Reducing material production of goods: A critical review of the fashion industry

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Abstract

Based on literature review and interviews with specialists from the fields of finance, fashion, circular economy and product design, this article discusses the possibilities and systems of reducing the material production of goods in the fashion industry. It first identifies the role of investment and economic growth as a driver for consumerism and stresses the importance of business owners in educating the consumer and developing business models, which do not rely on sales only. It then speaks of the risk for a decrease in the individual impact of a garment to be overshadowed by an overall increase in consumption and proposes sufficiency-based models as an alternative. This article concludes with a recommendation to move forward and to start taking immediate actions in order to solve the problem of production.

About the impact of clothing production on the environment

In 1973, Schumacher was starting his book Small is Beautiful by pointing out the problem of production. He remarked that if people treated natural and irreplaceable resources as capital rather than income, they should be concerned with preservation (Schumacher and McKibben, 2010, p.15). Since then, the environmental degradation has become a well-established evidence and the fashion sector began receiving recognition as a major player in the rapid deterioration of natural resources. (Circular Economy, 2015) As a response, brands such as G-Star or Nudie Jeans invested resources in decreasing the individual impact of a garment on the environment, but failed at understanding that the results were overshadowed by an increase in overall consumption. A report elaborated by the WRAP organization in the UK showed that while the water and carbon footprint of clothing per tonne had decreased between 2012 and 2016, the overall carbon emissions of the clothing industry were higher in 2016 than in 2012 due to an increased production and consumption (WRAP, 2016). Therefore, if the fashion industry aims at thoroughly reducing its environmental impact, production needs to decrease and an understanding of the influence of economic growth on fashion is crucial.

Economic growth as a driver for consumerism

Tim Jackson (2010) spoke of the role of investment in the circular flow of the economy, which has a major stimulating effect on the consumption growth. On the one hand, it chases productivity, which drives prices down and makes us buy more; while on the other hand it seeks novelty and thus the development of new production goods. As Jackson mentions, the human being does not only have a strong appetite for novelty but also uses the materiality of objects to define its status, who he is, and where he belongs. The problem is accentuated by the fact that consu-
Consumers fail at considering future benefits of their purchases and are highly influenced by the cost of the products, thus, preferring fast fashion even if it often involves lower quality and more environmentally harming production methods (The True Cost, 2015).

Wattanasuwan once said that “In order to feel ‘alive’ in this saturated world, we crave for a sense of meaningfulness in our pursuit of ‘being’. And it seems that we can symbolically acquire it from our everyday consumption” (2005: 179). More than to find a sense of meaningfulness, it is also important to acknowledge the existence of a social construct where symbols and meanings are transmitted between people as a mean of communication. Clothes and other sorts of consumption therefore function as a unique and intuitive language. We choose the message we want to convey to others and we read the information others provide us with through their own consumption. (von Maltzahn, 2017)

Thus, the demand and insatiability of the consumer are one of the drivers to a growth imperative experienced by companies (Day, 200). The worry of the shrinking opportunities in a highly competitive and saturated market motivates firms to continuously develop new and cheaper products in order to retain the consumer. It could therefore easily be assumed that the only driver capable of reducing the amount of goods produced is a decrease in consumer demand, however, there is a way in which companies can also play a role in this reduction, which shouldn’t be diminished.

**Sufficiency business models as a way of reducing production**

In order to move to a society where there is less pressure being put on the environment, business owners need to consider the influence they can have on the consumer and they need to start playing an educational role. By imagining business models, which allow other forms of profit than the ones made from sales, companies can truly influence the consumer. A way of achieving this goal is the use of sufficiency business models, which aim at a “moderate overall resource consumption by curbing demand through education and consumer engagement” (Bocken and Short, 2016). These models emphasize the need to build longer lasting products and to complement them with new revenue streams. In fashion, this can be realised by extending the product life through clothing items, which last longer, are timeless, more exclusive and not subject to the most recent trends. The most significant concern in creating sufficiency based models is that if the amount of sales is being reduced due to longer lasting products, other forms of income need to be developed in order for the company to survive and win new customers. Examples of alternative revenue streams can be services such as leasing or repair, the reuse of old garments, premium pricing or events such as workshops or gatherings being organised around the product.

All the previously named business models may hold individual challenges but there is one obstacle, which is particular to the fashion industry as a whole. The distinction between sustainability and sufficiency is not being made. Irene Maldini (2017), a researcher on the involvement of users in fashion design and its implications for the sustainability of clothing, speaks of a variety of proposed design solutions to tackle growing clothing volumes, which have not been subject to any empirical validation. Service-based solutions being one of them, she claims that even though clothing libraries may allow a reduction in production, as the consumer benefits from the use rather than the ownership of the clothes, there is a lack of valid numbers to confirm the affirmation. Consumers may use such services as a way to substitute their own wardrobes, or to increase the variety of clothes while keeping the same consuming patterns, which consist of purchasing new items and discarding old ones (Maldini, 2017). During an interview, she mentions that a similar effect happens for individuals, who sew their own clothes. There is no proof that such practice reduces the amount of items produced as people engage in the activity by pleasure and...
not need. There are therefore sustainable solutions being proposed in order to create a lower environmental impact of clothes, but these practices are not yet being accompanied by an overall decrease in consumption necessary for a significant reduction in environmental pollution.

Opportunities and obstacles of sufficiency business models

Sufficiency business models hold opportunities for a better use of material resources. However, they are currently being used on a small scale and by a considerably limited amount of companies, which struggle at competing with firms, which draw profit from large sales. An adoption of sufficiency models on a large scale would involve a shrinking of the economy and major changes to be made on a political, economic and societal scene, as there is currently an inadequacy between the aims of such models and the aims of the capitalistic system. Some of the changes needed would include the development of alternative measures to the gross domestic product (GDP), new forms of employment, which would pay a higher attention to leisure rather than economic activity, a higher involvement of stakeholders, new forms of money, investment and many other changes (Jackson, 2017) (Raworth, 2017). Most importantly, however, it would involve a change in the meaning given to growth and consumption. This change of mind-set is particularly important in the clothing sector, as the reign of fast fashion and consumerism precludes from imagining a context where the availability of clothes would be less exponential and of a higher price.

The challenges of sufficiency-based models hold many obstacles, and their adoption currently highly depends on the personal values and goals of the business owners. There are however opportunities, which can be beneficial to many companies. By giving a higher importance to stakeholders, customers may be more satisfied with the level of service and may develop into loyal customers. Moreover, there is a cost saving as the production is being reduced and the environmental benefits can be used as a marketing strategy. Finally differentiated value proposition may appeal to new consumers triggered by innovation and it can be used as an opportunity to gain market share and compete with larger sized companies, which cannot afford to loose profit by adopting sufficiency business models.

About the possibility for a change

The contemporary dependence on growth and consumerism seems to justify the common belief that despite the existence of natural resource scarcity, the problem will get solved by the technological advancement and human ingenuity. It is also belief that in order to move to a new form of economy and society, a large uprising of the consumer is necessary (Carlin, 2017). However, that is arguably a wrongly assumed idea, as strategies based on sufficiency already exist and can allow companies to move to a new form of business model while keeping a competitive advantage.

As for the fashion sector specifically, the industry needs to fight two strongly embodied limitations. The first one concerns companies, which need to overcome the fear of stepping away from sales based models they strongly rely on in order to stay on top of competitors. They need to recognise the validity of sufficiency-based models and the opportunities they hold for the future. The second limitation concerns customers, who need to fight back their impulsive buying behaviour and not rely on the belief that sustainable products can justify the purchase of additional items (Bocken and Short, 2016).

Finally, Naomi Klein, Tim Jackson or Kate Raworth, whose ideas strongly motivated this paper are only some of the influential figures who already speak of the need for a new form of society, economy and consciousness. They prove that a shift from a purely capitalistic system to a new form of economy is neither an apocalyptic prediction nor a utopian dream. It is an already existing reality and...
it is of the obligation of everyone to imagine not an ideal but better future based on lower production quantities and a better conservation of natural resources.

References


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