PLATE
Product Lifetimes And The Environment

The circular economy fashion communication canvas

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Abstract

Current design thinking focuses on incremental improvements to a linear system in which products are designed, produced and eventually disposed of. This continued consumption has resulted in over 1 million tonnes of discarded clothing and textiles entering into landfill each year in the UK alone. The effect of this high volume of waste is not only the loss of embodied energy and value, as re-useable items are disposed of, but continued environmental degradation through greenhouse gas emissions, toxic pollution and rapidly declining landfill space. As much as 70% of textile waste in the UK is sent to landfill or incineration from municipal waste collections. Whilst consumers are increasingly aware of the consequences of continued consumption, there is limited understanding of how to act more responsibly. Online sources of communication mean that although more information is available than ever before, confusion over terminology and the authenticity of messages can lead to in-action on the part of all stakeholders.

In order to investigate these problems key points at each stage in the fashion and textiles cycle were analysed using an exploratory sequential mixed methods approach combining case studies, semi-structured interviews and a consumer survey. Brands and designers working to create change by offering more conscientious product choices are struggling to connect with mainstream fashion consumers, hindered by a lack of industry acceptance and media coverage. Barriers to scaling up circular economy fashion strategies include a lack of market knowledge relating to consumers and the most effective promotional and retail strategies. These findings present significant evidence to guide the development of an effective fashion communication strategy for a circular economy.

Academic implications of the research include the identification of additional insights needed to establish more effective methods to communicate the economic, social and environmental benefits of textile reuse, recycling and upcycling to consumers and the fashion industry, leading to further research and contributions to knowledge. Practical implications include key contributions to the development of an operational framework to integrate circular economy fashion strategies into mainstream production and retailing. Originality lies in determining the existing practices already employed in this sector of the fashion industry and examining their effectiveness against the mainstream, in order to more effectively communicate to the benefits of sustainable, circular consumption in an industry which has so far thrived on linear consumption, novelty and obsolescence. In this way, marketing strategies can be developed for circular economy fashion which emphasise longevity, product lifetime optimisation, new forms of consumption and user experiences in a circular economy. The circular economy communication canvas serves a purpose to facilitate positive decision making for all stakeholders.

Introduction and Background

The fashion industry represents a vibrant multi-billion dollar global industry with international job opportunities at multiple levels. The industry faces significant challenges relating to environmental protection, workforce ethics and new technology, bringing a changing perspective to employment and current practices. (Jeffrey & Evans, 2011). It is stated that 'The fashion industry with its complex supply chains has, in several well publicised cases, been shown to be wanting in its treatment of workers, and much work is needed to rectify endemic practices' (Black & Anderson, 2010). Nordas (2004) acknowledges that the clothing and textiles supply chain can be seen as a number of discrete activities, but highlights that it is increasingly organised as an integrated production network, from the sourcing of raw materials via design and production to distribution and marketing. From an examination of supply chain management theories by Hines (2005), we

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can conclude that a supply chain can be viewed as an interconnected network of organisations and business functions, including retail buyers and suppliers. Each part works to integrate the flow of materials and information towards providing the products and services demanded by consumers. Jeffrey and Evans (2011) describe how the global supply chain is in a constant state of flux, and encompasses existing key players, along with emerging markets.

Farrer (2011) also illustrates the complexity of existing fashion supply chains, commencing with fibre processing, through textile manufacture, garment assembly, distribution, sales and eventual disposal. The challenge is to alter this model to include sustainable practice but also maintain profitability. Processes in the flow could in fact be more localised, but are usually global, and the use phase and disposal are seen as end points, rather than stages in a cycle. A sustainable fashion system is one which reduces negative triple bottom line impacts to the environment, society and economy (Elkington, 2004). The organisation of production in terms of materials use has increasingly come under scrutiny (Livesey & Thompson, 2013). The 'take-make-use-dispose' linear economic model has been called into question in terms of resource efficiency and negative effects along the material chain. A key concept which has been put forward to mitigate the risks associated with this linear model is the circular economy. In the UK WRAP (2010) has outlined a set of actions which relate to the sustainability of clothing and textiles in the circular economy. Through the Sustainable Clothing Action Plan (SCAP), WRAP's main actions to reduce the waste, water and carbon footprints of clothing include research into lower impact fibres, design for longevity and lower impact, supply chain efficiency and consumer information on use phase, garment care practices and recycling.

Solomon and Rabolt (2004) describe how fashion communication is often visual or non-verbal, and can include impersonal sources such as the media (magazines and websites) and personal sources such as friends and family, or people encountered on the street. Communication comprises of the sender, message, channel, receiver and feedback to the sender. In terms of fashion communication this can take the form of more formalised marketing messages, which must consider; who the message is for, how the message should be constructed, what it is about, where the message will be transmitted, why it is relevant to the targeted consumers and when should it be delivered (Moore, 2012; Solomon & Rabolt, 2004). Schneider (2014) highlights that communicating sustainability to mainstream consumers who care more about product design and personal benefits must take a different approach than strategies to communicate with those habitually choosing to purchase ethical fashion. Mainstream fashion consumers often exhibit little concern for responsible consumption choices, as unlike food, unethical garment choices are not perceived to have detrimental health effects (Chan & Wong, 2012). Consumers actively seek out low cost

fashion, as price is a major determinant in purchase decisions (Joergens, 2006; Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013). Mainstream consumers are reported to be driven by fun, simplicity, achievability, visibility, success, social status and esteem, as well as rewards and recognition. They follow fashion and trends, embrace consumption and always seek the best solution to improve their lives. To appeal to these customers, sustainable fashion brands must be aware of these influences and how they can be incorporated into a successful communication strategy (Schneider, 2014).

The aim of communication in circular economy fashion is to create more conscientious consumption patterns, moving away from high turnover retail models which put unreasonable pressure on manufacturers to cut corners and overlook worker safety (Sharma & Hall, 2010). Conscientious consumption operates within a sustainable fashion system, and is defined by attitudes and behaviours driven by reducing triple bottom line impacts which result from buying, use, maintenance and disposal of products. Key practices include seeking sustainable alternatives, low impact care options and responsible divestment of unwanted items (Eder-Hansen et al., 2012). Goworek et al. (2012) assert that there is a 'values-action' gap between consumers expressed intentions of ethically motivated purchasing and the translation into actual behaviour. Consumers require information to be broadcast in a clear, coherent and appealing manner, to inform decisions on sustainable fashion purchasing. However, media messages often focus on negative environmental impacts rather than positive developments in sustainable fashion practice, and the breadth and variety of media sources can present conflicting and in-authentic messages which result in confusion and consumer scepticism (Gam & Banning, 2011; Ha-Brookshire & Norum, 2011; Sheth, Sethia, & Srinivas, 2010; Zane, Irwin, & Reczek, 2015). Consumer perceptions within the context of sustainable fashion have been widely researched, yet current research lacks an understanding of how organisations that are producing sustainable fashion not only communicate their message to their audience, but also analyse how their consumers perceive their messages. This research addresses this gap by investigating how sustainable fashion brands understand their consumers' perceptions of sustainable fashion.

Methodology

In order to investigate these problems key points at each stage in the fashion and textiles cycle were analysed using an exploratory sequential mixed methods approach combining case studies, semi-structured interviews and a consumer survey. The practices of those collecting, sorting and grading post-consumer textiles, and those working within circular economy fashion to maximise the reuse and revaluation of such materials through their design practice, were analysed through semi-structured interviews, structured observation and process mapping. An online survey questionnaire evaluated how current consumer attitudes and behaviours would impact

upon a circular economy fashion system, assessing how demographic categories define the way individuals view their own practice as consumers, users and eventual disposers. Primary data collection was conducted in four phases using an exploratory sequential mixed method design, in which initial qualitative data collection and analysis informed subsequent quantitative data collection and analysis. (Creswell, 2014). In Research Phase 1, a review of literature on textile collection and fashion upcycling highlighted the interconnected nature of a closed-loop system and identified areas worthy of further investigation regarding processing, design practice and communication. Following the review of literature in Research Phase 1; textile collection and circular economy fashion case studies were conducted on Research Phases 2 and 3. Analysis of the qualitative data from Research Phases 1, 2 and 3 informed the quantitative data collection in the consumer survey of Phase 4. In Research Phase 5, findings and analysis contributed to the formation of a communication strategy for circular economy fashion.

To analyse the current practices of post-consumer textile collectors, three case studies of exemplifying textile collection firms were carried out during Research Phase 2. Semi-structured interviews with key informants from the waste textile management industry, structured observation and process modelling further documented sorting and grading activities and key themes within the industry. To analyse the current practice in circular economy fashion design and communication strategies during Research Phase 3, eight ethical fashion brands and five expert stakeholders were identified as individual cases for this stage of the research. Semi-structured interviews identified how the brands currently communicated their ethos to their consumers, what information it was important to know about consumers and areas in which they felt more understanding was needed. Expert stakeholders additionally informed the research by providing a range of insights into the current issues faced by the ethical fashion industry. Where applicable, designers also gave insights into their employment of a circular economy fashion design process and how this related to their communication strategy.

To evaluate how consumer attitudes and behaviours impact on a sustainable fashion system, qualitative insights from informants in Research Phases 2 and 3 of the study established gaps in stakeholders' consumer knowledge and indicated which lines of inquiry to pursue through quantitative investigation, in line with the exploratory sequential mixed method approach utilised. Along with critical areas highlighted through literature this further contributed to the development of a survey questionnaire during Phase 4. Areas of focus were fashion shopping behaviour; garment use and divestment; fashion influences and information; outlook on fashion consumption and ethics. A sample of consumers with an interest in fashion shopping was made available through internet based social networks and the survey was distributed through online snowball sampling. To

develop an effective fashion communication strategy for a circular economy, data derived from Research Phases 1, 2, 3 and 4 (literature review, case studies, interviews and consumer survey) were synthesised and analysed in order develop a circular economy fashion communication canvas, outlining the necessary requirements to effectively connect with consumers regarding sustainable fashion consumption and behaviour change.

Results and Analysis

Empirical evidence from the textile collection case studies, key informant interviews and consumer survey, plus key insights from literature regarding fashion communication, the circular economy and sustainable fashion were synthesised to establish an effective communication strategy for circular economy fashion. Thematic analysis revealed eight key elements deemed necessary for effective fashion communication and circular economy best practice which would facilitate positive decision making for all stakeholders, as shown in Figure 1. The Circular Economy Fashion Communication Canvas (Han, Henninger, Apeagyei, & Tyler, 2017).

Market research

Many small and micro enterprises in circular economy fashion investigated lacked the financial resources necessary for commercial market research, creating a limiting factor at this crucial stage. In order to bypass

THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY FASHION COMMUNICATION CANVAS

MARKET RESEARCH	**TARGET AUDIENCE**
Industry trends, competitor analysis, current issues in industry, market research	Clear consumer profile (e.g. age, occupation, income, interests)
COHERENT VALUES	**VISUALLY ENGAGING**
Core values must be clearly communicated and followed through across the supply chain	Use of creative, short, unique text, images and symbols
CLEAR MESSAGE	**MULTICHANNEL**
What is the brand ethos? Key values? Key attributes?	Reaching a wide audience by combining online and offline channels
COMPELLING PRODUCTS	**FEEDBACK LOOPS**
Unique pieces that attract consumers to buy into the slow-fashion movement	Creating feedback loops, which incorporate suggestions from stakeholders across the supply chain

Figure 1. The Circular Economy Fashion Communication Canvas - Adapted from Han, Henninger, Apeagyei, & Tyler (2017)

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this barrier, collaborating with larger organisations and academic institutions allows brands to access market intelligence and strategic planning resources to gather more information about their target audience, creating open and effective communication and assisting positive developments into the industry as a whole.

Target audience

Identification of a clear customer profile in terms of age, preferences, lifestyle choices and motivations will enable those working within circular economy fashion and textiles to target their communications to the right people. In order to appeal to younger individuals it will be necessary for circular fashion to be integrated and adopted alongside mainstream and high street fashion, both online and in stores.

Clear message

A clear message communicates the company ethos and the key values and attributes this embodies. Blanco-Velo et al. (2010) have shown that consumer understanding of ethical fashion messages is often hindered by overlapping and contradictory messages and statements. Circular economy fashion brands need to communicate a clear, authentic message about their supply chain transparency to ensure trust, participation and loyalty.

Multichannel

Multichannel message has the advantage of reaching a wide audience by combining online and offline channels. Survey respondents indicated preferences for online channels such as websites and social media, print media such as newspapers and magazines and through social interaction, either online through social networks, or in person such as shopping with friends or talking with friends and family.

Coherent values

For companies and brands operating within circular economy fashion, core values must be clearly communicated and followed through across the supply chain. Results of the consumer survey indicated that consumers expect ethical choices to be made on their behalf by the retailers and brands they buy from. These actions and values must always be clearly communicated in circular economy fashion to keep all individuals involved and engaged.

Visually engaging

Circular economy fashion messages should ideally be short, creative and image led with unique text, images and symbols. Brands and designers interviewed created design led, fashion forward garments, modelled in styled images and product shots. Connecting with consumers through aesthetics is vitally important in order to create a platform on which to engage individuals on the sustainable credentials and human stories regarding garment workers and the fashion industry, however this must be supported by the ability for brands to create well researched and targeted communications.

Compelling products

Circular economy fashion often benefits from a design led approach which creates unique pieces that attract consumers to buy into the slow-fashion movement. Fashion design informants expressed that establishing attractive designs would enable sales, followed by consumer understanding of the terms, care practices and provenance related to sustainable fashion offerings and that this in turn would add to the confidence of customers in making further purchases. Circular economy fashion must create compelling products that are able to compete with the style and design, as well the prices of the high street.

Feedback loops

Feedback loops enable communication messages to travel both ways between all stakeholders operating in circular economy fashion system, from brands and companies to individuals and consumers. Results indicated that social media presented opportunities for feedback from consumers, allowing individuals to express opinions and reactions towards new products, traceability, production information and the message communicated. Feedback loops in the form of in-store or postal take back schemes for unwanted items present an additional way for consumers to participate in good practice, and by offering full circularity to consumers, brands are able to communicate a commitment to diverting waste. Circular economy fashion should make use of each opportunity to offer greater circularity in fashion and textiles, through physical and virtual feedback loops relating to products, information and social interaction in order to stay up to date with and fully understand the needs of all stakeholders.

Conclusions

For effective communication, messages should be under-pinned by relevant market research to identify the intended audience and most effective forms of transmission. Short, creative messages, delivered through a wide variety of media, often using highly engaging visual or non-verbal forms target the predetermined audience. In mainstream and value fashion, promotional messages encourage hyper-consumption through a high turnover of new product lines. For sustainable and circular economy fashion, a paradoxical challenge arises in conveying a message, which aims to reduce consumption impacts and change consumer behaviour, yet also sell more products at the right price for the target market.

Results and analysis established communication as an essential moderator regarding sustainable behaviours and practice. Therefore, an effective communication strategy for circular economy fashion and textiles was developed to detail the essential elements for engaging stakeholders in collaborative best practice. To facilitate positive decision making the strategy for communication requires relevant market research to identify the target audience. A clear, multi-channel message should be communicated to the identified audience, with visual appeal and a compelling

value proposition backed up by coherent values. Feedback loops for two-way dialogue between each part of the circular fashion and textiles system are necessary to facilitate clarity, understanding and engagement between stakeholders.

Circular economy fashion communication aims to nurture relationships between consumers and producers and encourage responsible consumption choices which make use of products designed with long-lasting value and enduring style. Personal creativity is emphasised, in which non-purchase related lifestyle choices offer greater versatility, inventiveness and personalisation through practices such as mending, customising and swapping. It is in this departure of intended outcomes where mainstream strategies and those of the circular economy deviate. The operation of circular economy fashion is carried out with lower TBL impact, but this must still be combined with a message of compelling presentation of well-designed and desirable products. Information about company supply chains, ethics, and sustainability ethos must be communicated in a clear and coherent manner as an integral part of each brands' communication strategy, in a way which connects and is relevant to consumers.

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