

Towards Sustainable Fashion

Exploring Sufficiency-Oriented Business Models in French Fashion SMEs

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Abstract *This study analyses seven sufficiency-oriented SMEs in the French fashion sector, categorizing their strategies into efficiency, shift and sufficiency. It reveals the tension in balancing sustainability with financial viability, highlighting the systemic challenges posed by consumer preference for fast fashion.*

1. Introduction

The fashion sector is a significant contributor to global environmental issues, responsible for roughly 10 per cent of global carbon emissions (Vesterinen/Syrjälä 2022: 1). It is the world's second-largest polluting industry, surpassed only by the oil sector (Pal 2017). The root of the problem lies in the fast fashion paradigm, which relies on short production and consumption cycles, low production costs, fleeting trends and inexpensive but low-quality materials. Fast fashion promotes a throwaway culture, exacerbating waste generation and escalating consumption levels (Diddi et al. 2019). In contrast, an emerging “slow fashion” movement challenges this unsustainable status quo, with sufficiency as its cornerstone principle (Fletcher/Grose 2012).

Research on the role of businesses in transitioning towards sufficiency-oriented business models, particularly in the fashion industry, remains nascent (Freudenreich/Schaltegger 2020). A limited number of studies have explored how fashion companies implement sufficiency in their business operations, such as Freudenreich and Schaltegger (2020), Garcia-Ortega et al. (2023) and Schauman et al. (2023). However, it remains ambiguous which of the strategies fashion companies employ are genuinely aligned with efficiency, shift or sufficiency approaches, as defined by Akenji et al. (2021).

Then, there is a noticeable gap in research concerning the financial ramifications of adopting sufficiency strategies in the fashion industry (Fletcher 2010; Gossen/

Kropfeld 2022). The prevailing economic system prioritizes strategies that maximize sales and profits, contrasting with the sufficiency model that seeks to curb consumption. This raises the question of whether businesses can realistically adopt a strategy that reduces consumption and at the same time is financially viable.

This chapter explores these research gaps by focusing on sufficiency-aspiring French small and medium-sized fashion businesses. Through interviews with seven companies that have already adopted some sufficiency-oriented strategies in their business models and an analysis of their online presence and company documentation, this chapter offers insights into how businesses can contribute to a sustainable society through sufficiency-oriented business models.

2. Literature review

2.1 From efficiency and shift to sufficiency in business strategies

The literature on sufficiency has a long pedigree (e.g., Princen 2003). Some scholars define it as changes in consumption patterns and a reduction in overall consumption levels (Sandberg 2021), while others suggest that sufficiency is about reducing absolute levels of consumption (Mont et al. 2022; Niessen/Bocken 2021). In consumption studies, sufficiency is defined as a self-imposed restriction on consumption (Figge et al. 2014). The role of business is seen as that of actively creating opportunities for consumers to reduce their consumption (Freudenreich/Schaltegger 2020). Yet, there is a degree of uncertainty concerning which strategies lead to an outright reduction in consumption volumes and which might indirectly influence consumption volumes by altering consumption patterns (Freudenreich/Schaltegger 2020).

Recent literature on sufficiency in the business context tends to amalgamate various business strategies – such as those focused on efficiency, shift and sufficiency (Akenji et al. 2021: 18–19) – under the broad umbrella of sufficiency. This approach risks diverting attention from the task of directly reducing overall consumption levels. It also complicates understanding of whether sufficiency-oriented initiatives are gaining traction in businesses and how sufficiency is being operationalized in practice.

For example, a recent study by Bocken et al. (2022) introduced the concept of a “sufficiency-based circular economy” and scrutinized one hundred and fifty companies using this lens. Twenty-two of these companies explicitly questioned the need to consume, and thirteen included sufficiency in their mission statements. A mere eight companies took steps to moderate sales by actively discouraging purchases or avoiding reduced pricing. The remaining companies had adopted well-established strategies. These included improvements in product design, which falls under efficiency strategies; and, to some extent, the use of circular and sharing business mod-

els as well as product-service systems, representing shift strategies. These strategies can potentially reduce consumption levels, but indirectly (Figge et al. 2014). This observation prompts questions regarding the level of ambition of these companies to directly engage in reducing overall consumption levels.

In a similar study, Garcia-Ortega et al. (2023) studied ten fast-fashion companies. The most commonly implemented strategies included efficiency-oriented and shift approaches such as offering take-back and resale services for discarded products, designing durable products and providing consumers with information about product durability, usage, care and environmental impact (see Table 1). These strategies were summarized as focusing on services, product design and communication about products. Meanwhile, strategies aimed at moderating consumption volumes or reducing the business models' dependence on selling new items were scarcely utilized.

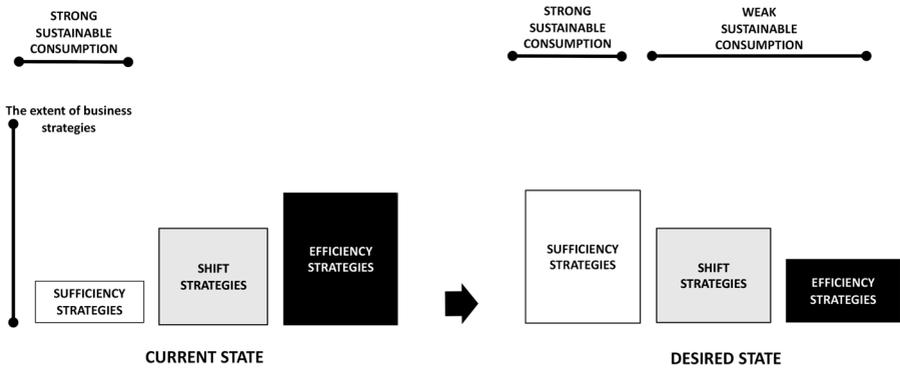
Beyeler and Jaeger-Erben (2022) analyzed fourteen companies, focusing on dimensions of sufficiency in business practices; nine of these companies were from the fashion industry. Utilizing the framework by Schneidewind and Palzkill-Vorbeck (2011), the authors identified 19 business strategies classified into four categories: decluttering (less), decelerating (slower), disentangling (more local), and decommercialization (less market). The decluttering category encompassed strategies that targeted consumption levels more directly, including marketing aimed at reducing consumption, moderate sales and demand reduction services (sufficiency-oriented strategies). However, product service systems and sharing – i.e. shift strategies – were also included in this category. The remaining strategies were extending product life and shifting to reuse and repair (also shift strategies), focusing on local services and supply chains and encouraging prosumerism.

From the perspective of sustainability transformation, integrating efficiency-, shift- and sufficiency-oriented strategies offers the most promising pathway towards sustainability, as supported by various studies (Vita et al. 2019; Freudenreich/Schaltegger 2020; Akenji et al. 2021); companies should ideally engage in all three categories, as indicated by the abovementioned studies. Yet, it would be beneficial for scholarly inquiry to have a clear differentiation between these categories, rather than amalgamating them, when examining business models. We therefore advocate for a nuanced differentiation between sufficiency-oriented strategies, which target absolute reductions in consumption volumes by both consumers and businesses; shift-oriented strategies, which redirect consumption towards less environmentally impactful products and services through alternative business models; and efficiency-oriented strategies, which enhance the efficiency of products, services and operations, thereby potentially influencing consumption volumes indirectly through altered consumption patterns. Sufficiency-oriented strategies are generally categorized as strong sustainable consumption (Lorek/Fuchs 2019), whereas

shift- and efficiency-oriented strategies are often classified as weak sustainable consumption (Dalhammar et al. 2022: 20).

Employing this differentiation shows that the companies investigated in previous research predominantly use shift- and efficiency-oriented strategies. Taking into account the rebound effects often associated with these approaches (Figge et al. 2014; Vita et al. 2019), as well as the broader criticism levelled against weak sustainable consumption strategies (Lorek/Fuchs 2019), it becomes evident that a transition is needed, both in practice and in research, from the current focus on shift- and efficiency-oriented strategies to a more profound adoption of sufficiency-oriented strategies (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Proliferation of efficiency, shift and sufficiency strategies in companies: the current vs. the desired state.



In the following section, we consolidate the numerous strategies employed by fashion companies aspiring towards sufficiency, as discussed in the academic literature. These strategies are then categorized according to the typology shown in Table 1.

2.2 Diversity of business strategies for efficiency, shift and sufficiency

In fashion, designing for sufficiency entails opting for environmentally preferable materials in production and high-quality materials that prolong the garment's lifespan; decelerate the production, use and disposal of garments; and reduce the need for producing new products over time (Fletcher/Grose 2012). Reducing the complexity of clothing designs and purposefully reducing the types of materials used helps produce clothes that are easier to reuse, repair and recycle. Designing for longevity offers an alternative to producing fast-fashion clothes. To achieve lasting

appeal, sufficiency-driven fashion brands seek to create clothing with timeless designs (Bocken/Short 2016; Sandberg 2022). Examples include classic, simple and seasonless garments that do not follow fashion trends, do not carry a brand logo and/or can be adapted to various settings with accessories or by combining them with other garments. Thus, the timelessness of pieces goes beyond their physical attributes to encompass high-quality design and a long-lasting style that can be worn regardless of fashion trends or seasons.

Designing for extended product use further requires a shift in consumer behavior from acquiring garments to actively using them, which Fletcher refers to as moving from “owner-ship” to “user-ship” (2014: 235). Indeed, improving the physical durability of garments can only be effective if users make use of the functionality offered by durable products. This calls for changes in consumption patterns that can be accomplished by developing an emotional connection between the consumer and the product. Sufficiency-oriented clothing brands use various strategies to nurture emotional durability, such as customization, personalization and involvement of customers in the design and production process (Niessen/Bocken 2021). Another sufficiency strategy is adding services to support extended use, such as repair, upgrade or upcycling services, or teaching customers how to perform these practices through online DIY courses (Freudenreich/Schaltegger 2020; Gossen/Heinrich 2021).

Collaborative value creation is essential for practicing sustainability strategies and is pursued through open-ended design processes, experimentation, trial and error, and pre-ordering (Kozłowski et al. 2016). The relationship between sufficiency-oriented companies and customers extends beyond a single sales transaction, involving multiple interactions over the lifetime of the garments throughout the acquisition, use and post-use phases. By involving consumers in the design process, companies are able to produce clothes that closely match their needs, increasing the value of the garments to the users. This approach also supports conscious purchase decisions by encouraging consumers to reflect on the necessity of buying a particular product. Additionally, it enables companies to limit production to the number of ordered pieces, which minimizes waste (Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022).

Sufficiency-oriented strategies often include marketing and communication efforts that actively discourage overconsumption (Gossen et al. 2019). More specific tactics might involve moderating sales and promotions by abstaining from consumer marketing campaigns or sales incentives like discounts, eliminating seasonal and limited fashion collections and operating without advertisements (Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022). Companies aspiring to sufficiency often utilize social media to directly engage with consumers, solicit feedback, provide information about their operations and products and educate consumers about the environmental consequences of their consumption (Gossen/Kropfeld 2022).

Table 1: Sufficiency-oriented business strategies in the fashion industry

	Focus	Examples of strategies	Sources
Efficiency	Products	Clothes design for efficient material use, lower lifecycle impact; and customised and personalised design	Fletcher/Grose 2012; Bocken/Short 2016; Niessen/Bocken 2021; Bocken/Niessen/Short 2022; Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022; Claxton/Kent 2020; Garcia-Ortega et al. 2023
	Services	Choice architecture: avoid selling high-polluting materials and clothes of poor quality on the market	Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022
	Business model	Sell efficient products; increase sales; reduce per-unit price	Fletcher/Grose 2012; Buzzo/Abreu 2019
	Communication and marketing	Inform consumers about clothes' impact, use, care and refitting (e.g., through labelling and campaigns)	Bocken/Niessen/Short 2022; Garcia-Ortega et al. 2023
Shift	Products	Design durable clothes for physical, functional and emotional longevity; seasonless design; easy-to-maintain, mend, refurbish or upcycle	Fletcher/Grose 2012; Henninger et al. 2017; Bocken/Short 2016; Niessen/Bocken 2021; Bocken/Niessen/Short 2022; Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022; Garcia-Ortega et al. 2023
	Services	Offer clothes extension services: (local) mending, refitting and tailoring services, take-back, upcycle, recycle	Freudenreich/Schaltegger 2020; Niessen/Bocken 2021; Bocken/Niessen/Short 2022; Coscieme et al. 2022
		Offer long warranty	Bocken/Niessen/Short 2022
		Support and offer reuse arrangements, e.g., organise collection of clothes for resale, donation and second-life	Fletcher/Grose 2012; Bocken/Short 2016; Niessen/Bocken 2021; Bocken/Niessen/Short 2022; Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022; Coscieme et al. 2022; Garcia-Ortega et al. 2023

Shift	Business models	Product-service systems: no-ownership offers, pay-per-use offers; temporary access to products: renting, leasing, hiring	Stål/Jansson 2017; Coscieme et al. 2022; Bocken/Niessen/Short 2022; Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022; Garcia-Ortega et al. 2023
		Sharing: offer an exchange platform for sharing and swapping clothes; clothes libraries and wardrobe-sharing; pay-per-use; membership fees	Pedersen/Netter 2015; Niessen/Bocken 2021; Bocken/Niessen/Short 2022; Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022; Garcia-Ortega et al. 2023
		Circular business models that build on ideas of reuse, repair, recycle	Elf/Werner/Black 2022; Coscieme et al. 2022
	Communication and marketing	Communicate about product durability, how to wear and maintain clothes over a long period of time	Laitala/Boks/Klepp 2015; Garcia-Ortega et al. 2023
Sufficiency		Communicate about how and where to lease, rent or swap clothes	Stål/Jansson 2017; Garcia-Ortega et al. 2023
		Communicate about the benefits of reuse and second-hand clothes	Garcia-Ortega et al. 2023
	Products	Designing for slow fashion: customised, size-fit and durable clothes	Fletcher/Grose 2012; Laitala/Boks/Klepp 2015
		Produce products in local production facilities; short supply chains	Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022
	Services	Support consumers in self-sufficiency and DIY, e.g., providing tools for sewing, mending or upcycling their clothes	Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022; Freudenreich/Schaltegger 2020; Bocken/Niessen/Short 2022
	Business models	Premium pricing: long-term consumer management	Freudenreich/Schaltegger 2020; Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022
		Produce clothes on demand	Buecher et al. 2018

Sufficiency	Communication and marketing	De-legitimise mass-produced and standardised clothes; question consumption levels/marketing for consumption reduction	Fletcher 2010; Cossen/Heinrich 2021; Bocken/Niessen/Short 2022; Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022; Cossen/Kropfeld 2022
		Moderate sales; avoid discounts, seasonal sales	Bocken/Short 2016; Cossen/Heinrich 2021; Gossen/Kropfeld 2022; Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022
		Moderate promotions and avoid advertising, e.g., aggressive marketing campaigns based on successive collections, trends and low prices	Bocken et al. 2014; Bocken/Short 2016; Cossen/Heinrich 2021; Gossen/Kropfeld 2022; Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022
		Demand reduction strategies	Bocken/Short 2016; Niessen/Bocken 2021; Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022; Cossen/Heinrich 2021; Gossen/Kropfeld 2022
		Promote convenience of extending product's use	Garcia-Ortega et al. 2023
		Promote needs over desires	Bocken/Short 2016; Garcia-Ortega et al. 2023

Table 1 demonstrates a detailed and classified account of strategies that fashion companies may employ to increase the efficiency of their products and operations, shift to alternative product categories and business models, and develop business models oriented towards sufficiency, as reported in the literature.

2.3 Rethinking purpose, profit and growth

Sufficiency-oriented businesses usually have a nuanced approach to profitability that diverges from the traditional focus on profit maximization. According to Wiefek and Heinitz (2018: 311), these businesses do not aim to maximize profits at any cost. Instead, they seek to achieve a level of profitability that allows them to cover operational expenses and pay salaries. This perspective aligns with Millstone's (2017: 174) distinction between profit seeking and profit maximization. While the latter prioritizes financial gains at the expense of environmental and social considerations, profit seeking aims for a balanced approach that mitigates the externalization of costs to stakeholders, including the environment and society.

Sustainable business models, including sufficiency-oriented businesses, aim to reduce negative environmental and social impacts while maintaining economic viability. These businesses focus on financial stability to sustain operations and fulfil broader social and environmental objectives (Bocken/Niessen/Short 2022). This approach is supported by research that examines profitability through the lens of financial viability rather than profit maximization (Katz/Page 2012).

In the fashion industry, sufficiency-oriented companies often adopt strategies that may appear counterintuitive in a market driven by high sales growth and market share (Bocken/Short 2016; Gossen/Heinrich 2021). To offset reduced production volumes, these companies employ premium pricing strategies (Gossen et al. 2019) that enable the producer to cover the total cost of making a product, including quality materials, durability, repair support, stakeholder well-being, and responsible supply chain and stakeholder practices.

The growth strategies of sufficiency-oriented businesses vary. Some aim for moderate or organic growth to maintain their values (Gebauer 2018), while others actively seek growth to expand their philosophy and market share of sustainable products and companies (Gossen/Heinrich 2021). These businesses often support ecosystem growth, which involves sharing knowledge and ideas within a community of like-minded companies and practitioners. This commitment often manifests through a focus on local embeddedness, fostering proximity and meaningful relationships with suppliers, consumers and other stakeholders (Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022).

However, operating within a growth-oriented economy presents challenges, especially when public companies seek to deliver financial benefits for their shareholders above all other actors (Millstone 2017). In contrast, businesses aspiring to

sustainability consider the benefits and costs to all stakeholders, including employees, customers, the environment and society (Reichel 2018). To maintain their independence and values, many sufficiency-oriented companies opt for limited liability or family-owned structures (Bocken et al. 2022). They also prefer mission-driven investors such as foundations, crowdfunding or personal investments (Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022).

When these companies generate a profit, they strategically reinvest the funds to foster future development, improve internal business practices and cultivate long-term, high-quality relationships with their suppliers (Gebauer 2018). Additionally, they extend their support to other initiatives aligned with sufficiency-oriented goals, such as social movements and non-governmental organizations (Khmara/Kronenberg 2018). A subset of these sufficiency-oriented businesses choose to organize themselves as benefit corporations, thereby legally obligating themselves to pursue public benefits for a diverse range of stakeholders, in addition to fulfilling their duty to generate profits for shareholders (Hiller 2013).

3. Method

This study used qualitative research methods to conduct a multi-case investigation. The following set of criteria framed the sampling of the case companies:

- Sufficiency orientation: companies that publicly identify themselves with a sufficiency-oriented purpose and combine several sufficiency-oriented strategies.
- Business size: micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).
- Fashion sector: B2C companies in the fashion industry.
- French region and language: companies located in France, with primary and secondary data available in French.

The sampling process resulted in the selection of seven companies. As a primary data source, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted between February and April 2023 with company representatives. The interview guide followed a list of questions about products, services and operations, business models, communication and marketing, and growth and profit. For every interview, questions and follow-up discussions were adapted to the specificities of each company. In a second phase, data triangulation was performed using secondary data collected from the companies' websites, blogs and Instagram accounts.

The data analysis was structured around four key categories: products, services, business models and communication and marketing, which offer insights about how sufficiency-oriented business models are being operationalized by the case companies (section 4). The categories of efficiency-, shift- and sufficiency-oriented

fashion business strategies presented in Table 1 were used to classify strategies employed by the case companies (see Table 3). The interview material was also analyzed regarding the case companies' strategies and attitudes towards profits and growth (section 5).

Table 2: List of sufficiency-oriented companies

Company	Description	Interviewee's position in the organization	Collected secondary data
Company A	Size: 48 employees Founding year: 2016	Finance manager	Website (#1) Blog posts (#4) Instagram posts (#2)
Company B	Size: 3 employees Founding year: 2013	Director	Website (#1) Blog posts (#8)
Company C	Size: 2 employees Founding year: 2013	Co-founder	Website (#1) Instagram posts (#2)
Company D	Size: 3 employees Founding year: 2019	Co-founder	Website (#1) Blog posts (#4)
Company E	Size: 4 employees Founding year: 2021	Co-founder	Website (#1) Blog posts (#5)
Company F	Size: 1 employee Founding year: 2020	Director	Website (#1) Blog posts (#2)
Company G	Size: 2 employees Founding year: 2019	Co-founder	Website (#1) Blog posts (#7)

4. How do French fashion SMEs work with sufficiency?

This section presents the various ways in which the seven French SMEs operationalize the concept of sufficiency.

4.1 Products

The studied companies have divergent interpretations of what constitutes sustainability and sufficiency. Thus, they employ diverse clothing design strategies for producing durable and timeless products. The first group of companies we interviewed aligns closely with existing literature (Gossen/Heinrich 2021), offering classic, seasonless and neutral garments. These companies aim to create clothes that outlast seasonal fashion trends, encouraging consumers to use them for extended periods of time.

The second group takes a slightly different approach. They offer garments that are sufficiently original to attract customers but are designed with a level of moderation to ensure they do not become obsolete or go out of fashion quickly. This strategy aims to strike a balance between originality and longevity.

The third group of interviewed companies defines their offerings as timeless products based on authenticity. According to these companies, consumers' emotional connection with authentic garments encourages extended use. This perspective resonates with Chapman's (2009) theory on "emotionally durable design", which posits that emotional attachment to a product can extend its lifespan.

Across all these case companies, we observed a common thread: the integration of timelessness of design and durability of materials. This aligns with the literature on a "decelerating" approach to fashion (Freudenreich/Schaltegger 2020). These companies opt for robust materials that not only withstand wear and tear but also complement their design philosophies, enabling the garments to last longer in terms of both style and substance.

4.2 Services and operations

All companies adhere to the principle of producing less, aligning with their broader sustainable fashion goals. As one company representative said: "We have a sustainable fashion objective, which means producing less, rather than just making clothes out of organic or recycled cotton" (Company E). And they added, "Selling tons of clothes, even if produced sustainably, is nonsense". These statements encapsulate the essence of the sufficiency approach, advocating for a change in both the quantity and the manner of production, as described by Fuchs and Lorek (2005). Regarding actual production volumes, these companies assume what could be termed a stewardship role, as Bocken et al. (2014) suggest. They continuously engage with various stakeholders, including customers, suppliers and workers, to ensure their well-being. This engagement extends to the broader public whenever the financial situation permits.

Some of the case companies have implemented a co-creation strategy through pre-order and tailoring activities, where customers' contributions are pivotal in the design and manufacturing of clothing. For these companies, co-creation enhances the longevity of garments by ensuring they closely align with customers' expectations, thereby maximizing the likelihood that the clothes will be valued and worn for extended periods. These companies engage in co-creation by actively collaborating with customers throughout the design process and consistently gathering and incorporating feedback for improvement. One company, in particular, emphasizes the inclusion of women of various sizes and involves their customers in photoshoots as an integral part of their customization practices. While some strategies, like co-cre-

ation and pre-ordering, are well-documented in the literature (Fletcher 2014), others, such as customer model imagery, are less explored.

Furthermore, our interviewees emphasized the personal nature of the relationships that the companies establish with their customers, a sentiment that aligns with findings from Beyeler and Jaeger-Erben (2022) and Elf et al. (2022). This personal connection is especially pronounced in companies with smaller customer bases, where establishing such relationships is more feasible. These strategies cultivate a “learning relationship” with customers, facilitating continuous improvement (Spangenberg 2018).

Six of the case companies opt for distribution through retailers or pop-up stores as their primary distribution channels, with only one operating a physical store. The pop-up stores provide customers the opportunity to purchase existing items while also trying on prototypes for potential pre-orders. In this way, the companies seek to attract new customers who may be unfamiliar with the on-demand business model. Additionally, these pop-up stores serve as venues for selling second-hand items, hosting guest speakers and organizing workshops and events that foster a community of companies with similar values, as reported in Beyeler and Jaeger-Erben (2022).

Digital platforms are indispensable for all seven companies. Their websites serve not merely as online stores but also as platforms that provide extensive information on the company’s history, mission, values, production processes and supplier networks. The companies utilize their blogs to establish their presence within a broader business network with similar sufficiency-oriented values. Their websites often feature repair guides and care instructions. Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram are used to disseminate information, educate customers and gather customer feedback. These digital channels align well with strategies for raising awareness and consumer education, as discussed by Gossen and Kropfeld (2022).

All companies place great importance on supplier relationships. They maintain a manageable number of suppliers, all based in Europe. Most companies provide detailed information about their suppliers on their websites, including their names, functions, locations, contact persons, areas of expertise, initial collaboration dates and any certifications they may hold. One company described its suppliers as “more than manufacturers, but true partners” (Company C), emphasizing the years it took to find partners who share similar values, such as prioritizing quality over quantity. This concurs well with findings from previous research (Bocken et al. 2022).

4.3 Business models

The case companies predominantly offer clothing at mid-range and premium price points, which they and their customers deem justifiable for society and the environment. This aligns with existing literature on sufficiency-oriented business models

(Bocken et al. 2014; Gossen et al. 2019), where a premium pricing strategy is often employed. Unlike fast-fashion companies, which rely on high volumes and rapid turnovers, these companies maintain modest sales volumes and inventory levels. Through the use of pre-ordering strategies, several companies mitigate costs by avoiding producing items that are difficult to sell. Additionally, local design and manufacturing practices reduce costs by shortening supply chains and eliminating the need for distant intermediaries. However, it is worth noting that labor costs in local and Western European contexts are significantly higher than global production centers known for cheap labor and lower environmental and ethical standards (European Parliament 2020).

Operating primarily as e-commerce entities, the case companies derive most of their revenue from online sales and the rest from pop-up stores and traditional retail channels. Two distinct sales categories are in-stock sales from existing inventory and pre-order sales for items not immediately available. Unsold garments are collected from these outlets and are sold in subsequent seasons, a practice facilitated by the companies' focus on producing seasonless, trend-independent items.

Another way the companies generate profit is by offering free lifetime alterations and repairs on their products, services that are accessible in major French cities. One company has developed a take-back system, incorporating a deposit fee into the cost of its products. This enables customers to return garments they no longer use and receive a partial refund. The returned items are either integrated into a second-hand collection or recycled if their condition is beyond repair. Another company provides a personalized tailoring service alongside its ready-to-wear range. The companies that offer garment repair and tailoring often consider factors like proximity and cost to facilitate ease of repair (Millstone 2017). Additionally, one company is developing a business consultancy service, which will include customer guidance on repair services and a guide listing recommended brands for wardrobe upgrades.

According to the interviewed companies, their average profit margin ranges between 2.5 per cent and 4 per cent, falling below the conventional retail market margin of 6 to 11 per cent (McKinsey & Company 2023: 118). Traditional fashion retailers often start with higher margins that diminish as they discount unsold items. Sufficiency-oriented companies, however, set realistic and fair margins upfront and plan for the retrieval of unsold items at season's end. While achieving profitability remains a challenge in a market dominated by inexpensive, linear products, these companies find their business models to be both meaningful and fair. Nevertheless, two of the case companies have yet to reach profitability but are nearing the break-even point.

The companies in question are small in scale. They do not possess their own production facilities, machinery or equipment and thus rely on external suppliers for garment manufacturing. Given their limited resources, the founders often leverage their professional networks to source expertise, materials and services.

Regarding the initial capital for launching their businesses, all founders relied on personal funds, which were subsequently supplemented through crowdfunding, bank loans or fundraising efforts, as also mentioned by Bocken et al. (2022). Some of these companies also secured public subsidies, and two pursued grants specifically for research projects. These additional financial resources have been allocated to various activities, such as expanding the customer base, securing television and print media appearances, recapitalizing the business and strengthening equity.

4.4 Communication and marketing

While all companies strive to harmonise fashion with sufficiency, some opt not to explicitly employ the term “sufficiency”, focusing instead on aesthetics and the joy and pleasure of garment selection. One company articulated sufficiency as “living well and ensuring that we utilize 100% of our wardrobe” with clothes that “bring us joy” (Company D). Conversely, others are direct about their philosophy on sufficiency, highlighting the relationship between well-being and quality through elegant, comfortable garments that instil confidence.

To align with a sufficiency-oriented approach, most companies cater to an environmentally and ethically conscious customer base who aspire to meaningful and healthy lifestyles. These customers view their clothing choices as an extension of their commitment to sustainability. One company explicitly targets professionals who frequently wear suits, possess significant purchasing power and are dedicated to “doing things right” (Company E). This customer group tends not to make impulsive purchases, aligning well with the company’s pre-order business model.

The role of advertising and marketing is both crucial and contentious among the interviewed companies. One company admitted to engaging in “extremely little marketing” and avoiding advertising altogether (Company B). Other companies use digital advertising platforms like Google, Facebook and Instagram. Budget constraints led one company to focus solely on search engine optimization, while others allocate a specific budget for marketing activities, with search engine advertising taking up a significant portion. Two companies are exploring alternative avenues for visibility that better align with their sufficiency-oriented ethos: “We don’t want to sacrifice our business model and our values on the altar of [customer] acquisition” (Company A). These companies cite referral programmes and word-of-mouth as better methods of gaining visibility. In line with existing literature, the companies adopt conscious sales and marketing strategies (Bocken/Short 2016) and engage in green demarketing by encouraging consumers to reduce their overall clothing consumption (Armstrong Soule/Reich 2015). They unanimously reject traditional discount-driven sales tactics, such as Black Friday and seasonal or limited collections.

Crucially, the case companies focus on fostering long-term customer relationships, as their business depends on customer loyalty and retention. Acquiring

new customers through limited advertising proves to be a challenging task. Transparency is a cornerstone value and a strategic approach for these companies in nurturing enduring customer relationships. All companies, with one exception, adhere to complete transparency, detailing the materials used in their garments, their origins, certifications, environmental benefits and supplier information on their websites. Such transparency elicits positive feedback from their customer base.

According to the companies, the primary hurdle to implementing sufficiency-oriented business models is not the cost of their products but rather the challenge of raising awareness and altering consumer behavior. This aligns with the academic literature on sufficiency-oriented business models (Gossen/Kropfeld 2022). Some also contend that the core problem does not lie with financially constrained individuals who resort to fast fashion; instead, “it is the wealthiest parts of the population that pollute the most” (Company E). The real challenge lies in influencing those who have the financial capacity to make sustainable choices but who continue to opt for fast fashion. As one interviewee noted, “not everybody has the means to buy a shirt for €150 or €200”, but the focus should be on customers who spend similar amounts on “poor-quality products” (Company D). Consumer education should aim to engage those who have the resources to effect change. Nevertheless, for many companies, “the ambition has always been to replace the [current] industry and consumption with a cleaner industry accessible to everyone” (Company A) and not merely to cater to the highest stratum of society.

Table 3 summarizes sufficiency-oriented business strategies in French fashion SMEs based on the information collected from interviews and secondary sources.

Table 3: Sufficiency-oriented business strategies in French fashion SMEs (Present [+], Absent [-], No available data [o])

Approach	Focus	Examples of strategies	French fashion SMEs							
			A	B	C	D	E	F	G	
Efficiency	Products	Clothes design for efficient material use; lower lifecycle impact; customized and personalized design	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	Services	Choice architecture: avoid selling high-polluting materials and clothes of poor quality on the market	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	Business model	Sell efficient products; increase sales; reduce per-unit price	+	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Communication and marketing	Inform consumers about clothes' impact, use, care and refitting (e.g., through labelling and campaigns)	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	+
Shift	Products	Design durable clothes for physical, functional and emotional longevity; seasonless design; easy to maintain, mend, refurbish or upcycle	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	Services	Offer clothes extension services: (local) mending, refitting and tailoring services, take-back, upcycle, recycle	-	+	-	+	+	+	-	-
		Offer long warranty	+	+	0	+	+	+	-	0
		Support and offer reuse arrangements, e.g., organize collection of clothes for resale, donation and second life	-	-	-	+	+	-	-	

Sufficiency	Communication and marketing	De-legitimize mass-produced and standardized clothes; question consumption levels/marketing for consumption reduction	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
		Moderating sales; avoiding discounts, seasonal sales	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
		Moderate promotions and avoiding advertising, especially aggressive marketing campaigns based on successive collections and trends and/or low prices	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
		Demand reduction strategies	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
		Promote convenience of extending product's use	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
		Promote needs over desires	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
			+	+	+	+	+	+	+

5. How do French fashion SMEs reconcile sufficiency with profits and growth?

In line with existing literature, all companies maintain a critical stance towards the conventional economic growth model, offering alternative perspectives and practices. Company B adopts a non-growth strategy, limiting its annual turnover and the number of garments it produces and sells. This company contends that growth is not a natural occurrence but is intentionally pursued, often under external pressures that come at the expense of employees, suppliers, materials and environmental resources. Company A, which has seen significant growth since its inception, continually questions the implications of this growth, asking, “What do we do with this growth? Where does it take us?”. This ongoing dialogue is crucial for the company as it seeks to uphold its original business model and values.

The remaining companies employ a blend of organic and external growth strategies for survival, although their desired levels of growth vary. Company F aims to boost its sales to ensure economic viability. Still, it has no aspirations to become a large enterprise, stating that “being sustainable is incompatible with being a huge company.” Other companies are considering external investments and expansion, contingent on a certain level of customer interest and the emergence of potential partners and collaborative opportunities. However, they intend to grow in a manner that aligns with their values and philosophy of balanced growth. For instance, one company plans to redistribute its profits to causes that resonate with its ethos. Another asserts, “We have no excessive ambitions” and believes in balancing what they give and receive (Company G). Thus, although most companies do not consider abandoning material growth entirely (Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022), they also recognize that moderate or organic growth is often inadequate for ensuring long-term financial sustainability. Consequently, they may turn to external growth strategies to secure their continued existence, as noted by Wiefek and Heinitz (2018). External growth can further their goal of expanding their market presence, thereby increasing the influence of sufficiency-oriented companies overall, as Gossen and Heinrich (2021) have noted.

Indeed, all the companies are united by a philosophy that focuses on the growth of sustainable fashion overall. The aim is to make sustainable options increasingly accessible to consumers while transforming an industry currently under the influence of fast fashion. In this landscape, sufficiency-oriented companies do not perceive each other as direct competitors. Instead, they see themselves as part of a network, commending each other as catalysts for sustainable consumption and occasionally collaborating. In an industry where sustainable fashion brands still represent a niche, these companies are committed to encouraging emerging fashion businesses to adopt sufficiency-oriented models. As articulated by one company, “there is room for all small brands on the market”, and given that “our collective strength

will always be dwarfed by the large fast fashion companies, the more of us there are striving to do things differently, the better” (Company D). These companies highly value knowledge sharing and are amenable to the idea of their business models being replicated by others, especially if it expands the reach of sustainable and sufficiency-oriented fashion.

6. Conclusions

Given the fashion industry’s critical role in driving unsustainable consumption, there is a need to explore alternative business models prioritizing sustainability and sufficiency. The prevailing fast-fashion model perpetuates a throwaway culture, exacerbating environmental impacts. In contrast, emerging sufficiency-oriented fashion companies offer a compelling counter-narrative to this unsustainable model. This study sought to delve into the strategies employed by these companies and to differentiate them from other prevalent approaches, such as efficiency and shift (Akenji et al. 2021). Our findings are the following:

- In the category of efficiency, companies design customized and personalized products. They all avoid selling environmentally detrimental and low-quality garments. Their communication strategies predominantly focus on informing consumers about their products’ ecological impact, proper use and maintenance.
- In the shift category, every company is committed to producing durable, seasonless and easy-to-maintain garments. While there are varied approaches to offering services like mending and refitting, none of the companies provides renting, leasing or sharing. Only one company uses a circular business model. Communication strategies in this category seek to inform consumers about the longevity and maintenance of the products.
- Finally, in the sufficiency category, all companies are united in their emphasis on slow fashion, focusing on customization, fit and durability. They also share a commitment to local production and short supply chains. Premium pricing and long-term customer engagement are the norm in their business models. Communication efforts are geared towards challenging the status quo of mass-produced fashion, moderating sales and promotions and fostering the benefits of product longevity.

The studied French fashion SMEs adopt a nuanced approach to profitability and growth. They do not aim for unchecked expansion or profit maximization. Instead, they focus on achieving profitability that sustains their operations and allows them to fulfil their broader social and environmental objectives. These companies often

employ a combination of organic and external growth strategies and seek to always adhere to their core values. In contrast to most traditional companies, they do not view each other as competitors but as part of a collaborative network. They are open to the idea of their business models being replicated by others, particularly if it expands the reach of sustainable and sufficiency-oriented fashion. Our empirical data aligns well with the existing literature, while adding nuanced insights.

Future research should extend the investigation of sufficiency, shift and efficiency-oriented strategies in the fashion industry and potentially beyond. A particular focus is needed on the mechanisms enabling a meaningful transition from shift- and efficiency-oriented strategies to implementing sufficiency-oriented strategies. Both existing classifications of business strategies in the literature and the framework presented in this chapter warrant further refinement. These should be carefully tested through comparative case studies or large-scale quantitative analyses. While this study has initiated a discussion on the complex interplay between sufficiency and the traditional business goals of profit and growth, there is a need for additional research. Specifically, studies should examine the long-term financial viability of adopting sufficiency-oriented strategies. In this context, successful case studies could serve as valuable blueprints, encouraging more companies to embark on the journey towards sufficiency-oriented business models.

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