

Fashioning circular logic: addressing the viability of a closed-loop economy for fashion

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Abstract

Business models predicated on continual consumption, fast fashion and globalized production systems creating major environmental and social impact dominate today's fashion marketplace. The resulting contradictions between the socio-economic importance of fashion and its in-built obsolescence through the increasingly dynamic fashion cycle also represent a significant problem for both producers and consumers. The fashion industry's relationship with sustainability is a contested site as fashion is an endeavour that is designed to constantly present a new offering each season, as opposed to preserving existing natural resources. The need to provide a regulatory system for sustainable fashion appears to be essential for the well-being of all involved across the supply chain. This will mean breaking away from the established ways of production and consumption for the fashion system as a whole. Hence, policy makers and fashion producers have been devoting attention to the notion of a circular economy as a possible solution to this in contrast to the traditional linear economy. Rooted in industrial ecology, the idea of a circular economy offers an optional regenerative way of managing and optimizing the cycle of production and consumption. In the context of the fashion industry, this multiple loop approach might secure the garment fabric in the producer-consumer cycle, giving it another life without losing significant value for the product. Based on preliminary findings from an on-going research study, this paper seeks to review the role of the producer in the circular economy. The paper will use ethnographic interview data and a case study approach focusing on the activities of a range of small, medium and large-scale fashion operations, including H&M and Li & Fung located in South East Asia. Outcomes from this research study suggest that there are varied ways of understanding and implementing the circular economy for producers with varying outcomes from reuse, waste reduction, reselling, remanufacturing or recycling. Findings suggest that many initiatives are a work in progress and are fragmented across the supply chain given the enormity of the task and the lack of enabling, technology, structural, collaborative effort, consumer understanding or support from governments and policy makers. Nevertheless, this research will suggest that a concerted approach among stakeholders towards circular economy thinking and practice with a more localised, culturally aware approach offers the transition to a new way of designing, making,

selling and using clothes thereby contributing to a fashion system with a more favourable impact on the environment and society.

Keywords: closed loop economy; circular fashion economy; sustainable fashion; green fashion business; eco fashion production

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