



How to guide a brussels citizen to become a circular consumer?

Key messages

1 Circular consumption is a learning process.

2 Keeping and preserving the diversity in retail is crucial.

3 CONECI has identified 3 tensions in circular consumers: between utility and leisure, ecological concern and cost-conscious concern, resistance and indifference and 6 circular consumer profiles: Pragmatic consumer, Hedonistic consumer, Ecological consumer, Cost-conscious consumer, Resistant consumer and Distant consumer.

4 Circular businesses are both places of commercial exchange and spaces for consumer awareness and engagement.

5 Brussels Region need to keep the added value of circular textile products in Brussels.

Introduction

The origin of the research comes from a questioning on the place of consumers in circular economy public policies. The research led us to explore the diversity of circular consumer practices in response to a circular economy policy that initially focused on material flow analysis and urban metabolism. From 2019 onwards, these policies have evolved to start taking consumers into account, but in a way that is too global and not very conducive to perceiving the diversity of behaviours tackled by the research. The challenge was to qualify consumption practices, in their diversity, in relation to the situation of the circular economy of clothing in the Brussels Region, in interaction with the places of circular exchange (market and non-market). We decided to focus on the textile retail sector which was understudied at the time of the research, allowing us to go

deep into the issue of this sector, from a circular perspective. Hence, our question was: How to guide a Brussels citizen to become a circular consumer? In this perspective, we focus on understanding the consumption “career” in circular economy, linking it to spatial practices and materiality, and taking into account differentiated social positions.

Methods, approaches and results/body

We leaned on a theoretical framework mixing sociology of practices (Reckwitz, 2002, Shove et al., 2012, Schatzki et al., 2005, Warde, 2014), Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, Özçağlar-Toulouse & Cova, 2010) and symbolic interactionism (mainly, Becker, 1985 and Goffman, 1973). We made 59 semi-directive interviews with consumer (mostly women), resource persons and shop-keepers (parts were informal discussions in their shops). We also made mind-map of their consumption space with the consumers only. We conducted two types of observation: an overdrawn observation in an associative sewing workshop (February and June 2019), and a non-participant undercover floating observation. The focus of the observation was on the selling arrangements and interactions in my 7 case-study stores: for Petits Riens, the stores Chasse, Marolles and Rue Américaine, Cyclup, Déjà Vu, La Ritournelle and Coucou-shop. The empirical material consisted of taking notes and photos. The observation was conducted between May 2020 and December 2021 (following Covid restrictions, I therefore returned regularly and at different times).

Our results are the following: There are 3 tensions in circular consumers practices: between utility and leisure, ecological concern and cost-conscious concern, resistance and indifference. From those 3 tensions, we design 6 consumer profiles: Pragmatic consumer, Hedonistic consumer, Ecological consumer, Cost-conscious consumer, Resistant consumer and Distant consumer. Circular businesses are both places of commercial exchange and spaces for consumer awareness and engagement. Material interactions with the business environment are a complementary lever for practice change mainly through commercials arrangements and spatial ties (Neighborhood Anchor, Metropolitan Anchor, Extended Anchor). This question the notion of ethics and commitment in a pragmatic way: being ethical can also be a matter of positioning oneself, as shown in the mind map, as “I have done the maximum to be ethical” according to one’s material, social and cultural possibilities, which therefore differ according to the individual. Ethical consumption is not here an immanent property, but is a matter of the qualification of an individual’s action.

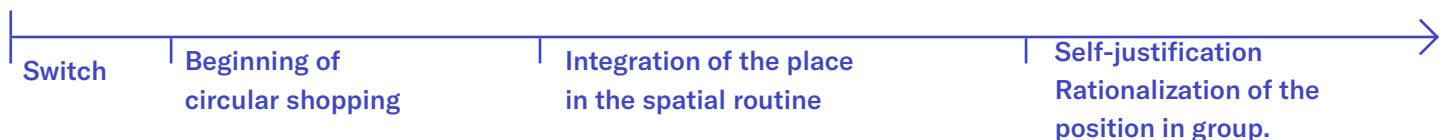
Conclusions

In concrete terms, this implies developing consumers' skills through policies centred on users and their practices (advice adapted to the consumers profiles and their identified needs, signposting of shops). The aim is to encourage shopkeepers to guide their customers through their shops with adapted signage and devices that encourage some to stroll (for the hedonist type, for example), but also to be efficient (for the pragmatist or indifferent type, for example): talking about a pleasant and useful experience implies both enjoying the place one visits (whatever the reason), but also simply finding the product one is looking for. Familiarization with the selling devices and the specificity of second-hand products takes time: a new customer must experience some repetition in the

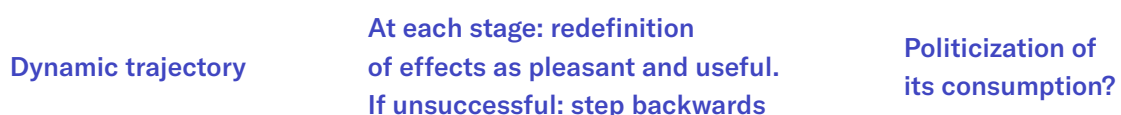
store, on a daily basis, and thus foster a slow shopping experience. This familiarization ultimately helps to justify oneself as part of a circular consumer group to one's social group and/or type of consumer, whether it is by setting an example, finding nuggets, saving money or shopping efficiently (these motivations can obviously add up). Guiding them through the store may be more essential than one may think. Because, throwing away an item of clothing has become a very commonplace act in our society, any practice that involves making a garment last via resale, donation, repair or upcycling is an (almost) new experience.

A sequential model of the circular consumption career

Learning - [Successive adaptation of its consumption



Learning about different consumption spaces



Policy recommendations

1 The Region could promote a more user-experience based policy, based on the 6 consumer profiles defined by this research

For instance, this can be done through commercial development plan focusing not on infrastructures but on Brussels inhabitants views and expectation on retail: is this shop easy to reach, affordable, local, welcoming, even has ethical concern? Become a circular consumer is a learning process: policies should hence focus on the user/customer more than on the infrastructure policy. From the 6 consumer profiles we draw – Pragmatic consumer, Hedonistic consumer, Ecological consumer, Cost-conscious consumer, Resistant consumer and Distant consumer – we venture that there is as many pathways possible as consumer types combinations. The 6 consumer profiles defined show that there are different orientations for public policies, which can be combined according to the targeted objectives. The Brussels Region should acknowledge this diversity and preserve it, like we preserve the biodiversity. This diversity should orient policies through a much more flexible and user-based direction.

2 The Region could promote those business through direct subsidies or Value Added Tax (VAT) adaptation to help them to be more competitive in the market

Understanding the circular offer implies understanding the diversity of the Brussels ecosystem of clothing circularity and this implies paying attention to the risk of standardization caused by the market, which paradoxically can lead to the disappearance of a certain number of practices: thus, there is not only one strategy to develop, but strategies for the different actors of the Brussels textile circularity and the different consumers profiles. Faced with the risk of market gentrification, it would even be opportune to pay particular attention to the conservation of a social segment of the second-hand clothing industry, which is essential for the cost-conscious type of consumer, but also for hedonistic, even ecological and resistant types of consumers who wish to be able to consume in this type of place for ecological and social reasons. Entrepreneurial types of circular shops are essentials to drive a new type of consumer, focused on efficiency and quality. Regarding competition, VAT adaptations are then important nowadays because it's still cheaper to produce something new on the other side of the planet. VAT should acknowledge the ecological attempt to have a more ethical business. Also, those shops compete with peer-to-peer exchange platforms, which simply does not face the

Policy recommendations

same taxations issue. In this frame, public policies could also strengthen links and connections between those shops: these circular shops could function as an ecosystem as they do meet different and diverse needs (according to the 6 consumers profiles).

3 The Region should consider the existing, keep the added value regarding circular economy

For instance, it could multiply the points of sale, increase their diversity, as well as remain attentive to their geographical, financial and logistic accessibility. Pooling resources, such as collection, sorting and storage, could facilitate the deployment of these shops on the territory by proposing a sourcing of second hand clothes that is no longer international, but 100% Brussels sourcing of second hand clothes, allowing to completely close the loop of circularity. Textile circular economy businesses are businesses that seek to anchor themselves in a neighbourhood and whose customers are largely local and metropolitan. These businesses, often found a few blocks apart, on the edge of commercial cores, have the potential to be very dense spaces in terms of consumption.

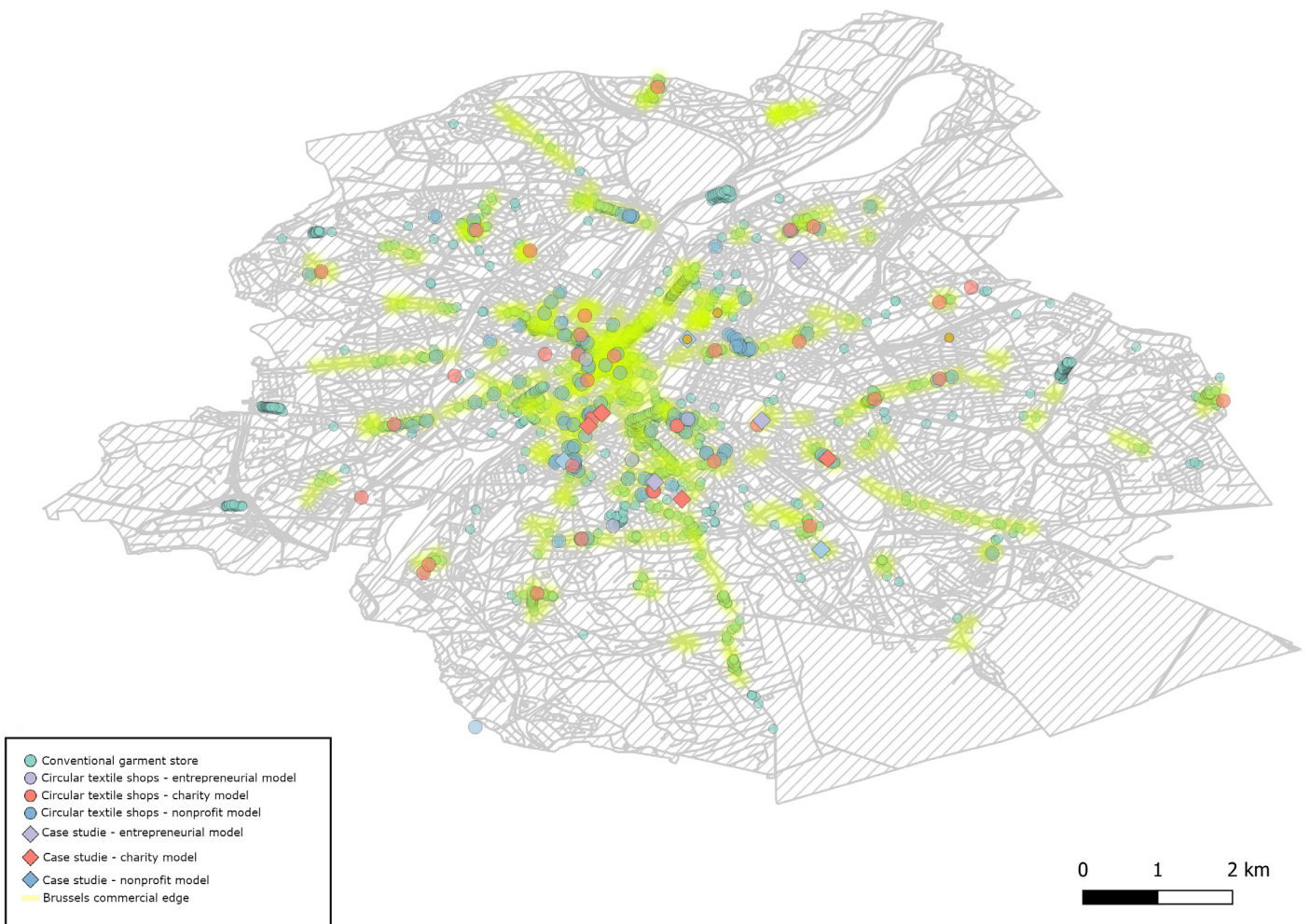
Concerning the clothes' stock, two options are possible:

- The first option consists in increasing the stock and its circulation (increase of stocks and flows, aiming at a growing consumption with the risk of a fall of the quality of the clothes put back in circulation).
- The second option consists in increasing the quality instead (social acceptance of an increase of the prices and a decreasing consumption) with the risk of excluding a part of the most fragile customers.

4 Circular commercial exchange and spaces should guide their customers through their shops

- In the shops, this guidance could be implemented through dedicated elements such as signs, pathways, elements of contexts regarding social or environmental issue.
- Public policies could promote such guidance offering to the consumers a better picture of circular possibility in Brussels. For example, a website similar to "Option-B" (focusing on second and shop in the Brussels City) could be extended to the whole region with a focus on individual path following the 6 consumers type proposed in this brief.

Policy recommendations



Map 1:

General map of circular shops in the Brussels-Capital Region (Source: BD Oligo, 2018, Brussels Urbanism and Heritage, 2021. Realization: Spor, 2021)

List of publications

Spor, Marine, CONSOMMATEURS DE L'ÉCONOMIE CIRCULAIRE : MOTIVATIONS, SAVOIRS ET PRATIQUES SPATIALES, Une étude qualitative sur les consommateurs et le secteur du vêtement circulaire en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale (titre provisoire), Thèse de doctorat en cours, Faculté d'Architecture La Cambre Horta, Université libre de Bruxelles, 2022.

Spor, M. (2019). *Consommer « circulaire » : quels enjeux et quelles pratiques ?* Poster session presented at 15e congrès de l'association française de sciences politiques (2 au 4 juillet 2019 : Bordeaux).

[Hyperlien](#)

Spor, M., Povoas, A., et al. (2021). *Cartographier l'éthique. Les consommateurs mobiles entre choix et contrainte.* Recueil des contributions (p. 199) Tous (im) mobiles, tous cartographes ? Approches cartographiques des mobilités, des circulations, des flux et des déplacements Méthodes, outils, représentations, pratiques et usages (14-16 juin 2021 : Toulouse).

Under review:

Participation in a proposal for a thematic issue in *Sociétés contemporaines* : « La consommation circulaire dans le textile : un paradoxe consumériste ? », from : Spor, M. (2021). *Agir sur sa consommation, analyse de trajectoires de consommation vestimentaire dans l'économie circulaire.* Paper session presented at Congrès conjoint ABSP – CoSPoF 2021 (7 - 8 – 9 avril 2021 : Bruxelles).

For *Carnets de la Consommation*, special issue *Consommation et Espace* : Spor, M. (2020). *Mobiliser le consommateur par les lieux d'échange marchand ? : Le cas de la consommation textile circulaire en Région Bruxelles-Capitale.* Paper session presented at Journée Consommation et Espace (18-11-2020: Caen [en ligne]).

About

The author & project

Marine Spor is a specialist in circular economy, textile and urban sociology. From a political science and geographical background, she now focus on sociological aspect of circular economy in Brussels through consumption and spatial practices. “CONECI” is a 4-year program (2018-2021) focusing on motivations, knowledge and spatial practices of circular economy consumer. Broader information can be found on the final account of the project.

Disclaimer

This research was conducted with funding from Innoviris. Any opinions, beliefs and recommendations expressed in this brief belong entirely to the author. Innoviris cannot be held accountable for them.

Prospective
research



Through the Prospective Research programme, the Brussels-Capital Region is hoping to fund research projects from a dual perspective: to provide a solid regional prospective vision; to build solutions to the specific challenges it will face in the years to come. The solutions proposed by the funded projects must take into account Brussels' urban complexity as well as the Region's environmental, social and economic transition objectives. The programme targets researchers in human science as much as researchers in exact or applied science.

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