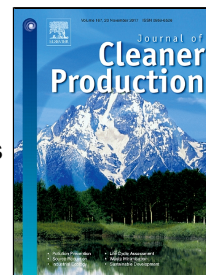


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A Decoupling perspective on Circular Business Model implementation: illustrations from Swedish apparel



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Abstract

Drawing on the concept of decoupling, from institutional theory in organizational studies, this paper explains how organizations mitigate demands for circularity. Seven Swedish apparel companies that have started collecting used clothes as a form of engagement with circular business models serve as case studies. The paper shows how outsourcing and internal separation allow these companies to buffer their business model and core way of creating value from emerging demands. It also shows how companies pro-actively work at influencing institutional demands for circularity by making these demands compatible with their own interests. The concept of decoupling thereby provides key insights into the development and implementation, or absence thereof, of circular business models.

Keywords: Circular business models, circular economy, decoupling, sustainable business models, institutional theory, product-service-systems

Highlights

- Decoupling allows firms to buffer business models from institutional demands
- Outsourcing and internal separation are means of decoupling
- Decoupling allow firms to showcase rather than truly adopt circular economy
- Firms influence institutional demands to appear circular but remain linear

1 Introduction

Circular business models (CBMs) involve value creation by exploiting value retained in used products to generate new offerings (Linder and Williander, 2015). Thus they entail activities such as repair, reuse, refurbishment, remanufacture, sharing, take-back and recycling (EEA, 2016), in contrast with linear models where value creation mainly involves virgin materials. Research focusing upon CBMs is fairly recent, although a type of CBMs, product service-systems (PSSs), has been examined extensively (Armstrong et al., 2015; Besch, 2005; Corvellec and Stål, 2017; Mont, 2002; Reim et al., 2014; Tukker, 2004). The insights from both these literatures indicate that although CBMs appear to have benefits, adoption has been slow (Reim et al., 2014; Tukker, 2015). Moreover, when CBMs are adopted, there seems to be a lack of integration in terms of how activities relate to the preexisting

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