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Making circular consumers: The F/ACT Movement and the agencing of reusing, repairing, renting, and redesigning, fashion consumers

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Abstract

While there are many reasons to be critical towards the hype surrounding the circular economy (CE), it is undeniable that considerable efforts are now being put into trying to bring about a more sustainable economy characterized by closed resource cycles. Definitions of CE are often focused on the production systems, such as business model development and product design, and less emphasis is put on the consumption or the consumers role in CE (Hobson, Holmes, Welch, Wheeler, & Wieser, 2021).

However, recently, research on the circular economy has started to give attention to the role of consumers, arguing, rightly, that consumers are key to closing resource loops. Many of the intended circular economy solutions require consumers be willing and able to putting in work to make sure products are shared, repaired, reused, upcycled or recycled. Central to the CE project is thus the creation of circular consumers. To function properly the circular economy needs consumers who reuse, repair and recycle the goods they consume. It needs consumers who have the necessary skills, competence, and material tools to perform this consumer work: consumers who are also motivated to perform these tasks, who see them as valuable and right.

To accomplish this, the CE “movement” - comprising of companies, governmental agencies, NGOs, designers and other stakeholders - have launched a number of “projects” (loosely defined) aimed at educating, supporting, motivating and activating circular consumers. Such as Loop, the in-store boxes that collect garments for recycling into new fashion items or the development of digital platforms such as Borw “a one stop for circular fashion” in which you can rent, buy and sell and donate and socialize. How do these projects work? Do they accomplish the task of construction circular consumers? And if so, what practices and processes are involved and what kind of actors are made?

These questions have received scant attention in previous research. There is limited research on circular consumption and the research that has been conducted has focused on consumer attitudes towards CE solutions (Kim, Woo, & Ramkumar, 2021; Vehmas, Raudaskoski, Heikkilä, Harlin, & Mensonen, 2018), consumers’ motivation for engaging in circular consumption (Machado, Almeida, Bollick, & Bragagnolo, 2019) or how consumer moral traits impact on their approach to circular consumption (Chung-Wha, Park, & Ha-Brookshire, 2020). While all these studies focus on circular consumers characteristics, they take no interest in their making; their existence is taken for granted. How circular consumers - a specific type of actor - are made and what is involved in their making has so far been left largely unexplored.

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to critically examine efforts to construct circular consumers as a specific type of market actor. Making use of constructivist market studies literature and drawing on an ongoing study of the F/ACT Movement – a project designed to transform fashion consumers into circular consumers – we analyze the efforts to configure consumers to repair, redesign, reuse and recycle their wardrobes.

Focusing on the F/ACT Movement project we empirically investigate how the circular consumer is shaped by a number of activities and challenges conducted over the period of nine months, from September 2020 to May 2021. We take an ethnographic approach and combine interviews with consumers, digital walk-throughs on social media content on F/ACT Movement participation (Fuentes & Sörum, 2019), and documents generated by the F/ACT Movement organization/team, such as project reports, descriptions, and notes from team meetings. The project is ongoing and we have at the time of writing conducted 8 interviews with consumers and plan to do a total of 15-20 interviews.

The preliminary analysis suggests that, in this case at least, agencing market actors does not only involve providing these actors with the necessary material resources and competence and know-how needed to act, but also enabling the construction of specific identities and an ethical rationale for the actions required.

More specifically, we show that the making of circular fashion consumers in this project involved three interlinked performances. First, the project recruited a set of fashion consumers and re-framed a selection of the

fashion activities they performed, fashion competencies they had developed, and fashion tools they had acquired, meanings they attached to fashion, as circular consumption. Through this move, the enrolled consumers existing consumption competencies and the fashion practices that they engaged in became a resource for the accomplishment of the F/activist movement and the enactment of a specific version of consumption. Second, the recruited participants underwent a program by which new fashion consumption activities were added. They were educated to resist consumption desires, taught how to mend and redesign clothes, encouraged to rent clothes, buy second hand, and swap clothes. Through the performance of these activities consumers' competencies developed, meanings cultivated, and tools acquired thereby expanding their agency as circular consumers. Important for this process was also the dual and interconnected development of a circular fashion consumption ethics and identity. Third, the recruited and developed F/activists were also activated. They were given specific goals and tasks – such as communicating what they have learned to others and thereby contribute to the “movement”. Through activation consumers were to put the resources they had cultivated to use and, by doing so, further developing their circular fashion consumption ethics and identities. The paper ends with a discussion of the possibilities and limitation of these type of consumer making projects and the role that retailers can have in relation to the emergence of circular fashion consumer as a specific type of market actor.

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