

University of the Arts London Student Sustainability Champion

Charlotte Rebekah Instone – Know The Origin

About the project

Summary

I am a final year Buying and Merchandising student at London College of Fashion. I was a founding member of LCF's student sustainability society and worked with the society committee to raise £7,000 for charity. I have used my skills to volunteer with a textiles income generation project in Tanzania over two years and then a UN Women project in Zaatari Camp working with Syrian Refugees. Whilst studying, I used every opportunity to promote affordable sustainable fashion through creating the Ethical Fashion Collective, which hosted a London showcase of 35 global brands, with over 700 attendees and an industry panel. I have spoken at sustainability workshops in the UK, Romania and Cancun. I have spent a month in Dhaka researching several ethical and fairtrade factories. I also spent time interviewing both the presidents of NGWF and BCWS trade unions, Mohammed Yunus, several NGOs, factory owners and survivors of Tazreen fire and Rana Plaza collapse in order to help create content for an ethics module at LCF.

This research has enabled me to ensure I can create a high impact social business, Know The Origin (KTO), selling design led, sustainable clothing with maximum impact socially and minimum impact environmentally. KTO is an online store that creates and curates products that reflect our name. We bring together brands built around transparency that value people, the environment and aesthetics in equal measure. The own brand collection is created through value led production businesses that transform communities in Bangladesh and India. 15% of profits will be used to help support trade union leadership programmes in Dhaka. The online platform will be used to provide education and campaigning around the impacts of fashion and consumption.

Project partners

Students from the UAL sustainability society – which I co-founded.
BCWS Trade union in Dhaka
Suppliers such as Mandela Factory in Bangladesh

ual: university
of the arts
london

Profile

- LCF is one of 6 colleges which comprise UAL
- LCF has over 500 staff & 5,500 students
- UAL has over 2,000 staff and 19,000 students
- LCF is located over 6 urban London sites.

Category supported by

TEC 
POWERING THE PUBLIC SECTOR



The results

The problem

The fashion industry now brings out a number of mid-season collections, compared to the traditional bi-annual spring/summer, autumn/winter collections, which fuels the consumption of 80bn garments each year. This 'fast fashion', driven by increased speed of production coupled with low prices has caused the cracks of declining ethics to become apparent both socially and environmentally.

The last three years have displayed the worst disasters in the history of the garment industry; from the Tazreen fire killing hundreds; to the collapse of Rana Plaza factory killing 1,133 workers and injuring 2,500; to garment workers being arrested and shot for campaigning for minimum wage. Thousands of lives have been destroyed in developing countries through fibre production from the chemicals being filtered into water sources to large cotton human trafficking rings. In the last 16 years one Indian farmer every 35 seconds has committed suicide due to the monopolisation of GM seed. The fashion industry has grown when the rule of law is weakest and vulnerable people are willing to work under any conditions. A recent Australian fashion report stated that 61% of brands were unsure who made their clothes and 93% were unsure where the fabrics came from. In a connected world consumers are becoming more and more disconnected from who made their clothes.

The approach

KTO is an online store that creates and curates products that reflect our name. We bring together brands built around transparency that value people, the environment and aesthetics in equal measure. KTO is a fashion brand built around radical transparency, using a sourcing model that adds visible value across the supply chain to create an alternative product above industry ethics standard. KTO will be one of the only brands that transparently prove the impact of the supply chain. We will maximise in every way social impact whilst minimising environmental impact through careful considerations of shipment, fibres and production methods used.

KTO will initially be an online clothing store with 10 UK topic themed popups over the first three years. We will launch in Spring/Summer 2016 with our own range of 20 pieces of design led garments split across menswear and womenswear. We produce using value driven Indian / Bangladeshi suppliers that we visited in May this year. They are a series of value driven entrepreneurs that are passionate about eradicating poverty through their businesses and use the highest standards surrounding workers' benefits and living wage.

Strong cohesive branding will be used across the website to deliver education through blogs written by KTO, industry speakers and ethical bloggers. These will equip people with actions on the impact of fashion and sustainable living, whilst building brand to customer relationships. Adding well-researched brands such as Everlane, Kowtow, Zady and People Tree will ensure we can make ethical fashion convenient through providing a wider range of technical seasonal pieces too. We will also use our supply chain to produce t-shirts for NGOs, allowing economies of scale and encouraging organisations to think about ethics. We have confirmed one order of 10,000 units in January 2016.

As well as impact created with the supply chain by helping fairtrade ethical producers and social businesses to grow; we will invest 15% of profit into BCWS leadership programs for women in Dhaka. We have seen these transformative programs help workers to learn and enforce their rights, creating revolutionary change on the ground in garment factories. We will also be running workshops in UK universities to influence other fashion students who will be in charge of supply chains in the next 5 years to start thinking outside of just profit. The online platform will be used to provide education and campaigning around the impacts of fashion and consumption. We also have a large network of volunteers with 15 confirmed film screenings of the True Cost film delegated to others

around the UK to organise it and provide speaking opportunities for KTO. The long-term goal is setting up a sustainable factory in Dhaka, investing into workers and creating a different culture of celebration, which is unheard of in the current 4,500 factories.

Our goals

- To create a 100% transparent supply chain that can create beautiful environmentally conscious clothes that add value and transform communities in Bangladesh and India. To value people, environment, creativity and profit in equal measure. Everyone can be treated fairly.
- To raise awareness on the true impact of fashion and consumption
- To celebrate the people and brands involved in creating a transparent future
- To bring the next generation of geniuses with us by changing the way we think about sustainability through ethics workshops in universities.
- To support trade union leadership programmes in Dhaka to see transformation in factories on the ground.

Obstacles and solutions

Finding value led suppliers – went out to Bangladesh visited over 50 factories with the help of an environmental NGO. We built upon research others have completed. Another obstacle was financing – as we have far lower margins. However we have found impact investors who recognise this business will take a little longer to make profit because of the transformation that is happening within communities we are working with.

Performance and results

The UAL sustainability society has grown now with over 200 in the membership- putting on UAL wide events. As for KTO we are launching the site in January 2016 and the store in April 2016. Alongside our own business, we have already secured an order for an NGO to produce 10,000 t-shirts.

The future

Lessons learned

When working with developing world suppliers you need to allow buffer time to cover problems and delay. Listen to what people need – suppliers often culturally agree to do anything. Taking time to understand their capacity and time frame can strengthen the relationship. Surround yourself with people far wiser than yourself – be open to developing every part.

Sharing your project

I have spoken to other ethical brands and NGOs about the idea. Two NGOs have changed their orders – meaning that 15,000 t-shirts are now being produced fairtrade and organic. We have also had impact through speaking at Greenbelt, Grace Academy and London College of Fashion. Students were engaged and challenged – some have come to work alongside us and two others are developing brands using ethically sourced fabric now.

Rosemary Varley, Course Director for Fashion Management and Marketing at LCF:

“Fantastic piece of research for dissertation looking into the validity of certifications. She has a combination of both sustainability and entrepreneurial skills. She absolutely deserves a Green Gown Award, she influences her peer students, academics and the future of the fashion business school. She persuaded me to come to the premier of the True Cost film which has renewed my vigour in terms of getting the message across. I am now determined to carry on and increase my work on this.”

John Fudge, Global Development Director for Urban Saints:

“She is intuitively able to get to the root of social justice problems. Charlotte’s knowledgeable and understands the complexity of the issues. She supplies her knowledge in a factual manner – others can take it or leave it and make their own minds up. She has challenged subcontracting in a fairtrade factory in Dhaka where conditions might not be ethical, she constantly questions ethical branding, never accepting a problem until she gets to the root of the issue. She impacts other people – two organisations completely revisited their ethical supply chains as a result of her”

What has it meant to your institution to be a Green Gown Award finalist?

To win a Green Gown award would be an outstanding achievement for London College of Fashion, UAL. As a University we are working hard to embed principles of sustainability into everything we do. When our work is recognised in this way it really helps to galvanise staff and students and underlines that the work we are doing must continue and that we’re heading in the right direction.

Further information

www.knowtheorigin.com

@KnowTheOrigin

Charlotte@knowtheorigin.com