



**RETHINKING WASTE,
REIMAGINING FASHION:
EU'S CIRCULAR TEXTILES
STRATEGY CHALLENGES
FAST FASHION INDUSTRY**

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Introduction

The fast fashion industry, known for its rapid production and consumption cycle, has raised significant environmental concerns due to its excessive resource usage, high levels of waste generation, and contribution to pollution. The EU's Circular Textiles Strategy is the EU's response to the environmental concerns posed by the fast fashion industry. The plan intends to pave the road for a more sustainable and circular fashion ecosystem by changing the fashion sector's approach to production and consumption.

The fast fashion industry has made the world of fashion more accessible than ever before. However, beneath the surface of its affordability, there is a significant environmental cost; the fashion industry accounts for 8 to 10% of global carbon emissions, which is more than all international flights and maritime shipping combined.¹ The industry is estimated to be responsible for 1.2 billion tons of CO₂ emissions per year.²

Aside from its carbon footprint, the industry contributes significantly to water pollution and waste generation. A single cotton T-shirt requires over 2,700 litres of water for production³, and textile treatment and dyeing generate nearly 20% of industrial water pollution.⁴ Surprisingly, one garbage truck's worth of textiles is said to be landfilled or burnt every second⁵, highlighting the wasteful nature of the linear fashion model.

Recognizing the importance of these issues, the European Union (EU) has taken a big step toward tackling the negative environmental impact of the fashion industry through

¹ The impact of textile production and waste on the environment (infographics) [online]. [cit. 2023-08-28]. Available from: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20201208STO93327/the-impact-of-textile-production-and-waste-on-the-environment-infographics>

² Niinimäki, K., Peters, G., Dahlbo, H. et al. The environmental price of fast fashion. *Nat Rev Earth Environ* 1, 189–200 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-020-0039-9>

³ Bailey, K.; Basu, A.; Sharma, S. The Environmental Impacts of Fast Fashion on Water Quality: A Systematic Review. *Water* (2022), 14, 1073. <https://doi.org/10.3390/w14071073>

⁴ REICHART, Elizabeth a Deborah DREW. By the Numbers: The Economic, Social and Environmental Impacts of "Fast Fashion." In: World Resources Institute [online]. [cit. 2023-08-10]. Available from: https://www.wri.org/insights/numbers-economic-social-and-environmental-impacts-fast-fashion?_ga=2.67275857.1

⁵ Ibidem

its Circular Textiles Strategy.⁶ This approach is a comprehensive solution aiming at changing the fashion industry into a sustainable and circular model.

Understanding the Circular Textiles Strategy

The European Union's Circular Textiles Strategy anticipates a paradigm shift in the way textiles are manufactured, consumed, and disposed of. Key goals include lowering textiles' environmental imprint, improving resource efficiency, and encouraging a more circular economy. The plan is guided by ideas including prolonging textile lifespan, encouraging sustainable resources, and reducing waste output.⁷

The EU's initiative towards sustainability entails an array of strategies and policies. The implementation of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) for textiles is a key component. This new approach requires manufacturers to accept complete responsibility for their products throughout their lifespans. This encourages designers to make goods that are more durable, repairable, and recyclable, lowering the environmental effect of textiles dramatically. This strategy strongly supports eco-design and sustainable manufacturing. Eco-friendly practices are integrated into the financial framework of the sector through practical initiatives and financial incentives. Producers who use these strategies not only help the environment, but they also improve their financial prospects.⁸

In addition, eco-friendly technology and materials are prioritized, encouraging experimentation and adoption. However, there are concerns about avoiding these goals for profit or evasion. The EU addresses this through stringent legislation and stakeholder collaboration. Clear mandates, transparency, and collaboration discourage evasion while encouraging compliance and accountability. The EU's comprehensive plan for sustainable textiles, underpinned by Extended Producer Responsibility, should lead to visible changes in design and production. By integrating innovation, regulations,

⁶ EU strategy for sustainable and circular textiles. In: European Commission [online]. [cit. 2023-08-10]. Available from: https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/textiles-strategy_en

⁷ Ibidem

⁸ Niinimäki, K., Peters, G., Dahlbo, H. et al. The environmental price of fast fashion. *Nat Rev Earth Environ* 1, 189–200 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-020-0039-9>

and partnerships, this framework aligns financial incentives with environmentally conscientious actions. This comprehensive method attempts to ease concerns about circumvention and steer the textile industry toward environmental responsibility.⁹

Implications for the Fast Fashion Industry

The fast fashion industry faces considerable challenges in reconciling its traditional business model with the principles of sustainability. The Circular Textiles Strategy poses both challenges and opportunities for this sector. It demands a reevaluation of current practices, from the supply chain to consumer behaviours. The strategy's potential impacts on the industry include a necessary shift toward sustainable production and supply chains. This entails reimagining manufacturing processes to prioritize longevity and resource efficiency over rapid turnover.¹⁰

The strategy's impact extends deep into the fast fashion industry's fabric, substantially changing existing business models. The advancement of rental and leasing services is a cornerstone of this strategy's advocacy for circular approaches. These initiatives actively promote the community use and long-term use of clothing goods. Beyond aligning with the prevailing currents of sustainable consumption, they directly confront the traditional norms surrounding ownership within the fashion landscape. However, incorporating such innovative techniques is not without obstacles particularly in terms of demanding a radical shift in consumer attitudes and inclinations.¹¹

Including a qualitative perspective in the discourse strengthens the discussion. The adoption of circular models involves not just a paradigm shift in business, but also a revolution in culture. Renting and sharing fashion items forces us to reconsider our conceptions of identity and personal expression, encouraging us to value diversity above possession. Furthermore, it emphasizes the shift from a disposable to a sustainable worldview. This journey involves a shift in our perception of clothing, from temporary trends to lasting style, and from solo ownership to a shared sartorial

⁹ Ibidem

¹⁰ EU strategy for sustainable and circular textiles. In: European Commission [online]. [cit. 2023-08-10]. Available from: https://environment.ec.europa.eu/strategy/textiles-strategy_en

¹¹ Ibidem

experience. In this sense, the strategy's impact on the fast fashion sector transcends economic dimensions, igniting a broader societal debate about values, identity, and environmental responsibility.¹²

Collaborative Efforts and Future Outlook

In theory, policymakers create an environment that allows for change by instituting regulations and providing incentives. Following that, brands, manufacturers, and retailers are ostensibly implementing sustainable practices that fit with the Circular Textiles Strategy. This organized collaboration appears to assist a smooth transition and to amplify positive impacts. However, it's crucial to assess how actively industry stakeholders are participating in this initiative. While some are definitely making progress, the extent to which these efforts match the sector's enormous carbon footprint is questionable. Is this a true commitment or an illusion of responsibility to ease rising concerns?¹³

Similarly, it is necessary to question the seriousness of customers' efforts to change their consumption habits. While there have been significant moves toward more mindful choices, it is unclear whether these improvements are durable enough to drive the amount of transformation required. Because of deeply ingrained views and marketing pressures, the tectonic shift required to modify consumption patterns often encounters resistance. Addressing these challenges requires a more critical lens, one that goes beyond the veneer of idealism that can sometimes define debates about such efforts. The optimism echoed in these narratives may be more successful if paired with a critical analysis of the industry's actions and the broader societal changes required for significant transformation.¹⁴

The Circular Textiles Strategy's impact is also increased by collaborating with existing EU policies. Its alignment with carbon neutrality goals and resource reduction initiatives, such as the European Green Deal, provide a comprehensive strategy. This

¹² EU STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE AND CIRCULAR TEXTILES [online]. 2023 [cit. 2023-08-28]. Available from: <https://thesustainableangle.org/eu-strategy-for-sustainable-and-circular-textiles/>

¹³ Ibidem

¹⁴ Ibidem

integration strengthens the circular economy by encouraging collaboration among sectors such as textiles, waste management, and resource recovery, hence optimizing resource use and minimizing waste.¹⁵

However, this promising trajectory rests on a pivotal challenge: the implementation by an industry known for its significant environmental impact. Can the fashion industry, often criticized for its carbon footprint and wasteful practices, truly adopt the ambitious changes envisioned by the Circular Textiles Strategy? The success of this narrative, despite its optimistic outline, hinges on the industry's willingness to overcome its deeply ingrained practices and to embrace a future that fundamentally reimagines its role within the broader sustainability narrative. Furthermore, it necessitates a fundamental restructuring of the business model that requires deep regulatory changes if the situation, globally, is to improve. Whereas the EU can potentially leverage a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) to enforce compliance domestically, the lack of regulatory tools to encourage sustainable fashion globally remains a concern.

Conclusion: Pioneering a Sustainable Fashion Odyssey

In the ever-evolving narrative of fashion, the convergence of style and sustainability has emerged as a compelling plot twist, demanding the industry to reconsider its impact on the planet. The journey embarked upon by the fast fashion industry, characterized by its frenetic pace and disposable trends, has brought us face-to-face with the ecological consequences of our fashion choices. As the metaphorical clock ticks relentlessly towards a potential catastrophe, this narrative assumes an even more urgent tone. However, within this chronicle of ecological uncertainty, the European Union's Circular Textiles Strategy emerges as a glimmer of hope amidst the gloom.

¹⁵ Ibidem