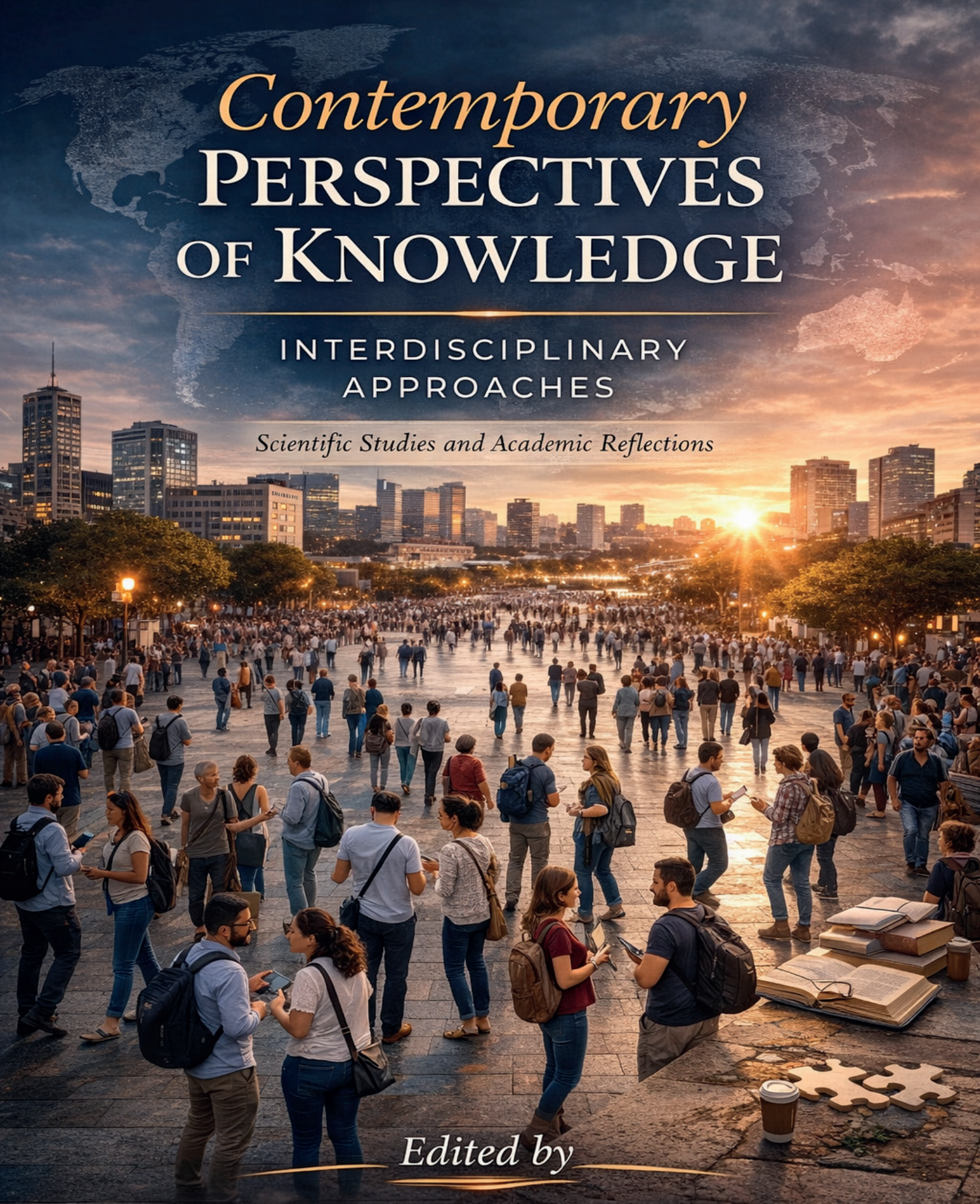
Contemporary PERSPECTIVES OF KNOWLEDGE

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

Scientific Studies and Academic Reflections



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Graphic Design, Layout and Cover

Academic Publisher Periodicojs

Language

Portuguese and English

International Cataloging-in-Publication Data (CIP)

(Brazilian Book Chamber, SP, Brazil)

C761 Contemporary Perspectives of Knowledge: Interdisciplinary Approaches/ Flávia Moreno Alves de Souza (org) – João Pessoa: Periodicojs publisher, 2026.

E-book: il. color.

Includes bibliography
ISBN: 978-65-6010-196-8

1. Free themes. I. Souza, Flávia Moreno Alves. II. Title

CDD 370

Prepared by Dayse de França Barbosa CRB 15-553

Index for systematic catalog:

Indexes for systematic catalog:

1. Education: 370

Work without funding from public or private bodies.

The published works have been submitted to peer review and evaluation (double-blind), with respective acceptance letters in the publisher's system.

The work is the result of studies and research from the Interdisciplinary Studies in Human Sciences section of the Humanities in Perspective book collection.



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CNPJ: 39.865.437/0001-23

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Chapter 37

FROM RESELLING TO COORDINATING ONE'S OWN PRODUCTION: SUPPLIER DEPENDENCE, DIGITAL PLATFORMS, AND THE BUILDING OF OPERATIONAL CAPABILITIES IN FASHION MICRO AND SMALL ENTERPRISES — A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW (2021–2026)



FROM RESELLING TO COORDINATING ONE'S OWN PRODUCTION: SUPPLIER DEPENDENCE, DIGITAL PLATFORMS, AND THE BUILDING OF OPERATIONAL CAPABILITIES IN FASHION MICRO AND SMALL ENTERPRISES — A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW (2021–2026)

Priscila Amorim Grunwald[1]

Abstract: Purpose: this article draws on a systematic review of the literature published between 2021 and 2026 to examine the mechanisms by which micro and small fashion retailers stop relying on the resale of finished goods and begin to specify and coordinate their own production, and the conditions under which this shift reduces their competitive vulnerability in digital channels. Method: following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines and the recommendations of Kraus et al. (2022) for treating reviews as stand-alone studies, peer-reviewed articles were searched in open metadata sources (Crossref, RePEc/IDEAS, SciELO, DOAJ) and publisher portals, covering January 2021 through October 2026. After screening against explicit eligibility criteria, 36 studies made up the corpus and were analyzed through configurative thematic synthesis. A documented case of a Brazilian women's apparel microenterprise served as an empirical vignette to anchor the interpretation. Findings: the literature clusters into seven streams: dependence and power asymmetry; hybrid platforms and supplier encroachment; governance choices among buying, making, and coordinating; dynamic and absorptive capabilities in small firms; the effectiveness of consulting and training interventions; product development, quality, and returns in apparel; and the Brazilian

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context of women's entrepreneurship mediated by social media. The synthesis indicates that the reseller's vulnerability is structural rather than merely operational, since it stems from the combination of low differentiation, dependence asymmetry, and the supplier's ability to sell directly in the same channel. Conclusions: a shift toward hybrid governance—in which the firm owns the specification, the pattern, and the quality criteria while outsourcing physical execution to third parties—emerges as the response best suited to the scale of these firms. Its effectiveness, however, hinges on building absorptive capacity and routines such as pilot samples, inspection, and component-based costing. The article proposes an integrative model with six propositions and a research agenda.

Keywords: supplier dependence; marketplaces; hybrid governance; dynamic capabilities; micro and small enterprises; apparel

INTRODUCTION

The growth of online marketplaces and social commerce has sharply lowered the barriers to entry in fashion retail. With little capital, a microentrepreneur can open an online store, buy ready-made garments from a manufacturer, and sell them to shoppers nationwide. Yet the same infrastructure that makes getting in easy makes staying in hard. In channels where offers appear side by side and prices can be compared in seconds, undifferentiated products tend to compete on price alone, and a reseller who does not control her own product is exposed to the decisions of whoever makes it. When that manufacturer decides to list directly in the same channel, the reseller ends up competing for customers with her own supplier—at a structural cost disadvantage.

This situation, common among small Brazilian apparel retailers, sits at the intersection of bodies of literature that rarely speak to one another. Platform economics studies the asymmetric relationship between marketplace operators and third-party sellers (Cutolo; Kenney, 2021; Hagiu; Teh; Wright, 2022; Rietveld; Schilling, 2021). Operations management models the decisions of a supplier that begins selling directly to consumers

through platforms, a phenomenon known as supplier encroachment (Fu; Chen; Yan, 2022; Wei; Dong, 2022). Transaction cost economics addresses when to buy in the market, produce in-house, or adopt hybrid forms (Avdasheva; Geliskhanov, 2025). The literature on dynamic and absorptive capabilities investigates how small firms with scarce resources build and renew competencies (Fabrizio et al., 2022; Francis; Chakravarty, 2025). Finally, development economics tests experimentally whether training and consulting actually change small-business practices (Anderson; McKenzie, 2022; Iacovone; Maloney; McKenzie, 2022; McKenzie, 2021).

Each of these streams sheds light on part of the problem, but none of them alone explains why changing the operating model—rather than merely switching suppliers—can reduce a fashion microenterprise's vulnerability in digital channels, or under what conditions that change holds up after outside support ends. There is, therefore, an integration gap. Existing reviews focus on platforms in general (Rietveld; Schilling, 2021), on the dynamic capabilities of small and medium-sized enterprises broadly (Deyassa, 2023; Fabrizio et al., 2022), on knowledge management (Durst; Edvardsson; Foli, 2023), or on supply chain resilience (Bak et al., 2023), without connecting these findings to the specific case of the small fashion business moving from reselling to coordinating its own production.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

In light of this gap, this article poses the following research question: what does recent literature reveal about the mechanisms, conditions, and limits of the shift by fashion micro and small enterprises from a model based on reselling finished goods to one based on specifying and coordinating their own production, in competitive environments mediated by digital platforms? Four specific questions follow from it: (Q1) which mechanisms make supplier dependence a structural problem for small resellers in digital channels; (Q2) which governance arrangements the literature associates with reducing that dependence; (Q3) which capabilities and routines must be built for the transition to deliver results; and (Q4) what evidence exists on the effectiveness and persistence of external interventions, such as

consulting and training, in building those capabilities.

The overall objective is to systematize and critically integrate the scholarship published between 2021 and 2026 on these mechanisms, proposing an explanatory model and a research agenda. To ground the interpretation in a concrete phenomenon, the article uses as an empirical vignette a documented case of a Brazilian women's apparel microenterprise that, between April and October 2023, stopped reselling ready-made jumpsuits and began selling a product developed to its own specifications, with continuity verified in September 2026 (Grunwald, 2026). The case is not meant for statistical generalization but for analytical illustration: it serves to test the plausibility of the model that emerges from the review.

The article makes a threefold contribution. Theoretically, it brings together streams that are usually treated separately and proposes that the small reseller's vulnerability be understood as the product of the interaction among dependence asymmetry, channel architecture, and the absence of specification capabilities. Methodologically, it sets out a replicable search-and-synthesis protocol based on open sources, which can be rerun and expanded in subscription databases. Practically, it offers managers, consultants, and policymakers who support micro and small enterprises a set of propositions on what must be transferred for an intervention to leave behind capability, not just advice, inside the firm.

The article is organized into six sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 presents the theoretical foundations that guided the review. Section 3 describes the method. Section 4 characterizes the corpus and synthesizes the seven thematic streams. Section 5 discusses the findings in light of the case and proposes the integrative model and research agenda. Section 6 offers concluding remarks and limitations.

DEPENDENCE, POWER, AND THE RESELLER'S STRUCTURAL PROBLEM

Interorganizational dependence is traditionally understood as a function of the importance of the resource controlled by the other party and the availability of alternatives. When a small firm buys finished goods from a single supplier, is not a significant customer for that supplier, has no equivalent alternative, and cannot integrate production backward, the

result is an asymmetry that shifts bargaining power to the supplier's side. Recent literature has refined this view by showing that what matters is not only asymmetry but also the total degree of interdependence between the parties. In a study of 174 buyer-supplier dyads in the Brazilian logistics sector, Rodrigues and Martins (2022) found that the greater the mutual dependence, the higher supplier satisfaction tends to be, and that asymmetric situations can still be satisfactory. In the authors' words, "situations of dependence asymmetry in which the supplier is highly dependent on the buyer can still be satisfactory" (Rodrigues; Martins, 2022). This finding suggests that the small reseller's problem is not dependence per se but the combination of one-sided dependence with low interdependence: the supplier loses little if the relationship ends, while the reseller loses her very product.

PLATFORMS, DIGITAL DEPENDENCE, AND SUPPLIER ENCROACHMENT

In platform-mediated markets, dependence takes on an additional layer. Cutolo and Kenney (2021) coined the term "platform-dependent entrepreneurs" to describe firms whose business exists inside an ecosystem governed by a third party, and they argue that "the power asymmetry at the core of the relationship between the platform and its ecosystem members is intrinsic" (Cutolo; Kenney, 2021, p. 584). Kenney, Bearson, and Zysman (2021) show that the platform economy has reached a degree of maturity and pervasiveness at which measuring its reach and exploring its power relations has become central to understanding contemporary economic organization. For the small fashion reseller, this dual dependence—on the product supplier and on the platform that mediates access to customers—creates a compound vulnerability.

The concept of supplier encroachment describes a supplier's decision to start selling directly to end consumers, competing with the retailers it supplies. Modeling this decision when the direct channel is an online platform, Fu, Chen, and Yan (2022) show that, unlike a supplier's own direct channels, encroachment via a platform can produce win-lose and lose-lose outcomes, and that when the platform operator retains the option to enter, "such encroachment is always harmful to the traditional retailer but beneficial to the supplier" (Fu;

Chen; Yan, 2022, p. 529). This is precisely the asymmetry a reseller experiences when her supplier starts listing right alongside her in the same marketplace.

BUY, MAKE, OR COORDINATE

Transaction cost economics offers the classic framework for choosing among buying in the market, producing in-house, or adopting hybrid forms, with asset specificity, uncertainty, transaction frequency, and the risk of opportunism as its core variables. Revisiting the lessons of this tradition for the digital economy, Avdasheva and Geliskhanov (2025) argue that digitalization "alters transaction costs, expands strategic interdependencies" (Avdasheva; Geliskhanov, 2025, p. 237) and calls for reinterpreting past lessons in new institutional settings. The implication for small firms is that the choice is not a binary one between buying ready-made and becoming a factory. There is an intermediate range of arrangements in which the firm retains the most specific decisions—product, pattern, and quality standard—and contracts out the least specific operations, such as cutting and sewing. Recent experimental evidence reinforces that the boundary of the small firm is a strategic variable: Anderson and McKenzie (2022) show that bringing functional skills in-house, or outsourcing tasks to specialists, can outperform training the entrepreneur as a way to improve business practices.

DYNAMIC CAPABILITIES AND ABSORPTIVE CAPACITY IN SMALL FIRMS

The dynamic capabilities perspective concerns a firm's ability to sense opportunities, seize them, and reconfigure its resources. In small and medium-sized enterprises, which face what Fabrizio et al. (2022, p. 617) call a "scarcity of strategic resources," these capabilities tend to reside in the routines of the owner-manager and a few key people, which makes individual microfoundations central (Chen et al., 2023; Zahoor et al., 2023). Absorptive capacity—that is, the ability to acquire, assimilate, transform, and exploit external knowledge—is the link between outside guidance and performance. Francis and Chakravarty (2025) show, for small and medium-sized enterprises that turn to consulting, that openness to

external knowledge is "necessary but insufficient" (Francis; Chakravarty, 2025, p. 35): performance gains depend on each dimension of absorptive capacity actually being developed.

These four foundations shaped the search strategies and analytical categories of the review, described below.

METHOD

Design

This is a configurative systematic literature review, whose purpose is not to pool effect sizes but to organize and interpret heterogeneous findings in order to build an integrated explanation of a phenomenon (Kraus et al., 2022). Reporting follows, insofar as they apply to management research, the items of the PRISMA 2020 statement, which was updated to reflect advances in the identification, selection, appraisal, and synthesis of studies (Page et al., 2021). Kraus et al. (2022) argue that literature reviews should be treated as stand-alone studies, with explicit research questions, a transparent protocol, and their own theoretical contribution, rather than as mere summaries of what has already been published. This guidance was put into practice through three decisions: formulating questions Q1 to Q4 in advance; defining eligibility criteria before the search; and orienting the synthesis toward proposing a model rather than describing studies one by one.

INFORMATION SOURCES AND SEARCH STRATEGY

Searches were conducted in open sources of scholarly metadata and in journal portals: the Crossref index, which records the metadata publishers deposit along with DOI identifiers; the RePEc repository, through its IDEAS and EconPapers interfaces, which indexes work in economics and management; the SciELO library and the portal of the Revista de Administração Contemporânea, for Brazilian and Ibero-American scholarship; the DOAJ directory, for open-access journals; and the journals' own websites, used to confirm

bibliographic data and abstract text. The time window covered publications from January 1, 2021, to October 13, 2026, using the issue date as the reference date or, for articles published only as advance online versions, the online publication date.

The search strategies combined, in English and Portuguese, blocks of terms corresponding to the four theoretical foundations. The dependence block included supplier dependence, power asymmetry, buyer-supplier relationship, and dependência de fornecedores. The platform block included platform-dependent entrepreneurs, third-party sellers, hybrid marketplace, platform entry, supplier encroachment, and marketplace. The governance block included make-or-buy, outsourcing, insourcing, transaction cost economics, terceirização, and facção (Brazilian outsourced sewing workshops). The capabilities block included dynamic capabilities, absorptive capacity, knowledge management, microfoundations, and SMEs. The interventions block included business training, consulting, management practices, and randomized experiment. The sector block included apparel, fashion, garment, product development, returns, quality, sewing defects, vestuário, confecção, moda, and female entrepreneurship. The blocks were combined with one another and with the terms small business, micro and small enterprises, and micro e pequenas empresas.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Studies were included if they met all five of the following criteria: (i) an article published in a peer-reviewed scholarly journal; (ii) publication within the 2021–2026 window; (iii) written in English or Portuguese; (iv) relevance to at least one of questions Q1 to Q4; and (v) complete bibliographic data verifiable in a primary source, with a persistent identifier whenever available. Excluded were books, book chapters, master's theses, doctoral dissertations, consulting reports, press and blog pieces, conference papers without full review, studies outside the time window even if considered classics, and works whose abstract or bibliographic data could not be confirmed at the source. This last rule, stricter than usual, was adopted deliberately to ensure that every reference and direct quotation in the article corresponded to text that had actually been published.



The exclusion criteria removed from the corpus, for example, a review on reshoring in the fashion industry published in 2019, a review on make-or-buy decisions published in 2018, a study on small suppliers in sustainable fashion supply chains published in 2018, a master's thesis on circular business models in Brazilian micro and small fashion retailers, and an academic blog post on the shortening of global apparel supply chains. All were thematically relevant but did not meet the publication-type or time-window criteria.

SELECTION, EXTRACTION, AND APPRAISAL

Selection took place in three sequential stages: title screening, abstract screening, and verification against the primary source. In the third stage, the following were recorded for each study: authors, year, title, journal, volume, issue, pages or article number, and DOI, as well as the objective, method, empirical context, main findings, and verbatim excerpts from the abstract suitable for direct quotation. Direct quotations from Portuguese-language sources were freely translated by the author, marked "our translation," and checked against the original text.

Study quality was appraised using three qualitative criteria, without assigning scores: clarity of the question and design; fit between method and conclusions; and transparency about limitations. No study was excluded on quality grounds, but the weight given to each study in the synthesis took the robustness of its design into account. Randomized experiments and meta-analyses (Anderson; McKenzie, 2022; Iacovone; Maloney; McKenzie, 2022; McKenzie, 2021) were treated as the strongest causal evidence; game-theoretic analytical models (Deng et al., 2023; Fu; Chen; Yan, 2022; Tang et al., 2024; Wei; Dong, 2022) as evidence on mechanisms under explicit assumptions; and case studies and surveys as evidence of plausibility and context.

Because the open sources used do not offer standardized, deduplicable results exports comparable to those of subscription databases, the number of records identified and excluded at each stage is not presented as a numerical flow diagram. This decision is acknowledged as a limitation in Section 6, and the search strategies have been described in

enough detail to allow the review to be replicated and expanded in databases such as Scopus and Web of Science.

SYNTHESIS

The synthesis followed the logic of thematic analysis. The extracted findings were coded inductively, grouped into categories, and then organized into streams. Seven streams emerged and were stabilized after successive rereadings. Each stream was then mapped onto questions Q1 to Q4, and the relationships among streams were expressed as propositions. Finally, the propositions were compared with the empirical vignette of the Brazilian women's apparel business, documented by Grunwald (2026) based on an invoice for the purchase of finished goods, dated brand posts, and an active marketplace listing, in order to assess their plausibility in the concrete context of a Brazilian microenterprise.

THE EMPIRICAL VIGNETTE

The firm studied is a women's apparel and accessories retailer based in São Bernardo do Campo, in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, run by its owner and with no factory or production staff. It sells through a marketplace and through its own social media channel. On April 4, 2023, an electronic invoice recorded the purchase of 37 finished jumpsuits from an outside manufacturer—a documentary snapshot of the resale model then in place. Beginning in April 2023, the firm received a pro bono technical intervention that started from an analysis of the garment it was already selling, identified the fabric, studied the construction, gathered the reasons for returns, and translated each problem into a decision about patternmaking, components, or finishing. On July 27, 2023, the brand announced the jumpsuit in fuchsia and, on October 21, in white—colors the previous supplier did not offer because they require a lining. In September 2026, the firm maintained an active listing for a jumpsuit of the same construction, and the owner stated that she continued to produce to her own specifications, contracting fabric and sewing directly (Grunwald, 2026).



The case document does not claim financial results from the transition, and neither does this review. The vignette is used solely to examine whether the mechanisms described in the literature are observable in a real, documented trajectory.

RESULTS

CORPUS CHARACTERISTICS

The final corpus comprised 36 studies. Their distribution over time is fairly even across the window: nine studies were published in 2021, nine in 2022, eight in 2023, one in 2024, seven in 2025, and two in 2026. The concentration in the first three years partly reflects the maturing of the research agendas on platforms and on experiments with small firms, whose seminal works had circulated as working papers since the late 2010s and were published in journals during this period. The 2025 and 2026 studies shift the focus to the fashion sector, returns, the use of online reviews in product redesign, and the Brazilian context.

In terms of research design, the corpus includes eight literature reviews, both systematic and integrative (Bak et al., 2023; Bhagya et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2023; Deyassa, 2023; Durst; Edvardsson; Foli, 2023; Fabrizio et al., 2022; Rietveld; Schilling, 2021; Silva et al., 2025); one meta-analysis with a policy discussion (McKenzie, 2021); two randomized field experiments (Anderson; McKenzie, 2022; Iacovone; Maloney; McKenzie, 2022); eight economics and operations management studies on platforms, whether analytical or empirical (Deng et al., 2023; Etro, 2021; Fu; Chen; Yan, 2022; Hagiu; Teh; Wright, 2022; Li; Wang; Song, 2021; Tang et al., 2024; Wei; Dong, 2022; Zheng; Pu; Chong, 2026); quantitative studies using survey or transaction data (Francis; Chakravarty, 2025; Kaushik et al., 2022; Nambisan; Baron, 2021; Patel; Karlsson; Oghazi, 2025; Rodrigues; Martins, 2022; Zahoor et al., 2023); case studies (Moin; Hossain; Baral, 2023; Tomiyama; Ando, 2026; Uchańska-Bieniusiewicz; Obłój, 2023); and conceptual essays, framework proposals, or sector analyses (Avdasheva; Geliskhanov, 2025; Cennamo, 2021; Costa; Mourthé, 2025; Cutolo; Kenney, 2021; Ghalachyan; Karpova, 2021; Kenney; Bearson; Zysman, 2021; Lu,

2025; Rangel; Corteletti, 2022).

The studies appeared in journals from a wide range of fields, which confirms how fragmented the topic is: economics, such as the Journal of Political Economy, The Review of Economic Studies, the RAND Journal of Economics, and the Oxford Review of Economic Policy; strategy and management, such as the Journal of Management, Academy of Management Perspectives, Review of Managerial Science, and Management Decision; operations, such as Production and Operations Management, the European Journal of Operational Research, and IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management; information systems and e-commerce, such as the Information Systems Journal, Electronic Commerce Research, and Electronic Commerce Research and Applications; and fashion and textiles, such as the Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, the International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education, and Textile & Leather Review. Four studies are Brazilian, published in the Revista de Administração Contemporânea, Estudos de Sociologia, Modapalavra e-periódico, and the Revista dos Mestrados Profissionais.

Geographically, studies on marketplaces are dominated by developed-economy settings and large platforms, above all Amazon. The experiments with small firms were conducted in Colombia and Nigeria, and the apparel sector studies cover India, Bangladesh, Japan, the United States, and Brazil. This distribution matters because it reveals a gap: platform mechanisms have been studied mostly from the standpoint of large operators and third-party sellers in mature markets, while the small fashion reseller in emerging economies appears only indirectly.

STREAM 1: DEPENDENCE, POWER ASYMMETRY, AND COMPOUND VULNERABILITY

The first stream brings together studies that explain why dependence on a more powerful partner weakens the small firm. Three findings stand out. The first is that dependence is multidimensional. Using response surface analysis, Rodrigues and Martins (2022) show that supplier satisfaction rises with the degree of mutual dependence and that, as

they put it, "the more dependent one party is on the other, generally, the greater the supplier's satisfaction" (Rodrigues; Martins, 2022). The flip side is what matters to the small reseller: relationships in which only one side depends on the other offer the least protection. A business that buys ready-made goods from a manufacturer with many other buyers occupies exactly this low-interdependence position.

The second finding is that, in digital markets, this dependence is layered on top of platform dependence. Cutolo and Kenney (2021) argue that prior research offered little guidance on how the far more numerous firms operating within ecosystems should compete, and they propose treating these firms as platform-dependent entrepreneurs whose relationship with the operator is structurally asymmetric. Nambisan and Baron (2021) add an underexplored dimension: digital ecosystems require entrepreneurs to play the roles of ecosystem member and leader of their own venture at the same time, and "often, these roles are incompatible, generating role conflict and high levels of stress" (Nambisan; Baron, 2021, p. 520). For a microentrepreneur who is simultaneously buyer, seller, photographer, customer service rep, and inventory manager, this cost is very real.

The third finding concerns resilience. In their review of 101 articles on supply chain resilience in small and medium-sized enterprises, Bak et al. (2023, p. 328) note that resilience "remains a major challenge especially for small and medium-sized enterprises" and identify four focal areas: collaboration and culture, firm capabilities, information systems, and costs and financing. Within this framework, dependence on a single supplier of finished goods is a point of weakness in all four dimensions: the firm does not collaborate in development, does not accumulate capability, has no information on the cost structure, and does not control the restocking schedule.

STREAM 2: HYBRID PLATFORMS, OPERATOR ENTRY, AND SUPPLIER ENCROACHMENT

The second stream is the largest in the corpus and deals with marketplace architecture. Rietveld and Schilling (2021, p. 1528) offer "a systematic and interdisciplinary

review of the literature on platform competition," covering 333 articles published between 1985 and 2019, which conveys the breadth and disciplinary dispersion of the topic. Cennamo (2021) proposes a platform-based perspective on competition in digital markets, shifting the analysis from the individual firm to the ecosystem in which it operates.

A first group of studies examines the operator that sells on its own marketplace, the so-called dual mode. Hagiu, Teh, and Wright (2022) describe platforms that run marketplaces for third-party products while also selling their own, and conclude that a regulatory ban on this dual mode "can hurt consumer surplus and welfare" (Hagiu; Teh; Wright, 2022, p. 297), with policies aimed specifically at product imitation and self-preferencing being preferable. Etro (2021) models product selection in marketplaces and shows that sellers' market power alters the operator's incentives between selling its own or private-label products, and that the commission model "generates a bias toward underprovision of entry" (Etro, 2021, p. 614). Li, Wang, and Song (2021) analyze third-party sellers' product entry strategy on a hybrid platform and its impact on sales, while Zheng, Pu, and Chong (2026) examine how third-party sellers respond to operator entry, distinguishing entry through reselling from entry through private labels.

A second group, particularly relevant to this review, examines whether sellers can benefit from operator entry. Deng et al. (2023) and Tang et al. (2024) use analytical models to investigate the conditions under which a platform and its third-party sellers can gain from entering each other's markets. The very framing of these studies indicates that the effect of entry on the seller is not uniform and depends on market conditions. Read alongside the product studies in Stream 6, they support the interpretation proposed in this review that the incumbent's exposure increases when the entrant's product is a close substitute for its own.

A third group deals specifically with suppliers that begin selling directly. Wei and Dong (2022, p. 986) show that "suppliers' product distribution choices are affected by platforms' decisions to introduce marketplaces," and that four distribution modes can arise in equilibrium, ranging from pure reselling to a pure marketplace, with two hybrid modes in between. Fu, Chen, and Yan (2022), cited above, demonstrate that encroachment via a platform can harm the traditional retailer. The situation faced by the women's clothing

business analyzed here is an instance of this phenomenon: the firm that had been supplying the store began listing in the same marketplace, right next to it, operating without the intermediary margin that the reseller represented (Grunwald, 2026).

Stream 2 thus makes it possible to refine the answer to Q1. The platform literature shows that the reseller's problem does not stem merely from easy price comparison but from channel architecture, which allows upstream players to enter the same product space with a structural cost advantage. The defense most consistently associated in the literature with protecting the incumbent is product differentiation, which leads to the next stream.

STREAM 3: BETWEEN BUYING, MAKING, AND COORDINATING—HYBRID GOVERNANCE AT SMALL SCALE

The third stream brings together studies on firm boundaries and on how apparel production is organized. Avdasheva and Geliskhanov (2025) revisit transaction cost economics to show that, in successful transitions, reforms evolved through adaptive governance and coordinated institutional development, whereas rushed transitions lacking governance capacity produced systemic inefficiencies. Scaled down to the level of the firm, the lesson is that changing the production arrangement requires the capacity to govern the new arrangement.

Anderson and McKenzie's (2022) experiment, conducted with small firms in Nigeria, is the most direct causal evidence in the corpus on the boundary of the small firm. The article starts from the observation that "many small firms lack the finance and marketing skills needed to grow" and that "a standard approach is to train the entrepreneur in these skills" (Anderson; McKenzie, 2022, p. 157). The authors compare this path with market-based alternatives, such as bringing in workers with functional expertise or outsourcing tasks to specialists, and find that these alternatives outperform conventional training and achieve results comparable to consulting at a lower cost. The finding shifts the focus from what the entrepreneur knows to how the firm organizes access to competencies, inside or outside its boundaries.

In the apparel sector, organization into subcontracting networks has a long history and has been studied in Brazil through the garment cluster in the Agreste region of Pernambuco. Rangel and Corteletti (2022) show that the cluster's competitiveness rests on historical dispositions, among them what they call the "imperative of independence," tied to individual accountability and "forged in the dialectic between deprivation and inventiveness" (Rangel; Corteletti, 2022, our translation). The study is a reminder that decentralized production in facções—small outsourced sewing workshops—is, in Brazil, readily available infrastructure that small brands can tap without becoming factories.

At the global level, production sourcing decisions are also being reshaped. Lu (2025) conducts a product-level analysis of whether Sub-Saharan Africa is ready to serve as an alternative to Asia for apparel sourcing by U.S. fashion companies, showing that where to produce has once again become a strategic decision rather than a given. In a case study of Shein, Uchańska-Bieniusiewicz and Obłój (2023, p. 47) conclude that this ultra-fast fashion business model "has changed the balance of power in the fashion industry" and adapts very well to new technological and social developments. The relevant point for small firms is not to imitate this model's scale but to recognize the principle it has made visible: whoever controls product development controls a significant share of power in the supply chain.

Stream 3 addresses Q2. The literature does not suggest that the small firm should vertically integrate production, which would be incompatible with its resources. Rather, it suggests that hybrid arrangements—in which the firm retains its most specific assets and contracts out standardizable operations in the market—can reduce dependence without requiring investment in manufacturing facilities. The women's apparel business is a textbook example: it came to own the specification, the pattern, and the acceptance criteria, while keeping physical execution with independent cutters and seamstresses. In the words of the case document, "it did not become a factory, and it did not need to" (Grunwald, 2026, p. 6, our translation).

STREAM 4: DYNAMIC CAPABILITIES, ABSORPTIVE CAPACITY, AND KNOWLEDGE IN SMALL FIRMS

The fourth stream deals with the capabilities that make hybrid governance viable. In a systematic review of 70 studies, Fabrizio et al. (2022) identify the "positive, direct and indirect influence of dynamic capabilities on competitive advantage" in small and medium-sized enterprises (Fabrizio et al., 2022, p. 617), with performance variables mediating the effect on innovation capability. In a review of 40 articles, Deyassa (2023) notes that most studies on dynamic capabilities and innovation in small and medium-sized enterprises in the Global North were conducted in Europe and concludes that "more research needs to be done on dynamic capabilities and innovation in SMEs of the Global South" (Deyassa, 2023, p. 7). This geographic gap reinforces the relevance of examining Brazilian cases.

Building on a systematic review, Chen et al. (2023) propose a multilevel framework for the microfoundations of dynamic capabilities, linking the individual, team, and organizational levels. In one-person or few-person firms, such as fashion microenterprises, the individual level practically merges with the organizational level, so the firm's capabilities are largely the owner's own routines and know-how. Zahoor et al. (2023) observe that "little attention has been paid to how the digital transformation of SMEs takes place" and show, with data from 158 firms, that managers' digital literacy affects transformation through the effective use of technology, moderated by attributes such as gender, education, and age.

On knowledge, Durst, Edvardsson, and Foli (2023) update an earlier review with 180 articles and organize research on knowledge management in small and medium-sized enterprises by theme, offering what they describe as the most comprehensive review of the topic to date. Using structural equation modeling, Francis and Chakravarty (2025) show that, when small firms seek consulting, knowledge acquisition influences assimilation, which in turn shapes transformation and exploitation, and that only firms with strong exploitation capability turn external advice into performance gains.

Stream 4 addresses Q3. The literature indicates that the transition is sustainable only

if the firm develops all four dimensions of absorptive capacity. In the case of the women's apparel microenterprise, the document describes an approach in which the consultant did not take over execution from the owner and included the part that is usually left out: how to talk to a cutter and a seamstress, how to present the pilot sample, how to ask for a test before committing to a production run, how to evaluate a finish, and how to reject work that falls short of the standard (Grunwald, 2026). In practical terms, this description corresponds to the knowledge transformation and exploitation stages that Francis and Chakravarty (2025) identify as decisive.

STREAM 5: EFFECTIVENESS AND PERSISTENCE OF TRAINING AND CONSULTING INTERVENTIONS

The fifth stream gathers the experimental evidence on external interventions. Reassessing the evidence on small business training, McKenzie (2021, p. 276) shows that "a meta-analysis of these estimates shows training increases profits and sales on average by 5 to 10 percent," effects consistent with what it would be optimistic to expect but too small for most experiments to detect. The author discusses five avenues for increasing the effectiveness of traditional training—incorporating gender, kaizen methods, localization and mentoring, heuristics, and psychology—and identifies delivering high-quality programs at a viable cost and at scale as the central challenge.

In an experiment with auto parts firms in Colombia, Iacovone, Maloney, and McKenzie (2022) compared individual and group consulting. Both improved management practices by about 8 to 10 percentage points relative to the control group, and the group format achieved this result at roughly one-third of the cost of the individual format, with more robust effects on employment and sales. Anderson and McKenzie (2022), for their part, show that alternatives that expand the firm's skill boundary can dominate entrepreneur training.

Two conclusions emerge for Q4. First, interventions limited to conveying generic content tend to produce modest effects. Second, applied interventions grounded in the firm's concrete problems and capable of changing practices produce more visible effects. None of

the studies in the corpus, however, specifically examines whether production capabilities persist years after a product development intervention in fashion microenterprises ends. It is here that the case of the Brazilian women's clothing business offers an observation of interest: the continuity of a product of the same construction nearly three years after the intervention ended is consistent with the hypothesis that capability, and not just advice, was transferred (Grunwald, 2026). This is, of course, a single observation without a comparison group, and it does not support causal inference.

STREAM 6: PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT, QUALITY, AND RETURNS IN APPAREL

The sixth stream brings together sector studies on the fashion product. Returns are the most frequently cited operational problem. Kaushik et al. (2022, p. 843) state that "the online apparel industry suffers from a major return problem" and, drawing on 34 factors identified in the literature and by experts, rank fit and size variation, defects, and finding a better product as the most critical. Using data from high-end fashion retail, Patel, Karlsson, and Oghazi (2025) show that the use of size recommendation tools slightly increases the likelihood of returns but raises customer value over time, concluding that managers "should weigh a small increase in returns against the greater customer value from repeat purchases" (Patel; Karlsson; Oghazi, 2025).

Sewing quality is another focus. Moin, Hossain, and Baral (2023) apply total quality management tools in the knitwear industry and identify open seams, skipped stitches, and labeling errors as the most frequent defects, accounting for 50, 29, and 7 percent of observed defects, respectively. Ghalachyan and Karpova (2021) develop an apparel product evaluation framework that systematically classifies evaluative criteria, which, as read in this review, provides a basis for translating shoppers' expectations into verifiable specifications.

Using the customer's voice in redesign is the subject of more recent studies. Tomiyama and Ando (2026) propose a framework in which online customer reviews "are treated as inputs for product redesign and company growth" and report, in the case of a shaping short, a drop in complaints that the hem rode up from 27 percent to 8 percent after the

redesign. Costa and Mourthé (2025) propose a fashion design framework for mass customization and stress "the need to value customer involvement, especially during the design process" (Costa; Mourthé, 2025, our translation). In a systematic review of 70 studies on niche strategies in fashion, Bhagya et al. (2025) point to "understanding the consumer as a central factor in the success of niche strategy" (Bhagya et al., 2025).

Stream 6 deepens the answer to Q3 by identifying the technical routines that translate capability into product. There is a strong correspondence with the women's apparel business case. The intervention started from the reasons for returns and the recurring complaints—concentrated on the difficulty of a single garment fitting different body proportions, the behavior of the built-in bra cups, and minor sewing and finishing defects—and turned each of these issues into a patternmaking decision, a component specification, or a finishing criterion, testing the result on a pilot sample before scaling up production (Grunwald, 2026). The sequence of listening, specifying, testing, and only then producing is, at an artisanal scale, the same logic that Tomiyama and Ando (2026) describe for larger firms.

STREAM 7: THE BRAZILIAN CONTEXT—WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SOCIAL MEDIA–DRIVEN SALES

The seventh stream situates the phenomenon in the Brazilian context. In a systematic review of women entrepreneurs and social media in Brazil, Silva et al. (2025, p. 76, our translation) find that "female entrepreneurship in Brazil is growing, driven by the search for autonomy, income, and personal/professional fulfillment" and that "Instagram is the main platform for promotion, while WhatsApp is crucial for closing sales." This channel mix mirrors that of the case studied, which sells through a marketplace and its own social media channel and used dated social media posts to launch the new colors (Grunwald, 2026).

Rangel and Corteletti (2022), discussed above, show how apparel production in Brazil has historically been organized into networks of small units, and Rodrigues and Martins (2022) provide Brazilian evidence on the effects of dependence in interorganizational

relationships. The scarcity of Brazilian studies in the corpus—only four out of 36—is itself a finding: small resellers who move on to coordinating their own production are a common phenomenon in Brazilian retail practice, yet they remain understudied in scholarly journals.

DISCUSSION

FROM COMPOUND VULNERABILITY TO HYBRID GOVERNANCE: AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL

The synthesis of the seven streams makes it possible to propose an integrative model explaining the shift from reselling to coordinating one's own production in fashion micro and small enterprises. The model has three linked components: the conditions of vulnerability, the governance arrangement, and the capabilities that make that arrangement effective. The relationships among them are expressed in six propositions.

The starting point is the compound vulnerability described in Stream 1. It results from the overlap of three dependencies: on the product supplier, on the platform that mediates access to customers, and on the very scarcity of resources that limits resilience (Bak et al., 2023; Cutolo; Kenney, 2021; Rodrigues; Martins, 2022). This vulnerability is amplified by channel architecture, which allows upstream players to enter the same product space (Fu; Chen; Yan, 2022; Wei; Dong, 2022).

Proposition 1: in digital channels, the vulnerability of small fashion resellers is a joint function of dependence asymmetry vis-à-vis the supplier, dependence on the platform, and the degree of substitutability between the resold product and what the supplier can offer directly; it is, therefore, structural rather than merely operational.

A direct implication of Proposition 1 is that switching suppliers does not solve the problem. If the vulnerability stems from the fact that the firm sells a product defined by third parties and available to competitors, any other supplier of finished goods reproduces the same structure. The case document puts this conclusion precisely: the problem was not whom the firm bought from; it was the fact that it bought ready-made (Grunwald, 2026).

Proposition 2: switching suppliers of finished goods while keeping the resale model

tends not to reduce structural vulnerability, since it preserves specification dependence and product substitutability.

The second component is the governance arrangement. The literature on the boundary of the small firm (Anderson; McKenzie, 2022), on transaction costs (Avdasheva; Geliskhanov, 2025), and on the organization of Brazilian apparel production (Rangel; Corteletti, 2022) converges on the viability of hybrid arrangements. In these arrangements, the firm retains its high-specificity assets—that is, the knowledge of what to produce, the pattern, the specification of materials and components, and the acceptance criteria—and contracts out low-specificity operations, such as per-piece cutting and sewing, in the market.

Proposition 3: for fashion micro and small enterprises, hybrid governance, in which the firm owns the specification and quality criteria and separately contracts for materials and operations, is the arrangement best suited to reducing dependence, because it combines control over the product with low fixed-capital requirements.

Proposition 3 has an economic implication that calls for caution. By breaking the purchase down into fabric, trims, cutting, and sewing, the firm gains visibility into each cost component and can negotiate each one, no longer paying the margin built into the finished product. At the same time, it takes on coordination costs that were previously built into the supplier's price—such as materials selection, quality control, schedule follow-up, and rework—and it buys inputs on worse terms than a higher-volume manufacturer would. The gain, therefore, is not automatic. The case document itself adopts this caveat and does not claim financial results (Grunwald, 2026). The literature reviewed offers no empirical estimates of this trade-offin fashion microenterprises, which constitutes a significant gap.

The third component is capabilities. Hybrid governance reduces vulnerability only if the firm is able to govern it. Streams 4 and 6 indicate which capabilities are needed: absorptive capacity to turn outside guidance into practice (Francis; Chakravarty, 2025); individual microfoundations, which in microenterprises reside in the owner (Chen et al., 2023; Zahoor et al., 2023); and apparel-specific technical routines, such as component specification, the pilot sample, inspection for sewing defects, and the systematic use of return reasons in redesign (Kaushik et al., 2022; Moin; Hossain; Baral, 2023; Tomiyama; Ando,

2026).

Proposition 4: the effectiveness of hybrid governance depends on building a minimum set of routines for specification, prototyping, inspection, and component-based costing; without them, direct coordination tends to raise costs and quality risks rather than reduce them.

Proposition 5: the systematic use of return reasons and customer complaints as inputs to specification is the mechanism through which coordinating one's own production translates into perceived differentiation, rather than merely a change of supplier.

Finally, Stream 5 helps clarify how these capabilities can be built through outside support. Generic interventions produce modest effects (McKenzie, 2021), whereas applied interventions grounded in concrete problems change practices more visibly (Iacovone; Maloney; McKenzie, 2022). The literature further suggests that expanding the firm's access to competencies, rather than just instructing the entrepreneur, may be more effective (Anderson; McKenzie, 2022).

Proposition 6: external interventions tend to leave behind capability, and not just advice, when they start from the product the firm already sells, keep execution in the owner's hands, and explicitly transfer the routines for working with service providers, approving pilot samples, and rejecting substandard work.

THE WOMEN'S APPAREL BUSINESS CASE IN LIGHT OF THE MODEL

The documented trajectory of this women's apparel microenterprise makes it possible to assess the plausibility of the six propositions. Regarding Proposition 1, the document records that the firm was selling a product that other retailers bought from the same source, with similar photos and descriptions, and that the supplier began listing in the same marketplace (Grunwald, 2026). All three dimensions of compound vulnerability were present. Regarding Proposition 2, the explicit decision not to switch suppliers but to change the model is consistent with the view that switching would have preserved the structure of the problem.

Regarding Proposition 3, the firm began buying the fabric, contracting cutting and

sewing separately, and keeping its own pattern, without setting up a factory. Regarding Proposition 4, the document lists eleven areas the firm came to master, including the rule of producing a pilot sample before opening a production run—described as a working rule rather than an optional step—inspection before shipping, and breaking down cost by component and by operation (Grunwald, 2026). Regarding Proposition 5, the intervention explicitly started from the reasons for returns and turned them into patternmaking, component, and finishing decisions, and the result became visible in the offering of light colors with lining, which the previous supplier did not produce.

Regarding Proposition 6, the approach described—in which the consultant did not take over execution from the owner and transferred the routines for working with the cutter and the seamstress—is consistent with the proposed mechanism. The strongest indicator, though not conclusive, is continuity: in September 2026, nearly three years after the intervention ended, the firm maintained an active listing for a product of the same construction, in different colors, with a lead time consistent with made-to-order production (Grunwald, 2026).

It is worth noting what the case does not allow us to claim. There are no data on margin, unit cost, sales volume, or return rate before and after the transition, nor is there a comparison group. The evidence of continuity rests on public listings and the owner's own statements. The case illustrates the plausibility of the mechanisms but neither measures their magnitude nor establishes causality.

TENSIONS AND DEBATES IN THE LITERATURE

Three tensions deserve attention. The first concerns the role of the platform. Part of the industrial organization literature shows that barring the operator from selling on its own marketplace can harm consumers and welfare (Hagiu; Teh; Wright, 2022) and that third-party sellers can, under certain conditions, benefit from platform entry (Deng et al., 2023; Tang et al., 2024). Another part, rooted in organization studies, emphasizes the power asymmetry intrinsic to the relationship (Cutolo; Kenney, 2021; Kenney; Bearson; Zysman, 2021). The

two readings are not incompatible: the first assesses aggregate welfare, the second the position of the small participant. For the small firm, the shared implication is that its position depends less on the channel's rules than on how differentiated its offering is.

The second tension concerns the size of intervention effects. McKenzie's (2021) meta-analysis points to modest average training effects, whereas case studies, including the one used here, report striking qualitative transformations. The difference may reflect both selection bias in the cases reported and heterogeneity across interventions, with applied, intensive interventions being more effective than generic ones. Resolving this tension requires studies that measure, with comparison groups, the effects of product development interventions in microenterprises.

The third tension concerns the use of digital tools. Patel, Karlsson, and Oghazi (2025) show that size recommendation tools can slightly increase returns while also raising customer value, which undercuts the idea that technology reduces returns on its own. For the microenterprise, this result reinforces Proposition 5: reducing fit-related returns depends more on patternmaking and size-range decisions than on interface tools.

RESEARCH AGENDA

The review points to a research agenda along five lines. First, longitudinal studies with comparison groups on the economic effects of moving from reselling to coordinating one's own production in fashion microenterprises, measuring margin, unit cost, return rate, inventory turnover, and stockouts. Second, studies of supplier encroachment from the standpoint of small resellers on platforms in emerging economies, such as those operating in Brazil, complementing the analytical literature centered on large operators. Third, studies on the persistence of capabilities after consulting interventions end, with two- to five-year follow-ups—a topic for which the corpus offers no direct evidence. Fourth, studies on the economics of facções and independent service providers from the standpoint of those who hire them at small scale, including coordination and quality costs. Fifth, studies linking social media–driven women's entrepreneurship (Silva et al., 2025) to product and governance

decisions, not just to promotion and sales.

Methodologically, the agenda would benefit from mixed-methods designs that combine marketplace transaction data, tax documents, and interviews—like those used to document the case examined here—and from field experiments comparing forms of support, such as individual consulting, group consulting, and facilitated access to specialized service providers, along the lines of the designs used by Iacovone, Maloney, and McKenzie (2022) and Anderson and McKenzie (2022).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND PUBLIC POLICY

For owners of fashion micro and small enterprises, the main implication is that dependence on a finished-goods supplier is a structural risk that worsens in digital channels, and that switching suppliers rarely solves it. The viable alternative is not to become a factory but to own what is specific—product, pattern, specification, and quality standard—and to contract out what can be standardized. This transition requires a minimum set of routines, including a pilot sample before every production run, piece-by-piece inspection, and component-based costing, as well as the systematic use of return reasons in redesign.

For consultants and support programs, the implication is that the form of the intervention matters as much as its content. Interventions that start from the existing product, keep execution in the owner's hands, and transfer the routines for working with service providers tend to leave behind capability. For policymakers, the findings suggest that support programs for micro and small apparel businesses could combine technical product guidance with mechanisms that provide access to qualified cutting, sewing, and patternmaking providers, in line with evidence that expanding access to competencies can outperform training the entrepreneur in isolation (Anderson; McKenzie, 2022).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Through a systematic review of 36 studies published between 2021 and 2026, this

article examined the mechanisms, conditions, and limits of the shift by fashion micro and small enterprises from reselling finished goods to specifying and coordinating their own production in environments mediated by digital platforms. In response to Q1, the review shows that the small reseller's vulnerability is compound and structural, resulting from the overlap of supplier dependence, platform dependence, and the low resilience typical of resource-constrained firms, and aggravated by the supplier's ability to sell directly in the same channel. In response to Q2, the literature points to hybrid governance as the arrangement best suited to the scale of these firms. In response to Q3, the review finds that the effectiveness of this arrangement depends on absorptive capacity and on specific routines for specification, prototyping, inspection, and costing. In response to Q4, the experimental evidence indicates that applied interventions grounded in concrete problems produce more visible effects than generic training, although the long-term persistence of production capabilities remains understudied.

The integrative model and its six propositions offer a coherent explanation that none of the streams provided on its own. The vignette of the women's clothing business—whose trajectory runs from the purchase of 37 ready-made jumpsuits in April 2023 to the continued sale of a product made to its own specifications in September 2026—shows that the proposed mechanisms are observable in a real, documented Brazilian microenterprise.

The study has limitations that should be taken into account. First, the search was conducted in open metadata sources and journal portals rather than in subscription databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, which may have left out relevant studies and prevented the presentation of a complete numerical selection flow diagram. Second, the requirement of full verification against the primary source, adopted to ensure the accuracy of references and quotations, deliberately reduced the size of the corpus. Third, configurative synthesis involves the author's interpretive judgment in constructing the streams and propositions. Fourth, the empirical vignette is a single case, documented by the author herself, who carried out the intervention it describes, with no financial data and no comparison group, and is used to illustrate rather than test the propositions. Future research can replicate the search in subscription databases, empirically test the propositions with samples of microenterprises, and



track the persistence of the capabilities built over time.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author carried out, without compensation, the technical intervention described in the women's apparel business case and is also the author of the document that records it (Grunwald, 2026). To reduce the bias arising from this dual role, the case was used only as an illustrative vignette, no financial results were claimed, and the evidence cited is limited to dated documentary records—such as the invoice, brand posts, and the active listing—and to the owner's statements, which are identified as such.

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