PROBLEMATIZING FASHION SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

Business author John Elkington´s key assumptions, presented in his 1997 work *Cannibals with Forks* - the multiple perspectives view, global data and future-oriented temporality - continue to inform mainstream fashion sustainability today. If fashion is to move beyond a singular profit-driven vision toward shared well-being, the research community needs to increasingly steer studies toward using reflexive approaches, by actively mobilizing and problematizing existing frameworks, not aiming to subvert or debunk or to vindicate or defend our normative point of view, but to critically problematize it. In this article, problematization methodology is used to identify and challenge the assumptions underlying Elkington's work and contemporary fashion sustainability research. By analyzing this seminal text the article contributes to the critical problematization of design disciplines, fashion sustainability in particular. Retaining hope and moving toward *prosperity fashion* in its true sense calls for dialectically questioning and unravelling one's own position, and scrutinizing and reconsidering some commonly held assumptions. This will enable us to make space for different positions and lines of thinking, which are desperately needed in fashion research.

Keywords: *Fashion research, Fashion sustainability, Problematization, Methodology*

INTRODUCTION

This article contributes to the discussion on the role of technocentric and market-led solutions and problem framings on issues concerning fashion sustainability (Biely & Chakori, 2025; Fletcher & Tham, 2015; Fletcher & Grose, 2013; Grose, 2017; Union of Concerned Fashion Researchers, n.d; Williams, 2024; Özdil & Konuralp, 2024); and how the current private governance model addressing climate change transforms crisis into opportunity (Aronczyk, 2023; Bernstein, 2002; Klein, 2007; Mirowski, 2013). At the same time, it aims to offer some practical, useful perspectives that can enable us to take steps beyond the industry-dominated and developmentalist conceptions of fashion sustainability.

The aim of problematization methodology is to generate novel research questions through a dialectical interrogation of one's own familiar positions, other stances, and the literature domain targeted at assumption challenging (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). This has been suggested as an alternative to the established ways of generating research questions using the gap-spotting method. Alvesson & Sandberg (2011) argue that gap-spotting leaves the assumptions underlying the existing literature unchallenged when formulating research questions. Thus, it reinforces rather than challenges influential theories (ibid.). In this study, the problematization of mainstream fashion sustainability also draws on the understandings of postcolonial and decolonial perspectives

(e.g., Allen, 2016; Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021; Liboiron, 2021).

The purpose of this text is to illustrate how problematization methodology can be used to generate research questions from a body of technologically focused environmental literature called *Bright Green Discourse*, which enjoys an influential position in design disciplines, as noted by White et al. (2017). The target of problematization here is business author John Elkington's body of work, more specifically, his text entitled *Cannibals with Forks* (1997). Elkington's work is based on corporate-led consensus-seeking through incorporating "multiple perspectives" into sustainability, legitimated by the categories of global data and future-oriented temporality.

The idea of multiple perspectives is not problematic in itself: it promotes interdisciplinary and intercultural competences, addressing the challenges encountered by local and planetary sustainability (UNESCO, 2012). Rather, the concern here is the ways in which the Bright Green Discourse has come to define the mainstream European fashion research on sustainability issues over the past thirty years, such as the multiple perspectives view used in the discipline. By problematizing the concepts and categories that are defined by this discourse, we are taking part in the task of unlearning the assumptions of European modernity and adopting a stance of modesty, not superiority, toward our own moral certainties (Allen, 2015).

By renewing - and not rejecting - this context with the Bright Green Discourse, I argue for a dialectical interrogation, to revive European fashion research in a way that will stimulate critical dialogue and open the discipline to learning from others.

METHODOLOGY

Problematization is an important and widely used component in design disciplines. The learning concept of double-loop learning questions the underlying assumptions, goals and norms and is well-known within design and design education. Double-loop learning regards change first and foremost as a learning process. It was developed in 1978 by scholars in the science of education, Chris Argyris and Donald Schön. Schön also worked with reflective practice, equally influential in the domain of design. His reflection-in-action model (1991) builds upon practitioners' disciplinary knowledge,

reflecting on their way of thinking, which places them in a particular situation. The recognition that it takes effort to arrive at an understanding and to formulate how the problem may be seen, is called "problematization" in design (Nielsen, 2020).

To illustrate the use of problematization methodology in fashion sustainability research, this text builds upon the work of previous authors. It follows the six problematization principles outlined by Alvesson & Sandberg (2013): (1) identifying a domain of literature, (2) identifying and articulating the assumptions underlying the domain, (3) evaluating these assumptions, (4) developing an alternative assumption basis, (5) considering it in relation to its audience, and concludes with (6) evaluating an alternative assumption basis.

Although this text is built on these methodological steps, the process of problematization can follow a variety of methods. Alvesson & Sandberg (2013, p. 72) stress that problematization methodology is not about adhering to strict protocols or guidelines, but about expressing and encouraging a certain intellectual attitude and ambition.

IDENTIFYING A DOMAIN OF LITERATURE FOR ASSUMPTION-CHALLENGING INVESTIGATIONS

Environmental thinking on the potentially abundant futures surrounding the concept of *sustainability* is a central theme in design disciplines. To illustrate the problematization methodology of Alvesson & Sandberg (2013) in the context of fashion research and the subject matter of sustainability, the chosen domain here is *Bright Green* literature, which offers technologically focused and design-oriented visions of the future (White et al., 2017:182). In the book *Environments, Natures and Social Theory* (2017), White et al. observe that Bright Green thinking enjoys a hegemonic status across design disciplines, and includes works by authors such as Paul Hawken, Hunter Lovins, Amory Lovins (e.g., *Natural Capitalism*, 1999), Michael Braungart, and William McDonough (e.g., *Cradle to Cradle*, 2002).

The focus of this article is the work of the above-mentioned authors' coeval and peer, business writer and entrepreneur John Elkington. His long-standing connection to design disciplines began with *The Green Designer* exhibition at the Design Council in London in 1986. His texts

exhibit the core tenets found in mainstream sustainability thinking: technological innovation, the multiple perspectives view, and future-oriented thinking. Elkington's writings form a timeline for the increasing need to reframe the ethos of "sustaining" as ideas of "regeneration". His works include: *The Green Capitalists* (1987), *The Green Consumer Guide* (1988), *The Breakthrough Challenge* (2014), *Green Swans: The Coming Boom in Regenerative Capitalism* (2020), and *Tickling Sharks: How We Sold Business on Sustainability* (2024).

In 1997, John Elkington published the book *Cannibals with Forks*, which introduced some of the main ways and assumptions with which trust in corporations facing environmental accountability is created. The umbrella term is called "sustainability", and the concepts that define the related ideas are accounted for in a framework called the "triple bottom line". The triangulation of the perspectives in turn are famously called "people, planet & profit". This idea is visually illustrated as three equally sized interlocking circles, representing the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development that triple bottom line thinking incorporates.

Today, contemporary approaches to sustainability would argue that Elkington's approach is a version of "weak" sustainability that focuses on only the total value of the aggregate stock of capital, ideally increasing it (Hartwick, 1977; Solow, 1986). Thus, contemporary approaches would not consider his works central in the research and development of environmental problem-framing and fashion sustainability.

In this article, I draw upon newly understood histories of the development of sustainability associated with recognizing the role of public relations (PR) as that of an epistemic community and a technology of legitimacy (Aronczyk & Espinoza, 2021). I argue that Elkington's work is part of this newly recognized canon, and that the concepts, categories, and assumptions introduced in *Cannibals with Forks* continue to underlie our understanding of mainstream sustainability in design disciplines today.

Examples of Elkington's thinking can be seen in the many iterations of the win-win (-win) propositions related to environmental problems in fashion research and in the reframing of sustainability to *regeneration and of people, planet & profit to responsibility, resilience & regeneration*. His

thesis is based on corporate-led consensus-seeking through the incorporation of multiple perspectives into sustainability, legitimated by global data and future-oriented temporality. These are all strategies introduced by Elkington in 1997, which continue to frame mainstream sustainability and sustainable fashion research in the 2020s.

IDENTIFYING AND ARTICULATING THE ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING THE CHOSEN DOMAIN OF LITERATURE

The most prominent assumption underlining Elkinton's argument on sustainability in *Cannibals with Forks* is the need for stakeholders' mutual interest or mutual understanding of the goal of sustainability. On a historical timeline, this coincides with a move away from environmental protection toward sustainable development, promoting market mechanisms over strict regulations (Bernstein, 2002).

The shift to mutual understanding that Elkington suggested in 1997 positions industrial knowledge on environmental issues in parallel with that of scientific communities. This epistemic position, Elkington suggests, is legitimized by increased engagement with the public and the creation of "multi-way active dialogue" with a wide range of stakeholders (Elkington, 1997, p. 172). The formulations of this consensual knowledge in fashion sustainability research are most typically win-win(-win) propositions that guarantee a favorable outcome for everyone involved; as well as research framings with a triple helix model of innovation, combining seemingly balanced interactions among university, industry and government. These shifts in industrial knowledge were institutionalized in the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. This is what political scientist Steven Bernstein has called "the compromise of liberal environmentalism", treating scientific and economic ideas as equal epistemic communities (2002, p. 125); and what sociologist Leslie Sklair calls "the corporate capture of sustainable development" (2019).

Communicating through consensus-seeking strategy and using a multiple perspectives approach to reasoning, makes sustainability a common project of progress: a shared responsibility and future vision of abundance of corporations and their stakeholders. However, the position

of corporations as problem-framers in sustainability transitions merges. Elkington writes: "Companies able to engage their stakeholders with a clear vision of their shared future and, in the process, to outperform their competitors against the triple bottom line will be much better placed to win people's hearts and minds — along with their money" (Elkington, 1997, p. 38).

This assumption regarding consensus on a shared project of progress is reinforced by two other assumptions presented by Elkington: the idea of global data as a tool for sustainability, and a temporality set in the future.

On the basis of triple bottom line theory, Elkington assumes that it is possible to gather global environmental and social data from the supply chain. Controlling the data of newly globalized supply chains transparently becomes a priority in his thesis of triple bottom line thinking. The goal of transparency throughout supply chains is also risk management: In a world that Elkington calls a "high-visibility environment" and an "X-ray environment", companies can no longer be sure that their actions in globalized supply chains will go unnoticed.

Lifecycle thinking and techniques to assess the benefits, costs and impacts of products, processes and systems have been introduced to measure the dimensions of the environmental and social aspects of production (Elkington, 1997: 212). Lifecycle thinking also becomes one of Elkington's entry points into design disciplines. As lifecycle thinking becomes integrated into the product development process, it becomes used for "designing for sustainability" (Elkington, 1997, p. 210). However, more than contributing to the science community, Elkington (1997, p. 169) is interested in how to translate this newly acquired data on supply chains to engage with the public's emotions and perceptions on legitimating corporate environmental behavior.

Another assumption that supports the consensus position on corporate actions concerns the temporalities of sustainability. Elkington suggests a shift from the "wide view of time", according to which events are mostly influenced by what is happening now, to "a long view of time", which claims that today's concerns and challenges originate from the past (Elkington, 1997, p. 250). He sees that the wide/long divide in corporate planning can help recognize and move beyond "corporate blind spots" (1997, p. 259). In other words, with scenario-planning as a tool, the focus would shift from "doomsday scenarios" to "how we can shape and harness the dreams and ambitions of ordinary citizens to the sustainability crusade" (Elkington, 1997, p.45). Scenario-planning, systems thinking, modeling, and futures research thus help companies move from plans to more strategic actions and communication on future premises and speculation. In the newly revealed "high-visibility environment" of global connectedness, the "long view of time" moved the focus from today's structural problems to future solutions. Almost thirty years later, the temporality assumption continues to underlie the positive and speculative ethos of fashion sustainability.

EVALUATING ARTICULATED ASSUMPTIONS

Does fashion research have an innate goal of consensus-seeking and multiple perspectives when it comes to sustainability?

As already recognized by the Union of Concerned Researchers in Fashion (UCRF, n.d.) fashion research has become overly subservient to the industry framings and formulations of sustainability. The theoretical potential of challenging the consensus creating assumptions concerning sustainability (the perceived idea of sustainability as a shared project of progress best approached through multiple perspectives) in fashion research is twofold. First, problematizing assumptions concerning the research and development of sustainability in design disciplines can make us rethink the discipline in ways that open up other ways of knowing, by exposing the structures that exclude others in the first place. Second, centering – not rejecting – the position of the Bright Green Discourse in design disciplines and in the research and development of sustainability and sustainable fashion, enables it to be used as a threshold concept: a way of crossing the boundaries into new conceptual space.

Through this definition of problematization, I am advocating for a critique of origins that works as a tool for unlearning, as described by critical theorist Amy Allen: "(…) a genealogy that aims neither at the subversion or debunking nor the vindication or defence of our normative point of view, but rather more ambivalently at its critical problematization" (2016, p. 31).

An aspect that continues to support these corporate-led concepts and categories in fashion

sustainability is the fact that contemporary fashion research does not consider them central. It sees such ideas as historical representations of *weak sustainability*; a developmental phase in sustainability thinking that belongs to history. The secondary interpretations of the Bright Green authors have rendered the specific, Western marketplace-centered and neoliberal worldview less visible in favor of a more multifaceted approach.

Seeing these assumptions as threshold concepts emphasizes the importance of disciplinary contexts, and encountering what Hunt & Chalmers (2012, p. 42) call "troublesome knowledge". This encounter provokes a liminal phase of transition, in which new understandings need to be integrated, and prior conceptions relinquished (ibid.). This liminal phase has the potential to open up new discussions and co-inquiries about the limits and possibilities of European fashion sustainability research.

DEVELOPING AN ALTERNATIVE ASSUMPTION BASIS

The alternative assumption basis presented here is built on newly understood histories of the ways that PR have shaped our understanding and responses to the environmental crisis (Aronczyk & Espinoza, 2021) and the Americanization of environmentalism (Aronczyk & Espinoza, 2021; Bernstein, 2002).

PR whether practiced by corporations or nonprofit and non-governmental sectors is the professionalization of public-making, predicated on appeals to self-interest, immediate situations, and directly implicated concern (Aronczyk & Espinoza, 2021, pp. 214-215). As defined by Aronczyk & Espinoza (2021, p. 215), a successful PR campaign functions as an epistemic community and a technology of legitimacy while controlling "(..) the way citizens come together to see themselves as members of a legitimate public and to recognize an issue as a legitimate problem".

According to this alternative stance, the mainstream sustainability assumption regarding consensus conceived by multiple perspectives can be connected to the "stakeholder" model of public formation used in PR (Aronczyk & Espinoza, 2021). A stakeholder model is built around the notion of risk and distributes it among a range of "decision-makers", whose participation stabilizes and renders the outcome of debate more indisputable by using global data and future-oriented temporality as support (Aronczyk & Espinoza,

2021, pp. 215-216).

Aronczyk & Espinoza (2021) conclude that this model has two major outcomes: First, a stakeholder model establishes a ground of consensus and compromise that operates beyond scientific or economic data, appearing more legitimate and representative of social values than the claims of scientists; and second, the stakeholder model of decision-making enables the model's facilitator to decide what problems are presented to the public and how these problems are framed. In other words, the shared communication among different stakeholders shields the true owner of the problem from full accountability. Thus, Aronczyk & Espinoza (2021) suggest that PR should be viewed as a technology of legitimacy and an epistemic community, actively formulating and legitimizing the assumptions regarding discussions on environmental problems.

In *Cannibals with Forks*, Elkington drafts a paradigm change for companies moving into broader triple bottom line thinking from the singular, profit-driven vision. The book, written ten years after the Brundtland Report that famously defined "sustainable development" and five years after the Rio Summit in 1992, which institutionalized scientific and economic ideas as equal epistemic communities, was driven by rapidly growing globalization; new media landscape spurred by the internet, value shifts, and a growing focus on the transparency of corporations and their product supply chains (Elkington, 1997, p. 62). Elkington, writing mainly for the business audience, was influenced by the backlash that followed some companies trying to ignore the negative news about their production practices in newly globalized supply chains. He mentions the case of sportswear company Nike and sweatshops, which surfaced in 1991, as his reference to corporate catastrophe (Elkington, 1997, p. 132).

Beginning in the 1970s and intensifying in the early 1990s, in an operational strategy that was later called "Nikefication" (Davis, 2015), Nike outsourced production and distribution to other organizations, separating them from design. Revelations of sweatshop conditions and child labor in Nike's production chains soon followed. In 1996, Life Magazine ran a reportage on child labor, presenting a Pakistani boy sewing a Nike football. Nike initially tried to ignore allegations and denied responsibility, but eventually, years later had to reverse, and change their communication strategy.

Nike's case, along with the industrial disaster in Bhopal, India in 1984, in which thousands of people died after being exposed to toxic gas, worked as an incentive for multinational corporations to privately promote corporate, voluntarist environmentalism (Elkington, 1997).

Accordingly, Elkington states that the key factor in determining long-term sustainability is the degree of trust between a corporation or industry and their external stakeholders (1997:85). To create trust, Elkington wanted to expand the range of stakeholders involved in industry's discussions and debates. Earlier, the focus had been on consumers and those directly affected by the company's products, as stated in The Green Consumer (Elkington et.al., 1990), but a widening range of stakeholders were needed after the unprecedented intensification of globalization integrated capital and product markets in the 1990s.

Elkington's thesis on stakeholder engagement and multiple perspectives draws inspiration from the value shifts from shareholder to stakeholder capitalism. He describes the latter as a "clarion call for the 21st century" (1997, p. 345). Integrating a growing range of partners (such as non-governmental organizations) and stakeholders into business environments became a key challenge to serve the basic idea underlying stakeholder capitalism: business and industry should be an integral part of society, not a separate set of institutions (Elkington, 1997, p. 231,298).

In other words, a broad range of stakeholders and the idea of multiple perspective sustainability is crucial for creating consensus and maintaining the hegemonic position of corporations in a globalized, connected world. Following the multiple perspective view, mainstream fashion sustainability research aims to operate by cataloging the various cultural practices associated with sustainability, and creating an encyclopedic gaze across different continents: an image of collaboration and learning from others. Consensus-seeking can also be seen in the ways that mainstream sustainability research often operates according to the triple helix model of innovation (Leydesdorff & Etzkowitz, 1998), combining the perspectives of academia, industry and government.

CONSIDERING ASSUMPTIONS IN RELATION TO THE AUDIENCE

The major audiences of this argument are located in the design disciplines, especially those dealing with sustainability and fashion issues. Will these audiences regard the alternative assumption basis as absurd, irrelevant or interesting?

As Kate Fletcher & Anna Fitzpatrick (2024) among others has noted, fashion sustainability requires many ways of knowing. This is a key assumption in the contemporary discourse on fashion sustainability. One approach to achieving this is to aim to decenter Eurocentric views on sustainability and to introduce forms of indigenous knowledge into the contemporary canon of fashion sustainability. For example, Jansen proposes a redefinition of research practice with the aim of "eradicating eurocentrism" and "delinking (fashion) from modernity", moving toward a "multitude of possibilities" and the "recognition of plurality of epistemologies" (Jansen, 2020, p. 3).

To further develop fashion sustainability research, this alternative assumption basis argues that more work needs to be done in the liminal phase created by the paradoxes of sustainable fashion. To decenter European perspectives of fashion sustainability, we first need to thoroughly center them and see how the Western ways of knowing epistemically structure fashion sustainability research, and work to marginalize other knowledge practices. Taking a historical and contextual perspective when studying how fashion research and mainstream sustainability have arrived at the *multiple perspectives* view could be one way to start and eventually contribute to opening up the discipline to other ways of knowing.

This alternative assumption basis does not suggest denying of the paradigmatic assumptions regarding fashion sustainability - including the need for several perspectives - but calls for further specification of the discipline's underlying categories and concepts. Thus, some of the audiences engaging with design disciplines from a sustainability viewpoint will potentially consider the alternative set of assumptions interesting.

EVALUATING THE ALTERNATIVE ASSUMPTION GROUND

This article examines John Elkington's seminal work *Cannibal with Forks* (1997), with a particular focus on the concepts and categories he introduced. Specifically, it analyzes how Elkington's

concepts have shaped consensus-seeking discourse on mainstream sustainability in this discipline of fashion sustainability.

As noted by Steven Bernstein (2002), the assumption that any cooperation on environmental problems means progress toward a more ecological order is overly simplistic, even faulty. This article argues that the categories of mainstream sustainability are facilitated by the argument that sustainability can have different orientations and that they derive from different value positions or definitions of the problem. However, these different orientations cannot be reconciled, and are based upon common standards. These common standards for understanding mainstream sustainability omit the broader historical context of marketplace and PR discussed earlier.

Drawing from the methodological considerations of reconstructing social theory (Allen, 2015, White et. al., 2017; Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021; Aroczyk & Espinoza, 2021); decolonial concern on fashion sustainability (e.g., Fletcher & Fitzpatrick, 2024; Jansen, 2020) and problematization (Allen, 2015; Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Bernstein, 2002), this argument engages in a critique of the canon by problematizing the underlying assumptions in the discipline of fashion research, not by denying or adding to the canon. In line with reconstructive ideas of social theory (e.g. Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021; Liboiron, 2021), its purpose is to show how the canon has been used to develop concepts and categories for understanding sustainability that erase its broader context with market-led definitions of environmentalism and PR.

By renewing this context and not rejecting it, I argue for a dialectical interrogation to revive European fashion research in a way that will stimulate critical dialogue and open it up to learning from others. If these assumptions underlying the discipline are not acknowledged, they stand in the way of developing fashion research on sustainability and moving toward other ways of knowing.

In the problematization process, the subject matter itself becomes the problem and instead of trying to formulate specific research questions by reviewing the literature, we need to ask different kinds of questions. Problematizing fashion sustainability without rejecting the troublesome knowledge on the market-led definitions and contextualization formed by PR could open up new perspectives and ways of thinking and practicing research on sustainability in fashion disciplines.

Problematization-based research questions could then be formulated as follows, such as: How has fashion sustainability become an object of scientific investigation? Why did the content of fashion sustainability, or the appropriate way of understanding, addressing, or managing fashion sustainability problems evolve as it did? What historical and practical conditions have formed the *multiple perspectives* view on mainstream sustainability, and how has this happened? What determines our current understanding of fashion sustainability, from which we are able to formulate our research questions?

Thus, making fashion sustainability the topic and placing the assumptions that underlie it under dialectical interrogation, opens up specific construction processes to inquiry.

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