

The Presentation of Social Sustainability and Corporate Responsibility in an Emerging Circular Textiles and Fashion Economy: **Insights from a Cross-Discourse Analysis**

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Challenges and Tensions

- Growing demands for **(circular) transparency**
- Current forms of consumer-oriented **sustainability communication**
- **Organizational structure** of textile and fashion businesses / Absence of policies
- **Contextual environment** / Environmental concerns
- Recycled materials as niche market / **Quality concerns**
- Consumer and workforce **awareness, behavior and education**
- **Circular rebound** effects
- Focus on **waste** (cost) and **recycling** technologies
- Highly contested impact on particularly **environmental and economic sustainability**
- ...



Solutions and Opportunities

- **Shared responsibility** for sustainable development
- Set of (public) **policy instruments / mandatory product data and design standards / alternative materials**
- Consumer perceptions, attitudes and education / **Changing relationships** to garments and raw materials
- Need for **new thinking about sustainability communication** at the business-consumer interface
- **Rearranging business models**
- Engagement in **partnerships and cooperation** / Empowering different stakeholders
- **Rethinking consumption / Longer lifetimes**
- Promotion of **repair, upcycling** etc.
- Quality of **textiles sorting**
- ...

- **Numerous corporate examples often related to technological developments and environmental aspects**
- **Need to investigate practices and current discourses with regard to the presentation of social sustainability and corporate responsibility among different actors**

- Fashion Retail: Multiple **sustainability challenges and negative perceptions** of global fashion value chains
 - Unsustainability of the fashion retail sector in particular due to high-tempo fast fashion and one-way linear economic model
 - **Increasing need to improve social compliance** (e.g., Rahim 2017)
 - Influence and pressure of especially secondary stakeholders to promote (social) sustainability (Jaegler & Goessling, 2020)
- Promotion of the **circular economy**
 - Aiming at establishing a green, restorative and regenerative economy
 - Multiple circular values (e.g., cascades orientation, waste elimination, economic optimization, technology-driven) (e.g., Ripanti & Tjahjono, 2019)
 - **Subordinated and under-theorized role of social aspects** (e.g., Acerbi & Taisch, 2020; Ashby et al., 2019; Millar et al., 2019)
- Increasing adoption of **circular fashion strategies and circular business models**
 - **Examples:** In-store take-back systems (e.g., Hvass & Pedersen 2019; Corvellec & Stål 2019), Second-hand market for reuse (e.g., Machado et al. 2019); Material recycling (Brydges 2021)
 - Role of stakeholder reports (e.g., GIZ 2019) and the circular fashion **consumer** (e.g., Brismar 2019)

Key research objective:
Identification and critical juxtaposition of social themes as communicated by different actors related to fashion

1 Corporate publications
9 Corporate sustainability reports of the fashion retailers C&A and H&M



2 Academic publications
130 scholarly peer-reviewed publications



3 Stakeholder publications
415 documents published by different types of stakeholders (e.g., media, NGOs, certification labels, consultancies)



Discourse analysis

Comparative evaluation of social themes by means of the text-mining and computer-assisted tool **Leximancer™**



Key research question:
To what extent are aspects concerning social sustainability addressed by different actors related to the fashion industry?

Longitudinal analysis: 2014, 2015, 2018

Summary of Key Findings and Discussion (I)

1

Corporate Publications



- Exclusive importance and appearance of concepts such as “customer / customers“ and “communities”, “commitment / committed” and “partners / partnership”, respectively
- Differentiated presentation of social sustainability-related concepts despite similar stakeholder pressures → idiosyncratic responses (e.g., Cordeiro & Tewari, 2015; Jakhari et al., 2018)

Proposition 1: Social sustainability in publications of circular fashion companies is increasingly depicted by following a company-specific approach, but implies risks of corporate deception, social- and greenwashing.

2

Academic Publications



- Exclusive appearance of concepts such as “consumption“ and “consumer / consumers“ → yet, de-politicized, passive role of individuals and weak approaches to sustainability (e.g., Hobson & Lynch, 2016)

Proposition 2: While social sustainability in academic publications related to an evolving circular fashion industry embraces a variety of aspects concerned with consumer ethics and alternative consumption practices, the group of corporate publications focuses on the customer, thereby insinuating a primarily economic perspective.

3

Stakeholder Publications



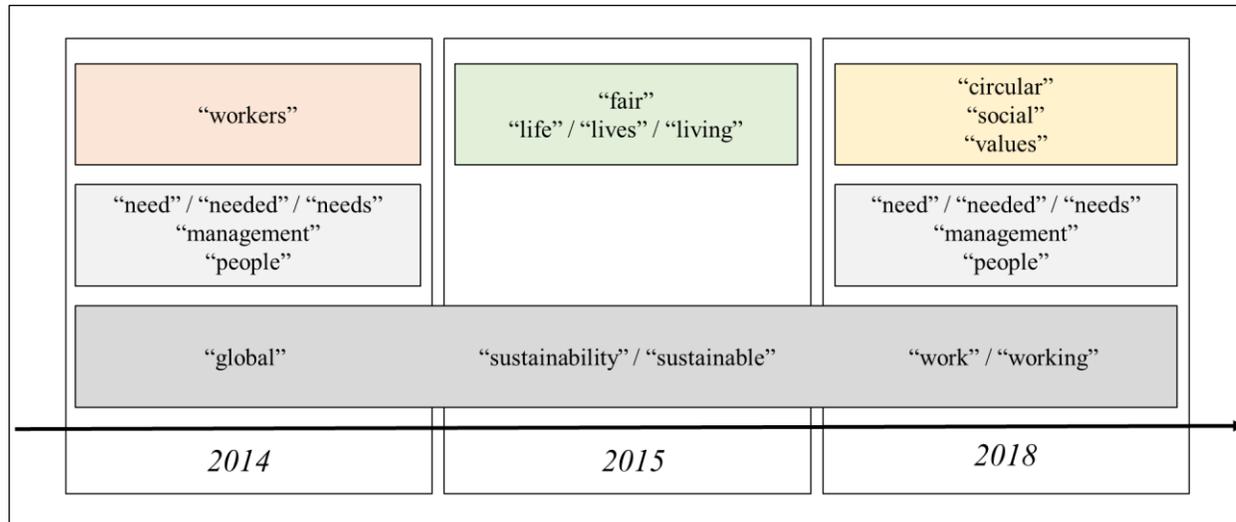
- Exclusive appearance of concepts such as “migrants“, “poverty“, “unions“, “ethical“ and “women“
- Relatively great number of social sustainability-related concepts in both 2014 and 2015

Proposition 3a: Social sustainability in publications related to an evolving circular fashion economy embraces core concepts and attributes often cited with regard to social evils in fashion production and consumption, but to a different extent across various interest groups.

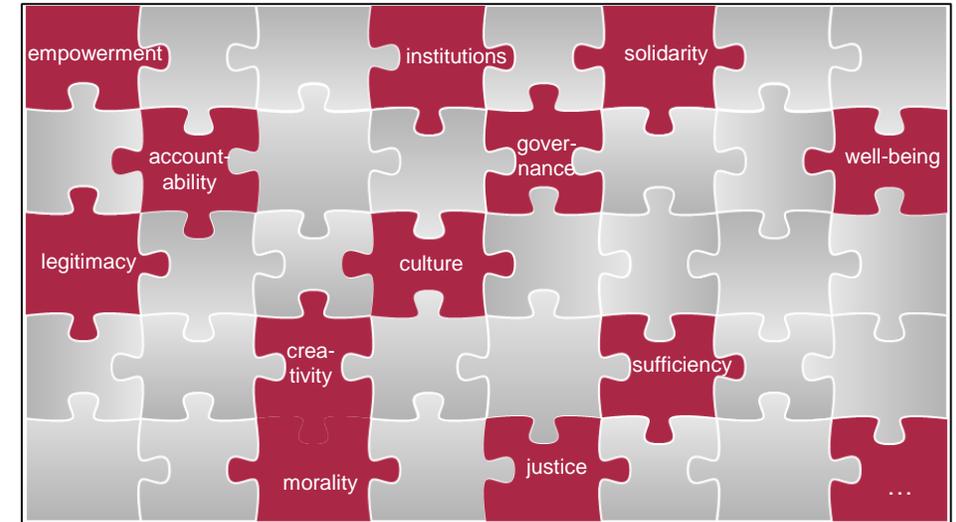
Proposition 3b: Further integrating social sustainability in a circular fashion economy would require society and other interest groups as primary stakeholders to provide and ensure persistent and harmonious support, but publications reveal non-lasting impacts since they do primarily take action in the case of critical incidents with utterly social devastations and great public uproar.

Summary of Key Findings and Discussion (II)

Identical social sustainability-related concepts across the groups



Overview of selected neglected concepts



Proposition 4: Social sustainability in an evolving circular fashion economy requires a holistic integration of sustainability values, but publications of all interest groups reveal the inadequate consideration of social, cultural and ethical norms, principles, beliefs and worldviews.

Conclusions of the study:

Contributions

- Comparative discourse and document analysis by delineating themes and concepts related to the social dimension in a circular fashion economy → extracting 'verbal patterns' in different publication groups; explicit positioning of different interest groups and stakeholders
- Statistical and descriptive analyses of more than 550 documents

Limitations

- Period of investigation comprises three years
- Potential flaws in the group of stakeholder publications (e.g., integration and language bias)
- Subjectivity concerning interpretation and evaluation of *Leximancer*TM concept maps

Further Research

- Examination of assumedly neglected, yet socially relevant, concepts, non-economic drivers and value-based concepts (e.g., "sufficiency", "justice", "equity" or "degrowth")
- Analysis of the role of the wider public in transitioning towards circular fashion
- Additional methods (e.g., manual content analysis)

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