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Circular Economy at the micro level: A dynamic view of incumbents' struggles and challenges in the textile industry

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Abstract

The Circular Economy (CE) has received considerable attention as an approach that promises to reconcile ecological systems and economic growth. In spite of its increased popularity, little is known about the implementation struggles of incumbent firms across industrial sectors. Furthermore, although the notion of circular production systems is at the intersection of different research areas such as sustainable product design, sustainable supply chains, and reverse logistics, knowledge on how these concepts combine to ease or impede firms' transition towards circularity is scarce. To shed light on these gaps, I used multiple case studies from Cradle to Cradle certified companies in the textile industry in Europe. By employing qualitative research, I identified a set of factors along the textile value chain, from product design to take-back and reprocessing, that are crucial in expediting or delaying a firm's aspirations to develop a circular product. The main contribution of this paper is the dynamic understanding of how certain collaborative supplier-buyer innovation factors (i.e., supply chain position, power balance, and a shared vision) coupled with complex aspects in product design, namely in basic materials, architecture, and functionality, combine to determine the output speed and quantity of circular products to be sold, taken back, and ultimately regenerated.

Keywords

Circular economy; implementation; supply chain collaboration; sustainable production; systemic change.

1. Introduction

The last 150 years of industrial revolution have been dominated by a linear model of production in which materials are extracted from resource-endowed countries and products are manufactured using these virgin resources. Consumers then use, discard, and eventually replace such mass produced goods with newer ones. The current economic model is essentially one of "take-make-dispose" in which firms accrue profits by producing products that will later on end in the landfill (Pitt and Heinemeyer, 2015). Such a model sees nature as a resource to be used for the benefit of corporations and consumers and assumes resource-intensive economic growth can be achieved with no restraints. However, contrary to widespread beliefs of limitless planetary boundaries we are living in times exacerbated by multiple environmental problems, including climate change, resource scarcity, biodiversity loss, and increasing levels of pollution (Rockström et al., 2009).

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