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## Articles

## Sustainability and corporate social responsibility in supply chains: The state of research in supply chain management and business ethics journals

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## ABSTRACT

Sustainability has become a popular topic, not only in business research at large, but specifically in the supply chain management (SCM) discipline. In addition, the business ethics (BE) field has an extensive stream of literature focusing on supply chain topics. While some exchange of ideas can be witnessed, the two streams developed largely independently. A key purpose of this article is to examine and contrast existing research and knowledge creation, focusing on sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) issues in supply chains, within and across these two disciplines. The in-depth systematic literature review covers 195 articles, published in 12 peer-reviewed journals from 2007 to 2013, examining the methodological and theoretical approaches, as well as the main research focus areas. We found highly complementary research topic areas but only limited synergy and dialogue between the disciplines. The research area at large would benefit from greater integration. Based on our findings, we propose a future research agenda that connects across the disciplines and highlights key areas that would benefit from further inquiry.

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## 1. Introduction

Academic research focusing on environmental and other sustainability issues in the supply chain management (SCM) discipline started about two decades ago (e.g., Klassen and McLaughlin, 1996; Murphy et al., 1996; Walton et al., 1998; Wu and Dunn, 1995). Since then, a considerable body of literature examining various sustainability-related topics has been produced (e.g., Bowen et al., 2001; Carter and Jennings, 2004; Tate et al., 2011; Zhu and Sarkis, 2004). In an effort to understand what has already been investigated, several researchers have reviewed extant literature and discussed possible future research directions (Srivastava, 2007; Walker et al., 2012; Winter and Knemeyer, 2013). Many of these reviews focus on broad areas, such as environmental purchasing (Tate et al., 2012) or sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) research (Carter and Easton, 2011; Carter and Rogers, 2008; Seuring and Müller, 2008). Other articles investigate more specific issues, such as definitions and measures used in sustainable purchasing research (Miemczyk et al., 2012).

While the previously mentioned literature review articles offer robust analyses of sustainability-related research published within the broader SCM discipline, they may only deal with other fields tangentially, or examine a limited set of issues across disciplines. The missing aspects in these review articles suggest that SCM and purchasing researchers are not benefiting from the full array of insights developed in other disciplines.

A significant amount of sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) research concerning supply chains has appeared not only in the SCM discipline but also in business ethics (BE) journals. The BE field is especially interesting because it is a major forum for discussions on sustainability and CSR, including research that extends beyond the focal firm. However, it has not been sufficiently incorporated into prior review articles published in the supply chain, purchasing and supply management fields, and it is therefore worthwhile to investigate how research on sustainability and CSR in supply chains is connected across these fields. The two distinct streams of literature covered are: 1) SCM, including more specific purchasing and supply management as well as logistics journals, and 2) business ethics and CSR. In this study, we provide a thorough investigation and comparison of research and knowledge creation within and across these disciplines, as to date no studies have investigated how much cross-fertilization takes place between them. The three research questions that guide our study

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are as follows. 1) How does research published in the SCM stream differ from that published in the BE stream? 2) What can the SCM discipline learn from BE? 3) Which areas would especially benefit from further inquiry? Through these questions, we examine an extensive amount of relevant research through a new lens, which allows us to generate novel perspectives and suggestions for future research on sustainable supply chains. This is particularly valuable in the rapidly expanding research area, which attracts the attention of a growing number of scholars from multiple fields.

In this research, 195 articles published in 12 peer-reviewed academic journals from 2007 to 2013 were content-analyzed and classified. We examined the methodological and theoretical approaches used, as well as industry and geographic contexts, sustainability dimensions and topics. A systematic approach was used in an effort to summarize, contrast and synthesize research evidence in a rigorous and transparent manner (Cooper, 2010; Denyer and Tranfield, 2009). Our approach of focusing on a specific set of journals and years is similar to the one used by Carter and Easton (2011), and gives a solid basis for a robust and thorough analysis. Simultaneously, the sample of articles is broad compared to similar review and meta-studies (Carter and Easton, 2011; Golicic and Smith, 2013; Miemczyk et al., 2012; Tate et al., 2012).

The study provides scholars a deep-level understanding of the research that has recently been produced at the intersection of the SCM and BE fields, highlighting both saturated areas as well as unclosed gaps. Overall, we assert that despite complementary research focus areas, synergy and dialogue between the disciplines appear to have been limited. Similar to Doh et al.'s (2010) examination of the (lacking) integration of international business and BE research, we identify new areas of shared interest to the two disciplines, which should lead to valuable research (Petersen and Autry, 2014). The main contribution of our study is a future research agenda that connects across the two, and additional, disciplines. It proposes open gaps, new research paths, and broader debates that could be better integrated to this area, with the aim to aid scholars in their research efforts. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we outline the theoretical background of the research area. In the following sections, we describe the research methodology and present the results. Last, we propose areas for future research and discuss the managerial implications and conclusions of our study.

## 2. Theoretical background

Since the early 1990s, a growing body of academic research addressing various environmental, social, and ethical issues in supply chains has been produced. Increasingly over the past several years, research in the SCM discipline has been conducted under the umbrella concept of sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) (Carter and Rogers, 2008; Seuring and Müller, 2008). In Carter and Rogers's (2008) framework, SSCM is seen as encompassing three dimensions, social, environmental and economic performance, which are often referred to as the triple bottom line (TBL) (Elkington, 1997). Sustainability is commonly defined through the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (1987) definition of sustainable development. The initial WCED report places heavy emphasis on environmental concerns and economic development, but the concept of sustainability has later been recognized to incorporate a broader range of considerations (see e.g., WCED (1987) and Garriga and Melé (2004)).

The corporate social performance (CSP) model (Carroll, 1979), on the other hand, treats social responsibility as a four-part concept comprising of corporations' legal, economic, ethical and discretionary (or philanthropic) responsibilities. Carroll (1991) uses

the same components in his famous Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which places additional emphasis on moral management and organizational stakeholders. The ethical layer of the pyramid is seen as an "obligation to do what is right, just, and fair" and as avoiding harm (p. 42). There are also numerous other definitions and interpretations of CSR; with varying meanings and practices attached to them, and with the concept frequently referred to as being 'contested' (e.g., Matten and Moon, 2008). As one way to categorize CSR theories, Garriga and Melé (2004) group them into instrumental, political, integrative, and ethical theories. Instrumental theories, such as the natural-resource-based view (NRBV) of the firm (Hart, 1995), mainly consider the corporation a vehicle for wealth creation. A central issue in political theories, such as the corporate citizenship approach (see Matten and Crane (2005)), is the social power of corporations. In integrative theories an important assumption is that firms should seek to meet social demands. For example, stakeholder management (Mitchell et al., 1997) integrates stakeholders into firm decision-making. Finally, ethical theories are "based on principles that express the right thing to do or the necessity to achieve a good society" (Garriga and Melé, 2004, p. 60). Normative stakeholder theory (Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984) is labeled an ethical theory, as is also the sustainable development approach. Overall, as the above discussion indicates, the varying interpretations of the terms sustainability and CSR make it difficult to draw exact boundaries around them, or to clearly delineate how they relate to each other. However, we conclude that the concepts considerably overlap. The use of these concepts in the SCM and BE disciplines is described in the results section.

## 3. Methodology

A systematic review methodology was used in this study, in order to systematically collect as much of the available evidence as possible and to analyze it in a robust way (Cooper, 2010; Denyer and Tranfield, 2009). A research protocol was developed in an early stage of the study to increase replicability, transparency, reliability and internal validity. It detailed how the data would be collected, analyzed and reported. Next, criteria were established for the selection of journals and the inclusion of articles. A content classification system was developed to minimize ambiguity in coding. The research process is presented in Fig. 1 and described next.

### 3.1. Search criteria

The first step was to determine the search criteria, including the scope of the study. Following an extensive reading of extant literature from various fields, we decided to use a transparent and robust approach similar to Carter and Easton (2011), where we focused on a specific set of journals and years. We included high quality academic SCM and BE journals and favored journals with an impact factor. We included seven leading SCM, purchasing and supply, and logistics journals (see Table 1). These journals often appear in various combinations in different types of literature reviews (e.g., Carter and Easton, 2011) and journal impact or assessment studies (e.g., Chapman and Ellinger, 2009; Zsidisin et al., 2007). Their 2014 Thomson Reuters' impact factors range from 0.946 to 3.857. For the business ethics (BE) stream, five journals were chosen (Table 1), all of which are ranked high in ratings of BE and corporate social responsibility (CSR) journals (e.g., Albrecht et al., 2010; Ma et al., 2012). All but *BASR* have an impact factor, ranging from 0.541 to 1.927. As the *JBE* publishes far more issues per year than any other journal included in this study, we reviewed more abstracts in the BE than the SCM stream. A seven-

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