

Faculty of Design

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## Fibreshed: A positive alternative for the fashion industry, consumers, and the planet

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# Slow Fashion

## Southwest England Fibreshed

### Service Design Brief

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Photo courtesy of  
Joe Green via  
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# Overview

Photo by Vishal  
Banak via  
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## **Background and context**

Climate change and resource depletion are significant challenges facing our society. The purchase and consumption of clothing through the fast fashion model contributes to these challenges through pollution, unfair labour practices, globalized supply chains and the rapid use of natural resources. To help address these problems, many people and communities are exploring sustainable fashion alternatives via the development of innovative clothing production and retail models.

One emerging innovation is the Fibreshed model, a bioregion based method of clothing production that relies on localized supply chains and natural processes – all in effort to reduce the negative externalities of clothing production. Fibresheds echo the bioregional focus of other sustainable consumption movements like local food (e.g., the 100km diet) or regional tourism (e.g., touring the Niagara Escarpment or the Grey-Bruce trail). However, like other emergent business models or practices, the Fibreshed model faces issues around scalability and sustainability. In addition, practitioners of Fibreshed models are often focused on their own part of the supply chain (e.g. raising livestock, creating fibres) and do not have sufficient resources or extra capacity to focus on refining how their individual parts of the puzzle can be connected in an optimal way to meet customer needs and value.

To help explore the sustainability and scalability of this model, this research project focuses on discovering and defining the key challenges and opportunities in Fibreshed models. It will also help Fibreshed practitioners understand how their individual roles and responsibilities fit together to produce clothing and how their work nestles within a more global system of clothing consumption, marketing and consumerism. This piece of research is critical to understanding the magnitude and priority of investments required to make the Fibreshed model a viable solution in helping the world resolve the challenges of climate change and resource depletion.

# Fibreshed models

Fibresheds are a model of slow and sustainable fashion production. They promote a supply chain that connects resources local to a specific bioregion from, raw materials to fibre processing facilities. Fibresheds also have parallel focus on creating regenerative production cycles, ensuring that as much processed fibres and by-products can be reduced to the soil (via compost) at the appropriate point in their lifecycle.

However, as an emergent model of production, fibresheds have yet to stabilise as a recognized resource by the larger fashion industry, sustainability movements and consumers. Further, fibresheds are uncertain about how they fit into the large fashion economy, often preferring to stay hyper local, resulting in challenges around scalability and sustainability. Understanding how fibresheds can better refine their value as a part of the large sustainable fashion solution is critical to both providing stability to the model and supporting a more ethical way of consuming clothing at-large.

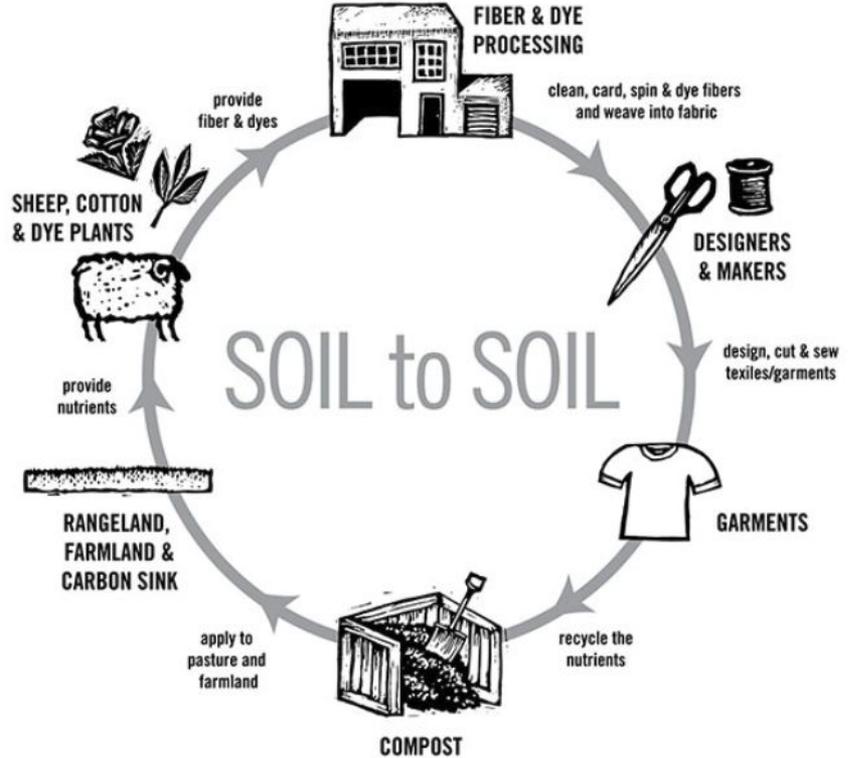


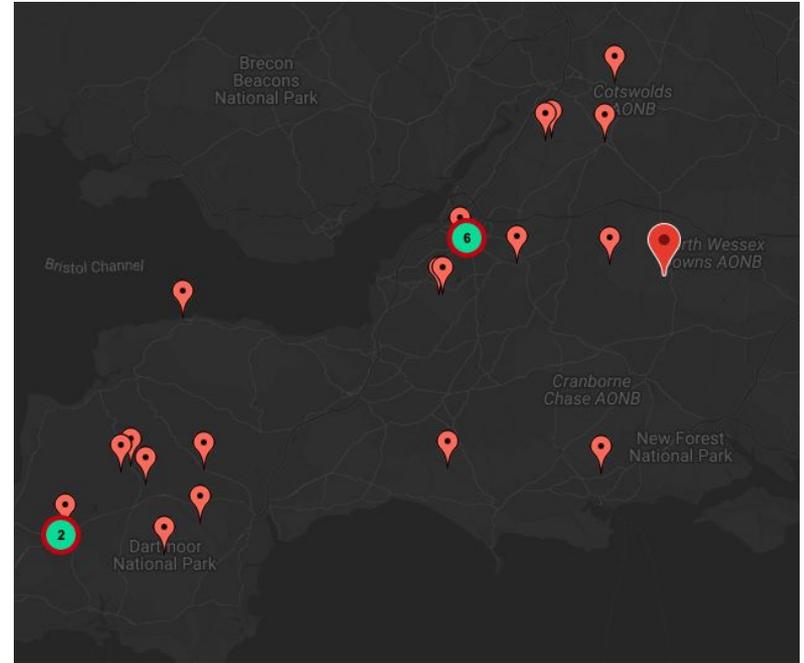
Illustration courtesy of Fibreshed

# The South West England Fibreshed

To ground our research, this project explored the current state challenges and opportunities of The South West England Fibreshed. The model is bioregional, and the geographic boundaries of this fibreshed are roughly Lyton to the north, Dartmoor to the south, Lancelton to the west and Dorchester to the east. By their own description, the Fibreshed works with those in Bristol, Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire.

There are currently (as of March 2021) 44 farmers, processors (spinners, dyers, etc.), designers, garment producers (weavers, knitters, etc.) and retailers connected within this fibreshed. These members pay annual dues to be part of the fibreshed and are able to access promotional opportunities, newsletters, convening events and knowledge sharing.

We were connected with this Fibreshed through Peter Jones and his involvement with Bounce Beyond. Bounce Beyond is a collective dedicated towards solving the world's most challenging problems and issues through exploring and realising new ways of working.



After some initial research and introductory conversations with the South West England Fibreshed, we saw gaps in how the model could become self-sustaining and how it could interact with (including potentially displace) the larger clothing consumption system that currently exists. In particular, we were concerned with how Fibreshed could stay connected and operate long enough to find its place in the clothing and fashion economy. As a result, we posed the following research questions:

### **How might Fibresheds establish themselves as a sustainable model?**

To help explore this question, we focused on the following sub-questions:

- a. How is sustainability defined in this model, in fashion, in clothing?
- b. Can we actually address all pillars of sustainability? (**People, Planet, Purpose and Profit**)
- c. What is the current policy context?
- d. What are the biggest challenges to fibresheds being competitive?
- e. What are the most challenging?/What are the priorities?
- f. What are the key differences in the economic culture between fibresheds and fast fashion?
- g. What are some emerging opportunities or solutions?

## **Research question and areas of interest**

# Service Design Brief



Photo by [Gabriel Jimenez](#) on [Unsplash](#)

# Stakeholders and actors

The stakeholders and actors involved and related to the Southeast Fibreshed are outlined in the influence map. For this service design brief, we focused on the highly interconnected nature of the Fibreshed actors as the core drivers of value creation in the proposed intervention.

The reasons we focused on these actors involve:

- **Geographic** - the players are located within the same bio-region and share a common economic, social and environmental context
- **Economic** - the players are all small, medium or independent businesses/enterprises, all dealing with challenges associated with mass industrialisation and globalisation (though with different reactions and solutions)
- **Operational** - these players are connected via their industries (e.g. agriculture, secondary producers/processors, etc.)
- **Social** - these actors are part of local community and live, work and play together

These actors work on a distinct rhythm than the other emergent spheres of actors, corporate retail/fast fashion which operates on a much faster and larger scale and government or natural systems which are slower and work agnostic of Fibreshed factors.

# Major challenges and intervention opportunities

Largely, the challenges and opportunities with the Southwest Fibreshed have to do with:

- Access to capital to sufficiently fund operations
- Challenges with co-ordinating between supply chain
- Local tacit and explicit knowledge around fibre production that has been lost
- Lack of policy and funding to address sustainability initiatives like Fibreshed
- Limitations associated with the Fibreshed identity (i.e. maintaining the “purity” of Fibreshed)

However, all these spaces do not exist over the same scale or level of control for the Southeast Fibreshed. In particular, the last two points are part of broader systemic or global pushes that the Southwest Fibreshed can contribute to, but should not ultimately rely on for success. In addition, the increase of local knowledge, capital and process were defined by stakeholders as the current limiting factors to the Fibresheds’ success.

As a result, the intersection of opportunities we looked at included:

- How might we build, capture and retain knowledge in the local Fibreshed
- How might we involve all Fibreshed actors at the local level to form relationships while creating value ?
- How might we align Fibreshed’s value creation with the large local movements of sustainability?

## **Service rationale**

Fashion is estimated to be a \$2.5 trillion industry with sustainability becoming one of its top priorities. A BCG (Boston Consulting Group) led sustainability fund, allocated \$20-\$30 billion per year to explore fashion innovation opportunities. In addition to inventing new materials, fast fashion has eroded the knowledge of artisanal sustainable practices, like in food production and mass manufacturing. Therefore, sustainability in fashion may be limited as knowledge of more sustainable practices may soon, no longer exist.

By leaning into the problem spaces outlined, Fibreshed can act as a local R&D engine that drives the development of sustainable production practices. By acting as an insulated and protected area to experiment with better ways of production and working, Fibresheds can focus on better production without the restrictions of margins, profit, etc. faced by established global conglomerates. Once Fibresheds reach a level of stability, they can share this knowledge with the larger industry who in-turn can invest more in emergent promising practices.

This process would also provide a common driver for Fibreshed actors to co-operate. A current concern is that large business will “swoop-in” and steal their knowledge. By co-creating a protected intellectual property of “fibreshed-qualified” processes, actors can derive collective value from figuring out how to work together and maintain ownership over the process and methodology, while licensing or selling outputs to larger industry.



# Research Plan and Process

Photo courtesy of  
Thredup

# Research Methods

Given the largely exploratory and discovery-based nature of our sub-questions, this project elected to use qualitative research methods. In particular, we focused on using more divergent and expansive methods that helped participants unearth and align on the challenges, opportunities and concerns around fibreshed.

This project employed:

- a. **Interviews** - used to get more in-depth information into fibreshed challenges and experiences in being part of the system
- b. **Workshops** - used to align stakeholders on perspectives to triangulate research
- c. **Secondary research** - used for context setting, established research and supplementary perspectives and context

# Stakeholders

As we were exploring both the economic, social and environmental side of fibresheds, we wanted to cast our stakeholder scope wide - reaching producers, processors and consumers.

As a result, our ideal stakeholder list included:

- Farmers
- Fibreshed members
- Fibre Manufacturers
- Consumers
- Policy makers
- Designers/Artists
- Garment Manufacturers

In the end, we were only able to directly access farmers and fibreshed members. However, these stakeholders had perspectives and experience in working with fibre manufacturers, consumers and garment manufacturers.

# Project phasing

1 week

## Discovery

### Activities:

- i) Secondary research
- ii) Influence map workshop

### Roles:

- Facilitator
- Whiteboard lead
- Note-taker
- Time-keeper

2 weeks

## Inquiry

### Activities:

- i) Interviews

### Roles:

- Interviewer
- Notetaker
- Transcriber (used Otter.ai)
- Coder
- Time-keeper

- ii) Secondary research

3 weeks

## Synthesis and iteration

### Activities:

- i) Secondary research
- ii) Synthesis and solutions workshop

### Roles:

- Facilitator
- Whiteboard lead
- Note-taker
- Time-keeper

# Methodology

Within our time and resource constraints, our methodology rolled out as follows:

**1. Secondary research**

We started the project by exploring literature and websites on sustainable fashion production, other fibresheds in the world and sustainable fashion brands. The objective was to better understand how sustainable production methods differ from fast fashion production and how the fibreshed model works and is unique. Literature was provided by the South West England Fibreshed and supplementary research was conducted via web search and social media (i.e. sustainable fashion brands selling on social media).

**2. Influence map workshop with Fibreshed members**

We conducted an influence map workshop with Fibreshed members to help them discuss and align on the key stakeholders involved and affecting Fibreshed, their interactions, dependencies and tensions. From this workshop, we were able to produce a draft influence map and also provide a foundational understanding of the key challenges and opportunities blocking fibreshed from finding momentum.

**3. Interviews with Fibreshed members**

We then conducted interviews with Fibreshed members individually to dig deeper into the difficulties around connecting farmers to fibre processors, how much and how well they work with the larger fashion industry and overall social and economic sustainability of the model. From these interviews, we were able to gather more details on the barriers to better coordination amongst fibreshed members and the emerging value of a fibreshed: becoming more of a resource for producers than a full clothing supply chain.

# Methodology cont'd

## 4. **Secondary research**

We conducted further secondary research to better understand opportunities for fibreshed and slow fashion. The objective was to find resources that supported and further explained the findings from our interviews and filled in remaining knowledge gaps. Further literature was provided by the South West England Fibreshed and the Bioregional Learning Centre to address unanswered questions during the interviews.

## 5. **Synthesis and solutions workshop with Fibreshed members**

We conducted a synthesis map and solutions workshop with Fibreshed members to review a framework for our synthesis map and align on a key set of opportunities for Fibreshed moving forward. The opportunities were presented in a 2x2 matrix with urgency and importance on the axes. From this workshop, we were able to advance our synthesis map and align on the inputs with the Fibreshed stakeholders. We integrated their feedback around focusing more on fibre and the South Devon landscape.

# Other Research Process Highlights

## **Recruitment**

Core research participants were introduced to the project team by OCAD University Professor Peter Jones in March 2021. Peter was connected to the research participants through the Bounce Beyond initiative, a platform for discovering and supporting emerging “next economies,” at different levels of scale and sustainability. There was no pre-existing relationships between the project team and the research participants.

## **Potential risks identified and ethics review**

We identified the potential for psychological and social risk for stakeholders participating in the research. The risks were around the project team identifying and presenting issues with their organization that could embarrass, worry or concern them. We also identified risk associated with research participants sharing their thoughts on issues and challenges about their fibreshed community if they felt there would be personal or social ramifications from community members reviewing the research output. Risks were mitigated by having open and transparent conversations throughout the process and aligning with stakeholders on the presentation and positioning of the opportunities and challenges identified.

Prior to executing our research plan, we submitted a Research Ethics Board (REB) proposal to OCAD University Professors Michele Mastroeni and Suzanne Stein. Their feedback was incorporated in our plan and approach. The REB submission is included in the appendix of this report.

# Other Research Process Highlights cont'd

## **Consent**

Informed Consent Forms were introduced during a video call with South West England Fibreshed and then emailed afterwards for signature and collection. The Consent Form clearly stated the research intent and the process for withdrawal. A sample of the Consent Form is included in the appendix of this report.

## **Data handling**

All research obtained and input from participants including digital data was stored in a private and secure OneDrive folder that could be accessed only by the OCAD University project team members.

## **Stakeholder communications**

Communication with stakeholders was managed over email (written) and Zoom (video). Meeting times were identified using doodle which helped to address any time conflicts arising from the five hour time difference.

## **Deliverables provided to stakeholders and research use**

A final copy of our synthesis map and influence map will be shared with South West England Fibreshed. A post-project meeting will be scheduled with the Fibreshed team to present the maps and close the project. The South West England Fibreshed plans to use the synthesis map for promoting the fibreshed model and securing funding and additional support. The OCAD University project team will not use the research findings without the consent of the South West England Fibreshed.

A wide-angle photograph of a large, industrial sewing factory. The room is filled with rows of sewing machines on tables, with workers visible in the background. The lighting is somewhat dim, with overhead fluorescent lights. The floor is white and appears to have some debris or fabric scraps scattered on it. The overall atmosphere is one of a busy, large-scale manufacturing environment.

# Research Findings

Photo by Rio  
Lecatompessy via  
Unsplash

# Overview of Findings

## **Key opportunity areas identified through our research include:**

- **Process: Reduce friction between actors in the supply chain**
  - Building agriculture and fibre overlaps by finding opportunities to co-produce and use each other's resources for better local resource flow
  - Improve logistics coordination (managing raw material production and processing)
- **Policy and Economic: Working with government and regulators to increase sustainable fashion and production**
  - Find different ways to introduce capital
  - Influence and advocate for local and government policy change to incentive sustainable production
  - Focus on reducing carbon emissions and waste in production process
- **Fibreshed governance and knowledge sharing: Building Fibreshed internal knowledge and capacity**
  - Leverage SW fibreshed networks for knowledge creation, sharing and preservation
  - Develop clear and consistent articulation of objectives and priorities to engage stakeholders
  - Share and promote success stories to engage, inspire and educate farmers and producers
  - Establish norms and ways of working together
  - Work with other local industries/sectors to better share knowledge
  - Increase collaboration between local farmers and reduce friction

# Overview of Findings cont'd

## **Further opportunity areas identified through our research include:**

- **Consumer: Building consumer awareness and excitement around sustainable fashion**
  - Identify opportunities to increase popularity of wool fashion
  - Capitalize more on emerging consumer values
  - Build plan to increase consumer awareness and economic accessibility and availability
  - To develop and promote inspiring local stories to engage and educate consumers
- **Partnerships and collaboration: Working with external partners to educate and broaden the slow fashion movement**
  - Find partnerships and collaboration opportunities with slow fashion and climate change movements
  - Work with luxury fashion brands to increase sales and awareness of fibreshed
  - Partner and collaborate with other Fibresheds to share and collect knowledge
- **Purpose and Direction: Reflecting on fibreshed purpose, requirements and traits**
  - Advocate to widen scope and criteria of Fibreshed to be more inclusive of other producers

# Key Findings: Interviews

Additional key findings were identified through our interviews:

- Southwest Fibreshed is a resource not a business
- Resistance to change is seen as a major obstacle to farming
- Income is generated from membership fees/dues and consultation
- 50% of wool goes to compost
- Fibreshed is focused on creating an equitable and just economic system
- Lack of knowledge, expertise and the breeds that produce stalk capable of textile use
- Fibresheds started as a model where one can make something that can ultimately feed nature at the end of its lifecycle (hence, #soiltoil)

## Key Findings: Workshops

Additional key findings were identified through our workshops:

- South West England Fibreshed has no local government support or connection, funding sources are mostly philanthropic
- South Devon is not connected to the Fashion Industry the same way the South East Fibreshed is due to proximity to London. South Devon is connected to processing and farming
- The fibreshed logo is really the only connection to the consumer currently
- Purist fibreshed criteria may be an overall detriment to their overall goal
- Other Fibreshed communities connect at some level to share data, insight, research
- While wool is the main fibre produced in South Devon (approx. 90%), there are many types of fibres with differences in production processes (including Flax, Hemp)
- Relationships are critical to getting fibre processed in South Devon - very 'who you know'
- Significant wool and fibre waste (up to 50%) at processing level
- Key parts of processing is outsourced due to capacity challenges and bottlenecks
- Transport and logistics play a big role in choosing where to process and create garments
- Producing is split between more artisanal and more industrial but gaps exist on both sides

# Key Findings: Secondary Research

Additional key findings were identified through our secondary research:

- Wool represents 1% of the textile industry
- Wool prices have also fallen from 77p/kg in 2014 down to a predicted 27p/kg in 2019
- Brexit is predicted to result in a further 5% reduction in overall UK sheep populations as the uncertainty with future export trade halts positive progress across all sectors
- Despite its importance in the textile market, there is an ongoing slow market decline for wool
- Wool and fibres blended with wool have high water requirements
- Clothing fibre production is dominated by cotton and polyester, which account for 35% and 40% of the global fibre market respectively
- 90% of UK clothing is imported, a significant overseas “footprint”, particularly in India and China

A close-up photograph of a person's hand adjusting a complex mechanical device. The device features numerous thin, dark wires or threads that are organized into bundles and pass through various metal components, including what appears to be a series of small metal frames or guides. The hand is positioned on the right side of the frame, with fingers delicately touching one of the wires. The background is blurred, showing more of the machinery and some greenish tones, suggesting an industrial or laboratory setting. The lighting is focused on the hand and the immediate mechanical parts, creating a sense of precision and manual work.

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Photo by Lidya  
Nada via Unsplash

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