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This is the accepted version of the publication Ki, C. W., & Ha-Brookshire, J. E. (2021). Consumer Versus Corporate Moral Responsibilities for Creating a Circular Fashion: Virtue or Accountability?. Clothing and Textiles Research Journal, 40(4), 271-290. Copyright © 2021 ITAA. DOI: 10.1177/0887302X20986127

Consumer versus corporate moral responsibilities for creating a circular fashion: Virtue or accountability?

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Publication date
2021

Journal
Clothing and Textiles Research Journal

Publisher
SAGE Publications

Abstract

Scholars in the fashion discipline have become more attentive to investigating how the fashion business can become more circular. In the past, many of the studies focused on identifying the supporting and/or hindering factors when creating a circular fashion (CF). Despite the insights these studies provide, their contributions are relatively limited in that many of them are exploratory in nature and skewed toward understanding CF from the stance of fashion companies who are situated at the supply side of the fashion economy. In contrast, little attention has been given to how consumers, on the demand side, perceive a CF. We employed a mixed-method approach using 332 respondents' narrative data and empirically identified whether consumers attribute moral responsibility to fashion companies as well as to themselves for creating a CF and, if so, whether there are any nuanced differences in their perceptions of consumer versus corporate moral responsibilities for a CF.

Keywords

circular fashion, circular economy, sustainable fashion, moral responsibility

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Introduction

A notable phenomenon in the textile and clothing industry (i.e., fashion industry) is its recent drive to move away from a linear economy in favor of a circular economy. While a linear economy is an economic system built on a "take-make-use-throwaway" model that creates excessive waste, a circular economy is an economic system that operates in a "take-make-use-reuse" model that aims at zero waste, resilience, and sustainable growth (Ellen MacArthur Foundation [EMF], 2017). For a long time, the fashion economy has operated in a linear way where large amounts of resources are extracted (i.e., take), transformed into fashion products (i.e., make) that are used a few times by customers (i.e., use), after which these products are thrown away in landfills or incinerated (i.e., throwaway), creating waste (Lieder & Rashid, 2016). In this linear economic system, fashion brands have consumed 1.78 million tons of raw materials to produce and supply around 1.14 million tons of clothes every year onto the UK market alone (WRAP, 2012). Among these clothes, only 60% are sold while 40% are unsold or thrown away in landfills or incinerated to protect brands' price integrity and prevent the brands from being counterfeited (Danigelis, 2017). To make matters worse, less than 1% of the materials that are used to make these clothes are recycled into new clothes or other products (EMF, 2017). This linear economy's "take-make-use-throwaway" approach has long prevailed on the supply side of the fashion economy, resulting in substantial economic losses and environmental destruction, all of which have put human welfare at risk (Gam & Banning, 2011).

As much as the linear economy implanted the "take-make-use-throwaway" practice on the supply side, it has likewise created a "throwaway" culture on the demand side of the fashion economy (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009). Having become used to the unsustainable linear process, consumers continue to acquire new fashion items every week (Kwon et al., 2020) and throw away used or

unwanted clothes after just several uses (Ruppert-Stroescu et al., 2015). As a result, consumer spending on fashion items is continuously increasing. For instance, the global consumer spending on clothing and footwear reached US$2.1 trillion in 2020 and is expected to reach US$2.8 trillion by 2025, which is more than a 70% increase from 2010 (Statista, 2020). In contrast, the lifecycle of clothing is declining because consumers are utilizing their clothes for an average of 3.3 years before discarding them (Roos et al., 2015). Such over-consumption, under-utilization, and disposal behaviors on the part of the consumers are causing severe consequences on the environment (e.g., accumulating post-consumer textile waste), economy (e.g., fluctuating textile prices due to the increase in material demand), and society (e.g., harming people's health and wellbeing).

To ensure that neither the supply side nor the demand side of the fashion industry is destroying the ecosystems and to make sure that there are enough natural resources for the industry to make products in the future, there is a call for creating a better balance and using our natural resources more wisely (Gam & Banning, 2011). To do so, some argue that our economy must become circular (Ki et al., 2020a; Niinimäki, 2018). The idea of circular fashion (CF) is simple: increase resource efficiency by making better use of resources or by using fewer resources per product (i.e., narrow the resource flow), extend or intensify the usage period of products by designing and making long-life goods (i.e., slow the resource loop), keep the resources in the value chain through recycling and reusing instead of throwing them away in landfills or incinerators (i.e., close the resource loop), and thereby give time for the natural ecosystems to regenerate (Ki et al., 2020a). Among the distinctive ways to achieve CF, closing the resource loop by collecting used or unwanted products from consumers and recycling and reusing them is the key to building a true circularity in the fashion business (Niinimäki, 2018). In doing so, the role of consumers is especially important to return the value of lost garments (i.e., post-consumer textile waste) to the fashion supply chain because consumers are the ones who will decide whether a fashion product ends up in a waste bin or elsewhere (Ki et al., 2020a).

Despite the fact that consumers serve as gatekeepers in the circularity of the fashion business, there is little understanding as to whether consumers morally support the idea of a CF (Ki et al., 2020b). This is a surprising ommission given the long-established literature that connects fashion production and consumption with morality (Ha & Lennon, 2006; Kaikobad et al., 2015). For a long time, the business ethics literature has discussed how the fashion industry can tackle the moral criticism of its business behavior (Brinkmann, 2004). The consumer behavior-related literature has investigated whether fashion consumers project moral values into their purchase and/or disposal decisions and, if so, whether these morals translate into real action (Ha-Brookshire & Hodges, 2009; Joergens, 2006). These two streams of literature imply that both the supply and demand sides of the fashion economy are subject to each individual's moral judgement. Understanding these individuals' moral views toward the CF phenomenon is therefore important because consumers will not send their unwanted clothes for reuse or recycling unless they feel that it is the morally right thing to do and/or feel morally obliged to do so (Ki et al., 2020b). Hence, this research seeks to investigate whether consumers attribute moral responsibility to fashion companies as well as to themselves (as fashion consumers) for creating this circularity in the fashion business. If so, do the moral traits they apply toward corporate responsibility and their own consumer responsibility hold true or differ? To formulate more detailed research questions, we conducted an in-depth review of the literature about this moral responsibility.

Literature Review

Moral responsibility: virtue or accountability?

The literature defines moral responsibility as the status of morally deserving blame or praise for an act or an omission performed or neglected in accordance with an agent's moral obligations (Honderich, 2005). In this vein, the term *moral responsibility* includes two aspects: (1) the judgement about what acts are deemed morally right or wrong (i.e., virtue) and (2) the judgement of when people are responsible for their acts (i.e., accountability) (Driver, 2008). Moral responsibility thus differs from causal responsibility in that people may attach moral standards to certain things, but they may not

necessarily be accountable for them (Sartorio, 2007). For example, if a person purchases an apparel product manufactured at a Bangladeshi garment factory that later burned down and killed many workers, we cannot say that the person who bought the apparel is accountable for the accident or the tragic deaths because she/he had no part in the accident. However, the purchaser may feel that the factory was morally unsound to put the rights and safety of the workers at risk, and thereby feels guilty for the accident because it was an indirect consequence related to the consumption choice the purchaser made. In contrast, the purchaser might perceive that the garment factory as not only blameworthy for the accident but accountable for it. This implies that the discussion of moral responsibility includes either virtue or accountability or both.

Indeed, previous research has regarded moral responsibility as either a virtue or accountability or both (Dubbink & Smith, 2011; Williams, 2008). The literature indicates that *moral responsibility as a virtue* (MR-V) is induced when a morally responsible agent's personal *temperament* or *attitudes* serve as the standards for assessing whether his/her actions are morally good or bad (Dubbink & Smith, 2011). Herein, the term moral agent refers to an individual or a company that has the ability to discern what is right or wrong and has the responsibility for an action (Ha-Brookshire, 2017). For example, Song and Kim (2018) show that individuals' innate temperament—e.g., conscientiousness and agreeableness—are critical in affecting the extent to which they feel morally responsible for certain things. In addition to a moral agent's temperament, the agent's cognitive and/or emotional attitude toward certain issues is also important in affecting the level of his/her MR-V (Dubbink & Smith, 2011). For example, when people carefully deliberate what is morally right or wrong for them to do, or give some consideration to what could be the consequences of their actions, we can say that they are forming their MR-V (Gauthier, 2005). Even when people show care or concern about the consequences of their actions and develop an emotional attitude toward certain things, this is concerned with MR-V (Gauthier, 2005). Indeed, the degree to which morally responsible agents feel a sense of MR-V depends on their

own personal temperament and/or the cognitive or emotional attitude they develop toward certain issues (Dubbink & Smith, 2011).

In contrast, *moral responsibility as accountability* (MR-A) considers a morally responsible agent as an actor who is liable for the harmful consequences she/he causes (Dubbink & Smith, 2011). For example, according to Velasquez (1998), people feel MR-A when they acknowledge that their own behaviors or actions have harmful consequences. In a similar vein, when people see that a company's business behavior has serious adverse effects on the environment and society, people may not only apply moral virtue in judging the company's business ethics but believe that the company is morally accountable for its business consequences (Ki et al., 2020b). In this way, MR-A differs from MR-V because the former puts more attention on a morally responsible agent's action-outcomes and their consequent liability, whereas the latter is built upon the agent's moral standards and attitude (Petersson, 2013). Taking note of the nuanced differences between MR-V and MR-A, we reviewed the literature on topics related to both sustainability and moral responsibility in the next section, and this helped us formulate two research questions.

Morally responsible agent: Are consumers and companies both morally responsible agents?

In our world in which sustainability is an increasingly important agenda, individuals' moral responsibility for the environment and society is in demand more than ever because people use their moral value to make decisions about whether something is right or wrong, and by extension, whether they should bear moral responsibility for certain things or not (Camacho et al., 2003). Just as a set of moral principles and standards guide a person's behavior, it also guides and motivates the person's consumption choices, for example, what to purchase and how to use and dispose of products and services (Chatzidakis et al., 2004). Thus, the more consumers are morally grounded about caring for the environment and society, the higher the propensity is for them to show their responsibility to make more sustainable choices and thereby protect the environment (Song & Kim, 2018). Traditionally, moral responsibility was thought to be a concept that was appropriate to use only for people. Yet, the

most recent stance is, “we can meaningfully and appropriately say that companies are morally responsible” (Chryssides & Kaler, 1993, p. 269) because a company has the same legal rights and responsibilities enjoyed by people (Ha-Brookshire, 2017). Indeed, individuals increasingly believe that a company should bear the same moral responsibility for protecting the environment and society as people do, and thus they pay attention to what a company says and how it operates its business (Ki et al., 2020a). For example, Jung and Ha-Brookshire (2017) show that consumers check on fashion companies’ moral values and behaviors and take the sustainability credentials of these companies under serious consideration before making a purchase decision. While the literature indicates that both consumers and companies are morally responsible agents in creating a more sustainable fashion economy, surprisingly, little research has provided empirical evidence on whether people truly believe that both consumers and companies are morally responsible for creating a circular economy in the fashion business. This led us to formulate:

> **Research question 1.** Do individuals believe that fashion companies on the supply side of the fashion economy and fashion consumers on the demand side are both morally responsible for creating a CF? What are the underlying reasons for their respective beliefs?

Consumer and corporate moral responsibilities for CF: MR-V or MR-A?

While the literature indicates that both fashion consumers and fashion companies are morally responsible agents for sustainability-related issues (Ki et al., 2020a), the nuanced conceptual focus of consumer moral responsibility versus corporate moral responsibility may differ. Paek and Nelson (2009) indicate that the degree to which consumers show their moral responsibility for certain issues is related to their virtuous traits (i.e., MR-V), such as the degree of their altruism, empathy, and fairness. Indeed, individuals’ personal virtue-related temperament (e.g., conscientiousness) acts as an important factor affecting their choice decisions related to environmentally friendly products (Milfont & Sibley, 2012). In contrast, when consumers have an opinion about companies, they apply MR-A believing that companies are directly accountable and blamable for any unsustainable practices and actions the

companies take (Amed et al., 2019). The fact that consumers hold such an opinion is not surprising because they see that the fashion business is supplying more than 150 billion items of clothing per year to the market hoping to be purchased by only 7 billion potential consumers (Segran, 2019), which results in 10% of all humanity's carbon emissions and the second highest water consumption (Di Benedetto, 2017). The more consumers see the dark sides of the fashion business, the more they may apply MR-A believing that many fashion companies pay little attention to corporate ethics (Birch, 2011). Indeed, when people witness unethical behaviors by a fashion brand, they perceive the brand not only as blameworthy but also as irresponsible (Grappi et al., 2017). In this vein, we presume that people may apply a different moral focus—MR-V versus MR-A—when it comes to their own moral responsibility versus corporate moral responsibility for a CF. This led us to formulate:

> **Research question 2.** Do individuals believe that consumers' moral responsibility for a CF and corporations' moral responsibility are similar or differ in terms of MR-V or MR-A? What are the underlying reasons for their respective beliefs?

Methods

Respondents and procedure

To address our research questions, we developed an online survey questionnaire and administered it through Dynata, a survey company that has a representative research panel in the United States (Milne et al., 2019). We chose U.S. consumers to be our survey participants because the U.S. clothing market has the largest volume worldwide (Statista, 2019). To ensure that survey participants understood the context of our study, we provided the definition and an example of a CF (e.g., fashion retailers' take-back recycling program) at the beginning of the questionnaire. We chose this program as the primary CF context of our study for three reasons: (1) fashion retailers (e.g., H&M, Levi's, and Eileen Fisher) are increasingly bearing post-retail responsibility through this program by collecting unwanted clothes from customers to recycle and thereby contribute to creating a CF; (2) even on the part of consumers, this program is regarded as an efficient way to address consumers' post-

consumption behavior (Leal Filho et al., 2019); and thus (3) this program was deemed appropriate for asking individuals' opinions about both the supply and demand sides of the fashion industry's CF endeavors (Ki et al., 2020b). To make sure that the survey was filled out by respondents who understood the principles of CF, they were asked to answer two screening questions: "What system does a circular economy endorse?" and "Which of the following is/are example/s of fashion companies' circular economy initiatives? (You may choose multiple answers if applicable.). Only those who answered both questions correctly could respond to the next set of questions.

The main section of the questionnaire consisted of two types of questions: "yes-no" and "open-ended" questions. As shown in Figure 1, participants were first asked to answer the following two yes-no questions: "Do you believe that you, as a *consumer*, have a moral responsibility to take part in making fashion circular? (i.e., consumer moral responsibility)" and "Do you believe that *fashion companies* have a moral responsibility to help make fashion circular? (i.e., corporate moral responsibility)." Those who answered "yes" to the consumer moral responsibility question were then asked to respond to the following two open-ended questions: "Why do you believe that you *have* the moral responsibility to take part in making fashion circular?" In contrast, those who said "no" were asked to answer to "Why do you believe that you *do not have* the moral responsibility to take part in making fashion circular?". Similarly, for corporate moral responsibility, those who answered "yes" were asked to respond to the following open-ended question: "Why do you believe that fashion companies *have* the moral responsibility to take part in making fashion circular?" In contrast, those who said "no" were asked to answer to "Why do you believe that fashion companies *do not have* the moral responsibility to take part in making fashion circular?"

== Place Figure 1 about Here ==

Initially, a total of 344 respondents' descriptive terms (i.e., textual content) were recorded that narrated the reasons why they did or did not believe fashion consumers and companies should bear moral responsibility for creating a CF. The data were collected for a week in January 2020. After

excluding 12 incomplete responses, 332 responses remained valid for the analysis. As shown in Table 1, the largest percentages of our respondents were in the following domains: females (62.05%), ages above 45 (54.52%), Caucasian (80.72%), married (54.52%), working full-time (44.58%), a bachelor's degree (34.94%), and an annual household income of $31,000–$62,999 (30.72%).

== Place Table 1 about Here ==

Data analysis

With the narrative data provided by 332 respondents, we used a mixed-method approach in the data analysis: (1) qualitative (i.e., thematic content analysis) and (2) quantitative data analysis (i.e., binomial test and Fisher's exact test). First, to analyze the respondents' textual data, we conducted thematic content analysis, which is a method of analyzing qualitative data to identify common themes of meaning that come up repeatedly (Ki et al., 2020a). In doing so, we used a systematic coding method using both deductive and inductive coding approaches. Deductive coding refers to a "theory-driven" coding approach, in which the coding is processed based on a pre-existing theory or concept (Rivas, 2012). For example, in our deductive coding process, we coded the data into one of two categories: MR-V and/or MR-A. Next, the inductive coding refers to a "data-driven" coding approach (Boyatzis, 1998). Instead of trying to fit the qualitative data into a pre-existing theory or concept, in the inductive coding process, researchers interpreted the textual data to develop common themes based on their similarities in meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2012). For example, within the data of MR-V, we broke down the excerpts into their similarities in meaning, for example, environment, society, etc. After these two steps of coding, we estimated the inter-coder reliability as 93.14%, which exceeded the 85% threshold (Kassarjian, 1977). We then calculated the induction rate of each category and sub-category that we deductively and inductively coded. Induction rate refers to the extent to which the identified category/sub-category was represented within the overall data (Ki et al., 2020a). To support our qualitative analysis results further, we conducted quantitative analyses that helped us provide

additional empirical evidence for addressing our research questions: a binomial test for research question 1 and a Fisher's exact test for research question 2. The results are presented in the next section.

Results

Analytical results of research question 1

To address research question 1, we analyzed the respondents' data in response to the yes-no and open-ended questions. Our findings showed that majority of our respondents did believe that both fashion consumers and companies are morally responsible for creating a CF. Detailed findings and their sample excerpts are specified below.

Consumer moral responsibility for a CF. For *consumer moral responsibility*, 272 (81.93%) out of 332 respondents responded "yes" to the question, "Do you believe that you, as a *consumer*, have a moral responsibility to take part in making fashion circular?" Example excerpts from the subsequent question, "Why do you believe that you *have* the moral responsibility to take part in making fashion circular?" included "Everyone wears clothes, so everyone should participate in circular economy," "The whole concept won't work unless the consumer is also responsible," and "We are the consumers who must take responsibility of our belongings once we purchase them."

In contrast, only 60 participants (18.07%) responded "no." Example excerpts from the subsequent question, "Why do you believe that that you *do not have* the moral responsibility to take part in making fashion circular?" included "I don't buy clothes that often. It is the company's responsibility, not mine," "Because I am not the one making these clothes," and "The power to make it a circular economy isn't in my hands. Without the fashion companies doing, I have no way to do it myself."

Corporate moral responsibility for a CF. With respect to *corporate moral responsibility*, the majority of 288 respondents (86.75%) out of 332 respondents responded "yes" to the question, "Do you believe that *fashion companies* have a moral responsibility to help make fashion circular" Example excerpts from the subsequent question, "Why do you believe that fashion companies *have* the moral

responsibility to take part in making fashion circular?" included "Companies have the power to change the industry, so they have the moral responsibility," "Manufacturers should take responsibility for the products they make even after they are sold," and "The companies are responsible for extracting the raw materials and should minimize the damage associated with doing so."

In contrast, only 44 respondents (13.25%) responded "no." Example excerpts from the subsequent question, "Why do you believe that fashion companies *do not have* the moral responsibility to take part in making fashion circular?" included "That's not their job to take the moral responsibility. Their job is to produce goods that people want," "It's up to each company to decide," and "There should be no attachment of morality."

To support whether there truly exists respondents' preference for opting for "yes" (should bear the moral responsibility) or "no" (no need to bear the moral responsibility), we conducted a binomial test. This is a statistic test used to determine whether there is a preference for one of two options: in this study, "yes" or "no" (McDonald, 2014). Our test results showed that the respondents' recording "yes" (81.93%) for *consumer moral responsibility* and their response to "yes" (86.75%) for *corporate moral responsibility* were significantly higher (one-tailed binomial test, $p < .01$) than their counterparts who answered "no" (Eriksson & Wallin, 1986). The results from both our qualitative and quantitative analyses clearly indicated that individuals show a high likelihood of believing that both the supply (i.e., fashion companies) and demand side of the fashion economy (i.e., they themselves as fashion consumers) are morally responsible for creating a CF.

Analytical results of research question 2

To address research question 2, we analyzed the respondents' data in response to our open-ended questions. To identify whether individuals believe that the focal trait of *consumer moral responsibility* for CF and the focal trait of *corporate moral responsibility* for CF hold true or differ, we analyzed the respondents' textual data that were recorded in response to the following two open-ended questions: (1) "Why do you believe that you have the moral responsibility to take part in making

fashion circular?" (n = 272) and (2) "Why do you believe that fashion companies have the moral responsibility to take part in making fashion circular?" (n = 288). The data were first analyzed using the deductive (theory-driven) coding analysis and were thus coded into MR-V and/or MR-A. For example, when the content indicated a morally responsible agent's (1) personal *temperament* (e.g., conscientiousness or moral value) or (2) attitude toward the environment or society, we coded them as MR-V. In contrast, if the content specified a morally responsible agent's actions and outcomes and their consequent responsibility, these contents were categorized as MR-A.

Consumer moral responsibility for CF. As shown in Table 2, with respect to *consumer moral responsibility*, our deductive coding findings showed that the majority of the content (212, 73.61%) was related to MR-V, whereas 68 (23.61%) were related to MR-A. The remaining eight (2.78%) were classified as neither MR-V nor MR-A. After deductively coding the data into these three categories, we then coded the data further using the inductive approach (data-driven coding approach). As a result, seven sub-categories were identified: (1) "attitude toward the environment," (2) "attitude toward the society," (3) "personal virtuous value," (4) "responsibility as a fashion consumer," (5) "responsibility for the environment," (6) "economic benefit," and (7) "others."

According to our results, three sub-categories were related to MR-V: "attitude toward the environment" (121, 42.01%), followed by "attitude toward the society" (68, 23.61%), and "personal virtuous value" (23, 7.99%). "Attitude toward the environment" included contents that indicated the respondents' attitude of caring for the environment and our natural resources. For instance, excerpts that indicated respondents' concern for resource scarcity and our planet were included in this sub-category. In contrast, "attitude toward the society" included contents that showed the respondents' attitude of caring for others in the society of the next generation. The excerpts that revealed respondents' caring for the community or their concern about the future generations were included in this sub-category. Lastly, "personal virtuous value" included contents based on the respondents' personal moral

values. Some excerpts in this sub-category indicated that engaging in a CF is simply the morally right thing to do.

For MR-A, our inductive coding result identified two sub-categories: "responsibility as a fashion consumer" (66, 22.92%) and "responsibility for the environment" (2, 0.69%). For "responsibility as a fashion consumer," some respondents narrated that they are part of the problem because of their linear fashion consumption practices (e.g., consumerism), and they acknowledged their responsibility for their action and outcomes. The respondents also recorded that they, as fashion consumers, are responsible for taking part in a CF and making a change. "Responsibility for the environment" included contents that reflected defining the respondents themselves as liable agents as they believe they are the cause of environmental degradation.

In neither MR-V nor MR-A, two sub-categories were identified: "economic benefit" (4, 1.39%) and "others" (4, 1.39%). "Economic benefit" indicated respondents' moral responsibility to preserve or help the economy. "Others" did not fit into any of the aforementioned sub-categories: e.g., "Seemed a better answer than no."

In summary, our qualitative data analytical findings showed that individuals associated *consumers' moral responsibility* for a CF more with MR-V compared to MR-A. That is, the majority of the respondents (73.61%) believed that consumer moral responsibility for creating a CF is associated with MR-V, while 23.61% of the respondents linked it with MR-A.

== Place Table 2 about Here ==

Corporate moral responsibility for a CF. To explore whether consumers' moral focus on corporate moral responsibility holds true or differs when compared to that of the consumers' moral responsibility, we also analyzed the data related to *corporate moral responsibility* deductively into two categories: MR-V and/or MR-A. As shown in Table 3, our deductive coding findings showed that the majority of the contents (162. 54.18%) were related to MR-A, whereas 123 contents (41.14%) were related to MR-V. The remaining 14 contents (4.68%) were classified as "neither MR-V nor MR-A."

With these deductive analytical findings, we proceeded with the inductive coding to identify more specific and meaningful themes. The inductive coding identified seven sub-categories: (1) "responsibility as a fashion producer," (2) "responsibility for the environment," (3) "attitude toward the environment," (4) "attitude toward the society," (5) "personal virtuous value," (6) "economic benefit," and (7) "others."

Among them, two sub-categories were related to MR-A: "responsibility as a fashion producer" (161 or 53.85%) and "responsibility for the environment" (1 or 0.33%). "Responsibility as a fashion producer" included contents in which the respondents explained that fashion companies are the ones profiting from the linear production methods that are destroying the Earth, and thus are accountable for creating a CF. Regarding "responsibility for the environment," respondents stated that everyone (including fashion companies) should take some kind of responsibility for the trash we are creating every day.

In contrast, our inductive analytical findings identified three sub-categories related to MR-V: "attitude toward the environment" (80 or 26.76%), "attitude toward the society" (29 or 9.70%), and "personal virtuous value" (14 or 4.68%). In terms of "attitude toward the environment," the respondents explained that companies have to take part in a CF to reduce our ecological footprint and save the planet. For example, respondents believed that everyone, including fashion companies, should show that they care for the environment. "Attitude toward the society" reflected respondents' care for society, which was indicated by their belief that any business owner should show care for the future generations. Regarding "personal virtuous value," respondents revealed their personal moral virtues by saying that showing a moral responsibility for building a CF seems simply the right thing for the fashion companies to do.

Lastly in neither MR-V nor MR-A, we identified two sub-categories: "economic benefit" (9, 3.01%) and "others" (5, 1.67%). "Economic benefit" included contents that did not belong to either MR-V or MR-A, but for which the respondents explained that they believed that a CF was not a moral

issue but an economic issue. For example, respondents' quotes addressing that fashion companies may want to take part in a CF because it will help them save costs were included in this sub-category. The "others" category contained the contents in which respondents believed that companies should take part in a CF to help enhance their brand image, or because it is simply a better answer.

As such, our qualitative data analytical findings indicated that the moral focus people apply to their own *consumer moral responsibility* versus *corporate moral responisbility* differed with respect to MR-V and MR-A. That is, people believed that their moral responsibility for a CF is associated more with MR-V (73.61%) and that corporate moral responsibility for CF is associated more with MR-A (54.18%).

== Place Table 3 about Here ==

To support further whether consumers' perceptions on their own moral responsibility and corporate moral responsibility truly differ, we conducted a Fisher's exact test, which is a statistical test that calculates the probability of all possible combinations in a contingency table with a fix/conditioned marginal total (Sauro & Lewis, 2016). In our study, we conducted the Fisher's exact test with the ratio of *MR-V related quotes* to *MR-A related quotes* for both: (1) consumer moral responsibility and (2) corporate moral responsibility. According to our test results, the MR-V/MR-A ratios for consumer moral responsibility (212:68) and the MR-V/MR-A ratios for corporate moral responsibility (123:162) were statistically different (two-tailed Fisher's exact test, $p < .01$). The percentage of MR-V quotes was significantly higher in consumer moral responsibility than in corporate moral responsibility (one-tailed Fisher's exact test, $p < .01$).

The results from both our qualitative and quantitative analyses clearly indicate that individuals' moral focus toward their own (consumer) moral responsibility for a CF and corporate moral responsibility for a CF truly differed. They associated their moral responsibility more with MR-V and linked corporate moral responsibility more with MR-A.

Additional findings

To understand the reasons why individuals do "not" believe that they and/or fashion companies need to bear moral responsibilities for a CF, we analyzed the respondents' qualitative data that were recorded in response to the following two open-ended questions: (1) "Why do you believe that you *do not have* the moral responsibility to take part in making fashion circular?" (n = 60) and (2) "Why do you believe that fashion companies *do not have* the moral responsibility to take part in making fashion circular?" (n = 44).

No consumer moral responsibility for a CF. As shown in Table 4, a total of 60 respondents answered "no" indicating that they did not believe that consumers needed to bear the moral responsibility for a CF. To identify the underlying reasons behind this belief, we conducted deductive coding analysis with these 60 respondents' excerpts and identified two categories: "neither MR-V nor MR-A" (48, 78.69%) and "MR-A" (13, 21.31%). To provide more nuanced implications, we analyzed the excerpts using the inductive coding analysis. By doing so, we identified four sub-categories: (1) "not a moral issue" (31, 50.82%), (2) "rather a matter of freewill" (12, 19.67%), (3) "no economic compensation" (5, 8.20%), and (4) "not my responsibility" (13, 21.31%).

Among them, three sub-categories were related to neither MR-V nor MR-A: "not a moral issue," "rather a matter of freewill," and "no economic compensation." First, in the "not a moral issue" category, respondents indicated that morals should not be a part of the discussion about consumers' responsibility for a CF. Second, as for "rather a matter of freewill," respondents shared that consumers' participating (or not participating) in a CF is a business or personal decision. Third, in the "no economic compensation" category, the respondents' quotes included, "I am charged a high price for the clothes I buy. If they want it back, they should offer me a credit or discount off the original price," and "Unless I'm being paid for my returned clothes, I do not feel the need to give back at the store." In contrast, one sub-category was related to MR-A: "not my responsibility." Herein, the respondents' quotes included "that's the job of the manufacturer," and "because I am not the one making these clothes."

== Place Table 4 about Here ==

***No corporate moral responsibility for a CF*.** With respect to corporate moral responsibility, a total of 44 respondents answered "no" (see Table 5), suggesting that they do not believe that fashion companies need to bear moral responsibility for a CF. To understand the underlying reasons why they believed so, we conducted deductive coding analysis with the 44 respondents' excerpts and identified one category: "neither MR-V nor MR-A" (44, 100%). To include more meaningful themes, we analyzed the excerpts further using the inductive coding analysis. The inductive coding results identified four sub-categories: (1) "not a moral issue" (18, 40.91%), (2) "rather a matter of freewill" (14, 31.82%), (3) "money-first approach" (10, 22.73%), and (4) "others" (2, 4.54%). In the "not a moral issue" category, respondents discussed that corporate responsibility for a CF should not be attached to morality. As for "rather a matter of freewill" contents, respondents believed that there should not be any regulations on fashion companies, or it is their business to decide what they want to do with clothes. Next, in the "money-first approach," respondents believed businesses exist to make a profit or to take responsibility on behalf of their stockholders. Lastly, in "others," respondent's excerpt included "I don't see it working in this throwaway society."

== Place Table 5 about Here ==

Conclusions

Today, there is a growing consensus among policy-makers, business practitioners, and academic researchers that the fashion industry should move away from a linear economy in favor of a circular economy to achieve sustainable development (Ki et al., 2020a). In agreement with this direction, scholars in the fashion discipline have started to link the circular economy phenomenon with the fashion industrial context (Niinimäki et al., 2017; Sandvik & Stubbs, 2019). In doing so, many of the prior studies have identified the critical CF-related drivers, practices, and barriers in the fashion industry by conducting interviews or literature review (Jia et al., 2020; Singh & Ordoñez, 2016). Despite the insights these studies provide, their contributions are relatively limited in two aspects. First, many of the former studies are exploratory in nature (Tunn et al., 2019; Ünal et al., 2019). Second,

extant studies predominantly focus on understanding the CF phenomenon from one side of the fashion economy—the supply side—grounded on the opinions from fashion designers, suppliers, and retailers in the CF discussion (Tunn et al., 2019; Ünal et al., 2019). In contrast, there is a lack of empirical evidence on identifying how consumers perceive the CF phenomenon and whether they feel that both the supply (i.e., companies) and demand sides (i.e., consumers) of the fashion economy are morally responsible for making fashion circular (Ki et al., 2020a). Filling these gaps in the literature is important because a true circularity cannot be achieved unless consumers are morally grounded in their support of the idea of a CF and take part in it. This study addressed this issue by investigating empirically individuals' moral stance toward *consumer moral responsibility for a CF* and *corporate moral responsibility for a CF*, and their *nuanced perceived differences*, using both qualitative and quantitative analyses.

Theoretical and managerial implications

Our research contributes to academic knowledge in the fashion discipline, especially on several aspects of CF.

Implications from research question 1. Our findings show that people do believe that both the supply (companies) and demand sides of the fashion economy (consumers) must take on the moral responsibility for making fashion circular (Ki et al., 2020b). Both the thematic content analysis and binomial test results, using 332 respondents' narrative data, clearly indicate that people have a high likelihood of believing that they (as fashion consumers) are morally responsible for engaging in CF—both in terms of MR-V and MR-A. For example, individuals felt MR-V when they believed that creating a CF is the morally right thing to do and/or a way to show their caring for the environment and society. As much as MR-V induced consumers' moral responsibility for a CF, MR-A also triggered their moral responsibility. People recorded that they are liable for the linear consumer behaviors (e.g., over-consumption and throwaway behaviors) and their subsequent adverse effects on the environment, thus they attributed MR-A to themselves.

As much as people felt the need to bear moral responsibility on the part of the demand side of the fashion economy (81.93%), they believed that the supply side is likewise morally responsible for building a CF (86.75%). This was empirically confirmed through both our qualitative and quantitative analyses. Individuals revealed a high propensity of believing that fashion companies should take both MR-V and MR-A. The reasons that respondents believed this were similar to those accountable for consumers' moral responsibility. In terms of MR-V, the majority of the respondents indicated that everyone, including fashion companies, should take part in a CF to show care in reducing their ecological footprint and for handing over a livable world for future generations. According to our findings, people also indicated a strong belief that companies should take MR-V as it is the right thing for them to do as the supply side of the fashion economy. In contrast, with respect to MR-A, many stated that fashion companies are the ones overproducing and harming the environment, and thereby they are highly accountable and morally responsible for building a CF. Our findings corroborate previous research that sees companies as moral agents, as are humans, who are responsible for creating a sustainable environment and society (Ha-Brookshire, 2017). While there are still controversies over whether sustainability and a CF should be seen as a moral issue (Ma et al., 2020; Niinimäki, 2015), our findings clearly show that people do project moral judgments—both with respect to MR-V and MR-A—towards a CF.

Implications from research question 2. Our research provides more nuanced insights into consumers' moral views on a CF. In response to our second research question, our findings show that, although people believe that both consumers and companies should bear the moral responsibilities for a CF, the moral focus they project toward each other differs. Specifically, we note that individuals associate their own moral responsibility more with MR-V (73.61%), while they link corporate moral responsibility more with MR-A (54.18%). Individuals' *attitude toward the environment* (42.01%) was the most critical factor affecting their MR-V, followed by their *attitude toward the society* (23.61%) and *personal virtuous value* (7.99%). In contrast, when it comes to corporate moral responsibility,

fashion companies' *responsibility as a fashion producer* (53.85%) was cited as the main factor affecting the companies' MR-A. People believed that fashion companies are the ones making a profit from the linear fashion production practices, while at the same time harming the environment and society. Thus, they believed that fashion companies should take part in building a CF because they are blameworthy and accountable for the dark side of the fashion business. Our research provides new insights into the CF literature by demonstrating that people project a distinct moral focus when it comes to their own moral responsibility versus the corporate moral responsibility for a CF.

Managerial implications. These findings provide important insights into fashion business practitioners as they indicate which moral appeal would be more effective in attracting consumers versus business leaders in maximizing each of their moral engagements in the creation of a CF. When taking note of our findings, fashion business practitioners may wish to employ a "virtue appeal" when their promotional message framing targets fashion consumers. In contrast, they may wish to employ an "accountability appeal" message framing in their marketing and communication strategies when they want to entice their collaborators' or supply chain partners' co-responsibility in the creation of a CF.

Our research provides important additional insights into the literature by revealing that a few consumers still believe that morality should not be attached to the discussion of a CF. In particular, as for consumer moral responsibility for a CF, 18.07% of the respondents believed that they do not need to bear moral responsibility as consumers for creating a CF. As for corporate moral responsibility for a CF, 13.25% of the respondents felt that fashion companies do not need to bear the moral responsibility for creating a CF. These findings imply that there is still a minor, yet strong, public opinion that does not see a CF as a moral issue. Taking note of this, we suggest fashion business practitioners take caution when they use morals or ethics as their main marketing and communication appeal, so that their marketing strategies for a CF do not backfire on them.

Limitations and avenues for future research

Our study has some contextual limitations and future research opportunities. First, our qualitative data were based on respondents residing in the United States, and these respondents were skewed towards females and Caucasians. Given that the choice of moral acts is often governed by unique ethnic or cultural meanings (Baldonado, 1996), we recommend that future researchers discuss individuals' moral views toward a CF across distinct ethnic or cultural groups to provide more nuanced implications in the literature. We also recommend that future researchers identify what mediates the perceptions of morality to better understand consumers' perceptions toward the CF phenomenon from various ethnic or cultural groups. Second, while the literature indicates that educated people with a higher income show a tendency to support sustainability more than their counterparts (Han et al., 2011), our findings are based on a group of informants, among whom 40% are unemployed and show that they morally support the idea of a CF. Employment status might therefore serve as a significant individual characteristic that influences consumers' perceptions of a CF. Thus, researchers may consider employment as an important moderating factor in their CF studies. Third, given that the topic of a CF is an emerging topic, consumers' perceptions of the topic may still be a time- and context-sensitive issue. Depending on whether the environmental problems increase, consumers' moral views on a CF might change. Thus, we recommend that future researchers keep track of consumers' moral perspectives of a CF. Whether and how consumers' perceptions of their own moral responsibility and corporate moral responsibility for creating a CF change may be an interesting future study.

Figure 1
Procedures for the survey questionnaire

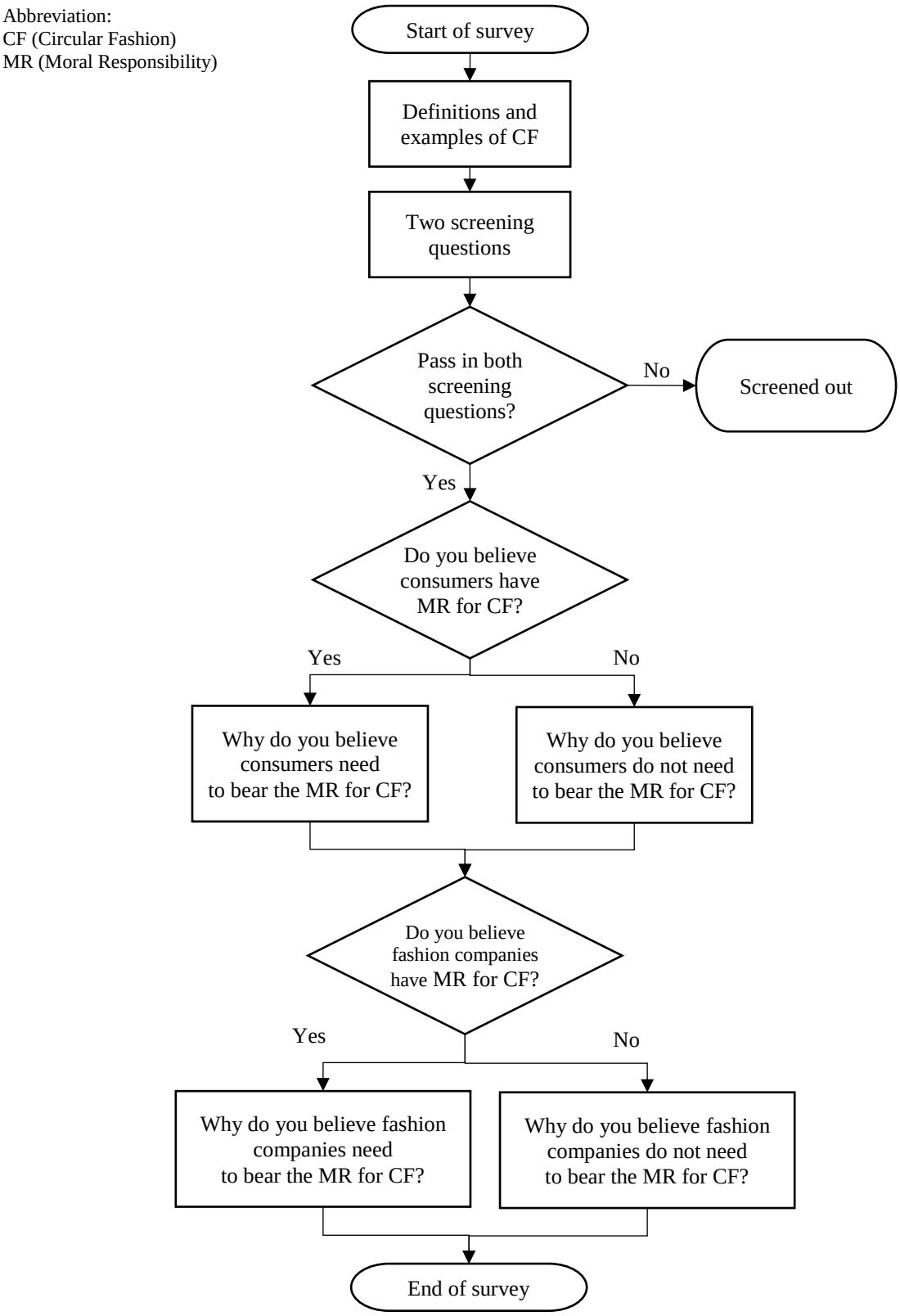

Table 1
Summary of the respondents' socio-demographic profile (n = 332)

Socio-demographic variables	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	124	37.35%
	Female	206	62.05%
	Other	1	0.30%
	Rather not say	1	0.30%
Age	18 to 30	53	15.96%
	31 to 45	98	29.52%
	Above 45	181	54.52%
Ethnic identification	African-American	21	6.33%
	Caucasian	268	80.72%
	Native American	1	0.30%
	Asian or Pacific Islander	16	4.82%
	Hispanic	19	5.72%
	Other	7	2.11%
Marital status	Single, never married	85	25.60%
	Domestic partnership	20	6.02%
	Married	181	54.52%
	Separated, divorced, or widowed	45	13.55%
	Other	1	0.30%
Employment status	Work full-time	148	44.58%
	Work part-time	52	15.66%
	Multiple part-time jobs	4	1.20%
	Do not work	128	38.55%
Education level	High school or less	51	15.36%
	Some college	93	28.01%
	Bachelor's degree	116	34.94%
	Graduate degree	71	21.39%
	Other	1	0.30%
Annual household income	less than $31,000	58	17.47%
	$31,000–62,999	102	30.72%
	$63,000–112,999	89	26.81%
	$113,000–247,999	72	21.69%
	$248,000 or more	11	3.31%

Table 2

*Respondents' excerpts in response to the reasons why they believe **consumers** need to bear a moral responsibility for a CF (n = 272)*

Categories identified	Sub-categories identified	Examples of participants' quotes
MR-V (212 or 73.61%)	Attitude toward the environment (121 or 42.01%)	Informant 190: I believe morally I should take part in making fashion circular because it's the best thing to do for our aging earth.
		Informant 318: As my kids get older, I realize how important it is to conserve natural resources. I also understand the power of renewable energy to help make our natural resources last longer.
		Informant 275: Because I care about the planet.
	Attitude toward the society (68 or 23.61%)	Informant 119: To contribute to society. If I wear something once, someone else maybe be able to repurpose it into something useful for themselves.
		Informant 75: For the next generation.
		Informant 140: It is good for the community and if I start doing it then maybe other people will as well.
	Personal virtuous value (23 or 7.99%)	Informant 125: It is simply the right thing to do.
		Informant 295: It's just the right thing to do.
		Informant 311: It seems like the right thing to do.
MR-A (68 or 23.61%)	Responsibility as a fashion consumer (66 or 22.92%)	Informant 278: We are part of the problem. We should do our part to limit our consumerism or participate in reuse/recycle practices.
		Informant 199: Once you buy the product it's your responsibility to deal the next step in the process.
		Informant 107: Without me being a part of it the concept would never work. The customer has to be a part of the program.
	Responsibility for the environment (2 or 0.69%)	Informant 147: We are destroying our planet. At this point, any small act can help our planet.
		Informant 91: It's our job to recycle.
Neither MR-V nor MR-A (8 or 2.78%)	Economic benefit (4 or 1.39%)	Informant 25: To preserve the economy.
		Informant 46: It would help the economy.
	Others (4 or 1.39%)	Informant 169: It would present different ideas for fashion.
		Informant 331: Seemed a better answer than no.
Total Induction = 288 (100.00%)		

Notes: 1. MR-V (Moral responsibility as virtue); MR-A (Moral responsibility as accountability)

2. Figures in the parentheses indicate the induction rates.

Table 3

*Respondents' excerpts in response to the reasons why they believe **fashion companies** need to bear a moral responsibility for a CF (n = 288)*

Categories identified	Sub-categories identified	Examples of participants' quotes
MR-A (162 or 54.18%)	Responsibility as a fashion producer (161 or 53.85%)	Informant 69: They are the ones producing and profiting from production methods that destroy the Earth. They have the biggest responsibility, even bigger than the consumer, to help.
		Informant 99: They are the ones making the product and should help the environment too.
		Informant 110: They overproduce and a lot of product goes to waste.
	Responsibility for the environment (1 or 0.33%)	Informant 179: Everyone must take some kind of responsibility or we will end up under mountains of garbage. We are creating more trash daily.
MR-V (123 or 41.14%)	Attitude toward the environment (80 or 26.76%)	Informant 78: Everyone must help save the planet.
		Informant 176: We all need to recycle to keep America cleaner and to save the environment.
		Informant 322: We need to help our country improve our global footprint.
	Attitude toward the society (29 or 9.70%)	Informant 129: To give back to the community.
		Informant 332: We have to try to leave our children and their children a livable world.
		Informant 7: Because any business owner should care about the kids and grandkids' future.
	Personal virtuous value (14 or 4.68%)	Informant 79: Just to do what is right.
		Informant 311: It seems like the right thing to do.
		Informant 221: Right thing to do.
Neither MR-V nor MR-A (14 or 4.68%)	Economic benefit (9 or 3.01%)	Informant 190: Yes, I believe that fashion companies should help in taking part to make fashion circular because it will help their company's save money….
		Informant 143: Because it will also save them money.
		Informant 185: It would cost them less in the long run.
	Others (5 or 1.67%)	Informant 47: It's good for their image.
		Informant 331: Seemed a better answer than no.
Total Induction = 299 (100.00%)		

Notes: 1. MR-V (Moral responsibility as virtue); MR-A (Moral responsibility as accountability)
2. Figures in the parentheses indicate the induction rates.

Table 4

*Respondents' excerpts in response to the reasons why they believe **consumers** do **not** need to bear a moral responsibility for a CF (n = 60)*

Categories identified	Sub-categories identified	Examples of participants' quotes
Neither MR-V nor MR-A (48 or 78.69%)	Not a moral issue (31 or 50.82%)	Informant 198: I don't believe morals apply to recycling old clothes.
		Informant 66: Morality shouldn't be a part.
		Informant 58: It's a good option, but I haven't seen a compelling argument for a moral responsibility.
	Rather a matter of freewill (12 or 19.67%)	Informant 168: When I make a purchase, that is the end of the transaction. What I do with my property is my business.
		Informant 222: I purchased these items so it should be my decision what to do them.
		Informant 293: What I do with my purchases is my business.
	No economic compensation (5 or 8.20%)	Informant 21: Unless I'm being paid for my returned clothes, I do not feel the need to give back at the store. I think stores should purchase back the recycled clothing or offer discounts on new clothing to customers that return their clothing.
		Informant 145: I am charged a high price for the clothes I buy. If they want it back, they should offer me a credit or discount off the original price.
		Informant 131: I paid for try product and unless I am compensated for its return, I will not bring it back and will give it to goodwill.
MR-A (13 or 21.31%)	Not my responsibility (13 or 21.31%)	Informant 323: The power to make it a circular economy isn't in my hands. Without the fashion companies doing, I have no way to do it myself.
		Informant 172: That's the job of the manufacturer.
		Informant 242: Because I am not the one making these clothes.
Total Induction = 61 (100.00%)		

Notes: 1. MR-V (Moral responsibility as virtue); MR-A (Moral responsibility as accountability)
2. Figures in the parentheses indicate the induction rates.

Table 5

*Respondents' excerpts in response to the reasons why they believe **fashion companies** do **not** need to bear a moral responsibility for a CF (n = 44)*

Categories identified	Sub-categories identified	Examples of participants' quotes
Neither MR-V nor MR-A (44 or 100%)	Not a moral issue (18 or 40.91%)	Informant 20: It's a good idea, but I don't think there is a moral responsibility.
		Informant 135: There should be no attachment of morality.
		Informant 233: Not a moral issue, but is economically smart.
	Rather a matter of freewill (14 or 31.82%)	Informant 282: Everyone decides on their own—no regulations.
		Informant 157: It's up to the buyers to decide what to do with it.
		Informant 68: Let the market do its thing.
	Money-first approach (10 or 22.73%)	Informant 50: They are in the business to make a profit.
		Informant 82: Their responsibility is to their stockholders.
		Informant 224: They should do whatever is best for stockholders.
	Others (2 or 4.54%)	Informant 62: I don't see it working in this throwaway society.
Total Induction = 44 (100.00%)		

Notes: 1. MR-V (Moral responsibility as virtue); MR-A (Moral responsibility as accountability)

2. Figures in the parentheses indicate the induction rates.

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