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Supply Chain Transparency and Sustainability

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Supply Chain Transparency and Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

In the past few decades, social and environmental incidents in global supply chains have propelled supply chain transparency to become an increasingly important topic for firms. Multiple stakeholders, including consumers, regulators, investors, and activists, are all exerting pressures to compel or mandate firms to monitor social and environmental practices in their supply chains and disclose the related information to the public. Creating a transparent supply chain requires a firm to both gain visibility into its supply chain and disclose information to external stakeholders. Gaining visibility involves substantial investment of resources by a firm. Disclosing potentially sensitive social or environmental information comes with both risks and benefits. Because of the complexity entailed in both aspects, supply chain transparency becomes an emerging field of study for academic researchers. In this monograph, we examine and discuss the academic literature that investigates both the visibility and

disclosure dimensions of supply chain transparency within the context of social and environmental responsibility. To present a clear picture of the research landscape for the operations management community, we focus our discussions on research from the behavioral and analytical modeling literature. By discussing some of the most representative and emerging studies in this space, we hope to highlight valuable research opportunities and inspire further research on the topic of supply chain transparency.

1

Introduction

In March of 2020, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a think tank established and partially funded by the Australian government, released a report claiming the exploitation of Uyghur and other ethnic minorities in the supply chains of well-known global companies such as Nike, Amazon, H&M, and IKEA.¹ The companies were unaware of the issues occurring in their supply chains and caught off guard by the report. Many of the high-profile companies identified in the report were brought in front of the Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy Committee of the United Kingdom Parliament in November of 2020 to address the claims made against them. Executives from each company addressed questions related to their levels of visibility into their supply chains and their abilities to detect modern slavery (Abdulla, 2020).

This example illustrates the pressures firms are facing to create transparent, socially and environmentally responsible supply chains. However, governments are not the only stakeholders demanding firms to become more transparent. Consumers are increasingly using their purchasing power to pressure firms to be more transparent about where and how the products they offer are being made. Nonprofits and activists

¹<https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale>

such as Fashion Revolution in the apparel industry are scrutinizing firms' efforts by grading and releasing scores that measure firms' levels of transparency.² Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance (ESG) investors are also demanding greater transparency from firms (Norton, 2019). Given the rapid growth that is occurring in ESG investing—by 2026, \$1 in every \$5 invested globally is projected to be ESG based (Michelson, 2022)—the investment community has quickly become an influential force for driving greater transparency in industries as related to social and environmental performance.

Creating a transparent supply chain requires a firm to both (i) gain visibility into its supply chain and (ii) disclose information to external stakeholders. Gaining visibility takes an extensive level of effort and investment of resources by a firm (Doorey, 2011). Disclosing potentially sensitive social or environmental information to stakeholders comes with both risks and benefits. Both dimensions involve a number of complex questions that firms must address. It is because of this complexity that supply chain transparency has become an emerging field of study for academic researchers. In this monograph, we examine and discuss academic literature that investigates both the visibility and disclosure dimensions of supply chain transparency within the context of social and environmental responsibility. In order to present a clear picture of the research landscape for the operations management (OM) community, we focus our discussions on works from the behavioral and analytical modeling literature. Our intent is not to provide an exhaustive review of the related literature. Instead, our primary goal is to discuss some of the most representative and emerging studies in this space, so as to highlight future research directions and inspire more research on supply chain transparency. To streamline the discussion, throughout the monograph, we use the terms “sustainability,” “social and environmental responsibility,” and “corporate social responsibility (CSR)” interchangeably. We also remark that while supply chain transparency is a topic of relevance for many management contexts, we particularly focus on its role in the context of sustainability in this monograph.

²<https://www.fashionrevolution.org/about/transparency/>

The remainder of this monograph is organized as follows. First, we provide a brief background on the topic of supply chain transparency. We then review the behavioral literature on supply chain transparency. This is then followed by a review of the analytical modeling literature that examines transparency-related contexts. Finally, we conclude the monograph by discussing potential future research directions.

A Brief History of Supply Chain Transparency: The rapid globalization of supply chains at the end of the twentieth century resulted in supply chain transparency becoming a top-of-mind issue for many industries. The level of transparency demonstrated by firms has continued to evolve over the last three decades with major high-profile incidents serving as reminders that there is still considerable work to be done for supply chains to truly become transparent. For example, one of the first realizations that greater transparency is needed in supply chains occurred in the 1990s with child labor incidents discovered in the supply chain of a Kathie Lee Gifford clothing brand sold at Walmart and in the supply chain of Nike (Epstein-Reeves, 2010). Both incidents exposed the unforeseen risks and dangers of globalization, and they highlighted the need for greater transparency. While the Kathie Lee Gifford brand was discontinued in large part because of the labor issues revealed, Nike continued to work towards improving conditions in its supply chain throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s. In 2005, as a culmination of its efforts, Nike voluntarily disclosed its supplier list to the public (Associated Press, 2005). At the time, it was rare for well-known brands such as Nike to voluntarily disclose their supply chains (e.g., Nike was the first major apparel brand to do so). This is because before social media and the rapid evolution of the internet, companies often treated their supply chains as trade secrets that they did not want to share with the public or competitors.

While these high-profile incidents raised awareness about the potential risks of global supply chains, firms continued to struggle to monitor and ensure responsible practices in their supply chains. In the early 2010s, two supply chain incidents served as harsh reminders of this lack of progress. In 2010, a string of suicides at Foxconn, a well-known supplier to consumer electronics brands such as Apple and Hewlett-Packard, highlighted the harsh working conditions still present

in supply chains (Barboza, 2010). In 2013, the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh killed over 1,100 people.³ As part of the tragic disaster, many brands were surprised to find their apparel products had been illegally subcontracted to the factory that collapsed. These tragedies revealed how firms still had poor visibility into their supply chains, even in the 2010s. This lack of visibility motivated a number of collaborative monitoring efforts between firms, activists, and governments. For example, after the Rana Plaza collapse, European brands established the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, a legally binding agreement between brands to share the costs and the information needed to improve practices in the Bangladeshi garment and textile industry.⁴

More recently in 2020, the reports of forced Uyghur labor in the supply chains of high-profile global firms received intense scrutiny from governmental and regulatory entities (as previously discussed). In the United States, legislation was passed to ensure firms were not helping to fund forced labor in the region of question.⁵ Incidents such as this helped motivate even stronger measures in the European Union, where countries such as Germany have adopted mandatory human rights due diligence laws that require large companies to prevent, identify, and correct human rights and environmental violations within their direct suppliers' operations.⁶ Increasingly, governments are introducing regulations to enhance their oversight into how firms monitor and operate their supply chains. These new requirements are ushering in a new era in which firms can no longer claim ignorance with respect to what is occurring in their supply chains. That is, supply chain transparency is no longer a nice to have, but instead, it is becoming an expectation and even a requirement for many industries.

³https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/geip/WCMS_614394/lang--en/index.htm

⁴<https://bangladeshaccord.org/>

⁵<https://www.cbp.gov/trade/forced-labor/UFLPA>

⁶<http://bit.ly/germany-human-rights-laws>

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