

Reconciling innovation, environmental and economic sustainability: examples of collaborative research with design-led fashion enterprise

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Abstract

The 20th Century fashion system, predicated on bi-annual presentations to wholesale buyers appears increasingly inappropriate in the 21st Century digital economy. External pressures such as natural resource depletion, escalating consumption and waste, globalized, conglomerate-led markets and financial fluctuations driven by the accelerating pace of fashion cycles, coupled with recent high profile designer tragedies and resignations at luxury fashion brands, all strongly indicate that the current fashion system is unsustainable from the perspectives of environment, economy and now its creative leadership. There is a critical need for fashion research to take a radical lead in shaping a more economically, socially and environmentally sustainable fashion industry based on alternative paradigms and business models that harness new ways of creating and producing fashion and engaging with consumers.

The designer fashion sector in the UK (and globally) is economically significant , comprising a high proportion of micro and small businesses that serve as a creative engine for much mass market fashion, but struggle to survive themselves. These design-led businesses have the capability to be highly agile, for example utilizing local and novel smaller-scale production methods and practices to meet changing demand efficiently. A number of innovators are developing alternative business models that demonstrate the potential to be more environmentally sustainable whilst maintaining a viable business.

The paper will present two case studies undertaken as part of a recent knowledge exchange project FIREup (Fashion, Innovation, Research, Enterprise) funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, in which exchange between fashion researchers and fashion micro businesses was catalyzed to investigate ways in which innovation and collaboration might engender a longer term research culture, opening a space for critical assessment of current practices beyond the immediate pressures of the next collection. These projects furthered the innovation activities of the SMEs involved and generated new insights into the opportunities and challenges surrounding

a sustainable business culture and collaborative research projects with this key sector of the fashion industry.

Keywords: Innovation, design-led fashion enterprise, research culture, sustainability, collaborative knowledge exchange

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