

Title: *Designing Ways to Shared Value Growth, and User-Centred Approaches in Canadian Sustainable Fashion Firms*

Abstract

Unsustainable apparel industry practices have created global social and environmental issues. In Canada, free trade policies destroyed local apparel manufacturing, which has made it challenging to offer a local response to prevailing conditions.

The principle of shared value states that companies should address existing societal needs to create value, rather than create new needs. This study investigates the potential for the growth of fashion firms who practice sustainability, when they examine their products, services, locations, networks and partnerships to serve more societal needs and gain new customers. The study also investigates the applicability of user-centred design theories which sustainable fashion literature argues is the way to transform current practice to sustainable practice.

The study is trans-disciplinary; the methodology used is both social constructivist and pragmatic. Methods are qualitative and exploratory, combining a literature review, semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to present findings.

The data shows that sustainable fashion firms are desired for their fashion relevance by citizens concerned about industry issues. Owners use collaboration, circular (waste reduction) practices, innovative “hacks” of traditional fashion processes and a mix of local and global supply chains to grow value, effectively *designing* sustainable ways out of the issues. The threats they face are the weak cluster for producing locally, the absence of external constituencies to create links to society and prevailing mindsets and modalities. The data shows that firms are not well-positioned to offer user-centred design within current practice, but its value is acknowledged.

As a first study of local, sustainable, fashion firms, further research will help to validate the potential for and threats to growth. As conditions are dynamic, new models of business that address “wicked problems” and respond to societal needs will emerge. These will enable more practical frameworks and strategies to be established and to further industry transformation, within the four-pillar framework of sustainability.

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