



KPMG IMPACT Podcast

Social Innovation in Taiwan with Kuan Chen

Time: 15.20 minutes

Participants: Ruth Lawrence, Senior Executive, KPMG Impact, KPMG Australia and Kuan Chen, Founder, Story Wear, Taiwan

Welcome to our KPMG IMPACT Podcast.

I'm Ruth Lawrence, a senior executive with KPMG Impact, a global initiative designed to build a more sustainable and resilient future.

Before we begin our conversation today, I'd like to acknowledge that many of us are meeting on land of our First Nations people. I would like to pay my respects to elders past, present, and emerging leaders and recognize their continuing connection to land, waters, and culture.

Each month, KPMG Impact is highlighting different sustainable development goals. And this month, we're highlighting SDG 5 (Sustainable Development Goals 5) – Gender Equality. Our story today, however, shows how interwoven the SDGs are. In addition to gender equity, we will also be talking about SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth, and SDG 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production.

So today I have the great pleasure of speaking to Kuan Chen, founder of Story Wear, a Taiwanese zero-waste fashion brand and social enterprise that employs disadvantaged women in Taiwan. We will be speaking about social innovation in Taiwan and the impact that Story Wear seeks to create in the world.

Good morning, Kuan!

Kuan Chen:

Hi, good morning!

Ruth Lawrence:

Can you tell us about where your interest in sustainable fashion and the circular economy began.

Kuan Chen:

I actually grew up in a fashion industry background. My family business is hosting this fashion brand in Taiwan. And I didn't realize that the fashion industry is actually the second-largest polluter in the world. And when I realized it, I felt like I have the obligation to do something about it, and somehow Story Wear was invented (edited).

And during this startup, we discovered a lot of connection with local (culture?) and also used circular method to adapt it into our business model.

Ruth Lawrence:

So it's been a long interest of yours then, with a family business? Can you describe Story Wear for our listeners?

Kuan Chen:

Story Wear is actually a zero-waste fashion brand. Everything we make is upcycled design. Everything, every resource, is from recycled textile garments and jeans. We use a lot of second-hand jeans to make our collection. And our manufacturers are women who are at a disadvantage locally (edited). While they are making our garments, we support them with money, financially (edited). And when people buy our products, they are actually solving the textile waste problem.

Ruth Lawrence:

Fantastic! So it's got that dual purpose of being sustainable and recyclable, as well as assisting people who are disadvantaged in your particular setting.

Kuan Chen:

Mmm.

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Ruth Lawrence:

And what led you to a social enterprise model?

Kuan Chen:

During our start up, at the beginning, I wasn't thinking about helping local disadvantaged women. But during the very start up we realized there's no factory willing to make our garments. So, since we need to disassemble jeans pair by pair, and then our fabric is not really a large quantity of manufactured pieces, there's no factory willing to make our clothing. And we found these local NPOs (non-profit organizations), 2–3 NPOs were willing to hand-make our products. So, from that we felt like there's a chance that we can work locally with these women.

Ruth Lawrence:

That's an interesting story and obviously you're contributing to those women's lives as well. And in terms of sustainability, I've heard that (illegible). Can you tell me about that?

Kuan Chen:

Sorry, you mean who made our garments?

Ruth Lawrence:

Yes. Set the label that actually goes with the idea of the garment.

Kuan Chen:

We have two organizations who mainly work to make the garments for us (edited). One is helping women, the theme of the NPO is 'women helping women' – so they are helping women who are being bullied in a marriage or find it quite hard to find a job in the society. There's another organization who help those with children who suffer from cerebral palsy children (heavy edit). So the women cannot go to work like others. They have to take care of kids 24 hours. Those are the main two NPOs working for us.

Ruth Lawrence:

Fantastic. That sounds like two very worthwhile organizations. Can you tell us about some of the challenges that you faced when you started turning your family business into a social enterprise.

Kuan Chen:

When we first started our company – I don't really work with my family business; this is a brand new business model invented by myself. And it's really hard because it's not a traditional or a usual way to build up this kind of fashion brand. So from research into recycled textiles and garments and work with the NPO production (units). Since they are not a professional manufacturer, we need to educate them and then set out a really good system for costing down.

It's quite hard in Asia; people don't have knowledge that the fashion industry is that polluting. So at the same time, we need to educate the public about the textile industry and fashion industry. Those periods are really hard – we need to make the product but also educate the public.

Ruth Lawrence:

Its sounds like quite a challenging beginning to start the organization. When you were educating the public in Taiwan about the fashion industry and sustainability, what sort of tactics did you use? How did you get your message out?

Kuan Chen:

For us, we want to link eco-friendly products with fashion products together because in Asia if something is really sustainable it looks really plain and then not fun at all. (Illegible sentence) But we are a fashion brand. So people, when they saw us, it's like: "Oh! They are the denim fashion brand! It's cool. It's chic (edited)." But when they found out the story behind it, they were really fascinated: "Oh, it's quite inspiring."

So we host a lot of exhibitions and pop-up shops and we talk to people. Also, we go to a lot of lectures and workshops to allow people to do DIY workshops, for them to realize and understand the concept behind it.

Ruth Lawrence:

Yeah, you're demonstrating to people how they can do it themselves, as well as purchasing the garments as well.

I've heard that you also worked with KPMG in Taiwan at some stages. What role did they play?

Kuan Chen:

We have worked with KPMG for almost six months now. KPMG has helped us a lot (edited). KPMG is a world leading company, and when startups like us want to go into international markets or get ready to become a more international or more stable company, this foundation, they help us a lot by consulting with us about how to manage internal systems (edited).

Ruth Lawrence:

So linking you up with other people. And has part of that been about growing and going to scale. What have you found helped you go to scale?

Kuan Chen:

We have been working with one and two really big companies in Taiwan so far. So the project will be launched in April – the project I was talking about, that we invent this cradle-to-cradle products. This product will be selling at the biggest convenience store in Taiwan. So people will understand what cradle-to-cradle products look like and they will understand the concept behind it (edited).

Ruth Lawrence:

Can you tell our listeners a bit more what that product is? Are you able to say that before the launch?

Kuan Chen:

Yeah, well, if the product is launching after April, which I can't see it!

But the thing is, why it is cradle-to-cradle is because we know a lot of recycled plastic, synthetic textile that we make into garments. But in Taiwan, there's a brand new technique that makes zippers and buttons with recycled plastic (edited). Imagine a shirt with buttons (made) of recyclable plastic. It's a single resource. When I finish these shirts, I can just put them into recycle bins. This is an eternal product lifecycle.

Ruth Lawrence:

Amazing! That's very inspiring. I haven't heard of that technology before. I really look forward to that launch. What have been your greatest successes during creation of Story Wear?

Kuan Chen:

We were the Taipei Fashion Week designers and we were launched at the Vogue Australia magazine, which stated that we are a social enterprise and fashion designer. Also, we have inspired a lot of companies to join us and understand more about sustainable fashion (edited).

Ruth Lawrence:

Congratulations, Kuan! That's very inspiring. And what would you say is critical to your success? That's really played a part.

Kuan Chen:

I think the people in our whole team. From the very beginning, we go to this recycle factory, talk to the people to give us jeans and textile. And also the manufacturers, the women who make the garment for us. It's a really difficult process that you need

to disassemble the jeans and then put it together. It's hard and long hours of work, but they are willing to play the part and help us to achieve this (edited). And even though with longer hours, the cost should be higher, for them it's like they will only need to use their scales to solve the environmental problem (not understandable). So, we work really close and trust each other and help each other to grow the business.

Ruth Lawrence:

And how about the future, Kuan? What's your vision for Story Wear?

Kuan Chen:

So for us, we really want to let the international market know that there is a sustainable fashion brand like us in Taiwan, because in Asia there are few companies like us in Japan and Hong Kong but not that much. So, we really want the international global market to understand that in Taiwan we're really good at making textiles.

I think Taiwan is the third-largest synthetic garment maker in the world (heavy edit). We have a really advanced scale to make textiles. And from making textiles to us – we are an upcycled designer (edited). And this can be a really good demonstration for the world that we can be a really sustainable fashion industry. An example for people that Taiwan is actually an example for others to look into (edited).

Ruth Lawrence:

Thank you so much Kuan, that's been very inspiring. And congratulations on all your work and (for) taking the whole idea of sustainable fashion and also helping mothers and women who are disadvantaged through employment in this sustainable venture. I am sure all our listeners today will be inspired by your drive and your vision.

My guest today has been Kuan Chen, founder of Story Wear, Taiwan. Thank you all for listening and I hope this discussion has challenged you to think about where we can all create impact within our own communities.