

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF LOCAL FASHION MICRO AND SMALL ENTERPRISES (MSES) IN VIETNAM'S CREATIVE ECONOMY

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGE

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Abstract

This study examines the opportunities and challenges that local fashion Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs) face as they contribute to Vietnam's creative economy. A key strength of these enterprises is their commitment to sustainability, reflected in their localised production processes and strong community engagement. This approach sets them apart from international competitors and provides a model for how fashion can foster a broader, more holistic notion of prosperity, one that goes beyond economic growth to encompass social and environmental well-being. The research is grounded in semi-structured interviews with local designers and an observational analysis of these MSEs' digital presence. Through this exploration, the paper contributes to the discourse on "Prosperity Fashion", demonstrating how localised, sustainable fashion practices can support a more inclusive and culturally rich economy.

Keywords: *Creative Economy, MSEs, Sustainable Fashion, Vietnam, Local Design*

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam's creative economy is increasingly contributing to the nation's economic growth, with the fashion sector playing a pivotal role in this transformation (Vietnam News, 2024). As the demand for unique, culturally resonant fashion grows, local Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs) in the industry have found innovative ways to distinguish themselves. These MSEs have leveraged the rise of digital platforms, using the internet and social media to establish a niche through unique designs that reflect Vietnamese cultural nuances and consumer preferences. This approach allows them to compete effectively with international fast fashion brands, which typically dominate the market through extensive product ranges and

substantial marketing budgets.

Despite these successes, local fashion MSEs face a complex set of challenges. As they strive to balance growth with sustainable practices, these enterprises encounter obstacles related to limited resources, scalability, and competition with larger brands. However, their commitment to sustainability, seen in their localised production processes and deep-rooted community engagement, demonstrates a unique model of prosperity fashion. This model extends beyond economic metrics to encompass social and environmental well-being, suggesting a broader, more holistic understanding of prosperity. This research examines the specific strengths and limitations of local fashion MSEs, with a focus on how they maintain cultural relevance while

adopting practices that align with global environmental standards. By analysing these enterprises through semi-structured interviews with local designers and an observational study of their digital presence, this study sheds light on how Vietnam's fashion MSEs are navigating the evolving fashion landscape. The findings will highlight the role of these enterprises in contributing to Vietnam's creative economy and their potential as agents of sustainable, culturally rich fashion practices in the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of a creative economy is closely linked to the creative industry, which was first introduced in Australia's 'Creative Nation' report in 1994 and gained popularity with the establishment of the Creative Industries Task Force in the UK in 1997 (Arshad & Irijanto, 2023). This framework suggests that creative industry stems from the creativity, skills and talents of individuals, generating wealth and employment through intellectual and cultural assets. These qualities are often concentrated within MSEs, defined by the European Commission and the Office of National Statistics as enterprises with 0-9 employees (micro) and up to 49 employees (small) (Williams et al., 2021). A recent guide on sustainable prosperity proposes that UK fashion MSEs measure success in broader terms than financial profit alone, emphasising culture, society, and the environment as sources of wealth. In Vietnam, MSEs are often grouped within the broader SME category (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises), comprising approximately 80% of the textile and apparel industry and employing over three million people (VNEconomy, 2023).

In August 2024, Vietnamese Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính signed Act No. 30/CT-TT, prioritising investments in technology and human resources for the cultural industries, with a focus on handicrafts, fashion and design (VOV, 2024). Historically, Vietnam's cultural industry served as a vehicle for national diplomatic initiatives. However, in the last decade, the government has opened this sector to private enterprises and individual creators (Vietnamese Sport & Culture News, 2023). Interestingly, the term '*Cultural* (văn hóa) Industry' is more commonly used in Vietnamese media compared to '*Creative* (sáng tạo) Industry', even though *Creative Economy* (kinh tế sáng tạo) has gained traction. This distinction highlights potential nuances in Vietnam's cultural and economic policies, which

will be further discussed in the "Discussion & Implication" section.

Over the past decade, private entities in Vietnam have launched numerous fashion and design initiatives to bolster the local creative industry. For example, *Vietnam International Fashion Week* (VIFW), produced by Multimedia JSC and sponsored by Aquafina, celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2024 (VietnamPlus, 2024). Although VIFW is recognised as one of Asia's leading fashion events, it lacks the strategic support that government-backed events receive in other countries. For instance, *Seoul Fashion Week* (founded in 2000) is hosted by Seoul government and includes *Seoul Collection*, *Generation Next*, and the *Seoul Fashion Fair*, initiatives designed to connect local brands to the global market (Seoul Fashion Week, n.d.). Similarly, *Shanghai Fashion Week*, part of the Shanghai International Fashion Culture Festival since 2001, benefits from support by the Ministry of Commerce (DeMode Magazine, 2020). While VIFW serves as an important branding opportunity for local MSEs, it remains largely commercial without substantial government support. Many Vietnamese designers aspire to participate in the "big four" global fashion weeks, even though this requires significant investment. *Vietnam Design Week* (VDW) is another private sector initiative, intended to showcase exceptional Vietnamese products and designers. Now in its fourth year, VDW is organized by the Vietnam Design Group and various cultural organizations (Hanoi Grapevine, 2023). The event fosters a vision for the next generation of Vietnamese designers to create a future reflective of their aspirations (Channel News Asia, 2022). However, VDW was postponed in 2024 due to economic challenges and limited brand sponsorship.

Hartono & Prihawantoro (2018a) emphasize that the creative industry contributes to value-added employment, and an improved quality of life. Over the past decade, Vietnamese MSEs have contributed to these outcomes, particularly through unique designs and services that enable them to compete with fast fashion. However, despite these contributions, there is limited academic and media coverage on the specific roles of local MSEs in job creation and quality-of-life improvements within the creative economy.

This study addresses this gap by examining how sustainable fashion MSEs contribute to Vietnam's creative economy. The principal research

questions guiding this study are:

1. What opportunities can local sustainable fashion MSEs create in contributing to Vietnam's creative economy?
2. What challenges do they face?

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a dual-method approach, combining semi-structured interviews and observational analysis to investigate the practices of local fashion MSEs in Vietnam. Semi-structured interviews (n=5) were conducted with designers and founders based in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, who are recognised for their sustainable practices and their ability to integrate cultural elements into their designs (Lam & Watkins, 2022). These interviews provided in-depth insights into how these MSEs connect with their target audiences and navigate the competitive market through unique, culturally resonant products.

In addition to the interviews, the study includes an observational analysis of the digital presence of these enterprises. This analysis examines how MSEs leverage social media platforms to promote their collections and engage with consumers, offering a broader view of their digital marketing strategies and brand positioning within the globalised fashion landscape (McRobbie, 2016).

To assess and measure the success of these sustainable practices, the UK Sustainable Prosperity Guide is utilised as a benchmark, enabling a structured evaluation of the contributions of these MSEs to the concept of "Prosperity Fashion" (Williams et al., 2021). This methodology allows for an understanding of the strategies that local fashion MSEs employ to thrive sustainably within the creative economy.

RESULTS

This section presents detailed case studies of five Vietnamese fashion MSEs exemplifying sustainable practices and cultural integration. Each case study provides an in-depth look at the founder's background, design approach, sustainability practices, and unique challenges. By highlighting these stories, this research illustrates how MSEs contribute to Vietnam's creative economy and align with the concept of "Prosperity Fashion".

CASE STUDIES

LINH PHAM

Background

Linh Pham (Fig. 01), a graphic design graduate from Hue University of Arts, followed her passion for painting and natural-dyed fabrics to Sapa. There, she became captivated by the traditional fabrics of local ethnic groups and co-founded *Linht Handicraft* (2016), a brand specialising in women's clothing and accessories that draw on natural dyes and traditional weaving.

Sustainability Practices

Linh sources natural-dyed and woven fabrics directly from ethnic communities, ensuring each piece reflects traditional artistry. While she handles design, her partner oversees merchandising in their Sapa store and manages online sales, largely through Facebook. For social media posts, they use photos of real customers in their products, bypassing influencers to maintain authenticity within budget constraints.

Community Impact

Linht Handicraft employs three to four full-time young ethnic women, along with a dozen freelancers, many of whom are family members or senior artisans from local ethnic groups. These artisans have grown up with weaving and dyeing traditions but prioritise their households and other commitments. Their work relationship is based on mutual respect and a sense of 'sisterhood,' with Linh emphasising a flexible, enjoyable environment. This collaboration allows Linh to create products that fuse traditional craft with contemporary appeal, helping keep these cultural practices alive.

Challenges

Financial limitations prevent Linh from expanding the brand beyond its current scope, and although government initiatives support the creative economy, she remains cautious about receiving direct assistance. For now, Linh's goal of scaling up to Hanoi or HCMC remains a distant dream due to limited resources.



Fig. 01

Key Insights:

- Authentic customer engagement and community-centered branding.
- Strong preservation of local cultural practices through artisanal collaboration.
- Financial constraints limit potential for expansion.

THAO VU

Background

Thao Vu (Fig. 02) founded Kilomet109 with a philosophy of being “sustainable from the ground up.” Her brand is dedicated to preserving ethnic textile craftsmanship by integrating traditional techniques into contemporary designs. For Thao, the process of making is about more than just producing durable, eco-friendly fabrics, it’s about fostering deep connections between people and nature.

Sustainability Practices

Thao collaborates closely with artisans during the weaving and dyeing stages to ensure her designs can be realistically executed while maintaining their cultural authenticity. This co-design process,

built on mutual respect and trust, allows both parties to share creative input. Known in Vietnamese as “quan hệ song phương” (mutual relationship), this partnership ensures that artisans are active contributors rather than passive labourers.

Building trust with artisans is a gradual process. Thao invests time in understanding their personal strengths and weaknesses, which helps establish a shared creative language. She also takes on financial risks to encourage artisans to experiment with new techniques. Once financial security is established, artisans feel more confident in innovating within their traditional craft.

Community Impact

Over the past decade, Thao has partnered with seven artisan communities across remote regions of Vietnam, including the Northwest, South-Central Highlands, and the Mekong Delta. These collaborations have widened her material palette, enabling her to develop unique designs while fostering sustainable economic opportunities for rural communities.

Thao actively works to connect these artisan communities, encouraging knowledge exchange to



Fig. 02

enhance their techniques. This networking not only preserves traditional handicrafts but also ensures their evolution and relevance in modern contexts. By creating locally sourced and produced textiles, Kilomet109 contributes to strong community development rooted in sustainable practices.

Challenges

Scaling Kilomet109 requires significant financial and personal investment. Establishing relationships with new artisan communities takes time and expanding production capacity to accommodate larger orders is resource-intensive. However, once artisans recognize the added value Thao brings, transforming their textiles from souvenir items into high-end fashion, they often approach her with innovative ideas for natural dyeing and weaving.

Thao's commitment to sustainability and cultural preservation has earned her media recognition and support from cultural venues, which frequently sponsor her exhibitions and installations. However, balancing these opportunities with the operational demands of a growing business remains a constant challenge.

Key Insights:

- Strong mutual partnerships with artisans foster trust and innovation.
- Extensive investment in community development and knowledge sharing preserves and modernizes traditional crafts.
- Media and cultural support enhance brand visibility, but scaling sustainably requires significant resources.

TOM TRANDT

Background

Tom Trandt (Fig. 03), a Parsons School of Design graduate, returned to Vietnam to launch Moi Dien, a brand renowned for its “zero waste” initiative and unique designs. His work resonates with individuals seeking creative, affordable fashion infused with local cultural elements. Moi Dien's designs stand out for their bold aesthetics and sustainable ethos, offering a fresh take on contemporary Vietnamese fashion.

Business Model and Adaptation Post-COVID

In the wake of COVID-19, Tom restructured Moi Dien's operations, transitioning from a “small” to a “micro-small” business model. This shift involved reducing the human resource footprint and integrating advanced technologies such as AI and



Fig. 03

ChatGPT to streamline operations. Outsourcing non-core activities has also positioned the brand for future scalability.

Production Model

Tom's production process is split among three distinct sources, each catering to different design complexities:

- **Retired Seamstresses (Aged 50-60):** This group specializes in intricate, technically challenging designs. Work with them operates on a flexible, non-deadline basis, as their involvement is driven by nostalgia rather than necessity. The relationship is collaborative (đồng lòng), with seamstresses often introducing skilled friends or suggesting practical design modifications.
- **Micro-Factories (3-5 Workers):** These factories handle less detailed designs.
- **Small-Medium Factories:** These facilities manage simpler designs requiring basic techniques.

While the latter two relationships are transactional (“order” versus “delivery”), the retired seamstresses provide a more dynamic and culturally rooted partnership.

Challenges

Tom faces significant regulatory hurdles, particularly regarding Vietnam's unclear tax policies for MSEs. The lack of VAT exemptions for retired workers complicates financial management, potentially forcing the brand to simplify its designs to cut costs. This simplification risks undermining Moi Dien's unique value proposition, which distinguishes it from international fast fashion competitors.

Tom also envisions the establishment of a government-supported physical marketplace for MSEs, similar to the organized food markets in Vietnam. Such a platform would provide much-needed visibility and engagement opportunities for local fashion brands, further strengthening their competitive edge.

Key Insights:

- A flexible, diversified production model allows for high-quality, zero-waste designs.
- Collaborative relationships with retired artisans preserve cultural craftsmanship.
- Regulatory challenges and limited public marketplaces restrict Moi Dien's scalability and market visibility.

KHA NGO

Background

Kha Ngo (Fig. 04), a fashion design graduate from the University of Architecture in Ho Chi Minh City, combines his creative background with technical expertise gained as a 3D technician in the fashion industry. He founded KHAAR, a brand that stands for both "Augmented Reality" and "And Recycling," reflecting its dual focus on technology and sustainability. Kha's innovative approach leverages digital tools to redefine sustainable fashion.

Digital Innovation and Zero-Waste Practices

KHAAR integrates advanced technology into every stage of its production process. Using AI, Kha optimizes the use of leftover fabrics by generating various pattern combinations, creating unique designs that align with zero-waste principles. This digitalization not only enhances the efficiency of design and sample production but also supports scalability. Kha's approach exemplifies how technology can be harnessed to minimize waste and maximize creative output.



Fig. 04

Market Engagement and Brand Exposure

To build brand recognition, Kha actively participates in prestigious fashion events, such as Vietnam Design Week in 2021, Elle Vietnam Fashion Shows in 2023, and Vogue Singapore in 2024. These platforms have significantly increased KHAAR's visibility, positioning it as a leading example of sustainable innovation in both local and international markets.

Scalability and Collaborative Potential

Kha's current MSE model operates with fewer than 10 employees. However, the technology-driven processes he has developed are scalable and could be adopted by other brands seeking to implement similar zero-waste practices. By offering these processes as a service, Kha envisions contributing to broader industry sustainability while expanding KHAAR's impact.

Challenges and Future Aspirations

Kha's primary challenge lies in the lack of government-supported marketplaces for sustainable brands. He hopes for initiatives similar to Singapore's Orchard Road, where young,

eco-conscious brands are given prime space to showcase their products. Such support would provide crucial visibility and engagement opportunities, helping KHAAR and other brands thrive in a competitive market.

Key Insights:

- AI-driven processes optimize fabric use and enhance scalability.
- Participation in high-profile fashion events boosts brand visibility.
- Lack of local marketplaces limits public access and growth opportunities.

ANH TRAN

Background

Anh Tran (Fig. 05), a graphic design graduate from the University of Architecture in Ho Chi Minh City, furthered her education with a master's degree in Edinburgh and gained ten years of professional experience in London. Seeking a more meaningful and unpredictable creative pursuit, she returned to Vietnam to launch *Dong Dong*. The brand name reflects Southern slang for “going around to relax” and also symbolizes the “recycling circle,” aligning with its focus on sustainability.



Fig. 05

Design Philosophy and Sustainability Practices

Dong Dong specializes in crafting unique design bags made from recycled materials, often incorporating prints inspired by Vietnamese culture. Anh thrives on the creative challenge of working with a limited range of colours and materials, which results in distinctive products. Her designs appeal to a diverse customer base, with a roughly equal split between locals and tourists, many of whom purchase the bags as gifts for friends and family abroad.

Dong Dong sources approximately 20% of its materials from event companies that produce banners, standees, and backdrops. These companies, recognizing the benefits of recycling, often deliver the used materials to *Dong Dong*'s warehouse voluntarily and without seeking recognition. The remaining 80% comes from supermarkets and seafood farming companies in the Mekong Delta. However, these suppliers provide no logistical or cleaning support, which adds to the brand's internal workload.

Operational Challenges

With a team of 12 people, cleaning and processing recycled materials is one of the most labour-intensive aspects of *Dong Dong*'s operations. The physically demanding nature of this task is compounded by several external challenges:

- **Limited Material Sources:** A lack of widespread awareness and education about sustainability restricts the supply of recyclable materials.
- **Unrealistic Consumer Expectations:** Some customers undervalue the creative process behind recycled products, assuming lower prices due to the “free” nature of the materials.
- **Short-Notice Corporate Orders:** Corporations often place large orders on tight deadlines for their “sustainable” PR campaigns, making it difficult for *Dong Dong* to plan production effectively.

Future Aspirations and Policy Needs

Anh's long-term goal is to scale her business while maintaining its core values and brand identity. However, she faces regulatory obstacles, particularly regarding tax policies. Current regulations do not provide tax reductions for individual suppliers who cannot issue VAT invoices, which complicates financial planning. Anh is currently paying fines as a workaround but hopes for government reforms to

better support sustainable businesses like hers.

Key Insights:

- Unique designs leveraging recycled materials appeal to both local and international markets.
- Lack of public education on sustainability affects material sourcing and consumer perceptions.
- Regulatory and logistical challenges hinder growth, highlighting the need for policy changes.

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Williams et al., 2021 propose that sustainable prosperity encompasses long-term quality of life for both people and nature. While economic prosperity is essential, it should not be the sole measure of well-being. True prosperity includes sufficient time, energy and opportunities for personal development and participation in culture and community activities, fostering meaning, satisfaction and fulfillment in life. Aligning with these principles, the interviewed fashion founders do not solely measure success by profit. For them, the creative process and continuous learning are the key drivers of their work.

CONTRIBUTION TO A SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

The interviewed MSEs localise their production by involving women, including ethnic groups and senior seamstresses, aiming to preserve traditional handicrafts for future generations. This approach contributes to an inclusive economy, empowering women and youth. These enterprises also impact the raw material industry, particularly in textile weaving and natural dying, as these are integral to creative production (Hartono & Prihawantoro, 2018b).

Through these practices, young designers embrace Vietnam's cultural heritage, modernising ancient techniques while valuing the ecological significance of fabric production. This not only sustains traditional craftsmanship but also fosters environmental stewardship.

THE CIRCLE OF PROSPERITY FASHION

The concept of Prosperity Fashion represents a sustainable connection among four key elements: economy, culture, environment, and society (see chart below). These elements are intricately linked, creating a holistic framework that drives sustainable growth.

From an economic perspective, the interviewed MSEs sustain their business by creating jobs for local women and youth, which in turn supports the local economy. In terms of culture, they enhance the value of traditional textiles by embedding creative and cultural significance into their designs. This not only elevates the artisans' work but also preserves and passes down these cultural practices to future generations. Environmentally, young designers leverage technology to optimise zero-waste practices, maximising the utility of leftover fabric while promoting eco-friendly products. This commitment to environmental stewardship ensures that resources are used efficiently and sustainably. Finally, in the societal domain, practical education initiatives foster a deeper appreciation for sustainability among consumers and future designers. This education effort creates a ripple effect, inspiring others to adopt sustainable practices and reinforcing the interconnected prosperity of the system.

This dynamic and interconnected framework benefits all stakeholders. As businesses thrive, cultural heritage is preserved, environmental impact is minimised, and society becomes more sustainability conscious. In this way, the 'circle of prosperity fashion' continues to grow, fostering sustainable development across multiple domains (Fig. 06).

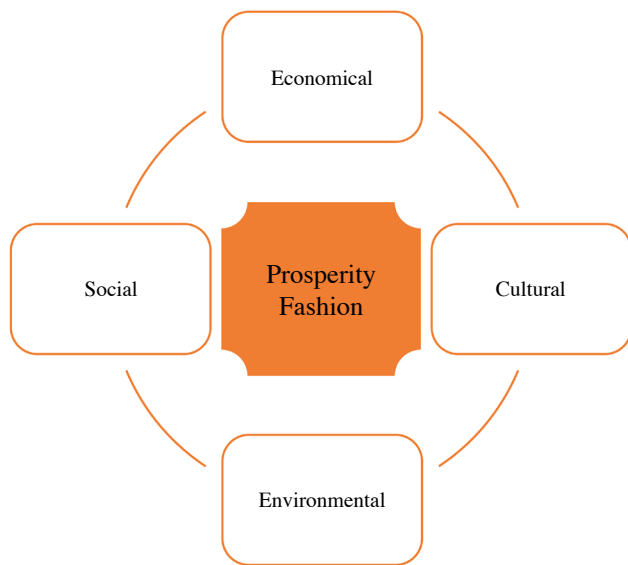


Fig. 06

TERMINOLOGIES IN CREATIVE INDUSTRY AND CO-DESIGN

The term co-design, sustainability, creative industry, and creative economy are rooted in Western academic discourse. Since the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, it is crucial to explore how these concepts are understood and applied in local design practices.

During a workshop on proposed government policies to support cultural and creative enterprises, the terms “cultural” (văn hóa) and “creative” (sáng tạo) were used interchangeably. Specifically, “cultural industry” and “creative industry” appeared in discussions during Vietnam Design Week 2023. Local media frequently used “Cultural (văn hóa) industry” in their coverage of the Prime Minister’s announcement, whereas “Creative (sáng tạo) industry” is more commonly referenced in the literature. However, over the past five years “creative economy” (kinh tế sáng tạo) has consistently been used, rather than cultural economy (kinh tế văn hóa). This linguistic inconsistency could lead to confusion, much like the evolving ways sustainable fashion has been communicated in Vietnamese media over the past decade.

CO-DESIGN AS A CORE PRACTICE

According to the interviewed MSE founders, co-design (*hợp tác or đồng thiết kế*) has been an inherent aspect of their working processes since their businesses began. While not always explicitly labelled as co-design in daily conversation, it is deeply embedded in their collaborative practices. This approach emphasises mutual support and shared goals, reflected in expressions such as “sisterhood” (*chị em giúp nhau*), “co-support” (*đồng lòng*), and “win-win relationships” (*quan hệ song phương*).

Co-design fosters personal relationships and collective creativity, ensuring a mutually beneficial process for all stakeholders. It not only enhances the quality and uniqueness of the products but also strengthens the social fabric of the communities involved.

CONCLUSION

This research contributes to the global discourse on redefining prosperity in fashion by advocating for models that prioritise environmental stewardship, cultural integrity, and community well-being over traditional profit-driven approaches. By aligning with these broader goals, Vietnam’s fashion MSEs have the potential to enhance their domestic impact and influence global fashion practices, setting a valuable precedent for other emerging markets.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

The Vietnamese government’s recent support for the creative industry presents a unique opportunity for MSEs. This study provides useful insights for policymakers on how effectively support sustainable fashion enterprises while establishing a long-term national framework for the fashion industry. Drawing inspiration from the successes of Korea and China, Vietnam could foster its creative economy through strategic interventions.

One critical area is education. Sustainability principles should be introduced at the high-school level and incorporated as core courses in textile, design, and fashion-related programs across colleges and universities. This would help raise awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and cultivate a new generation of sustainability-minded professionals.

Additionally, providing public spaces to showcase sustainable fashion, particularly from MSEs, could serve as a powerful government endorsement and an educational tool for the public.

Finally, simplifying and clarifying tax procedures would offer relief to MSEs in the creative industry, enabling them to spend less time on administrative tasks and more on innovation, ultimately adding greater value to their designs.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is limited by its relatively small sample size, focusing on a few MSEs within the sustainable fashion sector in Vietnam. Future research should aim to include a larger and more geographically diverse group of MSEs, exploring various sustainable business models. This broader scope would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how MSEs can contribute to both the local and regional creative economies.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Linht Handicraft (2024). Linh Pham (white top) and ethnic artisans in Sapa, Vietnam. <https://www.facebook.com/linht.handicraft>

[Fig. 02] KILOMET109 (2024). Thao Vu (second from the left) and the ethnic artisans in Northern Vietnam. <https://www.facebook.com/kilomet109>

[Fig. 03] MOI DIEN (2024). Tom Trandt models his product. <https://www.facebook.com/moidienstudio>

[Fig. 04] KHAAR (2024). Kha Ngo and his work at SUSTASIA FASHION PRIZE in Shanghai 2025. <https://www.facebook.com/khaar.vietnam>

[Fig. 05] Dong Dong (2024). Anh Tran models her product. <https://www.facebook.com/dongdongsg>

[Fig. 06] Circle of prosperity fashion of interviewed local MSEs. Created by authors.

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