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REFRAMING WASTE AT ABURI COMMUNITY, GHANA: ART AS A RESPONSE TO URBAN CONSUMERISM

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Abstract

This creative, art-based study, underpinned by a phenomenological design, employs a pragmatic approach to propose an alternative solution to solid waste and the associated pollution. In this contemporary era characterised by urbanisation, industrialisation, and high consumerism, waste generation cannot be overlooked as a critical issue in the global sustainability discourse. This interventionist study investigates the socio-economic and ecological impacts of dominant solid waste materials in the Aburi community, with particular attention to the effects of inadequate management strategies. In this context, four interconnected investigative concerns were addressed by integrating sustainability ideals and aesthetic principles, thereby unifying theoretical and practical dimensions. This qualitative research, underpinned by Behavioural Change, Transformative Learning, and Eco-aesthetic theories, examined the perspectives of purposefully recruited participants using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Data were generated through personal interviews and focus group discussions, while both participant and non-participant observations were employed to elicit insights beyond verbal interpretations across the study's phases. The conclusions drawn from the various chronological phases of the study, including interpretations from the participants, perspectives, and the researchers' observations, underscore the study's potential to foster the recontextualisation of waste for aesthetic and sustainability significance.

Keywords: *Upcycled art, sustainability, aesthetics, sociocultural transformations.*

1. Introduction

Recontextualisation of discarded materials as art captures diverse cultural and historical narratives across global art practice. This approach echoes earlier movements such as Pop Art and others contemporaneous with the Euro-American modernist tradition, and, grounded in avant-gardism, is characterised by experimentation with non-conventional media to engage sociocultural and environmental issues (Roth et al., 2020). Incorporation of discarded materials in art not only serves as a medium but is also embedded with psychovisual messages such as renewal, resistance, and many more. With the current growing global concern with environmental issues, the repurposing of discarded materials as art not only provides a pragmatic solution to waste accumulation through physical redaction, or creates ecological awareness with the compositional elements, but also conceptually portrays the importance of revisiting the abandoned and integrating with the present to inform the future, forming the conceptual basis of sustainability. It also symbolically explores the evolving meaning of waste within contemporary society, positioning discarded materials not as an endpoint but as the beginning of a new narrative (Anuardo et al., 2022).

Amid globalisation, urbanisation, industrialisation, and the high consumption of goods and services, waste generation cannot be overlooked as a critical issue in the global sustainability discourse. As the focus of this study, solid waste is an undeniably urban issue (Baba-Nalikant et al., 2023). The ever-increasing generation of solid waste, especially municipal solid waste, remains among issues that raise global concerns (Awafo et al., 2023), due to some potential threats to the biophysical environment and socio-economic wellbeing. This unsafe phenomenon has, over the years, warranted attention and action from various fields through academic and non-academic studies, undertaken by individuals as well as governmental and nongovernmental organisations, aimed at providing theoretical and pragmatic solutions to this complex issue. It is important to note that although developed countries with more urbanised communities produce more solid waste than developing countries, the consequential impacts are less severe in developed countries (World Bank Group, 2022) due to advances in waste valorisation management strategies. Adipah and Kwame (2019) argued that these imbalances in the production and impacts of solid waste are due to limited technical expertise and inadequate funding for valorisation processes in developing countries. Unsustainable solid waste management practices detrimentally affect biophysical diversity across various environments (Abubakar et al., 2022), yet the predominant management strategies are incineration, landfilling, and others, with consequential environmental footprints, especially in developing countries like Ghana.

The consequential impacts, when solid waste is not sustainably managed, include a reduction of the aesthetic value of the urban spaces, leaching that leads to the spread of odors as well as air and water-borne diseases caused by some pathogenic bacteria such as Escherichia Coli, Streptococcus Pyogenes and many others (Edjabou, Moller and Christensen, 2012; Kirama and Mayo 2016; Asamoah et al., 2022). In response to the previous statement, on the flip side, one can state that, apart from improving the aesthetic quality of an urban space, proper solid waste management also reduces the risk of pathogen accumulation and disease spread (Anuardo et al., 2022; Asamoah et al., 2022). The literature states that the waste sector contributes significantly to global emissions through incineration, composting, and other management methods, as reported by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Gautam & Agrawal, 2021). Additionally, smoke and the smell from incinerated waste debris (burning debris) can potentially result in sinus and vision problems, due to the presence of harmful substances such as particulate matter, gases such as sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides, volatile organic compounds (VOCs), and other toxic chemicals (Ferronato & Torretta, 2019; Asamoah et al.,

2022). Moreover, research by Abdel-Shafy and Mansour (2018) revealed that the populations living closer to landfill facilities give birth to babies with low weight, and some are affected by cancerous infections. It is also important to note that leaching of toxic chemicals into the soil during decomposition reduces soil fertility and poses health risks to soil organisms and plants. From the discussions herein, one must understand that waste becomes a threat to the fauna and flora inhabiting the biophysical environment only when it is improperly managed (Asamoah et al., 2022). Although many developed countries have advanced in the technological means of transforming solid waste into renewable energy and other useful products, it is important to note that identifying a valorisation strategy with minimal or no residual detrimental impacts is crucial to achieving an efficient solid waste management strategy. Over the past few decades, a wake-up call has emerged in many developing countries, calling for new and efficient solutions to solid waste and associated problems, as alternatives to traditional approaches. However, the appropriateness of the solid waste management strategy depends on the reactions of the material's component elements, the impacts of the end product, and the residual substances emitted and their effects on the biophysical environment. In the effort to find sustainable solutions to the issue of solid waste accumulation and allied pollution, a combination of theoretical studies and technological practical experimentations can lead to the discovery of innovative and efficient strategies that unveil hidden value in what has been considered waste; however, extending the lifespan of these products (Abdel-Shafy & Mansour, 2018).

Upcycling, as a valorisation approach categorised under broader recycling strategies, focuses on the quality of the outcome and is highly valued for its potential to integrate sustainability with innovation, creativity, and sociocultural impact. Despite the controversies surrounding the concept of upcycling and the process-based categorisation of recycling, procedurally, upcycling mostly overlapped with secondary recycling, as the material transformation is carried out mechanically or creatively, albeit into higher-value products. However, upcycling cannot be strictly classified under any of the four classifications or the classical recycling categories defined by bodies such as the International Organisation for Standardisation. Upcycling focuses on the quality of the outcome. Therefore, Sung (2015) described upcycling as a form of recycling in which the value or quality of the material or product is enhanced through repurposing or creative reuse. Valorisation includes a product's usability and aesthetic value. As a result, upcycling has received growing attention across various fields of knowledge, as well as professions and businesses (Lindeberg, 2020). The scope of upcycling encompasses “trash art” (upcycled art) and other creative practices that transform discarded or unfashionable objects into aesthetically appealing, contextually infused, and timeless works of value.

This interventionist study investigates the socio-economic and ecological impacts of dominant solid waste materials in the Aburi community, with particular attention to the effects of inadequate management strategies. The study further aims to collect and innovatively transform discarded solid materials into upcycled art, thereby recontextualising waste as aesthetic expressions that transcend temporal and cultural boundaries. It is essential to note that, despite increasing global awareness of upcycled art as an effective, research-oriented creative practice that engages environmental and cultural concerns, this area remains underrepresented in the literature on solid waste management in Aburi. In this context, four interconnected investigative concerns were addressed by integrating sustainability ideals and aesthetic principles, thereby unifying theoretical and practical dimensions. The study is guided by four key investigative questions:

1. What are the potential causes and detrimental impacts of solid waste in the Aburi community?

2. Where and how can discarded solid materials be collected?
3. How can the collected solid materials be transformed into upcycled art?
4. What is the significance of the resulting upcycled artworks?

2. Review of an Underlying Theory

2.1 Eco-aesthetics Theory

This philosophical approach explores the relationship between aesthetics, human existence and ecology (Gambaro, 2020). This theory supports coexistence, quality of life, and progress through respect for the environment, thereby fusing aesthetics with ecological and sustainability issues. This justifies how upcycled art allies with the principles of eco-aesthetics theory, as a waste management strategy that promotes harmonious coexistence and sustainability. Eco-aesthetics theory resonates with Arnold Berleant's (an American philosopher) approach to aesthetics, which acknowledges reciprocal interactions between organisms and their environment (Berleant, 1988). From research by Haruna, Oppong, and Marful (2018), Eco-aesthetics theory sheds light on the interconnections among ecology (biodiversity), aesthetics, culture, and sustainability. In other words, it is focused on harmony, coexistence, and responsibility in the relationship between humans and the nature we are immersed in, and also incorporates artistic and cultural practices. From this perspective, cultural and artistic practices that incorporate ecological values, such as upcycled art of this kind, aimed at raising awareness on the impacts of solid waste and as a possible mitigation strategy, as well as shifting attitudes towards sustainable living, are closely tied to eco-aesthetics theory.

2.2 Waste to Art: A Global Perspective

Moxey (1994) clearly explains that artworks are mimetic; they are not the exact representations of the real world but rather value-laden interpretations that vary among cultures and periods. Therefore, as a mirror to society, art reflects and responds to the sociocultural and political conditions, as well as ecological dynamics of its time. In the early 20th century, the experience of World War I also resulted in various artistic approaches and explorations of diverse media, including the repurposing of waste materials and readymade objects (Beghetto, 2022). This epoch marks a turning point in art history, laying the groundwork for various avant-garde movements including, Surrealism, Pop Art, and Fluxus, among others (Roth et al., 2020). The emergence of this artistic style was a way to critique and reject the cultural and artistic norms that preceded World War 1, reflecting emancipation from pre-war cultural stereotypes, and a response to the horrors and cruelty of the war. As stated in the literature, the use of waste materials and readymade objects as a medium for art began as a radical critique of the Western canon (Singh, 2023). In other words, it is a departure from the Western Standards, where idealised forms and standardised craftsmanship, inspired by Greco-Roman aesthetics, are prioritised.

Since this period the utilisation of waste materials and readymade objects in artistic creations has been aesthetically viewed from different perspectives (Singh, 2023). Artists employ diverse approaches, such as collage, assemblage, photomontage, and many other innovative techniques, in their executions. Despite the controversies this approach has generated globally over the years, the creative reuse of discarded and found objects has gained widespread acceptance due to its alignment with contemporary art ideals. Although the 'waste to art' approach is currently globally practised, the conceptual and aesthetic underpinnings vary among artists. Some artists focus on social commentary, some explore materiality for experimental purposes, while others focus on environmental activism. However, their

techniques and philosophical underpinning depend on personal experience, as well as cultural and other contextual influences. From this perspective, Odoh, Odoh and Arikpe's (2014) research revealed that “Transforming waste and found objects into works of art imbued with new meaning, value, and function requires a fertile imagination and a great deal of artistic freedom”. This statement clearly emphasises that the ability to discover an artistic value in a waste or discarded object requires a great deal of creativity and insight. This resonates with a statement by Ukeles (1969), as cited in Lithgow and Wall (2019), the aestheticisation of abject material not only adds value to the material but also to the related labour. This artistic practice requires seeing beyond the ordinary to reinterpret the object’s meaning, form, and function in a new, aesthetically engaging way. Based on that fact, Odoh, Odoh and Arikpe (2014) stated that this approach to art has really proven the power of imagination and has also truly demonstrated the limitless nature of creativity and innovation.

3. Methods

This qualitative study is underpinned by phenomenological design principles and a creative and art-based approach that integrates qualitative, subjective theoretical data with studio practice. Within a phenomenological framework, the study explores participants' in-depth lived experiences, perceptions, and attitudes towards solid waste to capture diverse perspectives and encourage critical reflection (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). A philosophical paradigm that aligns well with this kind of study aimed at a descriptive understanding of an experienced phenomenon is interpretivism (Pulla and Carter, 2018). The study, moreover, aligns with the praxis paradigm, which integrates creative practice and theoretical documentation to draw tentative conclusions (Marshall, 2010). As an interventionist approach to the solid waste issue, grounded in transformative learning, eco-aesthetics, and behavioural change theories, it seeks not only to understand the views of the participants (Coemans et al., 2017), but also to engage them in recontextualisation of the discarded and responding to the adverse implications of solid waste within various sociocultural contexts. In the data collection process, the purposefully selected participants, through purposive and snowball sampling techniques, were engaged in personal interviews and focus group discussions to elicit their in-depth experiences and insights into solid waste and its impacts on socioeconomic dynamics in the Aburi community. Moreover, participant and non-participant observations enabled the researchers to expose the unfolding processes and behavioural patterns across various phases of the study.

The creative and art-based component of the study, as a methodological tool, encouraged participants to engage critically with creative practice as a pragmatic solution to the issue of solid waste. This approach elicits insights beyond verbal interpretations (Dunn and Mellor, 2017). In this context, it is a demonstrative step to foster reflective learning and as a catalyst for behavioural change. The conceptual undertone of the forms and the compositional elements, which were semiotically analysed through the integration of practical and theoretical knowledge as well as sustainability and aesthetic principles, unveiled the contextual relevance and transformative potentials of the artworks.

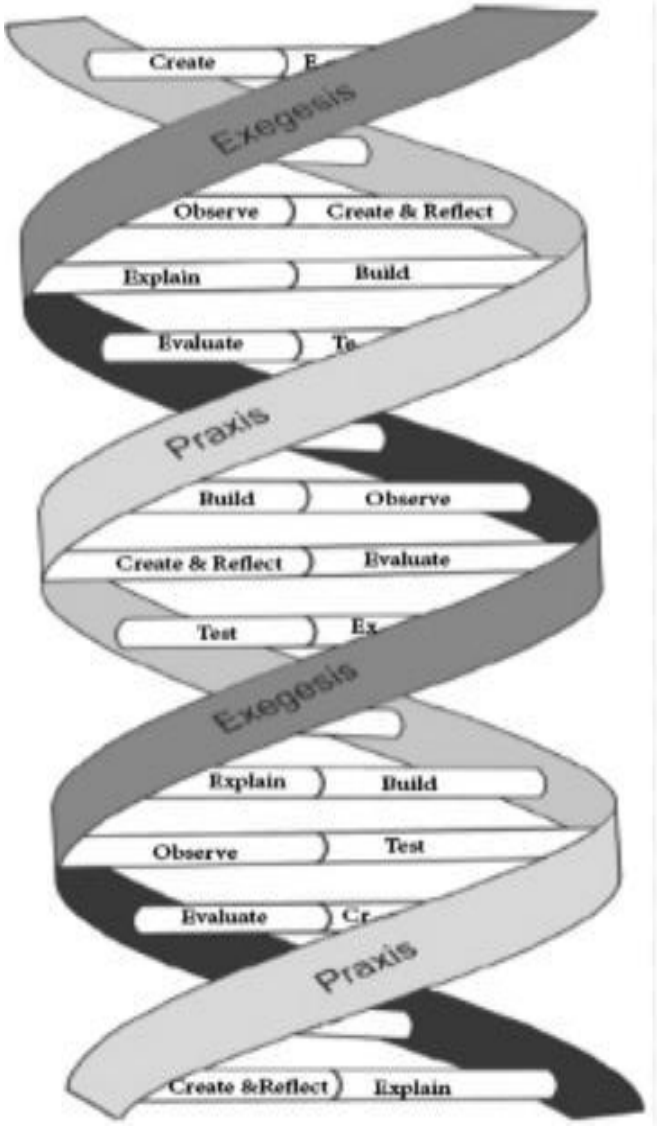

Figure 1: *Double Helix of Praxis-Exergesis Model for Creative and Arts-Based Research*
Source: Marshall (2010)

As a study that harmoniously integrates practical and theoretical dimensions, the execution procedure aligns with the Double Helix of Praxis-Exegesis model employed by Marshall (2010) as illustrated in figure 1. In this model, the creative or practical activity and the theoretical interpretation are intertwined and inform each other across the study's chronological phases. As a model reflecting the interconnection between theoretical reflection and creative practice, the knowledge generated contextualises continuous interaction between the artistic expressions and reflective interpretations. Although some recruited participants volunteered throughout the project's phases, including the collection and processing of discarded solid materials, the practical execution of the artworks was carried out solely by the lead author, a practicing artist. After the successful execution of the upcycled works, they were presented to the general public in an immersive exhibition co-curated by the authors. A participatory dialogic experience was created for both recruited participants and non-participants. However, it is important to note that data collection across the various study phases was limited to the recruited participants, as detailed in Table 1. The selection of participants aligns with the assertion by Creswell and Creswell (2018) that qualitative research does not impose rigid sampling restrictions. Consequently, individuals with in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon

and a willingness to share their experiences constituted the basis for sample selection. However, drawing on this inherent reflexivity, the researchers recruited thirty (30) participants, including one (1) environmentalist, two (2) waste pickers, two (2) traditional council members, eight (8) artisans, five (5) hospitality business owners, five (5) traders, two (2) teachers, and five (5) school children.

Table 1: The Sample Description

Aburi Community	Environ-mentalist and waste pickers	Traditional council members	Artisans	Hospitality business owners	Traders	Teachers	School children
Male	3	2	6	2	1	1	2
Female	0	0	2	3	4	1	3
Total	3	2	8	5	5	2	5

Source: Authors' construct (2026)

3.1 The Study Area

3.1.1 The Aburi Community in the Eastern Region of Ghana

Aburi forms part of the Akuapem South Municipal District in the Eastern Region of Ghana, which has a population of 76,922, comprising 37,101 males and 39,821 females (GPHC, 2021). It is the capital of Akwapim South Municipal District, which is one of the twenty-six (26) Assemblies that form the Eastern Region of Ghana. This district was formerly part of Nsawam/Adoagyri Municipality until it was separated on the 6th February, 2012. Therefore, it shares boundaries with Nsawam/Adoagyri Municipality to the West, Kpone-Katamanso to the South-East, Ga East Municipality to the South, and Akwapim North Municipality to the North-East. It is geographically located in the Southeastern part of the Eastern Region of Ghana, specifically, between latitudes 5.45 ° N and 5.58 ° N and longitude 0.0 ° W. See figure 1.

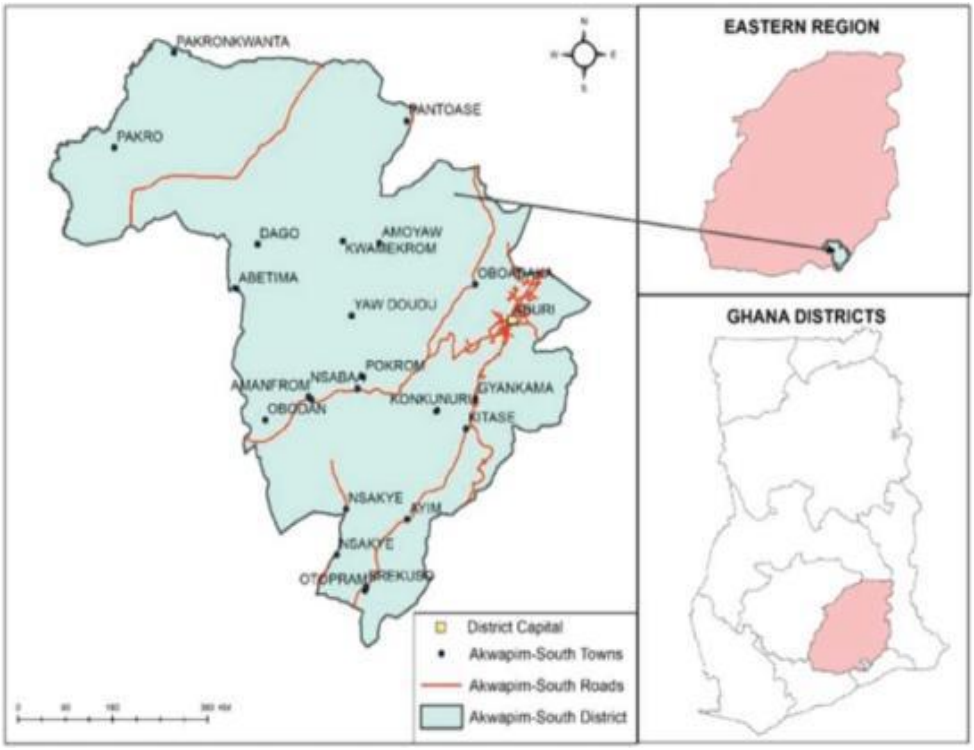

Figure 2: *Map of Akuapem South Municipal Assembly*
Source: Ofori-Appiah, Onumah, and Asem (2021)

Aburi has a mountainous landscape with high vegetation cover. Although Aburi is a mountainous area, the richness of its soil in nutrients supports the growth of a variety of food and cash crops. Therefore, farming has been one of the indigenous professions for livelihood. Moreover, the sustainability of the popular Botanical Gardens also attests to the richness of the land in terms of nutrients. Apart from agriculture, tourism has been the backbone of the economy of the Aburi Traditional Area. Aburi has been one of Ghana's tourist destinations; therefore, Haruna (2023) described the area as a haven for both domestic and international tourists. Aburi has a popular and fantastic Botanical Gardens which covers about 64.8 hectares of land, housing diverse species of exotic and indigenous plants, providing a cooler and refreshing climate, as well as a lush landscape (Debrah, 2005). This garden was established in the year 1890 to accommodate various species of medicinal, tropical, and ornamental botany. Since its establishment under the governorship of Sir William Brandford-Griffith, in the then Gold Coast, the garden has served as a pioneering experimental agricultural station, as well as a botanical research and conservation center for education and ecotourism (Darrah, 2023). The key founding figures behind the establishment of these amazing gardens are Sir William Brandford-Griffith, the Governor of the British Colonial administration, and Dr. John Farrell Easmon, a medical doctor from Sierra Leone who doubled as a botanist. Apart from the two mentioned, Alexander Worthy Clerk, a Basel missionary and Jamaican Moravian, also played a significant role by supervising the clearing of the land used for the Gardens. Apart from the plants, the garden has also been a habitat for diverse kinds of insects, birds, as well as some mammalian and reptilian fauna. This botanical diversity offers a serene and refreshing atmosphere, attracting businesses in the hospitality industry, such as hotels, restaurants, vacation cabins, guest houses, and many others that support tourism.

Aside from the famous botanical garden, Aburi tourism appeal also stems from rich cultural events like the Odwira festival, as well as the thriving wood handicraft industry. Odwira festival is a yearly traditional event that takes place in September or October, involving a series of activities like spiritual purification rituals, durbars, and various other cultural celebrations, attracting foreign and local tourists. The wood handicraft market produces and exhibits an extensive array of high-quality wood crafts sold directly and indirectly to buyers across the globe. Tourism, as one of the key drivers of the global economy (Kalling, 2024), can be viewed from diverse perspectives with varied benefits (direct and indirect benefits). Although the revenue collected from visitors to the Botanical Gardens does not directly benefit the citizens of Aburi, these tourists do patronise the local handicraft business and the hospitality industry, thereby enhancing economic prosperity. Due to the serene and refreshing atmosphere in the Aburi vicinity, which is suitable for physical health activities, it has been one of the topmost venues for physical exercise for the citizens and people in the neighboring Greater Accra Region. Research by Amo et al. (2022) revealed that at least 145,340 hikers traveled through the Accra-Aburi mountains in a year for recreational and physical exercise. From the discussions herein, it is evident that tourism has been the driving force behind Aburi's economic growth, boosting local businesses, enhancing infrastructural development, and fostering cultural exchange. This proves the veracity of the report by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2020), stating that tourism is among the key drivers of the global economy.

Despite the positive aspects, these sectors and their associated activities significantly contribute to global solid waste generation (Baah, 2017). Due to the nature of these activities, they impact environmental sustainability. It is essential to note that reducing environmental hazards from waste generation is crucial for tourism sustainability (Crotts et al., 2022), as well as for related businesses. However, sadly, Aburi tourism and its impact on waste generation

and management, as well as that of the associated activities, have been researched less. Moreover, art as an innovative management strategy to curb the adverse impacts in Aburi, through re-purposing (upcycling), has not been given much attention in the literature. These are the areas this study seeks to explore. Upcycled art as a sustainable strategy of mitigating the accumulated waste and the allied environmental impacts would ensure the continued economic prosperity of tourism in the Aburi traditional area. This approach would moreover ensure a harmonious coexistence between economic development through tourism, hospitality, and the related businesses, and environmental sustainability.

4. Presentation of Results and Discussion of Findings

As a qualitative study underpinned by phenomenology and studio explorations, the collection of non-numerical data, data analysis, and the artistic execution were conducted concurrently. The dataset information was gathered through focus discussions and open-ended interviews with the recruited participants, as detailed in Table 2. Moreover, relevant literature was consulted to examine the etymological and historical antecedents, as well as the conceptual underpinnings of the compositional iconography embodied in the artistic executions. Participant and nonparticipant observational stances were adopted to examine the procedural stages of the artistic executions, the gestural and nonverbal responses of the participants, as well as the visual impacts of the solid waste phenomenon across different parts of the study. All the aforementioned techniques were utilised concurrently across the study's chronological phases, yielding credible data and rich, innovative, and complex artistic and non-artistic insights that informed the study's conclusion. After the artworks were successfully executed, an exhibition was scheduled for the 2nd May 2026 at the Aburi Craft Village, attracting 67 audience, including participants and non-participants.

Table 2: The Sample Description

Aburi Community	Environ-mentalist and waste pickers	Traditional council members	Artisans	Hospitality business owners	Traders	Teachers	School children
Male	3	2	6	2	1	1	2
Female	0	0	2	3	4	1	3
Total	3	2	8	5	5	2	5
Percentage	10%	6.66%	26.66%	16.66%	16.66%	6.66%	16.66%

Source: Authors' construct (2026)

4.1 What are the potential causes and detrimental impacts of solid waste in the Aburi community?

From the participants' perspectives, potential causes and detrimental impacts of solid waste in the Aburi community include: factors that contribute to its accumulation. Moreover, the dominant management practices, which are not significantly different from those in other communities in Ghana, and the reasons for their insufficiency and ineffectiveness were also discussed in the conversation. Some of the areas highlighted in the dialogue are:

- Tourism and the related businesses
- Recreational and Cultural events
- Handicraft businesses

When principal and auxiliary questions were posed to elicit information on the contributing factors for waste generation in the locality, tourism emerged as one of the known contributing factors. From the participants, although tourism boosts the local economy in various ways, its impact on waste accumulation cannot be denied.

People who visit Aburi and its neighbouring towns occasionally, drawn by the popular botanical gardens, handicraft village, and other tourist sites, also patronise the food and beverage industry, as well as the hospitality industry, resulting in corresponding waste. Responses from some art and craft producers revealed that increased tourism leads to higher demand for their products; consequently, as production intensifies, waste generation also increases. Waste generated from this sector includes textile scraps and leather waste arising from the production of various apparel products. These are some of the responses:

> *I think the waste becomes more during the tourist seasons, because a lot of people come here." (Hospitality business owner (A)- 2, 3, and 5, personal communication 14 March 2025). In fact, we get a lot of orders around this season, and all the other businesses too, so why not waste? It is part of it.*

Moreover, Aburi is a destination for those seeking a serene atmosphere for physical exercise, thereby attracting people from neighboring cities, including Accra. These people also engage in activities with waste implications. Some carelessly dispose of post-consumer solid items, including plastic and aluminum containers, which does not support environmental sustainability. The researchers took a non-participant stance to observe discarded solid waste along the roadside linking Accra and Aburi. See Figures 3, 4 and 5.

Figure 3: *Littered roadside along the Aburi-Accra road*
Source: Photographed by Samuel Asamoah (2026)

Figure 4: *Fitness activities along the Aburi-Accra road*
Source: Photographed by Samuel Asamoah (2026)

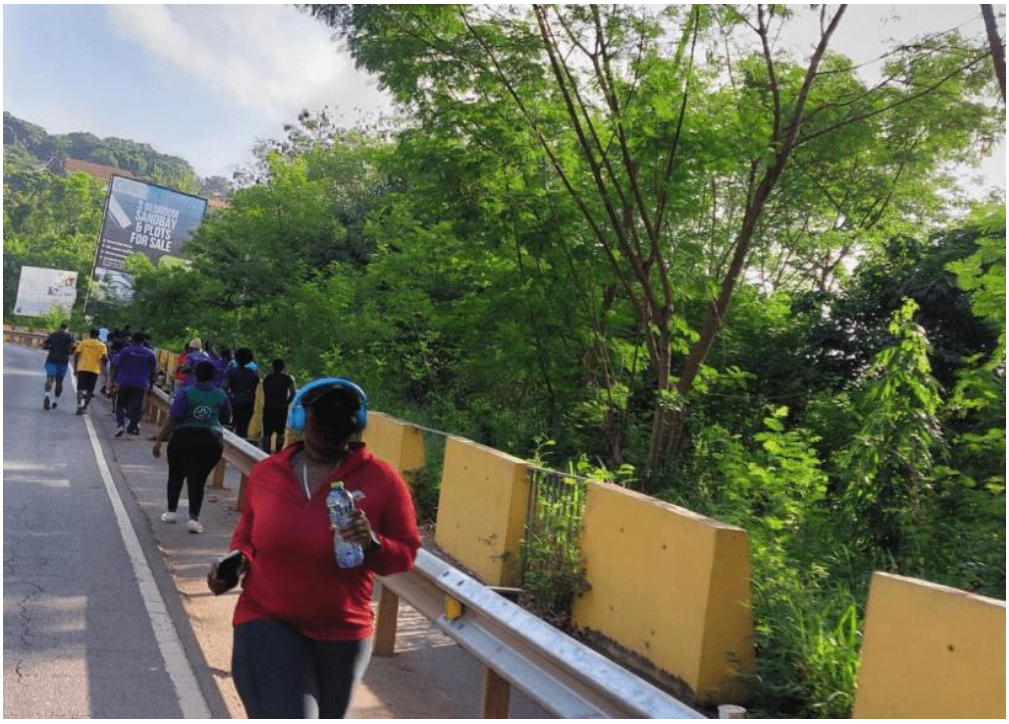

Figure 5: *Fitness activities along the Aburi-Accra road*
Source: Photographed by Samuel Asamoah (2026)

Regarding Recreational and Cultural Events, which are also interlinked with tourism, the participants cited the Odwira festival as an example. Based on their observations, this annual cultural event, held in September or October, attracts people from across the country and beyond, boosting the local economy through patronage of hospitality, handicraft, and other local businesses. However, despite the benefits, the consequences include increased solid waste production, particularly from the consumption of products with disposable packaging.

> *Another thing we can talk about is the Odwira festival, which makes this town full and all the hotels filled with Ghanaians and outsiders. And you know, when people travel to enjoy*

themselves, they take drinks and other things that will bring about waste.

Some traders among the participants recounted several instances when they encountered post-consumer aluminum cans, plastic packages, and promotional materials made from paper left behind after funerals and some recreational events. These are their responses:

When there is funeral, party, festival, or any other event, they leave a lot of waste behind, so we can say that is also a factor". You know these programmes come with food consumption, so can containers and bottles become very common.

It was also discovered in the conversations that the handicraft businesses, especially the fashion and apparel industries, achieve significant economic benefit or growth from cultural and recreational events. Many people get themselves new clothes to match the event vibe. However, the resulting waste, including leftovers and cut-off fabrics, negatively impacts social and environmental systems if not managed responsibly. Although some respondents cited wood waste as an example of solid waste from this sector, the research scope excludes it because of its environmental friendliness.

When questions about the management methods for solid waste in the community were posed, the two traditional methods (incineration and landfill) kept recurring throughout the conversation. However, the environmentalist among the participants provided education on the adverse effects associated with them, including the impacts of incineration on the atmosphere and issues related to the skin and respiratory systems. This finding aligns with research by Abubakar et al. (2022), which reveals that methane and other hazardous leachates emitted into the atmosphere through incineration and decomposition cause respiratory, skin, and other health problems, as well as global warming. Although some respondents were aware of recycling strategies, upcycled art was not well-known. Therefore, when upcycled art was proposed as an alternative management strategy, only a few of the respondents, specifically the artists, were aware of it. Even though none had ever explored this area, all the respondents in Aburi especially the artisans were eager to assist in diverse ways to make this intended project's concepts a reality, so they could take inspiration to address the issues associated with solid waste.

4.2 Where and how can discarded solid materials be collected?

Through conversations with the participants, appropriate locations for various discarded solid materials and those intended for disposal were identified. Since waste pickers also play a pivotal role in sanitation, two were recruited through snowballing, which facilitated the sourcing and separation of discarded solid materials. The waste pickers revealed that the majority of their collections were sourced from after tourism-related events and recreational and cultural events, such as festivals, funerals, and parties. The researcher, with the assistance of some participants, collected some waste materials along the roadside and from the fashion and other handicraft business owners. The waste materials collected include post-consumer food and beverage packages, as well as packages for other domestically used products such as cosmetics (perfumes, etc.) and insecticides, in the form of plastic, aluminum cans, and paper. There was also leather and textile waste, mostly collected directly from the dress and other apparel makers. See Figures 6 and 7. All the collected materials that required preliminary cleaning due to severe contamination were cleaned with the assistance of waste pickers before further cleaning and processing at the artist's studio.

The volume of each discarded solid materials collected from Aburi community was approximately 2,885kg of plastics, 57kg of paper, 289kg of textiles, 58kg of leather, and 210kg of aluminum, for a total of 3, 499kg.

Figure 6: Discarded can containers from Aburi were transported to the researcher's studio
Source: Researcher's Photograph (2023)

Figure 7: *Discarded textile materials from Aburi, transported to the researcher's studio*
Source: Researcher's Photograph (2025)

4.3 How can the collected solid materials be transformed into upcycled art?
All the discarded solid materials collected and transported to the artist's studio were thoroughly cleaned with detergent and antiseptic agents to eliminate any harmful contaminants they may have acquired. The paper and other materials that are not safe to immerse in water were cleaned using quasi-dry surface cleaning. After cleaning, all the varied solid materials were exposed to sunlight and air for thorough drying. See figures 8 and 9.

Figure 8: *Collected solid materials being washed for reuse*
Source: Photographed by Samuel Asamoah (2024)

Figure 9: *Discarded plastic materials are being dried under the sun after washing*
Source: Photographed by Samuel Asamoah (2024)

Other preparatory processes, including cutting, sizing, shaping, texturing, and experimental manipulations, were undertaken to make the materials suitable for the intended executions. These preparatory processes were undertaken with the assistance of some youths who regarded the activities as entrepreneurial opportunities and therefore took advantage of them during the execution period, and were duly incentivised. The execution of the upcycled works from the collected and processed discarded solid materials was not merely intended to explore alternative media for artistic creation, but also to convey a psychovisual message of resistance, renewal, revival, and transformation. This approach can be considered as a thoughtful exploration of the relationship between art and sustainability, as it recontextualises discarded materials into meaningful, innovative artistic expressions that communicate environmental, social, and economic narratives. Therefore, to develop creative expressions embedded with historical, cultural, and artistic significance, extensive consultation of relevant literature and experimental manipulations of the materials were undertaken. Moreover, there were reflections on the lifecycle of various solid materials and the ecological, social, and economic implications of contemporary consumption patterns and their accompanying narratives. However, across

the compositional iconography, there was an interplay of ancient philosophical symbols of diverse origins, such as Adinkra, Kemetic, and Alchemical symbols, alongside contemporary packaging symbols and digital iconography. See figures 10 and 11.

Other compositional elements incorporated references to the names of kingdoms and empires spanning different historical periods and temporal dimensions. The compositions also incorporated the names of wax-print fabrics commonly used during various cultural events. See Figure 12.

Figure 10: *Alchemical and Packaging symbols appropriated in upcycled art*
Source: Photographed by Samuel Asamoah (2025)

Figure 11: *Adinkra and Kemetic symbols appropriated in upcycled art*
Source: Photographed by Samuel Asamoah (2024)

Figure 12: *Names of wax-prints appropriated in upcycled art*
Source: Photographed by Samuel Asamoah (2026)

There were two main bodies of work executed: figurative portrait compositions and assembled abstract compositions. The portraits, executed through techniques such as layering, stapling, nailing, and gluing, symbolically referenced frequently overlooked patterns of consumption shaped by contemporary sociocultural dynamics associated with waste generation. See figures 13 and 14. The assembled abstractions, on the other hand, were executed through stitching, layering, and gluing, incorporating the mentioned iconography across temporal and cultural contexts to portray interconnectivity and dynamism. This is a means of fostering dialogue across the evolving variations of knowledge systems related to consumerism. See figures 15 and 16. Both approaches ultimately position artistic practice as both a creative process and a form of scientific research, and engage aesthetics, environmental, and historico-cultural significance.

Figure 13: *Samuel Prophask Asamoah, The world behind us, 2023, Discarded Plastic on wooden panel covered with canvas, 240cm X 240cm*
Source: Photographed by Samuel Asamoah (2023)

Figure 14: *Samuel Prophask Asamoah, Silent bloom Steady gaze, 2023, Discarded Plastic on wooden panel covered with canvas, 240cm X 240cm*
Source: Photographed by Samuel Asamoah (2023)

Figure 15: *Samuel Prophask Asamoah, Confluence of Cultures and Epochs, 2025, Discarded plastic textiles, and aluminium, 236cm X 305cm*
Source: Photographed by Samuel Asamoah (2025)

Figure 16: *Samuel Prophask Asamoah, The pride Possessions, 2025, Discarded plastic textiles, and aluminium, 254cm X 327cm*
Source: Researchers' Photograph (2025)

Following the successful completion of the artistic executions, the artworks were exhibited through an immersive installation that echoed the panoramic display tradition of the eighteenth century, in which the audience occupied the center of the exhibition environment. Nevertheless, the installation's contextual, participatory, and community-oriented nature situated it within contemporary twenty-first-century exhibition practices. The exhibition was scheduled on the 2nd May 2026, at the Aburi Craft Village. The title for the exhibition is "Gathering the Forgotten", which attracted around 67 audience members. See figures 17 and 18. A participatory dialogic experience created, evoked conversations among both recruited participants and non-participants, resulting in credible intellectual insights.

Figure 17: *Exhibition in Aburi, "Gathering the Forgotten"*
Source: Photographed by Evelyn Asamoah (2026)

Figure 18: *Exhibition in Aburi, "Gathering the Forgotten"*
Source: Photographed by Evelyn Asamoah (2026)

4.4 What is the significance of the resulting upcycled artworks?

By repositioning discarded materials within the space of contemporary art, this project invites everyone to reconsider their relationship with what is commonly perceived as waste. Beyond the physical perception as mediums, discarded solid materials were recontextualised to embody diverse cultural, historical, and conceptual narratives, including psychovisual and ecological dynamics. These contextual undertones and the overlapping contextual backdrops shape perceptions, foster awareness, and evoke emotional engagement. Amid growing concerns about solid waste and its concomitant pollution as environmental challenges, repurposing, as a pragmatic intervention, also creates entrepreneurial avenues, thereby fostering economic sustainability through material cycling. In this context, the controversies surrounding the concept of waste and the evolving perception of discarded materials as endpoints are reconsidered through the construction of new narratives. The use of discarded solid materials

as residues of contemporary consumerist culture, integrated with iconography across temporal and cultural dimensions, evokes a historical knowledge system that serves as inspiration for the future. The discussions herein extend the metaphor beyond the transformation of discarded materials into artistic media to encompass olfactory preferences across diverse fields of knowledge. These highlight the study's contemporaneity and significance in interdisciplinary discourse, while fostering inclusivity and harmonious coexistence as the foundation of sustainability.

5. Conclusion

Despite growing awareness of upcycled art, the practice is not widely recognised within the Aburi community, including in the handicraft industry, due to an over-reliance on conventional approaches to traditional practices. Undertaking this project in the Aburi community, whose economic foundation is rooted in tourism, hospitality businesses, and a renowned handicrafts industry, not only offers an alternative waste management strategy but also creates entrepreneurial opportunities that complement the existing ones. The study demonstrated a true reflection of art's role in fostering ecological awareness and exhibited a tendency toward creative reuse in transforming discarded materials into visually compelling works, underpinned by concepts that evoke cultural, historical, and broader interdisciplinary discourse.
The participants' immersion in and engagement with the works alongside the critical dialogues yielded insights that revealed the project's transformative tendencies, particularly in its recontextualisation of discarded materials as symbols of renewal, revival, resistance, integration, and the re-embrace of the abandoned.

6. Recommendations

Given that the project revealed limited awareness of upcycled art in Aburi, despite the community's long-standing handicrafts industry serving as an economic backbone, it is essential for practitioners to engage with current global discourses to expand their knowledge and practices in the field.
The pursuit of new and alternative approaches to complement existing practices can create entrepreneurial opportunities for others. Therefore, such an approach is also essential for socioeconomic growth and promotes sustainability. Artists and practitioners should adopt interdisciplinary perspectives beyond their area of specialisation to develop projects that foster inclusivity and a sense of belonging within global audiences. It is also essential for all practitioners to engage with diverse knowledge systems across temporal and cultural contexts in order to broaden their creative horizons and promote inclusivity and harmonious coexistence.

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