


Article

Between Fast and Sustainable Fashion: The Attitude of Young Lithuanian Designers to the Circular Economy

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Abstract: The textile and fashion industry is the second industry (after aviation) that pollutes the planet the most, and it uses natural and human resources excessively and irresponsibly. Fast fashion harms the environment. Fast fashion stands for low quality, low prices, constantly updated supplies, and high consumption of natural resources and chemicals. Nowadays, however, the evolution in the fashion industry from fast and unsustainable models to sustainability and a circular economy is firmly established. Fashion industry representatives are paying more and more attention to corporate social responsibility, business ethics, the implementation of circular economy principles, and the technological transition from linear production to a circular economy. The aim of this article is to evaluate the attitude of young Lithuanian designers towards the implementation of circular economy principles in the fashion industry. A problematic question is raised: how do young Lithuanian designers perceive sustainable fashion in the context of a circular economy? A qualitative semi-structured interview was used to collect data for the empirical study. The analysis has shown that the transition of the textile and fashion industry to a circular economy is a rather complex process that requires knowledge, significant financial investment in technological change, and greater consumer purchasing power in the production of products based on a circular economy. Moreover, new brands in the fashion industry do not always have enough information to start a business in the fashion industry based on a circular economy. A qualitative study conducted in Lithuania using the interview method showed that young Lithuanian fashion designers are very positive about sustainability solutions in the fashion industry and try to link their developing fashion brand with sustainability, but this is done fragmentarily rather than consistently. Young fashion designers state that they lack the in-depth knowledge and money to develop a brand in a circular economy. In conclusion, young Lithuanian fashion designers strive to create a sustainable fashion brand and link their development activities to a circular economy in a fragmentary way. Even after the research has been conducted, the question of how to get fast fashion manufacturers to produce sustainable fashion in Lithuania remains open.

Keywords: fast fashion; circular economy; sustainable development; sustainable fashion



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1. Introduction

The origin of the zero-waste philosophy is Pythagoras, who put forward the idea of a harmonious world with repeating cycles. Although the circular economy is not associated with the philosophy of zero waste, we can find connections by linking zero-waste philosophy with the cyclical nature of the circular economy in order to minimize the impact on the environment. According to the Pythagoreans, the development of the world is cyclic, while its aspects of harmony are both the repetitive movement of the heavenly bodies and the circle of human life. Later, this attitude was developed by Plato [1,2],

who reasoned about the soul of the world in search of the source of good (harmonious) movement. These ideas allowed Plato to solve the problem of evil. One of the pillars of this theology (developed by St. Augustine 1961 [3]) is Plato's doctrine of methexis, whereas Christianity rejects his idea of pantheism. However, these ideas were later developed by Spinoza (2012) [4], Hegel (2018) [5], Thoreau (1995) [6], and others [7,8].

The practical attitude of sustainable behavior is presupposed by two theories of the integral world and an individual in it. First, recognizing the world as our home without distinguishing between inside and outside, we cannot destroy it with our activities. Secondly, our activity cycles mirror the cycles of world development, which cannot be disturbed by our selfish goals. Thus, the idea of zero waste, including in the sphere of fashion, is the result of our free and responsible decision about our participation in the development of the world. The role of each of us is greater the more we realize that it is vanishingly small.

Modern life seems inseparable from growing consumption. Along with fast food restaurants and eateries, "fast" fashion has also emerged [9]. The impact of the growing volume of textile products on the earth and humanity is rarely thought about. According to Niinimaeki et al. (2020) [10], the textile industry is the second largest polluter of the 21st century (after aviation). The EEA Briefing Report (2019) [11] shows that textile products rank fourth in terms of the amount of primary raw materials and water consumed (after food, housing, and transport), and fifth in terms of the amount of greenhouse gas emissions. The textile industry is associated with at least 10 percent of global pollution [12–14]. This situation is associated with so-called fast fashion, and with the tendency to create new fashion collections for single seasons. Eco-Business (2017) [15] and Teerawatananon et al. (2021) [16] point out that fast fashion is characterized by cheapness and rapid change of assortment and supply to consumers, therefore, fast fashion is associated with increased resource consumption figures, low processing, and a short wearing time of the garment. The problems of the textile industry are also related to problems of processing and secondary recycling. According to the Ellen McArthur Foundation (2017) [17], it is estimated that less than 1% of all textiles worldwide are recycled into new textiles.

The textile industry and the fashion industry are considered to be industrial sectors that cause a lot of environmental problems and use a lot of resources [18]. For example, globally, 20% of industrial water pollution comes from textile dyeing and processing [19]. In a linear system, this industry sector uses the most non-renewable resources, "a total of 98 million per year including oil for the production of synthetic fibers, fertilizers for growing cotton and chemicals for the production, dyeing and finishing of fibers and textiles" [17]. Barber (2021) [20] states that the clothing industry has grown by more than 400 percent in the last 40 years, and this is all related to the enormous use of various natural and chemical industrial resources and so-called fast fashion, where the consumer devotes more and more income to buying clothes and less and less time to wearing them [21]. Peleg, Mizrachi, and Tal (2022) [22] said that by 2030, the textile industry will use more and more land resources and areas for fiber production. Ütebay et al. (2020) [23] indicate that only one percent of used clothing is recycled. The increasing levels of resource use and pollution in the textile industry indicate that the principles of a sustainable, circular economy are crucial for this industry. It should also be remembered that the textile industry is associated with the exploitation of child labor throughout the world. While a UNICEF report [24] says that child labor and human exploitation in the textile industry have improved over the past 20 years, the industry remains extremely problematic. This is not just when it comes to fast fashion [25]. Luxury fashion brands usually destroy their unsold collections by burning them. Napier & Sanguineti (2018) [26] report that more than 600 million tons of new textiles are burned or otherwise destroyed each year.

Fast fashion brands are taking sustainable development initiatives and some fast fashion brands will likely choose circular economy principles in the future. For example, one of the well-known fast fashion brands, H&M, has been inviting consumers to participate in a clothing recycling program that allows them to return unwanted clothes in exchange

for a discount since 2013. This company suffered losses in 2018 when it got into a situation where the products were not sold out on time. It had to offer extremely large discounts to consumers and, at the same time, offer newly manufactured textile products [27].

Napier & Sanguineti (2018) [20,26] and Peleg, Mizrahi, and Tal (2022) [22] believe that the need for change in the fashion industry is partly inspired by the growing honesty of consumers and their tendency to choose sustainable products. Therefore, the future and development of the textile industry must be linked to a circular economy, as an opportunity to pollute the planet less and meet the changing needs of consumers.

The movement of fast fashion towards the concept of sustainable fashion has been increasingly analyzed. A special shift for this movement according to Yoon et al. (2020) [28] was sparked by the 2013 disaster known today as the Rana Plaza incident, when over 1000 tailors died in a sewing factory. Shortly after this event, the Fashion Revolution Movement [29] was formed, which began to pay special attention to uncovering the problematic activities of the textile industry and the fashion industry and informing the public.

Dissanayake and Weerasinghe (2021) [30] found that the adoption of a circular economy approach by fashion companies could help to reduce emissions by up to 30%. The study found that the potential benefits of a circular economy could be maximized if fashion companies invest in renewable energy sources, reuse materials, and extend the lifespan of clothing. Another study, conducted by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation [31], found that the fashion industry could reduce its environmental impact by up to 60% by 2030. The study suggested that one way to do this would be for fashion companies to invest in new technologies, such as digital printing, which can reduce the amount of water and chemicals used in the production process. Finally, some researchers [32] found that the fashion industry could reduce its emissions by up to 50% by 2030 if companies prioritize the use of sustainable materials and invest in renewable energy sources. The study also recommended that companies implement initiatives such as leasing or renting clothing instead of selling it, etc.

Other studies have explored potential solutions for the fashion industry to become more sustainable. For example, Wu et al. [33] stated that the use of renewable materials could reduce the industry's environmental footprint by up to 90%. Additionally, a study conducted by the World Resources Institute in 2021 [34] found that the fashion industry could reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by up to 40% by 2030 if companies adopt new technologies, such as 3D printing. Finally, a study by the European Commission [35] resented the idea that the fashion industry could reduce its water use by up to 70% by 2030 if companies switch to more water-efficient production methods. This article analyzes the transition to a circular economy, although solutions for the implementation of the blue economy are currently being studied around the world. Some research showed that the textile and apparel industry demonstrates higher criticality concerning the problems of marine litter, eutrophication, and contaminants (including contaminants in seafood) [36].

Recently, numerous small and medium enterprises founded by young designers have been operating and emerging in Lithuania, operating in the field of both fast fashion and sustainable fashion.

The aim of this article is to evaluate the attitude of young Lithuanian designers towards the implementation of circular economy principles in the fashion industry. To achieve this goal, the following structure of the article was chosen: in Section 2, the literature review of circular economy principles and barriers in the fashion industry is given; in Section 3 the data and methods are provided. The results of the empirical research are presented in Section 4. Section 5 is dedicated to discussion of the empirical study results in light of other studies analyzed. Conclusions and limits of the study are provided, including future research guidelines, in Section 6.

2. The Circular Economy in the Fashion Industries: Some Theoretical Insights

In general, the notion of a circular economy is given a lot of attention. The European Union has set a goal to move to a circular economy by 2050. The European Commission's

Circular Economy Action Plan, launched in 2015, was the first step toward achieving this goal [37]. This plan aims to make the EU economy more circular by promoting resource efficiency, reducing resource consumption, and creating a new production and consumption model. The plan includes several initiatives and measures to achieve these goals, such as increasing the use of recycled materials, promoting the reuse of products and components, and introducing new incentives for companies to promote a circular economy [38]. The EU has also created a Resource Efficiency Scoreboard to monitor the progress of its circular economy initiatives. This scoreboard provides up-to-date information on the performance of the EU's circular economy policies and measures [39]. Fashion industries have long used, and some of them still use, a linear production model.

Wautelet (2018) [40] sees the linear production model as one characterized by thinking that resources and the earth's regenerative capacity are infinite, so it is possible to take infinite resources from the environment, create new products and waste them or, in other words, not care about what remains or is emitted into the atmosphere during the production and consumption processes. The principle of linear production develops in three stages: resources, production, and pollution. Meanwhile, the principle stages of a circular economy are resources, production, and regeneration [41,42]. The movement of fashion industries towards a circular economy is driven by changing consumer needs [43,44], by global agreements [45] (United Nations, 2023), and by EU sustainable development strategies and action plans [37–39].

When it comes to the principles of a circular economy, studies in the fashion industry show that attention must be focused on changing the value chain. In the value creation chain, cooperation with partners (changing management of the supply chain), innovation, reorganization of the waste management system, changing communication with customers, and changing the utilization model become important factors [46]. Therefore, following the principles of a circular economy (3Rs—reduce, reuse, recycle), it is necessary to change or adjust the existing business model [44,47]. A business model that is characterized by circular economy principles must include the search for new partners, the introduction of innovations, changing the waste management system, and other elements. Koszewska (2018) [48] believes that, first of all, when the fashion industry is moving to the principles of a circular economy, it is important for all stakeholders (suppliers, manufacturers, sellers, consumers) to be aware of sustainable fashion, to be involved in it, and to have knowledge about sustainable fashion.

The fashion industry is beginning to realize the potential of circular economy principles to reduce waste and increase efficiency. By introducing circular economy principles to the industry, fashion companies can create a closed-loop system in which resources are reused over and over again without generating much waste. Examples of applying circular economy in the fashion industry include using regenerated materials, such as yarns made from recycled plastic, and moving to rental and sharing models [49–51]. In addition, the use of digital technologies can help to reduce fashion waste and increase the efficiency of production and distribution [49]. By incorporating circular economy principles, fashion companies can reduce environmental impacts while creating economic value.

Thus, the fashion industry is no stranger to the concept of a circular economy. In recent years, the industry has seen an increase in research on the topic, with studies examining how best to implement the principles of a circular economy in the fashion industry. According to Arnold et al. (2022) [52], the main strategies used by fashion companies to implement circular economy principles are circular models, product life extension, reuse and rental services, and upcycling. Kirsi Niinimäki (2015) [53] found that the main challenges to implementing a circular economy in the fashion industry include the lack of infrastructure and technological capabilities, the need to change consumer behavior, and the need for greater regulation and incentives. Dragomir and Dumitru (2022) [54] took their study a step further and examined the development of circular economy models in the fashion industry using a sustainable business model. Their research found that companies must engage

with stakeholders, rethink the design stage, and think about the auditing and certification processes to develop effective and sustainable circular business models.

Overall, research on the implementation of circular economy principles in the fashion industry has shown that the industry has the potential to become more sustainable and reduce its environmental impact. To understand the operating principles of sustainable fashion and the circular economy, we need to analyze the manufacturers, fashion designers (designers), and consumers.

The fashion industry is quickly becoming a leader in the implementation of a circular economy, a concept that focuses on the reuse and recycling of materials and products to maximize their lifecycle potential. It is also quickly beginning to understand that circular economy is an alternative to the traditional linear economy (which involves a “take-produce-dispose” model of production and consumption) and is very important.

The circular economy in the fashion industry has the potential to bring numerous benefits to the industry. The most obvious benefit is the potential to reduce the environmental impact of the fashion industry. By adopting a circular model, the industry will be able to reduce its reliance on new materials and environmentally harmful production processes. In addition, a circular economy has the potential to reduce the amount of waste generated by the fashion industry and to reduce the energy and resources required for production. This economical model also has the potential to reduce production costs, as recycled and reused materials cost less than new materials. Finally, a circular economy has the potential to create jobs and strengthen local economies, as the use of locally sourced materials and the reuse of materials and products will require more skilled labor and create more economic opportunities.

However, several challenges must be overcome before a circular economy can be successfully implemented in the fashion industry. One of the biggest challenges is the lack of awareness and acceptance of the circular economy model among consumers [46,55].

Consumers have become accustomed to the traditional linear economy and may be reluctant to adopt the circular economy model. In addition, the fashion industry is highly competitive, with brands vying for consumers’ attention and loyalty. This competition can make it difficult to convince consumers to buy circularly produced fashion items [55].

The circular economy model allows the implementation of environmental targets for sustainable development by ensuring sustainable production and consumption. Another challenge is finding the right balance between sustainability and profitability. While a circular economy has the potential to reduce costs, it is still necessary to ensure that products are profitable. Finally, the challenge is to find suitable materials and products for reuse and recycling.

Despite these challenges, there are several opportunities for the fashion industry to embrace a circular economy. One of the most promising opportunities is the development of new technologies that facilitate the reuse and recycling of materials and products. For example, new technologies such as 3D printing and blockchain could enable the fashion industry to create unique one-of-a-kind pieces from recycled materials. In addition, the fashion industry could benefit from increased collaboration with other industries to develop innovative products and services. For example, partnerships with the automotive industry could lead to the development of innovative upcycling and recycling techniques.

The fashion industry could also benefit from increased investment in research and development to better understand the potential of a circular economy and how it can best be implemented.

In summary, a circular economy has the potential to bring numerous benefits to the fashion industry, from reducing environmental impacts to creating economic opportunities. However, there are several challenges that must be overcome before the circular economy can be successfully implemented. Despite the challenges, there are several opportunities for the fashion industry to embrace a circular economy, from developing new technologies to increasing collaboration and investment in research and development. It is clear that a

circular economy has the potential to revolutionize the fashion industry, and it is important that the industry takes the necessary steps to ensure its successful implementation [56].

It can be said that there are many business models and practical tips on how to develop a circular economy in the fashion industry. However, our focus is on exactly how circular economy models are developed and can be developed by new players in the fashion industry, designers in particular. Analyzing the case of Lithuania, it can be observed that large textile industry companies established in the market invest a lot in a circular economy and create sustainable fashion. For example, “Utenos trikotažas” [57], a company that is the first company in the world to fully comply with the Greenpeace environmental standards. It develops a circular economy model in its activities. It uses zero-waste philosophy, 100% green energy, does not use toxic substances in production, produces only to order, and applies other sustainability initiatives. The social business platform “Textale” [58] is also successfully developing its activities, among which it offers to collect and resell unworn fashionable clothes. Alongside these examples, many new small- and medium-sized fashion designer companies are being created. These companies are much less likely to declare sustainability, social responsibility, and implementation of circular economy principles. Most of the time, these companies do not have physical stores and they sell their products using technology, the internet, and social network platforms. Not all of these companies have their own website, so it is very difficult to determine if and which circular economy principles they follow. Therefore, our article is focused on understanding the goals of sustainable development of young, new fashion creators, designers, and their knowledge of the principles of the circular economy.

According to studies [59,60], designers are increasingly becoming aware of the importance of circularity in fashion, as the industry is one of the most polluting in the world. The traditional linear production model of “make, use, dispose” is no longer sustainable and is responsible for the large amounts of clothing waste generated every year. Designers are now looking for ways to reduce their environmental impact, and circular economy models are a great way to do this. This approach allows for a closed-loop system, where materials are kept in circulation for as long as possible, while still providing value to customers. Designers are beginning to see the potential of circular models and are exploring ways to incorporate them into their production processes [61].

The first step in creating a circular economy model is to reduce the use of new materials. Designers can do this by using sustainable, recycled, or upcycled materials whenever possible. This is not only good for the environment, but it can also help to reduce costs and increase profits. Additionally, designers can look for ways to extend the life of their products, such as offering repair services or lifetime warranties. This allows customers to keep their products for longer, reducing the need for new products and reducing waste. Designers are also exploring ways to upcycle old materials into new fashion items. Conducted research shows that the chain of sustainable fashion development depends on how fashion designers perceive sustainable development [62–64].

Companies such as Nike and H&M have started using recycled materials for their products, creating stylish and sustainable items. Upcycling is a great way to reduce the amount of waste generated, as well as to create unique and interesting items that customers will love. Finally, designers are encouraging customers to participate in a circular economy. Companies such as Patagonia and Eileen Fisher have started programs that allow customers to return used items for repair, reuse, or recycling. This is a great way to keep items in circulation and reduce waste. Additionally, companies such as Rent the Runway and Le Tote offer rental services that allow customers to access high-end fashion items without having to buy them. This reduces the amount of clothing waste generated and encourages customers to consider sustainable fashion choices. Overall, designers are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of circular economy models in fashion [65]. By reducing the use of new materials, upcycling old materials, and encouraging customers to participate in circular economies, designers can help to reduce fashion’s environmental impact and create products that are both stylish and sustainable.

Summarizing the performed theoretical analysis, it is possible to single out essential factors that should be considered in the fashion industry in order to move to circular economy principles and sustainable fashion: designers, fashion creators, the company's awareness of sustainable development, the motivation for creating sustainable fashion, knowledge of circular economy principles (sustainable business models, opportunities and barriers). All of these (philosophy of sustainability and sustainable action) must go through a process of understanding and management of fashion's environmental impact, social impact, economic impact, supply chain transparency, materials and textile sourcing, manufacturing processes, waste reduction strategies, consumer education, marketing practices, recycling, and upcycling.

3. Methodology

The methodology chosen was to conduct a qualitative study and interview designers who have been active in the clothing industry for no more than 5 years, and who have created and managed their brands. The term "young fashion designers" is conditional because, in the framework of this study, it is associated with active market activity (not longer than 5 years) in the development of a fashion brand created by oneself, and not with the designer's age. The representativeness of the studied companies was ensured by choosing to interview company's top managers, founders, and in other words those persons who are directly related to the company's development strategy. In the majority of researched SME, the head of the company is a brand developer, a designer, and a material selector who makes all strategic decisions. A semi-structured interview was chosen for the research. The selection of informants was carried out by the snowball method. Small enterprises with 2 to 25 employees were chosen to be studied. Taking into account the ethics of the research, and taking into account the fact that some of the respondents did not want their personal or brand data to be mentioned in the research, the respondents were coded by giving each of them a code from R1 to R21. Since the saturation of the research sample was reached, i.e., the answers began to repeat themselves, the conducted research can be considered as reflecting the studied whole. We realized the specifics of qualitative research, which does not apply strict sample calculation and representativeness methodology. During the research, respondents were asked 6 closed questions to profile them according to the number of employees, time of the company or brand on the market, main activity, place of sale of goods, and whether the company has a website with or without a store. It was also asked whether the company applies one of the 3R circular economy principles. Based on the analysis of the literature, the main questions of the interviews focused on five key areas. These were: 1. Awareness of sustainability in the fashion industry; 2. Motivations (choices) for creating sustainable or fast fashion; 3. Opportunities for sustainability in the fashion industry; 4. Challenges to sustainability in the fashion industry; 5. Suggestions for improving sustainability in the fashion industry. Following the five key areas, the following categories are distinguished: individual and managerial awareness of sustainability (from personal life and awareness to awareness in fashion sustainability, motives for creating sustainable or fast fashion, opportunities and challenges of sustainability in the fashion industry, and understanding of the future of sustainable fashion.) (Appendix A).

Twenty-one young designers and fashion brand creators participated in the research. Currently, these individuals act as brand developers and do managerial work. The representativeness of the studied companies was ensured by choosing to interview the companies' top managers, founders, and in other words those persons who are directly related to the companies' development strategy. Research data shows that out of twenty-one fashion designers who participated in the study, ten were in favor of fast fashion and eleven were in favor of sustainable fashion. This allows us to compare different positions and attitudes regarding the application of the principles of sustainable fashion and circular economy (Table 1).

Table 1. Essential characteristics describing the respondents.

Code	Number of Employees	Brand, Company Age (Active Time in Market)	Main Activity	Place of Sale of Goods	Having Own Website (with or without Online Store)	Does it Apply Any of the Circular Economy Components (Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle)
R1	17	4	Clothes for Women	Physical Store, Internet	+	Yes
R2	14	3	Clothes for Women	Internet	+	Yes
R3	5	4	Clothes for Women	Internet	+	Yes
R4	24	5	Clothes for Everyone, Cnisex collections	Internet	+	Yes
R5	12	3	Clothes for Women, Clothes for Kids	Internet	+	No
R6	8	2	Clothes for Everyone, Unisex Collections	Internet	+	No
R7	16	5	Clothes for Women, Clothes for Kids	Physical Store, Internet	+	Yes
R8	8	4	Clothes for Kids	Internet	+	Yes
R9	11	4	Clothes for Kids	Internet	+	Yes
R10	7	3	Clothes for Kids	Internet	+	Yes
R11	21	5	Clothes for Women	Physical Store, Internet	+	No
R12	14	3	Clothes for Women	Internet	–	Yes
R13	17	4	Clothes for Women, Clothes for Kids	Internet	–	No
R14	9	3	Clothes for Kids	Internet	–	No
R15	3	4	Clothes for Women, Clothes for Kids	Internet	–	No
R16	17	5	Clothes for Everyone, Unisex Collections	Internet	–	No
R17	12	4	Clothes for Everyone, Unisex Collections	Internet	–	Yes
R18	19	5	Clothes for Women, Clothes for Kids	Physical Store, Internet	–	No
R19	16	4	Clothes for Everyone, Unisex Collections	Internet	+	Yes
R20	13	2	Clothes for Everyone, Unisex Collections	Internet	–	No
R21	19	5	Clothes for Women	Internet	+	No

Source: compiled by authors.

4. Results

4.1. Awareness of Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

Conducted studies [62–64] have shown that the creation of sustainable fashion is linked mostly to the creators' attitudes and attitudes towards sustainability in general. On the other hand, we were also interested in how the respondents perceive the sustainability of fashion.

Analyzing the perception of fashion sustainability, it was found that only some of the respondents perceive sustainability in the fashion industry as important and necessary. In principle, a similar size of respondents evaluated sustainable fashion with some skepticism. During the research, the following subcategories were distinguished: the young designer's approach to sustainability and the importance of sustainability in the design process (Table 2).

In conclusion, it can be said that the results of the study show that the development of sustainable fashion is mainly related to the individual attitudes of the young designers [R1 ... *you won't believe it, but I buy my clothes only in a second-hand clothes store*, R12 ... *it's a way of life for me. I give all things a second chance...*, R17 ... *I set a goal in my personal life to live according to the philosophy of zero waste...*]. It is also noteworthy that awareness of the importance of sustainable development aspirations dominates. Awareness of sustainable development goals is not perceived equally. Although the results of the study show that some of the respondents are aware of the importance of fashion sustainability, some evaluate fashion sustainability in their business practices more negatively than positively.

Negative attitudes towards the creation of sustainable fashion, revealed during the research, are associated with personal attitudes and attitudes towards both sustainable development and business. One of the personal attitudes is a fragmented understanding of

the meaning of sustainable development [R15 ... *harmony is populism, it is impossible to live in complete harmony, you still make, work, use something...*]. It is also a common belief that it increases business costs and reduces revenue [R13 ... *we cannot invest so much... the market situation is not stable, we have to keep what we have...*].

Table 2. Awareness of sustainability in the fashion industry.

Subcategories	Representatives of Sustainable Fashion	Representatives of Fast Fashion
Individual Importance of Sustainability	R2 [... it's a new trend. We don't have a choice. We need to act...], R7 [it means adopting practices that minimize the environmental impact of fashion production and consumption...], R22 [... I feel moral satisfaction acting in this way...]	R5 [... good advertising and attracting consumers. No more.], R18 [... green brain washing... It works, but nothing more in reality. Can you produce sustainable clothes at low prices? (question)]
Importance of Sustainability in the Design Process	R3 [Very important. we only use recycled materials. This is our motto...], R19 [my brand for our team is like a disobedient child. More natural, the better the child (laughing)], R12 [... We are always looking for a new way to reduce production volumes, but at the same time to grow. That's our business model]	R5 [... its important, but difficult to implement...], R18 [... maybe it's important to customers, but they want not possible...], R21 [... our customers want fashionable cheap clothes. That says it all...]

Some research [10,14,66] confirms that the attitudes of fashion business creators (in our case we called them young designers) determine the perception of the market, as well as the greenness of the business model. Individual preferences are transferred into business practices, so it becomes important to integrate them into business processes as well.

The integration of the perception of sustainable development into business processes is usually analyzed in the contexts of social entrepreneurship and sustainable management. In these contexts, the manager, leader motivation, and green business philosophy are emphasized.

Other studies [22,67–69] claim that sustainable management and sustainable entrepreneurship are largely associated with the entrepreneur's motivation, and motives that determine the choice of a certain (in our case, sustainable) business model [61]. According to Crisp and Parekh (2022) [61], the motive for integrating the principles of a circular economy into a business model is the perception of changes in the business environment.

4.2. Motivations (Choices) for Creating Sustainable or Fast Fashion

During the research, when asking respondents what motivates fashion industry businesses to implement sustainable solutions, or the circular economy principles, two subcategories were distinguished: market and demand perception, and the business developer's perception of the importance of sustainable development (Table 3).

Market demand and consumer perception are key drivers of sustainable (or fast) fashion. This means that, in principle, the wishes of consumers are more closely followed. Consumer demand goes together with innovation and creativity as motivators to create sustainable fashion. Increasingly, consumers are demanding fashion that is sustainable, ethical, and responsible. Designers who are attuned to consumer preferences and changing market trends are inspired to create sustainable fashion to meet this demand and tap into the growing market for environmentally and socially responsible fashion. R4 [... *we create, we experiment, and our customers understand it, that's why they choose us. Consumers today perceive the value they get when they buy a natural, recyclable product differently than in the past*]. However, the perception of the consumer may not encourage the creation of sustainable fashion. Designers creating fast fashion believe that there is not enough consumer demand for sustainable fashion and, therefore, they do not see it as a viable business model. They perceive that consumers prioritize factors such as price, style, and convenience over sustainability and, hence, do not see the need to create sustainable fashion. Respondents are motivated not to participate in the creation of sustainable fashion by the

traditional alignment with large fast fashion brands, and the perception of competition as a constant struggle for survival. Thus, the approach to the market and consumer perception acts as an important motivating tool to create or not create sustainable fashion products.

Table 3. Motivations for creating sustainable fashion.

Subcategories	Representatives of Sustainable Fashion	Representatives of Fast Fashion
Market, Demand Perception	R1 [... first of all it is the quality of the clothes. Natural materials do not cause allergic reactions in contact with the skin, the skin breathes...], R4 [... this is a challenge for us, but it is motivated by the user. We create for them because they want it...]	R5 [... business is motivated by market trends and the consumer, us too], R18 [... we are motivated by sales. Once we feel that sustainable clothing is in demand, we will likely move to this alternative, I don't know what motivates others]
Business Developer's Perception of the Importance of Sustainable Development.	R8 [... we contribute so that clothes are not thrown away, but recycled and thus lighten the burden on the earth], R17 [sounds trite, but the phrase that you need to act locally and think globally is my business motto...], R7 [the desire to make sustainable fashion fashionable, necessary and exclusive clothing for the consumer]	R13 [... motive is to be competitive. And what kind of competition can there be if a small business goes against the grain and tries to provide something other than the Zara or H&M chains that offer a lot... maybe in big markets, not here...], R21 [... for me personally that sustainability is redundant. I don't believe that... I don't know what motivates others]

Another subcategory emerged, related to the motives for creating or not creating sustainable fashion. This is the creator's perception of the concept of sustainable development. The aim is to adapt to change but not to initiate it. Based on the obtained results, we can say that contributing to a circular economy and creating sustainable fashion are encouraged by the following factors: environmental concerns, designers motivated by a genuine concern for the environment, and a desire to reduce the negative impact of the fashion industry on the planet. They are inspired by issues such as climate change, pollution, and depletion of natural resources, and may want to create eco-friendly fashion, use sustainable materials, and minimize waste [R12 ... *the motive is to participate in the action most people are concerned about*]. Long-term vision also motivates: some designers have a long-term vision and understand the importance of sustainability for the future of the fashion industry. They recognize that unsustainable practices are not viable in the long run and want to create fashion that is sustainable and future-proof, taking into consideration the well-being of future generations and the health of the planet [R8 ... *it must be good for my children and grandchildren to live after me because they will take over the business*]. It can be said that the motivation to satisfy the needs of consumers, which is supported by personal preferences and an understanding of the meaning of sustainability, becomes the essential motive for a small Lithuanian business to exist between the fast and sustainable fashion. The conducted study only confirms the results of other studies: the motivation of fashion designers affects the choice of sustainable or fast fashion development in business.

Researchers [10,70] consider the motivation of designers and fashion creators to be an important factor to achieve consistency in the fashion industry. Motivation is determined by factors such as moral attitudes, the desire to be active in the field of sustainable development, and the desire to stand out and gain a competitive advantage. Sustainable fashion has become a growing trend in the fashion industry, with designers increasingly motivated to create environmentally and socially responsible fashion.

4.3. Opportunities for Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

As we discussed, the fashion industry is one of the largest contributors to global environmental pollution, and there is a growing need for sustainable practices to reduce the industry's impact. However, there are various opportunities for sustainability in the fashion industry that can help to mitigate this impact [10,11].

One opportunity for sustainability is to use sustainable materials, such as cotton, hemp, bamboo, and recycled polyester. These materials are environmentally friendly, and their use can help to reduce the environmental impact of the fashion industry. Another opportunity is to apply circular economy principles, to change the production chain, save water resources, and to use fewer chemicals. There are many ways to ensure the movement of players in the textile industry towards an environmentally friendly production system. It is also important to mention the essential EU documents, according to which there is an intention to fundamentally reorganize the textile industry by 2030, and the implementation of essential changes is projected for the year 2024. The EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles [71] talks about establishing mandatory ecological design requirements, abandoning the practice of destroying unsold or returned textile products, greater producer responsibility, encouraging the reuse and recycling of textile waste, requirements for providing information about textile products, and the introduction of a product passport. The aim is to demystify fast fashion and to develop the skills needed for a green and digital transformation. The Sustainable and Circular Economy Strategy of the EU envisages the development of a regulation on the ecological design of sustainable products by 2024. Currently, voluntary initiatives are being regulated, such as the EU ecolabel criteria for textile products [72] and the EU green public procurement criteria for textile products and services [35,38,39]. What opportunities do research participants see for the creation of sustainable fashion now or in the future (Table 4)?

Table 4. Opportunities for the creation of sustainable fashion.

Subcategories	Representatives of Sustainable Fashion	Representatives of Fast Fashion
Growing Demand for Sustainable Products	R3 [... customers satisfaction of course], R17 [... not sure, but maybe growing demand]	R13 [... maybe the growing demand among wealthy consumers]
Niche Market Positioning:	R8 [Upcycled or recycled fashion is a trend now...], R12 [Minimalist or capsule wardrobe fashion... which emphasize quality over quantity...]	R14 [... it could be local or artisanal fashion... its popular to emphasize vintage fashion now], R18 [... fashion from secondhand clothes]
Innovation in Materials and Production Techniques	R10 [... We are expanding our search for ecological cotton producers and want to switch to this cotton only], R5 [in the production of women's clothing, in production we are moving to a pre-order system only]	R6 [... need to renew production. We are currently only saving electricity...], R16 [... can search for producers of ecological materials... for selling to use only online stories]. R21 [... we can promise to plant a tree for your product].
Longevity and Durability of Products	R5 [... We sew a lot of clothes from linen. When worn responsibly, such clothes are not only of high quality, but I would say they are worn for a very long time...], R19 [... Quality can also be fashionable. We are going to get the necessary certificates...].	R16 [... switch to natural materials. After all, it's quality, but needs an affluent customer].

Those who create sustainable and fast fashion see the possibilities in the creation of sustainable fashion. The possibilities are most clearly visible: growing demand for sustainable products, niche market positioning, innovation in materials and production techniques, and longevity and durability of products. There is also a visible possibility to educate and grow the awareness of customers through marketing about sustainable fashion opportunities. Although the respondents agree that there are many and various opportunities to create sustainable fashion, they are still viewed with some distrust. R11 [... *there are many possibilities. But more theoretical, not for our small market*], R20 [... *fast fashion is booming in our market. sustainable fashion also exists, but there are still too few consumers for it*]. Therefore, it can be assumed that, in principle, the creation of sustainable fashion is perceived, but with all the possibilities of losing the occupied market. Furthermore, the transition to the creation of sustainable fashion requires investment not only in production but also in distribution. There is a fear of losing existing customers by focusing on higher

sales with a relatively low price strategy, rather than lower sales with a strategy for higher prices and better quality.

Such an assessment (of distrust) can be related to a lack of knowledge about the latest EU regulations regarding the sustainable textile industry. During the research, it was asked whether the respondents are familiar with the EU policy in the case of sustainable textiles [R10: *I can't say that I follow the information and know everything very well. However, we know the general trends and regulations rules*]. The respondents noticed that in Lithuania there were a lot of discussions about the support of EU structural funds for textile manufacturers in the transition to a circular economy, but now such opportunities are not offered. During the research, it was found that both sustainable and fast fashion designers are interested in the latest resolutions and regulations that directly affect the textile industry. However, during the interviews, it became clear that the interest is rather fragmented and not focused on predicting strategic changes in current activities. As mentioned earlier, although there is both a positive and a skeptical point of view towards the sustainability efforts of the fashion industry, the motivation to take advantage of all possible opportunities and alternatives offered by a circular economy is not high.

4.4. Challenges to Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

The analyzed data indirectly show that despite the personal perception of sustainability and seeing opportunities, there is still a sense of uncertainty and fear of risk in creating sustainable fashion. The respondents see many challenges associated with the transition to sustainable fashion. Fletcher (2013), Barnes and Lea-Greenwood (2006), and Kirsi Niinimäki (2015) [12,53,73] argue that creating fashion based on a circular economy is always associated with challenges. Fashion creators and producers have to think about the reorganization of the entire production chain, face problems in finding suppliers, and also have to rethink marketing actions. This is all about reshaping the strategic management of the entire fashion business. It is possible to reorient production from a linear to a circular economy in stages. However, the transition in stages is also associated with strategic choices, which may be challenged by the lack of support for the industry, balancing between sustainability and profitability, low awareness of consumer sustainability, and other challenges (Table 5).

We have divided the challenges mentioned by the respondents according to the sub-categories established. Limited resources are highlighted. Limited resources are perceived as one of the fundamental challenges in creating sustainable fashion. Both sustainable and fast fashion manufacturers emphasize the lack of financial resources above all. It is also emphasized that there is not only a lack of financial resources to invest in production, development, and securing the production chain by buying ecological, natural materials. There is also a lack of human resources. Some of the interviewees stated that seamstresses work part-time and also work with business licenses, so they are not employed by the company. Therefore, there is a lack of people who can make a strategic investment plan. It is difficult for small businesses to attract investment. The makers of sustainable fashion emphasized that attracting consumers, selling online, and organizing sales on social networks based on "living stories" requires spending a lot of money. Selling on Etsy is time-consuming and requires excellent marketing skills, but the problem is hiring a professional marketing specialist.

Limited market access can also be considered a challenge. Small fashion enterprises are facing challenges in accessing markets for sustainable fashion products. Building brand awareness, marketing, and the distribution of sustainable fashion products to a wider consumer base can be difficult, especially when competing with larger fashion companies with established market presence and resources for marketing and distribution. It is considered that is difficult to compete with famous fashion brands. The challenge is finding the balance between sustainability and profitability. We called it balancing sustainability with affordability. This balance was not mentioned as a challenge by any designer who is currently creating sustainable fashion. However, fast fashion makers

believe that their profits and market share may be reduced by purchasing more expensive sustainable materials in the market and then selling the product in the market at a higher price. It is believed that the transition to sustainable fashion will not bring profit to the company, as it will have to invest a lot in the search for new suppliers and marketing actions. It is believed that the consumer will not be able to purchase expensive products. It is asserted that, after all, the personal perception of the market and coherence forms the appropriate attitude towards the business activity being carried out. Therefore, challenges and obstacles are emphasized instead of opportunities. Representatives of the fashion industry realize that the consumer, with their expectations and purchasing behavior, is very important in the 21st century. How the consumer perceives fashion also depends on the attitude of fashion producers and creators towards what the fashion market needs: sustainable and fast. That is what we called limited consumer awareness and demand. It is important to remember that goal 12 of Agenda 2030 is to “ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns” [45]. The research confirms that a matching attitude of producer and consumer can act as a driving force for businesses to move towards sustainability. Scaling sustainability means that, for this moment, respondents are facing challenges in maintaining consistent sustainability practices, ensuring supply chain traceability, and meeting increasing demand while upholding sustainability values.

Table 5. Challenges in the sustainable fashion industry.

Subcategories	Representatives of Sustainable Fashion	Representatives of Fast Fashion
Limited Resources	R8 [... we don't have finance for certification...]	R6 [... finance and human resources. We are small and only few years in market...], R13 [...no finance for suppliers, for marketing...]
Limited Market Access	R17 [... of course marketing and distribution. Not easy to sell, but possible, possible...]	R11 [... how to compete with big and famous brands?], R15 [... in this case, I think the biggest challenges to rebuilding brand image]
Balancing Sustainability with Affordability		R6 [... it's not about our possibilities to buy sustainable materials. It's very expensive.], R18 [... how to navigate between expensive materials and consumers' solvency]
Limited Consumer Awareness and Demand	R10 [we are trying to change consumer awareness of fashion], R19 [... to attract more young and motivated consumers]	R14 [to attract consumers... our consumers are not green...], R21 [... fast fashion is more attractive. You can buy, to wear sometimes and to buy new...]
Scaling Sustainability	R4 [... we are growing and it's not easy to adapt all principles], R12 [... it is difficult to ensure the recycling process], R19 [how to ensure supply chain traceability...]	R13 [... it is better to create a new green brand than to change an existing one]
Lack of Industry Support from the Government	R12 [lack of financial and project support], R17 [... no support from the government in education sustainable consumption].	R13 [there is no state policy to support the sector...]

The fragmentation of the implementation of the circular economy principles was also evident. During the research, not a single case was found that indicated that sustainable fashion is created and realized after a complete conversion to the principles of a circular economy. The creation of sustainable fashion is understood as the selection of appropriate and responsible suppliers, and the use of natural materials for the production of clothing, as well as emphasizing the environmental friendliness, durability, and quality of such clothing in marketing and advertising. Furthermore, a few respondents indicated that they provide good working conditions for their employees. Although working conditions were not highlighted separately in the study, this component is extremely important in the fashion industry. It was mentioned earlier that some of the interviewees, including those who design sustainable fashion, indicated that employees work with company certificates but

are not employed by the company. In the long run, such work may reduce the employee's social benefits and retirement pension, so it is not a sustainable solution from the company's point of view. Most of the designers who create sustainable fashion stated that they cannot ensure that the garments they produce are recycled and sorted properly and responsibly after they are worn. Analysis of the data from the interviews with fast fashion designers revealed not only a lack of desire to create sustainable fashion, but also a lack of knowledge about how a circular economy works, where to start, and how to implement the principles of a circular economy. In general, there is a lack of public and government support. As R12 noted, [*... there is a lot of talk on social media about sustainable vehicles and greening cities, but almost nothing about what we wear, which I would have expected at all in the textile industry. After all, there are many small textile companies, and the future of all of us is not clear, especially under the conditions of war and high inflation*]. This highlights the lack of financial and project support from the state and various funds, or difficult access to such funds for small and medium enterprises.

4.5. Suggestions for Improving Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

Starting a sustainable fashion business requires a commitment to sustainability and a willingness to invest time and resources in developing sustainable practices [9,15,21,33]. In most cases, it is recommended to start using sustainable materials such as cotton, linen, bamboo, etc., and to create partnerships with ethical suppliers. Small companies can partner with ethical suppliers who prioritize sustainability in their operations. This can help to ensure that their products are produced in an environmentally and socially responsible manner. In addition, it is recommended to reduce waste by implementing measures to reduce waste. This can include recycling and reusing materials, reducing packaging, and implementing a circular business model to rethink water usage. Small companies can reduce water usage by using water-efficient equipment and processes, and by choosing materials that require less water during production. It is possible to encourage responsible consumption by promoting the durability and longevity of their products. This can be achieved through providing care instructions and repairing products. Rethinking the support of local communities may be a solution to developing sustainable fashion: companies can support local communities by sourcing materials locally and partnering with local artisans and craftspeople. This can help to reduce the environmental impact of transportation and support local economies. During the research, it became clear which recommendations and suggestions the young Lithuanian designers who create sustainable fashion would make (Table 6).

If we summarize the suggestions of the informants, we can say that the main factor in transforming a fashion business into a sustainable business (if it is a small, recently developed business) is the totality of knowledge about sustainable solutions for the fashion business. The informants mentioned that the knowledge and ability to select appropriate solutions for developing a sustainable fashion business are not always enough. It is important to emphasize that the informants associate knowledge about the circular economy model and sustainable fashion business with personal interests. Personal attitudes and awareness of sustainability seem to be one of the most important factors in choosing a sustainable fashion business. An important factor in the development of slow fashion is the ability to choose sustainable materials and ethical suppliers. Moreover, trust in the supplier and information about the supplier are also important factors here, since the results of the study show that some informants have encountered suppliers who provided false information about their materials, and could not provide documents and certificates confirming the compatibility of the materials. As the informants pointed out [*... you can trust the large material supplier companies more, but the materials they offer are more expensive. And when looking for smaller suppliers and cheaper material prices, you have to carefully check the information provided by such suppliers...*] As well as the choice of local producers in the selection of materials, the informants perceive this as one of the ways to develop slow fashion, and also to contribute to the support of the local economy. Informants realize that

the success of their business is linked to informing consumers. Consumer information is treated not only as providing the necessary information to the consumer but also as a way to promote one's products and, thus, attract new customers. Most informants lack reliable consumer research that would help in business development, especially in choosing the right consumer segment and predicting possible marketing actions. Consumer research, according to the informants, should be conducted by professionals, that is, research centers at universities. This research should be encouraged and supported by the state [*... it is important for all textile sector*]. For a small fashion business to apply the principles of a circular economy, to create sustainable slow fashion, state support in the most diverse forms is necessary. Moral support is necessary [*... small businesses create jobs, and bring unique new ideas to the market, so it's important to feel supported and encouraged...*] Informational support is also important: notifications about changes in laws and about pending decisions that directly affect the fashion industry [*... training, courses on the implementation of circular economy principles in small companies, possibility to contact consultants... participate in small business support programs, learn about social business in the fashion industry...*] Informational support is associated with financial support. Although the informants claim that they know that there is a possibility to receive EU support, and that there are funds that support the transition to sustainable business practices, digitization solutions, and other initiatives, they are unable to prepare applications themselves due to the lack of human resources and skills [*... very confusing and complicated... applications should be much simpler... requires a business plan, and how to prepare it is not clear. However, there are many consultants, but you need to pay a lot of money, but there is no guarantee that we will win a grant...*]

Table 6. Most characteristic suggestions from sustainable fashion representatives.

Subcategories	Representatives of Sustainable Fashion
Knowledge, Interest	R7 [choose reliable information and be interested in this area... and pay attention to the information. We have already had the experience of linen with chemical additives being sold as completely natural...], R19 [... thinking that what you are doing is the only one right way... respect not others but yourself acting in this way... select the information that you can use].
Sustainable Materials	R3 [search for sustainable materials and use them. If cotton, why not choose natural?], R17 of course sustainable materials, local materials... our famous linen...]
Customers Informing	R8 [Producing such kind of clothes it's a good way to inform our customers...], R10 [... we need to inform about our values and relationship with nature...]
Consumer Research	R5 [Maybe to involve universities to do research...], R7 [Sector needs data about Lithuanian consumers, but no abilities to collect...], R19 [... someone needs to start collecting and presenting data about the modern sustainable young generation...]
Active Support of the Government: Moral, Informational, and Financial	R10 [... if there is no support from the government, I don't think that sustainability will be achieved soon...], R17 [... this industry will not change without the support and the right solution... the market is small, the supply is huge...], R19 [they (government) must support our sector... morally and helping with information (new regulations, law, nearest future)...]
A Lithuanian Platform of Ethical Suppliers and Manufacturers	R3 [... to collect all in one place... for ideas, contacts, promotion...], R8 [... one in one place—from new regulations, useful information, suppliers of course too...]

Informants mentioned the need for a system, which we called a resource platform, where one could easily navigate and find all the necessary information. [*... Each supplier profile would provide detailed information about the company, including its production process, certifications, and policies. This information would enable us to make informed decisions about purchases... someone must be responsible for verifying the integrity of suppliers*]. Such a platform may have to provide information on legal aspects of slow fashion, and also project financing. It could be a place to present Lithuanian small textile companies and promote them.

Overall, the research revealed the fundamental aspirations of sustainable fashion designers, which, in some aspects, were comparable to those working in fast fashion.

5. Discussion

The scientific and methodological literature on sustainable fashion issues and the implementation of circular economy principles in the fashion industry is enormous. It is easy to get lost in this abundance and selectively choose only certain sources. This is not only true for people working in research, but also for institutions working practically in the industry. Moreover, in the EU alone, numerous strategies, regulatory methods for the textile industry, and tools for the development of sustainable fashion have been developed. Ambitious targets are set for the transition to sustainable fashion by 2030. Research reports and statistical data show that the fashion and textile industry is responsible for a huge negative impact on the environment around us. Data from various studies shows that this industry is only in an intermediate position between sustainable and fast fashion [10–15,17–21].

Most theoretical scientific studies emphasised the importance and necessity of the transition to a circular economy in the fashion industry [10,14,15,23]. However, the risks and negative consequences of a hasty approach to sustainable fashion are analyzed less, though many problems exist. Small- and medium-sized enterprises in the fashion industry that have only been active in the market for a short time are primarily trying to establish themselves, occupy, and gain the market. This is the crucial moment when the creator of a new brand has a choice. Which one to choose? Fast fashion, which is still very popular, allows you to experiment with an abundance of collections and is attractive to consumers because of the relatively low price [14,16]. Or do you choose the more complicated route and create sustainable slow fashion? Or perhaps you decide to position yourself in the middle? To “pay tribute” to the growing popularity of sustainable fashion but, at the same time, take a share of the fast fashion market? The conducted study tried to find these answers based on an empirical study conducted in Lithuania.

The results of the study only confirm the findings of other researchers [10,12,13]. Small- and medium-sized enterprises in the textile industry only partially apply the principles of a circular economy in their activities. However, there are isolated cases that show that small companies are preparing for sustainable fashion certification. Creators of slow fashion believe in growing awareness of the ethical and environmental concerns associated with fast fashion, which may influence designers.

To sum up the answer to the problematic questions of the study, young Lithuanian designers positively evaluate the principles of a circular economy that enables the development of sustainable fashion. However, this depends primarily on the attitude of the designer or brand developer towards sustainability in general. Different motives to create something that is sustainable or profitable depend on the customer profile and on personal preferences. Although the opportunities offered by the development of sustainable fashion are perceived, there are still challenges, such as lack of knowledge, funding, and the unclear position of the country’s government, combined with the awareness of interested parties.

However, the position of the creators of fast fashion and the identification of the benefits of this fashion are linked to cost efficiency, fast delivery times, and meeting consumer demand for fashionable and affordable clothing. Creators also believe in the potential benefits that fast fashion can bring, such as making clothing more accessible to a wider audience. A different view of consumer needs in fashion industry products, linked to personal attitudes towards sustainable development, encourages choosing a particular position when acting in the fashion industry. Designers’ decisions in the fashion industry can be influenced by changing consumer preferences, regulations, industry innovations, and market demand. Keeping up with these changing dynamics and being guided by sustainability and ethical considerations can be crucial for designers to make informed long-term decisions. By taking these factors into account, designers can help to create a more sustainable and responsible fashion industry. However, there is a legitimate question about the choice of a sustainable business model. After all, these are the same factors that drive fast fashion manufacturers to operate in the market. Let us take consumer practices. A fashion designer is also a consumer of his own or other manufacturers’ products. Therefore, we can say that despite the factors in the textile and fashion industry that are often studied,

analyzed, and implemented, fast fashion still finds both its consumer and its producer. This is similar to slow, sustainable fashion. In the move to a circular economy as a method of creating sustainable fashion, the factors that encourage the fashion industry to move towards sustainability, such as government support, consumer education, availability of innovation, and knowledge about sustainable fashion, are likely to work. Factors that inhibit fast fashion are consumer awareness and stricter legal regulations.

The qualitative research conducted provides certain insights that enable us to form an opinion about small businesses in the fashion industry in Lithuania. The results of the research reveal different points of view that illustrate the existing gap between the market for fast and slow fashion designers and consumers' perceptions. They also show that there is a fundamental need to address the challenges associated with creating sustainable fashion. Some of the challenges are indirectly related not to the functioning mechanisms of the industry or the fashion market, but to the lack of financial and moral support from the government and the problem of insufficient emphasis on the need for sustainability in the textile industry.

Although the EU has many regulations promoting the sustainability of sustainable fashion and the textile industry, there is too little talk about it in Lithuanian public space. However, it should be noted that the fundamental drawback of qualitative research is the reliability of the data and the ability to representatively reflect the entire general population. It should also be appreciated that different data may be obtained in different countries, taking into account economic, cultural, social, and political circumstances. To better understand the intentions of creating sustainable fashion and the integration of circular economy principles into fashion industries, especially in the case of small companies, further development of research is intended, combining qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. Consumers of fashion industry products and other interested parties should be included in the quantitative research. By repeating the qualitative research, representatives of medium and large companies in the fashion industry operating in Lithuania should also be involved to develop practical advice for small, young companies in the fashion industry, which could include aspects of clustering, technology sharing, and the ability to attract investment. This is in order for this Lithuanian sector to get out of the situation of "in-between" and be able to create sustainable fashion.

6. Conclusions

Theoretical contribution. The analysis of the academic literature, laws, regulations, and empirical studies shows that a great deal of effort is being made in both the academic and legislative spheres to enable the field of sustainable textile production. The continued academic interest in the fashion industry and the sustainability factors of these industries should not be seen as populism but as a need to understand the mechanisms that enable possible changes in this industry.

Practical implications. Firstly, it was found that the attitude of young Lithuanian designers towards a circular economy in the context of fast and sustainable fashion is crucial for shaping the future of fashion in Lithuania. Our analysis has shown that many young designers are taking positive steps towards adopting circular economy principles in their design practice, reflecting a growing awareness of sustainability issues in the fashion industry. This represents a great opportunity for the fashion industry in Lithuania to develop a more responsible and sustainable approach to fashion production and consumption. On the other hand, some of the fashion designers who participated in the survey are not yet ready to actively participate in the process of creating sustainable fashion.

However, it is important to acknowledge the challenges that young design companies may face in adopting circular economy practices, such as lack of resources and training, as well knowledge (scaling sustainability). It is important that all stakeholders, including designers, policymakers, and consumers, work together to overcome these challenges and create an enabling environment for sustainable fashion practices. By embracing the principles of the circular economy, young Lithuanian design companies can contribute

to a more environmentally and socially responsible fashion industry, setting an example for future generations of fashion professionals. Let us work towards a future where the principles of the circular economy are embedded in the DNA of the fashion industry in Lithuania, leading to a more sustainable and ethical fashion landscape.

Even after the research has been conducted, the question of how to get fast fashion manufacturers to produce sustainable fashion in Lithuania remains open. However, in principle, it is likely that strong leadership and entrepreneurship, which is connected primarily with the personal individual attitudes of the creator, and the brand manager will be analyzed and studied. Personal responsibility and awareness of the importance of sustainable development is one important aspect. It cannot be ruled out that when there is a lot of talk about the need for sustainability (a green, circular economy) these ideas begin to be questioned as moderate and significant. This is especially so in cases where, next to the abundance of information, there is paradoxically the fragmentation of the same information. In principle, this is also shown by the results of the conducted research. Regardless of whether it is influenced by fast fashion or slow fashion, the informants rarely mention sustainable solutions, such as organizing sales exclusively online, manufacturing exclusively according to orders, etc. They accept these and perceive them as a given, normal or modern way of business organizing or a financial saving (even a disadvantage), but not as a movement towards sustainable circular economy solutions in the fashion industry. Therefore, the transition of the fashion industry to a circular economy should be accompanied by the provision of appropriate information, focusing on the awareness of market participants, talking to businesses not in scientific or legal language, but in business language, emphasizing benefits, value creation, with the business and the government sharing a risk model.

The conducted study applies a qualitative approach and provides certain insights that enable us to get pilot results about attitudes about circular economy principles in the fashion industry in Lithuania. The results of the research revealed different points of view that illustrate the existing gap between the market for fast and slow fashion designers and consumers' perceptions. Future research based on quantitative methods for analysis of quantitative data on investments in recycling and sustainable production in the Lithuanian fashion industry is necessary.

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Appendix A

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCRIPT.

Name, number of employees, time of the company or brand on the market, main activity, place of sale of goods, does the company have a website with or without a store. Are the company applying one of the 3R circular economy principles (Table A1)?

Table A1. Questionnaire instrument.

Category	Questions
Awareness of Sustainability in the Fashion Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does sustainability mean to you as a young designer (or young company's representative in the market)? • How important is slow, sustainable fashion concept for designers, producers? • How important is slow, sustainable fashion for market, customers? • How important is sustainability in your design process?
Motivations (Choices) for Creating Sustainable or Fast Fashion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think motivates you (if you are involved in the creation of sustainable fashion) or other representatives of the fashion industry to create sustainable fashion and implement circular economy principles? • Company's image as sustainable company. Can it be a motivator for young designers? • What motivates you personally to create and produce fashion products?
Opportunities for Sustainability in the Fashion Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the opportunities involved in the fashion industry in general? • Fast and slow fashion. In your opinion, where are the greater opportunities for operating in the Lithuanian market? • What are the possibilities for creating sustainable, sustainable fashion? • Just imagine that you are creating only sustainable fashion, what opportunities for such fashion you see?
Challenges to Sustainability in the Fashion Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the fundamental challenges of the fashion industry? • What are your brand challenges? • What are the biggest challenges for sustainable fashion designers?
* Suggestions for Improving Sustainability in the Fashion Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What advice or recommendations would you give in making the transition to sustainable fashion?

* Only for sustainable fashion designers.

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