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## **GAINING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE THROUGH CSO: CASE STUDIES ON THE SUSTAINABLE FASHION BRANDS OF SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN**

### **ABSTRACT**

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Sustainable fashion has mainly been studied through analysis of consumers' behavior trends, as well as brands' business strategies, focusing mostly on Western case studies. Through the application of the Corporate Social Opportunity framework (Moon, 2012), this study aims to investigate how sustainable fashion brands in South Korea and Japan can gain competitive advantage while targeting environmental issues through social activities and profit from them. The results showed that the enhanced social and environmental activities can improve the brands' sustainable performance, profits, engagement with society, as well as lead to competitive cost advantage in the market. The study offers a solution to the issue of generating profit and achieving competitive advantage by engaging in social and environmental activities. Furthermore, its attempt of filling the gap in the literature, related to sustainable fashion in the Asian region, highlights its significance.

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*Keywords: CSO, apparel industry, sustainable fashion brands, South Korea, Japan*

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## INTRODUCTION

The idea of achieving sustainable goals, by targeting the fashion industry, is perceived by many as an intention mainly followed in the Western world. This argument is supported by studies focused on the investigation of the common characteristics of businesses that introduced sustainability in innovative ways (production and marketing-wise), in the fashion market (Molderez and Van Elst, 2015; O'Connell, 2020). Nonetheless, it would be inaccurate to argue the opposite in the Asian countries. Although Asian region is still the production center of fast fashion (Coscieme, Smatani, and Pulawska, 2020), it is continuously evolving in terms of sustainability (Nayak, Akbari, and Far, 2019; Peirson-Smith and Craik, 2020). Particularly significant is the presence of many Asian countries in the ranking list of the UN Sustainable Development Goals<sup>1</sup>(UNSDGs) Agenda. Being a member represents the commitment of a country to create and implement regulations to meet sustainable goals in multiple fields. Although not legally binding, adopting the UNSDGs 2030 Agenda proves the engagement in promoting substantial changes in the fashion industry. Nonetheless, despite the progress that has been made, sustainable fashion brands in Asia appear not to be as popular as they are in the EU or the U.S. The trend is influenced by a shortage of sustainable measures accommodating the establishment of these businesses, as well as facilitating the production of specific raw materials (Gupta, 2019; Majumdar and Sinha, 2019). Even so, a few sustainable fashion brands have started to appear in some Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to suggest how innovative business models can provide fully sustainable brands in South Korea and Japan, with a strategy to gain success in the highly saturated apparel domestic market. More specifically, the paper aims to investigate how South Korean and Japanese sustainable fashion brands can gain competitive advantage while efficiently engaging in social and environmental activities through Moon's (2012) Corporate Social Opportunity (CSO) framework.

The scarce investigation of the reality and the evolution of sustainable fashion brands in Asia represent the foundation of this research question. Firstly, studies focusing on the introduction of concepts such as sustainable fashion, slow fashion (Henninger,

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<sup>1</sup> The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are targets adopted by all UNMember states in 2015 as a global commitment to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure peace and prosperity by 2030.

Alevizou, and Oates., 2016), or circular economy (Ellen McArthur Foundation, 2017) only illustrate the environmental consequences of the fashion supply chain while suggesting strategies to improve the industry. In terms of consumers' behavior towards sustainable fashion studies (Chung, Zhang, and Woo, 2019; Hyun and Ko, 2017), the findings are usually country or city-specific when it comes to the Asian region, thus the data collected is insufficient to show a regional trend. Furthermore, the analysis of the literature on business strategy models such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Porter and Kramer, 2006), Creating Shared Value (CSV) (Porter and Kramer, 2011), or CSO (Moon, 2012) show that the empirical examples examined are rarely related to SMEs or industries such as the fashion one. Lastly, a common trend concerning publications of case studies on sustainable fashion (Clarke and Holt, 2016; Weber, 2019; Allende, 2019) demonstrated a lack of evidence targeting Asian sustainable fashion brands, since their focus is usually on Western companies. To fill the gap in the literature, the paper illustrates the topic of sustainable fashion brands in two countries; South Korea and Japan. The selection of the two Asian countries was driven by their similarities related to their performance in meeting specific UNSDGs, which are at the basis of most guidelines generated by the two countries in terms of sustainable regulations. According to the *UNSDGs for Better Fashion*, the main SDGs related to the fashion industry are: Goal 4- Quality Education, Goal 9- Industry Innovation and Infrastructure, Goal 12- Responsible Consumption and Production, and Goal 13- Climate Action. By examining South Korea and Japan's SDGs performance profiles (Sustainable Development Report, 2021) focusing on the abovementioned goals, the countries show similar scores. In terms of Goal 4 both countries successfully achieved and currently maintain the SDG set. For Goal 9, South Korea has some remained challenges to solve, whereas Japan has fulfilled the SDG. Goal 12 sees both countries in a position where they still have to face significant challenges, whereas Goal 13 is still characterized by major challenges in both nations. Furthermore, the selection of Japan and South Korea has also been highly influenced by their UNSDGs ranking position compared to other Asian countries. South Korea (78.59) and Japan (79.85) are the only Asian countries included in the top 30 list of countries with the highest UNSDGs scores, which implies their better performance in terms of sustainable measures in the Asian region.

The paper is organized as follows. The section below analyzes the preexisting studies on sustainable fashion and its related business models. The paper then applies Moon's (2012) CSO framework to the selected sustainable fashion brands' social and

environmental activities, suggesting improvements based on the analysis' findings. Lastly, the implications and contributions of this research are provided.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Sustainable fashion, Circular Economy**

As argued by Henninger et al. (2016), sustainable fashion is an integral part of the slow fashion movement, which is both a reaction and a solution to the consequences of fast fashion cycles and industry growth that led to a negative environmental impact. The movement advocates for ethical performance, a decrease of garment production levels, and for choosing quality over quantity clothing. Both slow and sustainable fashion represents an alternative view of production in the industry, promoting multiple techniques such as upcycling, recycling, and the employment of renewable and organic materials to create clothes. There are several examples in the industry showing their implementation by multinational companies. Among them, the cases of *Patagonia* with its 'ReCrafted' line (composed of upcycled garments) and *Eileen Fisher* with its 'Renew' program (a reselling-based system) are by far the most outstanding. Sustainable and slow fashion additionally focuses on transforming the perception of production by promoting transparency and models such as circular economy, a framework introduced by the *Ellen McArthur Foundation* (2017), based on three pivotal principles: designing out waste and pollution, keeping products and materials in use, and regenerating natural systems. The movement also focuses on improving how local manufacture is run by fashion brands, and by decreasing the number of collections created by a brand in a year. Amid these activities, the most successfully performed by companies has been the engagement with local communities. To support the statement, Gwilt (2020) described how fashion brands designers' engagement with local artisans and producers has been the most feasible way for companies to decrease their negative environmental impacts while supporting the local economy and saving the budget that can be invested into more efficient technologies and quality resources.

### **Consumers' influence on sustainable fashion**

Consumer behavior and preferences had a crucial role in the transformation of the fashion industry, particularly in terms of sustainability. Even though the increasing trend could be defined as a global one, it did not spread evenly; neither in all geographical areas nor among

different generations. For instance, according to the report *Pulse of The Fashion Industry* (2019), it can be observed that sustainable fashion is mostly supported by younger generations in Western countries. This factor is further suspected to be the reason behind the foundation of most sustainable fashion brands in the U.S. or the EU. However, recent studies confirmed that in North-East Asia, the trend is similar to the one observed in the West. A survey on sustainable fashion conducted by Chung et al. (2019), investigated how supportive consumers in Hong Kong, New York, Shanghai, Tokyo, and London are toward eco-friendly goods. The results showed that most of the supporters of this new type of fashion are younger people. Moreover, it was revealed that among the respondents in the five selected cities, the ones in Tokyo, Shanghai, and Hong Kong were more prone to buy sustainable fashion items during their purchases. To support this statement, previous research by Hyun and Ko (2017) attempted to find the motivations behind sustainable fashion purchases. Through a cross-cultural study, the scholars narrowed down the investigation to three North-East Asian countries: South Korea, China, and Japan. The survey showed that, overall, the respondents agreed that the environmental issues caused by the industry are concerning and need to be tackled. Moreover, the respondents shared their willingness to purchase sustainable fashion products to make an individual contribution to a pressing cause. However, the survey also brought up some drawbacks encountered by Asian consumers such as the difficulty in finding sustainable brands in both the domestic and regional market. This circumstance was perceived by the authors as an effect generated by multiple barriers such as Asian consumers and designers' limited knowledge on the topic, higher product prices compared to fast fashion goods, and lack of sustainable supply sources. Based on the pre-existing literature's arguments, it is correct to state that the trend has been increasing in the last years in Asia, yet it is still difficult to determine to what extent it can impact the fashion industry. Considering the barriers affecting the phenomenon, academia suggests the fashion industry to make more efforts into spreading information related to sustainability, and the creation of their products to raise awareness among consumers regarding the high risks of purchasing fast fashion items.

### **Corporate Social Responsibility, Creating Shared Value, and Corporate Social Opportunity**

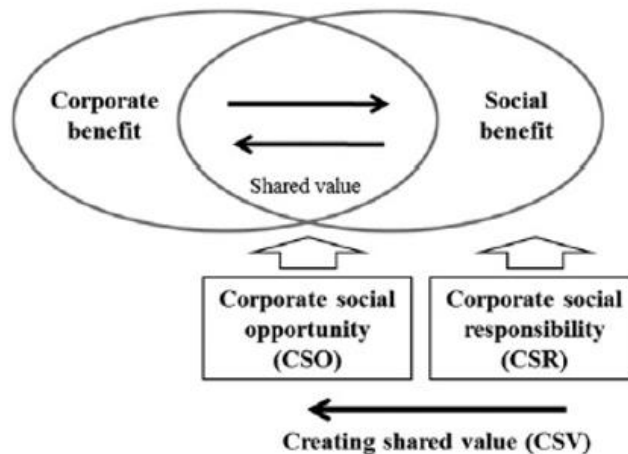
CSR is a management concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and interactions with their stakeholder (UNIDO, 2020). Although its definition implies a positive-game result, the concept has always been

misunderstood both by firms and society. Related to this misconception, the implementation of CSR has mostly been non-effective due to the mismanagement of its practices in the past decades. To provide a solution to this issue, Porter and Kramer (2006) laid out an analysis of the connection between competitive advantage and CSR. The scholars argued that, instead of perceiving it as an obligation, cost, or charitable activity, companies should see CSR as a source of profit opportunity. Therefore, it is necessary to seek the interrelationship between a corporation and society while at the same time anchoring it in the strategies and activities of specific companies. To create what the paper defines as 'shared value', corporations must include a social perspective in their core framework. To do so, firstly, intersection points between society and firms need to be identified. These linkages can be characterized by *inside-out* (a company's impact on society) or *outside-in* (society or external influences on a business) effects that can be either positive or negative. Secondly, companies must select which social issue to address, focusing on the ones strictly related to their core business. After having determined a social issue to tackle, companies must create a corporate social agenda whose goal is to set social and economic objectives that will be met simultaneously. Before the shift to the following step, the scholars identify two types of CSR to determine which is the most suitable to efficiently reach the agenda's objectives: *responsive* CSR and *strategic* CSR. The former is utilized by companies to show their positive reputation in terms of generic social impacts while attenuating negative consequences created by value chain activities. The latter is a tactical philanthropy, tackling social dimensions of competitive context, while simultaneously reshaping value chain activities to benefit society. Among the two, *strategic* CSR is believed to be the better option when implementing CSR activities because of its selective nature. Once the above-mentioned strategic agenda is defined, it is time for a business to move on to the fourth step of the framework which involves the integration of *inside-out* and *outside-in* activities. Finally, corporations are required to combine a social dimension to their value proposition which will create an improved strategy, eventually leading to better positioning in terms of competitive advantage. To build upon their view of CSR, in 2011 Porter and Kramer published a paper presenting CSV. According to their framework, there are three means to form shared value opportunities: redesigning products and markets, redefining value chain productivity, and facilitating cluster development. Hence, businesses should start their journey by seeking opportunities in underserved markets to lay the foundations of CSV. Based on the set target, companies should start implementing changes and innovations to

their value chain activities. To ease the achievement of CSV the scholars encourage the development of clusters, as well as collaboration between firms and organizations leading to an improvement of local communities and companies' productivity. Through their study, Porter and Kramer proved that CSV offers a greater solution to social issues compared to inefficient and outdated CSR practices.

Among the studies that have been carried out regarding extensions of Porter and Kramer's framework, Moon (2012)'s model is one of the most recent ones. In his book *Good to Smart* (Reinmaker, 2012) the scholar suggests a view of CSV as a means to reach CSO by having CSR as a starting point. Created by Moon (2012), CSO is a framework aiming to provide firms with a new and more advanced concept of CSR. The terminology was coined to cease confusion caused by Porter and Kramer's (2006, 2011) concepts of CSV, and *strategic* CSR. As illustrated in Figure 1, CSO is positioned in between corporate and social advantages emphasizing its focus on generating opportunities for companies to boost their core competitiveness through social initiatives. Additionally, the figure clearly shows the fundamental difference between the two concepts, which lays on the final beneficiaries. In sum, when companies want to shift from CSR to CSO, they should do so through CSV.

**Figure 1. Comparison of CSR, CSO, CSV (Moon, 2012)**



In further studies, Moon (Moon and Parc, 2019) specified that there are two types of CSO; CSO for competitiveness and CSO for reputation. What differentiates the two is

that the latter is employed to increase a firm's reputation, whereas the former increases corporate and social benefits while enhancing the firm's core competitiveness at the same time. Among the two, CSO is believed to be a better option for competitiveness because it is more sustainable in the long run since to improve its competitiveness, a firm upgrades its business through CSV. By doing so the business defines its main competence, transforms the productivity in the value chain, redefines comprehensive targets, and finally enables cluster development.

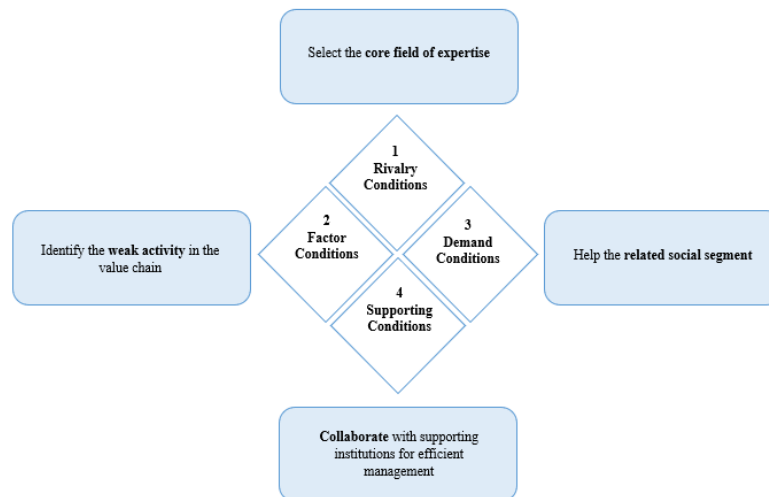
## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

To provide a clearer view of CSO, Moon (2012) illustrated the framework through Porter's Diamond Model<sup>2</sup> which presents a linear picture of its guidelines that can be easily implemented by companies willing to shift from CSR. As illustrated by Figure 2, to pursue CSO companies should follow four determinants: rivalry conditions (*Select the field firms have core competence at*), factor conditions (*Identify the weak activity in the value chain*), demand conditions (*Help the related social segment*), and supporting conditions (*Collaborate with supporting institutions for efficient management*). Each determinant provides specific guidelines which will ease the selection and creation of CSO activities. They are described as follows.

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<sup>2</sup> The Diamond Model is a framework created by Porter in 1990 to illustrate the main attributes that both individually and as a system explain a nation or a firm's advantage. The model consists of four determinants, namely, factor conditions, demand conditions, related and supporting industries, and firm, strategy, structure, and rivalry. In his article Porter explains that by strategically improving the areas of the diamond where they lack the most, nations, and particularly companies, can continuously achieve a competitive advantage compared to their competitors.



**Figure 2. CSO through Porter's Diamond Model (Moon, 2012)**

1. *Select the field firms have core competence at.* Just like Porter's rivalry conditions, also the CSO strategy requires firms to focus on their area of expertise to ensure successful results. Thus, a business should select its area of expertise or its position in factors of productions. This remains valid also in terms of CSO, hence, prior to determining a social initiative, a company should carefully select the business-related area to create a shared value.
2. *Identify the weak activity in the value chain.* To improve their performance, firms should firstly identify and then tackle any loophole in their value chain. The same applies in regards to CSO. Therefore, to create CSV, firms should identify the weak activity in their value chain. By doing so, they will be able to define an issue that should be solved through an activity with the potential to profit both society and the company.
3. *Help the related social segment.* Porter's demand conditions imply for firms to focus on the home-market demand for a specific product or service. Likewise, when firms aim to create a shared value, they must discover how to help society in the related field.
4. *Collaborate with supporting institutions for efficient management.* As mentioned by Porter (1990) when introducing the Diamond Model, only selective alliances and collaborations can facilitate the achievement of competitive advantage. In terms of CSO, to efficiently create a shared opportunity, companies should collaborate with other institutions.

When companies overcome the research and selection process of social and firm's issues to tackle through social opportunities, they can move to the creation of CSO, which will lead to a positive-sum game for both society and businesses.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The paper employed a qualitative methodology to analyze the selected sustainable fashion brands and their involvement in solving environmental issues caused by their production process. The brands examined in this paper were selected due to their reputation as pioneers of sustainability in their home countries. RE;CODE was the first fashion brand in South Korea that started practicing a circular economy, creating new clothes from deadstock through upcycling. Avanti, instead, was the first company in Japan to promote organic cotton and eco-friendly creation of garments from fabric production to garments' assembly. The data was collected indirectly from the selected brands' websites. Additionally, papers, CEO and managers' indirect interviews, company reports, articles, and videos of company presentations uploaded on the brands' social media channels, were employed to gather information on the companies' structures, business strategies, collaborations, and social and environmental activities. Lastly, Moon's (2012) CSO framework was applied to the brands' existing social and environmental activities by utilizing Porter's Diamond Model to have a clearer understanding of the process of creating CSO.

## **CASE STUDY**

### **Company profiles**

RE;CODE is an upcycling South Korean fashion brand founded in 2012 as a subsidiary of Kolon Industries to be in charge of sustainable, zero-waste fashion production through upcycling. The brand was originally developed as a solution to the long-lasting problem of material waste generated by its mother company. Its peculiarity lays in its philosophy of being eco-friendly while offering pieces of clothing characterized by unique and handcrafted designs in limited editions. To achieve these commitments, it combines different sets of sections obtained from deadstock items giving life to new collections while redesigning them. Since 2013, RE;CODE has been actively engaged in raising environmental awareness and in finding solutions through the upcycling of not only

deadstock, but also fabrics, and material waste created by other industries. To identify which types of materials have been employed in the creation of new items, the brand has divided its collections into three major lines of clothing: the military line, the industrial line, and the inventory line. The first utilizes military equipment (such as parachutes) which is defective or has passed its expiration date. The collection of military equipment was the result of an agreement between Kolon Industries and the Ministry of National Defense which granted the reemployment of items that would have been otherwise disposed of. The second line employs defective industrial materials, such as airbags or seats, whereas the third one simply utilizes clothing or other materials created by Kolon Industries which have been unsold for more than three years.

Avanti is a Japanese sustainable fashion brand founded by Ms. Chieko Watanabe in 1985. The brand also consists of its original brand PRISTINE selling Avanti's items both offline and online. PRISTINE was founded in 1996 and currently, its president and CEO is Ms. Hideko Okumori who, together with Ms. Watanabe, manages the company. PRISTINE manages both the store and the e-commerce and produces final products in collaboration with about 195 companies in Japan. The brand is highly involved in providing its consumers with various information regarding organic cotton, garments' manufacturing process, clothing care, as well as introducing various sustainable brands and designers in the Country. Although PRISTINE is in charge of the wholesale section, Avanti is the innovator and pioneer that introduced the concept of organic cotton "Made in Japan." There are several significant recognitions and collaborations related to sustainability, that should be pointed out regarding Avanti. In 1993 Ms. Watanabe established the "Katan House Japan Inc." in San Antonio, Texas to create awareness on organic cotton and became its president and representative director. In 2000, she was also appointed as the vice president of the NPO Japan Organic Cotton Association (JOCA) after its establishment. Accordingly, Avanti and PRISTINE share JOCA's principles on cotton production and create garments or accessories in conformity with the Charter of Japan Cotton Association. Other than creating JOCA certified garments, the two brands meet GOTS<sup>3</sup> standards since JOCA was one of the founders of the certification in early 2000 together with the Organic Trade Association (OTA, USA), the Internationaler Verband der Naturtextilwirtschaft (IVN,

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<sup>3</sup> The Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) is a globally recognized textile processing standard for organic fibers, including ecological and social criteria, supported by independent certification of the entire textile supply chain.

Germany), and The Soil Association (UK). As a result, all garments can be easily recognized by consumers as sustainable both on a national and international level.

### **Fashion brands' social and environmental activities**

The following section will focus on the presentation and analysis of RE;CODE and Avanti's social and environmental activities to observe how both brands manage negative environmental impacts generated by the fashion industry while spreading awareness on the topic and positively affecting society.

### **RE;CODE**

#### *"Good Will" Project*

The "Good Will" Project was created as a production team specifically consisting of individuals with intellectual disabilities. The craftsmen are trained to disassemble the old materials Kolon Industries has disposed of so that they can be upcycled. To improve this program, RE;CODE has started to expand the production teams outside of its main warehouses in order to efficiently help other minority groups within local Korean communities. By doing so, the brand has also started to help rehabilitate and train women who have been exposed to violence, as well as providing jobs to North Korean defectors who work for the team located in Nodeul Island, Seoul. Through the "Good Will" program, the brand is able to easily cope with the time-consuming process of upcycling materials by employing a larger working force. At the same time, it supports minorities in the community by providing financial support and by reintegrating these individuals into society.

#### *Re;Table*

Re;Table is a campaign aimed to introduce consumers to a more sustainable lifestyle in terms of fashion. Clients interested in upcycling and sustainable fashion can either visit the "Sharing Space" which is run by the brand in Myeongdong Catholic Cathedral Archdiocese of Seoul or participate in workshops and events. By visiting the "Sharing Space" users can enjoy free access to more than 1,500 books on environmental and sustainability issues together with more than 200 videos about the environment. Additionally, the space exhibits RE;CODE's upcycled clothing, accessories, and lifestyle items to allow visitors to see what types of clothes can be produced through this innovative method. To offer clients a direct

experience of the production process of a recycled item, once a year, Re;Table hosts workshops where craftsmen provide one-day classes to create personal sewing kits to repair older garments. The one-day classes are not only held at Myeongdong Catholic Cathedral Archdiocese of Seoul but also abroad during events such as Expos or Fashion Weeks.

### *Box Atelier*

Box Atelier is a program through which RE;CODE gives back to society while helping minorities in local communities. Box Atelier is a studio located in Nodeul Island, Seoul offering various repairing services performed by single mothers. The studio opens every weekend and provides single mothers with a part-time job that enables them to earn money despite their schedule. Box Atelier offers three main services to RE;CODE's customers:

- Re;Collection; a service purchased by clients who want to redesign an older garment to create a new one as a memory. If a customer brings to the studio a piece of clothing owned by a close relative or a special person, the item can be redesigned as an accessory or any fashion good.
- Re;Form; a service dedicated to customers who want to restyle or upcycle their older garments.
- Re;Pair; a repairing service to allow customers to wear their clothes for longer avoiding their premature disposal.

### **Avanti**

#### *Tōhoku Grandmas Project*

In March 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake had an epicenter east of the Oshika Peninsula of Tōhoku taking many people's lives, while shattering their houses and future. Due to the devastating effects of the earth tremor, starting in June of the same year, Avanti launched the Tōhoku Grandmas Project which aims to create jobs for the victims of the environmental disaster. Avanti established five main production sites consisting of different teams composed of elderly ladies in charge of creating organic cotton items. The project started with the realization of Christmas ornaments of which 25,000 were sold out in 2011. The earnings allowed the brand to pay 8 million yen to about 50 Tōhoku grandmas as labor charge. Although the amount of sold items dropped after a few years, Avanti stated its intentions of continuing to support the project for one or two decades to support elderly ladies living in earthquake-hit areas.

### *Avanti Farm*

To engage with local communities, and its customers, Avanti established its farm to demonstrate the benefits and the process of organic farming. The farm is situated in the Komoro eco-village which is the result of a partnership between the non-profit organization “Solar power plant networks” and the local private organization “Komorohashu club” to create a meeting point between cities and farming villages. The Avanti Farm cultivates cotton, chamomile, soybean, rice, and vegetables.

### *Ekodomo Private Tutoring School*

The Ekodomo Private Tutoring School is an initiative introduced by Avanti in 2014 to raise awareness on sustainability among younger generations. The facility is located in the above-mentioned Komoro eco-village and it is a space Avanti exploits as a testing area for cotton production, as well as a location to hold workshops. The school was established to generally target children of all ages and especially children from the Fukushima and Tōhoku areas, children living in orphanages, as well as boy and girl scouts. The program offers various themed workshops aimed to advertise the importance of organic farming and to spread the idea of limiting unnecessary waste production, through experiences of fabrics making and farming. Accordingly, the school offers three main activities related to different topics revolving around everyone’s lives: clothing, food, and housing.

### **Application of the CSO framework to the fashion brands’ social activities**

The CSO framework Moon (2012) is an easily replicable model to examine social and environmental activities. Based on its guidelines, the same determinants will be examined for RE;CODE, and Avanti’s social and environmental activities. Firstly, each activity will be analyzed to identify whether they have the potential to generate CSO. Then, explanations of which factor of the activities fall under the appropriate determinant will be provided. Finally, the implications of the findings will be illustrated.

### **RE;CODE**

#### *Select the field firms have core competence*

Overall, RE;CODE’s socially responsible activities are all related to the field of sustainable fashion and upcycling which are the fields the brand is specialized in. For instance, the “Good Will” Project is related to a specific phase in the upcycling production process. The

individuals employed, are assigned the task of disassembling discarded materials, which is a crucial stage in the upcycling process. Re;Table, aims to raise awareness on environmental issues caused by the fashion industry, as well as teaching clients how to upcycle and through what means they can incorporate sustainable habits in their everyday lives. Although its focus is less practical and strictly firm-oriented, the campaign spreads knowledge regarding the field of specialization of RE;CODE. Lastly, Box Atelier, likewise the “Good Will” Project, is strictly related to the upcycling process. However, the services it offers are not intended for the production of new outfits that will be sold by RE;CODE, instead, they are customized based on clients’ requests.

*Identify the weak activity in the value chain*

Even though all initiatives fall under the same business-related area, the “Good Will” Project and Box Atelier are the most prone to fill the gaps in RE;CODE’s value chain. The projects were created to solve the issue of workforce scarcity. By employing and training minorities in local Korean communities, the company managed to efficiently cope with the time-consuming process of upcycling materials, as well as to offer highly personalized and customizable services to clients.

*Help the related social segment*

There are various ways in which RE;CODE helps society in the field of sustainable fashion. Firstly, through the “Good Will” Project and Box Atelier, the brand helps society by hiring individuals belonging to minority groups such as people with intellectual disabilities, women who have been exposed to violence, North Korean defectors, and single mothers within local Korean communities. Prior to being assigned to different teams, the individuals are trained to create upcycled garments or to manually repair and reassemble older clothes. In sum, RE;CODE helps minority groups’ members by providing both financial support and by reintegrating them into society. In a broader sense, also Re;Table contributes to helping society by sharing knowledge, information, and pieces of advice on how to be more sustainable and environmentally friendly when purchasing garments. However, compared to the other initiatives, and because of their informative nature, Re;Table’s workshops and locations represent a more indirect way of helping society.

*Collaborate with supporting institutions for efficient management*

Based on its website, RE;CODE considers collaborations as a key factor for the success of its business. Hence, throughout the years, the brand has established various partnerships with companies, designers, as well as governmental institutions. Although the projects were all aimed to produce upcycled and sustainable goods, they were mainly firm-related. In terms of the social initiatives offered by RE;CODE, it is not clearly mentioned if the brand collaborates with specific institutions. For instance, the company’s website does not provide explanations on how individuals, belonging to minority groups, are selected or if they are linked to specific institutions.

*Where to improve and suggestions*

As shown in Table 1, the activities more likely to efficiently achieve CSO are the “Good Will” Project and Box Atelier since their characteristics match with a higher number of the model’s determinants (1,2, and 3 as they are not in bold).

**Table 1. RE;CODE social activities and determinants and suggestions (in bold)**

Social Activities	Select the field firms have core competence	Identify the weak activity in the value chain	Help the related social segment	Collaborate with supporting institutions for efficient management
“Good Will” Project	Upcycling production process of sustainable fashion business.	Workforce scarcity and high labor costs.	Targeting minority groups. Employment of individuals belonging to minority groups.	<b>Cooperation with public and private facilities, or organizations, specialized in reintegrating minorities into society, by sponsoring courses or workshops to learn about upcycling and provide training.</b>
Box Atelier	Upcycling production process of sustainable fashion business.	Workforce scarcity and high labor costs	Targeting minority groups. Employment of individuals belonging to minority groups.	<b>Cooperation with public and private facilities, or organizations, specialized in reintegrating minorities into society, by sponsoring courses or workshops to learn about upcycling and provide training.</b>
Re;Table	Raising awareness on sustainability, upcycling, and sustainable everyday habits.	Low awareness of consumers and the society on sustainability and fashion businesses.	Targeting society’s knowledge on upcycling by spreading information, and advices on sustainability related to the purchase of garments.	



Despite the programs well represent the concept of CSO since they generate profit while simultaneously helping the society without losing budget, their strategy has room for improvement. Cooperating with carefully selected institutions could drastically improve the company's performance, as well as the programs. To better understand how to establish a selective alliance in these circumstances an example will be provided. As previously mentioned, RE;CODE produces garments utilizing deadstock or waste material from other industries. To meet its goal of zero waste, the brand should produce as many garments as possible, and because the process of upcycling is highly time-consuming, the need for more workforce would increase. To solve the issue in its value chain, the brand would employ the "Good Will" Project and Box Atelier to simultaneously help society. However, the selection process and the training period of the newly hired employees would eventually slow down the manufacturing activity. To avert this hindrance, RE;CODE could cooperate with public and private facilities, or organizations, specialized in reintegrating minorities into society, by sponsoring courses or workshops to learn about upcycling. Establishing this type of partnership would create a positive-sum game, as well as CSO. Accordingly, on one hand, RE;CODE could expand its business, increase its production and profit, as well as save time that would have been allocated to the training of new employees. On the other hand, society would benefit because the company provides training while guaranteeing stable jobs for individuals with disadvantages in terms of social integration.

### **Avanti**

#### *Select the field firms have core competence*

Avanti's social activities are also generally related to the field of expertise of the brand which revolves around the production of organic cotton and garments. For instance, the Tōhoku Grandmas Project was launched to create jobs for elderly ladies living in areas hit by the Great East Japan Earthquake. The relation between the program and Avanti's field of expertise lays in the material employed by the old ladies to create Christmas ornaments; organic cotton. For what concerns the remaining projects, namely, the Avanti Farm and the Ekodomo Private Tutoring School, the correlation is narrower. The initiatives are mostly focused on informing, and sharing knowledge about the benefits of organic cotton, the techniques employed to seed, spin threads, and manufacture garments. Nonetheless, the projects are predominantly acting as learning centers targeting younger generations to share the concept of sustainability.

*Identify the weak activity in the value chain*

Other than having been created to share knowledge related to environmental awareness and sustainability, the Avanti Farm, and the Ekodomo Private Tutoring School are significant initiatives in terms of organic cotton farming. As previously mentioned, the brand sells accessories made out of organic cotton. However, due to Japanese soil and weather conditions, it is indeed complex for the brand to produce organic cotton domestically. To solve the lack of raw material, Avanti established the Komoro eco-village, part of which consists of crops employed as a testing space for new organic farming techniques. Once new techniques are approved, they are carried out in crops located all over Japan to harvest domestic organic cotton of the highest quality.

*Help the related social segment*

Avanti's most distinguished project, aimed to help society, is the Tōhoku Grandmas Project. The initiative provides employment and financial support to individuals living in harsh conditions due to the consequences of an environmental disaster. The elderly ladies involved in the initiative create organic cotton items sold by Avanti. The profit generated is then distributed as a labor charge and helps the elderly in the region to sustain themselves. Despite the program initially consisted of only three locations in the Tōhoku region, due to its success it spread to a total of five cities. The increase in locations, consequently created more opportunities for elderly people to support themselves thanks to their experienced crafting skills. Nonetheless, the program does not directly involve the community in its value chain since the items are not sold on the websites and the older ladies are not hired by the company. Thus, it does not fully align with the guidelines to create CSO.

*Collaborate with supporting institutions for efficient management*

The majority of Avanti's projects are the result of partnerships with diverse institutions. For instance, the Komoro eco-village, and all the experiences it offers, was founded by the brand together with the non-profit organization "Solar power plant networks" and the local private organization "Komorohashu club". Furthermore, the organic cotton crops in the village are cultivated in collaboration with the Faculty of Textile Science and Technology of the Shinshu University. Through these helpful alliances, Avanti can sustain projects such as the Avanti Farm, and the Ekodomo Private Tutoring School, as well as produce domestic raw materials.

*Where to improve and suggestions*

Avanti manages its social activities taking different approaches, which can be identified as social and environmental activities, but that are still far from creating shared opportunities. Nonetheless, the ideas behind the projects have the potential to be shaped into CSO. As shown in Table 2, and according to the analysis of the determinants for each campaign, the Tōhoku Grandmas Project appears to be the most prone to create a shared value with the implementation of a few improvements.

**Table 2. Avanti social activities and determinants and suggestions (in bold)**

Social Activities	Select the field firms have core competence	Identify the weak activity in the value chain	Help the related social segment	Collaborate with supporting institutions for efficient management
Tōhoku Grandmas Project	Organic cotton garments production process.	<b>Workforce scarcity and high labor costs.</b>	<b>Hiring a specific minority (elders in the Tōhoku region) to provide economic stability.</b>	Collaboration with care facilities for seniors
Avanti Farm	Information on organic cotton, and farming techniques.	Difficulty in accessing organic cotton (procurement).	<b>Targeting farmers providing special training on how to efficiently grow organic cotton.</b>	Collaborations with non-profit and private organizations, as well as with Shinshu University (Komoro eco-village)
Ekodomo Private School	Organic cotton manufacturing and craftsmanship skills.	Lacking manufacturing skills in the production of organic cotton garments.	<b>Targeting students and craftsmen providing special training related to the field of organic cotton garments.</b>	Collaborations with non-profit and private organizations, as well as with Shinshu University (Komoro eco-village)

The project lacks in terms of determinants 2, 3, and 4 as the results are shown in bold. To achieve CSO, Avanti could cooperate with care facilities for seniors in the region to hold crafting classes for the elderly and open to volunteers or individuals who wish to produce accessories made with organic cotton. This activity could generate CSO for competitiveness by hiring the formed individuals to produce organic cotton garments in Avanti's factories. Moreover, the brand could improve its image among its older customers creating CSO for reputation. Additionally, the outcome could be strengthened by the already existing image of Avanti's garments as being ideal for the most delicate types of skins (such as babies or seniors' skin), because of organic cotton's properties generating soft and durable garments.

In terms of the Avanti Farm, and the Ekodomo Private Tutoring School, the focus should be on determinants 3 and 4. Overall, the two initiatives provide experiences to understand the importance of organic cotton. Yet, there is no defined creation of shared value between society and the business. Firstly, Avanti should set targets in terms of helping society. In this case the sustainable fashion brand should target farmers, students, and craftsmen. According to the information reported on Avanti's website, there are no actual classes or workshops offered to learn either craftsmanship or farming techniques. In order to directly benefit from the initiatives, Avanti could take advantage of its partnerships. For instance, with the help of Shinshu University, the brand could organize internships for students attending the faculty of textile science and technology providing them with the opportunity to specialize in organic farming and cotton. This initiative could potentially benefit the brand through the creation of a skilled workforce, and society by training the students to become experts in a specific field while increasing their chances of being hired after graduation. Furthermore, training on organic cotton farming techniques could be provided to farmers in the region to ease the production process of cotton. Finally, courses on care and repairing, of organic cotton items purchased by consumers, could be offered to people at the Ekodomo Private Tutoring School to provide an array of initiatives targeting not only children but also adults.

### **Implications**

In view of the analysis of RE;CODE and Avanti's social and environmental initiatives, a few considerations should be observed. Firstly, both brands offer several social and environmental initiatives that either engage their clients in projects targeting sustainable practices or are shaped to help minorities in local communities. Secondly, some of the initiatives are more prone to the creation of a shared opportunity compared to others. Lastly, as shown in multiple examples presented by Moon (2012) and Moon and Parc (2019), creating social opportunities, besides generating financial gains for the firm, can be beneficial in terms of competitive advantage. To understand how CSO can lead to this specific outcome, a brief explanation regarding the concept should be provided. When addressing the topic of competitive advantage, firms can possess two types of basic advantages: cost and differentiation advantage. As introduced by Porter (1980, 1985, 1996) competitive advantage, together with the scope of activities, lead to three generic strategies that help firms achieve a higher performance in an industry. The strategies are cost

leadership, differentiation, and focus. In further studies, Porter (1985) extended the concept into four generic strategies where he divided the focus strategy into cost focus, and differentiation focus. Cost focus consists of exploiting differences in cost behavior in some segments, whereas differentiation focus exploits special needs of buyers in certain segments (Porter, 1980). Understanding the characteristics of different types of advantage helps to support the argument that CSO activities contribute to the achievement of competitive advantage.

Table 3 illustrates the suggestions formulated by the analysis for both RE;CODE and Avanti’s social and environmental activities to create CSO, together with the type of comparative advantage they lead to.

**Table 3. RE;CODE and Avanti’s social activities, improvements for CSO, and type of competitive advantage.**

Brand	Social Activity	Features of CSO activities leading to cost/differentiation advantages	Type of Competitive Advantage
RE;CODE	<b>“Good Will” Project</b>	Cooperation with public and private facilities, or organizations, specialized in <b>reintegrating minorities into society</b> , by sponsoring courses or workshops to learn about upcycling and provide training.	Cost Advantage & Market Penetration
	<b>Box Atelier</b>		
	<b>Re;Table</b>		
Avanti	<b>Tōhoku Grandmas Project</b>	Cooperation with care facilities for <b>seniors</b> to hold open workshops for training in the production of organic cotton items.	Cost Advantage & Market Penetration
	<b>Avanti Farm</b>	Organization of masterclasses <b>open to the general public</b> to learn craftsmanship and organic cotton farming techniques.	
	<b>Ekodomo Private School</b>	<b>Society’s education on sustainability</b> and benefits of organic raw materials. Take advantage of partnerships of Komoro eco-village to organize <b>internships for graduates</b> with Shinshu University.	

As can be observed from the table, the suggestions mostly focus on the creation of partnerships or collaborations with private and public organizations to provide training.

In RE;CODE's case collaborations will facilitate the selection process of future craftsmen in charge of specific upcycling segments. Within this context, CSO improvements support the achievement of cost advantage because it can reduce costs related to workers' training, as well as human resources because both the recruitment of workforce as well as the training will minimize the initial costs. Additionally, educating society on sustainability, sustainable fashion garments, and the upcycling process through Re;Table's projects will ease market penetration for RE;CODE. In terms of Avanti, the suggestions target the establishment of collaborations with existing partners, care facilities, and institutions to organize training courses. Same as for RE;CODE, also Avanti's CSO improvements can lead the brand towards market penetration and cost advantage. The latter is particularly accurate when considering the creation of internships for Shinshu University's students, or classes to learn organic cotton farming techniques. By doing so, the costs of training and specialization will be reduced and Avanti could increase its profit. Furthermore, being Avanti's garments made of only organic cotton and JOCA and GOTS certified, they provide items at prices similar or lower to their competitors but with better quality. For instance, Avanti's baby clothing and accessories line's prices range from ¥770- ¥2,000 for items such as socks, bibs, and underwear to ¥4,000-¥14,000 for suits, clothes and coats. Comparing these prices to other Japanese organic cotton baby clothes brands such as *cofucu*, shows how the range is similar if not lower for some items. To add on, although *cofucu* organic cotton items' price range is from ¥990 to ¥12,000 only a few items are JOCA or GOTS certified, thus comparable with Avanti's products. Therefore, cost advantage can be further supported by the above data since Avanti offers a wider variety of items with better quality at similar or low prices compared to its competitors.

The outcomes of the business strategy can furthermore be supported by different companies' examples of the application of CSO such as *Nestlé* and *MOD Pizza*. The Swiss multinational and drink processing conglomerate *Nestlé* in 2013 launched "Nestlé Needs YOUth", a workforce initiative providing training opportunities for young people (Nestlé S.A., 2020). To create this program, *Nestlé* partnered with public and private institutions all over the globe to help young people develop skills to be successful in the job market, as well as to hire skilled employees. A successful result was achieved in 2020 in the U.S. where the Nestlé campus recruiting program hired 138 interns and trainees who were eventually integrated remotely after receiving training across nine factories (Nestlé S.A., 2020). The American restaurant chain *MOD Pizza*, instead, partnered with community-based

organizations, as well as a national youth-centered social enterprise to solve its recruiting difficulties due to its rapid expansion (Shared Value.org, 2018). Through the established partnership *MOD Pizza* managed to solve its recruiting challenges by offering job opportunities to younger people. In view of the above considerations, CSO proves to be a strategy that leads to a competitive advantage (cost advantage for RE;CODE and Avanti) of the sustainable fashion brands compared to their competitors in the market. Nonetheless, the overall outcome derived by the implementation of the CSO strategy has the potential to be a positive one both in terms of competitive advantage and in terms of the creation of shared value.

## CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to show how the South Korean sustainable brand RE;CODE and the Japanese brand Avanti (together with its original brand PRISTINE) can gain competitive advantage while efficiently targeting social and environmental issues. With the implementation of the CSO (Moon, 2012) model's application to Porter's Diamond Model, the research firstly examined each social and environmental activity. Then it proceeded to suggest multiple possibilities that can be adopted by the brands to profit from their social and environmental activities while simultaneously benefiting society and the environment. Lastly, implications regarding the connection between CSO and competitive advantage were provided. All around, the proposals were designed to create social opportunities which can lead the companies to be well-positioned in their domestic fashion market. By implementing the suggestions formulated by this research, RE;CODE and Avanti can potentially gain a competitive advantage. This finding was supported by the outcomes generated through the CSO suggestions. The enhanced social activities, in fact, lead to a cost advantage in both cases since providing specialized training and programs to future workforce and individuals will eventually lower the companies' base-costs of training and selecting workforce. Furthermore, by upgrading their social and environmental activities, consumers would be more likely to perceive the brands as highly engaged in sustainability in terms of ethical, environmental, and production practices. Thus, considering them as better providers of sustainable garments compared to other companies. This result would also enable both brands to gain a positive reputation in the domestic fashion market, which is currently being highly influenced by consumers' preferences as pointed out by Chung et al. (2019) and Hyun and Ko (2017).

Although the abovementioned findings are significant, the limitations this paper faced were diverse. Firstly, the research focused its analysis on case studies in South Korea and Japan. This choice narrowed down the area of analysis, as well as the results of the paper. Hence, the replicability of the CSO framework applied to the social and environmental strategies of RE;CODE and Avanti, might not show the same outcomes for other companies. In fact, results might vary when implementing CSO strategy in different areas of the Region due to dissimilarities related to consumers' preferences, sustainable regulations, or society's needs. Nonetheless, being the application of the framework in this paper aimed to suggest guidelines to improve any business' social and environmental activities it can be implemented and customized based on firms' expertise, goals, and beliefs. Secondly, the research was limited because of the lack of data and literature regarding sustainable fashion in Asia. Although the topic of ethical and environmentally friendly fashion is still an emerging issue in the West, the number of studies published is far higher compared to Asia. In fact, the quantitative and qualitative researches focusing on successful sustainable companies are not scarce as illustrated by Michel, Feori, Damhorst, Lee, and Niehm's (2019) study of *Patagonia's* sustainable practices, or Weber's (2019) research on the circular economy strategy implemented by *Eileen Fisher*. However, the majority of the literature on the topic in Asia mainly focuses on the efforts of global fast fashion chains towards the UNSDGs, or sustainability policies as mentioned by Gupta's (2019). Finally, the nature of corporate websites as the main source of data collection for both RE;CODE and Avanti's social and environmental initiatives has resulted to be a barrier in terms of transparency. While newspaper articles might report personal experiences of the journalist regarding the sustainable fashion brands' initiatives, the data reports and posts published on the businesses' websites might be mediated by the brands themselves. Furthermore, considering that both brands are SMEs, the chances of finding detailed corporate reports like the ones published annually by global firms are quite low. In addition, some of the information published was only available either in Korean or Japanese, which partly limited the collection of more detailed explanations of RE;CODE and Avanti's company structure, as well as the organization of their corporate social activities.

The significance of this study is defined by multiple factors. Firstly, the paper offers an innovative outlook to the application of Moon's (2012) CSO framework to sustainable fashion brands which had yet to be suggested in the field of sustainable fashion. Secondly, its application to South Korean and Japanese brands presents the need for investigation of



a geographical area that has not been thoroughly given attention to by academia. Lastly, the study provides benchmark cases in South Korea and Japan where sustainable fashion is still a novel concept, and the implementation of its production practices is considered a tortuous and unclear task.

## ENDNOTE

This paper is abstracted and improved from the author's master thesis.

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