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Integrating sustainability in business planning for fashion enterprises

Eunsuk Hur[†]

School of Design, University of Leeds

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Addressing sustainability issues in fashion businesses is increasingly challenging due to the complexity of sustainability in the fashion industry, where there are various stakeholders involved in the production and consumption process, as well as environmental and social impacts that occur at every stage of the clothing lifecycle. Furthermore, the concepts of fashion and sustainability often contradict each other. The nature of fashion is involved inherently on the continuous process of change, while the term 'sustainable' commonly implies longevity and is adopted to address sustainable development (SD) of environmental, social and economic growth. Indeed, the concepts of fashion and sustainability can be difficult to merge as there are various challenges and barriers to addressing sustainability in the activities of the fashion business. Over the last few years, various tools have been developed to support sustainable design practices in order to evaluate the existing environmental impacts of products and supply-chain systems and to shape fashion business decisions. Although these tools help people make more informed decisions, little attention has been paid to integrating sustainability in the fashion business planning phase to support new business opportunities and to spark innovative solutions; only a few tools exist that support fashion enterprises incorporating sustainability.

This paper proposes how fashion designers and entrepreneurs incorporate sustainability in their fashion business planning processes. Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) and Design Thinking (DT) processes were adopted to propose a systematic tool to support fashion entrepreneurs in developing innovative design solutions for sustainability. The empirical study was conducted with 50 undergraduate fashion marketing students and 10 postgraduate fashion enterprise students. First, participants expressed their positive and negative perceptions of sustainability in the fashion business and then visualised the problem situations using Rich Pictures of the Soft Systems Methodology (SSM). The findings of the research indicated that the SSM and DT tools helped participants better understand the complexity of sustainable fashion and allowed them to develop products, services and system solutions for new fashion business opportunities. The findings of the research could contribute to a hands-on guide for providing practical solutions for entrepreneurs who wish to address sustainability in their business planning process.

[†] Corresponding author: e.s.hur@leeds.ac.uk