
Sustainability Intelligence (SI): X-factor of Third value in Fashion Business

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Abstract: This paper examines how re-awareness (re-aware), a third value beyond use and exchange value, serves as a new resource, driving re-capitalization in which Sustainability Intelligence (SI) informs the evolving logic of value creation in the fashion business. The study forms part of a broader doctoral research project on the SI systemic theory. It adopts grounded theory methodology, informed by an interpretivist epistemology, situating sustainable value creation within complex socio-industrial fashion systems. Empirical data include interviews and focus groups with fashion professionals across 13 countries, analysed using the constant comparative method by first author independently. Additionally, design-led and business-led industry perspectives reflects strategic implication of the “third value” concept illustrated through selected fashion artefacts, including its X-appeal, by assessing its applicability within real-world organisational logics and business conditions. Together, these insights articulate an SI-based mind value and demonstrate its capacity to foster re-awareness as a systemic transformation across fashion ecosystems.

Keywords: Sustainability Intelligence (SI); Third value; Fashion Business; Fashion Sustainability; Re-aware; Re-capitalism; Circular Economics; Conscious Business Cycles (CBC); Denim Design; X-appeal

1. Introduction

Systemic Innovation Failure and Fashion's Third Value

The global fashion industry faces a persistent systemic innovation failure, with sustainability remaining peripheral to core value creation despite decades of technical, material, and supply-chain improvements. Fashion systems remain governed by exchange-value-driven capitalist logics that prioritise speed, cost efficiency, and volume growth, while use value and socio-ecological values remain systematically undervalued, resulting in overproduction, environmental harm, labour inequities, and fragile supply systems (Harvey, 2015; Fletcher, 2016; UNEP, 2023).

Despite increasing sustainability awareness and innovative initiatives such as cleaner production, transparency tools, and circular pilots proliferating (Garcia, 2015; Szmydke-Cacciapalle, 2018), they largely operate as compliance or representational mechanisms, leaving the underlying value logic of the fashion system unchanged (Fletcher, 2016).

As reflected in industry practice and expert insights, sustainability remains framed as a compliance obligation rather than a source of strategic value, whereas consumers are largely guided by aesthetic appeal, price elasticity, and symbolic consumption rather than systemic awareness (Fletcher, 2016; Szmydke-Cacciapalle, 2018). This structural disjunction limits the fashion industry's ability to mobilise sustainability as a core driver of pragmatic and systemic business innovation (Singh and Noto, 2025). This systemic innovation failure challenges global sustainability agendas, particularly UNSDGs 8 and 12, which call for structural transformation of production–consumption systems and value creation models (UNEP, 2023).

The study addresses the absence of a systemic value logic that embeds sustainability into fashion business as a core value-creating capability. It proposes Sustainability Intelligence (SI) as a form of systemic innovation that enables the emergence of a third form of value in fashion business, which this paper calls the “re-aware” mind value, beyond exchange value and use value, with the potential to re-capitalise global fashion business systems.

SI Third Value: An Integrated Conceptual Foundation

This study is informed by three complementary positions of knowledge that together shape the articulation of Sustainability Intelligence (SI) theory, fostering re-awareness as a third value for re-capitalising fashion business. Bringing together industry practice and SI research, these positions enable a triangulated understanding of Fashion Business Model Innovation (FBMI) that integrates design, business, and systemic sustainability logics.

SI research-led insights are contributed by Gurpreet Singh, a doctoral researcher providing the systemic theory of Sustainability Intelligence (SI) and framing the SI as an intelligence capability embedded within fashion industry's design, business, and policy systems, advancing the concept of third value as a systemic construct.

Design-led insights came from Stefano Aldighieri, a senior global denim designer, emphasizing the role of design intelligence, material awareness, and aesthetic “X-appeal” in shaping sustainability perception, consumer re-awareness, and value creation within fashion industry systems.

Business-led insights were provided by Fabrizio Consoli, founder of Blue of a Kind, bringing strategic and experiential business knowledge, offering a critical lens on the “third value’s” feasibility within contemporary global fashion business contexts.

Together, these knowledge contributions establish the conceptual foundation of the “third value” in fashion business, enabling a re-awareness discourse between design practice, business realities, and broader SI research. The design-led and business-led insights provide contextual grounding, practical relevance, and business-oriented interpretive validation of the “third value” concept – an SI-based “Mind Value” – by exploring its X-appeal for denim fashion users and assessing its applicability within real-world organisational logics and fashion business conditions. The X-factor is positioned as a re-aware element of the SI-based “Mind Value” that extends beyond existing trade-offs and fragmentation between the fashion system’s exchange value and use value. Another Design Studio and Blue of a Kind supported the study by providing garments examined as reflective design artefacts that informed the theoretical articulation of the third value in fashion business.

The third value concept reveals SI’s capacity to foster re-awareness capabilities among fashion professionals working within fashion businesses, as well as among fashion users, ultimately re-capitalising value with a systemic transformation across fashion ecosystems.

2. Theoretical Background

Capitalism and power asymmetries in fashion systems

The fashion industry operates within an economic system driven by perpetual growth and consumerist materialism, where status competition and the fabrication of individual success and image continually sustain demand (Fletcher, 2016). The global apparel sector remains a significant and expanding industrial system, projected to generate approximately US\$1.13 trillion in output and US\$299 billion in value by 2026, with a CAGR of 2.44% between 2026 and 2029 (Statista, 2025). Despite its scale, the industry’s globally distributed networks externalise labour and concentrate value, reinforcing exchange-value logics of volume, speed, and cost at the expense of socio-ecological integration (UNEP, 2023).

Harvey (2015) argues that under contemporary capitalism, value is collectively produced through labour but realised as profit through commodity exchange. As theorised by Marx (1976), this creates a structural tension in fashion capitalism, where growth depends on expanding production and circulation, intensifying material throughput (Bauman, 2013; Fletcher, 2016). Surplus value is maximised through wage suppression and accelerated labour processes, reinforcing exploitation across global supply chains

(Marx, 1976; Elson and Pearson, 1981; Ahmed et al., 2014; Harvey, 2015). Harsanto et al. (2023) note that fashion sustainability innovation mainly targets environmental improvements, while social issues such as low wages, child labour, poor working conditions, inadequate pay, and limited mobility receive less attention. Anner (2022) shows how buyer-driven power asymmetries intensified during COVID-19, as brands cancelled unpaid orders and shifted risk onto suppliers and workers. Although the #PayUp campaign secured temporary concessions, buyers later reasserted control through lower prices, reduced volumes, and delayed payments, exposing the limits of voluntary sustainability initiatives (Anner, 2022; Gereffi, 1994).

Harvey (2015) argues that capitalism repeatedly resolves crises of value realisation through acceleration, credit expansion, and continual novelty. This is evident in fast fashion, where brands demand lower costs, shorter lead times, and high volumes to sustain turnover (Fletcher, 2008; Fletcher and Tham, 2019). Value is created through labour but expressed through money, creating a systemic gap between real value and price signals (Harvey, 2015). Consumers therefore respond more to price than to hidden social and environmental conditions (Bauman, 2013). In fashion, complex global production networks are reduced to a single market price, obscuring production realities and limiting sustainability-oriented decisions (Szmydke-Cacciapalle, 2018; Harvey, 2015).

The brand-facing market treats labour as a cost to be minimised, while money appears as the primary organising force of economic activity, deepening a fetishist confusion between social reality and its monetary representation (Capra, 2002; Harvey, 2015; Fletcher, 2016). As money becomes increasingly symbolic, digital, and credit-based, investment and production decisions are driven by financial metrics that often diverge from stable employment, safe working conditions, and socially necessary capacity (Harvey, 2015; Fletcher, 2016). This double abstraction helps explain why brands may report strong financial performance while suppliers and workers face worsening conditions (EDC, 2023). In fast fashion, practices such as price squeezing, lead-time compression, and last-minute order changes allow efficiency to coexist with exploitation and ecological harm (Szmydke-Cacciapalle, 2018, p.119). Within capitalist fashion systems, money not only mismeasures sustainability but systematically excludes it.

Consumer agency, power and ethical value exchange

Within contemporary fashion systems, consumer demand for ethical transparency acts as an extrinsic force shaping industrial practices through its influence on brand reputation, market positioning, and regulation (Newholm and Shaw, 2007). As sustainability becomes embedded in consumer culture, brands respond through transparency claims, traceability tools, and CSR communication to reduce reputational risk and maintain legitimacy (Kozlowski *et al.*, 2015; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). In this sense, marketing operates as a governance mechanism, translating complex global labour and environmental relations into simplified signals for consumers (Joy *et al.*, 2012). However, this also reconfigures agency, making consumer voice more visible and measurable than worker voice within global supply chains, shifting ethical discourse from labour rights to consumer-facing narratives (Bair and Palpacuer, 2015).

Empirical evidence shows sustainability has become a significant factor in fashion purchasing. Global surveys found 67% of consumers value sustainable materials and 63% value brands' sustainability commitments (McKinsey & Company, 2020). More recent studies report that over half of consumers are willing to pay more for ethical or sustainable goods (Simon-Kucher, 2024), with an average premium of 9.7% even during economic pressure (PwC, 2024). Academic research likewise identifies environmental consciousness and social values as key drivers of sustainable apparel consumption (Niinimäki, 2010). Collectively, these findings suggest sustainability demand is increasingly mainstream, reinforcing its role as a visible driver of change within fashion systems.

Emerging research on the social organisation of denim production complicates ethical value exchange by exposing structural opacity within informal manufacturing systems. Studies of Brazilian fashion economies show denim production often operates through decentralised networks of family labour, micro-enterprises, and unregulated workshops beyond formal retail visibility (Braga and Abreu, 2017). In these contexts, garments function as both commodities and survival strategies, with value shaped by precarious labour, local resilience, and weak oversight (Harsanto *et al.*, 2023). These conditions challenge ethical value exchange where production remains structurally invisible.

Consumer psychology and worker conditions cannot be understood separately from the dominant fast-fashion business model, which often remains the only viable option for consumers and producers, reinforcing structural power imbalances across the global fashion industry (Bauman, 2013; Grose, 2014; Fletcher, 2015). Fletcher's (2016) *Craft of Use* argues that "fashion attention is lavished upon what happens beyond the point of purchase, not before it," repositioning consumers as active agents through use-value. Complementing this, Szmydke-Cacciapalle (2018) identifies a major gap in sustainability communication between the fashion industry and the public. This suggests a gradual and under-recognised systemic crisis whose implications remain insufficiently understood by denim brands, exporters, and consumers alike. This research examines these dynamics through the lens of SI.

3. Research Design

Research Questions

The research conceptualises and empirically explores SI as a systemic innovation to address three interrelated Sustainability Intelligence questions (SIQs).

- SIQ1: How does Sustainability Intelligence (SI) unveil a pragmatic and systemic Mind Value among fashion professionals and users as a third value concept within the fashion business?
- SIQ2: How does Sustainability Intelligence (SI) materialise the distinctive quality of this third value through the experiential and aesthetic appeal of fashion products?
- SIQ3: How does the third value function as a systemic innovation within fashion business systems that moves beyond exchange and use value?

Grounded theory approach

The study adopts a grounded theory methodology informed by an interpretivist epistemology and forms part of broader doctoral research developing the Sustainability Intelligence (SI) systemic theory from situated industry practice within complex fashion systems (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Saunders et al., 2019). This approach emphasizes real-world applications and context-sensitive inquiry, prioritizing actionable knowledge over abstract theorization, making it particularly suited to complex sustainability issues in the fashion system. Grounded theory was used to identify emergent themes and systemic patterns related to the SI third value concept through iterative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014).

Empirical data were generated through online semi-structured interviews with 11 fashion professionals (Refer Table 1) and four online focus groups involving 20 professionals (Refer Table 2) across the global denim industry in 13 countries. Participants represented functional diversity and regional breadth, enabling comparative insights across varied fashion business models (Morgan, 1997). They included designers, business consultants, brand leaders, manufacturers, and sustainability practitioners working across the fashion value chain. Recruitment was facilitated through professional networks, and participants received an information sheet, consent form, and pre-discussion guide outlining the following line of query:

- How is sustainability integrated into the business model of a fashion organisation, both before and after the point of sale?
- How do global sustainability goals impact the fashion sector, and how can greater awareness be created?
- What emerging changes in production systems are supporting fashion sustainability?
- What external pressures influence sustainability practices within a fashion company?
- How does automation impact human skills, expertise, and experiential fashion knowledge?
- If sustainable processes increase manufacturing costs, what trade-offs do fashion businesses face?
- How are circular or regenerative models shaping the industry's relationship with consumers?
- What could strengthen an ethical relationship between consumers and the industry, and what role do consumers play within this culture?
- Can second-hand fashion exist independently of the mainstream industry?
- What is the future direction of fashion innovation, and what skills will be required?

Sessions were conducted via Microsoft Teams, lasted 60–90 minutes, and were recorded with consent. Identifying information was anonymised, and recordings were deleted after transcription and analysis. Focus groups were chosen for their ability to generate reflexive

dialogue across interconnected sustainability issues (Morgan, 1997, 2007), enabling insights into Fashion Business Model Innovation (FBMI) across denim design, product development, manufacturing, compliance, ethical sourcing, and chemical traceability.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically using the Constant Comparative Method (CCM) (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). The process was conducted manually in Microsoft Excel through four stages:

- Data Property Development: Initial coding based on recurring ideas and expressions in the transcripts.
- Category Development: Comparing transcripts to identify patterns, contradictions, and tensions.
- Theoretical Theming: Grouping categories into broader systemic themes linked to SI and fashion business models.
- Narrative Construction: Synthesising findings into a theory-informed narrative and validating it against the literature.

The CCM enabled iterative coding and conceptual refinement to identify recurring patterns, categories, and relationships related to sustainability awareness, decision-making, and value creation in fashion business. The analysis captured both individual and cross-functional insights that informed refinement of the SI third value concept.

Industry perspectives and design artefacts

In addition, design-led and business-led industry perspectives reflect strategic implications of the “third value” concept: design-led views explore its experiential and aesthetic dimensions, including X-appeal, while business-led views examine its application within organisational logics and fashion business conditions. These perspectives serve an interpretive and contextual role and do not constitute primary empirical data. Selected garments are discussed as reflective design artefacts contributing to the theoretical articulation of the third value, remaining distinct from the empirical dataset used for grounded theory analysis.

Table 1 Semi-structured interviews participants information (Author, 2025)

<i>Sr.</i>	<i>Anonymous code</i>	<i>Professional Achievement</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Country</i>
A	Design professional	Have 2 patents in garment constructions at US Creative director for a US based premium brand	4 th Apr 2023	US
B	Business professional	Visiting fellow at a reputed HK based fashion institute Vice president for a leading denim brand	5th Apr 2023	China
C	Production professional	Achieved several innovations in fibre recycling Included in 50 most influential people in denim industry	1st May 2023	US

D	Washing professional	Sustainability ambassador for a UK based retail brand Global director of denim exports	28th Mar 2023	Bangladesh
E	Chemical professional	Founder for a denim component making company Global team lead, CSR for an Amsterdam based premium denim brand	19th Apr 2023	US
F	Dyeing professional	Achieved innovation in dyeing process optimization Indigo dyeing chief for a turkey-based denim mill	15th Jun 2023	Turkey
G	Compliance professional	Compliance consultant for a US based retail brand Vice president for a premium US based retail brand	13th Apr 2023	US
H	Atelier professional	Revived an old Japanese technique for repairing denim Artist for a Amsterdam based luxury design studio	19th Apr 2023	Netherlands
I	Circular Denim Designer	Contributed to sustainable fashion initiatives, and managing a design department. Designed circular denim collections	21 st Feb 2026	Netherlands
J	Circular Fashion Designer	Led circularity strategies for global brands, focusing on circular design, traceability, and supply chains. Managed sustainability programmes in the denim	23 rd Feb 2026	Netherlands
K	Fashion Production Professional	Manages a brand specialising in circular garment production. Leads operations in upcycled fashion development.	16 th Feb 2026	Italy

Table 2 Focus group participants information (Author, 2025)

<i>Anonymous code</i>	<i>Professional Achievement</i>	<i>Country</i>
<i>Focus group A (12 September 2023)</i>		
Danish digital designer	Founder and Managing partner for a 3D modelling and digital fashion agency	Denmark
British washing specialist	Freelance denim design and wash specialist for best denim factories	UK
Spanish denim designer	Partner at a Portugal based Denim product design studio Design head for global design agencies based	Spain
Indian manufacturing specialist	Co-invented a circular production system for garment manufacturing	India
<i>Focus group B (19 September 2023)</i>		
Turkish production specialist	Worked on sustainable production of reputed denim export houses	Turkey
Danish business specialist	Founded consultancy on Circular denim based in Demarch Denim sustainability leader for a reputed denim brand	Denmark
Indian laundry advisor	Developed a pioneer in the Production & Laundry Equipment over 40 countries	India
Chinese retail advisor	Visiting fellow at a reputed fashion institute Vice president for a leading denim brand	China

Indian trade specialist	Managed production of best export and trading houses in India	India
<i>Focus group C (21 September 2023)</i>		
US business advisor	Managed global denim business in the past 48 years Founded a global denim trade show based in EU and US	US
Dutch chemical advisor	Director for a fashion industrial collective Global team lead, CSR for a premium denim brand	Netherlands
US technology advisor	Business expert and developed global business in Computer-Aided apparel technology Member Advisory Board for several Fashion Universities	US
Canadian sourcing specialist	Managing director of a denim sourcing agency Managed product development for global denim brands	Canada
US denim designer	Creative director for a USA based premium brand	US
US design consultant	Designed and developed for the US based brands Founded a denim design consultant firm	US
<i>Focus group D (17 October 2023)</i>		
French sustainability practitioner	Denim product manager for denim factories in Argentina Denim sustainability consultant	France
Indian fabric specialist	Denim fabric designer for best denim mills	India
Bangladeshi production specialist	Managed denim business and production across denim companies in Bangladesh, Germany, and Pakistan	Bangladesh
Pakistani production specialist	Managed denim product business for mills and factories in Pakistan and Bangladesh	Pakistan
Italian washing specialist	Research and design for denim washes at reputed denim research organization Developed denim products for global denim brands	Italy

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Research and Enterprise Unit Ethics Panel at Buckinghamshire New University, UK (interviews: UEP2023FEB01; UEP2024MAR03; focus groups: UEP2022JUL04). Participants received consent forms and were informed of their rights. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, and care was taken to address power dynamics and cross-cultural sensitivity throughout the study.

4. Findings

The findings show that sustainable fashion is still limited by exchange-value logic, with sustainability often treated as compliance rather than value creation (Fletcher, 2016). The analysis identifies SI as a systemic capacity that turns sustainability into value-generating intelligence by combining systemic awareness, material understanding, and socio-economic cognition across design and business functions (Singh, 2026c). SI creates a third “re-aware” value, reconnecting professionals and users to the social, material, and labour relations within fashion products, and reshaping sustainability beyond trade-offs between use and exchange value (Harvey, 2015).

The study indicates that “re-aware” acts as a new resource for sustainable value creation, enabling sustainability to be perceived as desirable, engaging, and culturally resonant, supporting a “sexy” sustainability value proposition in which ethical and systemic considerations become integral to fashion desirability (Bocken et al., 2014). This reframing contributes to a broader process of re-capitalising fashion business systems, positioning ‘re-aware’ as a key driver of systemic transformation within fashion business.

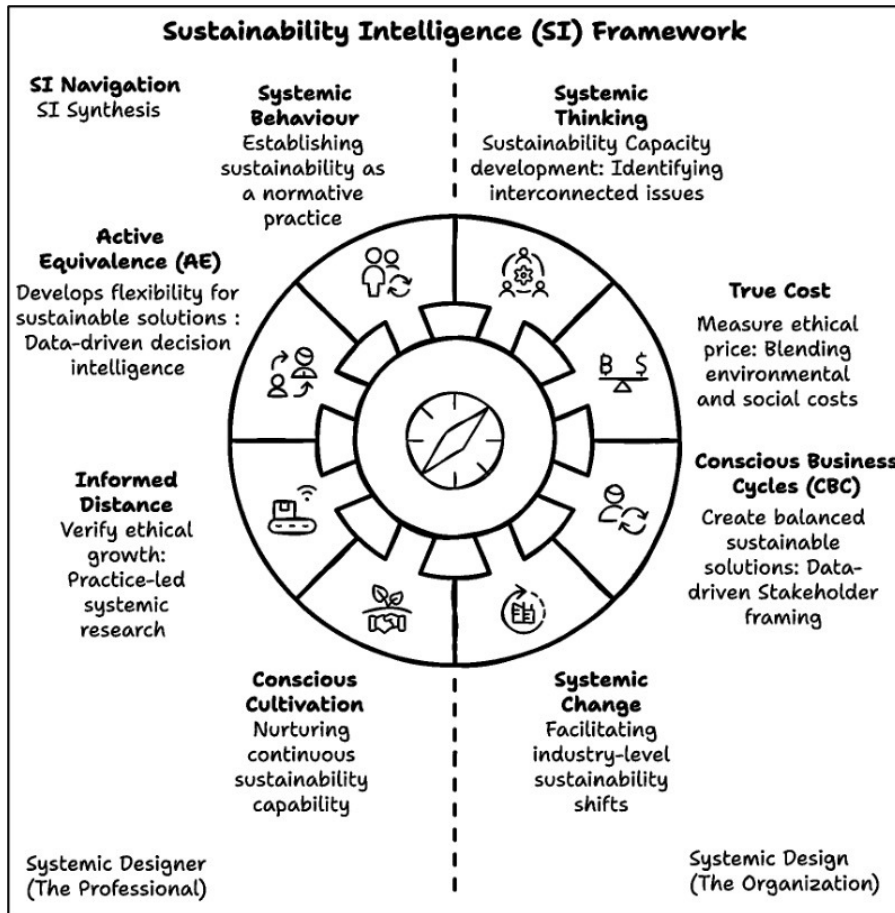


Figure 1: Eight element of Sustainability Intelligence (SI) (Singh and Noto, 2025)

SI moves beyond efficiency-focused sustainability approaches that reproduce the separation between exchange value and use value. SI fosters convergence between individual cognition and fashion systems, enabling professionals and users to develop a heightened state of re-awareness before purchase and during use, recognising that supply-chain transparency alone is insufficient (Singh, 2026c). The re-aware mind value underpins a more balanced and ethically grounded fashion system, supporting socio-economic transformation aligned with SDGs 8, 12, and 13 (UNEP, 2023). Figure 1 depicts eight elements of SI systemic theory that informs following principles of Third value guiding a re-aware systemic perspective (Singh and Noto, 2025).

Seven principles of Third value:

Resistance:

The continual growth of clothing volumes is driven by capitalist fashion systems structured around efficiency, resulting in innovations that are largely incremental and efficiency-driven (Fletcher, 2016).

‘For many, it’s a way to shift more merchandise... they use a green brush to paint everything they make.’ ‘There’s a lot we need to do differently.’ – (Focus Group C, US denim designer)

Meaningful sustainability requires moving beyond established thinking and confronting the scale, speed, and growth-driven logic of consumption (Bauman, 2013). Resistance reinforces industry responsibility, brand integrity, and organisational authenticity through Active Equivalence (AE), an SI element that supports the Conscious Decision Mechanism (CDM) through a systemic understanding of sustainability challenges in global industries (Singh, 2025a). AE positions the fashion professional as a systemic designer, clarifying the designer’s role, power, and influence within sustainable practice, while strengthening organisational responsibility to create products with integrity and authenticity.

‘A lot of people say we need to wait... consumer needs to want this. No, I think Industry have a responsibility for a good product, I don’t think it should be the consumer asking.’ – (Interview J, Circular fashion designer)

Through AE, the principle of resistance marks a radical shift from conventional sustainability approaches, where much of the industry passively waits for consumer demand. Instead, resistance advocates industry-led responsibility and proactive sustainable change: **Lead the value, rather than wait for it.**

Rechannel:

SI Conscious Business Cycles (CBC) approach encourages businesses to integrate feedback, stakeholder needs, operational realities, and external pressures so that decisions are balanced, context-specific, and adaptive. It uses context framing to understand sustainability decisions within their wider organisational, social, environmental, and market context, supporting informed and responsive action. Predictive modelling and real-time feedback loops ensure CBC remains scalable and adaptable to changing contexts. (Aagaard and Tucci, 2024; Marino, 2024; Dzhengiz, Haukkala and Sahimaa, 2023).

‘People want to be involved in sustainability... but the information they use might or might not be true.’ – (Focus Group C, US business advisor)

Principle of Rechannel, involves applying SI element of systemic thinking to the value chain for consciously reframing and balancing the stakeholder context through CBC approach (see Figure 2). It suggests that, not only organisations and people, but also the planet and the product, are recognised as stakeholders in the SI fashion system. It positions

the value chain as a systemic design, where place, people, production, and process are treated as design materials. The CBC fosters the systemic design of a rechannelled value creation and supply system (Singh, 2026a). Here, circularity goes beyond closing linear loops, rather: **Value lies in creating systemic loops.**

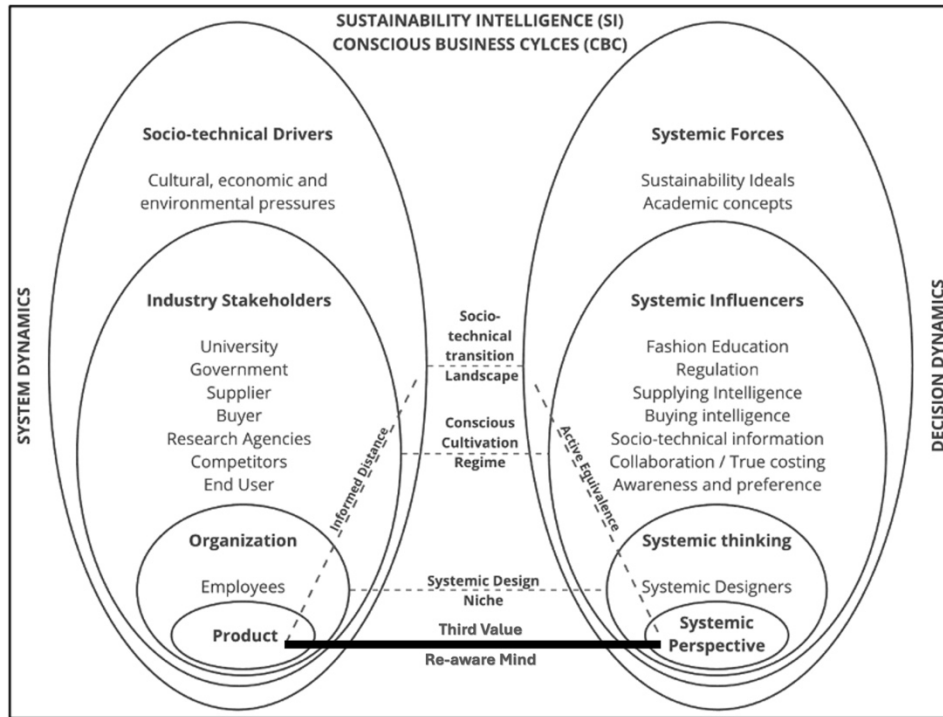


Figure 2: Contextual Framing of the Third Value through Conscious Business Cycles (CBC) approach (adapted from Singh and Noto, 2025).

Reduction:

Harvey’s (2015) call to reverse the production–realisation relation foregrounds the spheres of circulation and consumption as active determinants of production, suggesting that contemporary capitalism is increasingly organised around the conditions under which commodities can be realised as profit. Emerging approaches such as degrowth fashion and post-growth design seek to reduce overall production volumes, extend garment lifespans, prioritise durability and care practices, and reorient fashion systems away from continuous expansion toward socially and environmentally balanced forms of value creation (Fletcher, 2016; Fletcher and Tham, 2019). From this perspective, meaningful fashion sustainability would require slowing production cycles, reshaping patterns of social reproduction, and challenging the ideology of perpetual novelty. Such demands move beyond conventional CSR practices toward what Harvey (2015) describes as a broader reorganisation of value relations and social labour.

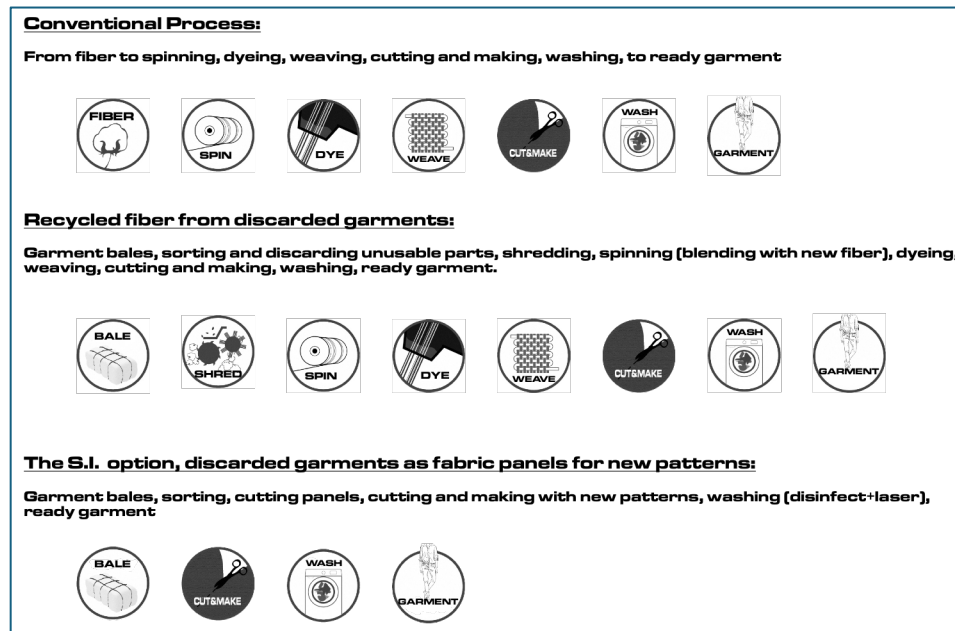


Figure 3: SI reduction option (Authors, 2026)

‘I understand the value of collecting and reselling second-hand garments, but the value proposition is harder to justify when items are only cleaned and relabelled rather than genuinely transformed through meaningful sustainability narrative’ - (Interview I, Circular denim designer)

The principle of reduction focuses on minimising over-processing through an iterative, practice-led process optimisation SI element termed Informed Distance. This concept reveals that value does not reside in the quantity of operations performed, but in the ability to generate a singular, compelling, and systemic perspective that can function as an X-factor in driving resale through a renewed value proposition (Teece, 2010; Bocken et al., 2013, 2014). Rather than merely creating cost efficiencies, it seeks to generate shared value and distinctive meaning across industrial viability, consumer desirability, and planetary compatibility. Figure 3 compares conventional, discarded, and reduction-based approaches to second-hand garments, demonstrating how a third SI option achieved an informed distance from panel to new pattern. Within the broader SI systemic perspective, this principle advances the proposition that: **Less should be more valuable.**

Resilience:

‘All actions consume resources, so we must choose the least harmful option.’ – (Interview A, Design professional)

The principle of resilience involves innovating business model through True cost, a SI element that strengthens the socio-economic position of the industry (Singh, 2026c). It’s reutilising of significant portion of investment which is available in terms of already made

or used garments. It fosters a systemic competency as an industrial disruption through circularity structures and atelier-based skills: This principal suggests there is no perfect sustainable way however: **A better value option is always available.**

Recent U.S. textile arrangements with Bangladesh and India are likely to increase market unpredictability as buyers shift sourcing to lower-tariff locations, creating volatility in demand, pricing, and investment planning (Reuters, 2026; Economic Times, 2026). While tariff concessions may reduce barriers, they also raise costs through compliance demands, supply-chain restructuring, and reliance on U.S. raw materials (Times of India, 2026). These changes may displace Indian MSME workers while supporting relative job growth in Bangladesh's garment sector (Times of India, 2026; Reuters, 2026). Overall, resilience will depend on flexible supply chains, export diversification, and higher-value production less exposed to tariff shocks (Economic Times, 2026), with adaptive capacity becoming key to competitiveness (McKinsey & Company, 2024).

This paper suggests transcending mainstream and second-hand business models to create a third type of fashion system rooted in the SI third-value principles, developing atelier production facilities in geographies with strong availability of post-consumer materials, such as Ghana, Portugal, and Turkey. This potential warrants further research, as such innovation partnerships between brands and suppliers are likely to generate new demands for atelier workforce skills, training, and compliance capabilities, requiring adaptation to evolving production, digital, and sustainability practices (McKinsey & Company, 2024).

Recapitalise:

Ethical consumption remains uneven across socio-economic groups and cannot resolve structural issues such as wages, buyer power, and subcontracting in global supply chains (Bick *et al.*, 2018). Brands often respond faster to consumer outrage than to worker-rights advocacy, reinforcing ethics shaped by consumer visibility rather than worker-centred justice (Bair and Palpacuer, 2015). Consumer power is therefore necessary but insufficient driver of transformation, requiring integration with labour rights, industrial restructuring, and regulatory governance.

SI establishes a clear distinction between the third-value business system and conventional second-hand fashion practices. Rather than functioning as an alternative market, it converges the value perceptions and propositions of mainstream fashion with second-hand practices, fostering a third discipline of ethical and circular fashion business model innovation (FBMI) (Todeschini *et al.*, 2017). This represents a socio-economic reorganisation of the fashion system, where radical systemic change is rooted in industry's political will and the consumer's role as a contributor by choice, rather than merely a response to consumer demand. The study identifies five key observations within the systemic inertia of the fashion industry:

1. Industry actors are aware of sustainability challenges yet fail to act due to the inertia of mainstream fast fashion systems.

2. While a segment of eco-conscious consumers demands sustainability, they often lack access to deeper knowledge of products, processes, and policies; moreover, their understanding is shaped by mainstream fashion marketing.
3. The industry continues to operate within a capitalistic logic, even when addressing sustainability, often commodifying it as an additional product feature.
4. Consumers have limited access to decision-making within the fashion system; their influence remains indirect and constrained by industrial structures.
5. In a truly transformative system, consumers should not bear responsibility for influencing sustainability outcomes; instead, it is the responsibility of the industry to deliver sustainable products as a fundamental consumer right.

In this context, the third value system focuses on developing ethical loyalty within the consumer's perception and vision, where brand value is aligned with organisational authenticity and responsibility, beyond reliance on consumer knowledge of sustainability science. SI re-capitalises the fashion business by enabling brands to re-awake consumers through X-appeal, grounded in shared sustainability values and integrity, thereby transcending fragmented understanding (Porter and Kramer, 2011; Korhonen and Niinimäki, 2024). This principle ultimately asserts: **Awareness is not enough; re-awareness is the new source of sustainable value.**

Resee:

The principle involves realising accountability through systemic behaviour, understood as recurring patterns of mindset, action, and institutional response that either embed or merely perform sustainability within organisations (Senge, 2006). RESEE critiques the prevailing model in which responsibility is shifted onto the consumer; instead, it reframes the user as an informed participant by choice, capable of offering feedback and influence, but not accountable for production systems beyond their knowledge or control.

'Engaging consumers with sustainability remains one of the biggest challenges, as guilt-based messaging can hinder connection, and scaling sustainable solutions requires reaching mainstream consumers who are not already environmentally conscious.' – (Interview J, Circular fashion designer)

Responsibility for sustainable production lies primarily within the production system, not with the individual purchasing the product. RESEE reinforces the consumer's reliance on brand integrity and authenticity. It recognises that many fast fashion consumers lack access, knowledge, or engagement with the systemic science of sustainability; therefore, the industry must not transfer accountability but instead transform consumer behaviour through a reliable and ethical relationship.

"Sustainability is not a commodity to be sold, but a systemic condition to be designed." – (Interview K, Fashion production professional)

As such, this principle emphasises the transformation of user perception at the point of sale and beyond, through meaningful communication that extends across the product

lifecycle (Szmydke-Cacciapalle, 2018). It ultimately confronts consumption fetishism by reappealing product aesthetics: **The skin becomes the site where re-awareness begins.**

Reappeal:

“To build a brand based on repair while competing in the wider fashion market, it is important to use language that consumer is familiar with; otherwise, it risks becoming a niche market rather than competing within the mainstream industry.”- (Interview K, Fashion production professional)

Restoring fashion value through uniqueness and meaning as a third value of SI mindset; not merely an act of recycling or reuse, but a process of re-awareness that re-engages and reactivates the fashion “X-factor” beyond fetishised consumption. It calls for systemic change, transforming repair into a form of cultural and aesthetic renewal that redefines sustainability as desirable. This principle suggests: **Reinvent and reposition sensuality, don’t just repair.**

The following two artefacts illustrate an expression of a re-aware mindset within the SI Third Value concept.

Third Value Artefact 1: 1920s Levi’s Reconstruction, by Stefano Aldighieri



Photograph by Stefano Aldighieri

Image courtesy of Another Desing Studio 2.0 (2026). Reproduced with permission.

This artefact, developed by Stefano Aldighieri over 20 years ago, involved the creative reconstruction of a heavily damaged 1920s pair of Levi's trousers sourced from the Levi Strauss & Co. Vault in San Francisco (Levi Strauss & Co., 2025). Originally offered as fabric reference material, the historic garment had survived only in partial condition. Aldighieri responded by combining the original remnants with a contemporary pair of Levi's 201 LVC reproduction jeans (Levi Strauss & Co., 2026), carefully cutting and hand-stitching the two pieces together to restore form and meaning.

Although experimental in nature, the resulting piece demonstrates how damaged heritage garments can be transformed into renewed objects of desirability. The artefact illustrates the Third Value concept through craftsmanship, historical continuity, emotional resonance, and aesthetic re-appeal, showing how fashion value can extend beyond conventional exchange value and use value. While the physical piece has since been lost, the surviving photographs provide evidence of an early design-led exploration of circularity, repair, and regenerative fashion thinking.

Third value Artefact 2: (re)made in Italy, By Blue of a Kind



Photograph by Fabrizio Consoli.

Image courtesy of Blue of a Kind (2026). Reproduced with permission.

The Artefact, sourced from the Blue of a Kind, illustrates the practical application of circular fashion within contemporary business practice. Founded by Fabrizio Consoli, the brand transforms pre-existing garments and surplus materials into renewed fashion pieces, extending product life while reducing waste and virgin resource dependency. Featuring male and female models partially framed in denim panels, the composition communicates aesthetic confidence, sensuality, and contemporary desirability, qualities often absent from conventional sustainability narratives.

Within the SI Third Value concept, the artefact demonstrates how uniqueness, meaning, and visual appeal can be repositioned as desirable forms of value, embedding

sustainability as aesthetic, emotional, and strategic value rather than mere compliance. The image therefore illustrates how circular innovation can contribute to the re-capitalisation of fashion systems by reinventing sensuality rather than simply repairing products.

5. Conclusion

Unveiling SI Third Fashion System

The paper situates the fashion industry within a broader creeping crisis of sustainability, characterised by systemic uncertainty, inertia, and delayed responses across both organisational self-regulation and individual responsibility (Boin and Lodge, 2019). As Meadowcroft (2007) argues, the central challenge is not simply identifying where power resides, but determining how complex socio-economic systems can be steered democratically in the absence of a shared understanding of their underlying structures. Within the global fashion industry, this highlights the need for a more integrated form of awareness that moves beyond isolated consumer action and fragmented corporate responsibility. Such a shift requires deeper social learning, enabling actors across the value network to recognise the interdependence of material flows, labour conditions, and cultural practices.

Within this context, the paper proposes Sustainability Intelligence (SI) as a “third fashion system” whose value lies in a “re-aware mind,” fostering systemic innovation that connects consumer awareness with ethical industrial practice. Rather than positioning sustainability as a product attribute or the outcome of individual ethical choice, SI frames it as a shared and distributed capability across the fashion ecosystem, linking knowledge, perception, and decision-making across design, production, retail, and use. In this view, consumer awareness is only an initial SI stage; systemic transformation requires a shift from individualised purchasing decisions toward collective systems thinking and shared responsibility across the value network.

Within such an SI third fashion system, everyone who designs, produces, sells, or wears denim becomes part of a distributed decision-making intelligence, recognising the interconnectedness of life, labour, and material culture. Through this systemic reorientation, ethical value exchange in the fashion industry can move beyond partial transparency toward genuinely transformative change in the design and governance of fashion industrial systems.

6. Contribution

This study contributes to innovation management in four ways: It introduces an SI-based third value transformation logic, “re-aware,” integrating awareness, desirability, and socio-ecological responsibility as a form of systemic innovation; advances SI as a socio-technical framework linking cognition, organisational practice, and supply–demand

dynamics through the CBC approach; provides empirical evidence from the global denim industry across 13 countries, supported by design-led and business-led perspectives, showing how exchange-value logics constrain sustainability and how re-awareness enables value creation; and clarifies the ambivalent role of AI-driven computational creativity, which can enhance efficiency but may reinforce fast-fashion unless embedded in SI-based value frameworks, positioning SI as a systemic innovation aligned with UNSDGs 8, and 12 (United Nations, 2015).

7. Practical Implication

The findings provide actionable implications across the fashion system: retail brands can reframe sustainability as a value proposition and implement “X-appeal” strategies and data-driven CBC approaches across product and system levels. Designers can translate sustainability into design narratives through the concept of ‘re-aware’, and design artefacts as carriers of emotional and systemic value; Policymakers and industry bodies can support systemic innovation beyond efficiency regulation through standardised indicators and circular production systems; supply chain actors can adopt flexible circular production and remanufacturing models; and consumers benefit from re-aware, ethical, and meaningful fashion experiences that support broader sustainability transitions.

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9. Disclaimer

The views, insights, and interpretations presented in this paper are solely those of the author(s). Responsibility for the accuracy, analysis, and interpretation of the content rests entirely with the author(s). References to Levi's and Levi Strauss & Co. are included solely for contextual and scholarly purposes, and neither organisation has endorsed or reviewed this publication. Blue of a Kind and Another Design Studio are represented in this paper through the co-authorship of their respective founder and president, who contributed practitioner insights and access to design artefacts.

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11. Biographies



Gurpreet Singh is a global fashion system innovator and PhD candidate in the United Kingdom, jointly at University of Staffordshire and Buckinghamshire New University, and teaches at the latter. His research, *Sustainability Intelligence (SI): A Systemic Theory Transforming the Design of Global Denim Industrial Systems*, is informed by fieldwork across 13 countries. He has extensive experience in the global fashion industry and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA), a Teaching Fellow at Advance HE (FHEA), and a member of ISPIM. Drawing on experience as a global fashion business consultant, he is connected with leading fashion organisations, which informs his SI research.



Stefano Aldighieri is an Italian-born American designer with extensive international experience across the global denim industry. Beginning his career in Europe, he went on to hold senior leadership roles in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, where he is currently based in California. He has served as Design Director at Levi Strauss & Co. in San Francisco, Creative Director at 7 For All Mankind and Hudson Jeans, and CEO and Co-founder of Tuff Gong Clothing. He is also the founder of Another Design Studio, collaborating with textile, apparel, retail, and brand organisations worldwide. Actively engaged in corporate social responsibility, Stefano regularly speaks internationally on sustainability, denim history, branding, and marketing. He holds two patents in garment construction, has published photography books, and was recognised by WeAr Magazine as one of the top 100 most influential people in denim.



Fabrizio Consoli is an innovation professional with extensive experience across fashion, media, and sustainability-driven business development. He is the founder of Blue of a Kind, a circular fashion venture focused on upcycling and responsible production. He is also co-founder of Daylight Studio Milano, supporting brands and creative teams through studio services, brand image, and campaign execution. He previously founded and served as Vice President of Integracy Advisory, supporting SMEs and entrepreneurs in M&A and asset transactions. Across earlier roles, he held managerial positions in brand strategy, product development, commercial execution, and cross-functional leadership, including work with REPLAY / Fashion Box and Marbas Golf. He has also taught at IED and Raffles University.