

“Changing consumer and cultural mindsets around (over)consumption is a much-needed discussion for the apparel industry, as is the need to embed circular economy principles to close the loop on its linear take-make-waste model.”

-Taylor BRYDGES, Mary HANLON

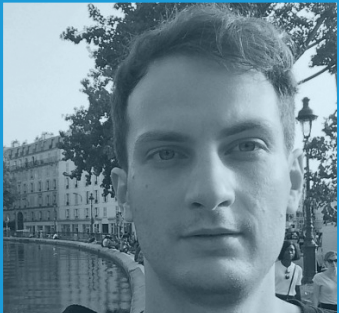
Image Source: The start-up hub of 'Station-F' in the 13th district of Paris, a multi-functional space praised by the start-up community, housed in a former warehouse. It was transformed into a vaccination center during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic that hit France and Europe in the winter of 2021-2022. Image by Nicolas J.A. Buchoud, all rights reserved ©.



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On (over)consumption in the clothing industry

Martin KOCHAN (MK): The clothing industry has a significant environmental footprint with respect to carbon emissions and water pollution. What can policymakers do to reduce the environmental impact?

Taylor BRYDGES (TB) and Mary HANLON (MH): The global fashion and apparel industry overwhelmingly operates on a model that prioritizes economic growth over environmental and social sustainability concerns. When designing interventions to mitigate environmental challenges related to the global fashion and apparel sectors, policymakers should avoid outsourcing responsibility solely to consumers. Addressing the environmental impact of the fashion industry will require meaningful dialogue between stakeholders across production networks, recognizing both the uneven power dynamics between stakeholders as well as their diverse and often divergent interests. Instead of imposing top-down approaches, policymakers should also consider the social and cultural behaviors of the industrial actors and acknowledge that the very nature of global production networks requires systems-level thinking.

Globally, we are now seeing examples of policymakers taking leadership roles in establishing frameworks to address the environmental impact of the fashion industry. For example, France introduced an Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) framework for end-of-life textiles which has significantly increased the collection and recycling of post-consumer textiles. In Australia, the Commonwealth Government recently announced a AUD 1,000,000 grant through its National Product Stewardship Investment Fund for an industry-led product stewardship scheme for clothing textiles. In the coming years, there will be increasing opportunities for policymakers to share experiences and

learn best practices. In the meantime, we should be wary of any product stewardship strategy that hopes to address 'waste' without first engaging in meaningful stakeholder dialogue.

MK: COVID-19 has disrupted supply chains globally and heavily impacted the garment industry. What exactly were the effects for the Global South?

TB and MH: Garment sector workers continue to be among of the most affected by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has only served to exacerbate longstanding worker health and safety concerns in the sector. While COVID-19 has disrupted the sector globally, the effects on garment workers in the Global South have been particularly significant and widespread. There have been several impacts, from factory owners being unable to pay their workers when large fast fashion brands abruptly canceled orders for garments that had already been made, to increased instances of brutal union-busting in Southeast Asia as one response to the economic uncertainty in the sector. Home garment workers - who typically lack formal employment contracts- and migrant workers have also been negatively impacted as they are often excluded from the minimal financial support offered by brands, manufacturers and/or governments.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Clean Clothes Campaign has been documenting the impact of COVID-19 on

garment workers around the world through their live blog. As their reporting illustrates, these impacts continue to be felt by garment workers in the Global South.

MK: Textile recyclers complain that the volume of discarded apparel is rising while their quality is decreasing. How can incentives be set to reduce consumption while improving quality?

TB and MH: This is certainly a challenge! Fast and ultra-fast fashion is premised on a low-cost business models that rely on fabric blends that are cheaper to produce. But as we also know, these fabric blends are difficult to recycle. There are some exciting global examples of recycling businesses engaging in a range of technological innovations to improve these processes and separate fibers so that they can be reused.

There are also challenges around developing the necessary infrastructure to collect and recycle clothes, which would, in turn, support the development of textile recycling businesses. Most end-of-life clothing textiles are landfilled or incinerated. Moreover, particularly in the Global North, we have come to over-rely on the charitable sector to manage the growing amounts of end-of-life clothing textiles. Pin-pointing what happens to donated clothes largely remains a 'black box' although we are increasingly seeing that only a small percentage of donated clothing stays in our local communities and the majority is sold into the global

second-hand clothing trade, which has significant environmental and economic implications for garment-importing countries such as Kenya, Ghana and Chile.

Changing consumer and cultural mindsets around (over) consumption is a much-needed discussion that the industry has been quite successful in avoiding. As these examples have shown, much of the application of the circular economy to the fashion industry is focused on waste or end-of-life. Also a concern is the notion that strategies to manage end-of-life might fuel an increase in product consumption. A broader conversation is needed about how circular economy principles can be embedded across the industry to truly close the loop on its linear take-make-waste model. This includes designing for circularity, whether by using better quality input materials, that have longer lives and can be repaired, or through design interventions that support garment longevity.

MK: Major fast fashion companies such as H&M have launched take-back schemes where consumers can return used garments in the stores. To which extent are such programs effective in closing the loop and how much is this mere greenwashing?

TB and MH: It is important to be realistic about what take-back schemes can and cannot do. Clothing take-back schemes can help divert clothing from landfills, but it is often misleading when a brand implies that a garment

returned to it through a take-back scheme will find its way back into that store as a new garment. Rather, brands like H&M partner recycling businesses who then find other uses for old garments such as downcycling into insulation or rags or selling the clothing in second-hand markets.

Take-back schemes can therefore contribute to resource recovery but not necessarily to a closed-loop fashion system because very few returned items are turned into new garments. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation has reported that less than 1% of the material used to produce clothing is recycled into new clothing. While take-back schemes could potentially be an important part of closing the loop in the fashion industry, in their current forms, these programs are highly susceptible to greenwashing.

MK: In recent years, new business models, such as fashion rental platforms, have gained popularity. Are these pieces of solving the puzzle of our linear take-make-waste model of consumption?

TB and MH: Fashion rental platforms are part of the story but as we have seen with other circular economy interventions in the industry, the devil is in the details. Fashion rental platforms could be important in providing consumers with an alternative to clothing ownership, particularly for rarely-worn garments such as formal wear, thus improving clothing utilization i.e., the number of times an item is worn or reused, thereby reducing the need for multiple gar-

ments and consequent greenhouse gas emissions. Rental platforms, however, do very little to address the social and environmental sustainability challenges facing the industry at the earlier stages of supply chains (especially take and make). Very few rental platforms are focused on the rental of sustainable clothing brands. Using a rental platform may also allow customers to continue consuming in trend-driven ways, without critical reflection on where their clothing comes from and how it was made.

There are many questions about the environmental impact of fashion rental platforms. Some research has raised concerns about the rebound effect, whereby the savings of using a rental platform are negated by other forms of consumption. Others have raised questions about the environmental impact of rental processes such as emissions from transportation and dry cleaning. The financial viability of the platform model has also been called into question during the pandemic and it remains to be seen how many rental platform businesses survive this crisis.