

Fashion Upcycling and Social Impact: A Case Study

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Abstract: To upcycle is to take something already made and then improve upon it, or turn it into a fresh item, so fashion upcycling is a process of using excess or waste clothing and textiles to generate new products, as an unconventional and new practices, which can successfully tackle concerns on excessive consumption of resources. The project "From Granny to Trendy" works with fashion upcycling and, in addition to the issue of sustainability, promotes the empowerment of unemployed women over 50 years. The main objective of our paper is to analyze social partnerships, particularly the social impact on the individual level, so a case study was conducted, exploring the benefits and difficulties of the project that belongs to a local nonprofit organization (NPO). The study is based on a qualitative (seven focus groups) and quantitative data analysis - two questionnaires, in two distinct moments: moment one corresponding to the beginning of the training and moment two corresponding to the end of the training, in a total of 100 questionnaires, 50 in each moment. Our study explores the project impact at the micro level, and conclude that participants gain benefits through the acquisition of new instrumental/technical knowledge/capabilities (e.g., new insights about fashion design) and psychological benefits (e.g., improvement of self-confidence).

Keywords: social partnerships, stakeholders, impact

1. Introduction

The fashion and textile industry are one of the world's highest polluting industries. Textiles production involves a lot of land for crops and uses a lot of water, energy, chemicals and other resources, having a very negative environmental, economic and social footprint (Aus et al., 2021; Oliveira et al., 2021), being that textiles resources, skills or wills for environmental protection have not always been found in textile fashion (Aus et al., 2021).

An effective and transparent impact assessment is a challenge for all organizations (Ebrahim and Rangan, 2014). There is a growing concern with reliability and credibility in any sector of activity, so, in order to promote transparency and increase communication with the various stakeholders, there is a set of indicators that are assumed in a holistic format, in order to respond to an internal and external analysis, being that there is no consensus as to a single form of measuring the social impact (Arvidson and Lyon, 2014).

Vintage for a Cause is a circular economy brand that reuses textile waste/used clothing, creating exclusive designs in collaboration with different designers, with the aim of minimizing the impact of the fashion industry on the environment. At the same integrates senior seamstresses in the production of garments, which identifies and trains in a program to empower women over 50 years, long-term unemployed, through the creation of sewing clubs where upcycling workshops, called "From Granny to Trendy", culminates in a fashion session and parade. In this event, users showcase their creations, a statement against textile waste fashion and cherishing knowledge and age.

2. Theoretical framework

The quality of the relationship between stakeholders and businesses is determined by the degree to which stakeholders benefit from the implementation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) partnerships, as well as by the nature of these benefits, that is the more the benefits, the better the quality of the relationship (Bhattacharya et al., 2009).

Social partnerships can produce benefits at different levels, notably at individual (micro), organizational (meso), sectoral and social (macro) (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012; Googins and Rochlin, 2000; Kolk et al., 2010; Seitanidi and Lindgreen, 2010). Micro, meso and macro are levels or scales that can and may be mobilized in social analysis (Serpa and Ferreira, 2019). Macro level focuses on the divisions between the perspectives on

society and culture, the meso level corresponds to organizations and groups and finally, the micro level corresponds to individual identity, motives and individual cognition (Hartmann, 2017).

With regard to the micro level, social partnerships can have positive effects on the organization as well as its employees since, they can help create favorable perceptions of employees on organizational justice, support, trust and satisfaction at work which might encourage greater motivation and productivity (Kolk et al., 2010), as well as benefiting individuals working on the project as their skills combine effectively with others to produce a successful project and/or to the extent that they learn from it (Selsky and Parker 2010). At this level, the value created for individuals can be double: instrumental and psychological (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012). For example, instrumental benefits may include new or enhanced management skills, leadership opportunities, technical and industry knowledge, expanded perspectives, among others. Regarding psychological value, this can be translated into the emotional benefits that cover the psychological satisfaction of individuals to contribute to social improvement and the development of new friendships with colleagues from the partner organization (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012). Interactions at the micro level may even have broad benefits, as individuals play various roles and micro effects quickly spread to the meso level (organization) and consequently at the macro level (society) (Seitanidi and Lindgreen 2010).

The most common focus in the literature and in practice is on the value accruing to the partners, which are the organizational benefits that enhance the performance of the NPOs or the company (Selsky and Parker 2010). The literature abounds with long and at times confusing arrays of benefits (Selsky and Parker 2010). At the meso level partnerships with NPOs can maximize the objectives of both organizations (NPOs and for-profit organizations) (Googins and Rochlin 2000), i.e. at this meso level, each organization hopes to benefit by meeting its partnership objective (Selsky and Parker 2010).

Beneficiaries of successful social partnerships get benefits such as improving self-confidence, financial capacity or workforce participation (Sharma and Bansal, 2017). The managers of these successful partnerships note that the projects also meet expectations of commercial cost, quantity, quality and punctuality. Organizations that assume cognitive fluidity (information and knowledge) seek to solve problems and accommodate each other's needs (Sharma and Bansal, 2017). The increase in the success of social partnerships is conditioned by the s'aring of the same values between socially responsible companies and NPOs (Méndez et al., 2018), that is, t'e compatibility of intersectoral organizations chosen for the partnership is crucial for the success of any collaborative enterprise. Success is understood as achieving the objectives of the partnership (Hartman and Dhanda 2018).

3. Methodology

Vintage for a Cause is an ethical and sustainable clothing brand, and the "From Granny to Trendy" project aims to fill the gap in occupational activities offered to women over 50 years (long-term unemployed), offering them a sewing workshop where they can meet, talk, create and learn from each other. The project "From Granny to Trendy", was promoted by Vintage for a Cause and by four Municipalities from the North of Portugal, in collaboration with several Institutes of Employment and Professional Training. The creative sewing course consists of 12 technical workshops and has as main objectives: to value sewing as an art; reuse resources (reuse of used clothing and fabrics) giving them a new life, i.e., doing fashion upcycling; to enhance the role of women over 50 and create new opportunities for learning.

The quantitative analysis is made through two questionnaires (see Table 1), in two distinct moments: moment one corresponding to the beginning of the training and moment two corresponding to the end of the training. Our sample consists of 50 individuals, that have participated in the project "From Granny to Trendy". Regarding qualitative analysis, we did seven focus groups, they were based on a previously established script, which was directed and adapted to the sample. Seven focus groups were organized, at moment two, with participants from the four different places where the trainings took place. The groups had between 4 and 6 participants and their duration varied between 15 and 30 minutes (see Table 2). Each interview had 9 questions, with the objective of determining the impact of the trainings.

Table 1: Structure of the two questionnaires

Q1 Start of Training M1 November 2019	Q2 End of Training M2 February 2019
Demographic data; Personal characterisation (health, quality of life, leisure time); General knowledge on: • association; • textile waste; • environmental impact of textiles; • sewing; • clothing transformation • fashion design; • circular economy; • communication; • overall environmental impact: Learning needs on: • Sewing • Confidence • Fashion	Demographic data; Personal characterisation (health, quality of life, leisure time); General knowledge on: • association; • textile waste; • environmental impact of textiles; • sewing; • clothing transformation • fashion design; • circular economy; • communication; • overall environmental impact: Advantages of training; Disadvantages of training.

Table 2: Characterization of Focus Groups (moment 2)

Group	Number of participants	Training location	Interview duration (min)
1	4	Porto	15
2	4	Guimarães	18
3	5	Guimarães	20
4	4	Guimarães	25
5	5	Esposende	26
5	5	Gondomar	22
7	6	Gondomar	30

4. Results

Comparison of questionnaires results in two different moments

The perception that this is a project with an important impact on the community lacks evidence, so the collection of data at two different moments, in the beginning and in the end of training, materializes the interest in identifying possible changes and/or improvements in the perception of participants. The main aspect to be mentioned is the perception of the health status of the participants, in moment one the majority of the respondents classified their health as poor or average, and at the end of the training only about 33% of the participants maintained the same state of health. Thus, there is an improvement in the perception of the health status of the participants, at the beginning of the training few of the respondents classified their health as good or very good and at the end of the training this value changed to about 67%. At the end of the training, most of the participants considered that they felt improvements in their health (see Table 3).

Regarding the quality of life, it is observed that in moment one more than half of the respondents classified their quality of life as very poor, bad or average and in the end only 30.4% of the participants maintained the same level of quality of life. Thus, there was a considerable improvement in the perception of the quality of life of the participants (see Table 3). In the group of questions about general knowledge, we can say that for all items (NPO, textile waste, environmental impact of textile, sewing, clothing transformation, fashion design, circular economy, communication an environmental impact in general) the values have grown, and generally the knowledge of the participants has greatly increased for all dimensions, namely the knowledge about the NPO initiative is now very high, the knowledge about the environmental impact of textile is now high or very high, as well as the knowledge about sewing, the transformation of clothing, fashion design and the circular economy. Regarding communication skills, in moment one only 14% of the participants had high

communication skills, and after the training, it was found that approximately 80% of them had a high or very high communication capacity. Finally, there is a very significant increase in the knowledge of general environmental impacts, now considered as high or very high (see Table 3). Finally, regarding self-confidence, a significant improvement is identified. Initially, 56% of the respondents classified their self-confidence as average and at the end of training, 73% classified self-confidence as high or very high (see Table 3). The main reasons that led the respondents to register for the NPO workshops were the possibility of gaining skills in the area of sewing and the possibility of meeting people. After the training, it is observed that the main advantages identified are precisely the fact that the participants have met people, occupy better their time and have gained skills in the area of sewing. Considering the data, in moment one, about the knowledge of environmental impacts in general, the textile environmental impact and the circular economy, it is possible to identify an important growth of knowledge on these topics. So, it is possible to identify the important work of the association in the context of environmental awareness.

Table 3: Results questionnaires (Moment 1 and Moment 2)

MOMENT 1			MOMENT 2		
		Percent			Percent
How you rate your health?	Very bad	0	How you rate your health?	Very bad	0
	Bad	8,7		Bad	12
	Medium	23,9		Medium	52
	Good	30,4		Good	30
	Very Good	37		Very Good	6
How you rate your quality of life?	Very bad	0	How you rate your quality of life?	Very bad	2
	Bad	4,3		Bad	4
	Medium	26,1		Medium	56
	Good	41,3		Good	30
	Very Good	28,3		Very Good	8
Association Vintage for a Cause Knowledge	Very bad	13	Association Vintage for a Cause Knowledge	Very bad	54
	Bad	8,7		Bad	22
	Medium	26,1		Medium	16
	Good	21,7		Good	8
	Very Good	30,4		Very Good	0
Textile Waste Knowledge	Very bad	2,2	Textile Waste Knowledge	Very bad	28
	Bad	6,5		Bad	18
	Medium	23,9		Medium	38
	Good	30,4		Good	10
	Very Good	37		Very Good	6
Environmental Impact of Textile Knowledge	Very bad	4,3	Environmental Impact of Textile Knowledge	Very bad	26
	Bad	17,4		Bad	20
	Medium	13		Medium	38
	Good	28,3		Good	14
	Very Good	37		Very Good	2
Sewing Knowledge	Very bad	4,3	Sewing Knowledge	Very bad	18
	Bad	6,5		Bad	22
	Medium	21,7		Medium	42
	Good	19,6		Good	14
	Very Good	47,8		Very Good	4
Clothing Transformation Knowledge	Very bad	0	Clothing Transformation Knowledge	Very bad	24
	Bad	10,9		Bad	32
	Medium	15,2		Medium	34
	Good	23,9		Good	8
	Very Good	50		Very Good	2
Fashion Design Knowledge	Very bad	6,5	Fashion Design Knowledge	Very bad	60
	Bad	15,2		Bad	22
	Medium	19,6		Medium	14
	Good	19,6		Good	2
	Very Good	39,1		Very Good	1
Circular Economy Knowledge	Very bad	2,2	Circular Economy Knowledge	Very bad	58
	Bad	17,4		Bad	26
	Medium	13		Medium	16
	Good	32,6		Good	0
	Very Good	34,8		Very Good	0

Communication skills	Very bad	0	Communication skills	Very bad	22
	Bad	4,3		Bad	20
	Medium	15,2		Medium	44
	Good	41,3		Good	14
	Very Good	39,1		Very Good	0
Knowledge Environmental Impacts in General	Very bad	4,3	Knowledge Environmental Impacts in General	Very bad	14
	Bad	4,3		Bad	20
	Medium	13		Medium	48
	Good	43,5		Good	14
	Very Good	34,8		Very Good	4
Self-Confidence	Very bad	0	Self-Confidence	Very bad	2
	Bad	2,2		Bad	12
	Medium	15,2		Medium	56
	Good	52,2		Good	24
	Very Good	30,4		Very Good	6

Focus Groups

Through the analysis of the answers to the question "what type of knowledge did you acquired in the last three months?" participants were unanimous, concluding that they acquired new knowledge, for example "we have acquired more knowledge. (...) At least I had no knowledge of sewing and then I learned a little bit." (FG1). It is observed that the participants benefited from the project, as they acquired knowledge at the level of clothing transformation, fabric conjugation, at the level of sewing where they learned to make manual stitches and still work in the sewing machine. The participants mentioned that they learned to take advantage of everything, it was also mentioned the conviviality as a positive aspect, since the "people are a little closed" (FG5), and the project contributed to create "new friendships" (FG6).

It can be seen that some of the knowledge was acquired through sharing. It was possible to perceive the unity and sharing spirit among the groups, seeing the emergence of friendships arising as a result of the participation in the project. When asked why this intense sharing existed, the participants justified it by the fact that they were all about the same age: "if we were younger, we might not feel as comfortable as we did. I'm honest, all the years I've worked in a company I've come to the point where I don't want to go to work. When I started this training, I started to wake up always in a good mood, I sang, everything. We'd spend the mornings there and we didn't even see time goes by, it was lunch time and we didn't even realize it. We also talked to each other about our problems. I know I have that commitment and I go to that appointment, but I'm going happy, which should happen in the factories, but it doesn't happen" (FG6).

Regarding the question about the existence of new friendships, it is observed that only in one group the participants all knew each other from before, on the other groups, they did not know each other or knew only one person. In this sense, it is observed that for those who already knew, the friendship remained, while for those who did not know each other, new friendships emerged, underlining another positive result of the project.

Regarding the question about whether any transformation was identified, after having participated in this project, it is observed that in all groups, the answer was unanimous in considering the project as very positive, and in mentioning the appearance of some transformation in their lives, "A little light appeared. We were almost all unemployed, so we thought there was going to be nothing left, ending there. After all, we found that there is much to do" (FG3). This testimony reinforces the importance that this project had in the lives of these participants, since, they left their homes, began to work with other people, learned new things, representing an important social change.

When asked what they intended to do professionally with this knowledge, almost all answered that they intend to apply this knowledge, but in a more unpretentious format, "now we look at cloth differently. Deep down we're going back in time, I remember my mom reusing her clothes. This is going back a little bit to what it should be" (FG5), and we identified some references to the desire to return to work, "I wish I had a job now"

(FG6) and to have the opportunity to start a business together with some colleagues "If this lady opens a business, I would work with her" (FG6).

The less positive aspects mentioned are very few, the short time of training and its end, underline their taste for the project and training, reinforcing the idea that they liked it, wishing that it would be longer to have more time to "conviviality and learn more" (FG2), not representing a negative aspect. Nevertheless, some answers mentioned the training location, the consequent transportation expenses and the limited variety of textiles cloth as some negative aspects.

Regarding the question "would you recommend the participation in the project to other people?" all participants in the project would recommend, without any hesitation. In fact, there are even those who said that they already did "I recommend it to two friends" (FG3).

5. Discussion

It is clear that social partnerships go beyond purely economic support, seeking to qualify the human workforce (Chen et al., 2010), providing access to resources that go far beyond cash contributions, including counseling, technological and communications support (Seitanidi et al., 2010). The resources (tangible and intangible) involved in social partnerships can be embodied in financial, operational, reputational, network, trust, relational capital, learning, knowledge and joint problem solving resources, contributing to the co-creation of value and consequently generating benefits for partners, individuals and society, among others (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012; Hartman and Dhanda, 2018).

In addition, NPOs motivations include the growth of public awareness of social problems, as well as greater support for its organizational mission (Gourvilhe and Rangan, 2004). Social partnerships can have positive effects on the organization, which encourages greater motivation and productivity (Kolk et al., 2010), in addition to benefiting the people participating in the project, as their skills effectively combine with others to produce a successful project as they learn from it (Selsky and Parker, 2010)

The scientific literature identifies some benefits at the individual (micro) level as catalysts for benefits at other levels, namely at the level of organization (meso) and society (macro) (Seitanidi and Lindgreen, 2010).

Micro level corresponds to the individual identity (Hartmann, 2017), so, in our case study, the beneficiaries of social partnerships perceptions (women over the age of 50 who participated in the "From Granny to Trendy" project) identify as main advantages the improvement of their health status, a good level of quality of life, a high level of self-confidence as well as changing the way they occupy their free time. Initially, through the analysis of the questionnaire (moment one), it can be seen that the participants of the training occupied their free time essentially watching TV, tidying up the house, reading a book or walking, so it can be inferred that they spent most of their free time at home. Additionally, it is observed that most of them lived alone, with their children or with their spouse, and the majority presented as reasons for their enrollment in the training, the need to meet people and enjoy better their time.

In this sense, it was extremely advantageous to participate in the training, being that in moment two we can see an improvement in the quality of life, higher self-confidence as well as a change in the way of leisure time occupation. In addition, participants also acquired knowledge about clothing transformation, sewing, fashion design and communication skills. The above corroborates the literature that states that at the micro level, the value for individuals can be twofold: instrumental and psychological (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012). Instrumental benefits can include enhanced management skills, leadership opportunities, technical knowledge, expanded perspectives, among others (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012). So, the acquisition of knowledge of clothing transformation, sewing and fashion design through participation in the training represent instrumental benefits. As far as the psychological benefits relate, these can be translated into the emotional benefits that cover the psychological satisfaction of individuals in contributing to social improvement and the development of new friendships (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012). The benefits that can be included here are, the high level of self-confidence, the high level of quality of life, the knowledge of new people, the emergence of new friendships, conviviality, as well as the high communication capacity resulting from participation in the formation. This project benefits the people who participated in it, since they learned from it by effectively combining their skills to produce a successful project (Selsky and Parker, 2010).

However, the main disadvantages of this project were the high occupation of the time of the trainings as well as the high distance from the local of the trainings.

Hypothesis are strengthened by our case study, since it is possible to conclude that the micro benefits have consequences at the meso level and macro level. Many of the aspects that appear at the meso level also appear at the macro level, since they are related, given that positive impacts that occur beyond the domain of the participating organizations and the receiving population in a broader environment, that is, beyond what they learned at the individual level resulting from the organization's action, produces a positive impact on society (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012; Selsky and Parker, 2010). For example, it turns out that there was a transformation in people's lives, denoting the importance that this project had in the lives of these women, since they left their homes, learned new things, and this represent a social change. So, this social partnerships can be seen as a mechanism to solve social problems, which can lead to organizational and social changes (Seitanidi et al., 2010; Sharma & Bansal, 2017). Again, we can evidence that the benefits arising from the micro level can produce a positive impact on society, by improving the quality of life of the participants (Seitanidi and Lindgreen, 2010).

Finally, through the analysis of focus groups, it is concluded that all participants would recommend this project without any hesitation, and there is once again an impact at the macro level.

6. Conclusions

Scaling up fashion upcycling businesses might empower the changeover of the fashion industry towards sustainability (Sung et al., 2020). Based on a global analysis, our case study allowed us to conclude that social partnerships have an important impact at the micro level (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012).

Regarding to the micro level, it is possible to conclude that social partnerships benefit individuals participating in these projects, since they help to create favorable perceptions of organizational justice, trust, satisfaction, greater productivity and motivation, as well as the acquisition of knowledge through these projects. With this analysis, it has also become possible to conclude that the benefits at this level can be divided into two, namely (1) instrumental benefits and (2) psychological benefits. The instrumental benefits of the social partnership studied, were configured in the acquisition of knowledge of clothing transformation, sewing, fashion design, among others. With regard to psychological benefits, these were embodied in the improvement of self-confidence, communication improvement, conviviality, the emergence of new friendships, among others.

Consumers' lack of awareness and negative beliefs and perceptions about upcycling and upcycled products are identified by retailers and consumers (Sung et al., 2020), so this awareness/perception is an important future challenge, in upcycling businesses, that should be addressed in future research.

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