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The Sustainability Rhetoric among the Spanish Fashion Companies  
Involved in the Rana Plaza Collapse of 2013

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By Keegan D. Lyle

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completion  
Of the Bachelor of Arts degree in International Studies  
Croft Institute for International Studies  
Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College  
The University of Mississippi

University, Mississippi  
May 2022

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## ABSTRACT

Over the last century, fashion has evolved to become a commodity that is rapidly changing and easily available. The processes that have led to this accessibility of fashion, however, have proven to be harmful to the environment and, most recently, proven to be potentially fatal for the people making the clothing. In 2013, a garment factory in Bangladesh, housing production for major global fashion brands, like Zara and The Children's Place, collapsed following a series of negligence. The event has sparked years of awareness-raising in the public dialogue of fast fashion. As a part of the newly-developing research in sustainable fashion, the goal of this thesis is to see how fashion companies communicate their sustainability. More specifically, how do the Spanish companies involved in the Rana Plaza collapse communicate their social and environmental sustainability? Through the use of qualitative discourse analysis, I have taken every public document regarding practices and policies for each company and noted where and how they discuss their social and environmental effects. From my research, I find that across the board for each company, environmental sustainability is discussed much more frequently and specifically than social sustainability. Additionally, I find that companies tend to place the responsibility for the safety of factory workers on the manufacturers and suppliers, avoiding responsibility themselves. As a result, I urge that companies be more transparent about the practices they are and are not exercising, so as to prevent further tragedies within the fashion industry.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A special thanks to Patrick Woodyard and Matt Stockamp at Nisolo, as well as Barrett Ward at ABLE, who all helped guide me to resources on sustainability at the beginning of this process. Thank you for the impacts you are making on the fashion industry and for taking the time to help guide me through this topic.

Thank you to those of my friends and family who listened to me rant about the issues of the fashion industry as I worked through this thesis. I am sorry I put you through that... It's over now.

Finally, I would like to thank the Croft Institute for mandating this thesis. I did not want to do it, but now that it is done, I am glad I did.

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis project is dedicated to garment workers across the world whose lives are continually put at risk for the sake of producing cheap, trendy clothing.

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## INTRODUCTION

Before the 19th century, the production of apparel was a taxing process. Due to the laborious sourcing and preparation of materials and extensive time needed to construct the product, clothing was viewed as more of a basic necessity, rather than a means of expression. At the start of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century, however, this process began to change. Suddenly, due to new technologies, the production of textiles became significantly faster and easier. Rather than just buying for necessity, people began to buy for style.

In the 1980s, Quick Response Manufacturing was created, significantly reducing the amount of time needed for the entire production process. This strategy had a significant influence on the growth of the fast fashion industry. According to the fashion sustainability rating group Good On You, a current global leader in the push for sustainable fashion, “fast fashion can be defined as cheap, trendy clothing that samples ideas from the catwalk or celebrity culture and turns them into garments in high street stores at breakneck speed to meet consumer demand” (Rauturier). The key of fast fashion is to get garments from design to store in minimal time, which is the model most apparel companies follow in today’s growing market. To give perspective, the global apparel market is worth over 1.5 trillion dollars and is projected to grow to 2.25 trillion by 2025 (Smith 2022).

While fashion does have benefits in terms of artistic creation and expression, its existence does not come without a cost. Fashion is the second-largest polluting industry in the world (Thacker). Ten percent of greenhouse gas emitted comes from the fashion industry, nearly double the amount of air and sea transport (Mulhern). Every year, nearly 2790





billion cubic feet of water are used in fashion production. Of the water used in production, the majority becomes polluted due to processes like garment dyeing. This polluted water constitutes nearly twenty percent of all global wastewater (“How Much Do Our Wardrobes Cost”). Even aside from the actions of the manufacturers, consumers are polluters as well. According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, “The main source of textiles in municipal solid waste is discarded clothing” (“Textiles”). It is projected that eighty-five percent of clothing ends up in landfills (Portela). Goodwill Industries is even known to be a contributor to this pileup, making it even harder for consumers to know how to help with the issue.

While the environmental issues surrounding the garment industry are profound, they are not recent discoveries. In the 1990s, substantial progress was made towards the promotion of environmentally sustainable development. The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, for example, offered new ideas for the way we should be producing and consuming, focusing on “sustainable development”, which was a newly founded concept at the time. In the decades following, progress has been made to achieve more environmentally sustainable production methods in the fashion industry; and, while the environmental issues surrounding the fashion industry are still of major concern, events in recent years have begun to highlight the social effects that fashion production can have.

### Rana Plaza

In the afternoon of April 24, 2013, chaos erupted in the Dhaka district of Bangladesh. One of Dhaka’s many factory buildings, Rana Plaza, which housed garment production for major brands like Walmart and the Children’s Place, had given in on itself, with thousands of workers inside. The collapse physically harmed over 2500 people.

Just one day prior, on April 23rd, workers in the building complained to management, reporting multiple large cracks within the walls. Many of those involved in the planning of Rana Plaza, including its architect, claimed that the building was not built to suit the large factory production. Despite the state of the factory, twenty-nine large global brands were identified as producing in the building in April 2013. On April 23rd, the building was evacuated, yet deemed safe to return to the next day.

At 2:45 the next afternoon, the cracks proved to be deadly as the building collapsed and over 1,000 of its workers were killed. Today, it still remains the deadliest event in the history of the garment industry. As a result of the collapse, fashion consumers across the world became informed on the reality of how their clothes were being produced, and the push for more environmentally and socially sustainable clothing was heightened.

#### The industry post-collapse

While sustainable clothing existed well before 2013, the public data on sustainable fashion prior to 2013 is scarce. Because of the lack of adequate data, the past decade has been one of sustainability research and development. While environmental sustainability has been researched for a while, research in social sustainability is still developing. Therefore, the goal of my thesis is to contribute to this lack of research, specifically by looking at how fashion companies communicated their social impacts following the Rana Plaza collapse.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Although it is frequently discussed, little research exists on sustainability in the fashion industry. In fact, little is even known about what research needs to be done. As of now, “the question of ‘what do we know about sustainable fashion and in management research and where do we go from here?’ remains unanswered” (Mukendi et al.). Nevertheless, companies have taken notice of the increased awareness of sustainable fashion and acted accordingly. “Due to the economic, social and environmental problems in developing countries, companies increasingly focus on sustainability and try to ensure the same quality and standards in working and production conditions throughout their supply chains” (Turker). Across the last decade, the market has grown for ethical fashion production. Many global companies have even taken initiatives to develop more sustainable clothing collections (Haug and Busch). Fashion companies have even created specific lines, like GAP’s “Generation Good”, utilizing more sustainable practices and resources. While these lines have made some strides in the fast fashion industry, their execution is erring less on the side of sustainability and more on that of greenwashing.

Greenwashing, a term originally coined by Jay Westerveld in 1986, is known as “A deception tactic—whether intentional or accidental—employed by companies that can cause customers to believe its products, services, or mission are more environmentally impactful than is true” (Yonkers). Companies employ the appropriate words – sustainable, ecological, recycled, environmental, green, ethical, inclusive, and organic – without explaining what those words mean or how they are exercised in production (Thomas). Most of the time, the color green is used in campaigns to help further this sustainable image (Hill). As the discourse surrounding

social sustainability is furthered, however, greenwashing has been expanded to include social matters as well, which is better known as socialwashing.

Socialwashing is described as “when brands of companies provide misleading information about their social consciousness, for example, human rights, labour rights, labour working conditions and more” (Valecha) . Socialwashing is, essentially, the social version of greenwashing. Socialwashing can appear in a variety of ways, typically through diversity, body positivity, and gender equality campaigns.

In light of greenwashing and socialwashing, focus has shifted to the fashion supply chain. As Turker et al. state, “what these companies are actually doing to manage their supply chain has not yet been explored in depth in the literature” (Turker et al.). Following the collapse of Rana Plaza, additional demand has been made for increased transparency in how companies are treating their employees across the supply chain. The elements of transparency range from wages, to health and safety, to child labor. One key way apparel companies communicate these social impacts is through Codes of Conduct and Corporate Social Responsibility reports.

Codes of Conduct and Corporate Social Responsibility documents discuss a plethora of issues concerning sustainability and ethical practices. Their purpose is to protect all stakeholders of a company. Brewer argues that “corporate social responsibility and sustainability initiatives may help to combat inequality in the fashion industry as well as improve standards and conduct” (Brewer). In her recently successful novel, *Unraveled: The Life and Death of a Garment*, however, Maxine Bédard argues that “codes of conduct are there *not* to create or protect rights for workers, but to avoid responsibility for unsavory factory outcomes” (Bédard). This supports the common argument that “despite innovative company attempts to address sustainability, the fashion industry continues to have a negative impact on both people and planet” (Pedersen et

al.). While there has been a recent push for company transparency within the fashion industry, even among fast fashion companies, many suspect that this transparency has been fabricated, simply “[paying] lip service to sustainability and ethics” (Bédard). Some even argue that we have a weak understanding of how sustainable business models are operationalized and executed (Stubbs and Cocklin). This all goes to say – we know little about the fashion industry’s true practices.

Haug & Busch argue that “most existing understandings of fashion ethics focus on the environmental harm caused and the wellbeing of those involved in producing the fashion objects... such understandings of the problems and solutions ignore relevant aspects” (Haug and Busch). This supports the idea that fashion ethics are under-researched, even outside of environmental harm and worker wellbeing.

In Spain specifically, consumers consider sustainability as a topic relating to both environmental and social matters, not just environmental (Blazquez). While Spanish consumers consider company trust an important factor in their buying practices, sustainability is not a core determinant of Spanish consumers’ decision to buy a product (Escobar-Rodríguez and Bonsón-Fernández). Research has shown, however, that “Spaniards show a higher behavioral intention for ethical fashion compared to environmentally friendly fashion” (Blazquez). All in all, I found little research on the fashion industry in Spain, especially in terms of sustainable fashion.

The theories and research available, although limited, suggest that while fashion companies are utilizing more strategies to communicate social and environmental sustainability, little is known about how or if these sustainable practices are executed. In the existing literature, environmental and social sustainability are often clumped together, and sometimes social

sustainability is never mentioned at all. Therefore, in this thesis, I study how Spanish companies differ in their environmental and social sustainability. Due to research limitations, I look specifically at how companies differ in their environmental sustainability versus social sustainability rhetoric.

## METHODS

Through the use of qualitative discourse analysis, I examine the environmental and social sustainability rhetoric among three major Spanish fashion retailers: Inditex, El Corte Inglés, and Mango. Discourse analysis is known as the analysis of spoken or written texts that contain more than one sentence, including their social context. By using this method in qualitative research, I am able to compare phrases concerning sustainability used by each of the three companies. From there, I compare how rhetoric differs between environmental and social sustainability. I also compare how the three companies differ in their results.

### Case Selection

The first criteria for selecting the companies considered in this thesis was involvement with the Rana Plaza collapse. At the time of its collapse, there were thirty-one fashion companies linked to Rana Plaza. From the thirty-one companies involved, I have chosen to single out the Spanish companies: Inditex, El Corte Inglés, and Mango.

I have selected the Spanish companies due to the unique nature of fashion in Spain. While Spain is not one of the leading countries in fashion exports or revenue, it does house the biggest fashion retail company in the world in terms of revenue – Inditex (Smith 2021b). In comparison to the other countries represented in the collapse, Spain is one of the only countries with a company that is not solely a fashion company (El Corte Inglés is a department store). This variation was appealing as it would help give a broader scope of sustainability rhetoric across more than one type of company producing fashion. It has been found that trust and perceived value of a company are two key factors affecting Spanish e-commerce consumption. Given the common use of greenwashing and socialwashing in the fashion industry, I decided Spanish

companies would be valuable and interesting to research given the Spanish consumer value of company trust and ethical sustainability, which I shared in the literature review.

An additional practical reason for selecting the Spanish companies was its accessibility. Selecting a foreign country gave me a more global perspective, and choosing a Spanish-speaking country allowed me to understand words or phrases written in the original language when no English translation was provided by the company.

### Inditex

Industria de Diseño Textil, or Inditex, was founded in 1985 by Spaniard Omancio Ortega. As of 2019, the Inditex group was the largest fast-fashion company in Europe, in terms of revenue (Smith 2021a). The products of Inditex are widely consumed across the world, mostly under its most successful brand, Zara. As of 2020, Zara was the most valued Spanish fashion brand by a long shot (Smith 2021e). In 2021, 324 Zara stores existed in the United States alone. Across the world, Zara sits as one of the top ten most valuable clothing & apparel brands in the world (Simionato).

In 2011, two Zara workshops in São Paulo, Brazil were found to be employing slave-like working conditions. In 2013, Inditex was found to be one of the fashion retailers producing in the Dhaka garment factory at the time of its collapse. Since then, Inditex has made several strides, the most notable being the creation of their sustainable line Join Life in 2016 and the signing of the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety in 2013.

### El Corte Inglés

El Corte Inglés was founded in 1940 in Madrid, Spain. As it stands today, El Corte Inglés is the largest department store group in Europe. As of 2020, it was considered the third-largest in the world, behind Macy's and Kohl's ("Top 10 Department Stores"). In 2020, the group ranked



fifth in revenue of department store chains across the world (Smith 2021c). Although it is large, El Corte Inglés is not a leading company in the world, Europe, or even Spain in terms of fashion production and consumption. However, El Corte Inglés was found to be one of the companies associated with the collapsed factory in Dhaka in 2013. As it is not solely a fashion company, its association with the Dhaka factory collapse offers a broader scope of how companies communicate sustainability.

### Mango

Punto Fa, S.L., known as Mango, was founded in 1984 in Catalonia, Spain by Turkish immigrant brothers Isak and Nahman Andic. As of 2021, Mango has operating subsidiaries in thirty-three countries and is one of the largest Spanish export companies (“Punto FA SL”). From 2010 to 2019, Mango’s sales value increased by 694,400,000 euros, from 1,118,750,000 to 1,813,150,000 (Smith 2021d). It is the second leading clothing retail company in Spain based on sales, just behind Inditex’s Zara. Mango was producing in Rana Plaza at the time of its collapse in 2013. Today, Mango considers itself a sustainable company.

### Data & Analysis

For each company, I have collected every document available on their respective websites regarding company practices. These documents include Codes of Conduct, Codes of Ethics, Sustainability Commitments, Sustainability Reports, Sustainability Policies, Occupational Health and Safety Policies, Ethical Channels, and Corporate Procedures on Management of Conflicts of Interest. The type of document used for each company is listed below:

Inditex: Code of Conduct for Manufacturers and Suppliers, Sustainability Commitment, Occupational Health & Safety Policy, Code of Conduct and Responsible Practices, Sustainability Policy

El Corte Inglés: Corporate Procedure on the Management of Conflicts of Interest, Ethical Channel, Code of Ethics

Mango: Code of Ethics, Code of Conduct, Environmental Sustainability Policy, Sustainability Report

To analyze these documents, I used the qualitative data analysis platform ATLAS.ti. Atlas proved to be the best method of data analysis, as it allowed me to upload each document, save it within the software, and apply “codes” to each one. In Atlas, “Coding is a core function... that lets you ‘tell’ the software where the interesting things are in your data. Coding in a technical sense simply means assigning a label to a data segment” (Friese). Another common way to describe coding is “tagging”.

As I read through each document, I created and assigned codes. If any phrase related to the company’s sustainability, social, or environmental impacts, it was assigned an appropriate code. Oftentimes, as I read through the documents, the need for a new code would emerge, meaning I had to read through documents multiple times before concluding the coding process. At the end of coding, I ended up with thirty-six different codes. The following are the codes used in order from most to least prevalent:

Sustainability, Environmental Impact, Global Connection, Proof, Social Impact, Working Conditions, Commitment, Compliance, Health, Transparency, Code of Conduct, Sustainability Goal, External Impact, Supply Chain, Ethics, Legislation, Human Rights, Production, Corporate Social Responsibility, Diversity/Inclusion, Consumers,

Discrimination, Recycle, Circularity, Child Labor, Wages, Women, Climate Change, Management, Animal Rights, Reputation/Image, Audits, Forced Labor, Green Imagery, Ironic/contradictory, Rana Plaza

After coding, I took each code and put all its associated quotes in a document. From here, I divided up quotes by company, then divided them up even further by theme. In the document for the Sustainably code, for example, the Inditex section has the following subsections: Things they should or need to be doing, What they are doing, Specific achievements, and Definition of sustainability. From each subsection, I created a summarizing paragraph describing common themes found within the quotes. From there, I was able to analyze each document in terms of its sustainability rhetoric.

For the purpose of this thesis, only summarizing paragraphs are given for the Sustainability, Environmental Impact, Social Impact, and Global Connection codes. These were the most used codes across every document, aside from the “Proof” code, which was not used due to the similarity between this code and the specific actions mentioned for social and environmental impacts. By analyzing the most used codes, I am covering the most common themes among the documents. While other codes contain valuable information, for the purpose of keeping the thesis at its target length, only four are analyzed.

### Limitations

In order to best understand the results of this study, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, because of a lack of access to data on company practices, like factory audits, I only focus on rhetoric, rather than actual practices. This type of analysis may not fully reflect the reality of how sustainable the companies truly are. Secondly, although many of the original

documents are written in Spanish, I made the decision to only analyze the English versions. The intention behind this was to limit any mistranslation on my part, however, it is possible that the translations made by the companies do not fully reflect the messages they are trying to communicate in Spanish. Thirdly, there is also a limitation in regards to the lack of access to proper resources. While I rerouted the thesis accordingly, I was not able to find any factory audits of the companies, which would have given insight into if or how company policies are being enforced, as well as how effective the policies are. Fourthly, there is potential for there to be bias in how I talk about the companies. While I did my best to remain neutral in my discussion of Inditex, El Corte Inglés, and Mango, I am naturally critical of the three given my prior knowledge of their reputations in sustainability. Lastly, in this thesis, I include no evidence that the companies' association with the Rana Plaza collapse has affected the sustainability rhetoric that I analyze. However, because they were involved, and because of the public outcry following the collapse, I concluded that they would be likely to do something about the issue and thus I consider the use of them for this thesis to be valid.

## ANALYSIS

### **Inditex**

#### Sustainability

As a company, Inditex defines sustainability as “a range of fashion goods offered on the market that fully respects Human and social Rights across the entire value chain and meets the most exacting environmental and health and safety standards, all of which on the basis of transparency and permanent dialogue with the Stakeholders of the Company” (“Sustainability Policy.”). This definition means that the company publicly recognizes sustainability as more than an environmental issue, but a social one as well, utilizing human rights as a basis.

Through the Inditex Sustainability Commitment, Code of Conduct and Responsible Practices, and Sustainability Policy, it is clear that the company agrees that it should be utilizing sustainable practices with respect for the environment. They believe that their employees “shall encourage the social and environmental sustainability of the company”, yet fail to mention how this “social sustainability” is guaranteed or even desired by the company as a whole (“Code of Conduct and Responsible Practices.”). Environmental sustainability, on the other hand, is frequently mentioned, often in regards to its importance in relation to innovation, biodiversity preservation, and consumer demand.

The values of Inditex are communicated through direct statements and implied through the knowledge of their general acts toward sustainability. The company prides itself in its innovation and design, mostly in terms of its production model. Inditex aims to promote social and environmental sustainability through its business model, so as to “[create] economic, social and environmental value for all its Stakeholders” (“Sustainability Policy.”). While social sustainability is mentioned often, little information is given on how the company achieves social

sustainability, other than the fact that they follow sustainability standards and criteria.

Environmental sustainability, on the other hand, has more specific actions mentioned, such as the company's foundation of their Green to Pack program to minimize packaging waste ("Our Commitment").

As evidenced by the Inditex Sustainability Commitment, the company has taken several initiatives to improve its sustainability and effect on the environment. In 2020, the company used over 73,000 tonnes of sustainable cotton and over 9,000 tonnes of recycled polyester in its clothing. Zara, the company's leading store, uses 100% recycled bags in-store and boxes made from recycled cardboard for online ordering. Zara also utilizes a clothing collection program, which seeks to minimize clothing waste. In this Commitment, Inditex claims that, as of 2021, 62,000 tons of garments have been collected since 2015.

While Inditex is seemingly moving towards more environmentally sustainable strategies, it should be noted that the company fails to mention any specific strategies or achievements to improve social sustainability, other than their Clothing Collection program, which "contributes to create jobs to vulnerable people" ("Our Commitment").

### Environmental Impact

Inditex verifies in its Sustainability Policy that environmental matters are those concerning climate change, water management, waste management, and the protection of biodiversity ("Sustainability Policy"). This all falls under its definition of sustainability, which is considered "a range of fashion goods offered on the market that fully respects Human and social Rights across the entire value chain and meets the most exacting environmental and health and safety standards" ("Sustainability Policy").

As a group, Inditex agrees that every being involved in the production process of their products should agree with and adhere to the environmental policies in place. These policies, which follow any applicable environmental laws, “[favor] the integration of sustainability practices... ensuring that [Inditex’s] business activity is carried out with full respect for people, the environment, and the community at large” (“Sustainability Policy”). Inditex believes all its practices should be conducted in the most environmentally-friendly ways possible, “encouraging biodiversity preservation and sustainable management of the natural resources”, in addition to following any signed agreements, like the Paris Agreement from the 2015 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (“Sustainability Policy”).

Inditex has in place a few goals and plans regarding environmental sustainability. For example, at the 2021 Annual General Meeting, a goal for net-zero emissions by 2040 was declared. The company has general goals to improve environmental matters regarding energy, water, and biodiversity and seeks to promote sustainability throughout every step of the production process.

Inditex has in place several strategies for the improvement of its environmental sustainability. The group even claims that “all [its] activities are carried out in a manner that most respects the environment” (“Code of Conduct for Manufacturers and Suppliers”). The Inditex Sustainability Policy makes it clear that the group strives to responsibly manage natural resources and chemicals used in the production process in an effort to promote the health of the environment and climate. The group also strives to make all manufacturers and employees aware of the potential environmental risks associated with their production.

One of the main ways Inditex is improving its environmental impact is through the implementation of eco-efficient stores for each of its brands. These stores utilize strategies, like

the implementation of LED lights, in order to minimize Inditex's environmental impact, just on a retail level. Inditex also exclusively uses renewable energy sources for its logistics centers in Spain and pledges to do the same for distribution offices and stores in the next few years. On an external level, Inditex holds partnerships with the Sustainable Apparel Coalition and Better Cotton Initiative, which both serve to improve sustainability in the production process.

### Social Impact

In their definition of sustainability, the group does mention the respect of human and social rights. The majority of the ways this respect is executed by companies is through female empowerment, the payment of fair wages, worker participation, and health and safety in the workplace.

As a company, Inditex agrees that all people with any relationship to Inditex should be treated fairly and honorably. Inditex believes the same for its manufacturers and suppliers, claiming that "Under no circumstances shall physical punishment, sexual or racial harassment, verbal or power abuse or any other form of harassment or intimidation be permitted" ("Code of Conduct for Manufacturers and Suppliers"). In terms of the implementation of these standards, Inditex has agreed to take the appropriate measures to identify and ensure the prevention of any issues regarding health and safety, although specific examples are not mentioned.

In their Code of Conduct for Manufacturers and Suppliers and Sustainability Policy, Inditex claims that it "adopts socially responsible practices" and that "all persons, individuals or entities, who maintain, directly or indirectly, any kind of employment, economic, social and/or industrial relationship with Inditex, are treated fairly and with dignity." The main ways the company exercises its social commitment are through external organizations, like non-profits, and internal practices.



Inditex is committed to offering the best working conditions for its employees, as it believes that this will improve productivity. The group is committed to creating value (economic, social, and environmental) for all stakeholders. It also claims that raising awareness of social and environmental issues among its employees is one of the principles directing its relationship with employees. Inditex hopes to become a sustainable company but does not label itself as one at the moment.

While Inditex does mention some general actions and beliefs regarding social sustainability, the only specific action they share is their garment collection program, which “contributes to create jobs to vulnerable people” (“Our Commitment”). Other than that short statement, no specific accomplishments or actions relating to social impacts are mentioned by Inditex.

### Global Connection

As a company, Inditex acknowledges its need to follow any external regulations regarding its production process. In their Code of Conduct for Manufacturers and Suppliers, the group states, “the provisions of this Code constitute only minimum standards”, meaning the severity of codes may be heightened if any appropriate national regulations or laws require such a change.

Inditex holds partnerships with several international groups, including the Better Cotton Initiative, CanopyStyle, Organic Cotton Accelerator, Sustainable Apparel Coalition, and Textile Exchange (“Our Commitment”). These partnerships serve to promote the use and availability of sustainable resources used in garment production. Inditex also partners with “prestigious” institutions, like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, with whom they work to improve their contribution to a circular economy. Across the production chain, Inditex is expected to

comply with environmental standards for fashion production. A large quantity of these standards is set by international organizations, such as the United Nations. With the United Nations, Inditex complies with the principles set at the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Convention on Biological Diversity, CEO Water mandate, and Convention on Climate Change. Other global partnerships related to environmental sustainability standards include the Clean to Wear standard.

As with environmental sustainability, Inditex partners with several global organizations to improve their social sustainability, such as the UNI Global Union, United Nations Global Compact, Ethical Trading Initiative, ITGLWF (International Textile, Garment, and Leather Workers Federation), International Labour Organization, and the United Nations. The overarching goal of these partnerships is to promote human rights and improve working conditions among its employees. While the Inditex group shares an impressive amount of partnerships, little to no details are mentioned about what their partnerships are doing specifically to improve social sustainability.

## **El Corte Inglés**

### Sustainability

As a company, the El Corte Inglés group has little published on their sustainability goals or actions. From their Code of Ethics, however, it can be understood that the company is aware of the importance and need for sustainable practices. The group states that “employees and managers must know and apply the policies of social responsibility and sustainability formulated by the Management of the Group” (“Code of Ethics.”). Additionally, the company claims to be committed to improving and developing sustainable practices with respect for the environment.

### Environmental Impact

While the El Corte Inglés group does not have many public documents regarding environmental sustainability practices, the Code of Ethics communicates some general values. The group states its commitment to the constant improvement of management and the minimization of environmental impacts. El Corte Inglés adheres to the United Nations Global Compact, which promotes the implementation of sustainable practices among businesses. The group has mentioned environmental impacts in its video advertising; however, for the sake of this thesis project, those sources will not be considered or analyzed.

### Social Impact

The El Corte Inglés group understands the importance of the implementation of Corporate Social Responsibility into its management strategy. As a “socially responsible entity”, the group is committed to improvement and therefore requires its employees to uphold its social policies as well. Little is known about the company's relationship to social sustainability otherwise.

### Global Connection

Throughout all the publicized documents of El Corte Inglés, little is mentioned about the company's involvement with external global organizations. The only evident involvement is the group's adherence to the United Nations Global Compact, which entails “taking on board all the human rights, labour, and environmental and anti-corruption principles which make up [the] international code of ethics” (“Code of Ethics.”). While this does mean El Corte Inglés is involved with external entities regarding both environmental and social standards, their involvement is not nearly as much in comparison to other major brands, as the other companies provide lengthy lists of organizations they are involved with.

## **Mango**

### Sustainability

In the Mango Code of Ethics and the Mango Sustainability Report, the company makes clear detailed statements outlining its objective to promote and improve sustainability. Mango values the promotion of sustainable development projects, legislative compliance, and transparent communication. The company aims to improve working conditions, improve environmental sustainability, and ensure financial profitability, solidity, and solvency.

The Mango company has set out clear commitments to the promotion of sustainable development projects and environmental improvement. Mango's sustainable line, appropriately named "COMMITTED", is the company's most public display of its stated commitment to sustainability. Additionally, Mango has set out measures to communicate its sustainability in a transparent manner. In the Mango Environmental Sustainability Policy, it is stated that :

"Transparency is a fundamental principle within the framework of Corporate Social Responsibility at MANGO. For this reason, MANGO is committed to communicating in a clear and precise manner all its environmental practices and impacts, both internally and externally. The progress in terms of sustainability of the brand will be made public through company communications and annually in the Sustainability Report."

If this is truly practiced, the public should be aware of all activity that happens and the effect it has on the environment. It should be noted that there is no stated commitment of a similar manner detailing the company's level of transparency regarding social impacts, however, there have been broad commitments to transparency in the Mango Sustainability Report.

Furthermore, it should be noted that Mango has labeled itself as a "sustainable company" in the most recent Mango Sustainability Report ("Sustainability Report").

In recent years, Mango has made many moves towards the improvement of its environmental impact and sustainability. These achievements are specifically outlined in the Mango Sustainability Report. To name a few, in 2019, Mango:

- Made eighteen million garments with “sustainable characteristics”
- Used 2.6 TN of Better Cotton Initiative cotton
- Reduced the hydric footprint of women’s jeans
- Approved the purchase of 100% renewable electrical energy for headquarters, logistics centers, and stores

There is an abundance of other accomplishments the company has made, like starting their “COMMITTED” sustainable line, as well as joining several coalitions and initiatives, like The Fashion Pact. What outsiders lack in information, however, is how the company is taking specific measures to improve social sustainability.

What Mango seems to do well is admit the impact it has made on the environment. In the Mango Sustainability Report, the group stated that a pair of jeans (made in Morocco) takes 1.71 m<sup>3</sup> (1,700 L) of water to produce, which is roughly 3400 standard 16.9 fl oz water bottles. Although the company claimed it would perform another study in 2020, this is the most recent study published on the Mango website.

### Environmental Impact

Mango has made clear many of its commitments to environmental sustainability. To name a few, Mango is committed to controlling [its] impact on the environment, promoting sustainable development projects, fighting climate change, conserving biodiversity, protecting the oceans, and managing store activity. In its sustainability report, Mango also mentions its commitment to

the Fashion Pact, which is committed to protecting the oceans, stopping global warming, and restoring biodiversity (“About The Fashion Pact.”).

As a group, Mango agrees that every step in its supply chain should be respectful of the environment and follow all applicable laws and regulations set by themselves or external entities. Mango places emphasis on the responsibility of manufacturers and suppliers to uphold this responsibility.

Overall, Mango’s central goal for environmental sustainability is “the optimisation of energy consumption and the implantation of improvements that mitigate [its] impact on the environment, paying special attention to promoting the circular economy” (“Code of Ethics and Responsible Conduct.”). In the short term, Mango has set goals to eliminate plastics, reduce carbon footprint, and promote green energy consumption (“Sustainability Report.”). In the long term, Mango has set goals such as the use of 100% cellulose fibers of controlled origin by 2030 (“Sustainability Report.”).

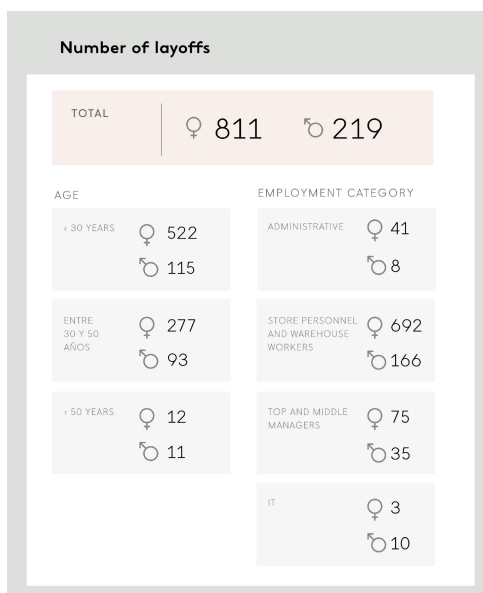
Mango promotes practices with minimal impact on the environment among itself and all its stakeholders. The group understands its responsibility to comply with all applicable laws and regulations regarding environmental impact, this includes the avoidance of protected habitats and harmful chemicals. The environmental values of Mango are most commonly communicated through the implementation of the sustainable line “COMMITTED” and the design of eco-efficient facilities. Mango expects the same environmental practices and values from its suppliers and manufacturers.

In its sustainability report, Mango has shared many specific examples of how it has worked to promote environmental sustainability, including the implementation of cellulose fibers and cardboard from sustainably managed forests. Mango has also mentioned specific

achievements regarding its stores, like optimization of natural light, installation of LED lighting, and the use of centralized air conditioning. In the production process, Mango has noted how products undergo an exhaustive analysis before shipment.

### Social Impact

In terms of social impact, Mango is committed to sustainable development and the promotion of workplace health and safety. As it mentions frequently, the Mango company values the fair treatment of all, with particular emphasis on gender equality. They believe in responsible management, and claim that “stability, dialogue, training and recognition are the pillars [they] develop in our daily activities.” At times, the company communicates corporate transparency as



one of its main values, which can be seen in the graph to the left from the Mango Sustainability Report.

Overall, the Mango company has not shied away from communicating its relationship with social sustainability and responsibility. It is clear from the Mango

Sustainability Report that the company values equal treatment and equal opportunities for its employees,

Mango even states that it “guarantee[s] equal treatment

and opportunities.” Mango has in place several policies, listed in their Code of Ethics, Code of Conduct, and Health and Safety Policy, which serve to defend this guarantee, along with others, and improve working conditions. Additionally, the company has designated people to monitor and ensure that these policies are being upheld, as well as to identify any issues or potential risks.

In their sustainability report, Mango has listed several ways they believe they are making impacts on social sustainability. One way is through their Workforce Position Architecture

Project, which serves to guarantee that gender does not affect wage differentiation. This project is in line with their guarantee of equal treatment and opportunity. The company also has in place programs and models to improve working conditions, such as the Take Care program, which utilizes the World Health Organization's three areas of health – physical, mental, and social – to help promote healthy lives for workers. Along these lines, the company also implements a remuneration model and flexible working hours to improve overall workplace health.

Mango has developed relationships with several foundations, nongovernmental organizations, associations, and initiatives in an effort to improve social matters both external and internal. Their partnership with CARES (Centro Especial de Empleo Fundación), for example, serves to provide work for those with intellectual disabilities. This partnership is another reflection of the company's guarantee of zero discrimination in the workplace.

### Global Connection

In order to promote social sustainability, Mango partners and complies with the regulations set by the International Labour Organization, United Nations, the Bangladesh Accord, the Luxembourg Declaration, the Amfori Business Social Compliance Initiative and Women Empowerment project, and several other global organizations. From the Code of Conduct, Code of Ethics, and Sustainability Report of Mango, it is evident that the company focuses on the prohibition of child labor, the improvement of working conditions, and the equal treatment of workers. The detailed regulation of these focuses is derived from global standards regarding these issues.

In their Sustainability Report, Mango does mention the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, which was put into place after the Rana Plaza incident of 2013. This accord, which Mango has signed, serves to improve conditions within factories of the fashion supply



chain. Mango has not mentioned any specific impacts their involvement with the accord has made.

Mango collaborates and complies with the United Nations, the Fashion Pact, the Better Cotton Initiative, the Sustainable Apparel Coalition, DETOX initiative, the Voluntary Agreements program, Greenpeace, and other global organizations in order to ensure the environmental sustainability of the company. These partnerships assist Mango in a variety of ways, including researching topics in sustainability, setting regulations for global compliance, and providing avenues for sustainability promotion. These regulations focus on a variety of topics and global issues.

In some cases, environmental and social sustainability are grouped together as one overarching issue. In the case of Mango's global involvement, the United Nations and World Health Organization are two groups that focus on both environmental and social development. The United Nations' sustainable development goals, for example, focus on social, environmental, and economic matters. Mango states that every alliance mentioned in its Sustainability Report "[is] aimed at fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with the United Nations Agenda 2030" ("Sustainability Report."). Additionally, Mango utilizes global organizations to construct its own projects for the improvement of sustainability. Its work health program Take Care, for example, utilizes the World Health Organizations' areas to improve overall health – physical, mental, and social. The company does not mention specific actions taken by this program other than implementation campaigns, like the campaign to quit smoking.

## DISCUSSION

### Environmental vs. Social Sustainability

Across each of the three companies, one thing was clearly evident – environmental sustainability is of higher priority than social sustainability. While each of the companies' definitions of sustainability would communicate equal importance of the two types, the stated actions for each of the two types communicate significant work in environmental sustainability and little to no work in social.

The most frequent way this difference was seen was in the specific actions shared by each company. The most specific statements regarding social impacts were similar to the following quote from Inditex: “All persons, individuals or entities, who maintain, directly or indirectly, any kind of employment, economic, social and/or industrial relationship with Inditex, are treated fairly and with dignity” (“Code of Conduct for Manufacturers and Suppliers.”). These statements mentioned what was happening, yet rarely ever how what was happening was executed or enforced. Environmental impacts, on the other hand, were mentioned far and wide with extensive detail. The following is an example quote from Mango:

“In 2019, and as part of the new CSR Sustainability Plan, Mango approved the purchase of 100% renewable energy for the electrical consumption throughout 2020 of all Mango headquarters, logistics centres and company stores in Spain. This represents 64,780 MWh of renewable energy certified according to local renewable energy source certificates. In addition, in 2019 the consumption of all UK company stores was certified from renewable energy sources (3,095 Kwh). In 2020 the electrical consumption of company stores in the UK will represent about 3,006 MWh of electricity certified from a renewable origin” (“Sustainability Report.”).

Given that each of the three groups mentioned social sustainability equally as much as environmental in their definitions of and commitments to sustainability, the proof of impacts should be nearly equal as well. As we can now see, however, this is not the case.

Between the three companies, Mango gives the most specific details regarding their social impacts. In the company's "TAKE CARE" program, for example, "specific actions are carried out in order to promote healthy habits (improve diet, avoid a sedentary lifestyle, promotion of physical exercise) as well as actions aimed at disease prevention (campaigns to quit smoking, stress prevention, mindfulness, skincare during the summer, breast cancer prevention" ("Sustainability Report."). Even here, however, no details are given for exactly what these "specific actions" are.

Thus, this difference in rhetoric is just another example of brands "paying lip service to sustainability and ethics" (Bédard). While brands have succumbed to the pressure to promote social sustainability following the Rana Plaza collapse, actual progress has been slow, if anything. Environmental sustainability appears to be embellished and pushed so as to deflect the attention away from socially sustainable practices.

#### The Responsibility of Manufacturers & Suppliers

While each of the groups mentions its responsibility to promote sustainability, particular emphasis is put on the manufacturers and suppliers to carry this through. In their sustainability report, Mango states: "MANGO requires in its Code of Conduct of manufacturers and suppliers that all activity in the MANGO supply chain be carried out in a manner that is respectful towards the environment, complying with all corresponding legislation and regulations. This code is mandatory for all suppliers and manufacturers" ("Sustainability Report."). Similar claims can be found for the other two companies.

While placing responsibility on manufacturers and suppliers is objectively important, especially given the Rana Plaza incident, the rhetoric used among the three companies is communicated in a way that appears to deflect responsibility and liability. While companies may argue that the responsibility is in the hand of the manufacturer and supplier because of the company's provision of the code of conduct within factories, it has been found that these codes do not always get posted. Bédard describes the code of conduct posters she saw while visiting a factory in Gazipur, Bangladesh as "hardly legible for the people actually working in the factory"- However, "as long as they were up on a wall, the brand could fall back on the fact that they *had* a policy" (Bédard). Thus, the corporate enforcement of these codes of conduct is often nearly nonexistent, supporting my finding that companies are deflecting responsibility.

## CONCLUSION

What these three companies have communicated in their available documents is a lack of initiative towards the improvement of social sustainability in their production processes. While all mentioned the importance of their social impact and responsibility, the rhetoric used communicates otherwise.

It has been nine years since the Rana Plaza tragedy, yet somehow there seems to be a lack of discourse surrounding the social effects of apparel production, at least in comparison to the discourse of environmental effects. In today's fashion climate, people may know what the clothes they are purchasing are made of and their exact carbon footprint measurement, but what they often do not know is *who* made their clothes and *how* those people were treated in the process.

While the topic of garment production is one of environmental concern, it is also one of human rights. If we, as consumers, are not made aware of what we are purchasing, we may unknowingly contribute to systems with potential outcomes similar to that of Rana Plaza. While ignorance may be bliss for the consumer, it is a matter of health and safety for the producer.

Not all hope is lost, however. There are some fashion companies that have created measures to help keep consumers informed on what they are buying. The sustainable footwear line Nisolo, for example, recently implemented a Sustainability Facts Label that, similar to a Nutrition Facts Label, communicates to consumers everything they need to know about the product, including social impacts. Several organizations have been created to aid this knowledge as well. The organization Good On You, for example, has set criteria to rate companies based on their impacts on the planet, people, and animals by taking into consideration actions like the payment of living wages, carbon emissions, and the use of animal hair

So, while progress is being made in the realm of fashion's social sustainability, there is still much more to be done in terms of research and development. In the future, I would propose that more research be done directly comparing a company's policies to its actions in parts of the supply chain that are not directly part of the company, such as in production factories. An analysis of the ways companies communicate respect and care for all yet legally avoid responsibility for what happens in their supply chain is a similar topic in need of research.

A more recent issue worth investigating is the effect of COVID-19 on company practices. In March of 2020, as stores began to shut down, many fast fashion companies failed to pay for billions of dollars worth of completed clothing items. The shutdown led to the loss of jobs for garment workers across the world and exposed many companies' hypocritical views of caring for workers and paying fair wages. This is just one of the many likely effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A plethora of topics exist within the fashion industry that are worth investigating, but I would argue that the one of these in most urgent need of investigation is the difference between company rhetoric and company practices. By restricting and manipulating the knowledge of consumers, fashion companies are allowing us to unknowingly contribute to the exploitation of millions of garment workers across the world. So, above all, I argue for full transparency of the fashion industry.

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