

Responding with care: ethical measures in the fashion industry during the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain

Responding
with care

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to analyze the ethical responses of the fashion industry to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic when the entire world was shocked by the rapid spread of the virus. The authors describe lessons from emergency ethics of care in the fashion industry during the initial months of COVID-19, which can assist fashion managers in improving ethical decisions in future operations.

Design/methodology/approach – Rapid qualitative research methods were employed by conducting real-time, in-depth interviews with key informants from multinational fashion companies operating in Spain, a severely affected region. A content analysis of news articles published during the first months of 2020 was conducted.

Findings – Five critical disruptions in the fashion industry were identified: (1) changes in public needs, (2) transportation and distribution backlogs, (3) defective and counterfeit supplies, (4) stakeholder relationships at stake and (5) managers' coping challenges. Additionally, five business survival responses with a strong ethics of care component were identified, implemented by some fashion companies to mitigate the damage: (1) adapting production for public well-being, (2) enhancing the flexibility of logistic networks, (3) emphasizing quality and innovation, (4) reinventing stakeholder collaborations and (5) practicing responsible leadership.

Originality/value – Despite the well-documented controversies surrounding unethical practices within the fashion industry, even during COVID-19, our findings inform managers of the potential and capability of fashion companies to operate more responsibly. The lessons learned can guide fashion companies' operations in a post-pandemic society. Furthermore, they can address other grand challenges, such as natural disasters, geopolitical conflicts and climate change.

Keywords Ethics of care, Fashion industry, COVID-19, Health, Sustainability, Grand challenges

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In early 2020, the COVID-19 crisis devastated global communities, impacting health and livelihoods. Fashion firms experienced unparalleled disruptions in their day-to-day operations

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Ivan Montiel (1975-2023), our coauthor in this paper, was a prolific, talented and generous colleague, as well as a good friend. He had a meteoric career in the field of sustainability. A tragic event took him away from us in his prime. We will miss him greatly. Finally, thanks to all the elite informants for their availability to participate in this study, as well as to Elena Galante for her help in carrying out this process.

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(Choi and Shi, 2022). Amid the pressures to keep their businesses afloat, managers often neglected their relationships with stakeholders and compromised on ethical considerations. News coverage highlighted instances of fashion companies such as El Corte Ingles or Adolfo Dominguez laying off employees. Smaller fashion companies, meanwhile (e.g. Iman and Cotton Crown) were complaining of pressure from their suppliers to make payments and a general lack of empathy (ABC, 2020). However, some fashion companies demonstrated ethical practices to mitigate the pandemic's damage. While the dominant rhetoric when confronting the crisis was akin to aggressive battlefield language (e.g. fighting the enemy, mobilization), some emphasized collaboration and kindness (Branicki, 2020). This raises the question: what can we learn from cases of emergency ethics of care in the fashion industry during the early months of COVID-19 to enhance ethical practices for managers?

Recent research has focused on various aspects of the pandemic on the fashion industry (Chan *et al.*, 2023); these include supply chain disruptions (e.g. Su *et al.*, 2022), corporate social responsibility (CSR) (e.g. Baek and Oh, 2021) and changes in purchasing behaviors (e.g. Milaković and Miočević, 2023; Okur *et al.*, 2023). Notwithstanding the importance of studying the social and economic impacts of the pandemic, there is a lack of research on how the fashion industry immediately responded to mitigate these impacts from an ethical perspective. Recent literature calls for employing an ethical perspective to analyze the management of crises such as COVID-19, rather than focusing exclusively on utilitarian and instrumental approaches (Branicki, 2020). Crisis management should be considered “not as a math problem with humans but a narrative of relationships that extend over time” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 28). Extraordinary situations such as COVID-19 make a large part of the population vulnerable, motivating researchers to not only analyze how businesses try to survive but also the complementary ethical component of how their behaviors affect such vulnerable people.

The ethics of care perspective is instrumental in evaluating the ethical foundation of companies' efforts during COVID-19 to secure business continuity and manage crises (Branicki, 2020). Ethics of care in business deals with leaders' responsibility to care about others, particularly in crises (Ciulla, 2009). While crises pose challenges in maintaining stakeholder relationships, ethics of care emphasizes creating and developing these relationships (Simola, 2003; Bauman, 2011; Linsley and Slack, 2013). Research on ethics of care during the COVID-19 crisis reveals that the pressures experienced by managers led them to pay less attention to employees, who in turn felt neglected, resulting in negative perceptions of the meaningfulness of their work and creating adverse organizational behaviors (Kong and Belkin, 2022).

Most research on ethics of care focuses on employee relationships (e.g. Vijayasingham *et al.*, 2018) or individual corporate crises (e.g. Simola, 2003). In this paper, we extend this to relationships with other stakeholders such as suppliers and communities in a global crisis context that affected organizations worldwide. We explore how some fashion managers exhibited ethics of care when making decisions that balanced their business needs with those of their stakeholders, thus expanding our understanding of corporate responses to the pandemic. It is important to note that these responses did not occur in all fashion companies; unethical behaviors also surfaced, such as the nonpayment of wages and the dismissal of workers derived from unauthorized subcontracting (Majumdar *et al.*, 2020). Also, some fashion retailers adopted multifaceted responses that combined ethical and nonethical practices. Zara used a two-sided approach, employing a strategy of denying initial media reports about worker mistreatment while also showing compassion through full payment commitments to suppliers and workers. On the other hand, H&M used a combination of denying direct responsibility by blaming suppliers, minimizing accountability by blaming the pandemic, showcasing care and commitment to their supply chain workers and shaping public perception (Kim and Woo, 2021).

In early 2020, we applied rapid qualitative research methods (Johnson and Vindrola-Padros, 2017; Vindrola-Padros *et al.*, 2020) to study in real time how the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was affecting the fashion industry and how it was reacting. Specifically, we examined multinational companies operating in Spain, one of the countries the pandemic hit earliest and hardest (Fernandes, 2020). We intentionally conducted our study during this initial wave to capture multiple perspectives and emotions that are difficult to recreate in hindsight and to document the ethically driven practices displayed by managers under extreme pressure. The first weeks of the pandemic constituted an extraordinary global emergency, creating a unique context to study how existing ethical beliefs and practices of individuals, organizations and institutions were suddenly challenged. Thus, we provide a historical snapshot of the crisis and record the ethically-centered responses for collective memory (James *et al.*, 2011).

Despite the controversies surrounding the fashion industry and its unethical practices (Huq and Stevenson, 2020), including during COVID-19 (Majumdar *et al.*, 2020; Kim and Woo, 2021), we observed some responses to the pandemic that emphasized ethics of care to save lives and minimize stakeholder damage. Some managers kept their businesses afloat while exerting unprecedented virtuous behaviors based on solidarity that are worth examining. We aim to contribute to the theoretical understanding of managerial ethics of care in the fashion industry during crises and thus exhibit a different face of this industry. We also aim to provide practical insights to managers in the industry on responsible actions in their day-to-day operations. In May 2020, McKinsey (2020) reported on the need for the fashion industry to leverage the opportunity presented by COVID-19 to foster sustainability. Our reflections can aid in transforming the fashion industry into one recognized by stakeholders – employees, consumers and local communities – as a respectable corporate citizen. Furthermore, it can contribute to addressing grand challenges and advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Montiel *et al.*, 2021).

Literature review

Crisis management

An organizational crisis is a “low probability, high impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly” (Pearson and Clair, 1998, p. 60). The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented global crisis. What was initially believed to be an external crisis beyond the business realm quickly became an organizational crisis, requiring managers to make quick, difficult decisions.

Scholars from various disciplines in crisis management literature have comprehensively explored organizational crises. Topics covered include antecedents (e.g. Coombs and Holladay, 2002; Kumar *et al.*, 2022); mitigation strategies such as effective stakeholder communication (e.g. Leta and Chan, 2021; Seeger and Ulmer, 2001); outcomes such as organizational reputation perceived by stakeholders (e.g. Schoofs *et al.*, 2019); and organizational learning to prevent future crises (e.g. Buhagiar and Anand, 2023; Eismann *et al.*, 2021; Veil, 2011).

Crisis management and ethics of care

Expanding on virtue ethics (Seeger and Ulmer, 2001), Simola (2003) suggests incorporating ethics of justice and ethics of care into the analysis of corporate crisis management. Ethics of justice focuses on fairness and equality based on moral principles and rules, while ethics of care emphasizes preserving relationships through benevolence and nonviolence (Gilligan, 1982). Care involves considering the emotional well-being of others facing global problems (Ciulla, 2009).

The term ethics of care is associated with feminist literature, specifically with the pioneering research by psychologist Carol Gilligan, who analyzed women’s moral

development. Gilligan (1982) observed how, beyond fair decision criteria, women were concerned with maintaining relationships, focusing on care for self, care for others and care for self and others (Simola, 2003). Other researchers, including Whitbeck (1983); Noddings (1984); Baier (1985), later used the term ethics of care. Noddings (1984) posited that ethics of care involves real-time moral deliberation, recognizing the uniqueness of each caring relationship. It necessitates genuine openness, receptiveness to others' realities and empathetic responses tailored to individual needs (Simola, 2003).

Ethics of care has been recently used to analyze different organizational aspects such as the positive relationship between perceived coworker care and increased pro-environmental behaviors (Paillé *et al.*, 2016); the positive relationship between care-based ethical frameworks within social entrepreneurship and the preservation of organizational moral principles (André and Pache, 2016); caring for employees and their increased sustainability-related activities (Carmeli *et al.*, 2017); integrating caring into design thinking (Hamington, 2019); and the positive effect of relational leadership on sustainability (Nicholson and Kurucz, 2019). In line with Simola (2003), crisis management research has used an ethics of care lens to study how, during crises, leaders care about employees (Bauman, 2011; Ciulla, 2009; Vijayasingham *et al.*, 2018) and stakeholders (Linsley and Slack, 2013). However, Branicki (2020) argues that organizational research on crisis management still heavily focuses on utilitarian and instrumental approaches and urges the adoption of an ethics of care perspective, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

In line with Gilligan (1982); Simola (2003); Branicki (2020), we use ethics of care as our theoretical framework, considering that managerial decisions directly impacted the well-being of numerous individuals during the COVID-19 crisis. We examine how fashion firms managed disruptions during the turbulent first wave of COVID-19 and the ethics of care-driven responses they implemented with various stakeholders to promote well-being. We propose an ethics of care lens that complements, without substituting, other approaches exclusively focused on the business's survival, allowing us to analyze reactions that took care of stakeholders compared to those that ignored them or took no action.

Crisis management in the fashion industry

The fashion industry has distinctive characteristics that justify the special attention paid to the crisis management literature. Evidence shows crises and pandemics usually create chaos in this industry (Cengiarslan, 2020; Judd and Lowell Jackson, 2021). Crisis management research in the fashion industry has studied several areas, factors such as the effect of supplier integration and green sustainability programs on the financial performance under global financial crises (e.g. Li *et al.*, 2016); how the global presence of a brand influences customer perceptions in times of global recession (e.g. Hassan *et al.*, 2015); or the impact of financial crises on fashion markets and their suppliers (e.g. Curran and Zignago, 2010).

Recently, studies have explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the fashion industry. Some of the areas covered are the impact on consumer behavior (e.g. Liu *et al.*, 2023; Okur *et al.*, 2023), the lack of movement toward circularity in the industry due to the pandemic (e.g. Sugg, 2022), the extent to which the pandemic disrupted supply chains in Bangladesh and China (e.g. Su *et al.*, 2022); and the effectiveness of business models in adapting to the crisis (e.g. Li, 2023). Despite these prior studies, opportunities for additional research remain. Unlike previous studies, we analyzed the critical disruption in the fashion industry and the ethical responses of this industry to the first COVID-19 wave. We conducted the study during the crisis to obtain multiple perspectives and emotions hard to capture in hindsight. Moreover, we employed an innovative technique combining real-time, in-depth interviews with key informants and content analysis of news articles.

Methods

Research setting

This paper aims to document significant disruptions experienced by fashion firms and analyze their ethics of care-driven responses during the initial months of the COVID-19 crisis. We examined multinational fashion companies operating in Spain, one of the countries most affected by the pandemic (Fernandes, 2020). Thus, the essential condition was that the companies operated in Spain, although they also operated in other countries. We assessed the role of ethics of care in this unprecedented emergency. Because of the distinctive nature of the pandemic, we chose to employ rapid qualitative research methods commonly used by social scientists, to study the effects and responses to health emergencies (Johnson and Vindrola-Padros, 2017; Vindrola-Padros *et al.*, 2020).

Data collection and analysis

We collected real-time primary and secondary data through in-depth interviews with elite informants (see Table I) and a content analysis of news articles published during the first months of 2020. Combining these two methods allowed us to triangulate the data and verify the results obtained from each method by comparing them (Nielsen *et al.*, 2020).

Elite informant #	Job position	Years of experience in the fashion industry	Duration in minutes
1	General Manager, Fashion multinational	More than 10	21
2	Head of Sustainability, International textile association	From 5 to 10	76
3	General Manager, Fashion multinational	More than 10	24
4	General Manager, Fashion multinational	More than 10	18
5	Commercial Director, Fashion multinational	From 5 to 10	28
6	General Manager, Fashion multinational	More than 10	22
7	CEO, Textile and Fashion multinational	More than 10	53
8	Consultant, Global sustainability and climate observatory	From 1 to 5	71
9	Network Representative, International apparel trade association	More than 10	79
10	Manager, Fashion multinational	More than 10	65
11	General Manager, Fashion multinational	More than 10	20
12	Supply chain manager, Fashion multinational	More than 10	26
13	Communications and Corporate Affairs Manager, Fashion multinational	More than 10	21
14	Coordinator, Sustainable mobility observatory	From 5 to 10	74
15	Operations management professor	From 1 to 5	46
16	Consultant and university professor	From 1 to 5	76
17	Director of Strategic Sourcing, Textile multinational	From 5 to 10	24
18	Director of Procurement, Fashion multinational	From 5 to 10	23
19	Director of Sales and CSR, Fashion multinational	More than 10	38
20	Director of Sales, Fashion multinational	From 5 to 10	40
21	Owner and CEO, Fashion retail store	More than 10	49
22	Chief Financial Officer, Fashion multinational	More than 10	34
			928

Source: Created by the authors

Table I.
Elite informants'
interview details

In-depth interviews with elite informants. We selected individuals from the fashion industry using a purposive sample. To select the individuals, we ensured they were all knowledgeable and experienced in the fashion industry in well-established multinationals firms operating in Spain. This approach involves researchers using their judgment to select individuals for the sample (Black, 2011), a method used in previous studies (e.g. Beadle, 2013; Shaw *et al.*, 2016). A purposive sample is justified in this context as we study an extreme and critical case, the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. We required information during a time of rapid change from knowledgeable individuals who were directly experiencing the crisis and had availability and an attitude compatible with our study. Given the urgency of capturing this valuable information, a purposive sample is adequate due to the limited number of sources available (Black, 2011).

Furthermore, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the disruptions and responses in the fashion industry by obtaining information directly from those experiencing the crisis (Shah and Corley, 2006). We chose open-ended questions based on the distinctive characteristics of the global crisis and avoided preconceived ideas, which suited our inductive study (Bettis *et al.*, 2014). Following Bluhm *et al.* (2011), we interviewed individuals with direct and indirect knowledge about the effects of the pandemic on fashion companies. These individuals, possessing exclusive information on the fashion industry and serving as key decision-makers, qualify as elite informants (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019). We recruited respondents with the assistance of a management consultant with 15 years of experience in private companies within the fashion industry. Knowledge about informants derived from the consultant guaranteed that those selected met our requirements of having experienced the crisis firsthand and holding positions of responsibility in the fashion industry. Thus, the chosen informants met the standards of elite informants as they possessed “extensive and exclusive information and the ability to influence important firm outcomes” (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019: p. 1293). All invited individuals agreed to participate in the study. To minimize observer bias (Eisenhardt, 1989), each interview involved at least two researchers present, enabling note comparison, clarification of ambiguous responses and discussion of our theoretical dimensions. We recorded and transcribed all interviews verbatim. We conducted 22 in-depth interviews via Zoom until we identified no new disruptions and responses, reaching data saturation.

News articles content analysis. To triangulate our primary data findings, we conducted a structured content analysis to identify disruptions and responses in the fashion sector during the initial weeks of the COVID-19 crisis. We analyzed news articles from major Spanish newspapers published between January and May 2020. Using Factiva, we gathered news articles on COVID-19 and the fashion industry, employing pandemic-related keywords (coronavirus, COVID, pandemic, SARS-CoV) and fashion industry terms (apparel, clothes, retail, textile, fashion, delivery, demand, distribution, goods, manufacturing, production, transportation, stakeholder, stock, storage, supplier, supply, value chain).

By combining these keyword groups, we initially found 19,987 news articles. Subsequently, we screened the articles using Nvivo 12 Plus software. Each paragraph underwent a thorough review to determine if it discussed the intersection of COVID-19 and the fashion industry or contained the keywords in an unrelated context. We excluded irrelevant news, resulting in a pool of 4,916 articles. After removing duplicates, we obtained 2,705 unique articles. Two coders followed a recursive analytical process to establish a comprehensive list of refined categories (Joshi *et al.*, 2010). Using the initial screening themes, the coders developed a coding scheme based on two code families: disruptions and responses. They identified disruptions and the primary responses implemented by firms and assigned them to their respective sections. News articles had to provide evidence of at least one disruption or response in the fashion industry; otherwise, we excluded them. We meticulously analyzed the

disruptions and responses, identifying similarities and differences and grouping them into broader categories with shared characteristics. This codification process revealed five disruptions and their corresponding responses in the fashion industry. Figure 1 illustrates the progression of the coding process (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). Table II summarizes the frequency of mentions for each disruption and response. Additionally, Tables A1-A4 include illustrative quotes from elite informants and news articles.

Responding with care

Findings

Our data consistently pointed to five disruptions and five business survival responses with strong ethics of care components in the fashion industry, discussed below and illustrated in Figure 1.

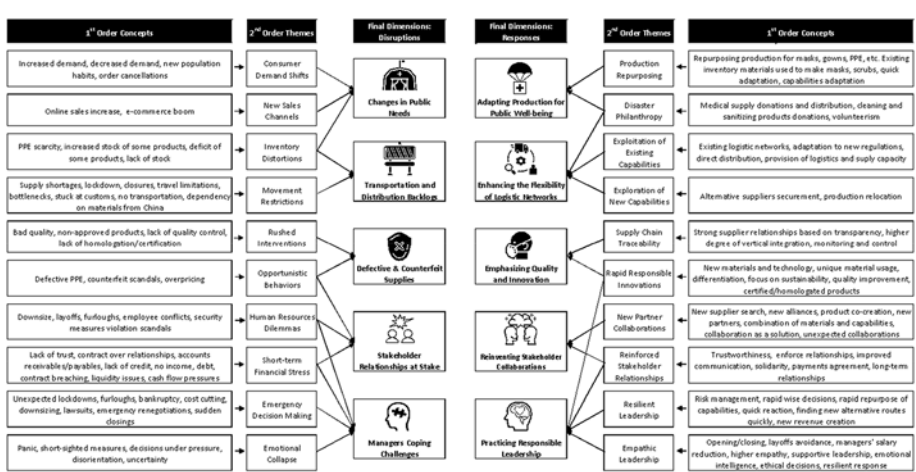


Figure 1. Disruptions and ethics of care-based business survival responses in the fashion industry

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Source: Created by the authors

Coverage in newspapers	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May
Total number of mentions	1	70	1,295	1,287	493
Disruptions reported					
Changes in public needs	0	17	339	259	29
Transportation and distribution backlogs	1	33	104	119	25
Defective and counterfeit supplies	0	0	57	132	43
Stakeholder relationships at stake	0	2	76	71	15
Managers' coping challenges	0	13	111	142	123
Responses reported					
Adapting production for public well-being	0	1	214	109	31
Enhancing the flexibility of logistic networks	0	0	143	118	34
Emphasizing quality and innovation	0	0	24	66	38
Reinventing stakeholder collaborations	0	0	123	172	92
Practicing responsible leadership	0	4	104	99	63

Source: Created by the authors

Table II. Disruptions and responses in Spanish newspaper reporting

Changes in public needs: adapting production for public well-being

The first wave of the pandemic caused unprecedented shifts in demand due to changes in consumer habits, impacting all industries. While sales of certain consumer products such as school supplies, skincare and makeup plummeted, there was a surge in demand for household supplies such as toilet paper, hand soap, packaged food, stationary bikes and treadmills (Bezdach *et al.*, 2020). E-commerce also experienced a boom, with a nearly 40 per cent increase in website traffic from January to June 2020 (Statista, 2020). As a nonessential sector, the fashion industry faced a substantial decrease in demand for its primary products. During the extended lockdown, purchases of fashion items decreased while new apparel for protection, including face masks and full-body protective gear, increased (Teodoro and Rodriguez, 2020). This sudden drop in demand led to massive quantity reductions and order cancellations. In an interview, the CEO of a textile multinational company stated

At the beginning of the pandemic, demand went down to almost zero for our apparel line. (Elite informant # 7, CEO)

Similarly, our content analysis of news articles highlighted the dramatic changes in demand, with a peak of 339 mentions in March 2020 (see Figure 2a). In April 2020, the

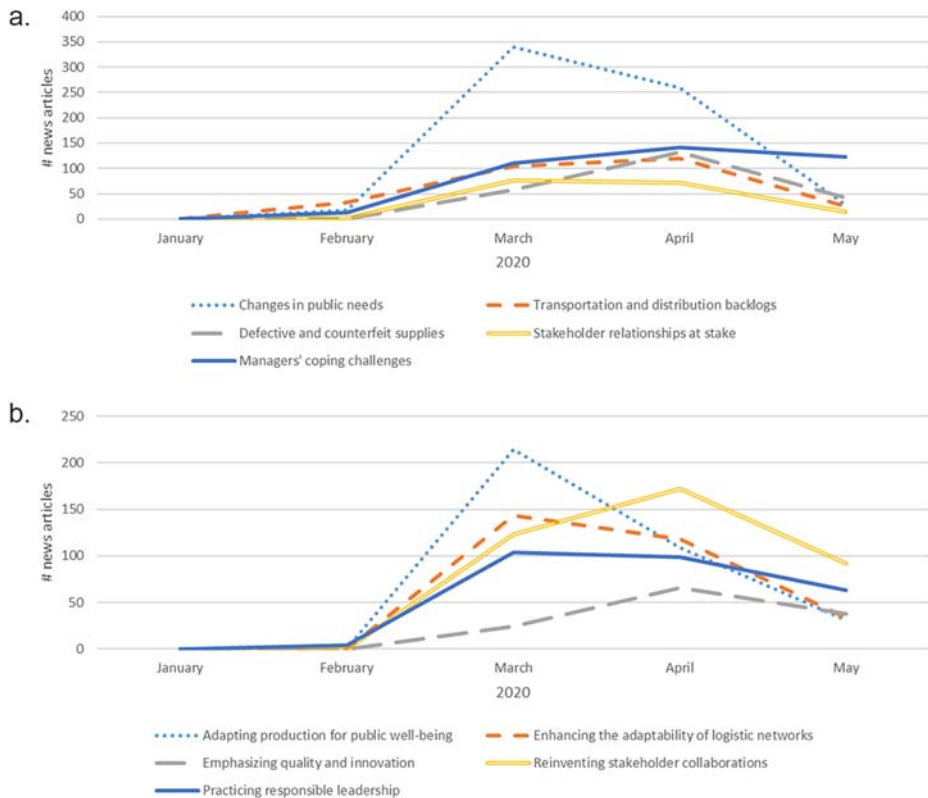


Figure 2.
a. Spanish newspaper reporting on COVID-19 in the fashion industry: disruptions
b. Spanish newspaper reporting on COVID-19 in the fashion industry: responses

Source: Created by the authors

ABC newspaper reported, “the increased demand for bleach, disinfectants, and sanitizers started at the end of February and never stopped” (Navas, 2020).

The crisis required companies to swiftly adapt their production lines to meet the unexpected changes in public demand. However, not all companies effectively managed this situation. Some struggled with an excess stock of less desirable products, a lack of supply for newly popular items, and/or a weak digital presence. Nevertheless, our analysis of news articles revealed that several fashion companies successfully adjusted their internal and external capabilities to produce medical apparel and personal protective equipment (PPE). These adaptations enabled them to address essential needs, exemplifying how managers recognized their interconnection with the broader population and demonstrated moral actions rooted in ethics of care (French and Weis, 2000; Nicholson and Kurucz, 2019). These rapid adjustments were not without challenges, as manufacturing these products required new raw materials and compliance with complex regulations, permits and standards. As expressed by an interviewed General Manager of a fashion multinational:

We had no idea about biosecurity and which fabrics we needed to use to shift our production to a line of products related to these new types of products that people needed, but we had to move fast to protect people. (Elite informant # 10, Manager)

Our analysis of press coverage during the initial weeks of 2020 provided strong evidence of how some Spanish fashion companies such as Grupo Santanderina and Mayoral adapted their products and online platforms to provide protective equipment. Similar reports highlighted the prompt responses of fashion companies from other regions of the world (Schmidt, 2020). Therefore, companies, driven by care-based responses, leveraged their existing competencies to innovate and offer new product lines while enhancing their online presence.

Transportation and distribution backlogs: enhancing the flexibility of logistic networks

China has emerged as the primary global supplier of manufactured goods and raw materials, making the world heavily dependent on its supplies. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed this global reliance on Chinese products and raw materials, leading to significant disruptions in supply chains (Ranney *et al.*, 2020). As stated by the Sustainability Director of a large apparel trade association:

One of the main problems to secure medical supplies on time is that companies ran short of raw materials needed to manufacture the medical supplies that were ordered from China during the first weeks of the COVID crisis. (Elite informant # 2, Head of Sustainability)

The early 2020 lockdowns reduced China’s manufacturing output, causing disruptions across industries and longer transportation lead times (BBC, 2020). Furthermore, major ports and airports faced bottlenecks as transportation companies canceled trips. As the pandemic spread, governments implemented travel restrictions, border closures and new social distancing protocols at docks and warehouses, further hampering operations (Twinn *et al.*, 2020). Shifting demand patterns and import regulations added to the bottlenecks, delaying distribution. Such was the case in Spain, where large quantities of goods, including medical supplies, were stuck in customs awaiting regulatory clearance. In our interview with a consultant from a global sustainability observatory, she further explained:

Manufacturing sanitary material implies not only finding the necessary raw materials and ways to transport it, but it is also necessary to pass existing bureaucratic processes, such as approvals, certifications, or tests. These bureaucratic procedures are defined by administrative systems that are not prepared to be managed in an emergency, causing delays and increasing lead times, putting the population at higher risk. (Elite informant # 8, Consultant)

Likewise, our analysis of news articles revealed the backlogs in transportation and distribution, reaching a peak of 115 mentions in Spanish publications in April 2020 (see [Figure 2a](#)). On March 29, 2020, *El Mundo* newspaper reported that transporting purchased goods from China encountered significant logistical challenges and experienced extensive delays ([Valle, 2020](#)). These shortages partly stemmed from a lack of government foresight and preparedness to respond to medical emergencies and the rapid spread of the virus, catching everyone off guard.

Some fashion companies understood this urgency and reacted quickly to the transportation and distribution backlogs differently. They adapted their capabilities by securing alternative suppliers to bypass backlogs and reduce lead times, ensuring products were available to meet the population's immediate needs. Less expensive solutions existed, such as doing nothing or stopping production, which some firms chose; however, some companies prioritized non-economic considerations and "did the right thing" ([Vijayasingham et al., 2018](#)). The Director of Sales at a Spanish fashion multinational explained their approach:

To avoid distribution backlogs, we moved part of our production from China to countries less affected and closer to the final destination such as Myanmar, Cambodia, Morocco or Turkey. (Elite informant # 20, Director of Sales)

Additionally, several fashion companies in Spain leveraged their extensive logistics capabilities to facilitate the distribution of medical equipment. Mango, Jevaso and Textil Santanderina, among others, swiftly distributed masks to medical centers across the country ([Iturralde, 2020](#); [S.L., 2020](#); [Icex, 2020](#)). The fashion industry's strength lies in its logistics, and taking no action to support the urgent needs of the public goes against ethics of care ([Simola, 2003](#)). Ethics of care questions whether actions or inactions help or hinder others ([Nicholson and Kurucz, 2019](#)), and these fashion companies that actively offered their logistics for the rapid distribution of medical equipment exemplify care in action, in contrast to inactive companies.

Defective and counterfeit supplies: emphasizing quality and innovation

As the global spread of the pandemic continued, panic buying surged, leading to increased demand for PPE, pharmaceutical drugs and COVID tests ([OECD, 2020](#)). This abnormal situation resulted in a concerning rise in defective and counterfeit products, often stemming from opportunistic behaviors, rushed interventions or inadequate quality control, common in crisis contexts. Such rushed interventions can tarnish an organization's reputation and undermine public trust. Moreover, the consumption and production of counterfeit products pose serious health and safety risks to the public as well as to employees working with unreliable suppliers. For instance, the Spanish government discovered 31 million Euros worth of fake face masks and 640,000 counterfeit COVID tests ([Lamet, 2020](#)). Governments implemented measures to slow customs clearance and delivery to mitigate counterfeiting and the circulation of low-quality goods. However, governments were not the only ones dealing with counterfeit issues: the private sector was also affected. The Director of Sales at a leading Spanish fashion company shared their experience:

We almost bought a large batch of counterfeit M95 masks. [...] Luckily, one of our Chinese partners realized the issue in time and we were able to cancel the order. (Elite informant # 20, Director of Sales)

In April 2020, more than 130 news articles highlighted the challenges faced by governments and businesses with defective and counterfeit supplies, in turn hindering a swift response to the crisis (see [Figure 2a](#)). For example, *El Mundo* reported, "...after the scandal over the acquisition of 640,000 'counterfeit tests' by the Spanish Government...".

Amidst the influx of counterfeit face masks and PPE, some fashion companies that had initially shifted their production to PPE chose to exit this highly competitive and unfair market. However, others remained but sought to differentiate themselves and add value. These companies engaged in rapid responsible innovation (Gutierrez *et al.*, 2020), introducing new technologies and unique materials to produce exclusive masks and other protective gear that aligned with their product portfolio while complying with all regulations. This allowed them to meet the sudden needs of the population. For example, the Spanish company Textil Santanderina adapted their sustainable cellulose fabric, Tencel, to create innovative face masks. Our analysis of news articles highlighted companies specializing in differentiated and high-quality PPE, with the number of mentions peaking in April 2020 (see Figure 2b).

Alternatively, companies with strong supplier relationships or some level of vertical integration could promptly meet quality and traceability standards by relying on a robust and trustworthy network of suppliers, enabling effective monitoring and control. Moreover, companies with advanced digital capabilities excelled in supply network visualization, inventory tracking and mapping critical partners. Ethics of care requires empathetic responses tailored to individuals' needs and well-being (Simola, 2003; Dagar *et al.*, 2022). Such examples demonstrated a genuine concern for public health among various companies that were committed to offering high-quality products that prioritized public well-being over opportunistic behavior.

Stakeholder relationships at stake: reinventing stakeholder collaboration

The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly reshaped managers' priorities and their relationships with stakeholders. Some stakeholder relationships, particularly between buyers and suppliers, encountered additional challenges due to cash flow pressures. Another critical issue managers faced was whether to downsize their workforce as news about layoffs and furloughs became the norm (Paton, 2020), creating tensions between employers and employees. Such stress, panic and tensions revealed people's true colors. One CEO and owner of a textile firm stated:

During the height of the crisis, I realized which suppliers and buyers I could really trust. Many of our top-tier suppliers did not react the way I expected; they just wanted to collect their receivables. Now I have a revised list of top-tier preferred business partners who take care of each other. (Elite informant # 7, CEO)

Lifelong and reliable business partners failed to deliver, while unexpected firms became key allies in times of crisis. Additionally, virtuality and remote work reduced face-to-face interactions with stakeholders, making relationship management more challenging and diminishing personal connections (Doerfler, 2020). In March 2020, we identified over 75 news articles reporting difficulties related to stakeholder relationships (see Figure 2a). For example, ABC reported: "Sometimes you may even have paid in advance – as manufacturers and suppliers are demanding – and then the chain disappears and the money has 'flown'..."

Liquidity issues pushed some companies to aggressively collect receivables, which deteriorated relationships with key value chain partners. However, other companies, such as Marie Claire and Temdam, responded more responsibly to their business partners. They engaged in philanthropic donations of medical supplies and communicated their financial expectations directly and honestly, leading to agreements on overdue payments and future orders. These actions fostered human bonds and cultivated healthy, long-term relationships. Beyond pursuing immediate economic interests, these companies sought to understand and empathize with their stakeholders, drawing on the social virtues of ethics of care, such as sympathy or compassion (French and Weis, 2000). Such efforts strengthened

stakeholder relationships, aligning with the principles of ethics of care (Simola, 2003; Bauman, 2011; Linsley and Slack, 2013).

Furthermore, collaborations with stakeholders may create key alliances that purposefully enhance, expand or modify the firm's resource base by including the resources of alliance partners (Helfat *et al.*, 2009; Monferrer *et al.*, 2015; Schilke and Goerzen, 2010). These collaborations represent creative resolutions of ethical conflicts, as ethics of care allows (Reiter, 1996; French and Weis, 2000).

Managers' coping challenges: practicing responsible leadership

In the first half of 2020, government mandates partially or entirely shut down manufacturing plants in several countries, such as China and Colombia. In other regions, such as Spain and the United States, plants ceased production due to supply shortages. Additionally, mandatory lockdowns forced thousands of retail outlets worldwide to close. These sudden events left managers shocked and disoriented, unable to identify alternative solutions for their businesses, such as collaborating with other partners, finding alternate shipping routes or exploring new ways to reach customers.

As the president of the Spanish fashion multinational Desigual pointed out in February of 2020: "the fashion industry is confronting a big challenge [...] we still don't know when we will be able to open our factories and go back to normal" (Gutiérrez, 2020). Similarly, a manager from the Latin America Division of a Belgian outerwear company described the abrupt closure of their factory, stating:

Without notice, we had to close the factory from one day to the next. I just went home and did not know what to do. It took me some days to process what was going on and start thinking of a contingency plan to keep my business afloat, keeping stakeholders in mind. (Elite informant # 10, Manager)

The press also reported on managers' challenges and uncertainties in coping with the crisis, particularly in March and April 2020, when such incidents also were more prevalent in the sample (see Figure 2a). Managers worldwide struggled to regain equilibrium after the sudden shock, with some unable to handle the pressure of halting operations while expenses continued to accumulate. Previous research suggests that a leader's inability to make rapid, wise and ethical decisions in times of crisis can harm the company more than the crisis itself (James and Wooten, 2010). For example, La Vanguardia reported in February,

The president of the Catalan brand Desigual, Tom Meyer, did not hide his concern this Wednesday. In an appearance to explain his company's plans, he admitted that the fashion industry faces the 'challenge' of the virus: *we still do not know when the factories will open normally.*

While some managers remained in shock and reacted impulsively by implementing layoffs, furloughs and short-sighted cost-cutting measures, others quickly realized they could repurpose their apparel manufacturing plants to produce PPE. This not only allowed them to reopen but also created new revenue streams with innovative offerings. Furthermore, some managers promptly sought alternative product distribution routes and secured new suppliers when the usual suppliers had to cease operations. Newspapers frequently mentioned resilient responses from managers, particularly in March 2020, when Spain first announced lockdown restrictions (see Figure 2b). For instance, Desigual adapted its logistics operations and explored alternative locations closer to Spain, such as Morocco and Turkey (Gubern, 2020).

In Spain, the textile company Marie Claire demonstrated swift reactions from leaders who retained most of their workforce by manufacturing new sanitary supplies. They also collaborated with the regional government to distribute them. Ethics of care emphasizes activating and nurturing relationships with stakeholders (Simola, 2003; Vijayasingham

et al., 2018), as exemplified by Marie Claire's engagement with employees, suppliers and the government. These collaborations prioritize the well-being and sustainability of all parties and align with the co-creation perspective of ethics of care, i.e. "growth in connection" (Dagar *et al.*, 2022; Nicholson and Kurucz 2017). Additionally, ethics of care explicitly requires leaders to combine care for others with a sense of duty, avoiding the inaction observed in some companies during the initial wave of the pandemic.

Care is about feelings, but it may also be framed in terms of attention to one's duty. Being there means the leader is "on the job" and paying attention. A leader's presence can give followers confidence in the leader and this confidence can be a source of comfort. (Ciulla, 2009, p. 4)

Theoretical implications

Unethical practices within the fashion industry have been extensively studied, highlighting its lack of ethics in production, marketing, supply chain and environmental sustainability (e.g. Huq and Stevenson, 2020; Pedersen and Gwozdz, 2014), including during COVID-19 (Majumdar *et al.*, 2020). However, our research provides a fresh perspective by demonstrating pioneering ethical behaviors in fashion firms, aligning with the limited existing literature on the subject (Pedersen *et al.*, 2018). We show how the fashion industry has the potential to make positive contributions to society and the environment, as revealed by some responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, our study expands the literature on the fashion industry during COVID-19. In addition to previous research on environmental sustainability (Su *et al.*, 2022) and CSR (Baek and Oh, 2021), we examine ethics in fashion management. Our findings support the concept of ethics of care, particularly in crisis management within the fashion industry. While previous literature on ethics of care in crisis management has focused on specific cases such as the shooting tragedy at San Ysidro faced by McDonald's Corporation (Simola, 2003) or the Northern Rock bank during the 2008 financial crisis (Linsley and Slack, 2013), our research analyzes how the fashion industry coped with the unprecedented global crisis brought by the pandemic. In addition, we extend the ethics of care literature focusing on organizations' relationships with their employees (Paillé *et al.*, 2016; Vijayasingham *et al.*, 2018). We show how fashion companies responded to environmental changes, keeping businesses afloat and considering the needs and well-being of multiple stakeholders, including employees, suppliers, customers and the public. Moreover, we observed collaborations with governments, competitors, universities and public institutions to mitigate the pandemic's impact. This research is an empirical demonstration in the fashion industry of how ethics of care centers upon creating and developing stakeholder relationships essential in crisis contexts (Simola, 2003; Bauman, 2011; Linsley and Slack, 2013).

Moreover, our study contributes to the literature on ethics-focused dynamic capabilities, which refers to "capturing the skills and resources a firm needs to obtain the synergies between ethics and performance over time" (Arend, 2013, p. 2), facilitating organizational adaptation to environment (Teece, 2007). This literature points to the critical role dynamic capabilities can play in responding to ethical and societal challenges in business, such as poverty (Tashman and Marano, 2009) or green challenges (Singh *et al.*, 2020). Dynamic capabilities have been recognized as crucial for fashion firms' success (Caniato *et al.*, 2013). Our findings reveal how ethics of care serves as a framework that enables fashion firms to develop adaptive responses (dynamic capabilities) to unprecedented emergencies such as the COVID-19 crisis, generating valuable synergies between ethics and performance.

Managerial implications

Our analysis highlights the capabilities of fashion companies to run their businesses while meeting stakeholder needs during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Integrating responses into crisis contingency plans is essential and can be applied to other scenarios, such as natural disasters or migratory crises. In the wake of ethical controversies surrounding the industry, we propose that fashion companies seize this opportunity to revise their strategies and incorporate ethical priorities into their post-pandemic operations. We offer five practical implications for fashion managers.

First, our results show how some fashion companies adjusted their manufacturing processes to respond to urgent public needs during COVID-19. By incorporating manufacturing flexibility, they could adapt traditional processes and produce urgently required products, showcasing responsible business responses to immediate population needs. However, this flexibility should extend to daily operations, transitioning toward a demand-driven model. This model must prioritize understanding customers' needs continuously and adopting responsible manufacturing processes. Key issues include sustainable raw material usage, extending clothing lifecycles, recycling, enhancing firm transparency and improving process efficiency. Consumers have reevaluated their consumption habits during the pandemic, attaching greater importance to ethical values and sustainability (McKinsey, 2020).

Second, we also discovered that fashion companies with high adaptability within their supply chains responded better and faster to the COVID-19 crisis. The distribution of essential products during crises (e.g. Russian invasion of Ukraine, climate disasters) is crucial to meeting public needs. We recommend that firms enhance their supply chain adaptability, enabling them to respond to future crises and improve their daily activities, stakeholder well-being and overall performance (Hernández and Pedersen, 2017). Therefore, better integration into the supply chain that also considers customer priorities is necessary, something which can also reduce risks and improve flexibility. Collaborating with local suppliers (nearshoring) or dual shoring are effective strategies.

Third, we also observed that fashion companies with strong digital capabilities could visualize their supply networks, track real-time inventory and map critical partners throughout the value chain. As a result, they were better prepared to identify and respond rapidly to backlogs, thus meeting the public's needs. This monitoring ensures product quality by avoiding contracts with unreliable suppliers that fail to comply with quality, security, health and labor regulations. Implementing supply chain traceability is essential, particularly in crisis contexts where urgent needs and opportunistic behaviors arise.

Fourth, we noticed how rapid alliances with new suppliers, governments and even competing firms flourished during the crisis. While we strongly recommend paying close attention to *Force Majeure* clauses in commercial contracts to safeguard against unexpected disruptions (Velez-Calle *et al.*, 2020), relational contracting proved essential in building trust and transparency with valued partners, creating more reliable value chains (Verbeke, 2020). It is crucial to reduce transactional relationships and cultivate solid supplier partnerships that ensure the supply of materials, mutual understanding in the face of economic difficulties, and collaborative projects, such as rapid responsible innovations (Gutierrez *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, during crises and complex situations, these practices should reinforce ethical values, sustainability and CSR practices rather than neglecting them.

Finally, we observed that fashion companies with leaders capable of overcoming the initial shock of the sudden COVID-19 disruption and empathizing with the struggle endured by all stakeholders were better valued by their customers and society. These companies were successful through exercising self-compassion, emotional and cultural intelligence, effective communication with suppliers and customers, exploring realistic and transparent ways to grant or receive payment moratoriums and avoiding layoffs and downsizing

practices (Brackett, 2020). An ethics-of-care leadership approach should guide the fashion industry in not squandering this opportunity to reassess its potential to contribute to society and a sustainable future.

Responding
with care

Conclusion

Our study is not without limitations. We collected primary data (interviews with elite informants) and secondary data (content analysis of news articles) from Spain. Consequently, although the observed companies are multinational and the newspapers have an international scope, the results are restricted to a geographical area other than Asia or the United States, key hubs in the global fashion industry. In addition, we centered our study on a purposive sample of the fashion industry, and thus, disruptions and responses could vary in other companies. However, our study does not suggest replicating the analyzed companies but instead presents a range of responses that represent a great opportunity toward sustainability for any firm operating worldwide.

Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge that although the informants emphasized the ethical component of their responses, these strategies also ensured the businesses' survival, potentially justifying their implementation (Acquila-Natale *et al.*, 2022). While our goal was to document the experience of significant disruptions and the ethics of care-driven responses by fashion firms during the first months of the COVID-19 crisis, future scholars could explore how firms have changed the way they do business during the first years after the COVID-19 crisis, and how the fashion industry is increasing its ethically driven initiatives. For example, Zara is entering the reselling market in the U.K., where shoppers can resell, schedule repairs and donate unwanted clothes to cut their carbon footprint (The Guardian, 2022).

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we witnessed how some fashion companies swiftly contributed to alleviating the crisis's impact through innovative, ethical responses. These companies demonstrated an ethics of care-based approach, enabling them to respond to shortages of essential products, combat counterfeiting, collaborate with stakeholders and responsibly manage relationships with employees and suppliers.

The fashion industry must seize this opportunity to showcase how it can contribute to the well-being of people and the planet in its regular operations, leaving behind any previous controversies and unethical decision-making. By adopting ethical and sustainable practices, the fashion industry can address the environmental priorities of its customers, explore new suppliers and alternative routes, establish strong alliances with stakeholders, foster responsible innovations and be guided by committed leaders who embody a coherent vision.

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Table A1.
Exemplary quotes derived from the elite informants' interviews: Disruption

Quotes	Second-Order Themes	Disruptions
<p>"At the beginning of the pandemic, demand went down to almost zero for our line of home products" (Elite informant #7)</p> <p>"After the initial lockdown, there was increased attention for solo sports, therefore demand for cycling apparel increased dramatically" (Elite informant #10)</p> <p>"Businesses had to adapt to online sales in a couple of days, [...] for large companies the online infrastructure was already there, but more small and medium enterprises moving to online sales was an unexpected challenge" (Elite informant #16)</p> <p>"Retail was the first one to stop and the effect was backward, so the firms located first in the supply chain (suppliers) were the last ones to receive the message to stop production and therefore got the biggest blow. They were left with most of the inventory" (Elite informant #6)</p> <p>"The pandemic affected supply chains at different times around the world. Early in 2020, suppliers in China started closing their factories. When they started opening in April and May, we in the Americas were not buying since our retail stopped and our sales were canceled" (Elite informant #17)</p> <p>"...the supply chain had several blockages. [...] The excessive demand of a type of material or product at the same time from different locations, and a very strong blockade in transportation since there were no planes, nothing" (Elite informant #8)</p> <p>"We had no idea about biosecurity and which fabrics I needed to use to shift my production to a line of products related to this new type of products but we had to move fast to protect people" (Elite informant #5)</p> <p>"In the midst of the first wave, the supply chain had several backlogs. [...] On top of that, counterfeit PPE supplies were surging... we experience so many cases, especially in Latin America" (Elite informant #8)</p> <p>"We almost bought a large batch of counterfeit M95 masks. [...] Luckily one of our partners in China realized of the issue on time and we were able to cancel the order" (Elite informant #20)</p> <p>"Our factory was closed for three weeks, there was panic, and the main dilemma was whether to start letting go of people or not" (Elite informant #10)</p> <p>"During the height of the crisis, I realized which suppliers and buyers I could really trust. Many of our top-tier suppliers did not react the way I expected, they just wanted to collect their receivables. Now I have a revised list of top tier preferred business partners who take care of each other" (Elite informant #6)</p> <p>"Our COVID related survey to 160 member companies and 400 producers, left a clear message: there is a need to improve empathic communication between buyers and producers" (Elite informant #9)</p> <p>"Without notice, we had to close the factory from one day to the next. I just went home and did not know what to do. It took me some days to assimilate what was going on and start thinking of a contingency plan to keep my business afloat keeping stakeholders in mind" (Elite informant #10)</p> <p>"The quarantine came out of nowhere, there was no warning. We did not know what to do. Managers panicked, even the government" (Elite informant #3)</p> <p>"Lots of managers gave up really quick. The difficult part was to be resilient and keep working to look after stakeholders" (Elite informant #7)</p>	<p>Consumer Demand Shifts</p> <p>New Sales Channels</p> <p>Inventory Distortions</p> <p>Movement Restrictions</p> <p>Rushed Interventions</p> <p>Opportunistic Behaviors</p> <p>Human Resources Dilemmas</p> <p>Short-term Financial Stress</p> <p>Emergency Decision-Making</p> <p>Emotional Collapse</p>	<p>Changes in Public Needs</p> <p>Transportation and Distribution Backlogs</p> <p>Defective and Counterfeit Supplies</p> <p>Stakeholder Relationships at Stake</p> <p>Managers' Coping Challenges</p>

Source: Created by the authors

Quotes	Second Order Themes	Responses
<p>“As soon as we reopened the plant, we repurposed it to manufacture biosecurity products for protecting the population” (Elite informant # 5)</p> <p>“People who used to make sacks for potatoes, have made robes, scrubs, masks, everything. All the people who had an industry that could be adapted for caring people did it” (Elite informant # 8)</p>	<p>Production Repurposing</p>	<p>Adapting production for public well-being</p>
<p>“In mid-March, in response to the serious health crisis that was taking place, we launched a project called <i>solidarity masks</i> for the manufacture and distribution of masks” (Elite informant # 19)</p>	<p>Disaster Philanthropy</p>	
<p>“... many times, here customs in Spain would in touch with them because they are more agile and know more about moving the goods globally...” (Elite informant # 8)</p> <p>“... we responded first by putting ourselves in the service of the customs office to advise them on standards, licenses and testing of the new types imported goods and materials” (Elite informant # 2)</p>	<p>Exploitation of Existing Capabilities</p> <p>Exploration of New Capabilities</p>	<p>Enhancing the flexibility of logistic networks</p>
<p>“Supply chains that were already transparent may have received the same blow, but they have been able to react in a more efficient way [...] there are clear measures and protocols for action, for example, effective and empathic communication” (Elite informant # 9)</p>	<p>Supply Chain Traceability</p>	<p>Emphasizing quality and innovation</p>
<p>“Since they saw this was going to be a sustainability and traceability issue, they started to manufacture a type of fabric that feels synthetic but is natural” (Elite informant # 2)</p> <p>“... we decided to repurpose our high resistant and transpirable materials used in cycling gear to manufacturing high-quality facemasks to guarantee to keep people safe” (Elite informant #10)</p>	<p>Rapid Responsible Innovations</p>	
<p>“... we generated a database to connect firms. One firm said I have an antibacterial thread, another one said I have or need this other material, and so on. What we did was get everyone in touch which led to the creation of new production and value chains even among competing firms.” (Elite informant # 2)</p>	<p>New Partner Collaborations</p>	<p>Reinventing stakeholder collaborations</p>
<p>“Alliances were key to combine materials and capabilities to respond faster to increased demand for biosecurity products” (Elite informant # 1)</p>	<p>Reinforced Stakeholder Relationships</p>	
<p>“This crisis did not stop us but actually motivated us to look for other suppliers in other countries” (Elite informant #4)</p>	<p>Resilient Leadership</p>	<p>Practicing responsible leadership</p>
<p>“Many companies went bankrupt. Some companies like mine decided not to get rid of our workers by reducing other costs, for example by renegotiating with our landlords, suppliers, and banks” (Elite informant # 7)“... proceed with payments as much as possible, contact local producers to understand local challenges. Communication and empathy are key..” (Elite informant # 9)</p>	<p>Empathic Leadership</p>	

Source: Created by the authors

Table A2.
Exemplary quotes derived from the elite informants' interviews: Response

Table A3.
Exemplary quotes
derived from the
Spanish news articles'
content analysis:
Disruptions

Quotes	Second Order Themes	Disruptions
<p>"The increase in demand for bleaches, sanitizers and hydrogels (for hand washing) started at the end of February and has not stopped growing since then" (ABC - April 10)</p> <p>"The report confirms the drop in consumer intention in categories such as fashion, travel, or hospitality.."(<i>Expansión</i> - April 14, 2020)</p> <p>"Online channels (H&M) acted as a buffer against the closure of physical stores and e-commerce sales increased by 17%. The firm kept the online store open in 47 of the 51 markets, while it closed many physical stores" (<i>Europa Press</i> - April 3, 2020)</p> <p>"Hydroalcoholic gel has become a staple good and therefore, given the lack of the product in stores and pharmacies ... (<i>El Confidencial</i> - April 11, 2020)</p> <p>"... the transfer of material, bought in China, like everyone else, is not logistically easy and suffers delays..." (<i>El Mundo</i> - March 29, 2020)</p> <p>"The Spanish textile sector is revealed as one of the most dependent in terms of supplies from China, since 3.47% of the materials and intermediate components that it needs to make its products come from this country. This explains that the crisis of the coronavirus has forced some firms to assume production delays" (<i>Expansión</i> - February 26, 2020)</p> <p>"... autonomous communities that have had to remove tens of thousands of defective masks" (<i>La Nueva España</i> - May 16, 2020)</p> <p>"... after the scandal over the acquisition of 640,000 'counterfeit tests' by the Spanish Government ..." (<i>El Mundo</i> - April 1, 2020)</p> <p>"Primark has decided to extend the Temporary Employment Regulation File until April 26 due to force majeure that affects about 8,000 employees, 98% of the workforce, and which has been applied retroactively since last March 15" (<i>El Confidencial</i> - April 14, 2020)</p> <p>"Sometimes you may even have paid in advance - as manufacturers and suppliers are demanding - and then the chain disappears, and the money has 'flown'. They are 'pirates', as many sources refer to intermediaries. «They don't give a damn if what they sell saves lives or not»." (<i>ABC</i> - April 25, 2020)</p> <p>"... economic measures are needed to help the textile and fashion sector "(.). That is why it asks the Government to adopt a set of fiscal measures for the postponement, suspension of taxation, the flexibility of requirements and establishment of certain tax benefits." (<i>20 min</i> - May 1, 2020)</p> <p>"The co-founder of the textile firm Clemente Cebrián announced through social networks that the company has had to adopt very tough measures and use furloughs that will affect 80% of its workforce, 500 employees" (<i>La Vanguardia</i> - March 24, 2020)</p> <p>"The president of the Catalan brand Desigual, Tom Meyer, did not hide his concern this Wednesday. In an appearance to explain his company's future plans, he admitted that the fashion industry faces the "challenge" of the virus. "We still do not know when will the factories open normally" (<i>La Vanguardia</i> - February 12, 2020)</p>	<p>Consumer Demand Shifts</p> <p>New Sales Channels</p> <p>Inventory Distortions Movement Restrictions</p> <p>Rushed Interventions Opportunistic Behaviors Human Resources Dilemmas</p> <p>Short-term Financial Stress</p> <p>Emergency Decision Making</p> <p>Emotional Collapse</p>	<p>Changes in Public Needs</p> <p>Transportation and Distribution Backlogs</p> <p>Defective and Counterfeit Supplies</p> <p>Stakeholder Relationships at Stake</p> <p>Managers' Coping Challenges</p>

Source: Created by the authors

Responding
with care

Quotes	Second Order Themes	Responses
<p>“... (the Valencian textile industry) reconverts its production to meet the pressing demand for masks, gowns and medical supplies in Spanish hospitals.” (<i>El Mundo</i> - April 13, 2020)</p> <p>“... Grupo Antolin, Inditex, Fama or Bimba & Lola produce sanitary gowns and protective suits to protect people” (<i>Cinco Dias</i> - April 1, 2020)</p>	<p>Production Repurposing</p>	<p>Adapting production for public well-being</p>
<p>“Inditex has donated more than 4.000 reusable and adjustable gowns to doctors and nurses of the A Coruña University Hospital Complex. In addition, the owner of Zara has donated sanitary material valued at 63 million euros to the National Health System” (<i>El Confidencial</i> - April 28, 2020)</p>	<p>Disaster Philanthropy</p>	
<p>“The two million masks donated by Mango are also in Spain and will be distributed to hospitals throughout the national territory, using the own logistics network of this textile company” (<i>Faro de Vigo</i> - April 1, 2020)“... the company (Inditex) has made its entire logistics and supplier network available to the Government to ‘attend to the emergency needs, both for sanitary material and textiles’” (<i>El Confidencial</i> - March 18, 2020)</p>	<p>Exploitation of Existing Capabilities</p>	<p>Enhancing the flexibility of logistic networks</p>
<p>“The big four of the sector in the Spain – Inditex, Mango, Cortefiel, and Desigual – are already looking for alternatives to fabrics from China” (<i>Economía Digital</i> – February 16, 2020)</p>	<p>Exploration of New Capabilities</p>	
<p>“... the quoted masks are being made by the Granlei company from Mosense (a children’s fashion textile company), which was commissioned with the order after verifying the quality of a previous consignment made by firm for donation. To do this, The City Council has acquired two spools of approved fabric from Tecfilter, a company which, in turn, donated a third spool. All three contain a textile used to produce FFP2 type masks, that is, certified for a retention degree of 95% ...” (<i>Faro de Vigo</i> - April 14, 2020)</p>	<p>Supply Chain Traceability</p>	<p>Emphasizing quality and innovation</p>
<p>“The job is being carried out by the operators that work in the factory (Panter footwear textile company) and part of the materials used have been donated by other firms in the province, prior agreement with the health authorities to guarantee their effectiveness. The masks are being manufactured with a textile certified for sanitary use approved by INESCOP (laboratory accredited by AENAC) and later these PPE (Personal Protection Equipment) are sent to hospitals where they are properly sterilized” (<i>ABC</i> - March 26, 2020)</p>	<p>Rapid Responsible Innovations</p>	

(continued)

Table A4.
Exemplary quotes
derived from the
Spanish news articles’
content analysis:
Response

Quotes	Second Order Themes	Responses
<p>“... signed agreement (...) Inditex, which entailed for its signature the International Organization of Employers (IOE), the Federation of Employers of Bangladesh, the International Federation of the Clothing Industry, the brands Adidas, C&A, H&M, M&S, Primark, PVH Corporación, Ralph Lauren, Tchibo, V.F. Corporation, Under Armor and Zalando. On the part of the trade union organizations, the International Trade Union Confederation, InsutriALL, and Global Union sealed the agreement. The basic commitments of the pact include: 1.- The payment of all orders completed or in process, at the established price and without requiring any type of discount. 2.- Maintain open, fast, and effective lines of communication with the supply chains ...” (<i>La Voz de Galicia</i> - May 24, 2020)</p>	New Partner Collaborations	Reinventing stakeholder collaborations
<p>“The company (Inditex) thanked ‘the solidarity and help offered from China by different suppliers and collaborators.’ In particular, it cited Tsinghua University, which has mediated to gain access to basic medical supplies” (<i>ABC</i> - March 19, 2020)</p>	Reinforced Stakeholder Relationships	
<p>“... the Galician industry has been quickly demonstrating its commitment with priceless donations of protection material against the coronavirus, but also by taking the initiative to start manufacturing it in record time” (<i>La Voz de Galicia</i>, April 9, 2020)</p>	Resilient Leadership	Practicing responsible leadership
<p>“Amancio Ortega is one of the businessmen who most quickly reacted to the crisis and lack of means to fight the coronavirus and keep people safe” (<i>El Confidencial</i> – April 11, 2020)</p>		
<p>“The textile chain also intends to complement the benefit that those affected by the furloughs would receive from the SEPE until reaching 100% of the salary. With this decision, the Galician company would join the decision made this week by other chains of the sector such as Tendam (Cortefiel, Pedro del Hierro, and Springfield), Adolfo Domínguez, and Bimba y Lola.” (<i>ABC</i>- March 21, 2020)</p>	Empathic Leadership	
<p>“The president of Inditex, Pablo Isla, has announced that the company will continue to look after employees and pay the remuneration to its entire workforce in Spain with its own resources, as it has been doing to date” (<i>Cinco Días</i> - April 13, 2020)</p>		

Table A4.

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