

# Are low- and middle-income countries profiting from fast fashion?

Countries  
profiting from  
fast fashion

Karan Khurana

*School of Business and Marketing, Westminster International University in Tashkent,  
Tashkent, Uzbekistan and*

*Antwerp Management School, Antwerp, Belgium, and*

S.S. Muthu

*SgT HK Limited, Cheung Sha Wan, Hong Kong*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – In the last two decades, the fashion value chain traveled to developing parts of the world. To these nations, it paved a path for socio-economic development initially but lately, the aftermath has costed more. This article visualizes the gains and losses of fast fashion to these countries.

**Design/methodology/approach** – An in-depth systematic literature review was performed to analyze the secondary data from academic journals and reports from international organizations. The authors have compiled their empirical journeys in academia, research and industry from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) based on Schon's (1983, 1990) theory of reflective practice. Further on, the article is structured using the value chain analysis (VCA) method which visualizes the aftermath of mass-producing fashion for the developed countries.

**Findings** – In this research it was found that LMICs have made substantial economic progress in the past two decades, however at a high social and environmental cost. It is the right time to find a balance between economic development and harm caused to the citizens of these nations.

**Originality/value** – At the moment the existing academic literature talks about unsustainable practices in the fashion sector around the world. This research precisely targets the LMICs where the aftermath is supposed to be much more severe. Further, it provides solutions and urges these nations to bring a substantial change throughout the value chain for a robust future.

**Keywords** Sustainability, Fashion and textile sector, Low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), Business models, Socio-economic development

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The race to socio-economic progress blindfolded the low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) toward the aftermath of the enormous amounts of production and consumption of clothing. The ever-increasing size of the apparel market is not hidden; according to [Fashion United \(2020\)](#), the value of the industry is three trillion dollars and is expected to grow at a progressive rate to become one of the biggest industries in the world. In the last two decades, the global shift of textile and garment production to lower-labor-cost countries led to a substantial decline of production in many developed countries, in some cases to the point of extinction, with conjoined increased complexity and reduced transparency through the supply chain. Asia has emerged as a garment and textile producing factory of the world and the movement has begun in Africa. On the positive side, this sector has contributed to overseas income, foreign exchange, women empowerment, the total export value and GDP in countries like Bangladesh ([Bala et al., 2020](#)) and Ethiopia ([Khurana, 2018](#)). On the other hand,



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*Availability of data and material:* The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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the future of this industrialization does not look promising for these economies. Global industrialization has led to the production in LMICs, where low production costs are the result of abusive practice, of both garment-workers' conditions, wages and the ecological environment. In the race of eradicating poverty, the manufacturing economies have completely neglected the side effects of mass production.

Various researchers (Pookulangara and Shephard, 2013; Turker and Altuntas, 2014; Fletcher and Tham, 2014; Weller, 2017; Macchion *et al.*, 2018; Buzzo and Abreu, 2019; Bottani *et al.*, 2019; Gardetti and Muthu, 2020) in the past have focused on showing the problems associated with unsustainable production and have provided solutions for the apparel value chain. However, these good practices have never been implemented in the LMICs due to a lack of governance, awareness and corruption. The paradox is that developed countries do not mass produce so there's minimal environmental degradation, they are less populated and the consumer and producer both are aware of the side effects of mass production and consumption. Moreover, research (Karaosman *et al.*, 2020; Niinimäki *et al.*, 2020) shows it is often difficult for downstream manufacturers to know where raw materials have come from and how they were processed. In LMICs the situation is quite alarming, production and consumption both are extremely high and its an ongoing challenge for realizing sustainability.

The issues in each LMIC are unique and require a customized set of managerial solutions. Waste management in the production (Rapsikevičienė *et al.*, 2019; Khurana, 2020), upcycling (Pandit *et al.*, 2019), second-hand clothing (Machado *et al.*, 2019; Khurana and Tadesse, 2019), use of recycled materials (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2019) are a few noteworthy strategies of the sector which takes the sustainability dialogue a bit forward. The Pulse (2019) Update report indicates that, as a whole, the fashion industry is slowing down on sustainability efforts.

The developed countries have been quite successful in making their environments sustainable but still, the sustainability dialogue in the value chain remains an oxymoron (Clark, 2008; Berger-Grabner, 2018; von Busch, 2018). This research visualizes the sustainability issue from the perspective of LMICs which has not been done yet. The aim of this article is not only to provide solutions but also to give a wake-up call to the LMICs before the next humanitarian disaster is on way such as the Rana Plaza tragedy. The COVID-19 crisis makes it even more essential to think selfishly and realize the following research questions:

*RQ1.* Are LMICs profiting from producing fast fashion?

*RQ2.* How could LMICs sustain socio-economic benefits while producing fast fashion?

The present researches highlight aftermath of fashion on the globe on the whole, whereas this article is novel as it brings in the empirical journeys of authors in garment and textile production in LMICs (India, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam Uzbekistan, Cambodia, China, Bangladesh, Madagascar and Myanmar, etc.). The authors foresee a challenging future for these nations and propose solutions for a sustainable future.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 *The perception of socio-economic development*

Haraguchi *et al.* (2017) state that low-income countries have experienced rapid industrialization with a disproportionately large share of manufacturing activities. The concept of economic development goes beyond raising the per capita income of the workers dedicated to the industry. In theory, industrialization proposes to promote an inclusive idea of an all-round/sustainable development of social livelihoods for the working classes of low-income countries. Whereas, what exists is a lack of job security, poor salary, long working hours, low access to the public services, poor health, poor living and working conditions, lack of legal rights, and physical and mental threats toward their economic and social well-being

(Reza *et al.*, 2019). Inflation in producing economies develops income inequalities (Das, 2019; Siami-Namini and Hudson, 2019) and the worker classes are practically never able to escape the burden of poverty. In most of the producing economies such as India (Mumbai and New Delhi) and Ethiopia (Addis Ababa) production sites are in the city outskirts where the workers often live in slums or low-income group housings. Previous researches (Deb *et al.*, 2020; Ahuja *et al.*, 2020; Woo and Jun, 2020) have highlighted that slums are breeding grounds of various social issues (drug abuse, lack of child education, domestic violence, a crime against women, child labor, etc.) in the outskirts of big cities in Asia and Africa. The brands producing in these countries have never delved into this issue and the lively hoods continue to deteriorate as we talk of it. Socio-economic progress is a very perspective ideology as the development has not been attained by the human resource working in the industry. The success of globalization belongs solely to the western brands and their manufacturing vendors in producing economies. The working classes became poorer and poorer while the affluent continued the extraction without caring about their future survival. India has been producing garments for over two decades today and still, human labor continues to struggle in these conditions. This raises serious questions about the sustainability of the fashion production system. The fashion revolution started a campaign “Who made my clothes” to bring forward this working-class but no effort has been made to uplift their status in society. In recent months as the world fights the COVID-19 pandemic; one of the most suffering classes is the workers. It is evident that the brands are suffering from economic depression but on the other hand, millions of workers across Asia are jobless immediately. As the governments stopped business in India, the workers had no option other than to walk back to their villages which were hundreds of kilometers away as the transportation system was also blocked due to the COVID-19. Whereas, Primark did £7.8 billion (about \$10.2 billion) in sales in 2019, earning £913 million in operating profit (ABF, 2019). Shockingly, nothing of these saving could be used to comfort workers during the crisis period.

Wallace (2017) advocates the concept of sustainable development as a key to industrialization which does not seem to be the case in Asian countries. In summary, how have these mass-market brands supported socio-economic development when the human resource (most important drivers of mass markets) is in such bad shape. The question who is achieving socio-economic development remains a challenge for LMICs.

## 2.2 *Employment or exploitation*

The human resource of the fashion and textile sector is driven by factory workers (low, medium, and high skilled), home workers (embroiders, surface ornamentation) and educated working class (designers, merchandisers, production managers) who manage the value chain. Edwards *et al.* (2019) state that global brands have sourced from around the world in search of low prices and governments have sought to instill conditions that preserve corporate profitability, the global economy has become characterized by an “escalating job crisis” in which low wages, coupled with wage theft and underpayment, have become an endemic feature of global supply chains.

The Guardian (2019) reports that in India almost all workers – 99.2% – were subject to conditions of forced labor under Indian law, which means they did not receive the state-stipulated minimum wage, late payments and penalties for not completing hefty orders on time. Workers are hired on a daily wage basis and monthly basis. Presently, there are an estimated 60 million garment workers globally, and around 80% of garment workers are women. Undoubtedly, the most vulnerable sections of the working class are the women and forced children. Besides a very low hourly wage (0.11 \$-0.35\$/hour) (ILO, 2019), women in these factories are subjected to gender-based violence, verbal abuse and inappropriate long working hours (Cowgil and Huynh, 2016; Hasan *et al.*, 2017). Further on, Children are exposed

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to machinery, pesticides, dust in agricultural work, and fumes, chemicals, acids, cotton and wool fiber in other forms of work that are detrimental to health (Srivastava, 2019).

“We must understand gender-based violence as an outcome of the global supply chain structure.” Jennifer Rosenbaum, US director of Global Labor Justice.

In Ethiopia, the case of exploitation is even more intriguing. The country has been termed the “China of Africa” and PVH Corporation, Gap, J.C. Penney, H&M are currently manufacturing in the country. MVO (2019) found in their research that the daily wage for an operator is currently approx. \$50 per month and can range from a starting salary of \$32 to \$122 for the most experienced operator. This salary is far from enough to cover basic needs like food, housing and transportation. Despite the low salaries, the production remains low as there are high attrition and no motivation among the workers. The majority of the factories are located in the outskirts of the capital city – Addis Ababa or Hawassa (140 Miles away from the capital). These huge industrial parks were farming lands that were sources of livelihoods for communities. It was promised by the government that the farmers would get jobs in garment factories and as compensation for their land, they would get housing. Such land grabbing incidents created ethnic unrest from the period of 2015–2017 in major parts of the country.

Coming to college graduates, the struggle is no less. On a personal level, the authors experienced a similar circumstance in the export sector. In 2007, while working as a junior merchandiser in an export house in New Delhi, the working conditions were intolerable. On an average day in summers, one could expect up to 60 degrees Celsius on the factory floors and working hours (9 a.m.–8 p.m.) as the human resource has to keep in time with the Buyers in the USA/Europe. A couple of months later on confrontation with the head of the department for salary as the first month was not paid, he unashamedly answered that my documents in the company were not processed and I was not going to be paid. There were numerous stories of such abuse with other colleagues that we came across in the industry. Sinkovics *et al.* (2016) demonstrate how the pressure for compliance has resulted in companies prioritizing the implementation of measurable standards for workers. However, as we talk there is still a large percentage of unnoticed small- and medium-scale factories (the sub-contractors) that have never been checked or socially complied. Siddiqui *et al.* (2020) further add that in Bangladesh sustainability of the labor governance mechanisms is significantly affected by the state’s ability to play the role of catalyst in the process, mainly due to the presence of a significant state-business nexus.

The exploitation of the workers is well documented in academic literature (Islam, 2017; Venkatesan, 2019; Akhter *et al.*, 2019). Cheap labor has been the key driver for the success of fast fashion and has driven garment and textile production from Asia to Africa in recent times. The concept of sourcing cheap labor stands in opposition to gainful employment as sustaining a job often leads to exploitation of human resources. Moreover, in current times, it’s seen that the human resource has no social and job security in these manufacturing companies which questions the reality of these employment opportunities.

### *2.3 Production and consumption – a twin disaster*

Pal and Gander (2018) argue that high water usage, pollution from chemical treatments used in dyeing and preparation and the disposal of large amounts of unsold stock through incineration or landfill deposits combine to make clothing one of the highest impact industries on the planet. Despite actions by the fashion industry to reduce environmental impact, current efforts to improve sustainability are often outpaced by increasing consumption (Fletcher, 2016). The cost of fast fashion is paid by the environment and public health. Africa and Asia are home to nearly 90% of the world’s rural population UN (2018) and here is where the challenge intensifies. According to ILO, garment production takes place on all five continents, with around 60% concentrated in Asia and hence the maximum impact is here.

Consider the case of India having a population of 1.4 billion people approximately. Fast fashion companies have made fine progress in the last decade. The profits of Zara and H&M (about 43–45%) confirm the consumption and production patterns of textile and garment in the country. It can be further confirmed by the landfills in New Delhi. On the outskirts of the capital city, 1,000 tons of waste is dumped daily into various landfills (plastic, clothing and garbage) and burnt causing intense air pollution in the city and making life very difficult in the nearby areas. Surprisingly enough the consumer and producers are not concerned or are not aware of this man-made environmental calamity. A similar case was recorded in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) where a trash landfill killed around 113 people in 2017.

The problem with uneducated citizens is that they are completely ignorant of the aftermath of excess consumption and production. Additionally, sub-contracting (small and medium scale) factories are often owned by uninformed owners that are completely overlooking the environmental complications of producing and selling large quantities of garments. LMICs are the most favorable destinations for fast fashion as the majority of the population is middle class. Brands produce and retail simultaneously, establishing a money-making value chain at very low costs. The rapid emergence of Asia's middle class has brought far-reaching economic change, creating new market opportunities for domestic and international companies. Such a population is one of the most promising economic stimuli as they earn and spend in the country.

Likewise, in each LMIC there is no consciousness or concern for sustainability among the stakeholders. However, the real problem prevails here and is continuously overshadowed by the economic growth of these countries.

#### *2.4 The future of local brands*

It is quite apparent (from point 2.3) that as the brands produce in these countries, they would want to retail as well as reduce supply chain costs. Globalization had a lot of negative impact on the LMICs and it has been highly criticized in the academic literature (Manda and Sen, 2004; Lee and Vivarelli, 2006; Ramdass and Kruger, 2011; Steger, 2017). Moreover, it creates a true challenge for every local enterprise but especially for SMEs (small and medium enterprises) since competition is increasing, and due to lack of financial resources local industry is losing its exclusively national character (Dahan and Peltekoglu, 2011). Looking closely at the case of India, the local brands have taken a back seat as the foreign fast fashion brands quickly occupied the domestic market due to low prices. The local brands have to shift their retail base to smaller cities to sustain their businesses. Today in big cities in India the retail centers (malls and hypermarkets) have almost no representation of the local brands. In Ethiopia (fake Chinese fast fashion) and Uzbekistan (LC WAIKIKI, Twister - Turkish brands) have overshadowed the local brands making it a difficult situation for the local value chains.

Various studies (Bailey-Todd *et al.*, 2008; Lindgren *et al.*, 2010; Craik, 2015; Lucia and Segre, 2017) from developed countries have highlighted the ill effects of vanishing local industries such as loss of cultural fashion, loss of retail market share and loss of domestic income to name a few. The above studies insist on saving the local brands and SMEs which are still the center of creativity in the fashion and textile sector. The survival of local brands is under major threat in LMICs as there is a visible consumer shift toward foreign brands. It proposes great socio-economic and cultural challenges which would have serious effects on these countries in the future.

#### *2.5 Consumer mindset*

Bringing a shift in the consumer mindset remains one of the biggest challenges in LMICs. Apparel manufacturers have shifted to circularity owing to the increased consumer

awareness about fast fashion impacts (Kozar and Connell, 2013; Kant Hvass and Pedersen, 2019; Zamani *et al.*, 2017; Khare and Varshneya, 2017) but studies show that the demand for green products has been stagnant (Arli *et al.*, 2018; Harris *et al.*, 2016). Previous researches have pointed out reasons for this slow rise of green buying behavior such as – poor quality and styled products (Joergens, 2006; Kautish and Sharma, 2021; Tong and Su, 2018); lack of awareness about green apparel and suspicion about fair-trade attributes (Lee *et al.*, 2015; Reimers *et al.*, 2016; Jacobs *et al.*, 2018); perceived benefits and past-experience of green apparel (Lee *et al.*, 2015); green peer influence (Khare, 2020) and lack of social media promotion (de Lenne and Vandenbosch, 2017). However, according to empirical evidence, we strongly support the fact that price sensitivity is the most important attribute to green buying behavior. Researches (Rothenberg and Matthews, 2017; Ritch, 2020) in developed countries have clearly stated that the inability to buy green clothing for a premium price. The success of fast fashion is based on low prices and consumer affordability. As observed in Ethiopia and Uzbekistan where the per capita income is much lower than in developed countries, customers are forced to buy fast fashion/fake Chinese clothing due to their inability to pay a higher price.

This gives rise to contradictory theories from developing countries; on one hand, companies are promoting green products and on the other, we see that limited or negligible green apparel buying. For instance, Khare (2015) reports limited knowledge about green products, organic and recyclable brands in India or Brazil, Garcia *et al.* (2019) suggest that 62% of the respondents were not aware of the clothing production chain. Further on, the companies have not put in much effort into communicating and engaging the public about the sustainability impacts of their consumption practices (Boström and Micheletti, 2016). Consumer buying behavior needs to change but certain limitations exist in these countries which cannot be neglected. Fast fashion has taken a huge advantage on the price sensitivity parameter to sell. Hence, it can be concluded that there exists a wide gap between consumer intention to buy and the ability to buy green clothing.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a meta-narrative systematic literature review approach to synthesize literature across sustainable or green fashion. Meta-narrative syntheses integrate qualitative and quantitative works while maintaining the integrity of the original work (Denyer and Tranfield, 2006; Thomas and Harden, 2008; Barnett-Page and Thomas, 2009). Denyer and Tranfield (2006) further add that this approach is useful for understanding complex issues, especially in emerging fields where the literature is still developing like sustainable fashion.

In this article, the authors have compiled their empirical journeys in academia, research and industry-based on Schon's (1983, 1990) theory of reflective practice. The tone of the article is in the story – dialogue method which is aimed to trigger the thought in the readers' (stakeholders) mind that is fast fashion benefitting the LMICs?

This article is structured using the value chain analysis (VCA) method (Kaplinsky and Morris, 2000). This method employs a stage-wise analysis of problems (section 2) and solutions (section 4). Previous researches in the fashion and textile sector (Dopico and Porral, 2011; Tran *et al.*, 2011; Pinto and Souza, 2013; Kadarusman and Nadvi, 2013; Paras *et al.*, 2018) have advocated that this model as it provides greater visibility of the problems for its stakeholders (suppliers, foreign investors, academia, governmental bodies and consumers).

### 4. Discussion and recommendation

In the case of LMICs it can be said there does not exist “one size first all strategy” as they have a very unique set of circumstances. Moreover, degrowth (ending manufacturing in many

developing countries) is not a viable solution as there would be social and economic difficulties for those countries that are currently dependent on their textile-manufacturing or garment-manufacturing industry (Anguelov, 2015). It is highly recommended that each of these countries think in a self-seeking manner to ensure a sustainable future for their citizens. In this section, the authors present solutions keeping in mind the viewpoint of growth and sustainability together.

#### *4.1 Sustainable product development*

The world population and consumption are an ever-increasing phenomenon and it would be too optimistic to believe that garment factories shall stop mass production. However, the production processes could be re-engineered to be made sustainable. Sustainable product development or eco-design shall begin at the raw material stages and it must be done from cradle to grave or even cradle to cradle stages. For each point of the life cycle of textile products, there should be the consideration to lower the environmental impacts significantly by finding the best alternatives in terms of raw materials, processes, transportation modes and routes, consumption scenarios. The utilization of textile waste and consumption and conservation of resources must be considered with the highest priority. Various researchers (Pensupa *et al.*, 2017; Sixta *et al.*, 2015) in the past have advocated the use of alternative raw materials to virgin cotton or viscose production.

Innovation in the fashion product will hold a very important place in establishing sustainability. Authors (Brezet, 1997; Ceschin and Gaziulusoy, 2016) define four levels of innovation: product-level improvement, product redesign, function innovation and system innovation. To this model, Kozłowski *et al.* (2019) add a new level of resilient, adaptable and circular (RAC) innovations to product development strategies.

In decreasing risk for LMICs, Camargo *et al.* (2020) recommend Ultra-fast fashion which differs from fast in the following supply chain strategies: avoids any excess inventory, focuses on local manufacturing, on-demand production and shorter lead times from a few days to a week with a combination of agile, lean, responsive supply chain strategies.

#### *4.2 Circular business modeling*

The creation of a sustainable product must be supported by a business model that makes a space in the market. Niinimäki *et al.* (2020) argue that the industry needs to improve sustainability and business needs to create alternative models for fast fashion. Creative business models built on proactive design act to reduce waste, avoid surplus production and, thereby, creating a more stable business environment. Moreover, combining the main findings from early works on sustainable business models and recent publications (Evans *et al.*, 2017; Lüdeke-Freund and Dembek, 2017; Schaltegger *et al.*, 2016; Lüdeke-Freund, 2020) reveal that the business model concept is seen as means to open up new business opportunities for sustainable entrepreneurs. Robust business models shall ensure that the LMICs profit the value chain while keeping people and environments in consideration. Furthermore, utilization of the blockchain framework (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2019; ElMessiry *et al.*, 2019) shall ensure traceability of the complex textile supply chain and circular economy models that are in need of the hour.

#### *4.3 Wages vs price of garments*

The ideology of “living wage” in the garment industry has been a concern for International Labor Organization (ILO) for a long time and yet to date no major brand can validate that all the workers in their supply chain earn a living wage. Despite increased media, policy and practitioner’s attention the evidence base remains unexplored the exploitation of human

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resources exists within the garment value chain (Cockbain *et al.*, 2018; Arslan, 2020). The Clean Clothes Campaign in their research found that the workers' wages represent only a fraction of what consumers pay for the clothes because of deep-rooted structural power dynamics. A decade ago, India was one of the largest garment suppliers but today it is taken over countries like Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Ethiopia, which offer cheaper labor. The buy-dispose cycle which is permeating the entire apparel industry has adverse consequences for workers.

As discussed above (section 2.2) the apparel value chain consists of factory workers, home workers and the educated working class. We propose to begin from the unorganized labor sector (home workers, daily workers) which is invisible in the value chain. These workers require immediate attention as a large majority of them are female workers who manage their household work and children simultaneously (Bishnoi and Kapoor, 2020). Due to invisibility, they face the following issues – lower wages than factory workers (Bremann *et al.*, 2009); irregular work content and timing, non-existent employment status (Chan, 2013), encouraging child labor, no social security and poor safety measures. The issue here is not record-keeping of these workers as the company pays them; it is the transparency of these records. As the buyer or the government authorities demands a social compliance check such records are never shown and these people always remain undercover. Illegal sourcing of labor enables the companies to pay according to their wish which under no circumstances in ethical sourcing.

The next category of workers is factory workers which are on the payroll, sub-contracted (small and medium factories) and daily wages. It is estimated that in a 29-euro t-shirt a worker receives 0.18 euro (0.6%) only. The inflation rate in LMICs is more erratic than in the developed countries, which leaves these workers struggling for basic daily needs. We do not disagree with the fact of cost optimization along the value chain but that can be achieved through improving operational efficiency, enhancing working conditions, reducing staff turnover and improving employee health and motivation. Brands, like Fair Indigo and Raven + Lily, have chosen to collaborate with worker-owned cooperatives to increase the wages. These measures would increase product/service transparency toward their consumers which is majorly missing at the moment.

As we look at the salaries of the educated human resource, there is a huge disparity between the merchandizer and designers in developing countries and LMICs. Moreover, the amount of work is way too much as compared to the buyer's end. Significant literature (Barrientos, 2013; Delaney *et al.*, 2015; Rainnie *et al.*, 2011) has addressed the role of factory workers but relatively less attention has been paid to these lower and mid-level managers of the value chain (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2019). This class of workers is instrumental in the success of the fashion and textile sector and needs to be addressed accordingly.

Fast fashion buyers have always demanded very competitive (often low) F.O.B (freight on board) prices. However, as consumer demand and awareness for more sustainable apparel choices are growing it is appropriate to revise the factory prices. Increasing prices shall ensure the possibility of giving the human resource its rightful remuneration and encourages conscious consumption. The Asia Floor Wage Alliance (along with Global Union Federations and ILO) has proposed a Purchasing Power Parity (PPP\$), which assures the standard living wage. This task remains the responsibility of the company owner to acknowledge the efforts of the human resource by following such standards. This will also help expedite companies' process of adjusting their brand value proposition toward sustainability in the eyes of the consumer.

#### *4.4 Increasing governance in LMICs*

The governments in the LMICs have always been encouraged by international institutions to put economic growth before stronger environmental and social regulation and thus the big brand retailers have been successful in operating at low-cost abroad (Boström and Micheletti,

2016). The global disintegration of the garment supply chain has given rise to various challenges related to geographical, cultural, political, legal, communicative and other gaps (Boström *et al.*, 2015). Such gaps have created great room for continued misperformance, misunderstandings and unsustainable practices in the end. LMICs have to look into innovative thinking and efforts on both the supply and demand side at multiple societal and governmental levels.

Enforcing the transparency of the supply chains should be the primary step in this process. Supply chain transparency could be better conceptualized as Traceability, which can be extended from within-the company processing (company level traceability) to sourcing and SCM, allowing products to be traced back to the whole supply chain ultimately to the raw material used (Khurana and Ricchetti, 2016). Various authors have suggested methods to implement traceability. Hazen *et al.* (2014) state that accurate, timely, consistent and complete information about the movement of products through the chain shall play a pivotal role in implementing traceability. Morgan *et al.* (2015) name operational supply chain transparency (OSCT), as a firm's capability to proactively engage in communication with stakeholders to obtain visibility and traceability into upstream and downstream supply chain operations. Trkman *et al.* (2010) conceptualized the supply chain analytics framework (Bell *et al.*, 2016) in terms of how it is employed to support four supply chain functions: planning, sourcing, making and delivery to increase supply chain performance and transparency. Zhu *et al.* (2018) further build upon the SCA to form organizational information processing theory (OIPT). OIPT characterizes business firms as open social systems that seek to execute business strategy through mitigating uncertainty in decision-making processes. Through these theories, it is evident that traceability shall not only help the companies to achieve high supply chain performance but also improve collaboration and communication with their stakeholders.

CSR has played a very crucial role in bridging the gap between the governments and companies in the developed economies. However, developing countries are practicing CSR mainly in a voluntary and philanthropic fashion to build public image and primarily enhance business profit, not necessarily for social well-being and environmental benefit (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021).

Lastly, in the current COVID-19 crisis, the health of the production sector has suffered immensely. As stated above the factories have stopped or limited production which has led to losing millions of jobs. In emerging economies workers have no social security and, in such times, it becomes even more difficult to sustain livelihoods. The governments should ensure that the companies have maintained all workers' contracts and full regular wages were paid. In case the workers contract the virus, they should be given proper medical care. And as the factories re-open overtime should not be imposed on the workers to complete the orders. It is now time that the governments begin to think of their citizens and delve into the fact that is this economic growth or a hoax.

#### *4.5 Leveraging the local fashion*

The local fashion merchandise is a shadow of the cultural heritage of LMICs. Preserving local fashion is the primary step toward a robust economy. Quartey and Abor (2011) argue that consumers in developed countries are loyal to nationalistic products, whereas in developing countries imported products are preferred. The companies that produce fast fashion should produce local brands that integrate local heritage and fashion into merchandise. Later on, these brands could be exported to developed countries fetching considerable revenue to LMICs. Fast fashion has made clothing very redundant and it lacks the splash of creativity. The local brands from LMICs should develop premium/luxury brands that exhibit their rich culture while establishing a natural connection to sustainability. Hand-made products,

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hand-printed textiles and surface ornamentation techniques have received a lot of appreciation due to their uniqueness in the luxury market space. Luxury and sustainability can co-depend on each other (Guercini and Ranfagni, 2013) while creating high-quality, durable and timeless fashion and lifestyle products (Campos Franco *et al.*, 2019). This would massively support the artisan communities who are fearing extinction in emerging economies.

The socio-economic conditions in LMICs have degenerated exponentially in the COVID-19 times. For instance, due to the cancellation and reduction of export orders small- and medium-scale factories have closed down in India. According to data from the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), a total of 1,150 garment factories in the country had to cancel or suspend orders worth 3.18 billion US dollars. As a result, human resource has been laid off and has caused a lot of tension in the garment industry. The workers have returned to their villages and getting them back to normal work would not be an easy task. The authors strongly believe that if there was a strong domestic value chain the losses would have been far lesser as the money would stay in the economy. However, looking at the positive side, it is now time to take advantage of this disruption.

#### *4.6 Social media and consumer consciousness*

The emergence of the social networks has encouraged the consumers to talk among themselves, to compare and recommend products and services and thus companies integrate the social networks into their business strategies (Kim and Ko, 2010; Tsai and Men, 2013; Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Bianchi *et al.*, 2017). Social media platforms are now the primary source of information for consumers and one of the most powerful marketing tools for fashion businesses (Chu and Seock, 2020). Moreover, social networks enable users to segment their audiences and identify their geographic, demographic and psychographic profiles by processing the information about their age, sex, city, interests, etc. (Arriaga *et al.*, 2017). Research has found a significant relationship between green apparel knowledge, awareness about the environment and consumers' willingness to buy green apparel (Hustvedt and Bernard, 2008; Hustvedt and Dickson, 2009; Connell, 2010; Muthu, 2019).

Park and Kim (2016) state that trends are most commonly led by fashion influencers (FIs) and also influence consumer purchase intention (Chetioui *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, influencer marketing (Li *et al.*, 2012) should be considered as one of the methods to increase consumer awareness in this area. Researches (McKeown and Shearer, 2019; Leban *et al.*, 2021) in the west have also shown the positive impact of social media influencers on spreading awareness for ethical fashion. According to the data, the number of citizens on social media in LMICs (India-376.1 million; Bangladesh – 36 million; China – 882 million; Uzbekistan – 3.2 million; Ethiopia – 21.14 million) in 2020 has increased sharply from the past and is further rising. Since a large number of consumers are present in the virtual space, it becomes quite efficient to reach and influence them for sustainable fashion.

## **5. Conclusions**

In 2016, the movie *River Blue* documented the destruction of our rivers caused due to the fashion and textile industry. Cotton farming used up so much water from the Aral Sea (Uzbekistan) that it dried up after about 50 years. In China textile waste polluted most of their drinking water sources or in Bangladesh where 1,200 people were killed in the Rana Plaza tragedy. There are various examples of the after-effects of fast fashion on LMICs, whereas in developed countries such as social and environmental disasters do not exist. Today, the sad part is that after several years of production and promised economic growth they are still developing. The big brand retailers have been promising a change in the value chain but

nothing has changed in the last two decades. They took advantage of cheap sourcing for all this while but today sustainability in the value chain has become a mandate and it is the right time to think about the future of their citizens.

The authors believe that the current COVID-19 pandemic is a nature's wake up call to these nations to slow down and take supreme advantage of this disruption. The LMICs have to set-up distinct policies for themselves and project them to the fast fashion brands. The mandates from international organizations and NGOs can no longer support the producing nations until they are not adamant about sustainable change.

"Detoxification of supply chains would happen quickly if both policy and the market moved in the same direction."- Lin Li, East Asia director of the ZHDC Foundation.

Cleaning and greening the fashion value chain should be considered imperative for the LMICs so that they can prevent social and environmental catastrophes. It is time that stakeholders take responsibility for the problems in the past rather than covering them up in the envelope of economic growth. Through this article, the authors have tried to trigger the thoughts of the producers and consumers of the value chain and look beyond profits. The authors do not deny the economic progress made in the last two decades but it is vital to see that what has it cost them. Lastly, this article opens ways for academia and industry to further delve into the value chain and achieve sustainable economic progress.

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**About the authors**

Karan Khurana- Dr. Karan Khurana is an educator in the field of fashion business and management with an experience of over a decade in India, Ethiopia, Belgium, Uzbekistan and USA. He did his Ph.D. in Management (consumer behavior regarding brand failures in India) and a master's in Fashion Marketing from Italy. Karan does research in sustainability in the textile and apparel value chain, business development strategies for SMEs and cultural governance, social entrepreneurship, teaching Methods, and educational management. He has a number of publications in SCI journals in business and management area and is also a reviewer for fashion and textile journals. Along with teaching he also contributes to the industry with training on design development and good practices in the fashion and textile sector. He has also mentored numerous masters and bachelor students around the world. Karan Khurana is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [khurana101karan@gmail.com](mailto:khurana101karan@gmail.com)

S.S. Muthu- Currently working for SGS HK as a Global Sustainability Consultant focusing on Life cycle assessment, Carbon footprint, Ecological footprint, Quantification of environmental impacts, Recycling related projects. Obtained PhD from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University for my dissertation entitled, "Eco-functional Assessment of Grocery Shopping Bags". Gained around 18 peer-reviewed journal publications to my credit from Phd study and afterwards.