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Social Unsustainability in the Vietnamese Garment Supply Chain: Theorization of Decoupling Mechanisms

Non-Durabilite Sociale dans la Chaine d'Approvisionnement de la Confection au Vietnam: Theorisation des Mecanismes de Decouplage

Thèse de Doctorat présentée en vue de l'obtention
du grade de docteur en sciences de gestion et du Management
par

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Three keywords sum up this PhD dissertation: supply chain, decoupling, and workers. My concern for workers harmed by unsustainable practices was ignited through a professional experience that sparked a longer intellectual journey, culminating in the creation of my dissertation. Persistence, self-transformation, and gratitude best describe this process.

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Sommaire de thèse

La présente thèse doctorale, intitulée "Non-durabilité sociale dans la chaîne d'approvisionnement de la confection au Viet Nam : théorisation des mécanismes de découplage", explore le phénomène des pratiques socialement non durables dans les chaînes d'approvisionnement de l'industrie de la confection. La motivation de ce travail trouve son origine dans mon expérience d'assistante de recherche à l'Organisation Internationale du Travail (OIT) au Vietnam (2014-2018), où j'ai mené des enquêtes de terrain sur les conditions de travail trois ans après l'effondrement de Rana Plaza. Au-delà de l'éveil de ma vocation doctorale, ces investigations ont révélé des informations cruciales sur les défis auxquels font face les travailleurs du secteur de la confection. Mon parcours professionnel en relations industrielles a structuré l'approche de ce projet en fournissant un cadre d'analyse critique de la gouvernance du travail, du bien-être des travailleurs et des dynamiques gestionnaires des chaînes d'approvisionnement. Les observations de terrain ont permis de dégager trois enseignements essentiels qui constituent le fondement du présent travail.

Cette recherche s'appuie sur le concept de découplage organisationnel (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), qui explique la déconnexion entre les politiques de durabilité formelles et les pratiques réelles. Fréquemment, les entreprises projettent une image de conformité pour gagner en légitimité tout en maintenant clandestinement des pratiques exploitantes. La catastrophe du Rana Plaza illustre de manière exemplaire les conséquences dramatiques de la non-durabilité sociale dans les chaînes d'approvisionnement. Cet effondrement, ayant causé la mort de plus de 1 100 travailleurs et blessé 2 000 autres, constitue un tournant décisif qui a déclenché une vague d'initiatives durables parmi les firmes multinationales

(Smithers, 2019). Néanmoins, la propagation de telles mesures à travers des chaînes d'approvisionnement complexes et multiniveaux a accru le risque de découplage, les fournisseurs distants éprouvant des difficultés d'alignement sur les exigences des donneurs d'ordre. Cette problématique s'analyse à travers le prisme du découplage entre politiques et pratiques, caractérisé par une mise en œuvre défaillante des directives, et celui du découplage moyens-fins, marqué par l'inadéquation entre résultats obtenus et objectifs visés (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Le découplage s'intensifie sous l'effet de l'écart institutionnel, manifesté par les divergences en matière de valeurs, de normes et de structures de gouvernance entre les entreprises multinationales (EMN) et leurs fournisseurs locaux. Cet écart entrave l'implémentation de pratiques durables et génère une disjonction entre politique déclarée et pratique effective.

Le présent travail adopte une méthodologie qualitative et abductive pour analyser comment le découplage se manifeste à différents niveaux de la chaîne d'approvisionnement et comment les acteurs — notamment les travailleurs, les gestionnaires et les acheteurs internationaux — interagissent avec ces dynamiques. S'appuyant sur 55 entretiens, des observations de terrain et des données secondaires recueillies au Vietnam, l'investigation analyse le rôle des régions du Nord et du Sud dans la configuration des expériences ouvrières. L'enquête capture également des perspectives nuancées de divers acteurs, dont des responsables de production, des auditeurs RSE, des représentants syndicaux et des ouvriers d'usine.

Cette thèse contribue à enrichir la littérature sur la gestion durable des chaînes d'approvisionnement (SSCM) en abordant le découplage entre politiques et pratiques. Les travaux en SSCM ont traditionnellement privilégié les facteurs

environnementaux, accordant moins d'attention à la durabilité sociale. Le présent projet met en avant l'importance du bien-être des travailleurs et la nécessité de cadres de gouvernance inclusifs qui alignent les politiques avec les réalités du terrain du terrain. Bien que la mondialisation ait créé des opportunités d'emploi, elle a également engendré une "course vers le bas" (i.e. “race to the bottom”) des normes du travail, où les pressions concurrentielles incitent les entreprises à délocaliser leur production vers des pays à faible coût sans assurer de conditions de travail décentes pour les travailleurs (Anner & Liu, 2016; Lund-Thomsen & Nadvi, 2010).

Cette étude aborde également les limites des mécanismes de gouvernance traditionnels, tels que les lois nationales du travail et les accords-cadres internationaux, pour traiter les enjeux transnationaux. Elle soutient que, bien que les codes de conduite privés soient nécessaires, ils ne peuvent pas se substituer à une gouvernance publique robuste. Le présent travail contribue au débat plus large sur l'efficacité des nouveaux mécanismes de gouvernance pour résoudre les problématiques sociales. Des chercheurs tels que Locke et al., (2013) et Meardi & Marginson (2014) ont débattu de la capacité des initiatives privées à compléter ou à remplacer la régulation étatique. Cette recherche propose une approche plus intégrée, qui réduit l'écart entre les politiques mondiales des EMN et les pratiques locales des fournisseurs.

L'étude conclut que les cadres multiniveaux sont essentiels pour gérer la durabilité dans des chaînes d'approvisionnement complexes. La littérature existante adopte souvent une approche d’acheteur-centrisme, en se concentrant sur les relations dyadiques entre les acheteurs internationaux et les fournisseurs de premier niveau. Néanmoins, le présent projet souligne l'importance d'engager tous les niveaux de

la chaîne, y compris les producteurs de matières premières et les petits fournisseurs de deuxième niveau (Mena et al., 2013; Tachizawa & Wong, 2014). Cette approche multiniveaux est essentielle pour comprendre les dynamiques de découplage et garantir une distribution plus équitable des bénéfices de la mondialisation.

La thèse est structurée en trois parties : La première partie présente les questions de recherche, le cadre théorique et la méthodologie (Chapitres 1, 2 et 3). La deuxième partie comprend trois articles, chacun explorant un aspect différent des pratiques non durables et du découplage dans les chaînes d'approvisionnement (Chapitres 4, 5 et 6). La troisième partie examine les implications des résultats pour les publics académiques et professionnels (Chapitres 7 et 8).

Le présent travail examine les pratiques socialement non durables dans les chaînes d'approvisionnement mondiales en se concentrant sur le concept de découplage et le rôle de multiples parties prenantes à différents niveaux. Ce travail s'appuie sur trois études interdépendantes : un cadre conceptuel sur le découplage multiniveaux, une enquête empirique sur les réponses des travailleurs dans le découplage de la RSE et une perspective de saillance des parties prenantes explorant les pratiques managériales. L'investigation de terrain empirique dans l'industrie de la confection au Vietnam constitue la base de ces études, en examinant les dynamiques complexes entre les acheteurs internationaux, les responsables des fournisseurs et les employés d'usine. Les conclusions mettent en évidence la manière dont les pratiques managériales, la pression des parties prenantes et les stratégies d'adaptation des travailleurs façonnent les résultats en matière de durabilité sociale.

Premier article : "Conceptualisation du découplage multiniveaux dans les chaînes d'approvisionnement"

Cet article développe un cadre conceptuel explorant les problématiques sociales à travers le découplage multiniveaux dans les chaînes d'approvisionnement multiniveaux. S'appuyant sur le concept du découplage (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017; J. W. Meyer & Rowan, 1977), l'étude considère le découplage comme une réponse managériale aux attentes des parties prenantes externes, limitées aux frontières organisationnelles. Alors que des recherches antérieures ont abordé le découplage dans les chaînes d'approvisionnement (Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Jamali et al., 2017), cet article étend l'analyse en examinant le découplage à plusieurs niveaux de la chaîne d'approvisionnement. L'étude explore la manière dont les acteurs à différents niveaux négocient le pouvoir et la légitimité pour faire face à des résultats socialement non durables, en intégrant une perspective des parties prenantes. Elle présente le découplage comme un processus évolutif (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Pope & Wæraas, 2016) façonné par les parties prenantes locales, telles que les travailleurs, dont la résistance transfère les pressions institutionnelles franchissant les différents niveaux (Soundararajan et al., 2019a). Deux questions de recherche sous-tendent cette enquête :

1. Quels mécanismes de découplage sont utilisés par les gestionnaires des chaînes d'approvisionnement ?

2. Comment les parties prenantes non managériales réagissent-elles aux enjeux sociaux causés par le découplage multi-niveaux ?

Cette recherche conceptuelle propose un modèle théorique expliquant comment la résistance locale perturbe le découplage et transmet la pression en amont dans

la chaîne d'approvisionnement. Les résultats mettent en évidence comment les interactions entre les parties prenantes périphériques et les entreprises leaders peuvent transformer les politiques formelles, passant d'une conformité superficielle à un changement significatif. Bien que conceptuelle, l'étude s'appuie sur des exemples illustratifs des chaînes d'approvisionnement pour étayer ses propositions.

Deuxième article : "Sortie, Voix, Loyauté et Cynisme : les réactions des ouvriers d'usine face au découplage de la RSE dans les chaînes d'approvisionnement du secteur de la confection"

Le deuxième article constitue une étude empirique, co-écrite avec Professeur Chikako Oka, Professeur Valentina Carbone et Professeur Aurélien Acquier. Ce travail analyse l'influence des travailleurs sur le découplage entre politiques et pratiques en matière de RSE, phénomène où les engagements des entreprises en responsabilité sociale ne se traduisent pas par des actions concrètes, générant ainsi des problématiques sociales sur le lieu de travail. La littérature existante s'est principalement focalisée sur le rôle des acheteurs et des fournisseurs dans la gouvernance de la durabilité, négligeant souvent le rôle des ouvriers d'usine. En inversant cette perspective, cette recherche humanise la gestion durable des chaînes d'approvisionnement (SSCM) en mettant au premier plan l'expérience des travailleurs au sein des réseaux mondiaux d'approvisionnement.

L'analyse mobilise le modèle de Hirschman « Exit, Voice, and Loyalty » (EVL) (1970) et l'enrichit par l'intégration du concept de cynisme, afin de mieux appréhender les réponses des travailleurs face au découplage de la RSE. Elle répond à la question

suivante : Quand et comment les travailleurs réagissent-ils au découplage de la RSE dans les chaînes d'approvisionnement mondiales ?

Le matériau empirique se compose de 25 entretiens avec des ouvriers et 15 entretiens menés auprès d'ONG, de représentants syndicaux et de responsables RSE, complétés par des observations de terrain. Les résultats révèlent que les travailleurs ne sont pas de simples récepteurs passifs des politiques de RSE, mais qu'ils acceptent, résistent ou négocient activement le découplage entre politiques et pratiques. Leur décision de s'exprimer (Voice – protestation), de quitter l'entreprise (Exit – démission) ou de rester fidèle (Loyalty – conformité) dépend de leur sécurité économique et des conditions de travail. Cette contribution étend le modèle de Hirschman au contexte du travail dans les chaînes d'approvisionnement, en mettant en lumière la manière dont les contraintes structurelles et les déséquilibres de pouvoir façonnent les réponses des travailleurs.

Les choix des travailleurs résultent d'un calcul stratégique. Ils peuvent s'aligner sur les décisions managériales pour maintenir le découplage de la RSE au sujet des enjeux mineurs, ou au contraire le contester lorsque leurs intérêts personnels et collectifs sont menacés. Cette étude met en lumière comment les réponses des travailleurs peut soit renforcer, soit résister au découplage, alimentant ainsi les recherches émergentes sur la gouvernance multiniveaux dans les chaînes d'approvisionnement mondiales. Les implications pour la conception des politiques RSE suggèrent qu'une meilleure compréhension des motivations ouvrières est essentielle pour lutter contre la non-durabilité sociale dans les chaînes d'approvisionnement mondiales.

Cet article apporte d'importantes contributions théoriques et pratiques en reconceptualisant le rôle des travailleurs dans la SSCM, en remettant en question l'approche traditionnelle descendante et en démontrant comment les ouvriers d'usine influencent activement les résultats en matière de durabilité. En étendant le modèle EVL de Hirschman, ce travail l'adapte aux dynamiques laborieuses dans les chaînes d'approvisionnement, illustrant comment les travailleurs naviguent dans les contraintes institutionnelles pour exiger une responsabilité accrue des entreprises en matière de RSE. Par ailleurs, il établit un pont entre les études sur le travail et celles sur la gestion des chaînes d'approvisionnement, en plaçant les ouvriers au cœur des discussions sur le découplage de la RSE et en offrant de nouvelles perspectives sur la gouvernance multiniveaux des chaînes d'approvisionnement. Globalement, cette analyse réinvente la SSCM à travers une approche centrée sur le travail, plaidant pour un renforcement des protections des travailleurs et une gouvernance de la durabilité plus ascendante dans les chaînes d'approvisionnement mondiales.

Troisième article : Décrypter le découplage sélectif : une perspective de la saillance des parties prenantes sur les enjeux sociaux dans les usines de confection au Vietnam

Ce dernier article déplace le centre d'analyse vers la gestion des fournisseurs, en examinant la manière dont les responsables des usines de confection vietnamiennes réagissent à la pression des parties prenantes. Inspirée par les travaux de Jamali et al. (2017) sur le découplage sélectif, cette recherche explore la manière dont les responsables hiérarchisent les politiques de durabilité sociale en fonction des attentes des parties prenantes. Ce travail introduit le concept de politiques « découplables » (Sauder & Espeland, 2009) et examine l'importance des

parties prenantes (Mitchell et al., 1997) pour comprendre comment les acheteurs internationaux et les ouvriers d'usine influencent les pratiques managériales.

Deux questions de recherche guident l'analyse :

1. Comment les responsables des fournisseurs perçoivent-ils la pression des acheteurs internationaux et des ouvriers des usines ?

2. Comment la pression des parties prenantes façonne-t-elle le découplage sélectif en matière de durabilité sociale ?

Sur la base de 44 entretiens, l'étude identifie des modèles de découplage sélectif, où les gestionnaires font la distinction entre les politiques en fonction de la visibilité du contrôle des acheteurs et des demandes des ouvriers. Les problématiques sociales au cœur du «travail décent» (Soundararajan et al., 2021) sont plus susceptibles d'attirer l'attention, tandis que les questions moins visibles sont découplées par le biais d'une conformité contingente ou fictive. Cette approche nuancée du découplage révèle comment les pratiques managériales varient selon les contextes institutionnels.

Les conclusions contribuent à la littérature sur la gestion durable de la chaîne d'approvisionnement (SSCM) en montrant comment une attention sélective aux revendications des parties prenantes entraîne différents modèles de découplage, notamment le couplage étroit, le recouplage et la conformité fictive. L'étude souligne la nécessité d'une meilleure adéquation entre les attentes des parties prenantes et les pratiques managériales pour améliorer les résultats en matière de durabilité sociale.

Collectivement, ces trois articles font progresser la compréhension du découplage et de la durabilité sociale dans les chaînes d'approvisionnement multiniveaux. En articulant le découplage avec la perspective théorique des parties prenantes, la thèse offre un cadre à multiniveaux pour analyser la manière dont les pratiques managériales, l'agence des travailleurs et la saillance des parties prenantes façonnent les résultats sociaux. Les perspectives conceptuelles, empiriques et managériales offrent une vue d'ensemble des défis et des opportunités pour parvenir à des chaînes d'approvisionnement durables.

Ce travail doctoral démontre que le découplage n'est pas seulement une réponse managériale, mais un processus continu influencé par de multiples acteurs. Les travailleurs jouent un rôle essentiel dans la lutte contre le découplage de la RSE, tandis que l'attention sélective des responsables façonne les résultats en matière de durabilité sociale. Ces conclusions soulignent l'importance de répondre aux pressions des parties prenantes à tous les niveaux de la chaîne d'approvisionnement pour éviter la non-durabilité sociale.

Cette thèse met également en évidence la complexité de la réalisation de la durabilité sociale dans les chaînes d'approvisionnement mondiales. Elle appelle à des recherches futures pour explorer les interactions dynamiques entre les pratiques managériales, l'agence des travailleurs et les attentes des parties prenantes. Relever ces défis nécessite une approche holistique qui tienne compte de la nature multiniveaux des chaînes d'approvisionnement et des rôles interconnectés des divers acteurs. Les recherches futures pourraient approfondir la manière dont les pressions institutionnelles se propagent à travers les différents niveaux, et élaborer des stratégies concrètes pour aligner les intérêts des parties prenantes sur des résultats durables.

Thesis Summary

This dissertation investigates socially unsustainable practices in global supply chains, focusing on the garment sector and the concept of organizational decoupling—where firms symbolically adopt social sustainability policies without altering exploitative practices. This research critically examines how decoupling unfolds across multiple tiers of supply chains and how various stakeholders—including workers, managers, and international buyers—respond to these governance failures.

The dissertation uses an abductive, qualitative methodology, including 55 interviews, field observations, and secondary data in Vietnam. It frames decoupling through two lenses: (1) policy-practice decoupling—disconnection between formal commitments and real practices, and (2) means-ends decoupling—misalignment between policy implementation and intended outcomes. These dynamics are shaped by institutional distance and unequal power relations across tiers.

Structured into three sections, the dissertation includes:

1. Chapters 1–3: Research questions, theoretical frameworks, and methodology.
2. Chapters 4–6: Three core articles offering conceptual, empirical, and managerial perspectives on decoupling.
3. Chapters 7–8: Discussion of broader theoretical and practical implications.

Article 1 proposes a conceptual model of multi-level decoupling in supply chains. It explains how workers' resistance can push institutional pressures upstream, disrupting decoupling and compelling lead firms to move beyond superficial

compliance. This article contributes a stakeholder-focused extension of decoupling theory.

Article 2 (co-authored) offers an empirical study of factory workers' responses to CSR decoupling using Hirschman's Exit, Voice, Loyalty (EVL) model, extended with Neglect and Cynicism. Based on 25 worker and 15 stakeholder interviews, the study highlights how workers strategically choose acceptance to or resistance based on material needs and constraints, recentering SSCM on worker agency.

Article 3 focuses on supplier management practices, showing how Vietnamese garment managers selectively decouple policies depending on stakeholder salience. Drawing on 44 interviews, it reveals that high-visibility buyer demands receive tighter compliance, while other areas face mock or contingent adherence.

Overall, the dissertation argues for a multi-tier, labour-centered governance approach to sustainability. It challenges buyer-centric SSCM models, demonstrating how selective attentiveness, worker agency, and institutional misalignments shape social outcomes. The findings support stronger integration between public and private governance mechanisms and call for future research on pressure transmission and stakeholder alignment across global supply chains.

Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Term
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
FF	Focal Firm
GFAs	Global Framework Agreements
GUFs	Global Union Federations
GSCs	Global Supply Chains
IFAs	International Framework Agreements
ILO	International Labour Organization
MNEs	Multinational Enterprises
MT-SSCM	Multi-tier Sustainable Supply Chain Management
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
OIT	Organisation Internationale du Travail (French acronym for ILO)
SCSRs	Supply Chain Sustainability Risks
SSCM	Sustainable Supply Chain Management
SS	Sub-Supplier

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PART I

This part sets the stage for the dissertation by outlining the motivations, theoretical framing, and methodological choices that underpin the research. Chapter 1 is driven by critical reflections from a prior field experience, where initial observations revealed persistent forms of business misconduct and varying worker reactions in global supply chains. These field-based insights prompted deeper inquiry into how social policies are implemented—or bypassed—within multi-tier supply chains. It also provides an overview of the dissertation structure and summarizes the three articles that comprise the core empirical contributions of the thesis.

Chapter 2 introduces the key theoretical lenses used to frame the study, including social sustainability, multi-tier supply chain management, and the concept of organizational decoupling. Following the theoretical framing, Chapter 3 outlines the overarching research questions and the interpretive methodology guiding the investigation.

By grounding the research in both practical field observations and theoretical inquiry, this part establishes a foundation for understanding the complex dynamics between social policy and practice in global supply chains.

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

"You cannot escape the responsibilities of tomorrow by evading it today."

Abraham Lincoln, circa 1870

"Sustainability is meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. [...] The question of population - of population pressure, of population and human rights - and the links between these related issues and poverty, environment, and development proved to be one of the more difficult concerns with which we had to struggle. The differences of perspective seemed at the outset to be unbridgeable, and they required a lot of thought and willingness to communicate across the divides of cultures, religions, and regions."

Gro Harlem Brundtland Oslo, March 20, 1987

1. Motivations for the thesis

1.1. Initial observations inspired by a previous field research

This dissertation delves into socially unsustainable practices in supply chains, inspired by my previous experience as a Research Assistant in the ILO Office for Vietnam. This experience, occurring three years after the Rana Plaza, marked my initial fieldwork investigating working conditions at various garment factories. The fieldwork conducted during my time with the ILO was a pivotal phase in my professional journey, sparking my interest in pursuing PhD research.

At the time, I worked as a research assistant in the ILO, trained in industrial relations. This meant that I approached this initial fieldwork from the perspective of industrial relations, rather than from the angles of Global Value Chains or Supply

Chain Management. This early exposure provided invaluable insights into the challenges faced by garment industry workers, leading to three critical observations that have profoundly influenced my academic journey.

My first observation was about the diffusion of labour standards in such supply chains. International brands played a central role in disseminating their Codes of Conduct and implementation programs. The lethal tragedy of Rana Plaza put a significant pressure on international brands to enhance social sustainability along their supply chains. Consequently, many initiatives intended to improve working conditions were launched, reinforced and cascaded on the shop floors of the factories we visited. Notably, building safety standards were enhanced, and awareness of safety issues among workers and managers increased. Improvements were particularly visible in the factories belonging to first-tier and strategic suppliers of the international brands.

My second observation concerned the absence of consideration for second-tier and smaller factories. During and after the field mission, I was left wondering about smaller suppliers, located in the lower tiers of the supply chains, which are less visible but which nevertheless play a significant role in the production process. Interestingly, the ILO's fieldwork to assess and improve working conditions only included Tier-1 suppliers. Second-tier factories were excluded from the analysis, reflecting their invisibility in global production processes. This oversight revealed a failure to properly map the supply chain and account for its real complexity and organization. Anecdotal experience from other local labour researchers, including those from NGOs and independent research institutes, also informed that the lower-tier suppliers were not supervised by either Tier-1 suppliers or the lead firms (i.e., international brands), and working conditions, therefore, were not guaranteed.

The third and arguably most significant experience influencing my motivation was witnessing the widespread business misconduct and its detrimental effects on labor rights and working conditions, including excessive overtime and dysfunctional workplace democracy. Through my observations, I found that these unsustainable practices often stem from inadequate enforcement of labor standards and weak governance structures. In this thesis, these issues are framed as practices of social unsustainability.

In the period of 2024-2018 when working for the ILO as a research assistant, I was in a strong exposure to the theories in industrial relations and learnt about the functions of tripartism, and workers' collective bargaining and social dialogues. Therefore, it explains why my original questions, ignited by practical observations, were very associated to industrial relations. At that time, I found it challenging to grasp the causes and mechanisms of business misconduct. And it was not evident to which extent workers would respond to such misconduct. I questioned whether organizing and unionizing were the only ways for workers in the lower tier of the supply chain to take collective action and make their voices heard.

In the context of Vietnam, where freedom of association remains restricted, workers face significant challenges in recognizing and addressing business misconduct that leads to social issues in the workplace. The absence of independent trade unions and the limited influence of worker representation mean that many employees may lack both the awareness and the mechanisms to contest unfair labour practices. Therefore, unionization was not widely practiced.

Furthermore, at the global level, International Framework Agreements (IFAs) or Global Framework Agreements (GFAs) are a negotiated instrument between a multinational enterprise and a Global Union Federations (GUFs), aiming to protect

workers' rights across the multinational's operations, promote fair labour practices, ensuring decent working conditions, and supporting labour standards enforcement. They often include commitments to core labour standards, such as freedom of association, collective bargaining, and measures to prevent discrimination, child labour, and forced labour. Such global agreements, given that their applications supposed to be in the whole supply chains regardless of location, are, however, not were not known in every workplace. I wondered if workers could always recognize business misconduct that creates social issues at the workplace and, if so, whether they could effectively respond to change their situation.

1.2. Business Misconduct and Worker Reactions in a Global Supply Chains

Reflecting on these questions and observations, my personal exploration began with an interest in how global supply chains have been evolving and the way local suppliers comply to the local laws as well as international standards. In the journey to understand this inquiry, I learned that global supply chains with decentralized production spreading across multiple are enabled by the liberalization of international trade, deregulation, and technological advancements in information and communication.

These changes have allowed multinational enterprises (MNEs) to reduce costs and boost efficiency by moving manufacturing and assembly to low-cost developing nations. As a result, production processes have become fragmented and complex. The belief that social conditions improve with economic growth is widespread, yet the new production structures, while increasing the competitiveness of MNEs from both advanced and developing economies, have introduced challenges in governance, labour conditions, and economic inequalities.

The evolving nature of global supply chains continues to influence the political, economic, and social realms of contemporary capitalism, revealing the intricate interdependencies and vulnerabilities within the global economy. Although the expansion of supply chains in developing countries has created more jobs, it does not automatically lead to better social conditions for workers. Instead, issues such as social deficits and degradation, often referred to as the "race to the bottom," are common. My fieldwork and various academic studies have consistently highlighted ongoing labour issues in global supply chains, especially in labour-intensive industries (Anner, 2018; Bae et al., 2021; Lebaron, 2018; Lund-Thomsen & Nadvi, 2010; among others).

The social issues within global supply chains are often highlighted by tragic events like the Nike Sweatshop scandal in the 1990s and the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, which were only the tip of the iceberg. The academic evidence from scholars such as Anner (2018), Lund-Thomsen & Nadvi (2010), Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen (2014) underscores the extensive and underreported nature of these issues. Despite the visibility of such tragedies, many labour issues remain hidden from the global eye, perpetuating poor working conditions and exploitation.

For example, when companies relocate their production to low-cost countries, it often creates jobs, but these jobs are usually poorly paid and lack decent working conditions. This reality is a stark reminder that we need strong mechanisms to ensure that the economic benefits of globalization actually translate into real social improvements for workers across all levels of the supply chain.

The media frequently covers these social issues, bringing them to the public's attention. And there's also a growing interest among academics in various fields who are exploring these problems (Ahi & Searcy, 2015; Anner, 2020; Barnes & Lea-

Greenwood, 2006; Freise & Seuring, 2015; Pagell & Wilhelm, 2025; Soundararajan et al., 2021). Globalization has indeed amplified social issues, particularly labour-related ones, on a global scale. Traditional governance methods, such as national laws and collective bargaining, often fall short in addressing these transnational challenges. Meardi and Marginson (2014) contend that national instruments (such as national legislation and laws) and collective bargaining appear ineffective when it comes to dealing with transnational flows of capital and workforces between countries. At the same time, although intergovernmental mechanisms that are implemented by international organizations (such as the International Labour Organization or the World Trade Organization) do play certain roles in the establishment of standards and rules, their ability to sanction any breach of commitments is extremely limited.

What is supposed to fill this gap are private actors like corporations using their own instruments. There's an ongoing debate about how effective these new forms of governance are. Academics have been discussing the role of private codes of conduct and related initiatives as either complements or substitutes for state regulations on social issues. Practitioners and academics alike have long debated the emergence and efficacy of new governance forms. Notably, academics from a variety of research fields, such as labour studies and management, have discussed the role of private Codes of conduct and related initiatives to either complement or substitute for state regulations on social issues (Locke et al., 2013; Meardi & Marginson, 2014).

From my perspective, understanding these dynamics is crucial. It's not just about recognizing the issues but also about finding sustainable solutions that ensure fair and safe working conditions for all workers involved in global supply chains.

Reflecting on my personal and professional journey, I have long been drawn to social issues affecting workers, particularly labor rights and gender equality. My experience at the International Labour Organization (ILO), combined with insights from academic literature, deepened my commitment to exploring these issues. Over time, I came to appreciate how various academic disciplines—such as industrial relations, labor governance, and management studies—offer distinct yet complementary lenses through which to understand these challenges..

Industrial relations scholarship typically foregrounds workers' viewpoints and class-based struggles. Labor governance research, by contrast, emphasizes regulatory frameworks and institutional mechanisms that shape labor standards. Management studies—especially within the context of global supply chains—focus more on managerial strategies, responses, and decision-making. While these fields are increasingly engaging with social issues, the management and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) literature often emphasizes compliance and accountability from the perspective of firms. As a result, workers' voices and lived experiences remain underrepresented in this body of research.

One theoretical concept that profoundly shaped my thinking is organizational decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), rooted in organizational institutionalism. Organizational decoupling can be defined as a management response to external pressures by separating formal structures—such as policies and codes of conduct—from actual practices. This allows companies to present a façade of compliance while continuing problematic internal routines. Such disconnection offers a compelling explanation for the persistence of labour-related issues despite the proliferation of sustainability initiatives.

Through my dissertation, I aim to investigate these gaps and understand how organizational decoupling perpetuates social problems in global supply chains. It aims to uncover the mechanisms through which policy-practice gaps emerge and are sustained, and to explore how they may be challenged or reinforced by various actors, including workers, managers, and international buyers.

By addressing these gaps, I hope to contribute to the broader discourse on improving labour standards and achieving genuine social sustainability in global supply chains. My goal is to understand the divide between policy and practice, ensuring that the benefits of globalization are more equitably distributed among all stakeholders, particularly the workers who are often the most vulnerable.

2. Theoretical framing

Examining the tensions between global socially responsible policies and unsustainable practices at the workplace, this thesis delves into the social construction of decoupling within complex supply chains. This investigation focuses on organizational decoupling at the workplace level by analyzing the intricate interactions between various stakeholders, including global companies, regulators, local tier 1 and tier 2 suppliers, local managers, unions, and the workers themselves. Specifically, the research aims to explore how factory-level workers react to policy changes brought about by new managerial decisions and policies intended to enforce socially responsible practices.

The concept of decoupling highlights the divergence between formal policies and actual practices within organizations. This phenomenon can lead to a façade of compliance while underlying unsustainable practices persist. By understanding

these dynamics, the study seeks to uncover the reasons behind the persistence of unsustainable practices despite the proliferation of socially responsible policies.

Furthermore, this thesis investigates the responses of factory-level workers to these policy changes, shedding light on their experiences and perspectives. By doing so, it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in implementing socially responsible practices in global supply chains and the resulting implications for workplace sustainability.

Examining global garment supply chains provides critical insights into the roles various actors play in decoupling processes. Firstly, these supply chains feature extensive production networks managed by international buyers, creating a complex network of global suppliers (Köksal et al., 2017). Globalization has had a profound impact on the garment industry, leading to increased outsourcing and complexity which coincides with reduced transparency and traceability. These intricate environments facilitate either the separation of policy from practice (policy-practice decoupling) or a divergence between policy implementation and its intended goals (means-end decoupling) (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Cao & Jayasinghe, 2024; Jabbouri et al., 2022).

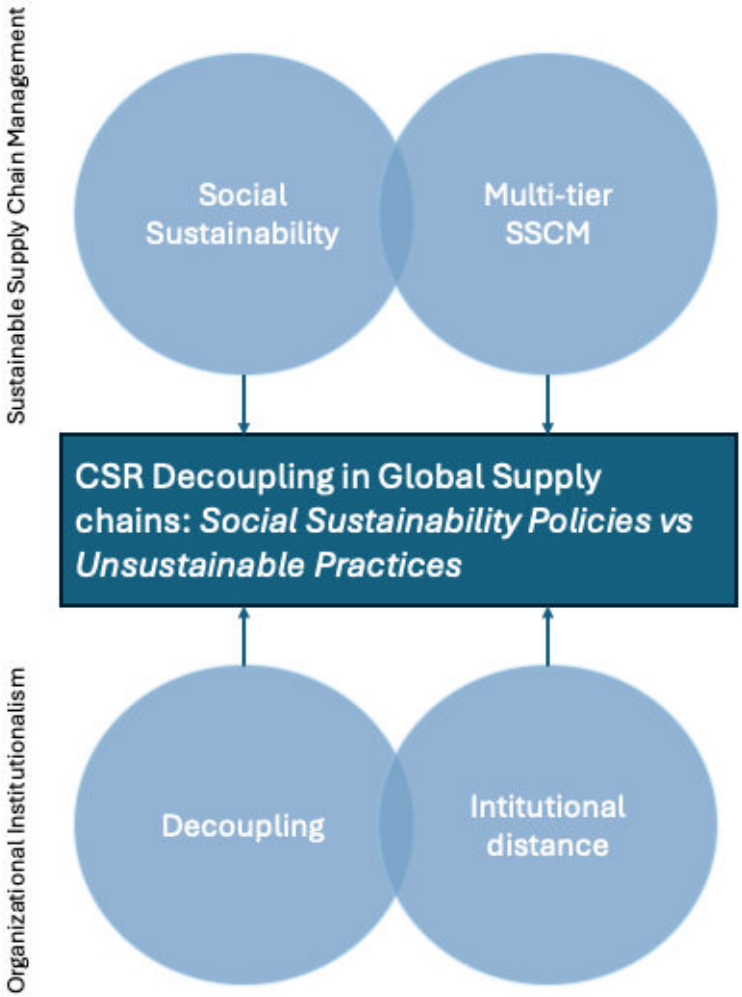
Secondly, the garment supply chain is highly labour-intensive, employing over 75 million workers (Global Living Wage Coalition, n.d.). This sector faces significant social issues, including poor working conditions, low wages, child labour, forced labour, and gender discrimination (Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2022; Marculetiu et al., 2023). These social issues are evident in first-tier factories of global brands and worsen further upstream (Jamali et al., 2017; Wieland et al., 2016). The high labour density and prevalent social issues make this sector an ideal case for exploring workers' responses to organizational decoupling by management.

Thirdly, MNEs operating from a distance continue to disregard social or other unsustainable practices far away from their headquarters (Huq et al., 2016). The interests of peripheral stakeholders, such as suppliers' workers, are largely overlooked unless crises force firms to address these concerns. For example, in turbulent issues like a health and safety crisis with industry-wide repercussions, MNEs face intense pressure to respond stakeholders' interests (Freeman & McVea, 2005). Industry-level shocks are unpredictable and can disrupt organizations and cause irreversible shifts. The shock might happen in one organization, but the negative impact may affect all companies within the industry (Meyer, 1982). Examples include the 2015 Dieselgate of Volkswagen (Fracarolli Nunes & Lee Park, 2016), the 2008 melamine contamination in China's milk industry (X. Jia et al., 2012), etc. The 2013 Rana Plaza collapse, which resulted in 1,134 deaths and 2,000 injuries (Schüßler et al., 2019), was an industry-level shock to the global garment industry. But it was neither the first nor the last (Huang et al., 2022; LeBaron, 2021; LeBaron & Lister, 2021). The industry-level shocks trigger a proliferation of social sustainability policies and programmes among MNEs. The diffusion of these policies and programmes through supply chains, notable to distant suppliers, increases the risk of decoupling (Huq & Stevenson, 2020).

Delving into the managerial practices of decoupling in global garment supply chains, this research is situated within the academic conversation on sustainable supply chain management (Carter & Liane Easton, 2011; Seuring & Müller, 2008; Touboulic & Walker, 2015; Yawar & Seuring, 2018). The dissertation specifically addresses the social sustainability pillar complementing the economic and environmental dimensions of Elkington’s triple bottom line (Ahi & Searcy, 2013; Bubicz et al., 2019; D’Eusanio et al., 2019; Galuppo et al., 2014; Mani et al., 2015; Nakamba et al., 2017; Yawar & Seuring, 2017). From a theoretical perspective, the

study employs organizational institutionalism to explore and understand the social issues arising from decoupling and the roles of different actors, particularly workers, in influencing or transforming decoupling practices in global supply chains

Figure 1 – Key theoretical elements in the dissertation



To summarize, this research employs the theories of organization institutionalism and SSCM, with empirical data derived from garment supply chains. Specifically, organizational decoupling is used to elucidate the disparities between socially sustainable policies and unsustainable practices, directly contributing to the study of social sustainability in SSCM. Additionally, the institutional distance is an explanatory factor of decoupling in multi-tier supply chains.

To explore the gaps between social sustainability policies and real-life socially unsustainable practices in global supply chains, this dissertation integrates two primary bodies of literature: sustainable supply chain management (Carter & Rogers, 2008; Gold & Schleper, 2017a; Luzzini et al., 2024; Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014; Seuring & Müller, 2008; Soundararajan et al., 2021) and organizational institutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Marano & Kostova, 2016; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Oliver, 1992; Roth & Kostova, 2003).This introductory literature review aims to connect the concepts of social sustainability in SSCM and organizational decoupling from neo-institutionalism.

This section offers an overview of current studies to identify the research gaps in social sustainability (Govindan et al., 2021; Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Panigrahi et al., 2019; Sarkis et al., 2010; Yawar & Kauppi, 2018; Yawar & Seuring, 2017) and multi-tier supply chain management (Mena et al., 2013; Sauer & Seuring, 2018; Tachizawa & Wong, 2014). Furthermore, it explores how organizational institutionalism can help in understanding the discrepancies between socially sustainable policy and practices through the lens of organizational decoupling (Athanasopoulou et al., 2024; Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017; Bromley & Powell, 2012; Gull et al., 2022; J. W. Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Stål & Corvellec, 2022; Sydow et al., 2022; Wijen, 2014). Considering the current structure of multi-layered, global, fragmented supply chains, the position and distance of the different tiers and their role in decoupling are examined (Kostova, 1997; Marano et al., 2017; Tashman et al., 2019).

2.1. *Social sustainability in supply chain management*

The field of SSCM has seen substantial growth, becoming a crucial area within supply chain management research. This expansion underscores an increased emphasis on integrating environmental and social factors into supply chains, advocating for a comprehensive view of sustainability throughout the supply chain, from procurement to stakeholder engagement (Seuring & Müller, 2008; Elkington, 1998; Gold & Schleper, 2017; Busse et al., 2016).

While significant advancements have been made in addressing environmental sustainability within SSCM, social sustainability has historically received comparatively less scholarly attention and development. However, there is a growing recognition of the importance of social dimensions—such as worker welfare, labor rights, and community impacts—which are increasingly being incorporated into research and practice (Ahi & Searcy, 2013; Carbone et al., 2019; Govindan et al., 2021; Mani et al., 2016; Pagell & Wilhelm, 2025). This evolving focus highlights the need to balance environmental and social priorities to foster genuinely sustainable supply chains.

Traditionally, SSCM research has been shaped by an instrumental logic, often aligning sustainability efforts with economic performance rather than adopting a truly holistic perspective. This can limit the transformative potential of sustainability initiatives (Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014; Gold & Schleper, 2017). Moreover, the literature frequently exhibits a buyer-centric orientation, with insufficient attention paid to suppliers—particularly those in developing countries—and to other key stakeholders (Soundararajan et al., 2021).

2.2. *Multi-tier sustainable supply chain management*

Recent research in SSCM has moved beyond the traditional buyer-centric approach, expanding to incorporate various tiers within the supply chain. This evolution reflects the complexity introduced by globalization, recognizing that sustainability involves not just immediate suppliers but all levels, including raw material producers (Christopher & Peck, 2004). Notably, there is an increased focus on the role of first-tier suppliers in sustainability, with analyses now considering the dynamics between two supply chain actors, or "dyads", such as buyer-supplier or supplier-supplier relationships (Mena et al., 2013; Choi & Wu, 2009a).

These dyadic relationships, whether cooperative or competitive, significantly impact the implementation and management of sustainability practices (Choi & Wu, 2009b; Nishiguchi & Beaudet, 1998). However, given the complexity of modern supply chains, a dyadic approach alone is insufficient. Consequently, multi-tier perspectives are increasingly being adopted to understand sustainability in a more networked context, taking into account factors such as product quality, risk management, and visibility throughout the entire chain (Gong et al., 2023; Tse & Tan, 2011).

Frameworks and theories have been developed to explain various structural and governance mechanisms within these multi-tier systems, providing a nuanced understanding of managing sustainability across different supplier levels (Mena et al., 2013; Tachizawa & Wong, 2014; Sauer & Seuring, 2019). Despite the progress, there remains a dearth of in-depth research on the alignment of buyers' sustainability policies with the practices of lower-tier suppliers. Sauer and Seuring (2019) address this by exploring how varying levels of institutional pressure influence suppliers' adherence to sustainability, with institutional distance playing

a significant role in potential discrepancies between policy and practice. Nonetheless, more research is needed, particularly concerning social sustainability within this multi-tiered approach.

2.3. Studying the discrepancies between social policies and practices through the concept of decoupling

The discussion on sustainable policies in global supply chains shows a clear gap between the socially responsible façades companies project and the tangible improvements in workers' lives. Academic literature highlights this gap using the concept of decoupling, which describes the difference between what companies say and what they do (Pope & Wæraas, 2016).

The concept of decoupling, introduced by Meyer and Rowan (1977), is a core idea in institutional theory. It describes how organizations separate their formal structures from actual production activities when faced with conflicts between institutional and task environments or conflicting organizational pressures. This separation allows organizations to gain legitimacy by conforming to rationalized myths while continuing "business as usual" (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017). Bromley and Powell (2012) categorize decoupling into two forms: *policy-practice* and *means-ends*. Policy-practice decoupling highlights the disconnect between formal structures and daily practices, resulting in the failure to achieve the intended outcomes of the policy. Means-ends decoupling, however, occurs when policies are implemented and evaluated, but the link between policy implementation, practice integration, and intended outcomes remains unclear.

In the context of sustainable development, the concept of decoupling was first utilized by Bloomfield (1999), highlighting the contrast between public

commitments to labour standards and the grim realities within industries such as garment manufacturing. Other scholars propose that while CSR is often heralded as a commitment to social welfare, in many instances, it operates merely as a veneer, serving more to protect corporate legitimacy than to institute substantive change (Banerjee, 2008; Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

The decoupling concept provides a critical lens for understanding the selective application of firm sustainability initiatives. MNEs are often influenced by external social pressures for legitimacy, rather than a genuine transformation of practices (Touboulic & Walker, 2015). This concept demonstrates that companies' operational practices often diverge from their public sustainability promises, especially in supply chains in developing countries. Here, the *institutional distance* between suppliers' environments and the commissioning corporations further complicates the implementation of socially sustainable practices (Huq & Stevenson, 2018).

2.4. Institutional distance

Institutional distance within organizational institutionalism refers to differences in regulatory, cognitive, and normative elements between countries' institutional environments (Busse et al., 2016). Regulatory elements include rules and laws that ensure societal stability, while cognitive elements pertain to established cognitive structures within a society. Normative elements encompass social norms, values, and beliefs that dictate acceptable behaviour. These differences create challenges for multinational enterprises (MNEs) as they navigate varying institutional landscapes, impacting their ability to achieve legitimacy and operational efficiency in different countries (Kostova et al., 2020).

The article by Busse and colleagues (2016) examines how different institutional contexts affect the perceived legitimacy of firms' actions. It highlights situations where suppliers meet their local institutional expectations but cause reputational harm to buyers due to differing legitimacy standards. The study provides examples like LIDL's suppliers in Bangladesh, where locally acceptable practices were deemed illegitimate by Western standards, leading to reputational damage for LIDL. The authors emphasize understanding varying legitimacy contexts to manage supply chain sustainability risks (SCSRs) effectively (Kostova et al., 2020).

Sauer and Seuring's article "A Three-Dimensional Framework for Multi-Tier Sustainable Supply Chain Management" proposes integrating supply chain uncertainty and institutional theory to manage sustainability across multi-tier supply chains (MT-SSCM). The framework highlights the interplay of supply and demand uncertainties and institutional pressures from both the FF and the supplier's environment. Effective MT-SSCM practices should consider these uncertainties to align sustainability goals. Reducing institutional distance and managing supply chain uncertainties through tailored MT-SSCM practices can enhance supplier compliance and overall sustainability performance (Sauer & Seuring, 2019).

Decoupling in social sustainability occurs when suppliers superficially comply with focal firm (FF) requirements while maintaining non-compliant practices. High institutional distance, representing significant differences in cognitive, normative, and regulative structures between the FF and the supplier’s environment, increases the risk of decoupling. Suppliers face conflicting pressures from different institutional contexts, making it challenging to meet the sustainability expectations of the FF while adhering to local norms and regulations. This

decoupling is a central concern in managing sustainability across global supply chains (Kostova et al., 2020).

A growing body of research focuses on the role of institutionalism in managing sustainability in global supply chains (Touboulic & Walker., 2015; Govidan et al., 2021). This theory provides powerful insights into understanding social issues through concepts like decoupling (Sauer & Seuring, 2019). However, the studies adopting this theoretical approach have certain blind spots. The existing studies often overlook less powerful actors, such as workers, by focusing predominantly on management perspectives. Additionally, they tend to view decoupling in binary terms rather than as a dynamic process and frequently confine the concept within internal organizational boundaries, which poses challenges given the interconnected and multi-organizational structure of modern supply chains as Kostova and Dacin (2008) argued.

3. Overall research questions

The intersection of the current research in social SSCM and organizational decoupling reveals certain research gaps. These include (i) the dynamic nature of decoupling across different supply chain tiers, and (ii) the overlooked influence of certain actors in shaping this managerial strategy. Therefore, three major questions are raised:

1. How does decoupling occur at different tiers of supply chains?
2. Which actors/stakeholders are involved in decoupling at each level?
3. How are these actors involved?

Alongside the two focal theories that this dissertation is anchored in, three articles tackle different aspects of decoupling in the global supply chain through

complementary theoretical lenses. In particular, the first paper, a conceptual study, uses the *multi-tier supply chain management* theoretical framework (Mena et al., 2013; Sauer & Seuring, 2018) to conceptualize the *multi-level decoupling* causing social issues in global supply chains. The second empirical article adopts a *Hirschmanian approach* (Hirschman, 1978) to examine the agency of factory-level workers in response to decoupling strategies implemented by suppliers' managers, which adversely affect working conditions. The third paper, taking the supplier's manager as the primary unit of analysis, utilizes the theoretical lens of *stakeholder salience* (Busse et al., 2016; Mitchell et al., 1997) to investigate the patterns of decoupling influenced by manager's perceptions of issues salient to different stakeholders (i.e., international buyers and factory-level workers).

4. Methodological approach

This manuscript relies on qualitative methodology with an abductive approach to address the three previously mentioned research questions. This approach allows the researcher to iteratively revisit theoretical foundations and field data to derive insightful interpretations from the qualitative data (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022). Given the complexity and sensitiveness of decoupling in the supply chains, this qualitative approach is particularly relevant in capturing the perspectives of heterogeneous supply chain actors about the hidden aspects (Reichertz, 2007) such as decoupling at the workplace. Therefore, interviews and field observations are the primary methods used in the fieldwork. Additionally, since this research is focused on the discrepancies between formal structures and outcomes/practices (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), it also includes an analysis of the existing gap between the public policies/programmes published by MNEs and social unsustainable practices identified during the fieldwork.

The empirical data for this study were collected during two rounds of fieldwork in Vietnam, the world's second-largest garment exporter.[1] Data were gathered from a diverse group of stakeholders, ranging from manufacturing managers, CSR auditors, international brands representatives to civil-society representatives, researchers and ultimately, factory-level workers. The field research, conducted across both Northern and Southern Vietnam, resulted in a total of 55 qualitative interviews, 35 pages of field observations, and an extensive collection of secondary data.

The first study in this dissertation employs a conceptual research design as outlined by Meredith (1993), which requires no empirical evidence. The collected data fed the two empirical studies developed in the thesis. Specifically, the second paper, which focuses on factory-level workers, relies upon 40 out of 55 conducted interviews and field observations. The third paper, based on a set of 44 interviews (out of 55 conducted interviews), uses various coding techniques to derive its findings and focuses on supplier management as the unit of analysis.

The methodology and the philosophical assumptions are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

[1] Vietnam has shown remarkable growth in the global textile and apparel market, with exports in this sector hitting a record $22 billion in the first half of 2022. Despite this impressive achievement, the industry faces challenges, such as a slowdown in orders from Western markets, leading to idle factories and a sharper-than-expected drop in exports during some periods. Nevertheless, long-term projections remain optimistic. Estimates suggest that Vietnam's textile exports could double within the next decade, reinforcing its status as a major player in the global market. The article highlights both the opportunities and challenges that Vietnam must navigate as it continues to expand its textile and apparel industry.
Nikkei Asia. (2022). Vietnam Textile and Apparel Exports Hit Record High in First Half. https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Trade/Vietnam-textile-and-apparel-exports-hit-record-high-in-first-half

5. Structure of the dissertation

The thesis is structured into three sections, comprising a total of eight chapters. The first section, which contains three chapters, begins with an introduction that outlines the motivations, objectives, and research questions related to social issues in supply chains. The second chapter delves into the theoretical orientations of the three papers, with a focus on social issues in Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM) and the concept of decoupling within organizational institutionalism. The third chapter includes the thesis philosophical foundations and its methodology.

The second section contains three chapters, each corresponding to one of the articles, and exploring different aspects of social sustainability decoupling in global supply chains. The first one employs a conceptual research design, adopting a multi-tier supply chain approach (Sauer & Suering, 2018) to conceptualize the mechanisms of multi-level decoupling. The second and third studies, both empirical, converge in their examination of decoupling at the supplier level, focusing respectively on the perspectives of factory workers and local management. The final section of this manuscript comprises the Discussion and Conclusion chapters. The Discussion outlines the general theoretical contributions of the study, along with its policy and practical implications. The Conclusion includes reflections on the limitations of the study and outlines a future research agenda.

Table 1 - Structure of the dissertation

Title of dissertation	From social sustainable policy to unsustainable outcomes: Theorization of decoupling mechanisms in supply chain with empirical evidence from Vietnam garment industry		
Overarching research questions	1. How does decoupling occur at different tiers of supply chains? 2. Who are the actors/stakeholders involved in decoupling at these levels? 3. How are they involved?		
Research context and unit of analysis	Garment supply chains		
Methodology approach	Qualitative methods with Abductive approach		
Article titles	Conceptualization of Multi-Level Decoupling: An Exploration of Social Issues in Supply Chain	It Is a Trade-Off! – Workers' Micro Institutional Work and CSR Decoupling in Vietnam Garment Factory	Unpacking selective decoupling in global supply chains: a stakeholder salience perspective on social issues in Vietnam's garment factories
Author(s)	Tra-My T. LE	Tra-My T. LE, Chikako OKA , Valentina CARBONE and Aurelien ACQUIER	Tra-My T. LE
Research questions	*RQ1: What are the decoupling mechanisms potentially deployed by managerial actors in the supply chains?* *RQ2: How do various non-managerial stakeholders respond to the social unsustainability outcomes caused by multiple decoupling in supply chains?*	*RQ3. When and how do workers respond to CSR decoupling in Global supply chains?*	*RQ4: How is pressure from international buyers and factory-level workers perceived by supplier managers?* *RQ5: How does stakeholder pressure influence supplier managers' decoupling in the area of social sustainability?*

Types of research	Conceptual paper	Empirical study	Empirical study
Data and methods	Theory building	40 qualitative interviews analyzed with abductive approach	44 qualitative interviews analyzed with abductive approach
Main findings	This provides a conceptual explanation of how local actors' resistance to social issues transfers from upstream to downstream in supply chains. The finding of the study includes: ● Research propositions explaining the interplay of local and peripheral stakeholders' responses to disrupt local decoupling in lower-tier supply chains. ● Explanation on how the involvement of non-managerial actors can transmit local institutional pressures to upper tiers of supply chains and ● Transmission of local pressures likely addresses other forms of decoupling and may transform formal structures imposed by lead firms	Our work examines workers' response to poor labour conditions caused by CSR decoupling—the gaps between the formal policies to which suppliers commit themselves and actual factory-floor practices. Particularly, the article provides: ● Analysis on role of workers in both accepting and resisting CSR decoupling in the labour market ● An understanding workers' agency in deciding whether or not to respond, with their decisions often driven by an overriding need for income.	This research utilizes the stakeholder salience as a theoretical lens to: ● Explain the variability of decouple-able social sustainability policies ● Identify the roles and actions of factory-level workers in shaping and reshaping suppliers' decoupling ● Highlight how selective attentiveness results in corresponding selective decoupling patterns: from tight coupling, contingent coupling, recoupling, mock compliance and decoupling.
Status	*Presented at the 6th World Conference on Production and Operations Management, Nara, Japan*	Submitted to *Journal of Supply Chain Management* In R&R pipeline (minor revisions)	Published on *Supply Chain Forum: an International Journal*

6. Summary of the three articles

This section provides the background and the summary of the three articles composing this thesis.

6.1. Article 1 - Conceptualizing Multi-Level Decoupling: An Exploration of Social Issues in Supply Chains

The first study is a conceptual paper which has the objective to provide multi-level insights (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015) on social sustainability decoupling in global supply chains. A preliminary version was presented in a session on Social Sustainability at the 6th World Conference on Production and Operations Management (P&OM) in Nara, Japan (2022). Following the guidance of my supervisors and building on the comments received from the P&OM community, the manuscript has been developed in a full format, and will be soon submitted to a journal (See Chapter 4).

This study aims to conceptualize social issues caused by multi-level decoupling in a multi-tier supply chain context. Decoupling is considered a managerial practice (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) deployed within and bounded to the organization's boundary to respond to stakeholders' expectations from the external environment. While there have been several attempts to explore decoupling in relation to social issues within a supply chain context (Bartley & Egels-Zandén, 2016; Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Jamali et al., 2015; among others), these studies tend to investigate decoupling within the firms.

The bodies of literature on multi-tier (sustainable) supply chain management and decoupling are the main scaffold for this study. On one hand, we conceptualize multi-level decoupling based on the dynamics of power and legitimacy between

heterogeneous actors in different tiers of the supply chain. On the other hand, we integrate a stakeholder perspective to explore interactions between these actors in the context of socially unsustainable outcomes resulting from multi-level decoupling. Consequently, we propose the following research questions:

> *RQ1: What are the decoupling mechanisms potentially deployed by managerial actors in the supply chains?*
>
> *RQ2: How do various non-managerial stakeholders respond to the social unsustainability outcomes caused by multiple decoupling in supply chains?*

By considering decoupling "as a process rather than a state" (Bromley et al., 2012) and as a ubiquitous managerial practice (Pope & Wæraas, 2016), this research investigates and conceptualizes the interactions of local non-managerial actors (i.e., workers) with such practices. We develop research propositions explaining the interplay of local and peripheral stakeholders' responses to disrupt local decoupling forms in lower-tier supply chains. The research also elucidates how the involvement of non-managerial actors can transmit local institutional pressures from particular supplier's space to supply chain's space. This transmission may tackle other forms of decoupling and possibly, in some cases, transform the formal structures imposed by lead firms (Soundararajan et al., 2017). In other words, we provide a conceptual explanation of how local actors' resistance against social issues transfers from suppliers in the low tiers of the supply chains to the focal firms. While a conceptual paper does not necessitate offering empirical evidence, we nonetheless attempt to provide several exemplary cases illustrating our arguments.

6.2. Article 2 - Factory workers and CSR decoupling in garment supply chains: a Hirschmanian perspective

This empirical research is co-authored with Professor Chikako Oka, Professor Valentina Carbone and Professor Aurélien Acquier, with myself as the first author. A working version was presented at the 36th EGOS Colloquium 2020 in Hamburg, Subtheme 2: Contesting Hegemonies in Organizing Social Responsibilities. Although the conference was held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the paper greatly benefited from the feedback provided by convenors, discussants, and community members. The complete manuscript (see Chapter 5) was initially submitted to *Organization Studies* and progressed through the review process in 2021. However, due to divergent comments from the blinded peer review, the co-authors decided to submit the paper to another journal in 2022.The paper is currently under review at the *Journal of Supply Chain Management*. It received a minor revision request and is in the process of being resubmitted.

In this study, we explore how workers attempt to influence managers' policy-practice decoupling, with respect to social issues in the workplace. To understand their responses, we draw on Hirschman's (1970) model of Exit, Voice, and Loyalty, along with the extended concept of neglect and cynicism. Building on this framework, we pose the following two research questions:

> *RQ3. When and how do workers respond to CSR decoupling in Global supply chains?*

We illuminate the pivotal role of workers in both accepting and resisting the decoupling at the workplace. While prior research has predominantly concentrated on roles of buyers or suppliers, our study shifts the focus to workers,

revealing how they determine whether to engage with or resist CSR decoupling—often influenced by the fundamental necessity of securing income. Furthermore, this work contributes to the broader effort to humanize the SSCM discourse by emphasizing factory-level workers and underscoring the importance of examining less dominant actors within global supply networks. Lastly, we extend Hirschman's model to workers' voice in the context of global supply chains, adapting it to better capture the unique power dynamics and structural constraints inherent in these settings.

6.3. Article 3 - Unpacking selective decoupling in global supply chains: a stakeholder salience perspective on social issues in Vietnam's garment factories

This is the first paper where I am the sole author. The initial version of this article was presented at the 8th International EurOMA Sustainable Operations and Supply Chains Forum at Excelia Business School, La Rochelle, France. The manuscript was significantly enhanced by valuable insights from my two supervisors, as well as feedback from the Guest Editors and three peer reviewers of *Supply Chain Forum: an International Journal*. By July 2022, the paper was accepted and published in the Special Issue on *Practicing Sustainability in Operations & Supply Chain Management* in the aforementioned journal (Le, 2022; see Chapter 7).

This article addresses the topic of decoupling and social sustainability from a different perspective. While the unit of analysis in Paper 2 is factory workers, this paper centers the analysis on supplier management. Inspired by the study of Jamali and colleagues (2017) on selective decoupling by Indian suppliers—where policy-practice decoupling occurs in areas with less buyer scrutiny—this research

suggests that some social sustainability policies are more "decouple-able" (Sauder & Espeland, 2009) than others. We investigate the role of supplier managers' perceptions of stakeholder expectations in empirically identifying decouple-able social sustainability policies, a topic that is underexplored in the literature on SSCM. This study raises two key research questions:

> *RQ4: How is pressure from international buyers and factory-level workers perceived by supplier managers?*
>
> *RQ5: How does stakeholder pressure influence supplier managers' decoupling in the area of social sustainability?*

In this paper, we adopt the theoretical lens of stakeholder salience (Mitchell et al., 1997, 2017) to understand how supplier managers' perceptions of stakeholder claims shape the decoupling of specific social sustainability policies. Although there is no universally agreed-upon definition of social issues and social sustainability among SSCM scholars, this research refers to a range of policies central to the notion of "decent work" (Soundararajan et al., 2021) in the labour-intensive garment supply chain in Vietnam. Our analysis, based on 44 interviews, reveals that local supplier managers exhibit selective attentiveness to the salience of buyers and workers, leading to corresponding selective decoupling patterns.

This research applies the stakeholder salience framework to explain the variability of decouple-able social sustainability policies within Vietnam's institutional environment. It highlights the roles and actions of factory-level workers in shaping and reshaping suppliers' decoupling practices. Furthermore, the study shows how selective attentiveness gives rise to different patterns of decoupling, including

tight coupling, contingent coupling, recoupling, mock compliance, and decoupling.

CHAPTER 2 - THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

"[S]ustainable supply chain management (SSCM) has moved from being a fringe topic that many of us were actively discouraged from studying to the mainstream.
So mainstream that many of the same people who discouraged such research are conducting it today."

Pagell & Shevchenko (2014)

"Most supply chain decisions have a direct or indirect impact on conditions for workers in other parts of the supply chain that are rarely considered. …[T]he SCM literature is people-blind."

Pagell & Wilhelm (2025)

1. Sustainable supply chain management

Prior to the doctoral journey, my academic exploration began with a deep engagement in the field of industrial relations, where the dynamics between employees, employers, and trade unions take centre stage. This early exposure grounded my understanding of labour as a central actor in organizational life.

Transitioning into the field of SSCM, however, was both intellectually stimulating and unexpectedly disorienting. I was struck, first, by the overwhelming emphasis on environmental sustainability in the SSCM literature. Second, while social dimensions are increasingly addressed, they are often framed through the lens of corporate economic performance. What was most striking, however, was the marginal attention paid to workers—the very individuals most affected by supply chain decisions. Their voices, roles, and lived experiences remain quite absent in dominant narratives.

This realization compelled me to delve deeper into the SSCM literature—not only to confirm my intuitive sense of this gap but also to critically assess how my dissertation might meaningfully contribute to the field. In particular, I sought to re-center the discussion around workers as active agents in sustainable supply chains, rather than as passive recipients of managerial or corporate strategies.

1.1. Origins and growth of sustainable supply chain management

Supply Chain Management (SCM) has been one of the most productive research fields in management sciences for a long time (Laengle et al., 2020). Over the years, SCM literature has both consolidated into a well-documented discipline and given rise to various emerging research streams. Over the past three decades, sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) has transitioned from a peripheral research subject to a central and widely embraced area within (Ansari & Kant, 2017; Gold & Schleper, 2017a; Pagell & Wu, 2009; Seuring et al., 2022). The growing number of academic publications on SSCM topics attests to the maturity of this field (Carter et al., 2020; Touboulic & Walker, 2015; Seuring et al., 2022). This development reflects the increasing interest among researchers and practitioners

in understanding how to manage the environmental and social impacts of supply chains.

Initially, SSCM focused primarily on environmental aspects, complementing traditional economic concerns. However, the scope of SSCM expanded to include social issues, particularly following the introduction of the "triple bottom line" concept by Elkington (1998). As a result, SSCM has become responsible for a significant and growing body of research output.

The literature on SSCM, which initially focused on focal firms, encompasses a broad span of supply chain functions, including sustainable sourcing and procurement, eco-design and green innovation, sustainable production and manufacturing, green logistics and transportation, and social responsibility and stakeholder engagement. Over time, this focus has broadened significantly to include various topics beyond focal firms (Gold & Schleper, 2017) such as supplier development (Busse et al., 2016), risk management (Reiner & Hofmann, 2006; Reinerth et al., 2019), decision-making processes (Brandenburg et al., 2014) and multi-tier supply chain management (Mena et al., 2013; Sauer & Seuring, 2020), among others.

In 2017, Rajeev and colleagues traced the evolution of sustainability in supply chain management (SSCM) through a comprehensive analysis of trends across industries, economies, and research methodologies. The study found that research addressing all three dimensions of sustainability—economic, environmental, and social—is relatively scarce. The authors highlight that studies focusing on social issues are limited, and there is a growing need for research on the measurement of social impacts along the supply chain.

1.2. The evolution of SSCM definitions

Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM) has evolved from its origins in traditional Supply Chain Management (SCM), a field historically shaped by practitioner-led definitions and focused primarily on logistics and material flow (Cooper et al., 1997; Jones & Riley, 1985; Mentzer et al., 2001). Over time, the concept of sustainability has been progressively integrated into SCM, reflecting a shift in both academic and practical priorities. Early definitions of SSCM emphasized the integration of environmental, social, and economic dimensions, aligning with the broader principles of sustainable development (Ashby et al., 2012; Fritz, 2019).

The foundational roots of sustainability in SSCM can be traced to international milestones such as the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. This landmark conference resulted in the adoption of the Stockholm Declaration with 26 principles with a human-centric approach and recognition of environmental protection and conservation.[2]

The concept of sustainable development did not receive widespread attention until the publication by Brundtland (1987), titled *Our Common Future*. The report emphasized the urgency of addressing global challenges, including environmental issues such as ozone depletion, global warming and the universal low standard of living of people around the globe. As a result, sustainable development began to garner significant traction at the international level among both practitioners and academics. The report defines sustainable development as:

[2] https://www.un.org/en/conferences/environment/stockholm1972

> "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (Brundtland, 1987, point 3.27).

In discussing "sustaining capitalism", the concept of sustainable development was operationalized in the Triple Bottom Line model by Elkington (1998). This model conceptualizes sustainability as the optimal intersection of "economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social justice" (p.2).

SSCM literature has historically drawn upon the TBL model as a core theoretical underpinning. A timeline of key definitions (see Table 2) demonstrates how environmental considerations dominated early formulations (Shrivastava, 1995; Beamon, 1999), often labeled under Green Supply Chain Management (GSCM). As the field expanded, scholars such as Seuring and Müller (2008), Carter and Rogers (2008), and Pagell and Wu (2009) incorporated broader concerns, embedding social and economic aspects alongside environmental ones.

However, despite the growing visibility of sustainability discourse in supply chain literature, early SSCM research was often instrumental in nature—centered on compliance, risk mitigation, and firm-level performance. The dominance of this managerial and firm-centric approach has led to critiques that SSCM insufficiently addresses the lived experiences of workers and broader systemic inequalities (Ashby et al., 2012; Yun et al., 2019)

The social aspect of sustainability is often considered ambiguous (Ashby et al., 2012) and may not necessarily be directly associated with enhanced firm profitability (Yun et al., 2019). Despite the growing prevalence of the term "sustainability" within the context of the triple bottom line, there is a notable dearth of attention given to

the social dimension in existing studies. However, social aspects in the supply chains have been garnered significant attentions from scholars (Acosta & Pérezts, 2019; Acquier et al., 2018; Bacchetta et al., 2011; Banerjee, 2018; Galuppo et al., 2014; Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Mani et al., 2018; Morais & Barbieri, 2019; Pagell & Wilhelm, 2025; Picasso et al., 2021; Soundararajan et al., 2025; among others).

Table 2 - Several definitions of Sustainable Supply Chain Management

Authors	Definition	SC and sustainability factors
Shrivastava (1995)	Reduction of risks occurring in long term that is associated with resource utilization, energy utilization and associated costs, product design, pollution, and management of waste in a supply chain.	Risk management Environmental aspects
Beamon (1999)	An extended supply chain that aims at minimizing environmental impacts of a product throughout its entire life cycle, such as green design, resource saving, harmful material reduction, and product recycle.	Extended supply chain Product life-cycle Environmental aspects
Carter and Rogers (2008)	The strategic, transparent integration and achievement of an organization's social, environmental, and economic goals in the systemic coordination of key interorganizational business processes form improving the long-term economic performance of the individual company and its supply chains.	Triple Bottom Line Long-term economic performance Individual Company Supply chains
Seuring and Muller (2008)	The 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 sustainability, such as, the economic, environmental and social, into account which are derived from customer and stakeholder requirements.	Supply chain management Triple Bottom Line Stakeholder perspective
Pagell and Wu (2009)	The specific managerial actions that are taken to make the supply chain more sustainable with an end goal of creating a truly sustainable chain.	Sustainable supply chains Managerial actions
Badurdeen et al., (2009)	Involvement of the planning and management of sourcing, procurement, conversion and logistics activities involved during pre-manufacturing, manufacturing, use and post-use stages in the life cycle in closed-loop through multiple life-cycles with seamless information sharing about all product life cycle stages between companies by explicitly considering the social and environmental implications to achieve a shared vision.	Supply chain management Closed-loop approach Product Life-cycle Sustainable development Environmental aspects Social aspects Inter companies

Wolf (2011)	The degree to which a manufacturer strategically collaborates with its supply chain partners and collaboratively manages intra- and inter-organization processes for sustainability.	Intra- and inter-organization Sustainability
Wittstruck & Teuteberg (2012)	An extension to the traditional concept of supply chain management by adding environmental and social/ethical aspects.	Supply chain management Sustainable development Environmental aspects Social aspects
Ahi & Searcy (2013)	The creation of coordinated supply chains through the voluntary integration of economic, environmental, and social considerations with key inter-organizational business systems designed to efficiently and effectively manage the material, information, and capital flows associated with the procurement, production, and distribution of products or services in order to meet stakeholder requirements and improve the profitability, competitiveness, and resilience of the organization over the short- and long-term.	Supply Chain Management Triple Bottom Line Stakeholder perspective Short- and Long-term profitability, competitiveness, and resilience
Pagell and Shevchenko (2014)	Sustainable supply chain is the design, coordination, control and organization of a supply chain to make it truly sustainable with minimum expectation being to achieve economic viability, while ensuring no harm to environment and social systems over an extended period of time.	Sustainable supply chain Economic viability Sustainable development Environmental aspects Social aspects
Panigrahi et al. (2019)	Sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) is management process which integrates environmental considerations, social performance, and economic contribution. Varied customer demand and complex product components gave rise to a strong internal competition between businesses along with the global competition.	Supply chain management Triple Bottom Line Customer demand Competition
Kuwornu et al., (2023)	SSCM involves integrating sustainable practices and principles into operations, enhancing supply chain performance, and aligning with sustainable development goals.	Sustainable Practices; Operational Integration; Alignment with SDGs

Matthews & Silva (2024)	Introduces the concept of "supply chain justice," advocating for supply chains designed and governed in alignment with principles of social, economic, and environmental justice.	Justice-Oriented Framework; Social, Economic, and Environmental Justice; Governance Alignment
Pagell & Wilhelm (2025)	Reconceptualizes supply chain excellence through the lens of sustainability, positing that the viability of social-ecological systems is a prerequisite for the functioning of supply chains.	Social-Ecological Viability; Sustainability as Baseline; Long-Term Economic Goals

Recent contributions in the field of SSCM have significantly advanced the discourse beyond the conventional Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework, striving to establish a more profound conceptual foundation. Pagell and Shevchenko (2014) argue that sustainability in supply chains should not be confined to the overlapping domains of economic, environmental, and social performance. Rather, they propose that a truly sustainable supply chain is one that "at least does no net harm to natural or social systems while still producing a profit over an extended period of time; a truly sustainable supply chain could, customers willing, continue to do business forever" (p. 45). This perspective underscores the need for systemic thinking that transcends short-term metrics and embraces intergenerational and intersystemic viability.

In 2017, Gold and Schleper argue that SSCM research needs to shift from treating sustainability as a strategic tool for reputation and risk management to focusing on the intrinsic value of people, ecosystems, and ethical responsibility. True sustainability means companies recognizing themselves as part of society, empathetically engaging with all stakeholders, including marginalized groups, and striving to do no net harm while fostering equity and well-being across supply chains and generations.

A bibliometric review by Fontoura & Coelho (2020) maps the intellectual landscape of research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and supply chain management (SCM) and identifies an ongoing diversification of themes. Similarly, research by Kuwornu et al. (2023) highlights the role of SSCM in enhancing competitive advantage and operational performance in developing economies, emphasizing stakeholder engagement and alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Building on this transformative shift, Matthews and Silva (2024) introduce the concept of *supply chain justice*, advocating for a re-engagement with the foundational normative values that underpinned the TBL as originally envisioned by Elkington (1998). They argue that contemporary SSCM scholarship has often diluted or bypassed embedded principles of justice—social, economic, and environmental. According to their formulation, supply chain justice demands the design and governance of supply chains in accordance with three interrelated justice principles: social justice, which emphasizes fairness and compassion in treatment; economic justice, which promotes the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities; and environmental justice, which highlights the unequal burden of ecological degradation disproportionately borne by those least responsible.

Further advancing the discourse, Pagell and Wilhelm (2025) reconceptualize supply chain excellence through the lens of sustainability, arguing that the viability of social-ecological systems must be treated not as an aspirational goal, but as a fundamental precondition for the functioning of supply chains. They contend that sustainability should no longer be considered a competitive advantage but a baseline requirement. Their argument aligns with foundational works such as Raworth's (2017)Doughnut Economics and Montabon et al., (2016) who emphasize the necessity of maintaining ecological and social systems in the pursuit of long-term economic value creation.

Collectively, these contributions reflect a maturing field that is evolving beyond compliance-oriented and instrumental logics. While managerialist and TBL-aligned approaches remain influential, a growing body of scholarship is advancing justice-centered, systemic, and digitally enabled models of sustainable supply

chain governance. These developments point toward a more holistic paradigm that repositions supply chains not only as conduits of economic value but also as critical sites for ethical responsibility and ecological stewardship.

1.3. Studying sustainability from various theoretical lenses in SSCM

Blending theoretical perspectives from different disciplines has been commonly practiced in SSCM literature (Koberg & Longoni, 2019; Seuring et al., 2022), in order to identify drivers and barriers to the adoption of sustainability policies. Resource-based view theory, stakeholder theory, institutional theory and transaction cost theory are among the most widely used theoretical lenses influencing the conceptual frameworks in SSCM (Carter et al., 2020; Gligor et al., 2019; Kayvan et al., 2010; Touboulic & Walker, 2015).

The resource-based view, focusing on the concepts of resources, performance, and power, is particularly relevant in exploring how firms derive competitive advantages from sustainability-related activities; and in understanding the relationship between performance and sustainability (Pullman et al., 2009; Qorri et al., 2021). However, SSCM scholars acknowledge that it is not always simple to operationalize sustainability concepts into quantifiable metrics (Flynn et al., 2018).

Transaction cost theory, originally proposed by Williamson O1981), provides another important lens in SSCM research. It enables scholars to explore the relationship between organizations through their exchanges or activities, particularly in terms of costs and efforts (Acquier et al., 2017; Grover & Malhotra, 2003; Ketokivi & Mahoney, 2020). Like the resource-based view, transaction cost theory has been applied to understand the link between performance and sustainability (Vachon & Klassen, 2006).

Institutional theory and stakeholder theory are widely adopted in SSCM research (Seuring et al., 2022). Unlike the resource-based view and transaction cost perspectives, which often emphasizes economic performance in relation to sustainability, these two theories focus on the influence of various actors on businesses, as a source for the emergence of SSCM. Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) is employed in SSCM research to investigate the reciprocal relationships between various actors in supply chains. For example, a study by Park-Poaps & Rees (2010) examined stakeholder forces that shaped socially responsible supply chain orientations in the footwear and apparel industry. Similarly, Meixell and Luoma (2015), in their systematic review of SSCM research, found that stakeholder pressures could lead to the adoption of sustainability strategies and the implementation of sustainable practices, although different categories of stakeholders have "dissimilar influence in the sustainable supply chain decision areas" (p. 77). In the same vein, Sayed et al., (2017) uses institutional theory to explore how institutional pressures, logics, and complexities influence the implementation of SSCM practices across different tiers of supply chain actors.

Institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; J. W. Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Tolbert & Zucker, 1999; Zucker, 1977) is also commonly adopted in SSCM research (Koberg & Longoni, 2019; Köksal et al., 2017; Seuring et al., 2022). This theory is often applied following the seminal work on isomorphism (DiMaggio & Power, 1983) which explains how the search for legitimacy drives organizations to converge towards similar behaviours under the influence of normative, coercive and mimetic pressures. However, beyond this view, other institutionalist scholars have highlighted that the search for legitimacy may also lead to “decoupling” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017; Jamali et al., 2017; Cao & Jayasinghe, 2024).

Decoupling, a concept introduced by Meyer and Rowan (1977), originally refers to managerial actions that symbolically adopt sustainability policies to gain legitimacy from external stakeholders while maintaining business-as-usual (i.e. policy-practice decoupling) (Gull et al., 2022; Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Jabbouri et al., 2022; Mor Barak et al., 2022; Tashman et al., 2019). Later studies on decoupling have unpacked another aspect of this phenomenon, where managers comply with standards but fail to achieve the intended outcomes (i.e. means-ends decoupling) (Cao & Jayasinghe, 2024; Jabbouri et al., 2022). The differences between the two forms of decoupling will be further elaborated in the section about *Organizational Decoupling*.

2. The focus on social sustainability in SSCM

Early studies in SSCM predominantly emphasized the environmental dimension of sustainability (Gimenez & Tachizawa, 2012; Martins & Pato, 2019; Winter & Knemeyer, 2013). This emphasis reflects the field initial efforts to incorporate sustainability into supply chains, which largely centered on addressing environmental concerns (Martins & Pato, 2019). Although growing at a slower pace, the social sustainability in supply chain management has increasingly attracted the attention of SSCM scholars (Bubicz et al., 2021; D'Eusanio et al., 2019; Galuppo et al., 2014; Govindan et al., 2021; Lee Park et al., 2022; Mani et al., 2015; Pagell & Wilhelm, 2025; Popovic et al., 2018; Quarshie et al., 2016).

However, this growth of publications focusing on social sustainability is insufficient (Matos et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2023; Soundararajan et al., 2021, 2025). First, many social issues associated with supply chains are perceived as less critical compared to economic and environmental challenges, largely because social issues are seen as relatively narrow range of impact (Alghababsheh et al.,

2020). Moreover, the complexity and difficulty of quantifying social sustainability—such as issues of discrimination or freedom of association—make it harder to integrate into supply chain management systems that are primarily designed for monitoring and control using measurable metrics, especially those related to environmental performance (Awaysheh & Klassen, 2010; Klassen & Vereecke, 2012; Luzzini et al., 2024; Wilding et al., 2012). Additionally, the lack of consensus on social issues in supply chains—partly due to their fragmented nature and complex evolutionary pathways—has hindered researchers from developing and testing theories of social sustainability in supply chain management. It has also made it particularly challenging to examine the relationship between social sustainability and supply chain performance.

This section of my dissertation delves into reviewing studies on social issues in SSCM, focusing on two key aspects: the theoretical lenses applied and the roles of various supply chain actors.

2.1. Definitions of social sustainability in SSCM

Recent industrial-level shocks in the Global South (Huq et al., 2014) have heightened both public and academic awareness of socially unsustainable behaviours in the supply chains (Ahi & Searcy, 2015; Govindan et al., 2021; Mani et al., 2016). Despite this increased attention, there remains, first, a lack of clear definitions of social sustainability, and second, no universally accepted definition that can be applied across contexts.

Nakamba and colleagues (2017) reviewed 109 articles in the period from 2007 to 2017 on the topic of social sustainability in supply chain management studies. Among these, only five definitions of social sustainability were explicitly provided

(Table 3). The authors categorize these definitions into two perspectives. The first perspective anchors on management practices and firm capabilities that may impact workers involved in supply chain activities, either negatively or positively (Awaysheh & Klassen, 2010; Sarkis et al., 2010; Sloan, 2010). The second perspective places a stronger emphasis on engagement, both within the supply chain and extending to the surrounding community (Klassen and Vereecke, 2012; Huq et al., 2014).

Studies on social sustainability within SSCM encompass a broad array of research topics These topics include labour conditions (Burchielli et al., 2009; Mont & Leire, 2009; Park-Poaps & Rees, 2010; M. Wilhelm et al., 2016; M. M. Wilhelm et al., 2016), human rights issues (Benstead et al., 2018; Clarke & Boersma, 2017) to community engagement (Missimer & Mesquita, 2022). Whilst human rights and labour standards pertain to the fair treatment, wages and working conditions for workers in the supply chains, community development is also a crucial concern, as supply chains can have a profound impact on local communities. Companies, therefore, bear the responsibility of ensuring that their activities contribute positively to these communities.

SSCM research generally either addresses specific issues, such as modern slavery or child labour or explores a range of challenges that primarily affect consumers. The concept of social sustainability is surrounded by ambiguity, which makes it difficult to pin down exactly the precise scope of social issues to be studied (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021). To date, SSCM research has predominantly employed a quantitative approach to social issues, focusing primarily on investigating the instrumental aspects of social impact and risk assessment for enterprises and

buyers (Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2022; Gold & Schleper, 2017a; Mani et al., 2016; Morais & Barbieri, 2019; Quarshie et al., 2016).

Table 3 – Definitions of social sustainability in SSCM

Definition of social sustainability	Authors
[As] Management practices that affect how a firm contributes to the development of human potential or protects people from harm, thereby capturing both positive and negative aspects, respectively.	Awaysheh and Klassen, 2010, p. 1248
Social dimension involves developing and maintaining business practices that are fair and favourable to the labour, communities, and regions touched by the supply chain.	Sloan, 2010, p. 8
Social sustainability is related to management of social resources including people's skills and abilities, institutions, relationships and social values.	Sarkis et al., 2010, p.338
Social sustainability is defined as encompassing three levels of stakeholders (who), focusing on the evolving set of social concerns for which the firm has influence in the supply chain (which issues), and involving management capabilities that respond to these concerns by mitigating risk or enhancing customer value (how).	Klassen and Vereecke, 2012, p. 105
Social sustainability is a holistic concept that must be integrated with economic and environmental performance considerations, recognizes stakeholders within and beyond the supply chain; and attempts to ensure long-term benefit for society.	Huq et al., 2014, p. 612
Social sustainability in SSCM is commonly defined as addressing "people and their working conditions".	Kuruvilla & Li, 2021, p. 43
Social sustainability is defined as the voluntary practices of delivering more entitlements, more rights or better welfare to worker.	Fontana et al., 2021, p. 157;
Social sustainability in the supply chain as a set of policies, mechanisms, capacities, practices and/or activities through which a focal company seeks to manage and tackle social issues in the supply chain.	Alghababsheh & Gallear, 2022. p. 85

Recently, Soundararajan et al., (2021) and Touboulic et al., (2020), using a critically engaged research approach, have advocated for a shift to "humanize" SSCM research. They emphasize focusing on social issues closely aligned with the notion

of decent work and incorporating a more “comprehensive range of actors." This shift involves moving away from a buyer-centric perspective and recognizing the voices and actions of marginalized actors, particularly workers, as legitimate stakeholders who influence sustainability practices in general and the social pillar in particular.

Pagell and Wilhelm (2025) argue that SSCM should more fully integrate people, communities, and societies into the foundation of the discipline. They offer three main rationales for this position. First, supply chain decisions—both strategic and operational—often have significant yet overlooked impacts on labour conditions across different tiers of the supply chain. Second, sustainability discussions in supply chain management tend to prioritize environmental concerns, such as greenhouse gas emissions, pollution, and biodiversity loss. However, as Rockström et al., (2023) contend, these environmental issues are deeply interconnected with questions of social justice. While the transgression of planetary boundaries is typically framed in terms of ecological degradation and risks to business continuity, its implications for human communities and social equity remain underexplored. Third, supply chain management as a discipline has received limited critical scrutiny regarding its ideological and structural effects. Acemoglu et al., (2022) show that business-educated managers are less likely to share profits with workers—despite no associated performance benefits—suggesting a managerial mindset oriented toward rent extraction. This tendency cannot be attributed to finance or accounting alone; rather, SCM’s strong emphasis on efficiency and cost reduction has contributed to the normalization of precarious work. Such work—characterized by insecure contracts, low wages, and weak worker representation—is increasingly embedded in supply chain structures (Wiengarten et al., 2021)

2.2. Multi-tier supply chain management

As SSCM continues to evolve, the focus has shifted from buyer-centric models to the complexities of multi-tiered global supply chains. This analysis now encompasses not only first-tier suppliers but also extends to raw material producers upstream in the supply chain. This shift, driven by globalization and the increasing need for sustainability, has prompted research into the roles of first-tier suppliers and their management practices, moving beyond the monadic buyer-centric approach to explore dyadic relationships. These relationships involve cooperation and competition, not only between buyers and suppliers but also among suppliers themselves (Christopher & Peck, 2004; Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Mena et al., 2013; Wilhelm et al., 2016; Wilhelm & Sydow, 2018; Wu et al., 2010).

The term "dyad" refers to the relationship between two nodes, i.e., the buyer and the supplier OR between two suppliers. This dyadic dynamism has been "naturally, the focus of the supply chain management literature"(Choi & Wu, 2009, p. 263). In the buyer-supplier dyad, Choi and Wu (2009) argue that the buyer plays a significant role in shaping the relationship with the supplier, often imposing various requirements such as supplier evaluation and certification programs. The buyer-supplier relationship can be either cooperative or competitive (Choi & Wu, 2009). Cooperative relationships are characterized by long-term partnerships and high levels of trust, with constant interaction and information exchange between the two supply chain actors. In contrast, competitive relationships involve adversarial interactions, short-term contracts, and sometimes unfair treatment. Emerging research has also examined how supplier-supplier relationships can influence the buyer's operations (Cox et al., 2004; Nishiguchi & Beaudet, 1998).

Mena, Humphries, and Choi (2013) provided the first theoretical framework for triadic formulation in multi-tiered SSCM practices (Sauer & Seuring, 2019), highlighting that the traditional dyadic approach does not adequately capture the complexities of supply chain networks. As a result, a multi-tiered approach has gained prominence in understanding the adoption and implementation of sustainability practices across various stages of global supply chains (Mena et al., 2013; Tachizawa & Wong, 2014; Sauer & Seuring, 2019). Initially, research on multi-tier supply chains primarily focused on managing quality among lower-tier suppliers (Gong et al., 2021). For instance, Tse and Tan (2011) suggest that greater visibility in multi-tier supply chains can mitigate quality risks.

In this theoretical framework, Mena and colleagues (2013) identified three types of multi-tier supply chain structures: open, transitional, and closed triads among buyers, suppliers, and suppliers' suppliers. In an open triad, the buyer has no direct relationship with the supplier's supplier, and the supplier independently manages its supplier. The transitional triad occurs when the buyer begins establishing a connection with the supplier's supplier. In contrast, a closed triad represents formalized cooperation between the buyer, supplier, and supplier's supplier. Tachizawa and Wong (2014) further expanded this framework by introducing four governance mechanisms—"direct," "indirect," "working with a third party," and "don't bother"—which international buyers use to manage their low-tier supplier chains.

This multi-tier approach has been utilized to unpack various aspects in SSCM. For example, Jia et al., (2019) used this approach to investigate the role of supply chain leadership of MNEs to facilitate the supply chain learning and adoption of sustainable practices in the context of emerging economies. In an empirical study

based on the evidence from 44 global experts specialized in sustainability in mineral supply chains, Sauer and Suering (2018) introduced the "cascading" effect into the debate of multi-tier SSCM.

While the multi-tier SSCM approach has significantly expanded in recent years to address certain research gaps, particularly those rooted in the buyer-centric heritage of SSCM, there remains a lack of systematic research on how mismatches between buyers' sustainability goals and unsustainable practices persist among lower-tier suppliers, including both Tier-1 and lower-tier sub-suppliers. In their conceptual article, Sauer and Seuring (2019) examined the role of sub-suppliers' direct environment and the sources of institutional pressure from buyers in the adoption and implementation of sustainability practices. The authors demonstrated that institutional distance—defined as differences in cognitive, normative, and regulative elements between institutions in two distinct contexts (Busse et al., 2016, p. 321)—strongly influences the varying levels of adoption of SSCM policies. In other words, greater institutional distance can increase the likelihood that suppliers will decouple from buyers' sustainability requirements.

While this article offers a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding sustainability uncertainty through the lens of institutionalism, integrating a focus on social sustainability within a multi-tier approach could deepen our insights. This dissertation examines how workers can raise concerns about socially unsustainable practices, particularly those driven by decoupling in upstream supply chains. It explores how the consequences of such decoupling might cross institutional boundaries, generating pressures that ultimately affect the lead firm within the supply chains

2.3. Who's in charge of socially sustainable SCM?

Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM) literature has alternatively focused its attention on the role of different actors involved in ensuring supply chain sustainability. Traditional actors, such as manufacturers, suppliers, and distributors, have long been central to supply chain studies. These actors can play a critical role in implementing sustainable practices by adopting eco-friendly manufacturing processes, ensuring ethical labour practices, and managing resources efficiently. Recent research highlights the importance of these actors in fostering a culture of sustainability within global supply chains, as well as the contextual barriers they encounter and managerial remedies to overcome these challenges (Koberg & Longoni, 2019).

In addition to these traditional actors, non-traditional players, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community groups, and consumers, have emerged as crucial to SSCM and have garnered increased attention in the literature. Studies suggest that non-traditional actors can play diverse roles, including acting as watchdogs, collaborators and innovators in sustainable supply chain practices (Carmagnac, 2021; Pagell et al., 2017). These actors bring unique perspectives and capabilities, advocating for sustainability, raising awareness, and influencing corporate policies through various forms of activism and engagement.

The dynamic interaction between traditional and non-traditional actors is considered to be pivotal for the evolution of SSCM, particularly in the development of new governance mechanisms and collaborative models that enhance the sustainability of supply chains. Such collaborations are essential for addressing complex sustainability challenges that transcend individual organizational boundaries, necessitating collective action and shared responsibility.

While SSCM research has extensively explored the roles of both traditional and non-traditional actors and their collective initiatives to foster sustainability in global supply chains, a significant gap remains concerning the role of workers within supply chains. Much of the literature tends to focus on higher-level strategic or operational perspectives, often overlooking the critical influence that workers wield on supply chain sustainability. For instance, issues like labour rights, worker safety, and fair wages are integral to truly sustainable supply chains, yet they receive limited attention in SSCM research (Soundararjan et al., 2021). Reinecke and Donaghey (2021) point out that SSCM literature has predominantly framed the discussion around corporate strategies or private-driven labour governance as the solutions for improving working conditions while considering workers as passive recipients rather than active participants.

Centering the worker perspective is not only a moral imperative but also a practical necessity for achieving truly sustainable supply chains. Workers are often the first to experience unsustainable practices and are uniquely positioned to identify risks and suggest grounded solutions. Ignoring their voices risks reproducing injustices and reinforces a flawed governance architecture in which those most affected are least heard. Including workers as active participants in supply chain governance strengthens accountability, improves the quality and relevance of social sustainability initiatives, and aligns with a recognition-based approach to justice that affirms workers' dignity, rights, and contributions. In short, no SSCM strategy can claim legitimacy or long-term effectiveness without integrating the perspectives and participation of the very individuals who sustain its foundation.

2.4. The image of workers in SSCM

Although social sustainability is fundamentally concerned with the living and working conditions of workers, worker-centric concerns remain markedly underrepresented in both academic discourse and practical implementation (Stephens et al., 2024). Workers—particularly those on production lines—continue to be treated as peripheral actors within the broader supply chain governance frameworks (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021, p. 17). As Gold and Schleper (2017, p. 428) contend, these workers are often "invisible, disrespected, or forgotten," highlighting a persistent neglect in both analytical and normative dimensions of SSCM.

This marginalization is further corroborated by empirical reviews. For example, Carter et al. (2020) found that less than 5% of SSCM studies focused explicitly on workers (Kuruvilla & Li, 2021). The disparity in attention given to workers compared to other stakeholders—such as buyers, suppliers, and regulators—has catalysed scholarly calls to reintegrate worker perspectives into SSCM agendas. Alghababsheh et al. (2023) argue that this imbalance has partly driven the emerging emphasis on worker voice as a mechanism for inclusion and redress.

Unlike traditional employee voice, which presupposes a direct employment relationship, worker voice in SSCM refers to the perspectives and agency of workers in supplier firms who are indirectly impacted by lead firm sourcing strategies (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021; Schrempf-Stirling et al., 2022). Kuruvilla and Li (2021) identify "harnessing worker voice" as a central research direction in advancing social sustainability in supply chains. While SSCM research has yet to formalize a consistent definition of worker voice, insights from related fields—such as human

resource management, organizational behaviour, and industrial relations—offer a conceptual foundation (Mowbray et al., 2019).

Worker voice holds particular ethical and operational importance in global supply chains, where workers frequently face systemic risks and labour abuses. In this context, voice is not merely an input into management decisions but a mechanism for safeguarding dignity and addressing power asymmetries. Taylor & Shih (2019, p. 132) argue that recent technological advancements have enabled innovative forms of worker voice, which can enhance both due diligence processes and the empowerment of workers through more effective feedback and remediation systems. In line with this, SSCM scholars have begun to operationalise worker voice through institutional arrangements, such as labour rights organisations and worker-driven governance models that foster industrial democracy (Kuruvilla & Li, 2021; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021).

Recent research efforts are beginning to move beyond abstract calls for inclusion, offering empirical insights into how worker voice can be embedded in practice. Reinecke and Donaghey (2021), for instance, propose a multi-level governance model in which worker voice is integrated across factory, supplier, and buyer levels. Kuruvilla and Li (2021) similarly highlight the importance of ensuring the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining as foundational pathways for workers to influence their conditions. Empirical contributions such as Bellingan et al., (2020) demonstrate the value of longitudinal, worker-centered methods—using verbal diaries to capture the evolving well-being of Chinese factory workers in order to inform social auditing practices. Likewise, BetterWork (2020) foreground workers' perceptions in their survey of Jordanian garment workers, noting a significant divergence between managerial assessments of working conditions

and those of workers themselves. These contributions collectively underline the importance of participatory, bottom-up perspectives in strengthening SSCM's engagement with social sustainability.

2.5. Research gaps and implications for the dissertation

Despite the significant growth in SSCM literature in recent years, persistent research gaps have been identified, which are considered barriers to achieving "true sustainability" (Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014; Gold & Schleper, 2017).

The first major research gap relates to the need to go beyond the prevailing instrumental approach to the formation and implementation of sustainability (Gold & Schleper, 2017). Current SSCM research has been criticized for emphasizing the relationship between adopting sustainability practices and a firm's economic performance. This interpretation of sustainability in SCM presents several problematic aspects. Firstly, this instrumental approach tends to frame sustainability as a means of maximizing profits and managing the risks associated with reputational damage from unsustainable practices (Adler et al., 2007; A. Prasad & Mills, 2010). Consequently, sustainability outcomes are often focused on "reduction, not elimination of harm" (Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014, p. 46). Secondly, the instrumental interpretations promote an epistemological approach, viewing sustainability primarily as a tool to measure inputs and performance (Wicks & Freeman, 1998). In this regard, research has predominantly focused on environmental dimensions, which are more easily quantifiable, rather than on social aspects such as working conditions and workers' well-being (Villena et al., 2021). Gold and Schleper (2017) acknowledge the gaps caused by this instrumental approach and call for a normative interpretation of sustainability to bring the "true" essence of sustainability into SSCM research.

The second research gap is related to the dominance of buyer-centrism (Bubicz et al., 2021; Nath et al., 2021a; Soundararajan et al., 2021; M. M. Wilhelm et al., 2016). Buyers, often multinational enterprises (MNEs) or lead firms, exert coercive pressures (Huq et al., 2016; Jamali et al., 2017) or collaborative pressures (Touboulic & Walker, 2015) to enforce labor standards in their supply chains. This is typically operationalized through Codes of Conduct and Sustainability Programs for their suppliers worldwide. The success of social sustainability implementation largely depends on the time and resources buyers are willing to invest in selected suppliers, as well as on the salient issues to buyers, such as child labor, as studied by Jamali and colleagues (2017). However, SSCM scholars have identified buyers' pressures as insufficient and as a driver of suppliers' decoupling practices in the field of social sustainability (Fontana et al., 2022).

The focus on the leading role of buyers also results in two significant research gaps in the current literature: insufficient attention to suppliers in developing countries and the neglect of other stakeholders' perspectives and interests (Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014; Soundararajan et al., 2021). While there has been an increasing number of studies on buyers' roles in the design and implementation of sustainability, far fewer papers address the unsustainable practices resulting from business misconduct among suppliers in developing countries (Yawar & Seuring, 2017; Zorzini et al., 2015). Notably, these suppliers are "often situated in very different and challenging institutional contexts" compared to buyers (Huq & Stevenson, 2020, p. 417). Even when environmental standards are consistent across regions, personal perceptions and local norms significantly influence social aspects, leading to diverse forms of social sustainability practices within supply chains. Additionally, other stakeholders' perspectives and interests, beyond focal firms and buyer-centric views, are under-researched in SSCM, particularly in social sustainability

studies (Soundararajan et al., 2021), with factory-level workers being especially overlooked. Consequently, Soundararajan and colleagues (2021) call for "humanizing SSCM research" (p. 4) by focusing on working conditions and placing workers at the heart of the research agenda.

This dissertation responds to these calls. This research prioritizes the perspectives and practices of suppliers' workers and other stakeholders, moving beyond the dominant buyer-centric view, with an emphasis on improving working conditions and worker well-being. Specifically, this study aims to examine the disparity between social sustainability policy and unsustainable practices from the perspectives of the 'other stakeholders,' notably supplier managers and factory-level workers in a developing country, Vietnam.

3. Organizational Decoupling

Research on sustainable policies and their impacts on social issues within the global supply chains reveals constant conflicts between the promises made by international buyers (i.e., MNEs) and actual improvements in workers' lives (Locke, 2013; Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014). Various conceptual frameworks have been proposed to explore and explain the persistence of socially unsustainable practices Some critical perspectives, for instance, have described CSR as mere window dressing or greenwashing, wherein buyers give "misleading information" about their CSR performance (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Laufer, 2003; Lyon & Maxwell, 2011; Marquis et al., 2016; Pizzetti et al., 2019). Several scholars argue that "CSR-washing requires the decoupling of CSR statements from CSR practices" and provide academic evidence of decoupling in "nearly all global CSR initiatives" (Pope & Wæraas, 2016, p.14). This decoupling tends to occur concerning specific social standards (Graafland & Smid, 2019; Jamali et al., 2017; Le,

2022; Levin, 2006). This section delves into the concept of decoupling, reviewing its various types and forms, and examining how this theoretical prism is applied to studying social unsustainability in the global supply chains.

3.1. Decoupling and organizational analysis

Decoupling is a well-explored concept within the field of Organizational Institutionalism, with numerous academic sources examining its various types, forms, and implications. Meyer and Rowan's foundational work (1977) on institutionalized organizations offered an early framework for understanding decoupling. The authors describe decoupling as a process to maintain ceremonial conformity that:

> "enables organizations to maintain standardized, legitimating, formal structures while their activities vary in response to practical considerations." (p. 357)

Meyer and Rowan's (1977) work has been the foundation for the decoupling literature (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017; Cao & Jayasinghe, 2024; Talpur et al., 2023). Originally, the formal structure arose from the external pressure to espouse organizational policies in pursuit of legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The authors suggest that decoupling occurs as a response to two primary contradictions: (1) between the external pressures and internal efficiency; and (2) among various external pressures themselves.

In their review of the evolution of core constructs in institutionalism, including decoupling, in institutionalism, Boxenbaum and Jonsson (2017) document a growing body of studies confirming the prevalence of decoupling. This review also sheds light on when decoupling occurs. The authors point out three conditions

when decoupling tends to happen more frequently. Firstly, decoupling is more likely in organizations facing strong coercive pressure to adopt certain practices, particularly when there is a lack of trust in the stakeholders exerting such pressure (Roth & Kostova, 2003). Additionally, organizations that do not believe in the necessity of aligning with formal structures for efficiency may also resort to decoupling (Rao et al., 2001; Westphal & Zajac, 1998).

Secondly, the local environment and internal power dynamics play a significant role in driving decoupling. For example, decoupling is more likely when top executives have considerable power to resist external pressures (Westphal & Zajac, 2001). However, strong pressure from influential shareholders, customers, and governments can make organizations less tempted to decouple from their ethics code (Marquis & Qian, 2014).

And thirdly, Boxenbaum and Jonsson (2017) emphasize the importance of networks and coalitions. For example, the longitudinal research of Westphal and Zajac (2001) suggests the executives with experience in decoupling or in the social loops of organizations with same practices tend to engage in decoupling.

Recent research has applied the concept of decoupling to the sustainability context, revealing that many companies disconnect their promoted policies from actual practices (Chang et al., 2017; Crilly et al., 2016; García-Sánchez et al., 2020; Gull et al., 2022; Kassem et al., 2022; Kuruvilla et al., 2020a; Mor Barak et al., 2022; Sauerwald & Su, 2019). Various terms describe the gaps between policies and practices, such as image washing, CSR decoupling, and social compliance decoupling.

Kotchen & Moon (2012), for instance, discuss "image washing," where companies use CSR policies to distract from unethical behaviour, thereby boosting their reputation despite engaging in Corporate Social Irresponsibility (CSIR). Pope and Wæraas (2016) refer to "CSR washing" as the gap between CSR communication and actual practices, often involving false claims to enhance competitive standing. "Greenwashing" involves misleading consumers about environmental practices, often through false labels or certifications (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2022; Pizzetti et al., 2019).

Another form, "CSR decoupling," is described by Tashman, Marano, and Kostova (2019) as a strategy where firms exaggerate their CSR performance in disclosures to bolster legitimacy. In the context of global supply chains, Cao and Jayasinhe (2024) introduce "social compliance decoupling," where supply chain actors fail to substantively implement labour code criteria in their practices.

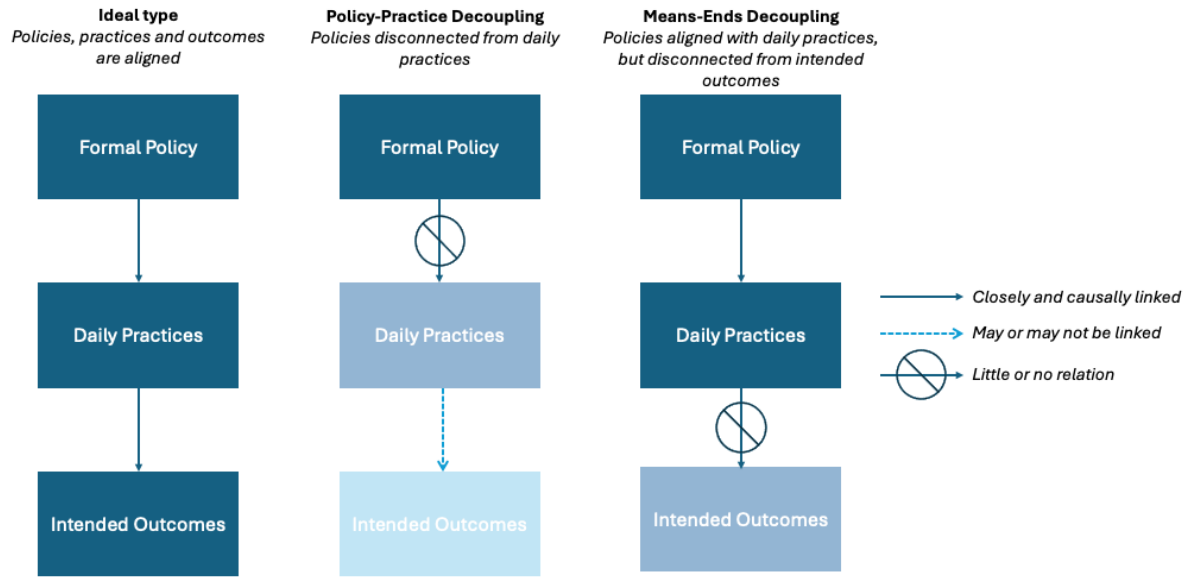
This dissertation examines decoupling in social sustainability within supply chains by focusing on labour standards. It aims to explore the various forms and types of decoupling, with the objective of understanding the dynamics between workers' actions and how these actions influence the forms of decoupling employed by their managers.

3.2. Forms of decoupling

In institutional theory, researchers have explored the concept of organizational decoupling, particularly the gap between formal policies and their actual implementation. Various studies have aimed to develop a typology of decoupling to distinguish the different ways these discrepancies occur (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Kuruvilla et al., 2020).

Bromley and Powell (2012) categorize decoupling into two forms: *policy-practice* and *means-ends*. In addition to the original elements of policy and practice, the authors introduce a third element – organizational intended outcomes (Figure 2). *Policy-practice decoupling* emphasizes on the disconnection between formal structure and daily practices, often failing to achieve the intended outcomes of the policy. *Means-ends decoupling*, on the other hand, occurs when policies are implemented and evaluated, but the connection between policy implementation, practice integration, and intended outcomes remains unclear.

Figure 2 – Policy-practice vs. Means-ends decoupling



Source: Bromley and Powell (2012)

According to these authors, most of the research has focused on the gap between policies and practices, particularly when managers fail or avoid implementing formal structures. Institutional studies inform that policy-practice gaps are more likely to occur early in the adoption process when the actors have limited capacity to realize the policies. However, policy-practice studies tend to hold strong criticism that "most institutional changes are merely window dressing" (Bromley &

Powell, 2012, p. 485). Because over the time, the symbolically adopted policies become more integrated into the organizations.

A further development in institutional theory introduces the concept of *means-ends* decoupling where organizations formally adhere to policies and modify work activities, yet these changes lack a clear connection to effectiveness or desired outcomes, as discussed by scholars like Briscoe & Murphy (2012) and Wijen (2014). This form of decoupling is notably prevalent in opaque fields where "the external pressures are institutionalized via hard or soft laws" (Kuruvilla et al., 2020, p. 848). Wijen (2014) suggests that opacity means when ‘‘observers have difficulty identifying the characteristics of prevailing practices, where observers have difficulty in establishing causal relationships between policies and outcomes and where observers have difficulty precisely measuring the results of policy implementation’’ (p. 302). In such opaque fields, even when symbolic adoption is addressed, discrepancies between practices and outcomes persist, partly due to the challenges in measuring and establishing causality.

Wijen (2014) further explains that opaque institutional fields, riddled with practice multiplicity, behavioural invisibility, and causal complexity, hinder compliance with socio-environmental standards. This opacity creates a conundrum where imposing uniform rules to mitigate symbolic adoption may inadvertently result in practice-outcome gaps. To address the complex nature of these fields, Wijen recommends a systemic approach to tackle the multilevel complexity inherent in these fields, encouraging the internalization of norms among actors and the formation of niche institutions that adapt universal standards to specific contexts.

Research on the two forms of decoupling within supply chains has been extensive (Gull et al., 2022; Jabbouri et al., 2022; M. Khan & Lockhart, 2022), particularly in

understanding how sustainability policies are adopted by international buyers and subsequently implemented by their suppliers (Cha & Park, 2020; Crilly et al., 2012; Jamali et al., 2015; Junaid et al., 2015; Mandrinos et al., 2019; Pache & Santos, 2013; among others). Studies on policy-practice decoupling highlight instances where formal policies are either not implemented or frequently violated. For example, Crilly et al. (2016) investigated how leading firms, through a study of 12 multinational enterprises, used complex language to publicly commit to sustainability, thereby misleading stakeholders, while failing to implement these commitments. Similarly, (Mor Barak et al., 2022) utilized climate theory to explore decoupling within and between two levels: (i) policies set by CEOs (top-level leadership) and (ii) the daily practices of supervisors (group-level leadership). In the supply chain context, for instance, Huq and Stevensson (2020) identified firm-, supply chain-, and environment-related factors that lead to non-compliance with social sustainability policies in developing countries. Decoupling has also been studied across various supply chain tiers, including risks in Tier 1 (Wilhelm et al., 2016a) and in lower-tier supply chains (Choi & Linton, 2011; J. H. Grimm et al., 2014).

Means-ends decoupling refers to situations where organizations, in response to institutional pressures, engage in activities that are only weakly aligned with their goals, resulting in ineffective outcomes (Wijen, 2014). This form of decoupling goes beyond mere window dressing; it involves actual practices that have significant consequences for organizations (Stål & Corvellec, 2022; Wijen, 2014).

Table 4 – Forms of decoupling within supply chains

Concept	Definition	Authors	Findings	Exemplar studies
Policy-Practice Decoupling	This form of decoupling refers to a strategy that allows organizations to abide only superficially by institutional pressures and adopt new structures without necessarily implementing related practices.	Meyer and Rowan (1977) Boxenbaum and Jonsson (2017)	Studies on policy-practice decoupling often focus on "why and how managers fail to, or avoid, implementing formal rules" (Bromley & Powell, 2012, p. 486).	*Inconsistent or symbolic adoption of labour code from buyers* (Anner, 2012; Egels-Zandén and Hyllman, 2006; LeBaron et al. 2022) *Prioritization of economic outcomes and deprioritization of social sustainability* (Barrientos and Smith, 2007; Egels-Zandén, 2007, 2014; Hoang & Jones, 2012; Huq and Stevenson, 2018) *Lack of implementation capacity* (Robinson et al., 2008) *Ineffective monitoring and evaluation* (Lindholm et al., 2016; Locke and Romis, 2007)
Means-Ends Decoupling	This form of decoupling occurs when the "policies policies are implemented but the link between formal policies and the intended outcome is opaque"	Bromley and Powell (2012) Wijen (2014) Stal and Corvellec (2022)	Wijen (2014 and 2015) argues that in the organizational field with high opacity, it is high likelihood that means-ends decoupling would occur rather than policy-practice decoupling.	*Implemented policies, but with uncertain relationship to outcomes* (Palazzo & Basu, 2007) *Ineffective Implementation led to unsolved issues and unintended outcomes* (Khan and Lund-Thomsen, 2011)

	(p.489).			

For instance, Jabbouri et al. (2019) explored how a research and development consortium failed to achieve its collaborative project goals, despite significant resource allocation by its partners. Similarly, Dick (2015) found that the UK police service's adoption of part-time roles resulted in only a marginal increase in such positions within police units. The literature on CSR decoupling also addresses this phenomenon. Lyon & Montgomery (2015) argue that "if external stakeholders enforce compliance with specific practices they may inadvertently exacerbate means/ ends decoupling if the practices are not sufficient to achieve the desired ends" (p.4). Their research investigates means-ends greenwashing, where organizations promote positive environmental actions while hiding negative ones. Furthermore, Khan and Lund-Thompsen (2011) examined the soccer ball stitching industry in Sialkot, Pakistan, through 137 interviews with local stakeholders. They highlighted that policies from international buyers (primarily based in America and Europe) were implemented without considering the local manufacturing context. This approach, coupled with price pressures, led to negative unintended consequences, particularly affecting women stitchers in the manufacturers studied.

3.3. Decoupling in Supply Chain Context

Decoupling is widely regarded as the main cause of failures in sustainability adoption and implementation in global supply chains (Cao & Jayasinghe, 2023; Crilly et al., 2012; Bartley & Egel-Zandels, 2016; Jamali et al., 2017; Graafland and Smid, 2019; among others). Under constant scrutiny from various stakeholders—such as governments in home and host countries, international organizations, civil societies, and end consumers—buyers often establish formal sustainability policies. However, these policies frequently respond to socially accepted norms or "myths"

without genuinely affecting operational practices, thereby perpetuating a "business-as-usual" mentality (Boxenbaum et al., 2017; Touboulic & Walker, 2015). This disconnect arises because institutional expectations often conflict with the technical or operational constraints necessary to maintain organizational efficiency. Moreover, the coexistence of multiple "competing and mutually inconsistent" rationalized myths (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017) leads to decoupling as an institutional strategy that enables organizations to navigate these contradictions by creating gaps between formal policies and actual practices. However, public exposure of such decoupling can undermine the legitimacy of both the organizations involved and the sustainability practices they claim to uphold (Hensel & Guérard, 2020).

Numerous scholars have suggested that organizational decoupling negatively affects the implementation of sustainability across global supply chains (Mani & Gunasekaran, 2018; M. M. Wilhelm et al., 2016), including the deterioration of working conditions for workers at the field level of supply chains. Discrepancies between sustainability policies, practices and outcomes, resulting from decoupling lead to failures to improve workers' life (Jamali et al., 2017) and contribute to the "inhuman living [and working] conditions" (Wilhelm et al., 2016). Furthermore, research on this topic has identified organizational decoupling in sustainability as a pervasive, informal strategy that is largely accepted as a standard, taken-for-granted practice (Jamali et al., 2017).

The literature identifies various decoupling mechanisms across supply chains, impacting not only individual tier, such as suppliers but also entire supply chains managed by key stakeholders—including buyers, suppliers, and third-party social

auditors (Bartley & Egels-Zandén, 2015; Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Cao & Jayasinghe, 2024). (See Table 5)

Table 5 – Decoupling research in SSCM

Supply chain actors	Decoupling practices in the Supply chains	Form of decoupling	Exemplar research
International buyers	Codes of conduct are designed at minimum level without implementation or toleration of violations. Misleading reporting about CSR/Sustainable performance.	Policy-practice	Amengual et al., 2020; Anner et al., 2012; Egels-Zandén & Hyllman, 2006; Holtbrügge & Conrad, 2020; Huq et al., 2014; Laferrière, 2015; LeBaron et al., 2022; Marquis & Qian, 2014; Tashman et al., 2019
	Buyer's audit uses checklist but ignores or underreports labour violations Lack of training and communications for factories	Means-ends	Amengual et al., 2020; Kim, 2013; Lindholm et al., 2016; Locke & Romis, 2007; Rosa & Franco, 2005
Suppliers	Deceptive behaviours to hide non-compliance	Policy-practice	Anner et al., 2012; Barrientos & Smith, 2007; Egels-Zandén, 2007, 2014; Faraz et al., 2014; Hoang & Jones, 2012; Huq et al., 2014; Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Kuruvilla et al., 2020a
	Lack of capacity in implementing the buyer' code of conducts and operations in a supply chain space that have a strong institutional distance from the norms provided by the codes	Means-ends	Cao & Jayasinghe, 2024; Cha & Park, 2020; Distelhorst et al., 2015; Hoang, 2019; Jabbouri et al., 2022; Sauer & Seuring, 2018

SSCM studies emphasize the "talking the talk while walking the walk" of the buyers (Tashmann et al., 2018). This is the case when decoupling has been revealed in the communication of buyers overstating their CSR/sustainable performance in their information disclosure (Ählström, 2010), in CEO's overconfident CSR pitch (Sauerwald & Su, 2019) and in the sustainable reports (Marquis and Qian, 2015; Holtbrugge et al., 2020). The review by Cao and Jayasinghe (2023) reveals decoupling in social sustainability by buyers, including non-uniform social sustainability standards, weak monitoring and evaluation system and deprioritization of social standards. For instance, the study of LeBarron and colleagues (2022) explores that buyers' commitments to living wages in garment supply chains haven't reached meaningful progress in realizing it in low tiers. The authors suggest buyers "outsource" the commitment to a multi-stakeholder initiative "while failing to modify commercial practices that give rise to low wages in their supply chains" (p.2).

Beyond the buyer level, research also shows that decoupling is prevalent among suppliers, especially those in low-cost countries. The research of Jamali et al., (2017) revealed that Indian suppliers comply with child labour standards whilst selectively decoupling other core labour issues in their day-to-day operations for the sake of efficiency. In the same vein, Bartley and Egels-Zanden (2016) developed several models to conceptualize the "previously overlooked forms of negotiation" between local unions and suppliers' managers to leverage CSR decoupling and present the existence of contingent coupling.

This body of literature highlights the diverse range of decoupling mechanisms and the intricate relationship between decoupling strategies and social issues (Winkler et al., 2020). Decoupling may manifest in various practices, such as selective

decoupling (Jamali et al., 2017), mock compliance (Huq & Stevenson, 2020), recoupling (Hallett, 2010), contingent coupling (Bartley & Egels-Zandén, 2016), and tight coupling (Sauder & Espeland, 2009).auder

Table 6 – Identified Decoupling Practices

Different practices of decoupling	Main reference	Definition
Decoupling	Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2017	Decoupling enables organizations to maintain standardized, legitimating, formal structures while their activities vary in response to practical considerations.
Mock compliance	Huq et al., 2014; Huq & Stevenson, 2020	Mock compliance is where a supplier appears to be complying with a code of conduct but is in fact concealing non-compliance, including hiding violations; short-term superficial conformance; and blatant cheating.
Recoupling (at organizational level)	Hallett, 2010	Recoupling is the process whereby policy and practice that once were decoupled are coupled again.
Contingent coupling	Bartley & Egels-Zanden., 2016	Contingent coupling describes a situation in which the [policy-practice] gap shrinks to some degree, but the underlying problem of competing demands persists.
Tight coupling (at organizational level)	Sauder & Espeland, 2009	Tight coupling refers to standardization, strong interdependence, and

		coherence between policy and practice.

Jamali et al. (2017) identify that Indian suppliers in their study exhibit a pattern of selective decoupling. They note that while measures addressing child labor—an issue that attracts significant attention and condemnation—are closely integrated with social sustainability policies, other fundamental humanitarian and labour rights concerns are not addressed as rigorously. The phenomenon of policy-practice decoupling is widely analyzed in business settings, whereas means-ends decoupling is more commonly studied within non-profit and public sectors (Stal & Corvellec, 2021; Wijen, 2014).

An illustrative case provided by Khan & Lund-Thomsen (2011) discusses the child labour eradication initiative in Pakistan's ball-stitching industry, which led to production being centralized and the phasing out of home-based work to prevent child labour. However, this socially sustainable approach inadvertently excluded women from the production process. Similarly, Dick (2015) critiques the adoption of part-time work accommodations in the British police force, arguing that such policies, while socially beneficial, can conflict with the organization's operational efficiency. These tensions, described as efficiency gaps, arise because the implemented practices may not align seamlessly with the demand for diverse, context-specific solutions.

The impact of decoupling may be exacerbated in the "challenging institutional contexts" of developing countries where the manufacturing is outsourced to local suppliers (Huq & Stevensson, 2020, p. 415). These suppliers operate within social and institutional frameworks distinct from those of lead firms, creating a scenario

of high *institutional distance* (Kostova et al., 2008; Sauer & Seuring, 2019), which is defined as the degree of difference between the institutional environment of an organization and the institutional environment of its suppliers. This can be measured in terms of factors such as the cultural, legal, and regulatory differences between the two environments. When institutional distance is high, it can be difficult for organizations to coordinate their activities with their suppliers, as they may be subject to different sets of rules and norms (Busse et al., 2016; Kostova, 1997; Kostova et al., 2020; Marano & Kostova, 2016; Omar et al., 2022; Westney, 1993).

Indeed, the local norms ruling suppliers' behaviours can be in conflict with those ruling focal firms in developed countries (Zhou et al., 2016). Therefore, the institutional lens enables SSCM scholars to unpack the difficulties of the implementation of social sustainability policies in global supply chains. In this context, organizational decoupling and institutional distance can interact in a number of ways. For example, suppliers may engage in decoupling in order to cope with the high levels of *institutional distance* they face (Busse et al., 2016; Sauer & Seuring, 2019). On the other hand, the literature of supply chain management also suggests that the new setting of global supply chains has helped international buyers to externalize those social issues away from their market (Ponte, 2019), and therefore lessen the negative impacts of social issues on end-consumers' buying decisions.

3.4. Research gaps and implications for the dissertation

While research in sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) using the decoupling concept to explore social unsustainability has been expanding, there are several notable gaps that hinder a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. First, much of the current literature treats decoupling as a fixed

managerial strategy, implying that once decoupling occurs, it remains static. However, emerging studies suggest that decoupling is a dynamic process, wherein managers continuously readjust their practices based on shifting internal and external pressures. This evolving nature of decoupling has been underexplored in SSCM research, and understanding this variability is essential for developing more adaptive management strategies that can effectively mitigate social unsustainability in supply chains. Scholars have started recognizing that various forms of decoupling—such as symbolic adoption, selective decoupling, mock compliance or tight coupling—require distinct managerial responses, which shift over time depending on changing market demands, regulatory pressures, and stakeholder expectations (Sauer & Seuring, 2018).

A second significant gap in SSCM research lies in the limited use of a multi-tier supply chain approach. Most studies focus on the immediate relationships between focal firms and their first-tier suppliers, while largely ignoring the extended tiers of the supply chain where much of the social unsustainability occurs. This myopic focus limits our understanding of how social issues, such as poor labour conditions and human rights violations, manifest in the lower tiers of the supply chain. A multi-tier approach is critical to fully capture the complexity of social sustainability challenges in global supply chains, especially since many sustainability risks lie in the extended supply networks that are often beyond the direct visibility of the focal firms (Busse et al., 2016; Nath & Eweje, 2021; Sauer & Seuring, 2018; Wilhelm et al., 2016a). Addressing this gap requires more research that traces social unsustainability across different supply chain layers, from raw material extraction to final production, thus offering a holistic view of where and how decoupling occurs.

Lastly, the research landscape has also failed to sufficiently focus on the end beneficiaries of social sustainability policies, particularly factory-level workers who are most impacted by these initiatives (Soundararajan et al., 2019; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021). Current SSCM studies often emphasize corporate-level policies and managerial perspectives, leaving the lived experiences of workers underexplored. This oversight creates a decoupling between corporate sustainability goals and actual on-the-ground improvements in labour conditions. To bridge this gap, future research should incorporate worker-centered approaches to better understand how social sustainability policies are perceived and experienced at the factory level. Incorporating the voices of workers can provide invaluable insights into how sustainability strategies can be realigned to ensure that they translate into tangible benefits for those at the bottom of the supply chain hierarchy (Sauer & Seuring, 2018).

This dissertation aims to address the key research gaps identified in the existing literature on SSCM and decoupling. First, by exploring how decoupling occurs at different tiers of supply chains, this study seeks to move beyond the static view of decoupling as a fixed managerial strategy. Instead, it will examine the dynamic nature of decoupling, investigating how it shifts across various levels of the supply chain, particularly in multi-tier structures that have been largely overlooked. Second, this research will fill the gap regarding the actors and stakeholders involved in decoupling by identifying key participants across different tiers of the supply chain. It will map out the roles of these stakeholders—from corporate managers to factory workers—to better understand who influences decoupling and how their actions shape the sustainability outcomes at each level. Finally, the dissertation will explore how these actors are involved in the process of decoupling, focusing on the mechanisms and practices that either enable or hinder the

alignment of corporate sustainability goals with on-the-ground realities. Through this multi-tier, actor-centered approach, the dissertation aims to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing social unsustainability in supply chains, bridging the gap between high-level policies and factory-level practices.

CHAPTER 3 – EPISTEMOLOGICAL STANCE, POSITIONALITY AND METHODOLOGY

> "The point we are making is that the SCM literature is people-blind. […] to overcome SCM's people-blindness, researchers should also consider the data they collect. […] Studies in the discipline that deal with social sustainability typically fail to collect data from actual workers or local community members, leaving the voices of the most vulnerable supply chain members unheard."
>
> Pagell and Wilhelm, 2025, Putting the S in Sustainable Supply Chain Management: A People-Centric Research Agenda

Having commenced my doctoral journey as a practitioner in 2018, my academic foundation initially required substantial development. A systematic and comprehensive literature review spanning multiple research streams and disciplines introduced me to diverse philosophical perspectives and methodological approaches. Navigating these philosophies and methodologies was not always obvious for me, primarily due to my educational background, which had predominantly emphasized Marxism—the sole officially philosophical framework taught across educational institutions in Vietnam. Consequently, I encountered considerable difficulty in clarifying my positionality and selecting an appropriate methodological approach for this dissertation.

This section presents a reflective account of my epistemological stance—how I perceive and interpret reality—and critically examines my interactions with

workers during the fieldwork, which allowed me to comprehend their realities through their narratives and actions. As discussed previously, during the time of my fieldwork in 2019, the voices of workers were scarcely conveyed in research within the domain of SSCM. Nonetheless, given increasing scholarly advocacy for integrating social sustainability dimensions into SSCM research (Soundararajan et al., 2021; Pagell & Wilhelm, 2025), my interpretivist-oriented research responds directly to these emergent academic calls.

This chapter outlines the philosophical assumptions that form the basis of the research design, including the ontological and epistemological orientations, as well as the methodologies employed in this dissertation and the individual papers. It explains the distinctions between various philosophical perspectives, particularly in relation to social issues within supply chains. Additionally, it details the inspiration and motivation behind this research, specifically how interpretivism was operationalized during fieldwork for data collection and analysis (Darby et al., 2019). The chapter also highlights the iterative nature of the qualitative research process, where research questions were continually refined during the fieldwork. It further discusses the often-overlooked aspects of data collection and interpretation, such as the use and significance of covert research and the participants' perceptions of the researcher's dual role as a doctoral student and a representative of an international organization.

1. The underlying philosophical assumptions and dominant methodology in SSCM

Traditionally, the supply chain has been conceptualized as a relatively static and well-defined system, one that can be distinctly separated from its external environment (Nilsson & Gammelgaard, 2012). This perspective has influenced the research focus in SSCM, where studies have predominantly centered on

organizations, networks of organizations, or specific functional areas within firms, rather than on individuals as key decision-makers or participants in supply chain processes (Flynn et al., 2018; Pagell et al., 2017). This organizational-level orientation has shaped methodological choices in the field, with certain research approaches being favoured over others. Underlying each methodological choice is a paradigm or philosophical assumption, where researchers adopt a natural preference for certain philosophical positions when conducting their studies (Mir & Greenwood, 2021).

1.1. Underlying philosophical assumptions

Researchers across various disciplines, including management, naturally gravitate toward certain philosophical stances during their research process (Mir & Greenwood, 2020). According to Johnson & Duberley (2003), philosophical assumptions form the foundation of any claim to truth and become evident when these assumptions are challenged or when overlooked alternatives are articulated, thereby creating alternative perspectives on reality (p. 77).

Philosophically, research in SSCM has predominantly aligned with a positivist orientation. However, this positivist dominance has been critically examined by Aastrup & Halldórsson 2008), who described it as "the myth of positivism." Aastrup and Halldorsson (2008, p. 749) argue that intellectual limitations constrain research in this field, and overcoming these constraints requires giving alternative approaches full autonomy rather than treating them merely as complementary or exploratory. Similarly, Adamides et al. (2012), p. 907) emphasize that a strictly positivist approach may be insufficient for addressing the complex and interconnected socio-material nature of supply chains, highlighting the need for holistic comprehension. Existing research can also be reconsidered from a critical

realist viewpoint, which allows for broader contextual interpretations beyond purely mathematical optimization.

Adhering strictly to a positivist paradigm has created conceptual barriers for integrating ethical perspectives in management research. Positivists assert that ethical and normative arguments are separate from science and incapable of producing knowledge (Wicks & Freeman, 1998, p. 125). Consequently, the positivist epistemological stance prevalent in North American scholarship often necessitates measurable inputs and outcomes to justify sustainability initiatives, reinforcing instrumental logic (Gold & Schleper, 2017).

Transferring the analytical logic from natural sciences, like ecology, to socio-natural systems in SCM is challenging, as human involvement introduces an additional interpretative dimension beyond spatial and temporal scales. Such systems require acknowledging symbolic meanings (Westley et al., 2002), enabling interpretive analyses (Darby et al., 2019). Humans actively construct meaning around observed events, creating virtual realities (Westley et al., 2002). Adding intierpretive scales of meaning allows researchers to recognize narrative interconnections across different conceptual levels.

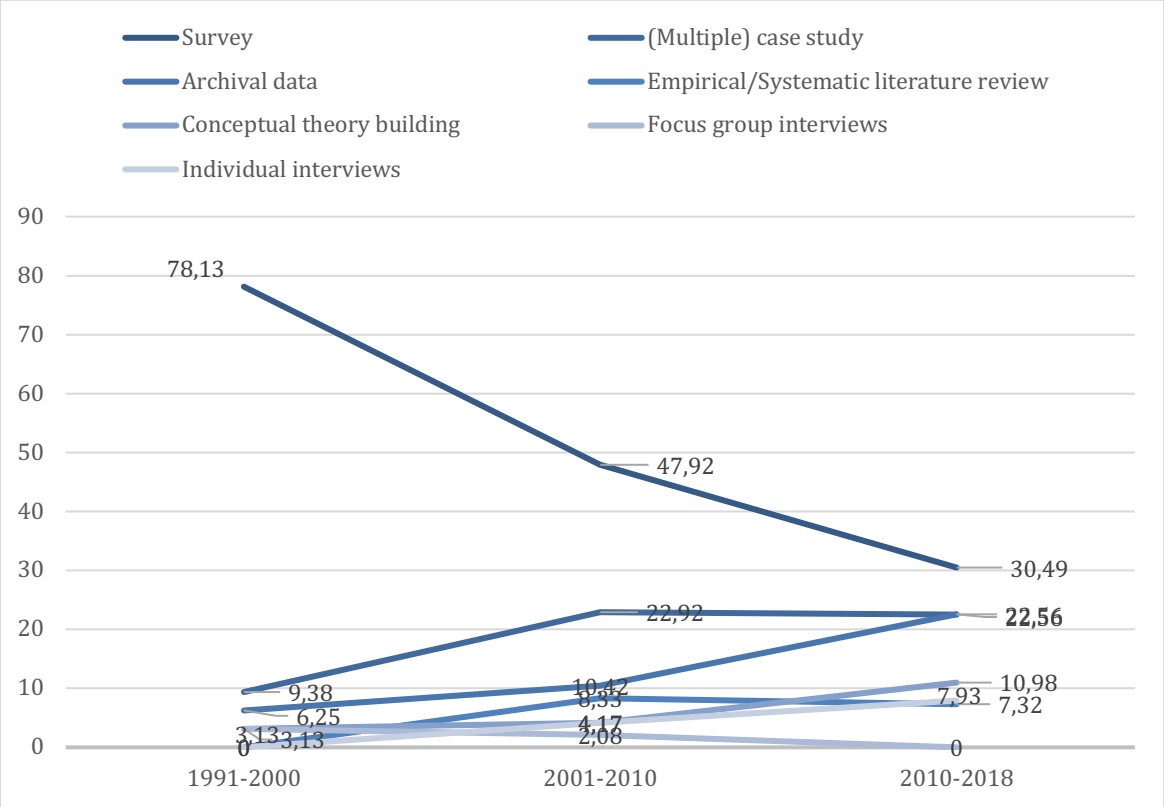
Interpretive research emphasizes that social actions embody meanings that require interpretive, not merely observational or measurable, analyses (Mees-Buss et al., 2022; Wieland et al., 2024). This paradigm prioritizes authenticity, plausibility, and criticality (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993), and offers "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973). Scholars accustomed to positivist traditions should reconsider their assumptions about interpretivism’s scientific rigor (Mees-Buss et al., 2022), recognizing its value in exploring nuanced human experiences.

1.2. Methodologies used in SSCM

In the context of sustainable supply chain management (SSCM), quantitative models have traditionally played a significant role, largely due to their ability to offer structured, systematic insights into supply chain operations and sustainability-related challenges (Brandenburg et al., 2014). Despite the historical dominance of quantitative methods, the methodological landscape within SSCM research has been evolving, reflecting shifts in both substantive research priorities and methodological preferences. Over time, scholars have sought to diversify their approaches in response to the growing complexity of sustainability issues in supply chains, leading to an increasing appreciation of qualitative and mixed-methods research.

A systematic review of 164 articles spanning nearly three decades (1991–2018) conducted by Carter et al. (2020) provides empirical evidence of these evolving methodological trends. The study found that survey-based research remained the most commonly employed primary methodology across three key periods of analysis: 1991–2000, 2001–2010, and 2010–2018. However, despite their continued prevalence, the dominance of surveys has gradually declined over time (see Chart 1). Unlike earlier periods where surveys were the overwhelmingly preferred approach, recent years have witnessed a more balanced distribution of research methodologies.

Chart 1 – Methods used SSCM articles, adapted from Carter et al (2020)



This diversification has been particularly evident in the growing application of case studies and the increasing reliance on archival data within SSCM research. Notably, the use of archival data experienced a significant surge, rising from 10.42% in the 2001–2010 period to 22.56% in 2010–2018. This shift may be attributed to a combination of factors, including increased awareness of the availability of archival datasets and their potential to offer rich, longitudinal insights into supply chain dynamics (Carter et al., 2008). Additionally, the growing legitimacy and acceptance of archival data as a robust methodological approach within the research community may have further contributed to its adoption.

Although methodological diversity within SSCM research has expanded, certain qualitative methods remain underutilized. Scholars primarily favor multiple-case

studies, often overlooking alternative qualitative approaches. For example, individual interviews, despite their growing application, are still employed less frequently compared to other methods (Wieland et al., 2024a). Within SCM, qualitative research focused on working conditions predominantly employs case studies. Although effective in analyzing firm-level or dyadic interactions, case studies often fall short in addressing nuanced individual and contextual dynamics or critically examining central issues (Touboulic et al., 2020a), particularly given the diverse actors and contexts in supply chains.

Qualitative research in SCM largely follows an objectivist perspective grounded in realist ontology and positivist epistemology, typically informed by methodological frameworks proposed by authors such as (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gehman et al., 2018) and Yin (2015). There remains a strong disciplinary expectation that qualitative research must yield rule-based generalizable findings, prioritizing reliability and validity.

Soundararajan et al. (2021) suggest that a human-centered research approach requires methods capable of capturing individual agency and relational dynamics within supply chains to understand contexts and issues deeply. Although suitable methods exist, new tools are needed for advancing the understanding and practice of decent work. Researching topics like human trafficking faces significant methodological, ethical, and safety challenges due to the clandestine nature of these issues (Lebaron, 2018; LeBaron, 2021).

Given that this research explores how supply chain actors perceive and (inter)act with CSR decoupling, a structured survey methodology was not deemed appropriate for this dissertation. While surveys offer the advantage of capturing broad trends across large populations, they often fall short in addressing complex,

nuanced interactions that involve perceptions, negotiations, and contextual influences (Flynn et al., 2018; Pagell & Wilhelm, 2025). The relationship between supplier managers and workers, particularly in discussions about working conditions, is deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts. These interactions cannot be easily quantified or distilled into discrete variables within a rigid hypothesis-testing framework. Instead, a qualitative approach was necessary to examine the subtleties of these exchanges and their broader implications for supply chain governance and CSR enforcement.

This study aims to uncover how suppliers navigate along with buyers' awareness of critical human rights concerns and to explore how workers respond—positively or negatively—to CSR decoupling. Understanding these responses requires an in-depth engagement with individual experiences rather than a purely operational or procedural analysis. Workers' and suppliers' perceptions of CSR decoupling are not formed in isolation; they are shaped by power dynamics, institutional pressures, and socio-economic conditions that surveys may struggle to capture comprehensively. To address this complexity, a methodological approach that prioritizes contextual richness and interpretative depth was necessary.

Interviews and direct observations were chosen as the primary research methods to facilitate a deeper exploration of these interactions. Through interviews, I was able to engage directly with participants, allowing them to articulate their perspectives in their own words, revealing insights that may not emerge from standardized survey instruments. Observations complemented this by capturing behavioural dynamics in real-world settings, providing additional layers of understanding beyond self-reported data. This methodological choice aligns with the broader objective of this research: to move beyond surface-level assessments

and engage with the lived realities of supply chain actors, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of CSR decoupling and its implications for both suppliers and workers.

By adopting this qualitative approach, this study contributes to a more nuanced discussion on CSR decoupling in global supply chains. This research foregrounds the voices of those directly affected by CSR decoupling. This methodological stance underscores the importance of context, interpretation, and experiential knowledge in understanding the real-world challenges and contradictions embedded in CSR enforcement.

2. Application of an interpretive approach

2.1. Orienting Frame-of-Reference

Interpretivism is the central epistemological foundation of this research, emphasizing the subjective experiences and meanings that individuals ascribe to their social reality. Unlike positivism, which seeks objective truths through measurable variables, interpretivism recognizes that reality is constructed through human interactions, making it multiple and relative (Creswell, 2009; Darby et al., 2019). By adopting an interpretive stance, this study delves deeper into the perceptions, narratives, and actions of diverse stakeholders, including workers, managers, and auditors. This epistemological perspective acknowledges that knowledge is co-created between the researcher and participants, making it context-specific and subjective. This approach is particularly effective in exploring complex phenomena such as decoupling, where formal policies often differ from actual practices. Through interpretivism, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social issues, such as labour practices and

workers' rights, are experienced and interpreted by different actors within the supply chain.

The interpretivist methodology allows the researcher to unpack the nuanced realities of the supply chain by emphasizing the importance of context and the perspectives of those directly involved. It also facilitates a deeper understanding of how social issues, such as labour practices and workers' rights, are experienced and interpreted by different actors within the system. By capturing these subjective realities, the study can provide insights that go beyond surface-level observations, contributing to a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the social dynamics at play.

This dissertation relies on the qualitative methods to explore complex social issues within supply chains. Our research investigates various questions regarding perceptions, voice and action of several actors. It requires the researcher to have an in-depth study to unpack the nuances in the fieldwork, which is not easily and thoroughly captured through quantitative methods. Ansell (2015) argues that interpretivism is particularly adept at addressing complex social phenomena by employing abductive reasoning. This approach involves iteratively moving between empirical observations and theoretical frameworks to generate new insights. By doing so, researchers can construct rich, grounded theories that are both empirically informed and sensitive to the context-specific nuances of social phenomena.

The dissertation employs interpretive and abductive approaches to deeply understand the complex phenomenon of decoupling between formal social sustainability policies and actual practices within supply chains. This methodological choice matters significantly as it enables capturing and

interpreting nuanced realities, which quantitative or purely positivist approaches might overlook. Interpretivism highlights the subjective experiences and meanings actors attribute to social sustainability standards, while abductive reasoning allows an iterative dialogue between empirical observations and theoretical insights, effectively uncovering and explaining inconsistencies and adaptations within supply chains.

Contextual factors such as economic pressures, inadequate enforcement mechanisms, and complex subcontracting arrangements significantly contribute to the decoupling phenomenon. Particularly evident in labour-intensive industries like garment manufacturing and electronics, decoupling emerges due to tensions between maintaining competitive production costs and adhering to international labour standards. Organizations may publicly declare commitments to ethical practices yet struggle or fail to realize these standards, resulting in discrepancies between stated objectives and operational realities.

By adopting interpretive and abductive methodologies, this study robustly investigates how international labour standards and social sustainability policies are perceived, negotiated, and often circumvented across various supply chain tiers. The inclusion of diverse stakeholders, such as workers, managers, and third-party auditors, further enriches the research, offering comprehensive insights into the effectiveness and limitations of existing labour standards and the concept of decent work as defined by the International Labour Organization. Ultimately, these methodological approaches facilitate a detailed exploration of the multifaceted, context-dependent dynamics that shape social sustainability outcomes in global supply chains.

2.2. Country context: Vietnam as a research destination

This section elaborates on the research context, as well as the methods of data collection and analysis. While each paper in the thesis is grounded in empirical settings, they only utilize specific segments of the overall dataset. Consequently, this section aims to offer a comprehensive and cohesive overview of the research methodology, highlighting key aspects and procedural details that are not extensively covered in the individual papers. It serves to provide clarity on the methodological framework that underpins the entire body of research, ensuring a clear understanding of the systematic approach adopted throughout the thesis.

For several reasons, Vietnam is a compelling choice for researching the apparel/garment supply chain. Firstly, Vietnam has been a major player in global apparel supply chains. As of 2019, when data collection for this study was completed, Vietnam was the third largest textile and garment exporter (after China and Bangladesh). Despite the setbacks caused by Covid-19 in 2020-2021, Vietnam's garment industry demonstrated its persistent growth, eventually surpassing Bangladesh to become the second-largest exporter.[3] The products made in Vietnam are the second largest source of garment and textile exports to the United States, accounting for (along with China) nearly half of all apparel entering North America. The industry has historically been the largest source of export revenue for Vietnam's economy only to be eclipsed in 2018 by electronics.[4] Furthermore, the sector has attracted substantial foreign direct investment, totalling up to USD 31.3

[3] Vietnam Overtakes Bangladesh to Become the Largest Clothing Exporters Globally in 2020. Accessed in March 2022. http://www.vietnamtextile.org.vn/vietnam-overtakes-bangladesh-to-become-the-second-largest-clothing-exp_p1_1-1_2-2_3-686_4-5534_9-2_11-10_12-10_13-181.html

[4] *(Vietnamese)* Export revenue of electronics sector in Vietnam: Situation and Solutions in 2021. Accessed in March 2022. https://vioit.org.vn/vn/chien-luoc-chinh-sach/xuat-khau-may-tinh--dien-tu-va-linh-kien--thuc-trang-va-giai-phap-4403.4050.html

billion, enhancing its production and export capacity.[5] This makes Vietnam's garment industry a fertile ground for research exploring labour and social issues.

Secondly, a growing number of fashion brands are shifting their production to Vietnam, a trend that has been accelerated by the economic complexities of the post-Covid context. his shift signifies Vietnam's growing importance as both a production hub and a potential consumer market, providing rich insights into the evolving dynamics of the global apparel industry.[6] As such, studying the country's supply chain can provide valuable insights into the current state and future direction of the industry.

Thirdly, Vietnam has been proactive in adopting sustainable supply chain practices. There is considerable research being conducted on supply chain management and sustainability within the Vietnamese fashion and retail sectors. This indicates that Vietnam is at the forefront of efforts to make the apparel industry more sustainable. Studying the country's supply chain can provide valuable insights into how sustainability is being integrated into the industry. The sustainable supply chain is an outlandish concept to many Vietnamese fashion enterprises (Nayak et al., 2019). A sustainable supply chain includes a broad set of topics. They range from environmental aspects such as green materials, and renewable energy to social issues at the workplace and societal matters in the local community. Fashion brands focus on sustainable products manufactured following ethical practices

[5] *(Vietnamese)* Extensive demands of FDI for Garment Industry Boost, 2022. Accessed in March 2022. https://baodautu.vn/det-may-co-nhu-cau-lon-ve-von-fdi-d172151.html#:~:text=H%C6%A1n%2031%20t%E1%BB%B7%20USD%20v%E1%BB%91n%20FDI&text=S%E1%BB%B1%20%C4%91%E1%BB%95%20b%E1%BB%99%20c%E1%BB%A7a%20c%C3%A1c,t%E1%BB%95ng%20gi%C3%A1%20tr%E1%BB%8B%20xu%E1%BA%A5t%20kh%E1%BA%A9u.

[6] Vietnam to Witness Rise of New International Brands in 2022. Accessed in March 2022. https://www.fashionatingworld.com/new1-2/vietnam-to-witness-rise-of-new-international-brands-in-2022

and fashion buyers emphasize green certifications such as SA8000 and ISO 14001 (Nayak et al., 2019).

Moreover, Vietnam's apparel sector has been the subject of extensive scrutiny regarding labour and social issues, with numerous studies and reports highlighting these concerns. A notable example is a study commissioned by the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS), which estimated the prevalence of forced labor in the industry. The political context, with a regime led by the Communist Party advocating for union monopoly, and the inherent institutional differences compared to other countries, also add complexity to the labour dynamics in the sector. Despite these challenges, the steady influx of garment orders underscores Vietnam's position as one of the leading apparel exporters.

Therefore, Vietnam's large and thriving apparel industry, its existing body of research on labour issues and social issues, and its particular political institutions all make it an excellent choice for researching labour issues and social issues in the apparel sector.

2.3. How was the data collected?

The empirical data for this study were collected through two rounds of fieldwork in Vietnam. Participants included a diverse range of stakeholders, such as manufacturing managers, CSR auditors, representatives from international brands, civil society members, researchers, and factory-level workers. The research, conducted in both Northern and Southern Vietnam, resulted in 55 qualitative interviews, 35 pages of field observations, and a substantial amount of secondary data.

The interview arrangements in Vietnam were leveraged through direct contact with NGOs connected to garment workers. On the other hand, local unionists served as intermediaries to reach senior managers at supplier firms. The study also benefited from the author's personal and professional relationships with various NGOs and multi-stakeholder initiatives in Vietnam, such as ILO, CNV, BetterWork Programme in Vietnam, and third parties, such as WRAP, ELEVATE, the Centre for Child Rights and CSR (CCR CSR), which provided deeper insights into the CSR landscape and the power dynamics between supply chain actors. Daily interpretations were meticulously documented in a diary, capturing observations on interactions between the interviewer and interviewees.

During the first round of fieldwork in August 2019, initial interview protocols aimed to explore participants' general understanding of labour violations and decoupling concerning social issues, as defined by Yawar and Seuring (2017), such as child labour, human rights, and minority development. This round was crucial for refining research questions, developing a theoretical framework, and creating a detailed methodological protocol for the second round. The interim analysis, consistent with qualitative research practices where data collection and analysis occur iteratively (Pratt, 2009), enabled adjustments to the research focus, centering on specific social sustainability policies aligned with the concept of decent work and the relevant theoretical frameworks.

Drawing on FES' (2016) classification of core labour standards critical for the decent work of garment workers, the research incorporated policies related to the ILO's fundamental labour standards (e.g., freedom of association and collective bargaining, child labour, forced labour, discrimination) and technical labour standards (e.g., occupational safety and health, living wage, and overtime). These

preliminary interpretations, along with detailed observations recorded during both fieldwork rounds, informed the subsequent analysis.

The second round of fieldwork, conducted from October to November 2019, involved in-depth semi-structured interviews to examine policy-practice decoupling at the factory level and (re)actions performed by workers individually and in collaboration with other supply chain actors. The insights from the second round of fieldwork were instrumental in understanding the intricacies of policy-practice decoupling and the informal strategies workers employ to navigate the often-precarious working conditions. This nuanced understanding is crucial for identifying the gaps between formal social sustainability policies and their implementation at the ground level, highlighting the need for a more integrated and context-sensitive approach to labour governance in global supply chains. The dissertation underscores the importance of considering the voices and lived experiences of workers, who are the most affected by these policies, to develop more effective and equitable labour standards that resonate with the realities on the ground.

Furthermore, the research demonstrates the value of employing an interpretivist approach to unpack the complexities of social issues in the supply chain. By focusing on the subjective experiences and meanings that stakeholders ascribe to their interactions and realities, the study provides a richer and more holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities for improving labour conditions in Vietnam's garment industry.

The 55 in-depth interviews are categorized into three groups: international buyers and tier-1 suppliers; workers and unions; and other supply chain actors (i.e. third

parties and NGOs). The following table presents the supply chain actors engaged in two rounds of fieldwork.

Table 7 – Interviews conducted through two grounds of fieldwork

	Organization	Category of interviewee	SC actors	Date	Place
1	A*	CSR officer	International buyer	30-Oct-19	HCMc
2	I*	CSR officer	International buyer	24-Oct-19	HCMc
3	P*	CSR officer	International buyer	09-Aug-19	Hanoi
4	L* F*	CSR officer	International vendor	30-Oct-19	HCMc
5	Tier-1 Supplier	Manager	Tier-1 Supplier - Manager	07-Aug-19	Nam Dinh
6	Tier-1 Supplier	Manager	Tier-1 Supplier - Manager	10-Aug-19	Hanoi
7	Tier-1 Supplier	Industrial Engineer	Tier-1 Supplier - Manager	12-Aug-19	Hanoi
8	Tier-1 Supplier	Manager	Tier-1 Supplier - Manager	14-Aug-19	Hanoi
9	Tier-1 Supplier	RD Officers	Tier-1 Supplier - Manager	15-Aug-19	Hanoi
10	Tier-1 Supplier	RD Officers	Tier-1 Supplier - Manager	15-Aug-19	Hanoi
11	Tier-1 Supplier	RD Officers	Tier-1 Supplier - Manager	15-Aug-19	Hanoi
12	Tier-1 Supplier	Operational manager	Tier-1 Supplier - Manager	22-Aug-19	Bac Giang
13	Tier-1 Supplier	HR Manager	Tier-1 Supplier - Manager	25-Oct-19	Binh Duong
14	Tier-1 Supplier	Executive Manager	Tier-1 Supplier - Manager	25-Oct-19	Binh Duong
15	Tier-1 Supplier	CSR Manager	Tier-1 Supplier - Manager	25-Oct-19	Binh Duong
16	Tier-1 Supplier	HR Manager	Tier-1 Supplier - Manager	19-Nov-19	Hai Phong
17	Tier-1 Supplier	HR Manager	Tier-1 Supplier - Manager	19-Nov-19	Hai Phong

18	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Headline	07-Aug-19	Nam Dinh
19	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Headline	11-Aug-19	Hanoi
20	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	QC	19-Aug-19	Hung Yen
21	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	25-Aug-19	Hai Phong
22	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	25-Aug-19	Hai Phong
23	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	25-Aug-19	Hai Phong
24	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	25-Aug-19	Hai Phong
25	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	25-Aug-19	Hai Phong
26	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	25-Aug-19	Hai Phong
27	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	25-Aug-19	Hai Phong
28	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	25-Aug-19	Hai Phong
29	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	25-Aug-19	Hai Phong
30	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	QC	25-Aug-19	Hai Phong
31	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Headline	20-Oct-19	HCMc
32	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	20-Oct-19	HCMc
33	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Headline	20-Oct-19	HCMc
34	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	20-Oct-19	HCMc
35	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	20-Oct-19	HCMc
36	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	20-Oct-19	HCMc
37	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	27-Oct-19	HCMc
38	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	27-Oct-19	HCMc
39	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Headline	27-Oct-19	HCMc
40	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	27-Oct-19	HCMc
41	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	28-Oct-19	HCMc
42	Tier-1 Supplier	Worker	Rank-and-file	28-Oct-19	HCMc
43	Union	Union	Union	11-Aug-19	Hanoi
44	Union	Union	Union	24-Oct-19	Dong Nai
45	Union	Researcher	Union	04-Nov-19	Hanoi
46	Union	Union	Union	19-Nov-19	Hai Phong
47	Union	Union	Union	06-Dec-19	Paris
48	BetterWork	CSR officer	Third Party	26-Oct-19	HCMc
49	Fair Labour Organization	CSR officer	Third Party	29-Oct-19	HCMc
50	WRAP	Auditor	Third Party	31-Oct-19	HCMc
51	Centre for Child Rights & CSR	CSR officer	Third Party	06-Nov-19	Hanoi

52	Elevate	Auditor	Third Party	18-Nov-19	Hanoi
53	Employment Relations Centre	Researcher	NGOs	03-Aug-19	Hanoi
54	SDRC	Researcher	NGOs	05-Nov-19	Hanoi
55	CDI	Auditor	NGOs	22-Nov-19	Hanoi

In line with the specific institutional environment and sectoral context, the purposive and snowball sampling techniques as outlined by Yawar & Seuring (2018) are deployed in this dissertation. Leveraging the author's expertise and deep understanding of Vietnam's garment industry, a purposive sampling method was used to select 15 first-tier suppliers in both northern and southern Vietnam.

Following these supplier interviews, several international buyers were identified. Utilizing a network of auditors and CSR officers, written requests for interviews were sent to the ten largest garment brands and vendors outsourcing to Vietnam. Of these, only three brands and one vendor agreed to participate, with all interviewees requesting anonymity for themselves and their associated firms. Once assured of confidentiality, these interviewees provided candid insights into both the improvements and persistent challenges related to social sustainability practices in Vietnam.

To capture authentic worker perspectives on decoupling beyond the organizational façade, the author relied on established relationships with Vietnamese NGOs to approach workers at their living quarters and NGO training centers outside of garment factory settings. Given the intricacies of the institutional context, as previously discussed, the decision to interview workers outside their workplaces was considered essential to alleviate managerial pressures and obtain more honest and open testimonies. This approach enabled a

comprehensive understanding of the workers' experiences and perspectives, contributing to a nuanced analysis of the decoupling phenomenon in Vietnam's garment industry.

2.4. The process of data analysis

The collected data serve as the foundation for developing two empirical studies. The second paper, focusing on factory-level workers as the unit of analysis, employs hermeneutic approach (Darby et al., 2019; Mees-Buss et al., 2022; Thornton et al., 2024) to analyze 40 interviews (with workers and non-traditional actors) and field observations. In contrast, the third paper analyzes a different set of 44 interviews (with supplier management triangulating with those of international buyers and workers) using various coding techniques, with supplier management serving as the unit of analysis.

The second paper, titled "Exit, Voice, Loyalty and Cynicism: Factory Workers' Response to CSR Decoupling in Garment Supply Chains," centres on decoupling as the core theoretical concept and examines workers' agency, building on Hirschman's model of Voice/Loyalty/Exit. This research adopts an interpretive hermeneutic approach, emphasizing that social reality is subjective and contextually constructed through ongoing interactions (Mees-Buss et al., 2022; Yanow D., 2015). Central to this method is the hermeneutic circle, which emphasizes understanding individual experiences in relation to their broader context (Prasad, 2017). Focusing on CSR decoupling in global supply chains, this study explores garment workers' varied responses within Vietnam, selected for its history of labor unrest. Informants, comprising diverse workers and stakeholders, were independently reached to ensure authentic and uninfluenced data (Darby et al., 2019; Huq & Stevenson, 2020).

This article is relied on 40 interviews from the fieldwork (25 with workers and 15 with experts), supplemented by secondary data and field observations. Ethical transparency and rapport-building were prioritized, ensuring comfortable and honest dialogues, while being sensitive to power dynamics (Martí & Mair, 2009). Concepts like "voice" and "freedom of association" were carefully clarified to avoid misinterpretation. The analytical process involved intra-textual and inter-textual analysis to identify common themes, resulting in categorizing worker responses according to Hirschman's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty framework and its extensions (Darby et al., 2019; Mees-Buss et al., 2022).

Through iterative analysis, responses such as silent exit, loyalty, cynicism, neglect, voice, and vocal exit emerged, shaped by themes like income necessity, endurance limits, local norms, labor market competitiveness, worker awareness, and collective identity. Patterns revealed nuanced insights into workers' behavior toward CSR decoupling, leading to an adapted analytical framework (EVLNC) to better capture the complexity of worker responses (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The process concluded with thematic saturation, ensuring the thoroughness and reliability of findings (Thornton et al., 2024).

The third paper, titled "Unpacking selective decoupling in global supply chains: a stakeholder salience perspective on social issues in Vietnam's garment factories" focuses on supplier management as the unit of analysis. It applies the stakeholder salience theoretical lens to analyze 44 interviews from fieldwork in Vietnam, revealing the factors that influence local supplier managers in selective decoupling. This study not only enhances our understanding of decoupling by local suppliers but also uncovers how workers influence their managers in shaping and reshaping decoupling practices.

The data were analyzed in three stages using the abductive approach, which facilitates generating new insights through a creative iterative process of theory matching. Initially, the empirical data were analyzed inductively, focusing on identifying social issues related to specific policies. In the subsequent stage, stakeholder attributes were analyzed deductively, as perceived by suppliers, using coding schemes that included "the stakeholder's power to influence the firm," "the legitimacy of the stakeholder's relationship with the firm," and "the urgency of the stakeholder's claim on the firm" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 854). Mitchell and colleagues' model (1997) was used to assess stakeholder salience levels (low, moderate, or high) based on the cumulative number of attributes. This was followed by identifying supplier decoupling practices and generating coding themes on various forms of selective decoupling. At this stage, interviews with buyers and workers were triangulated to identify convergence and divergence in selective decoupling practices (Vogl et al., 2019). The final stage involved cross-analysis, where different patterns of stakeholder salience emerged, influencing supplier coupling/decoupling practices.

3. Doing or not doing a Covert Research and Perception of interviewees about roles of the interviewer

“If you want to understand the real issues that workers face in the workplace, you need to be one of us, working on the production line. Only then will you see it clearly.” - Female sewer, employed at a Japan-FDI garment company in Ho Chi Minh City, October 2019.

The interview with this worker in her living quarters was a deeply insightful experience. With over ten years of experience in the garment industry, she grew from a rank-and-file worker and then became a headline worker and

demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of international labour standards compared to her junior colleague, who participated in a separate interview. Her experiences highlighted the discrepancies between these standards and their practical implementation, offering a critical perspective.

This contact was facilitated through a local NGO active in Ho Chi Minh City, which collaborates with garment factory workers to advocate for labour rights at the firm level. The worker's comments suggested the potential need for covert research, as workplace issues are not easily uncovered from managerial perspectives, and workers are often reluctant to speak openly without sufficient trust. Furthermore, she proposed that I apply for a low-skilled position, such as a probationary sewer, to gain direct insights into the workplace's social dynamics. This suggestion parallels research by Katie Quan, who worked incognito in a New York City Chinatown garment factory in 1982 to understand worker issues and organize a labour strike, an experience later chronicled in the article "Memories of the 1982 ILGWU Strike in New York Chinatown" (Quan, 2009), published in Amerasia Journal.

Quan's study, similar to my dissertation, underscores the sensitivity of labour issues, particularly regarding social sustainability. Throughout my research, openly disclosing my objectives frequently led to skepticism, particularly among private sector participants. This dynamic was notably evident in an interview with a worker who raised concerns about covert research practices during my fieldwork in Vietnam. Although limited disclosure can be methodologically justified under certain circumstances (Spicker, 2011), engaging in covert methods introduces ethical dilemmas due to their deceptive nature. While such approaches might uncover more candid accounts of workplace realities, they inherently risk compromising research integrity. Consequently, I decided against using covert

research methods, concluding that maintaining transparency and ethical rigour outweighed the potential benefits of obtaining unguarded insights. Ultimately, safeguarding the integrity of my research required a commitment to open and transparent methodologies to mitigate any risks related to research ethics.

Moreover, the perceptions of interviewees regarding the researcher's role emerged as a notable factor for the level of information sharing. All participants were informed that the interviews were part of a PhD dissertation. However, interviewees from the private sector and third parties, familiar with my previous role at the International Labour Organization (ILO), approached the interviews with more caution. In contrast, those who saw me purely as a doctoral student were more forthcoming in discussing workplace practices. This variation in responses highlights how the perceived identity of the researcher can influence participants' willingness to disclose sensitive information. In Vietnam, the ILO is often perceived as antagonistic toward the private sector, while a doctoral student may be seen as a less threatening figure, more aligned with academic inquiry than with institutional oversight.

Similarly, my interactions with workers were shaped by their introduction to me via 'gatekeepers.' In my initial fieldwork in Hai Phong, a small group of workers (5) was contacted through a grassroots trade unionist. However, trade unionists in Vietnam frequently hold management positions, which affected the authenticity of the workers' responses. I later shifted my approach, engaging with workers through NGOs in both Northern and Southern Vietnam via the Vietnam Labour Research Network. These introductions fostered greater openness among workers, allowing for more candid conversations and even recommendations for further investigation, such as the one mentioned above.

PART II

Bridging from Part 1, which established the theoretical foundations, conceptual frameworks, and methodological approaches, Part 2 presents three empirical articles that operationalize these insights. Each article investigates distinct but interlinked facets of decoupling in global supply chains. Specifically, they progressively explore the phenomenon from broader multi-tier structural dynamics, through worker-level consequences on factory floors, to managerial strategies employed by local suppliers in response to conflicting stakeholder pressures. This sequence offers a comprehensive, empirically grounded understanding of how theoretical decoupling mechanisms manifest concretely within supply chains, thereby enriching our grasp of social sustainability as experienced and enacted by multiple actors.

CHAPTER 4 - Paper 1 - Conceptualization of Multi-Level Decoupling: An Exploration of Social Issues in Supply Chains

1. Abstract

This study conceptualizes the social issues that arise from multi-level decoupling across multi-tier supply chains. It frames decoupling as a managerial practice used across organizational boundaries to respond to external stakeholder expectations. While previous research has examined decoupling in relation to social issues, it has typically focused on the internal structures of individual organizations. In contrast, this study draws on literature from both multi-tier supply chains and decoupling to explore the dynamics of power and legitimacy among diverse actors across different supply chain tiers. Adopting a stakeholder perspective, we investigate the interactions between managerial and non-managerial stakeholders in the context of socially unsustainable outcomes caused by multi-level decoupling. Our key research questions focus on identifying the mechanisms of decoupling used by managerial actors and understanding how non-managerial stakeholders respond to social unsustainability. By conceptualizing decoupling as a dynamic process rather than a static condition, we show how resistance by local actors to social issues can generate institutional pressures that travel across the supply chain—ultimately challenging or reshaping the formal structures imposed by lead firms.

Keywords: social issues, supply chains, multi-level decoupling, boundary and practice work, conceptual paper

2. Introduction

The literature on Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM) has increasingly shifted its focus towards addressing social issues, particularly in multi-tier supply chains (Bartley & Egels-Zandén, 2016; Jamali et al., 2015; Jamali & Carroll, 2017; Yawar & Seuring, 2017, 2018). This research trend reflects an effort to integrate sustainability comprehensively across supply chain networks, considering social dimensions alongside traditional environmental and economic concerns. A significant characteristic of SSCM scholarship remains its predominantly buyer-centric framework, which positions lead firms as central actors driving the diffusion of sustainability practices throughout supply chain tiers, including Tier-1 and Tier-n suppliers (Govindan et al., 2021; Hannibal & Kauppi, 2019; Jabbour et al., 2019; Sauer & Seuring, 2018). Despite these contributions, the complexity of translating upstream social issues, such as labour rights violations, into effective institutional pressures further downstream remains underexplored (Reinecke et al., 2018; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021).

This paper addresses this gap by employing the concept of decoupling (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017; Jamali et al., 2017a; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) to explain how social issues persist and transform across the various tiers of supply chains. Decoupling, in this context, refers to the disconnection between formal sustainability commitments made by firms and their actual practices at different operational levels. Previous research has largely focused on decoupling within the boundaries of individual organizations, such as lead firms (Pitcher et al., 2000; Sauerwald & Su, 2019; Tashman et al., 2019; Westphal & Zajac, 1995) and direct suppliers (Bartley & Egels-Zandén, 2016; Huq et al., 2014, 2016). However, studies that explore the dynamics of decoupling within multi-tier supply chains—where

suppliers are nested across different hierarchical levels—are limited. Sauer and Seuring (2017) argue that multi-tier supply chains consist of distinct firm-bounded spaces, such as lead firms, tier-1 suppliers, and tier-n suppliers, each operating under varied institutional constraints. Furthermore, Reinecke et al. (2018) highlight that these geographically dispersed manufacturing networks are shaped by localized institutional environments, which limit the ability of stakeholders to act cohesively across tiers (Crane et al., 2007; Soundararajan et al., 2018, 2019, 2021)

This research conceptualizes decoupling as an ongoing process rather than a static phenomenon (Bromley & Powell, 2012). It also posits that decoupling is often a strategic, albeit ubiquitous, managerial response used to navigate complex stakeholder expectations (Pope & Wæraas, 2016). The paper investigates how different forms of decoupling emerge across supply chain tiers and examines the role of stakeholder interactions—particularly at the lower tiers—in exposing and addressing these disconnects. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for analyzing how social issues are transmitted and transformed along the supply chain.

Using a conceptual research design, the study integrates existing theoretical frameworks to further develop the notion of multi-level decoupling (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). It adopts the methodological framework of Jaakkola (2020), identifying social issues within the theoretical domain of SSCM while employing institutional theory as a primary analytical lens (Matthews et al., 2016; Touboulic & Walker, 2015). The research proposes a conceptual framework incorporating insights from both institutional decoupling literature (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Wijen, 2014) and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997; Parmar et al., 2010). This framework aims to elucidate the role of local

stakeholders—such as workers—in either maintaining or disrupting multi-level decoupling practices within low-tier supply chains.

Building on Sauer and Seuring's (2018) multi-tier supply chain model, the study develops an an exploratory framework to understand the interaction between peripheral stakeholders. On one hand, these stakeholders work to dismantle localized decoupling practices; on the other hand, they attempt to transcend the constraints of lower-tier supply chains by exerting institutional pressures upward, exposing previously concealed decoupling at higher supply chain levels. This conceptualization explores how local actors' resistance to social issues can flow upstream and downstream, supported by other stakeholders with brokering agency (Soundararajan et al., 2017).

The primary contribution of this research lies in advancing the understanding of social sustainability within multi-tier supply chains. It develops a theoretical linkage between social issues evident at various supply chain levels and the phenomenon of decoupling, highlighting specifically how stakeholder interactions shape decoupling practices. Such an analytical perspective is essential not only for effectively addressing adverse social impacts that occur within global supply chains but also for maintaining organizational legitimacy among stakeholders and the wider public.

This research provides managerial implications by encouraging firms to develop deeper, more meaningful stakeholder engagements across supply chain tiers. It advocates for moving beyond superficial compliance mechanisms toward fostering collaborative practices that promote genuine social sustainability. In doing so, this paper lays the groundwork for future empirical studies that can

further explore the dynamics of stakeholder agency and decoupling within diverse industrial contexts.

3. Theoretical frameworks

Social issues in the supply chain derive from various causes, including the failure of the firms in complying to legal requirements of the countries where they operate (Oka, 2010; Sandholtz, 2012; Wijen, 2014) and the institutional distances between developed countries where lead firms are active and the developing countries where the suppliers situate (Busse et al., 2016; Kelling et al., 2020; Omar et al., 2022). This research focuses on the social issues that emerge due to firms' departure from and even violation of what they have been pledged to do. In other words, we draw on the concept of decoupling, as introduced by Meyer and Rowan (1977), to examine how firms—including lead firms and suppliers across various supply chain tiers—strategically buffer formal sustainability structures from actual practices, resulting in social issues that negatively impact workers. The concept of decoupling has been widely used in the CSR field (Athanasopoulou et al., 2024; Chang et al., 2017; Crane et al., 2007; Holtbrügge & Conrad, 2020; Jamali et al., 2017b; Kassem R et al., 2022; Sauerwald & Su, 2019; Sendlhofer, 2020) from various theoretical strands, such as world society theory (Lim & Tsutsui, 2011); political economy tradition (Banerjee, 2002) etc. SSCM research considers decoupling as a fraudulent behaviour threatening social sustainability in the supply chains (Gull et al., 2023; Huq et al., 2014; Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Khan & Kamal, 2021; Schüßler et al., 2019; Soundararajan et al., 2021; Talpur et al., 2023; Wilhelm et al., 2016).

3.1. Decoupling and its various forms

This research revisits a substantial body of literature examining institutional decoupling, especially building on Meyer and Rowan's seminal 1977 essay, which marked both a continuation and a breakthrough in neo-institutional theory. Meyer and Rowan highlighted the persistent discrepancies between formal organizational structures and their actual daily operations, framing managerial behaviors that sustain these inconsistencies as forms of decoupling. Decoupling thus serves as a "rational response" (Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2017), allowing organizations to symbolically conform to external institutional myths—expectations that prescribe particular behaviors—while, in practice, maintaining established routines and preserving their business-as-usual activities.

Boxenbaum and Jonsson (2017) reviewed a large amount of both theoretical and empirical studies about major concepts in organizational studies, i.e., isomorphism, diffusion and decoupling. The authors point out the empirical confirmation about the existence of decoupling between organizational structures and actions with a bundle of empirical research ranging from the early work of Abraham and Erlanger (1992), Brunsson and Olsen (1993) to more recent studies (close to the moment of writing the article) such as Turco (2012) and Crilly, Zollo and Hansen (2012).

Indeed, the maturation of decoupling-related research has reinstated its ubiquity as a common organizational practice (Pope & Waeraas, 2016). Some scholars have associated decoupling with greenwashing (Siano et al., 2017), organizational hypocrisy, organization façade (Cho et al., 2015), and window-dressing (McLean, 2003). Rapid globalization has led to the evolution of supply chains where the production sites can be geographically and institutionally distant from the market

or from the location where lead firms are located. Decoupling has been identified as a source of organizational misconduct at various levels of supply chains.

Decoupling has been categorized into policy-practice decoupling and means-ends decoupling. The first distinction was proposed by Bromley and Powell (2012) differentiating these two types of decoupling. While policy-practice and means-ends decoupling ultimately result in the same outcomes - unintended consequences (Selznick, 1949, Bromley and Powell, 2012), the configuration of these two types of decoupling are radically different. he conventional argument among constitutionalist scholars studying policy-practice decoupling focuses on adopters who fail to implement formal structures, rather than recognizing that efforts may be made to implement agreed-upon policies, even if the intended outcomes are not achieved. Research on policy-practice gaps seeks to unpack why and how managers either fail to implement or deliberately avoid implementing formal rules.

Means-ends decoupling, as conceptualized by Bromley and Powell (2012), arises when policies are formally implemented but lack robust operational instruments, limiting their effectiveness. These authors further argue that in a globalized context, means-ends decoupling is more likely to occur than policy-practice decoupling. Firms often genuinely adopt formal structures in response to stakeholder expectations. Nevertheless, the processes of evaluation, standardization, and benchmarking frequently intensify means-ends decoupling. The literature suggests alternative explanations, with some scholars attributing decoupling to either insufficient willingness (Cole, 2012) or inadequate capacity (Tsutsui, 2012). Such perspectives underscore that even sincere efforts to align policy and practice may fail to deliver expected outcomes. Wijen (2014) emphasizes

that means-ends decoupling is especially prevalent within opaque institutional fields, where ambiguity and complexity significantly hinder accountability.

3.2. Social issues in mutli-tier SSCM

The definitions offered by Carter and Rogers (2008) and Seuring and Müller (2008) highlight three key elements of sustainable supply chain management (SSCM): (i) inter-organizational management of capital, materials, and information within the supply chain; (ii) integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development—the triple bottom line of profit, people, and planet; and (iii) firms' responsiveness and adaptation to the requirements of customers and stakeholders.

SSCM research initially focused heavily on environmental sustainability, reflecting early efforts to address environmental concerns in supply chains (Gimenez & Tachizawa, 2012; Martins & Pato, 2019). In contrast, progress on the social dimension has been considerably slower, due to several challenges. Social issues are often perceived as secondary to environmental or economic concerns, as their impacts tend to be less direct or quantifiable. Moreover, the complexity of assessing social sustainability makes it more difficult to incorporate into monitoring systems, especially when compared to environmental metrics, which are more readily measurable (Klassen & Vereecke, 2012; Soundararajan et al., 2021).The fragmented nature of global supply chains and the absence of a clear consensus on what constitutes social sustainability have also slowed theoretical development in this area (Ahi & Searcy, 2015).

Despite these challenges, SSCM literature provides a wide set of studies on social issues in various levels in supply chain (Hannibal et al., 2019; Jabbour et al., 2019; Sauer and Seuring, 2018; Yawar and Seuring, 2017, 2018; among others), particularly

in response to industrial-level disruptions in the Global South (Huq et al., 2014). These events have heightened awareness of labour exploitation and other unsustainable practices in supply chains (Mani et al., 2016). However, a clear, universally accepted definition of social sustainability is still lacking, complicating efforts to apply it consistently across different contexts (Govindan et al., 2021). Nakamba et al. (2017) reviewed 109 articles and found only five definitions of social sustainability, which they categorized into two perspectives: one focused on firm capabilities that affect workers, and the other on broader engagement within the supply chain and with surrounding communities.

Research on social sustainability covers a wide range of topics, including labour conditions, human rights, and community engagement (Yawar & Seuring, 2017). Studies explore labour issues such as fair wages, working conditions, and the prevention of modern slavery (Leire & Mont, 2009; Jamali et al., 2017), along with the promotion of human rights (Benstead et al., 2018). In addition to ensuring ethical treatment of workers, companies are expected to contribute positively to local communities, recognizing that supply chains significantly impact these communities beyond economic transactions.

Recent SSCM research has advocated a shift toward "humanizing" supply chains by emphasizing decent work and expanding the range of actors considered in sustainability efforts (Soundararajan et al., 2021; Touboulic et al., 2020). This approach seeks to move beyond a buyer-centric model and acknowledges the role of marginalized stakeholders, particularly workers, in shaping sustainability practices. By incorporating these voices, SSCM can better address social issues within the supply chain, promoting more inclusive and comprehensive sustainability practices that align with the social pillar of sustainability.

3.3. Stakeholder perspectives in SSCM

SSCM research highlights the significant role of traditional actors, such as manufacturers, suppliers, and distributors, in ensuring sustainability by adopting eco-friendly processes, promoting ethical labor practices, and managing resources efficiently. These actors are essential for embedding sustainable practices throughout global supply chains despite facing barriers and requiring managerial interventions to overcome challenges (Koberg & Longoni, 2018). However, recent literature emphasizes that these traditional actors alone cannot address all sustainability challenges, necessitating the involvement of other key stakeholders.

Non-traditional actors, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community groups, and consumers, have increasingly become integral to SSCM. These stakeholders serve multiple roles, such as watchdogs, collaborators, and innovators, actively influencing sustainable practices through advocacy, policy engagement, and activism (Carmagnac, 2021; Datta & Shields, 2014). By raising awareness and driving corporate accountability, these non-traditional actors help shape sustainability goals and practices beyond mere compliance, complementing the efforts of traditional actors.

The interaction between traditional and non-traditional stakeholders is crucial for fostering collaboration in SSCM, promoting new governance models that address complex sustainability issues through collective efforts. Such partnerships ensure that sustainability efforts go beyond organizational boundaries, creating shared responsibility for tackling environmental and social challenges (Carmagnac, 2021; Davis, 2011). To bridge this gap, stakeholder theory therefore has been adopted to explore this aspect in SSCM (Beske & Seuring, 2014; Crilly et al., 2016; Damert et al., 2021; Meixell & Luoma, 2015; Panigrahi & Rao, 2018). Siems and colleagues (2022)

conducted a systematic literature review of 78 peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2020. They aimed to explore the roles of different stakeholders, such as governmental and non-governmental organizations, suppliers, customers, and focal companies, in driving, facilitating, or inspecting SSCM implementation.

Table 8 – Stakeholder Categorization in SSCM (Siems et al., 2023; Svensson et al., 2016)

Supply chain stakeholder		Literatures
Upstream stakeholders	*Raw material producers, tier-1 suppliers, and lower-tier suppliers*	Busse et al., 2016; Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Jamali et al., 2019
Focal firms	*Multi-National Enterprises or International buyers, including top-management, mid-management, and their employees*	Rathert, 2016; Sauerwald & Su, 2019; Tashman et al., 2019; Westphal & Zajac, 1995
Downstream stakeholders	*Retailers, wholesalers, and logisitics intermediaries*	Chkanikova, 2016; Nayak et al., 2019
Market stakeholders	*Unions, competitors, consumers and financial intermediaries*	Egels-Zandén & Merk, 2014; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2015
Societal stakeholders	*NGOs, governments, and research entities*	Roscoe et al., 2020; Silva and Schaltegger, 2019

Nevertheless, SSCM literature has predominantly explored strategic and operational perspectives, often neglecting the critical role of workers in shaping sustainability outcomes. Very few SSCM scholars investigate how factory-level workers – upstream-SC-stakeholders – reacts toward social issues. Although workers play a vital role in ensuring fair labour conditions, safety, and equitable wages, they are often treated as passive recipients rather than active participants in sustainability discussions (Soundararajan et al., 2021). For example, factory-level workers at the suppliers are directly influenced by the social issues, however, their roles and agency remain largely underexplored (Kirchoff et al., 2016; Schmidt et al.,2017). Workers, especially those on production lines, remain marginalised in supply chain governance (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021). Gold and Schleper (2017) describe them as "invisible, disrespected, or forgotten," and Carter et al. (2020) highlight that less than 5% of SSCM studies centre on workers (Kuruvilla & Li, 2021).

Unlike traditional notions of employee voice, worker voice in SSCM captures the perspectives and agency of workers in supplier firms—who are often indirectly impacted by the sourcing decisions of lead firms (Van Buren & Schrempf-Stirling, 2022; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021). Kuruvilla and Li (2021) identify worker voice as a key research priority for advancing social sustainability. It holds both ethical and operational significance in global supply chains, helping to address power imbalances and uphold workers' dignity. Emerging approaches, such as technology-enabled tools and worker-driven governance models, present promising avenues for strengthening worker voice (Taylor & Shih, 2019; Kuruvilla & Li, 2021). Yet, worker voices are often not heard, since this stakeholder group has traditionally been viewed as peripheral, with limited agency to influence the formation, adoption, and implementation of supply chain management strategies—including those related to sustainability. Moreover, the process by

which worker voices emerging upstream translate into institutional pressures downstream remains underexplored (Reinecke et al., 2018, 2021). These gaps have led to growing calls to humanize SSCM—not only by focusing on social issues aligned with the concept of decent work (Soundararajan et al., 2021), but also by broadening the range of actors considered in sustainability efforts, including those traditionally viewed as peripheral (Touboulic et al., 2020). This includes advancing the idea of worker-driven supply chain governance as a means to rebalance power and foster more inclusive decision-making (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021).

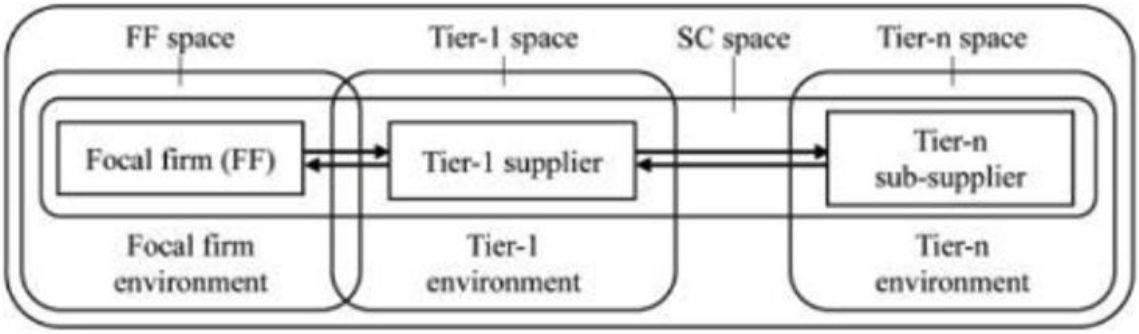
This approach seeks to move beyond a buyer-centric model and acknowledges the role of marginalized stakeholders, particularly workers, in shaping sustainability practices. By incorporating these voices, SSCM can better address social issues within the supply chain, promoting more inclusive and comprehensive sustainability practices that align with the social pillar of sustainability.

4. Conceptualization of multiple-level decoupling in multi-tier supply chains

This paper aims to connect the decoupling literature and the stakeholder theory in multi-tier supply chains. It's grounded on the multi-tier structure of focal firms (FF), the tier-1 supplier (T1) and the Tier-n supplier (SS) (Chand & Tarei, 2021; Gong et al., 2021; Mena et al., 2013; Sauer & Seuring, 2018). Sauer and Seuring (2018) conceptualized multi-tier supply chains as institutional fields, defined as compositions of multiple relational spaces: (1) the "supply chain space," encompassing firms involved in flows of materials, capital, and information; and (2) distinct "firm spaces," each including an individual firm and its immediate environment. The number of firm spaces corresponds to the number of supply chain tiers, with possible overlaps influenced by geographical or cultural proximity. Each relational space emerges through interactions among its participants,

exerting distinct institutional pressures within that space. Consequently, institutional pressures from different spaces overlap at specific actors. Actors unfamiliar with each other neither share relational spaces nor directly exert mutual pressures. Therefore, relational spaces are crucial for mediating institutional pressures, reducing supply chain uncertainty, constraining the influence of focal firms, and creating competing demands on sub-suppliers.

Figure 3 – Supply chain organizational field and supply chain actors



Source: Sauer and Seuring (2018)

In this paper, we introduce the concept of multi-level decoupling as *various managerial practices enacted across different tiers of the supply chain in response to institutional pressures from specific stakeholders operating within their respective institutional environments related to the supply chain space*. Multi-level decoupling can occur at any tier of the supply chain—including focal firms, tier-1 suppliers, and tier-n suppliers. The managerial actors involved in these practices are conceptualized as 'decouplers' (Westphal & Zajac, 2001). Table 9 presents the identified decoupling dynamics alongside the corresponding stakeholder pressures examined in SSCM research.

Table 9 – SC managerial actors and decoupling dynamisms

SC managerial actors	Active spaces Feature of SC space	Identified sources of institutional pressures to adopt and implement the Social Sustainability policy				Decoupling dynamics between SC managerial actors
		Upstream stakeholders	Focal Firms	Market stakeholders	Societal stakeholders	
Focal firm	Focal Firm Environment: Highly institutionalization (ref), isomorphism among organizations in the same field (ref)	-	Within the firm: Employees; Shareholders	Consumers; Competitors	NGOs and government	Top-management CSR decoupling overstate their CSR/sustainability performance in their information disclosure (Ahlstrom, 2010), in CEO's overconfident CSR pitch (Sauerwarld et al., 2019), and in sustainability reports (Marquis and Qian, 2015; Luo et al., 2016; Holtbrugge et al., 2020)
Tier-1 Supplier	Tier-1 Environment: Lower visibility (ref) and institutional distance (Hoffman, et al., 2018; Jamali et al., 2017)	-	Buyer's code of conduct, and third-party audit requirements	Competitors	NGOs and governmental inspectors	Focal Firms' tolerance toward Tier-1 suppliers' violations (Huq et al., 2014; Huq and Stevensson, 2018);
Tier-n Supplier	Tier-n Environment: High-opacity (Wijen, 2014; Wilhem et al., 2016); increasing institutional distance (Kim & Davis, 2016); "dark side"of mult-tier supply chains (Huq	Tier-1 supplier	Invisible to focal firms	Unions	Out of government's inspection scope Under limited NGOs' watch	Oral compliance betwee Focal firms and suppliers with little-to-no monitoring (Nath et al., 2018); Mock compliance (Huq & Stevensson, 2018)

	and Stenvensson, 2018)					

The insights derived from Table 9 illustrate that decoupling dynamics are significantly shaped by distinct stakeholder pressures within different managerial tiers of supply chains. Each actor—from focal firms through tier-1 suppliers to the less visible tier-n suppliers—responds strategically to institutional pressures, often resulting in symbolic compliance rather than substantive implementation. Recognizing this multi-tier interplay, we advance the understanding of decoupling not merely as isolated managerial decisions, but as complex, institutionally embedded actions responding to varied environmental influences. This perspective highlights the critical need for nuanced frameworks to analyze multi-level decoupling practices and their broader implications for supply chain sustainability.

Proposition 1. Managerial decoupling practices are shaped by the specific pressures exerted by stakeholders within their active environment.

The reflection of such supply chain environments is relevant to understanding the decoupling phenomenon at distinct tiers in the supply chains. There is academic evidence about multiple decouplers in multi-tier supply chains (Pope &Waeras, 2016; Jamali et al., 2017). Decoupling can be created by different “decouplers” such as focal firms, Tier-1 supplier and Tier-n suppliers (Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Rahim & Vicario, 2015; Westphal & Zajac, 2001).

Focal firms operate under the constant scrutiny of diverse stakeholders, including governments from home and host countries, international organizations, civil society groups, and end consumers (Reinecke et al., 2017). In response to these pressures, focal firms establish formal sustainability policies within highly

developed institutional environments (Sauer & Seuring, 2018). However, research shows that these firms often engage in managerial decoupling, where the communicated performance on sustainability exceeds actual practices. This behavior has been observed in overstated CSR disclosures (Ählström, 2010), in CEO's overconfident CSR pitch (Sauerwald & Su, 2019), and in sustainability reporting (Holtbrügge & Conrad, 2020; Marquis & Qian, 2014; Xue et al., 2018).

Managerial decoupling also occurs within supply chains, where suppliers superficially comply with focal firm requirements while maintaining non-compliant practices to manage conflicting stakeholder expectations. The extent of decoupling increases with institutional distance—the differences in cognitive, normative, and regulatory structures between focal firms and suppliers. Suppliers in such contexts struggle to reconcile the sustainability demands of focal firms with the local institutional norms they operate under (Kostova et al., 2020). These conflicting pressures make decoupling a persistent challenge in global supply chain management.

The relationship between focal firms and Tier 1 suppliers exemplifies this tension. For example, firms may negotiate compromises on compliance issues, such as excessive working hours (Huq et al., 2014; Huq & Stevenson, 2018). However, decoupling dynamics differ between Tier 1 suppliers and Tier-n suppliers to meet sustainability expectations, Tier 1 suppliers in developing countries may transfer production to lower-tier suppliers during peak periods, concealing non-compliance. Additionally, they resist compliance by challenging buyers, auditors, and third-party actors (Jamali et al., 2017; Huq et al., 2014). Studies reveal these practices across industries—selective decoupling in India's Jalandhar stitching ball cluster (Jamali et al., 2017), decoupling in Vietnam's garment factories (Le, 2022);

decoupling and contingent coupling in Indonesian apparel/footwear suppliers (Bartley & Egels-Zandén, 2016); garment suppliers decoupling factors in Bangladesh (Huq et al., 2020), among others.

Governance challenges intensify at lower supply chain levels, as highlighted by Soundararajan et al. (2019). At the Tier 2 level, the collapse of governance mechanisms allows practices such as double documentation to conceal violations. As monitoring efforts among lower-tier suppliers are often superficial or irregular, non-compliance remains hidden (Wilhelm et al., 2016). This lack of transparency contributes to the "dark side" of multi-tier supply chains, where institutional actors struggle to enforce sustainable practices (Nath et al., 2020, 2021; Nath & Eweje, 2021b; Tachizawa & Wong, 2014). Wilhelm et al. (2016) emphasize the need to understand how suppliers across multiple tiers respond to sustainability demands within complex institutional environments. Furthermore, scholars such as Sayed and colleagues (2017) and Huq and Stevenson (2018) call for more research into how lower-tier suppliers engage in decoupling, particularly in environments marked by institutional challenges. Exploring these dynamics further could shed light on the barriers to sustainable practice implementation at different levels of the supply chain.

Proposition 1a. Selective decoupling is a targeted managerial response shaped by the relevance of specific issues to stakeholders, where the prioritization of actions aligns with the concerns deemed most salient by these stakeholders.

Selective decoupling within supply chains reflects the strategic response of firms to varied stakeholder demands, where firms selectively comply with or ignore certain requirements to align with their priorities or stakeholder salience. Multiple studies highlight that certain social sustainability areas, like child labour or building

safety, are treated with high visibility due to intense stakeholder scrutiny, while other areas, such as freedom of association or collective bargaining, receive limited attention (Sauder & Espeland, 2009). Jamali and colleagues (2017) demonstrate this selective coupling, showing that Indian suppliers adhere strictly to child labour policies while loosening compliance with other labour standards that are less visible or pressing to international stakeholders.

Kuruvilla et al. (2020) offer further insights by revealing how opacity in supply chains enables firms to decouple policy from practice, creating gaps between formal sustainability commitments and actual outcomes. Stakeholders with greater leverage—such as international buyers or global watchdogs—tend to focus on "legitimacy-sensitive" areas like forced labour or child labour, pushing firms to comply visibly in these areas. Meanwhile, "enabling rights," such as freedom of association, which are often less scrutinized, remain decoupled in practice, as suppliers shift focus to meet immediate stakeholder demands (Barley & Egels-Zanden, 2015; Le, 2022).

This issue-driven nature of decoupling highlights how firms manage stakeholder pressure by prioritizing compliance where it enhances legitimacy while ignoring areas that are less salient to powerful stakeholders. Selective decoupling becomes a strategic response to complex institutional pressures, enabling firms to maintain relationships with external stakeholders while continuing business-as-usual operations in areas of less concern. This balancing act reflects the dynamic interaction between stakeholder expectations and the firm’s operational realities, where compliance is fragmented across different domains to cater to specific stakeholder groups.

Consequently, the phenomenon of selective decoupling reveals the need for more nuanced governance frameworks to manage stakeholder interests. Addressing these gaps requires transparency and a shift towards ensuring that compliance efforts cover all critical areas uniformly, not just those visible to dominant stakeholders. As Kuruvilla et al. (2020) argue, recognizing the disparities in compliance across various sustainability dimensions is essential for improving social sustainability outcomes across global supply chains. Without this shift, selective decoupling will continue to shape sustainability practices, prioritizing only the issues that are most salient to stakeholders with the greatest influence.

Proposition 1b. Decoupling is a dynamic and evolving process, rather than a fixed or static state, reflecting continuous adjustments in response to shifting contexts and conditions.

Interestingly, decoupling does not simply reflect black-and-white situations of compliance or non-compliance but rather constitutes a dynamic process that evolves over time. The literature on decoupling illustrates a diverse range of practices that shift between various levels of adherence and divergence from formal policies. Bromley, Huang, and Powell (2012) highlight that decoupling is not a fixed state but an ongoing process influenced by internal and external factors (Fiss and Zajac, 2006). It can manifest across a spectrum, ranging from tight coupling—where actions align closely with policies—to loose coupling, selective decoupling, and complete decoupling. This fluidity reflects how organizations adapt to changing institutional pressures and operational realities.

Moreover, organizations may deliberately disconnect their formal structures from operational practices to manage external demands without disrupting internal routines. Selective decoupling allows firms to align with some regulatory or social

expectations while neglecting others, especially when conflicting stakeholder pressures emerge. Over time, as conditions change, these decoupling practices may shift toward recoupling, where policies and practices become re-integrated. This re-integration helps organizations realign their operational practices with formal commitments, ensuring sustainability efforts appear consistent to external stakeholders (Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005).

The dynamic nature of decoupling also suggests that organizations are not static entities but are engaged in continuous negotiation with institutional pressures. For example, firms operating in multi-tier supply chains may temporarily decouple sustainability policies to navigate economic pressures or production demands. However, these firms may later engage in recoupling efforts to restore alignment with external expectations once operational challenges are addressed.

In essence, decoupling reflects a nuanced and evolving strategy that organizations employ to balance external pressures with internal capabilities. The ability to move between decoupling and recoupling demonstrates how organizations navigate competing demands, manage risks, and maintain legitimacy in ever-changing environments. This perspective positions decoupling not as an endpoint but as part of an adaptive cycle that shapes organizational responses to sustainability challenges and stakeholder expectations.

Proposition 2 – Factory-level workers' voices, when activated within Tier-1 or Tier-n supplier contexts, disrupt ongoing decoupling practices and trigger recoupling efforts to restore alignment.

Within the relational environment of suppliers, workers' silence contributes to the continuity of decoupling practices, while active expression of workplace concerns disrupts these dynamics, necessitating managerial interventions to restore alignment through recoupling. The worker's voice, however, seldom extends beyond the immediate supplier environment, as suppliers strategically manage internal dissent to avoid external scrutiny and maintain operational decoupling from focal firms or buyers (Hensel & Guérard, 2020). This selective engagement creates a tension where workers' collective actions are confined within Tier-1 and Tier-n environments, making it challenging for external stakeholders to detect violations or gaps in social sustainability compliance.

When workers disrupt the decoupling through strikes or other forms of protest, suppliers are often compelled to address their grievances promptly to avoid exposure that could lead to reputational damage or financial penalties. The threat of public exposure or audits forces suppliers to align their practices with social sustainability standards, either temporarily or permanently, through recoupling mechanisms. For instance, the micro-strikes initiated by female garment workers exemplify the influence of local-level protests in enforcing compliance through recoupling efforts (Hoang & Jones, 2012).

In some cases, recoupling is driven by external institutional pressures, such as government regulations or the influence of international labour standards. Suppliers operating in complex institutional contexts, such as Vietnam or Bangladesh, often face conflicting demands from local norms and international buyer expectations, resulting in ongoing cycles of decoupling and recoupling (Egels-Zandén, 2007). This process is further complicated by institutional distance—divergent cognitive, normative, and regulatory frameworks between

global buyers and local suppliers—forcing suppliers to selectively couple and decouple their practices to meet stakeholder expectations across different environments (Kuruvilla et al., 2020).

Proposition 3 – Worker voice expressed beyond supplier boundaries destabilizes decoupling and exposes hidden inconsistencies.

Worker agency has evolved to encompass individual and collective forms of resistance extending beyond immediate workplace settings. Labour governance research emphasizes that workers increasingly utilize external channels to pressure suppliers, thereby drawing attention to decoupling practices that undermine working conditions (Anner, 2015; Anner & Liu, 2016). Such externalization of worker voice challenges internal strategies aimed at maintaining decoupling. Specifically, when workers initiate wildcat strikes or collaborate with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and media outlets, they reveal discrepancies between formal sustainability policies and actual practices, subjecting suppliers to external scrutiny (Chan & Norlund, 1998).

A key example is the rise of wildcat strikes, particularly in contexts like Vietnam, where labour activism is tightly controlled but still manages to surface through spontaneous collective action (Chi & Broek, 2013). These actions highlight how worker voice extends beyond direct employment relations, forcing public attention on exploitative practices that might otherwise remain hidden within supplier networks. For instance, Quynh Chi (2017) documented how factory-level protests not only challenged wage conditions but also revealed the disconnection between codes of conduct and actual labour practices, further destabilizing the suppliers' carefully maintained decoupling.

This exposure poses significant risks to suppliers as it invites intervention from external stakeholders, including unions, media, and regulators. As public attention grows, suppliers must either terminate their decoupling practices or engage in recoupling efforts to restore legitimacy by aligning their actions with sustainability policies. Decoupling, once disrupted by worker agency, reveals the structural vulnerabilities of global supply chains and amplifies calls for enhanced labour governance frameworks (Kluge & Schömann, 2008). Thus, workplace voice, when it transcends internal supplier environments, serves as both a disruptive force and a catalyst for local institutional change in the environments where Tier-1 and Tier-n suppliers are active.

Proposition 4 – Transnational voice magnifies the consequences of decoupling, compelling upper-tier actors to respond through stricter implementation or enhanced monitoring.

The transnational amplification of workers' voice across multiple tiers of the supply chain has proven effective in addressing labor governance failures and reversing decoupling practices. Through collaborative efforts and institutional pressures, workers' voices reach beyond local boundaries, triggering compliance and recoupling processes. Transnational advocacy, such as unions and NGOs operating across borders, intensifies the scrutiny on decoupled practices by focal firms and suppliers, forcing upper-tier stakeholders to ensure stricter enforcement mechanisms (Pike, 2020; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021).

Moving beyond the Tier-1 and Tier-n suppliers' environments, workers' voices exert institutional pressure on higher-tier actors, including focal firms, highlighting systemic gaps in sustainability practices. This upward pressure not only exposes the limitations of local governance but also encourages upper-tier organizations to

intervene through stricter monitoring and better implementation strategies. These interventions become necessary to ensure genuine compliance with social sustainability commitments across all tiers of the supply chain.

Illustrative examples, such as the enforcement of union rights through workers' voices at the transnational level, demonstrate how collective bargaining extends beyond national boundaries, forcing global firms to couple their practices more closely with intended labour outcomes (Reneicker et al., 2021). Similarly, the role of audits and enforcement mechanisms, particularly in complex supply chains, reflects the need for rigorous monitoring, as outlined by Max and Wouter (2016). The Rana Plaza disaster serves as a stark example where vicarious worker voices resonated internationally, leading to unprecedented policy reforms among multinational corporations (Huq et al., 2014a; Shareef et al., 2020). These reforms, catalyzed by the exposure of decoupling practices, illustrate the power of transnational voice to realign business strategies with sustainability principles through recoupling efforts (Schüßler et al., 2019).

5. Discussion & Conclusion

The primary contribution of this research lies in advancing the understanding of social sustainability within multi-tier supply chains by establishing a theoretical connection between social issues across supply chain tiers and the concept of decoupling (Nath et al., 2021; Jamali et al., 2017). It highlights the crucial role stakeholder interactions play in shaping decoupling practices and introduces actionable insights for managers to navigate these complexities. A stakeholder-focused approach is not only essential for mitigating negative social impacts within supply chains but also crucial for maintaining firms' legitimacy in the eyes of

stakeholders and the broader public (Gold & Schelpel, 2017; Pagell & Wu, 2009; Soundararajan et al., 2021).

Proposition 1 emphasizes that managerial decoupling practices are shaped by the specific pressures exerted by stakeholders. Firms selectively engage in decoupling as a targeted response to the concerns most salient to key stakeholders (Proposition 1a), reflecting a strategic prioritization of actions. However, these decoupling practices are dynamic, continuously evolving as managers adjust to shifting conditions and stakeholder demands (Proposition 1b).

Moving beyond managerial responses, Proposition 2 highlights the role of factory-level workers whose voices create disruptions within Tier-1 and Tier-n suppliers, necessitating recoupling efforts to restore alignment. These disruptions can escalate beyond the relational spaces of individual suppliers (Proposition 3), exposing decoupling practices to external audiences and triggering reputational risks. When workers' grievances transcend local environments to gain transnational attention, the consequences of decoupling amplify across the supply chain (Proposition 4). This transnational voice drives upper-tier firms toward stricter monitoring and meaningful implementation of social sustainability policies to ensure alignment between policies and practices.

This research emphasizes the need for firms to move beyond superficial compliance mechanisms by engaging stakeholders across supply chain tiers. By fostering collaborative practices that promote genuine social sustainability, managers can address the challenges of multi-tier decoupling more effectively. The framework presented lays a foundation for future empirical studies exploring the dynamics of stakeholder agency and decoupling within diverse industrial contexts, supporting both sustainability goals and corporate legitimacy.

In conclusion, this research underscores the complexities involved in managing social sustainability across multi-tier supply chains, where decoupling practices emerge as both a challenge and a strategic response to stakeholder pressures. The propositions presented highlight that decoupling is not a static phenomenon but a dynamic process shaped by shifting stakeholder demands and contextual changes. Managerial responses, such as selective decoupling, are employed to address issues deemed most salient by stakeholders, reflecting a prioritization of compliance efforts.

The role of factory-level workers, as emphasized in the propositions, illustrates that disruptions in decoupling practices arise from within Tier-1 and Tier-n suppliers, necessitating recoupling efforts to restore alignment. Moreover, the amplification of workplace voice beyond relational boundaries and into transnational spaces further exposes decoupling and compels upper-tier firms to implement stricter monitoring and meaningful sustainability practices.

This research contributes to both theory and practice by offering insights into the interplay between decoupling and stakeholder agency within complex supply chain environments. It encourages firms to move beyond superficial compliance and foster deeper engagement across tiers, ensuring that policies align with practices. Future empirical research should explore these dynamics further to enhance understanding and support the development of robust strategies for achieving social sustainability in diverse industrial settings.

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CHAPTER 5 - Paper 2 - Exit, Voice, Loyalty and Cynicism: Factory Workers' Response to CSR Decoupling in Garment Supply Chains

1. Abstract

This research investigates the paradoxical portrayal of supply chain workers in the literature, depicted as passive, obedient and yet complicit or rebellious in the face of substandard working conditions in supplier facilities. Specifically, it examines workers' response to poor labor conditions caused by CSR decoupling -the gaps between formal policies suppliers commit themselves to and actual factory-floor practices-. Drawing on 40 interviews in Vietnam's garment industry and building on Hirschman's "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty" framework and its extensions, the authors develop a dynamic framework explaining when and how workers respond to decoupled practices. This article contributes to three key areas of research. First, it sheds light on the role of workers in both accepting and resisting CSR decoupling, advancing the literature on CSR decoupling in global supply chains, which traditionally focuses on buyers or suppliers. Second, it responds to calls for humanizing the sustainable supply chain management literature, by emphasizing factory-level workers and the value of studying less powerful actors. Third, it extends Hirschman's model to supply chain contexts, adapting it to reflect their unique dynamics. The findings also provide relevant guidance for policymakers and practitioners, demonstrating the need to strengthen worker voice through a multi-pronged approach.

Keywords: CSR decoupling; global supply chains; garment industry; workers; Exit, Voice and Loyalty

2. Introduction

With the rise of global supply chains came a host of social and environmental problems that continue to bypass regulatory oversight. Human disasters and crises – notably the Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh in 2013 – led to soul-searching in the industry and regulatory innovation such as the Accord and Alliance on Fire and Building Safety (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2015), ACT on living wages (Ashwin et al., 2020), brand advocacy (Oka, 2016; Xie et al., 2019), and capacity building initiatives (Oka et al., 2020). Nonetheless, violations of fundamental rights and substandard working conditions remain pervasive in global supply chains (Kuruvilla, 2020).

These unfold in a context marked by a multitude of gaps between corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies set by multinational corporations (MNCs) and actual practice in supplier facilities (Jamali et al., 2017; Talpur et al., 2023). Theoretically, this phenomenon has been studied through the lens of decoupling, in which formal policies do not translate into organizational practices (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017; Bromley & Powell, 2012). Research has shown that CSR decoupling in global supply chains is a pervasive, institutionalized phenomenon, hampering the implementation of CSR policies and programmes (Hasle & Vang, 2021; Huq & Stevenson, 2020). Indeed, a whole range of actors in supply chains is involved in producing and reproducing decoupling, leading to "decoupling cascades" (Cao & Jayasinghe, 2024).

Although they are directly targeted by CSR policies and directly concerned with CSR decoupling, factory-level workers remain the least investigated stakeholder in global supply chains. This appears highly surprising, since factory workers are more likely to understand what CSR decoupling means for them and why CSR decoupling is likely to persist on the floor.. Supply chain workers are often

portrayed § has developed around Hirschman's EVL model to explore employees' responses to job dissatisfaction arising from deteriorating workplace conditions. While this theoretical framework helps us understand when employees decide to stay, leave the organization, or attempt to address the issues, it has rarely been applied to supply chain workers in the Global South. In this study, we enrich this model to adapt it to the particularities of supply chain contexts.

To open up the black box of worker response, we draw on data collected in the Vietnamese garment industry, an ideal setting for our research. As the world's third-largest garment exporter, Vietnam exemplifies a typical garment-exporting country dominated by global buyers with extensive supplier networks, forming a complex multi-tiered system (Köksal et al., 2017). It is also typical in that low wages, excessive working hours, and poor working conditions remain widespread (Anner & Liu, 2016; Le, 2022b). On the other hand, Vietnam is particular in its formal restriction of freedom of association, allowing only one Party-controlled union to exist and operate (Chi & Broek, 2013). Deprived of representation, Vietnamese workers have occasionally resorted to wildcat strikes to make their voice heard (Anner & Liu, 2016). Such contrast makes it an interesting setting to explore a range of worker responses to CSR decoupling on the factory floor.

Through this research, we make several contributions to the literature. First, we shed light on the role of workers in both accepting and resisting CSR decoupling, offering new insights to the literature on CSR decoupling in global supply chains, which has traditionally focused on buyers or suppliers (Jamali et al., 2017; Soundararajan et al., 2021). We demonstrate how workers exercise agency in deciding whether or not to respond, while taking into account a common need for economic income which shapes these responses. Second, we answer the call to humanize the sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) literature by

focusing on factory-level workers and highlighting the value of examining less powerful actors in global supply chains (Pagell & Wilhelm, 2025; Soundararajan et al., 2021). Third, we apply Hirschman's extended model to supply chain workers and modify it to reflect the specific dynamics of supply chain contexts.

3. CSR Decoupling In Global Supply Chains

3.1. CSR decoupling: An institutionalized practice in global supply chains

The concept of decoupling helps explain why and how firms establish formal structures to appear compliant with social norms, while shielding themselves from public scrutiny to continue "business-as-usual" (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017). Originating from neo-institutionalism, decoupling stems from the idea that organizations adopt societal rationalized myths to gain legitimacy (J. W. Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Decoupling formal policies from actual practices allows organizations to buffer tensions and manage contradictions. Bromley and Powell (2012) made an important distinction between policy-practice decoupling and means-ends decoupling. Policy-practice decoupling refers to the disconnect between formal structures and daily practices, resulting in the failure to implement the stated policies. Means-ends decoupling, meanwhile, occurs when policies are implemented and evaluated, but the link between policy implementation, practice integration, and intended outcomes remains unclear.

CSR practices are likely to be decoupled for several reasons. First, the CSR field is replete with tensions, such as short-term versus long-term orientation, or individual versus organizational agenda (Hahn et al., 2015). Second, organizations are more prone to decouple when they experience intense coercive pressure to

adopt specific practices from stakeholders (Roth & Kostova, 2003), and stakeholder scrutiny around CSR has only intensified in the past decades. Third, decoupling is prevalent in highly opaque fields, due to causal complexity, practice multiplicity and behavioural invisibility, as exemplified by sustainability standards (Wijen, 2014) and private labor regulation in global supply chains (Kuruvilla, 2021). Not surprisingly then, decoupling has been widely observed in global CSR policies (Lim & Tsutsui, 2012), international CSR initiatives such as the Carbon Disclosure Project and the Global Compact (Pope & Wæraas, 2016), and CSR reporting practices (Xue et al., 2018).

Research suggests that CSR decoupling is widespread among multiple actors in global supply chains. Suppliers may comply with sensitive issues for western customers, such as child labor, while neglecting other less visible issues (Jamali et al., 2017), or engage in "institutional evasion," a cat-and-mouse game to bypass buyer pressures (Soundararajan et al., 2018). Auditors may collude with suppliers to overlook non-compliance (Kuruvilla et al., 2020b). Workers may prioritize their pay and benefits over safety (Oka, 2016) and help hide violations to secure overtime pay and job (Hoang, 2019). Buyers also decouple by failing to reward improvements in suppliers' CSR performance (Amengual et al., 2020). In this "decoupling cascade," where a range of actors serially decouples standards and policies, supplier workers remain the least understood, warranting further research (Cao & Jayasinghe, 2024). Our study addresses this gap by examining how workers navigate and influence CSR policy-practice decoupling, offering insights into how institutions are sustained, altered, or dissolved through everyday actions (Cardinale, 2018).

3.2. Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM) Research

It has long been pointed out that the SSCM literature tends to emphasize synergies between sustainability and buyer firms' profits while overlooking trade-offs and various stakeholders in general (e.g., Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014; Pagell & Wu, 2009). The SSCM field has progressively expanded its focus to include non-instrumental perspectives and non-traditional actors, marking a shift toward addressing broader sustainability challenges (Gold & Schleper, 2017b; Touboulic et al., 2020b). Adopting the paradox perspective, for instance, some scholars have explored tensions between cost competitiveness, financial objectives and sustainability (Xiao et al., 2019). Other scholars have investigated the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in making global supply chains more humane (Wilhelm et al., 2024).

While SSCM studies tended to examine the effects of CSR decoupling on buyers, such as financial performance and legitimacy (Busse et al., 2016), there is a shift toward the upstream dynamics in global supply chains, focusing on suppliers located in developing countries (Huq et al., 2016; Wilhelm et al., 2016). Acosta and her colleagues (2014) explore how first-tier supplier managers in Latin America selectively and partially comply with MNCs' demands, often as a gesture without full integration. Similarly, Le (2022) identifies stakeholder pressures that shape local supplier managers' selective decoupling practices in garment supply chains. Sauer and Seuring (2018) suggest that improving supplier compliance involves reducing institutional distance—differences in cognitive, normative, and regulatory elements—and managing uncertainties with tailored sustainability practices.

Nevertheless, most research emphasizes powerful actors, such as managers, and pays limited attention to factory-level workers, who remain the least examined

group in the SSCM literature and beyond. We argue that focusing on factory-level workers is crucial to understanding why, even within the same institutional contexts, local responses to CSR policies and decoupling can vary. This perspective may complement traditional buyer-supplier approaches, offering insights into how factory workers and local conditions influence the sustainability of global supply chains. In so doing, we also respond to Soundararajan and colleagues' (2021) call to humanize SSCM research to build a path to decent work in global supply chains by treating workers as humans with agency and inalienable rights in context.

Scholars from other fields, notably industrial relations, have started to make inroads into pathways for decent work with workers at the center. Kuruvilla and Li (2021) propose a research agenda on freedom of association and collective bargaining, arguing that worker voice is the key to better working conditions in global supply chains. Similarly, Reinecke and Donaghey (2021) propose worker-driven supply chain governance based on the democratic participation of workers at both workplace and transnational levels. To zoom in on the worker perspective that has been overlooked in the SSCM literature, we turn to the seminal work of Hirschman on "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty" (1970) – EVL in short – and its later extensions.

3.3. Workers and CSR decoupling – Exit, Voice or Loyalty?

A large body of literature has developed around Hirschman's EVL model to understand employee's responses to job dissatisfaction caused by deteriorating working conditions. Through examining how employees decide to stay or leave the organization, or attempt to address the organization's problems, this literature

offers a valuable approach to examining supply chain workers' responses to poor working conditions arising from CSR decoupling.

Hirschman (1970) examined the options available to customers or organizational members facing declining product quality or deteriorating working conditions. They may choose to exit by leaving the organization or discontinuing use, voice their concerns to seek improvement, or remain loyal due to a special attachment, enduring the situation in the hope that "things will soon get better" (p. 38). While later scholars interpreted loyalty as the third option, Hirschman viewed loyalty as a moderator that restrains exit and activates voice (p.78).

Building on Hirschman's work, other scholars have extended the EVL model to include neglect (Farrell, 1983; Rusbult et al., 1982), making it EVLN. Neglect in a work context refers to lax and disregardful behaviour among workers. Workers may respond to workplace dissatisfaction through "temporary abandonment" and "psychological inattention," manifested by lateness, absenteeism, and error rates, for instance (Farrell, 1983, p.598). Such behavior is likely to be rare in labor-intensive global supply chains, where actions negatively affecting production are harshly penalized by management. Given the severe consequences of neglect, workers in global supply chains are more inclined to express workplace dissatisfaction in less overt manners.

Naus and colleagues (Naus et al., 2007) added cynicism to the EVLN model arguing that it constitutes a distinct response, making it EVLNC.[7] Organizational cynicism is defined as "a negative attitude toward one's employing organization", consisting

[7] While other scholars have explored the dimension of *silence* (Birch, 1975), we see it more as a process (that can be combined with exit, loyalty, neglect, and cynicism) than a distinct response.

of a negative belief, negative affect, and critical behavior toward the organization (Dean et al., 1998, p. 345). Cynicism is thus a form of self-defense, or a coping mechanism in the face of unpleasant situations and feelings of disappointment about the workplace. Although cynicism is associated with "a host of negative effects, such as apathy, resignation, alienation, hopelessness, distrust of others, suspicion, contempt, disillusionment, and scorn" (Naus et al. 2007, p.690), it is not related to negative work performance or increased absence. This makes cynicism a less risky worker response than neglect, leading us to suppose that it is more prevalent in labor-intensive global supply chains.

Hirschman's EVL model and its extensions have rarely been applied to supply chain workers. Mellahi and colleagues (2010) used the EVLN framework in the Indian context but focused on the link between organizational commitment and EVLN options based on manager surveys. Existing studies on worker voice in supply chains often explore the nature of voice rather than the conditions shaping responses. For example, Gunawardana (2014) uses ethnographic data to examine how workers in Sri Lanka's export-processing zone navigate formal, informal, and external voice channels.

Overall, CSR decoupling is an institutionalized practice in global supply chains involving multiple actors, but limited research addresses how workers respond to decoupling or why they choose to ignore, resist, or accept it. Shedding light on this often-neglected role of workers can provide valuable insights into pathways for decent work in global supply chains. We seek to advance our understanding by employing Hirschman's extended EVLNC model to explore workers' responses to CSR decoupling in Vietnam's garment supplier factories.

4. Methodology

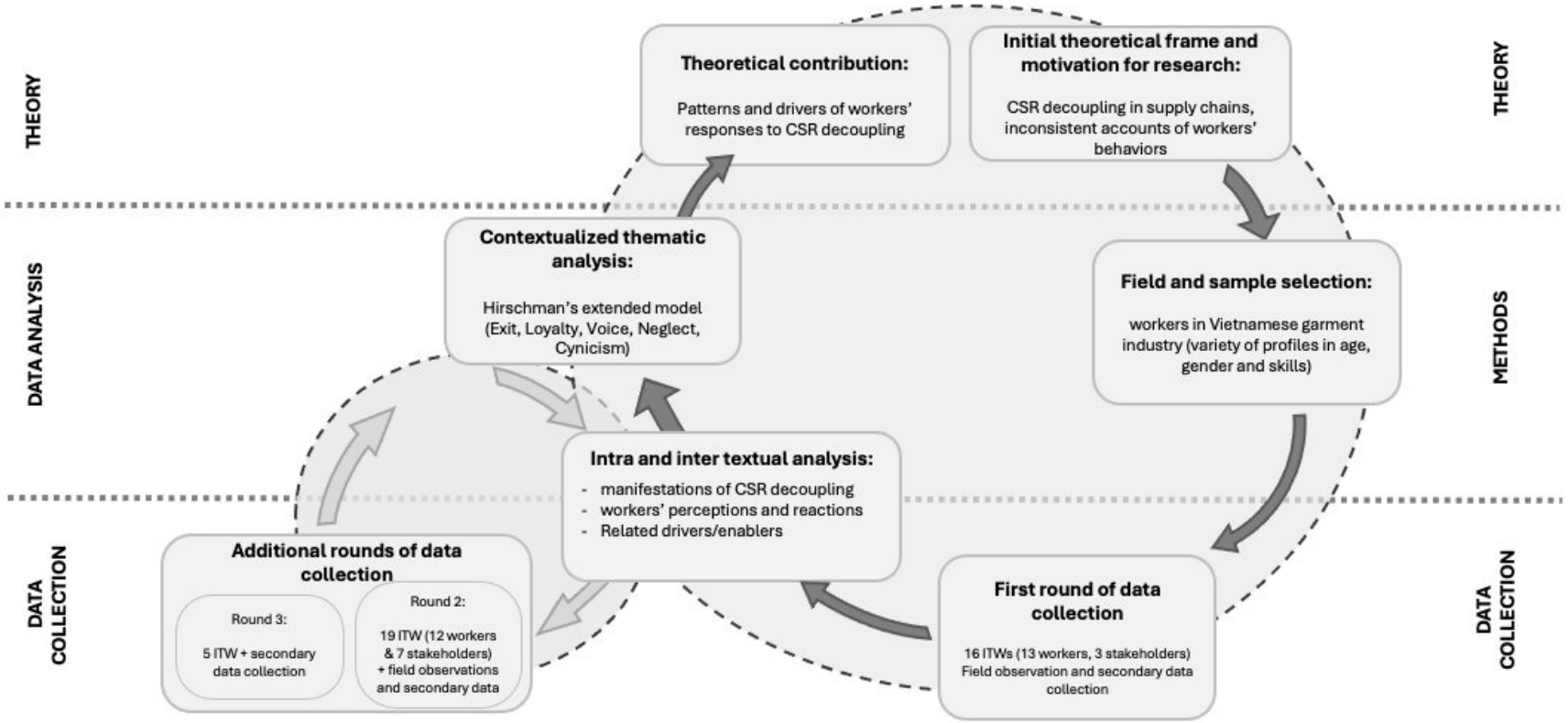
Just as supply chain management research has seen a broadening of interest to encompass non-instrumental perspectives and non-traditional actors, the field has been opening up to various qualitative approaches (Grimm et al., 2024; Wieland et al., 2024). This is based on the understanding that the dynamic, complex and urgent problems the world is facing today cannot be solved by the traditional SCM characterized by static, reductionist, and objectivist thinking (Wieland, 2021). Indeed, social challenges that emerge in today's supply chains are highly context-dependent, requiring a perspective different from the context-free, positivist traditions in SCM research (Darby et al., 2019). What is needed is an approach that enables a "deep exploration of human experiences that would otherwise be overlooked" (Wieland et al., 2024b).

To open up the black box of supply chain workers' responses to CSR decoupling, we have opted for the interpretive hermeneutic approach, which is based on the premise that the social world is subjective and interpreted in nature, whose meaning is not given but constructed (Mees-Buss et al., 2022). This approach views knowledge as emergent from ongoing social processes and interactions (Yanow, 2015). At the heart of interpretive research is the hermeneutic circle or the "part-to-whole process," where the parts (or texts) need to be understood in relation to the whole (or context) (Prasad, 2017). This emphasis on individuals' lived experiences is in line with our task of exploring how supply chain workers perceive and respond to the context they find themselves in.

This method section is structured around an adapted version of the hermeneutic circle (Darby et al., 2019), as depicted in Figure 4. We began by problematizing CSR decoupling in global supply chains and examining the role of workers,

paradoxically depicted as docile, complicit and yet occasionally rebellious. These initial insights guided us for the selection of context and informants.

Figure 4 - Overview of the interpretive hermeneutic research process



Context selection in interpretative research is driven by its potential to maximize insights and understanding as opposed to generalizability under the positivist tradition (Darby et al., 2019). Vietnam's garment industry, which has seen waves of strikes in the past decade, is an ideal context to explore the paradoxical nature of worker responses to substandard working conditions.

To fully grasp a wide range of uninhibited worker reactions, it was important to select workers with different characteristics (e.g. age, skills, gender) and to reach them independently from management or union channels. The lead author, a former program officer at the International Labor Organization (ILO), leveraged her network and gained access to garment workers through NGOs catering to them. Worker interviews were conducted in workers' living quarters or NGO training centers, where informants felt comfortable sharing their experiences and emotions. This was essential, as managers often coached workers to avoid negative comments, citing potential order losses and job risks (Huq & Stevenson, 2020). The lead author tried to encourage a dialogue with informants, bearing in mind that the researcher does not necessarily have a better understanding or a vintage point, one of the underlying tenets of interpretive research (Darby et al., 2019).

In total, the lead author conducted 40 interviews, of which 25 were made with workers and 15 with stakeholders and experts such as representatives from NGOs, inter-governmental organizations, multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs), unions, and CSR managers of MNCs, all based in Vietnam.

Table 10 – Data sources

Methodological approach	Referential Code	Informant demographic Professional role	Gender	Age	Organizations	Location
PHASE 1 AUG-SEP 2019 IN VIETNAM						
3 Qualitative exploratory interviews with researcher, unionists and CSR officer	Stakeholder 1	Lead researcher	Female	NA	ERC Center for Employment Relations - Social enterprise	Hanoi
	Stakeholder 2	Senior Project Manager	Male	NA	CCR-CSR - Third-party on CSR	Hanoi
	Stakeholder 3	Unionist	Female	NA	Hai Phong Industrial Zone Trade Union - Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL)	Hai Phong
13 Qualitative exploratory interviews with factory-level workers employed in 5 garment companies.	Worker 1	Headline worker	Female	26 years old	T1 Company 01	Nam Dinh
	Worker 2	Headline worker	Female	40s	T1 Company 02	Hanoi
	Worker 3	Quality control worker	Female	30s	T1 Company 03	Hung Yen
	Worker 4	Rank-and-file worker	Female	18 years old	T1 Company 04	Hai Phong
	Worker 5	Rank-and-file worker	Female	18 years old	T1 Company 04	Hai Phong
	Worker 6	Rank-and-file worker	Female	19 years old	T1 Company 05	Hai Phong
	Worker 7	Rank-and-file worker	Male	23 years old	T1 Company 05	Hai Phong
	Worker 8	Rank-and-file worker	Male	30s	T1 Company 05	Hai Phong
	Worker 9	Rank-and-file worker	Female	23 years old	T1 Company 04	Hai Phong
	Worker 10	Quality control worker	Female	40s	T1 Company 04	Hai Phong
	Worker 11	Rank-and-file worker	Female	20s	T1 Company 04	Hai Phong
	Worker 12	Rank-and-file worker	Female	20s	T1 Company 04	Hai Phong
	Worker 13	Rank-and-file worker	Female	30s	T1 Company 04	Hai Phong
PHASE 2 OCT-DEC 2019 IN VIETNAM						

12 Qualitative semi-structured interviews with factory-level workers employing in 7 garment companies	Worker 14	Headline worker	Female	39 years old	T1 Company 06	HCMC
	Worker 15	Rank-and-file worker	Male	44 years old	T1 Company 06	HCMC
	Worker 16	Rank-and-file worker	Female	36 years old	T2 Company 07	HCMC
	Worker 17	Rank-and-file worker	Female	25 years old	T2 Company 08	HCMC
	Worker 18	Rank-and-file worker	Male	27 years old	T2 Company 08	HCMC
	Worker 19	Rank-and-file worker	Female	30s	T1 Company 09	HCMC
	Worker 20	Rank-and-file worker	Female	36 years old	T2 Company 10	HCMC
	Worker 21	Rank-and-file worker	Female	41 years old	T2 Company 11	HCMC
	Worker 22	Headline worker	Female	40s	T2 Company 12	HCMC
	Worker 23	Rank-and-file worker	Female	30s	T2 Company 12	HCMC
	Worker 24	Rank-and-file worker	Female	20s	T1 Company 06	HCMC
	Worker 25	Rank-and-file worker	Female	32 years old	T2 Company 11	HCMC
7 Qualitative semi-structured interviews with researcher, unionists and CSR officers.	Stakeholder 4	Unionist	Male	NA	Dong Nai Union Legal Advisory Centre - VGCL	Dong Nai
	Stakeholder 5	Lead Enterprise Advisor	Male	NA	BetterWork Vietnam - Third-party on CSR	HCMC
	Stakeholder 6	Country Manager	Female	NA	FLA - NGO	HCMC
	Stakeholder 7	Union researcher	Female	NA	Institute of Workers and Trade Union - VGCL	Hanoi
	Stakeholder 8	Labour Rights Activist	Female	NA	Freelancer -NGO	Hanoi
	Stakeholder 9	Unionist	Female	NA	Economic-Zone Trade Union - VGCL	Hanoi
	Stakeholder 10	Vice Director	Female	NA	Centre for Development and Integration - NGO	Hanoi
SUPPLEMENTARY TELE-INTERVIEWS AND SECONDARY DATA COLLECTION (2019-2023)						
Supplementary interviews	Stakeholder 11	Unionist	Inditex project	NA	VGCL	Hanoi

01 unionist, 02 workers and 02 industry actors	Worker 2 (supplementary)	Headline worker	Female	40s	Tier-01 company	Hanoi
	Worker 15 (supplementary)	Rank-and-file worker	Male	44 years old	T1 Company 07	HCMC
	Stakeholder 12	Lead auditor	Male	NA	International brand - Industry actor	HCMC
	Stakeholder 13	Country Manager	Male	NA	Third-party Company	HCMC
Secondary data	Information on Code of Conduct, CSR/Sustainability Report, and CSR activities/projects extracted from the MNC websites.					

All the interviews, which lasted on average 50 minutes, were conducted face-to-face in Vietnamese by the lead author, recorded and transcribed verbatim, and subsequently translated in English. 16% of workers interviewees were mal and 84% female, reflecting the typical gender ratio in garment factories. The average age of workers was early 30s. In the first round of interviews, the lead author interviewed 13 workers and three stakeholders, with questions centered on substandard conditions in garment factories and workers' perceptions. To supplement interview data, secondary data (such as codes of conduct (CoCs) and sustainability reports of MNCs sourcing from the factories) were also collected. Table 1 summarizes the details of informant characteristics and data sources.

Respecting research ethics and being transparent with informants is crucial, particularly when the field of research includes marginalized, vulnerable, or less powerful groups in society (Martí & Mair, 2009). The lead author informed all the interviewees about the research objectives, mentioning the context of her doctoral dissertation. While participants' anonymity was granted, workers were informed that anonymized quotes might be used in academic publications. A verbal consent was obtained for each interview, and no incentives were offered during the fieldwork. As the lead author and most workers shared the same gender, language and culture as well as the age cohort, it helped create rapport and trust. While the lead author took care not to appear very different from these workers in terms of appearance and demure and paid attention not to sound superior in any way, she was conscious and reflective of the fact that workers might perceive power imbalance between them and herself, an elite PhD student.

In this context, we were aware of the need to act as a detective to uncover the meaning of what is being said (Van Maanen, 1979). In interpretive research, it is

important not to assume that the meanings of various concepts are shared across different sites or populations. The lead author took care to share our own understanding of concepts and terms that could be variably interpreted by informants. For instance, some workers interpreted "voice" as necessarily rebellious and aggressive actions against management. Every time the term "voice" was introduced in interviews, the lead author suggested that voice could entail a range of actions including constructively talking about workplace issues. Freedom of association was another alien and confusing term for workers who only knew about the party union, if at all. It required a lengthy conversation about the fact that unionists *could be* democratically elected.

Typically, the hermeneutic approach does not rely on a formal coding process or a template to make sense of the phenomenon under study (Mees-Buss et al., 2022). The first stage of interpretative analysis is intra-textual analysis, where each informant's story is fully captured in its context (P. Prasad, 2017). We read and re-read each transcript to understand each informant, paying attention to their personal characteristics such as age, skills, and family situations. This is followed by inter-textual analysis, where we search for commonalities across lived experiences and come up with the underlying narratives and storylines (P. Prasad, 2017). We searched for similarities and differences across narratives and identified a number of decoupling practices at work, such as "excessive overtime" or "double book-keeping". We then tried to understand workers' various reactions and labelled them as "resignation", "active support", "quiet quitting", "collective protest" and so forth.

Our contextualized thematic analysis revealed patterns in worker behavior that aligned with Hirschman's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty framework. For example, as

one worker remarked, “after a while they [workers] often quit if there are no constraints. They go to another company… [The problem] is never fixed” (Worker 22, female, 40s). We classified this quote as *silent exit*. Another worker described the following episode: “In my company, many people (workers) want higher insurance premiums as it would be better when they get old. They went to ask the HR manager” (Worker 18, male, 27 years old). This quote was classified as *voice*. When workers rationalized labor standard violations in their factory because “in other companies, things are much worse. It’s fortunate that we work in this company” (Worker 21, female, 41 years old), we classified this under *loyalty*. This analytical phase, therefore, led us to choose Hirschman’s model and its extensions as the new orienting frame of reference.

In the second round, the lead author conducted 19 interviews (12 with workers, seven with stakeholders such as unionists, staff at the ILO, MSIs and NGOs), supplemented by field observations and secondary data collection. The questions centered on patterns of worker responses (to substandard practices) and their driving factors. We conducted our intra and inter-contextual analysis, iterated between the data and Hirschman’s extended model. Here, we adopted an abductive approach, or “a nonlinear, path-dependent process of combining efforts with the ultimate objective of matching theory and reality” (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 556). Through this iterative process, we also sought to contextualize the framework. For instance, the iterative process underscored cynicism’s relevance and neglect’s rarity in our context, prompting us to adopt EVLNC over EVLN. Workers frequently manifested cynicism: “All the social stuff like union, my company just sets them up on paper. Nothing works. Worker rights are marginal. We can’t raise our voice” (Worker 21, female, 41 years old). This iterative process

generated the following patterns of worker response: *silent exit*, *loyalty*, *cynicism*, *neglect*, *voice*, and *vocal exit*.

Simultaneously, we identified which drivers shape worker's responses, as identified through intra and inter textual analysis. Seven themes emerged through this process: *need for income*, *reaching endurance limits*, *low-hanging fruit*, *prevailing local norms*, *labor market competitiveness*, *worker awareness*, and *sense of collective*. Workers' sheer need for income, as exemplified by "I have to work for my income" (Worker 16, female, 36 years old), was the recurrent theme that underpinned most worker responses. The need for income combined with one or several factors appeared to trigger a certain worker response. For instance, many workers reach *endurance limits* under harsh working conditions: "… it's too much and over my limits, it's unbearable." (Worker 15, male, 44 years old). But it is only those with job prospects (*labor market competitiveness*) who can exit, while others continue to toil in resignation (*cynicism*). Workers tolerate or even support decoupled practices (*loyalty)* because some practices are consistent with socially accepted norms (*prevailing local norms)* or because workers get something in return (*low-hanging fruit*): "My company has a double bookkeeping system. I know. I prefer to have that system because the income that I receive is higher" (Worker 17, female, 25 years old).

Finally, the lead author conducted five supplementary interviews to verify if the themes identified captured a full breadth and depth of the phenomenon under study. In interpretive research, it is thematic saturation rather than theoretical saturation that matters (Thornton et al., 2024). We have reached thematic saturation in the sense that additional interviews and analysis revealed

no new themes and the data collected was rich enough to contextualize our orienting frame of reference to yield new insights.

5. Empirical Context

CSR policies and initiatives in the global garment industry have proliferated, particularly following the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 (Oka et al., 2020). These range from buyers' CoCs, social audits, MSIs (e.g. the Ethical Trading Initiative) to union-inclusive instruments like international framework agreements (e.g. H&M with IndustriALL) or binding agreements (e.g. Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh) (Ashwin et al., 2020). The combination of mounting stakeholder pressure to improve conditions and intense pricing squeezes from buyers (Anner, 2020) make garment supply chains particularly prone to CSR decoupling.

Vietnam's garment industry provides a unique setting to explore CSR decoupling due to its institutional particularities. As the world's third-largest garment exporter, Vietnam accounts for 6% of global garment exports, with a turnover exceeding $31 billion in 2023 (Fibre2Fashion, 2024). While restricted freedom of association is not uncommon in many garment-producing countries, Vietnam formally restricts freedom of association permitting only one party-controlled, government-aligned union, similar to China. This leaves workers with a single pro-management union option (Chi & Broek, 2013), despite collective organizing and bargaining being fundamental ILO labor rights and core commitments in buyers' CoCs (Kuruvilla & Li, 2021). The absence of these enabling rights has resulted in the widespread occurrence of "wildcat strikes"[8] in Vietnam.

[8] Anner and Liu (2016) suggested that wildcat strike is a form of workers' activism "that workers mobilize without an overt leader and strike to resolve labor grievances rather than seeking official representation through institutionalized channels" (p. 5).

While buying firms often require suppliers to create “worker participation committees” as an alternative worker voice channel, they have proven ineffective in addressing sensitive issues like wages and working hours (Anner, 2018). Since 2005, Vietnam has experienced significant strike activity, with a peak of 857 strikes recorded in 2011 alone (Siu & Chan, 2015). Although the frequency of strikes has declined, they remain common, with over 150 reported in 2022, driven by demands for wages, allowances, and better working conditions (Buckley, 2021; U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Hence, Vietnam’s restrictions on freedom of association create significant gaps between buyer policies and supplier practice, amplifying CSR decoupling. The prevalence of wildcat strikes reveals a surprisingly rebellious side of Vietnamese workers, in contrast to the typical portray of docile workers enduring substandard conditions. These dynamics make Vietnam’s garment industry an ideal setting to explore worker responses to the disconnect between CSR policy and on-the-ground realities. While previous studies have focused on specific aspects, such as wildcat strikes (Anner & Liu, 2016) or worker-management collaboration (Hoang, 2019), this study uniquely examines the full spectrum of worker responses and their drivers.

6. Findings

6.1. CSR Decoupling on the Factory Floor

Based on interviews with workers and other stakeholders, we have uncovered a number of CSR policy-practice decoupling on the factory floor, as summarized in Table 2. Here, it is worth noting that the identified policy-practice gaps may be in relation to the national labour law rather than buyers’ CoCs. Given that buyers’

CoCs usually include respect for the national law as well as international core labour rights, we consider the identified gaps vis-à-vis the national law or international labour standards to constitute a form of CSR decoupling.

Table 11 – CSR decoupling issues at the workplace

Policy	Practice
Freedom of Association Buyers' Codes of Conduct (CoCs) emphasize workers' rights to form and join independent unions.	• Only state-controlled unions are allowed • worker participation committees, where implemented, are largely ineffective.
Collective Bargaining Agreement CoCs require suppliers to negotiate fairly with worker representatives.	• Collective bargaining agreements are unilaterally drafted by HR managers without worker involvement.
Working hours - Overtime Buyers' CoCs refer to ILO's standards, or applicable labour laws, or collective bargaining agreements applicable in the sector. Overtime must be voluntary and capped at 12 hours/week. Maximum 48 working hours per week.	• Excessive overtime is common, often exceeding the established limits • Workers must complete their production quotas without proper pay.
Child Labour CoCs adopt a "Zero-tolerance" policy for child labour; young workers (15–17) are allowed but must receive specific protections (no overtime, no night shift, exclusion from hazardous work.	• Underage workers (14–17) are employed without contracts or protections, often for seasonal work.
Occupational Safety and Health Buyers CoCs require that employers must provide employees with personal protective equipment (PPE) for free, and insure safe working environments.	• Workers purchase PPE on their own, or experience wage deductions. • Safety measures (e.g., needle shields) are temporarily installed for audits only.

Social Security CoCs and local labour laws require mandatory contributions for worker benefits (health, pension, unemployment).	• Employers deduct worker contributions for social security payments but fail to transfer them to the Social Security Agency.
Discrimination CoCs prohibit discrimination (based on race, gender, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation, or political affiliation) and harassment.	• Verbal abuse and age/pregnancy discrimination are rampant.
Wage and Renumeration CoCs require compliance with minimum wage laws; living wages encouraged.	• Minimum wages cover only 75% of living costs (Vietnam General Confederation of Labour)
Grievance mechanisms/Reporting concerns CoCs require anonymous, accessible, transparent channels for complaints, ensuring that workers can report grievances without fear of retaliation.	• Workers face retaliation risks • Suggestion boxes are monitored (placed under CCTV cameras) • Hotlines are often inaccessible (in English only).
Transparency and compliance with CoCs Buyers mandate transparency, on-site information and compliance with CoCs. They also impose social audits, either managed internally or by third parties.	• CoC information is displayed only during audits and removed afterward. • Workers are coached to provide scripted answers during audits. • Double bookkeeping systems conceal non-compliance (e.g., unpaid overtime, underreported wages). • Safety measures (e.g., needle shields) are temporarily installed for audits and removed afterward.

6.2.Accepting CSR Decoupling: Loyalty and Cynicism

Faced with such gaps, workers may accept CSR decoupling via *loyalty* or *cynicism*. We identify below a set of drivers that underlie workers' reactions. It is important to specify that by "accepting," neither do workers endorse the situation, nor do they take action to change it.

6.2.1. A Common Underlying Driver: the Need for Income

The primary reason why workers accept the substandard conditions resulting from CSR decoupling lies in economic dependency, and their overriding need to earn a livelihood and support their families. The need further intensifies when the worker is the sole breadwinner.

> I just work and work, you know, I have my family to feed. It will be so hard if I lose this job, so whatever they (managers) do, sometimes it is not really good, I don't mind. I just work. (Worker 15, male, 44 years old)

Given such immediate financial needs, workers often accept substandard conditions arising from CSR decoupling, as long as wages meet their expectations. For instance, they may tolerate irregularities like the absence of a formal contract, as required by labor law or buyer CoCs:

> I am working without a labor contract, but the company still pays for my insurance. It's alright, I don't have the intention to change anything. (Worker 1, female, 26 years old)

While workers rarely challenge decoupled practices if they feel adequately compensated for their work, other drivers may lead workers to accept situations of CSR decoupling.

6.2.2. Loyalty (Drivers: Low-Hanging Fruits and Prevailing Norms)

At the core of loyalty, as conceived in Hirschman's original work, is an individual's attachment to the organization and reluctance to exit despite disagreements with its practices. Similarly, our findings show that factors such as humane treatment by managers and workers' emotional attachment play a role in enabling workers to tolerate degrading workplace conditions:

> The wage is getting worse, less of the benefits… But I still want to work here. I feel comfortable and my boss is pleasant. Every day she visits the shop floor and chats with us, asking about our kids… So even though the working conditions are not good, the salary is low, it is still ok… (Worker 17, female, 25 years old)

However, closer scrutiny reveals that workers often accept substandard conditions in exchange for a "low-hanging fruit", such as financial or non-financial benefits, or promises of job security. Such benefits can facilitate workers' tolerance of and support for CSR decoupling. For instance, they may condone double bookkeeping system—prevalent in the industry—if the savings from unreported hours and wages benefit them directly:

> I know we have a double bookkeeping system: one book is to show our clients (brands/auditors) and the authorities, and the other is for real wage payment. The latter states our wages much higher and shows our payment for overtime. It's good since the company pays less or no social insurance, my wage deduction will be less. In the end, I earn more! It's good. They do the right thing, I guess. (Worker 16, female, 36 years old)

Meanwhile, workers may perceive certain CSR decoupling as acceptable or even legitimate, given prevailing local norms and practices. For instance, the presence of under-aged workers on the factory floor was often considered unproblematic. As one worker explained:

> There are juveniles in the factory, I know… They don't have contracts, no insurance. It's ok, actually. If they work, they get paid (Worker 16, female, 36 years old).

As these quotes illustrate, workers stay loyal despite substandard conditions not only because of personal attachment but also because of inducements and prevailing norms.

6.2.3. Cynicism (Driver: Reaching Personal Endurance Limits)

In the absence of a low-hanging fruit, workers facing substandard conditions and reaching their endurance limits tend to exhibit cynicism, characterized by a negative belief, negative affect and critical behavior. Workers' testimonials vividly illustrate their limits of endurance and their sense of hopelessness and disillusionment, a clear manifestation of cynicism.

> They do not let us take a break at noon and force us to work 30 more minutes. I really hate it. It's exhausting. But it keeps going on. (Worker 23, female, 30s)

Workers' endurance limits vary across individuals, time, and space: overtime may be a welcome source of additional income for young and healthy workers, but for others (particularly older workers with caring responsibilities) it is a cause of physical and mental exhaustion.

As we will discuss next, worker responses are significantly shaped by the collective perceptions of the conditions among factory workers.

6.3.Resisting CSR Decoupling via Neglect, Voice, and Exit

Workers may seek to change the situation caused by CSR decoupling via *neglect*, *voice* or *exit*. In fact, we find the dividing line between acceptance and resistance to be blurred, fluid and dynamic. Workers tend to combine neglect with voice, whereas voice is compatible with exit, with one encouraging the other. Moreover, resistance can quickly revert back to acceptance, or vice versa, if workers find their demands are (not) met.

6.3.1. Neglect (Driver: Sense of Collective)

Workers individually reaching their endurance limits tend to exhibit cynicism but rarely engage in neglect alone, understood as lax and disregardful behavior leading to negative performance at work. This is understandable in a context where lateness, slowness, and errors are severely penalized by deduction from bonuses, for instance. Nonetheless, our evidence indicates that workers may decide to take the risky step onto neglect (and voice), if they gain a shared understanding of the problem and a sense of collective. With the help of social media, it has become easier to connect with other workers and share problems they experience on the factory floor.

Recognizing that other workers face similar workplace issues is often a critical first step for individual workers to move from cynicism to more active responses. For example, an individual worker initially downplayed excessive overtime, avoiding action despite physical exhaustion and feelings of exploitation. However, upon discovering that her co-workers shared similar fatigue and sentiments, her

dissatisfaction coalesced into something larger, transforming individual cynicism into a bolder collective response.

> If it's only me finding excessive overtime troublesome, I'd never raise that problem to the manager, even though I'm exhausted after a working day. But if my colleagues feel the same, we all react to such problems. (Worker 22, female, 40s)

Although we found no evidence of workers engaging in neglect individually, we observed instances of collective work stoppages or temporary abandonment to demand action from the management, an example of collective neglect combined with voice.

> The more we ask for things, the hopeless we get. Everything is decided by the management, I feel like we have no rights at all… Our group (4–5 persons) stops working. We are there but not sewing. (Worker 21, female, 41 years old)

6.3.2. Voice (Drivers: Sense of Collective, Awareness and Support of External Stakeholders)

Building on a shared sense of collective around workplace issues, workers may exercise voice, either internally or externally. Internal voice can take the form of ad-hoc, issue-specific negotiations or in-house strikes. Encouraged by the recent waves of wildcat strikes, workers increasingly confront management collectively to demand what they are entitled to.

> Without hesitating, they [workers] will ask the manager why they haven't received salary, why their salary is deducted, why the factory doesn't keep

> its promise to pay salary on the 10th of each month. (Stakeholder 8, female, local labor rights activist)

When workers become aware of their entitlements and identify a gap between policy and practice that directly affects them, they may engage in ad-hoc collective negotiations with management.

> The company hasn't paid for social insurance since August until now. [...] They didn't inform us, but we know... We cross-checked through the social insurance's website ... Some of us questioned the managers about this issue. They told us to bring the bills, and that they would reimburse us. (Worker 16, female, 36 years old)

Here, workers pointed out decoupling in terms of social insurance payments, and management responded by reimbursing individual medical bills. This addressed workers' immediate financial needs but did not lead to recoupling. This quote illustrates how responding to worker concerns and handing low-hanging fruit can make workers "loyal" again without resolving the underlying decoupling. When management fails to respond, however, workers may escalate the issue through in-house strikes.

> We have about 20 requests, they [the employer] respond to only 10 of them. If the company doesn't answer or bargain, we go on in-house strike, we just come but don't work anymore, until they deal with our requests. (Worker 25, female, 32 years old)

In-house strikes, confined within the factory compound, can quickly escalate into full-blown strikes. Aware of the recent waves of wildcat strikes, factory management often seeks to appease workers to avoid public confrontation.

> ...so now, they go on in-house strike and force the employers... the boss doesn't want to make fuss in public... to let it explode is to let more people know, which might affect their reputation, and brands would rush to the factories. (Stakeholder 9, unionist)

Workers may also seek external channels for support, such as buyers, MSIs, or state authorities. For instance, worker 16—female, 36 years old—confided that she and her co-workers, approached the Department of Labor to address issues in their factory. Others reported management misconduct to the trade union office. Here, it is crucial to distinguish between factory-level unions, which are typically management-led, on the one hand and upper-level unions, which are state-led and viewed as relatively more impartial mediators, on the other.

> When we didn't see improvement, we went to the [trade union] office in the industrial zone office to denounce him [the director]. We have done that before, and everything is solved. The director got fined! (Worker 18, male, 27 years old)

Workers may also use the grievance mechanisms provided by buyers or MSIs. Training programs that raise awareness about worker entitlements and available grievance channels have been effective in encouraging workers' voice.

> After we conducted a training for workers about the Fair Wear Foundation hotline and a number of issues around benefits, the hotline received 152 calls from workers...because it's systematically wrong [in that factory]. (Stakeholder 10, female, Vice Director of a local NGO)

6.3.4. Vocal or Silent Exit (Drivers: Fear of Managerial Sanction and Labor Market Competitiveness)

Informed workers with a shared sense of the collective may become bolder, but raising their voice remains risky, particularly for strike leaders. If identified, they face dismissal and blacklisting as disruptive workers.

> Most of the time, when workers go on strike… they are not led by unionists. The leaders are called 'black leaders'… when they are identified, they are blacklisted by the company and other adjacent companies as well. The identified black leaders often have a slim chance of getting a job in the area… (Stakeholder 11, unionist)

Blacklisting is a common tactic used by employers to eliminate disruptive elements and discourage voice in the sector. Many interviewees mentioned the existence of such blacklists circulating among local managers, who regularly exchange information via employer associations. Given the high cost of voice, which may lead to sanctions or layoffs, workers who choose to speak out individually are both rare and ready to leave the company:

> If a worker decides to voice himself/herself about the problem, then for sure that he/she decides to leave that company (Worker 22, female, 40s).

Voice and Exit often go hand in hand in the context of this study. Aware of the high cost of voice, workers often opt for silent exit, quitting their jobs without raising complaints about substandard conditions, as one worker explained:

> I suffered from serious morning sickness, and they [the company] did not want to pay for my (medical) insurance… So, I quit (Worker 13, female, 30s).

Even without specific grievances, workers frequently seek better pay and conditions, comparing nearby factories and changing employers when opportunities arise. However, not all workers have equal opportunities to find alternative jobs. Age discrimination in the sector makes it particularly challenging for older female workers (over 35) to switch jobs, as highlighted by this 39-years-old female worker:

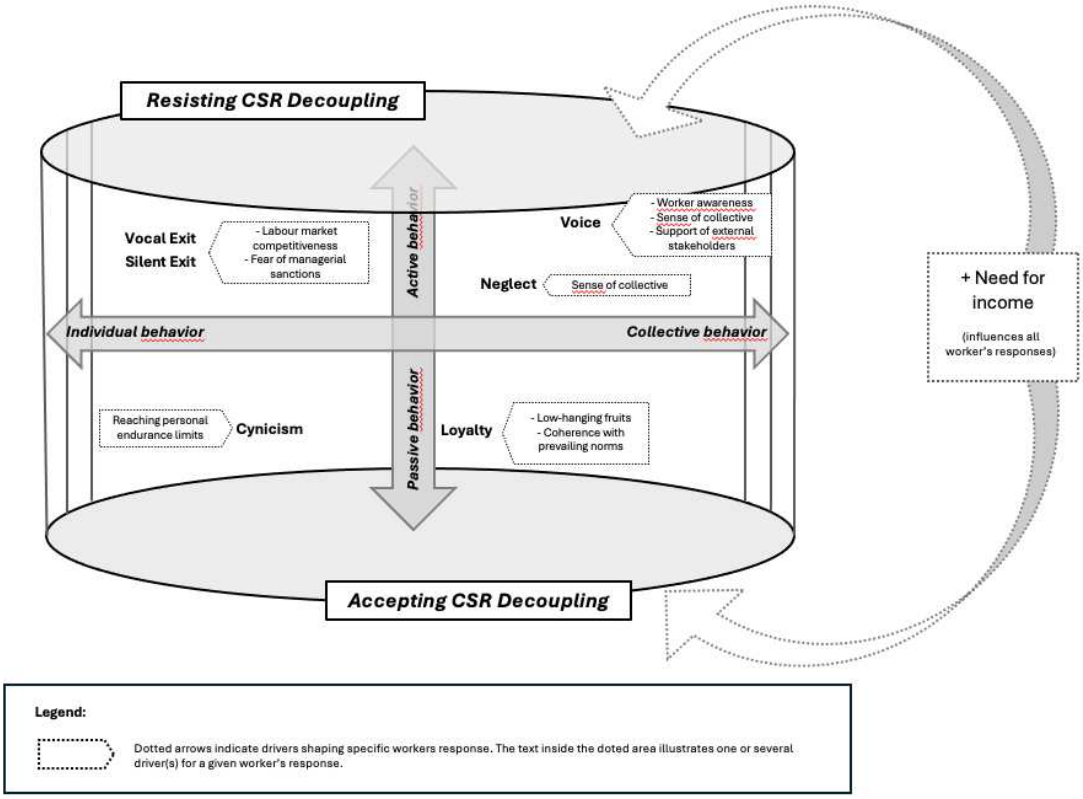
> Most workers do not complain. If they are young and feel bored, they will seek better work with better pay. Now I am old, where can I go? In my company, the majority of workers are old and can't go elsewhere. We are forced to stay here. (Worker 14, female, 39 years old)

This quote emphasizes the dual labor market and sorting effect, where competitive workers exit factories with poor conditions in search for better opportunities, while those with limited prospects remain and endure substandard conditions. In the absence of enforcement mechanisms, CSR decoupling persists as long as factories retain enough workers ready to endure such conditions.

6.4. A Dynamic Model of Worker Response to CSR Decoupling

We now sum up the findings and introduce a dynamic model of worker response to CSR decoupling based on the EVLNC framework as illustrated in Figure 5. Our model draws inspiration from the model of responses to worker dissatisfaction developed by Farrell (1983). Their original model categorizes four responses (exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect) along two dimensions: active–positive (impact on the problem) and constructive–destructive (impact on employee–organization relationships). However, we have modified this framework to better suit the features of the supply chain context as outlined below.

Figure 5 - Dynamic model of EVLNC (with drivers)



First, we moved away from categorizing EVLN as distinct, mutually exclusive responses, as our data revealed mixed and dynamic patterns (e.g., neglect combined with voice, vocal exit). Second, we replaced the constructive–destructive dimension with an individual–collective dimension, given that the collective aspect was critical for workers to shift from accepting CSR decoupling (via loyalty or cynicism) to resisting it (via neglect, voice and exit). Third, we introduced cynicism (Naus et al., 2007) as a more relevant response than neglect in the supply chain context. Finally, we identified drivers and enablers behind each worker response.

The primary driver behind workers accepting CSR decoupling is their sheer need for income, with low-hanging fruit such as cash payments sustaining loyalty despite questionable practices like double bookkeeping or unpaid social insurance.

When endurance limits are reached, however, workers often display cynicism, marked by resignation and hopelessness. A sense of collective is key to shifting from passive individual acceptance to active collective resistance. In the absence of enabling rights, like freedom of association, workers informally organize under influential “black leaders” to voice their demands and push for change.

Voice, whether internal or external, is often triggered by workers’ awareness of their entitlements and recognition of gaps between policy and practice. Internal voice can include issue-specific negotiations and in-house strikes, bypassing factory-level unions. When internal efforts fail, workers may turn to external grievance mechanisms provided by brands, MSIs, or upper-level unions. If their demands remain unmet, they may escalate to wildcat strikes. An interesting pattern is vocal exit, where voice is often followed by forced exit as disruptive workers face management sanctions, unless workers deliberately quit for a better position. However, more common is silent exit, where workers with labor market competitiveness quietly leave without raising complaints.

While the above EVLNC model explains workers’ responses to dissatisfaction, it does not account for situations where workers perceive decoupled practices as unproblematic and willingly accept them. We observed instances where workers showed no interest in resisting CSR decoupling, which helps explain why such practices persist. Workers may perceive certain CSR decoupling as acceptable or even legitimate in the light of prevailing local norms, as in the case of under-aged workers. Workers tend to accept decoupled practices (e.g. lack of formal contracts), if they do not feel directly disadvantaged. Similarly, workers may accept informal solutions, like ad-hoc reimbursement for unpaid social security contributions, rather than seeking fundamental solutions. In some cases, workers may view

certain decoupled practices favorably, as with double bookkeeping, if they gain personal benefits. These examples reveal a disconnect between CSR decoupling and workers' primary concerns, which are largely driven by a need for income. While workers may turn a blind eye to certain decoupled practices, they can vocally demand better pay and conditions (to go beyond the legal minimum wage which often falls short of a living wage). Indeed, the demand for higher wages has been the primary driver behind the waves of wildcat strikes in Vietnam.

7. Discussion

This study has explored factory worker responses to CSR decoupling (or lack thereof) in garment supply chains in Vietnam, building on Hirschman's extended model. Our findings and analysis make contributions to three sets of literature and present practical implications for regulating global supply chains.

7.1. Workers' Role in CSR Decoupling

CSR decoupling is an institutionalized practice in global supply chains, as a range of actors contributes collectively to a series of decoupling, creating decoupling cascades (Cao & Jayasinghe, 2024). In this ecosystem, the least known actor is factory-level workers, as research on CSR decoupling tends to focus on the role of buyers and suppliers (Jamali et al., 2017; Kuruvilla et al., 2020b) or unions and NGOs (Bartley & Egels-Zandén, 2016). Moreover, supply chain workers are often portrayed as passive and obedient, yet at times complicit or openly rebellious. Our research explores this paradox and provides insights into why and how workers respond to CSR decoupling in different situations.

Our study demonstrates that rank-and-file workers, far from being powerless, exercise their agency and choose to respond (or not) to various decoupled

practices. By contrast, workers are unlikely to resist CSR decoupling if they feel alone in enduring the problem or do not find it problematic due to prevailing norms or incentives. Such selective and ambivalent response by workers to decoupled practices means that workers can also be responsible for decoupling (Hoang, 2019; Oka, 2016). Moreover, the gaps between CSR policies and workers' actual needs suggest that examining CSR decoupling alone is not sufficient to tackle pervasive substandard conditions in global supply chains. The findings thus encourage us to look beyond CSR decoupling as we seek to build a path for decent work.

The Vietnamese case points to the agency, power and courage of workers who go on strikes without unions or external assistance. This contrasts with existing research that emphasizes the need to leverage external actors such as buyers, global union federations, local independent unions or NGOs to combat decoupling and bring about positive change on the factory floor (Bartley & Egels-Zandén, 2016). Nonetheless, workers are not prepared to take risky actions alone and fight for issues that are not dear to them. Our findings thus defy the portrayal of docile and powerless workers and yet provide a more nuanced picture about workers' willingness and capacity to overcome CSR decoupling in global supply chains.

7.2.Amplifying Workers' Voice in SSCM Research

Understanding workers' reactions (or lack thereof) to CSR decoupling at supplier factories is crucial to building a path to decent work, one of the most pressing issues in SSCM. Responding to the call to humanize the SSCM literature (Soundararajan et al., 2021; Touboulic et al., 2020b) this study has zoomed in on the role of factory-level workers and their responses to CSR decoupling. Existing SSCM

studies take organizational or inter-organizational perspectives focusing on powerful actors notably buyers and, to a lesser extent, suppliers (Acosta et al., 2014; Le, 2022b). While there is a burgeoning field of behavioral SCM scholarship (see Kaufmann et al., 2017), it rarely deals with supply chain workers. By opening the black box of factory-level workers' response, we demonstrate the importance of examining less powerful actors and call for better integration of intra-organizational dynamics centered on workers into the inter-organizational and mainly hierarchical, top-down processes that dominate the SSCM literature (Nath et al., 2021b; Sauer & Seuring, 2018).

A related contribution is to illuminate an important and yet overlooked local arena for CSR decoupling at the factory-level. We show how the factory site constitutes a space for local contestation and negotiation between managers and workers to reach a compromise on CSR decoupling in global supply chains. The existence of such space combined with the variance in organizational and worker characteristics explains why the degree of decoupling may vary quite significantly from one factory to another, even within the same country, leading to heterogeneous adoption and selective decoupling (Jamali et al., 2017). While it is challenging to directly link worker actions to buying firms' behavior in the SSCM field, our study emphasizes the indirect influence that worker agency may have on the (lack of) effectiveness of CoCs and audits.

Moreover, our findings shed light on the dark side of CoCs and social audits, which has been a central focus of SSCM research as an instrument to improve sustainability in global supply chains (LeBaron, 2021; Soundararajan et al., 2021). Such "ill-equipped instruments" (Wijen, 2014) based on buyer-driven and hierarchical approaches to sustainability have come under increasing criticism

(Crane et al., 2019; Soundararajan et al., 2019b). This study supports this critical view by showing that these instruments are likely to decouple in practice—sometimes with the forced, unintentional, or even deliberate involvement of their intended beneficiaries, namely factory workers. It has implications for redesigning supply chain strategies through long-term monitoring systems (Shevchenko et al., 2018), supplier development programs (Hasle & Vang, 2021), and voice protection mechanisms for workers (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021). We thus join the call for SCM scholars to move beyond traditional approaches and explore alternative governance models that are better equipped to improve working conditions in global supply chains (LeBaron, 2021).

7.3.The Extended Hirschman Model in Supply Chain Contexts

Being one of the first to apply Hirschman's extended model to supply chain workers, our research has yielded important insights into the model. Contrary to Hirschman's argument that voice and exit form a seesaw relationship, where one reduces the need for the other, we see a complementary relationship. While the lack of exit opportunity does not necessarily translate into voice (given the high cost of voice for workers), exit is likely to follow voice due to the existence of managerial sanctions. In addition, exit (high turnover) does not sap momentum for voice (e.g., waves of strikes) when pay and conditions in the sector remain unsatisfactory throughout. In fact, Hirschman (1970) did see such complementarity as he qualified strike as "a true hybrid of the two mechanisms" (p.86) and "that the effectiveness of voice is strengthened by the possibility of exit" (p.83), but complementarity is much more pronounced for supply chain workers. Meanwhile, Hirschman's argument that "loyalty holds exit at bay and activates voice" (p.78)

does not necessarily hold, as loyalty induced by low-hanging fruit helps to subdue worker voice, underlining the particularities of supply chain contexts.

Although Hirschman's extended model has been used to study different workplaces, our findings suggest that cynicism is more relevant than neglect among supply chain workers, who risk harsh repercussions for minor drops in productivity. With a shared understanding and a sense of collective, however, workers can engage in bolder action ranging from collective neglect, and in-house strikes to full-blown strikes. In the absence of independent unions, the feeling of collective was crucial for workers to shift from accepting to resisting CSR decoupling.

Our study demonstrates the importance of the collective dimension of worker voice, which has been overlooked in the voice literature in organizational behavior, which mainly focuses on individual voice with constructive intention (Wilkinson et al., 2018). Realizing the critical nature of the collective aspect of voice in supply chain contexts, we have introduced the individual–collective dimension and developed a model, explaining when workers accept (via loyalty and cynicism) or resist (via neglect, voice, and exit) CSR decoupling. Our research thus calls for bringing the collective back into the literature on voice, exit, loyalty and beyond.

7.4. Implications for Policy and Practice

In addition to theoretical implications, our findings provide practical guidance for MNCs and policymakers to improve working conditions in global supply chains. Notably, our study emphasizes the importance of establishing mechanisms to amplify worker voice at both the factory and the industry levels, particularly in contexts lacking freedom of association. For instance, MNCs could adopt a hands-

on approach (Ponte & Cheyns, 2013) by helping to raise worker awareness about their entitlements and to promote worker voice and grievance mechanisms that are accessible, safe, and effective. Here, collaboration with local NGOs that are trusted by workers appears key. Initiatives such as the inclusive labor monitoring network run by Issara Institute [9] constitute examples of locally embedded collaboration to combat human trafficking and poor conditions in global supply chains. Strengthening worker voice mechanisms could significantly enhance MNCs' adherence to the third "remediation" pillar of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights as well as the OECD Guidance for Multinational Enterprises for Responsible Business Conduct (OECD, 2023).

While worker-driven supply chain governance is much needed (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021), our research also indicates possible limitations for supply chain workers—preoccupied with their need for income and overloaded at work and at home—to act as monitors and enforcers of labor standards themselves. A more promising alternative is to train and hire former workers as monitors of labor standards and defenders of worker rights. The Fair Food Program developed by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Southern Florida[10] is one such model of (ex) worker-led monitoring, backed by buying companies' commitment to source from supplier farms that respect the standards (Rosile et al., 2021). Here, it is crucial for worker-led initiatives to be supported by buyers, suppliers, state actors as well as international networks of unions and NGOs to tap into broader resources and to amplify its impact (Soundararajan et al., 2025).

[9] https://www.issarainstitute.org/the-issara-model
[10] https://nfwm.org/farm-workers/farmworker-partners/coalition-of-immokalee-workers/

Governments also have a crucial role to play in reinforcing grievance resolution mechanisms. There is a pressing need to enhance protection mechanisms for workers, not only to facilitate voice/exit strategies but also to help them access to and succeed in legal disputes against employers. Key measures include investing in safeguards against unfair labor practices, improving access to labor mediation services, expediting grievance resolution processes to counter blacklisting practices. While the Vietnamese government has incorporated voice protection mechanisms into the Labor Code of 2019, as outlined in its free trade agreement with the European Union, effectively implementing them requires coordinated efforts on multiple fronts.

Beyond facilitating worker voice, it is essential to revamp state institutions to enforce national laws. As our results indicate, reinforcing the agency of workers does not help to address all types of labor standard violations, not least safety and health issues. There is thus an urgent need to strengthen the capacity of state enforcement agencies, currently acutely under-funded and under-staffed in countries where upstream parts of global supply chains are located. Here we argue that law – through the exercise of workers' rights – provides another form of voice. In line with previous work in the historical domain we suggest that Hirschman's framework should be expanded to include "law in action" (Stanziani, 2018). As laws can be placed on the statute book but can also easily become dead letters, we need to examine how the law is used in concrete situations, by whom and what impact it has on labor and working conditions. Enriching the Hirschmann framework with "law in action" may help assess the extent to which people can access the means to enforce their legal rights, when voice and exit mechanisms are not able to have an impact on worker real life.

8. Limitations and Further Research

Decoupling in global supply chains is a complex, multi-organizational and multilevel process, involving numerous actors ranging from buyers, multi-layers of suppliers, and workers. While our study illuminates the often-overlooked worker perspective, it does not investigate the role of other actors. Future research should incorporate a broader range of actors—buyers and suppliers in addition to workers—and develop a multi-level model of decoupling across different stages of supply chains, to explore the multi-layered and dialectical interactions between these actors.

Our findings based on Vietnam's garment industry are necessarily bound by its context. To be sure, the goal of interpretive research is a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in question rather than generalizability, as in positivist research (Darby et al., 2019). Nonetheless, countries where labor-intensive supply chains are located share certain institutional traits such as limited freedom of association. With China and Vietnam accounting for 37.6% of global garment exports (Fibre2Fashion, 2024), and other major exporters like Bangladesh suppressing independent unions (Kuruvilla & Li, 2021), these findings remain highly relevant. Future research could build on this study and further explore the lived experiences of supply chain workers through ethnography, for instance.

Our research suggests that CSR decoupling is more damaging to vulnerable actors—older female workers—as they are less likely to resist decoupling and more likely to remain victims. In line with previous work on poor working conditions in global supply chains (LeBaron, 2021), we call for increased research on worker identity and workforce composition. Scholars could draw on recent research in

related fields, such as that of Narayanan and Terris (2020), which explores ways to make manufacturing operations more inclusive to inform more inclusive practices.

9. Conclusion

This study extends and enriches the literature on CSR decoupling and substandard conditions in global supply chains by bringing into focus the role of factory-level workers. Until now, inquiry into how workers perceive and respond to CSR decoupling has been severely lacking, although workers hold the key to understanding why decoupling persists in global supply chains. Building on Hirschman's extended model, we have developed a conceptual framework to understand when and how supply chain workers respond to CSR decoupling. In so doing, we have yielded new insights and revealed a more nuanced picture of worker response. Importantly, we have shown the multiple and complex realities of CSR decoupling on the factory floor, as workers may ignore, tolerate, or embrace certain decoupled practices while resisting others. Such a complex picture defies the conventional understanding of CSR decoupling and underscores the importance of interpretive research, which in our case helped reveal how worker perspectives on the issue may not always fit with buyer or NGO priorities and expectations.

This research also yields important policy implications. On the one hand, there is an urgent need to promote and protect worker voice at all levels of supply chains, particularly in contexts where worker representation is restricted. Given field observations, locally-embedded and culturally sensitive interventions seem more relevant than more technologically sophisticated solutions that may be out of reach to workers (such as mobile apps). Buyers should consider intensifying collaboration with local organizations supporting workers, rather than pouring

more resources into auditing practices which have proven partially ineffective. On the other hand, worker voice needs to be complemented by other regulatory mechanisms. Here, governments, international organizations, NGOs, and other organizations promoting decent work, can play a crucial role.

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CHAPTER 6 - Paper 3 - Unpacking selective decoupling in global supply chains: a stakeholder salience perspective on social issues in Vietnam's garment factories

1. Abstract

Decoupling – a managerial strategy to buffer a company's social sustainability policy from its daily business practices in order to minimize the impact on operations – has long been studied in sustainable supply chain management (SSCM). While the SSCM literature offers many examples of buyers' decoupling, few publications focus on decoupling by suppliers, who are under pressure from buyers to adopt formal structures, i.e. social sustainability policies. There are even fewer studies exploring workers' claims related to social issues in this regard. Our study, drawing on the concept of policy-practice decoupling, investigates how suppliers navigate the different expectations of buyers and factory-level workers to find "decouple-able" policies when practising social sustainability. We apply the stakeholder salience theoretical lens to analyse 44 interviews from fieldwork in Vietnam to uncover *who* and *what* really counts for local supplier managers in selective decoupling. Along with enriching our understanding of decoupling done by local suppliers, our study uncovers the influence of workers on their managers in shaping and reshaping decoupling.

Keywords: policy-practice decoupling, social sustainability, local suppliers, stakeholder salience, garment supply chain

2. Introduction

Eight years after the Rana Plaza collapse, the worst disaster in garment industry history, the world was shaken again by another serious tragedy in Tangier, Morocco on February 28, 2021. A torrential downpour during the rainy season caused severe flooding, drowning at least 28 garment workers[11] including a 14-year-old girl.[12] They were trapped and electrocuted in a locked basement which housed an underground sweatshop supplying international buyers.[13] This event has once again brought to light the persistent chasm between the social sustainability policies designed by focal firms and their implementation by suppliers, with serious social issues, ranging from compulsory labour to illegal subcontracting practices, still rampant across the industry.

Decoupling, a concept in *organizational institutionalism,* which is increasingly studied in the sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) literature (Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Jamali et al., 2017, etc.), refers to the phenomenon where policy, i.e., a formal structure, is *ceremonially* adopted by an organization (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Facing stakeholders' rising concerns about environmental and social issues in supply chains, firms have used decoupling to respond to external pressures (Hensel & Guérard, 2020; Winkler et al., 2020) while proceeding with business as usual. In the SSCM literature, decoupling is

[11] Floods in Morocco Kill at Least 24 at Illegal Factory, accessed in Feb 2022 at https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/08/world/africa/morocco-flood-dead-factory.html

[12] Morocco: Labour groups call for immediate investigation after at least 28 garment workers, including a 14-year-old girl, are killed in disaster at informal garment factory, accessed in Feb 2022 at https://www.business-humanrights.org/fr/derni%C3%A8res-actualit%C3%A9s/morocco-at-least-28-garment-workers-incl-14-year-old-girl-killed-in-disaster-at-informal-garment-factory-labour-groups-call-for-immediate-investigation/

[13] Tangier Tragedy Can Happen Again, 2.4 Million Moroccans Are in Danger, accessed in Feb 2022 at https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2021/02/334553/tangier-tragedy-can-happen-again-2-4-million-moroccans-are-in-danger

characterized as a discourse strategy where international buyers overstate or misrepresent their sustainability performance (Tashman et al., 2019; Menke et al., 2021; Siems & Seuring, 2021) to gain legitimacy in the eyes of *salient stakeholders* (Ählström, 2010; Crilly et al., 2012). For local suppliers dealing with diverse sets of international and local stakeholders, *decoupling* is more nuanced and complex (Huq & Stevenson, 2020; Jamali et al., 2017; Nath et al., 2021). Such decoupling causes working conditions at factories to deteriorate (Winkler et al., 2020) and leads to "inhumane living [and working] conditions" (Wilhelm et al., 2016, p. 50).

At the same time, there is limited research in SSCM examining local suppliers and their relations with both international *and* local stakeholders in considering decoupling from sustainability policy at the factory level. One study by Huq and Stevenson (2020) affirmed that Bangladeshi suppliers' decoupling practices follow different institutional logics and are driven by various stakeholders, including buyers, workers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Similarly, Jamali and colleagues (2017) focused on selective decoupling by Indian suppliers where policy-practice decoupling occurs in areas with less buyer scrutiny. This research implies that some social sustainability policies are more "decouple-able" (Sauder & Espeland, 2009) than others due to varying degrees of local and international compliance pressure, and that practising social sustainability depends on highly contextual dynamics (Alves & de Barcellos, 2021; Huq et al., 2014). Notably, however, the role of supplier managers' perceptual considerations of stakeholder expectations in the empirical identification of *decoupleable* social sustainable policies has not been investigated. To address this gap, our study poses two research questions:

(1) How is pressure from international buyers and factory-level workers perceived by supplier managers?

(2) How does stakeholder pressure influence supplier managers' decoupling in the area of social sustainability?

To tackle these queries, we adopt the *stakeholder salience* theoretical lens (Mitchell et al., 1997, 2017) to understand how supplier managers' perceptions of stakeholder claims shape decoupling regarding specific social sustainability policies. Our study uses a qualitative method to investigate a range of policies that are central to the notion of "decent work" (Soundararajan et al., 2021) in the labour-intensive garment supply chain in Vietnam.

Our central argument positions local suppliers at the heart of practising social sustainability in supply chains, as important actors in either complying with or disregarding social sustainability policies in their factories. The paper, therefore, emphasizes the need to not only explore social sustainability practices from a top-down perspective, meaning the diffusion from buyers to suppliers, but also the bottom-up direction where suppliers' wrongdoings are corrected through negotiations and interactions with factory-level workers.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: We begin with a brief SSCM literature review on (1) social issues in SSCM as consequences of decoupling, and (2) studies applying the stakeholder salience theoretical lens. Then we present our methodology and data analysis of 44 interviews conducted in the field. Our paper provides vivid empirical evidence illustrating the negative outcomes of policy-practice decoupling on working conditions. Our observations and analysis reveal local supplier managers' selective attentiveness to buyer and worker salience, and

corresponding selective decoupling patterns. In the discussion, we explain further the theoretical contributions of our research to the organizational institutionalism and SSCM literatures. First, through the institutional lens, we discern the roles and actions of local peripheral actors – factory-level workers – in shaping and reshaping the suppliers' decoupling. These dynamics occur either through informal negotiations to maintain the decoupling or through powerful collective actions to correct the negative outcomes of decoupling. Second, our empirical data also show that decoupling is a rampant practice that can hamper decent work at the factory level in Vietnam. Based on this evidence, we conceive decoupling as a range of various forms where managers' decisions are informed by stakeholder salience. By examining manager perceptions of who and what really counts in practising social sustainability, our research offers an explanation for the latitude of decouple-able social sustainability policies in the particular institutional environment in Vietnam. In the discussion we provide several insights regarding the managerial implications of our research.

3. Theoretical Background

3.1. Linking social issues to institutional decoupling in SSCM

Seuring and Muller's (2008) SSCM definition comprises the three pillars of sustainable development (social, environmental and economic), together with the engagement of business and stakeholders. However, according to the SSCM literature, the simultaneous implementation of all three dimensions along complex multi-tier supply chains is considered difficult, if not impossible (Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014). For this study, we have chosen to focus on social issues, the most underexplored sustainability pillar (Soundararajan et al., 2021; Yawar & Seuring, 2018).

With multiple, recent industrial-level shocks in the Global South (Huq et al., 2014), social issues in the supply chain have become highly visible to the public and to academics (Ahi & Searcy, 2015; Govindan et al., 2021; Mani et al., 2016). Nevertheless, there is no conceptual consensus on the definition of social issues. For instance, while Klassen and Vereecke (2012, p. 103) associate social issues with "aspects related to products or processes that affect human security, well-being and community development", Chardine-Baumann (2011) sees the term as more specifically related to social working conditions, human rights, and social commitments of firms, as well as customer issues and business practices, such as fair trade. Due to the ambiguity surrounding the term, studies tend to explore either particular problems (i.e., modern slavery, child labour) or a range of issues mainly affecting buyers (Reinecker & Donaghey, 2021). To date, SSCM research has adopted a largely quantitative approach to social issues, mainly exploring the instrumental aspects of social impacts as well as risk assessment for firms and buyers (Govindan et al., 2015, Reinecker & Donaghey, 2021). Recently, Soundararajan et al. (2021) and Touboulic et al. (2020) with their critical engaged research approach, call for a shift to "humanize" SSCM research by focusing on social issues "close to the notion of decent work" and integrate a more "comprehensive range of actors". These authors recommend departing from the buyer-centred perspective and acknowledging the voices and actions of marginalized actors, notably workers, as legitimate stakeholders who influence sustainability practices in general and the social pillar in particular.

Critical research affirms that the gap between sustainability policy and practice constitutes an organizational façade used by firms to cover up social issues (e.g., Archel et al., 2011; Unerman & Chapman, 2014). The managerial action of concealing ethical problems by creating and displaying this organizational façade has been

conceptualized using several terms, such as window dressing (Kolk et al., 2013), green washing (Laufer, 2003), and even organizational hypocrisy (Cho et al., 2015). Among these, the concept of *policy-practice decoupling* is increasingly used to explore a range of social issues resulting in "inhumane living [and working] conditions" (Wilhelm et al., 2016, p. 50) and, generally, harm to workers' well-being.

Originally coined by Meyer and Rowan (1977), *policy-practice decoupling* is defined "as a strategy that allows organizations to abide only superficially by institutional pressures and adopt new structures without necessarily implementing related practices" (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017, p. 7). This decoupling has been identified across supply chains as a widely adopted managerial practice by buyers (Holtbrügge & Conrad, 2020). Indeed, Pope and Wæraas (2016) present academic evidence of buyer-initiated decoupling in "nearly all global CSR initiatives" (p. 14). SSCM studies referring to decoupling suggest that international buyers develop social sustainability policies in response to stakeholder pressure (Meixell & Luoma, 2015) to gain legitimacy. But the practical implementation of such formal structures is considered costly and inefficient for operations (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Buyers may therefore ceremonially adopt such structures while proceeding with "business-as-usual" (Jamali et al., 2017). Decoupling remains, however, a double-edged sword; if exposed, it can harm firms' legitimacy (Hensel & Guérard, 2020).

Studies about decoupling at the supplier level (Bartley & Egels-Zandén, 2016; Jamali et al., 2017) identify this managerial practice as a vicious pattern that causes working conditions to deteriorate at suppliers' factories (Winkler et al., 2020). The literature explores various forms of this ubiquitous practice, (see Table 1) including *selective decoupling* (Jamali et al., 2017), *mock compliance* (Huq & Stevenson,

2020), *recoupling* (Hallett, 2010), *contingent coupling* (Bartley & Egels-Zandén, 2016) and *tight coupling* (Sauder & Espeland, 2009). For instance, Jamali et al. (2017) argue that the Indian suppliers in their study deploy *selective decoupling*. In particular, the authors find that while social sustainability practices and policies on child labour, a highly visible and widely condemned practice, were *tightly coupled*, the same suppliers decoupled other "core humanitarian and labour rights issues" (p. 1).

Table 12 – Various forms of decoupling

Different forms of decoupling	Main reference	Definition
Decoupling	Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2017	Decoupling enables organizations to maintain standardized, legitimating, formal structures while their activities vary in response to practical considerations.
Mock compliance	Huq et al., 2016, 2018	Mock compliance is where a supplier appears to be complying with a code of conduct but is in fact concealing non-compliance, including hiding violations; short-term superficial conformance; and blatant cheating.
Recoupling (at organizational level)	Hallett, 2010	Recoupling is the process whereby policy and practice that once were decoupled are coupled again.
Contingent coupling	Bartley et al., 2016	Contingent coupling describes a situation in which the [policy-practice] gap shrinks to some degree, but the underlying problem of competing demands persists.
Tight coupling (at organizational level)	Weick, 1976; Sauder et al., 2009	Tight coupling refers to standardization, strong interdependence, and coherence between policy and practice.

Although many observations of this practice have been recorded, its drivers remain understudied. In an effort to explore how social issues and decoupling are related at the supplier level, we ground our inquiry in Sauder and Espeland's (2009) suggestion that some policy areas are more "decouple-able" than others. Furthermore, we investigate suppliers' decoupling as an institutional response to stakeholder pressures. Existing literature offers empirical evidence of suppliers' compliance with buyers' requirements; however, insight into suppliers' interactions with factory-level workers about social issues is lacking. To fill this gap, we mobilize the *stakeholder salience* theoretical lens to understand how and why different stakeholders influence local suppliers' efforts to couple particular policies around specific social issues, such as child labour in the case of Indian suppliers (Jamali et al., 2017) or building safety in Bangladesh (Alamgir & Banerjee, 2018), while selectively decoupling others.

3.2. Local suppliers' decoupling: a stakeholder salience perspective

Increasingly, managers are under stakeholder pressure to deal with social issues in supply chains. Quoting Freeman's pioneering work (1984), a stakeholder is "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (p. 46). The existence of multiple stakeholders, however, means that managers are likely to encounter conflicting demands (Hill & Jones, 1992, p. 138). Weber and Marley (2012) affirm that "understanding, weighing, and responding to these stakeholder demands" is a critical challenge for firms and scholars alike.

Adding a new perspective to stakeholder theory, Mitchell et al.'s (1997, 2017) *stakeholder salience* concept, defined as "the degree to which managers give priority to competing stakeholder claims" (p. 854), provides an explanatory

framework for measuring *who* and *what* really counts for a manager. The authors demonstrate their theory with two established attributes characterizing stakeholder salience, *power* and *legitimacy*, and a new attribute: *urgency* (see Table 5).

Mitchell et al. refer to Pfeffer's (1981) definition of *power* as “a relationship among social actors in which one social actor, A, can get another social actor, B, to do something that B would not otherwise have done" (p. 3). Although awkward to define, power is not hard to recognize since it is “the ability of those who possess power to bring about the outcomes they desire" (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1974, p. 3). In the stakeholder-management relationship, Mitchell et al. remark that a powerful actor can mobilize “coercive, utilitarian and normative means” (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 865) to influence managers. Coercive power entails force, violence, or restraint, while utilitarian refers to material incentives to encourage or discourage an action. Normative power, lastly, is associated with symbolic influence. The next attribute is borrowed from Suchman’s definition of *legitimacy* as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (1995, p. 574). Legitimacy can be analysed at different levels, including the individual, organizational and societal. Finally, Mitchell and colleagues define the last attribute, *urgency*, as “the degree to which stakeholder claims call for immediate attention” (1997, p. 864), emphasizing the multidimensional nature of this construct. Therefore, the evaluation of urgency is based on two sub-attributes: time sensitivity and criticality (Mitchell et al., 1997).

In general, the SSCM research applying the stakeholder salience concept employs an instrumental approach to investigate buyers’ behaviour towards stakeholders

(Busse, 2016; Park-Poaps & Rees, 2010). However, the buyer-centred approach fails to explore how stakeholder salience might influence local supplier behaviour regarding sustainable practices (Bartley & Egels-Zandén, 2016; Pope & Wæraas, 2016; Roy et al., 2020). In the limited research utilizing this lens at the supplier level, Gago and Antolín (2004) examine managerial perceptions about organizational stakeholder salience after surveying environmental managers from 277 Spanish firms. The authors note the hierarchy of important stakeholders for manufacturers and explore the influence of specific attributes on stakeholder salience. This research suggests that this theoretical lens can reveal insights into manager's perceptions of stakeholder claims related to social issues.

Based on the assumption that stakeholders' interests and expectations may conflict with one another (Hill & Jones, 1992), our study focuses on the salience to supplier managers of two specific groups of stakeholders: international buyers and factory-level workers. While various studies investigate buyer pressure on suppliers to implement policies, comparative research on the relationship and interaction between suppliers and workers is scant (Soundararajan et al., 2021). While stakeholder salience may potentially be an important explanatory framework for investigating suppliers' decoupling, no existing research has used this theoretical lens to explore supplier managers' perceptual considerations of stakeholder claims in their selective decoupling practice.

4. Socio-historical context and methodology

Social issues are more common within labour-intensive industries and are far worse in developing countries (Govindan et al., 2021; Köksal et al., 2017) where labour and environmental standards are less strict (Menke et al., 2021). To address the lack of relevant

Table 13 - Data collection

Categories of interviewees	*Interview information*			
	Round 1 July - September 2019	*Note*	*Round 2 October - December 2019*	*Note*
Suppliers	7 semi-structured interviews with five managerial staff members (Supplier 1-5)	S1: 45 mins, Manager, outside factory S2: 65 mins, Manager, outside factory S3: 60 mins, CEO of supplier, at company headquarters S4: 45 mins, group interviews with R&D, production and CSR managers, outside factory S5: 75 mins, operational manager, telephone interview	5 semi-structured interviews with four managerial staff members (Supplier 6-9)	S6: 65 mins, HR/CSR manager, outside factory S7: 40 mins, group interviews with Executive manager and CSR manager, inside factory S8: 65 mins, HR manager, inside factory S9: 80 mins, HR manager, outside factory
Workers	13 unstructured interviews (Worker 1-13)	W1:50 mins, production line leader, at the worker's house W2-6: 35-65 mins, rank-and-file workers, at a coffee house next to their living quarters W7-13: 45-50 mins each, rank-and-file workers, at their living quarters	12 semi-structured interviews (Workers 14-25)	W14-20: 45 mins each, a production line leader and rank-and-file workers, at their living quarters W21-22: 35-50 mins, rank-and-file workers, at a coffee house next to their living quarters W23-25: 45-60 mins, rank-and-file workers, at the NGO's training centre
Buyers (including brands and vendors)	1 unstructured interview with an international brand (brand 1)	B1: 90 mins, CSR representative in northern Vietnam	6 semi-structured interviews with 4 international brands and 1 vendor (Brands 1-2-3-4 and 2 interviews with Vendor 1)	B1: 50 mins, CSR representative in the South B2: 60 mins, CSR representative in the South B3: 55 mins, CSR representative in the South B4: 80 mins, CSR representative in the South V1: 50 mins, CSR representative in the South 70 mins, CSR representative in the North

empirical research pertaining to the institutional context of developing countries in this regard (Yawar & Seuring, 2018; Huq & Stevenson, 2020), our study explores social issues in Vietnam's garment suppliers, in order to gain new insights about the (de)coupling of policy and practice and stakeholder salience as perceived by local managers (Eisenhardt, 1989). A multiple case study approach allows us to explore a rich qualitative dataset (encompassing two rounds of fieldwork, including 44 interviews, observations and document analysis) to understand selective decoupling in the field. Multiple case studies at various suppliers bolster the external validity of the research (Barratt et al., 2011). We attempted to conduct as broad and multi-level an analysis as possible (Yin, 2009), with statements from suppliers' managers triangulated with those from international buyers and factory-level workers (see Table 2).

4.1. Vietnam's garment supply chain

In 2021, Vietnam surpassed Bangladesh as the second largest garment exporter behind China, accounting for 6.4% of global exports with a turnover of US$29 billion.[14] Most garment companies in Vietnam subcontract for international buyers and mainly fulfil Cut-Make-Trim processes – the lowest added value section in the global garment supply chain (Tran & Jeppesen, 2012). Suppliers are obliged to comply with the social sustainability policies of buyers, yet in comparison with other manufacturing industries, the Vietnamese garment sector has experienced massive waves of collective action by workers (Do & Broek, 2020). This makes Vietnam's garment industry a particularly interesting context to explore how suppliers practise social sustainability (and decoupling) under pressure from

[14] https://www.innovationintextiles.com/vietnam-worlds-second-biggest-apparel-exporter-but-for-how-long/

international buyers and local workers. Furthermore, distinctive features of Vietnam's local institutional environment, such as limited freedom of association (FoA) – a fundamental labour right recognized in buyers' codes of conduct (CoC) – and an ineffective collective bargaining (CB) system (Anner, 2020; Hoang & Jones, 2012) impact suppliers' decoupling. The local "challenging institutional context" (Huq & Stevenson, 2020) is, arguably, out of phase with international standards, making Vietnam's garment suppliers highly relevant subjects in the investigation of selective decoupling. We sought to unveil *who* and *what* really counts for supplier managers practising social sustainability and to understand how perceptual considerations influence managers' decoupling. Thus, our unit of analysis focuses on local supplier managers embedded in the particular institutional context of this developing country.

4.2. Research design

In the first round of fieldwork, our initial interview protocols were designed to explore interviewees' general understanding of labour violations and decoupling pertaining to the social issues defined by Yawar and Seuring (2017), i.e. child labour, human rights, and minority development, to name a few. As is common in qualitative research where data collection and analysis are done iteratively (Pratt, 2009), interim analysis helped us to adjust our research question on selective decoupling and to focus upon a particular set of social sustainability policies, close to the notions of decent work and the applicable theoretical lenses at hand. Referring to the policies associated with core labour standards framed by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2017) as "important to the decent work of garment workers" (p. 3), integrating policies related to the ILO's fundamental labour

Table 14 – Social sustainability policies in garment supply chains in our research

Social sustainable policy central to notion of decent work	Secondary data reference		Formal structures of international buyers
	International labour standards	Vietnam national laws	
Freedom of association	Convention No. 087, International Labour Organization	Labour Code 2019 Trade Union Law 2012	Labour Rights Charter Code of Conduct for Suppliers: 'Workplace Standards'
Right to bargain collectively	Convention No. 098, International Labour Organization	Labour Code 2019 Trade Union Law 2012	Labour Rights Charter Code of Conduct for Suppliers: 'Workplace Standards'
Forced labour	Conventions Nos. 029 and 105, International Labour Organization	Labour Code 2019 Penal Code 2015/2017	Modern slavery policy Code of Conduct for Suppliers: 'Workplace Standards'
Child labour	Conventions Nos. 138 and 182, International Labour Organization	Labour Code 2019 Law on Children 2016	Labour Rights Charter Code of Conduct for Suppliers: 'Workplace Standards'
Discrimination at work	Convention No. 111, International Labour Organization, UNDP, UNHRC	Labour Code 2019	Anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policy Code of Conduct for Suppliers: 'Workplace Standards'
Occupational safety and health	Convention No. 155, International Labour Organization	Labour Code 2019 Law on Labour Safety and Health	Health and safety policy Building safety policy Code of Conduct for Suppliers: 'Workplace Standards'
Wage-related payments	Conventions Nos. 095 and 131, International Labour Organization	Labour Code 2019	Labour Rights Charter Code of Conduct for Suppliers: 'Workplace Standards'
Overtime work	Conventions Nos. 001, 047, 014 and 171, International Labour Organization	Labour Code 2019	Labour Rights Charter Code of Conduct for Suppliers: 'Workplace Standards'

standards (i.e., FoA and CB, child labour, forced labour, discrimination) and technical labour standards (i.e., occupational safety and health (OSH), living wage, and overtime), we adapted the scope of our inquiry for the second round (see Table 3). Preliminary interpretations drawn from these two rounds of fieldwork were detailed in a fieldwork diary of observations about interactions between the interviewer and interviewees.

4.3. Data collection

In accordance with the particular institutional environment and sector of our inquiry, we applied purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Yawar & Seuring, 2018). Drawing on the author's expertise and intimate knowledge of Vietnam's garment industry, the purposive method was used to select 15 first-tier suppliers, in both northern and southern Vietnam. Whereas the standard protocol for securing interviews with workers involves getting in touch with unions, and with supplier managers normally reachable through the network of business associations, the specific institutional context of Vietnam necessitated a different approach. In Vietnam, conversely, local unionists often have close relationships with supplier managers, while workers are more approachable through NGOs' channels.

Therefore, capitalizing on personal links to local unionists who have close relationships with supplier managers, the author successfully met and interviewed nine identified suppliers. Through multi-level analysis we were able to identify patterns between decoupling and stakeholder salience. Using the snowballing technique, introductions to other suppliers were secured, leading to three more supplier interviews, which affirmed the identified decoupling patterns in the

suppliers as well as managers' perceptions of stakeholder salience, leading to theoretical saturation (Kovács & Spens, 2005).

From supplier interviews, we identified several international buyers. Through a network of auditors and CSR officers, the author sent written requests for interviews to the 10 largest garment brands and vendors outsourcing to Vietnam. Only three brands and one vendor agreed to our requests. All the interviewees from brands and vendors asked that they and their lead-firms remain anonymous. After being assured of non-disclosure, these interviewees openly shared their views about both improvements and ongoing challenges for social sustainability practices in Vietnam.

In order to glean workers' authentic perspectives about decoupling behind the organizational façade, the author relied on existing relationships with Vietnamese NGOs to approach workers at their living quarters and at NGO training centres outside the garment factories. Indeed, due to the peculiarities of the institutional context, as outlined above, the decision to interview workers outside their workplace was deemed crucial to relieve workers from managerial pressure and thus obtain more candid testimonies.

Table 15 - Data analysis process

Stage	Description	Coding categories	Data sources
Initial analysis	- Reading the interview transcripts in Vietnamese - Open coding inductively and translating the quotes into English - Identifying social issues related to social sustainability policies	Social issues regarding Freedom of association Collective bargaining Child labour Forced labour Discrimination Occupational safety and health	Interviews with suppliers, buyers and workers

		Wages Overtime	
Analysis of decoupling/coupling practices, and stakeholder salience as per the different social sustainability policies	Buyer and worker salience based on framework of Mitchel et al. (1997)	Coding scheme for stakeholder attributes (Table 5)	Supplier interviews
	Triangulation with stakeholders' influence on suppliers	Comparison of the claims of two groups of stakeholders pressuring suppliers	Buyer interviews Worker interviews
	Selective decoupling practices	Coding scheme for decoupling (Table 5) to identify decoupling/coupling practices in specific social sustainability policies	Interviews with suppliers, buyers and workers Formal structures provided by buyers
Cross-analysis	Identification of different patterns of supplier coupling/decoupling behaviour in the field of social sustainability issues		

4.4. Data analysis

After the fieldwork was completed, audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed. We analysed the collected data in three stages and applied the abductive approach outlined by Kovács and Spens (2005) to generate new insights from "a creative iterative process of 'theory matching'"(p. 139). Initially, we analysed the empirical data inductively, focusing on the identification of social issues related to specific policies. Next, we analysed stakeholder attributes deductively, as perceived by suppliers, with coding schemes including "(1) the stakeholder's power to influence the firm, (2) the legitimacy of the stakeholder's relationship with the firm, and (3) the urgency of the stakeholder's claim on the firm" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 854). We utilized the model developed by Mitchell and colleagues (1997) to evaluate the level of stakeholder salience (low, moderate, or high) based on the cumulative number of attributes present. We subsequently identified supplier decoupling practices and generated the coding themes on varied forms of *selective decoupling* (see Table 5). At this stage, triangulating interviews with

buyers and workers were used to identify convergence and divergence (Vogl et al., 2019) in selective decoupling practices. Finally, the third stage consisted of cross-analysis, during which different patterns of stakeholder salience influencing supplier coupling/decoupling practices emerged.

Table 16 - Codes derived from the underpinning theoretical frameworks (Stakeholder salience and Decoupling)

	Codes	Example of quote
Stakeholder-management relationship attributes - based on Mitchell et al., 1997		
Power	"a relationship among social actors in which one social actor, A, can get another social actor, B, to do something that B would not otherwise have done (Pfeffer (1981, p.3) cited in Mitchell et al. (1997, p. 865)	
Coercive means	Includes force, violence, or restraint, such as existence of threat, punishment for an action.	"If they want to get orders from us again, they must carry out a completely new assessment, re-audit to be approved and must reach C or higher[…] If they cannot achieve it, we will block them" - *Vendor 1* "Question: Who has forced you to apply them [the requirements on safety]? Answer: The buyers." - *Supplier 9* "Question: So you guys went on strike to make a change on wage issues or about what? Answer: That's correct. It's about wages. We workers always go on strike for better wages. Once we strike, they [managers] must change. They increase our wages according to our demands." - *Worker 26*
Utilitarian means	Includes material resources and incentives to encourage or discourage an action.	"Brands [buyers] still encourage suppliers to go beyond mere compliance. […] there will be more benefits for female labour like lactation rooms." (While gender and pregnancy discrimination is rampant in the field) - Buyer 1 "A buyer worked with our parent company in Singapore, then, we have to allow C* [a humanitarian organization] to come to the factory and communicate some policies for the workers. […] I think such organization is labour union." - Supplier 8
Normative means	Includes symbolic influence.	"That's what I told you, overtime is important. But the practice never improves [in this domain […]. There is an imbalance between [the number] of workers and the orders. [i.e. labour shortage leads to more overtime]. For us, if the suppliers violate the regulations on overtime, we need to adjust the records again to make them look compliant with the schedule." - Vendor 1
Legitimacy	Stakeholders' demands are perceived by the suppliers as "appropriate and desirable within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 869)	

Organizational level	Legitimacy of the claims is defined or negotiated at the organizational level or analysed at the organizational level.	"Well, they [buyers] must keep their reputation at the international level, they come to Vietnam for their business." - Supplier 6 "I agree that the standards [in CoC] are formal objectives. Of course, they are humane. But it doesn't always make sense for our local people." - Supplier 3
Individual level	Legitimacy of the claims is defined or negotiated at the individual level or analysed at the individual level.	Context - Conversation about anti-pregnancy discrimination: "You know, they [buyers] do have policies about these issues [pregnancy-based discrimination and hot working environment], but do not care about the implementation of such policies. But because my workers individually express their concerns about them, I will need to resolve the problem for each of them" - Supplier 9
Urgency	Stakeholders' demands require immediate action from suppliers to prevent further disruption.	
Time-sensitivity	"The degree to which managerial delay in attending to the claim or relationship is unacceptable to the stakeholder" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p.867)	"In general, when buyers face pressure from outside, like NGOs, they do very well in the relevant areas. So, in the past there may have been no requirements, but then, due to pressures from outside, policies such as building safety have been strengthened since the incident in Bangladesh." - Supplier 6
Criticality	"The importance of the claim or the relationship to the stakeholder" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p.867)	"Once workers' claims emerge, we need to improve our wage policy immediately" (Supplier 8).
Suppliers' selective decoupling practice		
Decoupling	The policies are not implemented by the suppliers.	"It's difficult to measure the difference between what suppliers do and what they claim that they do. Because, as you know, the data on the internet are only the great things that suppliers want to communicate about themselves. And of course, achieving good CSR is time-consuming and requires capital resources." - Supplier 4
Mock compliance	The policies are ceremonially implemented by suppliers by	"Brands may know, but they do not care. They only care about the consistency and suitability in invoices and papers." - Supplier 2

	providing fake paperwork or records.	
Recoupling	Under pressure from stakeholders and negotiation, the policies, where decoupling "was once in place", are tightly (partially or fully) coupled by the suppliers.	"I used to work at a company that kept two sets of books. However, I consulted the director to replace the two sets of books by just one. With the availability of the social media and mass media, we can't hide anything. Workers now have various channels to reveal the 2nd system [...] Currently auditors always make friends with workers. They follow workers' posts on Facebook about working conditions to see the situation of the factories." - Supplier 9
Contingent coupling	Some sub-sections of policies are fully complied with while other sub-sections are not.	"The auditing team is very sensitive [...], the auditors might pay attention to how many months they [female workers] have taken maternity leave. If a worker takes only one month off and then comes back to work, this is noncompliance caught by the auditors. They [buyers] also emphasize anti-harassment. [...] The HR team made [female] workers thoroughly understand that until they had worked here for two years, they could not have children. This is not written in the contract, just a verbal provision, like a form of implicit commitment." - Supplier 5 Field note taken after interview with Supplier 5 - "There is an 'internal' conflict in implementing the discrimination policy. Although anti-harassment (a type of discrimination as defined by AFL-CIO) is emphasized (ostensibly) by the buyers (maybe through their CoC and guidance), the unwritten rule on anti-pregnancy is blatantly stated by the HR managers of suppliers. Supposedly, there is certain pressure to implement part of the policy, but not the whole."
Tight coupling	The policies are fully complied with by the suppliers.	"No violation regarding child labour and forced labour, which are among the most fundamental points in the supplier selection process" (Vendor - Hanoi). "I have never seen any case of child labour at the placed I worked. The big companies [local suppliers] will not sign contracts with any persons who are less than 18" (Worker 1 - Ho Chi Minh city)."

5. Findings

5.1. Who really counts for local supplier managers

Our analysis reveals that buyers are, overall, perceived as extremely salient by local supplier managers. However, while the managers interviewed acknowledge buyer pressure, they also perceive workers as salient. Interviewed managers explain that workers' and buyers' salience cannot be disentangled, since the wellbeing and acceptable working conditions of workers are considered a means to ensure the completion of buyers' orders. While managers affirm the priority of buyers during auditing periods, factory-level workers capture supplier managers' constant attention on a daily basis. "We incessantly track workers' demands. If we feel there is something wrong in the air, we should actively find out the reasons and fix the problem. We don't wait until workers' discontentment blows up. There is not only a union channel, we have other informal ones. Whatever workers' concerns there are on the shop floor, we all know" (Supplier 7).

5.2. What really matters for local suppliers

Analysis of supplier manager interviews reveals not only which stakeholders are salient, but also that stakeholder salience itself is issue-driven. In other words, supplier managers "do pay certain kinds of attention to certain kinds of stakeholders" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 855).

Table 17 - Results

Studied social sustainable policies	**Perceived attributes of stakeholder salience**		**Suppliers' selective decoupling**
	Buyers' pressures	**Workers' pressures**	
Freedom of association	(Normative) Power	No claim	(Complete) decoupling
Collective bargaining	(Normative) Power	No claim	(Complete) decoupling
Child labour	(Coercive) Power (Organizational) Legitimacy (Time sensitive) Urgency	No claim	Tight coupling
Forced labour	(Coercive) Power (Organizational) Legitimacy (Time sensitive) Urgency	(Individual/Organizational) Legitimacy	Tight coupling
Discrimination	(Coercive/Utilitarian) Power (Organizational) Legitimacy	(Individual) Legitimacy (Critical) Urgency	Contingent coupling
Occupational safety and health	(Coercive/Utilitarian) Power (Organizational) Legitimacy	(Individual) Legitimacy (Critical) Urgency	Contingent coupling
Wages	(Normative) Power (Organizational) Legitimacy	(Coercive) Power (Organizational) Legitimacy (Time sensitive / Critical) Urgency	Mock compliance / Recoupling
Overtime	(Normative) Power (Organizational) Legitimacy	(Coercive) Power *(*Organizational*)* Legitimacy (Time sensitive / Critical) Urgency	Mock compliance / Recoupling

Based on the combination of stakeholder attributes – *power, legitimacy, and urgency* – we categorize stakeholder salience per policy into three levels: high, moderate, and low. Accordingly, when all three attributes are present, stakeholder salience is at a "high" level. The presence of two attributes corresponds to a "moderate" level, and when only one attribute is present, stakeholder salience is considered "low" (see Table 6).

High stakeholder salience

We find that buyer salience is high for certain policies where all three attributes of *power, legitimacy* and *urgency* are "perceived by managers to be present" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 878). However, salience can vary with time. For example, in Vietnam, we discovered that supplier managers consider buyers' concerns about *child labour* and *forced labour* as matters of the past, "[A] long time ago, our clients [buyers] were highly concerned about forced labour issues. They truly urged us to comply. However, that was in the past. They are much less focused on these issues [now]." (Supplier 7). At the time of our field research, interviewed managers recognize that buyers' priorities have shifted from the aforementioned areas to *building safety* and *anti-harassment*.

Conversely, worker salience is high regarding income-related issues, i.e., *wages* and *overtime*. "When I began my work here, we offered only basic wages. But now, workers are concerned about many other wage-related matters, such as additional allowances, commuting allowance, annual bonus and adequate overtime, etc." (Supplier 7). Indeed, suppliers recognize workers' claims related to income-related issues as *powerful, legitimate* and/or *urgent*. It is noteworthy that if satisfactory wages and adequate overtime are provided, workers' salience is moderate when only *legitimacy* and *power* are present. However, supplier managers also consider

workers to be highly sensitive about income-related adjustments. Therefore, in this context, *urgency* might be attributed to workers' claims, meaning salience would reach a "high" level due to the presence of all three attributes. Moreover, we posit that high worker salience may align with coercive power, i.e., collective action, such as strikes (Do & Broek, 2013). Overall, garment workers in Vietnam appear to have considerable agency to influence their managers through collective action, regardless of whether they are led by unionists or not.

Moderate stakeholder salience

In the business-as-usual scenario where supplier managers face no urgent claims from stakeholders, the salience of both buyers and workers is found to be moderate regarding *discrimination* (except for anti-harassment) and *occupational safety and health* (except for building safety). Our data show that effective implementation of policies in these areas is not automatically achieved: "You know, they [buyers] do have policies about these issues [pregnancy-based discrimination and hot working environment] but do not care about the implementation of policy" (Supplier 9). This may be due in part to discrepancies in the specific attribute combinations comprising moderate salience of workers and buyers in this context. Specifically, supplier managers attribute *legitimacy* and *urgency* to workers' claims, while they attribute *legitimacy* and *power* to buyers.

Concerning *wages and overtime*, as mentioned above, worker salience is often observed to be high, whereas buyer salience is moderate. "To these standards [wages and overtime] buyers' audit just needs us to provide consistent papers as proof. That's all!" (Supplier 2). The "papers" refer to accounting documents prepared by suppliers that buyers' auditors scrutinize to determine the number of contracted workers, their wages and timesheets. Our field data reveal the

pervasiveness of two sets of books at supplier factories to hide the difference between employed versus active workers and recorded versus real wages and overtime. When fraudulent activities are uncovered, buyers can impose certain requirements on suppliers for improvement. However, violations do not require buyers to cut ties with suppliers, except when buyers impose zero-tolerance policies. In our fieldwork, for example, only one buyer imposed zero-tolerance on the overtime policy. Generally, suppliers' managers associate buyers' requirements in these issues with *legitimacy* and *normative power*.

Low stakeholder salience

As for other policies in the CoC constituting the formal structure, buyers, theoretically, impose the right to freedom of association (FoA) on local suppliers. However, supplier managers hold that Vietnam-based factories are exempt from such obligations. "They [buyers] understand Vietnam's political system and they accept it. Somehow, [the lack of robust FoA tacitly symbolizes]… stable business without disruption" (Supplier 8). The discrepancy between formal structure and practice concerning FoA is regarded as a *clash of norms* between international and local institutional standards (Cortell & Davis, 2005). Our data do not show evidence of any worker claims in this area. Similar to the FoA issue, interviewed managers attribute low salience to buyers' requirements in implementing collective bargaining (CB). The CB process and agreements are considered as a "check-box" and a matter of "paper consistency", meaning compliance is merely symbolic, corresponding to *normative* power. Additionally, we found no supporting data for managers' attention to workers' CB claims. However, we note that even though CB does not function effectively at the supplier level in Vietnam, negotiations between supplier managers and workers *do* exist and are triggered by workers' coercive

power, i.e., wild-cat strikes or work stoppages that are not led by unions (Chan, 2020).

Other policy areas where supplier managers attribute low or no salience to workers include *forced labour* and *child labour.* In particular, supplier managers attribute zero salience to workers regarding *child labour*, while noting their concerns about forced labour, especially forced overtime. Nevertheless, based on our data, it is not easy to affirm whether such practices are associated with forced labour only or whether this also applies to overtime.

5.3. Supplier's selective decoupling shaped by stakeholder salience

Tight coupling when buyer salience is high

Traditionally, faced with high-salience buyers, suppliers acknowledge that buyers' *coercive power* in combination with supporting programmes to help suppliers eliminate child labour has led to long-term compliance. Our data reveal that buyers' zero-tolerance policies play a crucial role in imposing sanctions to punish local supplier misconduct when child labour or forced labour policies are violated. Therefore, suppliers tend to tightly couple these policies.

However, decoupling is more often exposed through discrepancies between suppliers' rhetoric and the reality of practices than through suppliers' statements alone (Jamali et al., 2017). Hence, buyer and worker testimonies were essential to identify such discrepancies. According to all interviewed buyers, consistent zero-tolerance policies toward child labour and forced labour issues are applied at their contracted suppliers. Interviews with workers, however, suggest that rigorous application of these policies is not as widespread as buyers and suppliers imply. On one hand, the majority of workers affirm that they have not encountered child

labour in their workplaces. On the other hand, our data reveal the existence of child labour practices, such as the employment of workers under 18 years of age in Vietnam. “I work with kids sometimes. They come to work during the summer vacation, like seasonal workers. They are about 16/17 years old working overtime quite a lot to earn [more money].” (Worker 3). In many developing countries, child labour is a cultural norm (Delap, 2001) and the situation in Vietnam is not an exception. Interviewed workers show little to no concern over this social issue.

Returning to stakeholder salience, our analysis suggests that suppliers tend to *tightly couple* certain high-salience issues for buyers, since buyers exert particularly strong pressure to eliminate suppliers’ wrongdoings in these areas. Therefore, we posit that, in Vietnam, suppliers’ decisions to *tightly couple* certain policies are generally influenced more by supplier managers’ perceptions of buyers than of workers.

Contingent coupling associated with a mixture of high and moderate stakeholder salience

Overall, our results indicate that suppliers do not fully comply with discrimination and occupational safety and health (OSH) policies. Some aspects of these policies are tightly coupled by local suppliers while others are not, meaning that suppliers are practising *contingent coupling*. For example, we find that anti-harassment policy and practice are consistently coupled by interviewed suppliers due to buyers' stringent requirements, especially regarding the prohibition of verbal and sexual harassment towards workers. However, despite this, pregnancy-based discrimination remains rampant in the field: “Yes, buyers say that we [suppliers]

are not allowed to fire pregnant workers, which is not good for mothers and children. However, if there is no employment contract, buyers can't track us! [...] I don't want to hire pregnant women. Then we will have to pay them six months of maternity leave without gaining anything. So, it's normal to make them commit to not getting pregnant." (Supplier 1).

The same contingent coupling is found in other areas. For example, we observe that interviewed suppliers prefer to employ workers in certain age ranges (18-35), which constitutes age-based discrimination (Duncan & Loretto, 2004). Contingent coupling is also found regarding OSH policy, where we note suppliers' tendency to tightly couple building safety issues, while decoupling other aspects such as the provision of protective equipment or menstruation breaks for female workers.

Globally, anti-harassment and building safety standards are among the most dominant requirements that buyers make of suppliers. Supplier managers recognize that violations in these areas are most likely to damage buyers' reputations. Furthermore, buyer salience regarding these issues has become heightened due to recent incidents in other countries (most notably, the Rana Plaza collapse). Therefore, anti-harassment and building safety are high-salience areas, where suppliers attribute *coercive power, legitimacy* and *urgency* to buyers' requirements. For other aspects pertaining to anti-discrimination and OSH policies, supplier managers believe that stakeholders possess two attributes of salience: namely, *power* and *legitimacy* for buyers, or *legitimacy* and *urgency* for workers.

Mock compliance: willing to mock and to be mocked

Recently, Huq and Stevenson (2020) identified "mock compliance" as a manifestation of *decoupling* at the supplier level. Our research echoes these

findings, revealing that Vietnamese suppliers also “mock comply” by hiding violations, conforming superficially in the short term and otherwise blatantly cheating.

This mock compliance emerges in certain practices. First, the practice of keeping multiple sets of books exists to hide the real number of workers employed by suppliers. Systematically, one set of books in which workers’ contracts and entitlements are recorded is presented to buyers and public authorities. Another set of books documenting the real number of workers, including workers with and without contracts, along with their wages, is strategically concealed. Second, because each supplier tends to manufacture for multiple brands, different sets of fake timesheets exist to ensure consistency with the number of orders under contract. Third, we have discovered that several suppliers have strategically divided facilities to steer audits in certain areas. Therefore, various levels of labour standards may be applied simultaneously in one factory to reduce production costs.

However, during interviews, suppliers acknowledge the possibility that buyers’ auditors might detect these decoupling practices. Here, suppliers often take advantage of income-related salience, where workers are willing to “mock comply” with the audit system for fringe benefits (Hoang, 2019). For example, workers agree to conceal actual overtime to support the supplier's official records if asked about working conditions by auditors. It is noteworthy that suppliers attribute *normative power* to buyers concerning these policies. Therefore, supplier managers believe that buyers would be willing to negotiate if multiple booking-keeping systems and timesheets were uncovered. “They [buyers] always say that suppliers must apply national laws or the Code, whichever is higher. However, wage and overtime issues relate to operational activities of business. Both my business and their business.

We might have some arrangement, of course, under the table to facilitate our operations." (Supplier 7). On one hand, workers want to earn a better income, so they cooperate with suppliers and mock compliance. On the other hand, buyers show little to no reaction when faced with mock compliance. Therefore, suppliers' mock compliance is considered a widely accepted practice at the local level.

Recoupling: when workers wield their power to express urgent demands

In recent years, the negative effects of decoupling (Jamali et al., 2017; Wilhelm et al., 2016) and rising awareness of workers about their rights have led to worker-initiated actions that disrupt decoupling. Collective action in or outside factories is becoming a common tactic for workers in Vietnam. "Well, the more they [workers] know, the more they strike. Previously, it [working conditions] was worse, far worse, but there were not so many strikes" (Supplier 8).

Indeed, this transformation of the worker-management relationship is increasingly recognized by suppliers. Marking a shift from *utilitarian power* and (often *individual) legitimacy*, workers are now building *organizational legitimacy*, *coercive power* (through collective action, i.e., strikes or the threat of strikes) and *time-sensitive and critical urgency*. Consequently, suppliers are recoupling practices to corresponding policies once workers notice the negatives of decoupling and wield their power to make their voices heard. "Workers went on strike because of excessive overtime. We overstepped the regulations somewhat. After the strike I called for an investigation to see how the strike was. We must improve to avoid strikes in the future." (Supplier 8).

Our data analysis also uncovered an interesting reversal: from suppliers' former mock-compliance to subsequent recoupling once the delicate balance of worker-supplier cooperation in concealing decoupling is broken. In some instances, workers may swing from supporting their managers to exposing decoupling to auditors if incentives do not exist or are insufficient. This finding resonates with the argument of Hoang (2019) about the active roles of workers in their relationships with both supplier managers and buyers' auditors. To prevent the exposure of decoupling, supplier managers mitigate workers' demands by recoupling certain policies: "offering better wages, better working conditions, and positioning workers as the highest priority" (Supplier 9).

(Complete) decoupling - the clash of norms, or when no one really counts

After analysis, we find that FoA and CB are the policy areas where (complete) decoupling is most often enacted by suppliers. During our fieldwork, FoA had not yet been embedded in national laws and practices. Therefore, the formal structure enshrined in buyer CoCs diverged from the realities of the national institutional environment, constituting *a clash of norms,* where buyers and suppliers deferred to national institutions.

However, while national laws about worker representation limit their formal participation in forming unions other than the Vietnam General Confederation (the Party-led union and the only one authorized in Vietnam), in practice workers are nonetheless permitted to elect union representatives. At the same time, buyers put forward "enhanced standards about labour unions such as the formation of unions, workers' elections…" (Vendor). However, buyer salience remains low on this issue. "No one would pay attention to the labour union… We [buyers] often said to each

other that the Vietnamese labour union was just a name" (Vendor). Furthermore, interviewed workers are mostly unconcerned with FoA, probably due to the lack of relevant national regulations. Therefore, conflict between international and local norms, plus workers being deprived of FoA, has created the perfect conditions for suppliers to ignore and hence completely decouple this policy.

Conversely, detailed regulations concerning the formal structure of CB, unlike FoA, are provided by both buyer CoCs and national laws (Do & Broek, 2013). In this study, interviewed workers indicate that they have little involvement in the CB process and that any questions about what CB is or how it works are left unaddressed. From the buyers' perspective, while acknowledging that CB is embedded in local unions' strategy, buyers consider that alternative solutions are more relevant for the business and workers. Stakeholder salience on this matter, therefore, is low or of no concern to suppliers, as previously mentioned. Once again, the pattern of complete decoupling is rampant among suppliers, where CB is ceremonially implemented without genuine manager-worker engagement. These observations echo those of Do and Broek (2013), who explained how CB agreements at the enterprise-level fail to address most workers' concerns.

6. Discussion

Policy-practice decoupling is a managerial practice frequently encountered in our field. With empirical data collected from Vietnam within its specific institutional environment, we provide an explanation for selective decoupling depending on supplier managers' perception of the variance between buyers' and workers' salience. Vietnamese suppliers selectively decouple, which can cause working conditions to deteriorate, directly impacting workers' well-being (Wilhelm et al., 2016). Our study thus offers theoretical contributions to the SSCM literature on

institutional decoupling by expanding beyond traditional actors, i.e., buyers and suppliers, to consider workers' actions and agency against decoupling.

Our first theoretical contribution pertains to the "humanization of SSCM research" by focusing on supplier manager-worker interactions. In the SSCM literature, workers have long been considered as marginalized actors lacking any power to change or influence suppliers' practices (Soundararajan et al., 2021). This assumption constitutes a critical limitation because it ignores the potential impact of "equally valid claims of stakeholders" (Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014, p. 49). Indeed, the suppliers interviewed in our study affirm that workers count significantly in their decisions about practising social sustainability. Additionally, our observation that Vietnamese workers play a reciprocal role (Hoang, 2019), to either mock comply or to recouple certain policies, constitutes a theoretical contribution to the literature on decoupling as well. Specifically, workers cooperate with suppliers to conceal certain violations against policies in exchange for short-term benefits, thus nurturing policy-practice decoupling concerning wages and overtime. However, once the balance between short-term benefits and long-term harm has tipped, workers are capable of activating their coercive power and wielding it to disrupt business-as-usual. Here, workers can make demands that suppliers recouple in mock-compliance areas by either revealing the suppliers' wrongdoings to other stakeholders (including buyers' social auditors) or threatening to do so. Eventually, discontent may even lead to the coordination of collective action in or outside the factories.

Our study emphasizes the importance of workers' participation in reframing and implementing decent work in the workplace as part of practising social

sustainability. The empirical evidence from Vietnam contributes to the conversation raised by Reinecke and Donaghey (2021) about worker-driven supply chain governance at both local and transnational levels where the authors offered a vivid example of Bangladeshi workers and unions. In the case of Vietnam, workers' daily battle to reshape working conditions at the factory takes place behind the factory doors and at a micro level. Against all odds, their voices are rising and pushing for solutions to the issues on their shop floors. Under certain conditions, as analysed in our study, their voices can reach beyond the factory's boundaries to catch the attention of other stakeholders through what Anner and Liu (2016) refer to as unauthorized workers' collective actions (such as wildcat strikes) – an alternative mechanism in a context where independent unionism is absent. Together with the buyer-driven pressure, the forces and voices of workers on the same issues can bring about radical change, by influencing managers' behaviours to recouple policy and practice and ensure sustainable compliance.

Our second contribution concerns the revelation that decoupling is a dynamic and ever-changing practice in which managers can selectively couple or decouple various social issues. While our observations of suppliers' coupling in some social sustainability areas (such as child labour and forced labour) echo other findings (Jamali et al., 2017; Huq & Stevenson, 2020), decoupling by Vietnamese suppliers is mainly done in the areas of FoA, CB, wages, overtime, discrimination, and OSH, where the realities of local institutions and social norms diverge from international standards. Based on the stakeholder salience perspective, we examine the perceptual considerations of Vietnamese suppliers underlying this selective decoupling process. The managers tend to tightly couple areas influenced by buyers' coercive power, exhibited through zero-tolerance sanctions for violations. Conversely, decoupling mostly appears in areas where the stakeholder salience of

buyers and workers is lower. In navigating various degrees of stakeholder salience, suppliers might change their behaviours in practising social sustainability. Furthermore, interviewed suppliers across Vietnam tend to enact the same types of coupling and decoupling, indicating a possible informal connection between executives of suppliers (Fontana & Egels-Zandén, 2019). Our results seem to suggest the existence of buyer-specific, systematic selective decoupling beyond individual factories – a promising potential avenue for future research. Therefore, we argue that suppliers who are active in the same local institutional context may engage in similar practices.

We identify several managerial implications of this research. First, suppliers take both the local context and stakeholders into account, not only to *decouple* but also to *(re)couple*. This observation extends the dominant perspective, in which buyers and suppliers alone possess coercive power over policy implementation. For example, (re)coupling in wage and income policy areas, in tandem with improvements to other working conditions such as OSH, would be a proactive managerial approach to retain the workforce in the context of a harsh labour shortage, especially given the growth of higher-wage industries (such as electronic assembling). Second, the dynamic nature of stakeholder attributes should not be overlooked. For instance, we have observed that workers' influence can evolve from hidden forms into visible expressions, such as from *normative power* to *coercive* means, or from limited-to-no *urgency* to *critical* and *time-sensitive* claims (in stakeholder salience terms). These are direct indicators that selective decoupling is impacting workers' overall well-being and creating a potential risk for buyers' reputations. Therefore, ensuring decent working conditions for workers is a safeguard for both buyers and suppliers. Third, the integration of Vietnam into the international economy, especially through its participation in free trade

agreements (FTAs) with developed countries, such as the CPTPP and the EU-Vietnam FTA, among others, will require ongoing, substantial changes in Vietnam's legal framework to align with international labour standards. Consequently, local suppliers need to be conscious of these macro-level institutional changes in order to ensure that their practices not only comply with social sustainability requirements, both environmentally and socially, but also with legal frameworks.

Taking a qualitative approach, we were able to explore suppliers' selective decoupling and stakeholder interactions in Vietnam extensively. However, our research remains heavily embedded in a particular context with a limited number of case studies. Therefore, we call for further studies to explore how other stakeholders pressure suppliers to deal with social issues in any challenging settings that may emerge and how they shape the local supplier's decoupling differently. Furthermore, in the global supply chain, decoupling is a complex, multi-organizational and multilevel process, involving myriads of actors, ranging from international buyers to field-level factories. Our study reveals only one angle of local decoupling from the stakeholder salience perspective by connecting buyer and worker pressure to the perceptions of local supplier managers. Policy-practice decoupling should be examined systematically and holistically in future research to paint a more insightful and detailed picture of the various decoupling mechanisms used by certain supply chain actors. Lastly, we call for more research to explore workers' power to correct local managers' wrongdoings as well as to inform other local and international actors of their struggles at the field level. These research avenues will enrich our understanding of worker-driven aspects, both current and future, of supply chain governance.

7. Conclusion

Departing from a buyer-centric approach, we study decoupling from the supplier managers' perspective and analyse their perception of international (i.e., buyers) and local (i.e., factory-level workers) stakeholder salience. Our field data in Vietnam confirms that buyers are not the sole actors impacting suppliers' social sustainability practices. Suppliers consider other stakeholders as well, including workers, who have been less visible in the SSCM literature (Soundararajan et al., 2021, Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021). Furthermore, our data analysis reveals how the specific attributes of stakeholder salience (i.e., power, legitimacy and urgency) impact suppliers' selective decoupling strategies.

At the supplier-level, each factory becomes a local arena where policies are negotiated between the supplier and its complex sets of stakeholders. Certain policies thus constitute hard-and-fast rules, whilst violations are tolerated in other areas by certain stakeholders. Our study reveals that selective decoupling is a process rather than a snapshot phenomenon, where suppliers continually navigate stakeholder expectations and salience to identify "decouple-able" policies (Sauder et al., 2009).

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PART III

This chapter synthesizes the findings of the three papers and discusses how they collectively address the dissertation's overarching research questions. It reflects on the interconnected theoretical and empirical insights that emerge from examining social sustainability through the lens of decoupling across multiple tiers of global supply chains.

The chapter begins by illustrating the integrative contributions of the three papers, showing how they each unpack distinct but interrelated dimensions of social decoupling—conceptual, worker-driven, and supplier-centered. It then articulates the theoretical contributions of the dissertation to both Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM) and decoupling research, advancing a multi-level, actor-centered understanding of symbolic compliance and social (dis)engagement in global production networks.

Beyond theory, the chapter identifies practical implications for firms, policymakers, and sustainability practitioners, particularly around strengthening accountability mechanisms and amplifying worker voice in CSR implementation. It concludes by acknowledging the limitations of the research and suggesting future directions, encouraging further inquiry into the dynamic agency of marginalized supply chain actors and the institutional drivers of enduring decoupling practices.

CHAPTER 7 - DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

1. Connection of three papers to answer the overarching research questions

The opening chapter of this dissertation set the stage by outlining the motivation behind this research, which lies in the desire to deepen our understanding of the complex and layered dynamics that characterize contemporary supply chains. The overarching aim of this work is to shed light on how disconnections between social policies and practices—or "decoupling"—manifest across different tiers of global supply chains, and how various actors engage with these processes. In particular, this study seeks to answer the following core research questions introduced in Chapter 1:

1. *How does decoupling occur at different tiers of supply chains?*
2. *Who are the actors or stakeholders involved in these decoupling processes?*
3. *In what ways are these actors involved?*

To address these questions, the dissertation draws on three interrelated research articles, each contributing to different facets of the overarching research questions through five secondary questions. Each article adopts a distinct theoretical lens and investigates a specific dimension of decoupling and stakeholder engagement within global supply chains. Paper 1 (Chapter 4) conceptualizes how decoupling unfolds across various tiers of the supply chain, with particular attention to the governance surrounding workers' voices and participation within supply chain spaces. Paper 2 (Chapter 5) examines how workers respond to and resist unsustainable practices in factories, highlighting their agency and the socio-political dimensions of workplace contestation. Paper 3 (Chapter 6) focuses on how

suppliers strategically navigate the competing demands of multiple stakeholders and manage their salience within complex institutional environments.

Figure 6 - Overarching research questions and its potential answers

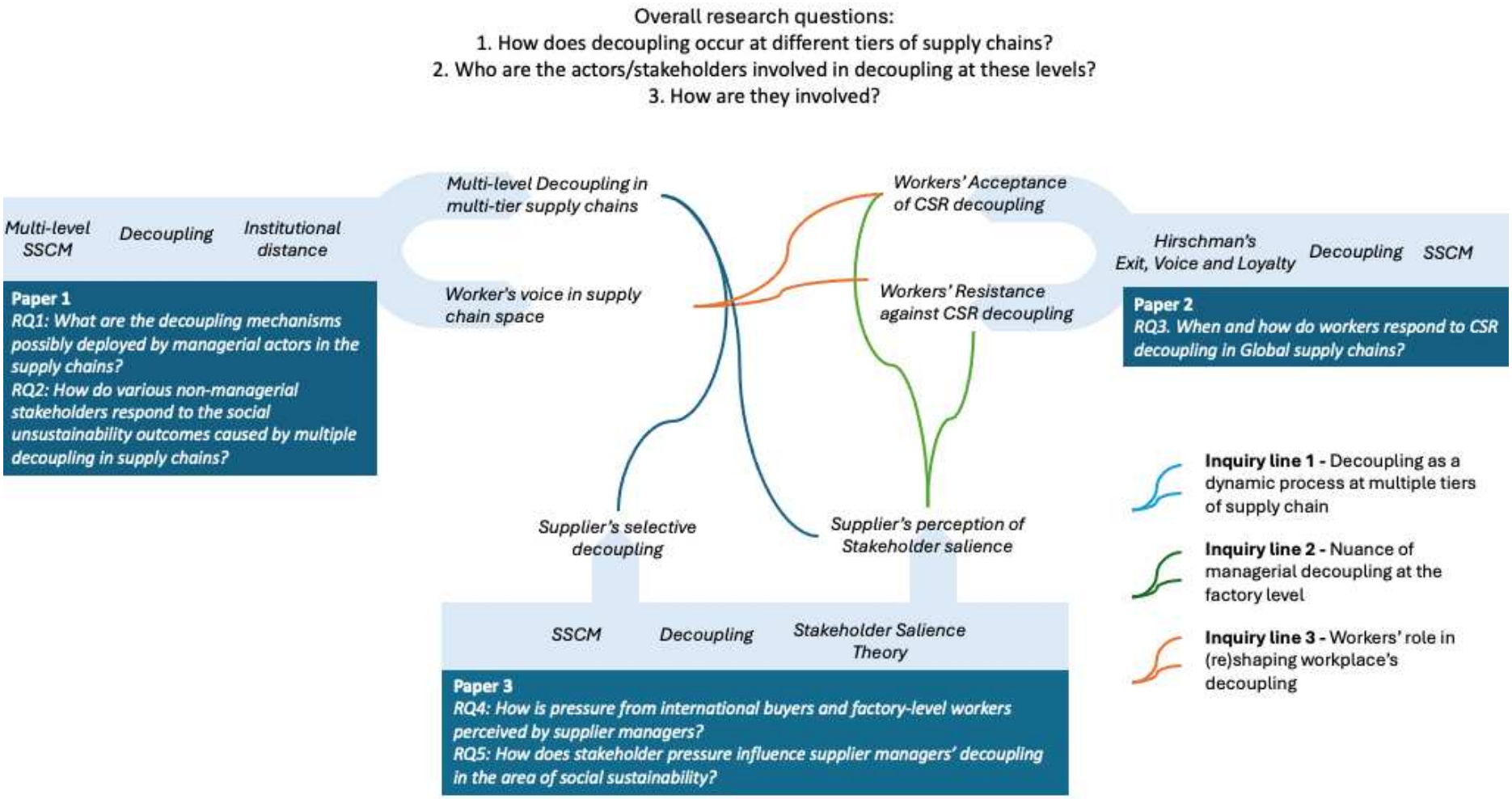


Figure 6 provides a visual synthesis of the dissertation's structure, illustrating the focus areas and principal findings of each paper. This diagram also highlights the conceptual and empirical connections across the articles, demonstrating how they collectively inform the broader understanding of supply chain decoupling and stakeholder dynamics. Three lines of inquiry include (1) the demonstration of decoupling as a dynamic process at multiple tiers of supply chain; (2) the nuance of managerial decoupling at the factory level; and (3) workers' role in (re)shaping workplace's decoupling. These three lines of inquiry are not isolated but rather interconnected. Together, they offer a multidimensional understanding of how decoupling plays out at different levels, and how actors—whether workers, suppliers, or international buyers—shape and are shaped by these processes. Each article contributes uniquely to the central questions while also reinforcing insights generated by the others, creating a layered and cohesive narrative.

In the first line of inquiry, chapter 4 (Paper 1) integrates the decoupling literature into the context of multi-tier supply chains, focusing on the distinct roles of focal firms (FFs), Tier-1 suppliers (T1s), and Tier-n sub-suppliers (SSs) (Chand & Tarei, 2021; Gong et al., 2021; Mena et al., 2013; Sauer & Seuring, 2018). Building on Sauer and Seuring (2018), these supply chains are conceptualized as institutional fields composed of overlapping "relational spaces," each defined by the distinct institutional environment in which a supply chain actor operates. These spaces are shaped through interactions among actors and governed by specific pressures that impact how stakeholder influence is exerted and how supply chain uncertainty is managed. Notably, institutional fragmentation tends to increase with both geographical and relational distance from the focal firm.

Chapter 6 (Paper 3) expands this framework with empirical evidence showing how stakeholder salience, particularly of buyers and workers, is perceived by local supplier managers. While buyers are viewed as the most dominant stakeholders due to their role in audits and enforcement, workers are increasingly acknowledged as critical actors whose well-being is vital to production continuity. Supplier managers monitor worker sentiment via formal and informal mechanisms, revealing the interconnectedness of buyer and worker salience—though these are prioritized differently depending on situational demands.

Addressing the second line of inquiry, the dissertation explores the nuances of decoupling in practice by examining suppliers' managerial approaches. Decoupling is not as a static state, but as a dynamic and evolving process that reflects how organizations adapt to shifting internal capacities and external institutional demands (Bromley, Huang & Powell, 2012; Fiss & Zajac, 2006). Organizations may move along a continuum from tight coupling—where policies and practices align—to various forms of loose, selective, or complete decoupling, before potentially transitioning to recoupling when pressures realign or stabilize (Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005). Of particular relevance is selective decoupling, which emerges as a strategic response to the salience of specific stakeholder concerns. Firms tend to comply with issues that are highly visible and legitimacy-sensitive—such as child labour and building safety—while neglecting others that receive less external scrutiny, including freedom of association (Sauder & Espeland, 2009; Jamali et al., 2017). At the same time, Paper 2 (Chapter 5) brings vivid evidence about workers' response – as internal pressure – to maintain or disrupt supplier's decoupling at workplace. It also means firm can re-adapt their decoupling trategies accordingly. This selective compliance is further facilitated by the opaque nature of global supply chains (Kuruvilla et al., 2020), where powerful external stakeholders,

particularly international buyers, drive issue-specific adherence (Barley & Egels-Zandén, 2015; Le, 2022). Consequently, selective decoupling allows firms to preserve external legitimacy without implementing holistic improvements, thereby underscoring the need for governance mechanisms that ensure balanced enforcement across all dimensions of social sustainability (Kuruvilla et al., 2020).

Paper 3 (Chapter 6) utilizes Mitchell et al.'s (1997) framework to examine supplier perceptions of stakeholder salience regarding decoupling practices. Salience—determined by stakeholder power, legitimacy, and urgency—varies significantly by policy. Freedom of association (FoA) and collective bargaining (CB) show low salience due to weak worker claims and limited buyer influence, resulting in complete decoupling (Chan, 2020; Do & Broek, 2013). Conversely, child and forced labour, marked by buyers' strong coercive power, legitimacy, and urgency, remain tightly coupled, ensuring more consistent compliance. Issues such as wages and overtime garner high worker salience, particularly when collective action amplifies pressure (Do & Broek, 2013). Moderate salience issues—discrimination and occupational safety and health (OSH)—experience inconsistent compliance. Buyers commonly resort to symbolic practices like document-based audits, and suppliers engage extensively in mock compliance, including dual wage and time records (Huq & Stevenson, 2020). Low-salience policies, notably FoA and CB, are justified by suppliers referencing Vietnam's political context, where independent unions are illegal, prompting buyers to adjust expectations (Cortell & Davis, 2005). Interviews highlight the symbolic nature of FoA and performative aspects of CB, facing minimal resistance from stakeholders (Chan, 2020; Do & Broek, 2013).

Suppliers navigate selective decoupling based on stakeholder salience. Child and forced labour, due to zero-tolerance policies and reputational risks, demonstrate

formal compliance. However, field data reveal discrepancies, such as child labour occurring informally during school breaks, influenced by local cultural norms (Delap, 2001). Contingent coupling appears within policy domains—anti-harassment policies might be enforced, whereas pregnancy discrimination persists; similarly, building safety is prioritized over OSH practices like protective gear provision or menstruation breaks. Mock compliance, including falsifying documents, continues strategically. Workers may participate for personal benefit, demonstrating mutual complicity (Hoang, 2019). Buyers may indirectly tolerate these practices, aligning with suppliers' operational interests. However, recoupling emerges when worker mobilization transforms them into coercive stakeholders, compelling improved conditions and wages, though such equilibrium remains fragile and dependent on sustained worker silence or loyalty (Jamali et al., 2017; Wilhelm et al., 2016).

The third line of inquiry is embedded in the three papers altogether emphasizing workers' role in impacting the working conditions by exploring their voice. Paper 1 (Chapter 4) elaborates on the role of worker voice in maintaining or disrupting decoupling. Silence perpetuates decoupling, while strikes and protests catalyze recoupling efforts (Hensel & Guérard, 2020). In Vietnam, micro-strikes by female garment workers have demonstrated how grassroots resistance can pressure firms toward compliance (Hoang & Jones, 2012). However, institutional distance across tiers continues to hinder uniform application of standards (Egels-Zandén, 2007; Kuruvilla et al., 2020).

Paper 2 (Chapter 5) applies Hirschman's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty framework, extended by Cynicism and Neglect, to explore how workers respond to CSR decoupling. Workers typically tolerate policy-practice gaps, like informal

employment or double bookkeeping, driven by economic necessity rather than genuine acceptance. Loyalty emerges through modest compensatory gestures, but when thresholds are breached, workers express cynicism, manifesting frustration and passive dissatisfaction (Naus et al., 2007).

Workers' resistance, as Paper 2 outlines, is rarely linear. Workers may shift between neglect, voice, and exit, often influenced by a shared sense of collective. Communication platforms like social media facilitate peer awareness and solidarity. Workers who initially refrain from voicing discontent may act collectively once they recognize shared grievances. In-house strikes and temporary work stoppages are used to exert pressure. Voice may also extend to external channels, including hotlines, unions, or multi-stakeholder initiatives. However, such actions are risky. Strike leaders may face blacklisting, rendering them unemployable within the local labour market. Consequently, many workers pursue silent or vocal exits when conditions deteriorate, while others—particularly older or less mobile workers—remain trapped in substandard environments.

The dynamic EVLNC model proposed in Paper 2 refines Farrell's (1983) original framework by introducing Cynicism (Naus et al., 2007) and emphasizing collective over individual responses. Workers' trajectories between acceptance and resistance are shaped by economic pressures, emotional thresholds, and peer networks. Resistance emerges when awareness and solidarity converge. Yet even then, institutional responses remain reactive and short-term.

The paper identifies cases of non-response, where workers perceive CSR decoupling as culturally normative or personally advantageous. Practices such as informal youth employment or ad hoc reimbursements are tolerated when they align with workers' immediate needs. This highlights the disjuncture between CSR

frameworks and workers' lived realities. In the absence of effective enforcement, CSR decoupling persists—not only due to corporate neglect, but because many workers have little incentive or capacity to resist.

The paper 1 of this dissertation also extends this analysis by highlighting how worker voice that breaches internal supplier environments can expose decoupling externally. Workers increasingly leverage partnerships with NGOs, media, and international advocacy groups to draw attention to deteriorating conditions (Anner, 2015; Anner & Liu, 2016). Such actions, including wildcat strikes, have surfaced in restricted environments like Vietnam, showing how external voice challenges the secrecy of decoupled practices (Chan & Norlund, 1998; Chi & Broek, 2013). These disruptions can destabilize supplier strategies, as revealed in factory-level protests that uncover the gap between codes of conduct and actual practices (Quynh Chi, 2017). Once exposed, suppliers face intensified scrutiny and are pressured to recouple (Kluge & Schömann, 2008).

Transnational worker voice as a powerful force can amplify the consequences of decoupling to fix the unsustainable practice at the workplace. When worker agency travels across borders—through global unions, advocacy networks, or transnational NGOs—it places institutional pressure on focal firms and top-tier actors (Pike, 2020; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021). This vertical pressure highlights governance failures and pushes upper-tier firms toward stricter enforcement and monitoring. Examples include the enforcement of union rights across borders (Reneicker et al., 2021), calls for more rigorous auditing (Max & Wouter, 2016), and systemic reform following major incidents like the Rana Plaza collapse (Huq et al., 2014a; Shareef et al., 2020; Schüßler et al., 2019). Such events demonstrate how

transnational voice can catalyze large-scale recoupling and shift corporate practices toward greater sustainability alignment.

Following the synthesis of the main findings from the three articles and their interconnections, the next section outlines the extent to which these insights advance existing literature on Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM) and decoupling, as well as their practical implications and avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical Contributions

This study directly responds to several critical research gaps in Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM), particularly regarding the role of workers, the conceptualization of decoupling, and the dominant buyer-centric approach to sustainability. While SSCM literature has extensively examined corporate strategies, it has largely overlooked the agency of workers in shaping sustainability outcomes (Soundararajan et al., 2021). Furthermore, sustainability efforts have frequently been framed through an instrumental lens—focused on economic performance—rather than as a normative commitment to ethical labour practices (Gold & Schleper, 2017). These gaps have resulted in a lack of attention to how sustainability policies translate into actual factory-level improvements, particularly in multi-tier supply chains in developing countries (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021). By integrating worker perspectives and examining sustainability governance beyond first-tier suppliers, this study contributes to humanizing SSCM research and rethinking sustainability beyond compliance mechanisms.

Furthermore, this study engages in theory-building by utilizing empirical data to interrogate existing conceptual models of sustainability decoupling. By focusing on worker perspectives, it advances a decolonized perspective of worker's voices,

resisting dominant frameworks that often marginalize workers' contributions. It also highlights how this research process has shaped the author's understanding of SSCM and labour agency, underscoring the iterative and reflexive nature of academic inquiry.

2.1. Contributions to SSCM

Addressing the Worker-Centric Research Gap in SSCM

A fundamental shortcoming in SSCM literature is the underrepresentation of workers' roles in shaping sustainability outcomes (Stephens et al., 2024). Existing studies often prioritize strategic and operational dimensions, portraying workers as passive recipients rather than active influencers of sustainability practices (Soundararajan et al., 2021; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021). Pagell and Wilhelm (2025) note that SSCM research historically emphasizes environmental aspects, subordinating worker well-being to economic efficiency and compliance. This study responds to these concerns by investigating the agency of factory-level workers and their contributions to sustainability discourse and practice. By bringing workers' experiences to the forefront, it advances a more human-centred understanding of SSCM that aligns with calls for the "humanization" of sustainability research (Soundararajan et al., 2021).

This research contributes to the urgency of this shift. Stephens et al. (2024) argue for expanding worker voice mechanisms beyond communication and representation, emphasizing recognition of justice in supply chain governance. Similarly, Jia, Gong, and Brown (2019) highlight the importance of multi-tier governance in ensuring workers' participation in sustainability initiatives.

Thorlakson et al. (2018) suggest that corporate sustainability efforts are often restricted to first-tier suppliers, leaving workers in lower-tier supply chains highly vulnerable to decoupling practices. These arguments align with the core contributions of this study: that meaningful SSCM must move beyond compliance-based models toward a governance approach that genuinely integrates worker agency.

This dissertation contributes to positioning workers' as active participants rather than passive recipients of sustainability policies (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021). By examining the experiences of factory workers, this research reveals how they can resist exploitative conditions, mobilize collective action, and engage with external actors such as unions and NGOs to push for better labour standards. Workers' roles in practising sustainability, from compliance monitoring to mobilizing resistance, are crucial in ensuring that sustainability goals extend beyond rhetoric and are meaningfully embedded in workplace realities. This is a contribution to decolonising research by exploring different voices from a marginalized actor in the supply chain (Touboulic & McCarthy, 2020; Silva et al., 2023). As research with empirical data from Global South, this study proposes a new understanding about workers' responses to the work-related challenges in the local context, despite the imposing international labour standards from international buyers from Global North.

This study also contributes to the humanization of SSCM by foregrounding the lived experiences of workers and exposing the gaps between corporate commitments and on-the-ground realities (Soundararajan et al., 2021). By documenting worker-driven forms of recoupling—where workers pressure firms to align policies with practices—this study broadens the scope of sustainability governance beyond

corporate initiatives to include worker agency as a critical force in social sustainability.

Pagell and Wilhelm (2025) highlight that sustainability decisions made at the corporate level—such as cost-cutting strategies, just-in-time production models, and supplier audits—often have unintended consequences for workers. This study extends their argument by demonstrating that workers are not merely passive participants in these systems but actively engage in shaping the implementation and contestation of sustainability policies. By documenting worker-led efforts to push back against exploitative practices, this research foregrounds labor agency as a critical but underexamined component of SSCM.

The research highlights the nuanced dynamics of worker agency by underscoring not only the potential for empowerment through collective action but also the clear limitations workers face. While increased awareness and solidarity can amplify workers' voices, compelling meaningful policy responses, the study also exposes significant barriers. Workers often confront substantial personal risks, such as blacklisting and retaliation, which can severely limit their capacity to sustain long-term empowerment or consistently resist exploitation. Thus, worker empowerment and voice, while critical, remain inherently fragile and contingent upon broader institutional support and protection.

With a qualitative method grounded in interpretative assumptions, this research also contributes to different ‘qualitative buildings’ in SSCM research (Wieland et al., 2024). In particular, it sheds light on how workers, and also supplier managers, give meaning to the labour standards and figure out strategies to implement such standards in the lower-tier of supply chains. Notably, regarding unsustainable practices at the workplace, the social actions of marginalized actors, such as

workers, must be explored with in-depth interactions and observations from researchers (Darby et al., 2019).

Moving Beyond an Instrumental Approach to Sustainability and Challenging the Buyer-Centric Model of SSCM

Existing SSCM research has been critiqued for adopting an instrumental approach, in which sustainability is primarily seen as a means to maximize profits or mitigate reputational risks rather than as an ethical imperative (Gold & Schleper, 2017; Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014). This perspective has led to sustainability strategies that focus on harm reduction rather than elimination (Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014). In contrast, this study adopts a normative approach to sustainability, emphasizing that sustainability must be assessed based on its tangible impact on workers' well-being rather than its ability to generate competitive advantages for firms.

By centring on the voices of workers, this research highlights how sustainability efforts can be co-opted into symbolic compliance strategies rather than leading to meaningful improvements in labour rights, safety, and fair wages. The findings underscore that sustainability must go beyond compliance audits and instead incorporate worker-driven accountability mechanisms, including stronger grievance systems and labour rights protections.

Another critical gap in SSCM research has been its buyer-centric perspective, which portrays MNEs as the primary drivers of sustainability while overlooking the perspectives of suppliers, particularly those in developing countries (Bubicz et al., 2021; Wilhelm et al., 2016a). This study challenges this assumption by demonstrating that suppliers often navigate conflicting pressures from buyers and workers, leading to complex decoupling dynamics.

By incorporating supplier perspectives, this research reveals the institutional constraints that shape supplier decision-making, including the financial and regulatory challenges that limit their ability to fully comply with buyer-imposed sustainability standards (Zorzini et al., 2015). The findings indicate that sustainability efforts must be adapted to local contexts, rather than dictated solely by corporate codes of conduct, which often fail to account for the realities of supplier operations in developing countries.

Expanding SSCM to Multi-Tier Supply Chains

Most SSCM research focuses on first-tier supplier relationships, failing to account for the extended networks where the most severe social sustainability challenges occur (Busse et al., 2016; Nath & Eweje, 2021). This study fills this gap by exploring multi-tier supply chain dynamics, demonstrating how sustainability governance is fragmented across different levels of the supply chain.

The findings show that sustainability efforts often weaken at lower tiers where the production takes places, where oversight mechanisms are limited and firms operate in institutional voids with weak labour protections (Wilhelm et al., 2016a). By highlighting the vulnerabilities of lower-tier suppliers and their workers, this study reinforces the need for multi-tier governance structures that ensure labour rights protections extend beyond first-tier suppliers.

2.2. Contributions to Decoupling Research

Reconceptualizing Decoupling as a Dynamic Process

Most SSCM research treats decoupling—where corporate policies diverge from actual practices—as a static, unchanging strategy. The evolving, dynamic nature of

decoupling, characterized by shifting managerial responses to market, regulatory, and stakeholder pressures, remains insufficiently explored.

A related contribution is to illuminate an important and yet overlooked local arena for CSR decoupling at the factory level. We show how the factory site constitutes a space for local contestation and negotiation between managers and workers to reach a compromise on CSR decoupling in global supply chains. The existence of such space combined with the variance in organizational and worker characteristics explains why the degree of decoupling may vary quite significantly from one factory to another, even within the same country, leading to heterogeneous adoption and selective decoupling (Jamali et al., 2017). While it is challenging to directly link worker actions to buying firms' behavior in the SSCM field, our study emphasizes the indirect influence that worker agency may have on the (lack of) effectiveness of CoCs and audits.

Our second contribution concerns the revelation that decoupling is a dynamic and ever-changing practice in which managers can selectively couple or decouple various social issues. While our observations of suppliers' coupling in some social sustainability areas (such as child labour and forced labour) echo other findings (Jamali et al., 2017; Huq & Stevenson, 2020), decoupling by Vietnamese suppliers is mainly done in the areas of freeom of association, collective bargaining, wages, overtime, discrimination, and occupational safety and health, where the realities of local institutions and social norms diverge from international standards. Based on the stakeholder salience perspective, we examine the perceptual considerations of Vietnamese suppliers underlying this selective decoupling process. Managers tend to tightly couple areas influenced by buyers' coercive power, exhibited through zero-tolerance sanctions for violations. Conversely, decoupling mostly appears in

areas where the stakeholder salience of buyers and workers is lower. In navigating various degrees of stakeholder salience, suppliers might change their behaviours in practising social sustainability. Furthermore, interviewed suppliers across Vietnam tend to enact the same types of coupling and decoupling, indicating a possible informal connection between executives of suppliers (Fontana & Egels-Zandén, 2019). Our results seem to suggest the existence of buyer-specific, systematic selective decoupling beyond individual factories – a promising potential avenue for future research. Therefore, we argue that suppliers who are active in the same local institutional context may engage in similar practices.

We identify several managerial implications of this research. First, suppliers take both the local context and stakeholders into account, not only to *decouple* but also to *(re)couple*. This observation extends the dominant perspective, in which buyers and suppliers alone possess coercive power over policy implementation. For example, (re)coupling in wage and income policy areas, in tandem with improvements to other working conditions such as OSH, would be a proactive managerial approach to retain the workforce in the context of a harsh labour shortage, especially given the growth of higher-wage industries (such as electronic assembling). Second, the dynamic nature of stakeholder attributes should not be overlooked. For instance, we have observed that workers' influence can evolve from hidden forms into visible expressions, such as from *normative power* to *coercive* means, or from limited-to-no *urgency* to *critical* and *time-sensitive* claims (in stakeholder salience terms). These are direct indicators that selective decoupling is impacting workers' overall well-being and creating a potential risk for buyers' reputations. Therefore, ensuring decent working conditions for workers is a safeguard for both buyers and suppliers. Third, the integration of Vietnam into the international economy, especially through its participation in free trade

agreements (FTAs) with developed countries, such as the CPTPP and the EU-Vietnam FTA, among others, will require ongoing, substantial changes in Vietnam's legal framework to align with international labour standards. Consequently, local suppliers need to be conscious of these macro-level institutional changes in order to ensure that their practices not only comply with social sustainability requirements, both environmentally and socially, but also with legal frameworks.

Workers' response to managerial decoupling: Role of Workers in Practicing Social Sustainability

CSR decoupling is an institutionalized practice in global supply chains, as a range of actors contributes collectively to a series of decoupling, creating decoupling cascades (Cao & Jayasinghe, 2024). In this ecosystem, the least known actor is factory-level workers, as research on CSR decoupling tends to focus on the role of buyers and suppliers (Jamali et al., 2017; Kuruvilla et al., 2020) or unions and NGOs (Bartley & Egels-Zandén, 2016). Moreover, supply chain workers are often portrayed as passive and obedient, yet at times complicit or openly rebellious. Our research explores this paradox and provides insights into why and how workers respond to CSR decoupling in different situations.

Our study demonstrates that rank-and-file workers, far from being powerless, can exercise their agency and choose to respond (or not) to various decoupled practices. By contrast, workers are unlikely to resist CSR decoupling if they feel alone in enduring the problem or do not find it problematic due to prevailing norms or incentives. Such selective and ambivalent response by workers to decoupled practices means that workers can also be responsible for decoupling (Hoang, 2019; Oka, 2016). Moreover, the gaps between CSR policies and workers' actual needs suggest that examining CSR decoupling alone is not sufficient to tackle pervasive

substandard conditions in global supply chains. The findings thus encourage us to look beyond CSR decoupling as we seek to build a path for decent work.

The Vietnamese case points to the agency, power and courage of workers who go on strikes without unions or external assistance. This contrasts with existing research that emphasizes the need to leverage external actors such as buyers, global union federations, local independent unions or NGOs to combat decoupling and bring about positive change on the factory floor (Bartley & Egels-Zandén, 2016). Nonetheless, workers are not prepared to take risky actions alone and fight for issues that are not dear to them. Our findings thus defy the portrayal of docile and powerless workers and yet provide a more nuanced picture about workers' willingness and capacity to overcome CSR decoupling in global supply chains.

Governance Beyond the Boundary of the Factory

The discourse on CSR decoupling has gained traction in sustainability research. According to Talpul et al. (2023), CSR decoupling refers to the symbolic overstatement of CSR performance in corporate disclosures to enhance legitimacy. In global supply chains, social compliance decoupling occurs when supply chain actors fail to substantively implement labour code criteria (Cao & Jayasinhe, 2023). These observations highlight the necessity of adopting a worker-centered approach to sustainability, ensuring that corporate policies translate into substantive improvements in labour conditions. Importantly, this study demonstrates that worker agency extends beyond the confines of the factory, influencing industry-wide governance and transnational labour advocacy networks.

Building on Pagell and Wilhelm's (2025) critique of firm-centric sustainability governance, this study highlights how alternative governance structures emerge when workers collaborate with unions, advocacy groups, and transnational networks. The research of (Hallikas et al., 2019) supports this by demonstrating how sustainability risk management is directly tied to worker engagement. This broader governance perspective disrupts the notion that sustainability compliance is solely driven by corporate oversight, illustrating instead how sustainability governance is contested and negotiated across multiple levels of the supply chain.

3. Practical Contributions

This research carries significant implications for both corporate actors and policymakers seeking to implement meaningful sustainability policies. By centring worker agency, this study provides actionable insights into how firms can move beyond symbolic compliance and establish more participatory sustainability frameworks. One key contribution is the emphasis on multi-tier governance structures that extend beyond first-tier suppliers, ensuring that workers throughout the supply chain are included in decision-making processes (F. Jia et al., 2019; Thorlakson et al., 2018).

Additionally, the study highlights the need for worker-driven accountability mechanisms, such as independent grievance platforms, union strengthening, and transnational labor coalitions. These findings align with broader calls in SSCM to shift from corporate-led sustainability to worker-centered governance models (Stephens et al., 2024).

This study offers several practical contributions for policymakers, businesses, and labor organizations. The study underscores the importance of integrating worker-

driven accountability mechanisms into SSCM frameworks, including stronger grievance reporting systems, independent monitoring, and labor union protections. The findings suggest that sustainability audits should shift from compliance-focused assessments to worker-centered evaluations that incorporate feedback from employees rather than relying solely on corporate reports. Rather than imposing one-size-fits-all sustainability mandates, MNEs should adopt localized sustainability models that account for the institutional and economic constraints of suppliers in developing countries. Sustainability efforts must extend beyond first-tier suppliers to include multi-tier governance strategies that address labour rights violations across the entire supply chain.

4. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, this research has several limitations. First, the study is primarily focused on Vietnam's garment sector, which may limit the generalizability of its findings across different industries and geographical contexts. Future research should explore sectoral variations in decoupling practices, particularly in industries with distinct labour dynamics, such as electronics or agriculture.

Another limitation concerns the visibility of worker agency—while this study captures explicit worker resistance, further research should investigate the subtler, everyday forms of worker negotiation and compliance with sustainability policies (Hallikas et al., 2018). Future studies could employ ethnographic methodologies to capture invisible patterns of worker engagement within supply chain governance.

Finally, this study calls for greater integration between SSCM and industrial relations scholarship. Understanding how labour movements and institutional

frameworks interact with corporate sustainability initiatives can provide deeper insights into the mechanisms of recoupling and long-term social sustainability.

By addressing these gaps, future research can further refine the role of worker agency in SSCM and contribute to a more people-centred, socially just approach to supply chain governance.

CHAPTER 8 – FINAL WORDS

I have often likened myself to a tiny ant—small, persistent, and quietly determined. This tiny ant has journeyed through seven years of doctoral study, a path longer than most of my peers'. This dissertation may not be perfect, as it is a puzzle I've been trying to solve. But it stands as the product of unwavering commitment and countless hours of effort. Every page reflects the resilience and quiet strength of that small but steady creature.

This intellectual journey has transformed me in profound ways. It has shaped how I engage with the world and deepened my understanding of its complexities. Since the first day, this research has not only helped me grow as an academic but also as an evidence-based advocate for workers' rights. Through my professional engagement with international buyers' sustainability programmes, the doctoral journey has empowered me to critically examine the policies and practices that affect workers' lives.

What I have discovered is sobering:

> In global supply chains, decoupling persists**—still, as always.**
> But alongside it, so too does resistance and the fight for change—**still, as always**.

And it is in this space, between the persistent challenges and the enduring hope, that even a tiny ant like me aspires to contribute—to push for change, to mend what is broken, and to work toward a better future for workers in every corner of the world.

ANNEXES

Appendix 1. *Exploratory Interview*– Developed before the Fieldwork 1

Used in Fieldwork 1

Research in August 2019

Designed on 02 July 2019

Research Location: Vietnam

A – For workers

Group 1: Workers' Personal Information

(1) Which company are you working for?

(2) How long have you been working for this company? How long have you been in the garment industry in total?

If you worked for other companies before, can you share a bit about your previous work experience?

(3) Does your current company produce export goods?

(4) What specific job are you currently doing for the company?

Group 2: Workers' Understanding of the Supply Chain and the Company's Position in the Supply Chain

(1) When sewing for a brand, do you know where the product you make will be exported to? If yes, where specifically?

(2) What brands have you sewn products for? Can you name them?

(3) Do the requirements of each brand differ?

(4) Do you know the supply chain tier of the company you are working for? (The researcher should briefly explain the supply chain.)

(5) Does your company have satellite factories to share orders? (The researcher should briefly explain satellite factories in the garment supply chain.) If yes, is this satellite phenomenon common?

(6) Do you know any workers at these satellite factories? If yes, can you compare their working conditions to yours? (Are the wages of workers at the satellites equivalent to yours?)

Group 3: Workers' Understanding of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Policies of the Company and Brands

(1) Does the company have a department handling CSR?

(2) Are you regularly trained about your rights, benefits, and responsibilities? Who conducts the training?

(3) Have you ever been called for an interview during an audit? How does the company prepare you for such interviews?

(4) Are you aware of the CSR policies of your company? Does your company have SA8000 or ISO 14000 certifications? Have you ever heard of them?

(5) Do you know what responsibilities the company has towards its workers? Where can these responsibilities be found?

(6) Has your employer ever informed you that the company is producing for a specific brand and explained the CSR policies of that brand? (The researcher should briefly explain the differences between the company's and the brand's policies.)

Group 4: Unwritten Rules in the Garment Industry

(1) Are you aware of any unwritten rules in the garment industry? For example, not hiring people over 35, not hiring pregnant women, underage workers (below 18), short-term contracts, etc.?

(2) In your opinion, do these unwritten rules actually occur in practice, or are they just rumors?

(3) What is the purpose of these unwritten rules? Why do employers impose such unwritten rules?

B – For union representatives

Group 1: Understanding Union-Company Dynamics

(1) Can you describe the role your union plays in representing workers in this company?

(2) How would you evaluate the company's adherence to labor laws and agreements?

(3) Are there frequent consultations or negotiations between the union and the company? What are the common topics discussed?

Group 2: Supply Chain and Worker Issues

(1) Are you familiar with the company's position within the global supply chain? How does this impact labor practices?

(2) What challenges do workers commonly report regarding supply chain demands, such as fast production deadlines or quality standards?

(3) Have you observed differences in working conditions or wages between this company and its satellite factories?

Group 3: CSR and Labor Rights

(1) Does the company collaborate with the union when implementing CSR policies? If yes, can you provide examples?

(2) Are workers informed about their rights and responsibilities under CSR frameworks? How is this communicated?

(3) Have you noticed any discrepancies between the company's declared CSR policies and their actual practices?

Group 4: Unwritten Rules in the Industry

(1) Are you aware of any unwritten rules (e.g., discriminatory hiring practices or short-term contracts)?

(2) How does the union address these unwritten rules with the company?

(3) What steps do you think are needed to eliminate such practices?

C – For CSR Officers

Group 1: CSR Policy Development and Implementation

(1) Can you describe your role in developing and enforcing the company's CSR policies?

(2) Does the company have any certifications like SA8000 or ISO 14000? How are these standards integrated into daily operations?

(3) How do you ensure that workers are aware of their rights and benefits under CSR policies?

Group 2: Interaction with Brands and Supply Chain

(1) How do brands influence the company's CSR strategies? Can you provide specific examples?

(2) Are there challenges in meeting different brands' CSR requirements? If yes, how are these addressed?

(3) Does the company's position in the supply chain affect its ability to enforce CSR policies?

Group 3: Audits and Compliance

(1) How often does the company undergo audits? What are the primary focus areas of these audits?

(2) What role do workers play during audits? How are they prepared for interviews?

(3) Have there been any cases where non-compliance was identified? How were these issues resolved?

Group 4: Unwritten Rules and Industry Practices

(1) Are you aware of any unwritten rules in the industry that contradict CSR principles (e.g., age restrictions or short-term contracts)?

(2) What measures does the company take to counter such practices?

(3) How does the company balance meeting production targets with maintaining ethical labor practices?

D – For Researchers

Group 1: Research Objectives and Focus Areas

(1) What are your main research interests in the garment industry?

(2) Have you studied the relationship between supply chain dynamics and labour practices? If yes, can you share your findings?

(3) How do you approach studying informal or unwritten rules in the garment industry?

Group 2: CSR Policies and Worker Welfare

(1) In your research, have you found significant gaps between declared CSR policies and actual practices?

(2) How do you evaluate the effectiveness of CSR training programs for workers?

(3) What trends have you observed regarding worker awareness of their rights under CSR frameworks?

Group 3: Supply Chain and Industry Dynamics

(1) Based on your research, how does the company's position in the supply chain impact its labor practices and CSR compliance?

(2) Are there notable differences between working conditions in main factories and satellite units?

(3) How do global brands influence labour standards in supply chains?

Group 4: Unwritten Rules and Ethical Challenges

(1) Have you encountered evidence of unwritten rules in the industry? If so, what are the most common examples?

(2) What are the underlying factors driving these unwritten rules?

(3) What recommendations would you propose to address ethical challenges in the garment industry?

E – For NGO

Group 1: NGO Involvement in the Garment Industry

(1) Can you describe your organization's mission and its involvement in the garment industry in Vietnam?

(2) What are your primary areas of focus (e.g., labor rights, CSR enforcement, supply chain transparency)?

(3) How does your organization collaborate with companies, workers, unions, and other stakeholders to promote ethical labor practices?

Group 2: Observations on Supply Chain Practices

(1) Based on your observations, how does the supply chain structure impact labor practices in the garment industry?

(2) Are satellite factories a significant issue in maintaining ethical labor standards? How does your organization address these challenges?

(3) How do you assess the transparency of companies in disclosing their supply chain structures?

Group 3: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Policies

(1) How effective do you think companies' CSR policies are in ensuring ethical labor practices? Can you share examples of successful or unsuccessful implementation?

(2) Do you observe significant differences between CSR requirements from global brands and their enforcement by local companies?

(3) How does your organization support companies or workers in understanding and implementing CSR policies, such as SA8000 or ISO 14000 certifications?

Group 4: Advocacy and Worker Empowerment

(1) What role does your organization play in educating workers about their rights and benefits under CSR and labor laws?

(2) Have you been involved in initiatives to empower workers to report grievances or improve working conditions? What strategies were effective?

(3) How do you address barriers like workers' fear of retaliation or lack of awareness in reporting non-compliance issues?

Group 5: Unwritten Rules and Industry Challenges

(1) Are you aware of unwritten rules in the garment industry, such as discriminatory hiring practices, underage workers, or short-term contracts? How prevalent are these issues in your experience?

(2) What are the systemic or cultural factors driving these unwritten rules, and how does your organization work to address them?

(3) What policy changes or interventions would you recommend to eliminate such practices and promote ethical labor standards?

Group 6: Collaboration with Other Stakeholders

(1) How do you collaborate with unions, researchers, and government bodies to advocate for better labor practices?

(2) Are there any partnerships or projects that have had a particularly positive impact? Can you provide examples?

(3) What challenges do you face in fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration to address systemic issues in the garment industry?

Appendix 2. *Semi-structured Interview*– Adaptation after Fieldwork 1 pilot

Used in Fieldwork 2

A – For workers

Updated 15 Oct 2019

This protocol is modified from the interview protocol with bottom-up approach 190702 designed for studies the reactions and responses of workers against the CSR decoupling. The interview protocol will be applied in the 2nd fieldwork in Vietnam.

- Methodology: In-depth interview with qualitative analysis techniques.
- Targeted subjects of study: Workers working in garment export-oriented companies; both male and female; no restrictions in terms of age of workers, ownership of enterprises;
- Number of samples: 17-20 workers.
- Length of the interview: 30-50 minutes, the interview can be made with individual or a group of workers (but not exceed 3 persons per group, each of them must have a separate interview sheets)

The structure of the interview

There are 4 parts of questions to understand different aspects in workers' thoughts and understandings: Part 1 – personal, company and supply chains information; Part 2 – understandings about CSR of the company and of their supply chains; Part 3 – understandings/awareness about different practices (decoupling practices) in the company; and Part 4 – workers' response to such practices.

Note:

(1) The interview shall be conducted in the residential quarters of workers.

(2) The language used in the round of interview (which is different from other rounds) is in Vietnamese and will be translated into English.

(3) Before the interview, the researcher s must provide the topic of research for the interviewees. Specifically:

- The research is about workers' response to the policies of enterprises/employers and to understand their awareness on CSR issues.
- All the information gathered through this interview, including personal identity, organization names and the contents of the interview, will be kept confidential and utilized for the purpose of the research only.
- If the information is necessary to quote, the names of informants, the identity of enterprises will not be shared.

(4) During the interview, the researcher took notes in combination with observation techniques to describe as much as possible the expressions of workers (both verbal and non-verbal).

(5) The interview must be recorded. The records will be transcribed and translated.

(6) For some particular concepts or notions, the researcher s must explain clearly for workers in a simple and succinct manner.

(7) It's desirable to use semi-structured interview techniques, which means the researcher s shall have other questions to dig the information further. If the researcher s find that the situation is constraint and impossible to conduct

semi-structured interviews, she shall switch to structured interview techniques, sticking with the prepared questions.

Questions in the interview – This part can be printed to serve as note-takings in the interview

Part 1 – personal, company and supply chains information

	Question	Note for research	Verbal expressions	Non-verbal or other expressions
1	What's your name? Where are you from? How old are you? Are you here with your family? Do you have children? (if yes, how many and where are they?)	This question is to identify whether workers are indigenous or migrant from other place. The researcher shall dig our more information about workers who are living away from children, the motivation for doing so, etc.		
2	What company are you working at? How long have you been working in this company? What sections/lines that you are working at (cutting/sewing/ect.)? What kind of product that you are making?	It's to understand the company is export-oriented or not and the seniority of workers in the company.		

3	Before this company, have you worked in garment sector before? What was/were the company(s)? How long, in total, have you been working in garment sector?	It's to dig out whether workers have the comparative experiences with other garment companies or not.		
4	Do you know the buyers of the company? Do you know where your products are exported to?	The researcher might need to explain the concepts of "buyer", "supply chains" for workers		
5	Do you know about the supply chains that your company is engaged in? Do you whether you company having other 'brother', 'sister' companies?			

Part 2 – understandings about CSR of the company and of their supply chains

	Question	Note for research	Verbal expressions	Non-verbal or other expressions
1	Do you know about the CSR policies of your company? Where are they publish? Do you read/learn about such policy frequently? Do you have training about CSR policies?	The researcher might need to explain the concepts of "CSR" for workers. Simple language should be used like "policies for worker, for working conditions". Question about how much workers' exposure to CSR policies of company		

2	Do you know whether your company has different certificates to show the buyer/audit? If yes, does the company inform you precisely what are the contents of those certificate? Do you join training or activities relating to these certificate?	Examples and explanation are necessary, such as ISO 9000 (for management); ISO 140001, Standard 1000 OEKO TEX, GOTS, Blue sign (about environment); SA 8000, Fair Trade, FLOCERT, WRAP, FWF (about social issues)		
3	Do you know your company join in training of buyers to improve CSR compliance and beyond-compliance initiatives?			

	Have you joined in audit interview? If yes do you have to prepare before such interview? How?			
4	Do you know your company are members of Better Work or Fair Wear Foundation? Do you know about their activities at the factory? If yes, what do you think about them?	If they don't know BW and FWF, give examples		
5	Do you think that the CSR policies of your companies and of the buyers are different? Why or why not? What are the difference/indifference?			

	Does the company inform you about CSR policies of buyers? If yes do they tell you such difference/indifference? If no, are you trying to find the information about CSR of buyers?			

In this research we aim to understand your thoughts about a number of social policies (not all) so we introduce the concepts of CLS+ (core labour standards plus) including: Freedom of association and collective bargaining, Child labour, Forced labour, Discrimination at work, Occupational Safety and Health, Wage, Overtime, Employment contracts. We would ask several questions about such standards at your workplace.

	Question	Note for research	Verbal expressions	Non-verbal or other expressions

1	Do you know clearly the policies of your company relating to these aforementioned standards? Where/which documents contain such standards? How do you know about them?			

2. Displaying below is a spectrum presenting these standards, please indicate in this range your concern levels in each type of standards (three levels of concerns: No/Low concern, Medium concern, High concern) and why are you having such no/low, medium and high concerns?

	FOA	CB	Child Labour	Forced Labour	Discrimination	OSH	Wage	Overtime	Employment Contract
No/Low									

Medium									
High									
Reasons why?									

	Question	Note for research	Verbal expressions	Non-verbal or other expressions
3	Do you know that Vietnam is a country of duo industrial relations systems? If yes, would you give the examples from your company?	The researcher might need to explain the concepts of "duo industrial relations systems" for workers. Such as, of course, there are policies but sometimes, employers/management would do things differently from the requirements of policies If workers say no, give them examples from the following questions in the next part.		

Part 3 – understandings/awareness about different practices (decoupling practices) in the company

The order of questions might be shuffled in line with high/medium/low concerns of workers. It's necessary to make the connections between such standards in the CSR of buyers and CSR of the suppliers/companies.

	Question	Note for research	Verbal expressions	Non-verbal or other expressions
1	Do you know about union in your workplace? Who are union executive members and chairpersons? Do you vote for them? How? What do you think about effective of union?			
2	Do you know about the collective bargaining at the workplace? Do you	If the answer is no, then researcher should dig out		

	know about collective bargaining agreement? If yes, what are the contents do you think that important to you? Do you participate in the collective bargaining process? Do you think it's important and beneficial?	further why they don't think that it's important?		
3	Does your company e employer restrict workers from leaving the C29 workplace, dormitories or industrial zone? Forced labour in overtime?			
4	Do you know about workers who are younger than 18, 15 years of age? If yes, Why are they working at that young age? What is company responding to this phenomenon? What are the reasons for company doing so?			
5	Do you know about discrimination practices at the company (or other companies in garment sector)? If yes, how?	Give examples about age, gender, pregnancy, regions discriminations		

	Do you think that it's beneficial to you or employer to have such discrimination?			
6	Do you know about deficient OSH practices at the company (or other companies in garment sector)? If yes, how? Do you think that it's beneficial to you or employer to have such deficits?	Give examples about unsafety at workplace?		
7	Does your company have two books of wage? If yes, do you agree with it why? Does your company pay wage regularly and on time? If no, what is the problem? And what do you do in such situation? Does your company deduct your wage? If yes, for what reasons? Do you agree when they are doing so?			

	What are composed your wage? Allowances? Fixed incomes? Additional payment? Is is enough for your living? Is the wage paid by piece rate or piece work? How much do you earn per piece?			
8	Do you have overtime this week? How many hours? Do you have overtime regularly? How many hours per months? Per years? Is the overtime varied during the years? When is the high time?			
9	Do you have contract? Are you paid the social insurance for your work? Do you know whether your colleague have 'chains contract'? What do you think about it?	Explain the 'chains contract'		

Part 4 – workers' response to such practices

Except the 1st, 11th and 12th questions, other questions can be shuffled.

	Question	Note for research	Verbal expressions	Non-verbal or other expressions
1	Given all of those different practices happening at workplace, what do you feel about it? Do you think that it's beneficial to you when such practices applied by employer? Do you respond to such different practices?	Probe for the sentiments, actions workers would have/take; would they choose to stay or to quit, why they would do so? Comparing with other colleagues' sentiments/actions if possible		
2	What do you think when union are not elected by you? Do you think that it's important to you?	Probe whether workers trust or distrust union leadership due to the lack of democratic elections. Explore whether this influences their willingness to rely on unions for addressing violations.		

3	What do you think collective bargaining are not participated and decided by you? Do you think that it's important to you?	Investigate whether workers feel excluded from key decision-making processes and if this affects their motivation to participate. Note any dissatisfaction or apathy toward collective bargaining processes.		
4	What do you think forced labour? Do you think that it's important to you?	Determine if workers recognize forced labor practices and how they perceive its severity. Investigate whether workers feel they have avenues to report such practices.		
5	What do you think when young workers (15 years of age) are working at your workplace? Do you think that it's important to you?	Probe workers' awareness of child labor laws and their opinions on younger workers in the workplace. Investigate whether workers see this as a violation or as a necessary economic survival tactic for families.		

6	What do you think when there are discrimination at your workplace? Do you think that it's important to you? Do you talk to employers when you feel the risk?	Understand how workers experience discrimination (e.g., gender, age, region). Explore whether workers feel safe speaking up and what responses they receive from employers or management.		
7	What do you think when workplace sometime is unsafe? Do you think that it's important to you? Do you talk to employers when you feel the risk?	Identify if workers feel comfortable raising concerns about OSH (occupational safety and health) violations. Investigate how management responds to such reports and the impact on workers' trust.		
8	What do you think when there are two wages systems? When your wages is deducted? When your fixed wage is low and you have to work overtime for more incomes? Do you think that you will need to talk to your employers when your wage is too low?	Explore whether workers understand wage deductions and feel they are justified. Probe if they negotiate with employers for better wages or resort to other coping mechanisms like working overtime.		

9	What do you think when there is no overtime? More overtime than now? Do you like overtime in general? Is there any time that you feel the overtime is too much? When you feel like that what do you do to let the employer know?	Investigate whether workers communicate dissatisfaction about overtime and how management responds. Probe whether overtime practices are seen as exploitative or necessary for survival.		
10	What do you think if you have no employment contract? Would you ask for this? What would you do if the employer doesn't sign contract with you?	Determine whether workers recognize the importance of contracts for job security and legal protection. Investigate their responses to contract-related violations (e.g., "chains contracts").		
11	Do you know that the different practices carried out by employers are sometime not in line with the CLS+ standards? In that case what do you think? Would you maintain it? If yes, how?	Probe workers' awareness of CLS+ standards and whether they feel management practices align with these standards. Investigate if workers tolerate these practices due to necessity, fear, or lack of alternatives.		

12	If no, why you would disrupt it? What are the reasons/motivation for your disruptions? And How you will disrupt it?	Explore workers' motivations for taking action against violations, such as solidarity, frustration, or legal awareness. Probe for examples of disruption, including strikes, protests, or reporting violations to external bodies.		

B – For stakeholders (industry and non-industry actors: unions, researchers, CSR-related actors)

Updated 15 Oct 2019

This protocol is modified from the interview protocol used in Aug-Sep 2019 designed for studies the reactions and responses of workers against the CSR decoupling. The interview protocol will be applied in the 2nd fieldwork in Vietnam.

- Methodology: In-depth interview with qualitative analysis techniques.
- Targeted subjects of study: unionists, CSR officers, researchers, NGOs actors active in garment export-oriented companies; both male and female; no restrictions in terms of age
- Number of samples: 7-10 stakeholders.
- Length of the interview: 60 minutes

The structure of the interview

There are 4 parts of questions to understand

Part 1 – Personal Background and Organizational Role;

Part 2 – Perspectives on CSR and Supply Chains;

Part 3 – Core Labor Standards and Decoupling Practices;

Part 4 – Responses to Social issues; and

Part 5 – Recommendations and Future Directions

Note:

(1) The language used in the round of interview (which is different from other rounds) is in Vietnamese and will be translated into English.

(2) Before the interview, the researcher s must provide the topic of research for the interviewees. Specifically:

- The research is about workers' response to the policies of enterprises/employers and to understand their awareness on CSR issues.
- All the information gathered through this interview, including personal identity, organization names and the contents of the interview, will be kept confidential and utilized for the purpose of the research only.
- If the information is necessary to quote, the names of informants, the identity of enterprises will not be shared.

(3) During the interview, the researcher took notes in combination with observation techniques to describe as much as possible the expressions of interviewees (both verbal and non-verbal).

(4) The interview must be recorded. The records will be transcribed and translated.

(5) For some particular concepts or notions, the researcher s must explain clearly for interviewees in a simple and succinct manner.

(6) It's desirable to use semi-structured interview techniques, which means the researcher shall have other questions to dig the information further. If the researcher find that the situation is constraint and impossible to conduct semi-structured interviews, other structured interview techniques can be used, sticking with the prepared questions.

Questions in the interview – This part can be printed to serve as note-takings in the interview

Part 1 –Personal Background and Organizational Role

	Question	Note for research	Verbal expressions	Non-verbal or other expressions
1	Can you tell us your name, your organization, and your role within the organization?	Explore their specific responsibilities and whether they work directly with garment workers, oversee compliance, or advocate for policy changes. Probe for job-related challenges or success stories		
2	How long have you been involved in this field or with this organization? What motivated you to work in this area?	Determine their expertise and insight level in labour issues and CSR policies.		
3	What is your organization's main mission or focus regarding labor rights or CSR in the garment sector?	Clarify if they prioritize issues such as freedom of association, wage fairness, or occupational safety.		

		Understand their target groups (e.g., workers, companies, policymakers).		
4	Does your organization work primarily at a local, national, or global level? What industries or sectors do you focus on?	If global or national, inquire about their view of Vietnam's garment industry's unique challenges.		

Part 2 – Perspectives on CSR and Supply Chains

	Question	Note for research	Verbal expressions	Non-verbal or other expressions
1	Are you familiar with the CSR policies of garment companies operating in this region? How would you evaluate their implementation and impact on workers?	Encourage specific examples of success or gaps in CSR implementation. Probe for opinions on whether CSR policies address key worker needs effectively		
2	Do you think companies adequately communicate their CSR policies to workers, unions, and other stakeholders? If not, what's missing?	dentify gaps in communication strategies. Compare this with worker awareness of CSR policies.		
3	Do you believe garment companies	Probe for examples of opaque		

	maintain transparency in their supply chains? If not, what are the key challenges?	practices, such as subcontracting or lack of information on end-buyers.		
4	Do you know about certifications (e.g., ISO standards, SA 8000, Fair Trade) that garment companies pursue? Do these certifications contribute to meaningful worker benefits, or are they mostly symbolic?	Explore whether certifications help enforce compliance or are limited to meeting buyer expectations.		

Part 3 – Core Labour Standards and Decoupling Practices

	Question	Note for research	Verbal expressions	Non-verbal or other expressions
1	In your experience, how well do garment companies comply with standards like freedom of association, forced labor, child labor, non-discrimination,	Investigate examples of both compliance and non-compliance. Encourage feedback on systemic barriers to compliance.		

	OSH, wages, overtime, and employment contracts?			
2	Have you observed companies adopting "decoupling practices" where they show compliance on paper but fail in actual implementation? If so, could you share examples?	Examples may include "two books of wages," underreporting hours, or hiring underage workers.		
3	Are workers and unions typically aware of these gaps in practice? How do these gaps affect workers' trust in employers or unions?	Gauge how decoupling practices impact worker morale and industrial relations.Understand their target groups (e.g., workers, companies, policymakers).		
4	How effective are unions in representing garment workers? Are unions independent, or are they influenced by employers or the government? Are collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) in the garment industry effective? Do CBAs reflect workers' needs, and are workers actively involved in	Gather opinions on union structure and decision-making processes Explore barriers to worker participation in CBAs.		

	bargaining processes?			

Part 4 – Responses to Social issues

	Question	Note for research	Verbal expressions	Non-verbal or other expressions
1	How do workers usually find out about violations of labor laws or company policies by management? Do you think workers are aware of their rights and the laws protecting them? Why or why not?	Probe whether workers learn through observation, coworkers, unions, or NGOs. Explore gaps in awareness and contributing factors like lack of training or information dissemination.		
2	When workers observe a violation (e.g., wage deductions, forced overtime, unsafe conditions), what is their first reaction? Do workers usually speak to their supervisors, report the issue to union representatives, or stay silent? Why?	Investigate reasons behind silence, such as fear of retaliation or mistrust of reporting channels.		
3	□ Are workers encouraged to report violations? If yes, how are they instructed to	Look for examples of successful or failed reporting.		

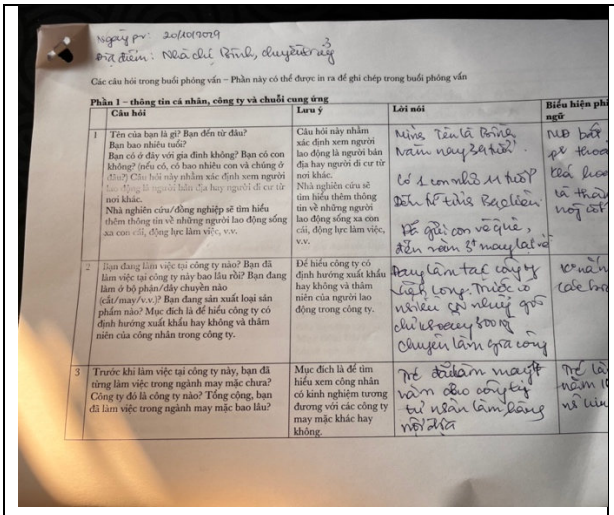
	do so (e.g., complaint boxes, HR, union)? Do you think the reporting mechanisms are accessible and effective? Why or why not?			
4	How do workers individually cope with violations when no formal resolution is available?	Examples include finding alternative jobs, informal negotiations, or relying on personal savings Investigate the success of informal negotiations		
5	What motivates workers to take collective action, and what are the outcomes? What motivates workers to take collective action, and what are the outcomes?	Probe for workers engaged in collective action (e.g., strikes, protests, petitions) in response to violations Probe for examples of successful and unsuccessful collective actions		

Part 5 – Recommendations and Future Directions

	Question	Note for research	Verbal expressions	Non-verbal or other expressions

1	What actions should companies take to address non-compliance or decoupling practices?	Look for actionable, realistic recommendations.		
2	How can collaboration between unions, NGOs, researchers, and companies be strengthened to improve labour standards?	Explore opportunities for joint training, policy advocacy, or worker awareness programs		
3	What tools or resources are needed to ensure better enforcement of labour standards?	Focus on specific suggestions, such as technology, policy reforms, or capacity building.		

Appendix 3. Example of fieldnote – worker 14 (in Vietnamese)

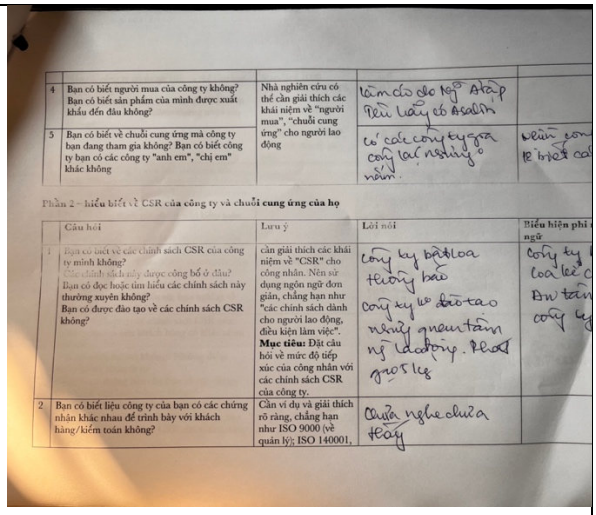


Ngày pv: 20/10/2019
Địa điểm: Nhà chị Bình, Chuyên Mỹ

Các câu hỏi trong buổi phỏng vấn – Phần này có thể được in ra để ghi chép trong buổi phỏng vấn

Phần 1 – thông tin cá nhân, công ty và chuỗi cung ứng

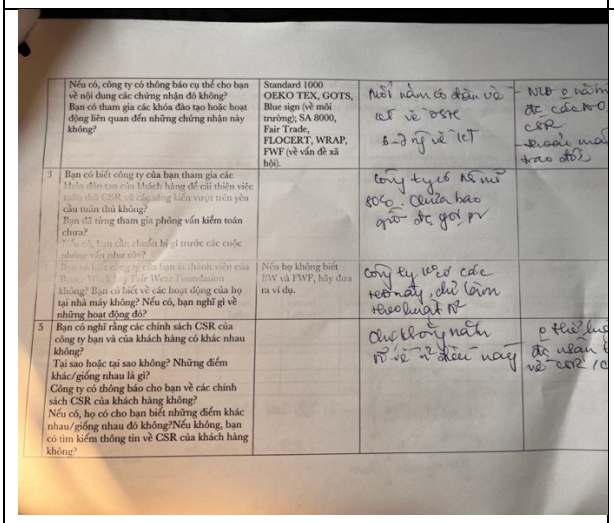
	Câu hỏi	Lưu ý	Lời nói	Biểu hiện phi ngữ
1	Tên của bạn là gì? Bạn đến từ đâu? Bạn bao nhiêu tuổi? Bạn có ở đây với gia đình không? Bạn có con không? (nếu có, có bao nhiêu con và chúng ở đâu?) Câu hỏi này nhằm xác định xem người lao động là người bản địa hay người di cư từ nơi khác. Nhà nghiên cứu/đồng nghiệp sẽ tìm hiểu thêm thông tin về những người lao động sống xa con cái, động lực làm việc, v.v.	Câu hỏi này nhằm xác định xem người lao động là người bản địa hay người di cư từ nơi khác. Nhà nghiên cứu sẽ tìm hiểu thêm thông tin về những người lao động sống xa con cái, động lực làm việc, v.v.		
2	Bạn đang làm việc tại công ty nào? Bạn đã làm việc tại công ty này bao lâu rồi? Bạn đang làm ở bộ phận/dây chuyền nào (cắt/may/v.v.)? Bạn đang sản xuất loại sản phẩm nào? Mục đích là để hiểu công ty có định hướng xuất khẩu hay không và thâm niên của công nhân trong công ty.	Để hiểu công ty có định hướng xuất khẩu hay không và thâm niên của người lao động trong công ty.		
3	Trước khi làm việc tại công ty này, bạn đã từng làm việc trong ngành may mặc chưa? Công ty đó là công ty nào? Tổng cộng, bạn đã làm việc trong ngành may mặc bao lâu?	Mục đích là để tìm hiểu xem công nhân có kinh nghiệm tương đương với các công ty may mặc khác hay không.		



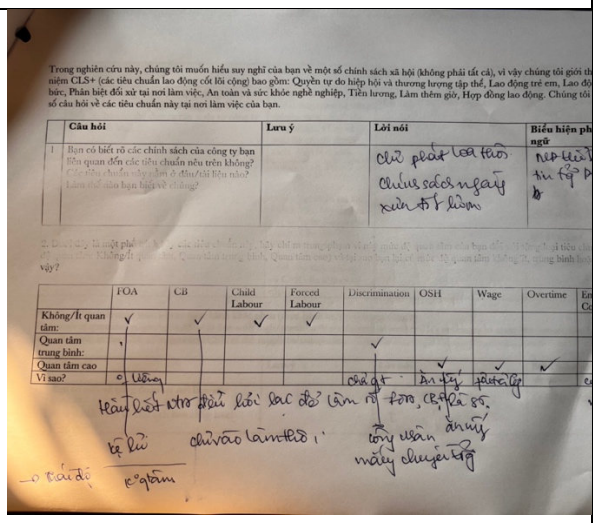
4	Bạn có biết người mua của công ty không? Bạn có biết sản phẩm của mình được xuất khẩu đến đâu không?	Nhà nghiên cứu có thể cần giải thích các khái niệm về "người mua", "chuỗi cung ứng" cho người lao động		
5	Bạn có biết về chuỗi cung ứng mà công ty bạn đang tham gia không? Bạn có biết công ty bạn có các công ty "anh em", "chị em" khác không			

Phần 2 – hiểu biết về CSR của công ty và chuỗi cung ứng của họ

	Câu hỏi	Lưu ý	Lời nói	Biểu hiện phi ngữ
1	Bạn có biết về các chính sách CSR của công ty mình không? Các chính sách này được công bố ở đâu? Bạn có đọc hoặc tìm hiểu các chính sách này thường xuyên không? Bạn có được đào tạo về các chính sách CSR không?	cần giải thích các khái niệm về "CSR" cho công nhân. Nên sử dụng ngôn ngữ đơn giản, chẳng hạn như "các chính sách dành cho người lao động, điều kiện làm việc". **Mục tiêu:** Đặt câu hỏi về mức độ tiếp xúc của công nhân với các chính sách CSR của công ty.		
2	Bạn có biết liệu công ty của bạn có các chứng nhận khác nhau để trình bày với khách hàng/kiểm toán không?	Cần ví dụ và giải thích rõ ràng, chẳng hạn như ISO 9000 (về quản lý); ISO 14001,		



	Nếu có, công ty có thông báo cụ thể cho bạn về nội dung các chứng nhận đó không? Bạn có tham gia các khóa đào tạo hoặc hoạt động liên quan đến những chứng nhận này không?	Standard 1000 OEKO TEX, GOTS, Blue sign (về môi trường); SA 8000, Fair Trade, FLOCERT, WRAP, FWF (về vấn đề xã hội).		
3	Bạn có biết công ty của bạn tham gia các Hoạt động của khách hàng để cải thiện việc tuân thủ CSR và các sáng kiến vượt trên yêu cầu tuân thủ không? Bạn đã từng tham gia phỏng vấn kiểm toán chưa? Nếu có, bạn cần chuẩn bị gì trước các cuộc phỏng vấn như vậy? Bạn có biết công ty của bạn là thành viên của Better Work / Fair Wear Foundation không? Bạn có biết về các hoạt động của họ tại nhà máy không? Nếu có, bạn nghĩ gì về những hoạt động đó?	Nếu họ không biết BW và FWF, hãy đưa ra ví dụ.		
5	Bạn có nghĩ rằng các chính sách CSR của công ty bạn và của khách hàng có khác nhau không? Tại sao hoặc tại sao không? Những điểm khác/giống nhau là gì? Công ty có thông báo cho bạn về các chính sách CSR của khách hàng không? Nếu có, họ có cho bạn biết những điểm khác nhau/giống nhau đó không?Nếu không, bạn có tìm kiếm thông tin về CSR của khách hàng không?			

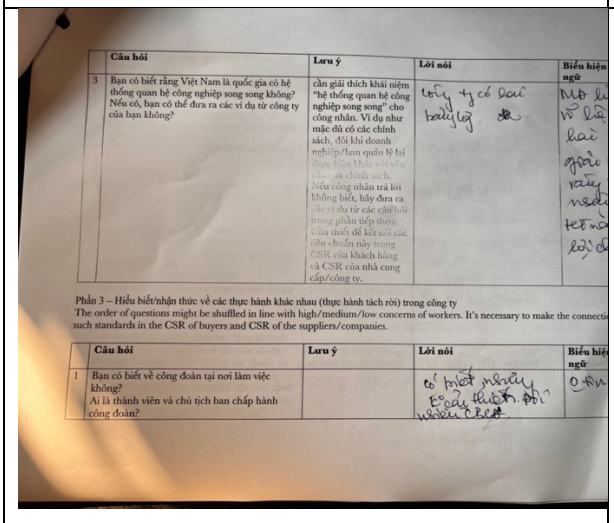


Trong nghiên cứu này, chúng tôi muốn hiểu suy nghĩ của bạn về một số chính sách xã hội (không phải tất cả), vì vậy chúng tôi giới thiệu khái niệm CLS+ (các tiêu chuẩn lao động cốt lõi cộng) bao gồm: Quyền tự do hiệp hội và thương lượng tập thể, Lao động trẻ em, Lao động cưỡng bức, Phân biệt đối xử tại nơi làm việc, An toàn và sức khỏe nghề nghiệp, Tiền lương, Làm thêm giờ, Hợp đồng lao động. Chúng tôi sẽ hỏi một số câu hỏi về các tiêu chuẩn này tại nơi làm việc của bạn.

	Câu hỏi	Lưu ý	Lời nói	Biểu hiện phi ngữ
1	Bạn có biết rõ các chính sách của công ty bạn liên quan đến các tiêu chuẩn nêu trên không? Các tiêu chuẩn này nằm ở đâu/từ khi nào? Làm thế nào bạn biết về chúng?			

vậy?

	FOA	CB	Child Labour	Forced Labour	Discrimination	OSH	Wage	Overtime	Em Co
Không/Ít quan tâm:	✓	✓	✓	✓					
Quan tâm trung bình:					✓				
Quan tâm cao						✓	✓	✓	
Vì sao?									

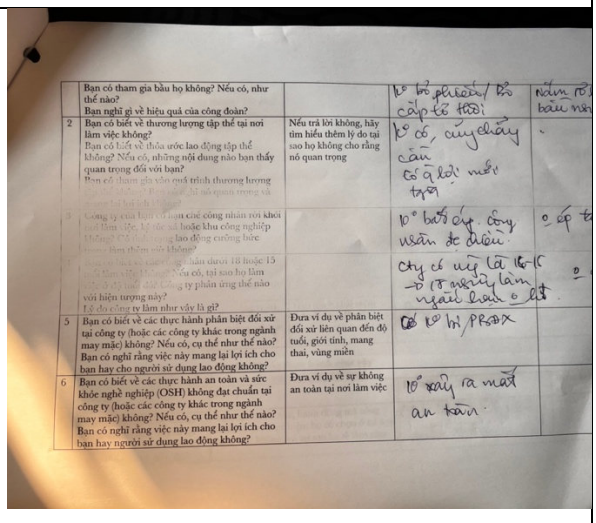


	Câu hỏi	Lưu ý	Lời nói	Biểu hiện ngữ
3	Bạn có biết rằng Việt Nam là quốc gia có hệ thống quan hệ công nghiệp song song không? Nếu có, bạn có thể đưa ra các ví dụ từ công ty của bạn không?	cần giải thích khái niệm "hệ thống quan hệ công nghiệp song song" cho công nhân. Ví dụ như mặc dù có các chính sách, đôi khi doanh nghiệp/ban quản lý hãy thực hiện khác với yêu cầu của chính sách. Nếu công nhân trả lời không biết, hãy đưa ra các ví dụ từ các câu hỏi trong phần tiếp theo. Câu thiết để kết nối các tiêu chuẩn này trong CSR của khách hàng và CSR của nhà cung cấp/công ty.		

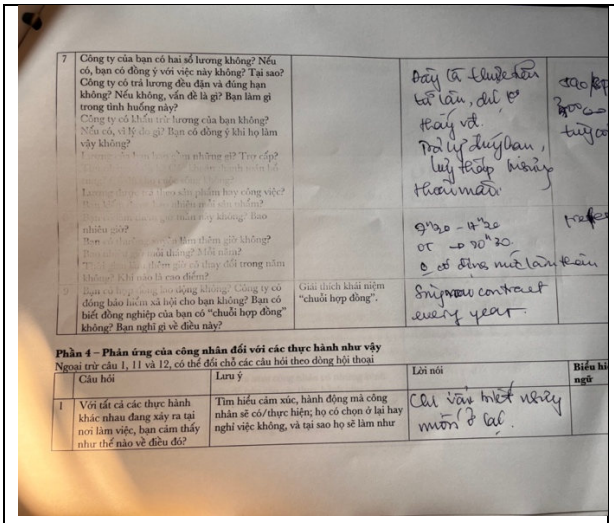
Phần 3 – Hiểu biết/nhận thức về các thực hành khác nhau (thực hành tách rời) trong công ty

The order of questions might be shuffled in line with high/medium/low concerns of workers. It's necessary to make the connecti such standards in the CSR of buyers and CSR of the suppliers/companies.

	Câu hỏi	Lưu ý	Lời nói	Biểu hiệ ngữ
1	Bạn có biết về công đoàn tại nơi làm việc không? Ai là thành viên và chủ tịch ban chấp hành công đoàn?			



	Bạn có tham gia bầu họ không? Nếu có, như thế nào? Bạn nghĩ gì về hiệu quả của công đoàn?			
2	Bạn có biết về thương lượng tập thể tại nơi làm việc không? Bạn có biết về thỏa ước lao động tập thể không? Nếu có, những nội dung nào bạn thấy quan trọng đối với bạn? Bạn có tham gia vào quá trình thương lượng	Nếu trả lời không, hãy tìm hiểu thêm lý do tại sao họ không cho rằng nó quan trọng		
3	Công ty của bạn có hạn chế công nhân rời khỏi nơi làm việc, ký túc xá hoặc khu công nghiệp không? Có hạn chế lao động cưỡng bức trong làm thêm giờ không?			
	Bạn có biết về các quy định dưới 18 hoặc 15 tuổi làm việc không? Nếu có, tại sao họ làm việc ở đó tại công ty? Công ty phản ứng thế nào với hiện tượng này? Lý do công ty làm như vậy là gì?			
5	Bạn có biết về các thực hành phân biệt đối xử tại công ty (hoặc các công ty khác trong ngành may mặc) không? Nếu có, cụ thể như thế nào? Bạn có nghĩ rằng việc này mang lại lợi ích cho bạn hay cho người sử dụng lao động không?	Đưa ví dụ về phân biệt đối xử liên quan đến độ tuổi, giới tính, mang thai, vùng miền		
6	Bạn có biết về các thực hành an toàn và sức khỏe nghề nghiệp (OSH) không đạt chuẩn tại công ty (hoặc các công ty khác trong ngành may mặc) không? Nếu có, cụ thể như thế nào? Bạn có nghĩ rằng việc này mang lại lợi ích cho bạn hay người sử dụng lao động không?	Đưa ví dụ về sự không an toàn tại nơi làm việc		

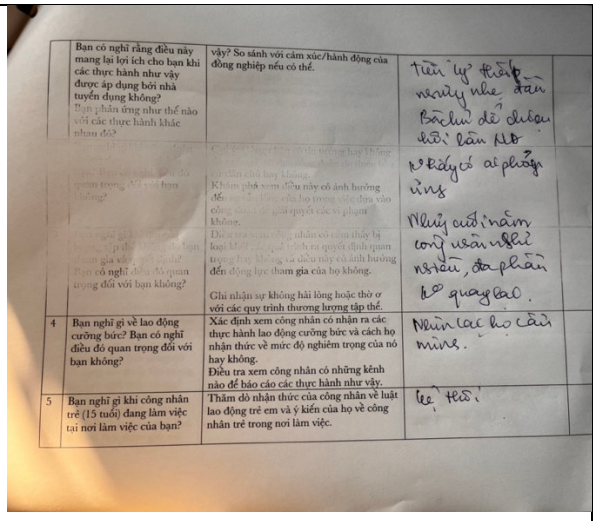


7	Công ty của bạn có hai sổ lương không? Nếu có, bạn có đồng ý với việc này không? Tại sao? Công ty có trả lương đều đặn và đúng hạn không? Nếu không, vấn đề là gì? Bạn làm gì trong tình huống này? Công ty có khấu trừ lương của bạn không? Nếu có, vì lý do gì? Bạn có đồng ý khi họ làm vậy không? Lương của bạn có những gì? Trợ cấp? Lương được trả theo sản phẩm hay công việc? Bạn có được làm thêm giờ không? Bao nhiêu giờ? Bạn có được trả tiền làm thêm giờ không? Bao nhiêu tiền một tháng? Mỗi năm? Trả tiền làm thêm giờ có thay đổi trong năm không? Khi nào là cao điểm?		Đây là thuật ngữ khá lâu, dự án hay về. Tại lý thuyết, lý thuyết không thường.
9	Bạn có hợp đồng lao động không? Công ty có đóng bảo hiểm xã hội cho bạn không? Bạn có biết đồng nghiệp của bạn có "chuỗi hợp đồng" không? Bạn nghĩ gì về điều này?	Giải thích khái niệm "chuỗi hợp đồng".	Sign new contract every year.

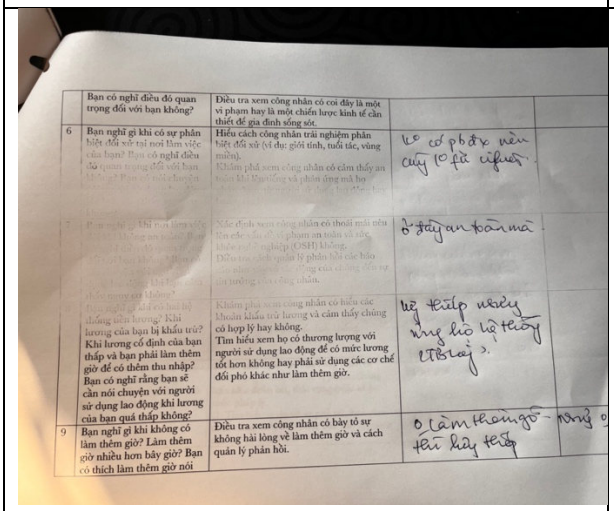
Phần 4 – Phản ứng của công nhân đối với các thực hành như vậy

Ngoại trừ câu 1, 11 và 12, có thể đổi chỗ các câu hỏi theo dòng hội thoại

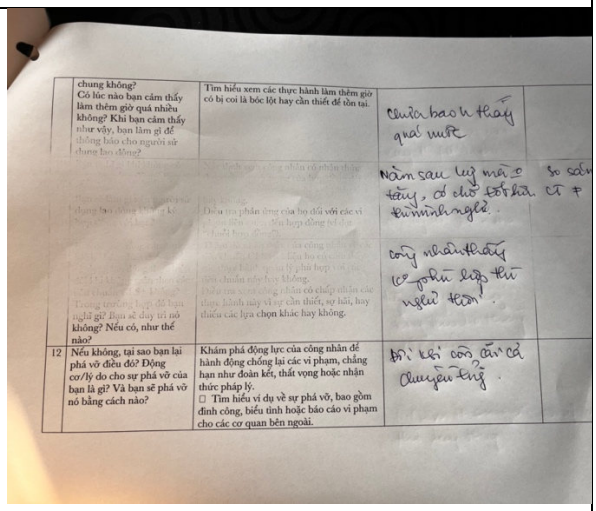
	Câu hỏi	Lưu ý	Lời nói	Biểu hiện ngữ
1	Với tất cả các thực hành khác nhau đang xảy ra tại nơi làm việc, bạn cảm thấy như thế nào về điều đó?	Tìm hiểu cảm xúc, hành động mà công nhân sẽ có/thực hiện; họ có chọn ở lại hay nghỉ việc không, và tại sao họ sẽ làm như	Chỉ vậy thôi nhưng muốn ở lại.	



	Bạn có nghĩ rằng điều này mang lại lợi ích cho bạn khi các thực hành như vậy được áp dụng bởi nhà tuyển dụng không? Bạn phản ứng như thế nào với các thực hành khác nhau đó?	vậy? So sánh với cảm xúc/hành động của đồng nghiệp nếu có thể.	Tiền lý thuyết nhưng nhẹ hơn. Bắt đầu để thuận lợi hơn. Không có ai phản ứng
	Bạn có nghĩ điều đó quan trọng đối với bạn không?	Khám phá xem điều này có ảnh hưởng đến [illegible] không.	Nhưng cuối năm công việc sẽ nghỉ nhiều, đa phần là quay lại.
	Bạn có nghĩ điều đó quan trọng đối với bạn không?	Điều tra xem công nhân có cảm thấy bị loại khỏi quá trình ra quyết định quan trọng hay không và điều này có ảnh hưởng đến động lực tham gia của họ không. Ghi nhận sự không hài lòng hoặc thờ ơ với các quy trình thương lượng tập thể.	
4	Bạn nghĩ gì về lao động cưỡng bức? Bạn có nghĩ điều đó quan trọng đối với bạn không?	Xác định xem công nhân có nhận ra các thực hành lao động cưỡng bức và cách họ nhận thức về mức độ nghiêm trọng của nó hay không. Điều tra xem công nhân có những kênh nào để báo cáo các thực hành như vậy.	Nhìn các họ cần mình.
5	Bạn nghĩ gì khi công nhân trẻ (15 tuổi) đang làm việc tại nơi làm việc của bạn?	Thăm dò nhận thức của công nhân về luật lao động trẻ em và ý kiến của họ về công nhân trẻ trong nơi làm việc.	Kệ thôi.



	Bạn có nghĩ điều đó quan trọng đối với bạn không?	Điều tra xem công nhân có coi đây là một vi phạm hay là một chiến lược kinh tế cần thiết để gia đình sống sót.	
6	Bạn nghĩ gì khi có sự phân biệt đối xử tại nơi làm việc của bạn? Bạn có nghĩ điều đó quan trọng đối với bạn không? Bạn có nói chuyện	Hiểu cách công nhân trải nghiệm phân biệt đối xử (ví dụ: giới tính, tuổi tác, vùng miền). Khám phá xem công nhân có cảm thấy an toàn khi thương lượng và thảo luận mà họ	Kệ có phải nên cứ kệ đi cũng.
7	Bạn nghĩ gì khi mức lương tối thiểu không tiến kịp với chi phí sinh hoạt? Khi lương của bạn bị khấu trừ? Khi lương cố định của bạn thấp và bạn phải làm thêm giờ để có thêm thu nhập? Bạn có nghĩ rằng bạn sẽ cần nói chuyện với người sử dụng lao động khi lương của bạn quá thấp không?	Xác định xem công nhân có thoải mái nêu lên các vấn đề vi phạm an toàn và sức khỏe nghề nghiệp (OSH) không. Điều tra cách quản lý phản hồi các hiểu biết và mối quan tâm của công nhân về sự thường của công nhân.	Ở đây an toàn mà
		Khám phá xem công nhân có hiểu các khoản khấu trừ lương và cảm thấy chúng có hợp lý hay không. Tìm hiểu xem họ có thương lượng với người sử dụng lao động để có mức lương tốt hơn không hay phải sử dụng các cơ chế đối phó khác như làm thêm giờ.	Kệ thấp nhưng nhà hỗ trợ thôi rồi.
9	Bạn nghĩ gì khi không có làm thêm giờ? Làm thêm giờ nhiều hơn bảy giờ? Bạn có thích làm thêm giờ nói	Điều tra xem công nhân có bày tỏ sự không hài lòng về làm thêm giờ và cách quản lý phản hồi.	Ở làm thêm giờ nhưng ít thì hãy thôi.



	chung không? Có lúc nào bạn cảm thấy làm thêm giờ quá nhiều không? Khi bạn cảm thấy như vậy, bạn làm gì để thông báo cho người sử dụng lao động?	Tìm hiểu xem các thực hành làm thêm giờ có bị coi là bóc lột hay cần thiết để tồn tại.	Chưa bao h thấy quá nước
	[illegible]	[illegible]	Năm sau lương mới ổ so sánh tăng, có chỗ [illegible] CT + tự mình nghỉ.
	[illegible]	[illegible]	Công nhân thấy có phải lợi thì nghỉ thôi.
	[illegible]	[illegible]	
12	Nếu không, tại sao bạn lại phá vỡ điều đó? Động cơ/lý do cho sự phá vỡ của bạn là gì? Và bạn sẽ phá vỡ nó bằng cách nào?	Khám phá động lực của công nhân để hành động chống lại các vi phạm, chẳng hạn như đoàn kết, thất vọng hoặc nhận thức pháp lý. ☐ Tìm hiểu ví dụ về sự phá vỡ, bao gồm đình công, biểu tình hoặc báo cáo vi phạm cho các cơ quan bên ngoài.	Đôi khi cũng cần có chuyện thôi.

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Résumé

Cette thèse, intitulée « Non-durabilité sociale dans la chaîne d'approvisionnement de la confection au Vietnam : théoriser les mécanismes de découplage », examine pourquoi les engagements de durabilité des entreprises multinationales se traduisent difficilement dans les pratiques des fournisseurs. Fondée sur une recherche empirique de terrain, elle mobilise la théorie du découplage (politiques-pratiques ; moyens-fins) pour éclairer les écarts engendrés par la longueur des chaînes, les pressions concurrentielles et les désalignements institutionnels. Une approche qualitative et abductive (entretiens, observations au Vietnam, et données secondaires) analyse les interactions entre acheteurs, gestionnaires des fournisseurs, syndicats et ouvriers.

Trois articles composent cette thèse : (1) un cadre théorique multiniveaux du découplage, où la résistance locale et les rapports de pouvoir perturbent la conformité de façade et déplacent les pressions le long de la chaîne ; (2)) Une étude des réponses ouvrières au découplage RSE, articulée autour des modalités Exit, Voice, Loyalty, Neglect et Cynisme : loin d'être passifs, les travailleurs acceptent, négocient ou contestent selon leur sécurité économique et leurs conditions de travail, façonnant ainsi la gouvernance de la durabilité ; (3) une perspective de saillance des parties prenantes sur le « découplage sélectif » du côté des fournisseurs : les gestionnaires priorisent ce qui est visible pour les acheteurs et saillant pour les ouvriers, produisant un couplage serré, un recouplage ou une conformité symbolique.

Dans l'ensemble, la thèse plaide pour une gouvernance publique-privée couvrant l'ensemble des niveaux (y compris l'amont) afin d'aligner attentes et pratiques, renforcer la protection des travailleurs et éviter la « course au moins-disant ». Elle conclut par un agenda de recherche sur la propagation des pressions institutionnelles entre les différents niveaux et sur des mécanismes concrets capables de recoupler politiques et pratiques.

Mots-clés : découplage organisationnel ; durabilité sociale ; parties prenantes et travailleurs ; chaînes d’approvisionnement mondiales ; industrie de la confection (Vietnam).

Abstract

This dissertation, **"Social Non-Sustainability in the Vietnam Apparel Supply Chain: Theorizing Decoupling Mechanisms,"** explains why multinational corporation's sustainability pledges translate poorly into supplier practices. Drawing on empirical fieldwork, it mobilizes decoupling theory (policy–practice and means–ends) to illuminate gaps generated by long supply chains, competitive pressures, and institutional misalignment. A qualitative, abductive design (interviews, observations in Vietnam, and secondary data) analyzes interactions among buyers, managers, unions, and workers.

The thesis comprises of three articles. (1) A multi-level decoupling framework: local resistance and power dynamics can disrupt façade conformity and shift pressures along the chain. (2) A study of workers' responses to CSR decoupling, structured around Exit, Voice, Loyalty, Neglect and Cynicism: far from passive, workers accept, negotiate, or contest depending on economic security and working conditions, thereby shaping sustainability governance. (3) A stakeholder-salience perspective on "selective decoupling" on the supplier side: managers prioritize what is visible to buyers and salient to workers, producing tight coupling, recoupling, or symbolic compliance.

Overall, the dissertation argues for public–private governance spanning all tiers (including upstream) to align expectations and practices, strengthen worker protections, and avoid the "race to the bottom." It concludes with a research agenda on how institutional pressures propagate across levels and on concrete mechanisms capable of re-coupling policy and practice.

Keywords: Organizational decoupling; social sustainability; stakeholders and workers; global supply chains; Apparel industry (Vietnam)