

Investigating Modern Slavery in the Post-Pandemic Textile and Apparel Supply Chain: An Exploratory Study

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Keywords: modern slavery, textile and apparel industry, fashion, social sustainability

Modern slavery (MS), which includes forced labor, child labor, low wages, and other forms of exploitation, continues to be a major problem in the textile and apparel (T&A) supply chain (SC) (Cole and Shirgholami, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this problem, as SC disruptions, economic downturns, and other factors have made workers even more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (Cole and Shirgholami, 2022). One of the key factors driving MS in the T&A industry is the pressure to produce apparel cheap and fast. Many fashion brands prioritize low cost and short lead time over worker welfare, leading to poor wages and working conditions (Rana and Ha-Brookshire, 2020). This practice has only intensified amidst the pandemic, as brands seek to cut costs and keep prices low to survive in a volatile economy. Another factor contributing to MS in the T&A industry is the fragmented T&A SC. Many fashion brands rely on a global network of suppliers and subcontractors, making it difficult to track and monitor working conditions and labor practices throughout the SC (Anner, 2020). This can make it easier for brands to exploit workers and engage in MS without being detected. The impacts of MS are devastating for workers, their families, and their communities. Workers are often paid low wages, forced to work long hours in unsafe and unhealthy conditions, and subjected to physical and emotional abuse (Han, Jiang, & Chen, 2022). Children are also often forced to work in the production facilities (Han, Jiang, & Chen, 2022). These practices violate basic human rights and have a profound impact on the health, wellbeing, and prospects of those affected. Therefore, the goal of this study was to investigate the state of MS in the post-pandemic T&A industry.

In this study, institutional theory (IT) was used to explain how MS has become institutionalized and sustained within the T&A industry. According to IT, organizations and industries are subject to institutional pressures that shape their behavior and practices (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). These pressures come from three main sources: regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive (Liu et al., 2010). Regulative pressures come from laws, regulations, and formal policies, while normative pressures come from social norms and expectations (Liu et al., 2010). Cultural-cognitive pressures come from taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions about how things should be done (Liu et al., 2010). In the T&A industry, MS has become institutionalized through a combination of these institutional pressures. Regulative pressures have been insufficient in preventing MS, as the laws and regulations meant to protect workers have often been poorly enforced or ignored by the industry (Odia, 2020). Normative pressures have also contributed to the problem, as the T&A industry has long prioritized cost-cutting and profit-making over worker well-being (Han, Jiang, & Chen, 2022). Cultural-cognitive pressures, such as beliefs that MS is acceptable in certain

contexts or that workers are disposable, have also played a role (Odia, 2020). Hence, this study aimed to answer the following questions: (1) What are the multiple facets of MS that are present in the current T&A SC? (2) Who are the affected population? and (3) Which fashion brands are responsible for such practices?

To answer these questions, 101 news articles were extracted from leading T&A industry-focused publishers, including Sourcing Journal, WWD, Just-Style, Remake, and Clean Clothes Campaign. To capture the true essence of post-pandemic T&A industry practices, only articles published after January 2022 were collected using keywords such as "textile and apparel industry," "working conditions," "wage and labor," "workplace exploitation," and "supply chain issues." The articles were then reviewed, coded, and analyzed using thematic content analysis (TCA), which is a method of identifying patterns, themes, and meanings in qualitative data, such as text data from news articles (Anderson, 2007). The data were further visualized in Tableau using a frequency graph of the MS factors, and the affected SC population was mapped using a global heatmap. Responsible apparel brands and retailers accused of MS were also examined.

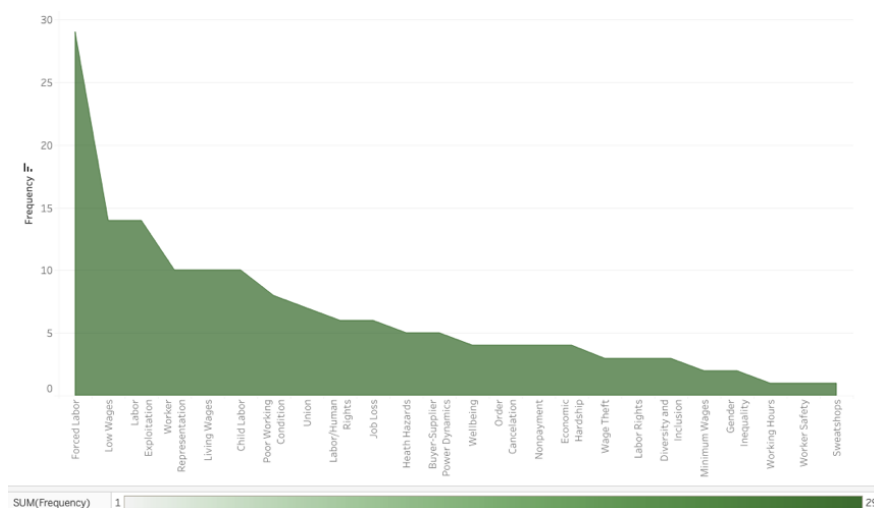


Figure 1. Modern Slavery Factors

From the TCA, four major themes of MS were identified. First, 52% of all the articles talked about labor issues in the T&A industry, which includes factors such as labor exploitation, child labor, and forced labor. Second, 47% of all the articles voiced concern about economic hardships, which includes factors such as low wages, minimum wage, living wage, job loss, nonpayment, wage theft, and order cancellation. Third, 36% of all the articles discussed worker representation in the T&A industry, which includes factors such as workers' unions, gender equality, diversity and inclusion, labor/human rights, and buyer-supplier power dynamics. Fourth, 20% of all the articles mentioned working conditions, which includes factors such as sweatshops, working hours, worker safety, health hazards, and well-being. The study also mapped the affected countries by MS in the

T&A SC, and the top five countries are Bangladesh (24), India (23), Cambodia (21), China (19), and Pakistan (18). Surprisingly, a developed country like the U.S. (15) is ranked seventh on the list. Finally, major apparel brands and retailers accused of practicing some forms of MS in their SC were illustrated in Figure 3.

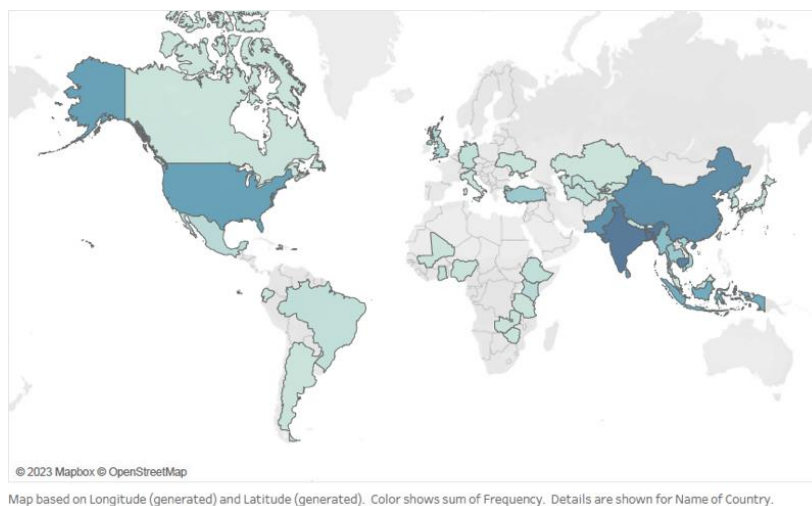


Figure 2. Global Heat Map of Affected Countries

The research on MS in the post-pandemic T&A industry provides crucial insights into the widespread problem of labor exploitation and human rights violations that continue to impact this sector. The study findings highlight the urgent need for SC-wide efforts to combat MS in the T&A industry, including enhanced monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, stronger SC transparency and accountability, and greater engagement with stakeholders across the industry. Future research should focus on more comprehensive and longitudinal studies on MS in the T&A industry i.e., investigating the root causes of labor exploitation and developing feasible strategies for prevention and intervention.



Figure 3. Responsible Brands

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