

Rethinking the Circularity of Fast Fashion. Study Case on Mass Retailers' Current Practices

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Abstract. *The fashion industry despite its big contribution to the global economy is one that impacts the environment and uses a big number of resources during the process of manufacturing, period of use and after the supposed end of life of the clothing items. Based on previous studies, in this article we will analyze the consumer behavior of buying clothes, especially from the fast fashion platform SHEIN, but not only. For the literature review we took the relevant studies that go around the fashion manufacturing and circularity. The article will also propose and analyze viable solutions for reintegrating clothes while checking current ethical and sustainable practices. It is known that time and commodity are two essential factors that determine the behavior of the consumers, a hypothesis that is further verified. The research methods for this were both quantitative and qualitative. Some of the questions followed the attractivity elements that keeps consumers engaged despite knowing the environmental problems caused by fast fashion. Circular fashion is a possible future scenario by taking a deeper approach on the supply chain management in the relation with the consumers ongoing and changing needs.*

Keywords: sustainability, circular economy, fast fashion, textile industry, sustainable practices.

Introduction

In the society we live in we are already engaged in some processes without further questioning their validity. We also live in a world where everything goes at high speed and we need to adapt in order to keep up, especially with the demand. Fast fashion is part of this category and is defined by the Oxford dictionary as “inexpensive clothing produced rapidly by mass-market retailers in response to the latest trends” that can be seen at fashion shows or on the catwalks.

Industries are part of our economy, especially the fashion industry that is valued at over \$ 1.5 trillion and employs over 75 million people. Over the last years the production of clothing has doubled. A study shows that in 2022 there was an increase of 25% of buying clothes compared to 2019, however 98% of the clothes were not used for a very long time. The fashion sector is growing, and we can't fail to notice the environmental issues (7).

A very important role in this whole equation is represented by the consumers and their behaviour. Generally, it is claimed by the consumers that they care about the environment, however, their sustainable consumption behaviour is not reflected. Studies have shown that “humans consume products and services faster than nature can regenerate, process, or recycle them”. Regardless, economy is still viewed as the most important factor in the production of physical products. Another interesting idea we need to consider is the following: environmental knowledge and risk perception are linked to increased.

In the modern world consumption has become part of our life as we tend to consume goods and services due to the existing supply and demand relation. On the Maslow pyramid having

clothes is a need we can find at the base of the pyramid. But how much do we actually need? Where do we put the line between need and desire? Some people have more clothes that they can wear.

How many clothing items does one person need? What happens with the clothes one does not want to wear anymore? What is the cycle of life of the textile products? These are some questions that will be tackled in this article.

One thing is certain, we need clothes. And if there is demand there is also going to be supply as well. Though, an important aspect is to be aware of the supply. We need to analyze the surroundings. Do consumers tend to buy more clothes because there is an ongoing increasing supply or vice versa?

It is important to carefully observe the cycle of life of the clothes. It starts from the manufacturing of the fabrics from raw materials and there are many aspects included such as the human and energy resources.

Why is circularity important in this field of fast fashion? To put it simple, there is a need of redistribution of the resources so that the needs of different categories of people are covered and satisfied without a very big economic change.

The impact of the actions of fashion retailers nowadays is really big even though they are trying to improve their practices to become more environmentally friendly. Is it well known that the fashion industry contributes greatly to the economy it, but unfortunately contributes highly to pollution as well. This way companies are seen having little consideration for environmental and social impacts.

Literature review

Fashion and textile industry

The textile industry is divided into three main categories which are apparel, home furnishings, and industrial textiles (). We will mainly focus on apparel by analyzing the processes and finding ways of promoting circularity towards the consumers while being able to observe their behavior. In this part of the article, we will overview some terms and definitions that will help us understand better the concept of circularity in the fashion and textile industry field.

Fashion manufacturing is considered the second most polluting industry. It mainly affects the agricultural land and impacts badly the environment. This industry involves a complex supply chain including production, raw material, transportation, retail, consumption, and the disposal of clothes eventually. We can observe a pattern of linear economy where waste is produced both in the manufacturing process and by the improper disposal of clothes. Based on research made by the European Parliament the textile production is responsible for 20% of global clean water pollution.

Some important numbers we need to be aware of when we address the topic of clothing consumption are the following: increase of fiber production from 5.9 kg per capita (1975) to 13 kg per capita (2018) and the volume of apparel manufacturing will increase by 81% between 2018 and 2030.

Even though the fashion industry brings an important contribution to the global economy, it also creates serious impacts for the environment regarding the climate change. Some examples are resource depletion, air and water pollution, and the use of chemicals.

Fast fashion, effects towards the climate and environment

The fashion market pollutes. It might not be as visible, but sooner or later the consequences will eventually affect each one of us directly with various impacts in our health and lifestyle.

When it comes to the relation between the environment and sustainable practices a problem intervenes, specifically the green washing. Green washing happens when the sustainability promises of companies do not align with their promises and for some consumers is very hard to tell apart from genuine intentions. On the other side, there are also people who are aware of the green washing of certain brand but decide to ignore it because the problems caused are not concerning them directly or that there are more benefits, and their needs are satisfied by certain products regardless secondary effects.

The process of the confection of the clothes is not a simple one and it goes through various stages and involves many resources such as human and material.

Circularity and sustainability in fast fashion

Circular economy is a concept that encourages a continuous cycle of the resources without losing them. As sustainability has become an essential topic being given the climate change issues, businesses must adopt and implement it in their processes.

Clothing stores regularly change their products according to the change of season and trends. Consumers are not usually aware of what happens behind the scenes as long as it is not something that concerns them directly.

What happens to the clothes that are not sold? What is the process of donating clothes?

There have always been initiatives of donating clothes to different causes or people from certain backgrounds. Such as warm clothes for homeless people or children clothes for orphanages. The benefit of donating clothes is that is a very good way to keep going the cycle of life of clothes with little costs and few resources.

Second-hand stores are a great alternative for sustainable shopping, and it gives the clothing items a new chance to enter the life cycle. Nowadays has become more common to buy secondhand items than buying new ones. This is a good change but at the same time this implies an increase of the prices based on the demand.

Selling secondhand clothes is not only done at physical stores. Since we live in the digital era, is so much easier for the consumer to scroll down on their device while looking for a certain product they need. For example, we have the Lithuanian owned platform Vinted (that is also available in Romania), an “online marketplace for buying, selling, and exchanging new or secondhand items, mainly clothing and accessories.”

Being given the current climate change problems, people became a bit more aware of their actions and are rethinking buying secondhand items instead of new ones because in some cases it can be more affordable and convenient.

Originally, clothes are supposed to be designed to last for a longer while. In the modern day, taking into consideration the rapid change of trends and the desire of the people to keep up with them, some clothes are discarded even though they would have more potential lifetime. A question that arises in the mind of the person is “what do I do with these clothing items I will no longer wear?”. And the most natural answer that comes instantly to mind is donating the clothes to certain charitable organization who need them for their causes. These organizations collect used clothing and resell it as secondhand clothes. (6)

The definition of secondhand according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is “acquired after being used by another”. There are many visible benefits for buying secondhand clothing. For

the environment we can observe the reduction of resources and waste involved in the creation of new clothing. For the consumer we can notice the affordability of the low prices.

Supply chain and demand

The life cycle of a clothing item consists of the following several key stages: raw material extraction (natural and manufactured fibers), fabric manufacturing (nonwoven, weaving and knitting), clothing (garments) manufacturing, retailing (conventional and online), use, end of life, and transportation. (Eryuruk, 2012; Muthu, 2014; O'Rourke, 2014)

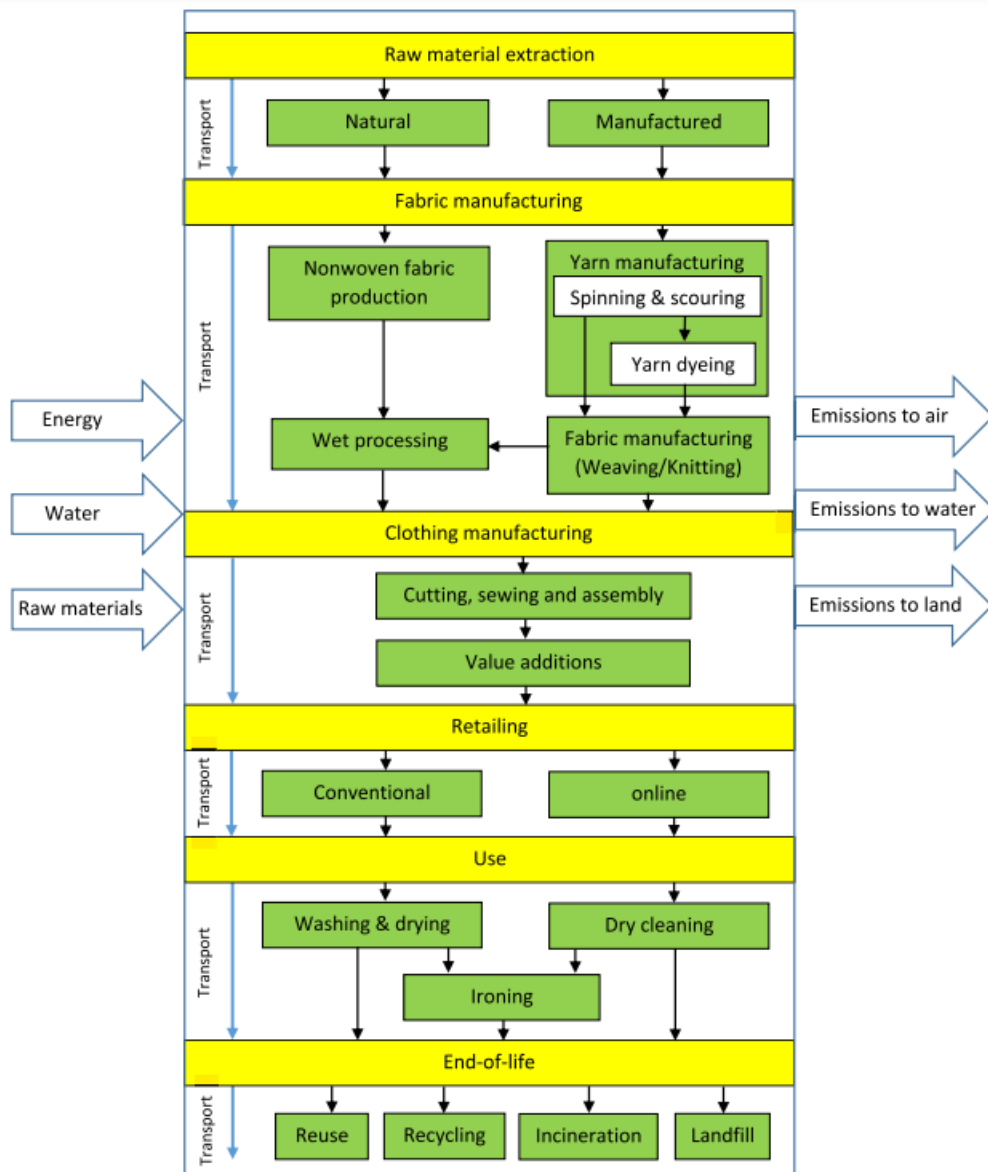


Figure 1. The life cycle of clothing

Source:

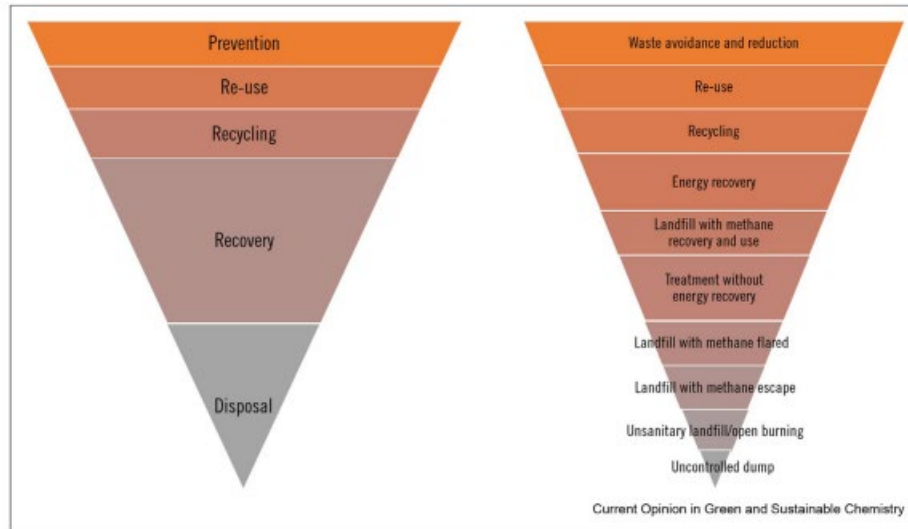


Figure 2. Waste stream

Source:

At the same time, we will go through the manufacturing process of the clothing items covering the stages it goes through presented in the following figure.

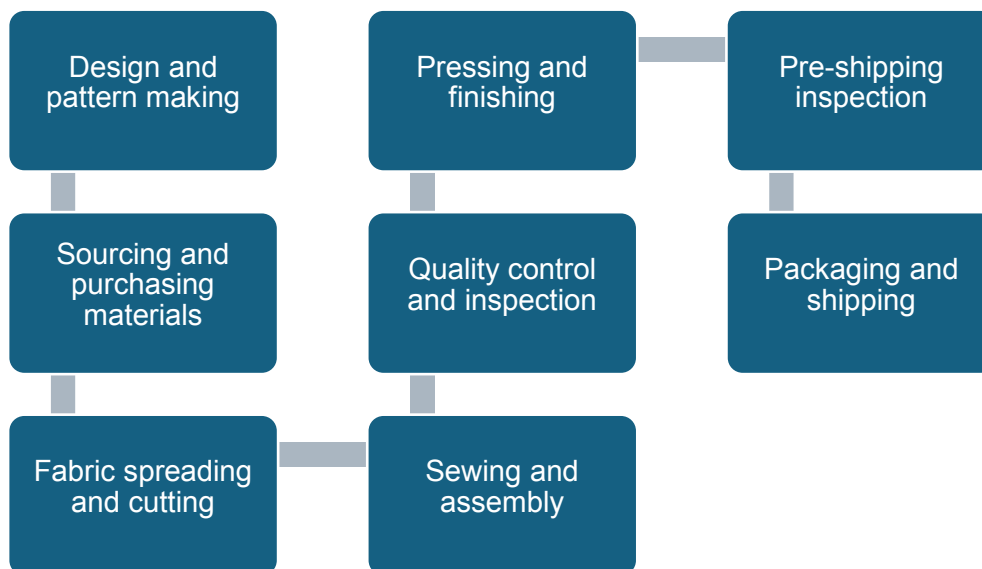


Figure 3. The manufacturing process of clothes

Source:

The current economic model is expressed in terms of linear material flows, where resources are taken from a natural system on a regular basis, modified during production, used for various purposes within the human system, and then disposed of back into the environment (waste), frequently with unfavorable outcomes. Value is added to the extracted resources during production in that linear process, although it is often created and acknowledged just once. Economically speaking, supply drives both output and consumption. When a product reaches the end of its useful life, the material's utility also often ends. Waste hierarchies are used to categorize and rank actions

ranging from prevention to reduction, reuse, and recycling to practices of recovery and landfill disposal. They were created to optimize the development and management of solid waste.

Methodology

After previously reviewing the relevant literature on fast fashion and circularity approaches, in this part of the article we want to deepen the study by digging into some fast fashion retailers, observing their processes and at the same time the behavior of their consumers. In this part we will deepen the understanding of the following: consumer behavior of an average SHEIN shopper, how do secondhand stores work as alternative, and what are some existing practices of circular fashion.

Mainly the research method is a quantitative one because it involves the analyze of various existing data and information. Additionally, to have a better approach of the consumer behavior, a qualitative method was used, specifically the one-on-one interview. The economic side is as important, and it was analyzed as well from this spectrum. The quantitative research has been made with data from this textile and fashion field.

As mentioned, for this research were used both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the behavior of the consumers and see what the impact is if the textile industry, discover the important elements behind the scenes. As for the qualitative research some interviews with some people who have made purchases from Shein were conducted in order to define some characteristics of the shoppers.

In the fast-paced world that we live in, time and commodity are two essential factors that determine the behavior of the consumers. We can observe in the daily life different types of shoppers, the ones that like to shop online and the ones who like to go to physical stores.

We will take a look at two big fast fashion retailers, namely SHEIN (which has its activity online) and INDITEX (which has its activity in the physical stores mostly).

As for sustainable alternatives for the two retailers mentioned above, we have two secondhand examples Humana (a physical store) and Vinted (an online platform).

For the past few years, an online platform that emerged and increased in popularity is Shein. Shein is a China founded fashion retailer with the headquarters in Singapore and has many shoppers globally. What attracts the customers are two simple elements: the cheap, affordable prices and the diversity of products. Many young people are buying from Shein nowadays and is a good insight to observe the determinant factors that are making this retailer so popular among this number of consumers.

The online presence of Shein is remarkable. Upon brief research on web browsers there could be seen many sponsored ads of products. What is the competitive advantage Shein has? A very big diversity of products and the affordable price. The main aim was to confirm a hypothesis by using the qualitative method of individual interviews with a group of buyers.

The interviews were semi structured, and the aim was to verify some hypothesis deducted from the visible consumer behavior in the recent period. The interviewees were people who made purchases from Shein in the past or are currently purchasing. As for the demographic profile of the interviewees, they were Romanian residents in their 20s, both male and female.

The main hypothesis that needed to be verified was: “consumers buy from Shein because their products are diverse and match their needs”. On the economic note it was important to see how much influences the price (and other additional costs) the decision of buying.

Another big fast fashion retailer that is relevant to bring into the discussion is the INDITEX Group, with headquarters in Spain, that is the mother group of renewed fashion brands such as

Zara, Bershka, Pull&Bear, Stradivarius, Massimo Dutti and Oysho. These are brands that can be usually spotted at any commercial center.

It is essential to analyze good practices and sustainable initiatives that Inditex has to encourage the people (not necessarily the brand consumers) to bring clothes they do not wear anymore and donate them to different causes. The company also complies to the SDGs that are implemented in the company's strategy. For instance Zara has this initiative called Clothes Collection Program that consists of bringing to the designated boxes inside the group's stores clothes of any type and the employees will take care of the following steps.

At the same time this kind of alternatives and circular models that encourage the reuse of clothes in a benefic way can shape the consumer positively and create a sustainable behavior. Circular fashion is possible to happen, only there is the need of some steps to be taken of.

Vinted is an online platform that helps the reselling of clothing items and not only.

During the research we discovered a solution that creates value for textile waste, specifically a French business called FabBRICK. In France only 6% of the textile waste is recycled or reused. But ever since the implementation of this solution more than 40 tons of textile were recycled.

Results and discussions

As it can be observed, buying clothes is a big hobby people have, especially for the new generations. Being given the state of economy in the last period, consumers cannot spend the same due to inflation and other economic changes. Thus, they have to adapt and find solutions that fit their budget and their needs. For the consumers it is more important to satisfy their needs despite the climate concerns.

One impressive aspect of the Shein platform is that it is up to date and keeps up in real time with the most recent trends and eventually will be able to provide for the consumer an option close to the item they imagine buying.

Converting the received answers to numbers, most of the responders do not think that Shein is an ethical company (a percentage of 75%). On the same note 66,6% of the responders are aware of the company's impact over the environment. From here we can deduce that consumers are aware of what is ethical and what is not environmentally friendly. However, most of the interviewees when asked if they would continue buying from Shein the answer was "yes". Even though most of them are aware of the environmental impacts, their decision of keeping with their consumption behavior is valid because there is no other relevant alternative that can satisfy the need of buying clothing items as affordable.

In most cases the interviewees would eventually stop buying from Shein if the company would stop manufacturing items that would not fit the consumers' needs up to the latest trends and personal preferences.

It wasn't surprising to find out that all of the interviewees said that the cheap and affordable prices are the most important thing that attracts them to the Shein platform. The diversity of products plays a huge role.

If we compile the answers, we can extract some other directions of discussions. These directions are the following: sustainable brands and sustainable fashion items are perceived as expensive; it is hard to find certain items in certain locations, such as the capital of the country, the price of certain items is up to 3 times more expensive than the price you can find on Shein.

Conclusion

As we have mentioned various times over the course of this article, the industry of fast fashion is a big contributor to the global economy, however it brings many environmental problems. The current economical pattern for this industry is linear as most of the products are not reintegrated in the life cycle properly. Consumer behavior and knowledge are two very important factors to consider.

On the economical side is important to be aware of the changes that are continuously happening. Consumers would prefer buying the cheaper alternative.

Circular fashion is not impossible to achieve as there can be noticed some good initiatives and practices such as the donation of clothes, buying and reselling secondhand items, even recycling or converting the items to energy.

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