



Navigating Ethical Crossroads: Unveiling Labor Practices In The Global Fashion Supply Chain - A Case Study Of Zara's Operations In Spain

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Abstract

This research explores labour practices in the global fashion supply chain, focusing on Zara's operations in Spain. The global fashion industry employs millions, yet ethical challenges remain regarding fair wages and working environments. The literature review chapter analysed existing research on ethical labour practices in global supply chains, balancing promising initiatives with exploitative norms and practices. It examined the implications of the fashion supply chain, conveying the friction between ethical brands and fast fashion. The review examined labour practices adopted by companies, including the challenges that come from subcontracting and consumer expectations.

The research has applied a secondary data collection method using a case study strategy to address the aim. The research followed interpretivism philosophy, inductive approach and explanatory design. It has been found that Zara adopted strategies related to labour practices such as due diligence, Workers at the Centre 2022 and a zero-tolerance approach to combat unethical issues in its supply chain. On the other hand, Zara faces ethical issues such as poor working conditions and lack of equitable wages leading the company to face protests by workers. In conclusion, Zara needs significant improvement in their labour practice to strengthen employees' morale and performance. Zara is recommended to integrate blockchain technology into the supply chain, implement worker welfare programs and partner with NGOs and advocacy groups.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Research

Fashion is one of the labour-intensive sectors along with a complex supply chain that stretches across international markets. The fashion industry involves about 75 million factory workers worldwide, yet less than 2% earn a living wage (Earth Day, 2025).

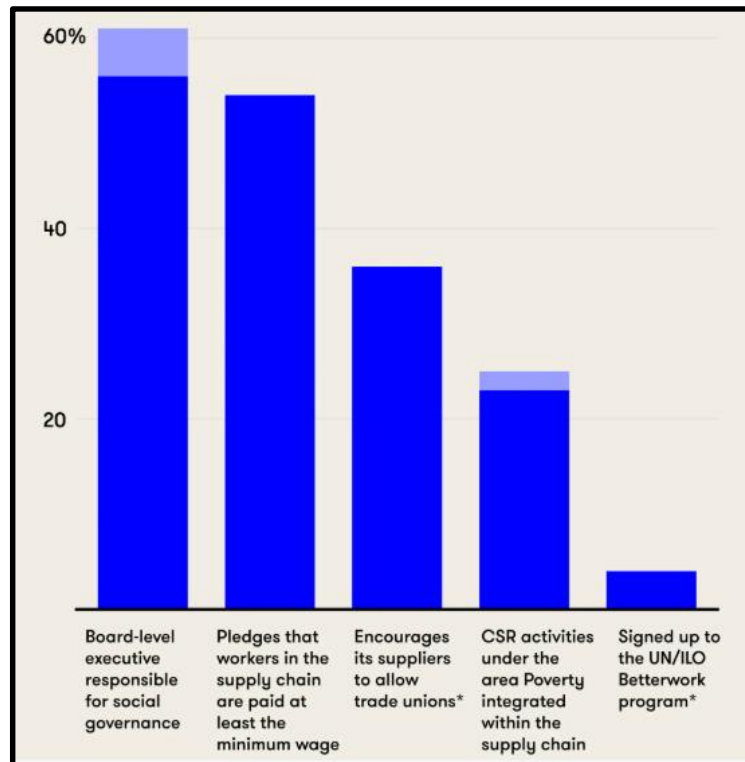


Figure 1.1: Consumer expectations for the fashion industry

Source: (Cernansky, 2021)

Figure 1.1 revealed that, 55% of customers expect fashion brands to treat workers fairly and be transparent on wages and labour rights. However, when employees experience unsafe conditions, low wages, exhausting hours and harassment, it not only affects their performance but also raises customer dissatisfaction (Cernansky, 2021). Zara has more than 2,264 stores across 96 nations and depends on a complex supply chain (Martin Roll, 2021). In Spain, despite strict regulations established by the EU, Zara is criticised for their labour practices (Business News Report, 2021). The research explores ethical issues in the fashion sector by evaluating Zara's labour practices in Spain.

1.2 Rationale of the Research

The major issue is the ethical concerns surrounding labour practices within the fashion supply chain. 93% of fashion brands fail to pay living wages, and 99% of the major brands do not publish the worker's numbers in the supply chain paid a living wage (Darmo, 2023).

This is a critical challenge as Zara emphasises profits over fair compensation. Thus, workers in Spain demanded profit sharing and improved working conditions (Reuters, 2024). Moreover,

the minimum wage in Spain accounts for €1,134 monthly (La Moncloa, 2024). However, Zara workers stated that the pay fails to address the increasing cost of living.

This is also an issue for the current situation due to the rising consumer demand and regulatory demands for more ethical labour practices. In 2023, the Spanish Union influenced Inditex to improve workers' wages, leading to a 20% salary hike. However, there is still a challenge regarding working conditions and subcontracting practices (Pons, 2023).

This study has a rationale to address these ethical issues by highlighting the unethical practices in Zara's labour policies and proposing adequate solutions to promote corporate reputation.

1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Research

Research Aim

The aim of this research is to navigate the ethical crossroads while unveiling labour practices in the global fashion supply chain, focusing on Zara's operations in Spain.

Research Objectives

- To identify Labor-Related practices adopted by Zara in the Supply Chain operation in Spain
- To analyse the challenges faced by Zara related to labour practices in Spain's supply chain
- To recommend potential strategies to maintain ethical labour practices in Spain's supply chain

1.4 Research Questions

- What is the Labor-Related practices adopted by Zara in the Supply Chain operation in Spain?
- What are the challenges faced by Zara related to labour practices in Spain's supply chain?
- How can Zara improve their labour practices in Spain's supply chain to maintain business ethics?

1.5 Significance of the Research

This study has significance as it will focus on ethical labour practices within Zara's supply chain operations in Spain, highlighting key issues related to wages, working environments, and subcontracting. By exploring these areas, the research study will suggest strategies to enhance corporate responsibility, encourage equal labour practices, and enhance Zara's adherence to ethical practices throughout its supply chain.

1.6 Dissertation Structure

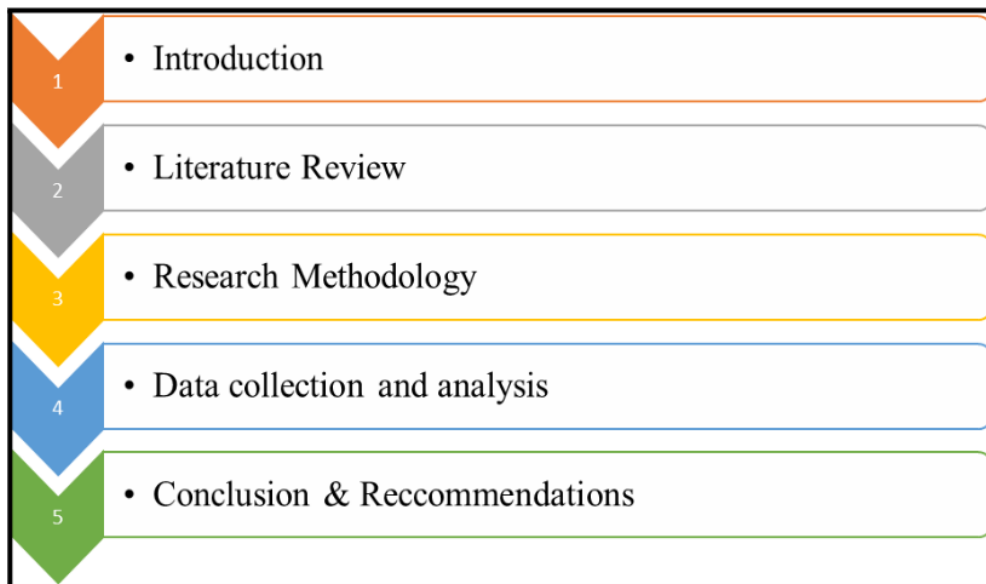


Figure 1.2: Structure of dissertation

(Source: Author)

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Labour-Related Practices

Labour-related practices involve employment practices, managing working conditions, and ensuring labour rights that companies uphold across their operations and worldwide supply chains (Guleria, 2024; Velluti, 2024). Disparities between ethical progress and ingrained exploitation in labour-related practices in global supply chains were highlighted by Fregonese (2023). According to Bank and Dogan (2024), while fair-world practices are adopted by many companies, such as prioritising the well-being of workers, major issues still exist, specifically in low-income areas of the world where the enforcement of labour laws is weak.

As per Hiba *et al.* (2021), exploitative conditions, such as long working hours, low pay and unsafe workplaces, continue to exist in many poorer countries, especially in the global fashion industry. Moreover, the potential of automation to drive inequality in global labour practices by threatening traditional labour groups was addressed by Velluti (2024) and Wadley (2021). Any move towards a sustainable, ethical solution will need to level up to address the restraints of global cooperation, tighter regulatory frameworks, and greater corporate responsibility to ensure ethical labour-related practices.

2.2 Global Fashion Supply Chain

The worldwide fashion supply chain is the system of activities linked to the coverage and supply of attire throughout the globe (Fraser and Van der Ven, 2022; Casciani *et al.* 2022). According to Fung *et al.* (2021), it encompasses raw material sourcing, textile manufacturing, garment production and retail delivery, with operations in several regions. Although it encourages innovation and economic growth, it raises ethical and environmental concerns. As mentioned by Hanzer (2022), while ethical brands advocate for fair labour practices and use sustainable materials, fast fashion frequently sources from exploitative labour and

unsustainable processes. On a similar note, Searcy *et al.* (2022) highlighted that through transparency, accountability, and responsible consumer behaviour, companies can transform this entire fashion supply chain and change the model of this industry.

2.3 Labour-Related Practices Adopted by Global Fashion Firms in Supply Chain

Fashion companies in Spain understand the significance of ethical labour-related practices, such as fair wage implementation and improved safety standards, to gain positive outcomes for respective companies. According to Plakantonaki *et al.* (2023) and Thakker and Sun, (2023), such efforts assist fashion companies in Spain to improve worker welfare and elevate brand reputation. However, Pál *et al.* (2021) argued that these developments are sometimes backslidden by weak enforcement mechanisms and a lack of standardised regulations. Cendron (2024) further added that this gap creates room for companies to practice exploitative and abusive working regulations in pursuit of a cost-effective way to meet the basic demands of their customer. Hence, such labour-related practices reflect the contrary between self-regulation and stricter governance in the fashion industry of Spain.

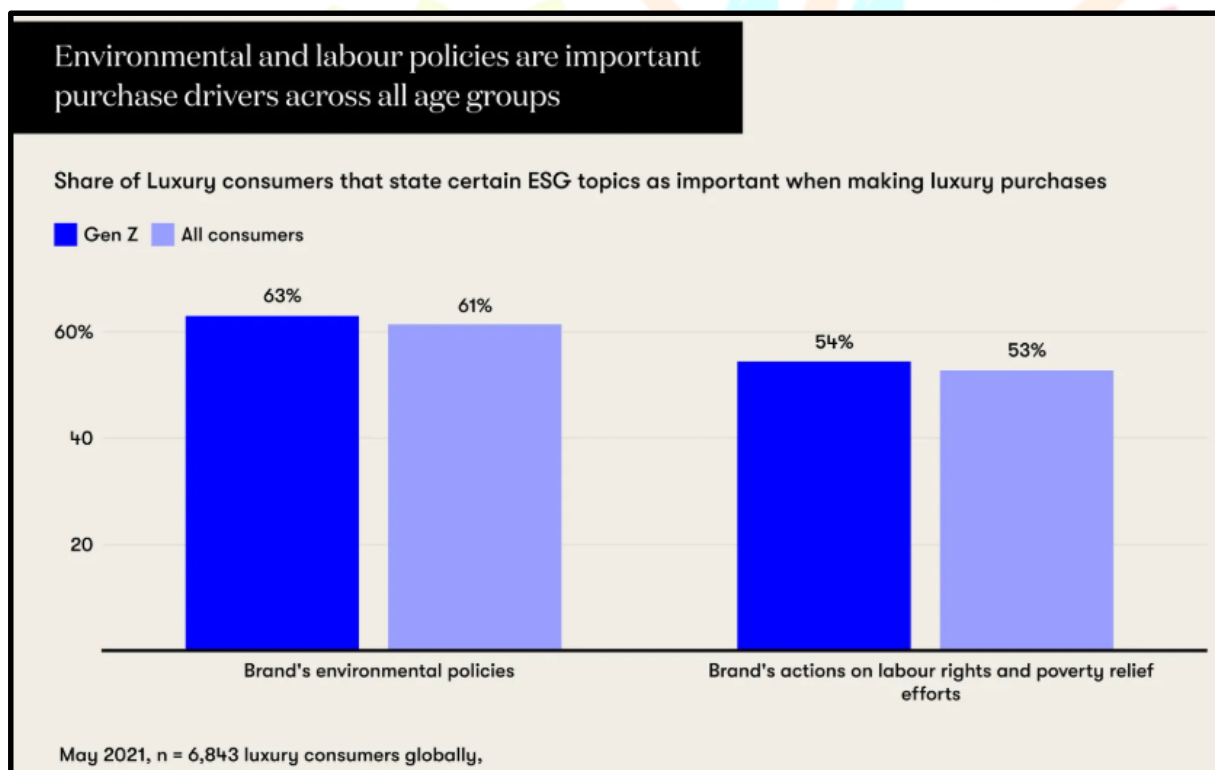


Figure 2.1: Labour Policies as an Important Purchase Driver

(Source: Cernansky, 2021)

As shown in **Figure 2.1**, around 53% of global consumers, including Spain, assume that ethical labour practice is an important purchase driver for customers of all age groups. As per Centobelli *et al.* (2022) and McGrath *et al.* (2021), emphasising transparency across the supply chain assisted companies in building trust among employees and consumers, leading to a positive social impact. Leveraging the workforce of other companies by using specific guidelines, such as subcontracting, can enhance transparency and accountability. However, Castillo *et al.* (2024) highlighted that the excessive use of subcontracting across the fashion industry of Spain leads to a lack of accountability, as workers are subjected to long hours,

dangerous working conditions and low pay. As a result, the tension between subcontracting and transparency addresses the limitation in surface-level improvements to mitigate core systematic issues faced by the Spanish fashion workers.

Additionally, Crapa *et al.* (2024) revealed partnerships between brands, NGOs, and advocacy groups hold promise for pushing ethical labour practices in Spain's fashion industry. However, Qamar (2023) contradicted that the slow progress toward genuine advancement reveals the overwhelming strength of profit-driven initiatives over true concern for labour rights. While some collaborative progress has been made in promoting ethical labour practices in Spain, most initiatives were undermined by persistent issues that characterise the supply chain.

2.4 Challenges Faced by Companies Regarding Labour-Practices in the Global Fashion Supply Chain

There have been some positive moves, such as minimum wage policies and subcontracting initiated by fashion companies in Spain's supply chain to ensure fair wages and safe working conditions. However, Harris and Nolan (2022) and Alghababsheh *et al.* (2023) argued that ***inefficient law enforcement and lack of global, standardised labour regulations*** often provide avenues for loopholes in severe labour exploitation practices. On a similar note, Gocek (2023) stated that this duality underscores the continuing challenge of effectively establishing true norms and ethical labour standards across the fashion supply chain of Spain.

According to Snyder *et al.* (2021), responsible subcontracting helps companies monitor working conditions and hold their suppliers accountable. On the other hand, Choi *et al.* (2021) highlighted that the subcontracting system is still a serious barrier in Spain since brands often lose control over human labour practices at lower-tier suppliers. This highlights the difficulty faced by fashion companies in ***navigating complex supply chains*** while maintaining a commitment to ethical standards.

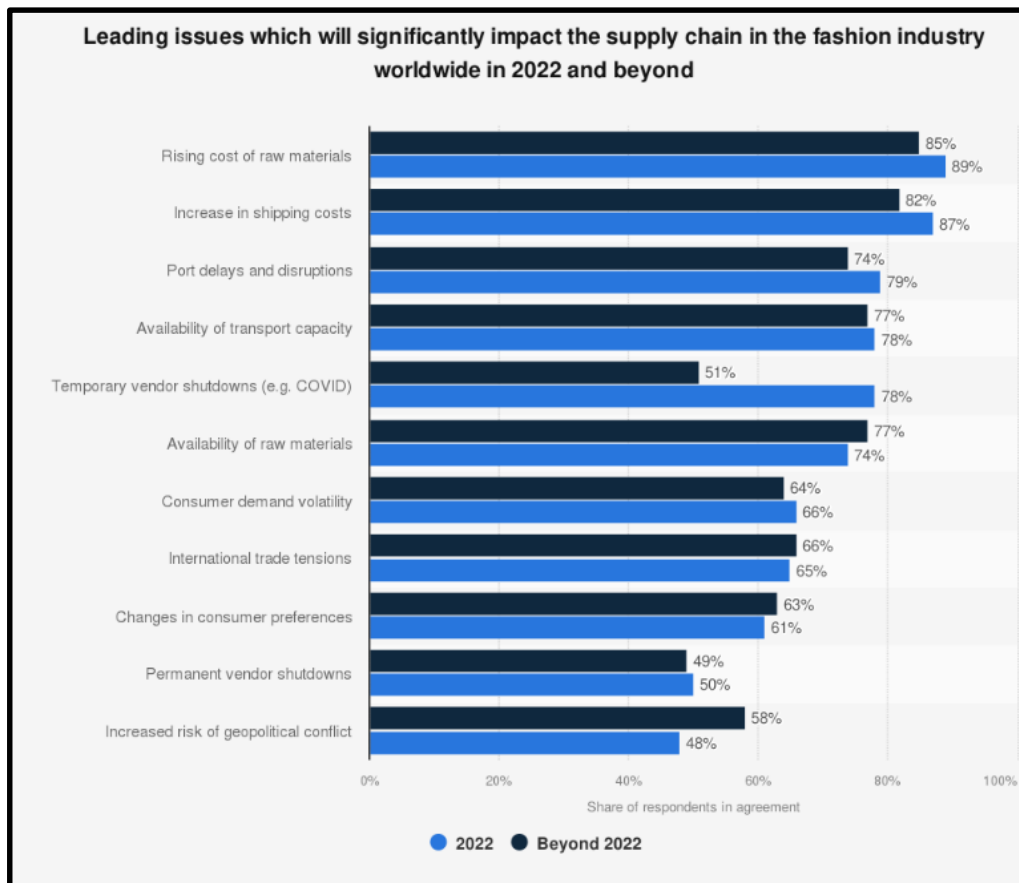


Figure 2.2: Leading Issues Impacting the Global Fashion Supply Chain

(Source: Lawrence, 2023)

As shown in **Figure 2.2**, rising costs in several operations and changes in consumer preferences are leading issues in the global fashion supply chain, including Spain (Lawrence, 2023). According to Fine *et al.* (2021), continuous cost pressure leads to unethical labour practices such as cutting labour wages and reducing the budget on safety standards. The significance of advanced technologies in enhancing supply chain transparency was highlighted by Montecchi *et al.* (2021). As per Tsolakis *et al.* (2023), the emergence of technological innovations like blockchain and AI-based monitoring systems have proven to be valuable assets in ensuring traceability and transparency relating to labour practices. However, Heim and Hodson (2023) argued that **financial and technological barriers** keep many small and mid-sized fashion brands in Spain from implementing these solutions, leading to a vast unregulated supply chain in the global fashion industry.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

Stakeholder Theory emphasises that an ethical corporation not only considers the benefit of shareholders but also ensures the various interests of employees, suppliers, customers, and society (Guttermann, 2023).

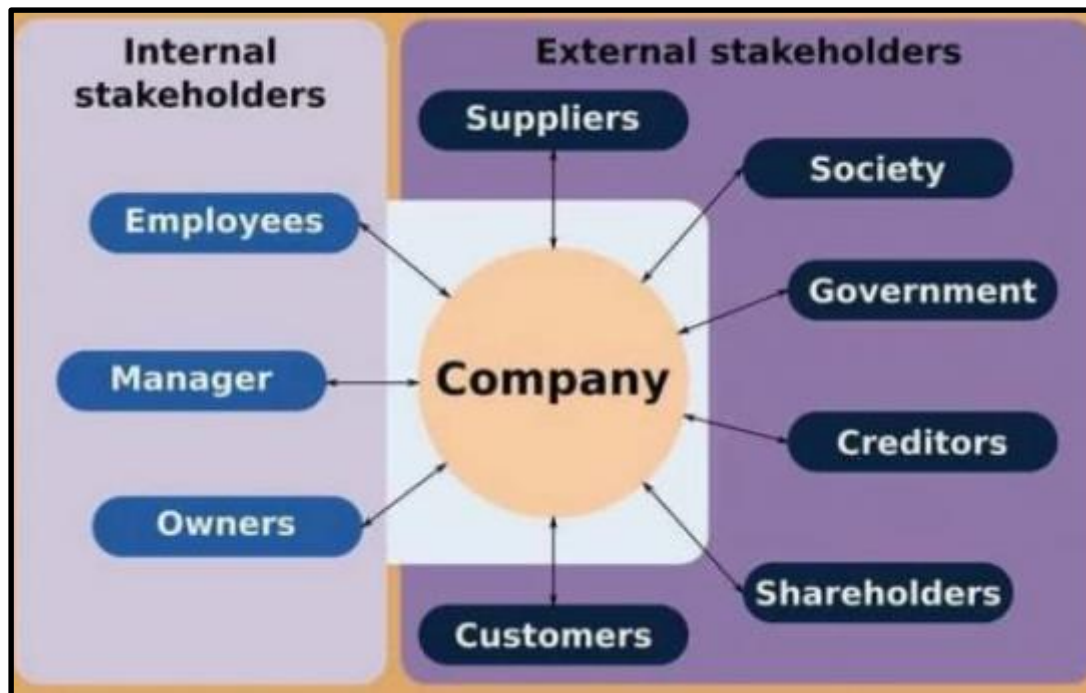


Figure 2.3: Stakeholder Theory

(Source: Garg, 2021)

The key components of the theory are stakeholder identification, engagement, and balancing competing interests. However, Schormair and Gilbert (2021) argued that despite its continued prominence, its generality offers little actionable help to navigate competing stakeholder pressures. Kurnia *et al.* (2021) further added that its scope does not adequately capture the intricacies of suppliers spread across the globe. On a similar note, Waheed and Zhang (2022) added the effectiveness of the theory can be further improved by integrating elements of sustainability and ethical issues.

For this research purpose, this theory's perspective serves as a valuable lens to explore Zara's labour considerations and challenges, particularly in terms of how it attempts to balance ethical issues through stakeholder management efforts in Spain. Moreover, it critically evaluates how transparency, accountability, and brand reputation play a key role in addressing consumer expectations in the supply chain.

2.6 Literature Gap

Although there is plenty of literature on global labour practices and ethical challenges in the fashion supply chain, there is a lack of concentrated analysis of labour practices in Spain by Zara. This research fills this gap by assessing Zara's labour management strategies, challenges, and ethics with practical recommendations for adopting sustainable and responsible labour practices.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy is the perspective of the researcher that guides the overall process of the research, from collecting data to extracting results (Bergmann, 2023). In this research, an **interpretivism** research philosophy was employed. Interpretivism research philosophy interprets social phenomena based on subjective experiences and interpretation (Junjie and Yingxin, 2022). This philosophy was best suited for this research as it enabled a deep exploration of Zara's labour practices in Spain, given the range of stakeholders being considered, including workers, managers, and regulators. However, interpretivism philosophy lacks in providing a generalised solution, as it depends on qualitative insights over objective measures (Sanchez *et al.* 2023). This philosophy reflected the complexities and moral dilemmas in the fashion supply chain of Spain.

3.2 Research Approach

The research approach defines the overall plan for data collection, data analysis, and data utilisation (Pregoner, 2024). This research employed the **inductive** research approach. The inductive research approach refers to generating theories and patterns from specific observations of collected secondary data (Proudfoot, 2023). This approach was most appropriate for this research as it allowed exploration that revealed the labour practices of Zara in Spain. However, its drawback is that the findings can be subjective and based on contextual data, creating difficulties in developing universally applicable conclusions (Taherdoost, 2022). It assisted in identifying themes and insights across the fashion supply chain of Spain as they emerged from the observation rather than forcing them into pre-defined frameworks.

3.3 Research Design

Research design is the systematic process of answering research questions through collecting, evaluating, and interpreting relevant data (Salter, 2023). The explanatory research design was utilised in this research. Explanatory research design is the process of explaining causal relationships between key variables of the research (Bhattacharya *et al.* 2024). However, its simplistic approach loses its effectiveness in underlying critical factors while navigating complex issues (Toyon, 2021). This was the most suitable design for carrying out this research by examining the effect of Zara's labour practices on worker welfare and supply chain dynamics within Spain.

3.4 Data Collection

Data collection in research methodology refers to the collection of relevant and impactful information in a systematic process to justify the research questions (Karunarathna *et al.* 2024). In this research, a secondary data collection technique is used. Secondary data collection is the process of gathering information from available authentic sources (Karunarathna *et al.* 2024). However, the secondary data collection process has significant limitations in terms of accountability and validity of collected data (Lochmiller, 2021). This process assisted in

collecting relevant information regarding the supply chain challenges faced by Zara in Spain from available pieces of literature, including journal articles, newspaper articles, case studies, government websites, and official websites.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of systematically inspecting data to discover patterns, trends, and insights (Taherdoost, 2022). In this research, the case study analysis technique was used to evaluate the gathered data. Case study analysis refers to the in-depth study of a specific event or case relevant to the research topic to extract fresh insights (Martinsuo & Huemann, 2021). However, the extracted information from one case study can not provide universal information applicable to other companies (Cannas *et al.*2024). The application of the case study analysis was justified for this research as it provided specific information on the ethical labour practices across the fashion supply chain of Spain focusing on Zara.

3.6 Ethical Consideration

This research ensured ethical declarations regarding the licensing and access of information from authentic secondary sources. A strong ethical aspect was followed to maintain the **Copyright, Designs and Patents Act (CDPA)** by adhering to the educational guidelines and quoting all authors correctly. Moreover, the data obtained and research findings were used for this research solely to avoid any unethical use of collected data and findings of the research.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 Findings and Analysis

Theme 1: Identification of Labor-Related practices implemented by Zara in the Supply Chain operation in Spain

Case Study	Findings
Inditex (2023)	As part of Inditex, Zara has adopted different labour-related practices to maintain ethics. For example, support and assessment of the suppliers have been the core aspect of due diligence in their supply chain. Zara focuses on improving wages, adherence to labour laws and under EU regulations and offering a safe working condition.
Inditex (2022a)	Inditex has implemented ' Workers at the Centre 2022 ' to ensure adherence to living wages and provide better working conditions for employees by aligning with ACT (Action, Collaboration, Transformation). This initiative also promotes women in the supply chain by providing them with better opportunities and conditions while promoting equality. This strategy helped 1,576,549 workers in 2022.

Inditex (2022b)	Zara is focused on ensuring the absence of forced labour by applying the Inditex zero-tolerance approach . The company comply with international standards and a code of conduct for suppliers and manufacturers, including in the raw material supply chain. The company has also developed strict regulations to foster respect for human rights across the Spanish supply chain.
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Table 4.1: Labor-Related Practices of Zara

(Source: Author)

Analysis

Zara has implemented various labour-related practices to ensure ethical compliance within its supply chain operations in Spain. Inditex (2023) reported that, Zara has implemented ‘due diligence’ practices that focused on supporting and evaluating suppliers to ensure adherence to EU labour regulations while improving wages and working conditions. Additionally, by complying with EU labour laws, Zara fosters secure and equitable working conditions for workers in the supply chain. Apart from that, Zara also prioritises Inditex’s ‘Workers at the Centre 2022’ to facilitate positive labour conditions by ensuring better living wages and an improved working environment for its employees. This initiative is in line with ACT, which strengthens ethical employment practices. According to Inditex (2022a), Zara ensured gender equality by expanding opportunities for women within the supply chain. Zara has implemented a zero-tolerance policy by aligning international labour standards and implementing a supplier code of conduct (Inditex, 2022b). These strategies helped 1,576,549 workers in 2022 Zara's supply chain (Inditex, 2022a). It can also be analysed that these practices demonstrate Zara’s strong dedication to ethical practices, fair compensation, and safe working environments while proactively combating labour rights violations across its supply chain.

Theme 2: Analysis of the challenges faced by Zara related to labour practices in Spain’s supply chain

Case Study	Findings
Times of India (2024)	Workers at Zara in Spain staged a protest, asking for a fair distribution of Inditex's €5.4 billion annual profit. However, Zara gave their supply chain workers a 20% salary hike in 2023 and a €1,000 bonus. Despite that the employees protest against the company for enhancements in working hours, benefits, and a more equitable sharing of profits.
The Economic Times (2022)	In 2022, around 1,000 workers at Zara in A Coruña, Spain, organised strikes to demand higher wages. It reflects employees' dissatisfaction as they do not get fair wages. Inditex raised their salaries by 25%, which led to an

	additional €322 monthly and a one-time bonus of €1,000, resulting in the strike's cancellation.
Kerpner <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Zara's labour issues also revolve around poor working conditions. Employees face poor work-life balance due to strict monitoring of workers' time and movements, prompting concerns about equitable treatment and labour rights in Zara's Spanish plants.

Table 4.2: Challenges Relevant to Labor-Related Practices at Zara

(Source: Author)

Analysis

From the findings, several issues related to labour practice have been encountered, mainly around employees' protests regarding fair wages, fair allocation of profits and working conditions. For example, despite a 20% hike in salary and the provision of a €1,000 bonus, supply chain workers protest against the company and ask for equitable distribution of Inditex's annual profit of €5.4 billion (Times of India, 2024). These protests reflect workers' dissatisfaction due to the lack of benefits, meaningful enhancements in work hours, and fairer profit-sharing. Around 1,000 participated in strikes to advocate for higher wages (The Economic Times, 2022). The strike highlights fair wages and compensation challenges that make employees feel undervalued despite the company's substantial profits. However, this strike led Inditex to increase salaries by 25%, which equated to an additional €322 per month (The Economic Time, 2022). Moreover, Zara has faced criticism regarding unfavourable working conditions, which include strict monitoring of employees' time and movements, raising concerns about work-life balance and fair treatment (Kerpner *et al.* 2024). Hence, it can be analysed that poor working conditions are intensifying labour rights issues within Zara's Spanish operations.

4.2 Discussion**Theme 1**

The literature studies highlighted that labour-related policies in global fashion companies are fair wage implementation and safety enhancement that positively impact employees' welfare and brand reputation (Plakantonaki *et al.*, 2023; Thakker & Sun, 2023). Similarly, Zara's labour-related policies relied on fair wage implementation was highlighted in the literature. Zara has implemented Workers at the Centre 2022 to ensure fair wages and gender equality to positively impact employees' welfare (Inditex, 2023). On the other hand, Pál *et al.* (2021) and Cendron (2024) contradicted that the lack of standardised regulations resulted in exploitative and abusive working regulations. Conversely, the practice of subcontracting contradicted Zara's stated efforts towards labour policies. According to Stakeholder theory, managing stakeholders' risks, including customers, employees and investors, helped Zara maintain

employees' welfare and benefit 1,576,549 workers in 2022 with 'Workers at the Centre 2022' initiatives (Inditex, 2022a).

According to Crapa *et al.* (2024), partnerships between brands, NGOs, and advocacy groups positively impact maintaining ethical labour practices in Spain's fashion industry. On a similar note, Zara has also implemented a zero-tolerance policy for addressing the the issues related to unethical labour practices by aligning international labour standards and implementing a supplier code of conduct (Inditex, 2022b). However, Castillo *et al.* (2024) argued that excessive usage of subcontracting caused a lack of accountability because employees are subjected to work for long hours along with dangerous working conditions and low pay in Spain's fashion industry. On the other hand, findings outlined that Zara is making constant efforts with its due diligence strategy to improve fair wages by complying with EU regulations.

Theme 2

The literature study and case study findings revealed various ethical practices implemented by fashion brands to improve labour welfare in the supply chain but highlighted obstacles preventing significant improvements. Harris and Nolan (2022); Gocek (2023) and Alghababsheh *et al.* (2023) revealed that inefficient law enforcement and lack of global, standardised labour regulations and duality are the constant hurdles across the fashion supply chain of Spain. Similarly, the perspectives of these authors align with the case study findings that revealed that Zara's workers are constantly participating in strikes and protests to advocate for fair wages and better working conditions. It showcases Zara's lack of standardised labour regulations as the company does not pay fair wages despite profit growth (The Economic Times, 2022). It also demonstrates the significant gap between corporate profitability and employees' expectations for fair wages and equal compensation.

Snyder *et al.* (2021) stated that responsible subcontracting helps firms monitor working conditions and hold their suppliers accountable. However, Choi *et al.* (2021) argue that the subcontracting system is a barrier in Spain since brands often lose control over human labour practices. These perspectives are also aligned with Zara's case study because, despite salary hikes and annual bonuses given to the company, employees continue to protest against insufficient wage increases and poor working conditions. Fine *et al.* (2021) illustrated that cost pressure leads to unethical labour practices like cutting labour wages and declining the budget on safety standards. On the other hand, the case study revealed that employees at Zara face poor work-life balance issues due to strict monitoring of workers' time and movements (Kerpner *et al.* 2024). However, Montecchi *et al.* (2021) and Tsolakis *et al.* (2023) stated that technological advancement with blockchain and AI-based monitoring systems has the potential to improve transparency and traceability within the supply chain.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The research explores the ethical challenges regarding labour practices in Spain's Zara fashion supply chain. A secondary data collection has been performed using six renowned articles and case studies of Zara. It has been found that Zara has implemented due diligence, Workers at the Centre 2022 and a zero-tolerance approach to improve workers' welfare and unethical issues in its supply chain. However, they face critical challenges regarding poor working conditions and equitable wages as Zara is facing constant protests by supply chain workers.

5.2 Limitations

To assess the challenges faced by Zara related to labour practice, the focus is only limited to Spain. Thus, the study failed to represent global labour practices and related issues faced by Zara. Additionally, the study lacks real-time data insights from supply chain workers' perspectives to generate a detailed understanding of labour issues in the supply chain.

5.3 Future Scope

In future studies, assessing the challenges faced by Zara related to labour practice will not be limited to Spain. It would drive insights from a global perspective to gain a more detailed understanding of the labour practices issues in the fashion supply chain. Moreover, a survey will be conducted with supply chain workers in fashion to derive direct insights from them to gain real-time and detailed understanding of their issues.

5.5 Recommendations

Integrating Blockchain technology in the supply chain

Zara can integrate blockchain technology to trace all operations and track the working conditions of employees and where materials are being sourced from in real time. For instance, the fashion brand **Stella McCartney** has collaborated with **RealReal** to implement blockchain solutions to trace the origin of raw materials in its manufacturing supply chain (Borsi, 2024). This would increase accountability in Zara's supply chain and discourage unethical behaviour.

Implementing worker welfare programs

Zara can implement fair wage policies and worker welfare programs for all of its employees, including workers across the supply chain. For example, **Patagonia** introduced a **Fair Trade** program to secure higher salaries and better working conditions for workers (Patagonia, 2024). A systematic and fair wage policy will assist Zara in ensuring workers' health and maintaining a safe working environment.

Partnering with NGOs and advocacy groups

Zara can partner with NGOs in Spain, such as SETEM and IDEAS, as they can aid Zara in spreading awareness regarding ethical labour standards. For instance, **H&M** endeavours to strengthen the rights and improve the working conditions of truck drivers through its partnership with the **Responsible Trucking platform** facilitated by **CSR Europe** (H&M Group,

2022). Moreover, strategic partnerships can also offer Zara independent third-party audits, leading to implement better labour management practices.

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