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Consumption Research Norway

OSLOMET

Feedback on the Sustainable Products Initiative

We at Consumption Research Norway have long experience working with sustainability and consumer practices. This feedback to the regulation on Ecodesign for Sustainable Products is based on our research and knowledge of textiles and clothing. It is not certain that the problems we raise will be the same for the other product groups. We have previously submitted input to Norwegian authorities related to Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles, and there is some overlap between these inputs[1].

Eco-design perspectives

Textiles are very complex products, socially, aesthetically, functionally and technically. Setting requirements for eco-design can thus have unintended effects. We see this clearly in the work with Product environmental footprint category rules (PEFCR) for Apparel and Footwear. It may sound sensible that all products should be more durable, but no matter how strength is measured or how the limit for strength is set, this will favor synthetic textiles – which are stronger than natural materials. If we look at how long consumers use different products, the opposite trend emerges. The "weak", i.e., the natural fibers, are often used longer[2]. Setting high requirements for physical durability thus favorizes the products that are used the shortest. This is one of many examples of how "eco-design" is not a simple field at all and that good intentions can easily have catastrophic consequences.

Only about 37% of garments are disposed of because they are worn out or broken. Therefore, it is important that the directive also takes into consideration the other design aspects that impact length of product lifespans, such as changes in fashion, and poor fit of garments.

We would also like to point that the commonly used claim about "80% of a product's environmental impact over its life cycle is determined during the design phase" is not true, and it stems from a misquotation. No product is sustainable if does not have a function and is needed and used. Too many products means that they are not sustainable no matter how "good" each product is. We suggest that the work must be based on knowledge (empirical research) and not on myths, marketing or blatant lies.

Durability

The document uses the term long-lived, but the fact that something lasts a long time does not necessarily mean that it is used a lot. Duration has both a technical and a social side. Said a little differently; if you produce a "merch" t-shirt, it may well be that it can "last" a few hundred years, but still never be used ever again after the event you participated in. In an economy with overproduction, that products last longer will first and foremost contribute to greater accumulations of products and when they are discarded, they still retain the potential useful lifespan. The term thus ignores the social side of clothing consumption and the perception of consumers of when a garment has been "used up".

Information

EU policy places great responsibility on consumers to bring about the reductions in environmental impact. The idea is that consumers should choose the least polluting products. For this reasoning to

[1] https://clothingresearch.oslomet.no/2022/05/04/feedback-to-the-eu-textile-strategy/
[2] https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/21/9151

work, some prerequisites must be in place. Firstly, the environmental difference between products must be large enough, and secondly, there must be reliable information available, that consumers can trust. As of today, none of this is the case for clothing.

There are no "sustainable clothes" – rather there is rampant overproduction. It is thus the quantity and not the individual item that is the main problem. There is little knowledge about the difference between the products, but in general it is the dyeing and finishing stage, and not fiber production, that constitutes the greatest environmental impact and probably also the greatest differences between products. The work that is underway to develop PEF for textiles clearly shows how wrong things go when there is lack of basic knowledge and when this is combined with the fashion industry's willingness to greenwash[3]. Knowledge gaps exist especially around products (especially chemical content), how to incorporate the environmental impact of fossil materials when compared with natural materials, and how the functional unit (lifetime) should operationalized[4].

For textiles, it will be a big step towards more plastics (synthetic textiles) and inferior products if PEFCR for apparel and footwear is implemented in its current form. We thus do not agree with the sentence "To improve environmental sustainability of products, information requirements should relate to a selected product parameter relevant to the product aspect, such as the product's environmental footprint or its durability". For this to be true, basic knowledge must be developed suitable for comparison and PEF for clothing must include all the most important environmental parameters and not include data or thinking from the industries' own greenwashing system such as HIGG Materials Sustainability Index (Higg MSI)[5].

Digital product passport

A key piece of information about products is when they are produced. Access to information about production year will ensure a greater opportunity for consumers, authorities and the waste industry to map how long things are used and last. It will also secure consumers if there is a problem with chemicals, and strengthen consumer rights such as those enforced by the Sale of Goods and Associated Guarantees directive. The fact that products are sold without information about the manufacturer and without production year, means that even the simplest forms of producer responsibility cannot be implemented or controlled.

In connection with product passports for textiles, the fiber labeling must also be updated. It should include information about content beyond the fibers, not least the content of environmentally harmful chemicals. Environmental toxins are a very important area. It would be a good start to revise the «regulations for fiber labeling» to include all chemicals that are on the «list of concern» and at the same time decide whether plastic is an environmental toxin. It is also a paradox that the information does not include the use of controversial technologies such as GMOs (Genetically modified organisms).

Repairability

Most clothes can be mended, and majority of repairs are quite easy. When they are not repaired, it is usually because they are so cheap that this does not "pay off", either in terms of using time or money for the repair. In other words, it is the cheap clothes that are not «repairable», but this logic is not discussed. There is little reason to believe that the EU wants to ban cheap apparel and this discussion

[3] https://eco-age.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/REPORT_Final_72dpi2.pdf and https://eco-age.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Great-Green-Washing-Machine-Report-Part-2_FINAL.pdf

[4] https://www.makethelabelcount.org/globalassets/make-the-label-count/documents/gd4505-mtlc-pef-whitepaper-final.pdf

[5] https://texfash.com/special/higg-msi-stands-discredited-norway-rules-against-norrona-warns-hm-hauls-up-sac

is rather about the technically non-repairable clothes. So what clothes are these? This will of course have to be investigated further, but we give two examples.

The simplest example of non-repairable is clothing with electronics embedded such as "intelligent textiles". It would be unproblematic to ban these, as we do not need flashing sneakers or Santa hats with batteries that cannot be replaced, but this makes only small share of the market.

Elastane, on the other hand, is included in underwear, gym clothes, jeans, t-shirts, etc. A small percentage Elastane (elastic plastic) is mixed in to give these clothes stretch. This ensures that the clothes "hold" their fit and form. The problem is that Elastane has a shorter life than the materials it is used in, and if it is mixed in or integrated in other ways, it will not be possible to replace it. Elastane in fabrics can make them more durable, but when the Elastane has lost its elasticity, the clothes can no longer be repaired. Will stretch in jeans, gym clothes and underwear be banned, or will there be a time-limit rule to how long Elastane should last? Clothes can in principle last for hundreds of years. The more clothes we have, the older they get. How many years do we have to require the clothes to last? Will Elastane be OK in some products (e.g. support stockings and bras) and not in others?

We write this to remind that demanding that clothes are "repairable" will be at the expense of something else. Many consumers appreciate flexible clothing that adjusts to movement and changes in body size, underwear that is invisible, gym clothes with a close fit or support stockings, etc. Based on the discussions in the work with PEF, it seems that the global, large-scale industry's solution is a very symbolic interpretation of "repairability", e.g. in the form of an extra button in the shirt, which is often already something most people have several dozen of. It has not been investigated whether an extra button will actually lead to more repairs, or only increased the environmental impact.

Recycled content

We recognize the urgency of building a larger second-hand market and a textile recycling industry in Europe. This will prevent landfill and export of waste to countries without proper waste management. We will nevertheless point out the dangers this entails. The first is the continued spread of chemicals and materials including plastics. The second is that the products are getting weaker and have poorer properties. If there is a requirement for recycled content, both of these factors must be taken into account.

Demanding mandatory recycled content will (fortunately) take time, as long as the EU's textile strategy makes it so clear that this is fiber to fiber, and not fiber from other value chains, such as rPET (recycled polyethylene terephthalate) from bottles[6]. At the same time, both the waste hierarchy and the findings from research indicate that there are very few "environmental benefits" to be gained from recycling. There is also a danger that this will lead to even more synthetic materials in clothing, because they are easier to recycle.

Destruction of unsold consumer products

We have a global overproduction of clothing. There are thus some products that are not needed and that must go away somehow. The question then is what is the alternative to destruction? We believe overproduction as well as too high import to Europe should be punished financially. The clothes should of course be used in the best possible manner according to the waste hierarchy as set in Waste Framework Directive. However, it is possible that destruction is the best option for many products that no one wants. We have designed a proposal for a possible extended producer responsibility (EPR) system called "targeted producer responsibility" (TPR) which seeks to make it unprofitable to produce

[6] http://changingmarkets.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/FOSSIL-FASHION_Web-compressed.pdf

/ import what will never be used[7]. The point of our suggestion is, that if there is a financial penalty for importing products that are not sold, or that are returned, go on sale or otherwise clearly not desired, this will reduce the amount that is imported.

We wish you all the best with this important work, and hope to contribute to that the knowledge of consumption will be used actively in the design of the directive to avoid unintended adverse effects of good intentions.

Respectfully submitted,

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https://clothingresearch.oslomet.no/

[7] https://sciencenorway.no/environment-fashion-opinion/hit-them-where-it-hurts-producers-of-fast-fashion-should-pay-the-most/2023959