Narrative Review Article

A Narrative Review of Fast Fashion, Greenwashing, and Weak Regulation Fuel Global Labor and Environmental Harm

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ABSTRACT

Known for advances in styles and influence, the global fashion industry has long been praised. Despite this, for many decades, the industry has masked systems of exploitation and environmental harm. Fast fashion is the mass production of trending, inexpensive clothes to meet rapid consumer demand, bolstered by microtrends and lack of consumer knowledge. This lack of knowledge is closely related to the absence of transparency, which is the clear, accessible disclosure of information throughout a company's supply chain, including sourcing, labor conditions, and production processes, allowing consumers to verify ethical practices. The paper evaluates the interconnected global environmental and social issues arising from the fast-fashion cycle by reviewing sources from JSTOR, credible articles, and industry case studies. Results indicate that demand for low-cost, high-speed production drives child labor, unsafe working conditions, and forced labor in countries with weak regulatory enforcement. Simultaneously, it generates extreme water use, toxic pollution, and massive volumes of textile waste. As concerns about ethics and sustainability grow, many companies have responded with greenwashing, where brands present initiatives as environmentally responsible without verifiable manufacturing changes. Existing regulations, including the FABRIC Act, represent progress but remain limited by slow enforcement and global supply chain complexity. Overall, this review argues that meaningful reform requires stronger regulations and increased transparency to reduce the social and environmental harms induced by fast fashion. This review draws on historical case studies and recent policy developments from 2013 to 2025, providing foundational context and data to report on emerging regulatory efforts.

Keywords: Fashion Industry; Fast Fashion; Greenwashing; Labor exploitation; Supply chain transparency; Sustainability; FABRIC Act

INTRODUCTION

Beneath the layers of style, perfection, and the glittering facade of the fashion industry lies widespread environmental and social problems. The glamorous fashion scene, with well-known events like Fashion Week, represents the influence fashion has on global markets and consumer behavior. While the mention of high fashion evokes a sense of elegance, its manufacturing is associated with environmental degradation, poor labor conditions, and complex supply chain exploitations.

The issue in the fashion industry stems from unethical practices hidden from consumers. Especially in a period that places great emphasis on honesty and integrity, the modern fashion industry directly contradicts the moral values of modern-day society. During the pandemic, the use of social media and the internet rose substantially due to the absence of in-person social interactions. With

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social media fueling micro-trends and the desire to be in style, fast fashion became the new norm (1). The rise of fast fashion appealed to major corporations, as it led to lower production costs while satisfying a sufficient number of consumers. As new trends emerged rapidly, companies turned to rapid manufacturing methods to shift clothing designs within weeks. Companies shifted away from prioritizing material and quality to speed and relevance. Major corporations like Shein target consumers with low prices, and since 2020, Shein's market share of fast fashion sales has more than doubled, increasing from around 12% of the market in January 2020 to approximately 50% by late 2022 (2). Despite the inability of clothes to last, corporations began to realize that the true path to success lay in highlighting the appeal of microtrends.

The textile industry has grown with the globalization of textile manufacturing, as labor costs are lower in Southeast Asia, China, and India (3). Textile production shifted to a cheaper, faster-paced model, and companies' ability to offer more affordable products to consumers came at the expense of workers' rights. To keep costs down and appeal to consumers, fast fashion companies relied on textile production in developing countries, as shown in Table 1. However, this also led to increased unsafe working conditions and worker exploitation. Events like the Rana Plaza disaster brought to light the international issue of undermining workers' value (4). It revealed the consequences of mass production processes, and the poor regulations in the working circumstances led to the deaths of thousands of people. From a positive perspective, as the horrors of the fashion industry came to light internationally, awareness of the serious problems grew as well.

Fueled by complex supply chain issues and high consumer demand, the modern garment industry faces a variety of systemic problems related to labor conditions and environmental responsibility. This study examines these issues through reviewing scholarly articles and industry reports based on labor rights, environmental issues, and regulatory efforts. This review aims to provide a clearer understanding of how fast fashion practices contribute to growing global social and environmental problems. It brings to light potential steps towards reform and more responsible production practices.

ETHICAL TRANSPARENCY IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

In the fashion sector, transparency is defined as the process by which companies disclose all information about their product-making methods and their

Table 1. Comparative Evidence on Labor, Environmental, and Governance Impacts of Fast Fashion

	Key Findings	Future Implications
Labor Impacts	Child labor, forced labor, and wage suppression are concentrated in weakly-regulated regions and countries.	Implies lack of enforcement and blind spots in global policy. Highlights major accountability failures in global governance, emphasizing the need to strengthen labor protections across global supply chains.
Environmental Burdens	Extreme water consumption, toxic chemical pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and substantial volumes of unrecycled textile waste negatively impact the environment on a global scale.	Signals long-term environmental degradation and worsening of climate change. It reinforces the need for strict environmental regulation and sustainable production processes.
Greenwashing Practices	Brands use vague sustainability claims, misleading labels, and unverified initiatives to appear environmentally sustainable without making real changes to production processes.	Undermines consumer trust and prevents meaningful reform. Greenwashing exploits regulatory loopholes, indicating the need for stronger enforcement and penalties to ensure corporate accountability.
Regulatory Responses	Policies like the FABRIC Act, the New York Fashion Act, and the Garment Worker Protection Act aim to improve transparency and labor conditions, but are still limited by loopholes and slow implementation.	Indicates that weakly enforced regulations enable harmful processes, highlighting the need for stronger, internationally coordinated regulations.

introduction to the public. This consists of making public the workers' salaries, the sourcing of raw materials, manufacturing methods, the distribution process, and the sale of finished products. Despite its importance, the majority of brands still lack transparency: according to the July 6, 2021 edition of the Fashion Transparency Index, only 11% of brands provided complete supply chain mapping from raw materials to final products (5). Supply chain mapping is a process that traces each stage of production and is widely regarded as the most effective way to demonstrate ethical practice. The system can be divided into four tiers: Tier 1 (factory manufacturing), Tier 2 (fabric dyeing and processing), Tier 3 (textile production facilities), and Tier 4 (raw material suppliers) (5). Many brands fail to map their supply chains due to limited knowledge of their sourcing practices, a lack of incentives, or an unwillingness to be held accountable for unethical actions. The pressure to produce clothes at a rapid pace and affordable amount is usually the main reason for the lack of transparent practices in the fashion industry. Due to the rise of digital space and social media platforms, microtrends have accelerated, making fast fashion more desirable and popular (5). To keep up with this demand, many fashion companies have turned to low-cost manufacturing options that rely on underpaid workers and unsafe conditions, often in the absence of labor laws (6). This lack of transparency undermines credibility and erodes consumer trust. For instance, the fast-fashion company ASOS, one of the biggest in the industry, has been criticized for perpetrating "fake transparency" in its supply chain (3). ASOS's environmental impact, labor rating, and animal welfare are rated "Not Good Enough" by the editors of the website goodonyou.eco (7). There is no evidence that ASOS is taking action to minimize textile waste, and it is unclear whether its supply chain meets healthy labor standards (7). Skepticism about ASOS stems from the lack of clarity about its manufacturing process.

Regarding ethical transparency in fashion, research has shown that although it is not always used, transparency is a crucial part of the industry for cultivating a positive image and fostering relationships between companies and consumers. Several brands and companies have earned strong reputations for their disclosed practices and transparency efforts.

For instance, Adidas has received substantial recognition for its commitment to transparency, ranking first with a score of 64% in the 2019 Fashion Transparency Index (which evaluates 200 of the world's top fashion brands). To verify their claims, Adidas has implemented extensive documentation requirements for its recycled-material certification, including production steps, supplier reports, and quality documentation, all of which are directly linked to purchase orders. These steps taken by Adidas help ensure the authenticity of its environmentally friendly materials, such as its recycled polyester or Mylo, a mushroom-based textile alternative (8). Additionally, since 2007, Adidas has made its list of global factories public, boosting its credibility and creating a trusting bond with consumers (8). However, Adidas' high transparency values reflect their understanding of the importance of public disclosure, rather than guaranteed improvements in labor conditions. It presents Adidas as an advocate for accountability rather than a definitive result of ethical processes. As growing concerns about labor issues began to surface, brands, instead of changing their practices, focused on their image. By using Greenwashing and vague "ethical" claims, brands found a way to protect their profits and avoid losing rapport with their customer base. For example, brands such as H&M and Zara used labels like "Conscious Collection" and "Join Life" to appear more sustainable while continuing to practice fast fashion (9, 10). At the same time, only a few companies, such as Adidas, showed meaningful transparency by mapping their whole supply chain and publicly sharing their factory lists and resources. This contrast in practices supports the view that sustainability should be shifted towards reinforcement through government-mandated policies and regulations, to avoid situations like the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013.

Over time, consumer attitudes toward corporate transparency have also shifted significantly. Increasingly, consumers critically evaluate the environmental consequences of their buying habits (11). Survey data shows that many consumers care about ethics and sustainability. For example, 88% of buyers in America say they are willing to boycott companies linked to social or environmental problems, and 88% are more loyal to brands that support such causes (11). In addition, 87% of consumers say they are more likely to buy products that have a positive environmental impact, and 56% of Americans report that they stop buying from brands they believe are unethical (12). These statistics show a strong desire for responsible business practices demanded by consumers. Social media and the wider accessibility of information have amplified this awareness. Social media influencers play a critical role in shaping public perception. They no longer solely encourage consumption; many influencers now participate in "de-influencing," a trend in which they guide followers

away from unnecessary purchases and towards sustainable behavior. In November 2023, a panel hosted by Lexi Wright, a prominent social media influencer, highlighted how influencer culture can be leveraged to promote sustainability and ethical consumption (13). Because influencers are often perceived as relatable and trustworthy, their support of ethical brands can meaningfully influence social behavior, strengthen consumer trust in transparent companies, and encourage the adoption of responsible production practices (1, 5). However, the contradiction between consumer values and the continuation of fast fashion reflects barriers that limit the shift of ethical intent into consumer behavior (14). While consumers increasingly express concern for ethical issues, purchasing decisions are still constrained due to price sensitivity, accessibility, social pressures, and green washing. With limited supply-chain information from corporations, it is often that consumers do not have all the information needed to make ethical choices in their purchasing history. Fast fashion thrives because people continue to buy more clothes than they need at the lowest possible price, often without fully researching or being able to access the information of the brands they support (5, 15).

The textile industry is increasingly under scrutiny to improve its ethical practices, driven by stricter regulations and consumer demand for sustainability. With consumer consciousness on the rise, major companies like Nike are improving their ethics. In the past, Nike received backlash due to reports of child labor in contract factories, especially in Pakistan. However, the company has acknowledged and worked to eliminate child labor across all its contractors, especially given the challenges of operating in regions with weak labor laws (4). Despite the efforts by companies, the integration of transparency alone is not enough. Implementations of government regulations like the FABRIC Act and the New York Fashion Act are increasingly recognized as necessary to ensure accountability across fashion supply chains (8, 16). Companies often use subcontracting to distance themselves from direct responsibility and claim they cannot fully control overseas factories (1). The discovery of child labor in Shein's supply chain, followed by the brand's limited response, shows how easy it still is for companies to downplay serious violations.

HARMS OF THE FASHION INDUSTRY

It is common for manufacturers to exploit the vulnerabilities of developing countries. Many of the worst labor abuses in the fashion industry occur in regions with weak regulatory systems. In these settings, underage individuals often have no choice but to accept low wages and unsafe conditions. Countries in the Asia-Pacific region—including Bangladesh, India, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand—have all been associated with forced or unfair labor practices (4). For instance, Bangladesh has faced international attention for the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory, an industrial disaster in 2013 in which more than 1,100 workers were killed, and thousands were injured. This incident highlighted the need for global accountability, renewing the need for labor regulations. It was the worst industrial disaster in the history of the global garment industry, opening the discussion of accountability in transnational production processes. In India, the "Sumangali scheme" is a form of modern slavery affecting young women in the textile industry (6). Young underage girls work in harsh conditions within the textile factories. A young 17-year-old girl, Kavitha, from the age of 14, worked at an Indian textile mill and died from injuries sustained from the hard labor- one example of hundreds of women working in dangerous conditions, a result of a lack of regulation leading to the exploitation of women (6). The pressure to produce clothes quickly and cheaply drives much of this exploitation, as fast fashion companies rely on underpaid labor and unsafe conditions to maintain low costs (5, 6).

According to the International Labor Organization, as of its 2020 global estimates, about 152 million children aged 5-17 are working worldwide, leading to phrases such as "modern-age slavery". Child labor is hard work performed by a child that is detrimental to their mental, physical, and social development. Usually, low cotton prices and wages push impoverished families to resort to child labor eventually. Worldwide, millions of families are dependent on garment factories for their livelihoods. There is child labor in at least 18 cotton producing countries, some main countries noted to consist of India and China. According to Child Labor Global Estimates, 70% or 112 million children of all child laborers are in agriculture, primarily, cotton production. Cotton labor is one of the worst forms of labor, as children are exposed to harmful chemicals, subjected to isolation, and bad conditions, which are all harmful to their health (17). Chinese fast fashion company Shein has found two cases of child labor in its supply chain, as revealed in its 2023 sustainability reports. Shein has faced criticism for weak factory regulations in its supply chain (14).

Reports of child labor continue across regions in

India, Nepal, China, and Vietnam. In India, embellished textile production has been linked to severe exploitation. Children between the ages of 8 and 14 often work under debt-bondage conditions, which constitute labor trafficking (6). In Mumbai and Delhi, factories producing zari embroidery employ large numbers of children. Government and NGO investigations estimate that 125,000–210,000 children work in Delhi's embroidery workshops, while about 100,000 children work in Mumbai's zari and textile embellishment factories (18). These children face physical punishment, unpaid labor, and excessive working hours. Nepal faces similar problems: boys aged 7 to 17 are forced into the production of embellished textiles, with an estimated 7,500 children involved (18). Family vulnerability also plays a major role. Parents sometimes accept payments from factory owners in exchange for their children's labor. The children receive no wages, and many are forced to live inside factories, where they are locked in and unable to leave.

Concerns about forced labor in China are persistently increasing across the cotton, yarn, textile, and garment production industries and factories. Approximately 85% of China's cotton is produced in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), where evidence indicates the widespread use of forced labor in harvesting and processing (17). These issues extend beyond China. For example, Vietnam imported 70% of its cotton textiles from China in 2021, indicating that its supply chain is closely tied to materials produced under suspected forced or child labor conditions (6). The pattern of labor exploitation is perpetuated by weak labor laws, the complexity of the global supply chain, and corporate incentives to prioritize fast fashion (1, 5).

The differences between fast fashion and sustainable fashion are substantial. Fast fashion refers to a production process designed to follow quickly changing trends, prioritizing speed and affordability over environmental impact and labor conditions. In fast-fashion systems, only about 30% of total costs are allocated to workers' wages (17). The use of cheap fabrics further reduces production costs. On the other hand, sustainable, ethically minded brands prioritize fair wages and worker safety, often exceeding legal requirements. Sustainable fashion is an approach to clothing production that minimizes environmental harm while emphasizing social responsibility, ethical labor practices, and sturdy materials to reduce waste. These practices increase production costs, which leads to higher retail prices (19). However, because ethical garments tend to be more durable, the cost per wear is often lower over time. Fast fashion depends on rapid cycles of micro-trends and mass production, resulting in garments that are inexpensive but short-lived. The central focus is speed, achieved at the expense of labor rights and environmental protection.

Sustainable or "slow" fashion operates under a different model. Its central focus is on long-lasting products, with a conscious, transparent production process. Garments are made with higher-quality materials and designed to last with a more basic approach to the design. Although the initial price is higher, the long-term value is greater because consumers do not need to replace items as often. The "slow fashion" trend also ensures transparency and ethical practices by highlighting fair wages and safe working conditions throughout production cycles (20). However, one challenge for sustainable fashion is the slower production pace, which can make it harder for brands to compete with the rapid output of fast-fashion companies—making them, in a sense, less favorable.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF THE FASHION INDUSTRY

The environmental concerns associated with the fashion industry are extreme water usage, widespread chemical pollution, and significant textile waste, as shown in Table 1. Textile production uses approximately 93 billion m^3 of water each year, accounting for about 4% of global freshwater withdrawals (17). Producing a single pair of jeans requires 3,781 liters of water and results in an estimated 33.4 kilograms of carbon emissions—equivalent to driving more than one hundred kilometers (21). Daily consumer habits also contribute to the problem. When you wash clothes, they release plastic microfibers and other pollutants into the water, contributing to ocean pollution. In addition, about 20% of global industrial water pollution stems from textile dyeing processes (22).

Toxic chemicals represent another major environmental issue. The textile industry uses more than 8,000 chemical substances during processing and finishing stages (22). According to the World Health Organization, a substantial portion of wastewater discharged from textile facilities contains hazardous dyes and chemicals. In many countries, these pollutants contaminate local water sources and threaten wildlife (18). Examples of these countries include China, Bangladesh, India, and America. China is an essential factor in the international textile industry, exporting

billions worth of textiles to America. There was a report from the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs that documented severe pollution caused by top brands such as Puma and Zara, which contracted with pollution factories. Major international brands released high levels of pollutants, resulting in severe degradation of freshwater (23). In Dhaka, Bangladesh, rivers are so polluted next to major garment manufacturing districts. There is no wildlife in the rivers, due to the extent of the pollution Bangladesh is the world's 2nd biggest garment manufacturing hub, but due to the weak regulation and enforcement of countries like Bangladesh, fashion is ⅕ of industrial water pollution (4).

Growing textile waste also poses a large environmental challenge globally. The majority of textiles produced are not recycled. In 2024, global fiber output reached 132 million tons, equivalent to producing four metric tons of fiber every second (23). Fossil fuel–based synthetic fibers made up 59% of this total. Yet textile-to-textile recycling remains below 1%. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reports that of the 17 million tons of textiles generated annually, only 14.7% is recycled (17). Beyond just the disposal of the fabrics and lack of recycling, dyeing, printing, spinning, weaving, and knitting processes all rely heavily on fossil fuels, releasing substantial carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Beyond labor laws, environmental harm follows a similar pattern: a balance between ethical practice and profit maximization. Fast fashion relies on cheap materials, high production volumes, and very short clothing lifespans. As a result, the fast fashion industry consumes large amounts of water and fossil fuels, emits high levels of greenhouse gases, and produces massive amounts of unrecyclable textile waste (17). Not to mention fiber production, dying and finishing processes introduce toxic chemicals to the environment, harming wildlife and local communities. These harms are not accidental; they are tied directly to the fast, low-cost, high-volume model employed by industry.

GREENWASHING

Greenwashing is a harmful, deceptive practice in the fashion industry that uses misleading claims and advertisements to attract consumers and increase profits. Brands promote deceptive products as ethical without having any evidence in their production process to prove the changes. It capitalizes on the growing interest in sustainability and uses it as a marketing tool rather than a genuine effort to protect the environment, as shown in Table 1. Greenwashing has become a major driver of overproduction and overconsumption because it convinces people that they are making responsible choices when they are not. Companies often use greenwashing to gain a competitive advantage in the market, especially given the importance placed on a greener future. H&M has been accused of greenwashing through a 2022 investigation that claimed that the brand misled consumers with its environmental scorecards (24). The brand launched the Conscious Choice collection, revealing its environmental impact. However, more than half of the brand's scorecards overstated the clothes' environmental soundness and reported that they used less water and energy than they really did. Additionally, companies hire ESG officers, who are heads of environmental, social, and governance, to appear more sustainable (10). The big fashion company SHEIN has also been exposed for attempts at greenwashing: it hired ESG officers to portray itself as environmentally friendly, even as its entire business is built on the exploitation of workers and the production of overconsumption.

To be recognized as sustainable, companies usually need certifications and other forms of proof, but many brands try to get around this by using vague terms that sound responsible but do not prove anything. H&M, for example, marketed some items as made from "sustainable materials," even though a third party never verified the claim. The phrase itself is neither regulated nor meaningful. Zara's "Join Life" label is another example. Although Zara advertised this line as more sustainable, the company still operates as a fast-fashion brand. In fact, Zara was the first company described as "fast fashion" by The New York Times because of its extremely fast turnaround time from design to store—sometimes as little as 15 days. Zara's Join Life webpage features calm, nature-themed images and minimalistic designs that make the brand appear more eco-friendly than it actually is. This highlights how greenwashing leverages visual presentations and misleading advertisements attract customers.

Even though it is illegal for companies to use terms like "eco-friendly," "chemical-free," and "organic" in misleading ways, many brands find loopholes in the system (10). The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) sets guidelines for labeling products, but some words—such as "natural," "non-toxic," and "eco-friendly"—are not clearly defined or regulated. As a result, companies can use them without breaking the law, even if the product does not meet real sustainability standards. The

enforcement of these rules is slow, which allows brands to mislead consumers for long periods of time. Claims like "chemical-free" are also scientifically inaccurate because all materials are made of chemicals. Green-colored packaging or simple, nature-inspired designs also contribute to greenwashing because they make consumers believe the product is more sustainable than it actually is.

Despite the many problems in the fashion industry, regulations are still being passed to address them. The Fashioning Accountability and Building Real Institutional Change (FABRIC) Act was the first federal fashion bill**.** It was made to ensure that the clothes in America were made ethically (8). It was passed to get rid of paying workers below the minimum wage, hold brands accountable for unfair labor practices, establish better transparency measures, encourage brands to bring fabric manufacturing back to the U.S. using tax incentives(rather than in regions where regulatory laws are not as enforced), and introduce grants for companies that produce clothes domestically and ethically. The Fashion Sustainability and Social Accountability Act (New York Fashion Act) was also created with the intent of ensuring transparency.

It requires companies to report a minimum of 50% of their supply chains (8). They have to report sources of raw materials, disclose the median wages of workers, and report total material production volumes online. Those who do not comply are penalized financially. More recently, the Garment Worker Protection Act was passed on January 1st, 2022, which advocated for a more ethical fashion industry (17). It required that workers be paid hourly and held fashion companies accountable for labor violations. It also specifies how employers may offer incentive-based bonuses. The employer must keep track of many factors regarding the workers: the names and addresses of the workers, the daily hours worked by the workers, the wages and rates paid at each payroll, the ages of minor employees, and all employment conditions (16). While the regulatory efforts signify the need for change in labor exploitation, there is a lack of long-term effectiveness and outcomes as shown in Table 1. Like other global laws, because the garment supply chains are spread internationally to other countries with different legal systems, despite the existence of regulation, limitations on enforcement mechanisms exist. The fashion network is difficult to trace internationally and fragmented governance makes it hard to assess whether regulations are truly improving labor conditions long term.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, transforming the fashion industry requires both accountability and a shift in values. Companies, policymakers, and consumers all share responsibility. Only by combining stronger regulations, honest communication, and more thoughtful consumption can the industry move away from the cheap, short-term value of fast fashion and toward a system that respects workers, protects the environment, and restores the idea that clothes should be made to last. This change requires a comparison between fast fashion and sustainable production. While fast fashion systematically externalizes labor and environmental costs through fragmented global supply chains, sustainable models demonstrate improved outcomes by prioritizing fair wages, safe production processes, durable resources, and reduced environmental harm. However, sustainable models remain more expensive and face limitations in scaling and competing with the speed and affordability of fast fashion.

Although multiple laws exist to face labor exploitation, greenwashing, and environmental problems in the fashion industry, they often have no effect due to weak enforcement, limitations, and complex global supply chains. Laws such as the FABRIC Act, the New York Fashion Act, and the Garment Worker Protection Act were created with the goal to improve transparency, protect workers, and hold brands accountable for their unethical practices. However, these laws continue to be restricted by slow implementation and limited impact beyond domestic production, allowing companies to harm less regulated regions internationally. The paper demonstrates how regulatory intentions do not coincide with the real-world enforcement effects. The policies were created to increase accountability, but they remain insufficient to actually deter violations.

Across reviewed studies, supply-chain transparency efforts are largely limited to early production tiers while later stages such as raw material sourcing remain less known. The lack of traceability limits the effectiveness of both regulatory enforcement and consumer accountability, reinforcing the need for more comprehensive approaches to the supply-chain transparency in future policies. Ultimately, achieving an ethical and sustainable fashion industry requires a collaborative effort in which consumers value accountability, companies prioritize transparency and long term responsibility over profit, and regulators enforce policies with a consistent global reach.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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