneyong & Thornton, 2011). The findings also support the use of actual objects to create an active learning environment and help the learner make links to the past (Jeffery-Clay, 1998; Marcketti, 2011). Given the responses to the assessment questionnaire regarding how to improve the activity, revisions include adding more garments for quality comparison and concluding with a detailed account of the textiles and related quality features of each garment.

Table 2. Students' definitions of apparel quality.

| Property | Rural ($n = 37$) | Urban ($n = 32$) | Total ($N = 69$) |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| | $n/\%$ | $n/\%$ | $N/\%$ |
| Textiles used | 11/29.7 | 23/71.9 | 34/49.3 |
| Durability | 26/70.3 | 2/6.3 | 28/40.6 |
| Construction of the garment | 17/45.9 | 8/25.0 | 23/33.3 |
| Longevity | 9/24.3 | 6/18.8 | 15/27.3 |
| Texture | 3/8.1 | 6/18.8 | 9/13.0 |
| Fit | 0 | 6/18.6 | 6/8.7 |
| Reputable brand name | 3/8.1 | 3/9.3 | 6/8.7 |
| Wear-ability | 2/5.4 | 2/6.3 | 4/5.8 |
| Price | 0 | 3/9.3 | 3/4.3 |
| Colour | 0 | 2/6.3 | 2/2.9 |

The results illustrate the impact region has on teaching fashion topics. While the activity was helpful for both urban and rural students, the responses to open-ended questions focused on fast fashion and apparel quality were different. Students studying in the rural area described fast-fashion incorrectly at the start of the learning activity, while urban students did not focus on that part of the question, discussing textile features instead. The results could be explained by the lack of retailers in the rural area that emphasise fast fashion, in addition to the lack of exposure to luxury retailers, with which urban students are very familiar. As one urban student (U5) noted, ‘Aside from price, the brand [name] is an important reason to purchase’.

To define quality, the rural students emphasised durability and garment construction. The urban students emphasised textiles, which may explain their focus on textiles when asked about fast fashion. These students are exposed to fabric shops and the ability to collect fabric swatches. Utility was important to the rural group as they sought garments that lasted long at a particular price. The rural group was more sensitive to appearance characteristics of a garment when worn. Urban students were extremely price sensitive and sought apparel with a designer appearance and label. Students in the rural group were less aware of fast fashion, despite access to it technologically (Lichter & Brown, 2014). Actually seeing garments firsthand from before and after the development of fast fashion seemed to prompt better awareness.

Overall, the model proposed by Mayo (2006) was supported. Students brought with them their personal experiences to the learning activity, reflected on past information, abstracted information from the analysis of garments, and integrated it all with their knowledge base. The researchers revised Mayo’s model to reflect the importance of the rural–urban context in teaching fashion topics. Actually experiencing garments proved to be important in the learning process (see Figure 2).

The results have implications for teaching textiles to students in different regions. To overcome regional

differences, it might help rural students to participate in additional immersive learning experiences to learn about fashion and product variety in textiles (e.g. images of stores, online study, field trips). Urban students could be taught by discussing their experiences with fast fashion and variety in textiles they know from living in an urban area. They also could complete exercises that assist with understanding durability and construction. Further research could examine the effectiveness of these teaching methods. The variables (comfort, brand name, etc.) noted by participants could be the foundation for a quantitative survey to measure perceptions or degree of understanding of fast fashion and quality among students living in different regions.

The activity could be changed to better suit other fashion courses, such as fashion industry, international markets, and costume history. For example, in international markets, students could be asked to make a list of how and where fast fashion garments were made before and after the development of fast fashion. Students could discuss how long each garment took to make, steps in the manufacturing of it, and cost. Knit garments were used for the activity, but as students suggested, garments made from different fabrics could be used. In that expanded version of the activity, students could detail the specific textiles used in each garment, such as fibres, yarns, finishes, and so on.

7. Conclusion

A primary purpose of this paper was to detail an innovative learning activity that was founded on a constructivist approach. The activity incorporated a series of questions related to the apparel quality of two garments, one made before and the other made after the development of fast fashion. The activity was successful as all students noted that they learned from it and they appreciated experiencing actual period garments. The activity could be altered to teach a lesson within a variety of fashion courses and topics. In addition, this paper compared and contrasted knowledge of fast fashion with apparel quality. The results demonstrated rural and urban students come to the classroom with different perceptions that can be accommodated, and rural and urban perceptions among fashion students can be a topic of further research. As technology continues to advance, a longitudinal study could also be completed that examines the impact of rural–urban differences in understanding fashion topics.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

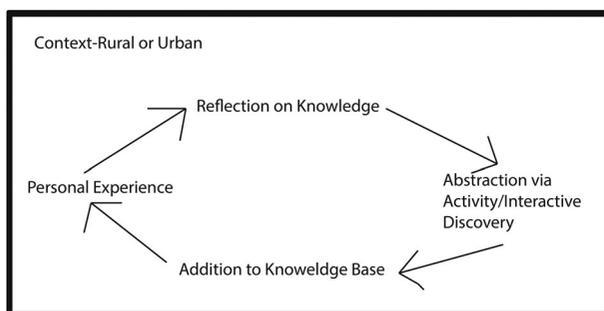


Figure 2. Model illustrating the process of learning fashion topics using constructivist learning.

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