From Fast to Slow Fashion.  
Management Challenges for the Sustainability Transformation of Business Models  
ABIS Annual Colloquium, 20 -21 October 2015 in Milano

Authors: Freudenreich, Birte  freudenreich@uni.leuphana.de  
Kaspar, Ulrike  kasper@uni.leuphana.de  
Schaltegger, Stefan  schaltegger@uni.leuphana.de

This paper focuses on sustainability issues of the mass market for clothing. Our research analyses the interplay between different actors along the clothing supply chain and the sustainability effects caused, through the lens of business models and business model transformation. Business model adaptation, innovation and re-design promise the potential to create significant steps towards a more sustainable economy (Boons & Lüdeke-Freund 2012; Schaltegger et al. 2012). In particular, we focus on fast fashion as a core concept in the clothing mass market and the opportunities presented by other concepts, such as slow fashion.

The production of fabrics and clothing has been linked to various environmental problems, including high water usage, particularly in cotton production (e.g. Chapagain et al. 2006), chemical use in dyes (e.g. Brigden et al. 2013) and transportation impacts from globalised production processes. Social issues have also been highlighted, relating especially to low wages and unhealthy working conditions on production sites (Dickson et al. 2009).

The speed of clothing production from the design to being sold in shops, as well as the speed at which consumers change their wardrobes, have increased dramatically over the last decade (Fletcher 2008; Greenpeace 2012). Fast fashion has become a prevalent business model concept in the clothing sector. This increases throughput in the clothing sector and exacerbates the social and environmental issues related to clothing production (Ellen Mac Arthur Foundation 2013; Kant Hvass 2015) and disposal.

The aim of our research is to gain some insight into the potential role of business models in the sector’s move towards more sustainable practices. We place particular emphasis on business models that are designed in accordance with the concept of slow fashion, which has its roots in the “Slow Design Manifesto” in Milano in 2006 and was first coined in 2007 by the designer Kate Fletcher (Fletcher 2007). Slow fashion focuses on extending the lifespan of clothing (Clark 2008; Ertekin & Atik 2015).

In the first part of the research we identify key actors in the market and map their interactions and relationships along the supply chain. The subsequent analysis zeroes in on focal companies – conventional clothing retail businesses and brand owners – who have direct interactions with consumers and who influence suppliers considerably. The sustainability effects of their business models is analysed qualitatively. Slow fashion business models which share some characteristics with the conventional models are furthermore identified and a comparative analysis of sustainability effects is conducted.

Our research provides a systematic overview of conventional and slow fashion business models in the clothing sector. It also provides insights about the sustainability effects of these business models. The study aims to show whether slow fashion business models are fundamentally or just marginally different from existing business models, and whether they could be adapted and further developed for application in the mass market.
References


