

On the Front Line of the Circular Economy: The Entrepreneurial, Identity and Institutional Work of a Female Entrepreneur towards the Circular Transition

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Abstract

This article traces the experiences of Vicky, a female entrepreneur who runs a circular business that produces swim and activewear from regenerated fishing nets. The idea of a circular economy, which moves away from the linear economic model based on a make-use-dispose logic towards the elimination of waste and a sustainable use of the world's resources, has rapidly gained popularity. Vicky's story highlights the often overlooked but critical role of small businesses and their owners in this systemic change. Vicky performs three intertwined but distinct forms of work – entrepreneurial work on the business, identity work on the self and institutional work on the wider world – that all contribute to the circular transition. At the same time, Vicky exemplifies an alternative approach to entrepreneurship through a relational interpretation of circularity. Her case draws attention to how the labour of actors in the grassroots propels large-scale transitions.

Keywords

circular economy, entrepreneurship, female entrepreneurs, grassroots actors, green economy, identity work, institutional work, small business, sustainability, systems transitions

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Introduction

This article traces the experiences of Vicky, a female small business owner who works on the front line of the ‘circular transition’. Vicky’s work is multifaceted: it includes running her business that makes circular use of waste materials, redefining her professional identity as a circular-economy entrepreneur after a successful corporate career, and contributing to the legitimacy and popularity of circular thinking by illustrating how it can be realised in practice. Scholars have noted the role entrepreneurs can play in pushing for change (Emilien and Veerta, 2017) and a feminist reading even sees entrepreneurship by women as a social change activity (Calás et al., 2009). Through Vicky’s account we are reminded how small and micro-businesses in the grassroots not only contribute to but indeed help enact systemic change of the highest order, and how entrepreneurs’ toil is integral to charting the pathways into alternative futures.

Support for a circular economy (henceforth CE) has been gaining ‘steady momentum’ in recent years (Circle Economy, 2020), challenging the dominant, extractive industrial economic model predicated on a take-make-waste logic. Fundamentally redefining growth, the circular transition promises to stop the consumption of finite resources by designing waste out of the system and retaining the value of products, components and materials through extended use (Ellen MacArthur Foundation [EMF], 2017). The many expected benefits of this transition include significant material savings, reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, as well as new jobs (Murray et al., 2017; Reichel et al., 2016) and economic opportunities of over US\$1 trillion (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2016).

Discussions around how the circular transition can be achieved have so far focussed overwhelmingly on large organisations – corporations, governments, major NGOs – whether applauded for furthering the cause (Veleva and Bodkin, 2018) or critiqued as obstructions. The role of small businesses and the entrepreneurs who run them as key change actors have largely been overlooked (Heshmati, 2015). This is particularly jarring given how many of the celebrated, imaginative circular business models and solutions in circular use of materials have been generated by small enterprises and the reliance of most economies on their vitality.

Vicky is one of a growing number of entrepreneurs who embody and enact the collective shift towards the circular economy through their small businesses, and for whom the circular transition is *laborious*. Specifically, her work takes three related but distinct forms, performed simultaneously in overlapping but incommensurable domains: entrepreneurial, identity and institutional.

The intertwined forms of work towards the circular transition

Vicky’s business *SwimHappy* produces and retails online high-quality, well-designed women’s ‘gym-to-swim’ activewear using recycled ocean plastics. It operates as a social enterprise, with 100% of profits invested in businesses by female entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan Africa through micro-credit loans. Vicky is the sole full-time staff member of *SwimHappy*, with input in design, marketing, digital services and other business tasks

provided by around half a dozen others as needed. She is highly active in various CE organisations and events, well-known and respected in the city where she lives, which is renowned for its progressive, ‘green’ politics and grassroots interest in sustainability issues. She is often asked to share her experiences with the public and would-be circular entrepreneurs keen to understand how to apply circular business principles in practice, with *SwimHappy* as an inspiring success story. The academic authors of this piece met Vicky through numerous CE events, including a workshop at their university on sustainability where both presented on the prospects of the circular future. They were also at some of her public talks on alternatives to wasteful disposable fashion that drew large and diverse audiences.

Vicky carries out work, firstly, in running her business, which we call *entrepreneurial work*. *SwimHappy* involves the various distinctive elements of the CE (Burger et al., 2019: 249–250): preserving and extending what is already made, using waste as resource, rethinking the business model, collaborating to create joint value, designing for the future and incorporating digital technology. Substantial business acumen and effort go into negotiating this complex equation. Vicky draws on the skills, expertise and networks she developed during decades of salaried corporate employment to carry out the material, interactional and financial tasks involved in managing an enterprise. She achieves the circular design and material use through a ‘closed loop model’, taking one set of materials and making another and extending the product value (Bocken et al., 2016). She must establish and sustain sufficient market reach, ensure efficient distribution, and provide a satisfying customer experience while remaining financially viable. Whilst many small businesses have been founded on principles of environmental sustainability, fairness and equality (Kirkwood and Walton, 2010; York et al., 2016), the requirements of circularity are more technically specific than is captured by the broader case of ‘ecopreneurship’ (Gibbs, 2009) and business models arguably more experimental and fragile.

Becoming the owner-manager, sole full-time staff member and public face of a circular business has also involved extensive *identity work* for Vicky, as has long been observed in entrepreneurial endeavours (Leitch and Harrison, 2016) and mid-career transitions to small business ownerships generally (Patterson and Mavin, 2009), and for women with previous professional careers specifically (Lewis, 2013). Even where business ventures fail, self-identities of women transitioning from corporate to entrepreneurial careers involve substantial change, entailing new senses of independence and control (Patterson and Mavin, 2009), with such change involving reflection, exploration and agency.

In Vicky’s case, this identity work is not pegged to the clichés commonly used by aspiring business owners (Down and Warren, 2008), embedded in the dominant ‘enterprise discourse’ where entrepreneurship ‘represents a heroic sense of individual agency and autonomy’ (Mallett and Wapshott, 2015: 264). Rather, Vicky draws on the notion of a circular transition, possible only through collective, collaborative action with contributions from many, for defining her sense of self as an entrepreneur. Specific life events or situational discontinuities (Meliou and Edwards, 2018) can prove to be a ‘provocation to identity work’ (Downing, 2005, as quoted in Mallett and Wapshott, 2015: 253) offering scope for reflexivity and action. For Vicky, this was a transcontinental move from a

corporate work location to where she now lives following a relationship dissolution and becoming a single parent to young children, in the middle of an economic recession. In the multifaceted self-reflection this prompted, putting her business acumen into a circular business offered Vicky meaningful work, ‘an authentic connection between [...] work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self’ (Bailey and Madden, 2017: 4). Such application of her mental, emotional and material resources into her business was the type of pursuit of authenticity that often informs women’s entrepreneurship in the sense of ‘having a clear sense of the type of business person they want to be, putting in place forms of behaviour with which they feel comfortable’ (Lewis, 2013: 261).

As a visible, energetic, and to many an inspirational figure among CE enthusiasts in her locality and sector, Vicky also contributes to the circular transition by performing *institutional work*. Such work involves ‘purposive action’ (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006: 215) to bring about changes in the institutional environment (Tracey et al., 2011: 215), and she does this in two ways:

First, *SwimHappy*’s success serves to exemplify, and thereby publicise, legitimise and encourage a circular business model, above and beyond its own fortunes. The business disrupts the dominant practices of the fashion industry by effectively adopting a circular approach both to materials use and to profits. An extensive corporate career has given Vicky the ‘embedded agency’ of institutional entrepreneurs (Emilien and Veerta, 2017: 1023), constrained by the dominant practices in a given field, e.g. cheap and environmentally problematic swim and activewear, but also enabled by their knowledge and experience. Vicky is able to draw on ‘specific resources and allies’ (Emilien and Veerta, 2017: 1022) accrued during her corporate career, such as the niche suppliers who have the skills and facilities to produce her designs that break with the ‘institutionalised template’ (Battilana et al., 2009: 68). Like social enterprises that bridge a logic of sustainability and a logic of market (Tracey et al., 2011: 75), *SwimHappy* embodies and demonstrates ‘a new organizational template’ (Tracey et al., 2011: 72) marrying the institutional logic of circularity with social and commercial logics.

Second, there is the institutional work inscribed in Vicky’s participation in the CE networks and community. As her business both economically and cognitively expands the space for circular thinking and commerce, for example through customers and suppliers, Vicky also dispenses substantial time and effort in CE events and networks. Many of these events are ‘celebratory or ritualistic occasions’ (Bailey and Madden, 2017: 13) that serve both knowledge-sharing and community building, and as a frequent participant and speaker Vicky is a vocal actor who contributes to boosting the legitimacy of the circular transition. Building ‘institutional infrastructures’ transcends the lone institutional entrepreneur and involves collective institutional entrepreneurship of several actors (Perkmann and Spicer, 2008) – the institutional work Vicky carries out highlights the role of small business owners in this context.

The grassroots as the front line

In Vicky’s account we observe her entrepreneurial work on the (small) business, identity work on the self, and institutional work on the wider world. This is just one, vivid illustration of how grassroots actors’ labour is poured into systemic change. While Vicky and

other circular small business owners deserve recognition as change agents towards a sustainable society in the grassroots (Pastakia, 1998), they do not merely implement or enact a fully-formed blueprint of the transition. Rather, Vicky's work at once promotes the idea of the circular transition and challenges its dominant form. *SwimHappy* embodies not only a 'new, counter-hegemonic narrative' (Mallett and Wapshott, 2015: 263) about entrepreneurship that eschews an exclusive focus on profit maximisation, but also demonstrates an agentic interpretation of circularity.

While the CE is celebrated and promoted as a radical challenge to the linear economic model, it is not immune to technocratic, instrumental and materialist reification itself. Both the popular and academic discussions to date show such tendencies, with a heavy materials science/engineering bias in the predominant framing of the transition. Vicky's imaginary and actual practice of circularity are different, anchoring it in a broader ethics of care and solidarity. *SwimHappy*'s circular reuse of ocean plastics in high-performance garments relies on expert understanding of materials and design in caring for the environment. However, the circle of care extends well beyond this, to a range of others in social, relational webs.

The relational web that Vicky's work sustains is heavily gendered. 'For women, empowered by women', *SwimHappy* connects a diverse group of women: those who help Vicky create and retail the products with their design, marketing, IT and creative skills; those who purchase the products as much in support of the values they embody as for their comfort and durability; and the over a thousand in distant locations who have received and continue to receive micro-loans generated by the profits. Vicky remains cognisant of her privileges as a business owner in an affluent country but draws on some of her structural advantages to support other women.

It has been argued that female entrepreneurs often channel their high levels of concern for the environment into 'green' businesses (Braun, 2010) and their concern with protecting the environment is intertwined with values of empathy and forging and sustaining relations in their communities (Hechavarria et al., 2017). Vicky's example corroborates this divergence from mainstream individualised, masculine representations of entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2006). When she speaks about *SwimHappy* as 'we', this suggests not only how enmeshed her personal and professional identities are, but also how she sees her business as a collective enterprise. This conceptualisation 'closes the loop' on circularity itself, infusing it with a sensibility of sharing and reciprocity that is both embedded in community-in-place and universal. The city-network of CE supporters are immediate recipients of and contributors to Vicky's work, but the circle also expands to far-away others.

Vicky is on both a very concrete and a metaphorical front line with her entrepreneurial, identity and institutional work, all of which help propel a systemic shift. Her account highlights the agency of those who toil in the grassroots of large-scale transitions and reminds us of the reality, variety and significance of their labour.

Vicky's story

The circular business

I started *SwimHappy* nine years ago. We are a not-for-profit, sustainable swim and active wear company. We use regenerated fishing nets, and we are concerned with a transparent

and clean supply chain and with what we do with our profits. We donate 100% of our profits to Lend with Care – a micro-finance company, having made so far over 250 loans to women entrepreneurs in 13 developing countries. Once the money comes back to us, we reinvest it in other women. The manufacturing is done in Europe because I wanted to offer a living wage and be able to see the manufacturing facilities easily.

Having both social and environmental impact sets us apart from other clothing brands. While fast-fashion has a negative impact on the world, I wanted to create an alternative way of consuming fashion that would be more sustainable and have a positive impact on people and our planet. Most people would define our business as circular. Although the term was coined in 2015, I always knew that I had a circular model because I deliberately designed it like that where all the materials and all the funding would just keep going around. We are closing the loop by collecting people's old swimwear (made by us or not) and remaking it into new styles. However, I believe that a truly circular business would also benefit from technology which can break down fabrics so that they can be reused. This is slowly happening, probably within the next 5 or 10 years, and once it does my business would be truly circular.

Entrepreneurial work

I trained as a fashion designer and then I specialised in swimwear and lingerie. I had an international career with many top brands as well as some small boutiques all around the world. I worked for American multinationals and some British companies including Victoria's Secret, Gap and Marks & Spencer's. During my career, I was involved in product development, design and production of swimwear and lingerie, as well as sourcing the best factories and making sure products were delivered on time, fulfilling quality criteria and compliance procedures in factories. I managed teams of 12 people at a time. I liked the fast atmosphere of corporate life, the problem solving and the juggling, the travelling and meeting people from different cultures. However, there was also great pressure to ensure both quality and on time delivery. If the factories do not perform, the relationship starts to deteriorate as multimillion pound orders are on the line. And you were meant to come up with solutions yourself.

I decided on swimwear as an area I was familiar with given my training as a designer and the corporate experience I had developed over the years. Swimwear is a product I could excel at. I also wanted to use regenerated fishing nets as most people involved in swimming or water sports are the ones that see the pollution in the ocean every day, and so are more likely to stop wearing ordinary swimwear made from petro-chemicals. They are the conscious consumers interested in the environmental or social side of the business. They will go the extra mile to find us online because they want to make an impact. Our customers are mainly European and more recently, from Australia, New Zealand and the US. Getting in front of that customer is quite expensive as we do not sell in physical stores. If we did, the store would take a margin turning us into a luxury product and then it all becomes about rich women helping poor women. We want people to be able to afford what we do so we are in the mid-price point range. We use Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to reach our customers.

I have drawn on skills from my corporate jobs all the time but running one's own business required learning new skills including cash flow management, web and social media

skills, small business management skills and so on. While the knowhow was transferable, I had to re-establish many networks from scratch. The UK lost all of the lingerie and swimwear manufacturing 20 years ago, so there are very few people left with those skills compared to countries like Spain and Italy.

Initially, we had seven or eight styles and we made about 50 or 100 pieces per style. It was very small scale; yet, we thought we would sell everything in the first year. Our sales projections were too ambitious but the great thing about sustainable fashion is that you do not need to sell out straightaway. Products are designed to be timeless and valuable. We still manufacture small scale, about 14 or 15 styles in different colours and up to 100 pieces. However, things are slowly changing. Although ethical fashion is still niche, it has grown probably 10 times from when we initially started. This gives us a bigger customer base and increased confidence. When we first started, it felt frustrating and really hard work trying to make people understand what we were doing and why we were different. I approached mainstream retailers because I wanted to get this message out, but it was pretty much a dead end. No one knew about plastics in the ocean or the pollution that the fashion industry causes. Many people are still unaware, but these concerns are more in the mainstream consciousness. David Attenborough and his Blue Planet Programme increased awareness about pollution from fishing nets and people understand that we must clean up our oceans. Recently, sports organisations approached us and this is different from having to bang on people's doors all the time.

Identity work

I moved back to the United Kingdom at the end of 2008, right in the middle of the recession. The good job offer I had from a company based in West London was rescinded because of the recession and so I found myself without a job and with two small children to support. Having no job and being out of the busy corporate world gave me a chance to stop and think about what I wanted to do with my life. After I did some freelance work for a fair-trade menswear label, I became interested in ethical brands. The two books that fundamentally made me want to start *SwimHappy* were *Half the Sky* (Kristof and WuDunn, 2010) and *To Die For* (Siegle, 2011). The first focused on the unequal ways women are treated, without opportunities to develop and have a voice. I found out about micro-finance too which is a strong part of *SwimHappy*'s mission. I looked online for micro-finance agencies and I came across Lend with Care, based in London. After meeting them I realised they were a good fit with what I wanted to achieve, allowing me to choose the women I wanted to invest in. I have usually been drawn by those businesses where a sewing machine is central. The second book focused on fashion and it really affected me because I read about some of the factories that I had worked in, their audits, and the dye stuffs that were going into the water supplies. These two books were particularly instrumental in the way I formed *SwimHappy* as a company that was about women and about making fashion a force for good.

There was wide variation in the structures and cultures of the different corporations I worked for, as well as different levels of environmental concern. Swimwear and lingerie factories are at the top of the spectrum of factories because the product is very technical, and the factories need to be clean. I never went to any sweatshops although these factories were leaching dyed stuffs into the water. There was a lot of greenwash in the corporate world. They try to make you believe all the audits and all the factory safeguards that

they put in place. When I left the corporate world, I found out that all the audits were not worth the paper they were written on.

I once went to Southern China and after an hour of travelling through paddy fields we eventually turned up at a manufacturing facility that was a concrete bunker within the paddy field. It was a state-of-the-art facility, pristine and clean, where thousands of women were bent over the machines and where they spent all their time. The factory manager was very proud of this facility but as I went outside, I looked around and all I could see were paddy fields, no villages, nothing that any of these girls could walk to. They could only take 10 days off at the Chinese New Year but coming from Northern China, it took them three to four days to get there and back so they only got to spend two to three days with their children back in their village. This was a light bulb moment for me, and I started questioning the system we have set up where women on one side of the planet are living like that just so women on the other side of the planet in Europe and in America can buy three bras instead of two. This is one of the reasons I am so passionate about people's working conditions and the environment. *SwimHappy* embodies those values.

I have also developed as a person much more in the last 10 years. That might have happened anyway because when one gets to their 40s their perspective on many things changes. You become much more connected to your community and the important things in life. I never picked up my kids from school or went to their school functions and events during my corporate life. Now, I feel much more connected to them, spending more time with them than I would have done had I carried on with the corporate work. It has been a great journey.

Institutional work

I am very passionate about making fashion circular. Not only are we addressing environmental concerns with fashion, but we are also addressing its social impact on other women because 80% of garment and textile workers are women. Globally, one in six people are involved workwise with fashion and textiles. If we could flip this industry to be for good, we can affect more people's lives and have more environmental impact than most other industries. Women make 90% of all consumer purchases because they're purchasing for their family, their husbands, their partners, themselves; it is about women helping other women and that's why it is important that this industry changes.

First, we need to raise awareness about the fashion industry. Many people my age gasp when they hear how clothes manufacturing is done overseas, women's working conditions, their pay and holidays and these are middle-class and educated. That is the reason I want to talk to people. That is the real driver and it is very rewarding when you can make people stop and think. Second, legislation changes combined with a mind-set change by the general population is needed. We need to value goods and services again, so they are no longer disposable or fast. The legislation should reintroduce the value by having a living wage for everyone involved in garment manufacturing wherever they are and better standards for clothing and dyeing, weaving and knitting that are enforceable. Recycled fibres instead of virgin ones should be used by introducing a higher tax on virgin fibres and lower taxes to reward those using recycled material. At the bottom of my street is Primark and every day I see women coming out with their brown paper bags full of stuff that they might only wear once or twice and yet, other women have been bent

over sewing machines to sew them. We must stop this crazy cycle we are on. Big businesses are only concerned with shareholder value and given the pressure retail is under at the moment they are not going to change unless they are made to.

I do a lot of work to make people see the value of their clothing, through collaborating with *Labour Behind the Label* and *War on Want*, using social media and also talks and events. The events on fashion and clothing are aimed at spreading the word to a bigger audience. They are about valuing your clothes and revamping them. We bring together 10 or 15 ethical fashion brands active in the city. These numbers might not sound high but there is little support for small businesses or designers. Ellen MacArthur Foundation, for example, has been a supporter of the CE but if you ask them for help, they will never reply. They only work with the big guys. Only this year they had an event for designers and CE thinking although they have been going on for years. At the local level, however, the city network are very supportive and collaborative. We have also received EU funding for certification, as well as to research the percentage of carbon emissions from our swimwear, which we now know is 42% lower than that of a normal swimsuit.

Despite the difficulties of running a viable business, there is less pressure when developing it organically. We have relied on collaborations with local actors, benefitting from the city's interest in the CE, social enterprise, creative and digital industries. Connecting with these people has been very helpful and I have received support with modelling, photography, marketing and accounting. They all donate their time for free because they know we are not just a fashion company. Our mission is to be the swim and active wear retailer of choice for people who care about their impact on the planet.

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Mirela Xheneti is Senior Lecturer in Entrepreneurship and Small Business. Mirela has a long-standing interest in how institutional change and enterprise policies affect entrepreneurial behaviour. This particular interest has led to a number of recent studies on the informal economy and entrepreneurial behaviour amongst women in developing country contexts and, the role of entrepreneurs in supporting the transition to the circular economy. Mirela’s work has appeared in numerous journal articles and book chapters including the *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development Journal*, *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal* and *Journal of Business Ethics*. Mirela serves on the Board of Directors of the European Council for Small Business and Entrepreneurship.

Vicky is a female entrepreneur who runs a circular business that produces swim and active wear from regenerated fishing nets. As well as supporting women’s small businesses in the developing world, she also provides training and mentorship for those interested in a career in fashion. Her work has gained her an ‘Ecopreneur of the Year’ award the year this article was written. Vicky is an avid swimmer and the beach is her favourite place.

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