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Supplier relationship management approaches for diffusing social sustainability in supply chains: a systematic literature review

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Abstract: By reviewing 65 papers, this study explores how firms can diffuse social sustainability practices in their supply chain by effectively managing their supplier relationships. We highlight the challenges of diffusing social sustainability in global supply chains, identify assessment and collaboration approaches in supplier relationship management (SRM) as the main themes in the literature, and discuss the effectiveness of approaches in addressing the identified challenges of social sustainability diffusion. We discuss that while the governance mechanisms of assessment and collaboration are commonly used, they both have limitations. By analysing the strengths and limitations of different approaches to managing supplier relationships, the article provides managerial implications for firms seeking to extend social sustainability practices upstream in their supply chain.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility; CSR; responsible sourcing; social sustainability; supplier relationship management; SRM; supply chain management; systematic literature review.

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1 Introduction

In recent decades, environmental sustainability has rightfully garnered significant attention across various industries. However, the focus on social sustainability is also on the rise. Companies are held responsible for the treatment of people not only in their own operations but also in their supply chains and grapple with issues related to diversity, equity, labour practices, community engagement, and human rights. Social sustainability issues in supply chains came to public prominence after several fatal incidents including the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh claimed the lives of many workers in factories supplying well-known international brands (see, for example, Huq et al., 2014; Meqdadi et al., 2017). Klassen and Vereecke (2012) define social issues in supply chains as those aspects of operations that affect 'human safety, welfare and community development'.

Implementing social sustainability in global supply chains present complexities and challenges (Abbasi, 2017; Akbar and Ahsan, 2021; Baig et al., 2020). Buying companies face challenges due to a lack of control in complex multi-tier supply chains, a power imbalance between buyer and supplier, or a lack of alternative suppliers (Köksal et al., 2017). Similarly, suppliers struggle with a lack of resources, local challenges such as weak law enforcement, and unfair treatment from buyers (Abbasi, 2017; Akbar and Ahsan, 2021).

Since firms are affected by the actions of all the actors in their supply chains, and they lack direct control over the activities of their suppliers (Gimenez and Sierra, 2013), effective SRM is required to minimise the risks of financial and reputational damage due to supplier social misconduct (e.g., cases of Mattel 2007 and Nike 1996; see also Gimenez and Tachizawa, 2012; Okay et al., 2024). SRM is an important element in the study of socially sustainable supply chains (SSSC). In their review of the literature on sustainable supply chain management (SSCM), Ashby et al. (2012) notify researchers of the potential to exploit the rich discussion of buyer-supplier relationship (BSR) literature in advancing the sustainability field. Nakamba et al. (2017) also mention a lack of deeper understanding of the activities and processes that influence the implementation of social sustainability, such as BSR. These insights drive us to scrutinise the literature on SRM practices of firms aimed at supplier social sustainability diffusion.

In their review of literature, Zorzini et al. (2015) mention that research related to the barriers and challenges of implementing socially responsible sourcing is limited. We aim to also focus on the challenges of social sustainability diffusion in supply chains and how

SRM approaches address these challenges. In this review, we seek to answer the following research questions:

RQ1 What are the challenges of diffusing social sustainability in supply chains?

RQ2 What are supplier relationship management (SRM) approaches to diffuse social sustainability practices upstream of buyers' supply chain? And how do these approaches address the challenges of diffusing social sustainability in supply chains?

This study differs from other systematic literature reviews on sustainable supply chains (e.g., Gimenez and Tachizawa, 2012; Yawar and Seuring, 2017) in several ways. Firstly, our review focuses specifically on the social dimension of sustainability, rather than addressing all three components of the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1998). Additionally, we concentrate on understanding the challenges of diffusing social sustainability practices and the role of SRM approaches. Previous studies, such as Durach et al. (2017), recommend focused systematic literature reviews with a smaller sample base, which guided our approach.

2 Methodology

This review follows the steps of a systematic literature review as outlined and modified for the supply chain management field by Durach et al. (2017):

1 Defining the research question(s) by taking a theoretical lens and developing a theoretical framework.

2 Determining the characteristics of primary studies by defining inclusion and exclusion criteria.

3 Getting a sample of potential articles through multiple databases, subsequent citation searches, and using a combination of keywords to get a broad baseline sample.

4 Selecting suitable articles by applying the defined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

5 Synthesising the literature by coding the sample, analysing and integrating the results, and refining the initial theoretical framework.

6 Reporting the results.

First, the research questions were defined, set out in the introduction section. Next in the review was the identification of research material by conducting a keyword search. We conducted our search in Scopus and complemented the list of articles by forward and backward search. The following search string was used: ('buyer-supplier relationship*' OR 'buyer-seller relationship*' OR 'supplier-buyer relationship*' OR 'inter-organisational relationship*') AND ('social sustainability' OR 'corporate social responsibility'). The search string was applied to all fields and limited to English language publications and academic peer-reviewed articles published in scholarly journals. No time limit was set on the search. This initial search resulted in 1,172 articles.

In the second step, articles were narrowed down by excluding publication sources that had a different scope such as a focus on tourism, psychology, customer relations, and marketing. Afterward, the titles, keywords, and, if necessary, abstracts of the articles were read to eliminate the articles that were out of the scope of this review for example

articles exclusively studying environmental sustainability or focusing on internal aspects and operations perspective instead of inter-firm and supply chain perspective. The number of articles was reduced to 255 at this stage.

In the next stage, the shortlisted 255 articles were carefully examined to pinpoint the articles that specifically addressed the topic of this review and brought insights to the research questions. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the systematic review

Inclusion criteria	*Exclusion criteria*
Peer-reviewed journal articles in English	Books, conference papers, book chapters, citations, reports
Articles addressing social sustainability through supplier relationship management	Other languages than English
Articles addressing challenges of social sustainability implementation upstream of the supply chain	Articles focusing only on environmental sustainability or where the social aspect was not the core focus of the study
	Articles focusing on firm-level sustainability and internal management processes
	Articles focusing on supplier selection and other 'hands-off' approaches

The inclusion and exclusion criteria ensured that social sustainability was the focus of the article. The BSR or SRM should be discussed as a 'hands-on' approach. Therefore, articles working on approaches with limited buyer engagement, such as supplier selection studies, were not included. The criteria also ensured that the focus was on upstream social sustainability practices; therefore, articles discussing internal practices toward the focal company's social performance were excluded. The criteria focused the sample articles on papers that provided an answer to the research questions of our article. In the next step, the focused list was complemented by forward and backward search to include the most relevant articles, resulting in the addition of 38 papers. The final 65 articles were then carefully analysed and coded to answer the research questions. Figure 1 summarises the steps of the literature review.

Figure 1 The literature review steps

3 Review results

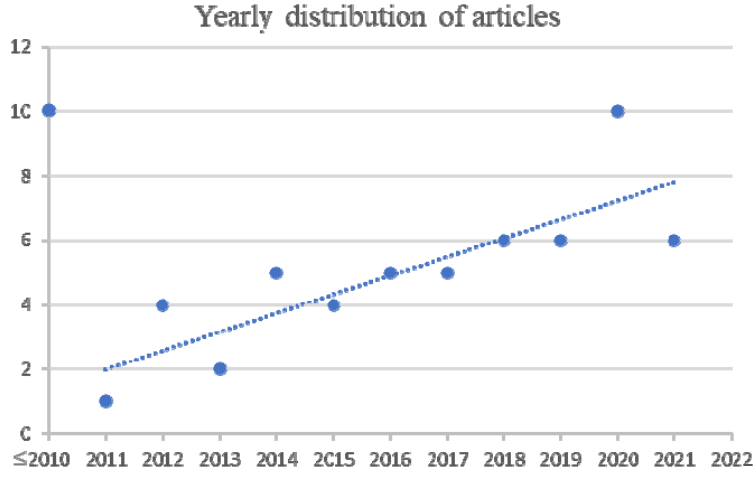
3.1 Descriptive analysis

The distribution of articles by year shows a growing trend, as illustrated in Figure 2. The almost continuous increase in the number of articles shows a growing focus and interest in the social aspect of sustainable sourcing.

We analysed the research methods used in the sample articles. The most used methodology was case study, used in 38 articles (58%), followed by survey, used in ten articles (15%). Seven articles were conceptual or theoretical; five articles used archival research methods; four articles used mixed methods, where both qualitative and quantitative data were collected; and one article used mathematical modelling.

Finally, we analysed the industrial context in which the data was collected. Out of 56 articles with information about the empirical setting of the study, 27 studied the apparel industry (48%), which emphasises the importance of this labour-intensive industry and the extent of its labour issues. Of the remaining papers, 15 used a multi-industry design (27%), six studied the athletic footwear and sport goods industry, five studied the electronics industry, and 1 paper each focused on the agriculture, toy manufacturing, and food industries.

Figure 2 Distribution of sample articles by year (see online version for colours)



3.2 Challenges of social sustainability diffusion in supply chains

Firms face various challenges in diffusing social sustainability in supply chains. Table 2 summarises these challenges identified in the literature.

Table 2 Challenges of social sustainability diffusion within supply chains

	Challenges	*Example references*
Buyers	Lack of power in the relationship, information asymmetry and lack of transparency, lack of alternative suppliers	Lee et al. (2020), Huq and Stevenson (2020), Locke et al. (2009), Hoang and Jones (2012), Perry and Towers (2013), Yu (2008), Amengual et al. (2020)
	Consumer pressure for lower prices	Perry and Towers (2013)

Table 2 Challenges of social sustainability diffusion within supply chains (continued)

	Challenges	*Example references*
Suppliers	Top-down governance issues and lack of workers' voice	Venkatesh et al. (2021), Soundararajan et al. (2021), Köksal and Strähle (2021), Egels-Zandén and Merk (2014), Jindra et al. (2019)
	Exploitative pricing and procurement practices and unfair buyer behaviour	Rahman and Rahman (2020), Soundararajan et al. (2021), Egels-Zandén and Merk (2014), Normann et al. (2017), Alamgir and Banerjee (2019), Jindra et al. (2019), Khattak et al. (2017), Perry and Towers (2013)
	Supplier mock compliance and buyer overlooking mock compliance	Köksal and Strähle (2021), Egels-Zandén and Merk (2014), Venkatesh et al. (2021), Huq and Stevenson (2020), Huq et al. (2016), Soundararajan and Brown (2016)
	Economic-first logic: prioritising profit	Köksal and Strähle (2021), Yu (2008), Huq and Stevenson (2020)
	Social standard, audit, and evaluation issues	Rahman and Rahman (2020), Venkatesh et al. (2021), Locke et al. (2009), Egels-Zandén and Merk (2014), Villena et al. (2021), Huq and Stevenson (2020), Jindra et al. (2019), Soundararajan and Brown (2016)
	Supplier internal issues, such as low management capabilities	Köksal and Strähle (2021), Jindra et al. (2019), Khattak et al. (2017)
Other stakeholders	Negative and demotivating behaviour and lack of support from other stakeholders	Venkatesh et al. (2021), Soundararajan and Brown (2016)
	Sub-suppliers not monitored	Köksal and Strähle (2021), Venkatesh et al. (2021), (Huq and Stevenson (2020)
	Local conditions such as lack of local law enforcement and government pressure	Köksal and Strähle (2021), Yu (2008), Huq and Stevenson (2020), Huq et al. (2016)

These challenges can be classified in relation to the different actors in the supply chain.

3.2.1 Buyers

There is a flow of pressure cascading upstream in supply chains leaving the most negative effects on the most vulnerable, i.e., workers. Studies in the apparel industry as an example, show that consumers still prioritise price, quality, and style over ethics (Köksal et al., 2017). Buying companies transfer price pressures to their suppliers, while also expecting high quality and fair wages for workers. Such conflicting signals could put economic and social values in conflict, leading suppliers to mock comply with sustainability requirements. Suppliers in turn transfer such pressures to their workers: longer working hours, lower wages, and mandatory overtime.

One challenge facing buyers is complex supply chains with low visibility, high distances, and lack of control. Buyers' control over their suppliers is sometimes overestimated (Hoang and Jones, 2012). Supply chains function like networks rather than

hierarchies where visibility and traceability can be lost. Buyers can face communication problems and cultural mismatch with suppliers in different locations due to geographical, organisational, and cultural distances (Abbasi, 2017; Walker and Jones, 2012). Buyers also face challenges with lack of power, lack of alternative suppliers, difficulty in changing suppliers, and lack of resources (Amengual et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020).

3.2.2 Suppliers

Supplier face challenges due to buyers' exploitative behaviour, governance limitations, contextual variables, and internal challenges. Suppliers are exposed to various forms of unfair behaviours from their customers: price pressures, lack of financial support, lack of long-term commitment, and shifting of risks and responsibility (Akbar and Ahsan, 2021; Köksal and Strähle, 2021; Normann et al., 2017; Walker and Jones, 2012). Buyers would shift the responsibility of implementing social standards to suppliers without sharing the costs or resources. Supplier left with the risks and costs of sustainability upgrading without the rewards of higher prices or longer contracts, would feel injustice and in turn pass on the risks further upstream to their suppliers, i.e., lower-tier suppliers, which are often not monitored (Huq and Stevenson, 2020).

Challenges also arise from ineffectiveness of the governance process including the principles and standards, the audit process, and the enforcement process (Egels-Zandén and Lindholm, 2015; Hoang and Jones, 2012). Social standards are criticised for being limited and counterproductive as they are designed without local circumstances and differences in mind (Akbar and Ahsan, 2021; Huq et al., 2014; Köksal and Strähle, 2021). In addition, multiple codes of conduct and annual audits, lack of unified measurement indicators or methods, subjectivity in evaluation, and credibility of third-party auditors make the process less effective (Abbasi, 2017; Akbar and Ahsan, 2021; Huq et al., 2014; Huq and Stevenson, 2020).

Supplier, especially from emerging economies, also bear the challenges of their local contexts such as lack of regulations, weak enforcement of regulations, general disregard of rules and regulations, bribery and corruption, inadequate infrastructure, local infrastructure failure, lack of trust in unions, and low power of unions (Akbar and Ahsan, 2021; Köksal and Strähle, 2021; Köksal et al., 2017).

Internal challenges also impede the adoption of socially responsible objectives and practices. These include economic-first value perspective or transaction costs economics (TCE) logic, lack of commitment from top management, and lack of skills, knowledge, time, financial, and human capital (Abbasi, 2017; Akbar and Ahsan, 2021; Köksal and Strähle, 2021; Walker and Jones, 2012).

3.2.3 Other stakeholders

Other stakeholders, in addition to buyers and suppliers, can also pose challenges. Third-party auditors have been found to exhibit unethical behaviour, such as reporting negatively to increase the number of visits and earn more money (Huq et al., 2014; Huq and Stevenson, 2020); multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) have been criticised for being overly corporate-driven, resulting in counterproductive audits and codes for workers, and a lack of transparency (Köksal et al., 2017); Opportunistic, politicised or corrupt non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or trade unions discourage supplier

commitments and compliance and taint trust in the process (Huq et al., 2014; Soundararajan and Brown, 2016; Venkatesh et al., 2021).

3.3 SRM approaches

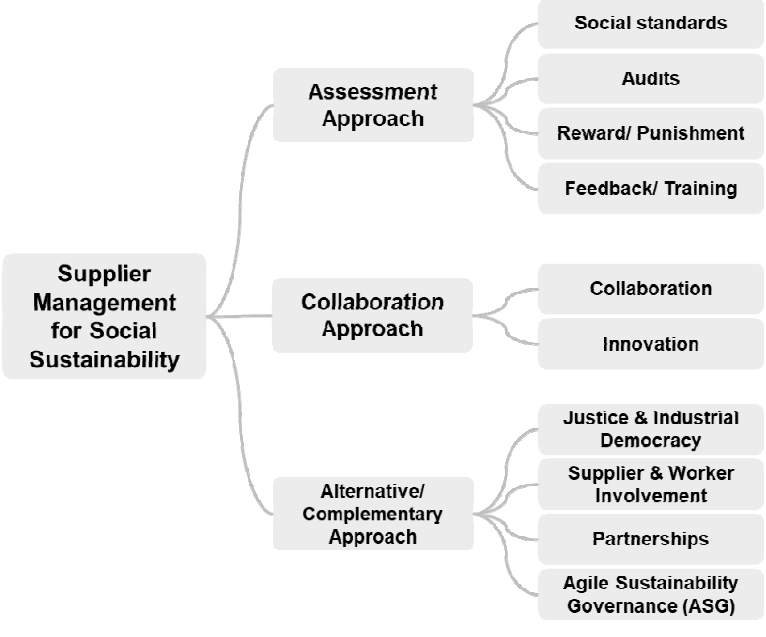
Our review identified two main approaches of SRM which following Gimenez and Tachizawa (2012) we call:

a assessment approach

b collaborative approach.

The two approaches are also referred to in several different terms such as reactive and proactive (Cox, 2004), indirect and direct (Arroyo-López et al., 2012), transactional and collaboration (Alghababsheh and Gallear, 2021), buyer-to-supplier and peer-to-peer (Jiang, 2009), coercive and cooperative (Hoejmose et al., 2014), compliance and collaborative/cooperative (Frenkel and Scott, 2002; Lund-Thomsen and Lindgreen, 2014), compliance and commitment (Locke et al., 2009), and prescription and collaboration (Muller et al., 2012) approaches. However, as will be discussed, some researchers criticise these approaches as being inadequate to respond to the complicated realities of social issues in supply chains. In response, these researchers propose complementary approaches for addressing social issues. Figure 3 illustrates all these approaches, and they are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Figure 3 Supplier management approaches and practices for social sustainability

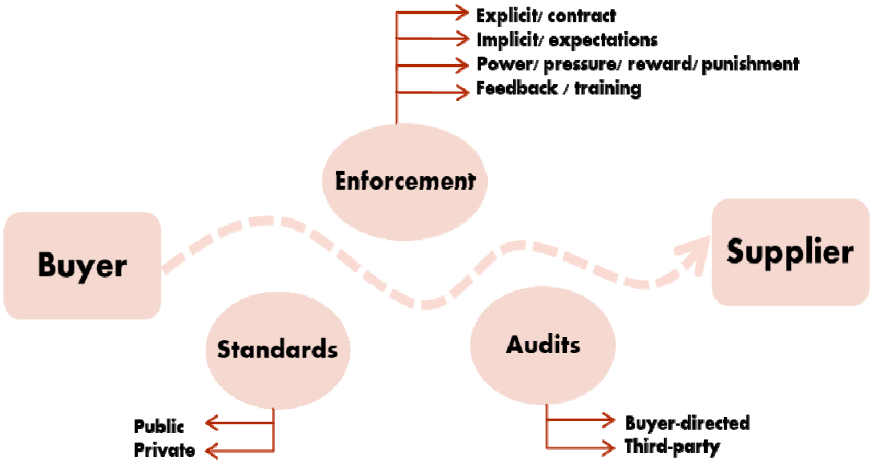


Source: Developed by authors based on literature review

3.3.1 Assessment approach

The assessment approach of managing suppliers for social sustainability usually includes a standard for suppliers to comply with and a monitoring process to evaluate supplier compliance. The standards can be internally developed by buyers [i.e., private standards or codes of conduct (CoCs)] or externally developed by third parties (i.e., public standards) such as ISO standards. The monitoring, often in the form of audits, is either performed by the buyer's employees or by third-party auditors, or requested from the supplier, who must pay for third-party auditors themselves. The practices of this approach are depicted in Figure 4.

Figure 4 The assessment governance approach (see online version for colours)



Another aspect of the assessment approach is a mechanism to enforce the standards, govern supplier compliance, or safeguard against supplier non-compliance. This can be done through explicit clauses in the contract and other means of formal agreements, agreed implicitly without formal enforcements, enforced by power and pressure mechanisms, or regulated by rewards and sanctions. This can be followed by evaluation feedback from the audit process and training to improve supplier performance.

Various actors have a role in implementing the assessment approach. Huq et al. (2016) emphasise that in the assessment approach, both buyers and suppliers play a role, and supplier compliance capabilities should be acknowledged alongside buyer monitoring capabilities. Frenkel and Scott (2002) also emphasise the role of the buyer's audit team and how skilled they are in fostering change and building collaborative relationships.

Assessment is a prevalent approach to governing suppliers' social compliance (Köksal and Strähle, 2021; Normann et al., 2017). Several studies explore the effectiveness of the assessment approach (Egels-Zandén and Lindholm, 2015; Egels-Zandén and Merk, 2014; Locke et al., 2007, 2009; Locke and Romis, 2007; Soundararajan and Brown, 2016; Yu, 2008). While some studies acknowledge the positive role of the assessment approach in improving supplier social compliance (Ciliberti et al., 2011; Egels-Zandén, 2014; Oka, 2010), many criticise its limitations (Hoang and Jones, 2012; Soundararajan and Brown, 2016; Villena et al., 2021).

Buyers and their procurement practices are subject to much criticism. Egels-Zandén and Lindholm (2015) and Egels-Zandén and Merk (2014) find the assessment approach fundamentally flawed and unable to detect violations of worker rights in the form of discrimination or lack of freedom of association. This shortcoming is frequently accredited to buyers' lack of genuine commitment to improving workers' rights (Anner, 2012) and failure to share the costs or considering the local conditions and suppliers' resources or capabilities (Soundararajan and Brown, 2016). The enforcement mechanisms of the assessment approach are not always present or effectively implemented (Amengual et al., 2020; Klassen and Vereecke, 2012; Locke et al., 2009; Villena et al., 2021).

Locke et al. (2007) and Locke and Romis (2007) observe that assessment has limited effect alone, but considerable improvements happen when it is combined with other interventions to address the root causes of poor working conditions. Locke et al. (2009) also mention that to improve the assessment approach, complementary initiatives such as a process of root-cause analysis, joint problem solving, information sharing, and diffusion of best practices are needed. Similarly, Hoang and Jones (2012) propose recognising and strengthening workers' voices in the workplace and going beyond auditing, by providing feedback and training. This suggests a transition from coercive approaches toward collaborative approaches of supplier management.

3.3.2 Collaborative approach

Collaborative approach refers to supplier development, integration, and capability building activities where both parties contribute resources in joint activities to improve social performance (Klassen and Vereecke, 2012). Several researchers report the positive outcome of collaborative initiatives (Distelhorst et al., 2017; Huq and Stevenson, 2020). For example, Jindra et al. (2019) explore the cooperative social initiatives of Fairphone in China and report a positive effect on social upgrading on both dimensions of measurable standards – workers' rights, which are more easily measured, such as wages and working hours; and enabling rights, encompassing other workers' rights, such as freedom of association.

Collaborative approaches to supplier management also face limitations: they require long-term trust-based relationships that can only develop over longer periods of time, impose high implementation costs and transaction-specific investments, and, therefore, can only be achieved with a small number of suppliers (Klassen and Vereecke, 2012; Lund-Thomsen and Lindgreen, 2014).

Innovation approaches are also introduced alongside monitoring and collaboration for the management of social issues in supply chains (Klassen and Vereecke, 2012). Innovation often involves new stakeholders or engaging existing stakeholders in new ways (Klassen and Vereecke, 2012). Huq et al. (2016) observe such capabilities at buying companies, for example, giving annual awards to suppliers for best sustainability contribution, auditing suppliers' capacity planning to prevent suppliers from accepting orders above their capacity, and developing unique social initiatives in collaboration with other stakeholders, such as health education sessions for female factory workers or an educational video on fire safety.

3.3.3 Complementary approaches

In addition to the governance mechanisms discussed above, studies have investigated complementary pathways on social sustainability diffusion in supply chains. Among the complementary approaches proposed are partnering with other stakeholders in the supply chain, such as NGOs (Rodríguez et al., 2016), competitor firms (Lee et al., 2020), and supply chain intermediaries (SCIs) (Cole and Aitken, 2020; Köksal et al., 2018); bottom-up approaches (Reinecke and Donaghey, 2021); and supplier-perceived justice in the exchange relationship (Alghababsheh et al., 2020; Normann et al., 2017).

One alternative approach studied by several researchers is the role of other supply chain stakeholders in the diffusion of social sustainability in supply chains and how buying companies can leverage partnering with them and utilise their expertise and capabilities to achieve sustainability goals that were not attainable before. Rodríguez et al. (2016) study the case of an NGO in Ecuador working on poverty alleviation, bringing its localisation knowledge and bridging capabilities and the buying firm providing knowledge and logistics resources. Soundararajan et al. (2018) explore the role of sourcing agents as SCIs to bridge the power, language, and culture gap between buyers and their developing economy suppliers. Similarly, Cole and Aitken (2020) investigate the role of not-for-profit organisations as sustainability SCIs at different stages of procurement.

One strand of the literature focuses on MSIs. MSIs are membership-based initiatives that bring multiple stakeholders together to increase sustainability in global supply chains through private forms of regulatory governance. Huq et al. (2016) see MSIs as promising avenues to improve buyer auditing capabilities, with the potential to fill the regulatory gap in emerging economies. Examples of MSIs include the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (Accord) and the Alliance for Bangladesh Workers' Safety (Alliance), which are explored and compared in several studies (Alamgir and Banerjee, 2019; Awasthy and Hazra, 2019; Kabeer et al., 2020; Oka et al., 2020; Rahman and Rahman, 2020; Tighe, 2016).

Contrary to the objectives of initiatives such as MSIs to involve suppliers and respect supplier agency, Lee et al. (2020) observe that recently, some developing country suppliers are gaining more power and becoming less dependent on buyers and, therefore, rejecting buyer labour initiatives, leading some buyers to move back from collaborative-trust-based models to coercive-power-based models. They study a subset of MSIs called business- (or industry-) driven initiatives (BDIs), in which buyers form a collaborative alliance to increase their leverage over suppliers. Such buyer coalitions are an alternative to coercive or collaborative governance mechanisms and can bring greater bargaining power to buyers, reduce the cost of audits, and stimulate knowledge sharing and discussion among buyers, leading to a pooling of resources to address labour issues in developing country supplier firms (Huq and Stevenson, 2020; Lee et al., 2020).

Suppliers' feeling of inequity is considered one of the reasons for their decoupling from sustainability initiatives. Buyers can potentially increase supplier social compliance by fostering a feeling of fairness in their suppliers by revising their procurement practices. Alghababsheh et al. (2020) hypothesise that buyer's justice, as perceived by suppliers, affects suppliers' social performance either directly or indirectly through SSSC practices. Normann et al. (2017) investigate whether and how the supplier assessment approach leads to suppliers' perceived injustice. They find that most suppliers experience injustice over their customers' assessment initiatives: they feel that buyers do not incur

many costs, but they (the suppliers) are heavily burdened by the costs of sustainability initiatives. Perceived justice was higher among suppliers who perceived their rewards, costs, and investments to be more balanced with those of their customers (Normann et al., 2017).

The ability of these approaches to bring meaningful and sustained improvements in worker rights is also challenged. Anner (2012) argues that corporate-influenced corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs are focused on basic working conditions (i.e., measurable standards), such as wages, working hours, and occupational health and safety, but fall short of more advanced and meaningful rights of freedom of association (i.e., enabling rights) because these put the corporation's control over their businesses at risk. They argue that labor-influenced programs, such as the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), are more capable of addressing these rights than biased, corporate-influenced programs (Anner, 2012). Following the same line of thought, Donaghey and Reinecke (2018) and Reinecke and Donaghey (2021) bring up discussions of industrial democracy as a solution to involve workers in developing effective initiatives to address labour issues. They argue that the worker voice should be incorporated at different levels across the global supply chain (i.e., transactional and work-place level) to drive decent work (Reinecke and Donaghey, 2021).

Considering the complexities of the issue and the lack of a single solution to fit all conditions, Soundararajan et al. (2021) propose a four-stage flexible approach called agile sustainability governance (ASG) to respond to the shortcomings of traditional top-down governance mechanisms. Their proposed approach includes a collective definition of sustainability benchmarks together with the suppliers, autonomous execution to ensure suppliers of different sizes and conditions have agency and freedom to find their own ways to adopt practices, evaluation and collective learning based on corrective measures and peer-to-peer learning, and, finally, collective redefinition based on authentic dialog (Soundararajan et al., 2021).

3.3.4 Moderating factors to assessment and collaborative approaches

A strand of literature studies the influence of moderating and contextual factors on the process of social sustainability diffusion. Khattak et al. (2017), Hoque and Rana (2020), and Alghababsheh and Gallear (2021) explore the effect of BSR dynamics, Oka (2010) studies the impact of buyer's reputation-consciousness – measured through the buyer's membership in the International Labour Organization (ILO) program and Better Factories Cambodia (BFC) – while Mani et al. (2018) study the moderating effect of buyer's commitment and long-term investments on supplier and buyer's performance. In addition, Bird et al. (2019) study the role of supplier organisational structure and Awan et al. (2018a, 2018b) study the moderating role of suppliers' top management behaviour and characteristics.

Another influencing variable suggested by many researchers is the national, political, and legal context in which firms operate. Reinecke and Donaghey (2021) emphasise the political nature of decent work issues in supply chains. Lund-Thomsen and Coe (2015) study the CSR effect on labour agency in Pakistan and conclude that the national context poses serious limitations that prevent the achievement of CSR objectives. Similarly, Khattak et al. (2017) observe that institutional factors affect the conditions created by buyers for supplier social upgrading, comparing Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Distelhorst

et al. (2015) also emphasise the national context as the main predictor of social sustainability compliance as opposed to private regulation initiatives.

3.4 Addressing the challenges of diffusing social sustainability

In this section, we discuss how SRM studies have addressed the identified challenges in diffusing social sustainability within supply chains. Table 3 summarises the suggested solutions for challenges derived from the literature.

Buying companies may face difficulties in diffusing social sustainability to their suppliers. Buyers can be in a disadvantaged position compared to their more powerful suppliers: being smaller than their suppliers (smaller size or small order volume) or a lack of access to alternative suppliers can put buying companies in a position with low bargaining power and low influence over non-compliant suppliers (Amengual et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020). Multi-stakeholder initiatives are proposed as a means for buyers to gain collective leverage over larger suppliers (Oka et al., 2020), and similarly, buyer coalitions (i.e., BDIs) are suggested to tackle this challenge: if competing buying companies who share a common supply base collaborate to leverage their collective influence, they can put pressure on more powerful and less dependent suppliers to comply with labour standards (Huq and Stevenson, 2020; Lee et al., 2020).

One of the impediments to sustainability in supply chains is the dominance of economic logic, where profitability overshadows social and environmental objectives. When competing over scarce resources, the conflict between social logic and economic logic (Huq and Stevenson, 2020) prevents firms from committing to social practices and leads to partial or non-compliance. Proposed solutions to this challenge try to narrow this value gap. Huq and Stevenson (2020) propose that collaboration between buying companies (e.g., joint auditing approaches, such as Accord and Alliance) can help overcome this challenge. Winning orders would become more difficult for non-compliant suppliers, making the price of decoupling higher and bringing more balance to social and economic goals. It is also proposed that education and training (especially training for owners) can change perceptions of value and increase the importance of social values closer to an equal position with (conventionally superior) economic values (Huq and Stevenson, 2020), creating a virtuous cycle over time as socially compliant suppliers receive the economic gains of their social practices by winning more orders and having more productive workers. Similarly, to address internal goal conflicts, buyers should empower their CSR departments along with adopting socially responsible values, visions, and organisational culture (Köksal and Strähle, 2021).

Local conditions in developing countries pose several challenges for social sustainability implementation. One of these challenges is governmental issues, such as authorities' lack of commitment to social standards (Köksal and Strähle, 2021), corruption and bribery (Köksal and Strähle, 2021; Köksal et al., 2017), inadequate regulations, and limited enforcement and monitoring of regulations (Abbasi, 2017; Akbar and Ahsan, 2021; Huq and Stevenson, 2020). Some studies propose that buyers' powerful effect, especially if joined and reinforced through coalitions, can replace the lack of governmental law enforcement and, hence, drive social sustainability compliance in developing country supplier firms (Huq and Stevenson, 2020; Huq et al., 2016). Locke et al. (2013) study the case of two matched suppliers to HP, one in Mexico and one in the Czech Republic, and find that, depending on the national context, private regulatory initiatives might complement or completely substitute public regulations. They observe

that in the Czech Republic, with stronger public regulation, private initiatives play a complementary role, while in Mexico, private initiatives substitute for weak or non-existent public regulations on labour issues.

Table 3 SRM practices to address the challenges of social sustainability diffusion

	Challenges	*SRM practices to address challenges*
Buyer	Buyer's lack of power in the relationship	BDIs and MSIs to gain leverage and coerce collective pressure (Huq and Stevenson, 2020; Lee et al., 2020; Oka et al., 2020)
Supplier	Top-down governance and absence of workers' voice	Supplier involvement, worker-driven, bottom-up approach (Reineke and Donaghey, 2021); collective definition of standards and autonomous execution (Soundararajan et al., 2021); a workers' committee to monitor workplace health and safety issues (Jindra et al., 2019)
	Economic-first logic	Empowering CSR departments (Köksal and Strähle, 2021); buyer collaboration to increase the cost of non-compliance for suppliers through loss of business; education and training (especially for owners) (Huq and Stevenson, 2020)
	Social standards failure	Social standards update: shift from outcome orientation, include measures of buyer sourcing practices, safeguards (Köksal and Strähle, 2021)
	Audit ineffectiveness	Unannounced audits (Köksal and Strähle, 2021); on-site managers from the buying firm and working with a local agency for social assessment (Jindra et al., 2019)
	Failure of reward and punishment as safeguard	Corrective measures instead of penalties; peer-to-peer learning for suppliers; experimenting (Soundararajan et al., 2021)
	Multiple CoCs and audits	BDIs or MSIs for joint auditing (Huq et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2020)
	Mock compliance	Buyer consortium audits are more strict, thorough, and transparent, which decreases suppliers' decoupling (Huq et al., 2016)
	Internal problems: employees seek overtime	Social standards should go beyond local wage (Köksal and Strähle, 2021); incentives to increase worker productivity to control overtime (Jindra et al., 2019)
	Buyer price pressure and exploitative procurement practices	Increased communication to create collaborative and transparent relationship; technical and organisational assistance for suppliers; updating monitoring system; buyer investigating their business process for sources of pressure on suppliers (Locke et al., 2007); reconfiguring sourcing models; prices reflecting fair wages and good working conditions (Alamgir and Banerjee, 2019); buyer changing purchasing policies to equalise purchasing orders (Jindra et al., 2019); improving forecasting using new technology (Köksal and Strähle, 2021)

Notes: BDI = business-driven initiative; MSI = multi-stakeholder initiative; CoC = codes of conduct; SS = social sustainability; SCI = supply chain intermediary.

Table 3 SRM practices to address the challenges of social sustainability diffusion (continued)

	Challenges	*SRM practices to address challenges*
Supplier	Unfair buyer behaviour: transferring risks to suppliers and no benefits	Incentives including price premiums, cost sharing, and guarantee for continuous orders (Köksal and Strähle, 2021; Yu, 2008)
	Ambiguity in the meaning and operationalisation of SS	SCIs transferring knowledge (Cole and Aitken, 2020)
	Lack of knowledge resources	SCIs as sources of knowledge (Cole and Aitken, 2020)
Other stakeholders	Lack of local law enforcement and government pressure	Buyer collaboration replacing government role (Distelhorst et al., 2015; Huq and Stevenson, 2020; Huq et al., 2016); BDIs to lobby governments (Lee et al., 2020)
	Sub-contractors not monitored	Social standards to include subcontractor monitoring and auditing (Köksal and Strähle, 2021)

Notes: BDI = business-driven initiative; MSI = multi-stakeholder initiative; CoC = codes of conduct; SS = social sustainability; SCI = supply chain intermediary.

In addition to influencing suppliers, global firms could even play a bigger advocacy role and lobby governments for improvements in labour standards in emerging economies (Lee et al., 2020; Oka et al., 2020).

4 Discussion

Buying companies strive to improve the sustainability of their supply chains. In this review, we explore the literature to find how buyers are managing their supplier relationships to achieve this goal, and we propose a model of approaches (see Figure 3) based on our findings. We observe that the literature is dominated by the studies of assessment and collaborative approaches. While earlier studies promote the positive outcomes of these mechanisms, their shortcomings led to a body of literature studying complementary practices and propositions on the future of SRM for social sustainability. Figure 5 illustrates the challenges of social sustainability diffusion in supply chains and a recurring process to detect underlying causes, bring equity to the process, involve different actors, pool resources through partnerships, and work together to implement social practices and redefine and improve relationship management approaches to overcome the challenges.

To overcome the challenges, studied articles propose and discuss various solutions. We categorise these suggestions into a five-stage process. First, the root cause hindering the application of social initiatives should be detected and addressed. Many researchers show that while buying companies require their suppliers to comply with social standards, they drive their suppliers into unethical practices by their unfair procurement practices (Alamgir and Banerjee, 2019; Jindra et al., 2019; Khattak et al., 2017; Köksal and Strähle, 2021; Perry and Towers, 2013; Venkatesh et al., 2021). For example, in the apparel and fashion industry, where demand is less predictable, sudden changes in orders

and short lead times required from suppliers leads to long working hours and worker mistreatment at supplier premises. If these practices stay in place, buyers' coercive attempts in extending sustainability to suppliers could prove ineffective. Addressing these issues might require buyers to analyse their procurement and business processes to detect and resolve sources of pressure on suppliers, to upgrade their forecasting capabilities by incorporating emerging technologies, and to increase communication with suppliers and build collaborative relationships to jointly handle such issues.

Figure 5 A model of SRM practices to address challenges of social sustainability diffusion (see online version for colours)

Social initiatives are commonly enforced as top-down approaches and are frequently perceived as unfit, forced, or unjust by suppliers (Venkatesh et al., 2021; Egels-Zandén and Merk, 2014; Jindra et al., 2019). Social standards and assessment approaches are usually designed in advanced economies, enforced on suppliers without considering their capabilities and resources, and miss workers' voices. To bring justice into the process, social initiatives need to be updated to include workers' voices in every stage of the process, and standards need to include measures for both buyers' sourcing practices and suppliers' compliance practices. To include these actors' voices, they should be involved in the social sustainability development and execution process. Social standards should be collectively defined, continuously evaluated and revised, executed with freedom and flexibility to respect supplier agency, and followed by corrective measures and necessary learning (Soundararajan et al., 2021).

To achieve such ambitious goals, buyers need to join forces with other supply chain actors and stakeholders (Huq and Stevenson, 2020; Lee et al., 2020). Buyers can

collaborate together through buyer consortium audits to streamline the auditing process, share knowledge, and pool resources for social goals; they can partner with and leverage the unique resources of NGOs, SCIs, and other stakeholders to localise social practices, strengthen links with suppliers, and advance supplier development programs; and buyers can establish or join MSIs to converge the scattered efforts of different stakeholders into a united and stronger force for social sustainability diffusion.

Finally, the unbalanced and unfair distribution of roles need to change (Alghababsheh et al. 2020; Normann et al., 2017): suppliers should no longer shoulder the heavier portions of the responsibilities, costs, and risks of implementing social initiatives while buyers enjoy the benefits of reputation and competitive advantages. Buyers need to go beyond regulating codes, audits, and penalties and get involved by supporting suppliers through training and education; sharing the costs of implementation; offering incentives to share the benefits and foster commitment; offering feedback, follow-up, and corrective programs; and establishing a safe environment of experimenting, learning, and open dialog where obstacles can be detected and addressed. This creates a continuous process of SRM improvements that can evolve and adapt to changes in the dynamic business environment to achieve a SSSC.

5 Conclusions and suggestions for further research

In this paper, we reviewed 65 peer-reviewed articles to identify the challenges of social sustainability diffusion in supply chains. In addition, we proposed a model of SRM practices from literature to address these challenges. This research has several implications for the literature on SSCM and responsible sourcing. The study shows a focus on the supplier assessment approach and criticisms to it, followed by studies of collaborative approach and comparisons of the two approaches. The analysis further reveals an emerging body of literature discussing alternative or complementary approaches, including partnering with stakeholders; reversing the top-down enforcement of solutions; involving suppliers, workers, and other affected stakeholders in the process of solution development and implementation; respecting supplier agency; minimising inequity; and addressing the underlying cause of unsustainable behaviour rather that treating the symptoms.

This research has practical implications for organisations, policymakers, and other stakeholders with interests in socially responsible sourcing. The proposed framework (see Figure 5) can be used to evaluate the relationship management efforts of firms for social sustainability based on current best practices. This can provide insights on the sources of challenges and help identify potential solutions to improve firms' social initiatives. Future research is needed to test and improve the model, explore the extent to which firms apply and benefit from the practices, study the applicability and contingencies of practices, and revise the process as solutions are developed and updated.

We also propose future research avenues based on the limitations of the approaches discussed, the infancy of research on alternative and complementary approaches, and the identified challenges of social sustainability diffusion that remain unresolved and require further investigation. Future research could further study the effects of consumers' prices-centric demands on driving unsustainable sourcing behaviours along the supply chain and the potential role of supply chain actors in influencing such behaviour. Further research is needed to address the challenges posed by the complexity of supply chains and the

geographical, organisational, and cultural distances, and the potential role of buyer coalitions and MSIs in addressing those challenges. Future research should also focus on less addressed contexts of suppliers' and workers' perspectives, developing country settings, and the service sector context. More research is needed to bring further empirical insight on emerging complementary and alternative approaches such as business- or industry-driven initiatives, agile sustainability governance, engaging non-traditional stakeholders, the role of industrial democracy and organisational justice, and the potential role of emerging new technologies to foster social sustainability in supply chains.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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