

Circularity and fashion: assessing the potential of a circular transition to promote sustainable development in the industry

	CIRCULAR ECONOMY (CE)	SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (SD)	SUSTAINABLE FASHION (SF)
key concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alternative approach to economic growth, focusing on the efficiency of recirculating materials and resources for as long as possible. Aims to produce economic and environmental benefits by a) reducing costs, maximising the lost potential of waste/by-products, and b) tackling the negative environmental impact of economic activities related to depletion of natural resources, pollution and excessive waste. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approach to development that recognises the interconnectedness between social, environmental and economic systems (pillars of sustainability). Grounded in the principle of 'leaving no one behind'⁽¹⁾ and promoting wellbeing for present and future generations in respect of planetary boundaries. Progress is measured not only in terms of economic growth and environmental impact but also according to respect of human rights and equality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Framework of individuals, organisations and initiatives that promote a systemic change in how fashion is produced and consumed, tackling the social and environmental concerns arising from current industry practices. Addresses themes like fair labour, inclusive and just economic growth, health and environmental risks, and transparency in the fashion industry. Operates on multiple levels of influence and action, including implementations of circular models.

aim CE gained popularity as a tool for sustainability because of its potential to favour a win-win situation for environment and economy. At the same time, assessing the impact of CE on SD is challenging due to the novelty of the concepts, scarcity of data, and implementations which are too recent to assess their outcomes. An emerging body of critical literature points out gaps in the conceptualisation and implementation of circularity, questioning the actual sustainability of a circular transition. My research contributes to such discourse, exploring means to promote a sustainable approach to circularity which accounts for the socio-ecological relationships that characterise the fashion industry⁽²⁾.

methodology A literature review of academic papers, reports and policies was functional to develop a theoretical framework on the relationship between CE and sustainability. Interviews with actors involved in the SF framework were used to contextualise this relationship in the fashion industry, and identify elements of the SF approach and value system that could contribute to make the circular transition holistically sustainable.

introduction CE is seen as a sustainable alternative to the production and consumption patterns in the industry because it addresses some core issues of the current system:

FAST FASHION Fast response of mass production to changes in fashion trends; fashionable products are offered at an affordable price, increasing consumption levels. As the size of the industry increases, so does its impact on society, environment and economy.

- Trends change quickly; thus, clothes are made and purchased to be cheap and short-lived → lower quality of materials, throw-away culture, increased production of landfill waste.
- Fast fashion is inefficient and wasteful, and costs of production and prices are kept low by relocating production in countries with less regulations on fair wages, pollution and safety → environment and people pay the price.
- Ecosystems cannot regenerate natural resources at the same pace as the industry consumes them → scarcity and depletion of natural resources.

problem the structure supporting the circular transition is weak, and might lead to unforeseen consequences that hinder rather than fostering SD⁽³⁾.

sustainable circularity the approach and value system of SF fill the gaps of CE, integrating sustainability-thinking as core element of the circular transition.

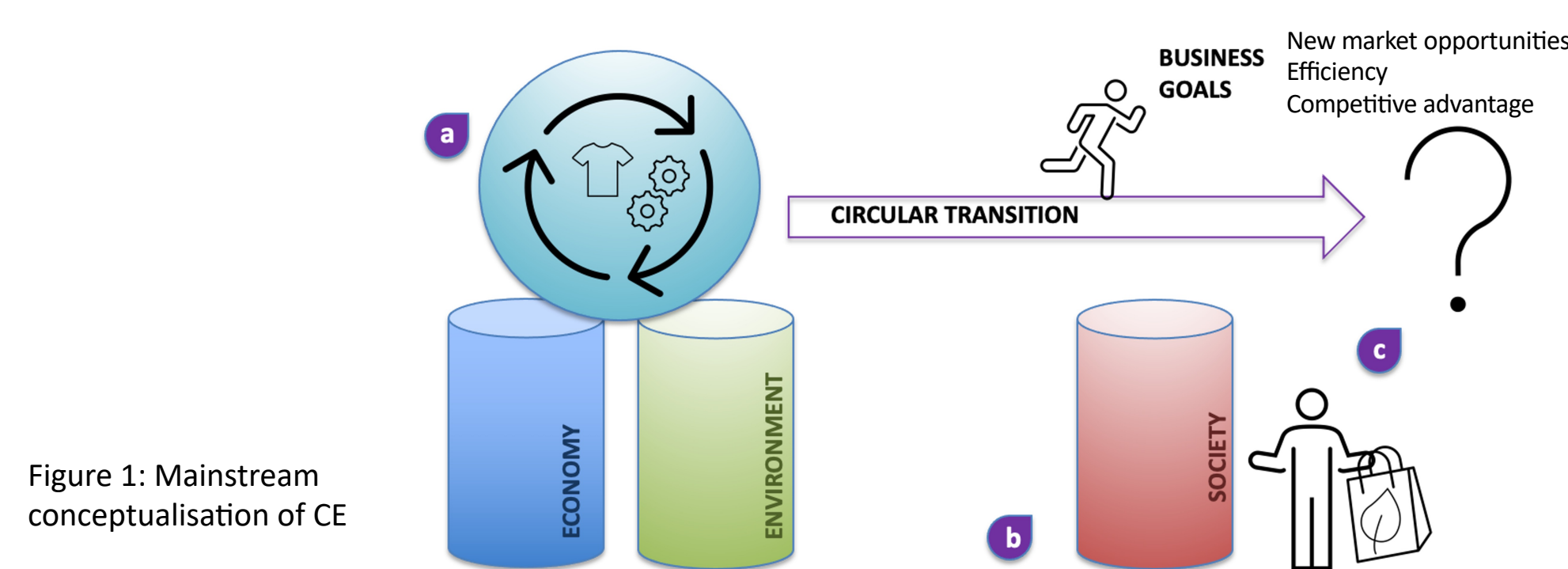


Figure 1: Mainstream conceptualisation of CE

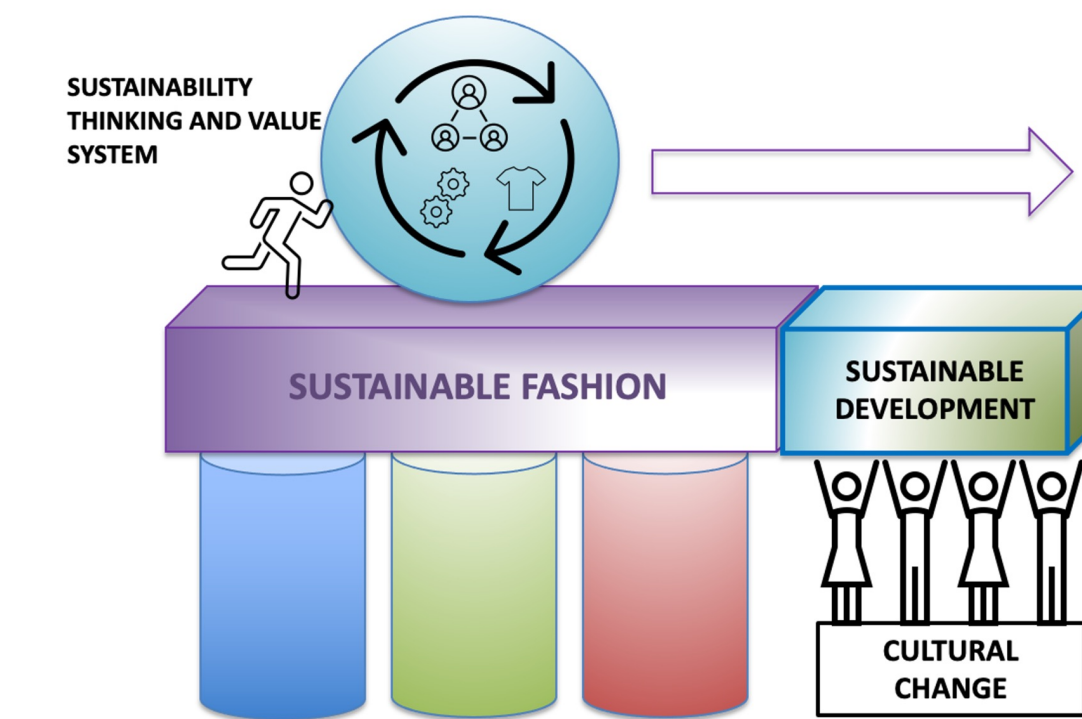


Figure 2: SF as the support structure for sustainable circularity

Systemic thinking is rarely applied to decision-making and impact assessment

Business-oriented approach

Little attention is placed on how to implement a systemic thinking approach

- The mainstream focus of CE is on material aspects of the transition: products, manufacturing processes, technologies and services suitable for recirculation of materials within the industry
- Systemic thinking in CE is translated in networks for sharing expertise and tools

A business-oriented approach tends to outclass the importance of cultural change as key enabler of systemic change towards a CE.

- CE fails to effectively convey the need to decrease the size and pace of the industry, and overlooks the role of individuals in initiating, accepting, and sustaining the transition over time.
- Mainstream narratives present the circular transition as a way to achieve business goals, while producing benefits for society overall. This approach incentivised more businesses to implement circular models, and policy-makers to develop tools in support of the transition.

Is the circular transition sustainable for all?

- The circular transition entails a re-design of production processes and infrastructures, up-skilling of workers and a drastic shift in consumer culture.
- A circular transition would affect people and economies differently according to their socio-economic background.
- Most conceptualisations and implementations of CE lack considerations on whether communities and economies are ready to sustain the circular transition, and how to build resilience to change for all parts involved⁽⁴⁾.

Systemic thinking grounded in principles of sustainability, inclusivity and participation

Value-driven approach

Collaborative approach over business competitiveness

- Mapping to coordinate a synergic effort and avoid duplicating action.
- Facilitation of dialogue between stakeholders within and beyond the industry.
- Action originates from personal drive of individuals, who then identify a network of stakeholders with similar values to collaborate with.

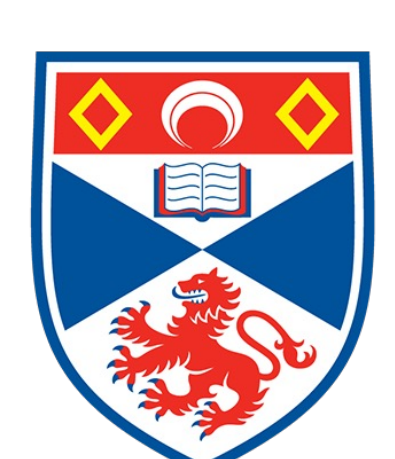
Everybody has a voice: the human dimension of fashion is as important as processes and materials

- Direct relationship with suppliers to ensure transparency and sustainability, and exchange expertise.
- Dialogue with local community/consumers to understand their needs and tailor the offer accordingly.
- Focus on ethical dimension of how clothes are produced.
- Representation of stakeholders not involved in decision-making in policy environments.

Sustainability-thinking and action with purpose

- Social sustainability is a necessary condition for the implementation of circularity.
- Slowing down the pace and size of the industry is a core priority.
- Products and processes are attributed a future-oriented value according to inclusive measures of development other than economic growth⁽⁵⁾.
- Values are consistent and integral part of organisations, providing direction for action.
- Effective communication of common values and purpose to consumers and stakeholders, to promote intentionally sustainable choices.

conclusion Some features of the SF approach identified as drivers for sustainable circularity are already implemented to a certain degree in more recent CE initiatives. However, in order for the circular transition to promote sustainable development on a systemic level sustainability-thinking should become integral part of the conceptualisation of CE and the planning of the circular transition. Comparing criticised elements of CE with the SF approach, there emerged an interesting complementarity. The foundations laid by SF, in terms of value systems that give purpose and direction and means to implementation, provide a support for the circular transition in the fashion industry. Findings suggest that a circular transition in the fashion industry can be positively transformative if it partakes in the ongoing efforts towards a sustainable change in the industry, whilst operating within the framework of SF.



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- (1) UN Sustainable Development Group (2022), *Universal Values Principle Two: Leave No One Behind*. Available at: <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/leave-no-one-behind> (Accessed: 4 July 2022).
- (2) Palm, C., Cornell, S.E. & Häyhä, T. (2021) 'Making Resilient Decisions for Sustainable Circularity of Fashion', *Circular Economy and Sustainability* 1, pp. 651–670. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43615-021-00040-1>.
- (3) Murray, A., Skene, K., Haynes, K. (2017) 'The Circular Economy: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of the Concept and Application in a Global Context', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 140, pp. 369–380. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2693-2>.
- (4) BRS, and Laudes Foundation. (2020) *Taking a People-Centered Approach to a Circular Fashion Economy*. Available at: <https://www.bsr.org/en/our-insights/report-view/taking-a-people-centered-approach-to-a-circular-fashion-economy> (Accessed: 29 June 2020).
- (5) Niinimäki, K. (2011). *From Disposable to Sustainable: The Complex Interplay between Design and Consumption of Textiles and Clothing*. Helsinki, Finland: Aalto University, School of Art and Design.