



Vaasan yliopisto
UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

Mikko Pekkala

Sustainable supply chain management practices in retailing

Qualitative content analysis based on sustainability reports

School of Technology and Innovations
Master's Thesis
Industrial Management

Vaasa 2023

Vaasan yliopisto**School of Technology and Innovations**

Tekijä:	Mikko Pekkala		
Tutkielman nimi:	Sustainable supply chain management practices in retailing : Qualitative content analysis based on sustainability reports		
Tutkinto:	Master of Science in Economics and Business Administration		
Oppiaine:	Industrial Management		
Työn ohjaaja:	Khuram Shahzad		
Valmistumisvuosi:	2023	Sivumäärä:	85

TIIVISTELMÄ :

Kestävä toimitusketjujen hallinta on noussut yhä tärkeämmäksi tekijäksi maailmassa, jossa kuluttajat vaativat yhä enemmän kestävän kehityksen mukaisia tuotteita. Kestävä toimitusketjujen hallinta on saanut paljon huomiota niin akateemisissa tutkimuksissa, kuin yritystenkin keskuudessa. Tästä huolimatta aihetta on tutkittu rajallisesti vähittäiskaupan näkökulmasta. Valtaosa tutkimuksista käsittelee valmistavaa teollisuutta, mutta vähittäiskauppojen merkittävä rooli valmistavan teollisuuden ja kuluttajien rajapinnassa tarjoaa otollisen lähtökohdan tutkia vähittäiskauppioiden kestävää toimitusketjujen hallintaa.

Tämän Pro Gradu -tutkielman tavoitteena on selvittää kuinka listatut suomalaiset vähittäiskauppiat edistävät kestävää toimitusketjujen hallintaa kestävän kehityksen näkökulmasta, ja kuinka yritykset raportoivat tästä osana vastuullisuusraporttejaan. Tämän lisäksi tutkitaan kuinka valitut vähittäiskauppiat ovat sitoutuneet YK:n kestävän kehityksen tavoitteisiin osana toimintaansa. Tutkimus toteutettiin käyttämällä laadullista sisällönanalyysiä, jonka avulla tutkittuun valittujen yritysten vastuullisuusraportteja vuosilta 2020–2022.

Keskeiset tutkimustulokset osoittavat, että valituilla vähittäiskauppiilla on pitkälti käytössä samankaltaisia keinoja toimitusketjujen kestävyden varmistamiseksi. Näistä erityisesti yritysten omat toimintaperiaatteet ja auditoinnit ovat merkittävässä roolissa toimitusketjun kestävyden varmistamiseksi. Havaitut keinot olivat enimmäkseen reaktiivisia ja vastuullisuusraportit tarjosivat vaihtelevasti näyttöä proaktiivisista toimista, kuten aktiivisesta toimittajayhteistyöstä. Toisaalta GRI raportointia käyttäneet yritykset julkaisivat kattavammin ja läpinäkyvämmiin myös proaktiivisia toimia. Tutkimustuloksista paljastui myös, että vain kaksi neljästä valitusta vähittäiskauppiasta olivat ottaneet käyttöönsä YK:n kestävän kehityksen tavoitteet, ja integroineet nämä osaksi raportointiaan.

Tämä tutkimus selvittää suomalaisten vähittäiskauppioiden keskeisiä menetelmiä toimitusketjujen kestävyden varmistamiseksi, sekä kuinka valitut yritykset raportoivat tätä osana vastuullisuusraportointiaan. Tämän lisäksi tutkimus tarjoaa ymmärrystä vähittäiskaupan kestävästä toimitusketjun hallinnasta, sekä kuinka yritykset myötävaikuttavat YK:n kestävän kehityksen tavoitteisiin.

AVAINSANAT: kestävä toimitusketjun hallinta, kiertotalous, vähittäiskauppa, kestävä kehityksen tavoite, kestävyysraportointi, läpinäkyvyys.

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Author:	Mikko Pekkala		
Title of the thesis:	Sustainable supply chain management practices in retailing : Qualitative content analysis based on sustainability reports		
Degree:	Master of Science in Economics and Business Administration		
Discipline:	Industrial Management		
Supervisor:	Khuram Shahzad		
Year:	2023	Pages:	85

ABSTRACT:

Sustainable supply chain management has become an important topic in a world where consumers are demanding more and more sustainable products. Sustainable supply chain management has received major attention in both academic research and among businesses. Nevertheless, there are limited amount of research about the topic from the retailer's perspective. Most of the existing research focuses on the manufacturing industry. Still, the significant role of retailers as an interface between the manufacturers and consumers offers attractive basis for studying retailers sustainable supply chain management.

The objective of this master's thesis is to figure out how the Finnish listed retailers are fostering sustainable supply chain management by using sustainable development as the dominant framework, and how the selected case companies are disclosing it as part of their sustainability reporting. In addition to this, case companies' commitments towards sustainable development goals are researched as well. This research is conducted as a qualitative content analysis where case companies' sustainability reports are analyzed from the years 2020-2022.

The key research findings indicates that the selected retailers largely do have similar practices to verify sustainability of their supply chains. Among these practices, companies own operational principles and audits play a significant role in verifying supply chain sustainability. The observed practices were more reactive in nature, and the sustainability reports provided rather variable evidence of more proactive practices. However, companies utilizing GRI reporting disclosed more comprehensively and transparently proactive practices. The research findings also exposed that only two out of the four case companies have adopted the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and integrated them into their sustainability reporting.

This research studies the key practices adopted by Finnish retailers to ensure the sustainability of their supply chains and how these are disclosed as part of sustainability reporting. In addition to this, this research provides insights into sustainable supply chain management in the retail sector and how companies contribute towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

KEYWORDS: sustainable supply chain management, circular economy, retailing, sustainable development goal, sustainability reporting, transparency.

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Abbreviations

CSRD	Corporate sustainability reporting directive
FMCG	Fast moving consumer goods
GRI	Global reporting initiative
ICT	Information and communications technology
SBTI	Science based target initiative
SD	Sustainable development
SDG	Sustainable development goal
SC	Supply chain
SCM	Supply chain management
SR	Sustainability Reporting
SRT	Sustainability Reporting Tool
SSCM	Sustainable supply chain management
QCA	Qualitative content analysis

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Supply chain management (SCM) is a topic which have been studied broadly and has achieved a major attention. In the same way, its relevance as well as its importance is rather well recognized in today's business environment. Nevertheless, in today's business environment just efficient SCM with focus on costs and time is no longer sufficient (Venkataraman, 2018, p. 23). The complex dynamics of business partnerships and quick shifts in consumer behavior are often cited as reasons why the business environment is considered nowadays turbulent and unpredictable (Madhani, 2019, p. 4). Consumers have become more and more demanding concerning the sustainability of their goods they buy and demand for socially together with environmentally friendly products have raised significantly (Esper et al., 2020; Venkataraman, 2018, p. 23).

In addition to consumers' high requirements and changing consumer preferences, firms are also facing major pressure from other stakeholders as well what comes to the sustainability of their operations. Sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) is a concept which has gained a lot of popularity in the past decade. Stakeholders pressure have contributed in a way which have forced companies to pay attention to the social and environmental aspects without ignoring the economic aspect. This thinking is also known as triple bottom line (TBL) approach. (Meixell & Luoma, 2015, p. 69)

Regardless of major attention towards SSCM practices, SSCM is considered to be inadequately comprehended in retailing (Saber et al., 2019, p. 1181; Vadakkepatt et al., 2021, p. 65). Retail companies do have an extraordinary position to interact both directions in the supply chain. In other words, retailers can leverage their position to the suppliers upstream and downstream to the customers. Thus, retailers can be a key player in securing the sustainability of the whole supply chain and foster SSCM related practices in the whole chain. (Vadakkepatt et al., 2021, p. 77) In addition to this, majority of the SSCM

literature is rather theoretical and conceptual (Morali & Searcy, 2013, p. 639). This leaves a reasonable research gap concerning the current state of SSCM adoption and practical actions employed towards it.

Therefore, this thesis focuses on SSCM practices and sustainable development goals (SDGs) adoption among Finnish listed retailers. In 2016, the law concerning Finnish accounting act changed that certain corporations must also report non-financial information (Kurittu, 2018, p. 36). However, the changed accounting act do not define specific guidelines how to disclose this information. In this regard, sustainability reports of Finnish listed retailers offer interesting area of research to evaluate how and what information related to the SSCM companies disclose to its stakeholders in these reports. Sustainability reports are relatively rarely used as a source of evidence in the research field concerning SSCM, but by no means unusual. In this regard, Meckenstock et al, (2016, p. 453) stated that businesses directly disclose SC effects that are not within immediate control in their sustainability reports. Furthermore, comparing companies' sustainability reports may provide valuable information regarding the current state of SSCM practices among Finnish retailers.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to research sustainable supply chain management practices and adoption of SDGs among Finnish listed retailers. Through the academic literature, books, and annual/corporate sustainability reports (CSR) this research is seeking answers to the following research questions:

1. How are SSCM related practices considered and evolved in the sustainability reports of the selected case companies included in the OMX Helsinki Retail GI index from the last three years?
2. How sustainable development goals have been adopted among the selected listed Finnish retailers?

Research questions are answered through the empirical section, which is built on analyzing annual reports of the listed retailers in Finland. Furthermore, this research has additional objectives that are listed below:

- To understand how Finnish listed retailers are adopting and reporting sustainability of their supply chain
- To evaluate similarities and differences concerning the companies' commitments towards SDG's
- To gain more understanding regarding SSCM management practices in retailing

1.3 Definitions and limitations

In this chapter, the definitions of the keywords related to this thesis are explained. In addition, limitations are also presented which affect to this thesis.

Sustainable supply chain management can be defined as “management of material, information and capital flows as well as cooperation among companies along the supply chain while taking goals from all three dimensions of sustainable development, i.e., economic, environmental and social, into account which are derived from customer and stakeholder requirements” (Seuring & Müller, 2008, p. 1700)

According to (Babin et al.), retailing is the “set of marketplace activities that create value by (1) removing the separation between customer and producer and by (2) creating a retail customer experience that is personally gratifying” (p. 88)

Sustainable development goals: “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” (United Nations, 2015a, p. 1)

Sustainability reporting: “the practice of measuring, disclosing, and being accountable to internal and external stakeholders for the company’s ability to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs)” (Calabrese et al., 2017, p. 439)

Transparency is disclosing information concerning upstream operations and products to the public (Sodhi & Tang, 2019, p. 2946)

There are also certain limitations which apply for this thesis. Firstly, this paper will only focus on sustainability from the triple bottom line (TBL) perspective. Furthermore, the selected Finnish retailers are chosen from the companies listed in the OMX Helsinki retail -index, and the analyzed annual reports/sustainability reports have been retrieved from the period of last three years.

1.4 Structure of the study

This thesis consists of five chapters. After this introduction is the second paragraph which consists of the literature review. Theories related to stakeholder theory, SSCM, circular economy, retailing, SDGs, transparency, and sustainability reporting are discussed in this section. After the literature review is the third main chapter which is a methodology. In this third chapter, the chosen research method and model is presented. In addition, theory and fundamentals concerning research philosophy and qualitative research are also discussed in depth. Equally important is that the validity and reliability related factors are considered in this chapter. Next follows the fourth chapter where the results are presented and analyzed according to major findings. The fifth chapter consist of discussion and conclusion. In this final chapter research questions will be answered and elaborated, and interpretation of the key findings is presented with the possible limitations. Finally, summary is formed concerning the research and simultaneously possible further research topics is proposed.

2 Literature Review

In this chapter, the theory is constructed thorough literature review. The literature review consists of six main subjects.

2.1 Stakeholder theory

As stated earlier, companies are facing major pressure from different stakeholders. Therefore, stakeholder theory and its contribution to the SSCM is justified to go through. Edward Freeman (1984) is one of the greatest contributors to the stakeholder theory, and according to him stakeholder is: “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives (p. 46)”. In principle and simplified, stakeholder theory can be seen as a theory how firms operate optimally (Freeman et al. 2010, p. 10). According to Freeman et al. (2010, p. 10) stakeholder theory raised to respond and challenge the mainstream thinking concerning value creation where shareholders benefits, and gains are in the core. Freeman called this kind of thinking as a “shareholder capitalism (p. 15)”. In the same way, the authors brought out that stakeholder theory provides a different angle, where the sustainable long term value creation is only possible when concerns of stakeholders is recognized and fulfilled (p. 12). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the benefits of business owners and different stakeholders must be contradicted. Different stakeholders can be divided into two classes which are called as primary- and secondary stakeholders (Fritz, 2022, p. 2). In the Figure 1 below these two different stakeholder groups are illustrated.

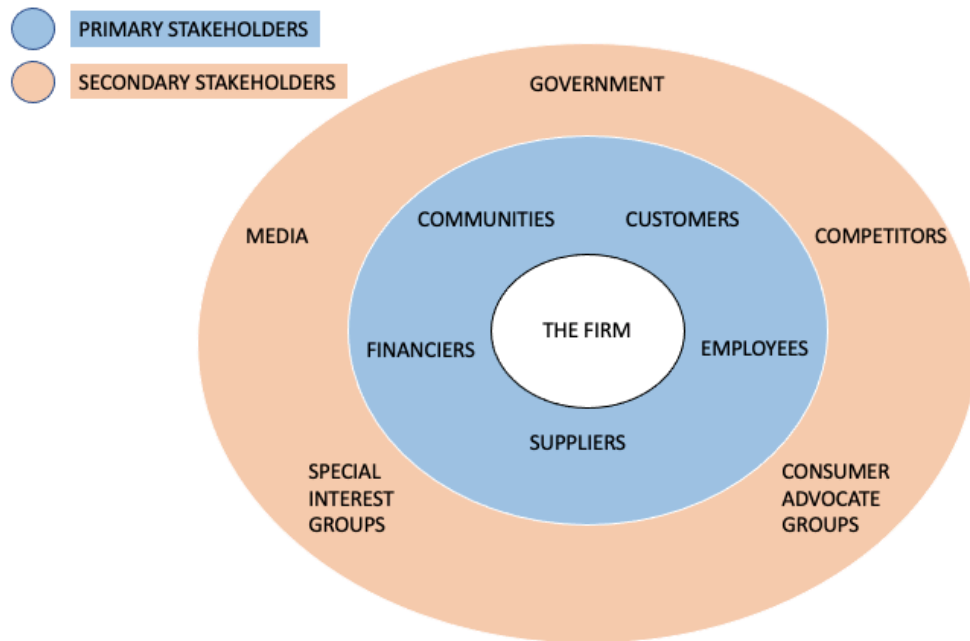


Figure 1. Firm Centric Primary- and Secondary Stakeholders (Fritz, 2022, p. 3)

Donaldson & Preston (1995) are also authors who have significantly contributed to the evolution of stakeholder theory. Stakeholder theory has received relatively major amount of criticism (Berman & Johnson-Cramer, 2019). However, Donaldson & Preston (1995, p. 70) described stakeholder theory to be more all-encompassing and broader rather than meaningless. Donaldson & Preston (1995) also presented broadly recognized model regarding aspects of stakeholder theory. This model consists of three layers which are descriptive, instrumental, and normative layers. This model reflects how stakeholder theory can be applied to study different phenomenon through the framework. Usually, stakeholder theory is used to identify how companies are operating and paying attention to different stakeholders, so it is suitable for descriptive studies. Framework can be also used as instrumental tool, to evaluate linkage to some measurable attribute. The innermost point of view of the framework is normative, which can be used as a tool to evaluate ethical and philosophical aspects. (Donaldson & Preston, 1995, p. 70-71) The normative point of view is that business relationships should be also examined from the ethical point of view (Kujala 2014, p. 10).

This begs a question, how this is related to the field of SSCM? According to Morais & Barbieri, stakeholder theory can be used to evaluate various issues in the field of SSCM (2022, p. 2). In the same way, Seuring et al. (2022, p.2) expressed that stakeholder theory will have its position in the future research in the field of SSCM as well. Through stakeholder theory and SSCM is possible to achieve holistic awareness of sustainability concerns in supply chains (Fritz et al. 2022, p. 1). Thus, stakeholder theory is broadly accepted theory to apply in the research of SSCM.

Meixell & Luoma (2015) have studied stakeholder pressure contribution to the SSCM. In the Figure 2 below, the major findings are illustrated from this research. Stakeholder pressure can affect companies' SSCM practices by three ways. It can increase companies' consciousness concerning SSCM practices. Secondly, it can affect adoption of sustainability. The authors stated that establishing some objective or goal regarding sustainability can be seen as adoption (p. 78). Thirdly, pressure could also lead to practical actions to put into practical SSCM actions. Naturally, companies' reactions to this pressure could lead to enhanced TBL performance. (Meixell & Luoma, 2015, p, 77, 83)

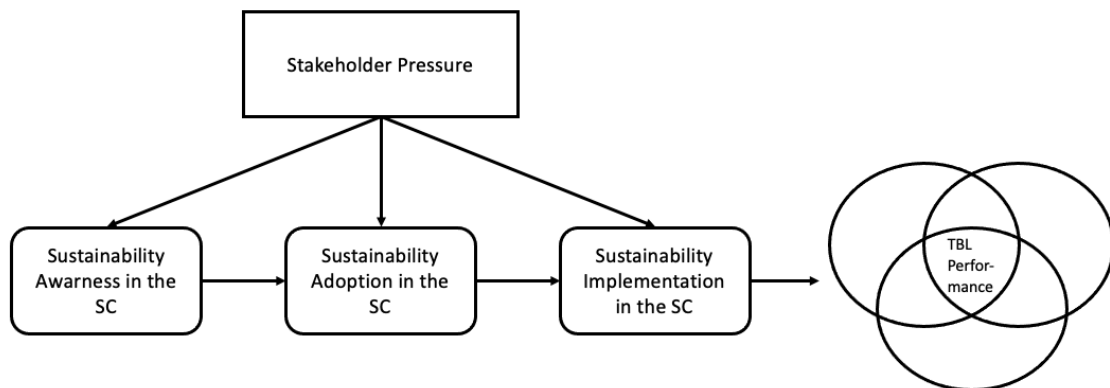


Figure 2. Stakeholder pressure and sustainability (Meixell & Luoma, 2015, p. 77)

2.2 Sustainable supply chain management

Supply chain management as a concept established itself already in the 1990s, and concepts like logistics and operations management were broadly used before SCM established its position (Hugos, 2018, p. 4). According to Hugos, SCM is: “coordination of production, inventory, location, and transportation among the participants in a supply chain the best mix of responsiveness and efficiency for the market being served (p. 4)”. As can be deduced from the definition, SCM requires tremendous amount of coordination among different parties in the chain. SCM literature have typically dealt constructs like material, information, and capital management related topics (Frostenson & Prenekert, 2015, p. 85). However, one of the major trends in the 21st century regrading SCM have been a raising interest towards sustainability, and this has also contributed to the published literature concerning SCM (Khan et al., 2021, p. 277). This has led to new field of research which is called SSCM (Schulz & Flanigan 2016, p. 449).

As stated in the introduction, stakeholders and consumer requirements are powerful drivers that foster companies to adopt SSCM practices. In addition to this, there are also competitive reasons why companies are adopting sustainable practices into their supply chains. Venkataraman (2018, p. 23) brought out that implementing sustainability into supply chains could bring numerous positive benefits as well. According to Venkataraman, benefits like reduced costs, lower risk profile, increased innovativeness, and interests sharing among SC participants could be achieved. In the same way, Wang & Dai (2018, p. 15) exposed in their research that SSCM is considered to be significant driver for advancing economic, social, and environmental performance which also contribute to the competitive advantage. Likewise, Rebs et al. (2018, p. 213) highlighted the significance of sustainability in supply chains for ensuring competitiveness in today’s business environment. According to literature, it appears to be obvious that benefits can be achieved by implementing SSCM practices. In this sense, companies should be extremely interested implementing SSCM practices into their supply chains.

As it turned out from the presented SSCM definition, SSCM is built on to all three dimension from the sustainable development (Seuring & Müller, 2008). Therefore, sustainable development is essential concept in the field of SSCM. The most known definition regarding sustainable development can be referred as: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 43). This definition also has been the foundation for Elkington, who developed the triple bottom line (TBL) approach also known as: people, planet, and profit (Elkington, 1997). Elkington defined that TBL is the: “balance or harmony between economic sustainability, social sustainability and environmental sustainability”. Below is a Figure 1 which is retrieved from research conducted by Dalibozhko & Krakovetskaya (2018), which illustrates the relationship between these all three essential variables. As can be seen from the Figure 3, sustainability can be only achieved when all these three dimensions are in balance. Main principle in TBL thinking is that company’s performance should be measured also through the people and planet point of view, instead of just focusing on financial related key performance indicators (Norman & MacDonald, 2003, p.1). Some of the key measures of these attributes have been described in the circles of these attributes.

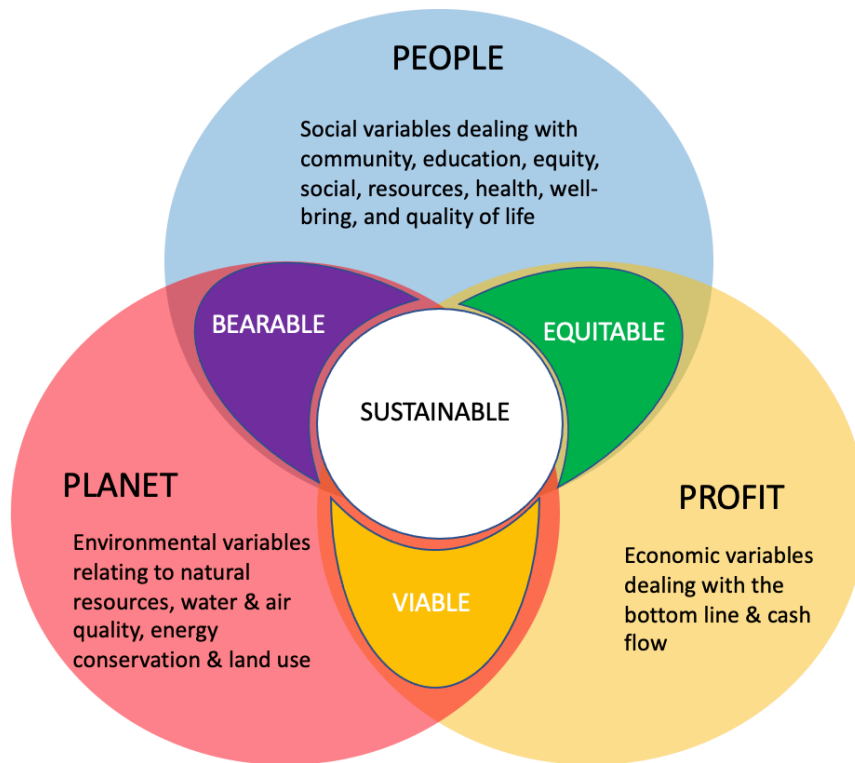


Figure 3. TBL framework (Dalibozhko & Krakovetskaya, 2018, p. 3)

As stated, SSCM principles are based on all the dimensions of sustainable development and TBL aspects. But at the same time, environmental aspect has still been the most researched attribute among journals in the field of SSCM (Seuring & Müller, 2008, p. 1702). Therefore, social aspect in SSCM is considered to be under researched compared to the other attributes (Morais & Barbieri, 2022, p. 1). One of the explanations for this might be that green supply chain management (GSCM) was broadly discussed before SSCM established its position. Ahi & Searcy (2013, p. 329) expressed that the GSCM focus more on environmental related issues whereas SSCM is more comprehensive term how sustainability can be applied into supply chains. On the contrary, it is also broadly recognized that evaluating and measuring all the TBL dimensions is rather difficult (Laosirihongthong et al., 2020, p. 1207). Social metrics cannot always be quantified, and there is also some amount of subjectivity included (Beske-Janssen et al., 2015, p. 664). Nevertheless, there are still ways and practices how SSCM can be employed in the supply chains.

In addition to essential TBL dimensions, circular economy can be also seen as an essential part of SSCM (Giudice et al., 2021, p. 338). Circular economy in the context of sustainable supply chain is often associated with closed-loop supply chain management (CLSCM)(Hazen et al., 2021, p. 512). According to Kirchherr et al. (2017) circular economy can be defined accordingly:

It operates at the micro level (products, companies, consumers), meso level (eco-industrial parks) and macro level (city, region, nation and beyond), with the aim to accomplish sustainable development, thus simultaneously creating environmental quality, economic prosperity and social equity, to the benefit of current and future generations. It is enabled by novel business models and responsible consumers (p. 229)

The definition includes similar elements with SSCM, hence Hazen et al. (2021, p. 513) stated that SSCM is an essential component to attain the CE objectives. Circular economy principles in the context of supply chain can increase especially the environmental aspect from the TBL metrics (Genovese et al., 2017, p. 344), but Cerqueira-Streit et al. (2021, p. 15) also emphasized CE possibilities to influence positively also to all TBL dimensions as well. CE's primary objective is to maximize recirculation while minimizing the amount of material that might end up in a landfill or being burned (Bernon et al., 2018, p. 483). CE frameworks and adaption is closely associated with the different "R" frameworks (Gebhardt et al., 2022, p. 3). Gebhardt et al. brought out that the basic idea in these "R" frameworks is to maintain the highest possible resource value throughout all situations (p. 3). One of the most known R frameworks is "4r" which consist of reduce, reuse, recycle, and recover (Kirchherr et al., 2017, p. 223). Below is a Table 1 which is adapted from this comprehensive literature review and represents this framework.

Table 1. 4R framework (Kircherr et al., 2017, p. 223)

4R Framework components	Principles
Reduce	Refusing, rethinking, redesigning (prolonging the lifespan of products), minimization, reduction, prevention of resource use and/or preserving of natural capital
Reuse	Reusing (excluding waste), closing the loop, cycling, repairing and/or refurbishing of resources
Recycle	Remanufacturing, recycling, closing the loop, cycling and/or reuse of waste
Recover	Incineration of material with energy recovery

Despite the CE and SSCM are closely connected, SSCM literature rather seldom deals with CE. Hazen et al. developed a framework which describes how CE can be aligned into SCM processes. According to their findings, CE can be adopted in the core SCM processes either closing, slowing, intensifying, narrowing, and dematerializing the loops. (Hazen et al. 2021, p. 526).

2.3 SSCM Practices

Numerous studies have examined different SSCM practices, but at the same time Morali & Searcy (2013, p. 639) stated that the literature concerning SSCM practices is fragmented. According to Shekarian et al. (2020) SSCM practices means “tools, solutions, approaches, methods, and strategies that help a company improve its sustainability performance through its SC (p. 2)”. Different scholars have classified SSCM practices differently. For instance, Prashar (2022, p. 2398-2399) studied SSCM practices in a fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) space and he grouped SSCM practices to be sustainable procurement, energy & emission reduction, waste management, sustainable distribution,

and water conservation. On the other hand, Zimon (2019, p. 225) classified SSCM practices into three groups according to the upstream and downstream actions within the SC together with focal company actions.

Regardless of the various classification methods, Kähkönen et al. (2018, p. 521) introduced an excellent three-dimensional matrix how classification can be executed. The three dimensions in that matrix are organizational structure including internal and external practices, sustainability TBL pillars, and its strategic importance meaning either reactive or proactive. The strategic importance is an attribute where the authors were able to highlight the role of reactive and proactive factors. According to this research especially proactive SSCM practices might enhance to obtain dynamic capabilities and at the same enhance sustainability performance in the long run. Supplier collaboration was emphasized as proactive practice since it also fosters the sustainability of the whole chain. In contrast, reactive practices do not have these same attributes and they are not as developed. (Kähkönen et al. 2018. p. 527) Despite of different classifications, Li et al. (2019, p. 607) discovered that companies with ambitious moral obligations towards SSCM practices tend to possess competitive advantage. Furthermore, it must be ensured that SSCM practices are integrated to ensure that they reach the pursued objectives (Wang & Dai, 2018, p. 15).

It is true, that the literature has recognized numerous SSCM practices. But at the same time, Shekarian et al. (2020, p. 1) recognized lack of comprehensive framework covering comprehensively SSCM practices regardless of certain industry. Therefore, Shekarian et al. conducted comprehensive and systematic review to recognize SSCM practices retrieved from various industries. This systematic review was based on 86 different articles including 789 different practices. As a result of this review, authors proposed systematic framework to improve companies SSCM performance and provide understanding of the practices. Below is a Figure 4 which illustrate the framework from that research. As can be noticed, the framework consists of 11 main categories, and below them are 38 different practices.

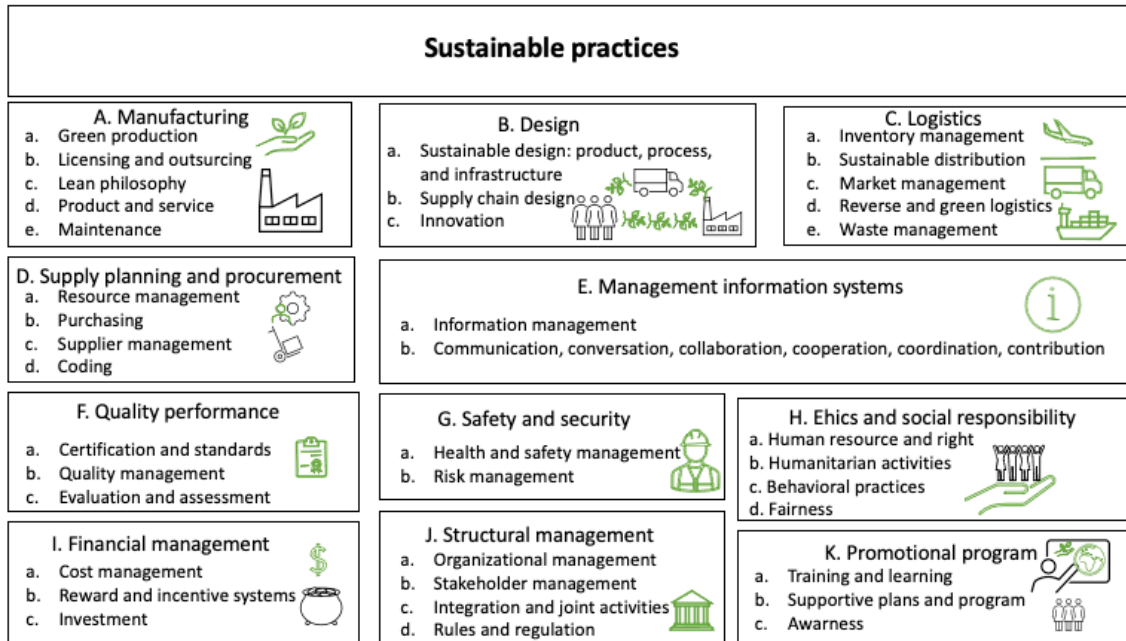


Figure 4. SSCM related practices (Shekarian et al., 2022, p. 5)

2.3.1 Retailing & SSCM

SSCM is a topic which have been researched significantly during this decade. In this regard, it is rather surprising that retail sector has not gained major interest in the SSCM scholars (Saber et al., 2019; Vadakkepatt et al., 2021; Wiese et al., 2012). In the same way, Shekarian et al. (2022, p. 25) reviewed industrial SSCM practices and also indicated that retailers are often forgot in studies dealing with the structures of supply chains. Saber et al. (2019, p. 1181) used term “gatekeeper” as an expression to describe retailers’ unique position in the supply chains. This unique position can be explained through retailers capabilities to affect upstream suppliers, and consumers towards downstream (Vadakkepatt et al., 2021, p. 77). In the same way, Saber et al. (2019, p. 1181) brought out from the previous literature that retailers have power to affect suppliers’ operations, and they can also direct consumers towards more sustainable choices. Likewise, Jones & Comfort (2020, p. 106) named four different ways how sustainable development can be advanced by retailers. The first two related similarly possibilities to influence both suppliers and consumers. In addition to this, Jones & Comfort named retailers’ own actions, and their influence within society are also things that could foster SD. In this regard,

retailers appear to be in a sweet spot to enhance SSCM practices, and of course then contribute to the SD as well.

In general, retailers as actors in SCs must be understood to realize more comprehensively how retailers can adopt SSCM practices in their operations. Sparks (2010) excellently describes the shift what has happened during this century among retailers. According to Sparks, retailers are nowadays more proactive players who plan supply in response to consumer demands. Furthermore, he stated that the retail supply chains are more organized, controlled, and managed. Therefore, retailers now place more emphasis on creating and controlling end-to-end supply chains. (Sparks, 2010, p. 1–2) Below in the Figure 5 is illustrated typical retail supply chain structure adapted from the book conducted by Ayers & Odegaard (2017). Exact structure of each retail supply chain varies depending on the product type and the structure. However, the authors still emphasize similarity of the retail supply chains. In this Figure 5 customers refers actors who make the purchasing decision whereas end-user employs the goods. (2017, p. 5–6) As can be noted from the Figure 5, it is justified to consider retailers as a gatekeeper due their interface is so closely tied to the customers and end users. In this sense, retailers appear to be appropriate targets of research what comes to the SSCM practices and fostering sustainable development.

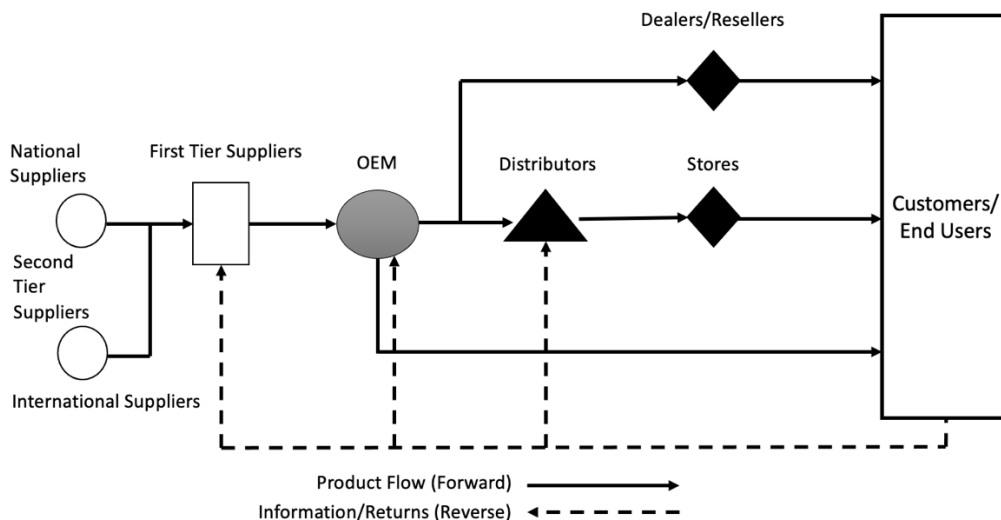


Figure 5. Typical retail supply chain. (Ayers & Odegaard, 2017, p. 5)

Vadakkepatt et al., researched sustainability among retail sector and they emphasized that retailers must implement the entire system integrations throughout the SC to gain advantages over time. In this same article, circular economy (CE) was named as one of the most powerful ways to foster sustainability among retailers (p. 77). Below in the Figure 6 is illustrated circular economy thinking applied into fashion industry. As can be seen from the Figure 6, the circular economy thinking aims to reduce use of virgin materials by adding circularity in SC. Forward supply chain in this Figure 6 is illustrated with black arrows whereas the dotted arrows illustrate the reverse SC. These dotted arrows represents how the existing materials can be reused, and trash can be minimised. (Vadakkepatt et al., 2021, p. 64) Naturally, this Figure 6 illustrates excellently how SSCM can be enhanced in retail SC through circular economy. In addition to this, it also visualise the essential role of retailers in reverse and forward supply chain management. The amount of arrows linked to the retailer is referring how retailers value chain position could advance SSCM.

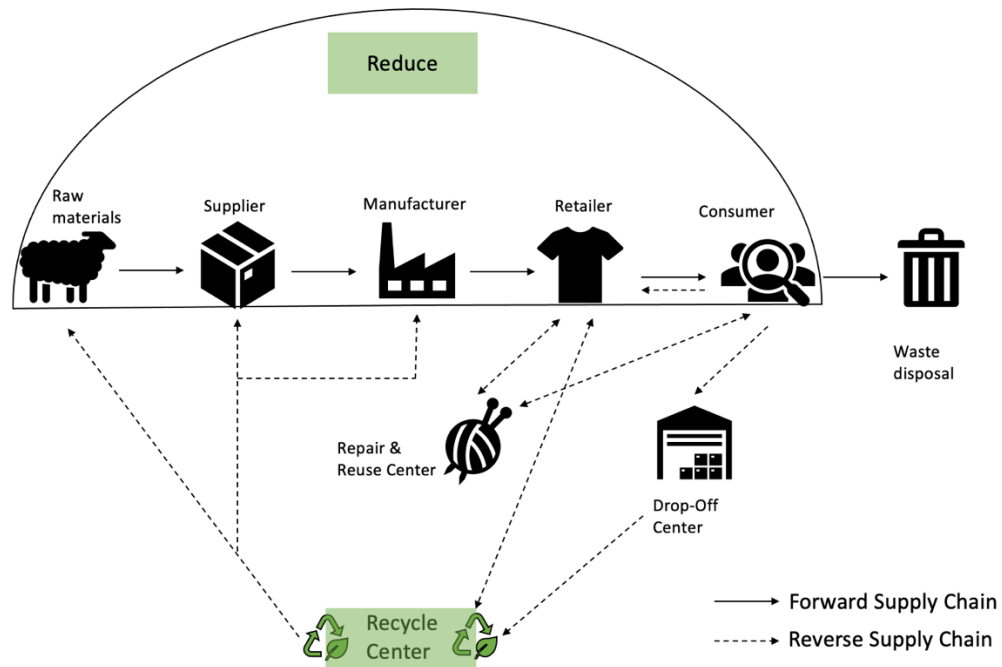


Figure 6. Circular retail supply chain (Vadakkepatt et al. p. 65)

Reverse supply chain is also one of the major parts in fostering CE within the SC context. Bernon et al. (2018) researched CE in the context of retail reverse logistics. In order to apply CE thinking into retail reverse logistics requires various commitments and actions. Bernon et al., developed framework how retail reverse logistics can be aligned with CE thinking. This framework consists of three main sections. Firstly, it requires top management commitment and strategic competitive fit. Secondly, various managerial actions are needed like CSR, SC integration, customer centricity, and collaboration. Thirdly, CE thinking must be integrated in core system of the reverse logistics. The authors also provided more practical actions how CE thinking can be applied into reverse logistics processes. This requires different choices how to recover products, like whether repair or recycle, and how the reverse logistics process can be applied into chosen product recovery strategy. Furthermore, collaboration among partners and rethinking overall SC structure are also factors which will facilitate adopting CE. (Bernon et al. 2018, p. 487 – 490)

Despite of CE seems to be important in fostering SSCM, there are also other ways how retailers can enhance sustainability of their supply chains. However, sustainable procurement tend to have emphasized contribution to the SSCM performance (Berning & Venter, 2015; Panigrahi et al., 2019). Panigrahi et al. accentuated that the productive SSCM requires excellent collaboration and relationship among suppliers (2019, p. 1025). Likewise, Berning & Venter (2015, p. 6246) studied African retailer SSCM engagement, and according to them retailer-supplier collaboration defines remarkably sustainability of the retail SCs. Instead, Styles et al. (2012) examined SC environmental management practices among retailers where supplier requirements and supplier development program were named as one of the best practices for achieving sustainability in product supply chains (p. 57). In addition to this, the authors revealed that establishing comprehensive collaboration with suppliers especially in items with relatively remarkable environmental footprint (p. 57). As described, the collaboration among suppliers is in the core to achieve sustainability in the SCs. Therefore, actions are needed how to enhance it.

One of the common frameworks to enhance collaboration with suppliers is from the UN Global Compact, which is illustrated in the Figure 7 below. The framework is appropriate for various industries and can be applied to suppliers and to sub-suppliers. Firstly, expectations need to be communicated to suppliers where code of conduct is an essential tool for that. This is followed by risk and impact assessment where the most important areas are recognized, and the resources can be placed there where they are most needed. Thereafter, suppliers' sustainability performance should be evaluated. This evaluation can include different methods like audits, and surveys. Next, is the remediation where together with suppliers' concerns related with subpar performance is resolved. In addition, it is also to recognize steps for further development. The two final steps in this Figure 7 are related actions to deepen the partnership and collaboration. Supplier training and continuous evaluation and improvement are essential to improve suppliers' sustainability performance. (UN Global Compact, 2015, p. 37)



Figure 7. Supplier sustainability development adapted from United Nations Global Compact (2015, p. 37)

Overall, social sustainability tend to be less studied in SSCM literature (Köksal et al., 2017; Morais & Barbieri, 2022) and also previously mentioned methods were more related to

the environmental aspect than social side. On the other hand, supplier collaboration is also considered as a key tool to improve the social dimension of SSCM (Köksal et al., 2017; Mohammad et al., 2021, p. 855). Traditionally, various standards and different metrics are used when choosing the supplier to ensure the social side of the sustainability (Miemczyk & Luzzini, 2018, p. 241). In addition to supplier collaboration, Styles et al. (2012) also mentioned product labelling and different certifications as tools among retailers (p. 57).

2.4 Sustainable development goals, retail, & SSCM

In 2015, United Nations agreed sustainable development goals which is called as “action for people, planet, and prosperity (p. 5)” (United Nations, 2015a). The SDGs consists of 17 different issues covering all three dimensions related to the sustainable development. Instead of ordinary specific SD measure or tool, SDGs provide rather holistic approach towards it (Pradhan & Routroy, 2018, p. 1169). According to the UN disclosure (2015a) all countries establish their own ways how to implement SDGs. On the contrary, SDGs are not legally binding, and this is challenge form the implementation point of view (Walker et al. 2019, p. 35). Therefore, different governance mechanisms and consistent guides from institutions is required to foster SDGs implementation (p. 35). In addition to countries responsibility, the role of private sector has been recognized to contribute massively to advance SDG agenda as well (UN, 2015a, p. 14; Walker et al., 2019, p. 2). In order to achieve the SDGs objectives, SDGs implementation still require cooperation among private sector, governments, and societies (Scheyvens et al., 2016). On the other hand, private sector obtains massive financial resources that can contribute to the SDGs adoption (Walker et al., 2019, p. 2). In addition to this, private sector has “innovations, responsiveness, efficiency, and provision of specific skills and resources (p. 371)” (Scheyvens et al., 2016, p. 371). In this regard, SDGs looks as an interesting opportunity among private companies as to pursue sustainability. But at the same time, it is delighted to notice that many private companies and public actors have utilized SDGs as a framework for sustainability programs and reporting (Koipijärvi & Kuvaja, 2020, p. 59).

Below is a Picture 1, which is retrieved from the United Nations that illustrates all the 17 different SDGs. Different scholars have tried to classify SDGs into different groups. For instance, classification on six groups based on their themes which are dignity (SDGs 1, 5), people (SDGs 2, 3, 4), planet (SDGs 6, 12, 13, 14, 15), partnership (SDG 17), justice (SDG 16), and prosperity (SDGs 7, 8, 9, 10, 11) (Leal Filho et al., 2018, p. 133). Another famous classification of these goals can be done according to the dimensions from sustainable development (Costanza et al., 2016, p. 353). In this framework, dimensions from sustainable development have been classified accordingly: environmental dimension (SDGs 6, 13, 14, 15), social dimension (SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 16, 17), and economic dimension (SDGs 7, 8, 9, 11, 12).



Picture 1. Sustainable development goals (United Nations, 2019)

SDGs can be applied into context of SSCM as well. Zimon et al. (2020) researched SDGs adaption in the context of SSCM, which the author revealed to be rather under researched topic in the field of SSCM. On the other hand, Fritz (2019, p. 10) underlined the important link between the SSCM & SDGs due the SCM is global and affecting to every service and

product that is consumed. Zimon et al. (2020) proposed a dynamic model how SDGs can be aligned into SSCM. The main conclusions in this study were that SDGs alignment with SSCM practices can provide synergies and complementary outcomes. But at the same time, there are numerous challenges still to be solved. The authors stated that business managers must obtain knowledge how to apply the goals in the SSCM practices. In addition to this, new involvement from all parties that generate value must deepen the collaboration and dedication to pursue SDGs to be implemented. (Zimon et al. 2020, p. 232) This is aligned with the UN disclosure which especially highlighted the significance of collaborative partnerships to advance SDGs (UN, 2015a, p. 1).

SDGs are interesting topic from the retailer point of view as well. United nations and KPMG (2016) have jointly produced SDG industry matrix for food, beverage, and consumer goods industry. This report revealed that SDGs enables massive opportunities to create shared value through enterprise development, sustainable supply, product innovation, health, and sustainable living (p. 8–9). Therefore, SDGs adoption appears to be beneficial for retailers. Jones & Comfort (2018) studied SDGs among European largest retailers, and retailers possibilities to advance SDGs have been identified. Jones & Comfort brought out especially the importance of SDG 12 among retailers. SDG 12 is named “responsible consumption & production”, and according to authors the importance of this goal is related to the retailers’ capabilities to influence them both. Overall, the authors perceived that SDGs have been taken seriously among largest European retailers, and especially SDGs 12 & 13 are in frontline. On the other hand, in the same article were also identified issues that must be solved to even enhance SDGs long term adoption. SDGs priority setting, measurement, reporting, communication, and as well as the inherent contradictions between sustainability and pursuit of profit. (Jones & Comfort, 2018, p. 113–118)

2.5 Transparency in SSCM

Transparency is a topic which is related to the SSCM rather closely (Schäfer, 2023, p. 579).

According to Sodhi & Tang, transparency in SCM means that the stakeholders have the visibility related to the supply chain information (2019, p. 2946). In addition to this, transparency entails not only providing information but also acting in a transparent manner (Gold & Heikkurinen, 2018, p. 321). However, acting as a transparent manner can be rather subjective issue. Thus, Sodhi & Tang (2019, p. 2948) discussed in their research paper different layers of transparency in SCM due companies rank transparency differently. Anyhow, Schäfer (2023) conducted a systematic literature review concerning transparency in the context of SSCM since the author claimed that the term transparency has been used rather casually. Therefore, Schäfer proposed a new framework and definition concerning transparency is SSCM. According to Schäfer, SC transparency is “the visibility and disclosure of sustainable supply chain information to stakeholders within and outside the supply chain (p. 594)” In this definition occurs all the three aspects presented by the author which are SC information, stakeholders, and perspective (p. 597). In addition to just disclosing relevant SC information, SC transparency include stakeholders’ involvement (Schäfer, p. 597). In this sense, stakeholder theory is important to gain holistic understanding of SC transparency. Instead of just disclosing information to the stakeholders, it is also important to think how stakeholders can send the information back to the company as well (Schäfer, p. 590). This topic should be major interest among retailers like Prashar (2022, p. 14) emphasized that transparency together with consumer involvement is critical to increase sustainability in SCs in the FMCG space. The third and final aspect related the SC transparency was called “perspective” (Schäfer, 2022). This perspective is related to companies’ viewpoints about the transparency, and this culminates what companies want to disclose, and how much visibility they have about their SCs (p. 597).

There are various reasons why companies should be extremely concerned to take transparency seriously. In addition to the increased need for transparency among consumers and stakeholders. Castillo et al. (2018, p. 49) stated that enhanced visibility and transparency into supply chain processes around the world can have an impact on a firm's image as well. Similarly, Carter & Rogers (2008) studied SSCM, and transparency was

named one of the supporting factors contributing positively to it. Carter & Rogers also mentioned that transparency should be viewed from broader perspective than just to providing visibility to the stakeholders. By that the authors mean that the collected feedback from stakeholders should also be used to enhance SC procedures overall. Increasing cooperation both horizontally in the SC and vertically in the networks may foster transparency. As an example of vertical collaboration could be some industry alliance's audits which reduces costs but provides shared value to many organizations. (Carter & Rogers, 2008, p. 367)

2.6 Sustainability reporting

Sustainability reporting can be considered as a comprehensive term for disclosing sustainability related issues to the public (Siew, 2015, p. 181). There are certain synonyms and terms which are also closely associated with the sustainability reporting (SR). Siew (2015) brought out that corporate social responsibility (CSR), TBL reporting, sustainable development reporting, non-financial reporting, and environmental, social and governance reporting (ESG) are used as synonyms for SR in general. Stakeholder theory has also contributed to the born of Corporate Social Responsibility (Freeman et al. 2010, p. 16). In this thesis, mostly sustainability reporting and CSR reporting are used to comprise the subject. Despite of any single established definition concerning SR, Calabrese et al. (2017) have defined it rather extensively. According to them sustainability reporting is all about: "measuring, disclosing, and being accountable to internal and external stakeholders for the company's ability to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs) and manage impacts on society (p. 439)". On the contrary, subject matters and the formulation of the reports are not strictly regulated (Meckenstock et al., 2016, p. 452). In addition, SR can be also used to encourage and improve SC sustainability and transparency (UN Global Compact, 2015, p. 71) In this sense, sustainability reporting and reports are suitable targets to examine the topic discussed in this paper.

Companies should be extremely interested concerning sustainability reporting for numerous reasons. The first and the most obvious reason is that legislation obliges certain

companies to disclose these reports (Zrnić et al., 2020, p. 278). In Finland 2016, accounting act changed and approved that obligate certain companies to disclose CSR reports. According to this Accounting Act 3A 1§ (1376/2016), companies with more than 500 persons must also report non-financial information. This non-financial information must provide information regarding environment, social and personnel, human rights, and actions done to prevent corruption and bribery (1376/2016, 3a 2§). In addition to this, regulative initiatives concerning sustainability reporting is also established in the European Union level. EU has published Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) in 2022 (2022/2464/EU). This EU directive specify the requirements for SR and include changes how SR should be construct in the future. For instance, requirement for SR will be included to all large companies (17) and listed small and middle enterprises. Overall, the legislation and regulation are extremely powerful drivers fostering SR.

Sustainability reporting can be also viewed through different lenses than just fulfilling the regulative requirements. Companies should also see the SR as an enabler rather than a burden. Kurittu (2018, p. 7) brought out benefits that can be gained through SR. Increased reputation, risk management, enhanced interaction, and operations development are things mentioned in her book. Arevalo & Aravind (2017, p. 214) found that CSR initiative combined with the UN Global Compact will enhance companies capabilities to gain competitive advantage. Similarly, Saeidi et al. (2015, p. 341) discovered that CSR reporting tend to improve companies performance mainly through increased competitive advantage, customer satisfaction, and reputation. On the other hand, Christensen et al. (2021, p. 230) disclosed that in general, voluntary based CSR studies provide more positive outcomes than focus on mandatory CSR disclosure. In the same way, Ayers and Oregaard stated that CSR may affect to the competitive position and consumers perception of the retailer (p. 75). Besides, Ayers & Odegaard highlighted that inside-out approach towards CSR is more beneficial rather than being reactive actor (p. 75). This suggest that voluntary and proactive way concerning SR might lead to better outcomes. But at the same time, Kurittu (2018, p. 7) emphasized that the potential CSR benefits remains unattainable if the report is poorly drafted.

2.6.1 Sustainability reporting frameworks & standards

Despite of mandatory legislation, companies may choose freely how to conduct sustainability reports (Calabrese et al., 2017, p. 272). This is also one of the reasons why different frameworks and standards have been developed (Siew, 2015, p. 181). Siew (2015) named these different guidelines as sustainable reporting tools (SRT). According to Siew, different tools can be divided into frameworks, standards, ratings, and indices. Even though the legislation obligates companies to disclose non-financial information, the elements included in these reports should include all three aspects from the triple bottom line framework (Calabrese et al., 2017, p. 445). Calabrese (2017, p. 445) continued that Important prerequisite for SR is also materiality analysis which objective is to recognize the most relevant topics concerning the sustainability. Materiality analysis facilitate companies to recognize the consequences of their actions, and fulfill the stakeholders' requirements (GRI, 2022, p. 6). Furthermore, materiality analysis also enhances how the overall business strategy is aligned with all the TBL dimensions (Calabrese et al. 2017, p. 445).

One of the most known sustainability reporting standards is global reporting initiative (GRI) (Kurittu, 2018), and it is a common method to increase transparency for the stakeholders (Machado et al., 2023, p. 1). In KPMG's sustainability reporting survey "Big Shifts, Small Steps" (2022, p. 23) GRI was mentioned to be the most often used standard worldwide. Machado et al. (2023, p. 1) were able to demonstrate that usage of GRI can improve GSCM transparency to the stakeholders. Due the SSCM is rather closely related to the GSCM, it is reasonable to assume that GRI reporting enhance SSCM transparency as well. In the same way, Beske-Janssen et al., (2015, p. 675) raised GRI to be rather appropriate for measuring SSCM performance. GRI standards consists of universal-, sector-, and topic standards which assists businesses in developing sustainability reports focusing on implications of their actions (GRI, 2022, p. 6). GRI was founded in 1997, and nowadays over 10000 enterprises utilize this framework (GRI, 2022).

Despite the GRI has significant role in SR space, there are various other tools as well. Siew (2015) excellently reviewed different tools for SR. The Global Compact, Carbon Disclosure Project, and Greenhouse Gas Protocol are examples of other frameworks used in SR. In addition to frameworks, there are standards like SA8000, ISO 14001, and ISO 9001 which can also be considered as SR tools. These standards require proper documentation, and these can be used to guarantee that topics included in different standards are always met. Finally, Siew raised different ratings and indices, but these are accomplished by third party. (Siew, 2015)

2.6.2 Issues in sustainability reporting

In the previous chapter, the most popular standards concerning sustainability reporting were discovered. One major issue in SR is especially the amount of these different standards that are used simultaneously, and it enables silo effect (Vanhala et al., 2022, p. 131). According to Vanhala et al. (p. 153), parallel use of multiple reporting standards enables companies to disclose too positive picture regarding their operations. This is also known as a greenwashing which is a practice where companies disclose symbolic information without actual activities (Walker & Wan, 2012, p. 231). Christensen et al. (2021, p. 1233) also highlighted that greenwashing together with boilerplate language is serious concern regarding CSR disclosures. Even though, disclosed information and real actions tend to correlate with each other (Papoutsis & Sodhi, 2020, p. 1). Another essential issue according to Vanhala et al. is that companies do not disclose relevant information, and CSR reports are not enough comparable among different companies (p. 134). Relevant information is usually defined through materiality analysis by managers, and stakeholders contribute immensely what companies should disclose in these reports (Calabrese et al., 2017, p. 278). This might be an issue because the most important objective of sustainability report is to transfer relevant information to the reader (Kurittu, 2018, p. 7). Furthermore, important way to ensure the quality of CSR disclosures is to have external assurance to verify the content of these reports (Zrnić et al., 2020, p. 277 ; Vanhala et al., 2022, p. 141).

2.7 Summary of the theoretical background

The main theoretical concepts applied to this thesis have been dealt. To summarize the addressed topics, the main concepts have been gathered and combined into a theoretical framework which is illustrated in the Figure 8. below. In this research paper, SSCM in retailing is approached through four relevant theories which builds the foundation for analyzing sustainability reports of the selected case companies. Main rationale and justification for this approach is established through stakeholder theory, where its relevance and linkage to the SSCM is discovered. Stakeholder theory is the backbone of this framework which emphasize the Freeman's et al. (2010) thinking that sustainable value creation is only possible when companies do also consider the needs of its stakeholders. Stakeholders do also create major pressure towards companies which in turn is also a major driver that push companies to foster sustainability of their supply chains. (Meixell & Luoma, 2015). As discussed in the literature review, CE thinking is also closely associated with sustainable supply chains (Giudice et al., 2021). Therefore, the bidirectional arrows in the Figure 8. illustrate their interdependence but mentioned as a separate entities.

All these theories culminates into transparency which in the context of SCM means that stakeholders have the visibility related to the supply chain information (Sodhi & Tang). Like stated earlier, consumers and stakeholders high requirements and pressure for sustainability challenge companies to increase sustainability of their operations. Indeed, this external pressure do also influence companies to report sustainability information in a transparent way (Fernandez-feijoo et al. 2014, p. 61). Stakeholders enhanced visibility and transparency could have an impact to the companies image (Castillo, 2018), and this can also provide valuable feedback from stakeholders to improve SCM overall (Carters & Rogers, 2008).

Based on these four theories, sustainability reports will be used as a source of evidence to recognize SSCM practices, and SDGs among the selected Finnish retailers as an objective to seek answers to the research questions.



Figure 8. Summary of the theoretical framework

3 Methodology

In this chapter, the research methodology of the empirical part is dealt. First, research design is covered through research onion framework. This study is conducted as a qualitative content analysis, so research strategy as well as its characteristics are covered. After that, fundamentals and the chosen strategy concerning the data collection is presented. In this section, the selected case companies are also introduced. Data collection chapter is followed by validity and reliability chapter where these points are elaborated.

3.1 Research design

Research design can be considered as a strategy how to seek answers to the chosen research questions (Saunders, 2007, p. 131). In that sense, it is appropriate to recall the original research questions of this thesis. The purpose of my study is to seek answers to the following research questions:

1. How are SSCM related practices considered and evolved in the sustainability reports of the selected case companies included in the OMX Helsinki Retail GI index from the last three years?
2. How sustainable development goals have been adopted among the selected case companies?

Various kind of aspects must be considered what comes to the research design. According to Melnikovas (2018), research methodology specifies how research should be conducted. It contains a set of philosophical presumptions and a set of believes that influence how the research methodologies are chosen, and how the research questions are understood. Carefully considered and evaluated research methodology also facilitate to create coherent research structure. In addition to that, proper design of methodology also facilitates avoiding contradictions between chosen approaches and philosophies. (Melnikovas, 2018, p. 33)

One of the most famous research methodology frameworks used in business research space is presented by Saunders et al. (2007) which is called as a “research onion”. The fundamental idea of research onion framework is to identify and illustrate the methods for gathering data and how to align it with the respective research philosophy (Saunders, 2007, p. 130). In this paper, the research onion framework is also used as a foundation for building research design and methodology. Adapting this framework enables to create coherent and rigorous research design. Below is the Figure 9, which illustrates the research onion framework adapted and modified to the context of this thesis. As can be noticed below from the Figure 9, the research onion framework consists of six layers. Each of the layers has a description of its meaning and those are filled with the chosen approach adapted to this thesis. In the following chapters, each of the layers is explained by starting from the furthest layer.

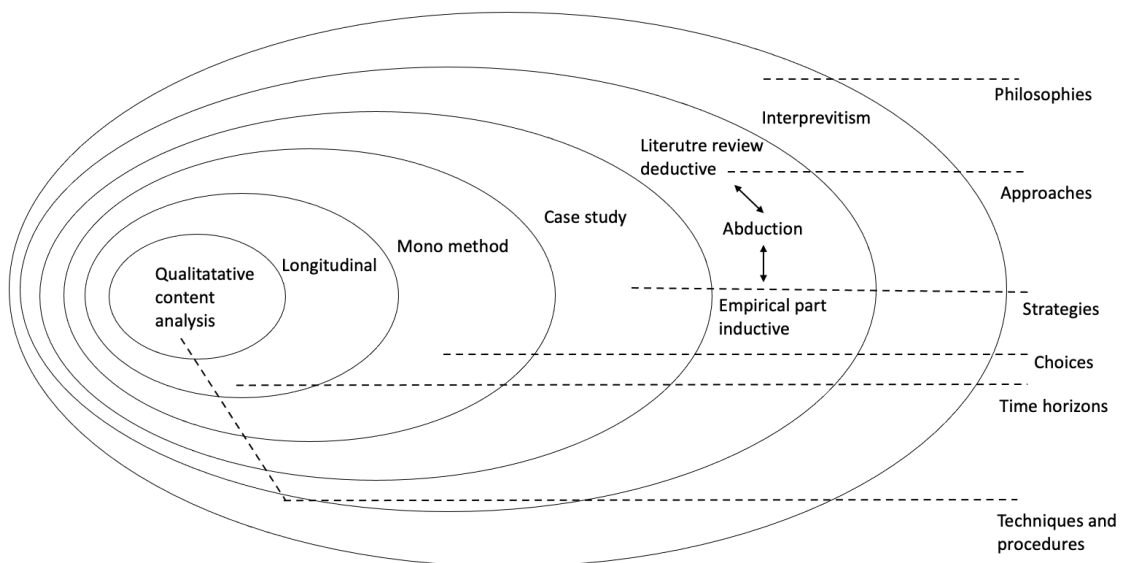


Figure 9. Research onion by Saunders et al. (2007, p. 132)

Research philosophy is the outermost layer in the research onion. Saunders et al. (2007, p. 101) stated that the research philosophy refers to “the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge”. In the same chapter (2007), the authors also emphasized that the research philosophy refers to how the author perceives the surrounding

world. In the same way, Eriksson & Kovalainen (2016, p. 24) brought out that researcher should have preferably moderate comprehension regarding different research philosophies due that is associated with different research methods. Similarly, in this same book was also stated that rather seldom researchers express the philosophical issues due it is considered unnecessary or too obvious to be brought out (p. 25). On the contrary, author also highlighted that considering research questions facilitate research design and improve decision making (p. 25). In that sense, short explanation concerning underlying research philosophy can be justified.

The main underlying research philosophy adopted to this thesis is interpretivism. Interpretivism has its root in hermeneutics (Kovalainen & Eriksson, p. 33). In addition, interpretivism as a philosophy has common features with constructionism as well (p. 34) and these philosophies are usually employed at the same time (Creswell, 2014). Interpretivism approach is applying more subjective view of the world than positivism and it is interested with extensive dimensions and context-related elements (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2019, p. 41). According to Alharahsheh & Pius, interpretivism view also emphasize that humans are distinct compared to physical phenomenon because people create different meanings to the different matters (p. 41). Saunders et al. (2007, p. 106) highlighted also that essential characteristic regarding interpretivism is to understand people as “social actors”. This is foundation for interpretivism which assume that language and societal structures affect remarkably how the real world is constructed (Eriksson & Kovalainen, p. 34). Eriksson & Kovalainen (p. 34) also mentioned that interpretivist is interested of the underlying societal factors behind the empirical data such as use of language practices as part of the empirical entity. Furthermore, scientists who employs constructionism think that interpretation is always shaped by researcher own historical experiences and societal factors (Creswell, 2014). This is aligned with my thinking of the matters as well. In this sense, the research philosophy is built on interpretivism and constructivist philosophy. This is rather important to disclose in the context of this study because the applied research method in this thesis is qualitative content analysis.

After the research philosophy researcher should be aware of research approach. The two most popular research approaches are either deductive or inductive approach. Deductive approach relies strongly on theory which is the main source of information to build hypotheses. Eriksson & Kovalainen (2016, p. 36) stated that pure deductive approach is seldom suitable for qualitative purposes. On the contrary, empirical data is the main source of information in the inductive approach. In inductive approach, the empirical data is then utilized to achieve theoretical understanding. For all that, research approach is not always a binary matter. Basically, this means that it is possible to employ both deductive and inductive approaches in the same research. Saunders et al. (2007, p. 121) stated that sometimes it is suitable to inductively interpretate the data by considering the theory as well. Likewise, Creswell (2014) discussed data analysis which employs both approaches. Creswell pointed out that this way of data analysis begins with ground up approach where the data is used accordingly creating suitable structure, classifications, and concepts. In this case, Creswell implicated that deductive reasoning is needed to ensure that the results are consistent. In this sense, this thesis also utilizes both deductive and inductive approaches. The rationale is that the data is the primary source of information in this paper. However, theory from the literature is used to interpretate and categorize the findings from the data. Thus, literature review is by nature more deductive, whereas empirical section will be approached more inductively. (Saunders et al. 2007, p. 117-122)

The approach layer is followed by the research strategy layer. Saunders et al. (2007, p. 135) emphasized that the most important feature in research strategy is that it is aligned with the purpose of the research and to find answers to the research questions. In this sense, adopting the right research strategy requires understanding of the research problem. According to Helo et al. (2019, p. 14), nomothetical and normative methods are the two most common approaches concerning research. Nomothetical refers to the current state of issues whereas normative approach seeks answers to the future related issues. Thus, nomothetical orientation is used in this paper. The most suitable research strategy

for my research problem is a case study. Case study is a rather adaptable research strategy, and it enables holistic and empirical view to the certain research topic (Schell, 1992, p. 2). Similarly, Helo et al. (p. 15) mentioned that case studies give a close-up, in-depth look at investigating the research topic in a specific setting. According to Yin, case studies fit for the purpose when research questions seek answers to the 'how' and 'why' related research questions, contemporary phenomenon is involved, and limited possibilities to influence what is under research (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005, p. 115). In this sense, case study strategy can be justified to fit for this thesis.

One of the most important decisions of the researcher is to determine whether the research is by nature qualitative, quantitative, or even both. In short, qualitative research is more focused on words whereas quantitative approach emphasizes more use of numbers (Creswell, 2014). Creswell continued that if case study employs both, then research is considered as mixed method research. Still, Saunders et al. (2007) mentioned that images and films are considered as sources of qualitative data. The authors also proceeded that mono method choice is applied when researcher use one way of gathering data and the data is characterized to be either qualitative or quantitative. Since the empirical part of my thesis is based on analyzing the annual reports of the selected listed Finnish retailers. And then, emphasis in the analysis is on verbal impression and interpreting the figures of the reports. Therefore, this thesis is more qualitative by nature than quantitative.

Finally, only two layers are left in the onion which are time horizons and techniques. Decision regarding time horizon must be made between cross-sectional and longitudinal data. Cross-sectional studies examine the research topic in a certain time. Longitudinal studies instead involve investigating the phenomena in longer periods of time. (Saunders et al. 2007, p. 148) In this thesis, sustainability reports are used as a source of data and those reports are retrieved from the last three years from each case company. In this sense, empirical part of this thesis is based on longitudinal data. The main technique which has been chosen to analyze the data and find answers to my research questions is qualitative content analysis.

3.2 Qualitative content analysis

Qualitative content analysis (QCA) is a research method which exploits and investigate the content to be explored and underlying meanings of it as well. Schreier (2012, p. 1) expressed a solid definition concerning QCA and according to her QCA can be defined as: “a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material. It is done by classifying material as instances of the categories of a coding frame”. QCA examines the data which is under investigation and seeks comprehensive knowledge and understanding concerning it. Suitable sources of data for QCA can be different kind of texts, sound, and image formats. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 120)

Of course, it must be elaborated that the chosen method is the most suitable for the intended research purpose. Schreier (2012, p. 3) listed certain factors which should apply in order QCA is the right method for the research purpose. Purpose and goals of this study fulfills the requirements for QCA, due the empirical study involves information that needs to be interpreted. Furthermore, the focus is on verbal and visual analysis of the data. In addition to this, annual reports have been retrieved from the internet and they are publicly available. Finally, Eriksson & Kovalainen (2016, p. 121) stated that researcher particularly should consider that the QCA method can answer to the research questions. In this sense, QCA can be considered as appropriate research method for this paper.

Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2018) discussed qualitative research and content analysis in their book. The main three options how to conduct QCA are so called content driven, theory guided, and theory driven approaches. (2018, p. 94) The chosen approach applied to this thesis is the so-called theory guided QCA. Theory guided QCA is a method where the analysis is accomplished through the theory but the foundation for analysis is not straightly retrieved from the theory like in the theory driven approach. In general, theory driven QCA is built on deductive approach. In turn, content driven QCA way is more inductive by its characteristics. The chosen theory guided approach is kind of between these other two practices. Schreier (2012, p, 89) also stated that it is rather unusual that

the coding frame is purely concept-driven or data-driven. As discussed earlier in the research approach chapter, this thesis utilizes both inductive and deductive reasoning. Tuomi & Sarajärvi brought out that relatively often inductive and deductive approaches are discussed alone in general. By that the authors mean that abductive logic has gained relatively minor attention, and the positioning between these terms are not always unambiguous. According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2016, p. 37), abduction is a process which utilizes both deduction and induction incrementally to get comprehension of the phenomenon. In addition, Tuomi & Sarajärvi stated that theory development is possible with abduction when some guiding principle is included to the process. Similarly, Graneheim et al. (2017, p. 31) introduced that by switching approaches during the research between inductive and deductive could lead to more comprehensive knowledge regarding the topic under research. In this sense, abduction hold for this thesis since deduction and induction alternate and are used side by side. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 80 – 84)

Data driven QCA can be roughly considered as a process which can be divided into three main phases. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, p. 91). These three phases are data reduction, clustering, and abstraction. The process is also visualized below in the Figure 10. Due the content driven approach proceeds according to the conditions of the material, the same process can be applied into the theory guided approach as well.



Figure 10. Main steps in QCA (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018)

As stated, QCA start with data reduction. In practice, this means that the irrelevant content is excluded from the empirical material (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Schreier (2012, p, 81) classified relevant data to be which facilitate to answer to the research questions. In practice, data reduction is conducted by carefully reading the reports, and utilizing text editor program to mark the relevant concepts appeared from the data. However, Schreier (p. 82) emphasized that major challenge in data reduction is to decide what data can be considered as relevant, and on the other hand what is irrelevant. In other words, data reduction is rather exposed for the bias of the researcher. This issue is mainly managed by using coding frame in this research. According to Schreier (2012, p, 61), coding frame is a practice for structuring the relevant material from the data. Schreier also continued (p. 83) that when it remains unclear whether some finding is relevant or irrelevant, it is better to code as relevant. As mentioned earlier, the coding frame of this thesis is based on theory guided approach, where the main categories are retrieved from the theory, but the subcategories are data driven.

Data reduction phase is followed by the clustering phase where the coded data is clustered e.g., categorized. Findings are classified into different categories. Categorization is a process where data is classified into desired units (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005, p. 207). Tuomi & Sarajärvi mentioned that desired unit of categorization might be for instance

feature, characteristic, or concept (p. 93). In this research paper, the unit of categorization is the concept. Categorizing the data builds the foundation for the data analysis and illustrate preliminary findings of the research. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 93)

The final phase in QCA is the data abstraction where the essential information is selected, and theoretical concepts are formed. According to Ghauri & Grønhaug, abstraction creates more general classes from the defined categories. Data abstraction is related how the results from the analysis are connected into theoretical concepts (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 90 - 94).

3.2.1 Reliability & Validity

One of the major challenges in qualitative research is to ensure sufficient scientific quality and trustworthiness (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 303). To assure the quality of this thesis, reliability and validity must be evaluated and discussed. Reliability in research refers that the results should be replicable (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 120). Particularly this mean that the results should be similar when the research is repeated (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 305). In QCA, reliability of the research is enhanced through consistency (Schreier, 2012, p. 167). Schreier (p. 167) also emphasized that the consistency of the coding frame determines the consistency of the research. Moreover, Schell (1992) emphasized the role of documentation in assessing reliability in case studies because that facilitates others conducting the same study in theory. In this sense, reliability is enhanced especially through proper documentation. In practice, this means that justifications and procedures are explained as broadly as possible.

The second main entity is called validity. Schreier (2012) provided a definition regarding validity, and according to her instrument is valid when it: “captures what it sets out to capture (p. 175)” In other words, valid findings should measure what is intended to be measured (Saunders et al. 2008, p. 150). According to Schreier (2012, p. 186), face validity and content validity are the most important when the purpose is describing the empirical data by using QCA. Face validity reveals how logical the chosen metric appears to

be (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005, p. 83). Instead, content validity exists when instrument encompass all aspects of concept (Schreier, 2012, p. 185)

Face validity is an extremely important when the coding frame is based on data-driven strategy. Since the used coding frame is based on both data-driven and concept-driven approaches the face validity must be evaluated properly. Schreier (2012) emphasized the number of residual categories affecting the face validity of coding frame. In practice this means that the more categories are included to the residual category, the lower face validity the coding frame obtains. At the same time, magnitude of abstraction is a second important feature affecting to the face validity. This could occur if the data is too generalized and reduced. In turn, content validity is particularly valuable in concept-driven approach. As stated, some of the categories are established through the theory so content validity is important as well. Content validity can be enhanced through an external expert. (Schreier, 2012, p. 186-190)

In this thesis, described factors above are implemented to enhance the validity of this work. Face validity is improved by objectively evaluating categories and sub-categories. Furthermore, content validity is improved by asking opinion and feedback from the supervisor of this thesis. However, additional strategies are useful to adapt since the inferences is tried to form abductively by combining the theory and empirical findings. Creswell (2014) emphasized the role of various methods to improve validity in qualitative research. One of the introduced methods by Creswell is triangulation. It is a technique utilizing many viewpoints to improve research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 306) Triangulation in this study is applied to the theories and data. This means that the findings of this research are constructed through the theories presented in the literature review section. Data triangulation instead is adopted by using longitudinal data from different companies to explore the phenomenon. These presented practices increase the overall validity. Finally, companies web pages are also visited to increase validity of this research.

3.2.2 Data collection & case companies

In general, empirical data can be divided into primary and secondary data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 95). The main differentiator between these types of data is that primary data is gathered by researcher and secondary data already exists (p. 95). As has already been stated, the data collection in this thesis is based on sustainability reports. Thus, the empirical data is considered as secondary data. The rationale for using secondary data for this thesis is rather obvious and natural choice. Firstly, the purpose of my study is to study retailers' sustainability reports, and secondary data is aligned with my research purposes and research questions. Secondly, accessibility to the data is guaranteed due the case companies are publicly listed. Thirdly, secondary data is rather fast to collect and collected information is reliable. Lastly, this kind of data also provide overview of the reporting practices and efforts towards sustainability among listed retailers in Finland.

The case companies are selected among listed companies in the HX4040GI OMX Helsinki retail index GI. This index consists of six companies which are Stockmann Oyj Abp, Verkkokauppa.com Oyj, Puuilo Oyj, Musti Group Oyj, Tokmanni Group Oyj, and Kamux Oy (Nasdaq, 2023). As has been said, longitudinal data is used to analyse the annual reports. The chosen companies are Musti Group Oyj, Stockmann Oyj, Tokmanni Group Oyj, and Verkkokauppa.com Oyj. Kamux Oy and Puuilo Oyj have been excluded from the sample. Rationale for this is that Kamux Oy is a used car dealer, and its supply chain differs remarkably from the other companies. Secondly, Puuilo Oyj is also removed from the sample because the company was listed recently in 2021, and there are not enough data existing about the company. Case companies' sustainability reports from the last three years have been retrieved. Thus, the chosen companies are Musti Group Oyj, Stockmann Oyj, Tokmanni Group Oyj, and Verkkokauppa.com Oyj. The Figure 11 below illustrate the retrieved sustainability reports used as a source of information in this thesis. In addition to this, short presentations of the case companies are presented below.

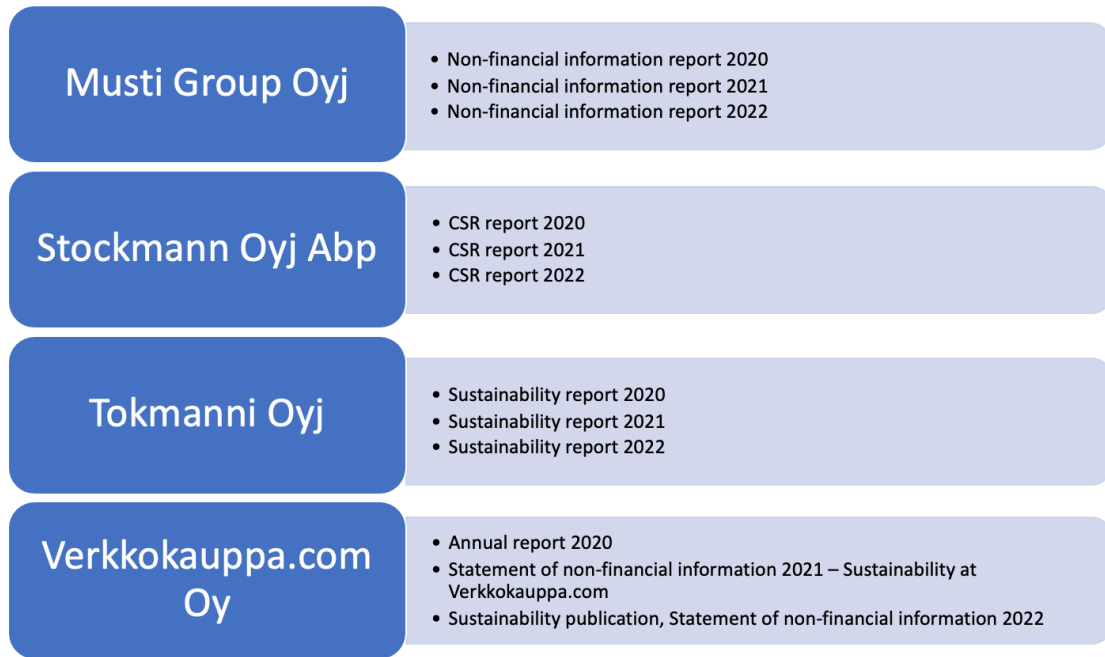


Figure 11. Selected case companies

Musti Group is the dominant player in the Nordic pet care market. The company has its operations in Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Musti Group had a turnover of 391,1 million euros in the accounting period of 2022. The company serves its customers both through digital channels and physical retail stores. In the end of the accounting period 2022 company had 335 physical stores, of which 16 were franchise stores. (Musti Group, 2022)

Stockmann is a famous Finnish retailer which was founded in 1862. Stockmann consist of two divisions which are Lindex fashion chain and Stockmann department stores. Both divisions also serve their customers through digital channels as well. At the end of the 2022, Stockmann turnover amounted to 981,7 million euros. (Stockmann, 2022)

Tokmanni is the biggest discount retail in Finland with its turnover of 1168 million EUR in 2022. Company had 4241 employers at the end of 2022. Tokmanni also serves its customers through its online store as well as its 198 number of physical stores. Tokmanni also has subsidiaries called Click Shoes, Shoe House, and Miny stores. (Tokmanni, 2022)

Verkkokauppa.com is the most popular online retailer in Finland which is founded in 1992. In addition to its e-commerce business, the company has also four physical stores in Finland. The company offers around 90000 products, and its core category is consumer electronics. Verkkokauppa.com had a turnover of 543,1 million in 2022, and it employed 821 employees. (Verkkokauppa, 2022)

4 Results

In this chapter, the main results are presented according to the selected methodologies presented in the previous chapter.

4.1 Musti Group Oyj

Musti Group discloses its non-financial information by using standalone non-financial reports. These reports are based on UN global compact principles, and the report is drafted according to this framework. Sustainability of Musti Group's business is based on their responsibility program which is named as "Trusty". The Trusty program is based on three major themes which focus on Pets and their parents, Employees, and communities. The foundation for these main themes is responsible supply chain, environmental impact, and governance & ethics. Below is a Table 2, where the main SSCM practices have been gathered from the non-financial information reports published during the last three years. As can be seen from the table below, the lengths of the non-financial reports are quite moderate, and the reports have not been externally assured. Even though, the reports still contained valuable information concerning SSCM efforts of the company. (Musti Group, 2020, 2021, 2022).

Table 2. Musti Group’s SSCM practices

Report Year	Pages in the report	External assurance
2020	11	No
2021	11	No
2022	15	No

Economical	Environmental	Social
Charity programs	Audits (major suppliers)	Amfori BSCI membership
Local sourcing	Certificates	Amfori Code of Conduct
	Code of Conduct	Audits
	Energy management	Charity programs
	Green transportation	Code of conduct
	Packaging optimization	Factory visits
	Sustainable products	International declarations
	Waste management	Policies
	Audits (all suppliers)	Responsible sourcing
	Supplier approval management	Supplier categorization
	IT device management	Transparency initiative
	GHG emission inventory	Stakeholder engagement
	UN Global Compact Climate accelerator program	Supplier approval management
	Major suppliers GHG target	Information management system
		Transparency of origin

To start with economical practices, one factor was identified that classified into economical practices. This is charity programs. The company has identified that the community’s acceptance is evitable in order to excel in their business. These various charity programs can be considered as community investments. For example, supporting animal welfare organizations through donations and establishing various campaigns. (Musti Group, 2020)

Numerous environmental practices were identified from the reports. Audits were named as one of the key tools to ensure environmental efforts of suppliers. Besides with audits, Code of Conduct (CoC) is also extended to consider environmental practices that suppliers must obtain. Certificates were named also as an environmental practice, and Musti has WWF Green Office Certificate for their environmental management system. Through energy management company is committed to acquire renewable energy on its own facilities, and it also focuses on energy efficiency. Reports also revealed the efforts to minimize emissions in logistics. Requirements for transportation companies to use at mini-

mum EURO 6 standard fuels support the ambitions. In addition to this, attempts to increase the size of consignments have been taken. Related to the green transportation, company also attempts to minimize packaging materials where the focus is especially on plastic. At the same time, waste management practices like recycling have been promoted. Company also seeks new sustainable products to be sold where emphasis is on sustainable materials. But at the same time, they are increasing the selection of sustainable product availability within its stores. (2020)

Concerning the social practices, the toolbox is rather broad for Musti. Likewise in environmental practices, CoC and audits are essential to ensure suppliers commitment for human rights. All suppliers must sign the CoC, and the ones located in risk countries must sign Amfori CoC as well. Factory visits are also part of ensuring the suppliers conditions for the set requirements, and all major suppliers have been visited. These all are related to the responsible sourcing, which company has recognized, and developing it continuously. As part of responsible sourcing is supplier categorization, where the risk level defines the rank of the supplier. Clear people principles are also in place to guarantee well-being of employees, and human rights overall. At the same time, different charity programs like customers opportunity to donate pet related stuff to low-income families can be seen as a social SSCM practice. Transparency of the supply chain was also mentioned to measure supplier performance, but the concrete actions were not disclosed in 2020. (2020)

4.1.1 Development in 2021-2022

Remarkable development has happened during the years when all the aspects from the triple bottom line are considered. Regarding the economical practices, company indicated their efforts to increase local sourcing to respond the growth of green consumption trend. Other economical practices couldn't be identified from the report (Musti Group, 2022)

Certain development has also happened during the studied years concerning the environmental practices. In 2021, supplier approval management update was renewed which can be seen as a positive factor (2021). In 2022, company reported that it has studied how to extend the lifespan of IT devices. Furthermore, recycling of IT devices got an additional effort that more items could be reused instead of ending up in a landfill. There has been a positive trend concerning the audits because in 2020 only major suppliers in risk countries were audited, but in 2022 this has been extended to include all suppliers. Also in 2022, company started GHG emission inventory, and joined into UN Global Compact Climate accelerator program that is rather significant step. Finally, company also started to require its major suppliers to set up their own targets how to reduce emissions. (2022)

Development in social practices were quite substantial in 2021 and 2022. In 2021, the same supplier approval management were updated which also affects to the social aspect (2021). In 2022, company applied and emphasized the meaning and development of information security management. Through enhanced information security management, risks related to human right can be reduced. Furthermore, transparency was put as a key performance indicator (KPI), and for Musti transparency stands for the origin of the product. (2022)

4.2 Stockmann Oyj Abp

Stockmann reports its sustainability through separate CSR reports which have been drafted according to GRI reporting principles, but they have not been externally assured. These reports contain information from Stockmann division as well as Stockmann's subsidiary Lindex division, but this information has been separated from each other. In addition to that, Lindex publishes their own comprehensive CSR report on their web page. Therefore, the analysis is targeted to focus only on Stockmann division. Stockmann's sustainability work is based on their CSR strategy which in turn guides their CSR work. The latest CSR strategy was updated to cover years 2022-2025, as an objective to guide the CSR work for: "toward resource-wise retail business (p. 8)". The most central themes are

closely related to the TBL framework, where economic, environmental, and social factors guide this work. Below is a table 3, where the Stockmann's SSCM practices have been gathered. (Stockmann, 2022)

Table 3. Stockmann's SSCM practices

Report Year	Pages in the report	External assurance
2020	47	No
2021	49	No
2022	62	No

Economical	Environmental	Social
Charity programs	Business travel guideline	Audits
Corporate citizenship	Circular economy principles	Code of conduct
Economic value generated	Code of Conduct	Factory lists
	Energy management	Factory visits
	GHG Calculation (CPD)	International declarations
	Green transportation	Supplier assessment
	ISO 14001	Supplier development
	Packaging optimization	Supplier self-assessment
	Supplier development	Supplier survey
	Supplier training	
	Sustainable brand promotion	
	Sustainable products	
	Waste management	
	SBTi initiative	
	Low emission deliveries	
	Circular training programme	
	Reverse logistics	

Despite that Stockmann publishes stand-alone CSR reports, economical aspect has been dealt in a solid way. Different charity programs are part of their CSR work, and these programs are targeted into countries where the company has its operations. Corporate citizenship can be also named as a SSCM practices since it has been applied as a KPI metric as well. In addition to charity programs, participating for several surveys and investing in transparent communication for stakeholders can be seen to support this aspect. Still, one of the most important aspects is that the company reports their direct economic value that they generate and distribute. The company disclose exact figures how the added value has been divided between different stakeholder groups, including personnel, shareholders, finance providers, and public sector. (Stockmann, 2020)

Stockmann has employed various practices concerning the environmental SSCM practices. It was delighted to notice that circular economy was promoted in a robust way. The company has been studying how to enhance lifetime of the products, and at the same time improving the recycling rate. Even though, waste is still generated but this is managed through waste management program which is in line with the environmental management system. Generated waste is reported in tons, and this is divided between the hazardous, and non-hazardous waste. This is also closely related attempts to reduce the impact of their packages, and to favor more sustainable packaging materials. But at the same time, the company promotes sustainable products and selection available to consumers. Code of Conduct is one of the key tools that suppliers and partners must commit where environmental matters have been considered. Energy management principles are adopted also by the company, and Stockmann discloses energy and water consumption figures as numbers. As part of the energy management their distribution center has LEED Gold environmental certificate. The company also reports its GHG emissions according to GHG protocol principles. The reporting considers scope 1, 2, and 3 emissions. Practices to ensure green logistics have been also applied, where the focus is on collaboration between partners, smart planning, and reverse logistics. The company has also ISO 14001 certified environmental management system in use that supports the environmental work internally, and externally through suppliers. Stockmann procures its own private-label products through its local purchasing offices, and local people will organize training concerning environmental matters and organize audits. Supplier development is also developed, and scorecards are used to rank suppliers according to their performance. (Stockmann, 2020)

Social practices include tools that were used to ensure also environmental matters. These are various audits, CoC, supplier assessments, and supplier development. Amfori CoC is mentioned as a separate practice to enhance working conditions in the supply chain. In addition to these practices, company is disclosing its suppliers that produces their own products. This is called as factory list which is available for all, and this list also reveals the production countries. Factory visits are also regular tool to ensure that the

requirements have been achieved. Supplier surveys are used to interact with the suppliers to enhance collaboration. Overall, numerous international declarations guide the CSR work in the company, and these are also ensuring the social sustainability in the supply chain. For instance, UN Guiding principles for human rights since 2018 and OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises are an example of applied declarations among others. Transparency is also emphasized in the reporting, but the intentions seem to be stronger than the deeds. Through product labeling the company discloses the origin of the goods concerning their own brands. There is no mention concerning the rest of the sold items from brand partners. (Stockmann, 2020)

4.2.1 Development during 2021-2022

The development of identified SSCM practices have evolved, even though the amount of identified new practices are rather limited. In 2021, the company joined to the Science-Based targets initiative (SBTi) to reduce their emissions even further. In addition to this, the company disclosed that they have started to offer low emission deliveries through the selected partner. There are also mentioned factors that foster circular economy through collaboration with partners to foster recycling, and at the sustainability information of the sold items have been increased. (Stockmann, 2021)

In 2022, new SSCM practices were not identified that could mentioned as a new practice. However, the focus has strongly been in continuous development of the ongoing practices. Even though, it is notable that the remarkable actions have been made especially concerning the circular economy. The company stronger indicated its role in their business operations. To illustrate this, the company joined training program as an intention to develop further their circular business models. At the same time, company started pilots to recycle textiles in their stores. In 2022, company has also made improvements to GHG emission calculation in line with the SBTi initiative. (Stockmann, 2022)

4.3 Tokmanni Oyj

Tokmanni reports its sustainability also through GRI standards, and exceptionally from the other case companies' Tokmanni's sustainability reports are also externally assured. Foundation for the sustainability work at Tokmanni are: "Code of Conduct and related principles, policies and guidelines (p. 19)". The main themes for the sustainability consist of business integrity, people, products and sourcing, and climate. The company has put effort to the sustainability reporting since the length of the reports are around 90 pages which can be considered rather extensive. In the Table 4 below is listed the major findings of the practices to guarantee sustainability of their supply chain.

Table 4. Tokmanni's SSCM practices

Report Year	Pages in the report	External assurance
2020	89	Yes
2021	91	Yes
2022	92	Yes

Economical	Environmental	Social
Economic value generated	Amfori BEPI self-assessment	Amfori BSCI membership
Tax footprint	Audits	Amfori Code of Conduct
Charity Programs	Certificates	Audits
Domestic sourcing	Circular solutions	Code of Conduct
	Circular solutions initiative	Factory visits
	Code of Conduct	International Declarations
	Energy management	Policies
	GHG Calculation (CPD)	Responsible sourcing
	Green transportation	Stakeholder engagement
	Packaging optimization	Training
	SBTi	Transparency
	Supplier development	Factory lists
	Sustainable products	Supplier events
	Waste management	Human rights assessment
	Number of certified products	
	Supplier SBTi targets	
	Supplier events	
	Biodiversity	

Economical practices in this context adhere to a similar pattern as previously observed in the Stockmann case. Tokmanni discloses its economic value generated for different stakeholders in the same way as Tokmanni. In addition to this, tax footprint is also disclosed which illustrates how taxes paid have been divided and into categories. Charity

programs are reported that can be considered as community investments. For instance, Baltic Sea preservation through external foundation has been continuous target of charity program. Finally, company do also disclose the sourcing spend per continent, and around 75 % of goods were sourced from Finland in 2020. This appears to be rather high proportion, and thereby this creates economic value to Finland where the company has its physical stores. (Tokmanni, 2020)

Concerning the environmental practices, the company has been a forerunner in adopting SBTi already in 2020 which have guided the environmental work. Naturally as a part of this, company collect and reports the GHG calculations according to the CPD. In the same way as its peers above, code of conduct contains commitments to the environmental matters. Audits are required from suppliers that are part of the environmental practices. Essential tool in ensuring the supply chain environmental capabilities is environmental assessment programme (BEPI). Through this Amfori's program Tokmanni is involving its suppliers to do self-assessments. In addition to supplier actions, internal actions do contain green transportation efforts, packaging optimization, energy- and waste management, and promoting environmentally friendlier products. Interesting in the report in 2020 was that circular economy was just briefly mentioned. However, company is still part of Finix research project where the aim is to promote circular economy. (Tokmanni, 2020)

Social SSCM practices were found broadly from the reports. The most essential tools to assure social sustainability of the supply chains are international declarations, CoC that includes numerous policies, Amfori CoC, and audits. These all are related to the responsible sourcing approach where the emphasis is on risk countries. The company requires that suppliers are committed to Amfori BSCI conduct and sub-suppliers must be committed to this as well. In addition to external audits, Tokmanni arrange its own factory visits to inspect the compliance requirements against audit reports. Internal training and participating to the various partner forums like sustainable Supply Chain Initiative of the

consumer goods forum is an example how knowledge can be improved internally. Transparency is referred how to assure the social sustainability in the supply chain. This has been fostered by establishing supplier management system in their sourcing joint company in Shanghai. On the other hand, it looks like supply chain transparency is still in a phase of early development. (Tokmanni, 2020)

4.3.1 Development in 2021-2022

The development of the SSCM practices have been proceeding and continuous improvement efforts have been executed proactively. On the other hand, some totally new practices were identified also that were not mentioned in the 2020 report. One of the most important actions was to encourage suppliers to set SBTi targets of their own during 2021. In 2021, 43 % of the item suppliers undertook the SBTi and set science-based targets. Tokmanni pledged that by 2025 that number should be 80%. Concerning the social side, clothing factory list was first time available in 2021 according to the company website (2022). This is a major improvement towards transparency of the supply chain. (Tokmanni, 2021)

In 2022, the continuous work was continued, and new relevant practices were identified. Supplier engagement was elevated by two supplier events where sustainability related matters were discussed. At the same time, the company started to review their contribution to biodiversity. As a result of this, company will analyse their objectives related to biodiversity. From the social side, supplier events also ameliorate the awareness concerning the social issues. Tokmanni also conducted separate human rights assessments by third party. Company has used commissioned human rights assessment as tool already in 2017, but in 2022 again activated with that practice. (2022)

4.4 Verkkokauppa.com Oyj

In 2020, Verkkokauppa.com published its non-financial report as part of annual reporting (2020), but after that the company shifted to publish standalone non-financial information reports. The reports have not been externally assured, but the GRI material references have been used in 2021, and 2022 reports. Sustainability work of the company is built on four key themes which emphasis the customers, environmental impact, community, and governance together with profitable business. Sustainable supply chain management practices were identified from these reports, and below is a Table 5 which illustrate the findings from these reports. (Verkkokauppa.com, 2020, 2021, 2022)

Table 5. Verkkokauppa.com SSCM practices

Report Year	Pages in the report	External assurance
2020	76 (part of annual report)	No
2021	23	No
2022	28	No

Economical	Environmental	Social
Economic value generated	Circular solutions	Audits
Tax footprint	Code of Conduct	Code of Conduct
	Energy management	International declarations
	Green transportation	Policies
	Packaging optimization	Stakeholder engagement
	Supplier survey	Supplier survey
	Sustainable products	Amfori BSCI membership
	Waste management	Amfori Code of Conduct
	GHG calculation	
	Expanded supplier requirements	
	BSCI audit	
	Scope 3 GHG emissions	

Economic practices were rather difficult to identify from the reports, but economic value generated to stakeholders has been disclosed. The company has categorized the added values consequences for its stakeholders. The categorized stakeholders were personnel, customers, supplier, shareholder, society, and environment. (2021)

The fundamental guidelines for environmental initiatives are outlined in the CoC, and environmental topics have been included in the supplier negotiation process according

to company's sustainable import plant. Verkkokauppa.com has also paid attention to energy management, packaging optimization, waste management, and sustainable products. In addition to this, most of the customer deliveries are shipped through carbon-neutral deliveries. One of the emphasized practices by the company can be placed under sustainable products -category. The aim is to provide enduring items that fulfill the customer needs and extend the life of the product through additional services. Similarly, steps towards circular economy have been taken. As an illustration, Verkkokauppa.com started pilot with partner to sell used phones. Returned products by the customers are also sold again as outlet items, and thereby around 1,0 % return rate in online sales was achieved. In 2020, audits were not mentioned active as part of toolbox to ensure environmental sustainability. However, the supplier survey was conducted in 2020 to map the status of the supplier's sustainability practices. (Verkkokauppa.com. 2020)

Social practices to assure sustainability is mostly driven by the company CoC that partners must comply with. CoC is also extended through different policies like Supplier Compliance Policy. Stakeholder engagement is part of the social sustainability as well, and relevant topics to stakeholders have been mapped through materiality analysis. As part of CoC, international declarations guide the work and promote the social sustainability along the supply chain. Valid audit is also required from private label suppliers. On the other hand, within the past two years audits were successfully cleared by 62 % of Tier 1 private label suppliers even though the target is 100 %. In addition to these practices, the supplier survey was used to also measure the suppliers' social practices. (Verkkokauppa.com, 2020)

4.4.1 Development in 2021-2022

Progress of the SSCM practices have evolved remarkably during 2021 to 2022. In 2021, the company started to publish standalone non-financial reports guided by the Finnish Accounting Act and EU Directive related to non-financial information together with material references from GRI framework. As a result of this, the reporting appeared as more

comprehensive, and KPI's were set according to main sustainability themes. Further economical practices were hard to identify in 2021, but environmental practices were launched and accelerated. Verkkokauppa.com started to report scope 1 & 2 GHG calculations. This represents an enhancement but Scope 3 indirect emissions from the value chain were not reported. Social practices were deployed even further when company decided to join to Amfori BSCI association. As a member of this organization Verkkokauppa.com seek: "to develop social responsibility in the supply chains according to the principle of continuous improvement (p. 15)". (Verkkokauppa.com, 2021)

The report of 2022 provided more evidence concerning the SSCM practices. Tax footprint reporting started where the disclosure contained the tax categorization. Environmental work continued through setting stricter requirement for suppliers, and supplier must consider these aspects within their supply chains. In addition to this, suppliers' environmental practices are evaluated through BSCI audit. Scope 3 emission from the value chain was also disclosed. Regarding the social practices update of the CoC according to the Amfori CoC requirements was the most emphasized practice concerning the social responsibility within the supply chain. In addition to this, major update in the purchasing policy has happened that the suppliers must provide proof of audit prior purchase order is possible to release. In 2021, order could have been placed prior audit if the supplier committed to do so later (2021, p. 16). This is a major improvement to ensure the social sustainability in the supply chain. In 2022, already 98 % of the Tier 1 private label suppliers had a valid audit. This figure has improved by 36 percentage points since 2020 (2020). In that sense, significant improvement has happened. (Verkkokauppa, 2022)

4.5 SDGs

The second research question related to adoption of sustainable development goals by the selected case retailers. Below is a Table 6 where the findings are presented and classified according to the three dimensions from the sustainable development by using Constanza's framework (2016, p. 353). Surprisingly, Musti Group and Verkkokauppa.com

haven't applied SDGs at all. Thus, it turned out to be impossible to analyze these companies' approach towards SDGs since they are not disclosing their commitments to them. On the contrary, Stockmann & Tokmanni have applied the goals rather broadly and extensively. It is also notable that the applied SDGs have remained as the same during the chosen three-year period.

Table 6. Adopted SDGs by case companies in 2020-2022

SDGs	Musti Group	Stockmann	Tokmanni	Verkkokauppa.com	
Economic					
7: Affordable and clean energy	-		x	-	
8: Decent work and economic growth	-	x	x	-	
9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure	-		x	-	
11: Sustainable cities and communities	-			-	
12: Responsible consumption and production	-	x	x	-	
Environmental					
6: Clean water and sanitation	-	x		-	
13: Climate action	-	x	x	-	
14: Life below water	-			-	
15: Life on land	-			-	
Social					
1: No poverty	-			-	
2: Zero hunger	-			-	
3: Good health and well-being	-		x	-	
4: Quality education	-			-	
5: Gender equality	-	x	x	-	
10: Reduced inequalities	-			-	
16: Peace, justice and strong institutions	-		x	-	
17: Partnerships for the goals	-	x	x	-	
Count:		0	6	9	0

Stockmann has determined six different SDGs where the company puts its focus and can most effectively contribute towards. According to Costanza et al. (2016) categorization, decent work, and economic growth (SDG 8) and responsible consumption and production (SDG 12) are the goals that take into consideration the economic aspect. From the environmental side, clean water and sanitation (SDG 6) & climate action (SDG 13). Finally, gender equality (SDG 5) and partnerships for the goals (SDG 17) from the social side. Overall, the company has shortly described how these goals are part of their business model. In addition to this, practical actions are also disclosed. (Stockmann, 2022)

In turn, Tokmanni has committed towards even in 9 SDGs which they pinpointed in 2019 to be the most relevant for the company and its stakeholders. The committed SDGs are almost the same as Stockmann, but in addition Tokmanni has detected that they can contribute also to SDG 7, 9, 3, and 16. But in contrast, they do not recognize SDG 6. Despite that 9 goals have been recognized, SDG 8, SDG 12, & SDG 13 have been emphasized where activities of the company can most positively affect. Tokmanni has divided their chosen SDGs according to their sustainability themes. But at the same time, sustainability goals have been disclosed and divided how they to support the SDGs, and examples are provided how the goals support the SDGs. (Tokmanni, 2022)

5 Discussion and conclusion

In this final chapter, the summary of the main findings is discussed, and the research questions are answered. In addition to this, managerial implications and suggestions for the future research is proposed.

5.1 Summary of the findings

The purpose of this study was to research sustainable supply chain management practices and adoption of SDGs among Finnish listed retailers. Through the qualitative content analysis main practices have been found from the available CSR reports how the selected case companies are managing sustainability of their supply chains. Furthermore, commitments towards SDGs have been researched and differences and similarities have been found. From the analyzed sustainability reports, it can be stated that the SSCM practices between the case companies have numerous similarities. On the contrary, there are still major differences concerning the level of transparency and practices that case companies have deployed in their operations. To illustrate the main findings, below is a Table 7 that presents the most often occurred SSCM practices, and their frequencies.

Table 7. Overview of the most identified SSCM practices and the frequencies

Economical	Environmental	Social
Charity programs (3)	Audits (4)	Amfori BSCI membership (4)
Economic value generated (2)	Circular solutions (3)	Amfori Code of Conduct (4)
Tax footprint (2)	Code of Conduct (4)	Audits (4)
	Energy management (4)	Code of Conduct (4)
	GHG Calculation (3)	Factory visits (3)
	Green transportation (4)	International declarations (4)
	Packaging optimization (4)	Policies (4)
	Sustainable products (4)	Stakeholder engagement (4)
	Waste management (4)	Transparency actions (3)

As can be noticed from the table 7, there are numerous similarities regarding the recognized SSCM practices. Direct economical practices from the sustainability reports were

rather hard to identify, but various charity programs that supported the local communities tend to be the most observed economical practice. And then, disclosure of tax footprint and economic value generated was observed from the reports. All the case companies naturally pursued to seek financial profits. Therefore, no additional efforts were put to them.

The number of the identified environmental practices were more mixed, and case companies disclosed various practices. On the other hand, abstraction process revealed that the most identified practices could be put under the same category. Obviously, Code of Conducts and audits were emphasized by all the companies. In the same way, efforts regarding energy- and waste management, more sustainable products with smarter packages, and green transportation related actions were broadly fostered throughout the companies. Three out of four companies disclosed their GHG calculations, and similarly interest and pilots towards circular solutions were mentioned.

Common denominator regarding the social practices among the retailers were also CoC and audits, but also membership in Amfori BSCI was massively emphasized as a single practice to verify social sustainability within the supply chain. In parallel, Amfori CoC was also used together with companies own CoC. Similarly, all the companies highlighted their commitments to numerous international declarations such as the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Together with internal declarations numerous internal policies have been placed. For instance, Tokmanni do not allow the cotton from Turkmenistan and Kinjiang because risk of forced labour (Tokmanni, 2022). Some of the policies are part of the CoC, but some policies have been placed separately to guide the sustainability work. It was also notable that all the companies had made efforts towards stakeholder collaboration. As an illustration, materiality analysis and surveys were conducted to seek the relevant matters for their stakeholders. Three of the four companies also conducted factory visits of their own except Verkkokauppa.com report didn't provide evidence of that. Actions related to increase the transparency of the SC related activities were mentioned from all the companies, but level of practical actions appeared to be a

mixed bag. Tokmanni seems to have the most extensive approach towards transparency of the supply chain or at least they disclosed the most information regarding of it. For Tokmanni, transparency of the SC is fostered by increasing certified materials in their products, and they do also attend Aalto University Finix project to foster transparency within their SC. Moreover, they explored blockchain as a technology to help providing transparency of the product origins (Tokmanni, 2022). For, Musti Group transparency was approached to be able to indicate better the origin of their products sold (Musti Group, 2022). Stockmann instead reported to focus closely on transparency, but the practical actions were not mentioned at all (2022). For Verkkokauppa.com, transparency mentioned communication of the product features and return rates to support responsible choices, but transparency of the SC was not mentioned (2022). As can be deducted from these examples, case companies tend to have rather limited overview and capabilities to increase transparency of their SC, regardless of its identified importance for stakeholders.

5.2 Research questions

The purpose of this study was to seek the answers for my initial research questions.

1. How are SSCM related practices considered and evolved in the sustainability reports of the selected companies included in the OMX Helsinki Retail GI index from the last three years?

SSCM related practices can be found from the sustainability reports of the selected case companies, but the observed practices varied remarkably. Overall, the development of the reported practices has evolved to the right direction, and the reports provided rather appropriate evidence regarding SSCM practices. On the other hand, maturity of the reporting practices varied remarkably between the companies and some of the reports provided more evidence than others. For instance, it is rather obvious that Musti Group's 2020 report which contained only 11 pages don't provide as much evidence than Tokmanni's or Stockmann's plus 50-page reports. However, it is worth to mention that the development of the reporting practices and disclosure of SSCM practices have been

evolving in all companies. This can be seen as increased number of identified practices in more recent reports. On the contrary, the maturity level and the starting point also affected to perceived development of the recognized reporting practices. For example, Musti Group has implemented numerous new practices during the review period. But in turn, Stockmann and Tokmanni who had extensive reports and practices in place already in 2020 couldn't provide as much new practices since the maturity and starting point tend to be rather higher. In addition to this, it is notable that Stockmann and Tokmanni who are reporting through GRI framework provided more evidence about their practices, and perceived level of transparency tend to be higher. GRI reports also revealed more proactive practices related to the supplier development.

The findings are rather well in line with the previous research regarding SSCM practices. Like Prashar (2022, p. 2398-2399) classified SSCM practices generally to be sustainable procurement, energy- and waste management, sustainable distribution, and water conservation. All these elements could be broadly found from the case companies' sustainability reports. Similarly, companies using GRI framework disclosed more transparent information which is aligned with Machado's findings (2023). Like Berning & Venter (2015) were able to indicate, retailer-supplier collaboration has major effect an overall retailer's sustainability performance. This was perceived also from the Tokmanni's and Stockmann's reports where supplier development actions were brought out more transparently through GRI reporting. This obviously have an impact also to the perceived sustainability, compared if these actions have been published poorly or at all.

2. How sustainable development goals have been adopted among the selected listed Finnish retailers?

The second research question related to how the case companies have adopted the SDGs in their operations. This matter turned out to be a differentiating factor among the selected retailers. Surprisingly, only two out of four companies had implemented SDGs as part of their operations. Musti Group and Verkkokauppa.com didn't mention SDGs at all, and none of the reports referred their commitments towards SDGs. This was rather un-

expected due adopting SDGs appears to be beneficial for retailers (KPMG, p. 8–9). Tokmanni and Stockmann had totally different approach since they were adopted SDGs rather extensively. Tokmanni has identified 9 SDGs where they can contribute on. From these 9 SDGs the company separately emphasized decent work and economic growth (SDG8), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), and climate action (SDG 13) where they target their efforts. In turn, Stockmann has implemented 6 different goals where they put their efforts. In addition to the previously mentioned goals, Stockmann will also contribute to gender equality (SDG 5), collaboration & partnerships (SDG 17), and clean water and sanitation (SDG 6).

Generally, SDG approach by Tokmanni & Stockmann is well line with the largest European retailers like Jones & Comfort have studied (2018). Jones & Comfort (2018, p. 107) emphasized especially the importance of responsible consumption & production (SDG 12) and both Tokmanni & Stockmann contribute on it. It is rather obvious that SDG reporting provided some color to the reports, and they complemented SSCM practices. However, comparing SDGs between the case companies proved to be difficult like Jones & Comfort also stated in their research paper (p. 116). SDGs could provide positive outcomes, but issues with measurement and communication must be more standardized like Jones & Comfort elaborated (2018, p. 118).

5.3 Managerial implications

The results of this study provided an overview concerning the dominant SSCM practices and adopted SDGs disclosed in case companies' sustainability reports. This study reveals current practices how the selected retailers have implemented SSCM practices into their operations, how SDGs are implemented, and especially how they are reporting of it. Results of this study can provide business managers and practitioners overview of the current practices that Finnish retailers do have in place. Despite that the results varied depending on the company, generally can be stated that majority of the disclosed practices tend to be more reactive in nature. According to Zimoni et al. (2019, p. 6) reactive practices refer to basic measures that meet sustainable regulation and allows more effort

towards economic performance. Even though that reactive practices are important, they do not enable dynamic capabilities like Kähkönen et al. were able to indicate in their research paper (2018). This is also aligned with Vadakkepatt et al. (2020) findings that by only implementing entire system integrations long-term advantages can be obtained over time. Together with entire system integrations, an effective collaboration with strategic suppliers is a necessity for the success of SSCM (Wang & Dai, 2017, p. 15).

Publicly listed retailers and business managers should also focus especially to the transparency of their supply chains. Like Schäfer (2021, p. 599) emphasized the importance of companies' capabilities to disclose SC related information in this current political landscape. Like Schäfer mentioned, transparency of companies supply chains is not only depending on their willingness to disclose. But it is all about what the companies can disclose based on their own visibility. For instance, Musti Group's target in 2022 is to improve transparency of the origin of their products (2022). This indicates that the overall capabilities to disclose comprehensive information regarding SC information is still in its early days. Especially from the SSCM perspective Tokmanni and Stockmann provided clearly more information concerning their SSCM practices compared to Musti Group and Verkkokauppa.com. The common factor between Tokmanni & Stockmann is adopted GRI framework. Like Machado (2023, p. 1) was able to demonstrate that GRI improve GSCM transparency to the stakeholders, it appears to be same between the chosen companies. In that sense, adopting GRI framework might be beneficial for the retailers where the requirements of the stakeholders are extremely emphasized.

5.4 Limitations & suggestions for future research

It is evitable that certain limitations do apply for this research paper. Firstly, SSCM practices that are linked towards anti-corruption and bribery have been excluded from the results. Secondly, practices related to companies own personnel have been excluded to keep the scope of this paper manageable. Despite that the content analysis have been executed as objectively as possible, there are still risk of some subjectivity of the results since the material have been coded inductively. However, this risk has been mitigated by

utilizing clear coding rules and theoretical framework to avoid excluding important evidence from the reports.

This research was conducted as a qualitative content analysis to find SSCM practices and adoption of SDGs among the selected case retailers. The future research could focus to seek best practices how to implement even more proactive SSCM practices as part supply chain management processes. This could be done by interviewing retail SCM managers and seek insights of the attempts to achieve higher SSCM performance and competitive edge at the same time. Even though that sustainability reports provided rather appropriate evidence regarding the SSCM efforts among the case companies, still interaction with SCM managers could reveal interesting evidence about the economic practices. This can be also linked to the SDGs like Jones & Comfort (2018) raised concerns regarding contradictions between sustainability and pursuit of profit. Furthermore, practitioners could also reveal their perspective towards SDGs, and how they do see the potential complementary outcomes by combining SSCM practices into larger framework of SDGs. Finally, discussions with SC managers could reveal the main barriers that prevents companies to disclose even more transparent information about their supply chains.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Empirical data

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