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# Ethical fashion: Need for regulations in the second-hand clothing industry



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Second-hand clothing

Trade in Second-hand clothing (SHC) has existed for decades, the rise in fast fashion since the 1900's and its resultant effects have however increased awareness and consciousness of SHC trading. As a solution to the increasing problem of textile waste caused by fast fashion, many scholars have proposed changes in consumer behaviour, an orientation to reuse, recycle and up cycle. This has caused a shift in consumer patterns with many choosing to purchase second-hand **Support** ly for

its ethical and environmental benefits. This has not always been the case, as hitherto second-hand clothing had been regarded as the purchase of the poor and lowly. In fact, in many societies this is still the case.

In Africa, Second-hand clothing has been both a commodity of necessity and a commodity of choice. Two seemingly opposing concepts but true, nonetheless. Africans for decades have purchased second-hand clothing for its economic value, hedonistic value and uniqueness/individuality. Economic value because of its affordability in comparison to local textiles and new garments. Hedonistic value because of the thrill of finding a great bargain for what might have otherwise cost a fortune. There is also the desire to purchase items that are considered one of a kind and rare to find. These factors have influenced trading in SHC for so many centuries. Till date, purchase of SHC in African countries is hardly due to ethical and environmental concerns.

In fact, many scholars have argued that importation of SHC into African countries, has created a system of dependency on the West, facilitated imperialism, ruined local textile industries, and created a system by which the West dumps its waste in Africa (Brooks, 2019; Abubakar et al, 2018; Haggblade, 2007). These concerns have led many African countries to place a ban on importation of SHC. However, even in those countries that have a strict ban on SHC, thousands of bales of SHC clothing still find their way in (Aluede, 2019; Brooks and Simons, 2012). This is usually facilitated through smuggling and bribery, further corrupting a system that is already failing.

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In Nigeria, for instance SHC is among a list of 35 items that are unconditionally banned by the Nigerian customs. However, during my research for this article, I have found and contacted over 100 SHC vendors trading within the Nigerian marketplace. The vendors I contacted trade mainly on social media sites. Their followers and customers are celebrities, corporate workers, government officials, teachers, mothers, young and old. Many of the traders themselves are educated and have a proficient grasp of the use of media platforms for trade and marketing. This, then begs the question – if there is such a thriving demand for SHC in Nigeria of what point is the ban? How does it benefit the nation? Do we not lose more from the lost tax revenue of smuggled goods?

### **Preventing dumping and protecting local textile industries**

In the 1980's there were over 175 textile factories in Nigeria, presently there are less than 30 textile factories operating in the country. The problems of the industry range from lack of electricity, unfavourable conditions for cotton farming, lack of capital for large scale production and preference for foreign textiles (Iweka, 2020; Frederick, 2020). It is imperative for the Nigerian government to solve these underlying issues, for the textile industry to thrive. The government has often made a scapegoat of the importation of textiles and second-hand clothing as the main cause of the failing textile industry. However, the policies and bans on importation of foreign textiles and second-hand clothing that have been put in place to help revitalize the industry has yielded no results and the industry keeps failing by the day.

Despite the restriction on imported textiles and the outright ban on second-hand clothing, foreign textiles and second-hand clothing are sold openly in Nigerian markets. This of course has been facilitated through smuggling and bribery. With the current situation, the textile industry is still jeopardized and at the same time the government losses revenue that would have come in form of taxation on these items. Similarly, it creates a situation that further corrupts the system. It is true that there is a need to protect local textile industry from heavy importation, however, a better alternative might be a gradual phasing out as opposed to a complete ban.

Further, globally, individuals and governments alike are becoming conscious of issues of textile waste and the resultant harm to the environment. Any efforts to grow the textile industry in Africa must be cognizant of this. The rise of fast fashion in the West has created the textile waste crisis, which we see today. It is a pandemic of sort, as no one is safe from its effect. As the Coronavirus pandemic has shown us, mother nature is one. Issues of climate change, global warming, pollution affects us all. The effects might not be apparent in some parts of the world yet, but it will, if we do not take the necessary steps to heal the environment.

Currently, Nigeria loses more from the ban on SHC than it gains. This is because; the trade still occurs through smuggling and the local textile industry the ban sought to protect is still jeopardized; the country loses tax revenue from the trade to neighbouring countries where goods are smuggled from; the hidden process of smuggling facilitates textile waste dumping as there are no regulations to prevent this.

It is my submission that in place of the ban, the government seeks trade regulations. As such, they can determine the quality of clothing that comes into the country while also benefitting from its taxation. It is common knowledge that organizations like Maidstone, Oxfam and other major exporters of SHC from the West continually stress that there should be no waste among clothing shipments sent to Africa. This form of waste, however, still comes into the country. This clearly shows a need for regulations on both sides. 'It is important that proper and robust checks are made by customs officers both in exporting and importing countries.' This will facilitate a process whereby defaulters can be blacklisted, and specific bans placed on them.

This article is a summation of a paper presented at the 2020 8th Annual Humanistic Management Conference by Ruqayyah Baderinwa. It has been adapted for the Christopher Kolade Centre for Research in Leadership and Ethics (CKCRLE) at Lagos Business School (LBS). CKCRLE's vision is creating and sharing knowledge that improves the way managers lead and live in Africa and the World. You can contact CKCRLE at [atcrle@lbs.edu.ng](mailto:atcrle@lbs.edu.ng).



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