In this paper we investigate the collaborative paradigm in Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM). The depth and quality of the relationship between a firm and its suppliers is widely recognised as a critical facilitator of SSCM. Many authors in the field have argued that a collaborative approach to SC relationship management was likely to be more fruitful in achieving sustainable development goals. However, little research has offered a more nuanced perspective on collaborative SSCM and specifically assessed its feasibility outside the context of large companies collaborating on environmental activities. In this paper, we explore collaboration in SSCs through a qualitative study of a large multinational in the food sector working with small agricultural suppliers. We show that there are both supporting and hindering factors to collaborative SSCM. The study reveals the dynamic nature of SC relationships for sustainability and that collaboration can be developed through time thanks to investment in both formal relationship building mechanisms and more relational aspects. The main contributions of the paper lie in its nuanced view of collaboration for SSCM and systematic application of relational theory (Dyer and Singh, 1998) in SSCM.
the business landscape driven by sustainability needs (Pagell et al., 2010). Some authors have specifically identified the value of understanding the degree of collaboration in SSC relationships (Hall, 2000; Matopoulos et al., 2007).

There is little research however that explores in depth the collaborative paradigm, offering a more nuanced view of collaboration, for instance by including considerations about power imbalances (Hoijmose and Adrien-Kirby, 2012; Walker et al., 2012). While true collaboration can arguably be considered the best way forward, it may remain difficult to attain in reality. This is even more relevant when considering that most research in the field has investigated the activities of large corporations often working with small and medium (SME) suppliers at home or overseas to implement sustainable practices (Amaeshi et al., 2008; Hall, 2001; Lee and Klassen, 2008; Walker and Preuss, 2008).

SMEs account for 99% of the economic fabric of the European Union (European Commission, 2013), and are key players in SCs. While past research has shown mixed evidence regarding the role of size in addressing sustainability in SCs, there seems to be a converging argument towards acknowledging the importance of resource availability for SSCM (Bowen, 2002; Lee, 2008; Lee and Klassen, 2008). It is therefore important to understand what constitute the conditions under which true collaboration for sustainability between large and small companies may be impaired or difficult to achieve, and what may be possible ways forward.

In this paper we propose to examine collaboration in SSCs involving a large multinational working with small suppliers. We aim to develop a better understanding of the specific problems that may arise in SC collaboration on sustainability issues. We pay particular attention to identifying both supporting and hindering factors to collaborative practices in this context. An understanding of these factors is critical to enable collaboration to be effectively developed by SC players. We draw from relational theory (Dyer and Singh, 1998) to analyse our findings.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, we offer relevant theoretical insights on SSC collaboration by exploring the relational view in sustainable SCs, which has not been used to a great extent (Vachon and Klassen, 2006a). While much research in SSCM remains a-theoretical (Carter and Easton, 2011; Touboulic and Walker, 2015), we offer a theoretically informed discussion of collaboration, which makes for an interesting contribution. Second, we examine both the factors that support and hinder collaborative practice on sustainability and therefore provide a more nuanced view of the collaborative paradigm. Last but least, we contribute to developing a better understanding of how SSCM unfolds in practice, rather than of the content of SSCM practices, as a more nuanced view of the collaborative paradigm. Last but least, we offer a theoretically informed discussion of methodology adopted in the study, providing details regarding research design, data collection and analysis. The findings of our study are presented and discussed in the subsequent part in light of the relational framework. Finally we provide answers to our research questions and reflect upon our application of relational theory and draw some conclusions that can inform managers and future research.

2. Theoretical background: a relational view of SSCM

2.1. Some background on SC collaboration and SSCM

There is a large amount of research that has been published on “traditional” SC collaboration that can inform our research. Some studies have focused on the factors enabling collaboration between SC actors, such as coordination mechanisms and benefits sharing (Lehaga et al., 2014), information sharing (Kache and Seuring, 2014), joint relationship efforts and dedicated investments (Nyaga et al., 2010), and investment in technology and measurement systems (Fawcett et al., 2008). ‘People issues’ are fundamental to successful collaboration but are difficult to predict and manage – such as culture, trust, willingness to change, and willingness to collaborate (Fawcett et al., 2012, 2008). Some authors caution that collaborative relationship practices are susceptible to failure due to wider organisational and behavioural issues (Emberson and Storey, 2006). These issues form part of the process of developing and sustaining a collaborative culture (Barratt, 2004).

Collaboration in SC has been found to have an effect on SC performance (Kache and Seuring, 2014), although often an indirect or mediated one. For instance, trust and commitment developed through collaborative activities lead to improved satisfaction and performance (Nyaga et al., 2010). SC players may also value collaborative aspects differently. Buyers focus more on relationship outcomes while suppliers look to safeguard their transaction specific investments through information sharing and joint relationship effort (Nyaga et al., 2010).

In SSCM, the notion of performance is actually extended to encompass not only economic but also environmental and social dimensions (Carter and Rogers, 2008). Arguably successful SSC relationship management leads to increased value creation at all three levels (Pagell et al., 2007). Seuring (2004: 1059) actually argues that co-operation is “the only way for companies to improve the competitiveness of the chain while reducing environmental burdens”.

2.2. Relational theory and its relevance to collaboration in SSCM

When considering the link between cooperation and SSC performance, authors have essentially studied ways to create sustainable competitive advantage (Solér et al., 2010). This view of SSC relationship resonates with the core tenets of relational theory (Dyer and Singh, 1998), which shows that competitive advantage does not emanate solely from within the firm’s boundaries, i.e. through the acquisition and use of unique resources (RBV Barney, 1991), but also from inter-organisational relationships. A key assumption of the relational view is that as firm are embedded in a network of relationships; collaborative efforts between organisations provide an opportunity to create value that could not otherwise be created by the organisations independently. Inter-organisational networks may be more efficient arrangements for achieving competitive advantage than single organisations.

In the relational view, developing a competitive advantage is about generating relational rents, i.e. above normal economic gains emanating from the ‘joint idiosyncratic contributions of specific SC partners’ (Dyer and Singh, 1998: 662). Dyer and Singh (1998) identify four supporting mechanisms for the creation of relational rents and four potential barriers as described in Table 1. The relational view has been successfully applied to study traditional buyer–supplier relationships, in particular strategic collaboration (Chen et al., 2004; Chen and Paulraj, 2004; Fawcett et al., 2012; Paulraj et al., 2008; Rosenzweig, 2009; Walker et al., 2013). The theory has helped defined some of the key competencies or capabilities supporting successful collaborative SC relationships. For example, communication and inter-organisational learning, in turn supported by partners’ levels of absorptive capacity, have been identified as important factors enhancing both buyers’ and suppliers’ performance (Paulraj et al., 2008; Zacharia et al., 2011). Applying the relational view has also helped authors...
دریافت فوری متن کامل مقاله

امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات