

## Independent fashion designers as par excellence sustainable producers? Insights from Poland

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### Abstract

**Background scientific research:** The issue of sustainability of fashion design, production and consumption has been one of the leading themes of the discourse on fashion in recent years (Gwilt, Rissanen 2011; Fletcher, Grose 2012; Niinimäki 2013; Fletcher, 2014; Gwilt 2014; Henninger 2017; Niinimäki 2018; Gwilt, Payne, Ruthschilling 2019), gaining prominence also in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe including Poland (Raciniewska 2014; Murzyn-Kupisz, Hołuj 2021). It has been often assumed that operating at the intersection of (almost) all stages of the fashion value creation chain, from developing its concept to its retail and being engaged in emotional labour, independent designers seem to be particularly well prepared to practice sustainable fashion approaches (Leslie, Brydges, Brail, 2015; Heinze, 2020; Kedron, 2020) and therefore act as key promoters of sustainable fashion to broader audiences and inspire new developments in the fashion market. Whether independent designers indeed perceive themselves as such agents of change, what motivates them to fulfill this role (Brydges, Hracs, 2019; Brydges, Retamal, Hanlon, 2020) and how do they understand the links between being independent actors in the fashion market and practicing fashion sustainability is not clear (Gurova, Morozov 2018).

**Research issue to be addressed:** The paper will present preliminary results of a study done within a framework of a broader research project entitled “Fashion market in the context of sustainable development” and focus on the issue of understanding of “independence” in the fashion market by self-employed designers and owners of small fashion firms in Poland and its connection with sustainable approaches to fashion.

**Methodology used:** Findings will be based on a qualitative content analysis of in-depth interviews conducted by the authors with over 30 independent creatives in the fashion sector in Poland in 2020-2021 which

included questions on their own perception and definition of “independence” and “sustainability” in fashion in the context of their professional practices.

**Results achieved (conclusions) or expected as well as their relevance for theory and practice:** The authors will consider to what extent from the perspective of fashion designers the two concepts inherently overlap and intertwine making the independent fashion creators par excellence sustainable. What features of independent fashion design and production make it inherently sustainable and, conversely, which are disputable in this context. On the one hand self-understanding of fashion design and production by self-employed and small scale fashion designers in Poland points towards many sustainable features such as local and ethical production, attention to quality and flexibility of uses, maximum use of textiles (zero waste), using ecological and recycled textiles, implementing own ideas independent of short term fashion trends and fads or seasons dominant in the fast fashion market. On the other hand, independence in fashion may pose significant challenges and dilemmas linked with economic sustainability, access to certified textiles and certification in general or focus on artistic and commercial rather than sustainable aims – green washing rather than true espousing of sustainable fashion prerogatives.

**Keywords:** independent fashion, sustainable fashion, self-perception, designers, Poland

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