

Abstract

In this short essay, we, by drawing on recent research, set out what is required to prefigure an alternative, sustainable and responsible fashion industry. To have a future, the fashion industry needs a rapid transformation; from the mainstream fashion industry's obsession with novelty and growth, often ignoring the costs to society and the environment to genuine alternatives. Although operating mostly in niches, a growing number of small fashion entrepreneurs already pioneered sustainable ways of doing fashion. These fashion entrepreneurs are agents for change in their industry seeking an active negotiation and harmonisation of sustainability and the demands of business in capitalist modernity. We present innovative approaches and the very process of how many sustainable fashion entrepreneurs overcome tensions and generate opportunities in an attempt to drive a profound transformation of the industry towards sustainability.

Chapter 17

The (only) future of fashion? the role of small sustainable entrepreneurship in driving transformational change

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Introduction

The fashion industry in its current form is inherently unsustainable causing significant harm to people and planets (Islam et al., 2021). Driven by the industry's obsession with novelty and growth, and manifested by its (in)famous fashion calendars, and ever shorter seasonal cycles and trends, people are encouraged to consume fashion far beyond their actual needs (Burns, 2010). The acceleration of fashion practices, including rapid acquisition and disposal of often cheap, low-quality garments, has led to damage to natural resources, excessive waste, significant CO2 emissions, and exploitative working conditions in supply chains (Niinimäki, 2015; Niinimäki et al., 2020). As a result, there is a clear and urgent need for transformational change across the industry; one that is grounded in ethical and sustainable thinking and responsible practices that enables living well within the boundaries and limitations of our planet. This change will need to come from the combined efforts of a range of stakeholders operating at multiple levels (e.g., Geels, 2019), including governments, businesses, customers, and campaign organisations.

However, so far governments have shown little ambition to introduce regulations that hold the potential to move the fashion industry to a more sustainable state (Cooper, 2019).

Similarly, larger fashion businesses equally lack commitment, often engaging with sustainability in 'piecemeal' or 'tokenistic' fashion without changing their underlying business

model of constant novelty and growth (Pucker, 2022) and linear business models and processes (Elf et al., 2022; Lüdeke-Freund et al., 2019). There are, however, a growing number of small fashion entrepreneurs who have started to act as true change agents as they set up, test and implement novel business models and approaches grounded in genuine sustainable and circular thinking in an attempt to challenge the ‘status quo’.

Our short essay focuses on impactful approaches by sustainable fashion entrepreneurs that aim to overcome tensions and generate opportunities to drive a profound transformation of the industry towards sustainability. By doing so, we shed light on the role small fashion entrepreneurs (SFEs) can occupy when seeking to challenge mainstream fashion in an attempt to change and transform the industry. Our essay is based on insights from our long-standing engagement and research with such fashion entrepreneurs and sets out the key aspects of the entrepreneurship they model. We begin by looking at the ethical qualities that underpin their practices. Then, we set out some selected challenges and decisions that they face as they seek to harmonise sustainability practices with financial imperatives and business goals, including the decision to grow as a business or to stay small. We further set out the different ways these fashion entrepreneurs can have a wider impact, which will help generate change in the industry, followed by some closing reflections.

Sustainable entrepreneurship as different kind of entrepreneurship?

Successful entrepreneurs are generally depicted in academic literature and popular culture as inspirational individuals who turn their novel business idea into an actual business, grow it big and then sell it on, making a lot of money in the process. This is particularly clear in the apparent obsession to become the next ‘unicorn’ business (cf. Gaskell, 2022). Such entrepreneurs are often seen as vital for the growth of economies, and the subsequent wealth that this generates for the societies of which they are a part (cf. Dodd et al., 2021). Similarly, fashion designers are

feted for their ability to create new trends, encouraging more and more consumption of fashion (Lewis, 2015), while making substantial profits from their designs (cf. Pofeldt, 2018) that are mostly produced in remote countries across the Global South with low labour costs and often precarious working conditions.

By contrast, sustainable fashion entrepreneurs are often driven by something else, that is, a deep and emotional involvement and investment in the practice they are engaged in with the aim to proactively create change (cf. Spinosa et al., 1997: 163). In other words, their love of the practice of fashion – which motivates so many young creatives to set up their own brands in the first place – serves as a starting point for them to look for ways to make products and offer services that put people and planet before profit.

This passionate commitment of SFEs is manifested in *creative* approaches towards refined, ever more sustainable solutions, and the pursuit of striking the right balance between sustainability practices and business imperatives and goals, coupled with the ability to show *perseverance* and *resilience* when encountering challenges and difficulties in their quest for sustainability and change.

Linked to this passionate commitment is the entrepreneurs' desire for *authenticity* and *transparency*. Gino et al. (2015) argue that authenticity involves both owning one's personal experiences (e.g., thoughts, emotions, needs, and wants) and acting in accordance with those experiences. Many fashion entrepreneurs we spoke to regard their business as a space where they can be true to themselves and live up to their felt responsibility for sustainable fashion, as opposed to working within corporate structures that might severely constrain fashion designers' ability to incorporate genuine sustainability within their practices. This desire for authenticity goes hand in hand with a wish to be fully *transparent* to others, at both personal and business levels. This striving for transparency is particularly manifested, for example, in open communication about where and how materials are sourced, as an overt attempt to push back against prevailing greenwashing practices in the industry.

Another quality that is central to sustainable fashion entrepreneurs is humility, a virtue that is often considered to be at odds with common (fashion) business as it seemingly works against the very nature of fashion as well as the need to survive as a business and thrive in a competitive market (Frostenson, 2016). This sense of *humility* is grounded in a profound understanding that their sustainability practices can never be considered an ‘end state’, as there is always room to improve the sustainability of products and services. Humility is notably about recognising the limits of self-sufficiency (MacIntyre, 1999: 96). For example, in our research, sustainable fashion entrepreneurs acknowledged the need to engage in constant learning, which is intimately tied to their *willingness to listen*, and learn from others (Werner et al., forthcoming).

As such, sustainable fashion entrepreneurs display a range of relational qualities, for example, *sharing*, *compassion*, and *empowering* – as they engage in multiple ‘networks of relationships of giving and receiving’ (MacIntyre, 1999). This may pertain to a long-term caring and supportive relationship with those who are involved in the creating and making of their fashion, that is, a ‘human focused’ approach as opposed to a narrow focus on business and profit. Another example is the desire to empower others including other businesses and customers in an attempt to change attitudes and behaviour towards fashion, as we will see later. Living out these relational qualities means to resist individualistic, competitive, and often materialistic tendencies found in businesses on an individual level across Western contexts (Isham et al., 2022).

Finally, sustainable fashion entrepreneurs display *moderation* (Corrall-Verdugo et al., 2021). For example, by showing caution and financial prudence in the way they seek to develop their business as opposed to the ‘go-big-or-die-trying’ approaches prevalent in the industry, or by opting for simpler, less resource-intense yet beautiful designs for their products. By displaying *moderation*, SFEs challenge the celebration and normalising tendencies of excess.

Negotiating sustainability priorities with business goals and financial imperatives

The commitment to run a business that takes responsibility for sustainability seriously inevitably comes with the need for SFEs to carefully consider and negotiate the balance of their ‘authentic practice of sustainable fashion’ and the need to make their business financially sustainable.

Arguably, this challenge exists primarily because sustainable fashion is costlier since social and environmental costs are internalised, as opposed to mainstream (fast) fashion where people and the planet carry the cost, while a focus on the financial bottom line dominates entrepreneurial ambition and decision-making processes.

As most SFEs remain part of the existing competitive fashion system and, indeed, the wider capitalist system, they are exposed to systemic pressures, which in turn demand deliberation about a range of issues pertaining to a balance between sustainability principles and business imperatives. Cases in point include the choice of production location, the choice and sourcing of materials, considerations as to what extent they should still participate in mainstream fashion calendars, seasonality, and wholesale practices, among others.

Production location

With regards to production location, for example, for some SFEs local production is integral to both their identity and their business model, and thus non-negotiable. Others are more open to the idea of producing in more remote, lower cost locations. Besides financial considerations, a key criterion here is the degree of control over design and supply chain practices to ensure sufficient transparency and accountability. This constant negotiation or practices between financial viability, quality issues, and control/sustainability are integral parts of their harmonisation practices.

Fashion calendars

Another area of negotiation is the extent to which SFE should participate in mainstream fashion calendars and produce seasonal collections. The constant production of new, fashionable, and

short-lived seasonal collections is seen as one of the key drivers of the industry's enormous environmental footprint. A number of SFEs reject seasonal collections altogether, emphasising the timelessness and simplicity of their designs, while others felt they needed to have at least some seasonal novelty in their collections to keep themselves relevant in the industry (Werner et al., forthcoming).

Growing for impact vs growing of impact

By accepting responsibility for sustainability, SFEs challenge their industry's practices that are predicated on novelty and economic growth, which cause much harm to people and the planet. As they wish to see a transformation toward sustainability, they will need to grapple with questions regarding their own business growth and the ways they can have an impact on their industry.

Growth and growth-for-impact strategies

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are advantages and disadvantages of growing a business. For some SFEs, there is a clear objective to grow the business and to take market share from unsustainable fast fashion, and thereby take responsibility to reduce the environmental footprint of the wider fashion industry and move their products and services from niche to a more sustainable 'new normal.' This can be labelled as 'growth-for-impact'. Such strategy does not come without any risks, however, as they risk co-optation by 'business-as-usual' thinking leading to a loss in transparency, authenticity, and connectedness, especially where wholesalers or financiers act as enablers of growth. There are ways to mediate this by making sure, for example, to find investors that buy into the vision of the company and are at least as equally interested in creating a positive impact as in financial returns or by reducing reliance on wholesale channels by developing direct-to-consumer models instead. This is far from easy (Lyon et al., 2023) but is required to ensure that a watering down of sustainability commitment and/or co-option is avoided. For

instance, SFEs who start their business with a strong sustainability vision – but decide to engage in conventional business growth processes – will likely have to engage with coercive pressures and demands of the capitalist modernity that demands accepting external finance to fund growth. This, in turn, may crowd out existing sustainability dispositions and commitments, moving SFEs from a scenario of ideal (and sometimes even somewhat idealistic) practices towards practices in which sustainability commitments and business goals are little or not aligned at all. Indeed, business growth always comes with a challenge to maintain control over practices and not watering down sustainability commitments.

An obvious question then arises: What growth path and growth ceiling is acceptable for SFEs wishing to grow their business for impact that still enables them to fulfil their felt responsibility towards sustainable fashion without being co-opted by the wider system?

At best, any business growth should be conducted in deliberate and organic ways, following a path of prudence and moderation. Many SFEs, however, decide to stay small in efforts 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 where possible to remain in control. 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 SFEs incorporate and equate their business practices with responsible *degrowth* principles where living well means not living at anyone else's expense (Brand and Wissen, 2021). As these SFEs accept more modest profits and low or no business growth, they consider other achievements as 'business success' instead, thus pursuing a 'growth-of-impact' strategy rather than a 'growth-for-impact' strategy.

'Growth-of-impact' and extended customer eco-engagement

Rejecting growth *while* proactively accepting ethical responsibility challenges the status quo and positions sustainable SFEs'harmonising practices through 'underdog strategies' (Freedman, 2013: xii) in light of (more) powerful actors and existing unsustainability.

Even where SFEs decide to keep their business small, they may engage in 'growth-of-impact' strategies by extending their influence and encouraging replication. This is particularly evident in relation to their engagement with their customers – something that we have previously labelled 'extended customer eco-engagement' (ECEE) (Elf et al., 2022). For example, SFEs might offer repair, rental, sharing, swapping, and resale services as well as advice on how to care for and mend their garments, in an attempt to change customers' behaviour around garment use. This often goes hand in hand with extensive educational efforts to reach out to customers to raise awareness about the current unsustainability of the fashion industry, educate them about the need for both *better* and *less* fashion consumption, and to instil in them a responsibility for wear rate, usage and responsible disposal of their garments (ibid). As such, they enable people to live more responsibly by being responsible for themselves and helping people imagine consequences that are temporally distant or occur in different, sometimes abstract and geographically distant contexts.

Furthermore, their own example of engaging in sustainable fashion may provide impetus for other actors in the fashion industry, and beyond, to emulate their practices and business models to allow others to imitate and improve their existing practices. In other words, they grow their impact (i.e., growth-of-impact) as one of our research participants (Werner et al., forthcoming) forcefully emphasised:

I think the way forward is local production and small scale. . . . 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. . . If we can be a template for other enterprises, that would be brilliant.

This quote is also a nod to Schumacher's (1973) seminal work 'Small is Beautiful' that firmly places small, sustainable approaches across technology, governance and policies as superior alternatives to the mainstream, normative ethos of 'bigger is better' (see also Black et al., 2023).

Wider collaborations across SFEs (vs. competition against each other) could make a far-reaching change in the industry, move linear to circular processes and facilitate a process that rewrites predatory, zero-sum game business practices which (too) often drive fashion businesses to pivot to cheaper and/or low-quality production processes. Instead, together they hold the potential to operate as 'disruptors', as they perceived their role as SFEs to engage in 'disrupting and questioning, and analysing the systems [they are] actually functioning in' (quote in Werner et al., forthcoming).

In order to achieve this, SFEs may take on an educational function (i.e., peer-to-peer support) that can shift the perspective of people who work in the industry, in particular in relation to young fashion designers who are just about to enter the industry, encouraging them to follow a path sustainability and sufficiency. Finally, SFE may also inspire larger businesses to change. As people who use their own business as a testing ground for alternative processes, products, and business models, they are in a unique position to challenge the 'status quo' through bottom-up innovation and consultancy work.

Conclusion

To have a future, the fashion industry needs to go beyond novelty and its growth obsession. We can no longer afford to accept unsustainable practices at scale as the norm. Taking on responsibility for sustainability requires a number of ingredients that need to spread quickly as part of the urgently needed transformational change across the industry. In this short essay, we have shown how SFEs can operate as crucial change makers. They can draw on strategies of 'growth-for-impact' or choose to remain small but encourage 'growth-of-impact'. A far-reaching

replication of their sustainable practices and business models by other small SFEs can, over time, allow for a transition to a more responsible industry working according to sustainability principles and a challenging of the current dominance of large global players (see Geels et al., 2015) and their unsustainable practices, which currently remain the norm.

As SFEs are looking to push back against commercial pressures, they create alternative practices that can support social and environmental justice and wellbeing in line with planetary boundaries as well as the emerging post-growth approaches (Hickel, 2021; Jackson, 2021). This stands in contrast to the currently dominating structures, which are marked by materialism and more individualistic orientations (Isham et al., 2022). This kind of ‘harmonising’ (cf. Spinoza et al., 1997) may be a pushback on capitalist tendencies and show examples of post-growth thinking (Jackson, 2021) while also being a practice of balancing sustainable orientations and business goals. This is found with those SFEs that take extensive responsibility for sustainability, seek to keep control over their practices and seek to avoid jeopardising their authenticity.

We need to be clear: we do *not* claim that SFEs practices automatically or necessarily lead to a breaking or transcending of existing structures; rather, these SFEs engage in so-called ‘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).

By introducing the notions of ‘negotiation’ and ‘harmonisation’, we introduce further nuance of how to challenge existing structures and driver transformational changes besides the niche SFEs usually occupy. That is, highlighting how SFEs seek to improve current sub-optimal outcomes through the employment of their entrepreneurial qualities (e.g., creativity), and practices emanating from their acknowledged dependence on others, for example, their desire to learn from others and get better, or through more extensive engagements with customers, using the freedom that a smaller business affords them to experiment (Elf et al., 2022). There might well exist different balances of non-negotiables and flexibility among SFEs with regard to their sustainability practices, which will lead them to accept certain practices whilst working actively to overcome the shortcomings of others.

Another aspect is that SFEs 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 while making the business itself more sustainable. Importantly, SFEs need to be aware and be able to deliberate about the pros and cons of different growth and influencing strategies available to them. Further, where SFEs explicitly wish to be part of the wider change of their industry, they can join forces with like-minded peers to introduce more circular practices, share knowledge, and create global, progressive bottom-up movements to make an equitable and just transition happen (Asara et al., 2013). That is, the responsibility to change an industry can come from enterprises collaborating together in clusters or hubs for resilience and impact. It can also arise through the translation of knowledge and lessons from niche alternatives into the mainstream.

From a policy perspective, it is becoming increasingly 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 seek to scale their *impact* and not solely business growth (Colombo et al., 2023), policymakers and intermediaries need to be aware that scaling up positive innovation can take place through both organisational growth and replication; whereby alternative models and activities multiply in numbers. 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 and 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 enforcing growth KPIs closely linked to expectations to maximise their financial return, thus putting profit over people and planet. Instead, must be seen (and used!) as a commitment to the future, with money as a social good and enterprise as service (Jackson, 2016).

By shedding light on the alternatives to business-as-usual, we have outlined which ‘ingredients’ are needed and which possibilities need to become realities to replace existing structures and norms in an urgently needed attempt to prefigure an alternative, sustainable, and responsible fashion industry.

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