Title: How can fast fashion brand River Island embrace innovation alongside eco and social consciousness to decrease their environmental impact?

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The purpose of this essay is to explore how a fast fashion brand like River Island could use innovation alongside eco and social consciousness to have less of an environmental impact. Multiple topics are discussed affiliated with the fashion industry including the linear economy, fast fashion, green washing, the circular economy and lastly systems thinking. Solutions and systems for change are found for River Island through looking at the practices of circular designers such as Pheobe English, Rebecca Early and Priya Ahluwali.

We are in a global crisis; the fashion industry remains as one of the most prominent causes of this. Water leftover from dying processes is often dumped into ditches, streams or rivers which makes it the world's second largest polluter of water (Davis, 2020). Our planet urgently needs the innovation of fashion industries emerging designers to develop solutions to decrease the effects of fast fashion on our planet. "The future of the industry is in your hands" (Contrado, 2022). If the fashion industry fails to continue to drive forward sustainable thinking, the place we call home could become a distant memory. It is more important than ever to help unsustainable fashion brands work towards minimal impact production methods and designs. River Island is a popular high street brand which was founded in 1948, they are based in London with stores in over 125 world-wide markets. A selection of womenswear, menswear, childrenswear, accessories and pet collections are offered by River Island, from looking at their website you will see items with prices varying from £5 - £300. River Island are one of many high street brands who are working towards a more environmentally conscious future. However, this cannot detract from the reality that River Island are a fast fashion brand.

Fast fashion could be viewed as a churning machine designed to principate spending; mass producing at fast rates allowing brands to frequently offer consumers the latest trends. However, manufacturing in such a vindictive manor causes devastating effects on our environment for instance increasing temperatures, severe weather events such as tornados and drastic increments of sea levels which causes floods. River Islands business strategy follows a linear economy of production, as do other fast fashion brands. A linear economy as displayed in figure 1, is a repeated process of production, consumption, and disposal. Moving from left to right of the diagram, you can see how damaging this method of production is.

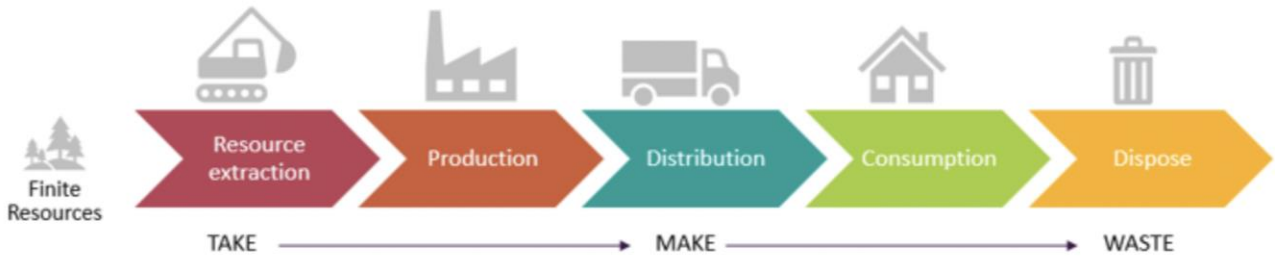

Fig 1: Group Investment Office, The Circular Economy – More Than Just Recycling, 2021.

From looking at figure 1 you can see there is no involvement with reusing, repairing, or recycling, instead the product is used and then disposed of to landfill sites. This signifies that the focus of the linear economy simply put is to make a profit without any consideration for the damage it causes to our eco system. In 2020 River Island produced a sustainability strategy which is available to view on their website, this document suggests that the brand is pushing to become more environmentally conscious. Within their sustainability strategy they display a table of '12 Commitments to people and planet', figure 2 presents these 12 commitments.

PEOPLE	1. EQUALITY, DIVERSITY, INCLUSIVITY	Cultivate a diverse and inclusive workplace, across all areas of our business
	2. WELLBEING	Foster a culture centred on people's wellbeing
	3. ETHICAL WORKING	Continuously improve working standards for our own employees and for those in our supply chains, underpinned by a commitment to eliminate Modern Slavery
	4. COMMUNITY	Give back to our communities; to those who help make our products, our colleagues that create and deliver our brand and to those who wear them
PLANET	5. SUSTAINABLE MATERIALS	Design more sustainable products, support responsible production practices and improve new and current products to reduce waste
	6. CHEMICALS	Eliminate all hazardous chemicals from our products and meet the highest industry standard
	7. WATER	Integrate sustainable water stewardship throughout our value chain
	8. WASTE & RECYCLING	Eliminate waste to landfill from all of our operations, and increase recycling
	9. CLIMATE CHANGE	Take action to reduce our carbon footprint through Science Based Targets to achieve net zero carbon emissions
PRINCIPLES	10. TRANSPARENCY	Attain full transparency through the business & supply chain in order to measure and deliver our commitments.
	11. ADVOCACY	Engage transparently with our customers, employees and stakeholders, sharing our journey to drive positive change
	12. PARTNERSHIPS	Collaborate through partnerships to validate our ideas and develop solutions for our material issues that require scale

Fig 2: River Island, Sustainability Strategy (12 Commitments to people and planet), 2020.

From looking at figure 2 you can see that River Island are committed to developing solutions to material issues and designing more sustainable products. The table also shows they are committed to reducing their carbon footprint, carbon emissions, hazardous chemicals used, and eliminating waste to landfill. The unsettling truth behind what a landfill site looks like due to fast fashion is exhibited in figure 3, the accumulation of detritus you can see within the image contains unwanted textiles discarded by the uneducated consumers of the fast fashion industry. "Europeans use nearly 26kg of textiles per person and discard 11kg of them every year. 87% of those clothes end up in landfill and the majority of those garments will contain polyester" (Gibson, 2022). Material Matters podcast by Grant Gibson discussing polyester, people and pragmatism with Rebecca Early who is a design researcher enlightens their audience with these alarming statistics. Polyester is derived from

oil and therefore one of the most damaging materials to our environment, with multitudes being used within the fast fashion industry due to the materials cost effectiveness.

Fig 3: CodoGirl, The Impact of Fast Fashion, 2019.

Unsustainable fast fashion should no longer be supported by industry bodies, consumer demand and government policy, longevity on the other hand within clothing should be available for any customer to explore (Gowerek et al, 2018). River Island could become even more successful if they were open to stepping away from fast fashion and instead become an environmentally conscious brand, though not successful in terms of profits but in terms of having a positive influence on other brands, consumers, and the planet. Garments that have timeless and classic aesthetics will ensure the items do not go out of season and thus the speed of production and consumption will dramatically decrease (Henninger et al, 2017, p.91). Like Henningers thoughts on Longevity, a Cardigan based jeans manufacturer Hiut Denim state that “Longevity, of course, doesn’t just come from the materials used but also from timeless understated design and great fit” (Hiut, 2022). These types of clothing are usually classic designs with neutral colours, an example of this is displayed in figure 4.

Fig 4: Hiut Denim, Womens Jeans, 2022.

River Island are extremely trend led since they are operating as a fast fashion brand, though indisputably a garment should be loved and appreciated for the duration of its lifespan and not discarded once trends have moved on. When sorting through wardrobes it is always the most simple and classic items that get kept like the garments in figure 4, for this reason there is logic behind encouraging better made clothing that will go beyond the season to help decrease waste to landfill. Fast fashion brands could disengage with trends as this is a large part of the industries problem. These types of brands target younger generations and make it seem like it is normal to update your wardrobe every week and keep up with the latest fashion trends. Members of design and buying teams look at information based on trends and past sales and combine this information to create proposals for new products to provoke customer desire (Payne, 2021, p.2). The fast fashion industry uses their consumers insatiable demand for new clothing to their advantage, luring you in to buy the latest trend. Consumers could share items that already exist instead of owning them (Rotation, 2022). With that in mind, a rental service could benefit the younger generation since they are more likely to feel the pressure of society to have new outfits. John Lewis who is a mid-market department

store are actually offering a rental service for clothing and more luxury designer items, this service allows you to select the perfect outfit, rent it for 4, 8, 10 or 20 days at a fraction of the cost. You simply then return the item back to the store for another consumer to rent.

Social media plays a big part in the brain washing of the youth, the influences certain platforms have on people is highly damaging, everyday posting the latest items they have to offer. River Island for example not only try to sell you clothes and accessories but also a certain lifestyle is portrayed by the brand for the consumer to be in awe of. They achieve this by using beautiful models living what seems to be glamourous lifestyles wearing only River Islands clothing. “Companies are often profit-driven and are aware that using idealized imagery (thin, white) may sell more products” (Marketti and Karpova, 2020, p.170). This shows that brand purposely uses these types of models in aesthetic settings to help sell their products and the lifestyle that is associated with River Islands garments. Shown in figure 5 are two screenshots from River Islands Instagram, you can see they are encouraging consumers to keep updating their style and indications of the brand being all about ‘the look’ is evident.

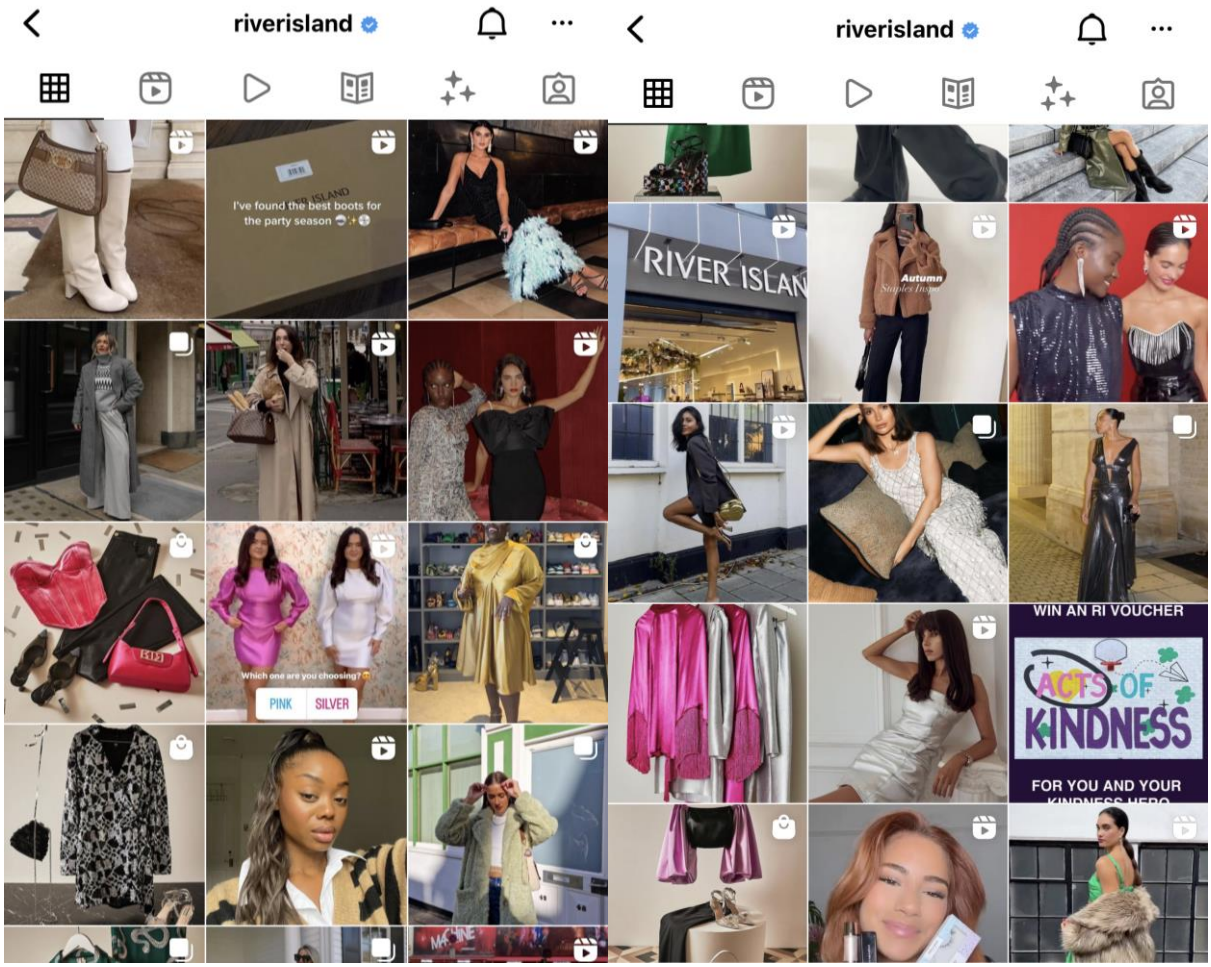

Fig 5: River Island, Instagram, 2022.

Seeing content like this every day has normalised this unhealthy way of consuming fashion and it needs to change, as the exposure of this is not only damaging to our planet but damaging to younger generations since this consumer behaviour is highly irrational. The fashion industry should try to better inform the public of the damaging effects fast fashion has on our environment. Instead, the younger generation are made to feel by the industry and society that they must keep buying new outfits for new occasions, as repeating outfits is a fashion sin. An example of this is shown in figure 5, you can see no outfit is used twice. Companies who rent clothing are tackling the issue surrounding the amount of clothing consumed by people due to the pressures of society. Fashion blogger Kaz Kamwi was on BBC Radio 1 discussing echo chambers. The Oxford Language Dictionary defines an echo chamber as "an environment in which a person encounters only beliefs or opinions that coincide with their own, so that their existing views are reinforced and alternative ideas are not considered" (2022). At 1hr 46mins and 22secs Kamwi (2022) mentions that she gets many eco activists on her page commenting on the fact that her outfits are not from ethical and sustainable clothing brands, Kamwi then went on to say that people do not realise sustainable clothing brands have very limited size ranges so she has no choice but to shop at less sustainable brands. Other consumers may be experiencing this struggle with sustainable brands and therefore like Kamwi have no choice but to shop at fast fashion brands. Using social media to shame people for this is not the way forward and will not solve this issue, instead activists could project their energy and passion towards the social media accounts of sustainable brands to become more inclusive so that consumers are no longer forced to support fast fashion. Educating consumers on inclusivity within fashion brands is just as important as educating them about the fast fashion industry as this will decrease misunderstandings amongst consumers and therefore create unity.

Due to the industrial revolution in the UK, new technology has allowed fast fashion to become our reality. However, to reduce the overall impact that the industry has on our environment, slow fashion has become a key movement and is needed now more than ever (Henninger et al, 2017, p.103). Instead of technology being viewed as one of the causes of fast fashion, designers could work with technology rather than against it, to create and source products in a way that has a more positive impact on our planet. Contrado is a manufacturing company based in London and make quality, custom products on demand. Contrado allow you to sell art, build brands and offer unique products. Their goal is to change the way items are being consumed by "connecting designers and buyers to our manufacturing on demand platform (Contrado, 2022). As well as working with technology, revisiting traditional production techniques that were used before the industrial revolution can help brands like River Island make slow fashion our reality once again, this will help reduce the industries environmental impact as they will be producing and disposing less. There is

currently an over stock issue in River Islands Morfa store due to the brand mass producing, this means they have too much stock in store. This has resulted in the 2021 stock being sold to staff shockingly for just £2. Due to the low price this will cause people to buy things not because they need it but because it is a bargain, this is the exact kind of consumer consumption we need to avoid. They are also devaluating their clothing because if you purchase an item for £2 when you might normally spend up to £300 on their items it is giving you an insight to their true value.

In contrast, Hiut Denim only make jeans, their purpose is to make the best jeans that they can and not the most jeans (Hiut, 2022). This is the right attitude to have, if companies focus on the quality of the items they are producing instead of the quantity, the longevity of the item will be increased and therefore less clothing will go to landfill sites and there would also be no issues of over stock within stores. River Island are not known for making long lasting, excellent quality clothing, and their clothing and accessories are certainly not to the standard of Hiut Denims goods. Many items of clothing are returned due to faults and once returned to store, if unsalable the items get sent to less fortunate countries. River Island state in their modern Slavery statement that their "top-5 countries were China, Turkey, Bangladesh, India and Romania" (River Island, 2021). This is in relation to where the brands goods are manufactured, Bangladesh, India and Romania are all countries who suffer from poverty. Are these faulty items getting sent back to where they came from as three of those 'top-5' countries are poor. Regardless of whether they are being transported back to where they were manufactured, even if they were being transported to different countries experiencing poverty, the carbon emissions that River Island are releasing into our atmosphere from this system they have in place is undoubtably going to have major implications regarding our environment.

Figure 6 was taken in the River Island Fforestfach store, the image shows a small section of the store featuring clothing packaged in plastic bags in readiness to relocate to a new premisses.

Fig 6: Zoe White, River Island Store, Moving Day, 2022.

From figure 6 you can see an abundance of plastic is being used. At least 50 pink bags can be spotted, and you can only imagine how many of these bags have been discarded and abandoned at landfill sites left to slowly decompose and seep into our environment as shown in figure 7.

Fig 7: Robert Sanders, Upcycling: Turning Plastic Bags into Adhesives, 2020.

River Island are providing consumers with 100% recycled plastic bags. This may seem positive however, these plastic bags regardless of being made from recycled materials will still likely end up going to landfill as shown in figure 7. A BBC News article called Plastic or Paper: Which Bag is Greener? states that, “plastic bags can take between 400 and 1,000 years to decompose” (Edginton, 2019). High street brands similar to River Island like H&M, Zara, and Primark all use paper bags as they decompose much faster than plastic bags and therefore are much kinder to our planet. Plastic products like bin bags are being provided by the company for staff to use within stores that have only 50% less plastic in them. Like the plastic bags given to shoppers, they could provide stores with 100% recycled plastic bin bags which would be less damaging to our environment. Clearly from this, you can see they are just trying to ensure that their consumers view them as an eco-conscious brand when really these issues are not important to them as their efforts would be mirrored with the products used by staff if their intentions were sincere.

Following the release of River Islands 2020 sustainability strategy displayed in figure 2, the brand released a sustainability update in 2021 which can also be viewed on their website. According to the

update on their sustainability strategy, one of their 'key successes' is eliminating single use plastic within their packaging (River Island, 2021). Twice a week on Tuesdays and Fridays, deliveries of tote boxes full of accessories and clothing individually wrapped in plastic are delivered to River Island stores across South Wales. Figure 8 shows the high volume of totes received by each store during the week of the 21st of November 2022.

Good morning,

Please see your times for tomorrow

Time changes due to high volumes across the brands

RI118	TORQUAY	TUESDAY	10:00	79 boxes / 14 HG's on 3 pallets
RI20	PLYMOUTH	TUESDAY	10:30	143 boxes / 20 HG's on 6 pallets
RI75	SWANSEA OXFORD ST	TUESDAY	08:00	151 boxes / 18 HG's on 6 pallets
RI336	SWANSEA MORFA	TUESDAY	13:00	177 boxes / 23 HG's on 7 pallets
RI885	CARDIFF SDC2 RI	TUESDAY	08:15	227 boxes / 29 HG's on 9 pallets
RI939	MERTHYR TYDFIL	TUESDAY	14:00	188 boxes / 24 HG's on 8 pallets
RI885	CARDIFF SDC2	Friday	08:00	122 boxes / 24 HG's on 5 pallets
RI337	LLANTRISANT	Friday	10:45	159 boxes / 20 HG's on 7 pallets
RI939	MERTHYR TYDFIL	Friday	08:30	132 boxes / 35 HG's on 6 pallets
RI75	SWANSEA OXFORD ST	Friday	08:00	101 boxes / 20 HG's on 4 pallets
RI336	SWANSEA MORFA	Friday	13:30	144 boxes / 28 HG's on 6 pallets
RI381	LLANELLI	Friday	10:15	133 boxes / 15 HG's on 6 pallets

Fig 8: Zoe White, River Island Delivery Statistics, 2022.

From figure 8 you can see in total each week 1,756 boxes are delivered to the South Wales stores; each box will contain on average 17 items depending on the products size. This means on average 30,730 items of clothing and accessories are delivered individually packaged in plastic. Figure 5 was taken within a River Island store and shows an example of what the box would look like once opened. It is disturbing to think how much plastic is used in a year by the company, as 30,730 pieces of plastic is used in just a week as stated above and this urgently needs to change. From this you can see River Islands 'key success' of eliminating single use plastic within their packaging as stated within their 2021 sustainability update is clearly misleading.

Fig 9: Zoe White, River Island store, Clothing in Individual Plastic Packaging, 2022.

From the evidence shown in figure 9 you can see that River Island are green washing. Green washing is where a company says they are being environmentally conscious but, instead are deceiving the public by continuing to operate in ways which are harmful to our environment. Instead of using plastic packaging they could resort to rolling up the items of clothing and tying them with string. Rolling the items will ensure that they do not get creased and then tying them with string will ensure the items do not unroll whilst being transported. This process could be more time-consuming however; less plastic will be used by the company which would not only benefit our ecosystem but would also mean that the company are no longer green washing. Also, these little gestures like using recycled plastic are most certainly not something we can celebrate. This is a poor effort of a brand trying to become environmentally conscientious, and for River Island to acknowledge this and understand how they can improve is vital to provide positive change for our environment. As a company in an era of climate crisis, River Island may feel they need to green wash to 'fit in' as they cannot compete with the more sustainable and ethical brands within the industry, for example Patagonia who is a non-profit outdoor clothing company. Yvon Chouinard is the founder of Patagonia and states that the "earth is now our only shareholder" (2022). The company choose to put 100% of their profits back into our environment as a commitment to try and save our planet before it is too late.

Slowing the rate of production is an effective way to ensure that the fashion industry is having less of an impact on our planet. The fashion industry is one of the largest emitters of carbon dioxide on the planet, it accounts for approximately 10 percent of carbon emissions due to the processes, materials and transport methods used (Marcketti and Karpova, 2020). River Island have said they are committed to reducing their carbon footprint and emissions but to achieve this they must work towards circularity. They should be encouraged to leave their linear production methods in the past and open themselves to the circular economy. Figure 10 displays what a circular economy looks like, on the right-hand side of the diagram it shows the more technical cycle where products are used and the left-hand side displays products that are consumed.

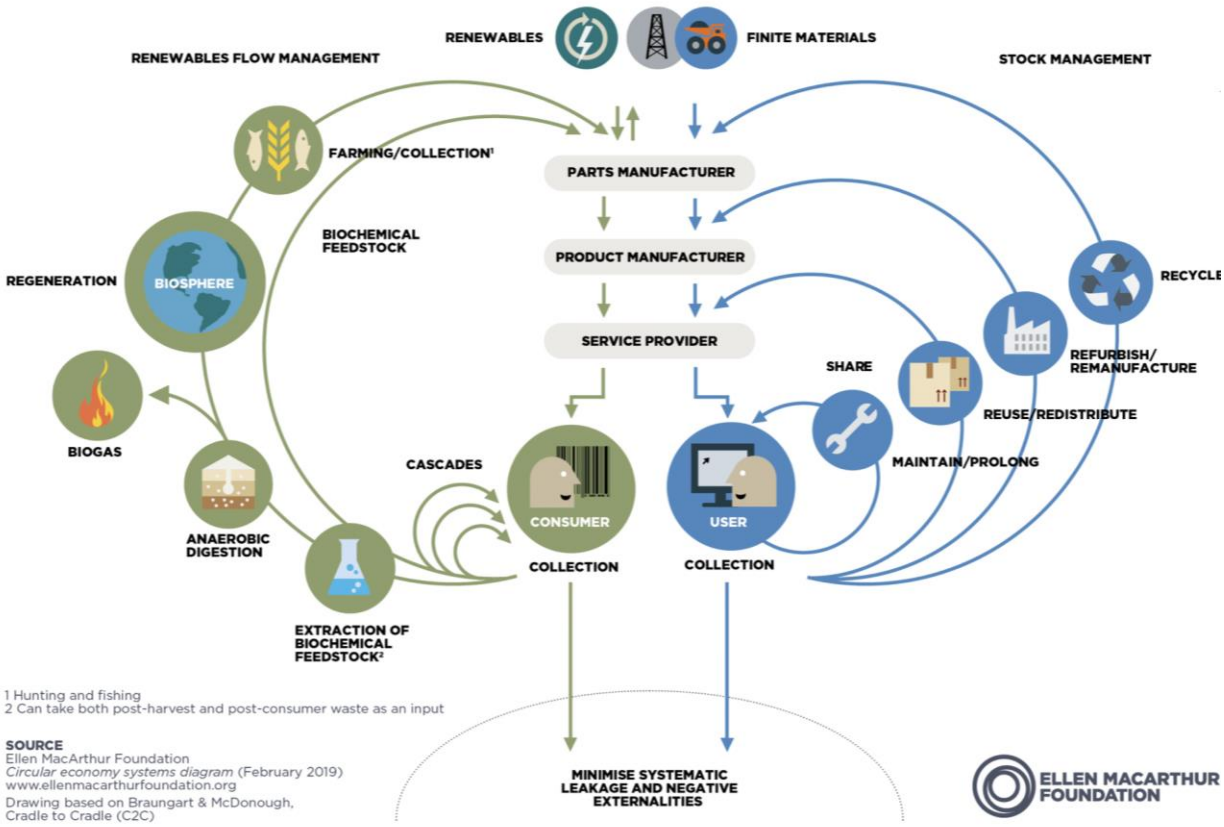

Fig 10: Ellen MacArthur Foundation, The Butterfly Diagram: Visualising the Circular Economy, 2019.

You can see from figure 10 that products are made, consumed, reused, repaired, recycled, and repeated for as long as possible. The flow of materials is continuous within the circular production method since the biodegradable materials are placed back into the earth; these materials contain nutrients which allows nature to regenerate. River Island are still mass producing when other ways of production could be implemented to reduce their carbon emissions, such as revisiting traditional production techniques to slow their rate of production. Sheepinc have done this, and are the first (independently audited) carbon negative clothing brand who have

> "Set out to reinvent the (spinning) wheel of how clothing is made. To see if we could combine age-old techniques and modern innovations to create sensationally soft knitwear that does the planet more good than harm"

(Edzard and Michael, 2022)

This is an example of a brand who has revisited traditional production techniques to have less of an impact on our environment. Being a carbon negative clothing brand means you are not contributing to the dangerous rise in temperatures which causes destruction across the globe, such as droughts, an increase in melting ice caps causing arctic wildlife to perish, and many other stresses on our

environment. River Island are continuing to send faulty items halfway across the world, which of course is contributing to their carbon footprint. Putting a repair system in place for these faulty items could be a solution for River Island to explore. Hiut Denim actually have a repair service for their jeans which is free for life. This means if the jeans can be repaired, they will continue to be used and will not be discarded. Hiut also buy back the jeans once they become almost redundant, this closes the design loops and improves the circularity of their products. You can see that this is a successful way of dealing with damaged goods, if River Island did this, they could increase their products life span whilst reducing their carbon footprint as they will not be shipping them to less fortunate countries. This is one of many brands River Island could look at and take inspiration from to become a more circular brand. Any faulty items that get returned to River Island could be repaired in the consumers local store and once repaired, handed back to them. This drop off repair system would be better for our planet, give the items a second chance and give River Island the opportunity to work within the circular economy.

Revaluing materials is important to reducing waste. Pheobe English has achieved this by working with scrap materials; she believes that we are “living in an age of waste” and questions whether design is “the answer to leaving our throwaway culture behind?” (English, 2021). Figure 11 shows two garments created by English for an exhibition called Waste Age: What can Design Do?

Fig 11. Pheobe English, Waste Age: What can Design Do?, 2021

From looking at these two garments within figure 11 you can see how successful working with a no waste attitude can be. This is one of many ways you can repurpose scrap fabric, working with geometric shapes, draping, and pleating can also ensure sufficient usage of fabric and therefore produce little to no waste (Gwilt, 2020). This method is used more in couture, but River Island could also take this approach on board to reducing waste. Malaika New York is a zero-waste clothing brand, “Our clothes are made from squares, triangles and rectangles to optimise our fabric use up to 98%” (Malaika, 2022). This shows just how much fabric can be utilised by working with geometric shapes and waste fabric and how a clothing brand is already successfully producing items this way.

Priya Ahluwalia is a designer who works mostly with deadstock and vintage materials collected from warehouses and second-hand markets. Due to the difficulty in sourcing these types of clothing/materials, Ahluwalia collaborated with Microsoft (computer software) to create a new digital platform called ‘Circulate,’ which enables Ahluwalia to “crowd-source clothing from the local community” (Farra, 2021). You simply take a picture of the item, upload it to the software Circulate and once approved you get sent a shipping label to post your item to Ahluwalia. This is similar to the

platforms Depop and Vinted, they allow you to buy and sell new or second-hand clothing. You can see how the designer and technology have come together to create an innovative solution to the material sourcing problem that Ahluwalia faced. Managing waste is also very important to the manufacturing company Contrado therefore, any fabric remnants are offered to 'craft' and 'DIY people.' In light of this, rather than River Island selling off their old stock to staff they could collaborate with circular designers like Ahluwalia. Not only will this avoid unnecessary mass consumption, but it will give River Island the opportunity to develop new markets and audiences, brand affiliation and nurture new talent.

Throughout my own projects using scrap fabric and unwanted clothing to print on has been especially important to me. Not only does it decrease damage to our environment, but you get to see something unloved or unwanted transform into something exciting. Figure 12 shows upcycled items from one of my projects, you can see they were a blank canvas just waiting to be transformed, the fashion industry should be encouraged to do this by working with the materials that already exist instead of creating more.

Fig 12: Zoe White, Upcycling, 2022.

Ensuring that consumers do not view longer lasting clothing as outdated is crucial to making a positive change for our environment. Superdry are achieving this by creating a female-led campaign to discuss their three-core sustainable initiatives which are organic cotton, net zero and circularity (Fashion Network, 2022). Their goal is to create conversations among an under 25 female audience and will "help educate their audience on how to shop for the season responsibly" (Fashion Network,

2022). River Island could use influencers to achieve a similar goal to educate their consumers. Educating people in terms of shopping responsibly is extremely important however,

Rebecca Earley (2022) believes the solution is not to get rid of unsustainable brands but to work with them to become more circular by using forward thinking and innovative solutions. River Island need to employ some sharp thinking and take inspiration from circular designers mentioned above, as they do not have to remain as a brand who is known for their negative impact on our environment, they could live up to their commitments to the planet rather than putting on a facade through green washing. River Island could take inspiration from John Lewis' rental service and use it within their company. Renting new outfits instead of purchasing them will prevent over consumption, leading to less items of clothing going to landfill. In addition to a rental service, River Island could use technology in a positive way to create something that has not yet been experienced by high street consumers whilst keeping the brands impact on the environment low. They could do this by using the manufacturing company Contrado, they produce their items on demand in the UK. This means items are not made until the customer places an order resulting in zero waste since no products are produced beyond need. Having the items produced in the UK is also positive as this keeps their carbon emissions low which is one of River Islands '12 commitments' as shown in figure 2.

"Digitization is upon us. The physical and digital worlds are colliding. Swatch editor™ offers a phygital solution where creatives can trade sustainably and efficiently in a virtual world" (Swatch Editor, 2022). Swatch Editor is a digital platform that could be used by River Islands consumers to "view and edit colourways and scales to enable important decision making in realtime using a fresh digitally enhanced immersive experience" (Swatch Editor, 2022). Figure 13 shows what consumers can expect from the digital platform, this gives you an insight as to how user-friendly Swatch Editor is.

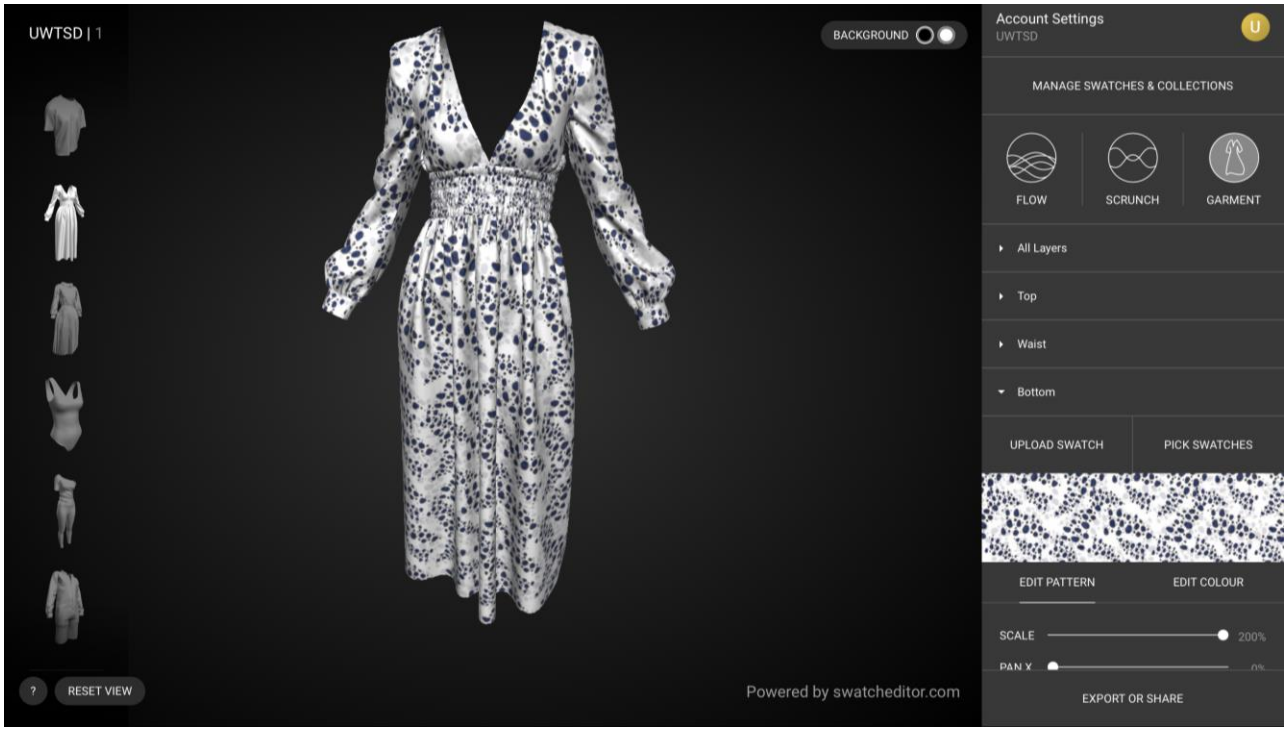

Fig 13: Swatch Editor, Manage Swatches & Collections, 2022.

Through using swatch editor and Contrado River Islands consumers will be able to create bespoke clothing by using their own patterns and designs as shown in figure 13. The price range for these items will of course come at a higher price point due to the type of service and technology that will be used, however these bespoke items will be loved and used by their consumers for longer than the average trend lend item that River Island produce, this will cause a decrease in waste, thus a decrease in the brands environmental impact.

The pressure to better our planet and have less of an impact does not only lay with designers and brands within the fashion industry, but we all share this responsibility; as inhabitants of the earth, we all have a duty to continue our efforts to protect it. The fashion industries contribution towards the global crisis should be a lesson to all upcoming fashion designers. It is time for innovation and forward thinking to take over the industry and show its consumers that circular design is our future, as without it there may not be a future. So, who holds the power, consumers or the fashion industry? Some may argue that the consumer has the power to lower the impact of the industry on our planet, if they stop supporting fast fashion brands the industry will see that consumers no longer have that insatiable demand for newness and therefore begin to manufacture in a way that suits the consumers' needs. However, others may think the industry are the ones who hold the power since they dictate what is being made, the rate of production, and the quantity of items produced. For a

consumer to influence how the industry is choosing to operate could be difficult but possible if they work together to tackle the issues as a nation and therefore help brands like River Island increase their eco-conciseness and help reverse the climate crisis.

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