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Sustainable Fashion: Upcycling Traditional Palestinian Dresses – Innovative and Sustainable Solutions for Protecting National Heritage

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Abstract

The cultural heritage of occupied countries is immensely valuable and a symbol of identity and proof of land ownership and belonging. Especially as these cultures are under threat of obliteration, distortion, and forced concealment. This research delves into the sustainable and innovative solutions created by Palestinian women to upcycle their traditional dresses to protect their heritage and educate younger generations about the Palestinian cause through the fascinating Palestinian embroidery (also known as Tatreez). This is achieved through a qualitative methodology with the use of purposeful sampling to select participants from a mall intercept and were randomly divided into five focus groups of ten. Each group was interviewed in a session. All focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed using NVIVO 12. Two overarching themes were identified from the focus group sessions; “Conserving and Sustaining Traditional Dress” and “Upcycling Traditional Dresses”. The results revealed that Palestinian women upcycle their traditional dresses by redesigning the dress and re-wearing it, reusing the dress into modern fashion pieces, or reusing the dress into homeware pieces. Further, the results demonstrated that upcycling traditional Palestinian dresses is a sustainable tool for protecting Palestinian heritage, rooting the Palestinian cause in the minds and souls of the new generations, and a sign of the right of return.

Keywords: Palestinian Dresses, Heritage, Culture, Upcycling, Redesigning, Sustainability, Innovation, Tatreez.

Introduction

Fashion is deeply entangled with culture. Traditional clothes are considered a symbol of identity and visualization of national heritage [1], [2]. They tie the one with his/her roots and homeland. Despite the modernization of all aspects of life, including the fashion industry, people worldwide continue to wear their traditional clothes regularly. Traditional clothes are seen as an art that reflects both society and time [3]. The designs, fabrics, and sewing methods are part of a nation's heritage. Traditional Palestinian embroidery (Tatreez) is a centuries-old handcrafting practiced by Palestinian women. It is a form of the indigenous language of Palestinian heritage. Since the Israeli occupation of Palestine in 1948 (The Nakba) and the mass exile of the Palestinian population, Tatreez has become a sign of Palestinian resistance, attachment to their homeland, struggle for justice, and the right of return [4]. Traditionally, Palestinian girls begin to learn stitching very early in their childhood. Typically, at the age of six or seven. “As soon as she could wield a needle...she was given a few piastres’ worth of silk thread and was taught cross-stitch and the simpler motifs of her village by older girls or women” [5]. Tatreez has been widely recognized and respected as a fascinating art and part of the global identity and heritage and that was crowned on 15 December 2021, when the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) inscribed “the art of embroidery in Palestine, practices, skills, knowledge and rituals” on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The traditional Palestinian dress is known as Thobe, a long gown with long sleeves that features

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intricately handmade embroidered panels typically on the chest, sides, and sleeves. The Thobe of each Palestinian village and city has its style, including; the design, symbols, the type of stitch, and the colors of the silk threads used in the stitches [6]. The embroidered details (colors and patterns) on the Thobe reflect the woman's origin and marital status, while the choice of materials reflects the woman's class status and wealth. Over the years, Palestinian women continued to wear and own traditional dresses and even brag about the number of dresses they owned. However, the mechanism of producing the Thobe has changed massively; originally, it was all handmade, while nowadays, it is produced through modern machines in factories. The machine-embroidered dresses are cheaper and more affordable than hand-embroidered dresses [7]. Therefore, hand-embroidered dresses hold more value, and women are attached to them more than machine-embroidered ones, as each of them carries a story or a memory. Thus, they try to preserve them for as long as possible and even pass them from one generation to the next. These practices of preserving traditional dresses are at the core of sustainable fashion. Sustainable fashion, also known as eco-fashion or ethical fashion, is an umbrella term for clothing and behaviors less damaging to the natural environment [8]. It has been said that fashion is among the most polluting and unsustainable industries, as it requires massive areas for crops and consumes huge amounts of water, chemicals, energy, and other resources while generating a significant amount of waste that has a highly negative ecological footprint and is often left untreated [9], [10].

Sustainable fashion involves production and consumption stages, including apparel design, textile production, manufacturing, advertising, distribution, post-purchasing, and disposal. The extant literature has mainly focused on sustainable production, while little is known about clothing disposal [11]. Clothing disposal refers to the process of discarding clothes as waste, donating to charities and second-hand shops, or recycling [12]. The reasons behind clothing disposal are varied such as poor fit, lack of space, worn out, outdated style, change of taste, or boredom [13]. Although recycling clothing can help turn this waste into useful items, it is not enough to suppress the alarming amounts of unmanaged clothing waste. Therefore, in the era of fast fashion, searching for sustainable solutions to manage clothing waste becomes imperative [14], especially with the alarming concerns about the environmental well-being of Planet Earth [15], [16].

Upcycling is an innovative and sustainable solution that involves transforming useless clothing and waste into novel and appealing products of higher retail value, better quality, and higher environmental value by applying considerable aesthetic changes through creative design and skilled craftsmanship [17], [18]. Unlike recycling or downcycling, which downgrades the item's value and discards the effort, details, and value invested in it. Upcycling evolves around the idea of refashioning end-of-life garments and clothing waste that are typically useless into fashionable items with a higher retail value offering a sustainable method for managing clothing waste [10], [19]. Upcycling continues to grab the attention of academics, the fashion industry, and environmentally aware consumers [20], [21] as a promising and sustainable solution to reduce energy and natural resources use, and decrease the amount of waste generated from this industry [14].

The changes applied in upcycling could vary from minimal to massive or complete transformation based on the limitation of the original garment and the consumer's specifications [22]. On one end, the upcycler could add some decorative trims, new embroidery, or print to revitalize a garment and align it with the latest fashion trends. Further, the upcycler could change the silhouette of the garment without changing the garment end of use, for instance, change an A-Line dress into a mermaid dress or change the sleeves of a blazer from bell-shaped into Kimono sleeves. On the other end, the upcycler could decide to fully deconstruct a garment and construct a completely different piece of clothing, for instance, transforming a dress into a tunic or a top or transforming a baby's clothes into a duvet [23], [24].

Recycling and upcycling are popular practices in developing countries due to limited resources and

cultural issues. However, recently, developed countries started to develop an interest in upcycling. It is estimated that the upcycling market worldwide is worth 150 million dollars, with the expectation to grow in the future [25]. Currently, upcycling is a growing trend among many fashion houses, and many fashion designers are turning to this solution [10]. However, until now, upcycling has been practiced on a small scale, not on an industrial scale, sold as unique pieces or added items in some collections [26]. Upcycling and recycling have been widely practiced by Palestinian women over the years. Their traditional dresses have been passed through generations as a sign of identity and heritage. It is common to see a Palestinian hand-embroidered dress worn by a mother, daughter, and granddaughter. These practices have become more popular among exiled Palestinian women in many countries worldwide as these dresses exemplify their culture, connection to their homeland, and national heritage. However, little is known about upcycling traditional Palestinian dresses. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap by exploring how Palestinian women upcycle their traditional dresses.

Materials and Methods

This research has an exploratory nature aiming at investigating how Palestinian women upcycle their traditional dresses. Exploratory research typically uses qualitative methods as they aim to reach a depth of understanding, interpretation, and contextualization of data. Therefore, data for this research was collected through five focus groups each containing ten **Palestinian** women. Focus groups have been widely used in the field of humanities and social sciences. It is a valuable tool for collecting rich and in-depth qualitative data that capture the experiences, perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and insights of the participants about a phenomenon in their own words [27], [28]. Focus groups are highly beneficial for exploring the participants' perceptions of the issue of study, investigating their personal experiences with it, and finding out the factors behind their specific way of thinking [28], [29]. To recruit participants for this research, the mall intercept approach was used. Mall intercept is a popular data collection method often used in marketing and social norms research, particularly for difficult-to-reach segments of a population [30], [31].

In this research, female shoppers at four malls located in Amman the capital of Jordan were solicited, screened for appropriateness, and invited by the researcher to participate in the research. The basic selection criteria were being a Palestinian refugee woman. The researcher gave these shoppers a brief description of the research and asked them to fill out a data collection form. The data collection form included sociodemographic information (e.g. age, marital status, educational levels, frequency of wearing traditional dress, visited Palestine or not). In addition to their willingness to participate in the focus group sessions. A purposeful sampling technique was used to select 50 participants from the mall intercept respondents, afterwards, the participants were randomly divided into five groups. The researcher asked the participants to bring with them their upcycled dresses or any photos of them wearing original or upcycled traditional dresses. The researcher concurred that following the fourth focus group, saturation was reached as no additional information emerged. All participants were asked to provide consent for their anonymized responses and photos to be published. All focus group sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. All sessions ran for an average of 60 minutes (Max: 65 minutes, Min: 55 minutes).

All participants were originally refugees whose families had left their homeland in 1948 after the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The age range for all **participants** was 25-60 years. Most participants have bachelor's degrees. The majority have never been to Palestine. All participants have traditional Palestinian dresses both new and upcycled, and the majority wore them occasionally. The characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants.

Characteristics		N (%)
Age	25-60	50 (100%)
Marital Status	Married	42 (84%)
	Unmarried	8 (16%)
Educational Level	Elementary school	4 (8%)
	Secondary school	10 (20%)
	Bachelors	28 (56%)
	Postgraduate	8 (16%)
Frequency of wearing traditional dress	Occasionally	33 (66%)
	Usually	17 (34%)
Visited Palestine	Yes	10 (20%)
	No	40 (80%)

Moreover, four overarching themes were generated from the focus groups: “Passing the dress to the next generation”, “Redesigning the dress and re-wearing it”, “Reusing the dress into modern fashion pieces”, and “Reusing the dress into homeware pieces”.

Results and Discussion

Two overarching themes were identified from the focus group sessions; “Conserving and Sustaining Traditional Dress” and “Upcycling Traditional Dresses”. Table 2 presents the overarching themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data collected in this research.

Table 2: Overarching Themes and Sub-Themes.

Overarching Themes	Sub Themes
Conserving and Sustaining Traditional Dress	Re-wearing the dress multiple times
	Passing the dress to the next generations
Upcycling Traditional Dresses	Redesigning the dress and re-wearing it
	Reusing the dress into modern fashion pieces
	Reusing the dress into homeware pieces

As for the first overarching theme regarding conserving and sustaining traditional dress, data showed that the interviewed Palestinian women either continued wearing their traditional dresses multiple times and/or passed their traditional dresses to the next generations. The following are some quotes relating to these practices;

“Our traditional Palestinian dresses are unlike any other type of dresses. For example, I may wear a party gown once but I keep wearing my traditional dress many times. To be honest, I will keep wearing them as long as they fit!!”.

“I am so attached to my traditional dresses, I have been keeping them for years, I am waiting for my daughter to grow up and give some of them to her”.

“Do you know that I still have my traditional dress that I wore to my Henna party, it has been 15 years now, and I still have it, and in a couple of years my daughter will wear it to her party too, inshallah”.

“My sisters and I have all my mother's traditional dresses, they are so precious to us, most of them are hand-embroidered by her or by my grandmother, may their souls rest in peace, I have worn mine on many occasions. I feel so proud to be able to have these precious pieces which remind me of my mom and my homeland”.

“I am very obsessed with our Palestinian hand-embroidered dresses, it is an amazing art that resembles our roots and our connection with our homeland -which by the way I have never been there- that's why

I adore Palestinian women who conserve their own dresses. In my family, it is a common tradition to give our traditional dresses to our daughters and granddaughters”.

“Can you imagine that my cousins and I have all worn my mother's traditional dress, she actually wore it when she was 6 years old. My mother and my aunts have kept passing it between them for so many years. All my cousins and I who by the way are 11 ladies, have worn it when we were little. I still have as I am the oldest among them and now I am waiting for my three-year-old daughter to grow up and wear it inshallah. It is really fascinating how we can keep our culture alive through generations”.

One lady agreed to share her photo along with another photo of her daughter wearing the same traditional dress but 10 years apart. She has also provided a photo of her grand-daughter wearing an upcycled version of the same dress. These photos are collaged and provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1: A Mother and Her Daughter Wearing the Same Dress 10 Years Apart, and the Grand-Daughter Wearing an Upcycled Version of the Dress.



Moreover, regarding the second overarching theme “Upcycling Traditional Dresses”, three sub-themes have emerged; “Redesigning the dress and re-wearing it”, “Reusing the dress into modern fashion pieces”, and “Reusing the dress into homeware pieces”. First, 90% of the participants mentioned that they had upcycled at least one of their traditional dresses in some way. While the other 10% emphasized that they are considering upcycling their dresses that do not fit anymore. The participants explained that the upcycling procedure depends on the type of the traditional dress, the fabric, the embroidered details (colors and patterns), and the required final output. For instance, if the traditional dress is going to be upcycled into another dress, then the designer will cut the chest, sides, and sleeves panels, move them into a new piece of cloth that match the colors of the stitches, additional decorative trims, or new embroidery details might be also added to revitalize the dress. Further, the participants described how the designer –upon the upcycler (Palestinian woman) request- might change the silhouette of the traditional dress from a Sheath to A-Line dress, or Empire into Mermaid, etc. They emphasized how these changes can rejuvenate the traditional dress, align it with the latest fashion trends, and keep it alive for many more years. Moreover, some of the participants brought a sample of their traditional Palestinian dresses which have been upcycled into dresses. The researcher took photos of these dresses which show the details of each dress (the chest, sides, and sleeve panels). These photos are collaged and provided in Figure 2. The following are some quotes relating to this sub-theme;

“I have upcycled the Thobe I wore on my engagement party. I love it so much, it is precious to me, and it was hand-embroidered. It is very colorful and vibrant. It didn’t fit me anymore, I kept it in my wardrobe for a couple of years and then decided to upcycle it into a new dress. We were able to conserve all of the details in the Thobe, all the embroidered panels. I am so happy that I can wear it again now”. (A participant describing the green dress appearing on the upper left of Figure 2).

“I upcycled my mother's Thobe. It was a piece of art. I always loved it on my mom. When I was little, I used to ask her about the colorful embroidered birds which appear on the side panels of it. When I grew up, my mom gave it to me. I always loved it and I even love the upcycled version of it more. The designer added her artistic touches. The original cloth was grey but I chose a navy blue cloth, the embroidered panels look perfect on the new cloth. We also added some trims in burgundy color to highlight the panels. We even made the sleeves into Kimono style”. (A participant describing the navy blue dress appearing on the upper right of Figure 2).

“This is the most precious Thobe I have, my grandmother –may her soul rest in peace- hand-embroidered most of it for me. She used golden reed threads on a black velvet cloth. It was very elegant and looked royal. However, after many years of wearing it the fabric started to worn out. Sadly, I couldn’t wear it anymore, but my friend advised me to upcycle it. I was a bit hesitant because it is so precious to me. But at the end, I am over the moon with the final result. We chose a more durable fabric. We conserved all the details of it, it is still black cloth with golden embroidery and with even more golden decorative trims. It looks amazing and will last years and years”. (A participant describing the black dress appearing on the lower left of Figure 2).

“This was originally my aunt's Thobe. My great-grandmother –may her soul rest in peace- hand-embroidered all of it. It ended in my hands. I wore it a couple of times and when it didn’t fit anymore with no doubt I decided to upcycle it. It is priceless, it is a reminder of my great grandmother who embroidered it in Bayt Nabala our original village in Palestine. It is a live piece of heritage. We conserved all the details but changed the color of the cloth to a more vibrant one. We added some embroidered details that fit both the new cloth and the original embroidery panels”. (A participant describing the golden dress appearing on the lower right of Figure 2).

Figure 2: Four Traditional Dresses that Have Been Upcycled.





Furthermore, the participants explained that they have upcycled some of their traditional dresses into other fashion pieces such as; modern cardigans, blazers, tunics, skirts, head covers, scarfs, shawls, headbands, purses, and clutch bags. Besides, some of the participants brought some fashion pieces that have been upcycled. The researcher took photos of these pieces and collaged them in Table 2. The following are some quotes relating to this sub-theme;

“I upcycled my mother's Thobe which by the way I wore it myself into a new dress for my little daughter. We conserved the chest panel, and parts of the side panels and we changed the sleeves into puff sleeves. It looks perfect on her”. (A participant describing the dress on the little girl appearing on the far right of Figure 1).

“I upcycled parts of my Thobe into a cardigan which I can wear more frequently and in different style. I wore it sometimes with a basic black dress underneath or with a top and pair of jeans. It is a brilliant way of how we can rejuvenate a thobe into some many modern pieces. I still have the chest panel of it and I am still looking for a new idea of what to do with it”. (A participant describing the cardigan appearing on the upper left of Table 2).

“I upcycled parts (side panels) of my first ever Thobe –which I had it when I was around 10 years old– into a prayer clothes for my daughter. I made a cushion cover out of the chest panel”. (A participant commenting the prayer clothes appearing on the upper right of Table 2).

“We Palestinians love embroidered items, it is a part of our culture, but sometimes specially in practical life for example at work you don't want to wear a Thobe or it doesn't real suit your type of work, but you still love your traditional embroidery. So I thought why not make Hijabs in different colors that have embroidered panels on them that you can wear every day, and that's what my sisters and I really did”. (A participant commenting on the head cover appearing on the lower left of Table 2).

“Every part of a Thobe can be used. We do not throw anything. Any leftover piece can be used. Even the tiny bits can be re-used. I made many headbands from the leftovers of different traditional dresses that I have upcycled”. (A participant commenting on the headbands appearing on the lower right of Table 2).

Table 2: Traditional Dresses That Have Been Upcycled into Four Different Fashion Pieces

	
Part of a traditional dress (Side panels) upcycled into a modern cardigan	Part of a traditional dress (Side panels) upcycled into prayer clothes for younger girls
	
Part of a traditional dress (side panels) upcycled into a head cover (Hijab)	Parts of different traditional dresses (sleeves panels) upcycled into headbands

Moreover, the participants explained that they have upcycled some of their traditional dresses into some homeware pieces such as; wall decorations, cushion covers, bookmarks, hoop organizer, trays, keychains. Further, some of the participants brought some homeware pieces that have been upcycled. The researcher took photos of these pieces and collaged them in Table 3. The following are some quotes relating to this sub-theme;

“I have embroidered items in every corner in my house. I upcycled one of my dresses into cushion covers that decorate my sofa in my living room”.

“I made a beautiful wall decoration out of the chest panel of my Thobe, and I also made many keychains and bookmarks from the other parts of it”.

“I upcycled my Thobe into set of trays. They are so beautiful and special”.

Table 3: Traditional Dresses That Have Been Upcycled into Homeware Pieces

	
<p>Part of a traditional dress (Chest panels) upcycled into a wall decoration</p>	<p>Parts of different traditional dresses (chest panels) upcycled into cushion covers</p>

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that all participants emphasized that the value of their traditional Palestinian dresses goes beyond its material value, to the moral value and what the dress actually symbolizes. They stressed that it's a symbol of their heritage and alive reminder of their cause and the right of return especially as the Palestinian culture has been under the threat of obliteration, distortion, and forced concealment for 75 years. They asserted that they have a responsibility to keep the Palestinian cause alive and protect their national heritage by educating the younger generations about their cause and passing the traditions to them, and the traditional Palestinian dress is an essential component of this heritage. According to the participants, these practices become imperative because they are all refugees, most of them have never been to Palestine, and all that they know about their land and culture have been passed to them through their parents and grandparents. Unsurprisingly, their younger generations will never see their homeland as long as the Israeli occupation remains. Therefore, conserving and upcycling traditional dresses is a powerful and sustainable tool for protecting the Palestinian heritage. Moreover, it is worth stating that the participants explained that the decision of what to upcycle the

traditional dress to either a dress, a fashion piece, or a homeware piece depends on the value of the traditional dress itself. They emphasized that because hand-embroidered dresses are more valuable than machine-embroidered ones. They tend to upcycle them into dresses or sometimes into other fashion pieces. While machine-embroidered dresses are most probably upcycled into homeware pieces.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to investigate the sustainable and innovative solutions practiced by Palestinian women to upcycle their traditional Palestinian dresses. Data was collected through a qualitative methodology with the use of purposeful sampling to select participants from a mall intercept and were randomly divided into five focus groups of ten. The results revealed that Palestinian women either conserve and sustain their traditional dresses, or upcycle them by redesigning the dress and re-wearing it, reusing the dress into modern fashion pieces, or reusing the dress into homeware pieces. Further, the results demonstrated that upcycling traditional Palestinian dresses is a sustainable tool for protecting Palestinian heritage, rooting the Palestinian cause in the minds and souls of the new generations, and a sign of the right of return. Moreover, future research may investigate the possibility of practicing upcycling traditional dresses on an industrial scale and whether upcycling other types of fashion pieces will have the same acceptance and success among customers as this practice is at the core of sustainable fashion that holds a significant potential of minimizing the ecological footprint of the fashion industry.

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