Geographies of dissociation: informality, ethical codes and fragmented labour regimes in the Sri Lankan apparel industry


This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/112414/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher’s version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.
Geographies of dissociation: informality, ethical codes and fragmented labour regimes in the Sri Lankan apparel industry

Shyamain Wickramasingha

*Department of Management, Research Fellow, University of Sussex Business School, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9SN, UK
**Visiting Fellow, Center for Business and Development Studies, Copenhagen Business School, Handelshøjskolen, Frederiksberg 2000, Denmark
†Correspondence to: s.wickramasinghe@sussex.ac.uk

Abstract

In this article, I use the emerging concept of geographies of dissociation to examine fragmented labour regimes in global production networks (GPNs). The article takes informality in the Sri Lankan apparel industry and the application of ethical codes as a case example. Using qualitative research methods, I provide a critical analytical lens through which the concept of dissociation makes visible what has been obscured through much of the debate on ethical codes. In so doing, the article makes three contributions to the debate on ethical codes and dissociation. First, I illuminate uneven geographies of ethical codes manifested through highly fragmented workplaces where some workers are excluded from the protection of ethical codes. In so doing, the article challenges the notion of homogenous workplaces, in which, dialectics of inclusion and exclusion of ethical codes often go unnoticed. Secondly, by illustrating bifurcated and inequal labour regimes, I argue that both association and dissociation practices can co-exist in the same workplace at the same time. This is in contrast to the existing works that mostly frame places of dissociation as distant and hidden from the association places. Third, I advance the concept of dissociation beyond its current framing to argue for a notion of collective dissociation emerging from fluid and complex social relations of multi-scalar actors. I argue that in GPNs, such collective practices of dissociation are possible and even necessary given the complex ways firms and non-firm actors are connected to each other from the global scale to the workplace.

Keywords: Ethical codes, labour regimes, apparel industry, informality, geographies of dissociation, Sri Lanka

JEL classifications: J8, J46, L14

Date submitted: 19 January 2023 Editorial decision: 20 April 2023 Date Accepted: 25 April 2023

1. Introduction

Global lead firms are increasingly embedded in the international networks of state institutions, non-governmental organisations, trade unions and other non-firm actors. Together they comprise a new complex of inter-firm ethical relations important to structuring the sourcing practices (Hess and Yeung, 2006; Smith et al., 2008; Barrientos, 2013; Ponte and Sturgeon, 2014; Coe and Yeung, 2015; Selwyn, 2019; Ponte, 2020, 2022; Ruwanpura, 2022). The rich literature on private regulation and ethical codes has illuminated...
researchers and policymakers on many facets of such ethical concerns from their performance to implementation, enforcement and monitoring in the producing countries (O’Rourke, 2003; Ponte and Gibbon, 2005; Locke et al., 2009; Goger, 2013; Locke, 2013; De Neve, 2014a; Ruwanpura, 2016). Yet, much of the focus has been on investigating questions around which actors in global production networks (GPNs) are included in the sourcing decisions of lead firms, rather than excluded through ‘the active obfuscation of network links’ (Ibert et al., 2019, 59). This is the ‘inclusionary bias’ of a good deal of Global Value Chain (GVC) and GPN research (Bair et al., 2013). The questions of which and whose ethical problems are central to the process of production and value creation, and which issues are sidelined, deserve more attention in the discourse of private regulation and claims of ethical sourcing (Kleibert et al., 2020). This is especially so when entire industries draw their symbolic as well as economic value from ethical claims (Mouat et al., 2019).

In this article, I examine the relatively neglected dimension of exclusions in ethical codes, by drawing on the cultural economic geography concept of ‘dissociation’ (Ibert et al. 2019). Dissociation denotes practices of weakening or obscuring negative links between a brand/commodity and other entities. It reflects relatively understudied practices of value creation, such as practices of managing the reputational risk inherent in a brand’s competitive position in the market (Ibert et al., 2019; Müller et al., 2021; Thomsen and Hess, 2022). In this article, using a multi-scalar analytical framework derived from the concept of labour regimes (Smith et al., 2018; Baglioni et al., 2022; Wickramasingha and Coe, 2022), I advance the concept of dissociation in two ways. First, by focusing on internally fragmented labour regimes, where a segment of workers are dissociated by firms, the paper addresses a tension in the current conceptualisation of dissociation in terms of places of dissociation. This article demonstrates that both association and dissociation practices can co-exist in the same site of production at the same time. I argue that it is crucial to think beyond the production of ‘dark and distant places’ when understanding dissociation practices. Second, I develop the notion of ‘collective dissociation’ to demonstrate that successful dissociation contains both implicit and explicit discourses and practices that are both spatial and multi-scalar in nature. Collective dissociation denotes practices even while being territorial and scalar, are also relational and networked, because the interface of constructing ethical narratives and value creation of a particular product/brand is distributed across space (Pike, 2013). Collective dissociation requires strategic coordination of multiple actors needed for dissociation practices to be salient as I explain in detail in my conceptual framework in Section 2.3.

I make this case by examining informal labour in the Sri Lankan apparel industry, where such collective forms of dissociation are notable. While hidden from the public and regulators, they materialise through internally fragmented labour regimes, where informal workers are discriminated and treated differently. Informal work, characterised by precarious contractual arrangements, is prevalent in GPNs (Mezzadri, 2010; Barrientos, 2013; De Neve, 2014b; Pattenden, 2016; Hewamanne, 2021; Riisgaard, 2022). Informal work represents the employment of unregistered workers in enterprises who themselves are either registered or unregistered. The resulting employment relationships are often highly exploitative in nature, with informal workers remaining less visible members of the labour force (Barrientos, 2013; Rossi, 2013; Skanthakumar, 2019). I demonstrate how the strategic ignorance of lead firms, the state and manufacturers have successfully excluded informal workers from the protection of both national legal frameworks and lead firms’ ethical codes, even though they produce the same garment at the same workplace as...
formal workers. I show that this segmentation of the workplace labour regimes into formal and informal work contains significant geographically focused elements of association/dissociation and inclusion/exclusion that underpin the ability of manufacturers to meet the exacting and fluctuating demands of lead firms in apparel production networks. In so doing, I bring attention to a segment of workers in GPNs that lead firms and manufacturers try hard to establish as ‘non-existent’ through their dissociative strategies in the production process. I argue that investigating such practices in workplace labour regimes and in the regulation of an informal labour force allows us to shed light on the entangled webs of materially and discursively forged connections and disconnections used to control and regulate the apparel labour force conducive to meet the demands of capitalists. By doing so, the article makes a third contribution to the debate on ethical codes by illuminating uneven geographies of ethical codes manifested through workplaces bifurcated into formal and informal labour regimes. By providing a critical analytical lens through the concept of dissociation, the paper sheds light on what has been left out, or obscured through, much of the debate on ethical codes.

This article is structured around six sections. Section 2 outlines my theoretical framework drawing on an array of diverse literatures ranging from economic geography work on GPNs, cultural economic geography concept of dissociation and the rich set of interdisciplinary works on private regulation, ethical codes and labour regimes in GPNs. Section 3 describes the research methodology followed by a contextual background to informality in the Sri Lankan apparel industry. Connecting the concept of dissociation with labour regimes, Section 5 illustrates the strategies and practices across the state–capital–labour nexus that have made it possible for manufacturers and lead firms to dissociate themselves from informal workers. I argue for the need to recognise collective forms of dissociation in GPNs followed by concluding remarks in Section 6.

2. Ethical codes, fragmented labour regimes and dialectics of association and dissociation

2.1. Ethical codes and dialectics of association and dissociation

The concepts of ‘association’ and ‘dissociation’ relate to Stuart Hall’s (1980) notions of ‘articulation’ and ‘disarticulation’ which, Bair and Werner (2011) used to study the inclusions in and exclusions from GPNs. Later, as a response to the overly optimistic accounts of integration into global production arrangements, scholars developed a dis/articulation perspective. This perspective highlights the importance of understanding those left outside or forced from integration into production networks (Bair et al., 2013; Pickles and Smith, 2016). Bair et al. (2013, 2545) conceptualise dis/articulation perspective as a ‘paradoxical double movement of articulation: the conjunctural connections of commodities, people and places and complex processes of separation and exclusion, that together constitute circuits of commodity production’. Indeed, the approaches of GPN (Henderson et al., 2002; Coe and Yeung, 2015) and GVC (Gereffi et al., 2005) have primarily privileged the study of ‘articulation’ (Pickles and Smith, 2016), which Bair et al. (2013) called an ‘inclusionary bias’. This inclusionary bias has extended to the study of private regulation and ethical codes of lead firms, that miss an array of social relations which negotiate ‘who is in’ and ‘who is out’. Such social relations include the state at various spatial scales, labour as complex and dynamic actors and specificities of place-based dynamics in implementing ethical codes (Pickles and Smith, 2016). One notable way this lacuna manifests in the
works of ethical codes is the way the workplace is conceived, which is almost always as homogeneous. This leads to the problematic assumption that ethical codes are equally applied to all workers in a given factory where these codes are implemented. Such a perception tends to miss a segment of workers at the workplace that ethical codes fail to protect. Indeed, in theory, ethical codes are applicable to all workers in the same workplace (Ruwanpura, 2022). But in this article, I use the concept of ‘dissociation’ as recently developed by Ibert et al. (2019) to unpack inclusionary and exclusionary bias of ethical codes in what I call highly fragmented workplace labour regimes, where a segment of extremely vulnerable workers is left behind.

‘Dissociation’ refers to the practices of weakening or obscuring negative links between a brand and other entities. This is in contrast to ‘association’, a set of practices that increases the salience of links that evoke or confirm all positive aspects of a particular firm’s product qualities (Ibert et al., 2019). Ibert et al. conceptualised dissociation as an important and distinctive element of value creation and valuation at various nodes in GPNs. Dissociation can be both proactive, seeking to avoid unpleasant connections from being created, and reactive, responding to specific reputational crises (Power et al., 2009). A distinct difference can be noted between the concepts of disassociation and disarticulation. Disarticulation is used more broadly on the wider operation of GPNs to highlight the ‘instabilities, disruptions and provisional outsides of global production networks’ and the resultant uneven development outcomes (Bair et al., 2013, 2544). Dissociation on the other hand can be practices embedded within both forms of articulation and disarticulation. In this article, I use the concept of disassociation as embedded within the forms of articulation. For example, Sri Lanka is an apparel production site, and by implication, all its factories are articulated into apparel production networks. Yet, within these factories, we see forms of disassociation practices that marginalise certain segments of workers.

The concept of dissociation as I used in this article is directly linked to the ethical claims and value creation of a certain product. As Bair (2019) noted, the corporate social responsibility of lead firms, manifested through private regulation and ethical codes, can be understood as an ongoing struggle between association and dissociation. Because unwanted associations with labour exploitation threaten and have threatened the reputational capital of lead firms, they engage in both proactive and reactive work to insulate themselves from such risks (Coe and Yeung, 2019; Coe, 2021). Through enforcing and regular monitoring of ethical codes, major lead firms provide assurance to customers and regulators that their products are made in humane and ethical ways, most often in the Global South (De Neve, 2009; Locke, 2013; Ruwanpura, 2022). In contrast, in dissociation practices, lead firms obscure the more problematic aspects of labour exploitation within the factory, which are often based on what Ibert et al. (2019) called ‘strategic ignorance’. As Ibert et al. argued, lead firms consciously exploit the strategic ignorance, made possible by the complex and interconnected organisational and spatial ecologies of GPNs. This was plainly evident when the Rana Plaza building collapsed in Bangladesh in April 2013 killing over 1100 apparel workers. What made it possible for lead firms to disassociate themselves from the incident were the claims that they did not know their products were being made in these factories or they had no direct sourcing relationships with the suppliers who operated those factories, even though, lead firms’ labels were found among the rubbles. The concept of ass/dissociation in this context provides a useful analytical lens to understand the practices of inclusion and exclusion of a labour force where ethical codes are concerned. In the next two subsections, I develop this concept further, building on the existing works of diss/association.
2.2. ‘Placing’ dissociation: fragmented labour regimes and dialectics of association and dissociation

The assumption in the current conceptualisation of dissociation is that while geographies of association denote visible and clearly identifiable places, the topologies of dissociation encompass a rather different set of places and sites (Pike, 2013; Hagemann, 2015; Kleibert, 2015; Ibert et al., 2019; Kleibert et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2021). These places are seen as typically inconspicuous and occupy locations remote from public spaces and centres of consumption, which Ibert et al. (2019, 57) called ‘hidden places’ and ‘dark places’. This identification of dissociation in discrete places elides the claims in this article that association and dissociation can occur at the same place. In other words, a given workplace may at the same time be subject to parallel and simultaneous practices of both association and dissociation. It is thus important to nuance out explicitly the intrinsically geographic, place-related dimensions of this dialectics of association and dissociation (Thomsen and Hess, 2022). It is the way actors relate to the workplace and construct spaces within the same location often separated only by discourses, narratives and through them, creating socially thick versus socially thin relations to separate associative and dissociative elements.

For example, in their insightful work in the gemstones and jewellery sector, Thomsen and Hess (2022) identify parallels of diss/association practices by retailers and traders, with mysterious and exciting places of association highlighted while hiding the problems in the same region in finding, refining and valuation of precious stones. As they argue, in the gemstone and jewellery sector, place—sometimes even the same place—can become a site of association as well as dissociation practices. Pushing Thomsen and Hess’s argument further, I show in the case of the Sri Lankan apparel industry, association and dissociation practices can be seen at the same place at the same time. While lead firms are quick to associate with the renowned image of Sri Lanka as an ‘ethical sourcing destination’ for apparel in the world (Ruwanpura, 2016, 2022), they also effectively dissociate informal workers who labour under extremely precarious conditions in the same ‘pristine’ production floors associated with ethical sourcing (Hewamanne, 2016, 2021; Wickramasinghe, 2020).

This shows the unfolding of dialectics of association and dissociation across different dimensions of space. For, while Sri Lanka as a territory of apparel production is associated with ethical sourcing, the actual labour process of the place of production where ethical codes need to be implemented remains obscured through a complex network of hiring and controlling workers. This has resulted in different workers labouring under different conditions even though they stitch the same shirt for the same firm. In such internally fragmented labour regimes, by outsourcing labour control and transferring the responsibility of one segment of workers to external labour market intermediaries, manufacturers have created socially thin relations with one set of workers that are characterised by transience, low frequency of interaction and emotionally superficial employment relations (Boschma, 2005), which Te Velde et al. (2002) called practices of emotional distance. For these practices to continue, the factory production floor as a place needs to be obscured from regulators as well as from the public. While physically the same place, these places therefore still remain ‘dark’ and ‘hidden’ spaces of regulation and control. This allows the exclusion of informal workers from mainstream regulatory protection and thus exploitation, while at the same time, the principles of ethical codes are applied to formal workers who work alongside informal workers. This raises the important question: what makes it possible for
actors to carry out both association and dissociation practices at the same place and same time? In order to answer this question, in Section 2.3, I develop the concept of collective dissociation.

2.3. Strategic ignorance, labour regimes and ‘Collective Dissociation’

Indeed, Ibert et al. (2019) recognised that strategies and discursive practices of dissociation are inherently spatial and constituted across multiple scales. This is well reflected in their detailed and insightful conceptualisation of geographies of dissociation, first, addressing the relational conceptualisation of space, and then connecting the relational proximity and distance to the aspects of territoriality, both physical and topological. Having noted that, there is still potential in the current conceptualisation to make these coordinated efforts more explicit. Not only will this allow us to unpack the role different actors play across the production networks in dissociating a particular process or a set of people, but it will also help us understand what makes it possible for such dissociation practices to be salient in the first place and their implications on people and processes.

In order to do this, I connect the concept of dissociation with the concept of labour regimes. Labour regimes are spatially and temporally contingent systems of contested and co-constituted relations between labour, capital and the state. Labour regimes intersect global production dynamics and territorialised social, political and economic formations (Pattenden, 2016; Smith et al., 2018; Wickramasingha and Coe, 2022). In connecting this concept of labour regimes to strategies of dissociation, I use a multi-scalar analytical framework that illuminates coordinated practices across four scales: dynamics of the labour process at the workplace; local labour markets; national regulatory spheres; and the contract manufacturing relations at the global scale (of which, this article focuses on the enforcement of ethical codes). As I show later, this allows us to see that in the Sri Lankan apparel industry, lead firms’ efforts to dissociate informal workers are aided and even facilitated by manufacturers’ recruitment practices at the workplace, reproduction of labour at the local labour markets and the ‘absence’ of the state at the national regulatory spheres. They all, in their own ways, have justified the exclusion of informal workers from the mainstream enforcement and monitoring mechanisms of labour standards, of which, lead firms’ ethical codes are grounded in. I argue that it is the efforts of all these actors as a collection, that have made it possible for lead firms to successfully dissociate informal workers from their ethical sourcing claims.

Having noted that, it is important to emphasise that collective dissociation may not always emerge through coherence and coordination on the part of the actors. Instead, this case study shows that collective dissociation emerges as an outcome of the common interests of the actors, which the concept of labour regimes helps unpack. On the part of capitalists (lead firms, manufacturers and labour market intermediaries) such interests are centred on controlling and maintaining a labour force to derive maximum profits possible. On the part of the state, the need to attract and maintain investments and keep the industry going amid a labour shortage well aligns with the interests of capitalists. As I show in my empirics such interests are reflected in the constant negotiation and re-arrangement of strategic ignorance of lead firms, manufacturers, labour market intermediaries, and the state who play different roles in the production network but whose actions are inter-connected.

In their study on the European fur industry, Müller et al. (2021, 91) called this “strategic agency” of the producers and marketers of goods that serve to obfuscate, hide, downplay, reframe and separate, thus protecting value propositions from adversarial
messages and images’. They found that in the fur and fashion industry, dissociation comprises a plethora of distributed agencies by multiple actors who employ reactive tactics and proactive strategies to distance themselves from distressing images of caged and crippled animals, and the killing and skinning of animals. Similarly, Thomsen and Hess (2022) emphasise on multi-scalar relational associative and dissociative practices in the valuation of gemstones and jewellery industry in East Asia. When it comes to lead firms’ ethical codes, as I show in the Sri Lankan case, a range of diverse actors who have a say on how ethical codes are implemented, including manufacturers, third-party auditors and the state are embedded in and make up such structural complexities. I argue that such collective practices of dissociation are possible and even necessary given the complex ways firms and non-firm actors are connected to each other from the global scale to the workplace in production networks (Coe and Yeung, 2015; Coe, 2021). Thus, as with geographies of association (Pike, 2013), geographies of dissociation are also multiple, fluid and unstable embedded in complex social relations, resulting in what I call collective dissociation. I demonstrate this with evidence from the Sri Lankan apparel industry in the rest of the article.

3. Research context and methods

The apparel industry is the most significant contributor to the Sri Lankan economy and is the country’s primary foreign income earner. The industry expanded in Sri Lanka in the early 1980s under market liberalisation and favourable trade policies (Kelegama, 2004). From what started off as a 2% contribution to total exports in 1977 (CBSL, 2009), the industry accounted for 44% of the country’s total exports by value in 2019 (BOI, 2019). As of 2021, the industry was valued at $5.3bn and remained a favoured apparel sourcing destination for major global brands, including Bestseller, C&A, GAP, H&M, Marks and Spencer, PVH and Victoria’s Secret among others. By 2021, it directly employed around 350,000 workers in over 400 garment factories spread across the country, including in its twelve Export Processing Zones (EPZ) (BOI, 2021).

This article is based on qualitative research conducted on the Sri Lankan apparel industry between 2018 and 2022. The research was carried out in the Katunayake Export Processing Zone (K-EPZ) just north of Colombo. Established in 1978, K-EPZ was home to around 35 garment factories accounting for 9% of the industry by 2020 (Wickramasingha and De Neve, 2022). By 2020, around 45,000 women worked in the factories in K-EPZ (Hewamanne, 2021). I conducted 109 interviews and 7 focus group discussions of which, 18 interviews were conducted via telephone due to the pandemic restrictions. Fourteen interviews and 6 focus groups (around 10 participants each) were with apparel workers. The 14 apparel workers were all informal workers and 2 of the 6 focus groups comprised only informal workers, while the other 4 had a mix of both formal and informal workers. In addition to the workers, I interviewed country representatives of 5 lead firms and 3 buying offices, 5 third-party auditors involved in monitoring the compliance of ethical codes, 5 manufacturers associations, 13 representatives of the government including the Department of Labour and the Board of Investment and 15 national trade unions. I also visited 16 garment factories most of whom engaged informal workers. During my visits, I spoke to factory managers and in some factories, had accompanied tours across the production floors. I was unable to interview labour market intermediaries, partly due to the inability of accessing them as most of them were not visible and/or were
reluctant to be interviewed. Partly, I was advised by factory managers and local civil society organisations not to approach some of them, as they operated like ‘thugs’. These stakeholders were worried about my safety given I was an unaccompanied female researcher. Having noted that, I was still able to get a well-rounded set of data about labour market intermediaries from the variety of stakeholders I interviewed above.

My questions during the interviews and focus groups covered among other things: the origins of informal work in K-EPZ, key actors, key drivers, legislative frameworks of informal work, nature and type of informal work, enforcement of ethical codes and monitoring mechanisms, in-depth accounts of working and living conditions of informal workers, managerial practices, production regimes and the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on informal work and informal workers. All interviews and focus groups were based on informed consent and full disclosure of the objectives of the study. In order to protect the anonymity of participants, I reveal no information pertaining to the names of the people I interviewed and the places I visited.

I analysed my data manually through three phases. First, I grouped the data under each category of participant—workers, firms, government, trade unions, etc. with specific codes given to them. Secondly, I grouped the data under each question I asked, still maintaining the ‘identity labels’ of the participant (i.e. if they were workers, factory owners, trade unions, etc.). At this stage, I modified and expanded some of the original questions to embrace the emerging themes from the field. In the third stage, I calibrated the data obtained from different categories of participants (i.e. workers, factory owners, government officers, etc.) as a form of validation. For example, on the questions of the enforcement of ethical codes, I considered the responses of the auditors, lead firms, manufacturers, trade unions and workers. This allowed me to understand and analyse different perspectives on the same subject, instead of relying on just one source of information. It is this data set that helped me isolate the three inter-connected elements of my conceptual framework: two different labour regimes at the workplace for formal and informal workers; dissociation of informal workers; and how this dissociation is materialised at the workplace as a collective effort, not formally agreed upon, yet resulting from the mutual interests. Hence, my conceptual framework is the result of an iterative process where I constantly travelled back and forth between the theory I was building and the data emerging from the ground. Table 1 provides key quotes from the field that informed my analysis and conceptual development.

4. Rise of informality in the Sri Lankan apparel industry: local labour market dynamics

The Sri Lankan apparel industry is a good illustration of the relentless expansion of informal relations and the increased use of informality to control and discipline a labour force in GPNs. Informal labour plays a key role in cutting labour costs and guaranteeing uninterrupted production. Informal work is rampant in K-EPZ, primarily engendered by the labour shortage that was prevalent in the zone since the early 2010s (Ranasinghe et al., 2016). By 2019, around 20% of the apparel jobs in Sri Lanka were vacant (Wickramasinghe, 2020). Today, informality in the industry is perpetuated by three notable factors in addition to the labour shortage. First, in contradiction to the perceived labour shortage, there is a steady supply of informal workers, most of whom chose informal work because of the flexibility it allows them to earn a daily wage and choose when to,
Table 1. Key quotes from the field

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labour market intermediaries and informality in the local labour markets</td>
<td>‘There are about 1,500 informal workers looking for work every day... Some agencies pay EPF and ETF [Employees Provident Fund and Employees' Trust Fund]. But some manpower agencies are working like thugs. There are no workers’ rights, no registration, no compensation’.</td>
<td>Trade Union/5, October 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘If a manpower agency provides 5 workers to a factory they get about LKR15,000. Out of that, the agency only pays the workers LKR5,000 [for all 5]. They don’t pay EPF or ETF. Factory managers do not have any responsibility for these workers and managers can get the work done without any liability. There is no obligation on the part of the factory. Factories don’t even treat these workers properly’</td>
<td>Civil Society/4, September 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘We work for 4 - 5 manpower agencies. We have not registered with any of them. There are no offices for manpower agencies. Agents come and stay under trees, near supermarkets, etc. We meet them around 7.00am...We get the salary from the agents. If we feel sick and leave work even one hour early they don’t pay us...’</td>
<td>Workers Focus Group/5, March 2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamics of workplace labour regimes</td>
<td>‘There are two different systems inside the factory for permanent and informal workers...’</td>
<td>Civil Society/1, September 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘When we get sick, the factories don’t even send us to their medical center. They don’t give us the food that they give their permanent workers. We are people too... but we are treated badly’.</td>
<td>Workers Focus Group/1, October 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘We had a case where workers were kept as informal workers for years (through manpower agencies) by breaking their service every 6 months. We filed 9 cases in Panadura Court on that. We won that case and every worker got LKR 378,000 as compensation.’</td>
<td>Trade Union/2, October 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National regulatory spheres</td>
<td>‘There are laws for manpower agencies like registration and obligations to pay EPF and ETF to workers, but the compliance of these laws are not being monitored by the government. This is not good for workers’.</td>
<td>Civil Society/1, September 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Implementing laws in the informal sector is very difficult. There are many cases of well drafted laws where there are loopholes in the law. It is sometimes difficult to identify who the employer is in the informal sector. Who is going to implement the laws?...Even if we have laws to regulate the informal sector, another informal sector can emerge. This is part and parcel of the informal sector’.</td>
<td>Panel Member, National Labour Symposium Sri Lanka, date and place anonymised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘We started stakeholder meetings with the Board of Investment, labour department, women’s bureau, health ministry etc. At the beginning they liked to stay connected with us. But when we started to talk about manpower agencies, they didn’t like it., so now they try to avoid the meetings. Now they have not given us a meeting for the last 7 months’.</td>
<td>Civil Society/2, September 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
and when not to, work. Second, informal work supports and facilitates the volatilities of production cycles. In certain seasons garment factories require an additional labour force in order to meet unexpected new orders and peaks in demand from lead firms. This way, factories can hire temporary workers to meet their seasonal demands rather than having to meet higher expenditures of maintaining an excessive permanent labour cadre throughout the year. Thirdly, manufacturers are increasingly relying on informal labour as this allows them the space to avoid regulations, cheapen the cost of labour and weaken the power of workers (Skanthakumar, 2019).

When it comes to informal workers, the direct employer is the labour market intermediary, who is known as ‘manpower agencies’ in Sri Lanka. The factory enters into an agreement with the manpower agency to provide an adequate number of workers to cover their daily labour shortages, and often, they happen to be months long agreements. The payment of wages and statutory obligations of workers remain with the manpower agency. Almost all manpower agencies operate within the local labour markets, and most do not have a physical presence. Some agents operate near the K-EPZ gates, near supermarkets and in other public spaces. In some cases, the only information workers had about the agent is a mobile telephone number. In the mornings, workers met these agents, who then assigned them to factories. Before workers were dispatched to their respective workplaces, they were informed about the daily wages to be received. In this system, the workplace can be any place, any industry and any type of work. Most often, workers did not have the choice in the type of work they wished to be engaged in.

Although informality in the Sri Lankan apparel industry is (re)produced in local labour markets, it maintains functional links between local social relations, workplace, national regulatory spheres and global lead firms which are paramount for maintaining and controlling the informal labour force. At the same time, informality remains outside national and global regulatory frameworks and ‘invisible’ from consumers and activists. This invisibility has given leeway for manufacturers to regularly engage informal workers in highly exploitative conditions of work even while dissociating themselves from informal workers. Such practices of manufacturers are enabled by the state’s inability and unwillingness to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Implementation and monitoring of lead firms’ ethical codes</td>
<td>‘When we take these [informal] workers we don’t have to follow buyers rules [ethical codes]’</td>
<td>Manufacturer/6, November 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘According to buyers informal workers should not be engaged. If they are engaged, buyers ask the factory to pay directly to the workers. But factories pay to the manpower agency. So in our audit reports, we mention that we found informal workers’.</td>
<td>Auditor/3, November 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Personally, I don’t think buyers are genuine. They are only concerned about the image, not about the actual betterment of workers. We as third-party auditors take the burden on our shoulders so they can do business. If anything happens, the buyer says, ‘auditors said the factory is ok’. They are spending lots of money on audits, just so they can save their own arses.’</td>
<td>Auditor/1, March 2019</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Labour regimes in the Sri Lankan apparel industry

5. Strategic ignorance, labour regimes and collective dissociation

In this section, I explain how dissociation practices are materialised and can be understood through the operation of labour regimes in the Sri Lankan apparel industry. Labour regimes illuminate the interplay of global production dynamics, in this case, enforcement and monitoring of ethical codes, and territorialised characteristics such as state regulatory frameworks, production regimes and labour market relations in dissociation practices. This interplay underpinning multi-scalar approaches to dissociation practices helps to grasp the manifold links and interdependencies connecting the actors and processes involved in dissociating informal labour in the Sri Lankan apparel industry. The section starts with explaining the dissociation practices of manufacturers at the workplace before moving on to illustrate how such practices are validated by the absence of the state in the regulatory spheres of informal labour. I then examine how and why the strategies and practices of manufacturers and the state, along with the dynamics of local labour markets, have provided the necessary impetus and a ‘legitimate’ foundation for lead firms to dissociate informal workers.

5.1. Workplace labour regimes and dissociation practices by manufacturers

As Ibert et al. (2019) argued, for dissociation, actors seek to enhance the intensity of dissimilarity and downplay the social richness of potentially problematic relationships. Manufacturers made sure of this by ‘othering’ informal workers in the production floors and maintaining socially thin relations between the factory and informal workers. They did so in four notable ways. First, manufacturers did not provide employment contracts to informal workers, the crucial document that establishes a formal relationship between the factory as the employer and worker as the employee. Secondly, manufacturers ensured that they did not directly deal with informal workers. When informal workers entered the factory, there was no written or verbal information on the number of hours of work, pay, or the exact job to be performed between workers and managers. Most of such terms of employment were communicated verbally by the agency to the workers on the day itself. Thirdly, managers fired informal workers on a frequent basis in order to avoid legal consequences of long-term employment. In some cases, factories employed informal workers at length to perform the same tasks but were denied employment security. Fourthly, with informal work bringing different employment terms and conditions to the production floor, the workplace displayed two internally fragmented labour regimes: one for the formal workers with employment contracts, better pay and benefits, and the other for informal workers with none of those benefits. This effectively discriminated informal workers even though they carried out the same tasks. For example, informal workers were not paid overtime, production incentives, annual bonuses and attendance bonuses. Moreover, informal workers reported that they were not able to access free meals or subsidised meals provided by some factories for formal workers and were not allowed to use the same transport or sick rooms that were made available for formal workers. Such discrimination practices were pronounced by the social segregation and othering of informal workers.
who were dubbed ‘manpower workers’. In so doing, managers treated informal workers as ‘inferior’ and ‘second class citizens’, and marginalised them at the workplace.

By treating informal workers as transient and external to the factory, manufacturers were able to successfully downplay the relationship between the factory and informal workers even while creating highly exploitative conditions of work and a segmented labour force. The worst effects of such dissociation practices were laid bare during the Covid-19 pandemic when lead firms cancelled or withdrew orders and or factories were closed during lockdowns. Dissociation of informal workers allowed managers to relinquish any obligations or responsibility towards informal workers in their pandemic response. For example, the government established a Tripartite Action Committee to manage the impact of the pandemic on workers with representatives of workers, the government and manufacturers. This Committee directed manufacturers to pay LKR14,500 (US$40) or 50% of the last drawn gross salary of workers who were furloughed during the lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. The Committee also negotiated with manufacturers not to terminate any worker due to the pandemic. However, manufacturers did not include informal workers in these agreements as they were ‘not their workers’. Consequently, most informal workers were effectively laid off without any compensation by the factories as soon as the pandemic hit the industry (Wickramasingha and De Neve, 2022). In some cases, informal workers continued to work and or were re-hired as the country emerged from the worse effects of the pandemic. However, managers excluded them from access to healthcare facilities made available by the factories for formal workers such as PCR testing, vaccination, assistance with treatments once infected with Covid-19 and relief packages—including dry rations, medicine, healthcare and sanitary products provided for workers during the recovery periods.

The work that is required to distance oneself from another actor and or a process is often associated with place. Much of it is about creating strong physical boundaries between the places of association and places of dissociation (Ibert et al., 2019; Kleibert et al. 2020; Müller et al., 2021). This makes it possible for actors to cover their tracks and keep these places hidden from the eyes of activists, regulators and consumers. Dubbed ‘dark places’ and ‘hidden places’ by Ibert et al. (2019) they are perceived as physically distant places that are conveniently kept away from legitimate and pristine places of association, thus, obscuring any links with the actors who are at the risk of getting negatively affected if came into light. Yet, the Sri Lankan case demonstrates that the place itself does not necessarily need to be separate or distant for dissociative practices to be ‘hidden’. Instead of physical demarcations, the separation is maintained by invisible, relational boundaries and exclusions, which are just as effective as Thomsen and Hess (2022) found in the gemstones and jewellery sector. In the Sri Lankan case of informality, the country as a territory of apparel production is known as an ethical sourcing destination, and Sri Lankan garment factories in general are seen as upholding national labour laws and the principles of ethical codes. Yet, the actual practices of implementing ethical codes and the inequalities they engender within these very production floors remain obscured. Hidden and dark places of dissociative practices in this sense are produced simultaneously alongside otherwise visible ethical production sites. While in the case of Thomsen and Hess such ass/dissociation practices were still separated by time and space, in the Sri Lankan case, these boundaries are embedded into and materialised in the form of two internally fragmented labour regimes at the same time and place: one for the formal labour force with better benefits and the other for informal workers without any of these benefits.
What makes it possible for managers to do this and get away with it? It is the result of collective and strategic ignorance of lead firms and the state, that has enabled dissociation practices of manufacturers at the workplace. In other words, dissociation is not time/place bound. Especially in a case like Sri Lanka, where dissociation practices take place at the same place and time as associative practices, it requires the buy-in and collective efforts of multiple stakeholders, who have a stake in the value capture arising from a particular production process and thus, vested interest in maintaining the boundaries and distance created in the process of dissociation. To keep such practices ‘hidden’ while keeping the place alive and visible in real time, collective dissociation is fundamental. Thus, the dissociation of informal workers that is materialised in Sri Lankan workplaces is the result of a complex network of practices that are both spatial and multi-scalar in nature. I unpack this further in the next two subsections.

5.2. National regulatory spheres and the ‘Absence’ of the state

As Ibert et al. (2019) argued, transactions across the market interface distribute ethical or moral responsibility between buyers and providers with the consequences that both partners can easily shift the responsibility to the respective counterpart. As a result, both buyers and providers feel more comfortable with immoral decisions (Falk and Szech, 2013) but enact a complex system of collective non-responsibility (Te Velde et al., 2002). The role of the state in facilitating this collective non-responsibility, and being an important accomplice in this, is crucial. As Smith (2015) emphasised, the actions of the state at global, national and subnational scales play a significant role in the formation, constitution and reshaping of the activities of capitalist accumulation strategies in GPNs. In particular, state policies with regard to labour regulation and accumulation are important instruments in defining the conditions of reproduction and control of labour in GPNs (Smith et al., 2002; Bair, 2005; Mezzadri, 2010). Ibert et al. (2019) emphasised that this way, the structural properties of the respective markets can be mobilised to prevent negative associations from becoming salient. In this sense, the structural make-up of the Sri Lankan labour markets in general and its regulatory frameworks have facilitated the dissociative practices of manufacturers and lead firms. This is in spite of the fact that Sri Lanka boasts high labour standards and human development indicators (Ruwanpura, 2022).

The strong labour laws in Sri Lanka were institutionalised and enacted as a result of the country’s long history of defending workers’ rights that dates back to the early 1900s (Gunawardana and Biyanwila, 2008). In particular, the Wages Board Ordinance 1935, the Factories Ordinance 1950, the Termination of Employment Workmen Act 1971, and the Industrial Disputes Act 1999, have historically protected the working class of Sri Lanka. This legislation encompasses a wide spectrum of areas from economic to social activities covering compensation, freedom of association and collective bargaining, industrial disputes, health and safety, working hours, leave, discrimination, employment of women and children, payment of gratuity and termination of employment (Wijayasiri and Dissanayake, 2009). Indeed, it became the basis for establishing Sri Lanka as an ethical sourcing destination (Ruwanpura, 2022). Yet, when it comes to informal work there is much less legal protection through this legislation. This is a fact compounded by the state’s inability and unwillingness to enforce and monitor the existing, limited laws on informal work. For example, the Termination of Employment Workmen Act 1971 provides that any worker employed consecutively for more than 6 months should be made permanent. To evade this, some manufacturers were in the habit of terminating the employment
of informal workers few days before they completed 6 months. After that, manufacturers hired a different set of informal workers for the next 6 months. In other cases, manufacturers hired informal workers for 3–4 days every week to avoid the consistency of employment. One trade union revealed that some manufacturers have employed the same worker for as long as 1.5 years this way, without providing any benefits accrued to permanent workers. In another example, an informal worker’s hand was cut off while on the job. The factory promptly dissociated itself from the worker and refused to take responsibility for, or provide compensation to, the worker because he was not their employee. Several trade unions and civil society organisations said that such incidents, failure to comply with laws and illegal employment practices go largely unnoticed by the Department of Labour.

At the same time, several officers of the Department of Labour and apparel industry authorities said that informal work is necessary for profit purposes. The general attitude was that if informal work is regulated, the industry will be negatively affected, undermining its competitiveness in the eyes of lead firms. These findings indicate that the Sri Lankan state has effectively turned a ‘blind eye’ to the illegal forms of accumulation through the informal sector in the apparel industry. The state, by its ‘absence’ was perpetuating informalisation in local labour markets as was also found elsewhere (Lee, 1999; Pun and Smith, 2007; Mezzadri, 2010). This has created a conducive environment for manufacturers to fragment their workplace labour regimes, and distance informal workers as not ‘their own’. By doing so, manufacturers have also decentralised labour discipline and externalised labour costs, borne by the informal workers themselves as was also found by others (Mezzadri, 2010; Barrientos, 2013; De Neve, 2014b; Riisgaard, 2022; Wickramasingha and De Neve, 2022). In this context, the state has indirectly redefined the conditions for the exploitation of informal workers in local labour markets resulting in the effective dissociation of informal workers by manufacturers. While the Sri Lankan state might not have directly crafted these illegal forms of accumulation as was found in other places—such as Mae Sot Special Economic Zone in the Thai-Myanmar border (Arnold and Pickles, 2011), it has nevertheless contributed to their establishment and reproduction by facilitating the resilience of informal work in the local labour markets, thereby creating conducive conditions for the expansion of accumulation (Selwyn, 2012; Smith, 2015). Together with the dissociation practices of manufacturers, this in turn has provided the perfect environment for lead firms to distance themselves from informal workers as I explain in the next subsection.

5.3. Ethical codes, fragmented labour regimes and collective dissociation

When ethical codes were introduced by lead firms in the 1990s, Sri Lanka was one of the first countries to adopt these codes (Ruwanpura and Wrigley, 2011). As Ruwanpura has extensively documented, given Sri Lanka’s historically strong social and human development trajectory, the welfare state and appropriate legal frameworks, there was less work required and less resistance to transitioning to ethical sourcing, with lead firms’ ethical codes acting as complementary interventions to state regulations (Ruwanpura, 2016, 2022). Through their claims to ethical sourcing, lead firms have capitalised on this institutional infrastructure for decades. A paradox enters when one segment of workers is dissociated from the ethical codes of lead firms. Even though a significant proportion of garments produced for lead firms are being made by informal workers at the same place of production where ethical codes technically should be applicable, these codes are consistently violated on the production floors by manufacturers where informal work is
concerned (Wickramasinghe, 2020; Hewamanne, 2021; Wickramasingha and De Neve, 2022). As Ibert et al. (2019) rightly note, in GPNs, proactive dissociation and strategic ignorance by lead firms are difficult to prove. However, the resulting complexity of the organisation of GPNs (Coe and Yeung, 2015; Coe, 2021) leaves much space for strategic ignorance on the part of lead firms. This point to the possibility that individuals and organisations may sometimes find it advantageous to cultivate and preserve individual and collective forms of ignorance of informal labour practices. In the case of lead firms and their ethical codes in the Sri Lankan apparel industry, this was evident in three notable ways.

First, although the national institutional and regulatory frameworks provide a solid foundation for lead firms’ ethical codes to build on, the gaps in labour laws with respect to informal labour provided the necessary impetus for ethical codes to neglect informal workers. As scholars have consistently established, the effectiveness of global regulations largely depends on the existence of strong national laws and the willingness of the state to implement them (Locke et al., 2013; Amengual and Chirot, 2016; Tran et al., 2017; Alford and Phillips, 2018; Smith et al., 2018). In the absence of a strong foundation and a national enforcement mechanism, ethical codes often evade accountability for all workers or are selective in their responsibilities. Secondly, lead firms do not own garment factories nor employ the labour force where informal work is carried out. This enables lead firms to establish corporate ignorance and ‘knowledge alibis. (McGoey, 2012, 563) when it comes to the technicalities of the enforcement of ethical codes, how they are applied on the ground, gaps in their implementation and non-consideration of who is excluded. Both lead firms and manufacturers in Sri Lanka relied on each other to keep the controversial employment relations of informality at bay. On the part of manufacturers, they claimed that when they employed informal workers, they were not bound to comply with lead firms’ ethical codes. Manufacturers, however, did not elaborate why this was the case, indicating an assumption on their part that lead firms’ ethical codes did not extend to informal workers. They were able to get away with it due to the ambiguities surrounding the enforcement of ethical codes by lead firms where informal workers were concerned. For, Lead firms were vague about both their knowledge of informal workers, the applicability of ethical codes to informal workers and the way codes were monitored. For example, some firms claimed that they did not allow manufacturers to use informal labour. Others claimed that while informal workers were allowed, full disclosure from manufacturers and submission of records were required. Yet, often this did not happen given the complex way informality was organised in local labour markets.

Thirdly and relatedly, the enforcement and monitoring of ethical codes on the ground are carried out by third-party auditors hired by lead firms. This provides lead firms with another knowledge alibi. Manufacturers and labour market intermediaries constantly re-arranged the employment conditions of informal workers to the extent that tracing records has become difficult, as auditors revealed. If such records were not forthcoming, auditors said that they made a comment on the audit report. Auditors, however, were not able to clarify the implications of ‘commenting’ on the audit report and whether lead firms took any action based on these comments. Commenting on the audit report seemed to be little more than a mere acknowledgement of the issue, without any follow-up action required. It was evident that while being aware of the practice of informality in the sector and its associated problems, lead firms have chosen to remain largely ignorant. One auditor from a well-established global agency said that when something goes wrong in the process, lead
firms would often feign ignorance of the problem and transfer the responsibility to auditors.

These accounts point towards an attitude of ‘silencing’, ‘denial’ and ‘looking the other way’ which Willis et al. (2016, 206) noted as being synonymous with dissociation. McGoey (2012) called this ‘strategic ignorance’ where actors have a tendency to deliberately insulate themselves from unsettling conditions. When it comes to collective dissociation, what is intriguing is that there is no evidence emerging from the field of coherence and coordination on the part of the different actors. Yet, strategic ignorance is made possible, on the one hand, by the ambiguous and contentious relations between manufacturers and labour market intermediaries, who filter information on the recruitment and employment of workers that is then shared (or not) with lead firms. While this may implicate manufacturers it disconnects lead firms from potentially value-degrading practices (Ibert et al., 2019). On the other hand, this is facilitated by a notable absence of the state in regulatory spheres with respect to informal labour (Smith, 2015). Together, these forces engendered the uneven application of lead firms’ ethical codes in the workplace resulting from a paradox of collective, yet non-coordinated efforts from manufacturers, labour market intermediaries, the state and lead firms. Consequently, almost all the requirements of lead firms’ ethical codes were violated on the factory floor where informal workers were concerned. Yet the published reports of lead firms’ ethical codes have avoided any references to practices, processes and people involved in informal work that might be detrimental to their reputation (Ibert et al., 2019). Instead, lead firms’ reporting of ethical sourcing via annual reports and their websites creates a false assumption among consumers that all workers who produce their garments are protected by ethical codes. In reality, some garments are made in internally fragmented workplaces, where certain workers are discriminated against and treated differently due to the segmentation of the labour force into formal and informal. Geographies of dissociation are thus enacted and socially negotiated across the spaces of regulation at national regulatory spheres and spaces of (re)production and control of labour at local labour markets and the workplace. By othering informal workers, and disowning them as ‘not ours’, capitalists have legitimately managed to distance themselves from informal workers. Even within the same spaces of the tightly packed production floors, the exclusion of informal workers is visible and felt by informal workers who labour under extremely precarious conditions.

6. Conclusion

Geographies of association and dissociation as developed by Ibert et al. (2019) enable an unpacking of the inclusionary and exclusionary dynamics in GPNs. In the existing works, dissociation is primarily seen as encompassing dark and distant places away from the places of association (Hagemann, 2015; Kleibert, 2015; Ibert et al., 2019). Such places of dissociation most often are hidden and inconspicuous, occupying locations remote from public spaces and centres of consumption. This article advanced this debate in two ways. First, the article argued that places of association and dissociation may not necessarily be separate, but practices of association and dissociation can co-exist in the same workplace at the same time. These findings push us to think beyond the physically demarcated places when imagining ‘dark’ and ‘hidden’ places of dissociation. Instead, this article demonstrated how dark and hidden places are constructed across different dimensions of space, materialising at the same place and time. This calls for a more nuanced approach to the
relational conceptualisation of places of dissociative practices (Ibert et al. 2019) which is currently somewhat under-developed and taken for granted in the discourse of as/association. Moving beyond the discourse of geographies of dissociation, these findings have implications for not just the works on dissociation but also for the works on labour regimes in GPNs, where, often, the workplace is treated as homogeneous. The paper challenges the way we understand the ‘workplace’ and argues for a more nuanced analysis of the fragmented nature of workplaces. Connecting dialectics of association and dissociation to labour regimes as is done in this case, can serve as an effective tool to unpack this important, but hitherto largely neglected element in studying workplace labour regimes.

Secondly, using the labour regimes concept, the paper argues for a notion of collective dissociation. The evidence shown on different and disparate sites of contestation of enforcing and monitoring labour regulations and ethical codes demonstrates how material and discursive dissociations are collectively forged by actors across a multi-scalar network of production and reproduction of labour. As such, this article promotes an understanding of the practices of dissociation as collective dissociation which explains the linkages between sourcing practices of lead firms and their ethical codes, labour reproduction in local labour markets, production regimes at the workplace and state (in)action. Dissociation practices in this sense, when it comes to workers, are inherently embedded in labour regimes, the way they are institutionalised, enacted and constituted across multiple scales (Smith et al. 2018; Wickramasingha and Coe, 2022). This means that while dissociation practices themselves may be place-bound and locally embedded, the social relations producing the dissociation are part of local, national and global networks, and lead firms’ sourcing practices. GPNs appear in constant flux and many linkages have become notoriously ephemeral or are switched frequently (Coe, 2021). Difficulties in observing or understanding practices in distant places and the complexity of product and processes can suggest opportunities for forging knowledge alibis (McGoey, 2012). It is the strategy behind such gaps, omissions and collateral damages that dissociation resonates with (Ibert et al., 2019). This article shows that such dissociative practices require constant negotiation and re-arrangement of strategic ignorance of multiple stakeholders who often work collectively through either implicit and/or explicit agreement to serve each other’s mutual benefits. It should, however, be reiterated that there is no evidence emerging from the field of explicit and organised coherence and coordination on the part of different actors. Collective dissociation in this sense emerges as an outcome of social processes and common interests of controlling and maintaining a labour force to derive the maximum profits possible on the part of capitalists.

By using the dialectics of association and disassociation this article also makes a contribution to the debate on ethical codes by illuminating uneven geographies of ethical codes manifested through highly fragmented workplace labour regimes. These dialectics in the application of ethical codes often go unnoticed even though such practices occur at the same place of production, where ethical codes are intended to protect all workers without discrimination. Not only do these findings challenge the transparency of lead firms’ claims to ethical sourcing, but they illuminate how uneven application of ethical codes shapes the way global production dynamics (in this case, private regulation) intersect with the employment practices involving securing informal workers in local apparel labour markets. In this context, this article provides a critical analytical lens through which the concept of dissociation makes visible what has been obscured through much of the debate on ethical codes.
In conclusion, this article raises two questions for future research on the geographies of dissociation. First, can collective dissociation be purposefully enacted by a set of different, multi-scalar actors across GPNs? While addressing the limitations of the current case study, this angle would not only be relevant to labour but also to specific products and processes linked to ethical claims and value capture in GPNs. Second, a theoretical intervention is needed to understand if the concept of dissociation is actually different to the concept of disarticulation. This article has incorporated dissociation within dis/articulation, but both concepts warrant a closer look in order to determine if they are similar, and if not, what different angles they offer to the researchers of global production.

**Research involving human participants and/or animals**

The study involved interviewing human participants. All ethical approvals for this were obtained prior to the fieldwork from the Institutional Review Board of the National University of Singapore and the International Centre for Ethnic Studies.

**Informed consent**

Each interview participant was informed of the project in detail and the explicit consent of the participants was obtained prior to the interview.

**Acknowledgements**

This article is partly based on research carried out while I was a doctoral student at the Department of Geography at the National University of Singapore (NUS). My research at NUS was supported by an NUS Research Scholarship and a Graduate Research Grant. Partly, data used in this paper are derived from a broader study I conducted for the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo (ICES) as a postdoctoral researcher. ICES’s financial support was instrumental in carrying out my field research in the post-pandemic context. This research was carried out with the full endorsement of the Institutional Review Board of NUS (Approval Number: NUS-IRB Ref No: S-18-252E) and the Ethics Review of ICES. I thank my research participants for their valuable time, and local civil society organisations in the Katunayake Export Processing Zone for facilitating the focus groups with workers. I am indebted to Adrian Smith of the University of Sussex Business School for reading the pre-submission version of this article and providing invaluable comments for improvement. I remain grateful to Neil Coe of the University of Sydney and Woon Chih Yuan of NUS for their guidance on my earlier conceptual development work as a doctoral student, of which, this article is based on. I thank Kanchana Ruwanpura of the University of Gothenburg for our thought provoking talks on the contentious subject of ethical codes in the Sri Lankan apparel industry; and Lotte Thomsen of the Copenhagen Business School for our insightful conversations on geographies of dissociation which inspired this article. Finally, I am most grateful to James Faulconbridge and two anonymous reviewers whose expert and engaging comments improved and made this article much stronger. Any errors remain my own.

**Funding**

This work was supported by: (i) National University of Singapore Research Scholarship and the Graduate Research Support Scheme; and (ii) Research Grant of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka.
Conflicts of interest statement

The author has absolutely no financial interests or connections, direct or indirect, or other situations related to the research conducted, the findings reported, and the conclusions and implications stated.

References


