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Research Article

Qualitative Exploration of Sourcing Narratives in International Fashion Business

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Abstract

This study presents a qualitative exploration of sourcing narratives in the international fashion business, focusing on how organisations construct and communicate their sourcing practices in response to evolving institutional, stakeholder, and market pressures. Using a secondary data analysis approach, the research examines corporate sustainability reports, industry publications, and academic literature to identify dominant themes and discursive patterns. Guided by institutional theory, stakeholder theory, and global value chain (GVC) analysis, the findings reveal that sourcing narratives are increasingly centred on sustainability, transparency, ethical labour practices, and technological innovation. These narratives function as strategic tools for legitimacy construction, stakeholder engagement, and brand differentiation. However, the analysis also identifies inconsistencies between narrative claims and operational realities, highlighting the persistence of symbolic communication and the risk of greenwashing. Structural constraints within global supply chains, including power asymmetries and limited traceability beyond first-tier suppliers, further complicate the alignment between rhetoric and practice. The study contributes to the literature by providing a nuanced understanding of sourcing narratives as both communicative and strategic instruments, offering insights for developing more credible and accountable sourcing practices in the global fashion industry.

Keywords: sourcing narratives; international fashion business; sustainability; global value chains; stakeholder theory; ethical sourcing; supply chain transparency.

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1. Introduction

The international fashion industry is one of the most dynamic and globalised sectors in the contemporary economy, characterised by rapid product cycles, geographically dispersed production systems, and intense competitive pressures. Over the past few decades, sourcing practices within this industry have undergone a significant transformation, evolving from cost-driven procurement strategies to more complex and multidimensional approaches that incorporate ethical, environmental, and social considerations. These transformations are largely a response to globalisation, technological advancement, and increasing scrutiny from stakeholders regarding sustainability and corporate responsibility (Gereffi, 2018; Niinimäki et al., 2020).

Sourcing in the fashion context refers to the processes through which firms identify, evaluate, and manage suppliers responsible for producing raw materials, textiles, and finished garments. Historically, sourcing decisions were primarily guided by cost minimisation and efficiency, leading many fashion brands to relocate production to developing countries where labour and operational costs are lower (Gereffi & Fernandez-Stark, 2016). While this global dispersion has enabled companies to remain competitive in price-sensitive markets, it has also introduced significant challenges related to supply chain complexity, labour exploitation, and environmental degradation.

The increasing visibility of these challenges has intensified pressure on fashion

companies to adopt more responsible sourcing practices. High-profile incidents, such as factory accidents and labour rights violations, have brought attention to the ethical implications of global sourcing and have prompted calls for greater accountability and transparency (Egels-Zandén & Lindholm, 2015). As a result, firms are now expected not only to ensure ethical compliance within their supply chains but also to communicate these efforts effectively to a broad range of stakeholders, including consumers, investors, regulators, and advocacy groups.

In this context, sourcing narratives has emerged as a critical component of corporate communication strategies. Sourcing narratives can be understood as the structured stories and discourses that organisations construct to explain, justify, and promote their sourcing practices. These narratives are typically disseminated through sustainability reports, corporate websites, marketing campaigns, and public disclosures. They serve multiple functions, including enhancing brand reputation, building consumer trust, and demonstrating alignment with ethical and sustainability standards (Moisander et al., 2016).

The growing importance of sourcing narratives reflects broader shifts in consumer behaviour and market expectations. Contemporary consumers are increasingly concerned about the origins of the products they purchase, as well as the social and environmental impacts of production processes. This has led to a demand for greater transparency and traceability within fashion supply chains (Niinimäki et al.,

2020). In response, companies are leveraging sourcing narratives to provide insights into their supply chain operations, highlight their commitments to sustainability, and differentiate themselves in a competitive marketplace.

However, the proliferation of sourcing narratives has also raised concerns regarding their authenticity and credibility. Scholars have highlighted the risk of “greenwashing,” whereby companies exaggerate or misrepresent their sustainability efforts to enhance their public image (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). This underscores the need for critical examination of sourcing narratives to assess whether they accurately reflect actual practices or merely serve as symbolic gestures aimed at satisfying stakeholder expectations.

Despite the increasing prominence of sourcing narratives in the fashion industry, there remains a significant gap in the academic literature regarding their qualitative analysis. Much of the existing research has focused on quantitative assessments of supply chain performance or case studies of specific brands, with limited attention to the discursive and communicative dimensions of sourcing practices. This gap is particularly important given that narratives play a central role in shaping stakeholder perceptions and influencing organisational legitimacy.

This study seeks to address this gap by conducting a qualitative exploration of sourcing narratives in the international fashion business. By analysing secondary data from a range of sources, including corporate reports, industry publications, and

academic literature, the research aims to uncover the key themes, patterns, and strategies that characterise sourcing narratives. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How are sourcing narratives constructed by international fashion brands?
- What key themes and discourses are embedded within these narratives?
- How do sourcing narratives reflect broader industry trends and stakeholder expectations?

To answer these questions, the study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in thematic analysis. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of textual data and provides insights into the meanings and interpretations embedded within sourcing narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to both academic and practical domains. From an academic perspective, the study advances understanding of the communicative aspects of sourcing practices and highlights the role of narratives in shaping organisational behaviour. From a practical standpoint, the findings offer valuable insights for industry practitioners seeking to develop more transparent, credible, and effective sourcing strategies.

In conclusion, as the fashion industry continues to navigate the challenges of globalisation, sustainability, and stakeholder scrutiny, sourcing narratives will play an increasingly important role in shaping corporate identity and market positioning. A deeper understanding of these narratives is

therefore essential for both scholars and practitioners aiming to promote more responsible and transparent sourcing practices.

2. Literature Review

The globalisation of the fashion industry has fundamentally transformed sourcing practices, enabling firms to establish complex networks of production across multiple countries. This shift has been driven by advancements in transportation, communication technologies, and trade liberalisation, which have reduced barriers to international business operations (Gereffi & Fernandez-Stark, 2016). As a result, fashion brands have increasingly outsourced production to developing countries to capitalise on lower labour costs and specialised manufacturing capabilities.

Global value chain (GVC) theory provides a useful framework for understanding the organisation and governance of these transnational production networks. According to Gereffi et al. (2005), GVCs are characterised by varying degrees of coordination and power asymmetry, with lead firms often exerting significant control over suppliers. In the fashion industry, this has resulted in a buyer-driven model, where brands dictate design, quality standards, and production timelines while relying on suppliers for manufacturing.

While globalisation has enabled cost efficiencies and market expansion, it has also introduced significant challenges related to supply chain governance. The geographical dispersion of production complicates

monitoring and enforcement of labour and environmental standards, increasing the risk of unethical practices (Turker & Altuntas, 2014). These challenges have necessitated the development of more robust sourcing strategies and governance mechanisms.

2.1 Ethical Sourcing and Corporate Social Responsibility

Ethical sourcing has emerged as a central concern in the fashion industry, reflecting growing awareness of the social and environmental impacts of production. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives have become a key mechanism through which companies address these concerns, encompassing practices such as fair labour standards, environmental sustainability, and community engagement (Joy et al., 2012).

Research indicates that CSR practices in fashion sourcing are often driven by external pressures from stakeholders, including consumers, NGOs, and regulatory bodies. For example, Egels-Zandén and Lindholm (2015) found that codes of conduct and auditing systems are commonly used to enforce labour standards within supply chains. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms has been questioned, as they may not fully address underlying structural issues such as power imbalances and economic dependency.

Sustainable sourcing extends beyond ethical labour practices to include environmental considerations, such as resource efficiency, waste reduction, and the use of sustainable materials. Niinimäki et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of transitioning from linear

production models to circular systems that promote reuse, recycling, and reduced consumption. This shift requires significant changes in sourcing strategies and supply chain management.

2.2 Transparency, Traceability, and Digital Innovation

Transparency and traceability have become critical components of modern sourcing practices, driven by increasing demand for accountability and information disclosure. Transparency refers to the extent to which companies disclose information about their supply chain operations, while traceability involves the ability to track products through different stages of production (Gardetti & Torres, 2017).

Technological advancements have played a significant role in enhancing transparency and traceability. Digital tools such as blockchain, radio-frequency identification (RFID), and data analytics enable companies to monitor supply chain activities in real time and provide verifiable information to stakeholders (Kouhizadeh et al., 2021). These technologies also support the development of more credible sourcing narratives by providing evidence of compliance with ethical and sustainability standards.

Despite these advancements, challenges remain in achieving full transparency and traceability. Supply chains are often highly complex, involving multiple tiers of suppliers, which makes it difficult to obtain accurate and comprehensive data. Additionally, there may be resistance from

suppliers due to concerns about confidentiality and competitive advantage.

2.3 Corporate Narratives and Legitimacy

Corporate narratives are an essential tool for organisations seeking to communicate their values, strategies, and practices to stakeholders. In the context of sourcing, narratives are used to construct a coherent and compelling account of a company's supply chain activities. These narratives often emphasise themes such as sustainability, innovation, and collaboration (Moisander et al., 2016).

Institutional theory suggests that organisations use narratives to gain legitimacy by aligning their actions with socially accepted norms and expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Sourcing narratives can thus be seen as a form of institutional work, whereby companies seek to establish credibility and trust among stakeholders.

However, the use of narratives also raises concerns about authenticity and transparency. Delmas and Burbano (2011) highlight the phenomenon of greenwashing, where companies selectively disclose information or exaggerate their sustainability efforts. This underscores the importance of critically analysing sourcing narratives to assess their alignment with actual practices.

2.4 Stakeholder Engagement and Consumer Perceptions

Stakeholder theory provides a framework for understanding the role of various actors in shaping sourcing practices and narratives.

According to Freeman (1984), organisations must consider the interests and expectations of multiple stakeholders to achieve long-term success. In the fashion industry, key stakeholders include consumers, suppliers, investors, NGOs, and regulatory bodies.

Consumers, in particular, play a significant role in driving demand for ethical and sustainable products. Research suggests that consumers are increasingly willing to support brands that demonstrate transparency and responsibility in their sourcing practices (Joy et al., 2012). This has prompted companies to incorporate sourcing narratives into their marketing and branding strategies.

At the same time, there is evidence of a gap between consumer attitudes and actual purchasing behaviour, often referred to as the “attitude-behaviour gap.” While consumers may express concern about sustainability, they may still prioritise factors such as price and convenience when making purchasing decisions. This presents a challenge for companies seeking to balance ethical considerations with commercial objectives.

2.5 Research Gap and Contribution

Despite the growing body of literature on fashion sourcing and sustainability, there remains a lack of research focusing on the qualitative analysis of sourcing narratives. Most studies have concentrated on quantitative metrics or specific case studies, with limited attention to the discursive and interpretive aspects of sourcing communication.

This study addresses this gap by adopting a qualitative approach to explore how sourcing narratives are constructed and what they

reveal about industry practices. By integrating insights from institutional theory, stakeholder theory, and GVC analysis, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping sourcing narratives in the international fashion business.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a multi-theoretical framework to examine sourcing narratives in the international fashion business, integrating institutional theory, stakeholder theory, and global value chain (GVC) analysis. These perspectives provide complementary lenses for understanding how sourcing narratives are constructed, communicated, and interpreted within the broader socio-economic and organisational context. The integration of these theories enables a comprehensive analysis of both the structural and discursive dimensions of sourcing practices.

3.1 Institutional Theory and Organisational Legitimacy

Institutional theory offers a foundational lens for understanding how organisations respond to external pressures by adopting practices and narratives that conform to socially accepted norms and expectations. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), organisations operate within institutional environments characterised by coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures, which drive homogeneity in organisational behaviour. In the context of the fashion industry, these pressures arise from regulatory frameworks, industry standards,

and societal expectations regarding ethical and sustainable sourcing.

Sourcing narratives can be conceptualised as a form of institutional work, whereby organisations actively construct and disseminate discourses that align with prevailing norms. For instance, the increasing emphasis on sustainability and ethical labour practices in sourcing narratives reflects the institutionalisation of these values within the industry (Moisander et al., 2016). By articulating commitments to responsible sourcing, companies seek to gain legitimacy and enhance their reputational standing among stakeholders.

Moreover, institutional theory highlights the symbolic dimension of organisational practices. In many cases, firms may adopt formal structures and narratives that signal compliance with institutional expectations without necessarily implementing substantive changes in practice. This phenomenon, often referred to as “decoupling,” is particularly relevant in the context of sourcing narratives, where the risk of misalignment between rhetoric and reality is significant (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). As such, institutional theory provides a critical lens for analysing the authenticity and credibility of sourcing narratives.

3.2 Stakeholder Theory and Value Alignment

Stakeholder theory complements institutional theory by emphasising the role of various stakeholders in shaping organisational behaviour and communication. Freeman (1984) defines stakeholders as any group or individual that

can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organisation’s objectives. In the fashion industry, key stakeholders include consumers, suppliers, employees, investors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and regulatory bodies.

Sourcing narratives are often strategically crafted to address the expectations and concerns of these stakeholders. For example, consumers increasingly demand transparency regarding product origins and production conditions, prompting companies to highlight traceability and ethical sourcing in their narratives (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Similarly, investors may prioritise environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance, influencing firms to emphasise sustainability metrics and responsible sourcing practices.

Stakeholder theory also underscores the importance of dialogue and engagement in building trust and legitimacy. Effective sourcing narratives are not merely one-way communications but are part of a broader process of stakeholder engagement, involving feedback, collaboration, and co-creation of value (Turker & Altuntas, 2014). For instance, partnerships with NGOs and suppliers are often highlighted in sourcing narratives as evidence of collaborative efforts to improve supply chain conditions.

However, stakeholder theory also reveals potential tensions and trade-offs. Different stakeholders may have conflicting interests, requiring companies to balance competing demands. For example, while consumers may demand low prices, NGOs may advocate for higher wages and improved labour conditions, which can increase production

costs. Sourcing narratives thus play a crucial role in mediating these tensions by framing organisational decisions in a way that aligns with stakeholder expectations.

3.3 Global Value Chain (GVC) Analysis and Power Dynamics

Global value chain (GVC) analysis provides a structural perspective on the organisation and governance of international production networks. According to Gereffi et al. (2005), GVCs are characterised by varying governance structures, ranging from market-based relationships to hierarchical control. In the fashion industry, GVCs are typically buyer-driven, with lead firms exerting significant influence over suppliers in terms of design, quality, and production standards.

This power asymmetry has important implications for sourcing practices and narratives. Lead firms often set the terms of engagement with suppliers, including compliance with ethical and environmental standards. As a result, sourcing narratives frequently emphasise the role of brands in driving positive change within supply chains, highlighting initiatives such as supplier training, auditing, and capacity building (Gereffi, 2018).

At the same time, GVC analysis reveals the limitations of such narratives. While lead firms may promote responsible sourcing, the fragmented and multi-tiered nature of supply chains can make it difficult to ensure consistent compliance across all levels. This complexity is often underrepresented in sourcing narratives, which tend to present a simplified and coherent picture of supply chain governance.

Furthermore, GVC analysis highlights the economic and social dependencies that shape supplier relationships. Suppliers in developing countries may have limited bargaining power and may prioritise cost competitiveness over compliance with ethical standards. This creates a structural tension between the demands of global brands and the realities of local production contexts.

3.4 Integrative Perspective

The integration of institutional theory, stakeholder theory, and GVC analysis provides a robust framework for analysing sourcing narratives. Institutional theory explains the normative pressures that drive the adoption of certain narratives, stakeholder theory highlights the role of the audience and engagement, and GVC analysis situates these narratives within the structural realities of global production networks.

Together, these perspectives enable a nuanced understanding of sourcing narratives as both communicative and strategic instruments. They reveal how narratives are used to construct legitimacy, manage stakeholder relationships, and navigate the complexities of global sourcing. At the same time, they provide a critical lens for examining the gaps and inconsistencies that may exist between narrative and practice.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on secondary data analysis, aiming to explore the construction and implications of sourcing narratives in the international fashion business. Qualitative

research is particularly well-suited for examining complex, context-dependent phenomena that involve interpretation and meaning-making (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given that sourcing narratives are embedded in textual and discursive materials, a qualitative approach allows for an in-depth analysis of their content and underlying themes.

Secondary data analysis involves the use of existing data sources to address research questions. This approach is appropriate for the present study, as sourcing narratives is publicly available in various forms, including corporate reports, industry publications, and academic literature. By leveraging these sources, the study is able to capture a broad and diverse range of perspectives without the constraints associated with primary data collection.

4.1 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The study draws on multiple types of secondary data to ensure a comprehensive analysis. These include:

- Corporate sustainability reports and annual reports from international fashion brands
- Official company websites and press releases
- Industry reports and white papers from organisations such as consulting firms and trade associations
- Academic journal articles and books related to fashion sourcing and sustainability

- Reports from NGOs and advocacy groups focusing on labour rights and environmental issues

The selection of data sources was guided by purposive sampling, a technique commonly used in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). The criteria for inclusion were as follows:

- Relevance to sourcing practices in the fashion industry
- Availability of detailed narrative content related to sourcing
- Representation of internationally recognised brands or organisations
- Publication within the last 10-15 years to ensure contemporary relevance

This approach ensures that the data set captures a wide range of sourcing narratives across different organisational contexts and geographical regions.

4.2 Data Collection Process

Data collection involved a systematic review of publicly available documents and publications. Corporate reports were accessed through company websites, while academic articles were obtained from scholarly databases. Industry and NGO reports were sourced from official organisational websites.

All selected documents were compiled into a digital database for analysis. Relevant sections of text related to sourcing practices, sustainability initiatives, and supply chain management were extracted and organised for coding. This process ensured that the

analysis focused specifically on the content of sourcing narratives.

4.3 Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

The study employs thematic analysis as the primary method of data analysis. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is particularly suitable for exploring narratives, as it allows for the systematic examination of recurring themes and discourses.

The analysis followed the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

- **Familiarisation with the data:** The researcher engaged in repeated reading of the collected texts to gain an overall understanding of the content.
- **Generating initial codes:** Relevant segments of text were coded based on their meaning and relevance to the research questions.
- **Searching for themes:** Codes were grouped into broader themes that captured key patterns in the data.
- **Reviewing themes:** Themes were refined and validated to ensure coherence and consistency.
- **Defining and naming themes:** Each theme was clearly defined and labelled to reflect its core meaning.
- **Producing the report:** The findings were interpreted and presented in relation to the theoretical framework and research questions.

This systematic approach enhances the rigour and transparency of the analysis.

4.4 Ensuring Research Rigour

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed:

- **Triangulation:** The use of multiple data sources helps to validate findings and reduce bias.
- **Transparency:** The research process, including data selection and analysis procedures, is clearly documented.
- **Reflexivity:** The researcher remains aware of potential biases and actively reflects on their influence on the analysis.
- **Thick description:** Detailed descriptions of themes and findings provide a rich and nuanced understanding of sourcing narratives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

These measures contribute to the overall validity and reliability of the research.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

As the study relies on publicly available secondary data, it does not involve direct interaction with human participants and therefore poses minimal ethical risk. However, ethical considerations were still taken into account, including (Mannan & Farhana, 2026):

- Proper citation and acknowledgement of all sources
- Accurate representation of data without misinterpretation

- Avoidance of selective reporting or bias

These practices ensure adherence to academic integrity and ethical research standards.

4.6 Limitations of the Methodology

While secondary data analysis offers several advantages, it also has limitations. One key limitation is the reliance on publicly available information, which may be subject to bias or selective disclosure. Corporate reports, in particular, may present an idealised view of sourcing practices, emphasising positive aspects while omitting challenges.

Additionally, the absence of primary data means that the study cannot capture the perspectives of internal stakeholders or verify the accuracy of reported practices. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating interviews or field studies.

5. Findings and Analysis

The thematic analysis of secondary data revealed that sourcing narratives in the international fashion business are structured around a set of recurring and interrelated themes. These themes reflect both the evolving priorities of the industry and the strategic intentions of firms in communicating their sourcing practices. The findings highlight five dominant themes: (1) sustainability and environmental responsibility, (2) transparency and traceability, (3) ethical labour practices, (4) technological integration and innovation, and (5) strategic branding and legitimacy construction. Each of these themes is

analysed below in relation to the theoretical framework and research questions.

5.1 Sustainability and Environmental Responsibility

One of the most prominent themes in sourcing narratives is the emphasis on sustainability and environmental responsibility. Across corporate reports and industry publications, fashion companies consistently highlight their commitment to reducing environmental impact through responsible sourcing practices. These narratives often include references to the use of organic or recycled materials, reduction of carbon emissions, water conservation, and waste minimisation.

This emphasis reflects the growing institutionalisation of sustainability within the fashion industry, as described by institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Companies are increasingly adopting sustainability-oriented narratives to align with societal expectations and regulatory requirements. For example, many brands articulate commitments to circular fashion models, which aim to extend product life cycles and reduce waste through recycling and reuse (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

However, the analysis also reveals variations in the depth and specificity of sustainability narratives. While some companies provide detailed metrics and measurable targets, others rely on broad and generalised statements. This variation suggests differing levels of commitment and transparency, raising questions about the authenticity of certain claims. In some cases, sustainability narratives appear to function more as

symbolic gestures than as indicators of substantive change, aligning with the concept of decoupling identified in institutional theory (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Furthermore, sustainability narratives often prioritise environmental aspects over social dimensions, indicating a potential imbalance in how responsibility is communicated. This selective emphasis may reflect strategic considerations, as environmental initiatives are often more visible and easier to quantify than complex social issues such as labour rights.

5.2 Transparency and Traceability

Transparency and traceability emerge as central pillars of sourcing narratives, reflecting increasing stakeholder demand for accountability and information disclosure. Companies frequently highlight efforts to map their supply chains, disclose supplier information, and implement traceability systems that enable tracking of products from raw materials to finished goods (Gardetti & Torres, 2017).

The adoption of transparency narratives is closely linked to stakeholder theory, as firms seek to address the expectations of consumers, investors, and advocacy groups (Freeman, 1984). By providing detailed information about sourcing practices, companies aim to build trust and demonstrate accountability. For example, some brands publish supplier lists and audit results, signalling a commitment to openness.

Despite these efforts, the findings indicate that transparency is often partial and uneven. While first-tier suppliers are commonly disclosed, information about deeper tiers of

the supply chain remains limited. This gap reflects the structural complexity of global value chains, where multiple layers of subcontracting make comprehensive transparency difficult to achieve (Gereffi et al., 2005).

Moreover, the analysis reveals that transparency narratives are sometimes framed in ways that emphasise progress rather than shortcomings. Companies tend to highlight improvements and initiatives while downplaying challenges, creating a potentially biased representation of their sourcing practices. This selective disclosure aligns with the strategic use of narratives to manage stakeholder perceptions and mitigate reputational risks.

5.3 Ethical Labour Practices

Ethical labour practices constitute another key theme in sourcing narratives, with companies emphasising their commitment to fair wages, safe working conditions, and compliance with international labour standards. These narratives often reference codes of conduct, supplier audits, and partnerships with NGOs as mechanisms for ensuring ethical compliance (Egels-Zandén & Lindholm, 2015).

The prominence of labour-related narratives reflects the historical context of the fashion industry, where labour exploitation and unsafe working conditions have been widely documented. As a result, companies face significant pressure to demonstrate responsibility in this area. Sourcing narratives thus serve as a means of addressing these concerns and reinforcing organisational legitimacy.

However, the findings suggest that the effectiveness of these measures is often limited by structural constraints within global value chains. Suppliers in developing countries may face economic pressures that make it difficult to comply with labour standards, particularly when brands prioritise cost and speed. This tension highlights the limitations of voluntary compliance mechanisms and raises questions about the extent to which companies can enforce ethical practices across their supply chains (Turker & Altuntas, 2014).

Additionally, ethical labour narratives frequently emphasise monitoring and auditing rather than empowerment and long-term development. While audits can identify violations, they may not address underlying issues such as low wages and a lack of worker representation. This focus on compliance rather than transformation suggests a reactive rather than proactive approach to labour issues.

5.4 Technological Integration and Innovation

The integration of technology into sourcing practices is increasingly featured in corporate narratives, reflecting the growing importance of digital innovation in supply chain management. Companies highlight the use of technologies such as blockchain, data analytics, and digital platforms to enhance traceability, efficiency, and transparency (Kouhizadeh et al., 2021).

Technological narratives serve multiple functions. First, they signal innovation and forward-thinking, enhancing the company's image as a leader in sustainable and

responsible sourcing. Second, they provide evidence to support claims of transparency and accountability, as digital tools enable more accurate and verifiable data collection.

However, the analysis indicates that technological adoption is uneven across the industry, with larger companies more likely to invest in advanced systems. Smaller firms may lack the resources to implement such technologies, creating disparities in sourcing capabilities. Furthermore, the effectiveness of technology depends on the quality and reliability of input data, which can be compromised by inconsistencies in reporting and limited access to information from lower-tier suppliers.

5.5 Strategic Branding and Legitimacy Construction

Sourcing narratives are not merely descriptive but are strategically crafted to enhance brand identity and competitive positioning. Companies use these narratives to differentiate themselves in a crowded marketplace, emphasising unique aspects of their sourcing practices such as sustainability leadership, ethical commitment, or technological innovation.

From an institutional perspective, these narratives function as tools for legitimacy construction, enabling organisations to align with societal expectations and gain stakeholder approval (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). At the same time, stakeholder theory highlights the role of narratives in building relationships and trust with key audiences.

The findings suggest that sourcing narratives is increasingly integrated into broader branding and marketing strategies. For

example, sustainability and ethical sourcing are often positioned as core brand values, influencing product design, marketing campaigns, and consumer engagement. This integration reflects a shift from peripheral CSR activities to central strategic priorities.

However, the strategic use of narratives also raises concerns about authenticity. When narratives are primarily driven by branding considerations, there is a risk that they may prioritise image over substance. This underscores the importance of critically evaluating sourcing narratives to assess their alignment with actual practices.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the construction and implications of sourcing narratives in the international fashion business. By integrating institutional theory, stakeholder theory, and global value chain (GVC) analysis, the discussion offers a deeper interpretation of how these narratives function within the broader socio-economic and organisational context.

6.1 Sourcing Narratives as Instruments of Institutional Conformity

The analysis demonstrates that sourcing narratives are strongly influenced by institutional pressures, reflecting the growing importance of sustainability, transparency, and ethical responsibility within the fashion industry. Companies adopt and disseminate narratives that align with these norms to gain legitimacy and maintain their social license to operate (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

This process of institutional conformity is evident in the convergence of sourcing narratives across different companies. Despite variations in size, market position, and geographic focus, many firms emphasise similar themes and language, such as “sustainable sourcing,” “ethical supply chains,” and “transparency.” This homogeneity suggests the presence of normative and mimetic pressures, where organisations imitate industry leaders and adhere to established standards.

However, the findings also highlight the phenomenon of decoupling, where formal narratives may not fully reflect actual practices. While companies articulate ambitious commitments, the implementation of these commitments may be constrained by economic and operational factors. This gap between rhetoric and reality underscores the symbolic dimension of sourcing narratives and raises questions about their credibility (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

6.2 Stakeholder Engagement and Narrative Construction

Stakeholder theory provides valuable insights into the role of sourcing narratives as tools for engagement and communication. The findings indicate that narratives are carefully crafted to address the expectations of different stakeholder groups, including consumers, investors, NGOs, and regulators (Freeman, 1984).

For consumers, sourcing narratives emphasise transparency, sustainability, and ethical practices, aligning with growing demand for responsible consumption. For investors, narratives highlight ESG

performance and risk management, reflecting the increasing importance of sustainability in investment decisions. For NGOs and regulators, narratives focus on compliance and collaboration, demonstrating a commitment to addressing social and environmental issues.

This multi-stakeholder orientation requires companies to balance competing demands and priorities. Sourcing narratives thus function as a means of negotiating these tensions, framing organisational decisions in ways that resonate with diverse audiences. However, this also creates the potential for selective disclosure and strategic framing, as companies may emphasise certain aspects of their practices while downplaying others.

6.3 Structural Constraints and GVC Realities

While sourcing narratives often present a coherent and positive picture of supply chain practices, GVC analysis reveals the underlying structural complexities and constraints that shape these practices. The fragmented and multi-tiered nature of global supply chains makes it difficult to achieve full transparency and enforce consistent standards across all levels (Gereffi et al., 2005).

Power asymmetries between lead firms and suppliers further complicate the implementation of responsible sourcing practices. While brands may set standards and requirements, suppliers may face economic pressures that limit their ability to comply. This creates a tension between the expectations articulated in sourcing

narratives and the realities of production on the ground.

The findings suggest that sourcing narratives often underrepresent these structural challenges, focusing instead on initiatives and achievements. While this may be effective for communication purposes, it risks oversimplifying the complexities of global sourcing and obscuring the systemic issues that need to be addressed.

6.4 The Role of Technology in Bridging Narrative and Practice

The increasing emphasis on technological innovation in sourcing narratives reflects the potential of digital tools to enhance transparency and accountability. Technologies such as blockchain and data analytics offer new possibilities for tracking and verifying supply chain activities, thereby strengthening the credibility of sourcing narratives (Kouhizadeh et al., 2021).

However, the discussion highlights that technology is not a panacea. Its effectiveness depends on factors such as data quality, stakeholder collaboration, and organisational commitment. Moreover, the adoption of technology may be uneven, creating disparities between companies and regions.

Nevertheless, technology represents a promising avenue for bridging the gap between narrative and practice. By providing verifiable evidence of sourcing activities, digital tools can enhance trust and reduce the risk of greenwashing.

6.5 Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings of this study have several implications for both theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, the research contributes to the literature by integrating multiple frameworks to analyse sourcing narratives. It highlights the importance of considering both discursive and structural dimensions in understanding organisational behaviour.

From a practical perspective, the study underscores the need for greater alignment between sourcing narratives and actual practices. Companies should strive to provide accurate, comprehensive, and balanced accounts of their sourcing activities, including both achievements and challenges. This requires a commitment to transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement.

Additionally, the findings suggest that collaboration across the value chain is essential for addressing systemic issues. Brands, suppliers, NGOs, and policymakers must work together to create more sustainable and equitable sourcing practices.

6.6 Future Research Directions

The study opens several avenues for future research. First, there is a need for empirical studies that examine the relationship between sourcing narratives and consumer behaviour. Second, research could explore the role of emerging technologies in enhancing supply chain transparency. Third, comparative studies across different regions and market segments could provide further insights into the diversity of sourcing narratives.

7. Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive qualitative exploration of sourcing narratives in the international fashion business, emphasising the ways in which organisations construct and communicate their sourcing practices within a complex and evolving global context. By integrating institutional theory, stakeholder theory, and global value chain (GVC) analysis, the research has demonstrated that sourcing narratives are not merely descriptive accounts of supply chain activities but are strategically crafted instruments that serve multiple organisational purposes.

The findings indicate that sourcing narratives are increasingly shaped by the growing importance of sustainability, transparency, and ethical responsibility. Fashion companies are under significant pressure from stakeholders, including consumers, investors, and regulatory bodies, to demonstrate accountability and responsible sourcing practices. In response, organisations have developed narratives that highlight their commitments to environmental sustainability, ethical labour standards, and technological innovation. These narratives contribute to the construction of organisational legitimacy and play a critical role in shaping brand identity and market positioning.

However, the study also reveals important challenges and limitations. A key issue is the gap between narrative and practice, where companies may articulate ambitious commitments that are not fully realised in their operations. This discrepancy is often influenced by structural constraints within

global supply chains, such as power imbalances, economic pressures, and the complexity of multi-tiered sourcing networks. As a result, sourcing narratives may sometimes function as symbolic representations rather than accurate reflections of actual practices.

The research underscores the need for greater alignment between communication and implementation. Companies must move beyond superficial narratives and adopt more transparent, evidence-based approaches to sourcing communication. This includes providing comprehensive disclosures, acknowledging challenges, and demonstrating measurable progress. Additionally, collaboration among stakeholders across the value chain is essential for addressing systemic issues and promoting more sustainable and equitable sourcing practices.

In conclusion, sourcing narratives will continue to play a central role in the international fashion industry as it navigates the demands of globalisation and sustainability. Future research should further investigate the impact of these narratives on stakeholder perceptions and explore innovative mechanisms, including digital technologies, to enhance transparency and accountability in global supply chains.

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