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UNDERSTANDING MNCS' SUSTAINABILITY: A LITERATURE REVIEW AND FRAMEWORK AT THE INTERSECTION OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS AND SUSTAINABLE SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT

ABSTRACT

Sustainability has frequently been discussed in connection with MNCs and their global operations under application of versatile sustainability definitions. The purpose of this paper is to develop a framework for the definition of sustainability in MNCs by conducting a structured literature review on the literature on sustainable supply chain management and sustainability in multinational corporations (MNCs) I develop a framework, which contributes to the development of a common definition of MNC sustainability. The review of 74 journal articles revealed a variety of drivers, circumstances and issues addressed in the studies as well as a taxonomy of definitions used in either of the domains. These included improved competitiveness, calls for accountability, philanthropy, but also unethical behavior as well as stakeholder pressure. As a result, I define MNCs' sustainability as the industry- and location-specific environmental and/or social actions taken by MNCs that exceed general economic transaction and that benefit the present and future. The suggested framework and definition allows for not only understanding the prevailing issues within the literature, but also facilitates MNCs' managers to position their sustainability strategy according to their specific needs within a comparable framework.

Keywords: Sustainability; MNC; corporate social responsibility; sustainable supply chain management

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INTRODUCTION

In a globalized world with constant access to new information, the world is presented in a new way. Just recently reports on Bangladeshi textile factories with unethical and inhumane working conditions flooded the news (e.g. Forbes, 2014a; The Economist, 2013). Also, BP's oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 was a frequent topic of discussion. In these and other cases quick responses and proactivity are clearly expected from those deemed responsible. Consequently, the call for accountability has particularly affected multinational corporations (Jamali, 2010). The most popular buzzword associated with accountability is sustainability (Carter and Easton, 2011), which has to address not only the economic responsibility of an MNC towards its shareholders, but also the social and environmental responsibilities beyond that. This is exemplified by Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces (a large group of hotels in Asia), for instance, who establish systems for food production, workplaces and education in local communities (Forbes, 2014b).

Adopting or considering sustainability to some extent has therefore been on the agenda of MNCs in recent years. The popularity of sustainability has not necessarily established clarity of the term as applied in MNCs. It appears as if MNCs chose aspects of sustainability to focus on. They particularly face challenges through not only their own complex operations in various business environments, but also the lack of a clear definition of sustainability for MNCs.

Thus, the *meaning of sustainability in an international context is still not clear, which applies to MNCs both from a research as well as practitioners perspective*. In order to advance academic understanding of this notion, I therefore set out to gather the conceptual understanding of sustainability in MNCs by drawing upon sustainable supply chain literature in addition to international business, institutional theory as well as business ethics literature. This stream of literature, similar to the international business literature, focuses

on sustainability on a strategic level, but has the potential to add considerable breadth of approaches to the issue and thus advance our understanding in the international business domain.

From a practitioner's perspective there appears to be a vast variety of perspectives on sustainability ranging from a proactive to reactive attitude as well as focusing on environmental, social, and/or economic aspects. Although this versatility in approaches arguably represents the diversity among the MNCs at hand, a true understanding of the prevailing approaches will equip MNCs decision makers to leverage their sustainability strategies.

Early discussions on sustainability took place at the World Commission on Environment and Development, where the term was defined as "meeting present needs without neglecting the needs of the future" (1987: 5). Since then a variety of definitions have circulated, which either focus on environmental, social, or economic sustainability or a combination of these. Later, Elkington (1998) introduced the triple bottom line of economic, environmental, and social aspects at the core of sustainability considerations.

International business research on MNCs takes a variety of approaches to sustainability without a clear consensus on the key aspects related to the notion. Meanwhile, in the domain of supply chain management a strand of literature around sustainable supply chain management has evolved within recent years, which seems to converge in their definition of sustainability.

As supply chains form the important channel that connects MNCs global operations with each other (Meixell and Gargeya, 2005), I use the literature on sustainable supply chain management to advance the understanding of sustainability in MNCs and develop a definition and a framework for understanding the key research areas addressed in previous research. I am extending the approach taken by Gold, Hahn, and Seuring (2013), who drew upon sustainable supply chain management to enhance understanding of supply chain operations at the base of the pyramid to facilitate a more generalizable definition and framework.

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Furthermore, upon researching sustainability in MNCs, I extend my inquiry to the corporate social responsibility research (CSR) as the term is often used interchangeably (van Marrewijk, 2003). Particularly international business research uses the term to address social and environmental aspects relating to the triple bottom line of sustainability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to enhance the understanding of sustainability in MNCs, I conduct a literature review utilizing sustainable supply chain literature. Thus, I first introduce my approach to this structured literature review. Thereafter, I introduce the two areas, MNC sustainability and sustainable supply chains, generally and finally discuss the findings of the MNC sustainability and sustainable supply chain review separately.

Scope of the literature review

My review relies on information extracted from 612 journal articles. I model this review in terms of structure and scope according to published articles in the *Journal of International Business Studies* by first conducting a content analytical approach (Stahl and Tung, 2015; Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990). This involves to first establish categories based on theoretical knowledge and thereafter to apply this categorization to relevant articles.

This literature review follows Armitage and Keeble-Allen (2008) by drawing upon sustainability as an increasingly popular notion to multinational corporations in a structured manner. While each MNC clearly defines their own composition of a sustainable MNC in various sustainability reports and other publications, academic literature also has drawn upon varying sets of definitions for sustainability.

While definitions differ, I combine three sets of literature in this structured review, namely, international business, sustainability and supply chain management literature, in order to provide unique insights into the *meaning of sustainability for MNCs*. In order to identify the key literature to draw upon from the three respective fields, I have I have adopted a keywords search approach which was applied to the published accounts available through Scopus, ISI Web of Science, and Google Scholar.

Therefore, I address the intersections of the three topics under review, ‘MNCs’ and ‘sustainability’, and ‘sustainability’ and ‘supply chains’ after one another in order to first establish an understanding of the three fields and thereafter draw common conclusions. This approach is exemplified in Figure 2 below.

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For the aforementioned significance of supply chain management as an operational channel of MNCs as well as for the purpose of building upon Gold et al.’s (2013) approach, I specifically draw upon the supply chain context of MNCs and therefore exclude other aspects such as marketing, customer relationship management, communications, finance, accounting, and legal. Nonetheless, literature including aspects related to any of these excluded areas is included as long as its focus lies in the MNC supply chain sustainability.

The review involves several steps. First, I used various database searches particularly focusing on Scopus and the ISI Web of Science to conduct research profiling. Here, I used various combinations of applicable keywords such as ‘sustainability’ and ‘MNC’ or ‘CSR’ and ‘multinational corporation’, among others, to identify suitable articles. Thereafter, I used google scholar and applied the same keyword search to find additional applicable literature. This resulted in 612 articles from 1993 to 2015 in the three predetermined fields.

The abstracts of these articles were reviewed for relevance. Articles are limited to a selection of international business, sustainability and supply chain journals. International business journals include the *Journal of International Business Studies, Journal of Management Studies, International Business Review, California Management Review, European Journal of International Management, Journal of International Management, Management Decision, and Thunderbird International Business Review.* Sustainability journals include the *Journal of Business Ethics, Business Strategy and the Environment, Social Responsibility Journal, Business Ethics Quarterly, Corporate Governance, Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management, Environmental Politics, Journal of World Business, Review of Social*

Economy, Social Responsibility Journal, Ecological Economics. Supply chain management journals include the *European Journal of Operational Research, International Journal of Operations and Production Management, International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management, International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management, International Journal of Production Economics, International Journal of Purchasing and Materials Management, Journal of Business Logistics, Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management, Journal of Supply Chain Management, Production and Operations Management.*

The journals were then reviewed for relevance. As a result of the procedures described above, the sample of the literature review includes 74 journal articles (a full list of the sample is provided in Appendix 1 and 2). As the aim was to define a sample based on its relevance to the issue at hand instead of focusing on a limited set of key journals, for instance, the final selection was made on subjective assessments to a certain extent. Although the majority of the articles is from the MNC sustainability domain, I searched for the respective terms in all three literary domains. This resulted in 49 relevant articles in the MNC sustainability and 25 articles in the sustainable supply chain literature search. Although the sustainable supply chain search resulted in the first stage of the article retrieval process in more than 80% of the articles, only a smaller number of articles was found supportive of addressing the research setting at hand.

In my search I focused on academic journal articles, books and book chapters already published and forthcoming. I therefore explicitly excluded working and papers, Master's theses, and other manuscripts not falling into one of the aforementioned categories. In the search of articles, I also only included articles written in English language. Additionally I had to exclude 5%of articles due to lack of access.

The 74 articles at hand were collected in one database – according to the domain they concern with – and a variety of information in addition to the basic referencing data was collected. This includes i. the focus of the paper, ii. applied definitions of sustainability (or CSR if applicable), iii. the term used, i.e. 'sustainability', 'CSR', or 'green supply', iv. the components included in discussing the respective term,

i.e. environmental, social, economic, and/or triple bottom line, v. drivers, vi. circumstances, and vii. key research areas addressed in the studies at hand.

Following Armitage and Keeble-Allen (2008) I conclude by synthesizing the findings. The identified findings allow me to draw conclusions on a framework for defining sustainability in MNCs. The result is the framework presented in Figure 8 including a variety of aspects identified in this review.

Analysis of the literature

In the following chapter I will discuss the background data on the literature at hand and thereafter discuss first MNC sustainability literature, followed by sustainable supply chain literature.

Sustainability has been vastly discussed in the management context within recent years. The number of Publications has increased exponentially particularly in recent years. This equally applies to the main domains considered in this paper – MNC sustainability and sustainable supply chain management.

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Sustainable supply chain literature dates back to 1994 with irregular publications in the years to come. Only starting from the mid-2000s this stream of literature steadily added 3 publications each year contributing to this definition-seeking paper. Applicable MNC sustainability literature starts in the later 1990s, while the mid- and later-2000s represent the peak of publications with up to 9 papers in 2010. A variety of general observations with regards to the drivers, circumstances, and key research areas discussed in the literature at hand could be made.

Stakeholder pressure is a particularly important *driver* across the fields finding application even more frequently in recent years. In the MNC context, moreover, the aspect of sustainability as a voluntary action or out of philanthropic beliefs (e.g. Zhao and Park, 2014) plays a significant role, while the general supply chain literature rather highlights competitiveness and increased awareness (e.g. Mollenkopf, Stolze, Tate, and Ueltschy, 2010).

In terms of the *circumstances*, i.e. the analyzed situation within the respective papers, the majority of papers concern with the institutional environment in both domains. But, while the MNC literature also focuses significantly on the emerging market context (e.g. Pinske and Kolk, 2010), the supply chain literature focuses rather on climate change (e.g. Foran, Lenzen, Dey, Bilek, 2005).

Finally, the main topics discussed distort the emerging pattern amongst the drivers and circumstances. As expected in the international business context, the MNC literature clearly discusses location and industry as critical topics in addition to partnerships, which are clearly linked to the emerging market context (Shah and Arjoon, 2014). Also expected in the supply chain context is the significance of green initiatives, the focus on industries and seeking out formal measurement and assessment mechanisms (e.g. Okongwu, Morimoto, and Lauras, 2013). Nonetheless, diversity and knowledge-sharing as well as employee relationships and managerial capabilities find only little application in MNC literature, which is surprising given the argument that sustainable actions are clearly intertwined with an organizational network, as argued by Beckman, Colwell, and Cunningham (2009).

Sustainable MNCs.

The issue of sustainability has been topic of international business research for 15 years, during which MNCs sustainability has been addressed in various ways. Nonetheless, researchers seem to still diverge significantly in their approach to the key attributes, not to speak of a common term to be used. In fact, the reviewed articles split fairly evenly into two groups - those using the term sustainability and those using the term corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Sustainability and CSR are often used interchangeably although literature (van Marrewijk, 2003) clearly distinguishes between the two terms. Regardless of their common application, the articles at hand in fact depict a clear difference in the interpretation of the two terms as Figure 4 illustrate.

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Thus, literature on sustainability in MNCs, on the one hand, links the term sustainability strongly to its environmental component, while still significantly accounting for the triple bottom line. Economic and social sustainability seem to be less represented in this form. On the other hand, the term CSR seems to be significantly linked to environmental and social components with less attention being paid to the economic component as well as triple bottom line. Moreover, the ambiguity in the use of either sustainability or CSR also continues on the level of the individual components, i.e. social, environmental, or economic component. Tan (2009), for instance, includes environmental sustainability in his definition of social responsibility.

In addition to the general association to sustainability made within the articles studied, various definitions have been provided by the authors. These range from merely focusing on one of the components (e.g. Clapp, 1998, and Luo, 2006), over the consideration of the triple bottom line (Wehling, 2009) to the development of terms that go beyond defining sustainability of CSR, such as transverse CSR (Cruz and Boehe, 2010, and Cruz, Pedrozo, Estivalete, and Hoff, 2010) as depicted in Table 1.

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When analyzing the literature, I identified three coding categories. I grouped these according to drivers, circumstances and key research areas. The *drivers* are those issues leading to sustainability adoption, such as 'increased awareness & call for accountability', 'competitiveness', 'voluntary actions & philanthropy', social injustice, corruption, and unethical behavior', as well as 'stakeholder pressure & organizational credibility'. The *circumstances* include the special areas the respective studies have concerned with. These are 'host country', 'institutional involvement', 'NGO involvement', 'emerging markets', and climate change'. And the *key research areas* are aspects that include initiatives, but also components and consequences of the aforementioned circumstances. These include 'partnerships', 'green initiatives', 'human rights', 'diversity', 'headquarter-subsidiary relationships', 'employee relationships &

managerial capabilities', 'communication & knowledge transfer', 'industry-specific aspects', 'location-specific aspects', 'resource use', and 'measurement and assessment'.

When further analyzing the literature according to the identified drivers, circumstances and key research areas, a variety of interesting observations were made. On the one hand, the literature seems to pay significantly more attention to sustainability-related circumstances as opposed to drivers or even specific research areas. On the other hand, although the drivers in general were not identified as the most important aspect of research on sustainability in MNCs, the driver of 'stakeholder pressure' was the most frequently occurring item with 55% of the 49 articles referring to it.

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Given that Rossi, Brown, and Baas highlight that MNCs are the "leading agents of change" (2000: 274), the lack of focus on the drivers appears surprising. This, however, may be closely linked to the challenges faced by MNC, identified by Cruz and Pedroso (2009). These challenges are i) the establishment of sustainability structures that cover a subsidiary, headquarter, and internal levels; ii) the continuous dialogue within the MNC as well as with external stakeholders; iii) the definition and alignment of environmental, social and economic objectives at the subsidiary and headquarter level; iv) the proactivity of sustainability activities at the subsidiary and headquarter level; v) and the exchange of information across the entire MNC.

As these challenges particularly refer to the research areas identified above, the lack of discussion around the drivers becomes apparent. Nonetheless, Pinske, Kuss, and Hoffmann (2010) argue that absorptive capacities are a key success factor for the incorporation of sustainability within an MNC.

As mentioned above, the most significant driver within the literature of sustainability in MNCs appears to be 'stakeholder pressure'. Surprisingly, aspects such as 'awareness' and proactive 'voluntary action' seem to be of less significance, while 'competitiveness' and 'unethical conditions' or 'corruption' find hardly any application. This clearly underlines the lack in discussion of the economic component within MNC sustainability literature.

Circumstances are the most discussed components in the MNC sustainability discourse. Particularly institutional structures and environments are highly studied, closely followed by partnerships and the emerging market context. This clearly supports the significance of the 'social' and 'environmental' component of sustainability in the studies at hand.

The key research areas present the greatest diversity among the individual factors. While 'industry-' and 'location-specific' issues are studied most frequently, only little attention is paid to 'communication', 'green initiatives', and 'diversity'. While the importance of 'location-' and 'industry-specific' aspects in the MNC context is clear, it appears contradictory that issues linked to the predominantly studied 'environmental' and 'social' component of sustainability, such as the 'green initiatives' and 'diversity' respectively are hardly studied. Particularly the notion of different institutional failures related to climate change depending on the country context (Pinske and Kolk, 2012) highlights the importance of this subject matter for further research.

Surprisingly, although economic sustainability is the key reason for MNCs existence (Blomström and Kokko, 2002), only little attention is paid to it. Thus, components often linked to the economic performance of MNCs, such as the quest for risk mitigation, performance management, and efficiency improvement are only to a small extent represented in the literature at hand.

Much of the earlier research concerned with the impact of MNCs on sustainability in terms of their environmental and social impact (Rugman and Verbeke, 2001). However, sustainability itself has gained strategic importance for the achievement of competitive advantage (Werbach, 2009). In line with the findings among drivers, circumstances, and key research areas, the nature of the firm-specific advantage additionally implies that the fast-paced global business environment might not only increase the requirements towards corporate investments in sustainability (Rugman and Verbeke, 2001).

Sustainability in SCM.

Sustainable supply chain management has been researched within the supply chain management domain for 20 years. But, as opposed to the literature studied on sustainability in MNCs, the terminology seems to

be clearer. More than 60% of the literature at hand in fact used the term sustainability, while the remaining articles were split between CSR and a term used in the supply chain domain, 'green supply' (e.g. Bowen, Cousins, Lamming, and Faruk, 2001; Min and Galle, 1997; Sarkis, Zhu, and Lai, 2011;Walker, Di Sisto, and McBain, 2008; Zhu and Sarkis, 2007). Consequently, when analyzing the components of the sustainability term in this field, I did not separate them according to the original term used (i.e. sustainability, CSR, or green supply) but rather consider them as different terms used to describe the sustainability notion.

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Thus, sustainable supply chain literature predominantly connections the sustainability notion to environmental aspects (52%), while particularly in recent years more frequently applying the use of the triple bottom line. Social and economic aspects appear to be less significant.

While the first paper included in this analysis – Drumwrights's paper on social responsibility from 1994 – clearly marks the introduction of social responsibility as a novel introduction of noneconomic buying criteria. Interestingly enough more recent papers, such as the one by Xia, Zu, and Shi (2015) in fact appear to rediscover economic factors as a measure to further understand sustainable supply chain management.

The definitions found in this literature search on sustainable supply chains range from focusing on either social or environmental buying, over approaches that combine some of the three components, to those that focus on the triple bottom line.

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Upon reviewing the explicit definitions in combination with the terms associated with each paper, it furthermore became apparent that the social component (for instance in Drumwright, 1994), which is significantly studied in the MNC sustainability literature, only finds little application in sustainable supply

chain domain. This clearly neglects the strong involvement of human resources within supply chains of every type of company (McAfee and Glassman, 2002).

Continuing from there, I similarly to the review of the sustainability in MNCs literature identified coding categories. I grouped these also according to drivers, circumstances and key research areas. While the drivers and circumstances did not differ from the earlier case, the key research areas were complemented by the 'risk' components, which often find application in sustainable supply chain management literature.

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Interestingly, sustainable supply chain literature mainly concerns with the issues underlying the sustainability notion in the supply chain context. Drivers only play a secondary role and circumstances are clearly not at the focus in the reviewed literature. Given that a variety of articles, such as Giunipero, Hooker, and Denslow (2012); Mollenkopf et al. (2010); Tate, Dooley, and Ellram, (2011), and Walker et al. (2008) clearly discuss the drivers and barriers, a stronger focus on these could have been expected.

The environmental focus among the sustainable supply chain papers clearly transcends the sheer definition. This is particularly represented in the dominance of 'climate change' as a circumstance within the studies and 'resource use' being one of the key research areas studied. In line with Mollenkopf et al. (2010), the majority of studies (more than 70%) refers to stakeholder influence as a key driver. Particularly important ones are customers, NGOs, governments, competitors, and suppliers (Walker et al., 2008; Zhu and Sarkis, 2007).

As opposed to the MNC sustainability literature, this stream focuses significantly stronger on economic indicators. Although the sustainability definition in this context addressed economic aspects to an even smaller extent individually, the key research areas of these articles in most cases address 'risks' – often of economic or financial kind as in Carter and Rogers (2008). Furthermore, Mollenkopf et al. (2010) highlight the impact of cost reduction as a driver and increasing costs as a barrier for sustainability adoption.

More broadly, sustainable supply chain literature provides valuable insights. Carter and Rogers' (2008) application of the triple bottom line to supply chains positions the best positioning within sustainable supply chains at the very center of all economic, environmental, and social performance. They furthermore highlight strategic embeddedness, organizational citizenship, values and ethics, stakeholder engagement and supplier operations for transparency, and contingency planning, supply disruptions, and outbound supply chains for risk management as key factors (Carter and Rogers, 2008).

MNCS SUSTAINABILITY DEFINITION THROUGH SCM LENSE

Given the patterns observed in the analysis of the two areas studied above, I proceed therefore accordingly in the disambiguation of those aspects. Therefore, I first look into the use of the term sustainability as opposed to corporate social responsibility. Secondly, I discuss the approach to sustainability taken in the research articles under consideration in terms of the focus on the triple bottom line or either of its three components. Thirdly, I address the components common to both streams of literary discourses in order to, finally, establish a framework for defining sustainability in the international business context.

The earlier discussed variety of terms to describe sustainability, clearly does not contribute to the understanding of sustainability in MNCs. Given that the sustainable supply chain literature, which after all addresses issues pertaining to MNCs global operations, in most cases refers to the term 'sustainability', the use of said term appears most feasible.

Following the discussion around Drumwright's (1994) work introducing the social component to the supply chain management discussion, after which the economic component had been disregarded for the sake of addressing the environmental and social one, a parallel pattern can be observed in the MNC literature. Recent discussions have been paying less attention to economic aspects and rather focusing on the environmental and social components. Given that, however, supply chain literature has recently increasingly returned to incorporating economic viewpoints into the sustainability discussion, I assume that

this is a valuable path for the MNC discussion to follow. I therefore conclude that the term *'triple bottom line'* in fact captures the debate best.

A variety of factors, such as partnerships, but also transparency (Carter and Easton, 2011) have clearly emerged as important aspects in both discussions considered in this paper. In order to develop a framework, which captures the main aspects of sustainability, I therefore draw upon the findings of the pattern review in the literature by relying upon the most significant factors among them.

First, I suggest to address the sustainability focus, i.e. environmental, social, economic, and/or triple bottom line, as well as the industry and location. The rationale behind this is the fact that in order to account for the different environments an MNC operates in, the mere triple bottom line as the single most valid approach to sustainability cannot be selected. Considering for instance an MNC that has manufacturing facilities in countries in which human rights standards are not strictly adhered to, the company may mainly pay attention to social aspects of sustainability as recent discussions around the textile industry in Bangladesh show. Regardless of this, MNCs may have different focus areas in different locations, depending on the respective environment.

The industry played an equally significant role both in the MNC as well as the supply chain literature. As industrial focus appears to significantly affect the focus area of sustainability, I therefore suggest to further refer to the difference among industrial classes. I follow Keig, Brouthers, and Marshall (2015) in building upon the SIC code structure. As opposed to their detailed approach, I use more generic groupings based on the three groups covered in the literature at hand. These three groups are into extractive, manufacturing, and service industries.

Finally, I suggest to include the location aspect into the framework at hand. Although this aspect bears more significance in the MNC literature, its importance also in terms of supply chain organizations is not negligible. Given that I aim at building upon the sustainable supply chain context to further the understanding of sustainability in MNCs, I therefore suggest to focus on the major distinction made in MNC literature between emerging and developed markets.

Taking these three dimensions and their respective components into account, I propose the following model represented on Figure 8.

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The figure illustrates the three dimensions: sustainability focus, industry, and location, which have clearly emerged as dominant themes in this literature review. Not only have the articles taken an approach that could be plotted in the intersection or within one of the boxes, such as Kolk's (2005) paper on corporate social responsibility in the coffee sector, which clearly fits to the social focus on extractive industries in emerging markets. But also the companies studied in these articles could equally be plotted within the framework proposed in Figure 8.

Thus, I suggest that sustainability in the MNC context can be summarized in one definition: *MNC sustainability describes the industry- and location-specific environmental and/or social actions taken by MNCs that exceed general economic transaction and that benefit the present and future.* Although this definition is certainly not a one-size-fits-all solution, it addresses the most significant aspects observed in the discussions to date.

The definition at hand provides a holistic perspective on MNCs sustainability by accounting for the most significant dimensions and combining these with the re-introduction of the economic component of the triple bottom line concept. It not only embraces the discussions of existing research so far, but also accounts for the criticism towards some existing approaches through the inclusion of all triple bottom line components. This definition facilitates a sustainability discussion on one level and allows for comparability. Consequently, research on sustainability in MNCs can now move beyond the current quest for key research areas surrounding sustainability. The use of sustainable supply chain literature for the development of this definition, however, provides a view on MNCs sustainability that provides significantly more depth to the discussion, which mostly took place the strategic level.

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

After examining the manifold approaches to sustainability in MNCs, this earlier questioned variety in fact seems to account for the versatility in MNC requirements. Particularly the vastly different environments faced by MNCs appear to be accommodated. Nonetheless, the common framework and definition developed in this paper forms a basis for future discussions by the apparently more mature discussion on sustainable supply chain management.

Given that there seem to be a variety of interesting relations between the drivers and the following circumstances and key research areas in sustainability issues, I suggest that the research on drivers and barriers should be extended. This discussion has already begun in sustainable supply chain literature, but the international business literature around MNCs could benefit from such a context-independent review of both internal as well as external drivers and barriers equally.

Additionally, I suggest for a similar analysis to be conducted with other types of international firms, such as born globals, for instance, to understand to which extent the existing definition applies to the international business environment or is MNC-specific. Furthermore, I propose that other studies, which would address other functional areas of MNCs, would be used to complement the understanding created in this paper.

Research on sustainability in the international context has furthermore been more frequent on the sustainability and supply chain domain rather than the international business field. Sustainability is in fact a significant prerequisite of operating globally, going beyond a mere phenomenon faced by MNCs. This “new normal” may be even more significantly discussed within international business research in upcoming years to address this changed business environment for MNCs.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1.

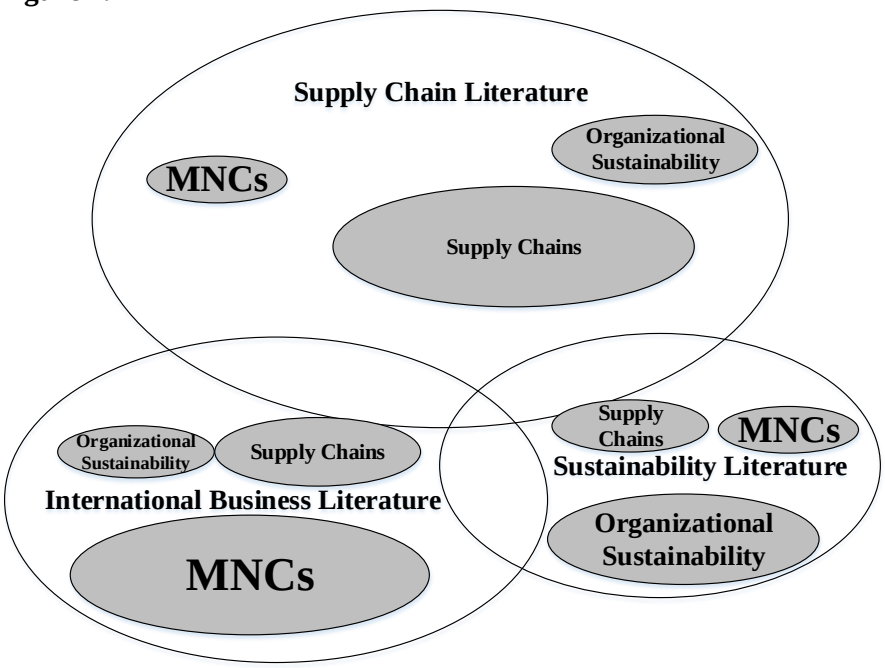

Figure 1. Illustration of the analyzed literature with the respective discussion of MNCs, sustainability & supply chains (size indicates approximate extent of the scholarly discussion in each field based on Scopus)

Figure 2.

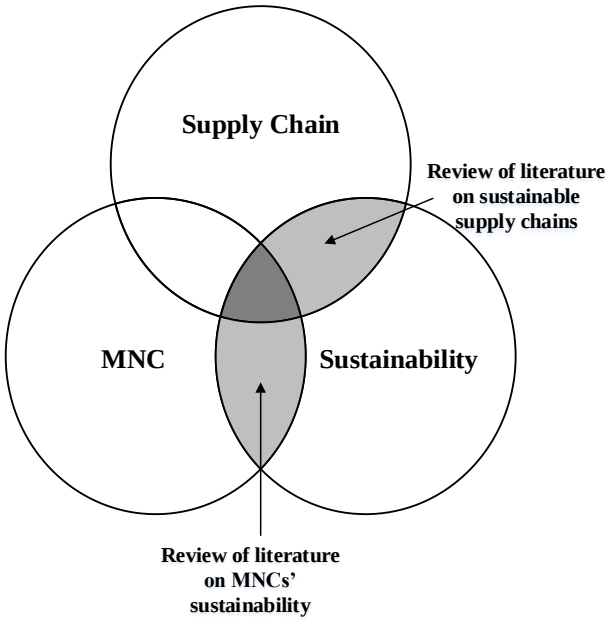

Figure 2. Positioning of the literature studied

Figure 3.

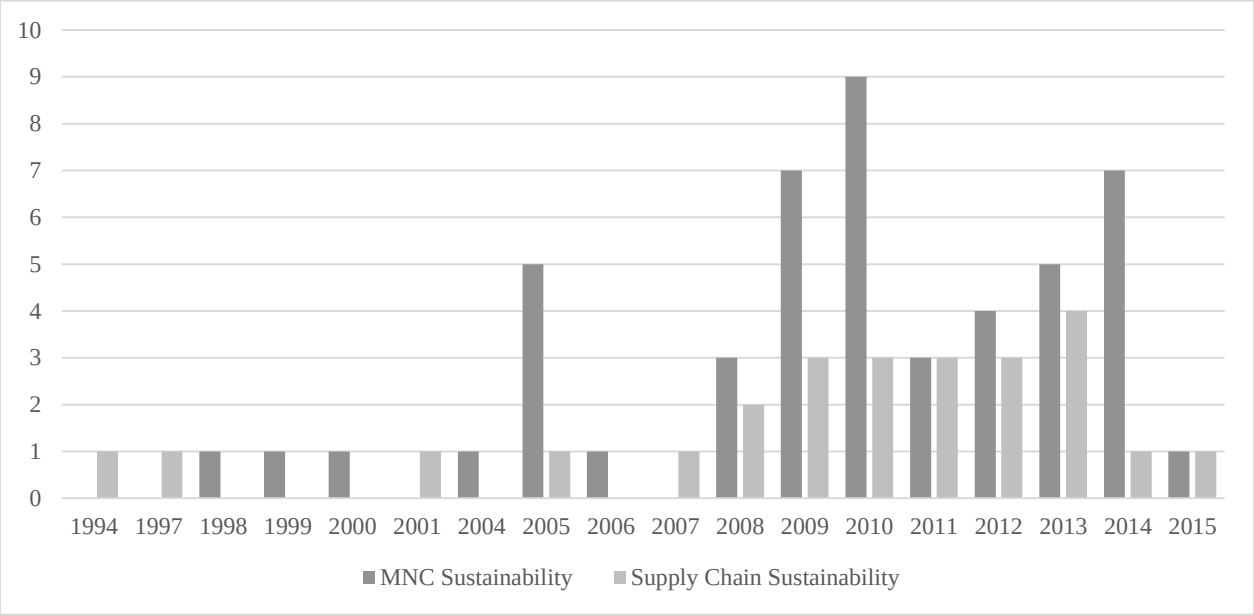

Figure 3. Timeline of publications included in this study (by area)

Figure 4.

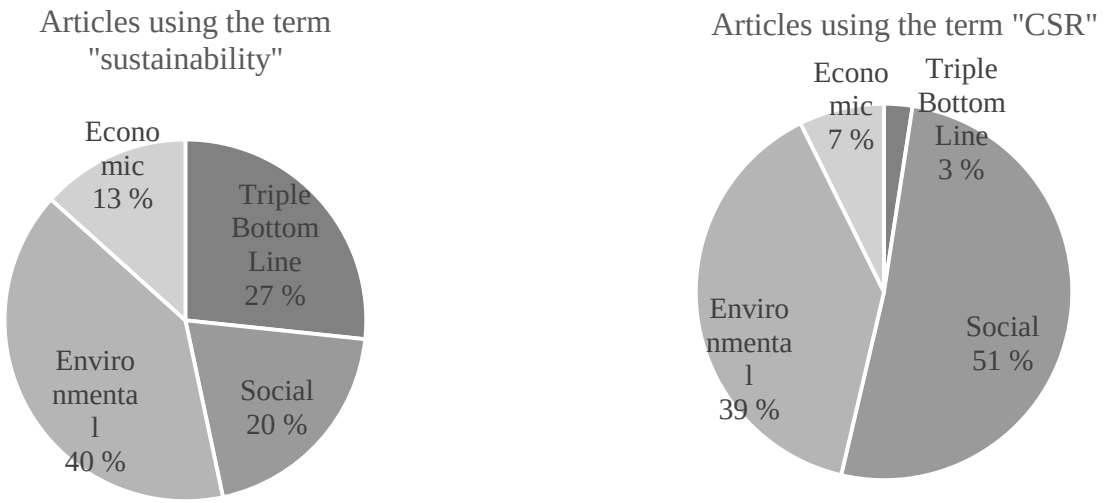

Figure 4. Definition of the terms sustainability and CSR

Table 1.

Table 1. Example definitions of sustainability and CSR in the MNC context

Definition	**Author**
Sustainability includes the "...actions [that] enhance long-term profitability and do serve the public good…"	Chen et al. (2009: 317)

"...we refer to *CSR* as an umbrella term, which includes concepts such as corporate citizenship, corporate sustainability, stakeholder theory, and business ethics."	Hennchen (2009: 2)
"[MNCs'] *corporate social responsibility* […] reflect[s] changing public attitudes about their social obligations […]."	Luo (2006: 747)
"*CSR* [is] defined as improved business ethics, multiple-stakeholder responsiveness, and environmental sustainability."	Windsor (2009: 307)
"*Transverse CSR Management* is defined as a distinctive form of organizational configuration that crosses different functional areas, country operations, and the boundaries of the firm."	Cruz and Boehe (2010: 243)
"We define *transverse CSR* structure as: (1) the existence of a CSR directory at the headquarters level and a CSR representative at the subsidiary level, and (2) the existence of representatives from different areas who participate in meetings or committees to make decisions about CSR strategy."	Cruz et al. (2010: 310)
Sustainability refers to "Voluntary standards and guidelines with respect to environmental practice […] [which] promote the goals of sustainable development."	Clapp (1998: 104)
CSR is defined as "[. . .] company activities – voluntary by definition – demonstrating the inclusion of social and environmental concerns in business operations and in interactions with stakeholders."	van Marrewijk (2003: 102) in Pedersen and Neergaard, 2009
Sustainability refers to the "Triple Bottom Line".	Wehling et al., 2009

Figure 5.

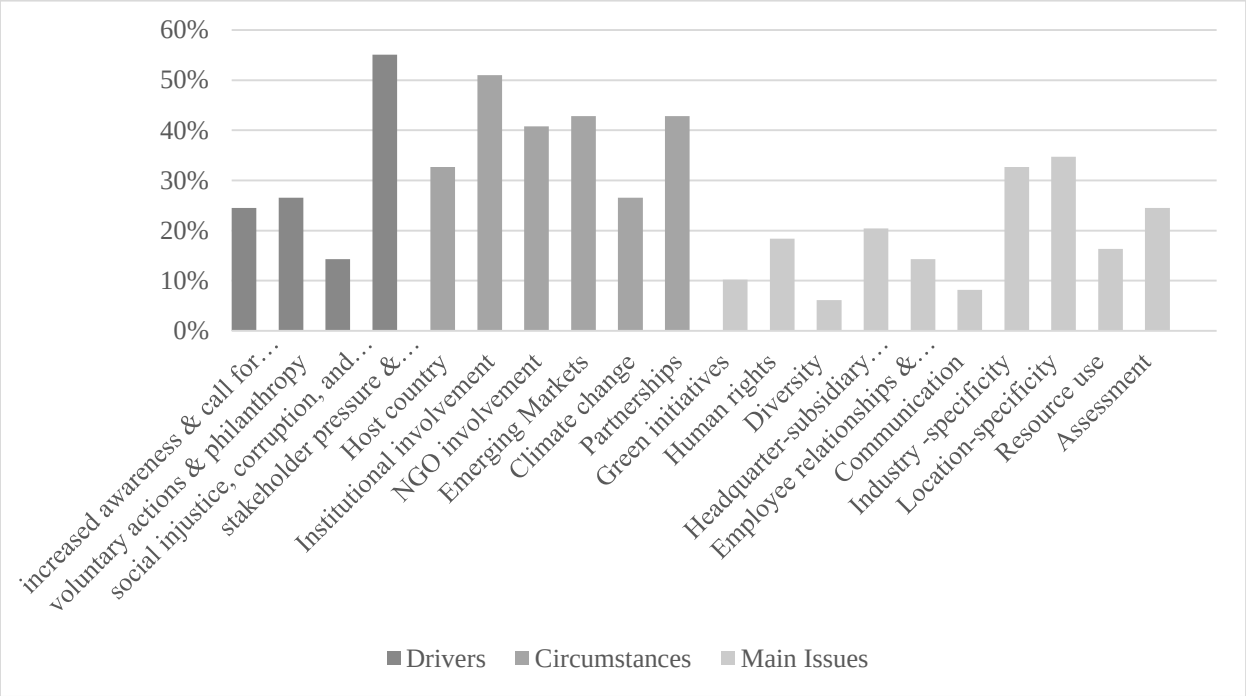

Figure 5. Frequency analysis of MNC sustainability literature

Figure 6.

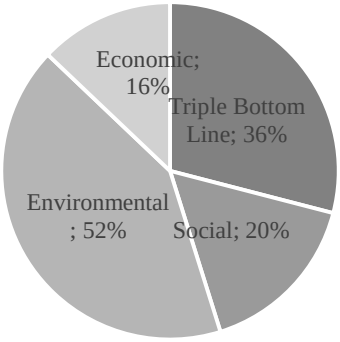

Figure 6. Definition of the term sustainability in SCM

Table 2.

Table 2. Example definitions of sustainable purchasing and supply

Definition	**Author**
"*Socially responsible organizational buying* is that which attempts to take the public consequences of organizational buying into account or bring about positive social change through organizational buying behavior."	Drumwright (1994: 1)

Sustainable sourcing refers to "managing all aspects of the upstream component of the supply chain to maximize *triple bottom line performance*."	Pagell et al. (2010: 58)
"Supply management activities that attempt to improve the *environmental performance* of purchased inputs, or of the suppliers that provide them."	Walker et al. (2008: 75)
"Managing the optimal flow of high-quality, value-for-money materials, components or services from a suitable set of innovative suppliers in a fair, consistent, and reasonable manner that meets or exceeds *societal* norms, even though not legally required."	Eltantawy et al. (2009: 101)
"Sustainable procurement is the procurement that is consistent with the principles of sustainable development, such as ensuring a strong, healthy and just society, living within *environmental limits*, and promoting good governance."	Walker and Brammer (2009: 128)
"Green supply" is used "to indicate supply management activities that are attempts to improve the *environmental performance* of purchased inputs, or of the suppliers that provide them."	Bowen et al. (2001: 175)
Defining "SSCM [Sustainable Supply Chain Management] as the strategic, transparent integration and achievement of an organization's *social, environmental, and economic goals* in the systemic coordination of key interorganizational business processes for improving the long-term economic performance of the individual company and its supply chains."	Carter and Rogers (2008: 368)
"To be truly sustainable a supply chain would at worst do no *net harm to natural or social* systems while still *producing a profit* over an extended period of time; a truly sustainable supply chain could, customers willing, continue to do business forever."	Pagell and Wu (2009: 38)
"…*environmental* practices are a subset of CSR." (p. 7) as defined by Carrol (1979)	Tate et al. (2011: 7)
"integrating *environmental* concerns in to the inter-organizational practices of SCM including reverse logistics"	Sarkis et al. (2011: 3)

Figure 7.

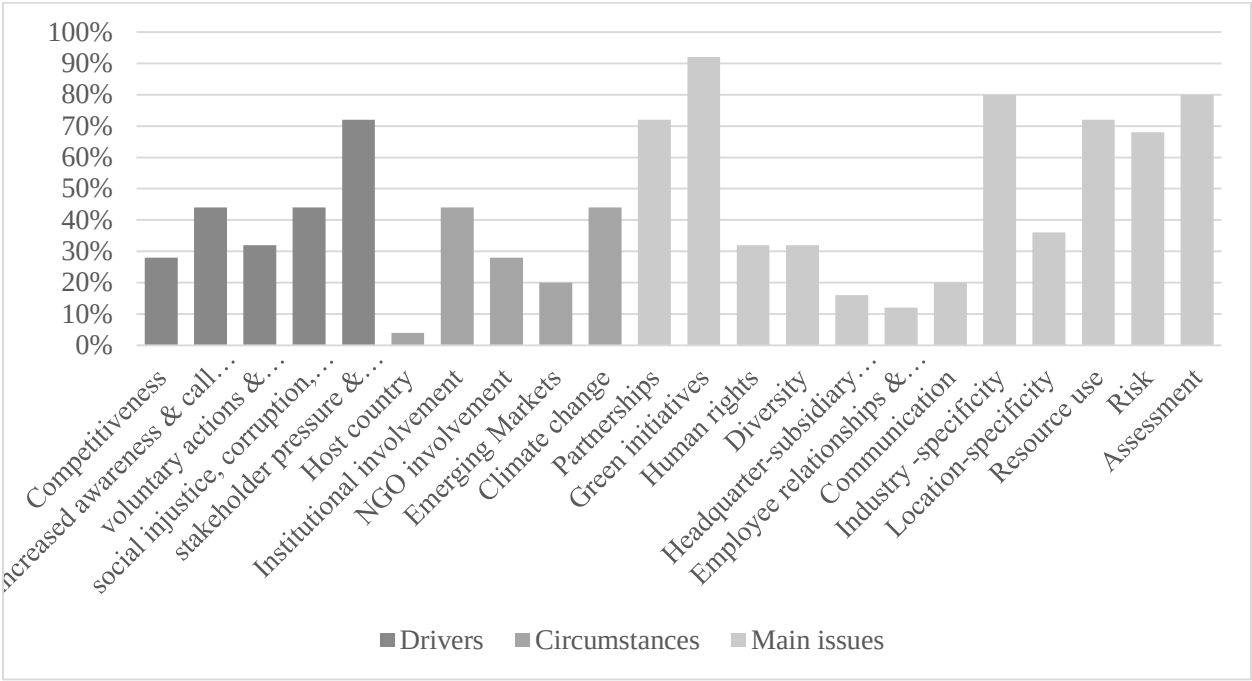

Figure 7. Frequency analysis of sustainable supply chain literature

Figure 8.

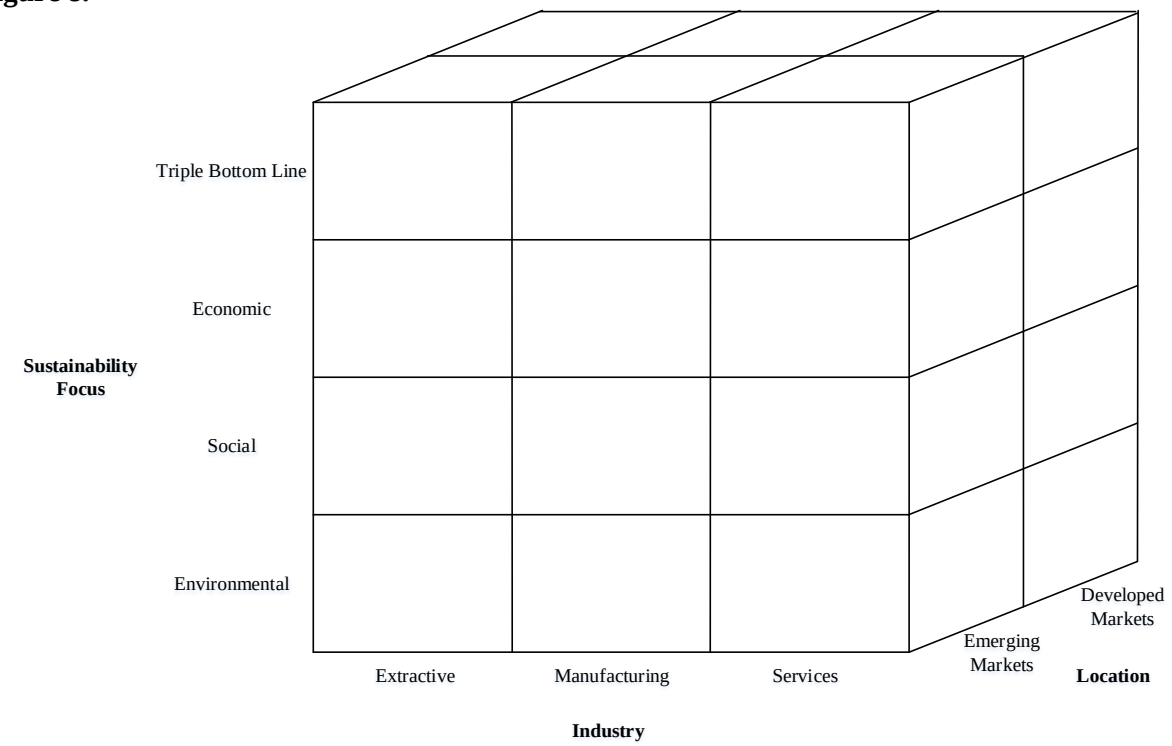

Figure 8. Framework for defining sustainability in MNCs

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Articles included in the MNC sustainability review

Year	Author	Name	Journal
1998	Clapp, J.	Foreign direct investment in hazardous industries in developing countries: Rethinking the debate	Environmental Politics
1999	McClintock, B.	The multinational corporation and social justice: Experiments in supranational governance	Review of Social Economy
2000	Rossi, M.S., Brown, H.S., Baas, L.W.	Leaders in sustainable development: how agents of change define the agenda	Business Strategy and the Environment
2004	London, T., Hart, S.L.	Reinventing strategies for emerging markets: beyond the transnational model	Journal of International Business Studies
2005	Salk, J.E., Arya, B.	Social Performance Learning in Multinational Corporations: Multicultural Teams, their Social Capital and Use of Cross-Sector Alliances	Advances in International Management
2005	Arthaud-Day, M.L.	Transnational corporate social responsibility: A tri-dimensional approach to international CSR research	Business Ethics Quarterly

2005	Kolk, A.	Corporate Social Responsibility in the Coffee Sector: The Dynamics of MNC Responses and Code Development	European Management Journal
2005	Andersson, L., Shivarajan, S., Blau, G.	Enacting ecological sustainability in the MNC: A test of an adapted value-belief-norm framework	Journal of Business Ethics
2005	Child, J., Tsai, T.	The Dynamic Between Firms' Environmental Strategies and Institutional Constraints in Emerging Economies: Evidence from China and Taiwan	Journal of Management Studies
2006	Luo, Y.	Political behavior, social responsibility, and perceived corruption: a structuration perspective	Journal of International Business Studies
2008	Perez-Aleman, P., Sandilands, M.	Building value at the top and the bottom of the global supply chain: MNC-NGO partnerships	California Management Review
2008	Kolk, A., Pinske, J.	Corporate Governance: The international journal of business in society	Corporate Governance
2008	Kolk, A., Pinske, J.	A perspective on multinational enterprises and climate change: Learning from "an inconvenient truth"?	Journal of International Business Studies

2009	Chen, D., Newburry, W., Park, S.H.	Improving sustainability: An international evolutionary framework	Journal of International Management
2009	Windsor, D.	Tightening corporate governance	Journal of International Management
2009	Pedersen, E.R., Neergaard, P.	What matters to managers?: The whats, whys, and hows of corporate social responsibility in a multinational corporation	Management Decision
2009	Tan, J.	Institutional structure and firm social performance in transitional economies: Evidence of multinational corporations in China	Journal of Business Ethics
2009	Beckman, T., Colwell, A., Cunningham, P.H.	The emergence of corporate social responsibility in Chile: The importance of authenticity and social networks	Journal of Business Ethics
2009	Cruz, L.B., Pedroso, E.A.	Corporate social responsibility and green management: Relation between headquarters and subsidiary in multinational corporations	Management Decision

2009	Wehling, C.ad , Hernandez, A.G.ae , Osland, J.bf , Osland, A.bg , Deller, J.ah , Tanure, B.ci , Neto, A.C.cj , Sairaj, A.bk	An exploratory study of the role of HRM and the transfer of German MNC sustainability values to Brazil	European Journal of International Management
2010	Cruz, L.B., Boehe, D.M.	How do leading retail MNCs leverage CSR globally? Insights from Brazil	Journal of Business Ethics
2010	Cruz, L.B., Pedrozo, E.A., Estivalete, V.F.B., Hoff, D.N.	The influence of transverse CSR structure on headquarters/subsidiary integration	Brazilian Administration Review
2010	Haugh, H.M., Talwar, A.	How Do Corporations Embed Sustainability Across the Organization?	Academy of Management and Learning Education
2010	Mäkelä, H., Näsi, S.	Social responsibilities of MNCs in downsizing operations: A Finnish forest sector case analysed from the stakeholder, social contract and legitimacy theory point of view	Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal
2010	Pinske, J., Kuss, M.J., Hoffmann V.H.	’On the implementation of a ”global” environmental strategy: the role of absorptive capacity	International Business Review

2010	Jamali, D.	The CSR of MNC Subsidiaries in Developing Countries: Global, Local, Substantive or Diluted?	Journal of Business Ethics
2010	Kolk, A., Lenfant, F.	MNC Reporting on CSR and Conflict in Central Africa	Journal of Business Ethics
2010	Cantwell, J., Dunning, J.H., Lundan, S.M.	An evolutionary approach to understanding international business activity: The co-evolution of MNEs and the institutional environment	Journal of International Business Studies
2010	Kolk, A.	Trajectories of sustainability reporting by MNCs	Journal of World Business
2011	Shah, K. U.	Organizational Legitimacy and the Strategic Bridging Ability of Green Alliances	Business Strategy and the Environment
2011	Escobar, L.F., Vredenburg, H.	Multinational Oil Companies and the Adoption of Sustainable Development: A Resource-Based and Institutional Theory Interpretation of Adoption Heterogeneity	Journal of Business Ethics
2011	Gupta, S.	Consumer stakeholder view of corporate social responsibility: A comparative analysis from USA and India	Social Responsibility Journal

2012	Hahn, R.	ISO 26000 and the Standardization of Strategic Management Processes for Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility	Business Strategy and the Environment
2012	Chakrabarty, S., Wang, L.	The long-term sustenance of sustainability practices in MNCs: A dynamic capabilities perspective of the role of R&D and internationalization	Journal of Business Ethics
2012	Pinske, J., Kolk, A.	Multinational enterprises and climate change: Exploring institutional failures and embeddedness'	Journal of International Business Studies
2012	Halme, M., Lindeman, S., Linna, P.	Innovation for Inclusive Business: Intrapreneurial Bricolage in Multinational Corporations	Journal of Management Studies
2013	Gold, S. Hahn, R. Seuring, S.	Sustainable supply chain management in ''Base of the Pyramid'' food projects - A path to triple bottom line approaches for multinationals?	International Business Review
2013	Baumann-Pauly, D., Wickert, C., Spence, L.J., Scherer, A.G.	Organizing Corporate Social Responsibility in Small and Large Firms: Size Matters	Journal of Business Ethics

2013	Zhao, M., Tan, J., Park, S.H.	From Voids to Sophistication: Institutional Environment and MNC CSR Crisis in Emerging Markets	Journal of Business Ethics
2013	Darrag, M., E-Bassiouny, N.	An introspect into the Islamic roots of CSR in the Middle East: The case of Savola Group in Egypt	Social Responsibility Journal
2013	Chakrabarty, S., Wang, L.	Climate change mitigation and internationalization: The competitiveness of multinational corporations	Thunderbird International Business Review
2014	Hennchen, E.	Royal Dutch Shell in Nigeria: Where Do Responsibilities End?	Journal of Business Ethics
2014	Beckmann, M., Hielscher, S., Pies, I.	Commitment Strategies for Sustainability: How Business Firms Can Transform Trade-Offs Into Win–Win Outcomes	Business Strategy and the Environment
2014	Shah, K.U., Arjoon, S.	Through thick and thin? How self-determination drives the corporate sustainability initiatives of multinational subsidiaries	Business Strategy and the Environment

2014	Mzembe, A.N., Meaton, J.	Driving Corporate Social Responsibility in the Malawian Mining Industry: A Stakeholder Perspective	Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management
2014	Asgary, N., Li, G.	Corporate Social Responsibility: Its Economic Impact and Link to the Bullwhip Effect	Journal of Business Ethics
2014	Detomasi, D.	The Multinational Corporation as a Political Actor: 'Varieties of Capitalism' Revisited	Journal of Business Ethics
2014	Zhao, M., Park, S.H.	MNC strategy and social adaptation in emerging markets	Journal of International Business Studies
2015	Keig, D.L., Brouthers, L.E., Marshall, V.B.	Formal and Informal Corruption Environments and Multinational Enterprise Social Irresponsibility	Journal of Management Studies

Appendix 2: Articles included in the sustainable supply chain review

Year	Author	Name	Journal
1994	Drumwright, M.E.	Socially responsible organizational buying: environmental concern as a non-economic buying criterion	Journal of Marketing
1997	Min, H., Galle, W.P.	Green Purchasing Strategies: Trends and Implications	International Journal of Purchasing and Materials Management
2001	Bowen, F., Cousins, P., Lamming, R., and Faruk, A.	The Role of Supply Management Capabilities in Green Supply	Production and Operations Management
2005	Foran, B., Lenzen, M., Dey, C., Bilek, M.	Integrating sustainable chain management with triple bottom line accounting	Ecological Economics
2007	Zhu, Q., Sarkis, J.	The moderating effects of institutional pressures on emergent green supply chain practices and performance	International Journal of Production Research

2008	Carter, C.R., Rogers, D.S.	A framework of sustainable supply chain management: moving toward new theory	International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management
2008	Walker, H., Di Sisto, L., McBain, D.	Drivers and barriers to environmental supply chain management practices: Lessons from the public and private sectors	Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management
2009	Eltantawy, R.A., Fox, G.A., Giunipero, L.	Supply management ethical responsibility: reputation and performance impacts	Supply Chain Management: An International Journal
2009	Pagell, M., Wu, Z.	Building a more complete theory of sustainable supply chain management using case studies of 10 exemplars	Journal of Supply Chain Management
2009	Walker, H., Brammer, B.	Sustainable procurement in the United Kingdom public sector	Supply Chain Management: An International Journal
2010	Mollenkopf, D., Stolze, H., Tate, W.L., Ueltschy, M.	Green, lean, and global supply chains	International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management

2010	Tate, W.L., Ellram, L.M., Kirchoff, J.F.	Corporate social responsibility reports: a thematic analysis related to supply chain management	Journal of Supply Chain Management
2010	Pagell, M., Wu, Z., Wasserman, M.E.	Thinking differently about purchasing portfolios: an assessment of sustainable sourcing	Journal of Supply Chain Management
2011	Tate, W.L., Dooley, K.J., Ellram, L.M.	Transaction Cost and Institutional Drivers of Supplier Adoption of Environmental Practices	Journal of Business Logistics
2011	Carter, C.R., Easton, P.L.	Sustainable supply chain management: evolution and future directions	International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management
2011	Sarkis, J., Zhu, Q., Lai, K.	An organizational theoretic review of green supply chain management literature	International Journal of Production Economics
2012	Faisal, M.N.	Sustainability metrics for a supply chain: The case of small and medium enterprises	International Journal of Services and Operations Management
2012	Crespin-Mazet, F., Dontenwill, E.	Sustainable Procurement: Building Legitimacy in the Supply Network	Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management

2012	Giunipero, L.C., Hooker, R.E., Denslow, D.	Purchasing and supply management sustainability: Drivers and barriers	Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management
2012	Miemczyk, J., Johnsen, T.E., Macquet, M.	Sustainable purchasing and supply management: A structured literature review of definitions and measures at the dyad, chain and network levels	Supply Chain Management
2013	Okongwu, U., Morimoto, R., Lauras, M.	The maturity of supply chain sustainability disclosure from a continuous improvement perspective	International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management
2013	Bask, A., Halme, M., Kallio, M., Kuula, M.	Consumer preferences for sustainability and their impact on supply chain management: The case of mobile phones	International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management
2013	Tate, W.L., Ellram, L.M., Gölgeci, I.	Diffusion of environmental business practices: A network approach	Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management
2013	Winter, M., Knemeyer, A.M.	Exploring the integration of sustainability and supply chain management: Current state and opportunities for future inquiry	International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management

2014	Dam, L., Petkova, B.N.	The impact of environmental supply chain sustainability programs on shareholder wealth	International Journal of Operations and Production Management
2015	Xia, Y., Zu, X., Shi, C.	A profit-driven approach to building a “people-responsible” supply chain	European Journal of Operational Research