

Sustainable Practices in Supply Chain Management: A Bibliometric Analysis

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Abstract

Sustainable supply chain practices have been gaining more interest in both the scientific and business community, in the context of green development and its corresponding objectives. Therefore, in today's rapidly evolving global landscape, the adoption of green supply chain solutions has emerged as a critical imperative for organizations across industries, some studies even mentioning the concept of supply cycle management (referring to an overall orientation towards zero-waste). Our paper aims to identify the scientific interest manifested for the topic of sustainable practices in supply chain management, by using bibliometric analysis, a quantitative research method. Our research methodology consists of two stages: conducting a query based on keywords on Scopus platform to select scientific papers that are related to the proposed topic and then analyzing the results. Our findings show that the scientific interest for themes related to both SCM and sustainability has increasingly grown especially over the past ten years. The results of our paper are useful for understanding the main research directions in this topic, as we also identify links with other keywords, and can be a starting point for practitioners in formulating a strategy for sustainability of the supply chain. Taking into consideration our results we can conclude that it is imperative to include sustainability objectives in the redesign of local and global supply chains, leading to the concept of green supply chains.

Keywords

Supply chain management, sustainable practices, bibliometric analysis, green supply chain.

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Introduction

Sustainable business practices allow companies to pursue profit, meanwhile taking into consideration sustainability aspects from an economic, environmental, and social perspective (Shekarian et al., 2022). The supply chain management (SCM) practices refer to procurement of raw materials, production stages and delivery of products to customers. The environmental impact of supply chain specific activities should be taken into consideration in the context of resource scarcity, pollution and climate change. The term "sustainable supply chain (SSC)" was added to the terminology of research studies (Lis, Sudolska and Tomanek, 2020).

The current paper approaches the best practices in green supply chain management, emphasizing the most recent innovations in this sector, triggered mostly by incorporating advanced technology in SC solutions. Because sustainability can be a very difficult goal to achieve, the literature review will focus also on the limitations of green supply chain solutions implemented by companies, reinforcing what true sustainability looks like from some authors' perspective. A common trend triggered by the orientation towards sustainability and the green supply chain can be seen in the use of biofuels as an alternative to traditional fuel. However, the biofuel production is controversial according to some theoreticians or practitioners, as it may be in contradiction with other sustainable development objectives related to food production and

ending world hunger. Recycling and green packaging solutions are also very important in the green supply chain, which is why the current paper indicates the current use of recycled packaging among companies worldwide. Our overview will highlight the most significant aspects that can translate into barriers in the implementation of green supply chain solutions, to identify the main risks that characterize the potential evolution in the area.

Our study aims to review the main contributions in the scientific literature dedicated to the topic of sustainable supply chain management and conduct a bibliometric analysis to highlight the interest of researchers in this domain. Our research questions are: Which are the main subjects related to sustainable practices in supply chain management addressed in scientific literature? What are the most frequent used keywords from this area of research? What is the trend in research papers publication on supply chain sustainability? Our paper is structured in five main parts: overview of the scientific literature on the most significant aspects of supply chain management from a sustainability perspective, methodology of research, bibliometric analysis, result and discussion, conclusions.

1. Literature review

1.1. Green supply chain solutions and its impact on sustainability

Sustainable or green development represents an important trend present worldwide, which involves a balanced development, in which all concerns regarding economic, social, and environmental factors are considered to achieve sustainable long-term development (Zhu et al, 2023). The concept of a green supply chain has developed starting with 2010 until today, despite the obstacles that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought (Deste, Yıldırım and Yurttas, 2024). The interaction between sustainable development and the green supply chain is essential to achieving environmental and sustainability goals. Based on complex research (Geng, Mansouri and Aktas, 2017) performed among manufacturing companies from Asian emerging economies, it is indicated that the use of green supply chain management (GSCM) contributes significantly to performance increase in the following economic, operational, environmental, and social areas.



Figure no. 1. Green supply chain structure

Source: Deste, Yıldırım and Yurttas, 2024

Research performed on Chinese manufacturing firms between 2011 and 2020, revealed that digital transformation contributed significantly to enhancing the corporate supply chain (Liao et al, 2024). In this regard, China seems to be the leading country in the green supply chain research area with a total of 1361 studies conducted between 2010 and 2020 (Deste, Yıldırım and Yurttas, 2024). Companies in sectors such as technology, retail, automotive, and consumer goods have made substantial investments in sustainability initiatives within their supply chains (Alsadi, Alaskar and Mezghani, 2021).

Esfahbodi et al. (2023) indicated in a recent study that adopting green supply chain management (GSCM) can lead to trade-offs between sustainability and profitability, known as the fallacy of profitable GSCM. They highlight the importance of green information systems (GIS) in moderating the relationship between GSCM practices and economic performance. Additionally, Heldt and Beske-Janssen (2023) discuss the use of satellite technology in managing sustainability in multi-tier supply chains, focusing on forest-risk commodity supply chains. Firms are leveraging satellite technology for traceability, monitoring, follow-up, and stakeholder accountability to address issues like deforestation. Moreover, Matsui (2023) explores optimal

collection channel strategies for recycling companies under competition, suggesting that differentiation of collection channels may be more beneficial than using both online and offline channels.

Regarding the reverse logistic subject, Nanayakkara et al. (2022) propose a circular reverse logistics framework for handling e-commerce returns, emphasizing the integration of Circular Economy principles in Reverse Logistics operations. Their approach leads to cost savings, optimized locations for Integrated Collection Centers, and an efficient Reverse Logistics network design. On a more practical side, De Souza et al. (2022) introduce a practical tool to assess companies' green logistics using a unified index, aiming to help identify areas for improvement and enhance environmental performance within the supply chain. The tool was applied to two companies in the plastic packaging sector, highlighting areas for improvement in green transportation, packaging, and reverse logistics. On the same page, Balouei Jamkhaneh, Shahin and Tortorella (2022) discuss the assessment of Logistics 4.0 service quality (L4.0SQ) criteria and sustainability enabler scenarios in emerging economies, emphasizing the role of emerging technologies in enhancing logistics services quality. They identify artificial intelligence, advanced robotics, blockchain, and additive manufacturing as crucial enablers for improving L4.0SQ. Additionally, Pathak, Kant, and Shankar (2022) emphasize the importance of considering consumers' preferences, pricing decisions, and sales strategies in a dual channel setting to maximize profitability across different channel configurations.

1.2. Creating a green supply chain: fuel consumption and alternative sources. The impact of biofuels in transportation

Transportation represents a critical part of the supply chain, as it contributes to CO₂ emissions, which is why in a green supply chain, the common trend identified nowadays is to use alternative fuels such as biofuels, CNG solutions, hybrid vehicles, and eco-friendly components to avoid the environmental impact. A recent study published by Statista Research Department (2024), indicates that the biofuel consumption in the E.U. has increased by 2.3 million metric tones between 2015 and 2021, biodiesel being the most consumed type of biofuels in Europe with a total consumption of 13.6 million metric tones (out of which up to 68.7% is used for transportation purposes). Even if they can be used also as heating sources or for electricity generation, biofuels are mostly used in the E.U. for transportation, the leading countries in this area being Germany, France, and Italy. Another research performed by the same source (Statista, 2024) indicates that France is the leading E.U. country by biofuel consumption in transportation during 2022 with a total of 3.1 million metric tons. Another recent Statista report (2023) conducted a forecast related to the annual growth of the biofuel market at a global scale between 2021 and 2030 by region. Based on the results of the research, the region that will register the highest growth will be the Middle East and Africa with 9.6%, followed by the Asia Pacific region with 5.5% and North America with 5.2%. The regions with the lowest estimated growth are Latin America, with 4.4%, and Europe with only 4%.

However, the subject of biofuels brings to attention another important subject, as we need to consider also the materials used for biofuels. The main categories of biofuels are the ones created from food crops, waste or co-products (advanced biofuels), and used cooking oil or animal fats. Out of the total consumption of biofuels in the transportation area during 2021 (7.5%), the highest rate corresponded to biofuels obtained from food crops (4%), followed by used cooking oil or animal fat (1.3%) and advanced biofuels (0.8%). The main issue stated by The European Court of Auditors in their most recent report on sustainable transportation (2023), relates to the impact that the total agricultural land used for food crops used for biofuel might have on food availability. Therefore, wider research performed by the same source, revealed that in most European countries, the total agricultural land used for food crops increased between 2014 and 2020 (Example: Greece: +37%, Poland: +33%, France: +26%, and Slovakia: +7%).

Another research (Jana, D.K. et al, 2022) proposes a systematic approach for biofuel transportation, supply, and process chain analysis, focusing on sustainability in the industry. The study emphasizes the importance of cleaner biofuel supply chains in reducing energy consumption and CO₂ emissions. It also highlights the role of various reduction techniques to address uncertainty in biofuel production and transportation, ultimately leading to cost-effective and sustainable solutions for the industry. The discussed optimization model for a cleaner biofuel supply chain is created using fuzzy goal programming. The model aims to optimize energy consumption and CO₂ emissions in the biofuel supply network, considering factors like feedstocks, transportation, plant locations, and technology. Various reduction techniques are used to convert Type-2 Fuzzy variables to Type-1 Fuzzy variables for optimization. The study includes a real-world case study to demonstrate the effectiveness of the proposed approach in reducing logistical costs in biofuel transportation.

1.3. Waste reduction, recycling and eco-friendly packaging

In the packaging process, the use of efficient packaging contributes to reducing shipping costs, while using biodegradable materials is extremely important as it reduces also the environmental impact. Thus, a study performed by Jaganmohan (2024), focuses on the share of plastic reusable, compostable or recyclable packaging which are used by companies in the food industry between 2018 and 2022. The findings of the research place Danone as the leading company with a percentage of 74% of the plastic packaging being either reusable, compostable or recyclable, along with Nestle which has only 51% of its plastic packaging under this criteria. The article written by Eslamipoor (2023) presents a mixed integer programming model for closed loop supply chains and investigates uncertainty in customer demand and returns using two-stage stochastic programming. The models proposed by the author aim to reduce environmental impact and optimize transportation costs in green supply chains. Another research (Berlin, Feldmann and Nuur, 2022) on the same subject, highlights that closed-loop supply chains (CLSCs) focus on returning products to the OEM for reprocessing and selling as perfect substitutes, while open-loop supply chains (OLSCs) involve other actors reprocessing products and materials for different markets.

Based on a study published by Eurostat (2023), plastic waste across the E.U. countries increased by 27% between 2011 and 2021, while recycled plastic in the same countries only increased by 3.9%. This disproportion in the increase of plastic packaging represents an important problematic that companies need to take into consideration when they design and implement their green supply chain solutions. The leading countries in terms of recycling plastic packaging waste across the E.U. are Slovenia, Belgium and Netherlands with a recycling rate of almost 50%.

Similar to the closed loop system, we identify also the concept of supply cycle management. Moreover, the closed-loop system can be applied to the area of inventory, impacting processes such as material flows, finished product flows and used item flows (Dwicahyani et al., 2017). The entities involved in the closed loop system are the suppliers, plants, warehouses, wholesalers, distributors, retailers, customers, collection centers and disassembly centers (Figure 2). From these centres, the packaging can be directed to recovery, recycling or disposal centres, depending on their final state (Gopal et al., 2023). One of the most important values brought by this type of supply chain comes from its capacity to enhance innovation and contribute to brand reputation (Gopal et al., 2023). Another study (Tushar et al., 2023) emphasizes the importance of sustainable waste management practices, such as reducing waste generation, optimizing resource recovery, and mitigating environmental impacts. Key areas for further exploration include Polymer-based products, Eco-neighbourhood designs, Building Information Modeling (BIM) applications, and efficient Management Systems.

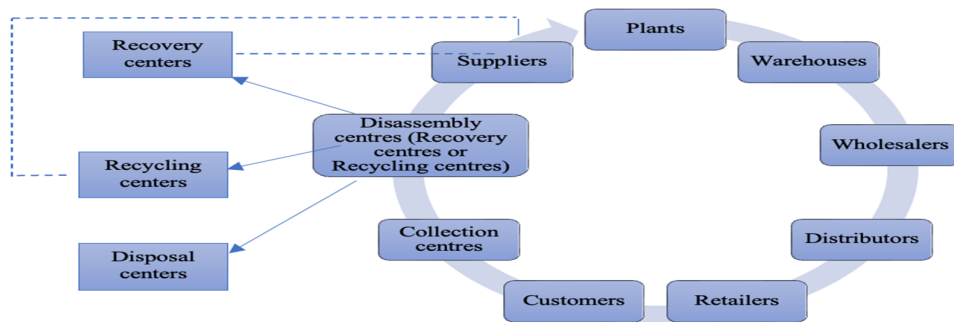


Figure no. 2. Closed-loop supply chain

Source: Gopal et al, 2023

1.4. Barriers in the green supply chain implementation

Even if a green supply chain represents a very actual trend, the reality is that several barriers can appear in this area. A perspective indicates that while companies continue to extend and expand their sustainability programs to include their supply chains, they often struggle with implementation. Moreover, a study that focused on the implementation of green supply chains in restaurants identified that the most common barriers are represented by skepticism, lack of financial responsibility, or corporate lying (Meager et al, 2020). If we consider also the benefic impact of technology within supply chain management, we can strongly affirm based on the insight provided by Dashore and Sohani (2013) that the lack of technology integration and the struggle to adapt to IT&C evolution represent major factors that can constitute barriers in the green supply chain solutions implementation.

In a study conducted by Chakraborty, Al Amin and Baldacci (2023), eight internally controllable factors within an organization are identified and ranked according to their driving power and dependence power. The most critical factor found is the commitment from top management. Additionally, the author classifies these factors into autonomous, dependent, linkage, and independent clusters based on their driving power and dependence power. Factors such as top management commitment, utilization of advanced technology and IT tools, supplier development, logistics system, materials storage and management, pollution prevention and hazardous waste management, reverse logistics management, and environmentally friendly packaging are examined for their impact on green supply chain management.

Another paper (Okorie et al., 2022), focuses on the barriers of Blockchain Technology (BCT) in the context of the Circular Food Supply Chains (CFSCs) and their impact on operational effectiveness. The study identifies 25 barriers categorized based on their area of impact such as law, technology, business environment or organizational functions. The results of the research show that organizational issues are the most significant barriers to blockchain adoption, while technological barriers remain the least weighted category.

2. Research methodology

Our main objective is to identify the scientific interest in the field of sustainable supply chain management. The research method is bibliometric analysis, a transdisciplinary approach at the intersection of information science and business research. The main steps for conducting this analysis are: establishing research objectives and selection of data from a scientific platform; using VOSviewer software and map visualization for bibliometric analysis, formulating conclusions, research limits and future research directions.

The selection of data includes scientific journals, articles, books, and other publications from Scopus database. We used VOS viewer software, version 1.16.19, to perform a quantitative analysis to measure the scientific interest in sustainable practices in supply chain activity and to create maps which graphically represent the links between the most frequent keywords.

Several filters were applied for the query and refinements were made to select the database. Following the query, a number of 272 documents were identified that contain the keywords: TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Sustainable practices" AND "supply chains management").

3. Results and discussion

The query of the Scopus database led to the identification of a number of 272 scientific documents in which the terms "Sustainable practices" AND "supply chains management" were found at least in their title, summary or keywords. The 272 analyzed documents refer to articles (65.4%), conference papers (14.7%), reviews (9.9%), book chapters (7%), books (1%). Regarding the temporal distribution of the selected works, the analyzed period is 2003-2024. According to our analysis, in the period 2003-2012 the topic of Sustainable practices in Supply Chain management was not at the center of concerns, as the annual values are between 0-3. Starting with 2013, the awareness regarding the importance of setting sustainability objectives for SCM activities has grown and this reflects in a significant increase in the number of publications researching this subject (see the Figure no. 3).

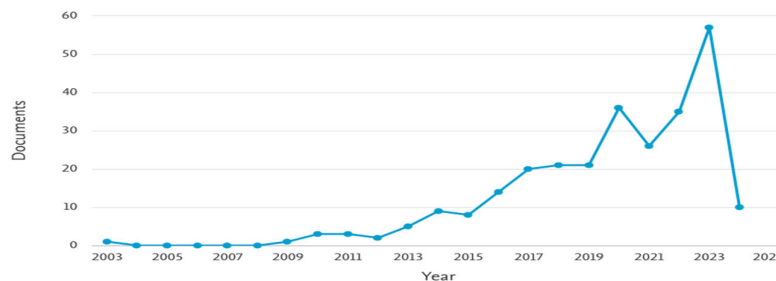


Figure no. 3. Temporal distribution of articles published in the period 2003-2024

Source: Scopus

Regarding the semantic analysis of the keywords with the highest number of occurrences in the analyzed documents, we present in Table no. 1, a selection of the top 10 keywords, according to the strength of the links (given by the number of co-occurrences) they have created with other keywords.

Table no. 1. Top keywords

Keyword	Occurrences	Total link strength
Supply chain management	175	857
Sustainable development	113	670
Sustainability	105	470
Sustainable practice	71	369
Sustainable supply chain management	43	281
Environmental management	47	213
Supply chain	21	161
Decision making	36	133
Green supply chain management	22	123
Manufacturing	16	111

Source: by the authors using VOSviewer

In Figure no. 4 the links between the keywords are highlighted, graphically presented by the branches connecting the different keywords (represented by circles with larger or smaller sizes, depending on the frequency of appearance in the analyzed works). Depending on the strength of the links, the lines are thicker or thinner. For example, a strong link, given by a number of 175 co-occurrences, appears between supply chain management and sustainable practice. It is necessary to specify we included 81 keywords, each of which has a minimum of five occurrences in the documents of the collection. They were grouped into 6 clusters according to the distance between them (by positioning them in a two-dimensional space).

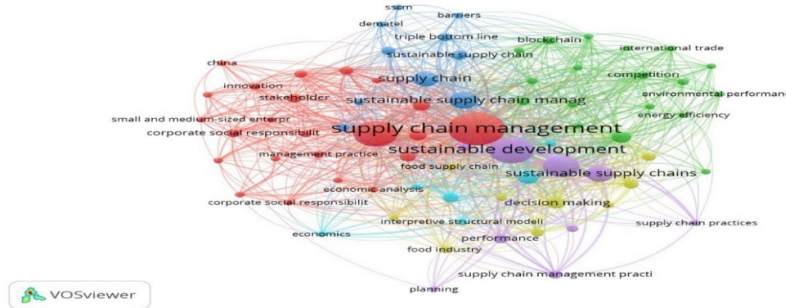


Figure no. 4. Link map between keywords

Source: by the authors using VOSviewer

As can be seen in figure no.5, the density visualization map based on the criterion of the minimum number of 5 articles/country, India represents the part with the highest density, at the level of this country 43 specialized papers were published. Along with India there are other countries with a large number of works such as: Great Britain 37, USA 37, Italy 24, Brazil 23, China 22.

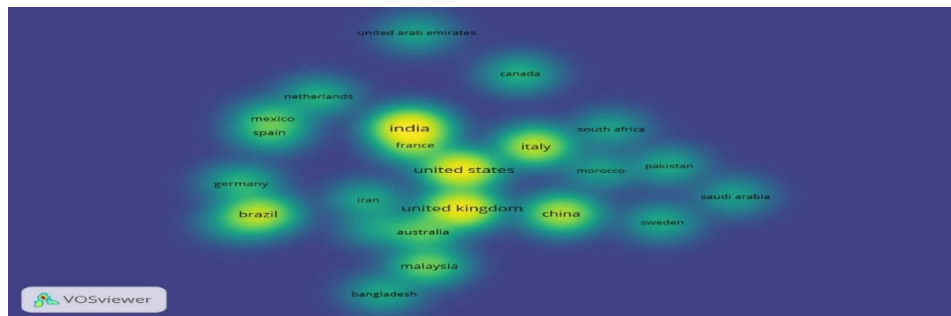


Figure no. 5. Bibliometric analysis according to the country of origin

Source: by the authors using VOSviewer

Conclusions

In the past decades, significant issues aroused regarding the impact of industrial and transport activities on the environment. Pollution and waste are considered to be vital factors that drive climate change, with many negative effects at environmental and social level. Thus, supply chain management activities must be reconfigured in order to include sustainability objectives. Our research focuses on the evolution of research dedicated to this subject, highlighting the main directions undertaken by academics and researchers. Our

analysis reflects a significant increase in awareness of the scientific community regarding the sustainability issues of SCM practices, in the past decade. The motivation for managers to set sustainability objectives for supply chain specific activities is driven by new legislation in this area, but also by collective consciousness that companies must pursue wealth creation without affecting the capacity of future generations to fulfill their needs and generate welfare.

There is a deep connection between research, innovation, and business practice, so we are confident that the growing interest in publication on themes of sustainability in SCM practices will reflect in a more sustainable development of businesses across the globe. The limits of this study are reflected by querying a specific scientific database, so we consider extending our research on several other platforms, as a future research direction.

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