Mapping the opportunity for circularity in fashion retail design and fit-out

Bethan Alexander[a], Rosemary Varley[b]

[a] London College of Fashion, University of the Arts, London

[b] London College of Fashion, University of the Arts, London

*Corresponding author e-mail: b.alexander@fashion.arts.ac.uk

https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2026.1198

Abstract:

While the fashion industry has accepted, conceptually at least, the benefits of circularity in the context of products and supply chains, little has been written about circularity within the wider context of fashion store design and fit-out. Yet, these aspects of planning and operating retail outlets are central to an industry sector which significantly contributes to local and global economies. This paper comprises an integrated review of academic and industry literature to form themes for future research development. The review revealed four key knowledge gaps: a paucity of data to understand how circularity is implemented in fashion retail design practice; how to measure the effectiveness of circularity related to retail design and fit-out; how and why circularity in retail design and fit-out could reflect a retail brand's approach to product design and management; and how the changing role of physical stores might influence circularity in fashion retail fit-out design.

Keywords: circularity; retail design; retail fit-out; fashion

1. Introduction

While fashion consumers have embraced digital touchpoints within omnichannel shopping journeys (Lynch & Barnes, 2020), the physical store retains a central but evolving role (Alexander & Varley, 2025). Within that evolution, store designs need to adapt to new purposes associated with phygital retail (Batat, 2024) such as facilitating the fulfilment of online orders (click and collect), receiving returns, accepting items for recycling, incorporating repair services and so on. Concurrent with the development of online and mobile retailing, increasing interest in circular business models within the fashion industry has been evident (Abdelmeguid et al., 2022) and while fashion retailers have accepted, at least conceptually, the benefits of circular business models/circularity in the context of fashion products and supply chains, little is known about circularity within a wider fashion retail context, which includes store design and fit-out (Whiting et al., 2023). Our research intends to spotlight fashion retail design and fit-out and map the nature and scope of circularity within that context. The aims of this paper are therefore as follows:

- To scope the extent and nature of circularity in fashion retail design and fit-out;
- To establish the extent to which fashion retail brands have responded to the opportunity to adopt circularity in the creation of their selling environments;
- To identify research gaps within this field of study for onward development including empirical research.

The paper takes the form of a preliminary literature review. By integrating insights from scholarly and industry sources, we identify existing knowledge gaps along with potential theoretical, managerial, and practical contributions, with the goal to help retail designers understand and implement the principles of circularity while encouraging retail leadership to view the principles of circularity as integrated across operational areas, and through transition, as an underpinning philosophy of their brand purpose.

2. Method

This paper assimilates industry and academic sources, including fashion market contextualising reports, retail industry reports, specifically produced professional stakeholder reports, and academic papers. This literature was gathered using search terms relevant to the research aims (such as ‘circularity in retail design’) in various available University databases (such as ABI Inform). This resulted in an initial review of secondary sources on circularity in fashion retail design and fit-out. This preliminary literature review forms the precursor to a planned systematic literature review which will follow the PRISMA (BMJ, 2021) process. This paper documents the outcome of the first stage of a systematic review where the search terms are built, an overview of the subject field is generated, and research questions are formulated. It is the beginning of the systematic approach to the literature review process recommended by Noblit and Hare (1988).

3. Literature review

3.1 The fashion retail context

In 2025 fashion retail sales in the UK reached £58.3 billion (Euromonitor, 2025), thereby accounting for around 12% of the total for all retailing. Despite the rise of e-commerce, 68% of global retail sales still occur within physical stores (Euromonitor, 2025). With a forecast growth rate of around 3.5% between 2025 and 2029 (Statista, 2025), the fashion retail industry remains an economic driving force for the UK economy.

Store design in physical fashion retail outlets has traditionally involved a higher level of aesthetic and atmospheric design (Kent & Petermans, 2017) in pursuit of a branded world where immersive storytelling and customer engagement can thrive (Alexander & Varley, 2025). In contrast, in other important retail sectors such as grocery, store retail designs veer towards optimising space allocations and product productivity, and efficiency in store management operations (Kent & Petermans, 2017). Moreover, fashion stores need to avoid being perceived as 'dated' while remaining responsive to customer tastes and shopping behaviours (Alexander & Varley, 2025; Münster et al., 2022; Snyman & Khan, 2019) leading to frequent fit-out changes or refurbishments (Mesher, 2010; Münster et al., 2022). In general, interior replacements occur 6-8 times over a typical 60-year lifespan of a store (Circle Economy Foundation (CEF), 2024; Greater London Authority (GLA), 2022) but in the case of fashion stores, the design life of a fit-out is between 5 and 10 years (Fieldson & Rai, 2009). Furthermore, short-term retail (pop-ups), while positive in terms of use of dormant retail space (Picot-Coupey, 2014), exacerbate the turnover of retail fit-out resources (Kent & Petermans, 2017). Frequent changes to physical retail environments come not only at a financial cost but also a significant environmental cost; for example, over a retail store lifetime, fit-outs are estimated to contribute an additional 60% to building embodied carbon after 10 years (CEF, 2024; GLA, 2022).

3.2. The problem: the environmental impact of the built environment and fashion retail fit-out

The fashion industry's reputation as a global polluting giant is well known. Carbon emissions, yarn, fabric, and other toxic waste as a result of garment production, water pollution from dyes and finishing processes, discarded garment waste in both land and water all together amount to 10% of global carbon emissions and 92 million tonnes of waste annually (Maiti, 2024). At the current rate of consumption, the fashion industry is using over 25% of the global carbon budget (Business of Fashion, 2024). Less well known, however, is the contribution to environmental damage made by the building and fit-out of fashion stores.

The construction industry is responsible for significant resource depletion and waste generation. The built environment accounts for 25% of UK greenhouse gas emissions, with construction contributing 10.8 million tonnes of CO_2 annually and generating over 60% of total waste (Statista, 2023). Overall, retail accounts for 31% of greenhouse gas emissions related to UK consumption (Fresen, 2024). Fit-out materials like steel, aluminium, plasterboard, and MDF (medium-density fibreboard) significantly impact carbon emissions and environmental unsustainability. Steel emits 1.85 tonnes of CO_2 per tonne, contributing 7-9% of global emissions annually, while aluminium releases 16.5 tonnes per tonne due to fossil fuel-dependent production (World Steel Association (WSA), 2023; International Aluminium Institute (IAI), 2022). Plasterboard and MDF production are energy-intensive and emit volatile organic compounds (Statista, 2023). Widely used in retail fit-out, MDF often ends up in landfills, releasing methane as it degrades (House of Commons (Environmental Audit Committee), 2022). In addition, the transportation of globally sourced materials further inflates emissions (House of Commons (Environmental Audit Committee), 2022). Like so many industry sectors, retail generally operates on a linear ‘take-make-waste' model, with constant refurbishment driving material consumption and waste. Despite various Circular Economy (CE) reports to support the understanding and adoption of circularity (e.g. British Retail Consortium (BRC) 2024; Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF), 2021), less than 10% of the built environment is circular (CEF, 2024) and the concept of CE in the interior design industry remains nascent (Leising et al., 2018).

3.*3 Circularity as a potential solution to environmental damage*

To counteract the continuing damages caused by the linear approaches that dominate fashion business models (especially in the fast fashion sector), the concept of circularity has emerged within the sustainable fashion agenda (EMF, 2021). This builds on a growing scholarly interest in the CE concept and circular business models (e.g. Bocken et al., 2016; Smol et al., 2024), and circularity more generally (e.g. Bakker et al., 2018; Sewenet et al., 2026), More specifically the rise in interest in circularity has been reported in the context of buildings (Motiei et al., 2024; Rashdan & Ashour, 2024) and the fashion industry (Abdelmeguid et al., 2022, 2024). Having reviewed 221 definitions of circularity, Kirchherr et al., (2023) concluded circularity is a holistic concept underpinned by the principles of reducing, reusing, recycling and recovering throughout a lifecycle (which includes design, production, use, end-of-use/disposal and recovery) Within CE , repurpose and reuse are built into the design, making, sourcing, and disposal of products to simultaneously minimize waste and maximise value (Weetman, 2016).

Projects like the British Fashion Council (BFC)’s Circular Fashion Ecosystem (BFC, 2024) have attempted to mobilise the fashion industry to achieve the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, but they focus exclusively on product-level circularity, neglecting broader applications like retail design. Similarly, other programs, including the Circular Fashion Innovation Report (UK Fashion and Textiles Network (UKFT), 2025) and WRAP’s (Waste and Resource Action Programme) Circular Business Models Guide for Fashion (2023), strive to advance the UK’s transition to a circular fashion ecosystem, but they do not include retail design and fit-out leaving the environmental impacts of retail design and refurbishment unaddressed. These omissions hinder the development of a holistic and systematic approach to sustainability by retail organisations. The lack of data and actionable strategies relating to store design and fit-out reflects a wider lack of engagement with circularity within the construction industry. In 2024, The Circularity Gap Report produced by the Platform for Accelerating the Circular Economy (PACE) highlighted the significant environmental impact of built environment waste.

> *“While cities occupy just 3% of the globe’s total land surface, the extraction of minerals used to produce construction materials is responsible for a quarter of global land use change. And what’s more - construction, building use and demolition are*

responsible for over one-fifth of global nitrogen emissions and more than half of atmospheric aerosol loading." (PACE, 2024, p.28).

3.4 The potential for circularity in fashion retail design and fit-out

To address the environmental cost of unsustainable retail design practice, a shift is needed toward sustainable fit-out that prioritises reduced embodied carbon, sustainable material selection, optimisation of material use, and embraces CE principles to lower resource consumption and waste. Furthermore, energy-efficient technologies and systems integrated into retail fit-out can help reduce operational emissions, supporting the transition toward net zero (Global Alliance for Buildings and Construction, 2021; Royal Academy of Engineering, 2023).

In 2022, Arup, the UK's leading design, engineering, architecture planning company produced a comprehensive and detailed account of circularity within the retail built environment (Arup, 2022). The purpose of the report was to *"raise awareness on circular design approaches for the fit-out of stores, as part of a more comprehensive strategy for the transition towards a circular built environment"* (Arup, 2022, p.5). The report sets out 11 circular design principles and guidelines for retail store fit-out:

1. "Dematerialisation": Design and deliver the same product or service with none or less material and resources required.
2. "Responsible Sourcing": Specify and source materials and other resources regeneratively and sustainably.
3. "Performance Procurement": Maximise products utilisation by procuring sharing/service models rather than relying on individual ownership.
4. "Design for Durability": Design products that last and have a long lifespan, extended through fixing and repair.
5. "Design for Repair": Products can be designed so that parts are physically accessible for repair to prolong their life cycles.
6. "Design for Adaptability & Flexibility": Prevent premature obsolescence by developing a new design culture focused on adaptation to different use scenarios in the future.
7. "Design for Remanufacture": Exploit residual value of products by designing for facilitating reuse of parts of a discarded product in a new product with the same/different function.
8. "Design for Manufacturing and Assembly": Ensure that a product is designed so that it can be easily and efficiently manufactured and assembled with minimum effort, time, and cost.
9. "Design for Modularity": Establish uniformity across manufacturing materials and processes.

10. "Design for Recyclability": Prioritise easy recovery and recycling of end-of-life products so that they can be collected and recycled after use.
11. "Design for Disassembly": Products and components shall be designed so they can be deconstructed at end-of-life.

(Based on Arup, 2022 and Bocken et al. 2016)

While comprehensive in terms of the scope of circularity within retail design and fit-out, the report provides no indication about the extent and rate of adoption of CE principles by retailers. What the report does mention, however, is the relationship between the development of sustainable and circular strategy in product design, make and consumer disposal, and the approach towards retail-built environment and fit-out, acknowledging that a store can communicate brand identity to customers and influence market positioning. They stress the need for a corporate level commitment to circularity: *"Policies are key enablers for setting the directions and requirements to enable the circular transition. By applying circular economy principles at corporate level influences governance and dictates how value is created across the business."* (Arup, 2022, p.10). The sustainable fashion brand Ecoalf demonstrates how sustainable store design can be used to reinforce a sustainable product stance. For example, in their Madrid store, 3.3 tonnes of plastic waste was used in a 3D printed store installation evoking a melting glacier (see Perez-Bou et al., 2024); an emotive backdrop to the merchandise displayed, which connects product and store design.

Within extant literature on circular systems, there is some consensus on the nature of challenges and drivers associated with the implementation of sustainable or circular retail design, many of which act as both. For example, Dangana et al. (2012) found legislation, costs, and roles and responsibilities to have both inhibiting and encouraging influences on sustainable retail design, aligning with Abdelmeguid et al.'s (2022) reference to regulatory, cost and stakeholder pressures. Münster et al. (2022) found costs to be both a driver and a barrier to CE and that it was often a source of discussion with clients: *"Designers are completely dependent on market economics, and designers are beholden to the demands of their clients."* (Münster 2022, p.4). Within the literature we identified the proceeding themes where the influence on circularity acceptance is likely to be strongest for fashion retailers.

3.5 Regulatory pressure

Environmental regulations and acts of law that apply to carbon emissions and waste management, are the responsibility of governments, which in the UK fall under the auspices of the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs – DEFRA. These provide the framework in which moves towards the CE are bound. In 2022 Abdelmeguid et al. produced a comprehensive review of literature pertaining to the challenges of applying the principles of CE within the fashion industry. While centred on the design, making and consumption of fashion products, they identified both hard and soft aspects of business that act as barriers to, or motivators for CE application, which have relevance in the construction and fit-out of retail stores. The hard aspects relate to physical resources, statistical evidence, systems and techniques, technology utilisation, policy and business model innovation, while soft aspects are those that are more human related such as organisational behaviour. Within these categories regulatory pressures in the form of legislations and regulations - such as the UK's Carbon Budget and Growth Delivery Plan (Gov.uk, 2025), and corporate social responsibilities affecting how companies operate - such as stated commitments to carbon emissions reduction, were considered hard aspects, given the unavoidable and likely impact of them influencing businesses. They also identified differing regulations in countries where suppliers may be located as a compounding issue.

3.6 Geopolitical pressure

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN n.d.) are a bold and comprehensive set of principles that frame the voluntary sustainability ambitions and commitments to sustainability and climate action across all industry sectors globally. These principles are the focus of the annual COP (Conference of the Parties) hosted by the UN. Although the COP gatherings have put a global geopolitical lens on sustainability and have resulted in significant agreements and mission statements, there are some arguments, ignited by the climate-change-sceptic US Government, that global environmental concerns are a weaker geopolitical headwind. Nevertheless, many countries remain committed to the principles of COP ambitions to reach net zero, and the likelihood that a more responsible attitude to environmental and climate changes will prevail. In the UK, for example, the government has recognised the built environment is responsible for approximately 25% of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions (as estimated in 2022/23) and has emphasised the urgent need to reduce emissions by 68% by 2030 to meet national climate goals (House of Commons, 2022). Given the global nature of fashion in both production and retail, international geopolitical influences are relevant to circularity ambitions in both long and short timeframes, and within local, national and global contexts.

3.7 Retail trends and peer pressure

The fashion industry's acknowledgement of its environmental responsibilities is helping to create the right environment for conversations about the wider opportunities for circularity. In addition, industry bodies within the architecture and building design sector are applying pressure on both designers and project clients. For example, RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) produced a report about circular design for buildings in the context of sustainability and CE (RIBA, 2020). It highlights the importance of considering CE principles to minimise the use of the planet's resources (RIBA, 2020). Circular design involves creating buildings and systems that can be reused, repurposed, or recycled at the end of their life, rather than being disposed. This approach aims to reduce waste and environmental impact by designing for longevity, adaptability, and the efficient use of materials (RIBA, 2020). The document also emphasizes the need for project teams to develop strategies that incorporate CE principles, such as sustainable land use, biodiversity, and sustainable life cycle value (RIBA, 2020). Overall, circular design is presented as a key aspect of achieving sustainability outcomes and reducing the environmental impact of construction projects (RIBA, 2020) and therefore will increasingly influence design and fit-out planning by retailers and their design service providers.

Arup (2022) stress the importance of a commitment to CE across stakeholders (for example, clients, design service providers, construction material suppliers and industry regulators):

> *"A transformational change in a company's business model to implement a wider vision and mindset shift to exploit value capturing strategies across the value chain... A multi-disciplinary and systematic approach through stakeholders' engagement is necessary to inform design decisions through collaboration"* (Arup, 2022 p. 46).

They further point out that retail brands need to anticipate trends and changes to government policies and industry regulations (Arup, 2022). This need for proactivity is echoed by Münster et al., (2022, p.2) *"This tension—between the demand for fast-paced renewal and the negative environmental impacts thus generated—creates an opportunity for retail design to be proactive in the transition to CE and provides motivation for revamping the design process".* Furthermore, Jaber et al. (2025) call for reframing the built environment as part of a broader, interconnected urban and ecological system (including buildings, transport infrastructure, public spaces and key societal dimensions such as culture and social norms) where decisions beyond retail sector-based optimisation can be implemented, underpinned by an understanding of a wider set of interconnected social, economic and environmental challenges.

3.8 Reuse and refurbishment of previous use or tenant occupation.

Most retail space is leased; therefore, a new fashion tenant will normally make changes to what is referred to by Fieldson & Rai (2009) as retailer-specific elements (flooring, display furniture, lighting and wall decoration).

> *"The design life of retail fit-out projects is short for a number of reasons. Stores may relocate if a better site becomes available that may improve footfall, fashion may require a brand overhaul and a new concept to be implemented, or space changes within a store may require major refurbishment. Sometimes the retail business is simply unsuccessful, and the store is closed within a few years"* (Fieldson & Rai, 2009).

This high turnover therefore leads to significant material wastage at the end of the service life of a fit-out or a tenancy period. Given that retail design is integral to fashion brand communication (Alexander & Varley, 2025) it is unlikely that fashion brand tenants will adopt a previous tenant's fit-out without making changes, but the opportunity to develop frameworks and protocols to enhance circularity could help retailers to avoid waste.

3.9 Creativity and innovation

The need for proactivity mentioned above also has implications for retail innovation and creativity. For example, stores can become multi-purpose, providing a venue for events such as fashion shows or workshops, driven by a localised marketing strategy (Arup, 2022; Alexander and Varley, 2025). These could encourage creativity and innovation, given that designers do not view the challenges presented by CE transition as a hindrance to their creativity (Münster et al., 2022).

Münster et al., (2022) additionally refer to the challenging balance between the demand for fresh and attractive stores and the need to be actively environmentally responsible. The positive corporate image outcomes of adopting sustainability in innovative retail design practice have been recognised for many years (Abdelmeguid et al., 2022; Dangana, 2012). For example Stella McCartney opened her first LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified store in 2011 and in 2018 the newly opened London flagship store introduced a range of sustainable elements into the store design, such as reclaimed timber, recycled foam seating, and mannequins made from biodegradable sugar-cane derived bioplastic. These innovative features reinforced the core brand values of Stella McCartney as sustainable luxury and demonstrated creative sustainable retail design practice that could contribute to CE (Radclyffe Thomas & Varley, 2019), The relationship between product brand and retail brand has not, however, been pursued in relation to research on circularity adoption. Alignment of retail brand values with approaches to product generation and physical brand environments could be an opportunity in the context of building the world of the brand in phygital fashion retail territories (Alexander and Varley, 2025).

> *"In the current trend, physical stores will increasingly have a completely different role: the main sales channel will be the e-commerce, while stores become the major point of contact between brands and customers. This allows to prioritze local existing context and slightly decouple the store refurbishment from volatile and changing trends driven by the sales activity."* (Arup, 2022, p. 35)

Further, Münster et al (2022) recognise there is a lack of empirical data and practical contributions regarding the role of retail designers in the transition to a CE. While there is theoretical and conceptual literature on CE, there is a paucity of studies that take the perspective of retail designers, resulting in a deficiency in understanding how designers can practically implement CE principles in their work.

3.10 Development of metrics for transformation

Extant literature refers to the thorny issue of developing suitable metrics to record the progress of transformation to circularity (Arup, 2022; Münster et al., 2022; UK Green Building Council (UKGBC), 2023). This reflects a growing recognition for new performance measures in retail more generally (Alexander & Varley, 2025) where traditional metrics are notoriously sales transaction orientated and not necessarily appropriate for a phygital retail brand that seeks to become part of the CE. Arup (2022, p.18) suggest omnichannel shopping behaviour "*is expected to unlock store design strategies from sales logics, becoming a sort of* *exhibition for the brand identity, as final stages of the purchase will be mainly online"*. Given this view of stores as an exhibition of identity, the contribution of circularity to the image of the brand exhibited is important to measure. Retail design and fit-out is integral to consumer experiences, but there is currently no common protocol on metrics with many companies reporting only against their own targets using disaggregated information (Arup, 2022). Furthermore, the achievement of circularity often relies on supply chain transformation and collaborations with suppliers, with whom successful relationships are developed over time and are rarely measured. Münster et al (2022) found that a well-established metric such as market share was not seen by retail designers to be within their scope of influence in terms of circularity. Providing clarity on metrics for transformation will help to build an accurate picture of circularity adoption in fashion retail design and fit-out.

In summary, these influencing factors, which may manifest as challenges, drivers or both, form a complicated context for circularity implementation. Regulatory and societal pressure at global, national and local level will drive businesses towards sustainable practices while industry bodies representing the built environment sector and fashion retail stakeholders continue to develop guidelines on how to transform to the circular economy, and how to measure success in that process. Business innovation and creativity will evidently drive circularity implementation alongside fashion retail evolution, helping to find approaches that balance tackling the challenge of frequent fit-outs with the need for unique branded retail environments.

4. Theoretical implications and research gaps

There is clear evidence within extant academic research (Leising et al, 2018; Münster et al., 2022; Whiting et al., 2023), the fashion retail sector (BFC, 2024; BRC, 2024; EMF, 2021; WRAP, 2023) and the built environment industry (Arup, 2022; GBC, 2023; PACE, 2024; RIBA 2020) that the concepts of circularity and CE are understood in these communities. In addition, the environmental impact of frequent changes to fit-out and the subsequent waste is acknowledged (CEF, 2024; Fieldson & Rai, 2009; GLA, 2022; Kent & Petermans, 2017). Furthermore, researchers (Abdelmeguid et al., 2022; Dangana et al., 2012; Münster et al., 2022) concur on the drivers and barriers that apply to the implementation of circularity within business contexts. These are applicable in general to fashion retail, however the evolution of the role of the store within an omnichannel or phygital retail strategy is changing (Alexander and Varley, 2025; Batat, 2024), and this will impact retail design and fit out. Indeed, the creation of a sustainable brand world that responds to new consumer behaviours and values could be a significant opportunity for circular retail design and fit-out (Arup, 2022; Alexander & Varley, 2025; Fieldson & Rai, 2009). While reports such as BFC (2024) and Arup (2022) set out the philosophy of circularity and guidelines about implementation there is no evidence of systematic and empirical research about how circularity is implemented within fashion retail strategies, despite the signs that some retail brands are active in this field (e.g. H&M Group, n.d.). Even less is known about how the success of circularity implementation is measured, given contemporary debates about metrics that apply in the era where retail formats and the boundaries between them blend and morph (Arup, 2022; Alexander, 2024; Alexander & Varley, 2025; Münster et al., 2022).

Our preliminary literature review found several themes where knowledge about circular fashion retail design and fit-out was rudimentary or lacking, presenting gaps as opportunities for further research. The first is to understand the scope of circularity within the specific context of fashion retail design and fit-out, building on extant research in CE product design and CE business models and to explore how circularity could be implemented in fashion retail design practice - from the perspective of retail fit-out designers, and other stakeholders such as fashion retail service users (clients), brand managers, and retail fit-out suppliers. The second is how to measure the effectiveness of circularity, relating to a diverse range of performance metrics, which are not defined in most instances. The third is how and why might a strategic approach to circularity in retail design and fit-out reflect the approach of a fashion brand to product design and management. The final gap is how the changing role of the physical store can influence circularity in fashion retail fit-out design.

5. Managerial implications

The regulatory and geopolitical forces continue to exert pressure on retail brands to consider their obligations with regards to a circular economy. In addition, societal values will continue to keep the concern for environmental impact high on the managerial agenda (Jaber et al., 2025). The preliminary review of industry sources suggests there is an inclination for change, and guidelines on how to think about circularity are available (BFC, 2024; BRC 2024; EMF, 2021), but there is little evidence of actual adoption in practice, and no specific recommendations for fashion retail strategies and operations. There is an opportunity therefore to draw up a set of clear and applicable recommendations that are grounded in best practice and pragmatic solutions. Flexibility in use (at both spatial planning level, - i.e. structure, internal partitions, flooring, lighting etc. and at fixture and fitting level - i.e. display units, furniture, visual merchandising props etc.) and alignment with brand values are likely drivers for fashion retailers, while a focus on cost to become a driver rather than a barrier is imperative. In addition, the building of a protocol for metrics to assess the successful implementation of circularity is likely to be of significant interest to fashion retail management.

The preliminary literature review suggests that the next stages of the research (systematic literature review and meta-analysis, and empirical research) will reveal further managerial implications and opportunities for recommendations to be drawn up specifically for fashion retail brands, their retail design partners and retail fit-out suppliers.

6. Future research plan

To explore the research gaps in more depth, we propose the following plan to take the research forward. The next stage will be a systematic literature search using the PRISMA process (BMJ, 2021), based on available University databases (including Scopus) supplemented by the identification of articles of interest using the AI-based Research Rabbit search tool. This will be followed by an extensive literature review based on sources selected to identify themes to underpin ensuing empirical study. Revisiting and confirming our research questions will be incorporated into this stage, and the methodological approach for the empirical research will be outlined.

7. References

Abdelmeguid, A., Afy-Shararah, M. & Salonitis K. (2022). Sustainable Production and Consumption, 32(July), 505-518. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352550922001294

Abdelmeguid, A., Afy-Shararah, M. & Salonitis, K. (2024). Towards circular fashion: management strategies promoting circular behaviour along the value chain, Sustainable Production and Consumption, 48. 143–156. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.spc.2024.05.010.

Arup (2022). Circular fit-out in retail stores: circular design principles. London: Arup. https://www.arup.com/insights/circular-fit-out-in-retail-stores/

Alexander, B., 2024. Customer Experience in Fashion Retailing: Merging Theory and Practice. Routledge, London. Publishing ISBN 9781032453002.

Alexander, B. & Varley, R. (2025) Retail futures: Customer experience, phygital retailing, and the Experiential Retail Territories perspective, Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services. 82. 104108. 10.1016/j.jretconser.2024.104108.

Bakker, C., den Hollander, M., & van Hinte, E. (2018). Products That Last. BIS Publishers.

Batat, W. (2024). What does phygital really mean? A conceptual introduction to the phygital customer experience (PH-CX) framework. Journal of Strategic Marketing, 32(8) 1220-1243, 10.1080/0965254X.2022.2059775

BMJ (2021). PRISMA 2020 explanation and elaboration: updated guidance and exemplars for reporting systematic reviews. BMJ 372 (160) https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n160

Bocken, N. M. P., de Pauw, I., Bakker, C., & van der Grinten, B. (2016). Product design and business model strategies for a circular economy. Journal of Industrial and Production Engineering, 33(5), 308–320. https://doi.org/10.1080/21681015.2016.1172124

British Fashion Council (BFC) (2024). Institute of Positive Fashion. https://www.britishfashioncouncil.co.uk/Institute-of-Positive-Fashion

British Retail Consortium (BRC) (2024). Climate Action Roadmap. https://brc.org.uk/climate-roadmap

Business of Fashion (2024). The State of Fashion 2025 Report. https://www.businessoffashion.com/reports/news-analysis/the-state-of-fashion-2025-bof-mckinsey-report/

Circle Economy Foundation, CEF (2024). The circularity gap report 2024. https://www.circularity-gap.world/2024

Dangana, Z., Pan, W., & Goodhew S. (2012). Delivering sustainable buildings in retail construction In: Smith, S.D (Ed) Proceedings of the 28th Annual ARCOM Conference, 3-5 September 2012, Edinburgh, UK. Association of Researchers in Construction Management. 1455-1465.

Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF) (2021). Circular Design for Fashion. Cowes: Ellen MacArthur Foundation Publishing.

Euromonitor (2025) Retail in the United Kingdom Report, April 2025 https://www.portal.euromonitor.com/portal/Analysis/Tabhttps://www.euromonitor.com/retail-in-the-united-kingdom/report

Fieldson, R. & Rai, D. (2009). An assessment of carbon emissions from retail fit-out in the United Kingdom. Journal of Retail Leisure Property. 8, 243–258.

Fresen, N. (2024). UK retail's path to sustainability? BRC intel revealed. The Retail Bulletin. https://www.theretailbulletin.com/food-and-drink/uk-retails-path-to-sustainability-brc-intel-revealed-08-04-2024/

Global Alliance for Buildings and Construction (2021). Global Status Report for Buildings and Construction. https://globalabc.org

Gov.uk (2025). Press Release. *https://www.gov.uk/government/news/climate-plan-captures-clean-energy-benefits-and-boosts-investment*

Greater London Authority GLA (2022). Whole Life-cycle Carbon Assessments: London Plan Guidance. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/lpg_-_wlca_guidance.pdf

H&M Group (n.d.). Our Stories. https://hmgroup.com/our-stories/garment-collecting-from-throwaway-to-here-to-stay.

House of Commons, (2022). Environmental Audit Committee. Building to Net Zero Report. https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/62/environmental-audit-committee/news/164168/building-to-net-zero-report-published-22-23/

International Aluminium Institute (IAI) (2022). Sustainable Aluminium Practices. https://international-aluminium.org

Jaber, A. A., Mairlot, L., Samsonova, T., Echave, C. & Spittler, N. (2025). Transforming the Built Environment: A Systems Thinking Approach for Sustainable Urban Futures, HotorCool, June. https://hotorcool.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Transforming-the-Built-Environment.pdf

Kent, A., & Petermans, A. (2017). Retail design: theoretical perspectives, Abingdon: Routledge

Kirchherr, J., Yang, N.-H.N., Schulze-Spüntrup, F., Heerink, M.J. & Hartley, K. (2023). Conceptualizing the circular economy (revisited): an analysis of 221 definitions, Resources, Conservation and Recycling. 194, 107001. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2023.107001

Lynch, S. & Barnes, L. (2020). Omnichannel fashion retailing: Examining the customer decision-making journey. Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, 24(3), 471-493.

Leising, E., Quist, J. & Bocken, N. (2018). Circular Economy in the Building Sector: Three Cases and a Collaboration Tool. Journal of Cleaner Production. 176, 976–989.

Maiti, R. (2024). Fast fashion and its environmental impact. https://earth.org/fast-fashions-detrimental-effect-on-the-environment/

Mesher, L. (2010). Basics interior design 01. Retail design. Lausanne: AVA Publishing.

Motiei, M., Iyer-Raniga, U., Andamon, M.M., & Khodabakhshian, A. (2024). Advancing Circular Buildings: A Review of Building Strategies for AEC Stakeholders. Buildings. 14, 2594. https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings14092594.

Münster, M.B., Sönnichsen, S.D. & Clement, J. (2022). Retail design in the transition to circular economy: A study of barriers and drivers. Journal of Cleaner Production, 362 (August). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.132310

Noblit, G.W. & Hare, R.D. (1988). Meta-Ethnography: Synthesizing Qualitative Studies. SAGE Publications: London, UK.

Perez-Bou, S., Sancho, J. A., & Arcenas, N. (2024). ECOALF: retail experience – visceral, behavioural and reflective design for engaging a sustainability community, in Ed. Alexander, B. Customer Experience in Fashion Retailing: Merging Theory and Practice. Abingdon: Routledge, 219-233.

Platform for Accelerating the Circular Economy (PACE) (2024). The Circularity Gap Report 2024. https://www.circularity-gap.world/2024

Picot-Coupey, K. (2014). The pop-up store as a foreign operation mode (FOM) for retailers. International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management, 42(7), 643–670. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJRDM-01-2013-0032

Radclyffe-Thomas, N. & Varley, R. (2019). Stella McCartney's Sustainable Luxury: The End of The Kerring/Stella McCartney Partnership and New Beginnings on Old Bond Street. Bloomsbury Fashion Business Case Collection DOI:10.5040/9781350996007.0007

Royal Academy of Engineering (2023) Reducing Carbon in Construction. https://raeng.org.uk/news/construction-sector-must-move-further-and-faster-to-curb-carbon-emissions-say-engineers

Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) 2020. RIBA Plan of Work 2020 Overview. London: RIBA.

Sewenet, A.D., Boulaksil, Y. & Pisano, P. (2026). Circular economy, circularity, and sustainability: A systematic review and conceptual framework. Cleaner Environmental Systems. 20, 100405. 10.1016/j.cesys.2026.100405.

Smol, M., Marcinek, P. & Duda, J. (2024). Circular Business Models (CBMs) in Environmental Management—Analysis of Definitions, Typologies and Methods of Creation in Organizations. Sustainability. 16(3) 1209 doi: 10.3390/su16031209.

Snyman, H. & Khan, Z. (2019). Hacking the taste cycle: a process-oriented view for sustainable interior fit-out. In 4th International DEFSA Conference. DESIGNED FUTURES: Design educators interrogating the future of design knowledge, research, and education, 253-265.

Statista (2023) UK Construction CO2 Emissions. https://www.statista.com/statistics/486106/co2-emission-from-the-construction-industry-uk/

Statista (2025) Revenue growth of apparel in the United Kingdom from 2019 to 2029 https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1156107/apparel-market-revenue-growth-in-the-united-kingdom

UK Fashion and Textiles Network (UKFT) (2025). Circular Fashion Innovation Report. https://ukft.org/cfin-report-2025/

UK Green Building Council, UKGBC (2023). Circular economy metrics for buildings report. . https://ukgbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Circular-Economy-Metrics-Paper.pdf

United Nations (UN) (n.d.) Sustainable Development Goals https://sdgs.un.org/goals,

Weetman, C. (2016). A Circular Economy Handbook for Business and Supply Chains. London: Kogan Page.

Whiting, P., Cullen, V., Adkins, H. & Chatteur, F. (2023). A New Retail Interior Design Education Paradigm for a Circular Economy. Sustainability. 15 (1487), 1 - 20. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15021487

World Steel Association (2023). Steel's Contribution to a Low Carbon Future. https://worldsteel.org

WRAP (2023) Circular Business Models Guide for Fashion. https://www.wrap.ngo/resources/guide/circular-business-models-guide-fashion.

About the Authors:

Bethan Alexander
Bethan Alexander is Reader in Fashion Retailing and Marketing at the Fashion Business School, London College of Fashion (University of the Arts, London). Her research, spanning online and physical retail experience, innovative retail, and responsible retailing is widely published.

Rosemary Varley
Rosemary Varley is Associate Lecturer at the Fashion Business School, London College of Fashion (University of the Arts, London). Her research interests include fashion retailing and fashion product management, and she had published articles and books in these areas.