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# Facing Textile Industry: Why Circular Design Has to Become a BA Fashion Programme and Creativity Alone is not Enough

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It is obvious how far fashion industry still is from being sustainable. Not only as the meaning behind the term sustainability is still discussed rather than systems are radically changed through actions. Furthermore, there still seems a 'need' for major incidents costing health and life to awaken the ones who seem to have little or no idea how big fashion industry's negative impact on our planet and people is. Who only call out for change after this sort of momentum? Now, who is to blame? Companies ask consumers to take over responsibility with their buying decisions, consumers request a change in production and urge companies to amend their workways first. They act like stubborn children, arguing who has to apologize first. Both want to keep up having a right being the last in changing behaviour for the better. An encounter of resistance with no real outcome. Governments juggle in between with an unpromising try to please economy and consumers at the same time. Their actions end up with minor consequences for industry, being closer to window dressing than to influencing urgent matter. And consumers are again left with making choices, mainly driven by costs or brand image. To speed up a global shift in fashion industry and to reduce never ending discussions about accountabilities without little progression, everyone involved in decision making processes has to act now and get into Thunberg mode. As knowledge is key, only by additionally looking into higher education systems can holistically be improved and evoke a major change in mindsets and habits.

**Keywords:** Fashion education; Circular economy; Joint activism; Academic challenge

**Introduction**

Being a huge labor market with more than 60 million employees worldwide [1] fashion industry with its current linear system faces the task to not only protect human interests, for example through enforcement of international applicable human rights. Furthermore, the aim has to be a drastic change of production and retail methods and with its implementation the immediate prevention of natural resource's exploitation. From an ecologic and social perspective, standards have to be redefined in a way that allows space for mindful economy as well. They have to be consequently aspired at interdisciplinary scale and effectuated in all individual parts with the aim of an optimum approach towards a circular fashion system.

**Stop Calling It Sustainable**

Too many certificates focusing on too many different issues spam the textiles market and irritate consumers. Finding a definition for the term "sustainability" dominates the constant debate in and around fashion industry arguing which amount of

sustainability is "acceptable". Even Oxford Dictionary leaves it open by defining sustainability as "the property of being environmentally sustainable; the degree to which a process or enterprise is able to be maintained or continued while avoiding the long-term depletion of national resources" [2]. In most discussions the differentiation between either a focus on environment or people included in the production cycle becomes the main point. This makes it easy to lose other aspects out of sight, especially as the structure behind fashion is complex on multiple layers and split into tiniest sections. As past behaviour shows, the impact of changing only individual parameters of the production cycle is not big enough. Rather than healing through this strategy, industry still seems to turn into a massive construct growing exponentially through exploitation, pollution and social imbalance into an uncontrollable monster. But there is hope.

Sustainable fashion slowly loses its 80s image of eco fashion ("Oekomode") and receives acceptance as part of the broader

luxury fashion scene, as press coverage and special issues of high fashion magazines have shown, like Elle UK in September 2018. Green is the new black and awareness for grievances on consumer side raises. Customers demand changes and use their voice to draw brands into being transparent with their actions, not only through initiatives like Fashion Revolution. Violence of worker's rights, humiliating its labor force, is known as a result of common fashion practices. Indeed, a deeper reflection of production conditions can lead to rejective buying behaviour when consumers favor other brands with fair attitudes. Individual brands and start-ups question the existing with their approach to design as well as the use of alternative sales strategies through crowdfunding campaigns hoping to finance manufacturing in advance. Design with purpose shines a light on thinking outside the box and places the designer into the centre of being a problem solver rather than simply being a product creator. On top of that, American Vogue dedicated an extensive article to the future of US fashion design graduates within sustainable design [3]. There is a lot of buzz going on.

Fashion research is initiated to build scientific foundation finding potential solutions on a larger scale, as happened earlier this year. Following Fixing Fashion [4] report, British Environmental Audit Committee proposed a 1p charge per garment to secure better clothing collection and sorting. A disappointing antagonistic result, when UK government did not follow their advice and lobby won again. Not realizing there will not be much economy left once all resources have been used and the planet has nothing more to offer. In August 2019, at recent G7 summit, a number of 32 leaders of fashion houses like Burberry, Prada or Inditex came together to unveil their so-called Fashion Pact to attendant heads of state. The Fashion Pact's objectives are to

- Stop global warming
- Restore biodiversity
- Protect the oceans

Its targets are based on scientific research, which means there is less room for individual interpretation and companies are less likely finding excuses to wriggle themselves out of set aims. The Fashion Pact aspires to be adopted by 20% of the global fashion industry. One might ask what happens with the remaining part of industry? As participant Kering states on their website: "These commitments are designed to be embraced by every company involved and backed by cross-sector initiatives, along with the deployment of innovation accelerators. (...) A collective endeavor by its nature, the Fashion Pact is open to any company that wants to help to fundamentally transform the practices of the fashion and textile industry, and to meet the environmental challenges of our century" [5]. Being a warm welcome to those who are already interested in changing business structures or feel society's pressure, it is not more than a loose invitation lacking real obligation. Furthermore, some of the objectives reach out an implementation only by 2050, achievement of net-zero carbon emissions for example. Current research on the contrary states there are only a couple of years left to turn climate

change around, whether it will be 10, 15 or 20 years. How serious can Fashion Pact be about changing the system in such a toxic slowness?

All these activities are facing the right direction, but it is still not enough as we are running out of time to reduce irreversible damages on various levels. Decision maker's mindsets have not significantly changed yet, there could be tens of thousands and more following the Fashion Pact commitment. Unless legislation fully embraces their own part in forcing companies to deliver a different outcome, people and environment rely on voluntary, individual activism. If people involved in fashion industry put their animosities aside, collaboration is seen as a benefit of actively finding solutions and humanity becomes the centre of all, mindful design can be created. When good design is automatically defined through its healthy and environmentally friendly background, there is no need to call it sustainable, but norm.

### Alternative Approaches as Driver for Change

More and more internationally active brands integrate sustainability on a long-term basis into their brand DNA. In doing so, not only the aim of ethical goals and transparency are taken into account, furthermore a sustainable oriented production can be driven by economic reasons as luxury-goods company Kering exemplarily shows. In 2010 the company created Environmental Profit & Loss (EP&L) [6], a system to envision the ecological impact of their production chain. Transformed into a monetary equivalent these are evaluable within Kering Group. Decisions for the entire production chain based on economic knowledge can be optimized and used to improve production from a more holistic point of view.

Business profiles like Estonian brand Reet Aus put emphasis on industrial upcycling and draw on existing pre-consumer waste from conventional productions. Costs for material invest stay minimal. At the same time Reet Aus keeps the company's ecological footprint in relation to usage of energy and water small and reduces with this business model the waste problem within their manufacturing facilities [7]. Their success in using waste as a source indicates how the idea of tackling one problem in fashion industry can bring benefit on an economical level as well.

Another innovative outcome from Dutch biotech company Inspidere BV is the economically viable method to extract raw material from cow manure, which is turned into new biodegradable products on a basis of regenerated cellulose processing. By using dung, methane gas emission is reduced and contamination of water and soil through intensive farming is prevented. Raw material can be used to create fibers or bioplastic for example. These can be woven into fabrics and depict a circular version with same or similar qualities of other cellulose based materials like cotton [8].

### Symbiosis of Radical Thinking and Fashion as Manifestation of a New Avant-Garde

Fashion design always had a broader context and has not only been about creating some beautiful shells for a long time. It has history, political and social impact and the potential to tell all

kinds of stories linked to its aesthetics. To become a designer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century means being progressive and visionary, to think critically and holistically as well as to bring in empathy and team spirit to continue good storytelling. The young generation has to take over responsibility not only for their own wellbeing or their direct environment, but also has to cover it initiatively for all people involved in the entire development process. It requires to risk progress in relation to low and high-tech, preservation of textile heritage and building upon both an economic foundation for fashion avant-garde with a new future-oriented meaning, raising niche design to the new status quo. Innovative ideas empower change. Letting these become norm and grow into business is a challenge that requires knowledge and awareness.

The constantly growing market of innovations, wearables and circular systems asks for designers with expert knowhow not limited to aesthetic aspects. They have to understand the symbiosis between all fashion disciplines, their cross over and links to economy. Advancing with their own ideas and preparing them efficiently for a bigger market can only happen where knowledge exists. Cooperation with biologists and chemists have successfully powered sustainable developments like Spider Silk or dyeing processes without polluting water. These alternatives picture only a small section but show the scope for textile innovation and progressive opportunities.

There might never be the 100% perfection of what industry should deliver to people and planet, but the end result should always get as close as possible. Looking into design systems circular economy offers the best possible approach to smart product creation. Its three core columns to

- Design out waste and pollution
- Keep products and materials in use
- Regenerate natural systems

transit a linear economy into structures which build economic, natural, and social capital [9] as Ellen MacArthur Foundation explains. Embedded into the concept of Cradle to Cradle, developed by Prof. Dr. Michael Braungart and William McDonough in the 1990s, it can and should be the starting point of every design work. Each product would then either follow a biological cycle (consumption goods) providing nourishment for nature after use or a technical cycle (services) where components circulate through industrial systems to be recovered, remanufactured or recycled [10].

In terms of fashion this development process can be implemented in various ways. Not only through the use of better materials which have been made with an underlying principle of Cradle to Cradle, but further require the shift from linear retail structures to closed loop offers. Other options are for example zero waste pattern cutting approaches. With this method material waste is designed out in first place, whereas the designer's affection to a specific aesthetic has to melt with the possibilities in managing pattern cutting. A second option is design for extended usage. Designers are challenged to think beyond point of sales, when

consumers enter the stage and garments have to perform. Being able to create an emotional bond between consumer and product, for example through good design and adjustment options of a garment to evolving needs, can help to keep garments in longer use. Above all, the main focus of creating circular structures lies in its holistic approach requesting the designer to think about their garment's journey and asking what is going to happen with products after consumers decide not to use them anymore. A thought process which is usually taught less at fashion schools.

### **Fashion Graduates: Only Creative or Already Competitively Viable?**

For sure awareness for problems in the textile sector raises with employment. But lack of time, external pressure or disinterest stand against a systematic improvement and solution development. In addition, most companies still do not actively examine the production cycle from a holistic point of view and draw their consequences from their findings. Extensive perspectives and various approaches to sustainable practices lack completely or are for a number of reasons not desirable.

Even though there is an international industry demand within large and smaller companies for a new generation of designers, familiar with sustainable and innovative production, there are still not enough fashion schools existing with an intense focus on these subjects. Only a few of the enormous numbers of institutions worldwide offer a specific education with an eye towards circular economy requirements. Single modules cover material innovation or systems thinking, often only included in general fashion design programmes. Some programmes reach out to MA students or are set up as short courses, both following an already existing interest in sustainable specialization. They rarely come as a full circular design BA course, dedicated to the future of fashion. This represents a gross disbalance between graduate numbers and the demand for progressive change, as education should always be ahead of time instead of shuffling behind. Fashion schools face industry development, they will have to adapt their education content to the requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as Li Edelkoort already stated in her talk "Anti-Fashion: A Manifesto for the Next Decade" in 2016 [11].

Right from the beginning of their education students should learn how to create biodiverse systems in a way to preserve resources and further limit harming influences on environment and people. Knowledge is key and commonly known as the power for change. If knowledge is not provided – how shall students be able to make healthier choices? Challenging implementation of sustainable, circular practices pushes none more so than student's creativity and their individual expression. At the same time, students should draw inspiration from restrictions, celebrate innovative solutions and add value to the diverse parts of the production chain rather than diminishing it. How shall educational institutions ever see what these designers are capable of if they do not set the frame for circularity? Students bring in the will and ability to learn. Embracing responsibility and finding the willpower

to change the industry, from sourcing raw materials to defining end of life solutions through innovative thinking and collaborative activism helps them to become strong and resilient individuals. Not stagnant in glorious 90s attitudes but fit for a labor market in motion.

Furthermore, international education standards should not only be defined by what industry already has or customers buy. They should be developed from a more cohesive approach tackling urgent ecological matters like climate change or social challenges as roots for future migration movements. Already education has to ignite a consequent durable and progressive approach to design. Only in following the richness of future facing strategies a young generation of designers will satisfy the increasing demands of fashion industry and respect the world we live in. When entering life after university, they will bring enough knowledge to radically rethink the system and raise their chances for employment. The better they are educated and the higher their qualification in interdisciplinary knowledge is, the earlier they find answers to pressing questions on a global scale and influence their environment for good. A win-win situation for students, the wider industry and at last fashion schools, having satisfied alumni.

### Joint Activism in Teaching

Fast fashion and consumption will always be part of the industry and constant source for dreams and satisfaction of desire. Hence, major change has to come from various sides and also lies in academic's hands. As educators we need to learn having a collective mindset ourselves and give up common ego driven workways to triumph over the harm fashion industry causes. Let us all be the role models' students should look up to, and redefine how we want higher education to be acknowledged. Who are we to argue

boastfully "this is what we always did"? Stop shifting responsibility and instead let us jointly move onto new territories. Let us walk to prevent the death of a higher education system which makes education in its current existing way obsolete and disposable. We need to support students responsibly to provide inclusive, innovative and future oriented education, ten steps ahead of industry. And by creating circular design programmes build a base for a world, in which aesthetic is defined by its potential to coexist healthily with people and environment.

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### Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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