When “Recycled” Isn’t Enough:

How RCS Certification Lets Brands Do Too Little, Too Loudly

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When "Recycled" Isn't Enough: How RCS Certification Lets Brands Do Too Little, Too Loudly

The Recycled Claim Standard (RCS) sounds reassuring. It's an international certification that "verifies recycled content" and "ensures traceability through the supply chain." In theory, that should mean progress. In practice, it often means **5% recycled content and 100% business as usual**.

RCS was built for a narrow job: to confirm that some recycled material is present in a product and that this material can be traced from the recycler to the final business-to-business sale. It applies to any product with at least 5% recycled content and accepts both pre-consumer and post-consumer materials. That's it. It does not measure pollution. It does not limit overproduction. It does not protect workers. It does not reduce fossil-fuel dependency.

Yet on the shop floor and in online stores, the RCS logo is rarely read as a technical chain-of-custody tool. It is read as a **promise**: this product is better for the planet.

That promise is not earned.

With a threshold as low as 5%, a brand can sell leggings, T-shirts, or home textiles that are overwhelmingly made from virgin petrochemical fibres and still market them as "RCS certified." The certification becomes a loud label for a very small change. It invites consumers to feel they are making a responsible choice while the underlying system—overproduction, fossil-fuel reliance, toxic chemistry—remains untouched.

RCS does nothing to slow the volume of clothes and goods being pushed into the world. It does nothing to address wastewater, microfibre pollution, or the communities living next to factories and landfills. It does nothing to guarantee living wages or safe working conditions. It simply tracks recycled content through a supply chain and stamps it as verified.

Even when managed by not-for-profit organisations, certification schemes like RCS can generate significant revenue through audits, fees, and logo licensing. That money flows whether or not the standard actually reduces harm. In this way, certification risks becoming another layer of **administrative comfort** for industry—paperwork that looks like progress while the planet absorbs the cost.

Recycled content matters. But **recycled content without limits on production, without fossil-fuel phase-out, without justice, is not a solution**. It is a partial tool being used as a total answer.

If we want standards that are truly fit for purpose in a climate emergency, they must:

- Set **meaningful minimums**, not token thresholds
- Address **overproduction**, not just material inputs
- Confront **pollution and toxicity**, not ignore them
- Protect **workers and communities**, not treat them as externalities
- Reduce **fossil-fuel dependency**, not rebrand it as "recycled"

Until then, RCS is best understood not as a sustainability guarantee, but as a narrow accounting mechanism—useful for tracking numbers, dangerous when mistaken for transformation.

What RCS Actually Guarantees vs. What People Assume It Guarantees

What RCS *Actually* Guarantees

- The product contains **at least 5% recycled material**
- The recycled content is **traceable** through the supply chain
- Both **pre-consumer and post-consumer** recycled inputs are allowed
- Verification ends at the **final business-to-business transaction**
- No assessment of **environmental impact**, **labour conditions**, or **chemical use**
- No limits on **overproduction**, **pollution**, or **fossil-fuel dependency**

What People *Assume* It Guarantees

- High levels of recycled content (e.g., 50–100%)
- Meaningful reductions in **carbon emissions**, **waste**, or **toxicity**
- Safer, cleaner, or more responsible manufacturing
- Lower reliance on virgin petrochemical fibres
- Protection for workers and surrounding communities
- A product that is **better for the planet**, not just technically traceable

Why 5% Is Not Enough

1. It Creates the Illusion of Impact

A product with **just 5% recycled content** can carry the same RCS logo as one with 90%.
The certification looks meaningful, but the environmental benefit is marginal.

2. It Masks Virgin Fossil-Fuel Dependency

A garment can be **95% virgin polyester**—a petrochemical fibre—and still be marketed as "RCS certified."
The logo distracts from the continued extraction beneath it.

3. It Enables Green Marketing Without Real Change

Brands can scale up "recycled" collections without reducing:

- production volumes
- emissions
- chemical pollution
- microfibre shedding

The certification becomes a marketing asset, not a climate tool.

4. It Does Nothing to Slow Overproduction

RCS verifies content, not quantity.
A brand can produce **millions of low-quality items** with minimal recycled input and still claim progress.

5. It Fails to Address Pollution or Toxicity

RCS does not regulate:

- wastewater
- dyes and chemicals
- microplastics
- factory emissions

A certified product can still be highly polluting.

6. It Misleads Consumers About What "Certified" Means

Most people assume certification equals environmental responsibility.
With a 5% threshold, that assumption is structurally false.

What a Meaningful Recycled Content Standard Would Require

1. A High Minimum Threshold

A credible standard would require **at least 50–70% recycled content**, not 5%.
Low thresholds dilute impact and mislead consumers about the true material composition.

2. Full Transparency to the Consumer

Clear, mandatory disclosure on every product:

- exact % recycled content
- whether it is pre- or post-consumer
- source of recycled material
- country of recycling and production

No logos without numbers.

3. Limits on Virgin Material Use

A meaningful standard would cap the amount of **virgin petrochemical fibre** allowed in certified products.
Recycled content should not be a licence to continue extracting fossil fuels.

4. Controls on Overproduction

Certification must address **volume**, not just material inputs.
A brand cannot claim sustainability while flooding the market with disposable goods.

5. Pollution and Chemical Safeguards

A real standard would regulate:

- dyes and chemical inputs
- wastewater treatment
- microfibre shedding
- air and soil pollution

Recycled content is irrelevant if production remains toxic.

6. Worker and Community Protections

Environmental claims are incomplete without:

- living wages
- safe working conditions
- protections for communities near factories and landfills

A standard that ignores people cannot claim sustainability.

7. Fossil-Fuel Phase-Out Pathways

Recycled polyester cannot be treated as a long-term solution.
A meaningful standard would require brands to reduce reliance on petrochemical fibres over time.

8. Independent, Publicly Accessible Audits

Certification must be transparent, with audit summaries available to the public.
Accountability cannot rely on private paperwork.

How Certification Became a Business Model

1. Growth Depends on More Certificates, Not Less Production

Certification bodies earn revenue through audits, fees, and logo licensing.
This creates a structural incentive to **expand certification**, not to reduce the volume of goods being produced.
The system grows by certifying *more*, not by producing *less*.

2. Brands Buy Legitimacy, Not Transformation

For many companies, certification functions as a **shortcut to credibility**.
Instead of redesigning supply chains, reducing fossil-fuel inputs, or slowing production, they purchase a certificate that signals responsibility.
The certificate becomes a marketing asset rather than a climate intervention.

3. Audits Become a Repeatable Revenue Stream

Every certified facility must be audited regularly.
This turns compliance into a **subscription model**, where the goal is to maintain the flow of audits rather than to drive systemic change.

4. Standards Stay Narrow to Maximise Adoption

Broad, demanding standards deter participation.
Narrow, low-bar standards attract more brands — and therefore more revenue.
This is why many certifications avoid requirements on:

- overproduction
- fossil-fuel phase-out
- labour protections
- pollution controls
- durability or reparability

The narrower the scope, the easier it is to scale.

5. "Not-for-Profit" Does Not Mean "For the Planet"

Even when certification bodies are legally not-for-profit, the ecosystem around them — auditors, consultants, training providers, logo licensing — can generate **significant income**.
Financial sustainability of the certification system can overshadow environmental sustainability of the industry.

6. Paperwork Replaces Accountability

Certification often produces **documents, not change**.
Brands accumulate certificates that look like progress while the underlying system — overproduction, petrochemical dependency, pollution — remains intact.

7. The Result: Administrative Comfort, Environmental Stagnation

Certification reassures brands, retailers, and consumers that something is being done. But without structural requirements, it becomes a comfort mechanism that stabilises the status quo rather than challenging it.

What Consumers Deserve to Know

1. The Exact Percentage of Recycled Content

Not a logo. Not a vague claim.
Consumers deserve a clear number: **“This product contains X% recycled material.”**
Anything less is obfuscation.

2. Whether the Material Is Pre- or Post-Consumer

These two categories have radically different environmental implications.
Consumers deserve to know if the recycled content comes from **industrial offcuts** or **actual discarded products**.

3. The Origin of the Recycled Material

Where was it collected?
Where was it processed?
Where was it spun, woven, dyed, and sewn?
Consumers deserve **geographic transparency**, not generic sustainability language.

4. The Environmental Impact of Production

Recycled content does not guarantee:

- lower emissions
- safer chemistry
- reduced water use
- less microplastic shedding
- responsible waste management

Consumers deserve to know the **real footprint**, not the implied one.

5. The Product’s Durability and End-of-Life Pathway

A recycled product that falls apart quickly is not sustainable.
Consumers deserve information about:

- expected lifespan
- repairability
- recyclability
- take-back options

Circularity is not a logo; it’s a system.

6. Whether Workers Were Paid and Treated Fairly

Environmental claims are incomplete without human rights.
Consumers deserve to know whether the people who made the product worked in:

- safe conditions
- with fair wages
- without forced overtime
- without exposure to toxic chemicals

A product cannot be “responsible” if the people behind it are not protected.

7. Whether the Brand Is Reducing Production Volumes

Recycled content means little if the brand is still overproducing.
Consumers deserve to know whether the company is:

- slowing production
- reducing waste
- eliminating deadstock
- designing for longevity

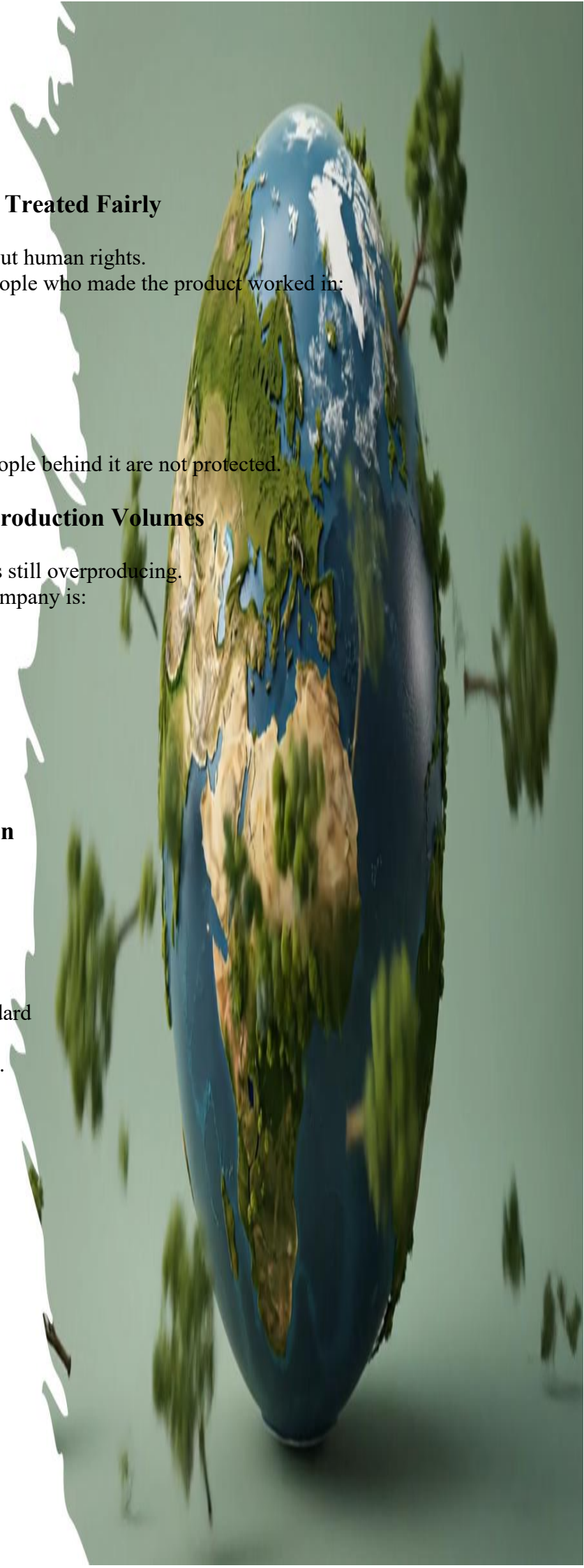
Volume is the real climate variable.

8. Who Profits From the Certification

Consumers deserve transparency about:

- certification fees
- logo licensing
- audit costs
- financial incentives behind the standard

Not-for-profit does not mean impact-driven.



The RCS logo signals far more than it certifies, it is a visual shortcut to credibility, allowing minimal recycled input to masquerade as meaningful sustainability.

Hansae's Green Mirage

How a Global Apparel Giant Masks Extraction with Symbolic Compliance

In the glossy pages of Hansae Co., Ltd.'s sustainability report, tree planting and museum sponsorships paint a picture of corporate responsibility. But behind the green veneer lies a global architecture of extraction — one that spans continents, exploits asymmetrical labour markets, and intensifies environmental harm.

A Global Footprint Built on Cheap Labour

Hansae's operational map reads like a case study in jurisdictional arbitrage. Design and governance are anchored in New York, while production sprawls across Guatemala, Nicaragua, Haiti, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Indonesia. These are not incidental choices — they are strategic placements in regions where wages are low, regulations are weak, and enforcement is sporadic.

Vietnam alone hosts 20,000 workers across 834,000 square metres of factory space. Nicaragua and Guatemala add thousands more. The company's consolidated financials show ₩1.79 trillion in revenue and ₩611.4 billion in retained earnings — profits extracted from the periphery and consolidated at the centre.

The Supply Chain as a System of Managed Obscurity

Hansae's global footprint is not simply dispersed — it is designed to be unreadable. The company's production network spans multiple tiers of factories, subcontractors, and satellite facilities, each embedded in regulatory environments where opacity is a feature, not a flaw. The sustainability report gestures toward traceability, but the operational reality is a system in which visibility is selectively granted and strategically withheld.

The document notes that "production sprawls across Guatemala, Nicaragua, Haiti, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Indonesia" — a geography that mirrors the global map of weak labour protections and fragmented enforcement. This dispersion allows Hansae to shift production rapidly in response to wage increases, political unrest, or scrutiny, ensuring that no single jurisdiction can exert meaningful leverage over the company's practices.

The result is a supply chain engineered for deniability. When labour violations surface, responsibility dissolves across borders. When environmental harms emerge, they are treated as local anomalies rather than structural outcomes. Hansae's scale becomes a shield: too large to trace, too distributed to regulate, too complex to hold accountable.

This is not inefficiency. It is strategy.

Sustainability as Spectacle

In 2023, Hansae donated 5,000 trees to Nicaragua's Ministry of Environment and recycled 164 kg of PET bottles into chairs for local children. Laudable? Perhaps. But Nicaragua has also suffered massive fires linked to ranch expansion and illegal mining — industries that intersect with the land pressures created by apparel manufacturing.

In 2022, labour monitors documented heat-stress injuries and excessive overtime in Central American garment zones, the very jurisdictions where Hansae concentrates production — a reminder that the harms are not abstract but lived.

The company's sponsorship of a climate exhibition at the London Natural History Museum drew over 100,000 visitors. Yet the same year, Hansae expanded its synthetic fibre production — polyester, nylon, spandex — all petrochemical derivatives with high carbon footprints and microplastic fallout.

The Aesthetics of Sustainability Reporting

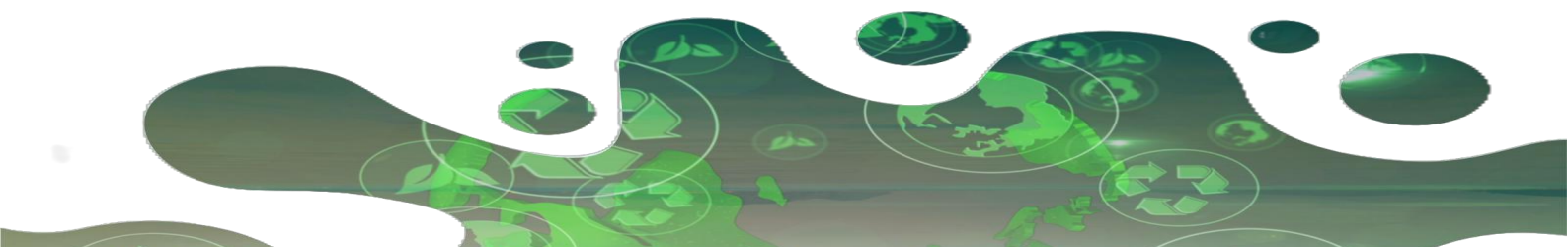
Hansae's sustainability report is not merely a document — it is an aesthetic technology. Its purpose is not to reveal the company's operations but to curate a visual and emotional experience that renders extraction palatable. The report relies on a familiar grammar of corporate sustainability: soft greens, rounded typography, aerial shots of forests, smiling workers, and infographics that imply transparency while withholding substance.

This aesthetic is not accidental. It is a design language engineered to soothe. The report foregrounds images of tree planting and museum sponsorships, echoing the text's emphasis on "5,000 trees donated" and "164 kg of PET bottles recycled into chairs" — gestures that are visually legible, photogenic, and easily consumed. These images function as emotional anchors, directing attention toward acts of care and away from the industrial scale of the company's operations, including the "834,000 square metres of factory space" in Vietnam and the rising synthetic fibre output.

The layout itself performs a kind of narrative containment. Environmental harms are abstracted into icons; emissions are reduced to colour-coded arrows; labour conditions are represented through staged photographs rather than data. The report's visual coherence creates the illusion of organisational coherence — a company aligned, intentional, and responsible — even as the underlying numbers tell a different story.

This is the paradox of sustainability aesthetics: the more extractive the business model, the more polished the visual language becomes. Hansae's report is a case study in this dynamic. It transforms structural contradictions into digestible imagery, converting systemic harm into a series of curated moments. The aesthetic does not clarify; it anesthetises. It replaces accountability with ambience.

In this sense, the report is not a disclosure mechanism. It is a branding instrument — a tool for managing perception, not impact.



Sustainability Claims vs. Operational Expansion:

Hansae's Forensic Timeline

Sustainability Claims

CDP

Joined CDP Initiative "Climate Reporting"

Sponsored London Natural History Museum Exhibit

PET Recycling Program Chairs for Children"

5,000 Trees Donated "Arbor Day Nicaragua"

Continued "Eco-Friendly Activities"

2011 2014 2017 2020 2020 2024

Global Factory Network
Offshore Production

Synthetic Fiber Output Increased

Synthetic Fiber Output Increased

Texollini Acquired
U.S. Textile Firm

₩1.79 Trillion Revenue
₩611 Billion Profits

Symbolic "Green" Gestures vs. Relentless Corporate Growth.

Texollini and the Aesthetic Strategy of Legitimacy

Texollini is not just an acquisition — it is an aesthetic instrument. In Hansae's sustainability narrative, Texollini functions as a visual and symbolic counterweight to the company's offshore labour architecture. The U.S.-based facility, with its clean production floors, advanced knitting machinery, and proximity to major brands, offers imagery that Hansae's factories in Nicaragua, Myanmar, or Vietnam cannot provide. It becomes the photogenic face of the supply chain.

The sustainability report leverages this contrast. Where offshore production is represented through abstract numbers or staged group photos, Texollini is depicted through high-resolution images of modern equipment and orderly workflows. This visual asymmetry is strategic. It allows Hansae to anchor its identity in the aesthetics of advanced manufacturing while keeping the bulk of its labour — the "20,000 workers across 834,000 square metres of factory space" in Vietnam — at a safe narrative distance.

Texollini also enables a shift in tone. Its presence allows Hansae to gesture toward innovation, circularity, and nearshoring without altering the underlying economics of its business model. The acquisition's "significant goodwill and intangible assets" become part of the aesthetic repertoire: a financial signal reframed as cultural capital. Texollini is presented not as a marginal addition but as evidence of a hybrid identity — a company that is both global and local, both high-tech and labour-intensive, both extractive and responsible.

This is the heart of its aesthetic function. Texollini provides the imagery and narrative scaffolding that Hansae's offshore operations cannot. It offers a site where sustainability can be photographed, where modernity can be staged, where compliance can be made visible. In doing so, it obscures the structural reality that the company's profits still depend overwhelmingly on low-wage, high-volume production in jurisdictions chosen precisely for their regulatory weakness.

Texollini does not transform Hansae's model. It transforms how that model looks.

The Numbers Tell the Real Story

Property, plant, and equipment: Up from ₩218.1B to ₩283.3B
Inventories: Up from ₩258.9B to ₩302.8B
Synthetic output: Rising
Net cash from operations: Down from ₩190.0B to ₩56.2B — a sign of working capital strain amid expansion

None of this appears in the sustainability report. The document repeats the same gestures year after year, disconnected from the scale and nature of Hansae's operations.

Hansae's Global Extraction Architecture

New York Design Center
Governance & IP Hub

Haiti
Access to U.S. Market

Guatemala
2,000 Workers
Massive Factory

Guatemala
2,000 Workers
Massive Factory

Nicaragua
3,500 Workers
5,300m² Factory

Vietnam
Ho Chi Minh & Hanoi
20,000 Workers

Myanmar
Yangon Subsidiaries
2,200 Workers

Tree Planting in Nicaragua

- 5,000 Trees Donated, Yet Drives Deforestation & Mining

London Natural History Museum Sponsorship

- 104,261 Visitors, Yet Expands Low-Wage Labor & Pollution.

Global Climate Pledge (CDP)

- Discloses Emissions Since 2011, Yet Synthetic Output Rising

Exploiting Cheap Labor & Greenwashing Environmental Harm.

The Architecture, the Aesthetic, the Alibi

Hansae's sustainability narrative is not a contradiction to its business model — it is an extension of it. The company's global footprint, its symbolic gestures, its synthetic expansion, and its acquisition strategy form a single, integrated architecture designed to extract value while managing perception.

The operational geography reveals the foundation. As your document states, Hansae's production is concentrated in "Guatemala, Nicaragua, Haiti, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Indonesia" — jurisdictions selected for their low wages, weak enforcement, and political volatility. Nicaragua, where the company foregrounds its "5,000 trees donated," is simultaneously a site of accelerating deforestation, land grabs, and industrial pressure — dynamics to which apparel supply chains contribute through water use, land competition, and waste streams. Vietnam alone holds "20,000 workers across 834,000 square metres of factory space", a scale that dwarfs the tree-planting and PET-chair initiatives foregrounded in the sustainability report. These gestures are not misaligned with the business model; they are calibrated to soften it.

The aesthetic strategy completes the illusion. The report's polished visuals — forests, smiling workers, museum exhibitions — transform structural harm into a curated experience of responsibility. The company's "5,000 trees donated" and "164 kg of PET bottles recycled into chairs" become photogenic proof points, while the rising synthetic fibre output and the tightening working capital remain visually and narratively offstage. The aesthetic does not disclose; it decorates.

Texollini enters as the alibi. The acquisition's "significant goodwill and intangible assets" are not simply financial entries — they are narrative assets. Texollini provides the imagery Hansae's offshore factories cannot: clean production floors, advanced machinery, proximity to U.S. brands. It becomes the visual centrepiece of a hybrid identity that obscures the reality that the labour force remains overwhelmingly offshore, underpaid, and invisible. Texollini does not change the model; it changes the optics.

The financials expose the underlying momentum. Rising PPE, rising inventories, and falling operating cash flow — "₩190.0B to ₩56.2B" — signal expansion, not transition. The company is investing in scale, not decarbonisation. It is consolidating its position in synthetic fibres, not moving away from petrochemical dependency. The sustainability report's silence on these numbers is not an oversight. It is a strategy.

Taken together, these elements form a coherent system:

- Jurisdictional arbitrage supplies cheap labour.
- Synthetic expansion supplies cheap materials.
- Aesthetic reporting supplies legitimacy.
- Texollini supplies a reputational shield.
- Financialisation supplies the engine.

Cheap labour at the periphery, petrochemical fibres at the core, and polished aesthetics as the connective tissue that makes extraction appear responsible.

This is not a company caught between profit and responsibility. It is a company that has learned to monetise responsibility as part of the profit mechanism. The sustainability report is not a counterweight to extraction; it is the narrative infrastructure that allows extraction to continue

Hansae's model is not broken.
It is working exactly as designed.

This is not a company mitigating harm.
It is a company monetising it.

Conclusion: What These RCS Claims Reveal

The RCS logo exaggerates a product's environmental credibility. With a threshold as low as 5%, brands can market items that are overwhelmingly virgin polyester as "certified." Hansae is a clear illustration of this dynamic: a global apparel giant able to leverage RCS claims while relying heavily on synthetic, petrochemical fibres. The result is a system where minimal recycled input is amplified into a sustainability narrative that far exceeds the reality.