

Project Title: Distribution of Environmental Responsibility in Apparel Supply Networks: Arriving at Industry Perspectives

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Abstract:

Stark warnings concerning the current and predicted impacts of the climate crisis have driven an industry-wide discussion on the distribution of environmental responsibility within the apparel sector.

Identifying, addressing, and phasing out the impacts associated with the production of apparel hold great potential to mitigate the effects of climate change. Despite general agreement on the apparel sector's obligations to address environmental impacts, the distribution of this responsibility between focal firms and suppliers has caused uncertainty within the industry and disagreement within academic literature. While focal firms have come to be regarded as a main actor responsible for addressing environmental impacts within supply networks, little is known about the suitability of this approach.

This study investigates focal firms', suppliers', and stakeholders' scopes of perceived and expected responsibility. Frameworks are then developed to map out focal firms' and suppliers' areas of responsibility, whilst the factors motivating, enabling or hindering industry participants in addressing these areas are presented. By applying a constructivist grounded theory approach and conducting interviews with industry actors, the diverse landscape of focal firms and suppliers is revealed, ultimately showing that no one actor has the ability or capacity to address environmental responsibility by themselves. Despite this, it is found that focal firms do have the potential to improve their responsibility performance by increasing supply network transparency, acquiring internal knowledge on environmental impacts arising upstream, and moving away from business models primarily geared towards increasing profitability. Suppliers, in contrast, were shown to face obstacles of a systemic nature, including power asymmetries with focal firms. Further barriers to focal firms and suppliers operating responsibly were associated with the capitalist economic system.

Amid the complexity of distributing environmental responsibility, a collaborative approach to responsibility was ultimately found to be a necessary component in any attempt to improve sectoral management of environmental responsibility.