**PhD Dissertation Overview**

**Background:**

Outsourcing manufacturing to low-cost countries is a business strategy used by apparel brands dating back to the middle of the 20th century. Outsourcing enables brands to remain competitive in a cost-competitive apparel industry but at the cost of safe factory working conditions. Labor disruptions such as worker protests and strikes can lead to a wide range of difficulties for brands including stock-outs, long lead times, failure to meet customer demand, and the brand damaged reputation. The news media can have a powerful effect on a brand reputation. In 2013, a series of building collapses and factory fires in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Indonesia captured the headlines of mainstream newspapers such as The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal. The negative headlines posed a threat to the reputations of the apparel brands who outsourced their manufacturing. The news stories increased public awareness about unsafe factory conditions and led to activism and protests. According to a recent Supply Chain Management World (SCM) survey (SCM, 2015), 83 percent of supply chain executives, across different industries including apparel, were concerned about the risk of production disruption such as fire and strikes; 84 percent were willing to invest in fair labor standards to help prevent these problems.

In response to pressure from activists in the early 1990s, brands adopted codes of conduct as guidelines for apparel factories. Most of the codes adopted by brands followed those of the International Labor Organization. Brands now use a factory audit process to verify whether suppliers meet the standards specified in the codes of conduct. Some of the issues covered in factory audits are health and safety, wages, working hours, freedom of association, discrimination, child labor, and forced overtime.

Critics argued that the assumptions underlying a compliance-based approach (i.e., the power of brands, the role of audit information, and incentives for good labor practices) are not based on a realistic empirical ground. They claim that the real causes behind limited working condition improvements at apparel factories are resources and power constraints of buyers, inaccurate audit information regarding working conditions and failure to either penalize non-compliant factories or reward compliant factories. Brands that rely solely on compliance-based factory audit information could miss code violations which may later turn up in negative newspaper headlines.

A complementary monitoring method to factory audits is worker feedback crowdsourcing; based on the workplace feedback system which can ensure the continuous monitoring of workplace activities at the factory level, as opposed to the snapshot approach of factory audits. The workplace feedback approach provides factory workers a platform on which to record their grievances anonymously whenever they face abuse inside factories. The factory workers complete periodic cell phone surveys but can also use a toll-free phone number to immediately report abuse. Conceivably, a brand could obtain continuous information about the factory conditions using this system; traditional factory audits provide information every six to twelve months.

**Findings & Implications:**

As part of my PhD dissertation, I used workers’ feedback crowdsourcing to answer the research question: Can we Use Workers’ Feedback Crowdsourcing to Protect Apparel Factories and Brands from Reputational Damage? To answer this question, I investigated two research objectives. First was to determine the association of factory characteristics (i.e., workers grievances and factory indicators) with the negative publicity of apparel factories in Bangladesh for the year 2016. The second was to identify the differences between factories that received negative publicity and those that did not base on factory characteristics, to understand the potential triggers of negative publicity. For negative publicity, publicly available news articles were searched using both local Bangladeshi and international news publishers, from Jan 1, 2016, to Jan 30, 2017.

My analysis of the data indicated that when factory workers faced forced overtime, lack of FOA right protection, and long working hours issues, the apparel factories and brands faced negative headlines. Furthermore, the triggering factors of negative publicity highlighted by local and mainstream media contradicted the issues faced by workers among the factories receiving negative publicity. Forced overtime was the only issue mentioned by both workers and the news media. Fire safety was the most frequent trigger of negative publicity mentioned by the news media but was missing on the frequent issues faced by workers among factories receiving negative publicity.

In summary, this data-intensive study presents a strong case for leveraging workers feedback crowdsourcing and news media sources to understand apparel factory working conditions in real-time and to limit the reputational damage of apparel factories. This use case can potentially impact the life of 60 million factory workers in global apparel and fashion supply chain where factory workers can express the workplace grievances without any fear of losing jobs.

Full length document of this dissertation can be found at : <http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/resolver/1840.20/35618>