10. Superbrands—Too Big to be Fair?

René König & Paula Wittenburg

Abstract
Superbrands, established global companies, are popular but their business practices are often controversial. Recent crises, from COVID-19 to the war in Ukraine, have reignited a key question: How can such global corporations maintain complex supply chains in more ethical and sustainable ways? We discuss these recent developments and ask if superbrands may simply be "too big to be fair" and whether smaller and locally oriented companies could provide a better alternative. Consulting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) experts and reports, we conclude that superbrands from industries like fast fashion face large structural changes to become more sustainable. This often leads to a gap between the vision for higher ethical standards and the actual implementation. Significant reimagination is required to make superbrands fairer and more sustainable, an endeavour we regard as inevitable to create a future of work that is just.

Keywords: superbrands, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), globalization, supply chains, fairness, marketing

Introduction

Globalized trade—once believed to be the driver of not just economies but also progressive social change—increasingly appears as a phenomenon that demands reconsideration. Climate change, COVID-19, and the Russo-Ukrainian war have laid open its practical weaknesses and ethical dilemmas. Superbrands, i.e., large corporations with a particularly strong relation to their customer base (Kralingen 1999), are of particular concern: their supply chains, as well as their consumer base, rely on globalized networks. They have not only accumulated unmatched economic and political power, but have also established themselves as popular cultural icons (Went 2000). From Apple to Zara, superbrands are

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shaping identities on all levels—individually, nationally, globally. Their image transcends their physical and economic significance, making them appear as creators of social identity (Bagozzi et al. 2021). Above all, it is this emotional and symbolic meaning, fuelled by clever marketing campaigns, that elevates them to their exceptional, or "super" status. This is what made Russians queue for hours to buy a mediocre meal that many of them couldn't afford when McDonald's opened the doors of its first branch in Moscow in 1990 (Wiener-Bronner 2022). In the same way, the symbolic implications could not be missed when many Western stores in Russia remained closed after Putin's invasion of Ukraine. These were not merely lost opportunities for trade but symbols of failed politics, broken links, and shattered futures. For decades, superbrands functioned as ambassadors of larger ideals, connected to the optimistic assumption that trade connections could also push forward democratic values and human rights. "Change through trade" was a long-established approach in Western foreign policy, but the Russian invasion made it painfully obvious how naive it was (Moens, Aarup, Leali and Lau 2022).

The recent drastic restrictions to trade—from COVID-19-related lockdowns to unprecedented sanctions against Russia—were almost unimaginable just until they actually happened. Practising the unthinkable has rapidly led to historic transformations that will have effects lasting far beyond the current crisis. Routines and taken-for-granted ways of working are being questioned, and new modes of organizing supply chains are emerging (Veselovská 2020). We are not facing a temporary crisis but possibly the dawn of a new era. Nobody can know with certainty what this new era will look like. But what we do know is that every crisis also holds opportunities for change and that decisions made today pave the path towards the future.

Superbrands are at a crossroads. Some left Russia not only because sanctions forced them to but because they feared long-lasting damage to their image being associated with the unethical actions of an unjust regime (Chin et al. 2022). Of course, the fear of image damage is not a new phenomenon—it did not appear with the current crisis, nor will it leave with it. But the current transformations give old and recurring questions a pressing relevance: are superbrands an adequate model for the twenty-first century? Can they maintain their complex supply chains in a socially and environmentally responsible way? Are smaller and local brands the more sustainable option and are superbrands simply too big to be fair with regard to their social responsibilities? Or do we need superbrands even more than ever as ambassadors that unify a divided world at least a little bit?

We discuss these questions by first taking a deeper look at the controversial images of superbrands. This makes us wonder if smaller and more local companies might be the more promising model. Through this speculation, we argue that fairer business models—including superbrands—appear inevitable even as they are difficult to achieve.

Superbrands, Super Evil?

The idea that trade might lead to positive social change really took off in the 1990s, another era of transformation, albeit a more optimistic one. Communism was defeated and capitalism emerged as the big winner of the Cold War. At least, that is how it appeared for a little while, prompting Francis Fukuyama to announce the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1992). This hypothesis, portraying Western liberalism as the clear winner of an epic ideological battle, has of course been controversially discussed (Kagan 2008; Hodgson 2002), but some also regard the latest developments as its confirmation (Glancy 2022).

Already in the 1990s, while governments worldwide embraced neoliberal strategies, an anti-capitalist counter-movement was on the rise. For instance, in 1998, the non-governmental organization (NGO) Attac[1] was founded in resistance to the seemingly limitless power of globalized corporations. A year later, 40,000 protestors turned against a conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO), clashing with police in what has come to be known as the iconic "Battle of Seattle." Global corporations were blamed for much of what went wrong in the world—from social injustices to environmental pollution. Naomi Klein's (2010) book, *No Logo*, became a bestseller, criticizing the overwhelming power of superbrands and their often-exploitative practices hidden behind the shiny facades created by marketing specialists:

> Since many of today's best-known manufacturers no longer produce products and advertise them, but rather buy products and 'brand' them, these companies are forever on the prowl for creative new ways to build and strengthen their brand images (Klein 2009, 5).

Looking back at the book two decades later, Dan Hancox (2019) portrays the atmosphere of that time thus:

> The battle lines were clear, as ordinary citizens around the world stood in opposition to corporate greed, sweatshops, union-busting, 'McJobs',

1 https://www.attac.org

> privatisation and environmental destruction: and the avatar for them all, the increasingly unavoidable logos of western 'superbrands'.

Klein wrote about an emerging movement that tried to fight corporations with their own weapons. "Adbusting," the practice of subverting adverts, built on the same powerful mechanisms as advertising to smear brands instead of promoting them. The campaigners had more than enough material at their hands. From environmental catastrophes to never-ending reports on terrible working conditions—there was no shortage of reasons to scratch the shiny facade of big brands. At the same time, their omnipresent advertising guaranteed an endless supply of material that could be weaponized.

Since then, nothing has fundamentally changed with brands and their perception. Major corporations continue to dominate the markets. Scandals keep surfacing just as predictably as the riots and protests waiting in the wings of the next WTO summit. Occasions and names may change, but the basic driving forces remain the same: greedy global corporations exploit vulnerable local populations, covered by corrupt governments. While a few "conscious consumers" may resist, the vast uncritical majority keeps the machinery running. In fact, the situation may have gotten worse due to the new superbrands of the digital economy as Dan Hancox (2019) remarks in his article reflecting on Klein's book:

> Proud of yourself for not buying books or gifts from Amazon? Fair enough, but it is also the largest cloud service provider, with a 32% market share; your favourite activist website is probably using Amazon Web Services.

The internet era started with the promise of endless possibilities. Yet, a smartphone user in the 2020s can merely choose whether to feed Apple's or Google's data-hungry systems. Klein's book seems as relevant today as it was during the Battle of Seattle. Superbrands are to blame. Who could argue with that?

Although they have contrary intentions, advertisers and adbusters have one motivation in common: they each paint a very one-sided picture of the story. The problem is that this approach rarely leads to a nuanced understanding. What's worse is that consumers are driven to a state of learned helplessness, a weird mixture of wilful naiveté of giving into the constant bombardment of glossy advertising, paired with occasional outbursts of inconsequential rage when we stumble over another scandal. All this obscures the fact that we don't live in a black and white world and there is much that can be done to improve it—and is in fact done on a daily basis, including by superbrands.

To get a better picture of these activities, we spoke to Linnea Holter Thompson. Her article, co-authored with Payal Arora (Arora and Thompson 2019), had served as an early inspiration for the FemLab project. She worked as a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) specialist for the Norwegian fashion retailer, Varner, before she became a sustainability consultant. When asked about the image of superbrands, she paints a picture that complicates the narrative of critics such as Naomi Klein:

> A lot of people have this perspective that the big corporations are the bad ones. But really, the more research you do on this, the more you will realise that this perception is often not true. The reason is simple: these big companies actually have the resources to put their words into action and work more systematically with responsible supply chain management (Personal interview).

Maybe more money doesn't necessarily translate to more exploitation. Yet, we intuitively take the side of the underdog. It's deeply rooted in our culture. From *David and Goliath* to *Slumdog Millionaire*—we love and cherish the narrative of the disenfranchized who beat the odds. But as attractive as these stories are, they might not be the best guides for conscious consumption. Marketing specialists already take notice of consumer preferences for the underdog and many try to portray their company as one—regardless of whether this portrayal is based in fact (Parmar 2016).

At the very least, small businesses usually stay under the radar while superbrands are always in the spotlight, making them giant targets that are hard to miss. Adbusting is one example for how this prominence can backfire, but brand communication is generally a balancing act with many pitfalls, especially when it comes to corporate responsibility, as Linnea Holter Thompson explains:

> I understand now how difficult it is to balance the communication of your CSR efforts. Social impact can be hard to quantify, so when big, well-known brands, for example H&M, make public claims, they are an easy target for quite intense criticism, when in fact they are quite innovative and have routines that other fashion companies should learn from (Personal interview).

Indeed, a closer look at the case of H&M reveals that the company's communication has resulted in greenwashing accusations, but it also scored highly on the Fashion Transparency Index (Kaner 2021), an incentive mechanism by the NGO Fashion Revolution[2] aimed at pushing large fashion brands towards more transparency. While it may be disputed how "good" or "bad" H&M and similar fast fashion companies actually are, it is clear that image and reality don't necessarily match. There is not much room for nuance in our polarized world and its fast-paced media landscape. What shapes our thinking are the big headlines, scandals, and crazy stories. Like the one from 2014, when Primark shoppers found labels in their clothes with sentences such as "Forced to work exhausting hours" or "Degrading sweatshop conditions" (Rustin 2014). While it is still unclear if these labels were even authored by actual workers, the story is too remarkable to forget. What remains untold are the many more stories in which workers found better channels to express their grievances due to CSR programmes and other activities to help workers. When asked about common misconceptions that she would like to change, Thompson answers:

> I think it is a misconception that small brands are responsible, and that big fashion brands purchase clothes from sweatshops. A small brand and big brand can have products with the same journey from raw material to finished product. We need to encourage companies and brands, regardless of their size, to openly report on issues and negative impacts, and to be specific when they report on their efforts (Personal interview).

The power of marketing images is a double-edged sword. Not only can it be turned against superbrands, but it also obscures a nuanced discussion of their practices. Sympathy for the underdog is an intuitive counter-reaction to the overbearing power of superbrands, but it rests on the same questionable mechanism: image over facts.

Still, the current transformations beg the question: are small companies the better option in a world of disrupted supply chains and ethical dilemmas?

The Smaller, the Better?

"Go local!" seems to be the obvious alternative to superbrands' global approach. The appeal contains assumptions: short supply chains promise less dependency, create more transparency, and can lead to smaller ecological footprints due to less transportation and consequently less emissions.[3]

2 https://www.fashionrevolution.org/about/transparency

3 For an overview of studies pointing out advantages of local production, see https://ilsr.org/key-studies-why-local-matters/.

As noted earlier, smaller companies also have the charming factor of the "underdog" which comes with further positive associations: they appear more personal, less anonymous, and less hierarchical. The layers of bureaucracy to coordinate a complex large organization are not required to the same extent. Instead, processes and networks can often be maintained on a personal level which—at least potentially—helps to build empathy and awareness amongst employees and beyond internal stakeholders. Interestingly, local companies tend to care more about their externalities and areas of impact which can be highlighted with an example of negative externalities on the environmental dimension: pollution produced by business operations is hard to ignore when it happens next door and exploitation becomes more tangible when people from the same community are affected (Environmental Protection Agency 2013).

The benefits of short supply chains seem obvious: companies are less dependent on external actors, political constraints of different countries, and other circumstances that are impossible to control. No matter what the cause may be, if it is about an infectious disease, a strike, or a war, international disruptions are less likely to affect local businesses with short supply chains. Moreover, it is also easier to monitor possible disruptions and to create fairer working conditions as well as higher ethical standards.

Large corporations, on the other hand, are rather bound to the interests of their shareholders and need to therefore maximize profit on a quarterly basis, which is fostering a short-term orientation (Zhang and Andrew 2021). While still tied to the same basic market pressures, smaller companies which are often privately held, have more liberties to specialize on customer segments that are willing to spend more money for fairer products. They operate under a shareholder orientation instead of mere stakeholder orientation. As suggested by stakeholder theory, a company's decisions should not be tailored just to the interest of shareholders, those who have invested in the company, but also to stakeholders (Harrison, Phillips, and Freeman 2020). Therefore, smaller, local companies can more easily centre their business model on fairer practices, higher ethical standards, and local production, allowing them to work with a more sustainable long-term orientation.

So, are superbrands simply too big to be fair? Are smaller companies and short supply chains the answer to the recent and future crises with the global goal to make the world more sustainable and fair? While the benefits of small and regional seem intuitively obvious, it is also clear that this approach cannot be the ultimate answer to the challenges we are facing. First of all, superbrands are likely to remain relevant, despite the problem that comes with their size. They are "too big to fail" because of their power, popularity, and cultural significance. Not only do they feed many mouths, they can also build on a loyal customer base that identifies with their products. These are strong forces at play that will likely keep the model of superbrands relevant throughout the twenty-first century.

While small companies are well-suited to tailor to niche audiences with special interests, it is questionable if they will be able to satisfy the demand of the global mainstream. Of course, it should be mentioned that this demand, or rather, need for consumption was partly created by the pervasive advertisements of large brands, which base their business models on mass production, cheap manufacturing, short-lived garments, and over-consumption (Niinimäki et al. 2020). While this reliance on over-consumption is not helpful to make more sustainable and fairer products, smaller companies and alternative business models alone also won't bring the desired change. In an article for *Harvard Business Review*, Kenneth P. Pucker (2022) dismisses sustainable fashion as a "myth." Not only does he criticize the greenwashing attempts of superbrands, he also questions if alternative business models are financially feasible and points to the fundamental flaws of market-driven solutions to the problems posed by the fashion industry:

> After a quarter century of experimentation with the voluntary, market-based win-win approach to fashion sustainability, it is time to shift. Asking consumers to match their intention with action and to purchase sustainable, more expensive fashion is not working. Were consumers really willing to spend more, sifting through claims, labels and complexity is too much to ask (Pucker 2022).

Localizing markets to create fairness and sustainability might also lead to more inequality on a global scale: instead of creating progress on a worldwide level, this approach might create more or less insulated production hubs with improved conditions, while other parts of the world would be left behind. Even the challenge of disrupted supply chains will not necessarily be adequately tackled by a localization approach: not shorter, but more diverse supply chains might be the better answer to risks that are hard to foresee (Liu, Lin and Hayes 2010).

The hyper visibility of superbrands makes them an easy target for criticism and at first sight, "going local" appears as a tempting alternative that seems to avoid many of their problems. However, a closer look poses the question: is this approach rather a distraction than an answer to the fundamental challenges superbrands face?

Roadmap: The Inevitability of Fairness and Sustainability

There are good reasons to believe that superbrands are simply "too big to be fair" and to hope for better conditions under small companies. However, if "going local" cannot replace big corporations and does not offer a comprehensive strategy to cope with the problems at hand, building fairer and more sustainable corporations and supply chains is an inevitable next step. Of course, unfair conditions and unsustainable processes can and will remain to some extent. But it will become increasingly unaffordable and risky to maintain structures which are not in alignment with international human rights or environmental regulations. Climate change does not stop at organizational or national borders. The internet sheds light on injustices and connects those who have not been connected before. Collapsing supply chains reveal one-sided dependencies and there is an increasing legislative pressure to make them transparent (e.g., the German "Supply Chain Act"[4] or the proposed "New York Fashion Sustainability Act"[5]).

Therefore, it can be concluded that superbrands are not "too big to be fair," but they cannot change in isolation. Support as well as pressure from different actors is needed to help them navigate through large structural changes towards progress. Market incentives, regulations, political guidance, and legal frames are some examples that can facilitate these changes. It might take time until they actualize, since substantial and lasting transformations do not occur overnight. When value creation beyond financial profits is better recognized and lived up to by some superbrands, it will almost be inevitable for other superbrands to become fairer too, if they want to remain competitive.

Numerous CSR efforts are indeed being practised to enable companies to adopt better conditions (Brewer 2019). For example, independent organizations in the garment industry have created numerous *certificates* that are aimed at creating better standards:

Oeko tex:[6] The standard indicates that the textile product is free of certain groups of harmful substances, ensuring that all certified products are harmless to health. The certification standards fall into three levels: 100, 1000, and 1000 plus as the highest and indicates that everything from fabric, threads, interlinings, hook-and-loop closures, hooks, etc., have met the criteria.

4 https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/supply-chain-act-1872076

5 https://www.nysenate.gov/newsroom/in-the-news/alessandra-biaggi/new-york-could-make-history-fashion-sustainability-act

6 https://www.oeko-tex.com/en/our-standards

OE-100:[7] Indicates that a product is made from 100 per cent organic fibre that has been tracked and verified throughout the production chain. Textile Exchange awards the certification.

ZQUE:[8] Indicates responsibly manufactured and environmentally safe wool. Wool with this accreditation has been produced in an environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable manner, to high animal welfare standards, and is traceable back to its source. Most Zque wool is merino wool, raised and produced in New Zealand.

MadeBY:[9] The sign is a label that indicates a fashion company's environmental responsibility and fair labour practices throughout the entire supply chain. The Made-By organization works with brands that use organic cotton and work with sewing factories with enforced social codes of conduct.

These efforts, while important, are certainly not sufficient, especially since they are often poorly implemented. A CSR expert from Outland Denim, an Australian denim company, explained to us: "Certifications do not resolve global issues around slavery" and stressed that companies need to go further to create fair conditions themselves. For this purpose, Outland Denim operates with different pillars which include, amongst others, special training for employees, creating educational opportunities, and paying fair wages. Furthermore, they work with people who have experienced human trafficking, to help provide the tools to support them in becoming the authors of their own futures (Outland Denim, n.d.). Our interviewee further stressed the importance of a company's genuine interest for change, highlighting that a mindset towards "people over profit" is beneficial to break free from unsustainable and unethical ways of doing business. Another example from their innovative business model is a clear focus on non-discrimination policies, female leadership empowerment, and gender equality. Furthermore, they established mechanisms that allow workers to voice their grievances through multiple channels and in distinct formats. Here, as well as during our conversation with Linnea Holter Thompson, the emphasis was on the need to offer multiple channels for this purpose. These may range from mailboxes in factories to WhatsApp, email, Weibo (China-based microblogging service), and more experimental technologies such as the crowdsourcing tool Quizzr (Arora and Thompson 2019).

There is no doubt that much more needs to be done to create fairer working conditions and more companies must centre their actions around the

7 https://textileexchange.org

8 http://www.zqmerino.com/home/zq-merino/

9 http://www.made-by.org

people over profit logic. But it would be wrong and contra-productive to dismiss the ongoing CSR efforts that build the road towards this future. Accordingly, when asked about common misconceptions in discussions around this topic, Thompson answered:

> Many big fashion companies have seen the reports of terrible working conditions in apparel supply chains, received pressure from customers and other stakeholders, and built mature routines for human rights due diligence (Personal interview).

Clearly, such an assessment of the status quo is relative and a matter of perspective. It is not difficult to find voices with a far more critical take. For example, the aforementioned Kenneth P. Pucker (2022), who suggests completely retiring phrases such as "sustainability," arguing that "[l]ess unsustainable is not sustainable."

But is painting a picture in black and white really the best approach to the complex situation? If superbrands are here to stay, isn't *any* progress better than *no* progress? While critical perspectives are essential to move ahead, they should also not obscure and diminish the positive change that is being achieved every day. This could lead to fatalistic and hopeless narratives, whereas what we need is the opposite: inspiration for a fairer and more sustainable future. Since everyone can take part in this creation, people should empower colleagues and friends to create impact in their area of influence and proactively foster change. Ultimately, we cannot rely on the superbrands to create the change for us, but we should support them—and yes, even pressurize them in any way we can. However, as Pucker correctly points out, we cannot rely on markets alone to fix the situation. Immense investments, efforts for restructuring current operations, and fostering a change in consumers' buying behaviour are difficult but also inevitable steps. Maybe we can direct some of the power of superbrands towards this goal.

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