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# Weaving a Sustainable Future for Fashion: The Role of Social Enterprises in East London

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**Abstract:** This study investigates how social enterprises in East London drive sustainability in the fashion industry, focusing on the following two case studies: Making for Change and Stitches in Time. The research uses the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework and social capital theory to assess how these enterprises integrate TBL principles and leverage social capital to promote sustainable practices. The qualitative exploratory study generates hypotheses proposing that East London-based social enterprises employ diverse TBL strategies to advance sustainability (H1) and utilise social capital through networks and community ties to support their initiatives (H2). Data collected through interviews and focus groups confirm that these enterprises effectively address social, environmental, and economic dimensions of sustainability. However, balancing these dimensions, especially economic sustainability, remains challenging and often varies depending on organisational objectives. The study also emphasises social capital's key role in enhancing internal cohesion and facilitating external collaborations. The research deepens our understanding of how social enterprises can drive sustainable development by providing evidence-based insights within an underrepresented context of the UK. Using social enterprises as exemplars, these insights could potentially guide the transition of the UK fashion industry towards more sustainable practices.

**Keywords:** fashion; sustainability; triple bottom line; social capital; social enterprises; East London

## 1. Introduction

The fashion industry is a significant contributor to environmental pollution, ranking among the largest polluting industries [1,2]. In addition to its environmental impact, the industry is also plagued by unethical practices, such as exploitative labour conditions and unsustainable production methods that exacerbate its adverse effects on both people and the planet [3–6]. These urgent issues demand our attention and action.

Despite the industry's move towards sustainability, using more responsible materials and production techniques, the notion of sustainability in fashion often seems contradictory [7,8]. This is because fashion perpetuates consumption and relies on ever-changing seasons of new trends and styles, which need to be consumed for clothing companies to continue operating.

However, there is hope. A practical approach to sustainability involves adopting the TBL framework [9], which enables companies to operate more sustainably while considering social, environmental, and economic factors [9]. It offers a way for the fashion industry to balance its inherent need for consumption with a commitment to sustainable and ethical practices. Social Enterprises is a prime example of a fashion business model that aligns with the TBL framework [10,11]. These enterprises, with their focus on social objectives, have challenged traditional fashion systems and have proven that it is possible to put purpose above profit, showcasing a positive direction for the industry's future.

A fashion social enterprise is defined as a cause-driven business that focuses on addressing social and environmental issues within the fashion industry [11]. These enterprises, driven by their values and a strong desire to do what is in the interests of people and the planet, are not just businesses. They are change-makers, advocating for ethical

working conditions and sustainable livelihoods. From working with disadvantaged communities and marginalised groups to engaging in environmentally responsible practices, these enterprises play a transformative role in improving the livelihoods of the people and communities in which they work. They are offering production services to local fashion brands and retailers, championing the principles of slow and responsible production, and helping these brands minimise their ecological footprint [10,12].

For this research, East London has been chosen as the geographical context due to its rich history of fashion manufacturing and creativity [13]. With 23% of London's social enterprises and a significant portion of employment in the fashion industry located in East London, the area drives growth in design, retail, and manufacturing [14]. Given the region's significance as London's leading manufacturing base, East London-based social enterprises have been selected to examine their contribution to ethical and sustainable practices in the UK fashion industry.

The present research aims to provide evidence-based insights into how social enterprises are driving the industry towards sustainability. Using the TBL framework and social capital as theoretical lenses, the following hypothesis are generated.

**H1.** *East-London based social enterprises integrate elements of the TBL framework into their operational strategies in diverse ways, which contributes to the advancement of sustainable practices in the UK fashion industry.*

**H2.** *Social enterprises in the East London fashion cluster utilise their social capital through networks, partnerships or community tiesto support their sustainability initiatives.*

It is important to note that the study is qualitative; therefore, the hypotheses are exploratory statements instead of the predictive hypotheses typically used in quantitative studies [15]. The purpose of these exploratory hypotheses is to guide the direction of inquiry based on existing theories [15,16].

The existing literature on social enterprises provides valuable insights into incorporating sustainability through circular economy principles [10,17–20]. For instance, Staicu's study [17] on Romania's textile and clothing sector explores the characteristics of sustainability-oriented innovators, offering insights into their market experience, legal forms, and the impact of their practices within the circular economy framework. Similarly, another study focused on Argentine social enterprises examined the strategies these enterprises use to establish sustainable value chains using circular fashion approaches [18]. Stratan's research [10] provided a framework for modeling social enterprise sustainable operations. Additionally, research on Brazilian social enterprises revealed the complexities of balancing social, environmental, and economic value [19].

Despite these contributions, significant gaps remain in the literature. First, existing studies stressed the importance of addressing social and environmental issues, but they often lack a comprehensive examination of all three dimensions of sustainability: economic, social, and environmental. Secondly, there is a lack of research focusing on social enterprises within the UK fashion industry, particularly in East London, an area that has been underrepresented in existing research. Using TBL and social capital theory, this study addresses these gaps by analysing how these enterprises manage their sustainability efforts across all three dimensions. It also highlights the critical role of stakeholder interactions facilitated by social capital, in this process, offering evidence-based insights into enhancing sustainability performance. These insights can guide strategies for social enterprises to advance sustainability across the UK fashion industry and serve as an exemplar of best practices within the industry.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Sustainability

Despite being a widely discussed topic since the 1980s, sustainability remains difficult to define [8]. The academic debate on the concept is still not entirely unified, resulting in a multitude of definitions.

One commonly cited definition of sustainability is derived from the Brundtland Commission report [21] that defined sustainability as "*meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*". However, this definition has been criticised for its vagueness, the ill-defined and abstract nature of 'needs', and lack of practical applicability.

Scholars such as Gunder [22] and Niinimaki [23] offer other perspectives on sustainability. According to Gunder [22] (p. 211), "*Sustainability is a concept that everyone purports to understand intuitively but somehow finds very difficult to operationalise into concrete terms*". This highlights the inherent complexity and challenge of translating the theoretical understanding of sustainability into practical actions. Similarly, Niinimaki [23] defines sustainability as a "*fuzzy and broad concept*", and involves a discussion on what exactly should be sustained: resources or lifestyle? This perspective points to the ongoing debate about the primary focus of sustainability efforts. It underscores the lack of consensus and the breadth of interpretations that exist within the sustainability discourse.

Although the debate on what sustainability is has polarised scholars and generated diverging schools of thought, these varying perspectives highlight the need for a multifaceted approach considering economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

The TBL framework [9] emphasising all three aspects [24] offers a more balanced and practical approach to understanding sustainability and is used in the present study.

### 2.2. Fashion and Sustainability

Research over the past decade indicates a significant increase in publications dedicated to "fashion and sustainability" [25]. Fashion and sustainability are often viewed as an oxymoron [7,8] as the former inherently promotes consumption and the latter advocates for prolonged use of resources and long-term ecological and social balance [22]. The fast fashion industry encourages continuous clothing purchases through rapid production and the introduction of new trends [4,8]. This model significantly impacts environmental and social sustainability by generating substantial waste and disposal issues, and by contributing to labour exploitation and unethical working conditions [3,6,26,27]. Numerous studies have examined the impact of fast fashion practices on the industry [3,6,27] and explored strategies for transitioning to more sustainable fashion practices, including slow fashion [28,29] and circular fashion [2,30,31].

Sustainable fashion, synonymous in academic literature with terms such as eco, green, and ethical fashion [5], is integral to the slow fashion movement. This movement prioritises sustainability values aimed at reducing environmental destruction and promoting ethical practices in the fashion value chain [32].

Similar to sustainable fashion, various terms have been used interchangeably with circular fashion, such as circular economy, sustainable business models, and regenerative design [33]. Circular fashion operates as a closed-loop system that addresses sustainability issues throughout the fashion product lifecycle [30,34]. It emphasises reducing resource consumption, improving production efficiencies, sourcing sustainable inputs, and promoting repair, recycling, and reuse of materials [2,35,36]. These principles of circular fashion help align business objectives with environmental and social responsibility, facilitating sustainable development initiatives [30,35].

Circular fashion necessitates fashion businesses to rethink and restructure their operational frameworks [2]. Transitioning from linear to circular fashion involves active participation from all supply chain stakeholders, including manufacturers, suppliers, distributors, retailers, and consumers, to achieve a balanced approach across economic, social, and environmental sustainability [37]. This holistic view aligns with the TBL framework, a

practical tool for companies to operate more sustainably while considering social, environmental, and economic impacts [9].

*2.3. Sustainable Business Models and Social Enterprises*

There is substantial evidence in the existing literature explaining the social, environmental, and economic values that companies can integrate as the foundation of sustainable business models. Sustainable business models are defined as frameworks "*describing, analysing, managing, and communicating (i) a company's sustainable value proposition to its customers, and all other stakeholders, (ii) how it creates and delivers this value, (iii) and how it captures economic value while maintaining or regenerating natural, social, and economic capital beyond its organisational boundaries*" [38] (p. 6).

Thorisdottir [39] illustrates in their study on the Nordic Fashion Industry how fashion companies address all three dimensions of sustainability to create value in their business models, thereby promoting the shift from unsustainable practices to sustainable ones. In a similar vein, Pal and Gander [1] argue that businesses should consider their business models as systems to generate value not only for customers but also for the environment and the firm itself to ensure their sustainability efforts are cohesive and effective [40]. This viewpoint aligns with the definition of sustainable business models presented in this study.

Social enterprises, which prioritise maximising social impact by reinvesting profits to achieve social and/or environmental goals, exemplify how such sustainable business models can be effectively implemented [10,17]. These enterprises operate across a diverse spectrum of organisations, ranging from charities with business operations to socially responsible commercial ventures [11]. With their commitment to ethical practices, and environmental stewardship, these enterprises naturally align with the principles of sustainable business models [17].

Research into how hybrid organisations, including social enterprises, implement circular economy models further underscores their role in supporting sustainable development. A study involving interviews with six Italian social entrepreneurs highlighted several critical elements for achieving circular economy goals within these enterprises, which are as follows: internal commitment, adaptive creativity, resource management, human well-being, reciprocity, partnerships, skill development, and educational efforts. This investigation demonstrates how the values and practices of social enterprises make them particularly effective in adopting and advancing circular economy strategies, although the study was focused on different industries [41].

Despite this promising potential, the literature examining the role of social enterprises in transitioning the fashion industry towards sustainable business practices remains limited. This gap suggests that while social enterprises strongly align with circular economy principles, more research is needed to explore their impact within the fashion sector. To address this, Stratan [10] conducted a study exploring how social enterprise operations can be modelled using existing business models that incorporate circular economy principles. The study provided a comprehensive framework for social enterprises seeking to adopt circular economy principles. However, it does not address practical challenges and barriers these enterprises may encounter during the implementation of proposed strategies. Additionally, it does not encompass all three dimensions of sustainability, highlighting the need for further research that considers the broader sustainability framework. Adding to this, a recent study [42] explored the uncaptured value within social enterprises in the Brazilian fashion industry using the lens of business models. Their findings revealed the complexity in the social enterprise landscape whereby social enterprises that emphasise social and environmental impacts often forego economic value, and vice versa. In another study [18], the strategies employed by Argentine enterprises in the fashion industry were examined to establish sustainable value chains by capturing social, economic and environmental values. The study provided insights into production and marketing strategies aimed at reducing consumption and maximising product value, aligning with circular fashion's ethos. Both these studies offer timely insights into addressing uncaptured values across

the three dimensions of sustainability and establishing sustainable value chains through circular fashion principles. However, they are limited in geographical scope, focusing on South American regions.

There is a clear need for additional research to comprehensively understand the role that social enterprises in the fashion industry can play in driving sustainability. Currently, the existing literature lacks evidence from the context of the UK fashion industry. To bridge this gap, the present study will focus on the East London fashion cluster, known for housing a diverse array of creative social enterprises [13]. The culturally diverse and rich environment of East London provides a unique setting to examine how social enterprise in the UK fashion sector can contribute to sustainable practices through the lens of the TBL framework and social capital.

### 2.4. TBL Framework

The TBL framework was developed by John Elkington and consists of the following three pillars of sustainability, often referred to as the '3Ps' of sustainability: profit (economy), people (society), and planet (environment) [9]. This framework reflects corporate performance by assessing the company's economic, social and environmental performance [43]. In the fashion industry, the TBL approach serves as a universal framework to enable companies to develop their economic, social and environmental resources [37].

Previous studies on sustainability in the fashion industry have predominantly used the TBL framework in the context of educating customers [43–45] and sustainable supply chain management [46,47]. However, there has been limited focus on utilising the TBL framework to understand how social enterprises contribute to sustainability [20,48] particularly in the context of fashion industry. With their inherent focus on social and environmental goals, the TBL approach is an invaluable framework to explore how social enterprises integrate these considerations into their core operations.

### 2.5. Social Capital

In the present study, the concept of social capital is utilised to explore how relationships and value creation in East London social enterprises can facilitate the transition towards sustainability in the UK fashion industry. Social capital is defined as the benefits and values that individuals derive from social relationships and interactions [49]. Previous studies [13,50] have used social capital solely as a measure of social aspects of sustainability. However, the current study focusing on the 3Ps (people, planet and profit) delves into the dynamic interactions and networks that foster value creation.

The perspective on social capital in the existing literature is shaped by three prominent theorists, Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Robert Putnam. Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, introduced the earliest perspectives on social capital in 1986. Bourdieu's framework of social capital identified the following three dimensions of social capital: economic, cultural and social. It argues that an individual's possession of these forms of capital can determine their social position in society [51].

Bourdieu emphasised that social relations enhance individuals' capacity to pursue their interests. However, critics argue that Bourdieu focuses on how social capital benefits the individuals and groups in the elite class through social stratification and overlooks its implications for less advantaged individuals or groups [52,53]. In contrast, American sociologist James Coleman conceptualised social capital as a universal resource available to all community members [54]. He defined social capital by its function, emphasising its role in facilitating actions within social structures [54] (p. 302). He viewed social capital as interconnected with human capital, serving both individual and collective interests [53].

Lastly, Robert Putnam [55] (p. 5) defined social capital as "connection among individuals' social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them". Putnam [55] categorised social capital into the following two forms: bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital refers to the advantages gained from close relationships like family, close friends, and socially homogenous groups. In

contrast, bridging social capital characterises the benefits derived from interactions with socially heterogeneous groups. His conceptualization is similar to Granovetter's idea of "weak and strong ties" [56,57]. He argued that strong ties are found in bonding networks, while weak ties are connections with people outside one's core network that act as bridges to other networks.

The present study utilised Robert Putnam's conceptualisation of social capital to understand how social enterprises in East London leverage their networks.

## 3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative exploratory research approach [58] adopting an interpretivist perspective to emphasise the subjective interpretation of strategies used by social enterprises to promote sustainability within the UK fashion industry. By employing inductive reasoning, the study aims to uncover and understand the complex human and social dynamics involved. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how social enterprises contribute to broader sustainability goals in the fashion sector and evaluate their impact on the local community and the broader industry.

Given the research focus, a qualitative case study design was chosen to investigate how social enterprises based in East London facilitate the UK fashion industry's shift toward ethical and sustainable practices. Yin [58] defines a case study as an "*empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context*". Case studies enable the examination of interconnected relationships and intricate processes that occur within the cases under investigation by asking "how" and "why" questions [58].

In addition, a case study provides meaningful insights into the research subject by using various data collection methods, ensuring a comprehensive understanding [59,60]. Using multiple case studies instead of a single case study is recommended, as this approach produces more reliable and robust results by exploring the similarities and differences within and between cases [58]. Therefore, multiple case studies were chosen for their ability to deeply explore the practices and challenges encountered by social enterprises within East London's fashion cluster, providing a comprehensive view of how these enterprises embrace the TBL approach.

### 3.1. Case Study Selection

Case selection is a pivotal aspect of this study's methodology, ensuring that chosen cases align closely with the research aim and provide rich insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Following Yin's [58] guidance, specific criteria were defined to guide the selection process effectively [59]. First and foremost, selected cases must qualify as social enterprises, embodying the values and practices associated with sustainable and ethical fashion practices as defined within this study's framework. Moreover, geographic specificity is crucial, with a focus exclusively on social enterprises based in East London. This regional focus allows for a concentrated examination of local dynamics and initiatives in the East London fashion cluster. Additionally, selected enterprises are required to offer training programs aimed at enhancing skills within the fashion and textiles sector, as well as providing production services to fashion brands and retailersLastly, active engagement with local communities is another vital criterion, ensuring that the enterprises' operations have a tangible impact beyond economic factors.

After developing a criterion for case selection, Miles and Huberman's [61] sampling parameters were used to provide a scientific justification for the case study selection. The Table 1 below summarises this justification.

**Table 1.** Scientific justification for the case study selection (Adapted from Miles and Huberman [62]; source: author).

| Sampling Parameters | Description | Scientific Justification |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Relevance | Cases must be chosen based on their relevance to answering specific research questions. | The selected cases directly address and align with the research questions, ensuring focused and pertinent data. |
| Richness | The selected cases must generate rich information for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under study. | Each case provides comprehensive and detailed data, allowing for deep exploration and understanding. |
| Analytic generalisability | Cases must offer insights into broader theoretical contexts, ensuring findings can be analytically generalised to similar contexts. Statistical generalisability to a larger population is not sought. | The findings from the cases are expected to provide insights that are applicable to other similar contexts, though not necessarily to a larger statistical population. |
| Potential to generate believable explanations | Cases must have high potential to generate credible explanations about the role and impact of social enterprises | The data from the cases are expected to support robust and convincing explanations regarding the impact and role of social enterprises. |
| Ethics | Obtaining informed consent from all participants, clearly explaining the study's purpose, procedure, and potential risks. | Ethical standards are maintained by ensuring informed consent and transparency about the study's procedures and risks. |
| Feasibility | The study must be practical within the available time, resources, and access constraints. | The focused selection of cases allowed for manageable and effective data collection and analysis, given the available resources and regional scope. |

Considering the case study criteria [54] and sampling parameters [57], two cases were selected for detailed investigation in this study. Prominent authors in qualitative research support the choice of a small number of case studies [54,57,58]. Yin [54] argued that fewer cases can yield rich and detailed insights into the phenomenon under study. Robert [58] added that selecting a few instances that are rich in information can be more valuable than a more significant number of less informative cases. Reiterating this, Miles and Huberman argued that qualitative researchers benefit from focusing on the depth and richness of data rather than the number of cases [57], particularly in exploratory phases, which often uses small sample sizes [62]. Therefore, using two case studies is justified in this study. These cases are introduced in the subsequent sections.

3.1.1. Case Study 1: Making for Change

Making for Change is a social enterprise that offers vocational fashion and textiles training and production programs. Established in 2014 with a focus on empowering women in prison through training, the program has since expanded its reach to serve the broader community in East London's fashion district. Headquartered at Poplar Works, Making for Change provides training programs and production enterprises, along with opportunities for fashion and creative business start-ups. Making for Change aims to promote skills development and ethical practices within the fashion industry, while also nurturing a supportive ecosystem for aspiring entrepreneurs and businesses in the creative sector.

3.1.2. Case Study 2: Stitches in Time

Stitches in Time is a nonprofit organisation focused on participatory arts and education, incorporating a social enterprise component. Situated within Tower Hamlets in East London's fashion district, the organisation was established in 1993 as a community project. The social enterprise celebrates the area's rich cultural history, provides fashion training and produces commissioned projects for ethical fashion and textile brands. The projects are

created in collaboration with participants, responding directly to their needs to empower individuals and build resilient, inclusive, and cohesive communities.

The Table 2 below presents key characteristics of these organisations:

**Table 2.** Characteristics of case studies (source: author).

| Core Operations | Core Focus | Outcomes for Trainees | Partnerships and Support | Community Group |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Training programs (professional skills and qualifications in fashion manufacturing and production) | Skills development, job creation, community support | Volunteering opportunities leading to full-time employment | Collaborations with educational institutions and local councils | Bangladeshi immigrants, local communities based in east London |
| Commercial production services for the fashion industry | Socially responsible practices   Environmental sustainability | Social inclusion and economic empowerment | Partnerships with fashion industry networks and support from regional development initiatives | |

*3.2. Data Collection Methods*

Two data collection methods were employed in the case studies, semi-structured interviews and focus groups [60], to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1.** *How do the social enterprises in the East London fashion cluster leverage the TBL framework to promote sustainable practices in the UK fashion industry?*

**RQ2.** *How do social enterprises in the East London fashion cluster utilise social capital to facilitate the transition towards sustainability in the UK fashion industry?*

Interviews are one of the most common qualitative data collection methods and can be a crucial source of information in case studies [59,63]. This method is widely chosen for its ability to capture individual experiences and comprehensively cover key issues in depth and breadth [60]. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from both social enterprises to explore their sustainable business models and the strategies used to promote skills training and sustainable practices within the industry. This method allowed for flexibility in setting interview guidelines to ensure that key topics were covered comprehensively [63]. The interview questions were formulated based on identified themes from the literature, serving as a guideline to ensure all relevant topics were addressed. The discussions covered themes such as the provision of production services to local fashion brands, stakeholder engagement, value creation, collaborative partnerships, institutional support, and the potential impact on East London's fashion cluster. The Table 3 below shows the details of the interviewees:

**Table 3.** Details of interviews (source: author).

| Interviewee Job Title and Organisation | Date of Interview | Location of Interview | Type of Interview | Duration of Interview |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Paul, Chief Executive Officer at Stitches in Time | 28 March 2024 | Stitches in Time, Tower Hamlets, East London | Face to face | 45 min |
| Gracie Sutton, Enterprise and Production Manager at Stitches in Time | 28 March 2024 | Stitches in Time, Tower Hamlets, East London | Face to face | 45 min |
| Anna Ellis, Head of Business Development at Making for Change | 30 May 2024 | Microsoft Teams | Online | 38 min |

To assess the impact on local communities and trainees, focus groups were established with volunteers and employees who received initial training and are now employed by or engaged in volunteering with the social enterprises under study.

Focus groups are a valuable method whereby gathering people together facilitates collective exploration of shared incidents and experiences. They effectively draw out common themes and consensus among the group, as well as reveal diverse perspectives. In contrast to interviews, the researcher typically plays the role of a facilitator, encouraging conversation and discussion among the participants [64,65].

The focus group sessions at both the social enterprises delved into participants' experiences with the training programs offered. Due to participant availability and time constraints, one of the focus groups was conducted in-person, while the other took place online using Teams. This approach allowed us to accommodate the schedules of all participants effectively. The first focus group had 6 participants, and the second focus group had 5 participants. The Table 4 below shows the focus group details:

**Table 4.** Details of focus groups (source: author).

| Focus Group 1: Stitches in Time Participants | Coded as | Date | Location of Interview | Type of Focus Group | Duration of Interview |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rohima Begum (Former Trainee and Employee) | Participant A | | | | |
| Malika (Former Trainee and Volunteer) | Participant B | | | | |
| Tayeeba Begum (Former Trainee and Employee) | Participant C | 28 March 2024 | Stitches in Time, Tower Hamlets, East London | Face to face | 1 h 15 min |
| Shaleha Sharmi Chawdhury Mitale (Former Trainee and Employee) | Participant D | | | | |
| Fateha Hussain (Former Trainee and Employee) | Participant E | | | | |
| Farida Yesmin (Former Trainee and Employee) | Participant F | | | | |
| **Focus Group 2: Making for Change Participants** | **Coded as** | **Date** | **Location of Interview** | **Type of Focus Group** | **Duration of Interview** |
| Ruma Boumik (Former Trainee and Employee) | Participant A | | | | |
| Fieruza Khanom (Former Trainee and Employee) | Participant B | | | | |
| Shahana Begum (Former Trainee and Employee) | Participant C | 6 June 2024 | Microsoft Teams | Online | 58 min |
| Nosira Begum (Former Trainee and Employee) | Participant D | | | | |
| Dicko Coulibaly (Former Trainee and Employee) | Participant E | | | | |

Discussions included motivations for joining specific programs, skills acquired, and how challenges were addressed. Participants also discussed the program's impact on their readiness for fashion industry employment, providing examples of skill application in work or personal projects. The sessions explored collaboration and networking opportunities within the fashion community, as well as participants' aspirations within the industry. Additionally, they examined how the training influenced their views on sustainability and

ethical practices in fashion and discussed the role of social enterprises in promoting these practices within East London's fashion cluster.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

The data obtained from interviews and focus groups as part of the case studies was analysed using 'thematic analysis'. Braun and Clarke [66,67] define thematic analysis as a method for analysing qualitative data that involves examining a data set to identify, analyse, and present recurring patterns. This approach not only entails describing data but also involves interpreting data during the processes of selecting codes and developing themes [67]. This is an interpretative process, in which themes emerge from the data set and have been linked back to the reviewed literature.

During the qualitative analysis process, Braun and Clarke's six-step framework [66] was followed as outlined in Table 5. Data were initially coded to identify interesting features across the entire data set, which were then collated into potential themes. These themes were reviewed and refined, ensuring they captured the essence of the data. The refined themes were then defined and named, providing a clear understanding of each theme. Finally, a comprehensive analysis was written, relating it back to the research questions and integrating it with the relevant literature to present the findings. The analysis was conducted manually, and later, Miro software ](https://miro.com/?gclsrc=aw.ds&utm_source=google &utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=S%7CGOO%7CBRN%7CTIER2%7CEN-EN%7CBra nd%7CExact&utm_adgroup=&adgroupid=140183594159&utm_custom=18265637429&utm_ content=667940851827&utm_term=miro&matchtype=e&device=c&location=9198246&gad _source=1&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIw87VuamDiAMVZG4PAh3JngzcEAAYASAAEgJJUPD_ BwE, accessed on 15 April 2024) was used to create a diagrammatic representation of themes.

**Table 5.** Six-phase framework for carrying out a thematic analysis [67] (p. 87).

| | Phase | Description of the Process |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Familiarising yourself with your data | Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas. |
| 2. | Generating initial codes | Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code. |
| 3. | Searching for themes | Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. |
| 4. | Reviewing themes | Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis. |
| 5. | Defining and naming themes | Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each themes. |
| 6. | Producing the report | The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis. |

### 3.4. Validity

In qualitative research, validity is ensured through several key practices that enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings [58,67]. This study strengthened validity by incorporating multiple data collection methods, including interviews and focus groups, as part of the case studies. Miles and Huberman's [61] sampling parameters guided case selection to ensure the cases were relevant and representative. In addition, Braun and Clarke's framework [66] was employed for data analysis to maintain systematic and

transparent interpretation of data sets. The combination of these approaches collectively strengthened the validity and reliability of the study's findings.

## 4. Results and Discussion

Using Braun and Clarke's framework [66], the initial codes were generated from both the interview and focus group data sets. These are presented in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.
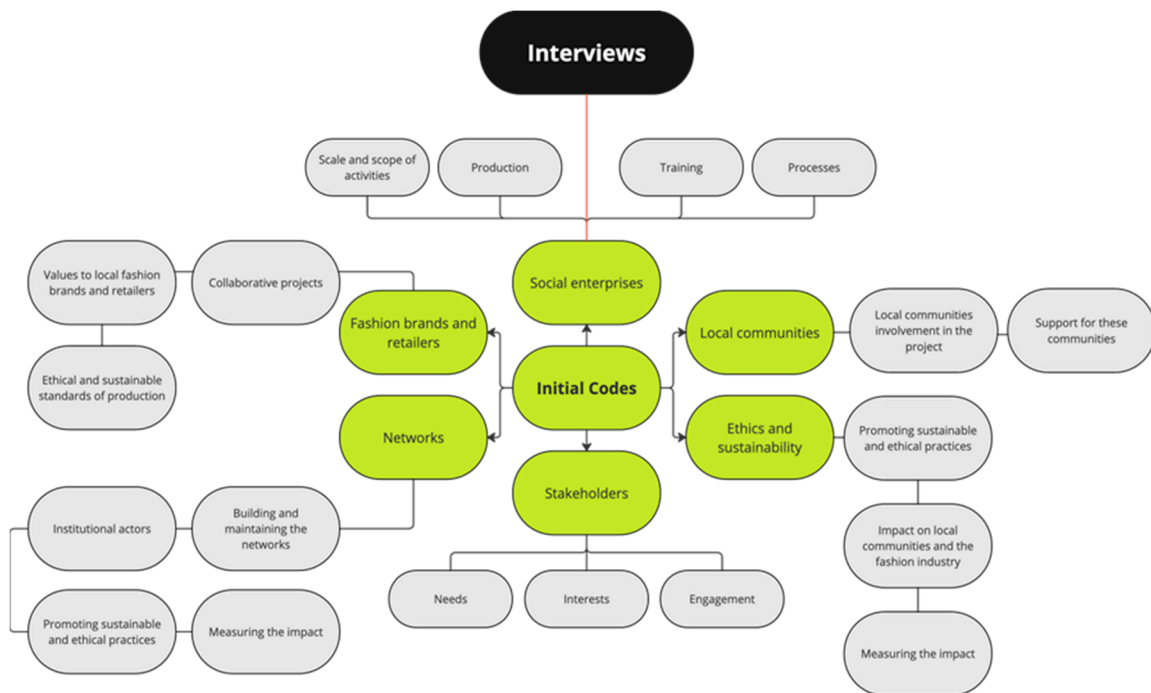


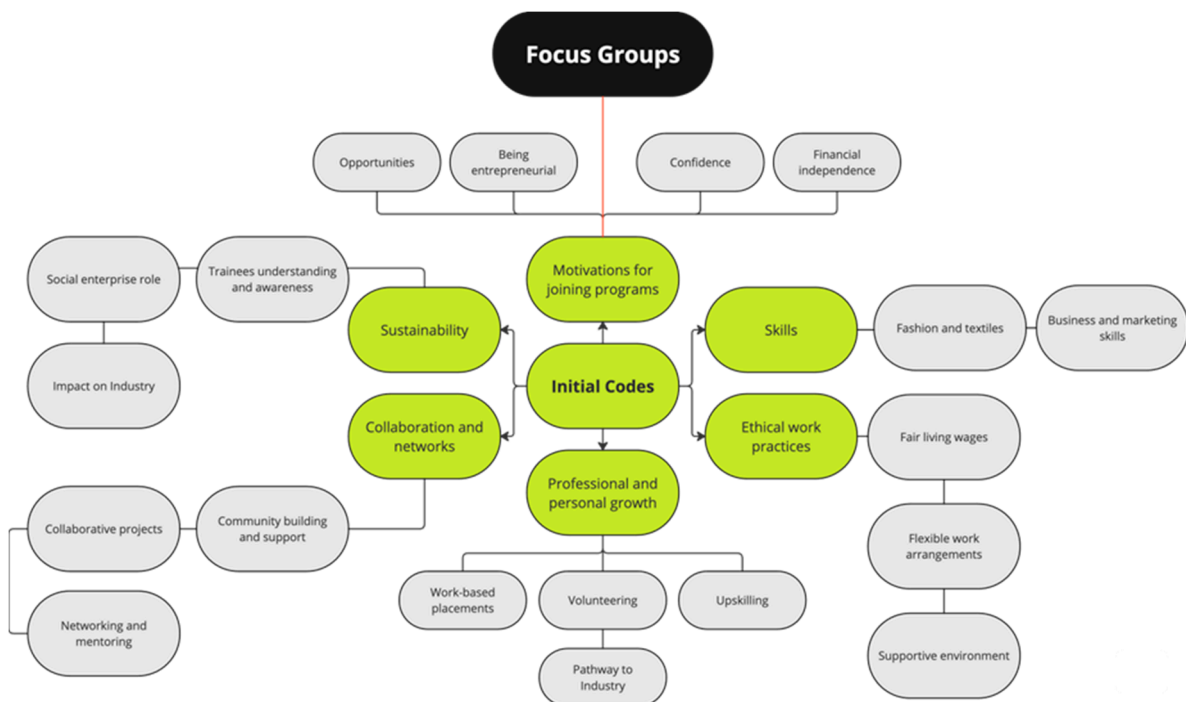**Figure 1.** Initial codes generated from interview data set.



**Figure 2.** Initial codes generated from focus group data set.

The initial codes were then organised into potential themes, such as value creation, community involvement and social impact, sustainable fashion, etc. These can be seen in the Figure 3.
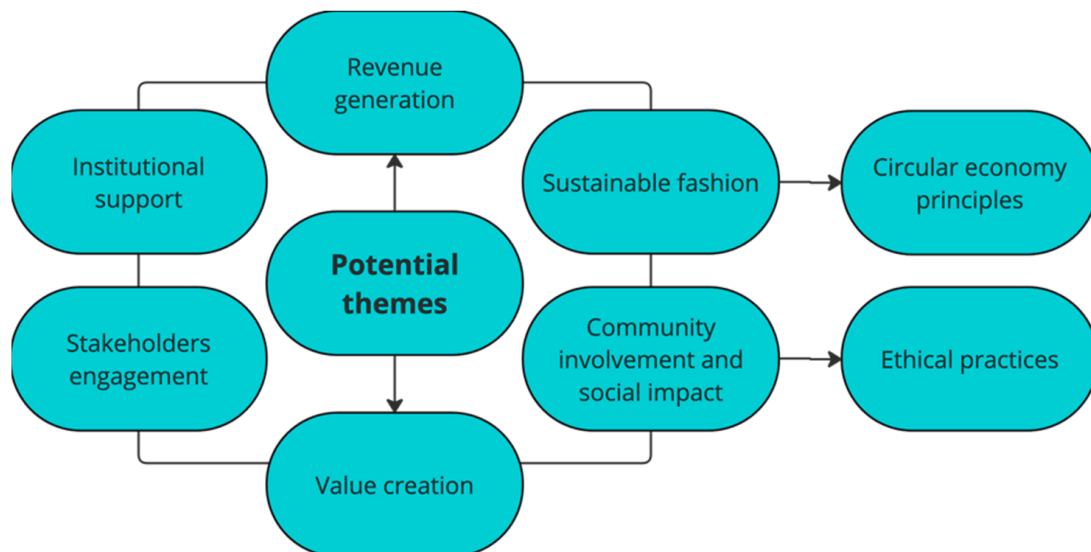


**Figure 3.** Potential themes generated from the data sets.

Through iterative review, potential themes were categorised into finalised themes, and a thematic map was created, as shown in Figure 4. This map illustrates how East London social enterprises integrate environmental, social, and economic considerations into their operational strategies. Additionally, the following two key themes emerged: bonding social capital and bridging social capital within these social enterprises. The five finalised themes reflect the TBL framework and the concept of social capital to help address the research questions. The excerpts from the interviews and focus groups have been added to Appendix A.

*4.1. RQ1: How Do the Social Enterprises in the East London Fashion Cluster Leverage the TBL Framework to Promote Sustainable Practices in the UK Fashion Industry?*

To answer the research question, the first three themes that emerged from the data analysis are used. These themes are presented in the Figure 5.

4.1.1. Social Considerations

Social considerations emerged as the central theme throughout the analysis, highlighting the ethical practices and social impact caused by the activities of these enterprises on multiple stakeholders, including trainees, employees, fashion brands, and local communities. There is also overlap with concepts related to collaboration, co-creation, and stakeholders' engagement, which are presented in themes 4 and 5 to answer research question 2.

Firstly, social enterprises leveraged a variety of ethical practices. These practices include ensuring fair wages, flexible work arrangements, and maintaining clean and respectable work environments. During focus group discussions, the trainees emphasised the extensive support they receive from these organisations as they progress from training to volunteering and then toward full-time employment. This support includes assistance with job interview preparation and navigating bureaucratic processes such as those at the Job Centre. Participants from both enterprises highlighted flexibility as a key feature that accommodates their personal schedules and family responsibilities. They also pointed out the ongoing learning opportunities and support, which have enabled both their personal and professional growth. The participants viewed the enterprises as supportive places that accommodate their customs.
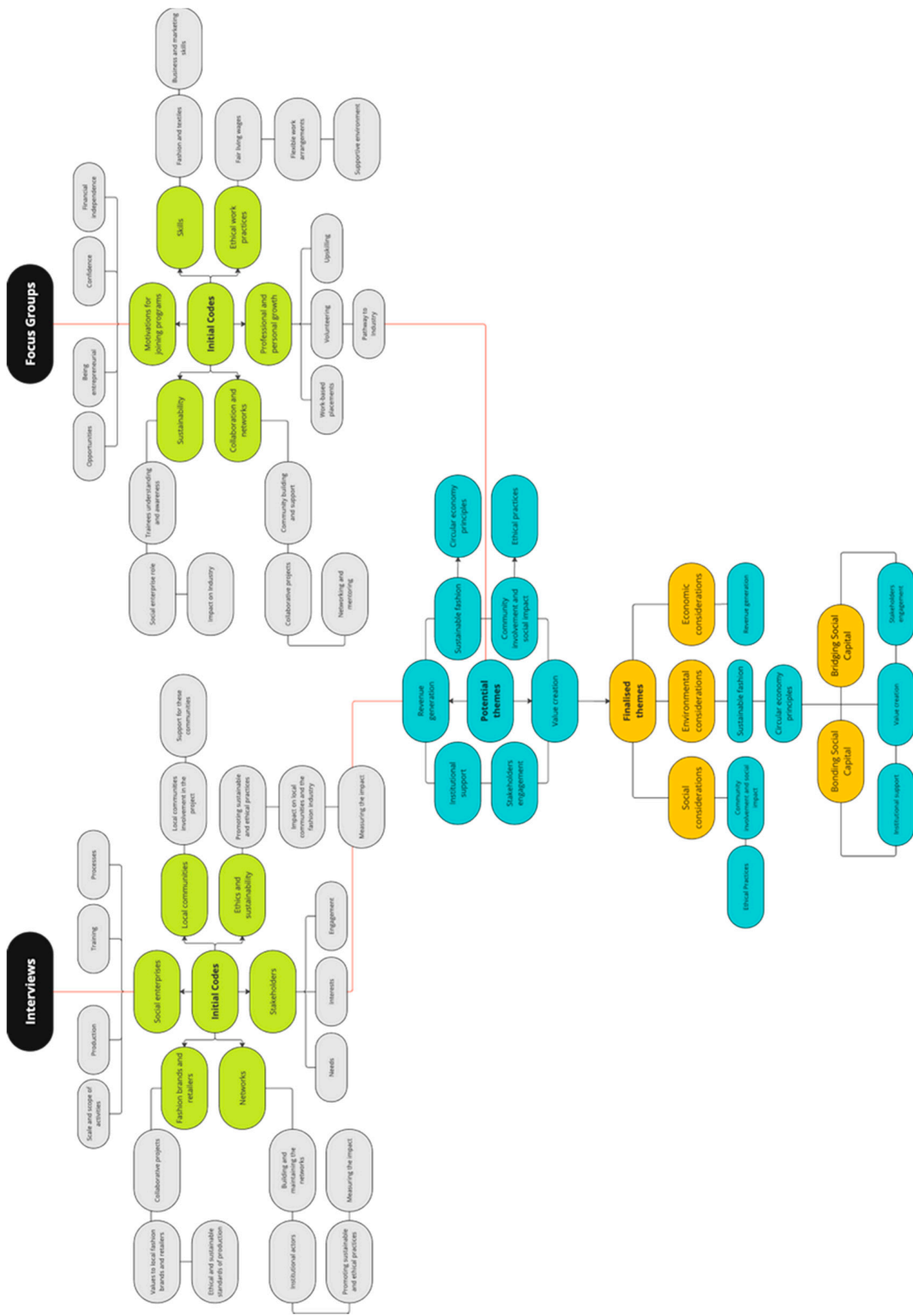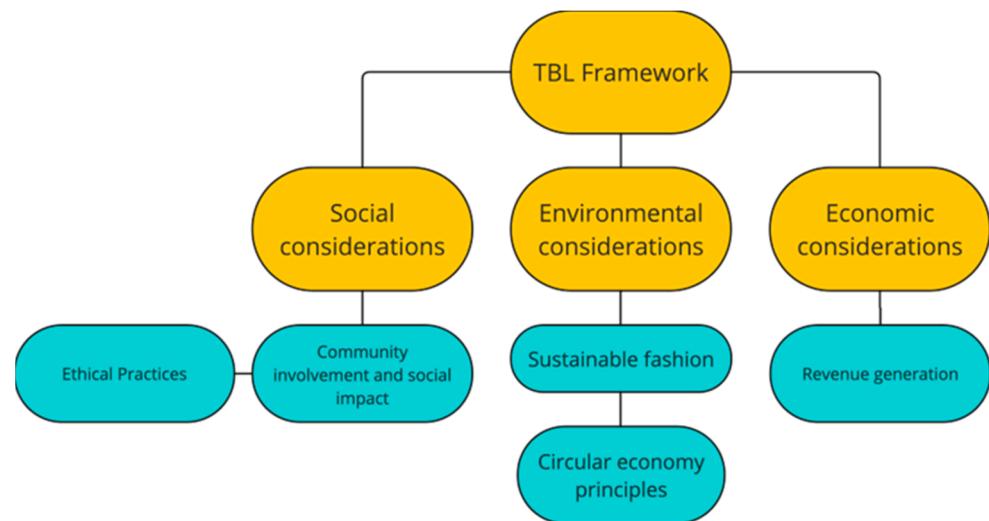
**Figure 4.** Thematic map.

**Figure 5.** The first three sub-themes to answer RQ1.

From the social enterprise's perspective, there was an emphasis and ongoing effort to move away from the perception of manufacturing as a factory-based environment to one that values skilled craftsmanship and ethical working conditions. Secondly, these social enterprises work closely with brands, individual designers, and other clients to ensure better quality and cost-effective products. They often work with smaller quantities to ensure that their workers are being paid fair wages and the transparency in costing is upheld.

Lastly, the findings underscored the significant social impact of the social enterprise's initiatives, particularly through their training programs. These programs positioned trainees as major stakeholders, empowering them through one-on-one support and personalised training. These individuals not only acquire skills but also benefit from employment opportunities facilitated by these social enterprises, resulting in a strong demand for these courses.

It was interesting to note that when asked about the value focus group participants gained from these training programs, their responses were not focused on technical skills but rather on how these training programs have been transformative in various ways, including boosting confidence and enhancing their learning, among other benefits. The Figure 6 illustrates these responses in a word cloud.



**Figure 6.** The responses from focus group participants.

In addition to this, social enterprise's collaborative partnerships with local communities enabled projects to be co-created to align with their needs, including support in navigating employment services and accommodating personal responsibilities. Their focus on community-driven initiatives emphasises broader societal value, fostering social inclusion and economic empowerment within the community, thus contributing to East London's fashion cluster.

4.1.2. Environmental Considerations

In addition to social considerations, the findings suggest that social enterprises also prioritise environmental sustainability in their practices by employing circular economy principles. Apart from working in small-quantity batch production and advising on garment costing and manufacturing techniques, these social enterprises are also involved in projects focused on upcycling, repairing, mending, and recycling. They collaborate closely with brands to integrate traditional skills like hand embroidery and artisanal crafts into their projects. Grace mentioned that in recent years, more fashion brands have approached them to co-create, specifically to utilise traditional skills like hand embroidery, including techniques for mending.

One notable example was a collaborative project between Stitches in Time and Making for Change, where they partnered with the renowned fashion brand 'Monsoon', which exemplifies social enterprises' commitment to circular economy principles by extending the lifespan of garments through mending and upcycling. These enterprises also employ approaches like using offcuts, smaller leftover pieces of fabric from production, to reduce waste and minimise resource use. In addition, Making for Change actively recycles waste. They collaborate with a third-party startup to transform their textile waste into new products, further contributing to sustainability efforts and reducing environmental impact. This partnership highlights their commitment to responsible waste management and innovative recycling solutions.

Furthermore, Making for Change is also exploring the potential of using technology, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI). By integrating AI-driven production scheduling in their digital cutter, they aim to assess its impact on reducing overproduction, which is a significant issue in the fashion industry. This showcases their proactive approach to leveraging AI for on-demand manufacturing.

Upon analysing the responses from focus group participants, it appeared that participants from Stitches in Time did not have a clear understanding of what environmental sustainability means. This observation may stem from the fact that, as discussed, Making for Change focused more on leveraging technology and innovation for waste reduction, while Stitches in Time concentrated predominantly on techniques such as repairing, mending, and repurposing.

During the focus group discussion, the participants from Making for Change highlighted several projects that they worked on, including the Monsoon project discussed earlier. It was noted that repurposing a garment, including the time required to unpick, cut, and reconstruct it into a new item, often took significantly longer than creating a garment from scratch. This suggests that sustainable practices may involve higher costs due to the extended production time.

Another project they discussed was their work with denim, where discarded denim pieces were transformed into patchwork garments. Participants also shared insights into collaborations with sustainable brands and designers. One notable example was when they recently worked for a designer who uses yoghurt bacteria to produce biodegradable clothing. They also worked with another designer to create bags and cushion covers from scraps, all of which were biodegradable.

Aside from discussing the projects, participants highlighted that working at Making for Change has increased their awareness about environmental sustainability and made them feel good about working towards making a greener world. Overall, the findings exemplify how both social enterprises, Making for Change and Stitches in Time, are

actively integrating circular economy principles into their operations and fostering creative solutions to reduce environmental impact in fashion manufacturing.

### 4.1.3. Economic Considerations

The economic considerations for social enterprises are crucial, as these organisations rely on ongoing funding and support. To ensure economic viability, they engage in a broad spectrum of projects and commissions, ranging from collaborations with small brands and startups to major retailers and bespoke designs for high-profile events like London Fashion Week and community-led textile projects.

One of the ways in which these enterprises ensure the projects and commissions they undertake are commercially viable is through meticulous calculation of production costs. This practice serves a dual purpose: first, it allows organisations to understand the financial implications of each project, ensuring that they can cover costs while potentially generating profit. Second, it enables enterprises to provide transparent and informed cost projections to their clients or collaborators, fostering trust and facilitating mutually beneficial partnerships.

In addition, the viability of on-demand manufacturing is another factor that these organisations need to consider, as Anna pointed out that for most fashion brands, sustainability means being able to produce in small quantities. She highlighted the issue of using offcuts, which clients request for sustainability reasons, but which comes at a higher cost due to cutting and efficiency restrictions and they have to explain this to brands.

Adding to this, Paul mentioned that maintaining economic sustainability presents challenges, particularly due to resource limitations for the social enterprises. These organisations often rely on fundraising efforts to support their training programs and sustain their operational capacity. Despite these challenges, there is a strong desire and commitment from these enterprises to be socially and environmentally responsible while ensuring economic viability.

The focus group discussions emphasised economic benefits such as job opportunities and income generation from training programs. Participants highlighted how participating in training programs offered by social enterprises enabled them to learn valuable skills and enhance their employment prospects. Many expressed gratitude for the opportunities these programs provided, often leading to employment or entrepreneurial ventures within their communities. Participants shared personal stories of how acquiring skills opened opportunities for them, and many expressed aspirations of starting their own businesses and contributing to economic growth in the East London region.

Analysing the key findings, it is evident that despite meeting the three pillars of sustainability, social, environmental, and economic, maintaining economic viability remains challenging for these enterprises. As small entities, they often rely on support and funding from larger institutions to continue operating. Without such support, they are compelled to prioritise one aspect over the others, frequently leading to compromises in achieving a balanced approach. For example, while striving to meet social and environmental goals, case enterprises struggle to maintain economic viability due to high operational costs and insufficient revenue streams. This challenge underscored the need for continued financial support and strategic investment to help social enterprises achieve a sustainable balance between their social mission and economic stability.

Furthermore, while both social enterprises under study strive to prioritise all three dimensions of the TBL framework, their focus varies. Due to its charity-based approach, one enterprise places greater emphasis on social aspects, whereas the other prioritises environmental sustainability. This difference in focus is evident in the responses from trainees and employees. In the organisation emphasising environmental sustainability, participants reported heightened awareness and understanding of environmental issues. In contrast, participants from the other social enterprise shared more examples of how it has impacted their lives and community well-being. These findings coincide with the research findings of a recent study [19] that highlights that social enterprises emphasising social

and environmental impacts often struggle to achieve economic sustainability. The study also suggests that balancing these considerations poses a significant challenge for these enterprises, necessitating ongoing strategic support and funding to ensure the long-term viability of these social enterprises. The findings also underscored the wide-ranging social impact of these social enterprises, which extend beyond their immediate stakeholders to influence the broader community and the industry. In addition to addressing social issues, these enterprises are uniquely positioned to play a key role in transitioning from linear to circular fashion principles [10,17]. The findings [18] examined Argentine enterprises, highlighting the critical role social enterprises play in advancing circular fashion. Contributing to the discourse, the findings confirmed that social enterprises, with their focus on both social and environmental objectives over profits, set a precedent for sustainable business models in the fashion industry. They exemplify the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental values in achieving sustainability in the UK fashion industry. However, balancing the TBL framework remains a complex challenge for these enterprises, as achieving this balance requires navigating trade-offs between social, environmental and economic sustainability.

### 4.2. RQ2: How Do Social Enterprises in the East London Fashion Cluster Utilise Social Capital to Facilitate the Transition towards Sustainability in the UK Fashion Industry?

To answer the research question, the themes shown in Figure 7 examine how bonding and bridging social capital foster cohesive support systems and provide access to vital resources, knowledge, and opportunities. This analysis highlights social capital's role in enabling social enterprises to sustain economic viability while being socially and environmentally responsible.
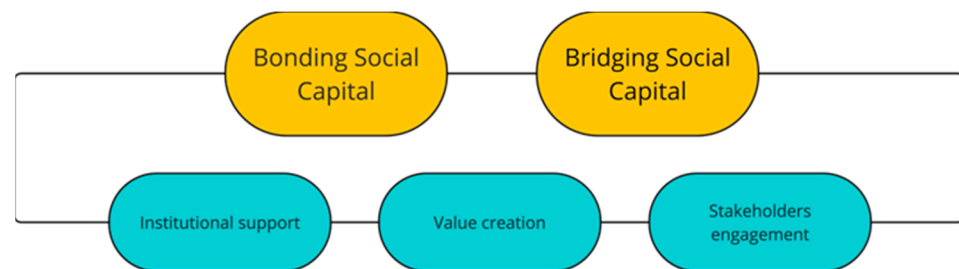


**Figure 7.** The themes answering RQ2.

### 4.2.1. Bonding Social Capital

The findings confirmed that the East London fashion cluster leverages bonding social capital through community involvement and collaboration. For instance, Stitches in Time engages beneficiaries in co-creation, ensuring their voices are integral to the enterprise growth.

Supporting this collaborative ethos, Anna Ellis highlighted a project on Modest Fashion launched for trainees as part of their training programs. This project involved trainees collaborating with a renowned modest fashion designer from East London and students from London College of Fashion. Industry experts in business and marketing also contributed to provide a holistic view for trainees interested in starting a business in modest fashion.

Paul added that they are currently working on an embroidery project for Hampton Court Palace, which highlights the stories of South Asian Makers. This project underscores the life experiences of their community members, showcasing the value of personal stories and cultural relevance in their work. This value creation extends beyond economic benefits, fostering social capital within the community through highlighting makers' stories and cultivating a strong sense of belonging. Such initiatives strengthen existing community ties, positively impacting social capital and promoting a socially responsible framework for the UK fashion industry.

In addition, these social enterprises work to reinforce skills development within the community. Grace noted the ripple effect of training women in East London, where many have volunteered their time to train others, thereby creating more employment opportunities and helping revitalise the East London manufacturing industry. He further added that the focus on community skill development and employment could help tackle issues like unemployment, and marginalised communities' voices. This will help build a strong foundation to support a more robust fashion ecosystem.

Focusing on the trainees' perspective, the findings indicate that bonding social capital within the enterprise community has played a key role in fostering trust and collaboration among members. Participants emphasised that they have created strong bonds that facilitate supporting each other. They also highlighted how these bonds have enabled them to exchange knowledge and opportunities, enhancing their sense of belonging and contributing to their professional growth.

Additionally, they noted that personal connections and assistance from the social enterprises have provided emotional support during challenging times and strengthened their commitment to community initiatives. Such support not only enhanced their well-being but also reinforced the resilience and cohesion of the community.

### 4.2.2. Bridging Social Capital

Bridging social capital is evident in the East London fashion cluster through institutional support and stakeholder engagement. This is exemplified through collaboration with other social enterprises and local production units. Paul, Anna and Grace highlighted that they partner with other social enterprises and local manufacturing businesses, leveraging their connections for direct production work and community engagement projects. Sometimes, this is due to resource limitations such as time constraints, lack of skilled personnel, or use of specific embroidery techniques. This is exemplified by the successful Monsoon Project mentioned earlier, which showcased the combined expertise of both enterprises. Such partnerships not only enhance the quality of the work but also provide mutual support and opportunities for shared learning.

These connections also extend beyond collaborating on joint projects and commissions to consistently partner with each other to offer skills development support to their trainees. This collaborative effort was also affirmed during discussions with focus group participants.

In addition, the enterprise also partners with local manufacturers to ensure trainees gain practical experience that leads to employment in the manufacturing industry. Anna also highlighted the important role of educational partnerships, such as the one with the University of the Arts London, which provides trainers and facilitates the recruitment process for their programs. She further discussed institutional support, emphasising organisations like the Fashion District, which partner with various entities to develop a sustainable network in the UK fashion industry.

Institutional support is crucial in bridging networks by offering access to diverse resources and opportunities. Their involvement significantly enhances the practices and initiatives of social enterprises, fostering community development and empowerment. However, there is a growing need for greater support from these larger institutions to effectively build and resource these connections. Regular funding and opportunities for these social enterprises are crucial and essential to allow the entire fashion ecosystem to thrive. This underscores the importance of sustained investment and collaboration to achieve sustainability in the UK fashion industry.

Lastly, the findings from the focus group presented a discussion on the numerous opportunities and support the participants have received to work with other social enterprises, students, and industry experts. These experiences allowed them to exchange ideas and learn from a diverse community, thereby bridging social capital. For example, the "Modest Fashion" project facilitated the exchange of ideas and learning from a diverse group of professionals, including designers and consultants. These collaborations offered opportunities for mentorship and insight into launching and developing fashion businesses.

In addition to working on a collaborative project, the participants had ongoing opportunities for learning and professional development. They also mentioned visiting factories during placements which provided them with valuable hands-on experience and insights into manufacturing processes. Additionally, they highlighted their participation in the British Bangladeshi Fashion Show, which enabled them to showcase their work and connect with a broader audience.

Overall, the findings confirm that social enterprises in the East London fashion cluster effectively utilise both bonding and bridging social capital to facilitate the transition towards sustainability in the UK fashion industry. Bonding capital thrives through close relationships and shared values among participants within social enterprises. These bonds are strengthened through collaborative projects that help build a sense of community and belongingness, enhancing skills and employment prospects for trainees.

Additionally, expanding outward, the outer cluster engages local government, educational institutions, and other supporting bodies bridging social capital. These networks play a vital role through partnerships with other local manufacturers and institutional actors, such as the University of the Arts London and the Fashion District. These networks act as bridges, providing access to resources and facilitating skill development for these enterprises while also integrating sustainable practices. Together, bonding and bridging social capital enables these enterprises to strengthen community ties and contribute to the sustainability goals of the UK fashion industry. These findings are supported by previous research [12,13] emphasising how businesses can integrate social inclusivity through social capital exchange, fostering bonding within the inner cluster and bridging with the outer cluster.

Finally, the study adds to the notion of social capital by Rogers [51] who illustrated how social capital can be integrated into measuring and reporting community sustainability efforts. He emphasised that the increasing levels of social capital can contribute to greater sustainability and resilience for individuals and communities, as evidenced in the current study.

## 5. Conclusions

This qualitative exploratory study hypothesises that East London-based social enterprises integrate TBL elements in varied ways and leverage social capital to support their sustainability goals. The findings confirm that balancing the TBL framework remains a complex issue for these enterprises. Achieving this balance requires navigating trade-offs between social, environmental, and economic sustainability. The enterprises find maintaining economic viability to be the most challenging aspect, highlighting the need for sustained support and strategic investment to ensure their continued success.

Although both social enterprises examined in the study addressed all three aspects of the TBL framework, their focus varies according to organisational objectives. The charity-driven (enterprise) emphasises social outcomes, prioritising ethical practices and community engagement. In contrast, the other enterprise, with a more environmental orientation, concentrates on sustainability and reducing ecological impact. This variation in focus reflects how each organisation's core purpose shapes its approach to balancing the TBL dimensions.

The findings underscore that despite challenges in maintaining economic viability, social enterprises successfully implement ethical practices, such as fair wages and flexible work arrangements, to advance social sustainability and support their diverse stakeholders. Environmentally, they embrace circular economy principles, including upcycling, repairing, and recycling, which underscores their commitment to minimising waste and reducing the industry's environmental footprint. Social capital emerges as pivotal, with bonding social capital enhancing internal cohesion and support among community members while bridging social capital, enabling valuable external collaborations and access to resources. This dual approach strengthens community ties and fosters partnerships with local businesses and institutions, facilitating broader engagement and resource sharing.

In conclusion, this study significantly contributes to the academic discourse by integrating TBL and social capital theories, offering new insights into how these interact to support sustainability in social enterprises. Managerially, this study delivers critical insights into East London's social enterprises, offering a strategic blueprint for not only the specific manufacturing cluster but the broader fashion industry. By highlighting East London's social enterprise's success in integrating sustainability across all three dimensions, the study sets a strong example of how the industry can drive meaningful change and lead the way in sustainable fashion practices.

*Limitations and Future Research*

This study has limitations. Firstly, it is based on only two case studies, which limits the applicability of the findings to other social enterprises with varying focuses and objectives and to regions outside the East London fashion cluster. To address this, future research could benefit from including a more diverse and inclusive range of manufacturing hubs.

Furthermore, the study's scope is limited as it primarily incorporates viewpoints from social enterprises' representatives and trainees. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the East London fashion ecosystem and its potential for sustainable practices, future research should expand to include multiple stakeholders. This could involve fashion brands, retailers, institutions within the East London fashion ecosystem, and policymakers. Such a broad approach could reveal how the fashion ecosystem in East London can transition towards sustainable practices and position itself as a hub for creativity and sustainability.

While the study offers valuable qualitative insights, it lacks statistical validation, which limits the robustness of the findings. Future research should incorporate quantitative methods and statistical analysis to validate and build upon the qualitative results and explore effective models of sustainable development for East London fashion enterprises.

### Appendix A

**Table A1.** Extract from the interviews and focus groups.

| Themes | Key Findings | Excerpts from Interviews and Focus Groups |
| --- | --- | --- |
| RQ1: *How do the social enterprises in the East London fashion cluster leverage the TBL framework to promote sustainable practices in the UK fashion industry?* | | |
| Social Considerations | Social enterprises leveraged a variety of ethical practices. | Focus group 1, Participant A: *"There is a lot of flexibility here with start times, appointments, family care, childcare, and other personal responsibilities. If there's a week when you can't work due to family commitments, allowances are made, so there's a system in place"*. Reiterating this, another participant said *"I have tried approaching other workplaces, but it just didn't fit our lifestyle with childcare, appointments, and health needs. Here, you have complete flexibility. Everyone here manages their own schedule to a certain degree"*.<br>Focus group 2, Participant B: *"They accommodate our cultural needs and religious beliefs, we have space to pray, can dress comfortably, including wearing the hijab. It's a safe space where we feel accepted and celebrated for our culture"*. |

**Table A1.** *Cont.*

| Themes | Key Findings | Excerpts from Interviews and Focus Groups |
|---|---|---|
| Social Considerations | These enterprises want to change the perception of manufacturing as a factory-based environment to one that values skilled craftsmanship and ethical working conditions. | Anna Ellis, head of business development at Making for Change said *"We do still have that connotation when you think of a factory, you immediate thing is to think of a sweatshop, and that's what we're trying to change"*. Gracie Sutton, enterprise and production manager at Stitches in Time, said the following: *"Brands can showcase our flexible work practices and the various sustainable methods we use. I think by sharing the stories and the impact on the makers, it gives a different example of how the fashion industry can work. Hopefully, that's a good guideline for how people can work differently within various factories and settings"* |
| | They work closely with brands, individual designers, and other clients to ensure better quality and cost-effective products. | Gracie said *"When smaller brands work with us, we help support them in terms of sampling and figuring out where we can reduce costs, or how to enhance and utilise the skills of the team as well. So, in that sense, they are not just coming to us with a technical pack and dictating what is being made. We are helping and supporting one another to produce something, which I think is great"*. Similarly, Anna said *"We offer more hands-on support than a typical manufacturer, meaning we closely examine their products. We also advise them on costing and techniques to produce garments that are either of better quality or more cost-effective due to improved manufacturing methods"*. |
| | Social enterprise's initiatives had a significant social impact, particularly through training programs that empowered trainees with personalised support and skills development. | Paul, Chief Executive Officer at Stitches in Time said *"We have a waiting list for our training courses that seems to be never-ending. But that's great; it shows there is a desire, there is a need, and that people gain value from it"*. |
| | Community-driven initiatives by the enterprises foster social inclusion and economic empowerment, contributing to the growth of East London's fashion cluster. | This sentiment is echoed by Paul who said *"I find the way it contributes to East London's fashion cluster is quite intriguing. As our story spreads not only through our efforts but also through brands that share it, it shines a light on our internal culture and the communities involved. This supports our role as a model and communicates the value of our work to other community enterprises, creating a ripple effect. Perhaps some of this influence will even shape the future creators of the next fashion wave. It's an interesting cycle"*. |
| Environmental Considerations | Social enterprises are committed to circular economy principles and collaborate with brands to upcycle, repair, mend and recycle products. | Talking about a collaboration between Stitches in Time and Making for Change, where they partnered with the renowned fashion brand 'Monsoon', Grace said *"We recently collaborated with Monsoon alongside Making for Change, involving both our trainees and employees. Together, we utilised our embroidery skills to enhance Monsoon's products, focusing particularly on upcycling dead stock items"*. Making for Change also recycle waste as confirmed by Anna in the following statement: *"We recycle our textile waste by partnering with a third-party start up that turns it into other products"*. |
| | Using innovative solutions, such as AI, to enhance on-demand manufacturing. | Highlighting this, Anna said *"We want to explore ways in which AI can make production more efficient and more sustainable"*. |
| | Sustainable practices incur higher costs due to the increased production time. | Focus Group 2, Participant D: *"the amount of time it took us to unpick a particular garment, cut it, and create something new with it was much longer than sewing a garment from scratch"*, |
| | Social enterprises enhanced participants' awareness of environmental sustainability, fostering a sense of pride and fulfilment in contributing to a greener world. | Focus Group 2, Participant B: *"The training programs and our work have enabled us to better understand the carbon footprint associated with our processes, and how we can reduce the wastage of fabric and other materials to promote sustainable practices"*. Adding to this, another participant said the following: *"we're not just churning out garment after garment without knowing what happens to it afterward. There's a story behind each piece, and there are people behind it"*. |

**Table A1.** *Cont.*

| Themes | Key Findings | Excerpts from Interviews and Focus Groups |
|---|---|---|
| Economic Considerations | Social enterprises ensure the commercial viability of their projects and commissions by meticulously calculating production costs. | Gracie highlighted that *"We spend a lot of time ensuring that the cost of production is viable for the team. During sampling, we calculate how long it takes to make a product based on the quantity we're producing. Once we reach around a hundred units or more, we switch to a production line to speed up the process. This involves detailed calculations and close collaboration with the client or brand to ensure they understand both the costs and the timeline. If they have a target cost in mind, we can adjust the design to meet their expectations and requirements"*. |
| | The viability of on-demand manufacturing is a crucial factor for social enterprises. As noted, sustainability often involves producing in small quantities, which can be more costly due to inefficiencies and the use of offcuts. | Anna said *"We may not necessarily be the cheapest; our pricing may not always match what our clients expect, but we explain our costs and try to collaborate where possible. However, commercial viability is very important to us"*. |
| RQ2: *How do social enterprises in the East London fashion cluster utilise social capital to facilitate the transition towards sustainability in the UK fashion industry?* | | |
| Bonding Social Capital | The East London fashion cluster utilises bonding social capital through community involvement, with enterprises like Stitches in Time engaging beneficiaries in co-creation. | Grace mentioned that *"Stitches in time was built around the needs of the beneficiaries. They are always part of the conversation about how we grow and navigate the enterprise. They have a lot of say in what we do and the commissions we take on as well"*. |
| | Social enterprises reinforce skills development, with trained individuals, such as women in East London, volunteering to train others, creating more job opportunities and revitalising the local manufacturing industry. | Paul highlighted that *"I believe Stitches in time's existing strengths as a social enterprise is its ability to connect particularly well with the Bangladeshi diaspora through skill-based cultural crafts. This connection is already a source of pride, fostering community communication and shaping social interactions"*. |
| | Bonding social capital within the enterprise community fosters trust and collaboration, with strong bonds facilitating support, knowledge exchange, and professional growth among members. | Focus Group 1, Participant C said *"My work is comfortable; it feels like a home away from home. It doesn't feel like coming to work; it's like being with friends, and I feel very comfortable here"*. Focus Group 2, Participant D: A participant commented the following: *"I am taking many of the skills that I have learned here and using them in my private time for friends, family and private clients"*. |
| | Personal connections and support from social enterprises provide emotional support during challenging times, strengthening commitment to community initiatives. | Focus Group 1, Participant B: *"In one of our classes, we have a woman who doesn't have the leave to remain in the UK, she doesn't speak English, and she has a brain tumour, so we were like heavily involved with helping her with her appointments. Being there, when she had to sign for her operation and all my colleagues went with her to the anaesthesia room because she was nervous. And that's just like individualised led case, and we were there when she woke up from her surgery to give her support"*. |

**Table A1.** *Cont.*

| Themes | Key Findings | Excerpts from Interviews and Focus Groups |
|---|---|---|
| Bridging Social Capital | Collaborations between enterprises leverage their combined expertise, resulting in higher-quality work. These partnerships provide mutual support and create opportunities for shared learning. | Paul said "*We are quite good at collaborating, and we have a long organisational history of helping shape other programs or other project work because people come to us as a kind of community engagement specialist in that sense*". |
| | Connections between enterprises go beyond joint projects, including ongoing partnerships to provide skills development support for their trainees. | Paul said "*I think it's a shared desire, especially between us and Making for Change, to promote an ethical production base in East London. It's something we're deeply interested in as an organisation. It's exciting to leverage our small-scale efforts to make this happen, not just as a story to tell, but by partnering with other organisations. We can share experiences, particularly in working with communities and how it can best benefit people*". This collaborative effort was also affirmed during discussions with focus group participants. |
| | The enterprise collaborates with local manufacturers to provide trainees with practical experience that leads to employment opportunities. Educational partnerships and institutional support further enhance training programs and contribute to building a sustainable network within the fashion industry. | Anna highlighted that "*There are several accelerator-type programs available to support organisations like ours. I have participated in a manufacturing forum that promotes innovative practices and processes in manufacturing. The Fashion District periodically hosts forums like these, offering competitions where manufacturers pitch ideas for financial support to bring them to life*". Focus group 2, Participant E: "*When we did the modest fashion program, we collaborated with students from London College of Fashion, a women's wear designer and an embroidery student. We also had someone who did printmaking. The designer who led the class, she's now open to mentoring if we're interested in starting a business or something like that. And then we had Toby Meadows, a fashion business consultant who's helped lots of fashion startups and worked with many brands around the world. So yeah, it's like we've had this opportunity to meet all these people in the field, and it kind of gives you an idea of what you can do with just a seed of an idea*". |

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