Journal of Purchasing & Supply Management 28 (2022) 100792

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pursup

Understanding the dynamics of global supply chain sustainability initiatives: The role of institutional distance from the buyer's perspective

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Buyer-supplier relationships
Global
Sustainability
Institutional distance
Institutional theory
Grounded theory

ABSTRACT

Research points to sustainable supply chain management as a core strategic goal for most global firms. However, managers continue to struggle with implementing successful sustainability initiatives both internally and throughout their globally dispersed supply chains. Using grounded theory, our findings uncover a potential explanation for how firms manage sustainability initiatives in the context of global supply chain management, from a buyer's perspective. Institutional theory of the firm is applied to help explain the challenges of developing and implementing global supply chain sustainability-related initiatives within buyer-supplier relationships. Analysis of the data from qualitative interviews show that institutional distance is an influential factor that produces mixed effects on the global buyer-supplier relationships in our sample in the context of buyer and supplier strategic orientation toward sustainability. The findings can help guide managers when approaching sustainability-related initiatives in the context of global supply chains. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed as well as areas for future research.

1. Introduction

Interest in sustainability as a global business issue has grown over the years, evidenced by a recent announcement by 140 global organizations who have pledged to develop reporting metrics for the three primary environmental, social, and economic dimensions of performance that make up the triple bottom line of sustainability (Elkington, 1998; Cann, 2020). However, despite the growing interest, managers still struggle to adopt and implement successful sustainability initiatives (Kiron et al., 2017). What makes sustainability challenging for managers is twofold. First, the more vertically integrated corporation has been replaced by far-reaching global supply chains over the past twenty years (McWilliam et al., 2020). This change has extended sustainability issues beyond the boundaries of the firm and the nation(s) in which it is located, increasing complexity, given the dynamic landscape of global operations.

Second, firms are now increasingly being held accountable for their suppliers' global operations and practices. This discussion has evolved from focusing on how multinational enterprises (MNEs) manage their worldwide operations to now include a focus on how MNEs manage their supply chain partners' processes and actions in a globally dispersed supply chain (McWilliam et al., 2020). Managers are tasked with ensuring that their global suppliers meet the regulations of the countries in which they operate and monitoring their suppliers' overall sustainability performance (Hajmohammad and Vachon, 2016). Many global firms seek to meet these expectations by setting purchasing ethics requirements, regardless of geographic location, and partnering with suppliers and customers to develop and implement sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) initiatives. However, firms are charged with these requirements, often with little guidance or knowledge (Kirchoff et al., 2016; Roy et al., 2020).

Researchers in both international business (e.g., Kolk and Tulder, 2010; El Ghoul et al., 2017) and SSCM (e.g., Pagell and Shevchenko, 2014; Shafiq et al., 2017) have made attempts to address the challenge of implementing sustainability across global supply chains. However, very little of the international business sustainability research focuses on global SSCM (Busse et al., 2016). For their part, SSCM researchers have historically been constrained to singular national contexts (e.g., Golicic and Smith, 2013). These discussions often bypass the discussion of multiple global institutions and ignore what Busse et al. (2016, p. 313) describe as the critical "cognitive, normative, and regulative contexts"

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pursup.2022.100792
Received 5 March 2021; Received in revised form 4 June 2022; Accepted 23 June 2022
Available online 30 June 2022

across the global supply chain.

One promising stream of emerging research related to *institutional distance*, described as the extent of similarity and dissimilarity between regulatory, cognitive, and normative institutions between two countries (Kostova, 1996), could help address the challenges of global SSCM (Busse et al., 2016). Greater institutional distance exists across countries where different values and shared interpretations can significantly influence inter-firm governance and practices (Abdi and Aulakh, 2012; Kostova et al., 2020).

The initial idea behind our research was to focus on how institutional distance moderated the impact of various contextual factors on the three dimensions of SSCM-related outcomes. However, during our data analysis, an interesting theme emerged: the successful development and implementation of global SSCM may hinge on the fit or misfit between buying firms' (hereafter referred to as *buyers*) and their global suppliers as explained by institutional theory (Yawar and Kauppi, 2018; Kostova et al., 2020). In addition, our analysis also revealed that the impact of institutional distance between the buyers and their global suppliers varied based on that fit or misfit primarily through a complex interplay between buyers' and suppliers' internal strategic orientation toward sustainability that focused almost exclusively on environmental sustainability (Beske and Seuring, 2014; Busse et al., 2016). This direction in our research, and ultimately the findings, support what Sauer and Seuring (2018, p. 563) call the "common meaning system" of global supply chain relationships and attempts to find congruency through complex social partnerships.

Therefore, the objective of this research is to gain a better understanding of the internal and external contextual factors within the buyer-supplier relationship that influence the development and implementation of global supply chain sustainability initiatives, from a buyer's perspective. From this objective, we address the research question, how does institutional distance and sustainability orientation between buyers and their global suppliers impact sustainability initiatives? Our research extends the conceptual work of Kostova et al. (2020), Busse et al. (2016), and Sauer and Seuring (2018) and presents a deeper understanding of the dynamic and socially complex nature of interorganizational linkages and of institutional distance through an empirical study that examines the behavior and decision-making processes of global supply chain managers.

The phenomenon under investigation includes multiple externalities with difficult to uncover intricacies and micro-foundations of human perspectives that underpin macro constructs. This type of investigation requires rich qualitative data with qualitative and immersive interviews needed to gain an in-depth understanding of global SSCM practices (Doz, 2011). Qualitative interviews can "enable elucidating" of these perspectives by gathering data from individual participants (Gligor et al., 2016, p. 105). Therefore, this research employs an inductive, grounded theory approach from a buyer's perspective to address the research objectives, which is integrated with institutional theory. Considering that our study seeks to gain rich insights into buyer-supplier relationship factors that influence global supply chain sustainability initiatives, this methodology is well suited to address our research objectives (Gligor et al., 2016).

2. Literature review

2.1. Sustainable supply chain management

SSCM is the broad notion of integrating the triple bottom line (TBL) of social, economic, and environmental performance goals into SCM processes as a way to improve long-term competitive and performance outcomes (Kirchoff et al., 2016). Researchers have dedicated considerable time to the potential benefits of implementing SSCM initiatives including operational efficiencies, product differentiation, risk mitigation and management, and competitive advantage (Pagell and Wu, 2009; Golicic and Smith, 2013; Kim et al., 2019). Scholars have also started to look beyond a general benefit discussion to focus on the implementation of SSCM initiatives throughout the global supply chain. For example, Foerstl et al. (2015) found that focal firm commitment to global supplier SSCM initiatives improves supplier commitment and innovation. Similarly, Sancha et al. (2019) found buyer-supplier collaboration on SSCM impacts global supply chain performance. Both Busse et al. (2016) and Sauer and Seuring (2018) focus on how institutional distance between focal firms and their global supply chain partners impact risk, governance structures, and trust. More recently, research has started to focus on how technology can help firms overcome global sustainability efforts in their supply chains to improve transparency and security (Saberi et al., 2019).

Research also increasingly focuses on the challenges of global SSCM and have found that for all of the touted benefits, sustainability remains difficult for managers to define, implement, maintain, and evaluate in their supply chains. For example, Pagell and Shevchenko (2014) described SSCM as a completely new and uncharted way for managers to think about their supply chains and supply chain management. Also, Kirchoff et al. (2016) found that managers often struggle with SSCM and have serious reservations about developing and implementing sustainable initiatives in their supply chains. Research further suggests that managers are constrained by bounded rationality (Roehrich et al., 2014) and confusion about sustainable requirements in regard to product development and production (Alblas et al., 2014), both of which lead to sub-optimal choices in SSCM implementation.

2.2. Global sustainability

Global sustainability research is often focused on performance outcomes of sustainability initiatives (El Ghoul et al., 2017; Ioannou and Serafeim, 2012). However, global sustainability research also focuses on global firms' strategic approach to sustainability and how sustainability is incorporated with firms' overall business strategies (Kolk and Tulder, 2010). Strategic approaches to sustainability may be reactive as a response to stakeholder and institutional and/or cultural (national or corporate) forces, in both home and in host countries. Such forces may include regulation, local policies, cultural perceptions, and legal practices (El Ghoul et al., 2017; Rathert, 2016). Consequently, the cumulative evidence suggests that a primary challenge has emerged in terms of institutional distance for globally dispersed companies in the same network. In a global context, institutional frameworks can be profoundly different between a focal company and its global suppliers. Firms are exposed to both familiar and unfamiliar institutional contexts; manufacturers and suppliers simultaneously operate within the norms of the dyad while also simultaneously maintaining their own internal norms (Busse et al., 2016). This can present a major challenge to implement, manage, or advance SSCM initiatives. Organizational practices and processes within the context of institutional norms can be drastically different across countries, as well as legal frameworks that outline the rules and enforcement of supply chain practices (Chan et al., 2008).

Implementing and managing SSCM initiatives across global supply chains cannot be achieved without a full understanding of the effects of institutional distance (Sauer and Seuring, 2018). Formal or informal institutional differences can have a major impact on global relationships and supply chain operations (Abdi and Aulakh, 2012; Wu and Jia, 2018; Kostova et al., 2020). An ongoing debate in the literature focuses on the significance and impact of institutional differences on implementing sustainability initiatives. For example, Gardberg and Fombrun (2006) specifically argue that nationalistic differences among companies and other international barriers can actually be overcome through cross-company sustainability initiatives. Sauer and Seuring (2018) similarly discuss that the degree of institutional distance among members of the supply chain impacts the type of SSCM initiative that should be implemented (highest chance of success) and the level of supply chain monitoring necessary to ensure compliance.

In contrast, other researchers found that firms experience difficulties

and significant barriers to such strategies and initiatives because of institutional differences. Campbell et al. (2012) claim that firms are often constrained as different cultural or geographic distance and different host country disposition limit firms in foreign markets and put them at a disadvantage when dealing with subsidiaries, suppliers, and competitors in host countries. Also, different cultural perspectives across global supply chain can lead to misalignment in efforts, expectations, and outcomes (Kirchoff et al., 2016).

2.3. Institutional theory and global SSCM

According to institutional theory, institutions (ways of doing things) tend to create isomorphic organizational responses because they accept the legitimacy of established ways of conduct to legitimate their own actions (Huq and Stevenson, 2020). These actions then turn into a pattern that evolves over time and becomes accepted within an organization (Pfeffer, 1982). Therefore, it is possible to predict practices within organizations from perceptions of legitimate behavior derived from cultural values, industry tradition, and firm history, for example. Behavior eventually becomes part of an internal orientation and the dominant driver for a firm's decision making internally and throughout its supply chain (Shibin et al., 2020). In the context of global SSCM, the level of internal orientation toward sustainability can drive firms to pursue, or demure, supply chain sustainability initiatives (Davis-Sramek et al., 2019; Roy et al., 2020). The level of the orientation is then influenced by the business and regulatory environment in which firms operate (industry, region, country), their supply chain relationships, and the scale and impact of institutional distance (Zhu et al., 2013; Hoque and Rana, 2020).

Interestingly, companies often engage in what institutional theory calls *decoupling* (Kern et al., 2018). Decoupling occurs when an organization constructs stories, strategies, corporate mottos and statements, or other types of symbolism in order to indicate that they are corresponding with social, industry, and customer expectations. However, these more "formal" structures are decoupled from the actual activities the company is undertaking. Meyer and Rowan's (1977) founding conception stressed that organizations respond to institutional pressures through ceremonial conformity. This is where organizations feel compelled to adopt structural change strategies in response to institutional demands, on the one hand, but then proceed to decouple the strategies from actual practices to consider local circumstances and practical realities. Firms may therefore recognize formal structures and institutional pressures and norms in their business environments, but decouple from these structures and norms when deciding the scale and scope of their SSCM initiatives (Huq and Stevenson, 2020). Decoupling can also impact suppliers' actions because it sends a signal that sustainability may not be a priority strategy or that a different approach is warranted, such as a reactive sustainability strategy (Huq and Stevenson, 2020).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

Grounded Theory (GT) methodology was deemed to be appropriate for our research objectives. As an exploratory qualitative methodology, GT is important to global buyer-supplier research to develop or elaborate theory and understand multifaceted complex social phenomena in areas that have not been adequately examined (Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan, 2007). Sustainability in global supply chains is an emerging area of study in the global buyer-supplier relationship literature (Quarshie et al., 2016). However, the full effects of country regulations and national cultural differences on sustainable initiatives in global supply chains are complex and still lack proper and deep understanding. Addressing the complexity of culture can no longer be done by relying solely on survey data from the Hofstede and GLOBE studies. Qualitative research can complement such studies by providing a closer and deeper investigation of the social phenomena of interest and accounting for some of the limitations of the current national culture scales (Caprar et al., 2015; Doz, 2011). Consistent with GT protocols and techniques, we used theoretical sampling and constant comparison and continually contrasted the findings with the literature to examine the differences and similarities between existing research and the emerging patterns from the findings (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

3.2. Research setting & sample selection

The appropriateness of sample selection in global studies is extremely important in order to provide valid results. One of the important aspects of sample selection is using more than one home country sample. As such, we chose a sample of managers and companies to interview based in two primary home regions/countries: North American (United States) and Europe (Italy). The two regions were appropriate for several reasons. First, this was done to eliminate any issues related to the single country sample problem and to ensure that any findings can be properly interpreted without any confounding variable issues. Second, both regions include a significant number of companies with global supply chains where the majority of strategic decisions are made in those regions. Third, having two regions provided us with a larger diversity of suppliers which was important to give us more data richness and help increase the generalizability of our findings.

The participants chosen for this research were based on theoretical sampling guidelines and snowball effect techniques. Participants were prescreened and selected based on two primary criteria: key involvement in the purchasing and supplier management functions of their firm and sufficient knowledge of their firm's sustainability initiatives with global suppliers and across their supply chain. Purposeful sampling techniques were followed in this research. Purposeful sampling or criteria-based sampling is a strategy that is used in qualitative research to deliberately select particular people or settings (Maxwell, 1996). The decision to sample from the buying or focal firms' perspective was done for two reasons. First, the focal firm typically has the relationships and perspectives on SSCM from their downstream customers and end-consumers, which is needed to better understand how these groups influence the focal firm's behavior and strategies. Second, an examination of the buyer's perspective provides a better understanding for similar firms in the industry but also for their global suppliers by gaining insights into the thought process of their direct customers on a front that is inadequately understood.

The selection was made from a wide range of industries across the United States and Italy. Participants (buyers) were asked to reflect on sustainability initiatives with several of their global suppliers. The interviews were conducted and analyzed between 2016 and 2018. After several interviews, patterns started to emerge and consistent with GT protocols, we focused our investigation on trying to further examine the emergent theory (Gligor et al., 2016). Similarities started to emerge about the context of the participants, their suppliers, and the effects of national and corporate cultural differences on sustainability initiatives. The specifics of the context and any additional emerging constructs were discussed by the buyers throughout the interviews and subsequent interviews were designed to further examine those emerging themes.

Data collection stopped when theoretical saturation (i.e., no new information/concepts emerged from subsequent interviews) in the findings and the stories describing different experiences was reached. The final sample included 29 buyers. The home country in the sample included countries from the United States and Europe. Participant and company profiles are detailed in Table 1. The suppliers described by the buyers were based in countries across North America, Central and South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa are also listed in Table 1. The final sample reflected diversity across industries, sustainability interest and knowledge, scale of operations, firm size, and annual revenues. More specifically, in all cases, the participants (buyers) in our sample worked

Table 1
Profile of participants and their supply base.

Name	Role	Industry	Home Country	Location of Suppliers
1	Procurement Director, 15 years of experience	Pet Food	Italy	Brazil, Ukraine, South Africa, Hungary, Italy
2	Assistant Director global procurement. 5 years of experience	Pet Food	Italy	Brazil, Ukraine, South Africa, Hungary, Italy
3	Procurement Director, household furniture, 7 years of experience	Manufacturer	Italy	Zimbabwe, Brazil, Germany, Italy, Finland
4	Global Procurement Director, 18 years of experience	Steel	Italy	China, Vietnam, Italy, South Korea
5	Purchasing head, 12 years of experience	Electronics	Italy	Italy, Germany
6	Procurement manager. 15 years of experience	Pharmaceutical	Italy	China, USA, Italy, Great Britain
7	Supply chain manager, 9 years of experience	Industrial Equipment	Italy	China, Vietnam, Italy, Germany, USA
8	Purchasing manager, 4 years of experience	Fashion	Italy	Italy, Spain, Turkey
9	Supplier & planning manager, 17 years of experience	Fashion	Italy	Italy, Spain, Turkey
10	Senior purchasing manager, 15 years of experience	Industrial Equipment	Italy	China, Italy, Germany
11	Supply Chain & Project Manager, 20 years of experience	Heating	Italy	Italy
12	Purchasing Manager, 7 years of experience	Glass	Italy	China, Chile, USA, Sweden
13	Purchasing Director, 16 years of experience	Home Appliances	Italy	China, Romania, Slovakia, Italy, Spain, Germany
14	Supplier and Planning Manager, 5 years of experience	Apparel – Shoes	Italy	Italy
15	Commodity manager/Team leader, 6 years of experience	Industrial Manufacturing	USA	China, Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, USA
16	V.P. of Business Development, 21 years of experience	Global Satellite Communications	USA	China, Taiwan, Japan, USA, South Korea, Mexico
17	SCM Manager, 25 years of experience	Lubricants	USA	USA, South Korea, France
18	Director of SCM, 11 years of experience	Electronics Distribution	USA	China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Japan, USA, Germany, Mexico, Canada
19	Global Director of Procurement, 16 years of experience	Pharmaceuticals	USA	USA, Mexico, Canada
20	General Manager of SCM, 12 years of experience	Industrial Manufacturing	USA	Japan, USA
21	Subcontract Administrator, 21 years of experience	Aerospace	USA	USA
22	Director of Purchasing, 24 years of experience	Automotive Supplier	USA	USA, Mexico, Germany, France
23	Director of Design and Development, 14 years of experience	Aerospace	USA	India, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Malaysia, USA, Germany
24	Director of Operations and SCM, 12 years of experience.	Healthcare	USA	China, USA
25	Manager of Supplier Development, 5 years of experience	Food and Beverage Mfg.	USA	China, Brazil, USA, Mexico
26	Manager of Purchasing Strategy, 23 years of experience	Automotive	USA	Brazil, Argentina, USA, Mexico, Canada
27	Director of Purchasing, 15 years of experience	Retail – Pharma	USA	China, USA
28	Global Product and Marketing Manager, 11 years of experience	Furniture Mfg.	USA	China, Vietnam, India, Philippines, USA, Italy
29	President, 23 years of experience	Electronics Mfg.	USA	China, Vietnam, India, Philippines, USA, Italy

for companies with annual revenues between $10 and $60 billion, had operations in multiple regions and countries across the world, and described their supplier relationships as long-term (in excess of 10 years).

3.3. Data collection

Following the steps of GT (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), we obtained data from the field using interviews, documents, secondary data, and notes to analyze and understand a complex social process. The interviews were conducted by at least two researchers and an immediate debrief was done to discuss any emerging patterns after every interview. The questions differed within each interview based on initial coding, memoing, comparative analysis. A secondary debrief was also done later with the rest of the research team utilizing the constant comparison technique for analyzing the data. The interviews lasted between 90 and 120 min. The grand touring technique was used where the buyers were asked to describe some of the sustainability initiatives that they were undertaking in their global supply chains. Follow up questions were designed to get a better understanding of the suppliers that were involved in such initiatives to assess national and corporate cultural differences and examine the effects of those constructs. All of the interviews were transcribed for analysis.

3.4. Data analysis

We started analyzing the data in light of institutional theory with open coding which gradually moved towards axial and selective coding as we homed in on the core phenomena of interest (Mollenkopf et al., 2007). Specifically, this approach started with open coding with the help of Nvivo. This approach consisted of each author independently following the coding techniques, which was facilitated by Nvivo software package (in a general sense: scanning the thousands of passages, returning to focus on words, phrases, sentences, sections, etc., listing hundreds of possible codes, returning to the transcripts again searching for similarities and differences to discover variation, and searching for

opposites or extremes to bring out significant properties of each code). Particularly important in GT is that the data analysis process is more than counting keywords or other statistics, something that is more appropriate for content analysis. Rather, notions of process, action, and meaning from symbolic interactionism is the focus, i.e., how the words are used. This involved comparing, analyzing in detail, and combining themes into categories. The results were then compared across coders to watch for the intrusion of bias.

The purpose of coding techniques is to identify "a slightly higher level of abstraction-higher than the data itself" (Martin and Turner, 1986, p. 147). This was achieved through the constant comparative method, which is the continuous interplay between sampling, data collection, and analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In this sense, we focused on creativity in applying analytical ability, theoretical sensitivity, and sensitivity to the subtleties of the actions and interactions. During this process, as is common with the incremental, iterative process of collecting and analyzing data in GT, the data collection and analysis constantly evolved over time and the themes and categories were modified accordingly. This resulted in "lifting" the participant's responses to themes, categories, and their properties and dimensional ranges into an overall theoretical explanatory scheme showing their relationships and interactions (Suddaby, 2006). The unit of analysis was the perceptions and experiences of the buyers as they worked with suppliers from different countries.

3.5. Data rigor and trustworthiness

We conducted several tests to ensure the reliability and trustworthiness of the data. Those tests included assessing criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, integrity, fit, understanding, and generality (Belk, 1989; Hirschmann, 1986; Kaufmann and Denk, 2011; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). A complete list of these criteria and how they were assessed is shown in Table 2.

4. Findings

The analysis of the data – the qualitative interviews in constant comparison with the literature – revealed four different scenarios that buyers face when dealing with sustainability initiatives with their global suppliers. The four scenarios emerged from the data and represent an aggregate of buyer experiences with their suppliers. Importantly, individual companies do not fall into one scenario or another, but instead, that data revealed four scenarios that exist across all of the companies in the sample. The analysis of the data also confirmed the pattern in the interviews: environmental sustainability was dominant in the interviews with almost nothing mentioned about social or economic sustainability, despite interview probes.

The themes that emerged from the analysis of the data are clustered around a primary theoretical category, Institutional Distance, and a secondary category, Strategic Orientation.

Both categories were derived from discussions in Busse et al. (2016) and Sauer and Seuring (2018) where distance, differences, and goal congruence between buyer and supplier can impact their relationships, information exchange, governance, and ultimately, the success of SSCM strategies throughout the global supply chain. Ultimately, the data revealed that the success or failure of sustainability initiatives was determined by the fit or misfit between the strategic orientation toward sustainability of the buyers, and that of their suppliers.

Institutional distance between buyers and their global supplier manifested itself similarly throughout the four scenarios. Buyers perceived institutional distance in subthemes related to power asymmetry, cultural distance, compliance and regulation differences, and operational complexity. Buyer-supplier power asymmetry was expressed in two ways. Some buyers stated that they had power over their suppliers, both implied and expressed, and how this power could create tension in the relationship. Other buyers did not express specific

Table 2
Data trustworthiness and validity.

Criteria	Description	Cites	Method Addressing the Criteria in this Study
Confirmability	Avoiding bias from researcher whether in participants' behavior or in interpretation of data.	Lincoln and Guba (1985); Miles and Huberman (1984)	Interpretations, documents, and summary of preliminary findings were independently reviewed by at least three researchers. **Result: Interpretations were broadened and refined.**
Credibility	Results do represent the data. Asking participants to check whether they buy into the findings or not. Persistent observation and triangulation, and the use of different investigators.	Lincoln and Guba (1985); Miles and Huberman (1984)	• Regular on-site team interaction and debriefing. • Codes and text were analyzed by independent coders. • Independent researchers reviewed interpretations. • Interviews allowed participants to respond to interviewee's initial interpretations. **Result: Emergent models were altered.**
Dependability	Establishing credibility is sufficient to demonstrate dependability. This could also be achieved through triangulation or replication (similar to the split half in quantitative studies).	Lincoln and Guba (1985)	Many experiences covering recent and past events were reflected on by the participants. **Result: Regardless of position in firm and when the story took place, found consistency across participants' stories across different organizations.**
Integrity Assessment	Making sure the participants are telling the truth.	Wallendorf and Belk (1989)	Interviews were of a nonthreatening nature, confidential, and professional. **Result: researchers never believed that participants were trying to evade the issues being discussed.**
Fit	The extent to which the findings fit under the substantive area under investigation.	Lincoln and Guba (1985)	Addressed through the methods used to address credibility, dependability, and confirmability. **Result: Concepts were more deeply described, and the theoretical integration was made more fluid and less linear, capturing the complexities of social interaction discovered in the data.**
Transferability			

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (*continued*)

Criteria	Description	Cites	Method Addressing the Criteria in this Study
	This checks whether the findings hold in a different context or even in the same context but at a different time.	Mollenkopf et al. (2007); Lincoln and Guba (1985)	•Triangulation of interview sites within and across participating organizations. •Theoretical sampling. **Result: Data from all participants were represented by the theoretical concepts.**
Generality	Whether the findings discover multiple aspects of the phenomenon which can be established through lengthy and open interviews.	Mollenkopf et al. (2007); Strauss and Corbin (1998)	Interviews were of sufficient length and openness to elicit many complex facets of the phenomenon and related concepts. **Result: Captured multiple aspects of the phenomenon.**

power asymmetry but did mention a perceived power struggle, possibly due to institutional norms in place in global buyer-supplier relationship. Cultural distance was expressed as both corporate culture distance and national culture distance between buyer and supplier. While corporate culture distance was deemed less of a barrier to the buyer-supplier distance and overall relationship, national culture distance was discussed as it impacted the overall buyer-supplier relationship. Regulatory and compliance issues were primarily expressed as challenging and cumbersome between buyers and their global suppliers. Nearly all of the buyers discussed that understanding the regulatory environment of their supplier was difficult and had the potential to create significant distance. Finally, operational complexity was made up of several themes, expressed as collaborative efforts, visibility and traceability in the supply chain, corporate vision, and overall expertise. The majority of buyers explained that they did not see eye to eye with their suppliers on all of these subthemes.

The interviewees focused almost exclusively on environmental sustainability. Therefore, the four scenarios draw out different relationships and facets of institutional distance and strategic orientation in the context of environmental initiatives and strategies. Strategic orientation was described by participants through their understanding of their organization's environmental and sustainable policies, initiatives, and strategies. Some of the emerging sub-categories in the discussion focused on the strategic orientation of sustainability along dimensions related to the perceived value and quality, perceived, risk, and sustainability metrics.

The categories and subthemes are depicted in Fig. 1 where the respondents described a significant variation within their own set of suppliers and discussed how that variation led to advancing or slowing down their sustainability initiatives. Each of the four scenarios is a variation of Fig. 1 where the scenario explains how the relationships between buyers and their suppliers exist. Institutional Distance is related to institutions at the national level and Strategic Orientation is related to institutions at the firm- and dyadic-level. Fig. 1 therefore represents the four scenario variations and both categories, taken together across all of the companies in the sample. Thus, the findings do not represent an individual firm case analysis rather the aggregate of interviews and experiences for each participant.

4.1. Scenario #1: business as usual - high institutional distance, strategic orientation fit

The scenario Business as Usual represents high institutional distance between buyers and their global suppliers who shared serious concerns about the implementation of sustainability initiatives in their global network. Generally, there was no push from either side to start new or expand any existing sustainability programs. The buyers actually described a kind of anxiety about what they perceived to be negative consequences of supply chain sustainability, including the potential negative impact on product quality by using environmentally sustainable materials or components. One of the buyers voiced their concern regarding product quality issues as follows:

> *"The fact that a more sustainable material is more expensive does not imply that it also has a higher quality or, at least, the same quality that a non-sustainable one has. The sustainable material may have lower quality in many cases. For instance, when we tried to find a substitute for a component of the bag handle, that component gives rigidity and softness at the same time but is made by PVC. We were not able to substitute it, even if we pay more. We were not able to substitute it because the proposed*

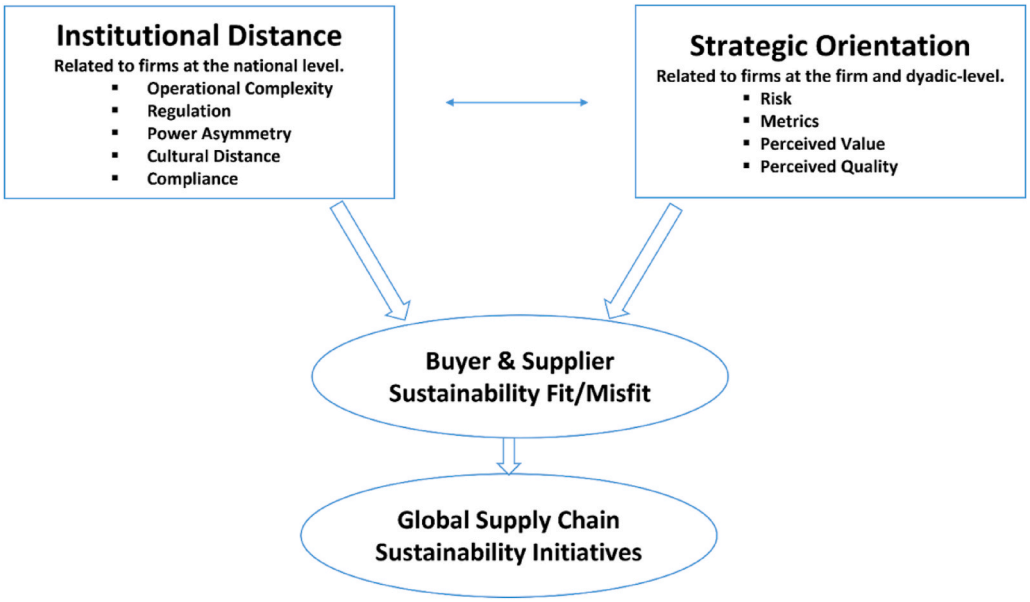

Fig. 1. Qualitative categories and subthemes: Buyer & supplier fit/misfit.

material does not present the same flexibility and the material properties. You obtain a product with a lower quality." – Italian Fashion Company.

The buyers in this scenario had a low strategic orientation toward sustainability and perceived this also in their suppliers. Because of this, there was fit and both sides of the dyad were compatible in setting and meeting quality metrics. For example, sustainable raw materials such as wood and glue were recognized as lower quality by both the buyer and the suppliers and avoided, per mutual agreement. One buyer described the fit between his firm and its suppliers as a kind of goal congruency, stating:

"Collaboration with the suppliers seems to be the right alternative. We try to collaborate or help them provide the product correctly without stressing out suppliers too much but we all agree it (sustainability) is too complicated of a problem." – USA Automotive Mfg.

The lack of interest from the buyers and their suppliers to pursue any sustainability initiatives also was a result of what they described as something that would "complicate" a global supply chain that was already geographically and relationally complex. Many buyers spoke of little perceived value for them or their suppliers; they did not see any added value of taking on additional complexities. In addition to the complexity, the buyers explained that there were no major drivers for change from their customers. One buyer described the lack of customer interest as follows:

"Customers pushing us will probably be the only real motivation. That is, when customers are willing to pay. Honestly, I think green may be just a fad. Customers do not care about it and the only things they care about are product quality and price. Sustainability may be a good thing to talk about but they really do not care and they certainly will not pay for any added costs." – USA Industrial Equipment Mfg.

Interestingly, respondents in this group described the impact of institutional distance on their business relationships with suppliers as challenging, but generally felt that in the context of sustainability, institutional distance did not have a major impact. This is because the focus of the dyad was always on reactive compliance and avoidance of cost increases. Buyers expressed feeling comfortable achieving that outcome, despite institutional differences, because the differences did not impact the dyad's orientation toward sustainability. The buyers felt that there was a general agreement between them and their suppliers, and that the only benefit gained was compliance and ensuring no liability issues occurred as those might harm the company financially.

This finding seemed counter-intuitive at first, given that the data indicated that the buyers believed significant institutional distance existed between them and their global suppliers. Yet, through the lens of institutional theory, it can be adequately explained. The impact of institutions on supply chain relationships can differ, depending on the context (Kelling et al., 2021). In this case, institutional distance was, in a sense, overlooked in order to meet congruent goals of the dyad. Within the context of sustainability, agreement on a reactive approach to certain institutions, such as regulation, can provide stability in buyer-supplier relationships, even when overall higher institutional distance exists (Nath et al., 2020). Buyers in this scenario applied passive isomorphic pressure by finding common ground on the sustainability issue with their suppliers through mutual agreement on how to react to regulation and decouple institutional norms and in a sense, sidestep institutional distance, in this context (Zsidisin et al., 2005; Kern et al., 2018). The institutional distance still exists, but the buyer and supplier acknowledge and adhere to institutional demands to comply with regulation and decouple on any further institutional expectations. One of the buyers described how they felt about the impact from sustainability initiatives as follows:

"The environmental sustainability must be accompanied by the economic one. Everything has to respect economic sustainability. Relying on a supplier respecting environmental sustainability can create problematic impacts on costs. I do not know if our company would be ready to face such a problem because we have to get profits, like all the other companies. So, we stay the same now. We focus on making sure that our suppliers are certified because of all the different requirements and legalities, but that's it for us, and for them." – Italian Pet Food Mfg.

4.2. Scenario #2: forward alone -high institutional distance, strategic orientation misfit

This scenario was characterized by buyers and suppliers who did not share a compatible strategic orientation toward sustainability. The perception of the importance and the value of taking on sustainability initiatives was higher with the buyers than it was with their suppliers. Buyers described interest in pursuing sustainability initiatives and perceived value for their firms with these initiatives. Conversely, the buyers felt that their suppliers were not interested in pursuing sustainability initiatives in any proactive manner whatsoever and felt any possible gains would be outweighed by investment costs. Furthermore, buyers, facing institutional pressure to ensure supplier sustainability behavior and compliance, were constantly concerned about making sure their suppliers are compliant with regulation. Through the lens of institutional theory, the buyers sought to obtain legitimacy through agreements with their suppliers to pursue SSCM initiatives and reduce potential conflict with institutions throughout the supply chain (Bai et al., 2016). However, buyers in this scenario stated that agreements with their suppliers with ideas to develop and implement sustainability initiatives never materialized. The buyers attributed this misfit between them and their suppliers to significant institutional distance in the context of sustainability that unlike scenario #1, could not be overcome. One buyer described this issue with suppliers as:

"There are certain global suppliers that are extremely inflexible and like to conduct their business in regional silos and they place restrictions on you. A lot of times it is just the business model they have set up that makes it a challenge to manage things like sustainability." – USA Electronics Mfg.

The perceived level of complexity in regulations across different regions also led to frustration and difficulty in dealing with the range of confusing requirements that varied by region and by country. Buyers in this scenario could not navigate the differences in policies, compliance requirements, and other laws and practices which posed barriers to adopt or implement sustainability projects alone and perceived that their supply base exacerbated the problems by not cooperating. Such differences were seen as major obstacles in moving forward on both new and existing sustainability initiatives, despite repeated efforts by the buyers. One buyer voiced frustration with the perceived differences in practices and norms and cultures in dealing with global suppliers on sustainability:

"There are many suppliers located in different regions in the world. The fact they belong to different cultures and they have different values and behaviors implies that a common audit procedure does not exist to verify environmental guidelines are being followed. These suppliers have behaved differently and this adds to our exiting difficulties in managing our global supply chain. Dealing with suppliers with very different cultures can be extremely challenging and sometimes drives us nuts but I guess that's the nature of today's business, but to require additional work like sustainability with our suppliers is just adding a layer of complexity." – USA Electronics Distributor

Buyers explained that another challenge directly related to institutional distance which impacted their strategic orientation toward sustainability was the limited metrics in place and their applicable across different global suppliers. Again, from an institutional theory perspective, firms are motivated to pursue sustainability initiatives by the combined factors of institutional norms and potential benefits

(Campbell, 2007). However, institutional distance stalled and demotivated buyers because they had difficulty deciding which sustainability KPIs and outcome measures would be understood, and agreed upon, by their non-cooperative suppliers in different regions and countries. One buyer explained:

> *"The bottom line is we do not measure or track sustainability and outcomes as we should and it is even more difficult for us to use on set of universal metrics to assess global suppliers in different regions with very different kinds of operations. Suppliers don't like this." – Italian Steel Mfg.*

4.3. Scenario #3: against the wind - high institutional distance, strategic orientation misfit

In this scenario, the suppliers were perceived as having a high strategic orientation toward sustainability and had experience with sustainability initiatives while the buyers did not exhibit the same interest, creating misfit. Buyers perceived limited potential value in adopting sustainability initiatives in terms of improving their corporate image. Yet at the same time, they were mired by high levels of awareness of the level of complexity and difficulties in improving and advancing sustainability initiatives.

Buyers' concerns also revolved around their perception that the legal and regulatory frameworks in their global supply chains were too high to efficiently execute sustainability initiatives. Another part of their concern was continuity of operations; the buyers did not trust that their suppliers could deliver because of the added complexity related to sustainability initiatives and because of the perceived institutional distance that exists between them and their suppliers. Such challenges were perceived to be compounded by the complexity in regulations in different regions as well as the dissimilar governmental institutions and practices that, like the relationships in scenario #2, could not be overcome. Buyers recognized that a number of their global suppliers' corporate cultures were orientated toward sustainability initiatives and stated that some suppliers had attempted to push the buyer to recognize the importance and the value in sustainability. As one buyer explained sustainability requirements in their supply chain, "we don't have any criteria … so, it's possible that our suppliers would be leading us on that even though we're probably a pretty good ways away."

Ultimately, the institutional distance in the dyad in the context of orientation toward sustainability could not be overcome and negatively impacted collaboration on sustainability initiatives between the buyers and their suppliers, engendering a kind of relational *blindness* toward cooperation. Part of the issue was buyer concern with the potential negative impact on product quality when adopting more sustainable components and production processes. There was also a feeling from buyers that environmental sustainability-related products and processes posed risks to their businesses. A buyer explained the risk of one remanufacturing process their business had initiated:

> *"I would say we wouldn't do the reprocessing if the – let me just give you that example, if we truly found out that reprocessing impacted the quality of the product being used, we would halt – we would halt the green initiative immediately because it's risky. And I'll say we would halt the initiative that also had the green component because of the risk, I think is the way I would say it." – USA Furniture Mfg.*

Buyers also worried that mixed interest from their end customers created significant barriers. Even when customers conveyed interest in sustainable products, buyers were reluctant to pursue sustainability initiatives. The buyers seemed to almost be caught in-between customer interests and supplier interests, but unable or unwilling to initiate sustainability ideas. The buyers' inaction and reluctance toward sustainability initiatives were motivated by institutional pressure from their end-customers who demand high quality (Kostova et al., 2020). Institutional distance engendered concern among the buyers in this scenario that their suppliers' sustainability initiatives would fall short. This failure, in their minds, posed too great a risk in terms of quality and ultimately meeting the end-customers' specifications. One buyer summed up this sentiment:

> *"Suppliers could also have cultural barriers despite some interest in the topic. Our customers signaled several times that this could be of interest to them but we decided to stay away from this. We did not want to take this risk because dealing with global suppliers is extremely challenging because of the differences in supplier behavior, their different cultural backgrounds, and governmental regulations and practices where our suppliers are located. Just too much risk." – Italian Home Appliances Mfg.*

4.4. Scenario #4: moving forward together - high institutional distance, strategic orientation fit

In this scenario, both the buyers and their suppliers had a strong strategic orientation toward sustainability and worked together to implement sustainability initiatives. The buyers discussed previously implemented projects and were enthusiastic about this topic as they and their suppliers had shared interests in pursuing such initiatives mutually. Sustainability was perceived to be valuable and, in some cases, a potential differentiator in the market. Sustainability initiatives and the enthusiasm to move forward with them did not seem to be significantly impacted by the perceived institutional distance that existed between the buyers and their global suppliers. The buyers stressed the importance of sustainability certifications and stated that the majority of their global suppliers were compliant prior to such requests being made. Furthermore, the buyers told us that their suppliers were proactive with getting certified and were eager to maintain their certifications.

The buyers in this scenario revealed a considerable level of collaboration with their global suppliers on sustainability initiatives and projects as a part of their shared strategic orientation. Collaboration efforts included brainstorming sessions to understand where to begin and cross communication and follow up during implementation and assessment. Furthermore, buyers could see the value in pursuing collaborative sustainability initiatives and perceived that their suppliers felt the same way. Buyers in this scenario were able to proactively advance sustainability initiatives beyond regulation and compliance requirements as an outcome, despite other institutional difference that might arise between them and their suppliers. Furthermore, as a result of compatible views toward sustainability in this scenario, any kind of disagreement or tensions that might arise over development and implementation of sustainability initiatives in the supply chain were never mentioned because of buyer-supplier fit. A manager for a buyer company explained:

> *"You and your suppliers have to share a vision of sustainability together and then also throughout your supply chain. When you and your suppliers understand that what you are doing generates a value added for your company and for him and when everyone understands that (sustainability) generates a value added for him and for his stakeholders and partners". - USA Aerospace Equipment Mfg.*

Some buyers considered that the size and capabilities of the suppliers sometimes hindered the continuation or further progress on sustainability initiatives. Another buyer explained some of the challenges in dealing with suppliers of smaller size or limited capabilities:

> *"Then, there are suppliers that are relatively small. They have a relevant cultural gap to overcome, I do not see any problems at negotiating these questions with big actors. Negotiating with the small suppliers is sometimes more problematic." – Italian Shoe Mfg.*

However, this issue was mitigated by the perceived similarities in corporate cultures between the buyers and their global suppliers and the willingness on both ends to take on sustainability projects. Strong cooperation and collaboration were emphasized by the buyers in this

scenario because of similarities in orientation toward sustainability. This was an interesting finding because buyers reported that significant institutional differences with their suppliers were evident in other areas of their relationship but did not perceive those differences as problematic in the context of supply chain sustainability initiatives.

Again, institutional theory helps explain the almost paradoxical relationship between institutional distance and buyer-supplier fit in this scenario. Firms will adopt policies and practices that are in line with they perceive as institutional norms, regulations, and cognitive demands (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). This is done to legitimize themselves in the face of important stakeholders and to follow internal and supply chain norms, e.g., SSCM initiatives (Rathert, 2016). In this scenario, the buyers attributed the high levels of collaboration as leading to resource sharing with suppliers and overcoming governance difficulties, despite institutional distance because both sides of the dyad wished to follow perceived institutional norms and their own internal orientations. In this scenario, the buyers and suppliers perceived norms and internal orientations were similar. The resulting fit produced mutual benefits for both parties in the dyad. As one buyer reported:

> *"This way they are more willing to work together on things like sustainability and we have seen a big difference and significant benefits for both of us when there is a joint collaboration on such efforts despite all of the external challenges." – Italian Electronics Mfg.*

5. Discussion

Analysis of the findings that emerged from our GT study, drawn from interviews across a broad spectrum of organizations in different industries, suggests an interesting dynamic for the impact of differences and similarities across buyers and suppliers on sustainability initiatives. The findings also extend the work by Busse et al. (2016) and Sauer and Seuring (2018), both of which call for in-depth empirical studies to better understand how institutional distance fits into global supply chains and how institutional distance is influenced by the nature of different supply chain relationships. The results of the empirical data add to their research through both validation and by contrasting our empirical findings to their theories.

Specifically, our findings revealed that the fit between the buyer's orientation and the supplier's (perceived) strategic orientation toward sustainability, both of which are impacted by internal and external institutional pressures and conditions, has a significant impact on the sustainability initiatives that buyers and suppliers will pursue. This finding supports Sauer and Seuring (2018), who theorize that global partners are influenced by institutional contexts when considering sustainability initiatives. However, in contrast to both Sauer and Seuring (2018) and Busse et al. (2016), fit does not necessarily equate less institutional distance. Instead, our findings are supported by institutional theory where firms may engage in divergent behavior that departs from dominant institutional norms to overcome institutional distance (Fortwengel, 2017). For example, in scenario 4, there was fit; the buyers perceived that they and their suppliers were able to overcome the challenges posed by their institutional distance. While most respondents acknowledged that they had to deal the with challenges of institutional distance and not "gloss over them", as one buyer put it, institutional distance had little impact on the advancement of buyer/supplier sustainability efforts in their global supply chains.

The fit present in scenario 1, when both entities were not interested in pursuing sustainability in a proactive manner, was also the result of buyers and suppliers overcoming institutional distance challenges. Factors that may have otherwise created issues between buyers and suppliers were discussed as being irrelevant since there was no interest at all in actively pursuing global sustainability initiatives as the only focus for this group was being compliant in a reactive manner. In this case, the strategic orientation fit between buyers and suppliers can reduce or eliminate tension between corporate and sustainability strategies because the agreed reactive approach was mutually beneficial (Hengst et al., 2020). This finding contrasts with Sauer and Seuring (2018) who theorized that high institutional distance leads to less cooperation and closer monitoring of suppliers.

The findings also further support both Busse et al. (2016) and Sauer and Seuring (2018). Where there was strategic orientation toward sustainability misfit between the buyer and the supplier, as in scenarios 2 and 3, institutional distance was perceived to be a more dominant force in posing challenges for sustainability initiatives. Such challenges were seen to be hard to overcome and were discussed as a major hurdle in pushing sustainability initiatives in their global network. Buyers' perceptions and experiences with global suppliers in these scenarios had different responses to their external environments which could not be resolved. This extends the Busse et al. (2016) framework to include the legitimacy context from the perspective of both the buyer and the supplier, where both sides of the dyad may question the other.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Our findings allow us to make several noteworthy theoretical and managerial contributions. First, we make a key contribution to the sustainability literature by providing evidence that a high level of strategic orientation toward sustainability is not always desirable for supplier firms as they typically hold less power in the buyer-supplier relationship. Previous research has uncovered numerous contexts where suppliers need to be strategic with their relative position of power (Benton and Maloni 2005). We augment this stream of research and make a noteworthy contribution by fine-tuning this dialogue in the literature through the exploration of the distinct influences of the buyer' and the supplier's levels of orientation toward sustainability within the buyer-supplier relationship. Specifically, we uncovered two scenarios when such an orientation is not desirable for suppliers. Scenarios #1 and #3 illustrate that buyers who possess a low level of orientation toward sustainability are more satisfied and report having a better business relationship with suppliers with a similar orientation. Moreover, as Scenario #3 detailed, such buyers tend to be apprehensive of the possible outcomes associated with the implementation of the supplier-suggested environmental sustainability initiatives. As one participant stated, "*we would halt the green initiative immediately because it's risky* ". Such buyers would actually push back on the suppliers' initiatives, which can create tension and distrust in the buyer-supplier relationship. Scenarios #2 and #4 provided further evidence that a high-level of supplier orientation toward sustainability is only desirable when the buyer in the relationship also has a high-level of orientation toward sustainability.

In sum, our findings show that regardless of whether or not sustainability initiatives are implemented throughout a supply chain, buyers and suppliers develop more successful relationships (fewer tensions, better collaboration) in the case of strategic orientation toward sustainability fit (i.e., low buyer orientation-low supplier orientation-Scenario #1, or high buyer orientation-high supplier orientation-Scenario #4), than in the case of misfit (i.e., low buyer orientation-high supplier orientation-Scenario #3, or high buyer orientation-low supplier orientation-Scenario #2). That is, a high level of strategic orientation toward sustainability might actually be harmful to the buyer-supplier relationship if it is not shared by both parties.

This research also contributes to literature by revealing how various contextual variables influence the implementation of environmental sustainability initiatives within buyer-supplier relationships in a global supply chain context. The inductive methodology allowed us to provide a rich description of the factors that impact buyers' decisions to collaborate on such initiatives with their global suppliers. Interestingly, our findings uncovered a factor that did not behave as expected: institutional distance between buyers' perceptions and experiences and their suppliers. While institutional distance was brought up by firms in all four scenarios, distance was not a deciding factor in the scenario

classification. This finding runs counter to the literature and suggests that in some cases, firms' internal orientations may play a more pivotal role in determining the nature of supply chain relationships than institutional distance (e.g., Davis-Sramek et al., 2019). In this vein, we also contribute to a better understanding of the challenges and the dynamics of global SSCM.

Finally, we make a noteworthy contribution by uncovering additional contexts where institutional theory principles can help shed light on complex phenomena. Research indicates that the interaction between firms and societal expectations will influence institutional norms and encourage responsible corporate behavior (Yawar and Kauppi, 2018). However, the important role of the fit between buyers and their global suppliers in terms of orientation toward sustainability can impact this interaction. Our findings indicate a potential downside to responsible behavior in that the buyer-supplier relationship may actually suffer when suppliers exhibit a high level of orientation toward sustainability. Rather, the buyer-supplier relationship may be stronger when the supplier's level of orientation toward sustainability is aligned with that of the buyer.

5.2. Managerial implications

Our research provides some key implications for managers. Managers can apply our findings to help guide resource decisions related to sustainable SCM initiatives. Supplier firms should be aware that buyer firms will not always appreciate a high level of orientation toward sustainability. In fact, buyers with a low level of orientation toward sustainability are likely to be dissatisfied with suppliers who seek to promote initiatives related to environmental sustainability within the buyer-supplier relationship. Although suppliers might do so in good faith (i.e., to positively impact the environment), such initiatives are likely to encounter distrust and push back from some buyers, which could strain the buyer-supplier relationship. However, suppliers should also be aware that buyers with a high level of orientation toward sustainability are encouraging of such initiatives. In essence, our findings indicate that is not recommended for suppliers to seek to aggressively alter buyers' perceptions and attitudes toward sustainability as such actions can cause conflict within the relationship.

For buyers, our findings suggest that they too should seek to conduct business with suppliers that share their orientation toward sustainability. We found that buyer firms that partnered with suppliers that did not share their orientation toward sustainability experienced tensions within the relationship and poor/sub-optimal collaboration. Although it might be tempting for buyers with a low level of orientation toward sustainability to collaborate with suppliers with a high level of orientation toward sustainability because of pressures from various stakeholders (e.g., customers, regulatory agencies), buyers should approach such collaborations with caution unless they are open to change (i.e., become more oriented toward sustainability). Such buyers should be aware that tensions could arise within the relationship if none of the parties is willing to alter its orientation.

Our results also offer managers a rich description of the factors that lead to fruitful buyer-supplier collaborations, primarily as it relates to environmental sustainability. Firms can use this information to pinpoint some of the root causes of success/failure in their relationships with global buyers or suppliers and take corrective actions. One of the main critical areas is the interplay between strategic orientation toward sustainability and institutional distance and other global factors. Institutional distance and other variables that increase the level of operational complexity in global supply chains can be mitigated by having the right strategic fit toward sustainability between the different members of the supply chain. On the other hand, institutional distance and other factors are felt in a more amplified way as a hindrance to advance sustainability initiatives when there is buyer-supplier misalignment in the orientation.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This research has several inherent limitations which also offer opportunities for future research. Overall, the generalizability of the findings is limited because the data was collected only from firms in North America and Europe and the findings did not highlight differences between these two regions. This limits the geographical and cultural generalizability of the research to these two regions where general economic forces and government structures are relatively similar. Therefore, future research should seek to address our research objectives in other regions of the world and include emerging economies. This could improve the external validity of our current findings and lead to new discussions and research of global SSCM. A broader global perspective would also increase variability of the findings, given the different institutional structures, economic systems, and attitudes toward sustainability across the globe.

Similarly, scholars should also investigate other factors that might increase the variation and likelihood of differences and similarities among buyer-supplier relationships across the globe. Future research should explore the impact of formal and informal institutional differences by uncovering additional contexts that may influence global buyer and supplier relationships. These contexts could include knowledge, institutional norms, societal expectations, political issues, and personal beliefs. Importantly, future research should investigate how perceived performance outcomes from SSCM influence how buyers and suppliers view SSCM strategies and practices, within the context of both the dyad, and the broader global supply chain.

Another limitation is related to the grounded theory methodology used in this research. One weakness of qualitative research is an overabundance of variables that may be identified in the findings, often due to the amount of data (Miles, 1979). Therefore, future researchers should consider other methods such as a quantitative or modelling perspective, that could synthesize and develop specific constructs and relationships. A mixed-method approach could develop the qualitative data and model from this research into a construct-driven process model. Scale development would allow researchers to empirically test and validate our findings here and potentially help triangulate the data.

Additionally, focusing on one side of the dyad may induce some bias in the research and could miss important details regarding the phenomenon that could only be captured by studying the entire dyad. An important step to understand and consequently improve global supply chain sustainability is by understanding the exchanges that take place between two firms. A dyadic approach takes two party exchange relationships as its fundamental subject matter to be explained. Gathering data from both sides of the dyad would also help uncover potential insights and arguments concerning buyer and supplier as a relevant factor that was not explored. Sustainability initiatives and strategies can be particularly challenging to implement across the supply chain because the benefits are not always apparent, leading to apprehension on the part of some supply chain members, and potential coercion on the part of others. Institutional distance could also aggravate tensions. Future research should therefore use dyadic interviews to consider delving deeper into buyer-supplier power relationships, personal and corporate values, and even managers' personalities.

Finally, categorizing all buyer-supplier relationships of each sample firm into one scenario ignores the reality that buyers do not always have homogeneous relationships with the different suppliers in their supply chain. Supplier categorization and segmentation are well known in the literature (e.g., Lambert and Schwieterman, 2012), yet much of the empirical buyer-supplier research is dyadic, which ignores the breadth and the variance of relationships between buyers and their global suppliers. Accordingly, future research should explore sustainability fit/-misfit across different suppliers of a given buyer. This would allow greater insight into the challenges and opportunities facing buyers in their attempts to implement global SSCM initiatives.

Author statement

The authors below certify that we have all seen and approved the final version of the manuscript being submitted. Furthermore, the authors warrant that this research is our original work and has not received prior publication elsewhere and is not under review or consideration elsewhere.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors below acknowledge that there is no conflict of interest with this research. No primary interest exists that would, for example, jeopardize the validity of the results of this research, nor is do the authors have any financial stake in the outcome of this research.

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