

KIKO ROMEO'S PRODUCTION METHODS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO SUSTAINABLE FASHION PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Problem: Trend-based, low quality, mass produced clothing has a short life cycle (Cachon et al, 2011). Once used up, it is disposed in landfills or it finds its way to the secondhand markets of third world countries like Kenya. **Introduction:** The global fashion industry continues to receive criticism for being one of the worst offenders when it comes to unsustainable practices. Materials used to make clothes and accessories are produced in a manner that degrades the environment (Brooks et al, 2017). Labor practices in garment factories are questionable, with overcrowding, long hours and unfair wages being the main points of concern (Verklan, 2021). **Objectives:** By examining Kiko Romeo's production methods, the objective of this research was to identify practices that produce garments with a long shelf life. **Subject:** Kiko Romeo, a Kenyan fashion house established in the 1990s. **Results:** Kiko Romeo's fashion designs are not trend-based. This means that they have longevity. Their insistence on using natural fibers means that once textiles have run through their life cycle, they are biodegradable. Kiko Romeo has also demonstrated ethical labor practices. **Conclusion:** Kiko Romeo's sustainable practices have resulted in a premium brand with products that are designed to last. By outlining these practices, a case study can be made for actions that can be implemented to improve the global fashion industry.

Keywords: fast fashion, sustainability, collaboration, fair wages

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Fast fashion continues to be villainized globally. Fast fashion is characterized by two key components. First, the clothing produced is extremely trendy. Second, the clothing is produced quickly and brought to market within a short time (Cachon et al, 2011). The result is low quality fashion textiles at rock bottom prices. Fast fashion profits from sheer scale.

From a quality standpoint, the textiles are made using cheap (mostly synthetic) materials. These fabrics do not perform well when stitched in aspects such as durability and fall. That is why fast fashion tends to look ill-fitted once worn by the consumer. Synthetic fabrics like polyester, acrylic and nylon are not too breathable and cause sweating when worn in warm climates (Kozlowski et al, 2012). Because of their flammability, they are a fire hazard too.

Fast fashion has had a devastating effect on climate change. Not only are the synthetics used to make most clothes bad for the environment since they are non-biodegradable, but their production is also quite a toxic process (Brooks et al, 2017). Natural materials used, such as cotton, require vast amounts of water for processing. One t-shirt uses up about 3000liters of water in its production cycle (Burcikova, 2017).

Fast fashion producers are notorious for overproduction (“Ban on Mitumba”, 2020). Though wasteful, it is cheaper for them to overproduce based off of projected demand, than to underproduce and then have to do another production run later (Turker, 2014). The fashion styles made are based on trends of the time. This means that they go out of style quickly as the next big fad is introduced. The result is that depending on the brand, 10-30% of fast fashion produced never gets sold. It is destroyed by burning or cutting and sent to landfills.

Sustainable production practices can contribute to the slowing down of environmental degradation (Brooks et al, 2017). This research paper examines the sustainable practices employed by Kiko Romeo in the production of their fashion items.

2.0 BACKGROUND

Kiko Romeo is a Kenyan fashion brand that has been in operation for over two decades. The Swahili name translates to “Adam’s Apple” (“How it All Started”, 2012). The company is steered by designers Ann McCreath and her daughter Iona McCreath. Kiko Romeo produces hand crafted ready to wear clothing.

Ann McCreath was born and raised in Edinburgh, Scotland. She received her fashion training in Rome, Italy. She first came to Kenya as an expatriate with Médecins Sans Frontières (Mukei, 2015). In her early career, McCreath designed menswear. She later diversified into female fashion design. McCreath founded Kiko Romeo in Kenya in the year 1996.

2.1 Sustainable Practices

Sustainability has been a key priority for Kiko Romeo since their inception. The brand’s practices continue to improve the livelihood of their employees. Some of Kiko Romeo’s sustainable production practices are discussed below.

2.1.1 Cultural Preservation

The brand pays homage to Kenyan culture. This is evident in the use of indigenous names such as “Nyasi Bumi Jumpsuit” for their fashion products. Traditional crafting styles including beadwork and crochet are used in their designs. The styles of their clothing is in keeping with the local music and art movements. Kiko Romeo inspires a sense of pride in local contemporary culture.

2.1.2 Collaboration

Kiko Romeo has collaborated with numerous artists and designers in the East African region to create fashion masterpieces. For instance, El Tayeb Dawelbait is a Sudanese artist who hand paints designs onto the brand’s garments. Fusion of styles creates a unique, yet distinctly African end product.

The brand often joins forces with other design disciplines as well. They are no stranger to collaboration with theatre, film and music.

2.1.3 Ethical Labor Practices

The fast fashion industry has been under scrutiny for a number of infringements on the rights of workers. Unreasonable hours, unfair wages, poor working conditions and use of child labor are all areas of concern (Kozlowski et al, 2012).

The 2012 garment factory fire in Dhaka, Bangladesh exposed the rot within fashion production chains. Tazneem Fashions workers were instructed to keep working despite smoke alarms going off. When they did eventually try to escape, the exits were locked and fire extinguishers were not operational (Verklan, 2021). Despite the death toll of over one hundred casualties, more of the incidents have happened since (Burcikova, 2017).

Kiko Romeo is committed to ethical labor practices. Where possible, production is done by women’s groups. This facilitates creation of employment opportunities for marginalized groups. Work hours are limited to five days of the week and employees are paid a livable wage. Kiko Romeo has invested heavily in mentoring and training of staff (Mukei, 2015).

The result of this mode of operation is worker retention. Many of Kiko Romeo’s employees have been with the organization for over a decade.

2.1.4 Natural fibers

Use of natural fibers that are biodegradable and perform well is synonymous with Kiko Romeo. Attention is paid to the source of the materials. For example, the brand utilizes rain fed cotton and leather off-cuts that would otherwise have been deemed waste in their production process.

v. Artisanal handcrafting

Kiko Romeo has a keen emphasis on handcrafting. Their bespoke fabrics are hand dyed using traditional African techniques. Some textiles are crafted on hand looms and others are hand spun.

3.0 RESULTS

Hundreds of thousands of tons of used clothes end up in landfills every year. Fast fashion practices have drastically reduced the lifespan of a garment. Clothes do not last as long as they did a decade ago (Burcikova, 2017). Kiko Romeo clothing is the opposite of this. Garments are made out of good quality natural materials which can be repaired. They are also well stitched. The shelf life of a Kiko Romeo creation is well over seven years with normal use.

Fashion is an industry just like any other. The end goal is creation of value. If it is made to last, fashion can serve as a store of value. Clothing is a record of culture and can be passed down to the next generation as an heirloom. The quality of Kiko Romeo garments makes them an investment piece.

Third world countries have the most to lose from the fast fashion industry. Their resources and labor are exploited to produce cheap clothing for the export market. And once the first world is done with consumption of these products, they are returned as waste back to these same underdeveloped countries (Turker et al, 2014).

Fast fashion is designed for Western tastes, Western culture and the Western environment. It is a shame for third world countries to be the custodians of an industry that bears no representation of their own culture. It is also a shame to wait on the scraps of the second hand market for products that can be produced locally.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Consumers are constantly seeking a cheaper price. This practice fuels persistence of the fast fashion industry. While producers have a role to play for unsustainable models, they merely respond to market demand (Verklan, 2021). A change in consumption habits could go a long way towards inspiring better practices. Sustainability comes at a monetary price, but it may be worth the investment.

In March of 2020, the Cabinet Secretary for Industrialism banned the importation of second hand clothing into the Kenyan market (“Ban on Mitumba”, 2020). Although this turned out to be a temporary move, it sparked conversation on the state of the Kenyan textile industry. Even after years of reforms, local clothing is unable to compete with the low prices of secondhand imports. Kiko Romeo’s garment prices on their website ranged between \$325 and \$610 in the year 2021. This price point is out of reach for most Kenyans, even if it was their desire to participate in sustainability. In fact, it can be argued that sustainable fashion is currently an aspiration for the elite.

Fast fashion adapts quickly to the market. It is a quick response system that innovates rapid design and production to meet demand cycles (Cachon et al, 2011). While harmful in the fashion context, it may be beneficial to replicate this model of production with shorter lead times in other industries such as the manufacturing of medical vaccines.

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