

Anti-sweatshop campaign images and supply chain traceability: a study of global fashion retailers

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Abstract

In this paper we investigate the influence of image-based protests by ethical activists and anti-sweatshop activists on traceability in relation to the supply chains of global fashion retailers. Traceability, a key part of organisational transparency, is the desire and the ability to publicly observe the entire production process, including the origin of the products, factory locations, the origins of raw materials and the conditions under which labour is used for manufacturing, and so on. This research builds on past scholarship based largely on social movement theory within the sociology literature and on the disclosure and transparency literature within the field of accounting, by highlighting the notion of ideologically focussed social movements, espoused in Gramscian philosophy. We find that image-based protests by anti-sweatshop activists significantly influence traceability in relation to the production facilities of global fashion retailers in our sample. Image based protests highlighting production facilities located in the worst countries for workers' rights is the most significant. Our findings therefore show evidence of the influence of anti-sweatshop activists, using protest images, on the traceability of supply chain information. Social movement activism and actions are therefore important influences on corporations to be socially traceable (i.e., revealing information that can be used to track and trace social issues) and play an important part to create change in corporate social transparency.

Key words: traceability of supply chains, fashion industry, protest images, anti-sweatshop activists, social movement theory, Fashion Revolution.

1. Introduction

Traceability is a fundamental component of corporate transparency in global trade, in particular in global supply chains. Traceability is seen as the ability for someone to see or locate where and how materials and labour are used and the nature of operations in the production of garments, in order to establish whether the product is free from ethical violations or not. Traceability of factory conditions has become a key transparency concern in the global north as broader stakeholder groups, including anti-sweatshop activists,¹ have raised concerns over, and campaigned against, global fashion retailers' negligence of human, animal and natural rights in the fashion and clothing production supply chains (Oakes, 2023; UK Parliament, 2018; HRW, 2017; Ansett & Hantover, 2013; Frenkel & Kim, 2004; Haltsones, Kourula, & Salmi, 2007; Hughes et al., 2007). For example, Human Rights Watch (HRW), joined by many anti-sweatshop campaigners and activists, have been campaigning against global clothing and fashion retailers to publicly disclose information about their supplier factories (HRW, 2019). However, despite these concerns, there is a lack of research investigating what influence traceability as a key component of the retailers' supply chain transparency. While research has so far investigated both corporate financial transparency (see for example, Bushman et al., 2004; Cannizzaro & Weiner, 2015) and corporate social transparency (see for example, Islam & Van Staden, 2018; Guo et al., 2022), traceability as the objective of corporate social transparency has not been the focus of this research. Accordingly, we aim to investigate whether and how particular campaign groups and anti-sweatshop activists influence the traceability disclosures of global fashion retailers with regards to their production processes within global supply chains.

One of the important campaign tools used by anti-sweatshop campaign groups is protest images, i.e., photos or placards showing images of sweatshop conditions and related protests (see for example, Ferdous, 2014; Kolben, 2019).² Images are a critical tool for protesters to mobilise and galvanise their campaign activities, generating greater public awareness and support for their causes (Casas & Williams, 2019; Ferdous, 2014). Despite the presence of image-based campaigns against global retailers, research in the broader social science and accounting fields have not yet investigated and documented image-based protests as a form of social movement activism, and whether and how this may influence

¹ Anti-sweatshop activists include ethical fashion activists, workers' rights NGOs, civil society organisations, trade union bodies, and ethical/fair trade campaigners.

² Extant social science literature highlights that pictures or images can be used to create powerful emotional reaction and can move people more than words (see Winkielman & Gogolushko, 2018) hence the age-old adage 'an image or picture paints a thousand words'. A single picture/image has the power to sway people – changing how they behave – while a single word does not (Winkielman & Gogolushko, 2018).

organisational transparency and accountability practices. Within the accounting field, images were the focus of research investigating issues ranging from images in the corporate annual reports (see for example, Preston et al., 1996; Preston & Young, 2000), historical photo-elicitation and accounting and management control within the office (Parker, 2009; Parker & Jeacle, 2019) to images of accountants and the accounting profession (see, Dimnik & Felton, 2006; Baldvinsdottir et al., 2009). While both sociology and accounting research (for example, King et al., 2007; Amenta et al., 2010; Islam & Van Staden, 2018) investigated different social movement tactics (i.e., protests, boycotts, collaboration, etc.) to understand organisational practices, accounting research has not yet considered images or image-based protests as a potential social movement factor to influence corporate transparency and disclosure. By focusing on image-based campaigns, our research addresses this gap in the accounting literature.

We draw on the social movement literature in sociology (King, 2008; Briscoe et al., 2015; Soule & King, 2006) and the Gramscian perspective of social movements (Lee, 2007; Gramsci, 1971), to hypothesise that image-based anti-sweatshop protests will influence global fashion retailers' supply chain traceability disclosures. We consider the traceability disclosure scores of large global fashion retailers sourced from the Fashion Transparency Index compiled and published by the Fashion Revolution, one of the world's largest fashion activist movements. In addition to the traceability scores, we hand collected data on image-based protests by anti-sweatshop activists against fashion retailers,³ and collected company and country specific data from financial and other databases. We use several statistical analyses to test our hypotheses and we find that image-based protests by anti-sweatshop activists significantly influence the supply chain traceability disclosures of the companies/brands in our sample. Furthermore, image-based protests highlighting production facilities (supply chains) located in the worst countries for workers' rights have the most significant influence. Social movement activism and actions are therefore important influences on corporations to be socially traceable (i.e., revealing information that can be used to track and trace social issues) and play an important part to create a change in corporate social transparency.

Our research extend the interdisciplinary literature within both the sociology (King, 2008; Briscoe et al., 2015; Soule & King, 2006) and accounting domains (Islam & Van

³ As we describe in the research method section, our hand-collected data on image-based protests came from a wide range of sources including (but not limited to) google search tool (google image), activists' websites (including their annual reports and press releases on campaign activities), narratives/data on campaign activities stored in Business and Human Rights Research Centre, and the news media.

Staden, 2018) on the roles of social movement organisations (SMOs) and their protests as extra-institutional pressures to influence corporate transparency and disclosure practices. Supported by the notion of ideological social movements as espoused in the Gramscian philosophy (Gramsci, 1971), we extend the accounting literature on the roles of broader stakeholders/the community (Guo et al., 2022; Cannizzaro & Weiner, 2015; De Villiers & Van Staden, 2006; Roberts, 1992; Patten, 1992), the media (Islam & Deegan, 2010; Aerts & Cormier, 2009) and NGOs and SMOs (Islam & Van Staden, 2018; O'Sullivan & O'Dwyer, 2015; Deegan & Islam, 2014; Deegan & Blomquist, 2006) by highlighting the role of a specific social movement tactic (image-based protests) on corporate traceability, an important transparency issue that has not been investigated before. In fact, traceability literature in the accounting domain is surprisingly lacking and we address this gap in the literature. Our research is therefore significant and essential in the accounting domain, as it offers new insights into corporate social transparency and broaden our knowledge of organisational motivations for traceability disclosure practices.

The article is structured as follows. The next section, Section 2 provides a brief background to anti-sweatshop campaigns and an overview of previous relevant research on transparency and the conceptual framing of traceability disclosures. Section 3 describes the theoretical framework (social movement theory) and hypothesis development. Section 4 provides the research methods employed, and Section 5 provides the results and analysis. Section 6 provides our conclusions.

2. Background to anti-sweatshop campaigns and traceability disclosures

Over the past three decades, global fashion and clothing retailers have shifted the sourcing of products from developed nations to underprivileged developing nations, resulting in high levels of public concern and activist protests, mostly in the developed world, over supply chain issues associated with poor human rights and modern slavery conditions, i.e., sweatshop conditions (see, for example, Oakes, 2023; HRW, 2017; Ansett & Hantover, 2013; Frenkel & Kim, 2004; Islam et al., 2021; Haltsones et al., 2007; Hughes et al., 2007; Spar, 1998, Wilkins, 2000). Sweatshops are factories where workers are employed at very low wages for long hours and under poor or inhumane conditions. As Meyers (2004) stated:

‘Much of the merchandise produced by U.S. companies and sold to U.S. consumers is manufactured by workers in third world countries who earn as little as 12 cents per hour drudging away in harsh and even dangerous work environments. Such workplaces are referred to as sweatshops and are especially common in the apparel and shoe industries and in toy

making. Many critics object to sweatshops on the grounds that they harm the workers or violate basic human rights' (p. 319).

Over time, the activities of anti-sweatshop campaign groups and ethical activists have resulted in some important developments. First, the evolving nature of corporate social responsibility disclosure practices, i.e., companies are now engaged in providing different kinds of disclosures, ranging from Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) reports to modern slavery reports. Second, there are new forms of disclosure regulations, such as the UK Modern slavery Act 2015, the Australian Modern Slavery Act 2018, and the US Conflict minerals disclosure rules.⁴ These regulations have highly focused disclosure provisions regarding the actions that should be taken by fashion brands and retailers to eliminate modern slavery and sweatshop conditions in supply chains. While transparency in general is a major concern, more recently, the EU has been putting forward regulation that will largely address traceability issues (see Walley, 2022). Third, while anti-sweatshop and ethical activists have a long history of campaigning and protest activities, the nature of their activism changed over time (see for example, HRW, 2019). Over the last decade, these campaign organisations have not only advocated regulators to introduce more stringent (mandatory) disclosure requirements, they have also continued sustained pressure on companies to disclose where their clothes are produced, and under what conditions (Islam & Van Staden, 2022). Accordingly, traceability is one of the fundamental concerns of ethical and anti-sweatshop activists who are putting pressure on retailers to disclose their factory locations and the nature of their operations.

2.1 Conceptual framing of traceability within global supply chains

Traceability is a well-known notion in the food science and food supply chain literature. Based on a review of 101 scientific articles relating to food traceability, Olsen and Borit, (2013, p. 148) defined the traceability of food products as:

‘The ability to access any or all information relating to that which is under consideration, throughout its entire life cycle, by means of recorded identifications’.

To understand this definition better, we should also consider other definitions highlighted by Olsen and Borit (2013). For example, traceability as defined in legislation: the EU General Food Law (Regulation 178/2002) defines traceability as ‘*The ability to trace and follow a*

⁴ The more recent development is that Germany introduced a Supply Chain Due Diligence Act effective from 1 January 2023 to tackle human rights abuses in the global supply chains. The EU is also considering a Due Diligence bill to address human rights and environmental issues.

food, feed, food-producing animal or substance intended to be, or expected to be incorporated into a food or feed, through all stages of production, processing and distribution'. Olsen and Borit, (2013) find the definition by the EU General Food Law quite popular and quite detailed with respect to what should be traced and followed, and where. Importantly, Olsen and Borit argue that traceability must be based on the systematic recording and exchange of information; there are many relevant properties that will be lost if there is no record-keeping system and a way of distributing/sharing the information. To support their argument, Olsen and Borit (2013) mention that prior definitions lack the inclusion of information recording and disclosure. We find their work the first that highlight and focus on disclosure issues, and accordingly we argue that it is critical for companies to disclose product manufacturing and factory information to enhance trackability (traceability). Given Olsen and Borit's (2013) review of the prior literature, we have reviewed studies after 2013 and present a summary of these studies in Appendix A.

Studies (generally from outside the accounting field) since 2013 as documented in Appendix A acknowledge the importance of traceability and the demand for more transparency at organisational and institutional levels, as the lack of adequate traceability have led to different social and environmental sustainability crises and scandals. For example Sander et al. (2018) examined meat traceability by pinpointing varied approaches and views of stakeholders within meat supply chains and revealed the conflicting perceptions of varied stakeholders when it comes to the significance of a particular form, technology or instrument of transparency and traceability. Sarpong (2014) provided an analysis of media reports and discussions generated following scandals in the food chain in the European context and found that a recent horsemeat scandal and lack of traceability around horsemeat in European markets, has damaged consumer confidence in the industry's ability to regulate itself. Sarpong (2014) emphasized the importance of traceability measures to eliminate fraud in the food chain. Ringsberg (2014) discussed different views on food traceability along with supply chain risk management approaches, using the philosophy of the scientific framework and offering suggestions for further research.

Research focusing on fashion and clothing supply chains, embraced similar definition of traceability to the research on food products. However, given its importance in the garment and fashion sector, literature focussing on this sector is not that rich. Egels-Zandén and Hansson (2016) conducted a case study of a Swedish global clothing retail company describe the importance of the traceability of information that provides transparency around factory operations and factory disclosures. Traceability could result in positive changes in the way

that organisations manage their supply chain labour practices.⁵ Furthermore, Gardner et al. (2019), focussing on clothing supply chains, discuss the disclosure of specific information, including the traceability of suppliers by providing the names and factory locations of suppliers involved in producing the organisation's products, and the working conditions associated with these suppliers. In supply chain research, using an integrative and systematic literature review approach, Garcia-Torres et al. (2019) investigated how companies enact traceability within their global supply chains to attain sustainability goals and how the traceability for sustainability can contribute to (sustainable) supply chain management.

In environmental and sustainability studies, Bailey et al. (2016) argued that traceability could more equitably and effectively govern sustainability, if a shift towards traceability as a real sustainable governance tool takes place. They maintained that in this case the broader debate of who should design and fund the systems that facilitate information flows within and beyond global value chains should be addressed. Warner et al. (2016) criticised the proposed traceability rule that was under discussion to trace seafood sold in the U.S., claiming that the rule only regulates a small subset of the seafood consumed by the American public. Cameron and Stanley (2017) addressed key challenges to advance transparency in the extractive industries, outlining several transparency initiatives. Kashmanian (2017) examined several aspects that can assist companies in building greater transparency in supply chains, including supply chain mapping, traceability, third-party certification, and goal setting, as well as reporting on their progress toward achieving these efforts.

While traceability is a well-known issue in the broader supply chain literature, the extant research has not yet explored its relationship with social activism and/or stakeholder pressures. Despite some studies (for example, Egels-Zandén & Hansson, 2016) echoing Olsen and Borit's (2013) arguments regarding the recording and disclosure aspects of traceability, surprisingly little research has so far acknowledged and/or emphasised the disclosure aspect of traceability. Arguably 'traceability' of information is one of the critical ways to define the boundary of transparency within global supply chains. That is, to be traceable, a member of the broader community (including civil society actors and consumers) should be able to easily trace where (which factory) and how (under which conditions) a

⁵ However, there is a view that disclosing this information generates risks and expenses for a corporation if its competitors do not disclose similar information (Egels-Zandén & Hansson, 2016). *'For that reason, mandatory factory disclosure would be justified as a measure to level the playing field and to help ensure that those corporations who do the least to police their supply chain labor practices are not rewarded by their ability to remain hidden in the shadows'* (Doorey, 2011, p. 601).

particular product was manufactured (this includes production, transport, and processing systems) from the information disclosed by the retailer. While prior research beyond the accounting field focused on traceability within the global clothing and fashion industry, this mostly provided general descriptions of traceability as a part of supply chain management and transparency. There is therefore a lack of research that provides a systematic investigation into the notion of traceability, i.e., the documentation and disclosure of traceability and its connection with stakeholder expectations and activism. Importantly, the issue of traceability, which is believed to be a central part of transparency disclosure, has not been investigated within the accounting domain so far.

2.2 Transparency and disclosure research and the notion of traceability

Transparency is a widely studied topic in different fields ranging from communication, development studies, ethics, law, political science to business and accounting (i.e., Gardner et al., 2019; Islam & Van Staden, 2018; Gold & Heikkurinen, 2018; Egels-Zandén et al., 2015; Berliner, 2014; Hollyer et al., 2014; Zhu, 2004; Fenster, 2010; Quaak et al., 2007; Bushman et al., 2004; Finel & Lord, 1999). One common thing about transparency across these fields is that information, or the disclosure of information, is considered to be the basis of transparency, however, not all disclosures are transparent. As a relational concept, transparency can relate to a particular context, a particular concern, particular conduct, and so on. For example, in terms of particular concerns within a corporate setting, transparency can relate to financial concerns (see, for example, Qian et al., 2015; Cannizzaro & Weiner, 2015; Barth & Schipper, 2008; Bushman et al., 2004) and non-financial and/or social and/or environmental concerns (see, for example, Islam & Van Staden, 2018; Quaak et al., 2007). While transparency about social and human rights concerns may take different forms (such as disclosure of information about companies' impact on society and workers in general), our focus is on a particular form of transparency or traceability that relate to a particular issue among the disclosure of fair and ethical trading practices, i.e., the disclosure of factory/production locations and working conditions within global fashion supply chains.

3 Theoretical framework and hypothesis development

We consider social movement theory from the sociology literature (i.e., King, 2008; Briscoe et al., 2015; Soule & King, 2006) and the Gramscian notion of social movements (i.e., Lee, 2007; Gramsci, 1971) to develop our hypothesis and interpret traceability as a core part of corporate transparency in global supply chains. While social movement theory usually takes

into account different kinds of movement tactics, such as collaboration, protests, boycotts, and naming and shaming that can influence companies and markets in general (Soule & King, 2006), we consider a specific tactic, i.e., image-based protests, to understand its influence on corporate transparency practices, this being the provision of traceability information.

3.1. Social movement theory and the Gramscian perspective

Early social movement theorists focussed on the roles of SMOs and tactics that contributed to state-oriented system changes, such as policy changes, changes in regulation and so on (Jenkins, 1983; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). However, as social movement activities against corporations, increased over time, researchers within the sociology and organisational fields started focussing on these organisations (Davis et al., 2008; Soule, 2012). Accounting researchers have also shown interest in this theory (for example, Islam & Van Staden, 2018; O'Sullivan & O'Dwyer, 2015) to explain corporate transparency and social accountability practices. Our choice of this theory is motivated by Davis et al.'s (2008) argument that the theory not only goes beyond conventional explanations to unveil new insights into organisational practices, but also offers new areas of inquiry. Earlier work by Taylor and Whittier (1992) and Soule and King (2006) suggested that as social movements attempt to effect social change at a particular level, they emerge as an oppositional force, ideology, and belief, against the dominant power-wielders in conventional institutions. Ideology is a fundamental factor for many SMOs to create change in society (Soule & King, 2006; Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007; Zald, 2000) and our focus is the change created by social movements and activists.

There are different types of social movement tactics and prior research focused on how different types of tactics are used by SMOs to gain influence in organisational policy and procedures (e.g., King, 2008; Briscoe et al., 2015). These tactics include lobbying, testimonials, collaboration, fundraising, petitioning, counter-accounts, sit-ins, protests, boycotts, violent attacks and rioting (see Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007; Briscoe et al., 2015). Briscoe et al. (2015) argued that social movement activism can be classified as disruptive tactics (i.e., protests and other extra-institutional pressures) and non-disruptive tactics (i.e., collaboration and lobbying). Prior social movement research has suggested that the choice of movement tactics depends on a range of concepts and notions, i.e., the notion of political opportunity (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004; Tarrow, 1998), the concept of cultural resonance (Van Dyke & Taylor, 2018), the notion of resource availability and resource dependency (Andrews

& Biggs, 2006), and the notion of ideologically motivated social movements (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007; Zald, 2000).⁶ We argue that the different concepts and notions ingrained in social movement theory are not mutually exclusive and could be integrated. For example, SMOs seek political opportunities for movement tactics and at the same time they are ideology driven.

When we think of ideology, we consider how social movements merge their activities with their organised or shared beliefs about a preferred world order and about social justice. While their activities can be radical in nature (such as protests in the streets), modern-day ideological social movement activities are socially cohesive in order to achieve drastic change. Ideological social movement activities usually aim to attack organisational legitimacy by discrediting the companies through questioning their moral standing in the society in which they operate - the idea is ingrained in a Marxist informed perspective and the Gramscian notion of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). While Gramsci largely wrote about cultural hegemony which highlights that the state and the ruling capitalist class (including large corporations) use cultural institutions and ideas to maintain self-interest and capitalist order, he did address the power and role of social movement organisations and civil society groups, as a counter hegemony (Carroll & Ratner, 1994; Billings, 1990; Hall et al., 2013; Carley, 2016). Therefore, we emphasise the ideology of particular social groups that influences mainstream actors to change their behaviour.

The source of Gramscian ideological social movement came from the Marxist perspective that the ideas and values of the ruling and capitalist class reinforced economic exploitation (Hall et al., 2013; Gramsci, 1971). During his imprisonment, Gramsci wrote his influential notions of hegemony and the manufacture (or obtaining) of consent and saw the capitalist state as being made up of two overlapping spheres, a 'political society' (which rule through force) and 'a civil society' (which rules through consent) (Gramsci, 1971). He saw civil society as the public sphere where trade unions and political parties gained concessions from the capitalist state and the sphere within which ideas and beliefs were shaped, where bourgeois 'hegemony' was reproduced in cultural life through the media, universities, and religious institutions to 'manufacture consent' and legitimacy (Heywood, 1994). He argued that the idea of a 'counter-hegemonic' struggle advance alternatives to dominant ideas of what is normal and legitimate and has had broad appeal in social and political movements

⁶ In relation to ideology, Den Hond and De Bakker (2007) stated that '.....ideology comprises an interconnected set of beliefs and attitudes relating to problematic aspects of social and political topics that are shared and used by members of a group and that inform and justify choice and behavior' (p. 903).

(Heywood, 1994). And hence, the roles and activism of social movements and NGOs that embrace counter hegemony are emphasized here. The Gramscian idea of ‘counter hegemonic’ posits that corporations operating in line with neoliberal ideology are therefore challenged by the social justice ideology that many activists embrace.

Prior accounting research used the Gramscian notion of hegemony predominantly to contribute to the professional accounting literature by highlighting hegemony and power struggles within the profession (Mihret et al., 2020; Yee, 2012; Richardson, 1989) and some research contributed to the social disclosure literature by problematising disclosure practices (Spence, 2009; Spence, 2007). However, there is a general gap in the research to investigate whether and how a particular ideologically driven SMO, highlighting corporate hegemony and injustice, influence a particular form of transparency and disclosure practice. While prior accounting research that used Gramscian is qualitative and descriptive in nature, there is scope to depart from this approach and take a quantitative approach,⁷ – this is relatively common in the field of sociology.⁸

Our research is aligned with the growing counter accounting literature that recognises the emancipatory roles of NGOs, activists and/or social movement organisations (Gallhofer et al., 2006; Lehman et al., 2016; Denedo et al., 2017; Vinnari & Laine, 2017; Islam et al., 2018; Andrew & Baker, 2020; Perkiss et al., 2021; Islam et al., 2021; Twyford et al. 2022; Islam & Van Staden, 2022; Ferry & Slack, 2022; Ahmad et al., 2022). While this growing research is qualitative and rich in understanding the nature of counter accounts and their emancipatory roles (for example, Gallhofer et al., 2006) and transformative potential (for example, Vinnari & Laine, 2017), it has generally overlooked empirical investigation into how counter accounts, such as protest narratives, impact corporate disclosure, transparency and accountability practices. It is emphasized that despite this body of research, it is a significant challenge for qualitative research to establish a systematic link between counter

⁷ In supporting quantitative analysis, Patten (2015) argued that despite criticism by some researchers, there is a place for quantitative analysis in the social and environmental accounting/disclosure research and critical accounting research which can arguably play emancipatory roles to truly understand and ultimately, improve corporate transparency and disclosures. Our choice of the Gramscian notion and a quantitative method to explain corporate traceability disclosures, is in line with Patten’s argument. Patten (2015) puts forward the view that ‘it is crucial for all of us to engage with all kinds of analyses (multiple approaches)’ (p. 48) in order to add meaningfully to social and environmental accounting and disclosure literature. Patten calls on future researchers to investigate corporate disclosures beyond the saturated arguments for firm size, industry affiliation, profitability etc. as explanatory factors and focus on unique situations/contexts that will allow them to explore factors that create or mitigate corporate legitimization concerns in a way not found and theorised previously. Our research responds to this call.

⁸ See for example, Lee’s (2007) application of the Gramscian notion using quantitative analysis. We find Lee’s approach interesting, not only because it was based on the Gramscian perspective, but also because of the way he applied this perspective in a quantitative setting.

accounts and corporate accounts (accountability and/or transparency narratives). We argue that quantitative research is well placed to investigate the systematic relationship between counter accounts and particular transparency or disclosure practices. Furthermore, the literature on counter accounting has not yet investigated image-based protests as a counter account or as a social movement tactic. Accordingly, we conduct a systematic and quantitative investigation into the influence of anti-sweatshop campaign images as a form of counter accounts on traceability disclosure practices by global fashion retailers.

3.2. Image-based protests as a social movement tactic

Images in general have received attention in accounting research. For example, early research by Preston et al. (1996) investigated visual images within corporate annual reports and argued that annual report images can be seen in different ways which can encourage critical dialogues about their ideological content. Images can also reveal structures of social classification, institutional forms and relationships and create different types of human subjectivities and realities. Preston and Young (2000) investigated the constructive potential of images as part of the media scape of annual reports and found that through pictures in the annual reports, corporations constructed themselves as global entities. Benschop and Meihuizen (2002) investigated representations of gender in corporate annual reports and found that the images in the reports contribute to the gendering of organisations. Furthermore, Dimnik and Felton (2006) examined the accountant's image in popular cinema over time and found an increase in the representation of females and ethnic minorities as CPAs and CAs. As movie accountants, CPAs and CAs are more likely to be viewed as heroes than any other stereotype. Interestingly, Parker and Jeacle (2019) used historical photo/image-elicitation as a research method to explore how accounting records that emerged in the US during the late 19th and early 20th centuries created new modes of domination, disciplinary power and surveillance within the office. There is a lack of research in accounting that consider images as a stakeholder tool to challenge oppression, social inequality and the lack of transparency and traceability of corporations. Our focus is image-based protests about labour conditions and sweatshops. We follow the age-old adage and argue that 'a picture paints a thousand words' (see image 1 as an example).

3.3. Hypotheses

The Gramscian perspective (Gramsci, 1971; Lee, 2007) and the social movement literature (King, 2008; Briscoe et al., 2015; Soule & King, 2006) show that SMOs have the power of

building organising capacities to challenge mainstream assumptions and norms, and to articulate pro-people ideology. Their actions can hold states and corporations to account for their irresponsible actions, such as human rights negligence and adverse working conditions. Prior research in different fields of social science documented the ideological orientation of policy makers that influenced different institutional and policy changes through social movement activism (Bowler et al. 2006; Ha, 2012; Fielding et al., 2012; Federico et al. 2017). In line with this research and the Gramscian notion of ideological social movements, we argue that the actions (protests, boycotts, etc.) of labour rights activists are an important factor to create corporate social transparency and traceability. We focus on one such action, image-based protests and offer the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Image-based protests by anti-sweatshop campaigners influence the provision of traceability disclosures by global fashion retailers.

Image 1: The deadly Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh



<caption> Corpses laid out after recovery from the rubble of Rana Plaza, which collapsed on 24 April 2013. Photo: Rahul Talukder, *The Daily Star* (leading Bangladeshi newspaper) (Islam et al., 2021, Fig 1, p.6).

To develop our second hypothesis, we argue that the use of protest images focusing on particular locations enhance activism and traceability demands.⁹ We therefore argue that if protests and related images focus on factories of suppliers located in countries with a record of extreme violations of workers' rights, the legitimacy crisis for fashion retailers involved in sourcing products from suppliers in these countries will be higher. That is, public demand for production traceability from fashion retailers appear to be higher if activists protest against them (concerned retailers) and highlight image(s) of inhumane working conditions in supply factories located in countries that have records of high labour violations. Anti-sweatshop campaigners and global trade union bodies often highlight and document the worst countries for workers' rights. For example, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) publishes the Global Rights Index report annually which shows the ten worst countries for workers' rights.¹⁰ We therefore argue that the geographic location highlighted by the protest-images matters (Oliver & Myers, 1999) and accordingly we have developed the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: Image-based protests against global fashion retailers by anti-sweatshop campaigners, highlighting production facilities located in the worst countries for workers' rights, has a bigger influence on the provision of traceability disclosures by those retailers.

4. Method

We focus on the production traceability disclosures within the supply chains of the world's largest fashion and clothing retailers. We primarily rely on the fashion transparency database covering 250 global fashion brands by Fashion Revolution, an NGO which is recognised as the world's largest fashion activism movement, mobilising citizens, brands and policymakers through research, education and advocacy. The brands and retailers included in the index have been chosen on the basis of their annual turnover, which should be over \$400 million USD,¹¹ and represent a spread of market segments including high street, luxury, sportswear, accessories, footwear and denim, from across Europe, North America, South America, Asia and Africa. The 2020 index ranks 250 of the world's largest fashion brands and retailers

⁹ It is apparent that social activists adopt a particular tactic or a mix of tactics to reflect the balance of their ideological adherence and enhance their effectiveness and survival over time (Meyer, 2004) and our research focus on the use of protest images highlighting sweatshops in particular geographic locations within global supply chains.

¹⁰ Their reports rank the worst countries for workers' rights, which includes brutal repression to silence protesters and the murder of trade unionists (ITUC, 2019).

¹¹ The turnover range of the companies in our sample is US\$532mil – US\$523,964mil.

while the 2019 index includes 200. We collected the traceability and transparency scores for the 250 (200) brands giving us 450 brand-year observations. While Fashion Revolution has documented their data brand-wise and not company-wise, we converted their data to company-wise by connecting the brands with the companies (retailers) owning the brands. We identified approximately 150 companies for a two-year period, 2019-2020 (i.e., 300 company-year observations) – i.e., some retail companies own more than one fashion brand. We had to do this conversion as we relied on other databases (protest images, financial data, ESG data) which are only available on a company basis.¹² In addition to the Fashion Revolution database, we used a wide range of data sources including annual reports, documents and websites of respective SMOs, and the Thomson Reuters Eikon database – see Table 1 for a description of the variables and the data sources. We could not collect data on the control variables for all the companies due to the data not being available in the databases that we used. When we collect the financial control variables (Size, ROA, Leverage and Tobin’s Q) our sample drops to 260 (company-year) observations. When we then collect the non-financial control variables (Env&Soc, IndDir, FemDir, CSRCom, Dir Ten), our sample drops to 155 (company-year) observations.¹³ We also collected country level data to support our analysis.

4.1. Dependent variable –Traceability disclosure measure (*Traceability*)

We use supply chain traceability information disclosed by global fashion retailers as a measure of the dependent variable, i.e., the scores of the Fashion Transparency Index as compiled and published by the Fashion Revolution (<https://www.fashionrevolution.org/>). As mentioned, The Fashion Revolution is the world’s largest fashion activism movement, and they are working globally towards systemic reform of the fashion industry with a focus on transparency.¹⁴ We consider the traceability data produced by Fashion Revolution as unique and most interesting for our research. In fact, this is the only known and available database that produces traceability scores systematically for the world’s largest clothing companies.

¹² That is, financial, ESG and governance data is not available by brand.

¹³ We do report some information (i.e., descriptives, correlation and regression) using the full sample of 450 observations to support our main results.

¹⁴ Before we decided to use the transparency database by Fashion Revolution, a member of the research team interviewed a representative from the Fashion Revolution twice and they confirmed that the organisation is not funded by any fashion retailers or corporate bodies and their transparency database is independent of any kind of corporate influence. In another related project, one of the co-authors of this paper interviewed 22 civil society and activist groups based in the USA and EU, and found that unlike some other civil society groups, Fashion Revolution produces its transparency database independently and in collaboration with academic researchers prominent on labour rights issues.

Fashion Revolution's traceability and transparency database uses a methodology which was designed during 2017 through an extensive consultative process and input from of a diverse group of industry experts and stakeholders from academia, the trade union movement, civil society organisations, socially responsible investment, business consulting and the media. Academics and researchers from universities including (but not limited to) Penn State University, the University of Exeter, and the University of London were consulted to develop the methodology for the database.

The Fashion Revolution has purposely chosen to focus on transparency through public disclosure. If the information disclosed by fashion retailers is publicly available, detailed, and specific enough, it can be used by various stakeholders, including worker representatives, anti-sweatshop campaigners, environmental groups, investors, consumers, and policy makers, to trace factory conditions and production processes and to drive positive change on human rights and environmental issues (Fashion Revolution, 2020). Fashion Revolution looks for public transparency and disclosure, not only on the policies, guidelines, procedures and governance of retailers, but also for meaningful disclosure of progress, results, outcomes and impacts across the business and its supply chains (Fashion Revolution, 2020).

The Fashion Transparency Index uses a ratings methodology to benchmark the public disclosures made by brands and retailers across five key areas: Policy and Commitments (social and environmental policy and commitments), Governance, Traceability (supply chain traceability), Know, show and fix (i.e., supply chain due diligence and remediation), and Spotlight issues (i.e., working conditions, consumption, product/material composition and climate). The Index covers a wide range of social and environmental topics such as animal welfare, biodiversity, chemicals, climate, due diligence, forced labour, freedom of association, gender equality, living wages, purchasing practices, supplier disclosure, waste and recycling, working conditions, etc. While an overall score is calculated using a weighting for the five key areas based on 250 datapoints, we use the supply chain traceability score in our main analysis.¹⁵ We use the 2020 and 2019 scores. The scores are expressed as a percentage (i.e., out of 100). Higher scores indicate more comprehensive information disclosure, while lower scores indicate the opposite.

The supply chain traceability score focusses on whether brands are publishing lists of their suppliers and what level of detail brands/retailers are disclosing about suppliers'

¹⁵ We use the overall (transparency) score as a robustness test.

locations, productions and working conditions. This covers the following key disclosures, based on 79 datapoints:

- Disclosures on the factories where clothes are made, often referred to as the first-tier or tier 1 manufacturers - in other words, the facilities with which brands have a direct relationship and typically do the cutting, sewing and final trims of products.
- Disclosures on the processing facilities further down the supply chain, i.e., knitting, weaving and spinning mills, wet processing, embroidering, printing and finishing, dye-houses, tanneries, laundries, and so on.
- Disclosures on the suppliers of raw materials, i.e., primary materials such as fibres, hides, rubber, chemical and metals and if brands disclose information about tracing at least one raw material supply chain such as leather, cotton, down, or wool.
- Disclosure of information about suppliers including: Address of the facility; Types of products/services made in each supplier facility; Approximate number of workers; Gender-disaggregated breakdown of workers at each site; Percentage of migrant or contract workers; If the facility has a trade union; If the facility has an independent worker committee; Name of parent company; Business relationships between facilities at different levels of the supply chain; If supplier list was updated within the last six months.

4.2. Explanatory variables:

4.2.1. Anti-sweatshop protest images (Protest_Images)

We rely on protest images largely produced by anti-sweatshop activists against global fashion retailers. To document relevant images, we relied upon the google search tool (google image), anti-sweatshop activists and trade justice organisations' websites (including their annual reports and press releases on campaign activities), documents and data on campaign activities stored by the Business and Human Rights Research Centre (BHRRC), and the news media via the Dow Jones Factiva database. We considered images that contain workers and/or campaign groups protesting against brands/retailers for the non-payment of wages, use of child labour, harassment, gender violence, forcing workers to not organise protests and forcing workers to not join trade unions, and so on.¹⁶ For the images, we focussed on and reviewed, website information of anti-sweatshop and trade justice organisations, including (but not limited to): the Clean Clothes Campaign, Labour Behind the Label, Traidcraft

¹⁶ For example, images of workers' working in poor conditions, workers' protests in front of supply factories, campaigners' protests in the streets in front of high street brands.

Exchange (now Transform Trade), BHRRC, No Sweats, the Worker-driven social Responsibility Network, the Fashion Roundtable, HRW, Remake, and the Workers' Rights Consortium. Many of these organisations work closely with trade union leaders, workers and local NGOs in the global South, where most of the clothing and fashion products are produced.

Image 2: Protest image

Zara RESPECT-ing its workers?
An investigation

Highlighting the need for transparency, SKC financially supported an investigation by the CCC-Switzerland partner, Public Eye, and others, tracing the production of Zara's R.E.S.P.E.C.T. hoodie, to see if the brand practices what it preaches and respects workers within its own supply chain. Through persistent efforts to obtain information from Zara on the hoodie's production locations, Public Eye traced the item all the way to factories in Izmir, Turkey. The investigation found workers living on meagre wages and excessive hours, with many also placed in precarious contracts. According to calculations, Zara earned twice as much per hoodie than all the people involved in its production put

together. Despite Zara branding itself as a transparent company that places an utmost importance on its workers' wellbeing, it does not disclose any data on suppliers' wages or purchase prices.

This extensive investigation demonstrated the importance of ensuring transparency, to ensure brands are complying with their own codes of conducts and treating their workers with 'R.E.S.P.E.C.T'.



Source: Clean Clothes Campaign Annual Report 2019 (p.12).

Each source of protest images was cross checked and only those images were considered which had connections with narratives/reports/blogs/press releases or media articles. While individual activist organisations' annual reports, press releases, news articles, and google images were reviewed, if one image was spread over these different social media of communication, we considered it as one image, even though this was used in different places. While such duplication has a media agenda setting effect, it is complex to measure.

Each image documented for this research was counted as 1. Where two different images were found in the same document (such as a news article), this was counted as 2. Image 2 shows an example of a protest image. We collected this information for all 450 brand/year observations in our sample. We lagged this variable by one year and used 2018 protest images for the 2019 traceability score and 2019 protest images for the 2020 traceability scores.

4.2.2. Image-based protests highlighting sweatshops located in the worst countries for workers' rights

We rely on 2018 and 2019 Global Rights Index reports by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) as these reports rank the ten worst countries for workers' rights. The 2018 Global Rights Index report shows the top-10 worst countries for workers' rights as Algeria, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Colombia, Guatemala, Egypt, the Philippines Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey and the 2019 Global Rights Index shows the top-10 worst countries as Algeria, Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Kazakhstan, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Zimbabwe. We split our image-based protest measure between those image-based protests against retailers focussed on the worst countries for workers' rights (*Worst_Country_Images*) and image-based protests against retailers focussed on other countries, that are not the worst countries for workers' rights (*Non-Worst_Country_Images*).

4.3. Control variables

We include control variables as shown in the literature that could influence the voluntary disclosure of information about social issues. We control for past campaign action as retailers /brands that faced campaign action in the past (i.e., before 2018), could be expected to be more willing to make disclosures that could aid traceability and transparency. We use activists' websites, the BHRRC database, and the news media to find information on past sweatshop campaigns against the retailers (brands) and code past campaign action (*Past_Campaigns*) as 1 if protests were present and 0 if not.

We use the Thomson Reuters Eikon database to collect the financial and Env&Soc variables. Past literature has shown that larger companies are more willing to voluntarily disclose social information due to greater visibility and more resources available (Blanc et al. 2017; Cahan et al., 2016). We control for company size using total revenue as our size measure. We use the natural log of total revenue (*Size*) in our analysis to control for concerns

with heteroscedasticity. Profitability can also influence the willingness of companies to disclose social information (De Villiers & Marques, 2016). We use return on assets (*ROA*) as a profitability measure, calculated as the ratio of net income before extraordinary items to total assets (De Villiers & Van Staden, 2011). Companies that have higher leverage face bigger pressures from creditors and are therefore more willing to disclose additional (social) information (Alrazi et al. 2016). We measure leverage (*LEV*) as debt to assets as a percentage. Tobin's Q is a measure of value or future potential (i.e., a measure of the market's assessment of a company's long-term expected growth (Cahan et al., 2016). Companies' long-term value and growth prospects, as shown by Tobin's Q, could influence their willingness to be socially transparent (De Villiers & Van Staden, 2011). We include Tobin's Q (*Tobin's_Q*) in our analysis, calculated as the market value of equity and debt over the book value of total assets.

The literature also shows evidence that social and environmental performance could influence the willingness to disclose social information (Al-Tuwaijri et al., 2004; Cahan et al., 2016) although the direction of the influence is not clear. We include the Environmental and Social scores from Thomson Reuters Eikon as a non-financial performance measure.¹⁷ We calculate the average combined Environmental and Social score (*Env&Soc*) out of 100, with a higher score indicating better (environmental and social) performance.

Conceptualising from the earlier literature, De Villiers et al. (2011) and Chan et al. (2014) suggested that good corporate governance involves promoting ethical and strategic guidance for the company and an environment of transparent disclosure practices. We include four corporate governance measures. Independent directors (*IndDir*) improve the willingness of the board to voluntarily disclose additional information in order to improve transparency (Jizi, 2017). We measure this as the percentage of independent directors on the board. Next, we control for female directors (*FemDir*) which we measure as the percentage of female directors on the board. Having more female directors on the board can have a positive effect on disclosure, both financial and non-financial (Jizi, 2017, Hillman & Dalziel, 2003). Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) committees are deemed to be having a significant influence since many critical decisions and the company's CSR strategies and policies are

¹⁷ Thomson Reuters Eikon (now Refinitiv) describe their Environmental and Social scores as designed to transparently and objectively measure a company's relative environmental and social performance, commitment and effectiveness, across 10 main themes, based on publicly available and auditable data.

made by them (Endrikat et al., 2021). We control for a CSR committee of the board (*CSRCom*) which is a dummy variable indicating if the company has a CSR committee or not (Mohamed Adnan et al., 2018). Longer serving board members will have more experience and familiarity with the company and could therefore be aware of social issues that should be disclosed (De Villiers et al., 2011; Galbreath, 2017). The director tenure (*DirTen*) variable is measured as the average number of years each board member has been on the board.

Cahan et al. (2016) and Ioannou and Serafeim (2012) have shown that CSR disclosures are influenced by country differences. Since the companies in our sample comes from many countries around the world, we include a country variable to control for any country differences that may have influence social disclosure transparency. We use the company head office location to determine the country to which it belongs. We have used the following countries, the USA, the UK, Europe (as a region), Canada and Australasia (*CanAust*), which includes Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and the rest of the world (*RoW*) which includes Asia, India, China and Japan.

Lee (2007) finds (based on the Gramscian perspective) that for countries in which labour unions and union-linked movements achieves a balance of power, this contributes to a shift in the state of the power structure and to better governance and transparent democracy. In line with Lee's argument, we argue that stronger labour unions in a country will influence the traceability of companies' supply chain information and we control for this influence in our analysis. For the trade union power variable (*TUnion_Power*), we rely on the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) global statistics on trade union membership and trade union density. We use their country level trade union density rate to measure trade union power. The trade union density rate ranges from 0 to 100%, the higher the rate in a country, the stronger the trade union density in that country.

We also include the Corruption Perception index by Transparency International as a transparency measure (*Transparency*). It is expected that companies based in countries with better public sector/government transparency (i.e., less corruption) will have higher levels of corporate traceability. The scores range 0 to 100 - the higher the value, the higher the country-level transparency (i.e., less corruption). We add a country level Press Freedom variable from Reporters without borders (*Press_Freedom*) (Cahan et al., 2016). The values range from 0 to 100, the higher the value, the higher the press freedom. Companies located in a country with higher press freedom is expected to be more transparent (Blanc et al., 2017) because

journalists and the press can highlight stakeholders and SMOs campaigning against companies' irresponsibility and also highlight traceability issues in global supply chains.¹⁸

Furthermore, we control for protest images highlighting sweatshops located in the countries with a record of devastating incidents of forced labour – we call these controversial countries, i.e., the most repressive regimes for workers. Our review of the news media (using the Factiva database) and our prior research in the area suggest that two regimes received the highest levels of media and public attention in the global north over the past decade; Bangladesh (Rana Plaza) and China (Uyghur suppression). The Rana Plaza incident in 2014 in Bangladesh that killed more 1100 workers has shaken the whole world and protesters/campaigners until today use images of dead/injured workers as well as collapsed buildings in their anti-sweatshop campaigns. The incident marks the most devastating example of use of forced labour in the corporate history (Islam, 2022) - if workers were not forced to enter damaged buildings, they could have been saved from the collapse (Odhikar, 2013). Another extreme case of forced labour that received global attention in recent times, is China's repression of the Uyghur people in the Xinjiang region of north-western China. There are allegations that garment factories in the Xinjiang region use forced Uyghur labour for producing garments for global retailers (The Guardian, 2020). Given that, we use a variable for measuring protest images highlighting sweatshops located in these countries (*Controversial*): we assign 2 if protest images highlight sweatshops located in both Bangladesh and China (Uyghur); we assign 1, if protest images highlight sweatshops located in Bangladesh or China; and we assign 0 if protest images do not highlight these countries.

Finally, since our data is from two years (2020 and 2019 Traceability Scores), we include a year variable (*Year*) to control for any differences between the two years.

Table 1 show the variable descriptions and data sources.

[Insert Table 1]

4.4. Regression analysis

For the regression analysis we use OLS regression with robust standard errors in order to obtain unbiased standard errors of coefficients under heteroskedasticity. We use the following model:

¹⁸ The corruption index is taken from Transparency International <https://www.transparency.org/>. The Press Freedom measure is taken from *Reporters Without Borders* <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

$$\text{Traceability} = a_1 + B_1\text{Protest_Images} + B_2\text{Past_Campaigns} + B_3\text{Financial control variables} + B_4\text{Non-financial control variables} + B_5\text{Country variables} + B_6\text{Year}$$

Traceability is the traceability scores from the Fashion Transparency Index. *Protest_Images* represent 2018 and 2019 imaged-based protests respectively for the 2019 and 2020 traceability scores and for hypothesis 2 this is split between *Worst_Country_Images* and *Non-Worst_Country_Images*. *Past_Campaigns* control for campaigns in earlier periods (before 2018). Financial control variables are *Size*, *ROA*, *LEV* and *Tobins_Q*. Non-financial control variables are *Env&Soc*, *IndDir*, *FemDir*, *CSRCom*, and *DirTen*. Country variables are the countries where the companies are based (*Europe*, *USA*, *UK*, *CanAust*, *RoW*), *TUnion_Power*, *Transparency*, *Press_Freedom* and *Controversial*.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics are reported in Table 2. The traceability score has a mean of 14.74% and a range of 0 – 82%. The average score was 16% for 2020 and 12% for 2019 according to the Fashion Transparency Index documents (Fashion Revolution, 2020, 2019), the mean of our sample therefore sits between these. The anti-sweatshop campaign image variable (*Protest_Images*) has a mean of 3.35 and a range of 0 – 10.¹⁹ 64% of the companies/brands faced past campaigns. The average company size in terms of Revenue (Turnover) is US\$30,395mil, ranging from US\$532mil to US\$523,964mil. This is expected as the companies need to have revenues above US\$400mil to be rated in the fashion transparency index. Sample companies have a mean ROA of 6, LEV of 23.36%, and Tobin's_Q of 2.15. The companies have a mean Env&Soc score of 63.43%. The companies have on average 68.45% independent directors and 32.99% female directors and an average director tenure of 8.85 years. 77% of the companies have a CSR committee.

Panel B shows the country level descriptives. The mean for the trade union power variable is 16.13, suggesting a relatively low level of trade union power. The mean transparency for the countries in the sample is 71.48, while the mean press freedom is 76.55%. 36% of the protest images represent protests in controversial countries. Furthermore,

¹⁹ The mean for *Traceability* based on 450 brand-year observations (i.e., 300 company-year observations) is 14.29 (0 – 82) and the mean for *Campaigns* based on 450 observations is 2.18 (0 – 10). Informally this indicates that the missing variables that reduces the sample size to 155 (from 450) is missing at random (MAR), i.e., the events that lead to any particular data-item being missing occur entirely at random and the missing items can be accounted for by variables for which there is complete information – see also Footnote 20 and 21.

most companies are from the USA, followed by Europe and the UK, with some companies from Canada and Australasia, and the Rest of the World making up countries with very few observations per country. There are 84 observations from 2020 and 71 from 2019. Overall, there was a good spread of companies across countries and observations across the two years.

[Insert Table 2]

5.2. Correlation analysis

The correlation analysis is shown in Table 3. Protest_Images are highly correlated with Traceability (0.628 at the 1% level of significance). Of the imaged based protests, it is those in worst countries that are significantly related to traceability while those for other countries are not. Past campaigns are also significantly correlated to traceability (0.374 at the 1% level). This shows that the use of sweatshop campaign images by activists are correlated to higher levels of traceability for the brands and companies in our sample. We will investigate this further through means tests and multiple regression analysis.²⁰

For the company financial measures, we note that size is significant (at the 5% level) while Tobin's Q is significantly (at the 1% level) correlated to traceability, while ROA and Lev are not significant. The Env&Soc measure is significantly correlated to higher traceability (at the 1% level). Independent directors (at the 5% level) and CSR committees (at the 1% level) are significantly correlated with traceability, while female directors and director tenure are not significant. In terms of the country variables, trade union power is not significantly correlated with traceability, while transparency and image-based protests focused on controversial countries are significantly correlated with traceability. None of the individual countries are significantly correlated with traceability. Neither is the year variable.

The multiple significant correlations with the dependent variable (Traceability) is a motivation for doing regression analysis to include these influences at the same time and thereby controlling for these influences while observing the effect of our independent variables. Furthermore, the correlation analysis shows that we do not have multi-collinearity concerns if we use these variables in the same model, i.e., correlations between the independent and the control variables are correlated at R of less than 0.65.

[Insert Table 3]

²⁰ When using all the observations (450), Protest_Images are correlated at 0.626 (sig at the 1% level) with Traceability.

5.3. Means comparison

In Table 4 we report the results of a means comparison using an independent samples t-test to compare companies with high traceability (62) with companies with low traceability (93), using the mean of traceability as the cut-off. Companies/brands with higher traceability faced significantly higher imaged-based protests (at the 1% level). Those with higher traceability faced significantly more protests in worst countries for workers' rights (at the 1% level). Past sweatshop campaigns were also significantly higher (at the 1% level) for companies with high traceability. Companies with high traceability are also on average significantly bigger and have a higher Tobin's Q (at the 1% level). Companies with high traceability have significantly higher Env&Soc scores (at the 1% level). These companies also have significantly more independent directors (at the 5% level) and on average significantly more likely to have a CSR Committee (at the 1% level). Higher traceability companies are based in countries with better transparency and higher press freedom, but they don't face different levels of trade union power. Furthermore, those with protests associated with controversial countries had higher traceability. Being head-officed in a certain country made no difference and the year (i.e., whether 2019 or 2020 data) made no difference.

The t-test of means therefore shows significant differences in our variable of interest (image-based protests) and the control variables for companies that have higher levels of traceability as shown by the traceability score, compared to companies with lower levels of traceability. However, this bi-variate analysis does not show how the variables may influence each other when considered together in the same model. We consider this in the next section where we discuss the regression analysis.

[Insert Table 4]

5.4. Regression analysis

We show the regression analysis in Table 5. Model 1 shows that Protest_Images are highly significant at the 1% level related to traceability. This suggests that imaged-based protests are effective in improving the traceability disclosures by the fashion companies about their supply chains. This supports hypothesis 1. Model 2 show that image-based protests in the worst countries for human rights are significantly related to traceability, while image-based protests in other countries are not. This supports hypothesis 2.

The control variables reveal that ROA is significant (at the 5% level) and negative, i.e., companies with high traceability have lower profitability. Tobin's Q is positive and

significant at the 1% level. The Env&Soc measure is significant at the 5% level, i.e., traceability is related to higher levels of Env&Soc. Of the corporate governance measures, CSR Committee and director tenure are significant (and positive) at the 5% level. Of the country variables, trade union power and country level transparency are significant at the 1% level.

[Insert Table 5]

Since we have lagged the Protest_Images variables by one year, i.e., we use the 2019 Protest_Images against the 2020 traceability scores and the 2018 Protest_Images against the 2019 traceability scores, we propose that the traceability disclosures result from the image-based protests (that is, data on the Protest_Images precedes data on traceability and hence traceability cannot have a causal effect on Protest_Images). The regression analysis therefore supports our expectation that the Protest_Images influenced the fashion brand companies to be more transparent about their supply chains.²¹ Our results are therefore consistent with social movement theory (Soule & King, 2006; King, 2008) and the Gramscian perspective of social movements (Gramsci, 1971; Lee, 2007) in that protest images used by anti-sweatshop campaign groups, as extra-institutional pressure, influence global fashion retailers' traceability disclosures.

In further analysis, we use the log of traceability (our dependent variable) to overcome any heteroskedasticity in the regression residuals using a log plus 1 conversion. When we run the models with the natural log of Traceability as dependent variable, our results are qualitatively the same. i.e., Protest_Images and Worst-Country_Images are highly significant and positively related to Traceability and the same control variables (i.e., ROA, Tobin's Q, Env&Soc, CSR Committee Director tenure, and Transparency) remain significant. Trade Union Power is not significant in this analysis. As a robustness test, we do the analysis with the overall transparency score (see 4.1) – see Appendix B. Our results are qualitatively the same in that Protest_Images remain significant at the 1% level (coefficient 1.619) and the variables that were significant in the main analysis, remain so at the same levels and in the same direction. However, trade union power is not significant anymore. This suggests that trade union power significantly influences traceability disclosures, but not transparency.

²¹ We also run our regression excluding the limiting control variables (i.e., Size, ROA, LEV, Tobin's Q, ESG, IndDir, FemDir, CSRCom, DirTen - this gives n = 445) and we find that our results hold – Protest_Images remains significant at the 1% level (coefficient of 3.250).

6. Conclusion

Traceability is an important transparency issue for global fashion and clothing retailers as they move their production locations to the global south. In the past, retailers were reluctant to disclose factory or production location information as this was perceived to be commercially sensitive information and they might lose competitive advantage if they disclose where exactly their products were produced. The sustained protests by social movement and labour rights organisations over time and their present demand for traceability of production locations and processes within global supply chains has now created a unique context of corporate responsiveness. However, how particular labour rights SMOs and their tactics (such as protests) influence the disclosure of traceability information regarding the supply chains by big fashion retailers, has not yet been examined and theorised.

By relying on the 2019 and 2020 traceability scores from the global campaign group, Fashion Revolution, for more than 150 fashion retailers, we investigate the role that a specific social movement tactic, i.e., image-based anti-sweatshop protests, played with respect to corporate disclosures regarding supply chain traceability. We find that image-based protests lead to more explicit traceability disclosures. In particular, we find that retailers are more responsive via traceability disclosures, when protests highlight sweatshops located in the worst countries for workers' rights. We also find that trade union power influence traceability disclosures.²² We argue that our findings are original and offers new insights within the accounting literature by offering a deeper understanding of the disclosure differences in relation to traceability.

Our research contributes to the transparency literature within the accounting field (Islam & Van Staden, 2018; Guo et al., 2022) and beyond by specifically looking at traceability, a transparency issue, that accounting research hardly addressed before. By embracing social movement theory (King, et al., 2007; Soule & King, 2006; King, 2008; Briscoe et al., 2015) and building on ideological notions in line with the Gramscian perspective (Gramsci, 1971), we offer new insights into the role of a specific social movement tactic, protest images, to create a new form of corporate transparency, i.e., traceability. We also contribute to the counter account literature (Ahmad et al., 2022; Andrew & Baker, 2020; Vinnari & Laine, 2017; Lehman et al., 2016) and the accounting literature focusing on images, pictures, and photographs (Preston et al., 1996; Dimnik & Felton, 2006)

²² Interestingly, trade union power does not influence the overall transparency measure, see the robustness test (Appendix B), but it does influence traceability. This could be showing that traceability is an important issue for trade unions.

by providing original insights into how image-based protests, as counter accounts are used by SMOs to influence disclosure and traceability practices by global fashion retailers.

As the issue of traceability is an ongoing global concern (i.e., the EU and North America are considering regulations on due diligence specifically with regards to the traceability issue), our research has practical implications. As SMOs have the power to create change in corporate social transparency, regulators in democratic countries need to understand and acknowledge this influence and the role of continued surveillance by SMOs of sweatshop practices within global supply chains. If regulators want better results on traceability issues, they should encourage more activism against the irresponsible practices of fashion retailers.

Our study focusses on factual traceability disclosures (for example, disclosure of factory addresses should be objective and factual because disclosure of false addresses in the public domain could easily be caught by activists), and therefore we argue that better (more explicit) disclosures on traceability may lead to improved corporate social transparency. However, like any other study, our study is not free from limitations. We use hand-collected data for some of our variables - this is a time-consuming task. This resulted in a sample size that is not large by some standards, but adequate for our purposes, in that our sample size compares well to research relying on hand collected data to investigate CSR disclosures (i.e., Al-Tuwaijri. et al. (2004) have a sample of 198, De Villiers and Van Staden (2011) have a sample of 120, and Islam and Van Staden (2018) have a sample of 139). We encourage further research to explore transparency and traceability within the different industries.

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Tables

Table 1: Variable descriptions

Variable	Designation	Description/calculation	Source
Traceability Score	Traceability	The traceability score (out of 100) as calculated by Fashion Revolution.	Fashion Revolution 2020 and 2019 Fashion Transparency Index documents
Imaged based protest	Protest_Images	Anti-sweatshop protest images produced by anti-sweatshop activists against global fashion retailers (during 2018 and 2019)	Google search tool (google image), activists' websites (including their annual reports and press releases on campaign activities), narratives/data on campaign activities stored in the BHRRC database, and the news media
Geographic location of image-based protests	Worst_Country_Images Non-Worst_Country_Images	Anti-sweatshop protest images in the worst countries for workers' rights. Anti-sweatshop protest images in other countries	Worst countries for workers' rights as per the 2018 and 2019 Global Rights Index report by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)
Past campaigns	Past_Campaigns	Dummy variable indicating of there had been past (before 2018) sweatshop campaigns against the brand/company or not	Activists' websites and the Business and Human Rights Research Centre, and the news media
Size measure - total revenue	Size	The natural log of total revenue	Thomson Reuters Eikon
Performance measure ROA	ROA	Net profit as a percentage of total assets	Thomson Reuters Eikon
Leverage	LEV	Debt to Assets as a percentage	Thomson Reuters Eikon
Performance measure Tobin's Q	Tobin's_Q	Market value of equity and debt over book value of total assets	Thomson Reuters Eikon
Environmental and Social score	Env&Soc	Score shows to what extent company has addressed Environmental and Social issues. As calculated by the Thomson Reuters Eikon ESG database. Out of 100.	Thomson Reuters Eikon
Independent directors	IndDir	Percentage of independent directors on the board	Thomson Reuters Eikon
Female Directors	FemDir	Percentage of female directors on the board	Thomson Reuters Eikon
CSR Committee	CSRCom	Dummy variable indicating if there is CSR board committee or not	Thomson Reuters Eikon
Director Tenure	DirTen	The average number of years the directors have been on the board	Thomson Reuters Eikon

Table 1 – Continued

Variable	Designation	Description/calculation	Source
Country variable	Europe USA UK CanAust RoW	Number of companies with head office in the various countries	Fashion Revolution 2020 and 2019 Fashion Transparency Index and searches for head office locations
Trade Union Power	TUnion_Power	Measure of trade union membership and trade union density	International Labour organisation's (ILO) global statistics on trade union membership and trade union density
Corruption Perception index	Transparency	The Corruption Perception index - scores range 0 to 100 - the higher the value, the higher the country-level transparency	Transparency International
Press freedom	Press_Freedom	Press Freedom variable. The values range from 0 to 100, the higher the value, the higher the press freedom.	Reporters without borders
Protest images in countries with devastating incidents of forced labour and abusive treatment of workers, i.e., total disregard of workers' rights – we call these controversial countries	Controversial	Protest images highlighting sweatshops located in the countries with the most repressive regimes for workers.	We assign 2 if protest images highlight sweatshops located in both Bangladesh and China (Uyghur); we assign 1, if protest images highlight sweatshops located in Bangladesh or China; and we assign 0 if protest images do not highlight these countries.
Year variable	Year	Dummy variable indicating if the observation is from 2020 or not.	Fashion Revolution 2020 and 2019 Fashion Transparency Index

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

Panel A - Variables	N	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Std. Deviation
Traceability	155	14.74	0.00	82.00	19.44
Protest_Images	155	3.35	0.00	10.00	4.08
Worst_Country_Images	155	2.71	0.00	10.00	4.06
Non-Worst_Country_Images	155	0.65	0.00	10.00	1.92
Past_Campaigns	155	0.64	0.00	1.00	0.48
Size	155	15.98	13.18	20.08	1.46
ROA	155	6.00	-36.04	28.30	8.48
LEV	155	23.36	0.00	72.16	17.49
Tobin's_Q	155	2.15	0.00	13.71	2.22
Env&Soc	155	63.43	2.21	96.02	24.47
IndDIR	155	68.45	0.00	91.67	18.12
FemDir	155	32.99	0.00	64.29	14.33
CSRCom	155	0.77	0.00	1.00	0.42
DirTen	155	8.85	2.09	25.46	3.98
Size in \$	155	30,385	532	523,964	84,100

Panel B – Country and year					
TUnion_Power	155	16.13	8.90	44.20	7.80
Transparency	155	71.48	39.00	87.00	8.77
Press_Freedom	155	76.55	21.00	91.00	5.97
Controversial	155	0.36	0.00	1.00	0.55
		<u>Count</u>			
USA		66			
Europe		36			
UK		25			
Canada & Australasia		11			
Rest of the World		17			
Total		<u>155</u>			
2020		84			
2019		71			
Total		<u>155</u>			

Notes: All variables have been defined in Table 2. Size in \$ (Revenue) is in millions of US dollars. For Past_Campaigns (median = 1.00) and CSRCom (median = 1.00) the value in the mean column is the proportion of those coded as 1. In all further analysis, the natural log of the size measure (Size) is used.

Table 3: Correlation analysis

Panel A	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 Traceability	1												
2 Protest_Images	0.628**	1											
3 Worst_Country_Images	0.632**	0.888**	1										
4 Non-Worst_Country_Images	-0.001	0.247**	-0.226**	1									
5 Past_Campaigns	0.374**	0.535**	0.438**	0.211**	1								
6 Size	0.195*	0.378**	0.371**	0.020	0.387**	1							
7 ROA	-0.049	0.206*	0.191*	0.033	0.064	0.169*	1						
8 LEV	-0.032	-0.090	-0.179*	0.186*	0.071	0.038	-0.306**	1					
9 Tobin's_Q	0.278**	0.238**	0.241**	-0.004	0.196*	0.059	0.584**	-0.127	1				
10 Env&Soc	0.341**	0.464**	0.433**	0.069	0.425**	0.593**	0.090	0.236**	0.098	1			
11 IndDIR	0.195*	0.218**	0.214**	0.010	0.035	-0.058	0.124	-0.151	0.043	-0.088	1		
12 FemDir	-0.095	-0.056	-0.065	0.018	0.019	0.009	0.092	0.244**	0.038	0.198*	0.205*	1	
13 CSRCom	0.363**	0.324**	0.286**	0.085	0.268**	0.290**	-0.017	0.123	0.151	0.600**	-0.002	0.220*	1
14 DirTen	-0.011	0.077	0.060	0.035	-0.060	0.059	0.107	-0.270**	-0.117	-0.233**	0.071	-0.353**	-0.445**
15 TUnion_Power	-0.001	-0.201*	-0.198*	-0.009	-0.015	-0.222**	-0.101	0.328**	0.131	-0.064	-0.292**	-0.080	0.100
16 Transparency	0.215**	0.054	0.009	0.096	0.195*	0.092	-0.143	0.035	0.030	-0.043	0.076	-0.109	0.056
17 Press_Freedom	0.064	0.065	0.065	0.002	0.096	0.023	0.128	0.137	0.141	0.210**	0.111	0.172*	0.211**
18 Controversial	0.469**	0.556**	0.618**	-0.125	0.426**	0.270**	-0.046	-0.056	0.045	0.276**	0.265**	0.060	0.245**
19 Europe	-0.108	0.038	0.066	-0.058	0.032	0.130	0.077	0.090	0.054	0.402**	-0.382**	0.313**	0.187*
20 USA	0.035	0.127	0.126	0.003	-0.113	-0.034	0.086	-0.369**	-0.143	-0.298**	0.607**	-0.015	-0.315**
21 UK	0.072	-0.056	-0.107	0.109	0.220**	0.016	-0.120	0.194*	-0.008	-0.053	-0.192**	-0.063	0.111
22 CanAust	0.069	-0.024	-0.017	-0.014	0.051	-0.079	0.115	0.199*	0.270**	-0.014	0.204*	0.096	0.089
23 RoW	-0.052	-0.168*	-0.148	-0.043*	-0.166*	-0.076	-0.193*	0.071	-0.058	0.003	-0.385**	-0.403**	0.041
24 Year	0.116	0.007	-0.056	0.134	-0.045	-0.013	-0.251**	0.240**	-0.102	0.075	0.127	0.128	0.123

Table 3 - Continued

	Panel B	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
14	DirTen	1										
15	TUnion_Power	-0.314	1									
16	Transparency	-0.181**	-0.197*	1								
17	Press_Freedom	-0.145	-0.075	0.437**	1							
18	Controversial	-0.032	-0.088	0.136	0.007	1						
19	Europe	-0.119	0.012	-0.280**	0.247**	-0.141	1					
20	USA	0.426**	-0.646**	-0.048	-0.233**	0.172*	-0.474**	1				
21	UK	-0.359**	0.410**	0.427**	0.060	-0.001	-0.241**	-0.378**	1			
22	CanAust	-0.133	0.252**	0.315**	0.388**	0.047	-0.152	-0.238**	-0.121	1		
23	RoW	0.019	0.317**	-0.308**	-0.355**	-0.119	-0.193*	0.302**	-0.154	-0.097	1	
24	Year	0.003	0.014	0.030	-0.083	-0.032	-0.046	-0.020	-0.055	0.153	0.033	1

Note: Pearson correlation. All variables have been defined in Table 2. ** and * show correlation significant at the 1% and 5% levels respectively. For non-continuous variables, Pearson correlation gives an approximation only.

Table 4: Means comparisons

	Traceability high	Traceability low	t-stat
	(N = 62)	(N = 93)	
	Mean	Mean	
Protest_Images	6.74	1.10	10.423***
Worst_Country_Images	5.95	0.55	9.164***
Non-Worst_Country_Images	0.79	0.55	0.741
Past_Campaigns	0.87	0.48	5.734***
Size	16.48	15.65	3.691***
ROA	6.70	5.54	0.792
LEV	22.75	23.76	-0.357
Tobin's_Q	2.81	1.71	2.740***
Env&Soc	74.96	55.75	5.506***
IndDir	72.00	66.08	2.169**
FemDir	31.46	34.01	-1.165
CSRCom	0.98	0.63	6.627***
DirTen	8.67	8.96	-0.480
TUnion_Power	15.99	16.22	-0.189
Transparency	73.65	70.04	2.690***
Press_Freedom	77.56	75.87	1.874**
Controversial	0.61	0.19	4.623***
Europe	0.23	0.24	-0.155
USA	0.37	0.46	-1.131
UK	0.23	0.12	1.700
CanAust	0.11	0.04	1.529
RoW	0.06	0.14	-1.571
Year	0.61	0.49	1.455

Note: All variables have been defined in Table 2. *** and ** represent significance at the 1% level and 5% levels respectively, two-tailed. Cut off between high and low traceability is at the mean.

Table 5: Regression analysis with Traceability

	Model 1	Model 2
Protest_Images	2.252***	
Worst_Country_Images		2.706***
Non-Worst_Country_Images		0.707
Past_Campaigns	-2.574	-0.822
Size	-1.330	-1.645
ROA	-0.677**	-0.595**
LEV	-0.085	-0.033
Tobin's_Q	2.877***	2.589***
Env&Soc	0.202**	0.186**
IndDir	0.074	0.063
FemDir	0.023	0.062
CSRCom	6.427**	7.729**
DirTen	0.862**	0.970**
TUnion_Power	0.765***	0.863***
Transparency	0.710***	0.848***
Press_Freedom	-0.148	-0.201
Controversial	2.565	-0.703
USA	4.945	5.324
UK	-3.407	-5.089
Europe	-2.259	-3.441
CanAus	-9.046	-11.780
Year	1.500	2.027
Constant	-55.104	-59.973
N	155	155
Adj R2	0.550	0.578
Model F Stat	10.423***	11.045***

Notes: All variables have been defined in Table 2. *** and ** represent significance at the 1%, and 5% levels respectively, two-tailed. The base country is the RoW, and the base year is 2019. OLS regression using robust standard errors have been used to obtain unbiased standard errors of coefficients under heteroskedasticity.

Appendices

Appendix A - Summary of literature on Traceability (since 2013)

Reference	Contribution	Country context	Industry	Methodology	Study domain
Sarpong (2014)	The paper found that the recent horsemeat scandal in European markets has damaged consumer confidence in the industry's ability to regulate itself. It also Provided some suggested measures to eliminate fraud in the food chain.	European context	Food chain	Analysis of media reports and discussions generated following the scandal	Business studies
Ringsberg (2014)	The author discussed different views on food traceability along with supply chain risk management approaches, using the philosophy of scientific framework and offering suggestions for further research.	Global supply chains	Food industry	Literature review	Systematic literature review
Warner, Mustain, Geren, & Lowell (2016)	The report criticised a proposed traceability rule that was under discussion to trace seafood sold in the U.S, claiming that the rule only regulates a small subset of the seafood consumed by the American public.	US	Seafood supply chain	Theoretical analysis	NGO research report
Bailey, Bush, Miller, & Kochen (2016)	The article argued that traceability could be more equitably and effectively govern sustainability if a shift towards traceability as a real sustainable governance tool takes place. They maintained that, in this case, the broader debate of who should design and fund the systems that facilitate information flows within and beyond global value chains should be addressed.	Global context	Seafood value chain	Theoretical analysis	Environmental studies
Egels-Zandén & Hansson (2016)	The paper examined whether consumers in practice leverage increased supply chain transparency, challenging the prior literature claiming that supply chain transparency is a useful consumer tool. It concluded by debating the policy implications of transparency to increase sales without increased consumer pressure.	Swedish company	Garment sector	Case study (experiment)	Business
Cameron & Stanley (2017)	The authors addressed key challenges to advance transparency in the extractive industries, outlining several transparency initiatives.	Global context	Extractive industries	Theoretical analysis with some illustrative examples	Energy
Kashmanian (2017)	This article examines several aspects that can assist companies in building greater transparency in supply chains, including supply chain mapping, traceability, third-party certification, and goal setting, as well as reporting on their progress towards achieving these efforts. It also introduces examples of companies that are building greater transparency in their supply chains, efforts that also help companies better manage the environmental impacts from their supply chains.	Global context	No specific industry	Theoretical analysis with some illustrative examples	Environmental studies

Appendix A – Continued

Reference	Contribution	Country context	Industry	Methodology	Study domain
Sander, Semeijn, & Mahr (2018)	The paper examined meat traceability by pinpointing varied approaches and views of stakeholders within meat supply chain. It also assesses the potential of blockchain technology as a viable transparency and traceability system. It concluded that consumers are overwhelmed by the amount and complexity of certification labels, and that blockchain technology implementation seems to have substantial positive impact on consumers' purchasing decisions. This study reveals the conflicting perceptions of varied stakeholders when it comes to the significance of a block chain technology as a transparency and tractability system.	Germany, Netherlands, Belgium and Great Britain.	Meat industry	Mixed methods (survey and interviews)	Food studies
Garcia-Torres, Albareda, Rey-Garcia, & Seuring (2019)	This research investigated how companies enact traceability within their global supply chains to attain sustainability goals and how this so-called traceability for sustainability can contribute to (sustainable) supply chain management. It theoretically frames supply chain management exploring traceability for sustainability as a meta-capability, contributing to the question of how to achieve sustainability in global supply chains.	Global context	Apparel industry	Integrative and systematic literature review (content analysis and abductive category-building).	Supply Chain research

Appendix B - Regression analysis with Transparency

	Model 1	Model 2
Protest_Images	1.619***	
Worst_Country_Images		1.793***
Non-Worst_Country_Images		1.023***
Past_Campaigns	-1.231	-0.555
Size	-1.104	-1.225
ROA	-0.397**	-0.365**
LEV	-0.065	-0.045
Tobin's_Q	2.243***	2.132***
Env&Soc	0.363***	0.357***
IndDir	0.090	0.086
FemDir	0.082	0.097
CSRCom	1.171	1.673
DirTen	0.698**	0.740**
TUnion_Power	0.258	0.296
Transparency	0.369**	0.423**
Press_Freedom	-0.183	-0.203
Controversial	3.445	2.185
USA	-2.348	-2.202
UK	2.157	1.508
Europe	2.613	2.158
CanAus	-7.960	-9.014
Year	0.385	0.588
Constant	-17.285	-19.163
N	155	155
Adj R2	0.746	0.750
Model F Stat	23.583***	23.033***

Notes: All variables have been defined in Table 2. *** and ** represent significance at the 1%, and 5% levels respectively, two-tailed. The base country is RoW, and the base year is 2019.