



# The Circular Economy: A Game Changer in the Fashion Industry

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## Abstract

The circular economy is the most recent wave for academics and practitioners due to the attempt to integrate business activity with the environment. The demand to limit the negative consequences of the traditional linear business model is set by European norms and legislation, as well as by consumers, through the circular economy as a step toward carbon neutrality. The research motivation is to examine whether multinational corporations have set out to provide solutions to a changing world. This study focuses on challenges in the fashion industries. The research design is organized on analyzing the concept of circular economy, and the implication in circular transition for a sustainable society for the top ten European fashion industries. The research methodology is an exploratory analysis. This paper is an important research tool, providing a valuable answer to the question of multinational business in a changing economic and environmental context. The major findings of this paper highlight the transformation process from the linear business model to the value circle. Circularity is expected to become a way of working in the future. This is the first case study of top ten European fashion corporations transitioning to a circular economy, with editorial implications. Furthermore, the circular economy phenomenon has been demonstrated on sustainable business models of fashion multinationals.

**Keywords:** sustainability, circular economy, marketing

## Introduction

A circular economy needs to be analyzed in order to facilitate multinational corporations' transition to models of sustainable business. Taking into consideration the ambition of European carbon neutrality through a circular economy approach, the fashion industry (Hultberg and Pal, 2021; Shrivastava et al., 2021; Cooper and Claxton, 2022) may be aligned with all multinational companies with a focus on long-

term positive impact on the environment, people, and planet. Some multinational corporations are using similar circular campaigns worldwide (Brydges, 2021; Colasante and D'Adamo, 2021; Kim et al., 2021). It is the most recent attempt to build a long-term method of integrating economic activity with environmental well-being. The traditional linear economy paradigm continues to dominate business, society, and research. In recent years, the major global polluters (e.g., fashion, oil and gas industries)

have faced adversity as a result of business models with significant environmental and social consequences. As a comparison, oil and gas companies may use plastics for re-oil, such as the OMV REOil pilot project, net zero ambition by 2040 or 2050, information campaigns for customers, and use of raw materials for bio-oil. Circular economy concerns are taken into account, like reducing resource use, recycling, and reusing (Zhijun and Nailing, 2007; Kirchherr et al., 2017).

The main objective of this editorial was to evaluate the circular economy impact of fashion multinationals as a corporate social responsibility analysis. The research methodology is an exploratory analysis. The results confirmed the research question as well as indicated the importance of circular economy practices within fashion multinational corporations on long-term strategies.

The study hypothesis was confirmed. Thus, the major findings of the article highlight the transformation process from the linear business model to the value circle of fashion multinationals. This paper is one of the few that investigates the impact of circularity in multinational corporations by analyzing the top ten fashion corporations as a case study.

### Literature Review

In the recent internationalization process, multinationals' analysis dominated the literature of international marketing (Brandenburg, D. et al., 2016; Young et al., 2021); and its impact on sustainability (Brito et al., 2008; Ahola et al., 2020; Cowan and Guzman, 2020; Niinimäki et al., 2020). The fashion industry's (Herstein et al., 2013) impact on sustainability (Caniato et al., 2012; Karaosman et al., 2020) is a modern topic due to its value of more than 3 trillion USD and over 75 million employers worldwide. A circular economy will facilitate the fashion industry's transition to models of sustainable business (Hultberg and Pal, 2021).

According to the "Global Fashion Index" (McKinsey, 2018), the fashion market is dominated by twenty companies, accounting for 97% of global economic profit in the sector. Textile marketing studies have sparked a lot of focus for practitioners and scientists (Caniato et al., 2012; Karaosman et al., 2020). The fashion market at European level, according to the Retail Index, is dominated by ten multinationals with a cumulative turnover in 2020 of around EUR 69 billion.

### *Sustainability in fashion*

The "21st century mantra" (Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002) is sustainability (Brito et al., 2008). The book "The limit to Grow" (Meadows et al., 1970) reflects the reality, even today that, without substantial changes in resource consumption, there will be an uncontrollable decline in both the population and industrial capacity. Other relevant concepts used for this paper include responsibility (Perry and Towers, 2009), of any business actor in relation to some key areas of intervention: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic (Carroll, 1979, 1983, and 1991).

Sustainability is defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs". Also important to be mentioned is the "Triple Bottom Line" concept, which consists of three major aspects: social, environmental, and economic performance (Elkington, 2004). A focus on sustainability is critical (McQuilten et al., 2015; Vatamanescu et al., 2021). The terminology of sustainable fashion includes terms that are often used interchangeably as ethical, recycled, environmental, ecological, green, organic (Thomas, 2008), sustainable manufacturing, green distribution, eco-material preparation, green retailing, and ethical consumers (Shen, 2014).

It is considered that consumers bear in mind sustainability when shopping (Butler and Francis, 1997; Connell, 2011), as well as cost, availability, knowledge, and interest (Butler and Francis, 1997). Kozinets (2011) studied meta-analyses regarding sustainable consumption, while Connell (2011) demonstrated that consumers perceive sustainability in long-term lifecycle products. With 3 years of average clothing lifespan (Riya, 2021), the fashion industry is the world's second major polluter after the oil industry, and one of the major contributors of plastic microfibers entering the oceans. According to Fletcher (2008), this industry, due to hazardous chemicals, environmental degradation, low wages, and violations of workers' rights, may generate negative externalities for the environment and society (Bly et al., 2015; Niinimäki et al., 2020), while consumers demand to minimize the environmental impact (Shen, 2012). Fashion production is considered to generate 10% of humanity's carbon emissions (UNECE, 2018). The impact of fashion is also related to human costs (UNEP, 2018; WRI, 2019), and, in some

cases, may result in human rights violations (Human Rights Watch).

### ***Circular Economy***

The circular economy is outlined as a mix of reuse, recycling, and reducing activities (Kirchherr et al., 2017). It is an operational tool to implement sustainable development (Ghisellini et al., 2016; Murray et al., 2017) and is considered too vague (Brandt et al., 2011; Peltonen 2017). Naudé (2011) considered it as a "theoretical dream," but present reality is an age of sustained babble (Engelman; 2013). The unclear description of the concept was concluded by Yuan et al. (2008), Lieder and Rashid (2016), and Kirchherr et al. (2017).

Circular Economy requires a change in product design, business models and supply chains (Bressanelli et al., 2022). Kirchherr et al. (2017) identified a "sample of 114 definitions that features 95 different definitions". The most prominent definition is provided by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2012) which considers an industrial system to be restorative or regenerative by design or intention (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; Schut et al., 2015). The concept is also known as the 3R principles (Lieder and Rashid 2016). Zhijun and Nailing (2007) are considering it an ecological economy, while designing products easier to reuse or recycle (Dupont-Inglist 2015).

The European Green Deal proposes to transform the EU in order to overcome climate challenges through legislative and non-legislative measures. The new circular economy action plan is one of the important building blocks of Europe's new agenda for sustainable growth. Circularity is a prerequisite to achieving the EU's 2050 climate neutrality target.

### ***Circularity in fashion industry***

Fashion multinational corporations are searching for innovative solutions in order to reduce their negative impact on the environment. The concept of circular economy is extremely important (Provin et al., 2021). This concept explains a more sustainable business with minimum waste and maximum resources; a circular product would be designed to be recycled and used for longer. The current dominant model of production in the fashion industry follows a linear "take, make, waste" logic with environmental impacts. Based on a study of 19 Swedish fashion brands, Brydges (2021) considered that brands in the process of

implementing circular economy principles must integrate strategies from key stages such as take, make, and waste across supply chains and not limit them to the waste stage. A circular economy, therefore, represents a systemic shift to deepen relationships with customers and build long-term resilience across different business models. According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, there are three principles of circularity in fashion: designing out waste and pollution, keeping products and materials in use, and regenerating natural systems. Online rental platforms and Instagram micro celebrities may influence consumers to accept the recycling and reusing of used clothing (Shrivastava et al., 2021). While Cooper and Claxton (2022) confirmed that increased garment durability supports garment longevity.

Circular fashion still needs to get control, specifically of contamination and generally of the negative images associated with second-hand clothes. Kim et al. (2021), after an online experiment of 238 U.S. consumers, confirmed that product history enhances consumers' trust. Based on a survey of 402 respondents, Colasante and D'Adamo (2021) suggest that environmental concerns of Italian consumers were overshadowed by their perception of second-hand clothing. Consumer awareness of sustainability's real meaning and businesses with ethical and circular bioeconomy practice integration are required. According to Fletcher (2008), fashion products must be produced in a sustainable manner in accordance with sustainability guidelines such as ISO 14000 (Lo, 2012) and specific regulations on the circular economy. Taking into consideration the ambition of European carbon neutrality through a circular economy, the fashion industry may be aligned with all multinational companies with a focus on long-term positive impact on the environment, people, and planet.

### ***Hypothesis***

H1: *The fashion business must prioritize sustainable effects.*

### **Research And Methodology**

The present study aims to explore whether multinational corporations have set out to provide solutions to a changing world and the challenges of climate change. The research methodology is exploratory, based on secondary data, and empirical, based on quantitative data collection. This paper is an important research

tool, providing a valuable answer to the question of multinational business in a changing economic and environmental context. In order to collect the data, the analysis was performed on a sample of fashion multinational corporations that were part of the 2021 European Top 10

Fashion Companies. The desk research involved analysis of sustainability and/or annual reports, websites, and social media profiles in order to detect companies' circular economy commitments, targets (see table 1), and approaches (see table 2).

**Table 1: Companies' circular economy commitments and targets**

Commitments for Circular economy	Target	Multinational corporations
Global or European commitments	Plastics Economy Global Commitment	Inditex
	Ellen McArthur - Make Fashion Circular initiative	LVMH, H&M, Primark, Zalando
	Zero waste to landfills by 2023	Inditex
	Global Fashion Agenda	Inditex
	Use recycled and sustainable materials by 2030	H&M, Primark
	Eliminate plastic from fossil oil by 2026	LMVH
	Extending the life of at least 50 million fashion products by 2023	Zalando
	Textiles 2030	JDSport, Next
	Paris Agreement and the UN Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action	Zalando, JDSport
Net zero by 2040 in the UK and Republic of Ireland	Marks and Spencer	

Source: Authors' research, the sustainability/annual reports, sustainability strategies of the analyzed companies.

**Inditex's** circular slogan is "collect, reuse, recycle". The products collected are donated to 45 different non-profit partners while others of these items "are sorted for repair, resale or recycling". The funds raised from these sales are also kept by non-profit partners of the company. Another commitment of the company to the Global Fashion Agenda is partnerships with more than 40 local non-profit organizations in order to re-sell used garments. Besides, the company has a "free at-home clothing collection service" in Spain, Paris, China, London, and New York. Customers can drop off their used products at collection points in eight brands' stores, or cities, or offices across a number of the company's main markets. The group's waste was mainly from headquarters, logistics centers, and Inditex factories; 91.21% of waste was sent for reuse and recycling. Zara "implemented its Single Hanger

project" in their worldwide stores. This means that only one single hanger is used by the textile suppliers to transport the garments and display them in the store. The cardboard boxes are used on average six times before they are recycled. Inditex deleted all the plastic bags and started to use the paperless receipt system for all online orders. The company has been committed to replacing the gift envelopes and collecting 100% of all company packaging materials collected for reuse or recycling in the supply chain in 2023. The company's results related to reuse and recycling behavior were as follows: 100% of company waste was sent "for recycling or appropriate environmental management", 1,074 million security tags were reused, repaired, or recycled, and 61.8 million hangers were recycled.

**H&M** elaborated on a circular trajectory in its production. Through the company's information campaigns, customers are inspired to share what they wear in order to enjoy fashion more sustainably and without having to sacrifice style. The importance of sharing is „a key part of closing the loop in fashion" as well as helping the fashion industry become more circular in order for customers to enjoy fashion in a sustainable way. For some collections, the company is already using recycled materials for 65% of the materials and intends to only use recycled, as well as other sustainable materials by 2030, including turning plastic waste into plastic materials. In 2020, the company collected and recycled 3.5 million PET bottles. While in 2021, there were over 7.5 million. Also, customers are encouraged to choose a fill made from wildflowers for warmth and comfort. H&M has proposed to reuse already existing denim. The main company goal is to use the raw materials for products that will consist of 30% recycled materials by 2025. Threads, labels, pocketing, including weaving the fabric, leftover cotton from spinning the yarn and cutting the material, as well as partially recycled metal zips, rivets, buttons, and trims, are used in the company's garments. The company's fabrics are a mix of "pre-consumer recycled cotton (meaning manufacturing waste cuttings that never made it to customers), and post-consumer recycled cotton (textiles that have been worn and recycled)", while the accessories are patch worked entirely from production rejections.

**LVMH** is adopting the LIFE 360 strategy. One of their key pillars is spotlighting creative circularity. By 2030, the Group intends to create products with eco-design as well as eliminate plastic from fossil oil by 2026. Also, the company is trying to implement it by already testing new circular services. The main goal is guided by four principles: eco-design with innovation and certain raw materials (bio-based materials, recycled materials, biotech materials, certified materials, materials from regenerative agriculture and other innovations); techniques with low environmental impacts; "product longevity as the DNA of luxury" (high-quality products, refills and filling systems, repair and patina, product makeovers and new services); and "BORN-AGAIN," which is a reborn product. LVMH's circular fashion model includes the Nona Source platform that resells, mainly centralizes, upcycles, and sells "deadstock fabrics and leathers" from LVMH fashion houses to young fashion brands in support of the creative

community. An innovative project is crafting bags by using "leather offcuts" from previous collections, woven from "excess leather strips" in a variety of colors. These initiatives are closely related to the Eye/LOEWE/Nature collection that is created from eco-responsible and upcycled materials.

**Primark** is using a range of natural and manmade fibers, while cotton is in the spotlight. Sustainable cotton for corporations is sourced through the Sustainable Cotton Programme, namely, grown using regenerative and natural farming methods, including reducing water, chemical fertilizer, and pesticide use, as well as training farmers regarding these methods for the improvement of their livelihoods, too. This issue is very important for the company, and, in this regard, Primark has been committed to making all clothing using more sustainably sourced materials or recycled fibers by 2030. Primark intends to integrate more sustainable raw materials into company clothes, such as cotton sourced from Primark Sustainable Cotton Programme and recycled polyester, also to minimize and reduce the waste of every garment's life (at the start and end of its lifecycle). As well, companies intend to stop using virgin or new fibers in clothes, to the detriment of more sustainably sourced ones. Primark proposed becoming more circular by enhancing the durability of clothes and, by 2027, having clothes be recyclable by design. In this direction, the company elaborates informational campaigns about circular design, considering the fabrics in use, the garment association, and if trims are easily removable, in order to make possible garment recycling at the end of their life. Primark has launched its first Cradle to Cradle Certified™ Gold certified denim jeans that are more sustainable and have a lower impact on the planet and its people (100% organic cotton, produced using less energy and water, and made to last as well as designed to be recycled).

**C&A** is implementing circularity in its long-term sustainable program. The company is proud of its achievements in this sector, mainly that it's the first in the world to produce 100% recyclable denim that is produced in an economically and socially responsible way. Also, the company increased the number of its recycled fabrics and the use of recycled fibers by 12 times. By using more sustainable viscose in 2019, the company avoided 57,157 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent. The company is increasing its organic share in order to achieve 100% more sustainable cotton, also known as bio cotton. While all old clothes, fishing

nets, or plastic bottles are very precious, the company confirms that all of them can be recycled. Another circular strategy of the company is "We take it back" in order to give a second life to old clothes, and customers receive a voucher for their next purchase in return. C&A integrated a community strategy into its sustainable program with the main idea that everyone is welcomed and taken great care of by its more than 31,000 employees all over the world working for C&A. The company's business is built on the family values of love, respect, and responsibility.

**Zalando** is a leading European platform for fashion and lifestyle. Their vision is to be a sustainable fashion platform with a net-positive impact on people and the planet, and they have a commitment to apply the principles of circularity and extend the lives of at least 50 million fashion products by 2023. Zalando has a circular economy strategy, a digital application for selling and buying pre-owned clothes for reuse and reselling. Zalando extended the life of over 1 million fashion items. The seamless integration of "pre-owned" into the Zalando online shop makes it easy for customers to buy and trade-in pre-owned items just as it is to shop for new clothes. The company applies one of the principles of circularity: "keeping products and materials in use." Another focus area in their sustainability strategy is sustainable packaging in ways that minimize waste, keep materials in use, and eliminate single-use plastics. The boxes are made from 100 percent recycled cardboard, and "beauty bags" are made from 100 percent recycled paper. To make it easier for customers to extend the life of garments, the company launched a pilot with the goal of testing an end-to-end solution that goes beyond circular design and scales the learnings across our private label business and brand partners. The pilot collection has 50 pieces, and all of them are designed for circularity, meaning that products are made of recycled or renewable materials and are made to last longer through reuse and recycling.

**JD Sports** is one of the 65 founding signatories to Textiles 2030. Textiles 2030 is the UK's most ambitious voluntary agreement designed to limit the impact clothes and home textiles have on climate change, in line with the Paris Agreement and the UN Fashion Industry Charter for Climate

Action. By 2030, the members of the organization will reduce their combined greenhouse gas emissions in line with a 1.5°C UN trajectory to reduce climate change by 50%, reducing the water footprint of products sold by 30%, and following a roadmap to a more circular fashion future. The steps of the company are in the direction of packaging (e.g., have increased from 33% to 50% recycled material for bags), applying the principles of the "reduce, reuse, and recycle" approach to plastic, and reviewing and studying different solutions to reduce and re-use waste streams.

**Marks and Spencer** is committed to becoming net zero by 2040, sending zero waste to landfill from operations and construction activities in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. They also work across their value chain and take action on key areas of waste, such as used clothing, food waste, packaging, and carrier bags. The sustainability strategy is called Plan A, and they have started transitioning to a circular model by improving the recyclability of packaging and goods, increasing the use of recycled materials, and improving the durability of products.

**NEXT** has a Responsible Sourcing Strategy through which they work to reduce the environmental impact of their business activities. Circularity is achieved through activities that include reducing packaging through a Responsible Sourcing Strategy, working to reduce impact and help drive efficiency within the supply chain, and designing take-back schemes to ensure valuable resources are kept in circulation. The company is a supporter of WRAP's Textile 2030 initiative.

**PepCo** is not using the concept of circular economy on the company website or social media channels. The sustainability strategy is focused on four pillars: the environment, ethical supply chain, employees, and charity. The sustainability aim is to protect the planet and contribute to improving the quality of life of our employees, customers, and local communities. The company uses recycled paper. 96% of the promotional leaflets are printed on recycled paper. In terms of packaging, the company wants to increase the proportion of recyclable and/or recycled packaging for bulk and unit packaging.

**Table 2. Companies' circular economy approaches**

<b>Circular economy approach</b>	<b>Multinational corporation</b>
Collection of used products	Inditex, C&A, Next
Donation of collected products	Inditex, Zalando
Repair and reuse of collected products	Inditex, H&M, C&A, LVMH, Zalando, JD Sport
Resale of collected products	Inditex, Zalando
Recycling of collected products, by design and raw materials	Inditex, H&M, LVMH, Primark, C&A, Zalando, Marks and Spencer, Next
Optimizing the packaging	Inditex, Zalando, JD Sport, Marks and Spencer, Next, PepCo
Cardboard boxes used on average six times	Inditex
Information campaign	H&M
Turning plastic waste	H&M, C&A

Source: Authors' research, the sustainability/annual reports, sustainability strategies of the analyzed companies.

Some multinational corporations are using similar circular campaigns (see Table 2) worldwide. Mainly, oil and gas companies may use plastics for re-oil, such as the OMV REOil pilot project, net zero ambition by 2040 or 2050, information campaigns for customers, and use of raw materials for bio-oil.

### Results And Discussion

In recent decades, multinational corporations' analysis has dominated the international marketing literature (Brandenburg D. et al. 2016), representing a major interest in their impact on sustainability (Ahola et al., 2020; Cowan and Guzman, 2020) and the circular economy (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2012; Schut et al., 2015; Ghisellini et al., 2016; Murray et al., 2017; Geissdoerfer et al., 2017) toward the new journey for net zero ambition. Also, the sustainability of the fashion industry (Caniato et al., 2012; Karaosman et al., 2020) represents an interesting case. The circular economy implies the aim of reusing waste from a production sector in order to increase the product life cycle (Provin et al., 2021).

From the analyzed data, it is relevant to emphasize that the majority of the top ten European fashion multinationals are part of international organizations that are promoting and implementing circular economy practices. Also, the majority of them have medium and long-term targets in relation to the circular economy. Kim et al. (2021) confirmed that reused or recycled product history enhances consumers' trust regarding the service. Colasante and D'Adamo (2021) considered that consumer awareness of sustainability's real meaning and businesses with ethical and circular bioeconomy practice integration are required.

Hypothesis 1 investigated the necessity for multinational corporations, as well as the fashion industry, to implement CE practices in order to have a positive impact on the environment, people, and planet. Regarding companies' public disclosure and circular economy practices, this hypothesis was supported. A possible explanation is that the greater the implication of the company in the circular economy, the greater the perceived positive impact of their awareness campaigns on the environment. Incorporating circularity into the day-to-day business model is a necessity for medium and long-term business

sustainability for multinationals in general, but also mandatory for the most pollutant ones: fashion and the oil and gas industry. These results were also confirmed by Zhijun and Nailing (2007), Lieder and Rashid (2016), and Bressanelli et al. (2022). According to the Ellen McArthur Foundation, the circular economy is a solution that tackles global challenges.

### Conclusions

In the present period, the circular economy is a trending concept. When a concept is trending to become diffuse in its meaning, researchers tend to focus on this phenomenon (Zhijun and Nailing, 2007; Dupont-Inglis, 2015; Schut et al., 2015; Lieder and Rashid, 2016; Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). This has also happened to the circular economy concept (Kirchherr et al. 2017). Those circular approaches are also implemented by multinational corporations worldwide, mostly by fashion, oil, and gas companies. Fashion multinationals' research represented a major interest for both researchers (Caniato et al., 2012; Karaosman et al., 2020) and practitioners.

In conclusion, multinational corporations need more effort to succeed in implementing the circular economy concept. This research provided favorable support for the established hypothesis. Based on the significant attention paid to sustainability in terms of environmental protection, many multinational corporations, namely the top ten in the fashion industry, have recognized the importance of the circular economy and implemented practices in this regard.

It seems to be easy to pledge for circularity in the fashion industry, the second-largest polluter in the world after the oil and gas industry. Future research should aim at providing a comparative analysis of the implementation of a circularity approach from the fashion industry to the oil and gas industry. While our research is not without limitation, it brings insights for academics, researchers and practitioners from the fashion industry.

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