ORIGINAL PAPER

Beyond Novelty and Growth: A Virtue Ethics Enquiry into Fashion Entrepreneurs' Responsible and Harmonising Practices Towards Sustainability

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Abstract

A growing number of small fashion entrepreneurs seek to offer an alternative to the mainstream fashion industry, which, in its obsession with novelty and growth, often ignores the costs to society and the environment. There is a need to develop a deeper understanding of how these fashion entrepreneurs may be agents for change in their industry. Using rich data from an in-depth study of 27 UK-based entrepreneurs, we offer such analysis, drawing on a novel framework that combines MacIntyre's virtue ethics scheme and Jonas's responsibility imperative. We identify key virtues—passionate commitment, authenticity, humility, sharing and empowering, and temperance—which shape the entrepreneurs' practices in line with their accepted and perceived responsibility for sustainability. These virtues shape the entrepreneurial processes that seek an active negotiation and harmonisation of sustainability and the demands of business. In particular, we pay attention to the different ways in which fashion entrepreneurs take responsibility for sustainability which ranges from a 'growth for impact' strategy to staying small and seeking impact through influence and replication. Conclusions are drawn on conceptualising the varieties of 'postgrowth entrepreneurship' that aligns the virtues of a deep-rooted sense of responsibility with business goals. This shows what can be possible and prefigures an alternative fashion industry.

Introduction

There is a growing awareness that the fashion industry in its current form is inherently unsustainable, causing significant harm to people and planet (Islam et al., 2021). This is driven by the industry's obsession with novelty and growth, manifested by its (in)famous fashion calendars, and ever shorter seasonal cycles and trends, which encourage people to consume far beyond their needs (Burns, 2010). A clear and urgent change of direction is required for the industry, one which is grounded in ethical thinking and more responsible practices, and that enables living well within the boundaries and limitations of our planet.

Our article focuses on the role of small fashion entrepreneurs (FEs) who seek to offer an alternative to the mainstream in an effort to create a more sustainable fashion industry. Previous studies have offered accounts of motivations, conflicts and tensions of sustainable fashion entrepreneurs (e.g. DiVito & Bohnsack, 2016; Heinze, 2020; Poldner et al., 2017), whilst there remains an evidence and theorising gap related to explaining how FE can operate as agents for sustainable transitions in their industry. In our article, we offer a novel ethical theoretical framework that aims to close this gap. Our analysis is based on, and extends, MacIntyre's (1985) virtue ethics approach, which focuses on business actors' virtues and their role in balancing the external (e.g. profit, business growth) and the internal good of business (the productive craft it houses) with the aim to foster human flourishing (Beadle and Moore, 2006). In order to give greater consideration to sustainability (Lane,

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2017), we make a novel contribution by combining MacIntryre's approach with Jonas's (1979/1984) *Imperative for Responsibility.* Jonas's work sets out an ethical imperative for humankind to take responsibility for the future of the planet. By doing so, we enable a fuller contextualisation and exploration of FEs' assumed responsibility for sustainability. As such, our work does not only make a distinct contribution to the literature on fashion entrepreneurship, but also makes a theoretical contribution to the field of business responsibility for sustainability more widely.

Our novel combined framework enables identification of the virtues (human qualities) that sustainable fashion entrepreneurs exhibit. As they seek to live out their felt responsibility for sustainability in their business, we explore how virtues shape their negotiations between their sustainability-focused practices (internal good) and business goals (external good), and in particular considerations around business growth. From this analysis, we draw conclusions as to the potential and challenges of FEs as change agents in their industry, and contribute to debates on postgrowth/degrowth alternatives (Hickel, 2021; Jackson, 2021). Our analysis draws on rich data from an in-depth study with 27 small fashion businesses across the UK.

The article is structured as follows. The next section provides more detail about the unsustainability of the fashion sector, the roles of different industry actors, and empirical research on sustainable FEs, followed by a deeper exploration of our chosen ethical frameworks and how they link together. After setting out our research method, we present our findings. Next comes our discussion in which we offer an interpretation of our findings and theory development. Our final section offers some concluding remarks regarding the role of sustainable fashion entrepreneurs in the creation of a postgrowth/degrowth world. We also propose areas for further research, and set out managerial and policy implications of our findings.

The Unsustainability of the Fashion Industry and the Role of Sustainable Fashion Entrepreneurs

Although it is notoriously difficult to report reliable data due to the industry's complex and global supply chains, the vast social and environmental impact of fashion is increasingly well documented, urgently demanding change. For instance, in 2019 approximately 62 million metric tons of apparel were consumed globally (The World Bank, 2019) with an estimated 300,000 to 350,000 tonnes of clothes ending up in landfill every year in the UK alone (WRAP, 2017). Within 15 years the industry doubled production, whilst the time clothing is worn before it is thrown away fell by around 40% (Souchet, 2019). Estimates suggest that the sector emitted

1.025 gigatonnes of CO_2e in 2019, which equate to around 2 percent of annual global greenhouse gas emissions with emissions expected to grow to 1.588 gigatonnes by 2030 (Sadowski et al., 2021). At the same time, garment workers and their communities suffer a range of adverse effects from the production of these large volumes of clothing including health issues related to pollution and use of chemicals, and flood-risks stemming from climate change, in addition to the more well-known issues of poor working conditions and poverty wages (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2022).

The need for a deep transformation of the industry towards postgrowth/degrowth is recognised by many; the sustainability transitions literature highlights that change needs to come from the combined efforts of multiple stakeholders operating at multiple levels (e.g. Geels, 2019). Despite being a powerful actor, the initiation of such deep transformation is less likely to come from governments, which have previously rejected even small taxes for unsustainable fast fashion brands (Cooper, 2019).

Large businesses have started to introduce sustainability programmes beyond compliance and conventional Corporate Social Responsibility efforts, with many large fashion brands announcing 'sustainability' collections (Pucker, 2022). These efforts, however, are frequently critiqued as limited in reach, as they do not substantially lessen the industry's environmental footprint as "pressure for unrelenting growth summed with consumer demand for cheap fashion" continue to be main driver in the industry (ibid.). Similarly, only a minority of large apparel companies are compliant with setting climate targets needed to keep global warming below 1.5C (UNFCC, 2023). Thus, whilst small changes are being achieved, the majority of mainstream businesses do not fully acknowledge their responsibility and act accordingly with efforts often considered piecemeal (Niinimäki, 2015) and involving 'greenwashing' practices (Wright & Nyberg, 2015).

Deeper, transformational change might be initiated by other actors including environmentally conscious customers and environmental movements such as Extinction Rebellion as well as smaller fashion enterprises. In this paper we focus on small FEs who utilise their businesses as a space to challenge the 'status quo', by testing and implementing alternative, more sustainable, processes, products and business models with a view to creating change in the industry (Elf et al., 2022).

Existing empirical research around sustainable fashion entrepreneurship has developed an understanding of 'sustainability' principles that FEs might follow (e.g. Cataldi et al., 2017; Niinimäki, 2015) including design for timelessness and longevity, on-demand/bespoke design, use of natural low-impact fibres and recycled materials, creating value from waste (upcycling), offering repair services, swapping and rental platforms; with case studies capturing

these models and practices (e.g. Molderez & van Elst, 2015; Todeschini et al., 2017). Another growing body of literature focuses on sustainable fashion entrepreneurs themselves, offering accounts of their motivations, conflicts and tensions, based on qualitative studies. DiVito and Bohnsack (2016), for example, develop a typology of sustainable FEs (green-, humanitarian-, and holistically oriented), and examine these types according to their entrepreneurial propensities such as risk-taking and innovativeness, and the trade-offs between ecological, economic and social dimensions of their practices. Other studies highlight the passion that FEs exhibit with regards to their practice of sustainable fashion and a range of complex challenges they face, including with regards to sourcing decisions, the price point of sustainable apparel and the need to change customers' mindsets (Heinze, 2020; Su et al., 2022; Hoffmann et al., 2022).

Importantly, the above studies do not utilise any ethics frameworks in their analysis. Whilst Poldner et al. (2017), offer some philosophical theorising around sustainable fashion entrepreneurs in their work on embodied multi-discursivity as an aesthetic process approach to sustainable entrepreneurship, and on embodied experience in the formation of the 'ethical self' of sustainability-motivated entrepreneurs (Poldner et al., 2019), no study has utilised a virtue ethics framework to analyse sustainable fashion entrepreneurship.

Going beyond existing accounts of motivations and challenges in sustainable fashion, our novel approach enables an in-depth interrogation of how FEs take responsibility for sustainability whilst negotiating and resisting commercial and market pressures and expectations of 'business as usual'. In particular, our framework locates FEs' business activities in the context of systemic sustainability challenges of the current economic system and, consequently, the call for post growth/degrowth alternatives. This, in turn, enables an ethical critique and re-formulation of business growth imperatives that small innovative businesses seeking to challenge the mainstream face (e.g. Hoffmann et al., 2022).

Analytical Frameworks

Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics has enjoyed growing popularity amongst business scholars (e.g. Collier, 1995; Dunham, 2010; Sison et al., 2017) in different cultural contexts (Alzola et al., 2020), due to its relevance to the value creation propensities of business in terms of achieving the 'good life' or 'flourishing' (Hartman, 2017). Virtues are conceptualised as acquired human qualities that involve "a characteristic motivation to produce a certain desired end and reliable success in bringing about that end" (Zagzebski, 1996).

The literature explores a range of virtues linked to sustainability, reframing 'traditional' virtues and stressing the importance of humility, simplicity, frugality, cooperativeness, conscientiousness, creativity, and open-mindedness (Kawall, 2021), or attentiveness, receptiveness, care, respect and responsibility (Becker, 2017) as pre-requisites for addressing sustainability challenges. Others propose novel virtues such as 'harmony with nature' (Jordan and Kristjansson, 2016), or Confucianist views of harmony within larger ecological systems (ibid., Huo & Kristjánsson, 2020).

Our work draws on, and extends, the work of virtue ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre (1985, 1999) as influential business ethics approach (Beadle, 2017) that has shown to provide a useful framework in Western (e.g. Moore, 2002, 2012) and non-Western settings (e.g. Chu & Moore, 2020; Fernando & Moore, 2015). By doing so, we acknowledge its strengths *and* seek to overcome its current limitations.

The framework distinguishes between *practices* and the *institutions* that house practices—with institutions being linked to wider systems (e.g. the capitalist market economy)—and its subsequent *internal/external* goods distinction, which carries analytical power enabling explorations of tensions and complementarities between these two sets of goods. In a business context, practices are about the 'productive craft' pursued within a business (e.g. the making of bread; the designing and making of clothing/fashion), with standards of excellence and the perfection and flourishing of those engaging in the practices seen as 'internal goods' (Moore, 2002). Internal goods contribute to the good of the community (ibid.), thus 'excellence' of products/services is not just about superiority in practice but also serves larger social purposes (Wang et al., 2016).

By contrast, institutions, such as business *organisations*, are seen to be predominantly concerned with their survival and (financial) success, enabled and defined by external goods such as money, power, reputation. Whereas the success of institutions is needed to sustain the practices that they house, an excessive focus on external goods (e.g. profit) could have a corrupting and erosive effect on internal goods (Moore, 2002). Such corrupting effect can be observed in the current 'status quo' of the wider fashion industry, where the focus on profit based on high volumes and short seasonal cycles has led to an erosion of the cultural value of fashion (Whitty, 2021) and a deep alienation (Jonas, 1984, p. 154) between the people designing and making garments, and the object and processes of their work (cf. Lewis, 2015).

MacIntyre's virtue ethics framework challenges such tendencies. Based on MacIntyre's (1985) idea that the making of an institution itself has all the characteristics of a practice, Moore (2002) proposes that the goal of business owners/managers should be to create businesses which are focused on the external good (e.g. profit, growth) in so far that it supports the development of the practice housed in

the business; but to resist the corrupting power arising from an excessive focus on the external good, which, in turn, may be pushed by "competitors, suppliers, or those that represent the financial market" (Moore, 2002). Empirical studies (Chu & Moore, 2020; Fernando & Moore, 2015; Moore, 2012), have sought to establish business actors' ideal organisational balances and perceived relationships between internal and external goods, using 'excellence' and 'success' as respective prompts for interviewee responses.

The possession and exercise of *virtues* are, in MacIntyre's framework, seen as enabling (i) the achievement of the internal good linked to practices, and (ii) the resisting of the corrupting power of external goods, thus helping negotiate any tensions between these two sets of goods (MacIntyre, 1985, pp. 191/194). MacIntyre cites justice, courage and truthfulness as being important, with his later work also emphasising virtues of 'acknowledged dependence' (MacIntyre, 1999), to account for our vulnerability, limitations, and subsequent dependence on others.

Another key concept in the MacIntyrean framework is the notion of 'quest' (Beadle and Moore,2006). MacIntyre (1985, pp. 218–221) holds that our human life is a journey in the search for the 'good', of which we have some notion, but is not yet fully characterised. The 'good' that people seek in their quest, however, is not just about a good that benefits them as individuals, but is linked to the good of particular communities and, ultimately, the universal good for humankind. We follow Moore's (2002) suggestion that individuals' narrative quest can be bound up in practices pursued within businesses. Moore and Beadle (2006), in a case study of a large UK fair trade business, show that his notion of quest is applicable to those working in business: many of the employees had strong faith-based values and thus would see working in the business as part of their narrative quest to achieve their own *telos*. The researchers also observed the exhibiting of virtues such as prudence, courage, integrity in the company meant to keep the internal and external good in balance.

MacIntyre's framework conceptualise the internal good as being linked to 'excellence' and 'human flourishing'. However, insufficient attention has been paid to the requirement that human flourishing needs to be understood as something that "is intimately interwoven with the natural and ecological systems of this planet" (Kawall, 2021, p. xviii). Although examining sustainable practices of New Zealand small wine enterprises, Wang et al. (2016), drawing on MacIntyre, simply equate 'sustainable practices' with 'excellence' and do not offer a detailed exploration of how the internal good is informed and constrained by considerations of sustainability (Lane, 2017) and how this affects the external good.

Given this conceptual gap, and the need to bring it up to date so that it stays relevant in contexts marked increasingly by complex and pressing issues, such as the fashion

industry, we link the MacIntyrean framework with Hans Jonas's (1979/1984) *Imperative for Responsibility* ethics framework and related work to account for the wider systemic sustainability challenges faced by contemporary economies and societies. We do so to enable a better account of the relationships between internal goods, external goods and the wider system, and the responsibilities businesses carry in a globalised world in view of the need to change the (fashion) system towards more sustainability.

Jonas's Critique of Human Irresponsibility and Economic Growth

In his seminal work *The Imperative of Responsibility (IR)* (1979/1984) Jonas posited that "responsibility is a correlate of power, so that the scope and kind of power determine the scope and kind of responsibility" (1984, p. 12). He argued that humans hold a metaphysical responsibility beyond self-interest because of their power to have significant impact on, and within, the biosphere (ibid.). As a result, Jonas (ibid.) demanded a rethinking of our very basis for ethics, which needed not only to be directed to the human good in its nearness and contemporaneity, but also in the spatial spread and time-spans between cause and effect of our actions that impact other humans and non-human life.

He emphasised the importance of a responsibility for the future for public policy (p. 12) but also for individuals and their actions (p. 85), stressing the link between individuals' subjective purposes and their bounded-up-ness with humankind's objective pursuit of ends (pp. 61). This echoes MacIntyre's notions of virtue and quest.

Jonas's IR is of far-reaching relevance for sustainability in the twenty-first century. His extended understanding of responsibility can be considered a challenge to the economic growth paradigm that informs contemporary policy decision-making (Jackson, 2016), and as an important basis for postgrowth/degrowth thinking (Garcia et al., 2018; Jackson, 2021).[1]

Economic growth has been regarded as a precondition for lifting people out of poverty and providing wider opportunities to citizens in the name of societal progress, but analysis shows it cannot be considered a precondition for wider wellbeing enhancements, flourishing societies or protecting nature (Jackson, 2016). The rationale for growth ignores that

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[1] In this article, we will be using degrowth and postgrowth interchangeably. Both demand a shift beyond capitalism but whereas the former seeks to "reduce the environmental impact; redistribute income and wealth within and between countries; and promote the transition from a materialistic to a convivial, participatory society" (Cosme et al., 2017), postgrowth approaches are deemed less radical as they focus on achieving prosperity without an obsession with growth (Jackson, 2021).

powerful actors like corporations externalise responsibilities as they pursue profit. Under a late capitalist regime, growth is increasingly dependent on the active exploitation of actors along the value chain, a particular issue in the complex and often obscure global supply chains the fashion industry. This externalisation of impacts extends beyond the present. For example, climate change is considered a pertinent externality of the current industrial system, of which fashion is a part (Niinimäki et al., 2020), that will disproportionately affect future generations. These developments give new impetus for Jonas's ethical imperative to "[a]ct so that the effects of your action are not destructive of the future possibility of [genuine, human] life" (Jonas, 1984, p. 11), which is also echoed in the Brundtland Report's (WCED, 1987) call for *sustainable* economic development.

As Jonas puts responsibility for the future at the core of his framework, we position his work as a postgrowth approach that provides a powerful analytical frame to both understand and critically assess business practices. This also has implications for MacIntyre's framework as it extends its conception of the 'internal good' of practices housed within businesses, by binding it to an extended understanding and accepting of responsibilities towards the natural environment. It also calls for a reconsideration of the external good of business as it questions the need and, indeed, the legitimacy of the current system's obsession with (excessive) profits and business growth. It thus sheds a critical light on the fact that entrepreneurs' goals of success are often linked to unquestioned expectations embedded in the wider capitalist structure (cf. Dodd et al., 2021).

Taken together, the MacIntyrean virtue ethics framework and Jonas's IR constitute the analytical frame for the present study. Based on ideas from both frameworks, our analysis identifies and examines the virtues that FEs seek to exhibit as they pursue their quest for sustainable fashion within their business. In a second step, we then explore how FEs live out their virtues. Here, we examine processes that aim to negotiate different equilibria between the sustainability-informed internal goods of their practice and the external goods of business that are congruent with their quest of sustainable fashion, with a particular focus on intentions regarding business growth.

Methods

Data Collection

This article draws on evidence from a larger study on sustainable practices in small fashion design enterprises in the UK, which is considered a particularly interesting and relevant context since its small fashion businesses are widely recognised as drivers of design innovation (Malem, 2008), including the development of alternative ways of doing fashion.

Respondents to our qualitative in-depth interview-based study were recruited from a survey sent to FEs, which received 144 UK-based responses, and from the researchers' wider networks. We conducted 48 first-round semi-structured interviews with FEs, which were either founder-directors, or senior personnel of the respective fashion business, exploring a number of areas including respondents' visions, values, practices, networks and challenges (see online supplement for interview questions).

From these initial interviewees, 27 were selected for further enquiry, to enable a deeper understanding of the topics raised in the initial interviews. This comprised a second round of interviews, and, in some cases, additional interviews with the FE, their employees and other key stakeholders. It resulted in a rich data set of 80 interviews (see online supplement for further details) with a total running time of close to 95 h, allowing for far-reaching insights.

The data was collected between June 2019 and April 2021. For the first interview round, we met with most respondents face-to-face, with a few interviews being conducted online. Second round interviews were conducted several months after the first interview, and as most of these coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, they were conducted online.

The double interview strategy introduced a longitudinal element which revealed how interviewees had adapted their business practices to cope with the pandemic. However, the main contribution of this element to this paper is to confirm how their adherence to sustainability responsibilities (and associated virtues) had remained stable and consistent over time and during a period of crisis.

The interview questions we developed for the interview rounds can be found in the online supplement. The semi-structured topic guide allowed a flexible approach and in-depth probing of the complex issues faced by interviewees in their real-world contexts. Questions were posed in as an open-ended way as possible (using *what, why, how* etc.), with examples requested to help clarify and back up particular assertions, and minimise any bias. In our interviews, a diversity of views emerged in relation to views on growth, acceptability of production locations, the willingness to engage in mainstream industry practices, or what constituted truly sustainable materials. It is important to stress that we were interested in understanding sustainable fashion entrepreneurs/entrepreneurship and, consequently, recruited and interviewed by definition entrepreneurs that either consider themselves, or are considered by the wider industry, as demonstrating particular commitment to implementing sustainability principles through their practices. Although one might argue that this is an obvious limitation to our

study, we see it as both a necessity and a key strength that allowed us to achieve our research objectives.

The interviewed fashion entrepreneurs' businesses cover a range of products and services (see Table 1 for a detailed description of the sample). Names of the businesses were anonymised. Overall, the sample consisted of entrepreneurs from micro (81%) and small (15%) sized enterprises with one entrepreneur's enterprise falling into the medium category. The high incidence of micro enterprises in the sample resemble the makeup of UK fashion enterprises as a whole (Malem, 2008).

Data Analysis

To enable rigorous data analysis, all interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. The transcripts were stored in NVivo to facilitate coding and analysis.

Our data analysis followed an abductive approach (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 27), that is, an approach which neither completely follows inductive or deductive processes, but that allows for researchers' engagement in an iterative, back and forth movement between theory and data with the aim to develop new or modify existing theory (Saunders et al., 2012). We broadly followed Dubois and Gadde's (2002) *systematic combining approach*, a "nonlinear, path-dependent process of combining efforts with the ultimate objective of matching theory and reality". This involved a process of moving between framework, data sources, and analysis, to reveal new insights. For our study, we used the frameworks set out in the literature review as flexible analytical lenses (Miles & Huberman, 1994) allowing both for an analysis informed by the literature and inductively building new insights. In a first round of analysis, text passages were coded into parent codes that referred to (i) the notion of virtue, either where respondents answered a direct question about their personal qualities or where they elaborated on 'how' they engaged in their practices, and (ii) the notions of how they sought to negotiate their pursuit of sustainable

Table 1 Interview respondents

Respondents	Core business	Years in business*	Size of business**
FE1	Luxury womens' dress shoes from sustainable materials	5	Micro
FE2	Womenswear/menswear based on co-creation model	3	Micro
FE3	Menswear and community impact projects	2	Micro
FE4	Womenswear, working with women from deprived communities	5	Micro
FE5	Childrenswear made from organic materials	3	Micro
FE6	Wearable technology for couture and wellbeing	14	Micro
FE7	Accessories/homewares from upcycled waste	14	Small
FE8	Sustainable outdoor wear/surf wear/leisurewear	16	Medium
FE9	Organic lingerie, using a subscription model	5	Micro
FE10	Consultant, special projects development	8	Micro
FE11	Artisanal accessories from sustainable, repurposed materials	9	Micro
FE12	Clothes sharing and swapping platform	4	Micro
FE13	Consultancy, special projects	11	Micro
FE14	Women's/men's limited-edition jackets	1	Micro
FE15	Innovative sustainable childrenswear	2	Small
FE16	Sustainable womenswear/menswear	8	Micro
FE17	Sustainable menswear/womenswear	10	Small
FE18	Jewellery from upcycled materials	11	Micro
FE19	Womenswear made with sustainable materials	5	Small
FE20	Sustainable men's swimwear	10	Micro
FE21	Sustainable womenswear	5	Micro
FE22	Wardrobe management app	4	Micro
FE23	Software to enable batch or customised orders	6	Small
FE24	Consultancy, sustainable materials development	15	Micro
FE25	Sustainable womenswear	2	Micro
FE26	Pattern cutting and sample run services	9	Micro
FE27	Manufacturing/production services for fashion designers	8	Micro

*At time of first interview

**Column indicates the size of business: micro: 0–9 employees, small: 10–49 employees, medium: 50–249 employees

fashion with the imperatives of business; and how they sought to develop their business.

In a second round of analysis, we identified and refined the virtues that were captured by the parent codes by comparing emergent notions of virtues with descriptions of these virtues in the conceptual literature (e.g. authenticity—Gino et al., 2015, humility—Frostenson, 2015) which, in turn, sharpened our conceptualisation of these individual virtues. Subsequently, virtues expressing related notions were grouped together. For the analysis of the various areas of 'negotiation' for FEs, and their varying approaches to the growth and/or development of their business, we followed a more inductive 'thematic approach' (Nowell et al., 2017). The whole research team engaged in coding the manuscripts and other analytical activities with two or more researchers coding/analysing the same interview transcripts to ensure sufficient depth and validity.

In line with the abductive approach, and throughout the process, all researchers discussed and compared emerging findings to arrive at a final set of codes and categories. An iterative utilising of contextual knowledge gained from our large data set and our constant engagement with fashion practitioners, stakeholders and fashion scholars also facilitated consensus.[2] In a final step, we synthesised our empirical findings by linking them back to relevant theoretical frameworks covered in the literature review, drawing out our contributions and theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

Findings

The Virtues Shaping, Guiding and Enabling FEs' Quest for Sustainable Fashion

(Involved) Commitment to the Practice of Fashion and Sustainability

FEs' quest for sustainable fashion is enabled and driven by a strong sense of commitment; that is, a deep and emotional involvement and investment in the practice they are engaged in with the aim to create change (cf. Spinosa et al., 1997, p.163).

Many FEs in our sample used emotive words such as 'love' and 'passion'/'passionate' when describing their practice (cf. Heinze, 2020; Su et al., 2022). This love or passion was focused on the practice of designing/making fashion itself:

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[2] Some exemplary data trees that were the result of our deliberations can be found in the online supplement.

"*I always wanted to be a fashion designer, literally always. … [I] just absolutely love making, love colour, love materials, love people, love making for people.*" (FE14).

Whilst 'passion' has also been ascribed to mainstream entrepreneurs (e.g. Baum & Locke, 2004), in our case, this love of the practice of fashion served FEs as a starting point to look for ways to make their products in a way that avoids harming people and planet. In the case of FE14, this led to the decision to set up a made-to-order business models of high-quality jackets to avoid waste, create a long-lasting product, and so encourage customers to change the way they consume clothing. For others, their passion was driven by a direct concern for sustainability:

"*I was really passionate by the problem [extending the life of people's clothing]. I needed to solve and I felt like I needed to solve it. It was kind of compulsory for me to go and find a solution, and the more I discussed with people about it, the more I got passionate.*" (FE22)

This passion for their practice and its wider sustainability was found to lead to *creativity* and the development of *perseverance* and *resilience* when it came to tackling sustainability-focused challenges in their business:

"*When you are faced with challenges, that's when you become creative, if you are resilient and if you are resourceful as well, and that's where you find other more scalable ways to keep going.*" (FE22)

Authenticity

Strongly linked to this passionate commitment to their practice was the virtue of authenticity. Gino et al. (2015) state that authenticity involves both owning one's personal experiences (e.g. thoughts, emotions, needs, and wants) and acting in accordance with those experiences. In our data, authenticity was identified as a key virtue for FEs, as they regard their business as a space where FEs can be true to themselves and live up to their felt responsibility for sustainable fashion. In MacIntyre's (1999, p. 66) words, running their own business enables them to give their practice of sustainable fashion a proper "place in their life".

Nurturing a commitment to sustainable fashion, authenticity enabled a response to the shortcomings of (mainstream) fashion:

"*[A] lot of fashion people … have to fit in, they have to grab, they have to take … they're just trying to fight to stay alive so we don't want any part of all that. We want to be able to sit down and do our own thing really.*" (FE24)

This ability to be authentic and truthful was particularly important for those FEs who had felt constrained in previous jobs they had held in the industry. These jobs allowed only little or no room at all to introduce sustainability, and, subsequently, led to discontent and dissonance (Gino et al., 2015). The following quotation from an FE who previously worked for a well-known luxury shoe designer brand emphasised this further:

> "*You're so restricted when you work for another company, and it's the freedom to action that and to actually have a platform to talk about [sustainability] and to be completely truthful in what you want to do.*" (FE25)

The ability to be authentic in their quest for sustainable fashion was often linked to a desire to be fully transparent to others. Notably, authenticity and transparency were important on a personal *and* business level, informing the way they seek to conduct their business and source materials:

> "*When somebody interfaces with us they know exactly where it's come from because we're very transparent.*" (FE24)

The desire to be transparent was also seen as a sign of their commitment to push back against the greenwashing that they perceive to be happening in their industry:

> "*It's really important to be transparent … I want to be difficult and I don't want to do greenwashing. I want … to prove and say, we're actually sustainable because we're trying to innovate through new materials we're using.*" (FE1)

Whilst being authentic was seen as having value in itself, a number of FEs also reported the positive response they got when they were perceived as being authentic and truthful, leading to positive outcomes for their business:

> "*I think that if that is truthful, and you walk the walk and don't only talk the talk, I think the people will want you to succeed because your success translates to something positive for them too.*" (FE15)

In this context, some FEs also understood authenticity as a means to safeguard against falling prey to capitalist market powers:

> "*When we're authentic to ourselves and we're being comfortable in our own skin, then the customer gets it. But as soon as you try to be something you're not or you spend a bit too much time looking at the market and not at your customer or not at your natural surroundings, yes, the authenticity sort of slides.*" (FE8)

Humility

Whilst their business enables FEs to live out their quest for sustainable fashion, for many in our sample their efforts were accompanied by a sense of humility. Unlike passionate commitment, humility as a virtue is often considered to be at odds with common business practices, seemingly working against the drive to survive and thrive in a competitive market (Frostenson, 2015). However, a number of our FEs invoked classical notions of the virtue of humility such the refusal to claim superiority and a modest sense of self (ibid.).

Many FEs expressed humility due to a profound understanding that their sustainability practices could never be considered an 'end state', as there is always room to learn more and to improve:

> "*We were aware that there'll never be the perfect state and it'll always be an ongoing improvement and learning.*" (FE7)

This points to the notion that humility is also about recognising the limits of self-sufficiency, (ibid.; MacIntyre, 1999, p. 96). In our sample, the FEs' acknowledged need to engage in constant learning, for example, was strongly tied to their *willingness to listen* and learn from others*:

> "*I think you've got to have a certain amount of humility to do this work … because we're always willing to be told that we're wrong from the right people.*" (FE4)

Sharing, Compassion, Empowering

This recognition of the limits of self-sufficiency was also linked to another set of virtues. These encompassed FEs' sense that their quest for sustainable fashion was something that they could not and perhaps should not pursue on their own, but that this was something that they needed to pursue, and share *with others* or, in MacIntyre's (1999) words, that this required participation in "networks of relationships of giving and receiving" and engaging in "acts of generosity, justice and compassion". For the FEs, this encompassed a willingness to *share* resources, knowledge and information with those pursuing a similar vision as themselves. FE16, for example, considered the network of designers that they had built over the years an asset to be utilised *to "share or pass on information"*. Something that may be perceived unusual in a widely competitive industry where people are normally seen *"to grab … to take and … don't share contacts, don't share information"* (FE24).

It also pertained to their relationship with those who are involved in the creating and making of their fashion—a 'human focused' approach as opposed to a narrow focus on business and profit. This was particularly exemplified in

FE4's business model, which seeks to make use and promote garment making skills of women in deprived communities, and to give them good wages and provide funding for other support.

Empowering and sharing were found in relationships between businesses and customers with attempts to change attitudes and behaviour towards fashion. Reaching out to customers encompassed efforts to teach them how to care for their garments (e.g. FE15, FE19), to teach them repair skills (e.g. FE8, FE17), and/or to instil a responsibility in people to ensure that garments are worn as often as possible before being discarded (FE12). This, again, pointed to a broadened understanding of responsibility and a commitment to fulfil the former.

Temperance

A final virtue identified in the FEs' accounts was *temperance* or *moderation*, which includes notions of 'self-regulation', 'self-restraint' and 'simplicity' (Corrall-Verdugo et al., 2021; Ferkany, 2021).

This was highlighted in FEs' accounts of how they sought to be careful with money spend in their business (e.g. FE14), or how they sought to develop their business in a slow and considered way as opposed to 'go-big-or-die-trying' approaches prevalent in the industry:

> *"A lot of business is taught, like you've got to go big; you've got to get PR, you've got launch this big collection. It's all about that initial impact, and [my approach] is absolutely the antithesis of that in that it's about launching small, getting feedback, adapting your product."* (FE9)

Temperance and restraint were also seen in the prioritising of a style of fashion that was focused on *simplicity* to be in line with a sustainability ethos, opposing the flamboyancy prevalent in the industry. A shoe designer who pivoted from conventional designs to sustainability designs, for example, stated:

> *"The designs have changed, [they] are a lot more simple. And the shapes have changed where before I did a lot of surface embellishment and stuff like that."* (FE1)

Balancing the Goals of Sustainable Practice with the Goals of Business

Negotiating Sustainability Priorities with Financial Imperatives

The commitment to run a business that takes responsibility for sustainability seriously inevitably comes with the need for FEs to carefully consider and negotiate the balance of their business' internal and external good, that is, their conception of the 'authentic practice of sustainable fashion' and the need to keep their business financially afloat. This challenge exists primarily because sustainable fashion usually comes with a higher price tag as social and environmental costs are internalised (as well as the lack of scale economies available to small craft-based enterprises). Some areas of this negotiation, often simply referred to as 'trade-offs', have been identified by previous studies, such as choices around the sourcing of materials and production location (DiVito & Bohnsack, 2016; Heinze, 2020; Hofmann et al., 2022; Poldner et al., 2017; Su et al., 2022), which we also found in our sample.

In some of our FE cases, local production was integral to both their identity and their business model, and considered to be non-negotiable to remain authentic, whereas in other cases, FEs utilised—at least to some extent—production facilities in low cost regions due to financial reasons. A key criterion here is the degree of control over design practices and the sustainability of their products and supply chain practices to ensure sufficient transparency and accountability. The constant negotiation or harmonisation practices between financial viability, quality issues and control/sustainability led a number of FEs to source from European countries such as Portugal or Spain, enabling a balance between lower production costs and control over production processes and ensuring decent conditions for workers in line with their ethos of sharing/compassion.

A further area of negotiation was the extent to which FE participate in mainstream fashion calendars and produce seasonal collections. That is, to what extent they were able to reject imposed dynamics and circumnavigate their business from mainstream practices to follow a path of more simplicity and timelessness:

> *"I'll design things that come into the collection and stay until they just don't work anymore. Instead of doing seasonal collections… ."* (FE25)

Another FE still engaged with the seasonal model and even fashion shows for commercial reasons, but, because of arising ethical tensions, sought to move away from it:

> *"The only reason we keep doing shows is because there isn't another platform that gives you the same access to press and inform the buyers at the same time. … [F]or a little while now we've not been expanding product range even though potentially it would be a good moment to do that commercially speaking. We keep looking at ways we can scale it back a little bit, if it means repeating certain styles that we know are really well received, trying not to create too much newness but enough that it feels fresh. [But] we'd love to not have to participate*

in this sort of endless cycle of the fashion show." (FE19)

A similar negotiation also took place with regards to the use of wholesalers, where FEs weighed up the achieving of more sales through wholesale channels with pressures coming from having to comply with wholesalers' demands (FE8), having to make speculative sales which could produce waste (FE16, FE17), and the opacity and mark-up of retail sale prices (FE20, FE21).

Growing Versus Staying Small

Whilst financial sustainability was generally considered an important goal by the FEs to enable themselves to earn a livelihood from the business and follow their quest (e.g. FE17, FE9, FE7), there were different views regarding the extent to which they wanted to expand and grow their company. Some felt the need to grow their business to increase the impact of their practices rather than to generate more profit:

> *"We are growing and I feel like we have an obligation to grow as long as the problems we're trying to solve are bigger than we are. But … we don't want to build an empire, we want to build impact."* (FE7)
> *"Growth for me is a really, really important part of why I get out of bed every day actually … because the more that we grow, the more we can have impacts and do all the good stuff that we can do, we can do more of it. And actually the bigger you get—it can be easier."* (FE8)

Whilst this could easily be interpreted as an adoption of corporate rhetoric, this vision to grow-for-impact was underpinned by their passionate commitment to advance sustainable fashion, to move it from the niche to the new normal. The word 'easier' highlights the constant struggle FEs face when confronting mainstream fashion.

By contrast, a significant number of FEs felt that they did not want to grow their business, or, at best, in a slow and deliberate, organic way, following a path of temperance and moderation. This was partly linked to their desire to run their fashion business in line with their own lifestyle decisions (e.g. FE14) but also because they felt a smaller business enabled them better to authentically live out their virtues and felt responsibilities:

> *"We always wanted to be a microbrand because I think microbrands are the future [as they are] more flexible, more transparent, more honest."* (FE24)

Self-imposed Limits on Growth for Greater Control

Some FEs saw limiting their growth ambitions as something that safeguarded them to a certain degree from being co-opted by market forces, enabling them to focus on developing and improving their extended internal good without having to engage in compromises that they felt would come from seeking significant growth:

> *"When you grow you need to make lots of compromises and that could come at the back of quality, of where you manufacture or what you manufacture, or what you source and stuff like that. …[W]e've been very strict about not wanting to make compromises by making the best product."* (FE20)

Others, whilst not opposed to business growth per se, recognised that if they were to grow too rapidly, they would lose the essence and authenticity of their business, and, instead, expressed a tendency for moderation and self-restraint:

> *"I'm not planning to have a radical expansion for the sake of having an expansion if that would mean that I wouldn't have the transparency I have at the moment. So, I'm not willing to sacrifice consciousness in order to grow too fast."* (FE21)

A key aspect in the context of growth is that of 'control'. Pursuing growth was perceived as a factor that could result in a loss of control over the direction of the business.

> *"Increasing your income and getting bigger and bigger. There's always this push for that [and] I don't think there should be such an importance on accelerating. It's fine to be small. … What can you actually shift so that you continue to do the things you want to do but to do it in a way that's actually got a better balance for you and it's better recognised, without you necessarily then having to grow in a conventional way or then not being able to continue to do things the way you're doing them because you've suddenly become bigger? … So that's the tension … is it about the fact that you need more people but then does that then mean that you grow? Does that mean then that you are less autonomous or less able to be just flexible and malleable? It's what we're still trying to work out."* (FE3)

The sense that (too much) business growth may lead to a loss or relinquishing of control over the business and sustainability practices important to them, was a recurring theme in the FEs' accounts. Indeed, this led a number of FEs to reject external finance:

> *"The way that we do our business is controlled, our time management is controlled by us and we don't have*

massive investors to dictate to us. We've had many offers of people putting money in. We're nervous of that because the second you do that you lose control of what you can do". (FE24)

Accepting external finance to enable growth may induce a shift of the FE's focus, as, for example, an FE who took on investment to grow their service platform for customised and waste free fashion designs acknowledged:

"I mean, ultimately, as an investment backed company, it's about revenue. And growth is the main measure." (FE23)

To counter a potential loss of control and a watering-down of the sustainability commitments related to the internal good at the expense of growth-dynamics, investor alignment with the goals and virtues of the business was important for those FEs that seek growth:

"I think we're going to have investors for a long time and we need to ensure that we are satisfying them to some degree. But I mean the investors that we've built …they're very well aligned with what we want. …We didn't take money from the wrong people, which I think is a very easy thing to do." (FE15)

Growth of Impact Through Influence and Replication

Whilst only few FEs followed a common 'business growth agenda'/growth-for-impact strategy, others felt that, despite their modest size, they were still able to influence their industry as a whole and contribute to its transformation.

In line with the virtues of *sharing* and *empowering*, for some it was important to have an educational function that can shift the perspective of people who work in the industry:

"I would like to get more people on board and make them part of this kind of journey that we're on but also I would like to inspire the next generation because … that's why it's important to me to have the lecturer job as well and talk to students early on." (FE21)

Similarly, some aimed to showcase the cutting-edge sustainability *practices* they developed in their business to become a benchmark for others:

"I would feel that people would look at the brand as a sort of a benchmark and people who tried and cared, and respected the work, the clothing and how they were made, who by … and that would be one form of success." (FE20)

Others proposed that the business model they developed should be replicated by other small businesses, as opposed to them growing themselves, in an attempt to support and help found many smaller firms rather than a few big ones:

"I think the way forward is local production and small scale. … I kind of want the death of the high street. … I want there to be 10,000 smaller companies that provide clothing for everyone in a way that's much less carbon intensive and resource intensive. It's almost as if we can prove that this model works … then it's an example for other people to also start their own enterprises in their local towns or cities … If we can be a template for other enterprises, that would be brilliant." (FE4)

Such vision was—in line with the virtues of *sharing* and *empowering*—accompanied by a desire for small businesses to work together (and not compete against each other) to make a change in the industry (FE3, FE9).

Finally, some saw themselves explicitly as 'disruptors', as they perceived their role as FEs to engage in "disrupting and questioning, and analysing the systems we're actually functioning in" (FE16). This meant, for example, openly challenging the concept of seasonality as it would go against the notion that "good design should last forever" (FE16), or even challenging the industry bodies that put pressure on young designers to follow a growth paradigm (FE24).

Discussion

Virtues in the Quest for Sustainability

Our analysis identifies a number of key virtues driving FEs' quest for sustainable fashion and their attempts to align the (extended) internal and external good of their business (MacIntyre, 1985). As such, these virtues give rise to practices that push back against what is perceived as 'business-as-usual' in the fashion industry, and in capitalist systems more widely with their focus on efficiency and money as notions of success (Dodd et al., 2021) and a desire for economic growth whatever the cost (Jackson, 2021). FEs show a deep *commitment* to and passion for a more authentic form of sustainable fashion entrepreneurship involving an active concern for the environment and people. These are manifested in *creative* approaches towards ever more sustainable solutions, accompanied by a notion of *humility* as FEs recognise that the quest for sustainability is an ongoing and never-ending one. The virtues of *authenticity* and *truthfulness* push back against a growing sense of alienation as experienced by many fashion designers; and the desire to demonstrate *transparency* opposes tendencies across the fashion industry to engage in greenwashing and often opaque business practices (Wright & Nyberg, 2015). The virtues of *sharing/compassion/empowering* seek to resist individualistic

and competitive tendencies found in business in Western contexts. Further, the virtue of *moderation* challenges the celebration and institutionalising of excess.

The virtues identified here can be seen as a necessary combination of entrepreneurial virtues (e.g. passionate commitment, creativity, resilience [see Baum & Locke, 2004] - albeit here directed at making the practice of fashion more sustainable; virtues of integrity (authenticity, transparency) and self-restraint (temperance); and pro-social virtues (e.g. sharing, empowering), as a pre-requisite of virtuous sustainable entrepreneurship.

These virtues shape how the FEs pursue their quest for sustainable fashion (MacIntyre, 1985), that is, they circumscribe how FE pursue their goals and generate desired impacts. They also show how individuals take responsibility to act for sustainability (Jonas, 1984). Following MacIntyre (1985), these efforts are an active attempt to balance their 'internal good' of the practice of sustainable fashion with the 'external good' of business, which, in turn, ideally enable and not hinder the FEs' pursuit of their quest.

However, as FEs remain part of a competitive fashion industry and wider capitalist system, they remain exposed to systemic pressures, requiring them to engage in constant negotiation and harmonisation processes as demonstrated in their deliberations around participating in key elements of the fashion industry such as releasing new collections each season and being forced to design for mass wholesaling.

Indeed, our analysis points to a struggle of survival. Importantly, this is not a purely economic survival, as highlighted in previous studies (e.g. Hofmann et al., 2022), but a struggle for FEs to live in harmony with the virtues that are close to them and informed by their wider felt responsibility for nature, environment and society. It is an attempt to 'break with what breaks them', leading to a continuous search for better harmonisation between their practice of sustainable fashion and their business goals (external goods). By introducing the notions of 'negotiation' and 'harmonisation', we add further nuance, providing a dynamic element to issues and challenges that are often perceived by outsiders as static 'trade-offs' including in the sustainable fashion entrepreneur literature (DiVito & Bohnsack, 2016; Su et al., 2022).

Our research shows that FEs seek to improve current sub-optimal outcomes through an active employing of their entrepreneurial virtues (e.g. creativity) and practices emanating from their virtues of acknowledged dependence, e.g. their desire to learn from others and get better, or more extensive engagements with customers, using the freedom that a smaller business affords them to experiment. Our research also shows that there exist different balances of non-negotiables and flexibility amongst FEs with regards to their sustainability practices, which will lead them to accept certain practices whilst working actively to overcome the shortcomings of others.

Challenging the "Business Growth Agenda"

By accepting responsibility for sustainability, the FEs in our study also question their industry's current practices that are predicated on novelty and economic growth yet cause harm to people and planet. Instead, the FEs seek to change consumer behaviour and reduce the footprint of the industry. This raises questions regarding their own business growth and ways they can have an impact on their industry to help facilitate a transformation toward sustainability.

All our FE respondents had debated the advantages and disadvantages of growing their business. For some of them, there is a clear objective to grow the business and to take market share from unsustainable fast fashion in an attempt to reduce the environmental footprint of the overall fashion industry. This can be labelled as 'growth-for-impact'. Such strategy, however, risks co-optation by 'business-as-usual' thinking leading to a loss in transparency, authenticity and connectedness, especially where the involvement of wholesalers or financiers act as enablers of growth. Thus, the call for business growth to increase positive impacts, as found in the sustainable fashion entrepreneurship literature (e.g. DiVito & Bohnsack, 2016, Hoffmann et al. 2022), is not unproblematic.

Other FEs have decided to stay small in an effort to retain authenticity and autonomy. These organisations engage in growth to achieve a financially sustainable level after which they show a strong reluctance to compromise on the sustainability of their business processes (e.g. design, production). They avoid external investment to remain in control and to be able to act in accordance with their felt responsibility (cf. Jonas, 1984). This rejection of growth shows a prioritisation of autonomy and control over the sustainability and ethics of their products and services. One might argue that these FEs incorporate and equate their business practices with responsible degrowth principles where living well means not living at anyone else's expense (Brand & Wissen, 2021).

Rejecting growth *whilst* proactively accepting ethical responsibility challenges the status quo through 'underdog strategies' (Freedman, 2013, xii) in light of (more) powerful actors and existing unsustainability. For example, even where FEs decide to keep their business small, they may engage in "growth-*of*-impact" strategies through extending their influence and encouraging replication. This is particularly evident in relation to their engagement with their customers as, by accepting their own responsibility, they facilitate opportunities for behaviour change (Elf et al., 2022) and postgrowth lifestyles (Jackson, 2021). They enable people to live responsibly by being virtuous/responsible themselves and helping people imagine consequences that are temporally distant or occur in culturally and geographically distant contexts. Furthermore, their own example of engaging in sustainable fashion practices may provide impetus for other

actors in the fashion industry to emulate these. Staying small whilst sharing their business models and innovations to help transform their industry is an entrepreneurial strategy that has been observed in other industry sectors, too (Vickers & Lyon, 2014).

Implications for Theory: MacIntyre

Our analysis shows different approaches to harmonising and aligning the internal goods based on individuals' expressed virtues, and external goods based on business goals. Our understanding of harmonisation is informed by our novel framework grounded in MacIntyre and Jonas's seminal work, which provides an extended view of the internal good and highlights the context of unsustainability within which fashion operates.

In the classic conception of MacIntyre's framework, which juxtaposes 'excellence' and 'success' without taking sustainability challenges into account, the harmonisation between the internal and external good appears somewhat easier. Whilst not free of tension, empirical studies (e.g. Moore, 2012) show how some virtuous balance between these two sets of goods can be achieved, for example, by businesses doing well through providing an excellent service/product to customers.

With considerations of sustainability, this harmonisation is more challenging and complex. Figure 1 shows different scenarios of alignment. The depiction on the left shows where external goods (e.g. profit, growth) exert power over internal goods (practices considering concern for people and planet). There is a low harmony and alignment position between external goods (blue) and internal goods (green), and individual virtues are likely to be pushed back by the goals of profit maximisation and business growth driven by the capitalist system. This is where people working in fashion might experience 'alienation', as expressed by a number of FEs in our sample as they recounted their decisions to leave large employers prior to starting their own business.

The next two scenarios, and nuances in between, are those open to FEs wishing to incorporate sustainability into their practices. The middle one might be occupied by FEs seeking to incorporate sustainability into their practices whilst still predominantly engaging with the 'old system' of fashion calendars, seeking to optimise supply chain efficiency and utilising mainstream distribution channels out of profit considerations. Whereas this represents an attempt to align internal and external goods, the current system's dynamics are still accepted as dominating force.

A third scenario is an attempt to harmonise and more fully align the internal and external good. This form of harmonising may be a push back on capitalist tendencies and show examples of postgrowth thinking (Jackson, 2021) whilst also being a practice of balancing virtues and business goals. Such an approach has implications for the conceptualisation of the external good as these FEs might accept more modest profits and low or no business growth, and consider other achievements as 'business success' instead. This might refer to the influence they have by modelling exceptional environmental and social practices in their business, for example, leading to replication by others (a growth of the internal good).

FEs who start their business with a strong sustainability vision but decide to grow as they want to achieve more impact through their own business, and see this as their responsibility toward sustainability, will have to be careful about their growth path. Growing the business might mean having to engage with the pressures and demands of the system (e.g. if accepting external finance to fund growth). It may crowd out existing virtuous dispositions and water down sustainability commitments ('greenwashing'), moving them from the scenario on the right back towards the middle one, where sustainability commitments and business goals are less well aligned. This also leads to the risk that FEs might experience a new sense of 'alienation' as responding to the system might inhibit the use of their business as a vehicle to pursue their quest for sustainable fashion.
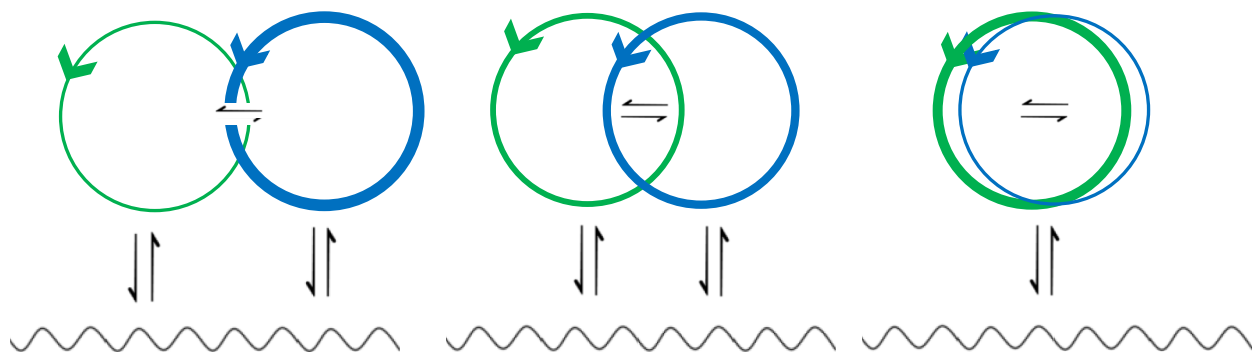

Fig. 1 Harmonisation processes of internal and external good. Internal good is represented by green circle. External good by the blue circle. Arrows indicate interaction. The thickness of the respective cycle indicates which good dominates

The question arises what growth path and growth ceiling will be acceptable for FEs wishing to pursue a 'growth-for-impact' approach that still allows them to fulfil their felt responsibility towards sustainable fashion (Jonas, 1984) and adhere to their virtues (MacIntyre, 1985) without being co-opted by the wider system. Similarly, the model challenges those FEs who sit in the middle scenario to move towards the position on the right, to escape cooptation from capitalist forces and embrace virtuous responsibility for sustainability more fully.

Whilst previous studies have shed light on approaches that aim to bring together sustainable and economic priorities (Vickers & Lyon, 2014), our findings illustrate how practices are shaped by underlying virtues and the perceived responsibility.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored how small fashion entrepreneurs (FE) can challenge the unsustainable practices of mainstream fashion, using a novel ethical framework that combines MacIntyre's virtue ethics approach with Jonas's *Imperative for Responsibility*. As a contribution to the sustainable fashion entrepreneurship literature, we demonstrate that FEs challenge the 'status quo' by engaging in practices that are circumscribed by a distinct combination of virtues marked by the FEs' concern and responsibility for sustainability, and which have distinct implications on how these FEs seek to develop their business. Our contribution has wider implications for conceptions of fashion entrepreneurship that put people and planet ahead of profit and economic growth.

FEs exemplify postgrowth/degrowth and innovative business models and practices for others to emulate. By taking on the responsibility to be more sustainable, we show that FEs can draw on strategies of 'growth-for-impact' or choose to remain small but encourage 'growth-of-impact', a distinction that is a useful addition, and challenge, to the existing sustainable fashion entrepreneurship literature. A far-reaching replication of their business models by other small FEs might, over time, allow for a transition to a more responsible and sustainable industry, challenging the current dominance of large global players (see Geels et al., 2015). Our data demonstrate that FEs do not expect to model this perfectly. However, as they are looking to push back against commercial pressures, they create alternative practices that can support social and environmental justice and wellbeing in line with the emerging postgrowth/degrowth thinking (Hickel, 2021; Jackson, 2021). We do *not* claim that their practices automatically or necessarily lead to a transcending of the existing materialist and individualistic structures (Isham et al., 2022); rather, these FEs engage in 'interstitial strategies'

that involve the building of new forms of social empowerment on the margins, usually outside of spaces dominated by those in power (Wright, 2019). This does include FEs' efforts to reach beyond the boundaries of their own organisations utilising the networks and links that exist in their industry.

Future research should build on our findings. Albeit in line with conventions for qualitative research, our sample is concentrated in one particular Western country and industry. We invite future research to explore entrepreneurial practices utilising our proposed theoretical framework in other cultures (cf. Fernando & Moore, 2015) and across industries. Furthermore, longer term data collection may enable a wider examination of change processes.

Our research has several managerial and policy implications. In terms of practical management implications, there is a need to show to prospective and emerging fashion entrepreneurs that they have a responsibility to explore how their business can be a force for good, or, in other words, how they can direct their individual entrepreneurial drive into an active taking of responsibility for sustainability (see Jordan, 2022). This includes a need to identify their non-negotiable elements of sustainability whilst also identifying areas for pragmatic flexibility that is needed for their survival. In this process of negotiation, transparency is vital to avoid any accusations of greenwash or a lack of authenticity. Entrepreneurs need to focus on the development of their business' capabilities (Elf et al., 2022) that will enable them to develop and improve sustainability practices within the business whilst making the business itself more sustainable.

Entrepreneurs also need to possess the necessary capabilities to deliberate about the pros and cons of different growth and influencing strategies available to them. Further, where FEs explicitly wish to be part of the wider change of their industry, they can create global, progressive bottom-up movements to make an equitable and just transition happen (Asara et al., 2013).

From a policy perspective, it is important to find suitable ways to support the diffusion of 'green niche' and socially oriented innovations and practices that small entrepreneurs develop. Recognising that a number of small sustainability-focused enterprises do not intend to scale-up and grow (Colombo et al., 2023; Vickers & Lyon, 2014), policy makers and intermediaries need to be aware that scaling positive innovation can take different forms. The responsibility to change an industry can come from enterprises collaborating together in clusters/hubs for resilience and impact. It can also arise through the translation of knowledge and lessons from niche alternatives into the mainstream. In order to be effective in successfully facilitating wider transition processes, such alternative niches should be conceived as protective spaces which need to be shielded, nurtured and empowered (Smith & Raven, 2012).

Finally, there is a need to rethink investment with alternatives such as impact and philanthropy investment (Ozdemiroglu, 2019) and ethical crowdfunding (Lyon et al., 2023) working on the principle that investors 'buy into' the vision and purpose of the business rather than expect to maximise their financial return only. In this way, investment is seen as a commitment to the future, money as a social good, and enterprise as service (Jackson, 2016).

By shedding light on the alternatives to business-as-usual our research shows what can be possible in the future in an urgently needed attempt to prefigure an alternative, sustainable and responsible fashion industry.

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Declarations

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