

Chapter – Change designers: Uprooting the fashion system through collective action

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Learning Outcomes: by the end of this chapter you will be able to:

1. Begin to understand and communicate the concept of systems change as well as its potential to bring about transformative change in fashion.
2. Begin to picture the framework of the dominant fashion system and understand the processes, injustices, barriers, and potential opportunities to intervene for lasting systems change.
3. Examine more closely six places to intervene for systems change through the leverage points framework.
4. Consider what could be disrupted and what could be strengthened (e.g. processes, values, relationships) if the goal of fashion was to maximise universal wellbeing for people and planet rather than maximising private profit.

Introduction

The need to examine the dominant social paradigm of fashion production and consumption is well established (Ritch and McColl, 2021). For over two decades there have been allegations that fashion workers are exploited to provide consumers with ever-decreasing prices (Holenstein, 2020; Hearson and Morser, 2006). More recently, there has been growing awareness of the toll that faster, cheaper, and more globalised fashion production has upon the environment, contributing to the climate crisis (United Nations, 2020) as well as exploiting people. Despite all this, the mainstream fashion industry continues to promote inexpensive fashion using marketing tactics to encourage impulse overconsumption (Ritch, 2023; Niinimäki et al., 2020). Yet, in the fringes of fashion practice, there are many grassroots movements and smaller organisations challenging the dominant paradigm. They are crafting new environmental paradigms that allow consumers to practise fashion in a way that does not induce inequalities and environmental degradation. Instead, these new concepts place fashion practice back into localities and allow consumers (or citizens (Alexander, 2022)) greater engagement with fashion and control over the consequences of their behaviour. Take, for example, the fashion landscape in Scotland, where there are incredible individuals and organisations forging transformative sustainable fashion pathways. Yet, the landscape is disconnected and fragmented (Lowe, 2020). As a result, there is great energy fuelled by frustration and determination to connect, collaborate, and work collectively towards a nationwide sustainable fashion transformation. Many consumers in Scotland are unaware of these organisations and that there are alternative routes to acquire and practise fashion. Community-led nonprofit Sustainable Fashion Scotland (SFS) was launched in February 2020, led by Mairi Lowe (co-author) and Liisa Lehtinen while studying for their

Master degrees at Glasgow Caledonian University. The mission was to identify a means to connect the fragmented fashion landscape and community in Scotland and support fashion practitioners to cultivate a more sustainable industry through collective action.

Emerging from SFS's experiences in nurturing connected and collaborative place-based networks between designers, educators, manufacturers, students, and other diverse fashion practitioners, and based on related research that examines sustainable fashion stakeholders in Scotland (Lowe, 2020), this chapter argues the need to examine the pertinent, interconnected issues of climate and social justice through a systems change lens that prioritises equity and empowers people to enact change collectively. The chapter begins by detailing how the established structures of the mainstream fashion industry foster an imbalance of equity and power, setting out the argument for adopting a systems change approach. This approach has the potential for transformative change and is examined as a shift from focusing on isolated interventions by individual organisations to strengthening relationships between all actors in a system to collectively achieve lasting social change. Successful collective impact (Kania and Kramer, 2011) requires increased cross-sector collaboration and citizen participation (Lowe, 2020). It is supported through activities which develop community capacity, engage diverse perspectives, distribute power, and create an environment that enables everybody to contribute to collective action. The chapter will then introduce the systemic leverage points framework (Meadows, 1999) and illustrate points of intervention in a system with high potential for impact through real-world examples in fashion. Centring on equity and community power, as seen and nurtured in Scotland by SFS, these examples champion collective action that empower change from the bottom up in order to uproot and redesign the fashion system to one that is just and regenerative for all.

The argument for adopting systems change

'Systems change, NOT climate change' is a phrase you may have read held up on cardboard signs at protests by climate activists. Perhaps you have heard, 'the fashion system is broken' in recent sustainability dialogues. You may be thinking, 'what on earth is a "system" anyway, and how can we "change" or "fix" them if they are broken?' This chapter aims to begin to address these questions, to intrigue you enough to explore systems change further, and to encourage you to shift how you both think about and work in fashion and sustainability from the 'business as usual' narrative to adopting more disruptive, systemic approaches.

Firstly, let's address the phrase, 'the fashion system is broken.' When we say something has broken, we usually mean it has ceased to work for the purpose which we intended it to fulfil when it was designed. Whether a clock, a vase, a business, or even an industry, when something no longer fulfils its intended purpose, it is broken. What we can surmise from this, is that in order for something to be able to break, it must have been designed by somebody - the designer. My questions to you then are, if the fashion system (or dominant global industry) is 'broken', what was its original intended purpose which it no longer serves? And secondly, if fashion is broken, who designed it and its original purpose in the first place?

The meaning of fashion is explored in other books, such as *'The Meaning of Dress'* by Damhorst, Miller-Spilman and Michelman (2005). While this is not further examined in this chapter, the broader

interpretation of fashion as a form of communication, signalling self, identity, and belonging within wider society leads the discussion. We also note that the inability to participate in fashion practice can impact on wellbeing (McNeil, 2018) and therefore this discourse underpins the importance of disruption to ensure equity and inclusivity. Historically, fashion was only accessible to the wealthy, such as nobility, and was used to establish status within society. However, industrialisation and mass-production reduced the cost of fashion. Since the 1990s, the price of fashion has continued to decline due to outsourcing production to low and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Jones, 2006). As a system, the democratisation of fashion was positioned at making fashion affordable and accessible to all to avoid the stigma of being priced out of the previous system (Budnarowska, 2009). Yet, while fast fashion has enabled consumers in wealthy countries to purchase fashion items, they do so at the cost of workers in LMICs who are not paid a living wage and often experience inhumane working conditions (Holenstein, 2020). This is, in effect, modern day slavery. Further, the system entices consumers to make impulsive, frequent, and excessive purchases of garments; this infers notions of disposability which is very damaging to the environment. While this system seemed to intend to increase inclusivity, instead it has further marginalised disadvantaged communities and threatens the existence of humanity by significantly contributing to the climate crisis.

Remember the clock mentioned in the list of things that can break? Let's go back to that for eight sentences: A friend visited my home and noted that my clock was broken. The hands stood still at half past 10, yet in reality it was 2.08pm. "It's not broken," I said. In response to their confused, concerned expression, I turned the clock around to show my friend the back. There they saw a sticker with my WiFi username and password written on it. "This clock reminds me of my WiFi details," I said, "and it works perfectly well for this purpose which I designed it for." To my friend and everybody else, my clock was broken. But to me - the designer - it was in perfect working order!

With this anecdote in mind, I challenge you to consider who fashion currently *does* work well for. Who benefits most from the destruction and exploitation that the system perpetrates? Let me give you a clue: in 2018, Oxfam (Alejo Vázquez Pimentel, Lawson, and Macías Aymar) reported that it takes just four days for a CEO of one of the world's largest five fashion brands to earn the same amount a Bangladeshi garment worker will earn over her lifetime. For the rich male CEOs of fashion brands - mostly men due to deeply-rooted issues of gender inequality (Zubaviciute, 2021) - the fashion system works perfectly well for the purpose they intended it to when designing their organisations and fast-fashion business models: generating astronomical profit for their own pockets (Fletcher, 2015). Amancio Ortega Gaona is the founder of Inditex, one of the world's largest fashion retailers, and is currently listed as the 23rd wealthiest person in the world with a \$59.6bn fortune (Forbes, 2022). He is credited with pioneering the fast-fashion business model through Zara (The Business of Fashion, 2022) and the majority of his fortune is derived from his 59.3 per cent stake in Inditex (Bloomberg, 2022). The pursuit of profit results in unequal power relations prevalent in the fashion system, "*where the overflow of wealth in some parts is directly connected to exploitation in others*" (Sachs, 2015 cited in Göpel, 2016, p.106). Further, while consumers may benefit from inexpensive fashion, the dominant social paradigm has reduced the opportunity for SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) and entrepreneurs to carve out creative, innovative, and sustainable enterprises that can compete with fast fashion (Shell, 2009; Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010).

Unequal power relations have resulted in an industry focused on making those with power and privilege wealthier by exploiting the labour of those with less power. This is evident in the fast-fashion business model, where ever decreasing production costs are passed onto the consumer to increase frequent impulsive consumption (as discussed in Chapter 2). Outsourcing fashion production to LMICs (often in the Global South) means that fashion factories keen to get orders from high-income countries (HICs) (often in the Global North/West) will provide competitive costs, resulting in employment regulations often being overlooked (Ritch and McColl, 2021). Non-governmental organisations have warned for almost two decades that garment workers are exploited (Hearson and Morser, 2006) and still allegations continue (Kelly, 2022). Although consumers express discomfort that they benefit from low prices which could be a consequence of low wages, and that they are aware of how damaging the fashion industry is to the environment, they appear to be locked into the dominant system of fashion overconsumption, leading to cognitive dissonance (Cairns, Ritch, and Bereziat, 2021). This illustrates a level of discomfort at the wider implications of fashion practice. The injustices of the current dominant fashion system are unequivocal. How can we create a fashion system that works for all?

Fashion for the Common Good

Aja Barber, author of *Consumed: The Need for Collective Change: Colonialism, Climate Change, and Consumerism*, confirmed during an online Sustainable Fashion Forum (2020) panel addressing overconsumption that this inequality is caused by the greed of CEOs:

"I think that if everybody wanted the same thing in the fashion industry there would be no billionaires at the top. ... the people who are actually doing the most back breaking labour are making pennies and if we all wanted the same thing the people at the top would not be able to sleep at night with the profits that they have been making for the last 20 years."

Systems theory explains that the dominant purpose or underpinning goal of a system has incredible power to shape the emergent direction and characteristics of all resulting actions (Abson et al., 2017a). So, if the goal of fashion CEOs is to maximise private profit, the businesses they lead and have power over will emerge, evolve, adapt, and configure to fulfil this purpose. This then explains the social and environmental sacrifices (Ritch and McColl, 2021) made by fashion companies who are working to reduce costs to increase profits, cutting corners wherever possible. Just a month after news broke about the alarming working conditions found in a Leicester factory supplying garments to Boohoo (including a reported illegal wage of £3.50 per hour) (Bland, 2020), Channel 4's (2020) *Inside Misguided* documentary aired, applauding a team member in Manchester haggling a supplier down from £7.50 to £7.40 per unit. Similarly, a fashion buyer for In The Style haggled with a supplier to further reduce the cost of production (BBC iPlayer, 2019). In contrast, both documentaries demonstrate how much they are willing to pay 'influencers' as a marketing tool. This at least partly explains the emergence and exponential growth of fast fashion, as selling monstrous amounts of low-cost clothing equals more sales and more profit. But this is not a business model that garment workers in the Global South benefit from.

Realising that fashion - or at least the current dominant global fashion industry of fast fashion - exists to maximise profit for a few people in power can be overwhelming and disheartening. However,

when we choose to believe that this knowledge equips us with immense power, we are already beginning to shift our mindsets. We can apply this thinking to improve our understanding of sustainability and the effectiveness of our interventions and approaches. By understanding where the problems in fashion stem from, we can shift our thinking and approaches to address the root causes of these problems, rather than putting a plaster over the symptoms. This is what we call systems change.

Systems change

Inspired by Social Innovation Generation in Canada, Kania, Kramer, and Senge (2018) defined systems change as *“advancing equity by shifting the conditions that hold a problem in place.”* To emphasise the fact that systemic approaches focus on addressing the root causes of problems, this definition lives more vividly in my mind: *“Systems change advances equity by addressing root causes of complex problems rather than symptoms”* (Lowe, 2021).

As the fast-fashion business model is designed to make more profit by selling more product, literature outside of fashion finds the deep-rooted economic growth paradigm of capitalism hinders sustainability transformations due to its promotion of relentless consumption (Jackson, 2009; D’Alisa, Forno and Maurano, 2015; Göpel, 2016). Today, the fashion industry is criticised for presenting inadequate solutions to fast fashion that aim only for incremental improvements within the boundaries of current growth practices (Baldassarre et al., 2017) - symptom solutions. An example of this is H&M’s garment collection and recycling programme: in exchange for dropping off a bag of unwanted clothing at an H&M store, consumers receive a £5 voucher to spend with the brand. This further encourages consumption by removing consumers’ guilt when disposing of ‘throwaway’ fashion and increases company profits from the production of new clothing. More recently, brands publish targets to make most of their garments from ‘sustainably-sourced’ materials with a focus on recycled fibres. However, Changing Markets Foundation (2021) reports that companies largely focus on downcycling PET bottles (a form of polyester, just like clothing fabric) into textiles rather than fibre-to-fibre recycling, and *“are not making the necessary investments to ensure a future in which clothes can be recycled back into clothes.”* Further, despite Adidas boasting about their Parley collection that supposedly aims to *“help end plastic waste”* (Adidas, 2022), reporter Darcy Thomas discovered that less than 20 per cent of the upper part of the sneakers are made from recycled plastic (Glennie, 2022). This means new, virgin fibres are still required for production. These trainers will eventually make their way to landfill where the impact of microfibres (plastic-based threads that wash out of synthetic clothes) on the environment is significant (Fashion Revolution, 2021a). This problem will not be solved by garments made from recycled plastic which, as well as virgin fibres, shed microfibres. Moreover, the opportunity to repeatedly recycle materials is limited and Maldives’ Minister of Environment, Climate Change and Technology Aminath Shauna refers to this as *“delaying landfill”* (Glennie, 2022). As long as brands continue to think up symptom solutions within the boundaries of current growth-focused business models and profit maximisation goals, initiatives such as using recycled plastic and donating unwanted garments will fail to address the root problem of overconsumption, and will continue to have high environmental and social costs.

In Tim Jackson’s ground-breaking book *Prosperity Without Growth*, first published in 2009, the ecological economist affirms that environmental and social sustainability issues stem from our

economy's emphasis on profit maximisation, consumerism, and overconsumption. This and similar literature (D'Alisa, Forno and Maurano, 2015; Göpel, 2016) establish that sustainability transformations for fashion cannot be achieved without *“addressing the root causes of excessive consumption and exploring how sustainability transformations can be advanced through a macro-level systems perspective”* (Lowe, 2020). For the fashion industry, systemic approaches are championed and considered *“essential to developing innovative solutions for sustainability”* (Kozlowski, Searcy, and Bardecki, 2018, p.196; Armstrong and LeHew, 2011). Specifically, Fletcher (2015, p.20) prompts researchers and industry to *“broaden the agenda for fashion and sustainability beyond production and consumption of new clothes”* to develop new goals, structures, business models, and practices that are socially just and regenerative.

Through my work and research, two major concepts have emerged related to systemic approaches and perspectives: systems thinking and systems change (see Table 1):

Table 1: Conceptual framework for systematically adjusting fashion practice

Systems theory major concepts	
Systems thinking	Systems thinking is a process adopted to address complex social problems that require ‘the interdependent structures of dynamic systems’ (Kozlowski et al., 2018, p.196) to be understood to facilitate lasting social change. By focusing on the interactions between elements rather than elements in isolation (Milligan et al., 2017), systems thinking can encourage change agents to move beyond delivering isolated solutions and focus on altering the relationships and interconnections of a system (ibid.; Burns, 2014). Literature specific to fashion emphasises how this focus on process can encourage participation from all stakeholders in the fashion system (such as citizens) when designing sustainable solutions (Fletcher and Grose, 2012; Kozlowski et al., 2018).
Systems change	Systems change is defined as both a process and an outcome in literature. As a process, systems change involves ‘addressing root causes rather than symptoms by altering, shifting and transforming structures, customs, mindsets, power dynamics, and rules through collaboration across a diverse set of actors’ (Ashoka et al., 2020 cited in Ioan, Mühlenbein and Shirobokova, 2020, p.10) with the intended outcome of transformative and lasting social change (ibid.). Birney (2015, cited in Birney, 2016) emphasises systems change as an outcome defined as ‘the emergence of a new pattern of organisation or system structure.’

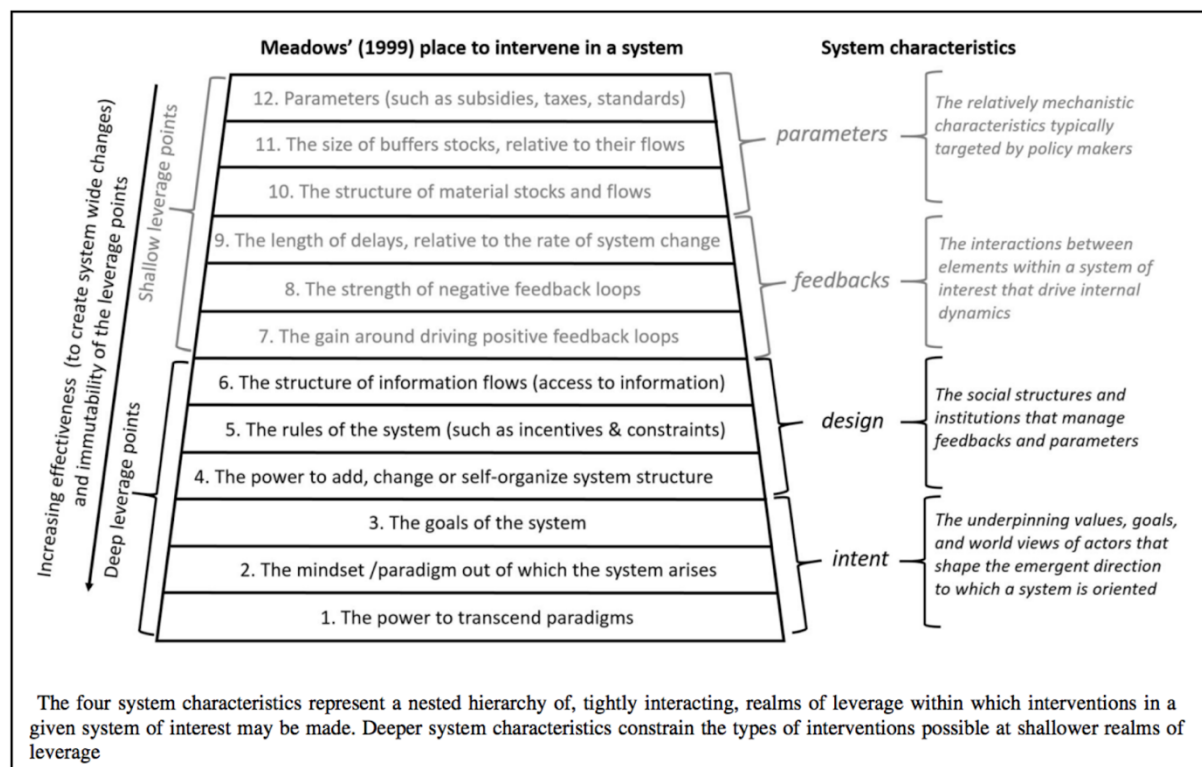
(Lowe, 2020)

A research agenda in the *Routledge Handbook of Sustainability and Fashion* features contributions from leading thinkers and is edited by seminal sustainable fashion pioneers Fletcher and Tham (2015). The agenda encourages researchers to experiment with alternative fashion futures where industry shifts away from mass production, as well as to explore *“new roles for designers beyond the realm of the product”* (Fletcher and Tham, 2015, pp. 294-295). Emerging from this is the idea of designing for change: an exciting opportunity for many people with different skills, interests, and

capacities to get involved in redesigning the fashion system - one that is just and regenerative for all people and the planet.

To uproot the current fashion system, we must take on the role of change designers. By applying systems thinking and systems change processes in practice we can begin to understand how to diagnose a system and address the root causes of complex challenges. This will greatly increase our capacity to design effective sustainability solutions. To help us identify the most impactful opportunities for change in a system, one framework we can refer to is that of ‘leverage points’ (Meadows, 1999). Meadows (1999) was a pioneering environmental and systems scientist whose seminal paper on leverage points provides a practical framework for change designers when planning where to intervene in a system to achieve the most impactful results. The framework establishes 12 places to intervene in a system where small shifts in one part can catalyse whole systems change, in a hierarchical order of effectiveness aligned with difficulty to achieve due to system resistance. The acclaimed paper is available to read online in the Donella Meadows Archives (Meadows, 1999) and the framework is widely adopted in systems practice, having recently been developed in sustainability literature by Abson et al. (2017a) and Fischer and Riechers (2019). Fischer and Riecher (2019) find that a leverage points perspective (LPP) is accessible to non-academic audiences, while Abson et al. (2017a) organise the 12 points introduced by Meadows into four ‘realms of leverage’ to support change designers in practice (Figure 1). They emphasise the need for sustainability interventions or solutions to target ‘deep’ leverage points in the design and intent categories: “*points that might be more difficult to alter but potentially result in transformational change*” (Abson et al. 2017a, p.31).

Figure 1: Meadows 12 places for systems change interventions



(Abson et al., 2017b) 'From twelve leverage points to four system characteristics'

Do not worry if this diagram looks a little daunting. As Meadows (1999) and Abson et al. (2017a) agree about the hierarchical order of leverage points, let's focus on the six deepest for now, as these are places where, together with other integrated approaches, we have the greatest potential to create change.

Abson et al. (2017a) categorise the six deepest leverage points into two categories: 'design' and 'intent', with the following descriptions and leverage points in increasing order of potential for impact (see Table 2).

Table 2: The role of design and intent as supporting system change

Category	Category Description	Places to intervene/Deep leverage points (in increasing order of impact)
Design	'The social structures and institutions that manage feedbacks and parameters'	6. The structure of information flows (access to information) 5. The rules of the system (such as incentives & constraints) 4. The power to add, change or self-organise system structure
Intent	'The underpinning values, goals, and world views of actors that shape the emergent direction to which a system is oriented'	3. The goals of the system 2. The mindset/paradigm out of which the system arises 1. The power to transcend paradigms

To bring these six leverage points to life, below are examples of each related to fashion from place six to one. It is important to note that none of these sustainability initiatives prioritise or even involve the production and consumption of new clothing. What other common threads can you spot that are woven throughout these examples? What stands out to me is that the majority are led by diverse stakeholders brought together by a shared purpose or vision.

We recommend delving deeper into the examples and leverage points that intrigue you to increase your understanding of the complexities that are simplified here due to limited word count.

Place 6: The structure of information flows (access to information)

Fashion Revolution (FR) is *“the world’s largest fashion activism movement, campaigning for a fashion industry that values people and the planet over profit and growth”* (Fashion Revolution, 2021b) with teams in over 100 countries creating positive change. After the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh on 24th April 2013, a factory that produced clothing for some of the biggest global fashion brands, Fashion Revolution was born as a response to the deaths of over 1100 people, to demand a fair and safe fashion industry.

This preventable tragedy was partly attributed to the lack of transparency in the fashion industry’s *“highly globalised, deregulated, complex and opaque”* (Fashion Revolution, 2021c) supply chains. Since FR’s launch in 2013, the cornerstone of the movement has been a call for transparency to induce accountability in giant global brands. Indeed, FR defines transparency as *“the public disclosure of information that enables people to hold decision makers to account”* (ibid.). One major way FR practices this call for transparency is through their annual Fashion Transparency Index.

In 2021, FR reviewed and ranked 250 of the world’s largest fashion brands and retailers *“according to what information they disclose about their social and environmental policies, practices and impacts, in their operations and supply chain”* (Fashion Revolution, 2021a). While the organisation notes that transparency is not radical in itself, it recognises it as being *“foundational to achieving systemic change in the global fashion industry”* (Fashion Revolution, 2021a), as publicly disclosed information enables anybody to hold brands accountable and to demand change.

“Transparency is a tool for change, not the end goal. Transparency is a baseline, without which we cannot meaningfully move towards accountability and positive impact in the global fashion industry. Transparency is not a silver bullet that will solve all of the complex and deeply systemic problems in the global fashion industry. However, transparency provides a window into the places and conditions in which our clothes are being made and allows us to address them more quickly and collaboratively. Transparency is not to be confused with sustainability, but without transparency, achieving a sustainable, accountable and fair fashion industry will be impossible.” (Fashion Revolution, 2021c)

In her 1999 paper, Meadows observes that *“missing feedback [or data] is one of the most common causes of system malfunction”* as it prevents accountability. She advocates it as a powerful leverage point that is *“popular with the masses”* and *“unpopular with the powers that be”*, encouraging change makers to go around those in power and increase access to information despite the system’s resistance. By increasing public access to fashion brands’ exploitative and unsustainable practices, brands are incentivised to take responsibility and change their practices so as not to lose customers or face punishment by governments.

A mainstream, compelling example of going around those in power to increase access to information of the fashion industry’s exploitative practices is through documentaries such as *The True Cost* (2015); *Stacey Dooley Investigates: Fashion’s Dirty Secrets* (2018) and *The Truth About Nike and Adidas: Dispatches* (2022). These reach large audiences who may not yet be aware of the injustices of the fashion industry.

How else could increasing access to information catalyse change in fashion? What missing information could be shared, and who would this information need to be communicated to - and in what way - in order to induce action?

Place 5 - The rules of the system (such as incentives & constraints)

To understand a system and be able to design effective interventions, Meadows (1999) encourages us to *“pay attention to the rules, and to who has power over them.”*

In the UK, tech start-up Sook offers short-term rental of retail spaces to SMEs, making in-person retail accessible through flexible, customisable spaces for events, meetings, exhibitions, shopping, and more. This provides convenient access for consumers to local, sustainable brands (and other sustainable fashion initiatives wanting to engage with the public) who often cannot afford to operate long-term in prime shopping locations with high footfall and high rent. Launched in 2019, Sook has spaces available in London, Cambridge, Gateshead and Edinburgh, with plans to expand to more locations. In Edinburgh, fashion entrepreneur Nicole Stark runs sustainable fashion pop-up events through events business Studio 88 at the Sook St James Quarter space, bringing her successful Depop vintage brand Glownic and other sustainable fashion brands to customers in person (Sook, 2022). By offering prime retail space on a short-term, more affordable pop-up basis, Sook has successfully transformed the rules of the high street to enable sustainable fashion brands and initiatives to access high footfall and engage with citizens in person in a way that works for their capacities and goals.

An area where interventions at this leverage point could potentially have great impact is government and policy, specifically regulation for the fashion industry. Meadows (1999) writes about alarm bells ringing when she learnt about the new world trade system with *“rules designed by corporations, run by corporations, for the benefit of corporations”*. Similarly, fashion is a sector alarmingly lacking regulation. For example, brands conduct their own audits, akin to students *“marking their own homework”* (MacGilp, 2021). An intervention with potential to shift this pattern is the Fashion Sustainability and Social Accountability Act (Fashion Act) which emerged in New York State in January 2022 and would require any *“global apparel and footwear companies doing business in New York with more than \$100 million in revenues to disclose their environmental and social due diligence policies”* (Green, 2022). If passed, the Act would be enforced by the New York State Attorney General with minimum fines of up to 2 per cent of a company’s annual revenue for noncompliance (meaning a minimum of \$2 million). For a deeper insight into the potential of government and regulation to transform the fashion system, we recommend reading MacGilp’s (2021) article featuring perspectives from varied industry experts, as well as keeping up to date with progress of the Fashion Act.

Place 4 - The power to add, change or self-organise system structure

Self-organisation can be a tad confusing. Meadows (1999) defines it as the power of living systems and some social systems *“to change themselves utterly by creating whole new structures and behavio[u]rs”*. She illustrates the concept by comparing it to evolution in biological systems, and innovation in human economies. Self-organisation - the power to add, change or self-organise system structure - is enabled through rules that encourage *“variability and experimentation”* rather than suppress diversity (ibid.).

Community-led non-profit Sustainable Fashion Scotland (SFS) aims to connect the fashion community in Scotland and accelerate collective action for a sustainable fashion transformation. The organisation was founded on the knowledge that there are many inspiring individuals and organisations in Scotland working on innovative initiatives who are all determined to make change, but lack a supportive network and infrastructure to resource these initiatives, as well as time and capacity to make these connections themselves. By connecting changemakers to each other, knowledge, and resources, SFS presents new rules of self-organisation, enabling practitioners to multiply the potential of their impact through supported collaboration. Like evolution, self-organisation denotes that complex things can emerge from new patterns. The equity-led guiding principles at SFS promote diversity by directing the organisation throughout their work to “*engage diverse perspectives*” and to enable changemakers’ “*capacity to thrive rather than prescribe solutions*” (Lowe, 2020). Through supported collaboration, fashion practitioners in Scotland can combine their expertise and resources to create greater impact together than they could achieve on their own due to the synergetic process of collective action.

Another interesting example of a social system that is changing itself by creating new structures is that of Midsteeple Quarter, a community benefit society in Dumfries. The project, funded by the Scottish Government amongst others, was launched to enable local people to redevelop empty high street properties and shape a new future for the town centre “*with a mix of uses built on principles of local prosperity and well being*” (Midsteeple Quarter, 2022a). Due to funding and the community benefit society structure, local citizens in Dumfries now have the power to transform and evolve their town centre, aligning with their needs and desires. Similarly, Journeys in Design is a series of initiatives in Scotland exploring where design meets wellbeing and sustainable futures, focusing on engaging local communities (Journeys in Design, 2022). Initiative ‘Our Linen Stories’ focuses on flax fibre, linen, and regenerative textile design. Through the collaborative #flaxScotland project, Our Linen Stories is supporting community gardens and growers across Scotland to grow fibre flax, and is working towards “*a regenerative textile network and educational outreach*” (Our Linen Stories, 2022). The initiative celebrates design in flax fibre and linen, and increases the potential of its impact by enabling diverse stakeholders across the country to participate, experiment, and contribute to the movement.

Place 3 - The goals of the system

Earlier in this chapter we observed that if the goal of fashion CEOs is to maximise private profit, then the businesses they lead and have power over will evolve and configure to fulfil this purpose, resulting in the current exploitative, dominant global fashion industry. Imagine then, if this goal could be shifted. If the goal of fashion was to maximise universal wellbeing for people and planet rather than maximising private profit, how would the parts of the system shift, evolve, adapt, and configure to fulfil this new purpose? What would be disrupted and what would be strengthened to steer the system in this new direction? Fashion *can* be a force for good depending on who is steering the system and what goal they are championing. Collective action and integrated, synergistic approaches help shift the direction we are steering in.

Although we may not know exactly *how* we will navigate to a new sustainable future, we must articulate and relentlessly advocate for the type of future we want, to enable new goals and the

waters we need to pass through to get there to emerge. For example, Midsteeple Quarter has a goal to bring “*opportunity and prosperity for everyone in [the] community*” (Midsteeple Quarter, 2022a). The project developed a participatory community vision for a vibrant town centre that centred on “*community ownership*” and “*local prosperity*” (Midsteeple Quarter, 2022b). Similar to Sustainable Fashion Scotland, Midsteeple Quarter is community-led, advocating that the involvement of local people provides the best chance at achieving a sustainable future and “*prosperity that is shared fairly amongst everyone*” (Midsteeple, Quarter 2022b). In addition, Sustainable Fashion Scotland practises components of appreciative inquiry (focusing on Discover and Dream) to help citizens imagine what the future of fashion would look like if the goal of the system was universal wellbeing for people and planet. By articulating goals for the future (e.g. where prosperity is shared fairly amongst everyone) we can begin to enact that future in the present (e.g. by adopting community-led processes). Slowly but surely we begin to steer the system towards a new goal, and shift to sail in a different direction.

Place 2 - The mindset/paradigm out of which the system arises

While Meadows (1999) notes that an individual’s mindset can be changed in an instant, she also recognises that whole societies “*resist challenges to their paradigm harder than they resist anything else*”. Again, this is why systemic change requires integrated, synergistic approaches all working together to tip society from one paradigm into another, from ‘growth is good’ to ‘*some types of growth are good*’ (i.e. growth of shared prosperity, not private profit). This leverage point is number two on the list because it can be extremely difficult to catalyse, but that does not mean we should not try.

Citing Thomas Kuhn (1962), Meadows (1999) shares the following advice on how to change paradigms:

“In a nutshell, you keep pointing at the anomalies and failures in the old paradigm, you keep coming yourself, and loudly and with assurance from the new one, you insert people with the new paradigm in places of public visibility and power. You don’t waste time with reactionaries; rather you work with active change agents and with the vast middle ground of people who are open-minded.”

One example of this arose during the Sustainable Fashion Scotland Community Call in April 2022, where, led by designer Hannah Clinch, fashion practitioners came together to discuss ‘How can we strengthen design and material reuse networks in rural places?’ (Sustainable Fashion Scotland, 2022). While discussing how to shift society’s understanding and attitude towards sustainable fashion manufacturing, an idea emerged for rural practitioners and organisations (such as weavers and mills) to participate in Doors Open Days in September 2022 (this is an annual event in Scotland where places of cultural interest open their doors for free to allow citizens to view the space). The annual festival celebrates Scotland’s heritage and the built environment, offering free access to over 1000 venues across Scotland each September. Venues offer events such as walking tours, talks, and exhibitions. By opening up manufacturing spaces to citizens, the practitioners on the SFS Community Call hope to shift people’s mindsets and behaviour by increasing understanding of the effort and skill that goes into the production of clothing and textiles, and encouraging consumers to value and care better for their clothes.

To add

Looking back at previous leverage point examples, you will probably notice that many interventions (if not all) also target this leverage point - following Meadows' advice - and are working synergistically to change the entrenched paradigms that maintain the exploitative, dominant global fashion system.

Place 1 - The power to transcend paradigms

Meadows (1999) invites us to embrace the fact *"that there is no certainty in any worldview"* as the *"basis for radical empowerment"* to enable us to transcend paradigms. For fashion, this means recognising the possibilities and potential of fashion beyond the production and consumption of new clothing. When we realise that the exploitative, dominant global fashion system is not the only option, we free our minds to explore alternative futures and purposes for fashion. This is emphasised in the Earth Logic Research Action Plan by Fletcher and Tham (2019) which directs interventions to address deep leverage points, including examining mindsets and goals of the system and working with local communities to develop a new narrative and social purpose for fashion (ibid.)

What other paradigms exist - or are yet to exist - that we could try next for fashion? Which paradigms from the past can we look to for inspiration, and which equitable partnerships can we form in the present to progress universal wellbeing (such as with local communities and Indigenous peoples)?

Conclusion

What fuels my hope is knowing that we all have the power to transcend dominant paradigms. We all have the power to reimagine sustainable futures and to redesign the fashion system through our practice as change designers, in whatever role that is or evolves to be. Once we understand that fashion can exist beyond the exploitative, dominant global fashion system and industry we currently have, our mindsets are already shifting towards more systemic thinking and approaches.

So, while we wait on big brands and governments to get on board with this deep paradigm change, what I recommend you do is consider where you are best placed to intervene in the system, making sure to strengthen your power by acting collectively with a community group (local or online via shared interests). Just as Sustainable Fashion Scotland connects the fashion community in Scotland, start where you have knowledge and where you can have influence. In order to uproot the entrenched paradigms that maintain the current system and to redesign the fashion system to one that is just and regenerative for all, we need multiple interventions working synergistically and at many different levels (at different leverage points). Remember: our power to transcend paradigms is multiplied when we nurture relationships between diverse stakeholders across the system and act collectively. Through adopting systemic, relational approaches in the present, together we can redesign new, alternative futures for fashion and begin to forge pathways towards lasting systems change.

Over to you.

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