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Second skin: Using Textile Testing to Enhance Garment Longevity

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The current system of fashion is one of unparalleled expansion, particularly in terms of the volume of clothing each person consumes (WRAP 2017). To borrow a concept from systems theory, this has created 'reinforcing feedback loop': a system which rapaciously expands to the point of erosion and collapse (Meadows 2009). Leverage points are points at which small disruptions to existing systems can produce big gains and have the potential to re-direct and shape fashion behaviors towards responsible consumption.

To develop a leverage point around slowing consumption, by improving the longevity of the garment, our proposal is to give consumers increased access to the information and the tools they need to become change-makers, via existing technical textile testing.

Existing guidelines which benchmark the longevity of products such as knitwear, make recommendations with regards to the appropriateness of yarns and materials, ease of use for care instructions, and quality control to ensure a garment has longevity throughout its lifecycle.

Tools already exist which provide objective measurements for garment handle, softness, drape, and stretch, via the Kawabata Evaluation System (KES). Similarly, technical testing of physical garment durability, such as seam strength, and of garment appearance, such as pilling and colorfastness' tests, are routinely conducted by responsible brands. These tests exist for quality assurance and serve to enhance the brand values of the retailer (WRAP 2017).

Tools for textiles and brands benchmarking (Higg Index 2012; Modint Ecotool 2012) provide other assessments and results for fashion brands, to ensure their product ranges are ethically and responsibly sourced and manufactured, providing data from points along the supply chain.

However, the results of these assessments are not readily available to consumers, particularly in terms of the rigorous results of testing procedures and protocols.

We propose giving consumers the tools they need to make informed decisions and become change makers, via more visible textile testing, and communication of the results of both technical reports, and responsible design audits. This is work the brand is already doing, but finding means to interpret and communicate technical terms, in everyday language, to answer questions such as, 'how many wears will I get from this garment if I wash it every time, or just every 5th wear? For online purchases, how breathable, stretchy, soft or cooling is the fabric? How colourfast can I expect it to be after 10 washes?'

These tools can be used to enhance desirability, branding, lifestyle, and through repeated wear, the garment's emotional connection and relevance for the consumer.