

Knowledge barriers to circularity: Holistic approach or merely a fabric strategy?

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Abstract

The fashion industry has undergone significant commercial evolution, and today “fast fashion” is the leading commercial strategy which has caused a range of persistent environmental and social externalities. Increasingly, there are calls for fashion to transition to a circular approach. However, fashion is an industry overwhelmed with complexity. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that transitioning to circularity has become equally complex and messy in its aims, expected impacts and implementation. This article aims to identify the causes of these complexities in transitioning to circularity through interviews with circularity experts. Although enthusiasm for circularity is clear, applications appear to present incremental rather than radical approaches, with the most interest in fabric strategies or add-on initiatives. The findings show that although many actors share aspirations to transition to circularity, there remains significant knowledge challenges at the industry, organisational and consumer level.

Background research: Fashion – in its current form - has increasingly being recognised as an unsustainable industry, with a range of persistent and severe environmental and social impacts (Niinimäki et al., 2020). The industry has undergone significant commercial evolution, and today “fast fashion” is the leading business strategy (Todeschini et al., 2017; Shirvanimoghaddam et al., 2020). Increasingly, there are calls for fashion to transition to a circular approach to safeguard the industry’s future and ensuring more broader sustainability objectives of planetary health for future generations (Pieroni et al., 2019).

Research Issue to be addressed: However, fashion is an industry overwhelmed with complexity: within production process, supply-chains and consumers (Boström and Micheletti, 2016). As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that transitioning to circularity has become equally complex and messy in its aims, strategy and implementation. The industry is fragmented with few scaled examples of holistic circular economy approaches.

Methodology: This article aims to identify how the CE is viewed and approached by different players through expert interviews with stakeholders from a range of organisational settings operating in the fashion and textile sectors in Europe.

Results: The findings show contrasting opinions with what circularity means: some highlight its potential as a fabric strategy, others point to business models and fewer consider its potential as a holistic model of sustainability. Environmental and social impacts of production are often viewed as separate challenges, ignoring the potential benefits of adopting a more systems perspective. It appears that although many actors share aspirations to transition to a CE, there remains a lack of common approach between industry stakeholders as well as internally within organisations themselves, with knowledge barriers presenting transitional challenges. Furthermore, a lack of understanding of circularity on the consumer-side can be considered a further knowledge barrier. A set of managerial recommendations are raised to support a transition to circularity in the fashion industry.

Keywords: fast fashion; circular fashion; circular economy; organisational transitions; business models

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