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## **Understanding Corporate Social Responsibility with the integration of Supply Chain Management in Outdoor Apparel Manufacturers in North America and Australia**

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates how supply chain management issues feature in the understandings of corporate social responsibility (CSR) held by managers of outdoor apparel manufacturing firms and whether outdoor apparel manufacturing firms engage in sustainable supply chain management practices. Data were collected using two methods: through semi-structured interviews with nine managers from nine manufacturing firms in the outdoor apparel industry; and through a review of the sustainable supply chain management practices of 27 firms that manufacture and retail outdoor apparel. Interviewed participants articulated their understandings of CSR in terms of three perspectives on sustainability (financial, environmental and social issues). A small number of firms were found to engage in multiple types of sustainable supply chain management practices, and a larger number of firms either did not engage in any sustainable supply chain management practices or used only an industry administered code of practice to guide the way they worked with their suppliers.

**Keywords:** corporate legitimacy, fair trade, sustainable supply

### **INTRODUCTION**

Apparel manufacturers and retailers often face a number of challenging issues relating to the sustainability of their businesses, including: the assurance of fair standards of pay and equitable working conditions within their supply chains, which are commonly located in developing countries (Claudio, 2007); growing demand to use more environmentally-sustainable materials (Filus, 2008); pressures to improve water and energy use efficiency; and growing demand for

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less wasteful packaging (Gupta, 2008). One sector of the apparel industry for which issues of sustainability are of particular concern is the outdoor apparel industry. In 2005, the US retail market for outdoor apparel (including footwear) was valued at over US\$33.3 billion (NDP, 2006). A number of well-known brands make up the sector, including, *Patagonia*, *Timberland*, *Nike*, *Black Diamond* and *Mountain Equipment*. For many consumers, these brands have a strong affiliation with ideas of sustainability, fair-trade and environmental stewardship (Schnitzspahn, 2008). A survey of outdoor apparel consumers conducted by outdoor apparel retailer *Recreation Equipment* revealed that the sector was perceived to have a high-level commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR) principles, although the majority of consumers could not name a single initiative to support this claim (BGI, 2007). This finding supports the assertion that consumers generally see the outdoor apparel industry as a clean and green industry, even though it shares many of the same sustainability shortcomings that tend to characterize the apparel industry at large (Alsever, 2007).

Arguably the most publicized of these challenges is how the industry deals with issues related to the social fairness of its supply chains. A report by the US International Trade Commission claims that the majority of firms in the US outdoor apparel industry manufactured most of their products in the developing countries of Asia. The report highlights that this procurement trend was due to the capability of those suppliers to produce cost-competitive high-technology textile goods that were crucial to the outdoor apparel industry's product makeup (USITC, 2007). Such a reliance on supply from developing countries presents a number of important social issues for manufacturers of outdoor apparel. These issues include the provision of clean and safe working conditions within suppliers' factories and the maintenance of fair rates of pay for workers and contractors employed by suppliers. Indeed, such sustainable supply chain management issues have been central themes in highly publicized debates about the ethical behavior of a number of apparel manufacturers, the case of *Nike* in the 1990s being arguably the most well-known (Spar and Burns, 2000). The North American outdoor industry has responded to stakeholder demands through the introduction of a number of fair labor standards. The Outdoor Industry Association (OIA), the peak industry body in North America, has developed the *OIA Fair Labor Toolkit*; a certification scheme designed to help firms achieve minimum industry standards for fair-trade, improve related regulatory compliance, manage risk, and implement better working conditions throughout their supply chains. The toolkit presents firms with a protocol to conduct facility-level audits with the aim of taking corrective action, benchmarking performance and reporting on outcomes.

### Corporate Social Responsibility in Theories

Many of these types of initiatives can be encapsulated in the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). CSR is frequently referred to as a concept that encapsulates good corporate citizenship, corporate social investment

and the due recognition of a business' social obligations to its stakeholders (Porter and Kramer, 2006; Auld et al. 2008; Dahlsrud, 2008; Keating et al. 2008; Andersen and Skjoett-Larsen, 2009; Pedersen, 2009). Blyth (2005, pg. 30) recognized that, 'there is no single definition of what it takes to be a responsible corporate...the key is to have a rigorous process for identifying those responsibilities and fulfilling them'. Porter and Kramer (2006, pg. 81) defined CSR as simply that businesses need to 'do the right thing'. Outdoor apparel manufacturer Patagonia publicly described CSR as 'a broad-based movement in business that encourages companies to take responsibility for the impact their activities have on customers, employees, communities and the environment' (Patagonia, 2008 pg. 2). The varied definitions of CSR extant in the literature demonstrate many different understandings of the concept, understandings that typically encompass not only social issues but also issues of financial and environmental sustainability.

A key question is then; how does a firm put its CSR principles into practice (and in the case of the outdoor apparel manufacturing industry, how do firms put their CSR principles into sustainable supply chain management practices)? Matten and Moon (2008 pg. 409) introduced a conceptual framework of CSR wherein it was described as either 'explicit' or 'implicit'. Explicit CSR referred to 'corporate policies that assume and articulate responsibility for some societal interests. They normally consist of voluntary programs and strategies by corporations that combine social and business value and address issues perceived as being part of the social responsibility of the company'. Implicit CSR referred to 'corporations' role within the wider formal and informal institutions for society's interests and concerns. Implicit CSR normally consists of values, norms, and rules that result in (mandatory and customary) requirements for corporations to address stakeholder issues and that define proper obligations of corporate actors in collective rather than individual terms. Matten and Moon (2008) suggested that more firms were adopting an explicit approach to CSR, and that this involved more industry-driven CSR practices, such as codes of conduct prescribed by industry and independently audited CSR reports that were based on informal standards and principles accepted by industry.

Benn et al. (2008 pg. 156) suggested an integrated phase model for how corporations make the transition from a primary concern with compliance to the attainment of strategic sustainability and beyond to the 'ideal' of a sustaining organization. According to this model, CSR practices would transition from practices that are primarily concerned with compliance (for example, compliance with employment laws) to practices that are concerned with strategic positioning (for example, the declaration of CSR policies) to practices that effectively exercise the CSR principles espoused by the firm (for example, certification of sustainable supply chain management practices against a respected standard). Auld et al. (2008) framed CSR in terms of 'old' and 'new' CSR, wherein old or traditional modes of CSR were largely focused on philanthropic activity not directly linked to a firm's core business practices, and new CSR was concerned with internalizing the externalities produced by a firm's core business. Auld et al. (2008, pg. 430) also described new CSR in terms of 'seven ideal types of CSR

innovations'. These seven types of practices (which are detailed in the Data Collection Methods section below) have informed the design of criteria used to analyze the sustainable supply chain management practices of the outdoor apparel manufacturing firms that are examined in this article.

### **Interaction of CSR and SCM towards Sustainability**

While CSR at the firm level is becoming better understood and has received increasing research attention, less attention has been paid to how the benefits of firm-level CSR strategies and actions may be delivered through the whole supply chain to the end consumer, particularly in the fashion industry ([de Brito, Carbone and Blanquart, 2008](#)). It is known that firm-level CSR can generate improvements in sustainability whose benefits accrue primarily to the organization itself ([Moore and Manring, 2009](#)), but those same improvements may also attract customers who seek to work with suppliers with strong sustainability credentials ([Eltantawy et al. 2009](#); [Lee and Kim, 2009](#)). Replicating this pattern along an entire supply chain by linking suppliers and customers who jointly recognize the value of sustainability initiatives, and delivering these benefits to consumers, gives rise to what [Carter and Rogers \(2008\)](#) refer to as 'sustainable supply chain management'. [Suering and Muller \(2008\)](#) asserted that a substantial gap in the current research was that, 'an integrated perspective is required for future research where social issues in particular and the interrelation of the three dimensions (financial, social and environmental) need to be investigated much further'.

This article seeks to contribute to the debate concerning CSR and sustainable supply chain management in the international outdoor apparel industry, by addressing the research questions; how do managers of outdoor apparel firms perceive CSR (particularly in terms of the interrelationship of financial, social and environmental dimensions) and what features characterize the CSR practices of firms that manufacture outdoor apparel?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Data Collection Methods**

A two stage approach was used to address the research question. The first stage involved the application of a research method known as phenomenography (as described by [Marton, 1981](#)). Nine senior managers of firms that manufacture outdoor apparel (herein referred to as the 'participants'; denoted in the Results section of this article as P1 to P9) were interviewed. Each of these managers had direct responsibility for the management of corporate social responsibility issues within their firms, although their job titles varied from 'Corporate Communications Manager' to 'Marketing Manager' to 'Sustainability Manager'. The purpose of the interviews was to elucidate the participants' understandings of CSR. Theoretical saturation (as described by [Eisenhardt, 1989](#)) was reached

with these nine participants. Other studies from social science settings published in respected peer reviewed journals that have used similar research design circumstances that have claimed to have reached theoretical saturation with similarly sized samples of participants include [Lee et al. \(2002\)](#), [Jette et al. \(2003\)](#) and [Troiano \(2003\)](#). The numbers of managers of large firms in the outdoor apparel manufacturing industries of Australia and North America is relatively small (perhaps less than 50), so the circumstances of this research match the type of research method used by the above authors.

At the time of interviewing (between March 2008 and June 2008) each participant was employed by one of nine outdoor apparel manufacturing firms that had their headquarters in either Australia, Canada or the USA but who sold their products into at least one other international market, such as Japan or the European Union. Participants took part in a single interview of between 30 and 50 minutes in length, conducted either in person or via telephone. Participants were then asked one open-ended question: what is corporate social responsibility and what does it mean for your business? Follow-up questions were used to encourage participants to elaborate on their comments. [Matten and Moon \(2008\)](#) found that business managers from the US and business managers from the EU understood CSR in different ways, with business managers from the US taking more of an explicit approach to CSR than their EU counterparts. Whilst the authors acknowledged the findings of [Matten and Moon \(2008\)](#) in the design of the research method used herein, it was considered that differences in the understandings of CSR between Australian, Canadian and US business managers would be sufficiently small as to not warrant any further distinction in this article.

The second data collection stage involved a review of the sustainable supply chain management practices of twenty-seven outdoor apparel firms. Firms were chosen on the basis that their annual turnover exceeded US\$1 million between July 2006 and June 2007 (this was an arbitrary delineation), that they had a corporate website that had been updated since June 2007 and that their headquarters were located either in Australia, Canada or the USA. All of the nine participants in semi-structured interviews described above were employed by firms that were included in this stage. The review collated publicly available information from each firm's corporate website under seven categories of sustainable business practice relating to the firm's management of suppliers (Table 1). These criteria were selected by the authors as broad criteria that should reflect a range of sustainable supply chain management practices. The criteria are consistent with the seven ideal types of CSR innovations proposed by [Auld et al. \(2008 pg. 430\)](#), namely; 'individual firm efforts, individual firm and individual NGO agreements, public-private partnerships, information-based approaches, environmental management systems, industry association corporate codes of conduct and private-sector hard law'.

**Table 1:** Categories of business practice relating to supplier management assessed

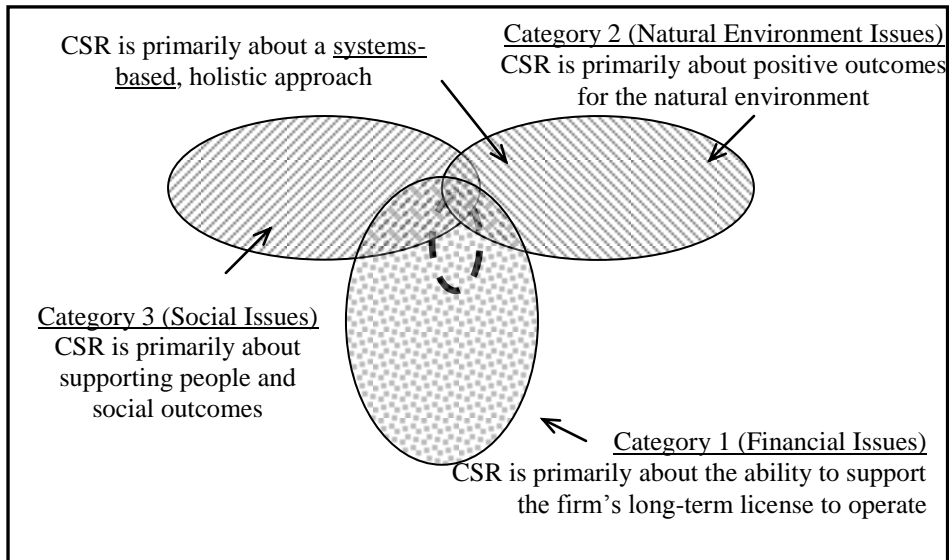
Business Practice	Description
Code-of-conduct	Does the firm seek to enforce a code-of conduct that stipulates fair work conditions and rates of pay in its supply chain?
Certification (social)	Is the firm certified according to the FLA code or SA8000?
Certification (environmental)	Is the firm certified to some environmental management standard?
Reporting emissions	Does the firm publicly report its greenhouse gas emissions?
Reporting waste output or recycling	Does the firm publicly report on waste output or its recycling activities?
Community contribution benchmarking	Does the firm benchmark its community contributions against an internationally recognized index or standard?
Auditing of CSR reports	If the firm produces a CSR report, does it have that report audited by an independent qualified party?

## RESULTS

All participants expressed their understanding of CSR in terms of three categories of issues. Some participants emphasized the relative importance of different categories but no single category of issues was emphasized by a majority of participants. Some participants also adopted a holistic or systems-based perspective on CSR, indicating that a good CSR outcome could be achieved by balancing financial, environmental and social outcomes. The participants' understandings of CSR are conceptualized in Figure 1.

Participants who emphasized the first category of issues (Category 1: 'financial issues') considered that CSR was most important for its role in supporting the firm's ability to continue to do business and generate profits. These participants highlighted that compliance with legislation and regulation was a critical part of their sustainable management practices.

- a. The motivation is the payback; marketing payback...and the absence of negative marketing... customer concerns drive our CSR efforts ... (P1)
- b. Shareholder apprehension over CSR and related risk management issues rate highly is our decision making processes... (P3)
- c. It's expected from a fund managers point of view, if you're not seeing to be the right thing it becomes harder and harder to obtain finance for new projects... (P9)



**Figure 1:** Conceptual representation of understandings of CSR

Participants who emphasized the second category of issues (Category 2: 'environmental issues') considered that CSR was primarily about working towards positive outcomes for the natural environment as represented in ecological outcomes such as eco-efficiency. The alignment by consumers of outdoor apparel manufacturer's brands with notions of environmental sustainability was highlighted by some participants as a reason why CSR was important to their business.

- a. CSR is part of our core business ethics and culturally, that's what our brands are known for: clean, socially and environmentally strong, active and all those things that go with being an outdoor brand... (P9)
- b. The heart of our market is the environment... therefore we need to do all we can in terms of corporate social responsibility and sustainability... (P4)
- c. It's a sound business case to do it...you're protecting the resources which the people you're selling your product to enjoy and use your product in... (P5)

Participants who emphasized the third category of issues (Category 3: 'social issues') considered that CSR was primarily about supporting people and social outcomes. Most participants conceptualized these social outcomes primarily in terms of maintaining positive relationships with other stakeholders throughout their supply chain.

- a. Until you've got a good relationship with your supply chain, nobody's really going to listen to you... (P7).
- b. Integrating CSR in supply chain management is a core commitment of our firm... (P4)
- c. Once you have a solid relationship with your suppliers you earn the right to ask them to improve efficiency which often leads to an improvement in their businesses other areas...and they'll thank you for that' (P5).

When discussing issues associated with the management of their supply chains, some participants also emphasized the importance of pursuing more eco-efficient practices.

- a. Our eco strategy is founded on a simple premise: *reduce*. This strategy and its chain of initiatives span all of our corporate functions and the life cycle of its products, cradle to cradle ... (P2)
- b. We have a design orientated approach to sustainability...good gear equals less waste... (P5)

### **Review of Sustainable Supply Chain Management Practices**

Table 2 presents a summary of the sustainable supply chain management practices of twenty-seven firms in the outdoor apparel industry. Analysis of Table 2 reveals that of the practices reviewed, the use of a code of conduct (administered by the firm) to guide relationships with suppliers was the practice most commonly engaged in (supplier codes of conduct were used by close to 60 percent of the firms reviewed).

Analysis also revealed that a minority of firms were certified against recognized social or environmental standards. Approximately 30 percent of firms were certified against social accountability standards and approximately 20 percent of firms were certified against environmental management standards. The mostly commonly used social accountability certification schemes were the *Outdoor Industry Association Toolkit* and the *Fair Labor Association 3.0 Sustainable Compliance Methodology*. None of the firms reviewed were certified under *Social Accountability's* SA8000 scheme, which is a fair-trade certification scheme used extensively by firms in other types of apparel manufacturing industries (Ciliberti et al. 2009; Stigzelius and Mark-Herbert, 2009).

Of the six firms that reported on their production levels of emissions and waste, five firms did both. Similarly, of the four firms that reported their contribution to communities against best practices standards, all four also reported on their levels of emissions and waste. Moreover, all three firms that had their CSR reports independently audited also reported on their contribution to communities against best practices standards as well as on their production levels of emissions and waste. These results suggest that a small number of firms in the outdoor apparel industry engage in multiple types of corporate social responsibility, and that a larger number of firms either do not engage in



sustainable supply chain management practices or use an internally administered code of practice to guide the way in which they work with suppliers (de Brito, Carbone and Blanquart, 2008).

**Table 2:** Review of the sustainable supply chain management practices of twenty-seven outdoor apparel manufacturing firms

Company	Supplier Code of Conduct	Certification (Social)	Certification (Environ.)	Reporting Emissions	Reporting Waste Output and Recycling	Community Contribution Benchmarks	Auditing of CSR Reports
REI	Y	Y1	N	Y	Y	N	N
Timberland	Y	Y1	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Columbia	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N
Ice Breaker	Y	N	Y6,7	N	N	N	N
Mntain U.S.	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Sierra Designs	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N
Ripcurl	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Patagonia	Y	Y2	Y4	Y	Y	Y	Y
Quiksilver	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Smith Optics	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
K2 Sports	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
North Face	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Keens	Y	Y1	N	Y	N	N	N
Black D/mond	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N
Cascade	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N
Arcteryx	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Teko Socks	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N
Big Agnes	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Fox River	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N
La Fuma	Y	Y5	Y5,7,8	N	N	N	N
Prana	Y	Y2	Y6,8	N	N	N	N
Teva	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N
Chaco	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Go Lite	Y	Y1	Y4	N	N	N	N
Marmot	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N
MEC	Y	Y2,3	Y4	Y	Y	Y	N
Nike	Y	Y2	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
(Y)	16	9	6	6	6	4	3
Response	(59%)	(33%)	(22%)	(22%)	(22%)	(15%)	(11%)

**Note:** (Y = yes, the firm does engage in that practice or N = no, the firm does not engage in that practice); <sup>1</sup> Outdoor Industry Association Toolkit, <sup>2</sup> Fair Labor Association 3.0 Sustainable Compliance Methodology, <sup>3</sup> AA1000 series on corporate accountability, <sup>4</sup> Forest Steward Ship Council certification, <sup>5</sup> UN Global Compact principle of human rights and environmental stewardship (this scheme can be considered as both a social certification program and an environmental certification program), <sup>6</sup> ISO14001 standard for environmental management, <sup>7</sup> Oeko-Tex Standard 100 which is a certification scheme for textiles that limits the use of some chemicals, <sup>8</sup> certified according to a recognized Organic standard.

## DISCUSSION

Participants articulated their understandings of CSR in terms of three categories of sustainability; financial, environmental and social issues. A small number of participants also expressed a systems view of CSR, according to which, each of the three categories of sustainability had to be managed in an integrated manner in order to achieve good CSR outcomes. Furthermore, in terms of the social aspects of CSR, participants emphasized supply chain management issues; namely, how positive relationships with suppliers could be fostered and how improved eco-efficiency could be achieved. The idea that managers would place equal importance on each category of sustainability, and the idea that supply chain management issues feature most prominently in the social aspects of CSR, are important considerations for theory building and future research, especially given [Seuring and Muller's \(2008\)](#) assertion that most research on sustainable supply chain management to date has focused on environmental issues.

There are a number of possible explanations for the results of the analysis of the sustainable supply chain management practices of the 27 firms surveyed. One reason why a small number of firms were found to engage in multiple types of corporate social responsibility, and that a larger number of firms either do not engage in sustainable supply chain management practices or use only an internally administered code of practice to guide the way in which they work with suppliers, is that a firm's capacity to engage in sustainable supply management practices might be mediated by its size and available resources.

- a. Nike is a massive corporate machine with the resources needed to maintain social standards and transparency within their supply chain... (P9).

Some informants also suggested that some supply chain management practices were complex and required substantial skills to undertake.

- a ...deconstructing the full life-cycle assessment to map the environmental impact of polyester...it's just mind blowing... is one way to recycle polyester better than another? The environmental component required includes both scientific and value based elements, making it very complex. Another example

would be plastic packaging... while petroleum based plastic may be seen as evil, bio-plastics, from corn, raises issues of GMO, deforestation and food price issues.... The devil is in the details... (P6)

## CONCLUSION

Indeed, the three firms that were found to have engaged in multiple types of sustainable supply chain management practices (Nike, Timberland and Patagonia), are amongst the largest firms in the outdoor apparel industries of the studied three countries? It could be that many smaller-sized firms either did not engage in sustainable supply chain management practices or only used codes-of-practice because they could not sufficiently resource the often complex and time consuming tasks of certification, reporting and/or independent verification. A more extensive analysis of how small to medium sized firms from other industries engage in sustainable supply chain management practices, as compared to larger firms that have more resources at their disposal, would be a topic for future research.

It is also likely that many of the 27 firms studied would be at different stages in the transition to more 'explicit' and more 'ideal' CSR practices, as per the models of corporate sustainability transition proffered by [Matten and Moon \(2008\)](#), [Benn et al. \(2006\)](#) and [Auld et al. \(2008\)](#). Firms at different stages of development in regards to their approach to CSR would very likely engage in different practices, although this might not necessarily mean that firms at more advanced stages would engage in a greater number of practices, as opposed to perhaps focusing on a smaller number of selected practices that better serve their objectives. The question also arises as to what types of factors drive the transition of firms to more sustainable practices. [Matten and Moon \(2008\)](#) discussed these factors in terms of institutional theory, and [Benn et al. \(2006\)](#) discussed them in terms of stakeholder theory, both articles arguing that a complex mix of regulatory, governance and stakeholder forces influenced the rate of a firm's progression towards more sustainable practices. Some of the supply chain practices of firms studied in this article, such as Nike, have been subject to intense scrutiny over the last 10 years. It is likely that these external forces have influenced their current understandings of CSR and how they have engaged in sustainable supply chain management practices. It is also likely that other firms in the outdoor apparel industry, whilst not directly subject to the same scrutiny, have been subject to scrutiny as an industry-at-large to a greater extent than many other industries. A further explanation of the dynamics of these organizational and supply chain development issues, as they apply to other industries, would be a topic for future research.

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