

# Exploring the Antecedents of Mobile Garment Alteration Business in Ghana: Benefits, Potentials and Quandaries

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**Abstract:** The continual widespread advances in fashion and particularly garment construction has encouraged many individuals to adopt new methods of improving the way their clothes fit and look on their figure. This study investigated the antecedents of mobile garment alteration business in Ghana with a particular focus on its benefits, potentials and the challenges. The study employed the qualitative methodological approach for the conduct of the survey. Employing the snowball sampling technique, 14 participants from the Ashanti and Brong Ahafo Regions of Ghana were used for the study. Thematic analysis was conducted on the collected data and inferences drawn. The study found that in Ghana, entry into the mobile garment alteration business is somewhat a family-based heritage passed on from one generation to the other. The study also discovered that the mobile garment alteration business serves as a principal source of income for most alterationist.

**Keywords:** Mobile garment alteration, alterationist, travelling tailor, garment repair.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Many people have discounted clothing alterations as merely an additional cost to maintaining their wardrobes. After all, why recycle an old item when a new one can just bought? The issue, though, is that not everyone can afford that every time they need to upgrade their wardrobe. Clothing alteration, as it stands, remains the most economical way to refurbish an old item into something more modern and stylish. The continual widespread advances in fashion and particularly garment construction has encouraged many individuals to adopt new methods of interacting with both old and potential customers to help improve the way their clothes fit and look on their figure. The fashion sector is continuously searching for ways to use technology for these purposes, and for the customer, create more convenient methods of construction garments to fit the various figures of individuals.

The mobile garment alteration business is seen by many as one of the areas of garment alteration that helps patrons in obtaining clothes that actually fits their personal and unique figures. It also provides a one-on-one relationship between the 'alterationist' and clients since many customers are craving for more personal attention. The most optimistic supporters of the mobile garment alteration business claim it is cheaper, safer and more convenient compared with going to an established fashion house to have a garment altered. Mobile garment alteration business appeals to individuals because the customer can access it on the move, regardless of time or place. A major factor in these type of business is its usefulness [1].

Mobile clothing alterationists' provides services such as garment repairs, tailoring and clothing alteration services, that include cutting, sewing and reworking clothing articles to clients' specifications [2]. Mobile clothing alterationists' usually alter garments by hand or by machine. Alterations as [3] points out, may involve: reconstructing damaged clothes; shortening or lengthening garments; taking in or letting out parts; replacing buttons or zippers. The benefit of mobile

garment alteration business and other such businesses like the mobile banking has been attributed to its convenience and compatibility with modern lifestyle, [4], [5], [6], [7], time-saving characteristics and low fees [8] and also because it gives customers control [9]. A critical driver of the adoption of mobile garment alteration business has been its convenience as mentioned earlier.

A mobile garment 'alterationist' is usually referred to as the travelling tailor, but in Ghana, they are popularly known as "ADEIYE" an Akan language which literally means someone who repairs. It is a business that both men and women engage in. Most mobile garment 'alterationist' spend most of the day moving around various neighbourhoods carrying sewing machines on their heads or shoulders with the support of coiled strip of cloth or a small pillow. Also, few tools and sewing materials are carried in small polythene bags or containers. The garment alterationist announces their presence by tapping the handle of the shears together or by shouting "ADEIYEOO! ADEIYEEEOO!!ADEIYEOO!!!" intermittently as they move along. They usually work on repairs or alterations such as hems of skirts, fixing a botched job on a pair of culottes or fixing the waist of a vintage dress. Most individuals looking to do something with their pile of clothes that do not fit quite right or need repairs employ the services of these alterationists'.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. *Benefits of mobile garment alteration:*

The advantages of mobile garment alteration business just like mobile banking, is convenience, access to the alterationist no matter the location or time, and efficiency, since there is instant, 24/7, 365 days'/year operation [10], [11], [12], [13]. There is nothing so frustrating as having a closet full of clothes yet finding nothing to wear. People lose weight once a while, and garments that once fit individuals perfectly may not after a few years. However, with the help of a mobile garment 'alterationist', all these can be turned into perfect fits. The too-big trousers can be taken in, the shirt sleeves can be shortened, and even oversized jackets can be updated to a modern silhouette. All these does not come free of charge. Alterations cost money but are usually far less than it would cost to replace the garment entirely. Not every garment is worth repairing, however, for expensive garments, alterations can be a valuable investment.

Garment alterations certainly bring people many benefits especially if professionals take on the job of style revisions. A garment altered can transform how people look at themselves as strategic changes can result in an image that appears slimmer, taller, fitter, and more stylish. Some studies suggest how clothing alters the perceptions of both wearers and people that take the time to look at how others dress (see [14], [15], [16], [17]). Alterations are also an affordable alternative to obtaining fashionable apparel for men, women, and children.

Getting clothes altered is a bit more work than buying new ones. However, mobile alteration can be worth the extra effort. There are several reasons why having clothes altered is beneficial to the client. First, altered garments afford a perfect fit. Garments bought off the rack are made to fit a standard figure, with measurements that fall close to the average. However, actual figures are not a one-size-fits-all. Every individual's measurements are slightly different, so when garments are bought and worn for some time, the best a person can usually hope for is a fit that is good enough. Hence, by having clothes altered, they can be made to fit excellently.

Second, what is typically referred to as the 'shifting size' can easily be solved with the help of a mobile alterationist. Not only are figures different, but it also does not always stay the same from year to year. Hence, with a little adjustment, the same garment can be worn again, sometimes even looking better on the wearer.

Third, fashion and styles change from year to year, and apparels that still have lots of life left in them most times end up stuck in the wardrobe because they look old-fashioned. However, bringing them up-to-date is most times very simple. With the help of a mobile alterationist, the same garment can a fresh and a fashionable new look.

Fourth, minor alterations done by a mobile alterationist can keep clothes from slipping, sliding, and gaping in ways that expose a bit more of the body than desired. For instance, busty female figures can add little snaps between the front buttons on a blouse to keep it neatly fastened at all times. Females with narrow shoulders can maintain their blouses from slipping by attaching tiny loops on the insides of the shoulders to clasp over their brassiere straps to hold the blouse in position. These can be easily carried out by a mobile alterationist.

Fifth, clothes that wear out do not necessarily have to be discarded. Most times it is possible to extend their life by replacing a lining or turning a worn collar. A skilled mobile alterationist can keep that garment alive by replacing the lining of

worn-out collar garment. Accessibility to a mobile alterationist is not limited as long as the customers are home. Most garment alterations can be performed within a few minutes. Almost all clothing alterations can be executed anywhere.

Finally, extending the life of any garment would reduce carbon footprints and cut resource costs. This is a crucial opportunity to make a difference, and involves changes in design as well as increasing durability, getting existing clothes out of the closet more often, and this affords greater re-use of clothing by individuals.

For the mobile garment alterationist, wage rates for various types of alteration vary depending on the sort of work they undertake. It also creates self-employment opportunities to work independently on a self-employed basis. As pointed out by [3], the clothing alterationist does not usually need educational qualifications to enter this job. However, most alteration workers have experience of garment production. Relative to skills and experience, most clothing alteration workers have competencies in some form of garment manufacturing. Many may have worked as sewing machinists or as tailoring [3].

### **2.2. Potentials of mobile garment alteration business:**

The mobile garment alteration business is a profitable business opportunity that is both enjoyable and rewarding to the two parties involved, thus, the alterationist and the client. This is so because it is sort of a professional business that provides a personalised service to its loyal clients base and there are all kinds of people who need a good alterationist to tailor their classic pieces that do not fit quite right. However, as mentioned earlier, finding the perfect fit is especially difficult with some vintage pieces that were designed to fit distinct figures, and modern mass produced garments present these challenges.

Again, mobile garment alteration business fosters deeper relationships and increases satisfaction with the customers. It builds satisfaction and loyalty, profitability and engagement. Self-employment opportunities may also be created by offering mobile alteration services. These can generate a steady income with a business that has returning customers. However, as with all business ventures, the success of mobile alteration services will depend on the quality of marketing and customer service, as well as the quality of work rendered to clients.

### **2.3. Quandaries of mobile garment alteration business:**

The mobile garment repair and alteration businesses are unique in today's modern consumer society. However, there are growing challenges as well. Some of these difficulties include the unfavourable shifts in consumer preferences and mounting competition from other industries that provide identical services [2]. Again, though the mobile garment repair and alteration business has a low level of capital intensity, with investments primarily made on basic sewing equipment, the actual garment repair and alteration process remains a specialised, very labour-intensive profession where most services are carried out by hand.

In Ghana, usage levels of mobile garment repair and alteration are small compared to what would have been hoped for. Consequently, the question is what factors are inhibiting the large-scale adoption of mobile garment repair and alteration? Field investigations have revealed that customers worry about how much it will cost without even finding out or asking first. The perceived complexity of mobile garment alteration in terms of whether those who carry sewing machines on their head will be able to perform the desired alteration to perfection is also argued to be a cause of low usage levels. Just like mobile banking, which according to [18] has trust issues, trust for the mobile alterationist is one of the most important factors in the low adoption of mobile garment alteration services. Considering that it is difficult to trust someone with personal items such as clothing, meeting them for the first time and this is the factor that most impacts on customer satisfaction. For instance, as pointed out by [19] 'anytime we meet someone; we form first impressions' (p. 229).

First impressions according to [19], are first evaluations based on nonverbal communication signals. Series of research carried out [20] indicates that it takes approximately a tenth of a second to create an impression of a person's appearance and that, not even a prolonged contact can substantially change those opinions. In a twinkle of an eye, individuals take an insignificant sample of a person and assume it signifies a 100 percent of their personage. They next decide based on that to either trust, like or want to maintain interaction with them [19]. Investigations have affirmed that people make a relatively realistic evaluation based on rapid observations [21]. People must hence show they are honest, trustworthy or decent with nonverbal communication in a flicker of a second or interaction can be terminated [19]. It is generally believed that whenever personalities meet each other for the first time, they know absolutely nothing or close to nothing at all about one another.

Although mobile garment alteration brings quite a lot of benefit for both customers and alterationist, there are still some challenges and difficulties in the process. The primary challenge of all mobile garment alteration services is the dilemma of convenience and trust. Most people refuse to use mobile garment alteration services because of trust as mentioned above. Customers expect convenience, as well as trust. These two factors conflict with each other.

#### 2.4. Estimated prices for most common alterations:

Since each and every garment differs, some alterations and repairs may necessitate more comprehensive work than others. These demands may not be appreciated until the actual alteration has been done. That is the reason why price ranges may vary. The lists below are estimated costs. The listed prices are in Ghana Cedis (GH¢) (£1 = GH¢ 4.5).

TABLE I: ESTIMATED PRICES FOR COMMON ALTERATIONS

Type of alteration	Price range	Type of alteration	Price range
Dress hem	20.00 – 27.00	Dress hem	20.00 – 27.00
Fixing new pockets	12.00 – 16.00	Fixing new pockets	12.00 – 16.00
Fixing sleeves	17.00 – 22.00	Fixing sleeves	17.00 – 22.00
Re-hemming a Jacket	19.00 – 22.00	Re-hemming a Jacket	19.00 – 22.00
Taking in or letting out skirt hem	10.00 – 15.00	Taking in or letting out skirt hem	10.00 – 15.00
Zipper fixing	15.00 – 18.00	Zipper fixing	15.00 – 18.00
Trouser hem	14.00 – 18.00	Trouser hem	14.00 – 18.00

### 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Qualitative research strategy oriented towards description, discovery and holistic appreciation of processes and activities was adopted for the conduct of this investigation. The qualitative approach was adopted because qualitative inquiry presumes that an entire phenomenon is under study and that a phenomenon as complex as mobile garment alteration business cannot be meaningfully reduced to some variables and linear causal relationships [22]. The approach was appropriate because this research involves how people make sense of their lives, how they interpret their experiences and how they structure the world around them. Additionally, a qualitative study allows for a more focused descriptive analysis of the phenomenon primarily using the researcher as the principal instrument for data collection and analysis.

Relevant information for this research was sourced from respondents by the administration of an interview protocol. The questions were structured for easy understanding by the respondents to enable them to give appropriate responses. The time span of all the interviews lasted was three (3) months (September 2016 – December 2017).

The non-probability sampling, specifically snowball sampling was employed to gather information from the mobile garment alteration operators. Since this study is predominantly qualitative, the focus was less on the sample representativeness or specific techniques for drawing a probability sample. Rather, the focus was on how the small collections of cases illuminate both the economic and social life of these people. The snowball sampling approach was also adopted because of the difficulty of locating data sources that satisfy the criteria of mobile garment alterations. In all, a total of 14 mobile garment alterationists from the Ashanti (9) and the Brong Ahafo Regions (5) of Ghana were interviewed on various subjects such as how they entered the business, the scope of the garment alteration activities, the time element involved in a given alteration, alteration supplies or tools they use and challenges they face in the business. Data was analysed using sub-themes generated from the interview protocol supported with direct quotations from the respondents.

### 4. RESULTS

#### 4.1. Entry into the mobile garment alteration business:

The Ghanaian garment industry is a highly competitive and fragmented industry with low barriers to entry. The mobile garment alteration business for some time now has experienced high patronage due to the upsurge in the importation of second-hand clothing. Although the service is facing growing challenges as a result of stationary garment manufacturers providing alternative services. Unfortunately for these service operators, restored demand for garment alteration services was progressively offset by unfavourable shifts in consumer preferences and mounting competition from well-established

garment manufacturers that provide same services, both of which have hampered business performance during the latter half of this year.

In Ghana entry into the mobile garment alteration business has been somewhat family-based heritage passed on from one generation to the other. Investigations for this research revealed that most people who undertake mobile garment alteration duly received their training under the tutelage of their parents or direct relations. Response to that effect is quoted below;

*“That was my father’s occupation, so there was always a sewing machine in the house and with time he taught me how to do the alterations and because there was always machine at home I was practising on my own dresses and that of my school mates as well. So, that was how come I got into this business...”*

That notwithstanding, others also had to deliberately make an effort to learn the skill of undertaking alterations. Learning the skill for most respondents on the average took about two years of active participation to acquire the skill. Response from another respondent in that category is given below;

*“I went out there to one man who was noted for that in the area to learn, and it took me about two years before I realise I’d acquired the knowledge and skill to do any garment alteration that came my way without any supervision...”*

The responses suggest that in Ghana, people learn the trade through their family lineage whereas just a handful of individuals in the business learned from other people.

#### **4.2. The Scope of the mobile garment alteration:**

Observations of the industry showed that the garment alteration business provides garment repair, and clothing alteration services, which involve cutting, sewing and reworking clothing items to customers’ specifications but in most cases not tailoring. However, the interview results showed that the industry does not provide care and maintenance in the form of cleaning of garments. This is essentially so because mobile garment alterationists have less time and space to render any meaningful cleaning function for garments brought for alteration works. Responses to prove this point is given below;

*“...I do any kind of alteration works, so I go round, I make this sound by beating the scissors to alert potential customers to know I have come around. When I am called, all I do is to do the alteration and move on I don’t have that time to spare cos the longer I stay there I might miss my next opportunity...”*

Additionally, respondents were asked whether the alteration the offer require a high level of skill to be able to do that. The responses give the impression that generally, alteration works depends on the kind of garment and fabric used in sewing the garment to be altered. Some mentioned that some of the dresses require special care and attention to maintain the aesthetic appearance of the garment which is based on the alterationist’s level of skill and expertise. Selected responses are as given below;

*“...Yeah! You know initially, I did not realise it until recently when I worked on someone’s dress. It gave me a hell of a time because the fabric was delicate, and that made handling tough. So, I think that every alteration is unique one way or the other which demands that you know and understand the various ways of handling different fabrics...”*

*“...Yes, every fabric has its own characteristics so you cannot treat all of them the same way No! You will destroy someone’s dress...”*

#### **4.3. Why people need clothing alteration and repair:**

Purchasing new clothes is an investment, no matter how big or small the purchase is and ideally like any other investment people make. Inevitably, clothing may either wear out due to the daily wear and tear, or it will eventually not be something that fits the individual’s taste. Based on this assertion, it was enquired from respondents why they think people need clothing alteration and repair. According to the majority of the interviewees, it is cheaper to ‘alterate’ or repair the clothing than to buy a new one. Selected responses to that effect is given below;

*“... You see as people buy clothes every day, with time some will wear and tear and all that, and you can’t give your clothing to a professional tailor all the time, he/she won’t even have the time to do it, so that makes people do*

*alteration....and also when there is a small problem with your dress, you can't throw it away and buy a new one just like that..."*

Additionally, other respondents believed that clothing repairs are essential because of poor construction of the garments. Response below is an example;

*"... Sometimes take me as a woman for instance, by chance you happen to come across a dress that will look very nice on you, but it is big or small, but you could see there is some allowance in it so you can buy and let an alterationist work on it for you..."*

In furtherance of the above, respondents were asked the severity of repair or alteration they usually undertake. The outcome of responses revealed that most of the repair works are quite extensive especially when it involves female clothes.

*"...some of them are problematic especially ladies' wear; as for men's wear I usually don't struggle with it like that, but for the women's, you dare not. They come with weird instructions and styles and all that... sometimes it is irritating but what can you do, that's the work I do..."*

When asked about their ability to repair or alter all garments, responses showed that mostly the alterationists were limited by the kind of machine used. It became apparent that not all sewing machines can work on all manner of garments. Response to that effect is given below;

*"...Some of the fabrics are very tricky to deal with especially these slippery ones (Silk) sometimes I have to place a paper underneath before I can do anything meaningful with it..."*

#### **4.4. Preparations for alterations:**

As already established, clothing repair or alteration can cover a rather wide range of activities varying from those requiring very little skill to those demanding a lot of sewing skills and expertise. For that matter, it requires preliminary preparation towards the entire process. In that regard, it was enquired from respondents some of the things they do and look out for before they begin the alteration process. The responses reflect the idea that the alterationists look at the nature of the garment and then decide on what to do with it. For instance, stated below is a respondent's comment;

*"... what I do is that when you bring the garment I ask you what you want and then I quickly assess the material and then if I do not have the needed inputs readily available I ask the one who brought to get them..."*

Concerning the time frame required for effective alteration or repair work to be done, respondents noted that actual time for completing single alteration works relies heavily on the kind of alteration and this is particularly based on gender. It was understood that generally, ladies' clothes are more complex than gents wear, hence, requires more time. However, men's trousers, for instance, requires more time than that of the female. The investigations further revealed that on the average, clothing alteration or repairs takes approximately about 20 – 40 minutes to be completed. However, much depends on the type and nature of alteration being carried out.

Furthermore, the respondents were asked about the type of alteration or repair they normally do. Responses to that effect show that specifically, alterations done include hemming, sleeve shortening and waist adjustments for women, men and children's wears. However, the study revealed that children's wear was the most repaired of the three. This is not in doubt given the fact that when children attain a certain age, they become aggressive and sometimes it is their clothing that suffers. Selected response is given below;

*"... Typically, when they come its either am to shorten a sleeve or adjust a part of the dress for them. Around this area, it is children's dresses that I repair the most, but I do for adult men and women as well..."*

The outcome of the results suggests that first, alterationists assess the garment that needs alteration and then decides whether to do it. Since the alterationists can carry only one machine around at any given time, some are unable to work on some types of garments and this in itself is a limitation on their part. Additionally, their ability to work on a garment is dependent on whether they have the necessary tools and supplies to work on the job at that time.

#### **4.5. Tools and Supplies (Logistics):**

Tools and supplies are needed for effective clothing alteration or repair work. When respondents were asked some of the mending supplies and tools they use for their alteration work, it became evident that they mostly use tools and supplies

ranging from buttons, threads, scissors, measuring tapes, needles and among other essential tools and supplies needed for clothing repairs.

*“... For me, I use the basic sewing tools to do all the alteration works I get when I am working...”*

*“...normally I use the usual threads, needles, scissors and tapes for the garment repair work...”*

From the results, it could be inferred the basic sewing or tailoring supplies and tools are needed for effective mobile garment alterations to be done. This is because mobile garment alterationists carry their machines wherever they go, hence, carrying a lot of material supplies and tools will be too much of a load for them.

#### **4.6. Benefits of the mobile garment repair business:**

When respondents were asked about their take on the benefits of the business they were involved in, the majority of them indicated that it had given them some form of employment. They stressed that unlike before they were just idling about without being productive. However, now they go about looking for customers who earn them some money to spend. Selected responses are given below;

*“...at first I was just wasting time at home doing nothing, but since I learned this trade, I move around looking for people with problems with their clothing so I can work on them for some money...”*

*“... am sure it is good for the customers because they would not have to go and sit by a stationed seamstress or tailor to do their alterations for them and like I said they do not have that time, so we have become a stop in gap for people who need such services...”*

From the enquiries, it could be inferred that the mobile garment repair business offers some form of employment to the alterationists as well as giving customers the convenience of repairing or mending their clothes.

#### **4.7. Challenges faced;**

According to the respondents, the primary challenge they face in their business happens to be slow development and trust issues. The alterationists face stiff competition from the professional stationed tailors who also offer garment alteration or repair services. Responses also suggest that this in a way is preventing large scale adoption of the garment alteration business. Selected responses have been given below;

*“... Our big problem is the well-established seamstress and tailors. Some of them provide our services too, and most people think they are more trustworthy, and even some don't charge at all, so of late people prefer taking their clothes to them for alteration or repairs. However, they have one problem too they do not have the time; they are always busy...”*

*“...people are beginning to label us as being old-fashioned, out of date and not trustworthy hence prefer their garments to be worked on by a professional fashion designer...”*

Another issue is the pricing for the alterations. When respondents were asked how much they charge for common alterations, responses were quite surprising. According to the majority of them, the well-established fashion outfits are virtually charging nothing for common alterations. Hence, they are compelled to reduce their charges to the barest minimum to sustain their businesses.

*“... Charging for my services is actually becoming an issue for me in particular because I find that some of the tailors around this area do it for free. For some time, I comb round the whole place without getting any requests which were surprising until I got to know that they are doing it for free...I even don't know how much to charge those I get...”*

*“... I charge between GH¢5 – Gh¢10 for the alterations I do, but it could go beyond depending on how difficult or complicated the work is...”*

From the results, it could be implied that mobile garment repairers mainly are challenged by competition and trust issues. These may be stemming from well-established fashion outfits who also provide similar services is actually affecting the operations of mobile garment alterationists in Ghana.

Additionally, the responses indicated that another main difficulty is the carrying of the machine around looking for clients. They have to walk far distances just to locate the one client who might be looking for an alterationist to mend their garments for them. Below contain selected responses;

*“...one of my major difficulty now is the carrying of the machine. At first I could walk for a very long time with the machine on my shoulder and not be tired but now because of old age I carry and I have body pains all over I am unable to even walk for long...”*

Some stressed on the health implications of carrying the machine for long distances;

*“I am particularly concerned with the effect on my body. I can see my body frame is tilting, lowering on my right side down. I suspect it is because I carry it on my right side that is why. It is killing us slowly but we don't know”.*



**Figure 1: Mobile alterationists carrying a sewing machine**

By implication alterationists face some amount of health hazards by carrying the machine for prolonged period.

## 5. CONCLUSION

There are several means to earn money in sewing. One of the obvious and probably quickest ways is to offer alterations and repair works as this investigation has demonstrated. Most people have the ability to hem their own garment replace lost buttons, repair zippers, etc. A mobile alteration and repair business can easily be started by taking advantage of one's sewing abilities. A regular income can be created with a business that has returning customers.

However, success will depend on the quality of alterations made, marketing and one's customer relations. To the client, there are numerous grounds why having used clothing altered is often an excellent option than purchasing new ones. These may include; obtaining a perfect fit, shifting sizes and changing styles. Since fashion is dynamic and frequently changes, there is the need to keep oneself decent. The findings of this study provide valuable insights regarding the current issues in relation to mobile garment alteration business in Ghana, its benefits, potentials and challenges.

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