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Avant-Garde Fashion Projects from Sekondi-Takoradi in Ghana

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Abstract: This study seeks to highlight the concept of avant-garde as a viable and radical approach to instilling creativity in fashion design practices in Sekondi–Takoradi, Ghana through putting together different materials to represent shapes and forms in the ultimate sculpting of silhouettes. This experimental exercise is a sequel to an earlier study that gauge the level of engagement of fashion students and practitioners regarding the avant-garde concept within the study area. Even though the avant-garde concept could be useful in terms of creativity and material exploration, the practice is not common around the study area due to the high cost of fabrics and other materials and the fact that it has not been part of the training of fashion practitioners. There were a series of experimentations and material collaboration in this study that led to a number of garments and accessories. In all, twenty (20) pieces of garments and accessories were made from a selection of low-cost fabrics, feathers, beads, canes, straw, glitter, leather, can spray and other fibrous materials. The garments were showcased at two major fashion runway events namely the Technique Style Fashion Show organised by the Department of Fashion Design and Technology, Takoradi Technical University in Takoradi and the Portrait of Reality Show, organised by Exquisite Modelling Empire in Accra. It is anticipated that this project will serve as a pointer to reinforce the concept of avant-garde as a creative design paradigm in fashion design practices in Sekondi-Takoradi and Ghana as a whole.

Keywords: Avant-Garde, Sekondi-Takoradi, Fashion Design, Material Exploration

1. Introduction

This study encompasses a breadth of practical avant-garde fashion projects with different materials and diverse outcomes. It is anticipated that this would create the necessary awareness to some extent of the concept of avant-garde as a viable creative avenue for fashion practitioners within the Sekondi-Takoradi area of the Western Region, Ghana. Fashion is a form of self-expression, at a particular period and place and in a specific context, of lifestyle, clothing, footwear, accessories, makeup, body posture and hairstyle [1]. In everyday application, the term implies a look defined by the fashion industry as that which is in vogue or trending. Everything that is considered fashion is available and popular by the fashion industry and media. Fashion has become a global phenomenon; from runway to street, it touches almost everyone all over the world. The fashion industry employs millions of people, not just fashion designers but also; illustrators, journalists, editors, photographers, models, stylist, hairdressers, makeup artist, clothing manufacturers, sales people and marketers, and more importantly education or training. [2] emphasised that clothing has passed being just a basic need, most people crave change and excitement in the way they present themselves and compete with one another, making people fashion slaves and dedicated followers of fashion. It is what pops stars do, what kids on the Lower Eastside of New York do, teenagers in a Manchester disco do, footballers do that is pushing forward fashion and life culture.

The need for constant change is a pressure the fashion world craves continually. Fashion is very expressive and can indicate

our sexuality, morality and approach to individuality and the collective society. "Fashion is not something that exist in dresses only. Fashion is in the sky, in the street, fashion has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening" [3]. Dressing in style and creating styles is as much as keeping an eye on what is coming next as knowing what happened before. Visually stunning catalogues of images drawn from paintings, sculptures and photographs of the period accompanied by expert commentary captures and highlight fashion delivery and dynamics. Photographic tours showcase classic pieces from every angle and close-up images of fabrics, tailoring and accessories reveal the details that make them iconic or simply extra ordinary. In all these interactions the concept of avant-garde is central in driving creativity and material exploration.

Avant-garde came from the French expression "advance guard" or "Vanguard", which literally means fore-guard. Fore-guard connotes people who experiment or works that are experimental, radical or unorthodox with regard to arts, culture or society as described by [4]. Almost eighty years on, [5] indicated that the European avant-garde movements could be defined as an attack on the status of art in middle-class society" and it is "the intent of the avant-garde movements to reintegrate art in the praxis of life. In a more recent study, [6] defines avant-garde fashion as forward-looking undertaking animated by innovative designers and artists who dare to go against the mainstream and proposed ideas that stand out from the conventional. Avant-garde clothes have the propensity to reshape the human body and suggest new ways of relating it to its environment, through constant deconstruction and reinterpretation. Avant-garde could be said to be going against the grain or breaking the rules of fashion to create other avenues to perceive and reinterpret materials and end products such as garments. The latest avant-garde discourse and literature derives from the dichotomy between conventional, cliched language and experimental linguistic forms that dislodge those cliches. This explanation, of course, is not unique to the study of the artistic media using language, since a similar dichotomy of conventionality versus originality has dominated the critique of other arts.

Gongini [7] further posits that the avant-garde movement primarily consists of artists, designers, musicians, writers and even think tanks who are opposed to cultural values of the mainstream. The vanguard as explained earlier means travelling beyond the social norms to think and create beyond established social norms. At a global level, the movement has seen noticeable progress ever since its inception in the late 1850s. The cultural impact has since been defined, categorised and made iconic by personalities who, for their contribution, have become notable names for the avant-garde. The avant-garde concept progressed sturdily even though it faced severe oppositions, just like many of the art and design movements that sprang up in different parts of the world. However, France was the epic centre of the movement, and from there, it spread to several parts of Europe, the Americas and later Asia and Africa.

Although the roots of avant-garde are deeply ingrained in France, the idea of high-concept, mostly handmade, custom clothing was established by an Englishman from Lincolnshire. After moving to Paris, Charles Worth gained fame in the 1860s for the incredibly intricate and well-made dresses he produced for the wife of Napoleon III, Empress Eugenie. As demand among Parisian socialites multiplied, Worth laid the foundations for the legends that later followed in his footsteps, the most illustrious being the iconic Coco Chanel and Christian Dior [6]. The term Haute couture is associated with the avant-garde concept in fashion and reached its peak in the 1950s, with around 200 houses presenting their designs to the French capital's elite, as well as to those travelling from as far as New York. As the years passed, however, numerous brands have buckled under the pressure of hosting expensive shows and creating regular collections of handcrafted masterpieces, which are made with specialist techniques and the finest materials [8]. Incorporating the avant-garde concept on the yearly collections for the runway involves a significant investment and very demanding in terms of producing and presenting the collection. However, over the years, the various fashion runways such as Paris, Milan, New York, Tokyo and London have seen some impossibly extravagant and outrageous assemblage of costumes. To the untrained mind, most of those runway garments are impractical in the everyday scenarios hence the opposition and scepticism over the years. However, most of these so-called outrageous runway garments, have influenced most of the everyday garments year after year.

1.1. Sekondi -Takoradi

Sekondi-Takoradi is also known as the twin city of Ghana with Sekondi as the administrative capital. It occupies the south-eastern part of the Western Region of Ghana; and shares boundaries with Ahanta West, and the Shama Municipality. It is located on the coast, about 200 kilometres west of Accra, the capital of Ghana with Ahanta and Fanti as the main languages spoken by the indigenes. Farming and fishing are the major occupation in the area.

A cosmopolitan city with a population of 445,205 people [9], Sekondi-Takoradi which is arguably Western Region's largest city and an industrial and commercial centre, boasts of an outstanding artistic heritage that manifests itself in all aspects of cultural performance and craftworks. Tourists, students and teachers of Takoradi Technical University explore this rich heritage through deep and meaningful engagement with 'opinion leaders', local scholars, artists, dancers (the Kundum dance is distinctly unique to the people of the area), musicians, painters, sculptors, weavers, dress makers, writers, and other in-country experts. The leading industries in Sekondi-Takoradi are timber and lumber, shipping and shipbuilding, mining, railways and in 2010 the discovery of crude oil. Sekondi-Takoradi lies on the main railway lines to Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti Region of Ghana. There are a breadth of small to medium-scale production activities in soap making, palm oil, fashion and garments, and textile production which comprises batik, tie dye, embroidery, t-shirt and fabric printing. Fashion and

garment production is mainly at the houte couture level, that is, production is commissioned or custom-made and are mainly one-off design to the client(s).

1.2. Avant-Garde: Art or Fashion

There are some antecedents that could be interrogated to further throw some light on this perception. According to [10] Rivera had travelled in Europe on a government-sponsored art scholarship from 1907 to 1921. He met Pablo Picasso and practised Cubism while there. When Rivera returned to Mexico, he found the country transformed by the revolution. He also found a government that commissioned its artists to create immense public murals to depict and support the ideology of the revolution. Rivera went from being a Cubist on a formalist quest to become a painter of large figurative murals. His politically engaged agenda was explicit. He declared, "To be an artist, one must first be a man vitally interested in all social problems" [11]. There have even been instances where fashion has been displayed as art in museums. Fashion also qualifies as art based solely on its physical properties. In the simplest of terms, the clothing article itself is a form of soft sculpture that requires the human form for completion of the work. Like the plastic arts, the all-encompassing term under which fashion can be included, garments can take form in a variety of mediums limited not only to textiles, but to garbage bags and flattened aluminium cans [12]. Thus, fashion can be considered an actual art form, but it has generally been denied this status given that it operates outside of the art domain in most institutions. This exclusion, however, is what makes possible, in part, the opportunity for a revival of the avant-garde in fashion practices just as conceptual arts is currently a parallel term in art.

Hogan [13] stated that Art and fashion share many significant characteristics in the way they function in society. Both have also changed with increasingly dramatic speed over the centuries. In art, the movement known as the avant-garde set out to continually redefine itself; in fact, to redefine art. However, this continual discarding of what was done already has had a tendency to be self-destructive of the movement itself. [12] indicated that, the Museum of Metropolitan Art contains a few evening gowns created by Charles James (and American couturier of the mid-1900s who believed himself to be a true artist) in their collection. When the term, avant-garde, came into common use in the social spheres of the art world, it was used to describe art that was ahead of its time, art that caused discomfort and shock among viewers. However, over time the concept has gained wider acceptance across the world; the term avant-garde is now inclined more to fashion designing than art in essence. On the other hand, art has progressed into the conceptual paradigm which is very diverse and probing. As [14] puts it, conceptual art is also termed post-object art or art-as-idea, artwork whose medium is an idea or a concept, usually manipulated by the tools of language and sometimes documented by photography. Its concerns are idea-based rather than formal paper/canvas, inks/paints and brush/palette knife rendering. Fashion is already in a cycle of new forms replacing the old. It has less of the conflict over this process than art has had. This allows it to generate innovation with great efficiency. Thus, fashion has the potential to carry the aims of the avant-garde forward and vice versa. Already, there has been a massive decentralization of the creative spark of fashion, via the internet. Young people generate ideas and share them widely without the slightest need for a 'house' of fashion or a show. There is an existing formal structure for the dissemination and diffusion of products and messages well in place and a ready audience for them as well [12].

Avant-garde in the nutshell is art meet fashion, art getting married to fashion, an expression and interpretation of what a designer envisions fashion in his or her mind's eye at a season and period, bringing back the past, although living in the present and a forecast to the future. To wits, avant-garde is very important to designers especially students, since it brings out the creativity inside out, what is most important is, schools being able to teach and differentiate avant-garde front houte couture, for there is a line between the two. This study, therefore, experiment with different types of fabrics and other unconventional materials to demonstrate and reinforce the concept of avant-garde as a viable and creative approach to fashion practices in Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana.

2. Materials and Methods

This section outlines the general procedure and material collaboration of the project. Three different sets of materials were used for the experimentations. The first set of material was a combination of crepe satin and satin organza in two shades of green. Greige fabric was used for the second set of designs and some colouration was introduced on the fabric to enhance the appeal. The greige fabrics were combined because of their draping characteristics and a number of peacock feathers were used to trim the garment. In the third set of designs, Hollow Conjugated Siliconized Polyester Staple Fibre (HCSPSF) was used for the production. These are bonded artificial fibres that come in a roll and have relatively light weight. The fibres when cut, has thick edges so blanket stitches was worked on the edges to make them thin. Beads were used to trim the garment to give a sparkling effect.

2.1. Mood Board

The mood board comprises assortment of peacock images, plastic materials and colour swatch. The peacocks were selected because of their large, iridescent tail feather plumage. Even though the tail is the most widely recognized feature of peacocks, only the males have these beautiful tail colourings to attract female partners. Some species have a plumage that is smaller than the commonly known blue peacock that originated from Indian. Aside the attraction of the plumage, it also used to discourage predators because peacocks appear bigger [15]. The mood board served as a source of reference and spin-off for colour, shapes, fabrics or materials and accessories. Figure 1 is the mood board for this experimentation.
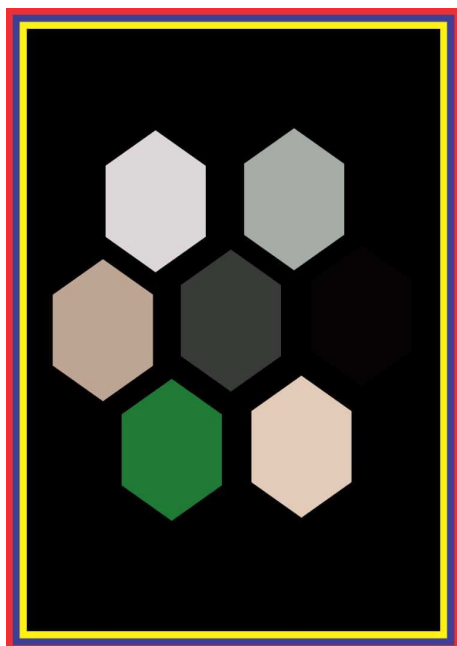
Figure 1. *Mood board.*

Figure 2. *Colour ways.*

Figure 3. *Material Board.*

2.2. Design Project One

2.2.1. Design Analysis

Garment two is asymmetric with both shoulder and waist darts maintained and converted into a dart equivalent seam line. It is a bustier dress with one part of the dress cut to knee level, slashed up and spread out to produce some kind of fullness, a godet has been inserted in the fullness to give more elaborate fullness. The back view of the garment is also an asymmetric design with both shoulder and waist darts maintained and converted into a dart equivalent seam line with the hem of the dress shaped from one side to the hem of the side seam, it has an opening at the centre front of the dress and a zip fastening.
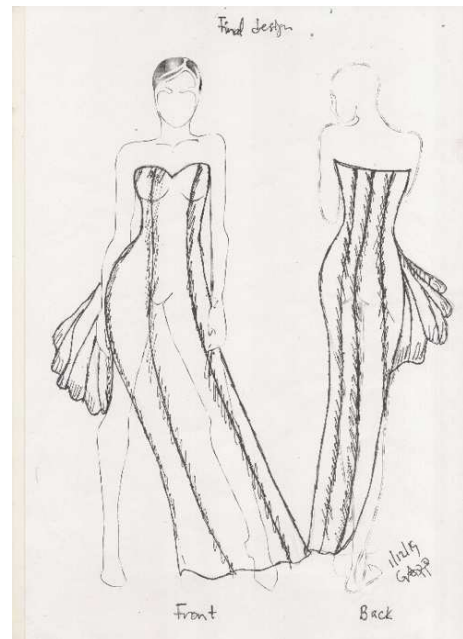

Figure 4. *Sketches.*

Figure 5. *Colour rendering – project one.*

2.2.2. Working Process

Patterns were made by the drafting method; fashion fabric and lining were cut. Vilene was attached to the wrong side of lining. Garment pieces were together, a zip fastener was attached and lining joined to the edge of the bustier at the right and turned to the wrong side. Seams and raw edges were over locked.
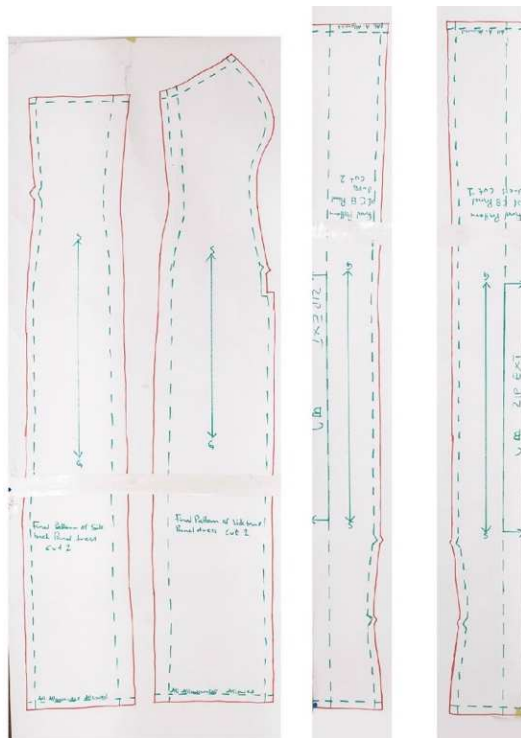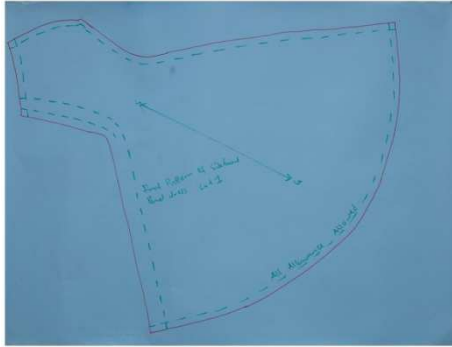
2.2.3. Patterns

Figure 6. Patterns.

2.2.4. Finished Designs: Project One

Figure 7. Side view – project one.

Figure 8. Front view – project one.

Figure 9. Back view – project one.

2.3. Design Project Two

2.3.1. Design Analysis

Garment five is an asymmetric sleeveless caftan with a round neck, slit opening and a hood. There is a diamond cut

shape cut around the stomach area of the caftan with straps arranged beneath. The front hem of the caftan has a concave shape. The back also has a triangle shape created around the waist area and the hem of the caftan extended to form a tail. The caftan has a yoke at the shoulder area. The trouser is cut to the knee level with a pleated flounce attached to the knee. The waist of the trouser is finished using casing technique.

2.3.2. Working Process

Patterns were obtained and used to cut fashion fabric. Shoulders of caftan were joined and hood attached to the neckline of caftan. A slit opening was made at the centre front of caftan and finished with a facing. Straps were arranged at the cut edges of the caftan and were stitched. The waist of the trousers was finished with a casing and a loop. A pleated flounce was made and attached to the ¾ shorts to form a full trouser; parts of the garment were sprayed with paint to decorate it. Masking tape was used to block parts of the garment that didn't need the paint.
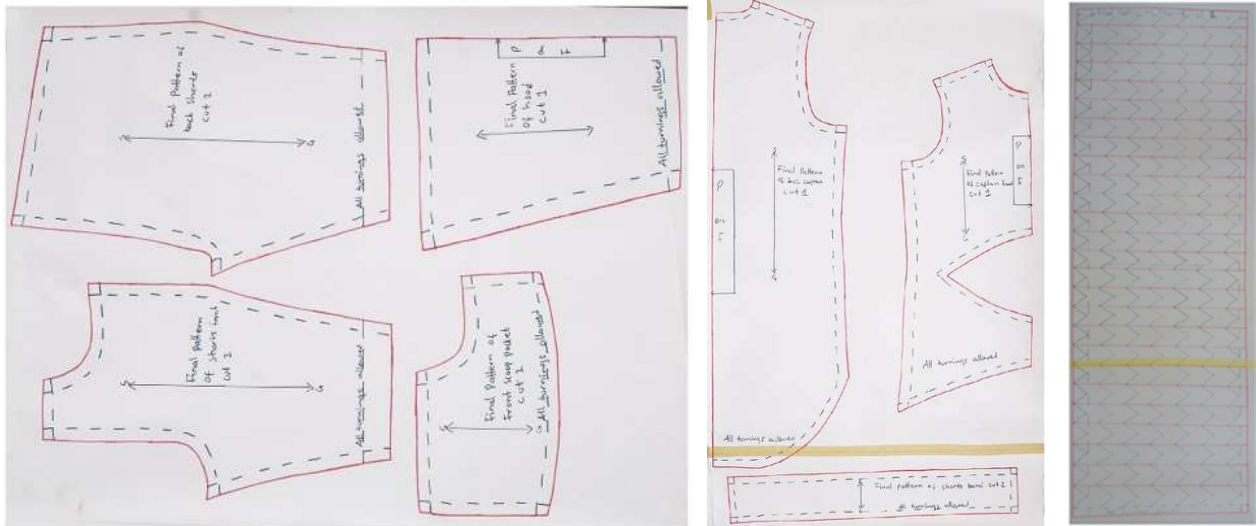

Figure 10. Colour rendering - project two.

2.3.3. Patterns

Figure 11. Patterns.

2.3.4. Finished Designs: Project Two

Figure 12. Front view - project two.

Figure 13. Side view- project two.

Figure 14. Back view – project two.

2.4. Design Project Three

2.4.1. Design Analysis

It's a symmetric design with both underarm and waist darts maintained and the front shoulders extended above shoulder level, it has a keyhole neck line with a seam joining the bodice to the skirt. The waist dart of the front skirt has been released and there is a slash from the hem of the skirt up to a point on the thigh on the dart line. The back view of the garment has only a strap joining the side seams of the front bodice which serves as a fastening. The waist dart is maintained and it has a seam line at the centre back of the skirt and a continuous strap at the waist which serves as fastening.

Figure 15. Sketches – project three.

Figure 16. Colour Rendering.

2.4.2. Working Process

A skirt was cut in an "A" line shape with a gray baft which served as an underlining for the HCSPSF. The dart lines of the front skirt were slashed up to the thigh and edges finished with blanket stitches. Patterns of different sizes were obtained which was used to cut the HCSPSF which is serving as the fashion fabric. Each of the cut fibres was neatened using the blanket stitches; they were then arranged and stitched on the "A" line skirt. The front bodice was also cut with the gray baft (double layer), darts were held and layers stitched and turned inside out from the waist line; the fibre was cut and neatened with a blanket stitch. A strap was inserted at both side seams which will be fastened at the back; a Cane was inserted into the wings to enable it to stand when worn; the bodice was attached to the skirt by hand using a back stitch.
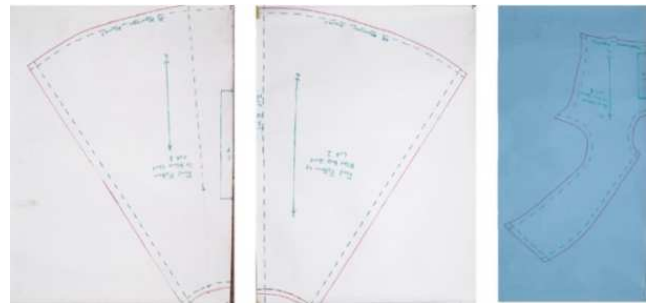
2.4.3. Patterns

Figure 17. Patterns.

2.4.4. Finished Designs: Project Three

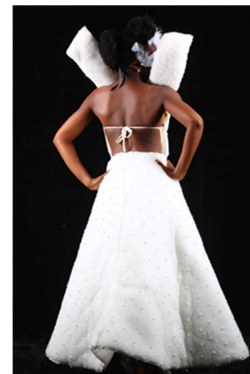*Figure 18. Front view – project three.*

Figure 19. Back view – project three.

Figure 20. *Side view - project three.*

3. Findings and Discussion

The central inspiration for the various garments made in this project was the peafowl and that informed the creation of the mood board which consists of different image compositions of the peafowl. The colours for the designs were also derived from the cocktail of colours associated with the peafowl. Design notes were taken from the mood board; both negative and positive and were used to create different designs. The designs were fitted on human figures, rendered in silhouette and colour was applied before real production. The different types of materials and their properties that were explored and used for the garments were taken into consideration and consist of HCSPSF, greige, crepe satin and organza satin and accessories.

In all, twenty garments and accessories were made from the various experiments; four with greige for male figures, another four with satin organza and crepe satin for the females and then three were made with the HCSPSF also for females and the remaining items were face masks and other accessories. The greige was decorated with paint using the spraying technique; the HCSPSF which had thick edges was secured with blanket stitch to reduce the thickness and give it fine edges. Accessories such as mask, crown, giant bow tie and fascinators were made to compliment the garments. The mask was made with leather, feathers, paper and beads; the crown was made with fibre, beads and comb; the fascinators were made from crepe satin, feathers, straw and comb; and the giant bow was sculpted from creep satin, straw and feathers. The colours for the collections were carefully selected from the mood board to depict the colours of the peacock, the two shades of green were chosen to achieve harmony and at the same time variety in terms of colour intensity. Stripes of hues in the shades of yellow, red, blue, orange, and green were used in decorating the greige fabric. Since the greige fabric comes in a seemingly boring off-white colour, introducing multiple colours in decorative pattern made the design much colourful and aesthetically pleasing to best represent the colourful features of a peacock. The third collection depicted in solely white, was inspired by the white peacock.

The finished garments were showcased at two fashion show events in Takoradi and Accra. In Takoradi they were showed as part of the Technique Style Fashion Show 2019, organized by the Department of Fashion Design and Technology, Takoradi Technical University. They were also part of the runway of the Portrait Reality Show 2019 in Accra organized by Exquisite Modelling Empire. The collection made a good impression on the patrons of both shows. Figure 21 and Figure 22 are images from the Technique Style Fashion Show 2019.

Figure 21. *Technique Style Show 2019.*

Figure 22. *Technique Style Show 2019.*

As indicated above, were moved from the confines of the academic environment to a typical fashion run way scenario pitching the works against other designers as part of the runway of the Portrait Reality Show 2019 in Accra. The show was organised by Exquisite Modelling Empire. The collection made a good impression on the patrons of both shows. Figure 23 and Figure 24 are images from the Portrait Reality Show 2019.

Figure 23. *Portrait Reality Show 2019.*

Figure 24. Portrait Reality Show 2019.

4. Conclusion

Creativity is a difficult concept to conceptualize in the main stream curriculum of fashion design and likewise in the fashion apprenticeship programmes as practice in Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana. Meanwhile, creativity in fashion design is the principle upon which new design concepts could be developed and translated into products. The avant-garde designs produced in this study has shown that through material manipulations, different types of designs could be produced from relatively cheaper and simple materials. It is anticipated that this study would serve as pointers to a more diverse fashion design trajectory. The material collaboration dimension is expected to encourage practitioners in fashion to try new materials and unorthodox approaches in creating new and engaging designs.

Creativity in the contemporary fashion space especially on the runway is motivated by the need to satisfy a massive craving for something out-of-the-ordinary. And this is what the avant-garde experiments in this project seeks to conjecture. With that mind set, most fashion practitioners can express their thoughts by creating new designs resulting in the rising wave of competitiveness in the fashion industry, especially on the runway. This is the main motivation for this study, that is to encourage fashion practitioners to focus on new designs to remain relevant and stay within the ambit of modern trends. The ultimate desire for fashion practitioners is to attract and sustain people's interest in what they do successively. The drive to dominate the design landscape and the runway is also key and to achieve that, designers must therefore, be versatile. This can only be achieved through a flux of activities in material exploration towards trend setting in fashion at the local level first then translated into something bigger at the international space. It is hoped that this study will inspire a wave of practices that would lead to practical, useful and diverse fashion products.

Appendix

Other Design Outcomes from the Project.

Figure 25. Front view of Design from crepe satin and satin organza.

Figure 26. Front view of Design from crepe satin and satin organza.

Figure 27. Front view of design from crepe satin and satin organza.

Figure 28. Side view of design from HCSPSF.

Figure 29. *Front view of design from HCSPSF.*

Figure 30. *Front view of design made form greige fabric.*

Figure 31. *Back view of design from HCSPSF.*

Figure 32. *Back view of design made form greige fabric.*

Figure 33. *Side view of design made form greige fabric.*

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