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**EXPLORING THE NATURE OF SUSTAINABLE SUPPLY CHAIN
MANAGEMENT: A DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVE ON CORPORATE
REPORTS**

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Abstract

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Large companies have been increasingly pressured to incorporate the societal and environmental considerations into their supply chain management strategies, organizational structures, and operational practices. Although there has been a growing interest in the topic in general, a discursive perspective is almost entirely ignored in the supply chain management research field. The objective of this study is to analyze the discursive construction that constitutes the idea of sustainable supply chain management and explore the natures of buyer-supplier relationships that are constituted as a consequence of discourse use.

The study subscribes to social constructionism and builds the conceptual framework to contextualize a discourse on sustainable supply chain management and methodological approach for the analysis of the discourse. The study presents the analytical framework to utilize a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis to reveal the construction of the discourse as well as interpret the construction of subject positions, and power relations constituted through the use of language. The material for the study consists of twenty sustainability reports from large Nordic companies from several industries identified as sustainability leaders.

The results showed the tensional dynamics of the discourse on sustainable supply chain management constituted from three discourses; the ruling discourse of sourcing excellence, the opposite discourse of commitment to sustainable supply chain, and the alternative discourse of building opportunities. Each discourse constructs unique conditions for buyer-supplier interaction, through which subject and power appear into being to manage preferred relationship aims. The study provides new ways to conceptualize the phenomenon of sustainable supply chain management for academics, as well as tools for practitioners to adopt the new realities of supply chain management in a sustainable domain.

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Yhteiskunnalliset tavoitteet määrittelevät yhä voimakkaammin suurten kansainvälisten yritysten hankintatoimen strategiaa sekä tapoja organisoitua ja toimia. Vaikka kiinnostus aihetta kohtaan on kasvanut, erityisesti diskursiivinen lähestymistapa on jäänyt huomiotta hankintojen johtamisen tutkimusalalla. Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on analysoida kestävien hankintojen johtamisen diskurssin rakennetta ja merkityksiä, sekä tarkastella diskurssinkäytön seurauksena muodostuneiden toimittajasuhteiden rooleja ja valtarakenteita.

Tutkimus lähestyy kestävien hankintojen johtamisen diskurssia sosiaalisen konstruktionismin kautta, yhdistäen tutkittavaa ilmiötä taustoittavan kontekstuaalisen viitekehysten ja diskurssianalyttisen lähestymistavan. Analyttinen viitekehys perustuu Foucaultialaiseen näkemykseen diskurssin konstruktivisesta luonteesta, sekä eri toimijoiden välisen vuorovaikutuksen, asemoitumisen ja valtarakenteiden rooliin ylläpitää diskurssia. Tutkimuksen aineisto koostuu kahdenkymmenen pohjoismaisen suuryrityksen yhteiskuntavastuuraporteista.

Tulosten mukaan kestävien hankintojen johtamisen diskurssi rakentuu kolmesta toisiaan täydentävästä, mutta samalla osin ristiriitaisesta diskurssista; hallitseva hankinnan tehokkuutta korostava diskurssi, täydentävä kestävään hankintaan sitoutumisen diskurssi, sekä vaihtoehtoinen toimittajayhteistyön mahdollisuudet huomioiva diskurssi. Nämä diskurssit rakentuvat toimittajasuhteen vuorovaikutuksen kautta, jossa toimijoiden väliset roolit ja valta-asetelmat saavat merkityksen. Tutkimus tarjoavaa uusia tapoja käsitellä kestävä toimintaketjun johtamiseen liittyviä ilmiöitä, sekä välineitä kestävä toimitusketjun johtamisen ammattilaisille vastuullisuuden johtamiseen osana yrityksen hankintatoimea.

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Abbreviations

CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DJSI	Dow Jones Sustainability Index
FDA	Foucauldian Approach on Discourse Analysis
ODA	Organizational Discourse Analysis
RDT	Resource Dependency Theory
SCM	Supply Chain Management
SRM	Supplier Relationship Management
SSCM	Sustainable Supply Chain Management

1 INTRODUCTION

“To make a progress on environmental issues, organizations must understand that they’re part of larger system”.

Peter Senge

1.1 Background

Sustainability has risen among the mainstream discourses in the society during the last few decades (Dryzek, 2013). The sustainability discourse reflects the fundamental search for an ecologically and socially sustainable development model of societies to solve the problems that are generated, a little paradoxically, by the societies themselves (Condrad, 2013). Even if incremental progress towards sustainability has been achieved at different levels in the society, are the most critical sustainability challenges such as climate change, social inequality, and resource depletion getting worse around the globe (Dobers & Springett, 2010). Especially globalization has been blamed for its adverse effects on sustainability. Aside from the well-known benefits of globalization, numerous companies, especially multinational ones, have been criticized for the lack of concern for a life and work of people, overuse of natural resources, and profits achieved at expense of the broader society (Mourdoukoutas, 2011). As the size and power of these companies have constantly increased, there has been a growing debate on their responsibilities and engagement to contribute sustainability (Kolk, 2008).

Much consideration has also been given to globalization of supply chains and their sustainability (e.g. Linton & Klassen, 2007; Carter & Rogers, 2008). In a globalized economy, competition has been increasingly shifted from companies to their supply chains. The current wave of globalization is contributed by the horizontal integration of businesses and outsourcing of production in low-cost countries in particular. This has been a source of competitive advantage for many western companies (Beske, Koplin & Seuring, 2008) but has also led increased complexity and reduced transparency in supply chains, and ultimately companies’ inability to control their social and environmental impacts (Piplani & Pujawan, 2008; Burgess, Singh & Korogly, 2006). At the same time, various stakeholders, including consumers, governments, and NGOs, hold companies accountable for ‘*social and environmental dumping*’ along their supply chains, which causes significant reputational and operational risks for

companies. In response to these developments, the way how companies manage their purchasing and supply chain operations has radically changed (Mollenkopf, Stolze, Tate & Uelschy, 2010; Carter & Easton, 2011; Wu & Pagell, 2011)

Against this background, it is not a surprise that the concept of Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM) has risen a growing topic both among practitioners and researchers (Seuring, Sarkis, Müller & Rao, 2008). SSCM has emerged from the recognition of strategic importance of purchasing and supply chain activities in reducing social and environmental impacts, mitigating supply-related risks, and improving companies' long-term business performance (e.g. Carter & Rogers, 2008). The transition towards sustainable supply chains has resulted changes in business behavior regarding purchasing strategies and relationships with suppliers (Pagell & Wu, 2009). Especially the role of Supplier Relationships Management (SRM) has gained attention in SSCM research, since better coordination and higher level of information sharing across the supply chain proves to be a paramount characteristic of the SSCM (e.g. Seuring & Müller, 2008; Beske & Seuring, 2014; Seuring et al, 2008).

In response to the rise of sustainability into mainstream societal discourses, large companies, especially stock exchange-listed, have started to communicate their sustainability stance in a more strategic manner (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005; KPMG, 2014). Besides traditional and mandatory economic and financial corporate reporting, the emergence of voluntary sustainability reporting has been increasingly rapid since the early 1990s (Hahn & Kühnen, 2013). The sustainability reporting practice serves as *“a barometer of organizations' attitudes towards social and environmental responsibility, strategic planning, and the level of integration in the organization”* (Kolk, 2008). Since companies purchasing and supply chain related operations represent one of the most visible activities in a public (Wu, Dunn & Forman, 2012), companies have included disclosures with the supply chain focus in their sustainability reports. Therefore, sustainability reporting practice provides opportunities to investigate companies purchasing and supply chain activities (Tate, Ellram & Kirchoff, 2010), and the way how they are presented as a part of an organizational sustainability discourse.

1.2 Need and motivation

The interest in studying an organizational discourse has increased during the last decades in the academic community (Phillips & Oswick, 2012; Dobers & Springett, 2010). Especially the

importance of scrutinizing companies' communication related to sustainability (e.g. Burchell & Cook, 2006; Aras & Crowther, 2008; Guthrie & Farneti, 2008) has been emphasized. To date, there has been some research, though relatively limited (Tate et al., 2010) related to sustainability communication with a supply chain focus. Those few studies (e.g. Tate et al., 2010; Arora, 2014; Closs, Speier & Meacham, 2011; Alexander, Touboulic & Walker, 2014; Allen, Walker & Brady, 2012; Ciliberti, Pontrandolfo & Scozzi, 2007; Turker & Altuntas, 2014) are carried out more or less in quantitative terms, with larger samples, and through mechanical coding. From the perspective of studying the language as a constructive activity, the lack of a research is readily apparent (Ellis, Purchase, Chan & Lowe, 2006). Since methodological developments represent a step forward in the SCM research (Sarkis, Zhu & Lai, 2011), there is a potential to apply novel approaches that are capable of describing for companies' activities related to SSCM (Ellis et al., 2006; Touboulic & Walker, 2015).

Apart from these methodological inquiries, the supply chain scholars have devoted a greater attention to the conceptualization of SSCM phenomenon (Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014; Pagell & Wu, 2009). For instance, despite the interest from both academics and practitioners, there is a lack of understanding of how sustainability is perceived at operational level of SCM, and how companies actualize sustainability agenda in their supply chain operations (Carter & Easton, 2011). In addition, several authors have emphasizes a relevance of boundary-spanning research (e.g. Carter & Rogers, 2008), horizontal integration of sustainability in supplier relationships (e.g. Pagell & Wu, 2009; Seuring & Muller, 2008; Svensson, 2007; Koplin, Seuring & Mesterharm, 2007), and examination on how buyer-supplier relationships are, and should be established in the SSCM setting (e.g. Gold, Seuring & Beske, 2010). Higgins and Ellis (2006) encouraged, in particular, to examine how supply chain relationships are constructed through the use of discourse. These issues have become important, as there are strong evidences, hat some aspects and practices at the supply chain level may have to be changed and managed different way than in the traditional way of SCM (Beske & Seuring, 2014).

Given the collision of these inquiries, organizational discourse analysis grounded in French philosophers Michael Foucault's ideas on discourse, subject, and power present itself a fruitful way to contribute ongoing debate on the SSCM. I will present in this study a way to employ A

Foucauldian approach on discourse analysis¹ (FDA) to develop knowledge on the conceptualization of the SSCM phenomenon (e.g. Carter & Easton, 2011) and deepen understanding on construction of buyer-supplier relationships in the SSCM setting (e.g. Gold et al., 2010) through the examination of organizational discourse occurring in sustainability reports. I will demonstrate that a discursive approach provides opportunities to examine some of the most fundamental questions related to SSCM. For instance, understanding a discursive construction of SSCM phenomenon may help to reveal underlying ideological meanings that easily pass unnoticed (see Vaara & Laine, 2006) with traditional approaches. Furthermore, its focus on the subject and power makes Foucauldian approach useful since it can “*liberate the non-rational and subjective ways*” (Ellis et al., 2006) to scrutinize the construction of buyer-supplier relationship in the SSCM setting. As far as I know, the discourse research approach also extends the methodological framework applied in the SSCM research field.

1.3 Objective and the research questions

This explorative study takes a discursive view on the SSCM phenomenon. In particular, given the research gaps discussed above, this study explores:

The construction and consequences of the discourse on SSCM in sustainability reports

The broader empirical setting, in which this study is situated, consists a group of publicly listed companies from the Nordic region, identified as the sustainability leaders in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI) in 2014. Nordic countries consist of Finland, Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Denmark. They are all ranked among the most sustainable countries in the world by RobecoSAM (2015). Large companies are recognized as the key actors for providing solutions to sustainability challenge, and therefore, focusing the ways how they talk about sustainability a part of their business operations is important (Trigidga, Milne & Kearings, 2007). A sustainability reporting practice, in turn, serves as a naturally occurring conveyer of organizational discourse (Phillips & Oswick, 2002), providing thus a rich and advanced secondary source of material (Ziek, 2009) to investigate how companies actualize sustainability agenda in their purchasing and supply chain operations (Tate et al., 2010). Due to the relatively

¹ A term Foucauldian approach is used as a convenient way of identifying the primary theoretical and methodological approach used in this study.

low number of language-related topics in the prior SCM research, I sketched the constructive and consequential levels of analyses. The first research question asks:

Q1: *How is the discourse on Sustainable Supply Chain Management constructed in sustainability reports?*

1.1 *What are the main themes of SSCM discourse?*

1.2 *How is the discourse on SSCM discursively constructed?*

At the constructive level, my aim is to recognize the construction of the SSCM discourse. Idea here relies an approach that aims to deconstruct corporate sustainability rhetoric (e.g Livesey, 2001; Heikkinen, 2014). I make the distinction between a thematic organization and discursive construction. The first sub-question answers the “*what question*” and focuses on different themes that holds the SSCM discourse together, deploying the principles of thematic content analysis. This phase is also an essential prerequisite for actual discourse analysis, as it is used to isolate the SSCM discourse from the other content in the studied material. The remaining “*how-questions*” are answered employing ideas of the FDA. The second sub-question explores the discursive construction of SSCM discourse. My aim here is to recognize different types of discourses, shared ways of thinking, knowing and speaking, and consider different meanings, or representations surrounding the SSCM phenomenon. Together, these considerations increase a conceptual understanding of how large companies consider and actualize sustainability agenda in their purchasing and supply chain operations (e.g. Carter & Easton, 2011). Then, the second question focuses the consequential nature of discourse use:

Q2: *How are buyer-supplier relationships constructed through a discourse use?*

2.1 *How a function of buyer-supplier relationship is constituted?*

2.2 *How are actors’ identities and relational power constituted?*

2.3 *How subject and power shape the means to manage sustainability?*

At the consequential level, I am interested how the discourse use constitutes organizational life, rather than how it is constructed (see Phillips & Hardy, 2002). While there are many topics to be considered from Foucauldian perspective, a construction of buyer-supplier relationship deserves particular attention (e.g. Gold et al., 2010). The common aim of the second research

question is to scrutinize the language and especially representation of interaction between buying companies and suppliers, and how it constructs their identities, power circumstances and relationships. As Foucault (1982) proposed, this kind of question can be approached through three interrelated sub-questions. The first sub-question explores diverse functions of supplier relationship. The second one investigates identities, or subject positions, and natures of power relations between companies and suppliers. The third sub-question consider how the subject and power shape the means to manage sustainability in supplier relationship. These analyses provide insight into the construction and governance mechanisms of buyer-supplier relationships (Pagell & Wu, 2009; Gold et al., 2010) in the SSCM setting.

There are also certain assumptions that will guide the focus of this study. My first assumption is that the SSCM is treated as strategic choice, and it has effects on companies' purchasing and supply chain activities compared to the traditional view of SCM (Beske & Seuring, 2014). Second, since the current SSCM research mainly focuses on upstream supply chain operations (Linton et al., 2007), is the analytical focus of this study restricted to inter-organizational operations and supplier interfaces, ignoring thus activities that go beyond the core of SSCM research. Third, I will examine the SSCM phenomenon mainly at an organizational level, recognizing that it can be studied at various levels (Walker, Alexander & Touboulic 2012). Fourth, I am not interested conditions of possibility or whether the SSCM practices are able to foster the sustainability agenda. Instead, I assume that sustainability reporting practice reflects an organizational reality, even if consistency between words, companies' actions and actual sustainability performance have been a topic of debate (Joutsenvirta, 2009). Fifth, the primary focus is not in a communication characteristic of SSCM discourse, for example, to scrutinize why something is said, but in trying to understand what is said and how it constructs an organizational reality. Finally, I recognize an essentially subjective nature of this study.

1.4 Research framework

The aim of this study is multidisciplinary, and therefore, a particular attention is paid to the research framework. The researched phenomenon, the construction and consequences of the SSCM discourse, is approached from a constructionist perspective. It means that the way how the discourse on SSCM takes its shape in organizations, and consequently in their sustainability reports, is a part of socially constructed reality (see Berger & Luckmann, 1991). In this sense,

this study subscribes the view that language use is tied up with the value system of the society (Hall, 2001) and plays a central role in the construction of an organizational reality (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). The social constructionist approach of the study is discussed in more detail in section 3.1. A constructionist starting point guides both the conceptual and methodological choices of the study. The framework for the study consists of contextual discussions² that will conceptualize the research phenomenon, as well as a theoretical and methodological approach that will guide the empirical analyses. Overall, this research framework enables researching the construction and consequences of the SSCM discourse. Figure 1 illustrates the framework of this study and existing streams of research that are involved.

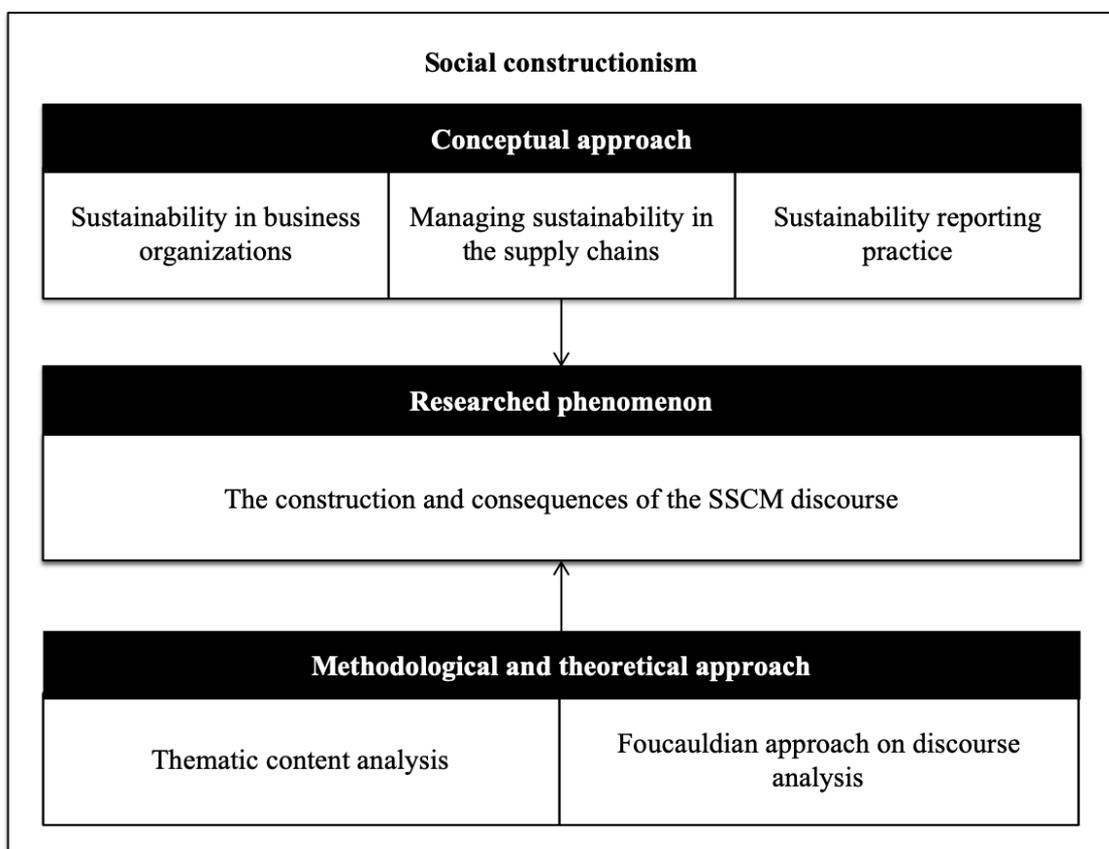


Figure 1. Framework of the study.

From the conceptual perspective, I recognize the importance of context in examining the discourse on SSCM. Especially in constructionist research, it is typical that investigated

² The role of the theory in discourse studies, or prior research in a certain field of research, is help to focus on relevant research problem, understand the current situation in the field, establishment the context for analysis, explore the production process for material, and frame of reference on which the analysis and interpretations are based (Phillips & Hardy, 2002).

phenomenon is constructed in relation to various contexts. There are at least two contextual levels that must be considered in conducting an organizational discourse research; situational context, where the discourse takes place, and more extensive societal context, in which companies are operating (Fairclough, 2005; Song, 2010; Keenoy, Osrick, Grant, 1997). In this study, as SSCM is defined as a sustainability-related phenomenon (Carter & Rogers, 2008), broader societal, political and organizational discourse on sustainability provides the higher-level interpretative context for the researched phenomenon. Furthermore, since the material of the study consists of sustainability reports, the situational context, in which the discourse on SSCM takes its shape, consists of the sustainability reporting practice. Both of these contextual elements root the study also loosely into sustainability accounting research³. Recognizing the contextual standpoint is essential for interpreting a studied discourse, and its ignorance can lead, for example, to underutilization of the studied material (Keenoy et al., 1997). In addition to these interpretive contextual elements, the research framework naturally considers the current state of SSCM research, allowing to place new findings in the appropriate context.

From a methodological perspective, I will employ FDA as a primary tool in investigating the SSCM phenomenon. As discussed earlier, the study makes a distinction between the constructive and consequential levels of an analysis. Such an analytical distinction is necessary in order to comprehend the discourse on SSCM as a body of knowledge and to interpret how the discourse use shapes the organizational life (see Vaara & Laine, 2006). It should also be noted, and as will be discussed in chapter three, it is hard to understand a FDA as an analysis method in a traditional sense, but rather as a whole methodology or theoretical perspective, that guides both analyses and interpretation of empirical materials (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Hence, a FDA serves as a primary frame of reference on which analyses and interpretations of this study are based. In addition, thematic content analysis is used to reveal descriptive themes and organization of the discourse on SSCM in studied sustainability reports. To achieve the research objective, conceptual, theoretical, and methodological elements are combined with the empirical material. Methodological elements of the study are discussed in third chapter.

³ Another good option would have been rooting the study tighter in the societal and environmental accounting and organizational research, but I decided, mainly due to the explorative aims of this study, to focus on general characteristics of the SSCM discourse rather than scrutinizing it from some specific perspective.

My decision⁴ to utilize proposed research framework, consisting of conceptual discussions from the several fields of research combined with a novel methodological approach in the SSCM domain, can be justified by three interlinked reasons. First, the framework is consistent with the social constructionist approach adopted for this study. Accordingly, my aim is not to test a theory, but to develop new categories of knowledge by examining how a discourse, different meanings, and organizational reality are constructed through the use of language in the sustainability reports (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Second, the study recognizes that investigation of social phenomena rooted from sustainability pushes strongly towards interdisciplinary approaches (Gladwin, Kennelly & Krause, 1995) especially when analyzing discourses related to corporate sustainability (Dobers & Springett, 2010). Third, SCM in sustainable domain is a novel field of research, and there is not an established approach that captures a whole complexity (Touboulic & Walker, 2015). Thus, considering that the objective of the study is complex and multidisciplinary, it is justified to draw insights from different fields of research, rather than focus on any single theoretical or methodological approach.

1.5 Organization of the study

I have so far discussed the background, need and motivation of the present study, outlined the research objective and the research questions, as well as presented the research framework for conducting the study. The remainder of this study is organized into five chapters. In the following, I will shortly describe the idea and aim behind each chapter.

1. **Introduction:** This study began with a brief discussion about the central role of purchasing and supply chain operations for achieving companies' sustainability aims. I also provided a brief overview of the current situation of the SSCM research with promising research directions, set out the objective and the research questions for the study, and discussed of contextual and methodological elements of the study.
2. **Conceptualizing the discourse on Sustainable Supply Chain Management:** Chapter two introduces the conceptual background of the study through the three interrelated topics. It discusses the transition towards sustainability in business organizations,

⁴ I also acknowledge that there are several theories and research streams dealing with Sustainability and Supply Chain Management, which this study could be positioned. However, due to exploratory nature of the study and challenges in using current concepts and theories in the field of SSCM (e.g. Touboulic & Walker, 2015), I decided to focus on interpretation work without rigorous theoretical foundations.

reviews the background and characteristics of the SSCM phenomenon, and scrutinizes the characteristics of the sustainability reporting practice. This kind of multidisciplinary conceptualization is important especially when studying sustainability related topics. Drawing from these discussions, I conclude the chapter with a brief synthesis, and consider the relevance of studying the discourse on SSCM. The overarching aim of the chapter is to provide an understanding of the SSCM discourse taken its place at companies' sustainability reports to arrive at the conceptual starting point of the study. In addition, it naturally contributes to the frame of reference on which my analyses, interpretations, and conclusions are based on the empirical part of the study.

3. **Conducting the study:** Chapter three describes the social constructionist worldview adopted in this study, familiarizes with a thematic content analysis, an organizational discourse analysis, and Foucauldian approach on discourse analysis that also plays a theoretical role in this study, and further discusses the potential of a Foucauldian approach in yielding new insight into SSCM research field. After that, the chapter describes actual research process including the rationale for choosing sustainability reports for the material, provides an overview of the material, introduces the actual analysis framework, and describes the conduct of analyses. Finally, I will offer some personal reflections regarding the overall research process. Thus, the common aim of the chapter is to introduce the theoretical and analytical frameworks through which the empirical analysis is undertaken and describe their utilization in practice.
4. **Results and interpretations:** Chapter four presents and discusses the empirical findings of the study. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the first research question, the construction of the SSCM discourse. After reviewing the thematic organization of the discourse, the discursive construction is presented in the form of the three different discourses that companies use in constructing and maintaining their understanding of the SSCM phenomenon. The first part concludes with a short consideration of the meanings and interdependencies of SSCM discourses. Then, the second part of the chapter investigates, in line with the second research question, different constructions of buyer-supplier relationships, constitution of subject and power, and their role in the management of sustainability aims in supplier relationships. The chapter concludes with a summary and discussion of the empirical findings.

5. **Conclusions:** Chapter five concludes the central findings of the study in relation to research questions. Furthermore, theoretical and methodological contributions, as well as managerial implications are presented, and some interesting areas for future research are pointed out. At the end of the chapter, quality of the study is evaluated.

2 CONCEPTUALIZING THE DISCOURSE ON SUSTAINABLE SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT

The research phenomenon, the discourse on SSCM in sustainability reports, is constructed and shaped in relation to various contexts. The common aim of this first chapter is to provide an overview on the central concepts of the study, and discuss existing research related to the studied phenomenon to establish the appropriate context for empirical analyses⁵. The chapter is divided into three larger sections. The first section discusses sustainability as a business case, building a rationale behind the SSCM phenomenon. Then, the second section provides an overview of the current SSCM research relevant for this study. The third section explores the nature of supply chain disclosures in the context of sustainability reporting practice. At the end of the chapter, I will provide a short synthesis and consider the relevance of studying the construction and consequences of SSCM discourse in the light of this conceptualization.

2.1 Towards sustainability in business organizations

The role of businesses to foster sustainability agenda has been considered important. Before focusing a more deeply on sustainability in a supply chain setting, I will take a wider view on the transition towards sustainability among businesses. This section consists of three interrelated topics that constructs the rationale behind SSCM phenomenon. I will first focus on the growing responsibilities of businesses in the society from a system perspective. Then, I will give a brief overview of the concept of sustainability and describe some of its applications in the business sphere. Finally, I will discuss the integration of sustainability aims into business strategy. Altogether, this section clarifies the socially constructed nature of companies' sustainability strategies and establishes a macro-context for empirical analyses.

2.1.1 Approaching business sustainability

The world is moving towards sustainability within businesses, governments, and institutions alike. For businesses, sustainability represents a similar cultural shift since the industrial, agricultural, and information technology revolutions during last decade (Edwards, 2005). Sustainability is fundamentally a highly contextual concept with a question about the

⁵ My aim here is not to provide any theoretical lens that will guide my analyses in the empirical part of the study. Instead, they are presented together with the methodological approach in the third chapter.

relationship between businesses, nature society around (Pollach, Johansen, Ellerup Nielsen & Thomsen, 2012). As the general system theory argues, all organisms, including business organizations, are in continual interaction with their social environment (Bertalanffy, 1972); business activities impact upon the society, and societal actions effect on business. Businesses, therefore, are inextricably linked to the society around (Marcus, Kurucz & Colbert 2010). Natures and developments of these relationships have been examined in various socio-technocratic disciplines. For example, Marcus et al. (2010) found three alternative views of business-society-nature relationships in contemporary management literature; the disparate, intertwined, and embedded. These three alternative relationships are presented in Figure 3.

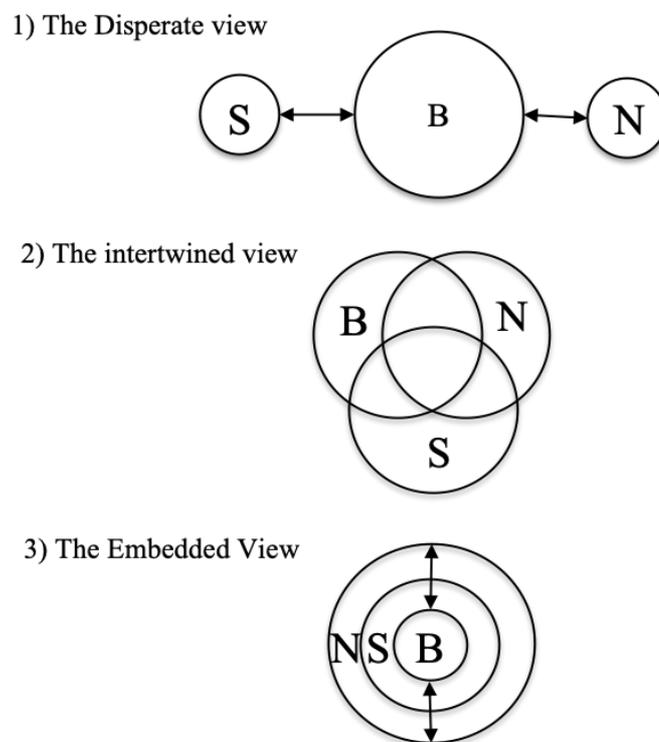


Figure 2. Relationships between business, society and nature (Marcus et al. 2010).

The disparate view represents an externalizing perspective, drawing from traditional neoclassical capitalism where businesses try to maximize their financial wealth, being a separate entity from society and natural environment. Intertwined view, instead, provides a relating perspective where society, nature and businesses are integrated in a way which yields mutual benefits (Marcus et al., 2010). For example, Triple Bottom Line approach (TBL) (Elkington, 1998), which is discussed later in this chapter, represents such an intertwined view on sustainability. Finally, the embedded view reorganizes the previous view considering

business, society, and nature as a nested system. Even if this kind of symbiotic view will not fit easily into dominant focus of management paradigm, it is the best to cope with sustainability challenges, as it emphasizes complete interdependence between business, society, and nature (Marcus et al., 2010). Even if relationships between businesses, society and environment have undergone positive developments during the past decades (Pollach et al., 2011), there is a broad consensus that the system is more unstable than ever (Marcus et al., 2010).

Especially an imbalance between corporate power and social responsibility has been widely criticized for the fragility of these relationships (Bendell & Bendell, 2007). Large companies are the most powerful institutions in the world (Kolk, 2008), and their operations have been linked to deepening social and environmental problems, resource depletion and ethical scandals. In other words, they are perceived to be prospering at the expense of the society (Porter & Kramer, 2011). However, as the iron law of responsibility suggests, “*in the long run, those who do not use power in a manner which society considers responsible, will tend to lose it*” (Davis 1973). Hence, power cannot be viewed in isolation from responsibility, and growing societal concerns generate various market based and regulative forces to balance power and responsibility. This pushes companies to self-regulation and deal with various stakeholders⁶ to maintain their “*societal license to operate*” (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014). As a result, large companies have made significant shifts towards sustainability in the conduct of their operations and attitudes to business in general (Bebbington, Unerman & Dwyer, 2014).

2.1.2 Understanding business sustainability

The emergence of sustainability concern among businesses can be traced back to the industrialization era in 1950s, when the growth of companies caused debate on about their appropriateness with society and natural environment (May, Cheney & Roper, 2007; Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014). The rise of sustainability in the broader awareness in society has been linked in the report of Our Common Future, also known as Brundtland Report from the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. The report loosely defines a well-known idea of sustainability as “*a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*” (WCED, 1987). The

⁶ Stakeholders comprise “*groups and individuals who can affect, or are affected by, the achievement of an organization’s mission*”. They can include, for instance, governments, suppliers, customers, investors, political groups, communities, trade associations and employees (Donaldson & Preston, 1995)

implicit message of the report was, that despite the finite resource limits in the earth, sustainability and development can still coexist, and future generations needs ensured, if wise policies are put into practice. Since the Brutland report, companies are increasingly accepted sustainability as a core business (White, 2009), even if they are also blamed for the hijack of the concept and harnessing it to serve business interest (Tregidga et al., 2013).

When interpreting the idea of sustainability⁷ in a business setting, it necessitates for “*strategies and activities that meet the needs of organization and stakeholders while protecting human and natural resources that will be needed in the future*” (Ganescu, 2012). Since companies’ neoclassical focus on financial performance, in terms of profitability and economic growth, has become contested widely in the society, and increasingly also by companies themselves, there has been a surge of conciliatory concepts such as Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach (Elkington, 1998), that provides an intertwined perspective for the business-nature-society relationships. TBL approach is widely adopted among the public, policymakers, and businesses, and it necessitates for equal consideration of economic, social, and environmental performance to achieve overarching sustainability goals in the society (Norman & McDonald, 2004; Gladwin et al., 1995). The well know idea beyond TBL approach is that in the intersection of social, environmental and economic goals lies certain activities, that not only positively affect at the societal and environment level, but also make economic sense and result in a competitive advantage for companies (Porter & Kramer, 2011; Elkington, 1998).

The idea of sustainability is often operationalized at company level through Corporate Social Responsibility (Dobers & Springett, 2010). CSR is a management approach that encompasses the responsibilities that companies, especially the large ones, have to societies they operate in (Carroll, 2008). Hence, the rationale behind CSR lies in companies’ tendency to stabilize their power and social responsibility. CSR is usually defined as “*the voluntary integration of social and environmental concerns into business operations and in their interaction with stakeholders on voluntary basis*” (European Commission, 2012). Thus, its basic idea is to integrate social and environmental concern into values, culture, strategy, and decision-making. However, even if the CSR shares the same normative goals with sustainability (Ebner & Baumgartner, 2006), it mainly encompasses responsibilities that companies have to their stakeholders, and thus

⁷ I use the term sustainability and sustainability development interchangeably in this study to refer the broader societal development that focuses to the integration of societal, environmental and economic concerns.

excludes a direct focus on economic profitability (Dobers & Springett, 2010). Therefore, there is a strong tendency, that businesses are gradually moving from responsibility towards creating shared value, as their competitiveness and appropriateness in the society are proved to be mutually dependent in the long run (Porter & Kramer, 2011)

2.1.3 Building sustainability into business strategy

Growing numbers of companies have adopted sustainability into their strategic planning agendas (White, 2009). Corporate sustainability strategy aims “*balancing the social, environmental and economic needs of both the company and society*” (Espstein & Roy, 2001). Thereby, as sustainability contain three domains of performance, the development and especially implementations of business strategies to contribute sustainability goals has been a challenge for companies (Van der Heijden, Cramer & Driessen, 2012; Galpin & Whittington, 2012; Porter & Kramer, 2006; Baumgartner, 2014). In many cases, sustainability is pursued more coincidentally in companies than with a clear strategy (Baumgartner & Ebner, 2010). For instance, it is argued that uncoordinated sustainability initiatives, such as philanthropy, are mostly disconnected from companies’ business strategy that neither makes any meaningful societal impact nor strengthens their long-term competitiveness (Porter & Kramer, 2006). Hence, to incorporate sustainability “*into the DNA of the company*” (White, 2009), it should be linked into strategy, business models, culture, organizational, structures and processes, and core competencies in a way that provides long-term value for company itself and society around (Porter & Kramer, 2006; McElhaney, 2009; Doz & Kosonen, 2010)

Development of sustainability strategies at a company level follows usually Mintzberg's view of emergent strategies (Beske & Seuring, 2014). It views that a strategy is not a fixed plan but “*emerges over time as intentions collide with and accommodate a changing reality*” (Mintzberg, 1978). The process involves a series of phases including rejection, ignorance, compliance, efficiency, proactive strategy leading to corporate sustainability (Holton, Glass & Price, 2010). Existing literature recognizes an array of different sustainability strategies that companies can adopt (Baumgartner & Ebner, 2010). For instance, with regard to SCM, Van Bommel (2011) identified continuum of three generic approaches to corporate sustainability. Companies can adopt a resign strategy when, due to the lack of pressures and incentives, the process of implementing sustainability is not started. Defensive strategy, instead, prioritizes the establishment of environmental requirements along the supply chain to manage risks. Finally,

offensive strategy seeks to cooperate in the supply chain to innovate in a sustainability-oriented manner to create new market opportunities. It has also been recognized that companies can choose a defensive strategy for certain products or services, and at the same time, an offensive strategy for other categories of products or services (Van Bommel, 2011). Companies can also adopt different strategic approaches for different dimensions of sustainability (Kogg, 2009). Hence, choosing a proper sustainability strategy is highly challenging, and for some companies engaging sustainability is not appropriate at all (Baumgartner, 2014)

Widespread adoption sustainability strategies have also caused debate of their long-term impact for businesses. The evidence of whether sustainability strategy is a cost of doing business or can it also enhance the companies' economic performance is somewhat mixed (Baumgartner & Ebner, 2010). While some authors suggest a trade-off game where strategic decisions with sustainability goals come with economic costs (Hoffmann & Ventresca, 1999), the current understanding supports a win-win situation where the interests of most stakeholders can be satisfied simultaneously with the above-the-average business performance (Porter & Kramer, 2006; Porter & Kramer, 2011 Zadek, 2004; Porter & Van der Linde, 1995). Hence, choosing a proper sustainability strategy can serve businesses by the means of "*reducing costs and risk, maximizing profits and competitive advantage, increasing reputation and legitimacy and creating synergistic value*" (Kurucz, Colbert & Wheeler, 2008). However, it is also argued that the comparison between the cost and benefits is becoming irrelevant, as it is clear that business organizations will need to deal in the future with environmental and societal issues, that creates sustainability a common practice for companies to survive (Corbett & Klassen, 2006).

2.2 Managing sustainability in supply chains

Purchasing and Supply Chain Management represent a key area of businesses through which sustainability goals can be achieved. This section consists of three interrelated topics. First, I will consider the transition from the traditional SCM towards a more sustainable SCM. After that, I will give an overview of the concept of SSCM. Then, I dealt with the strategic essence of SSCM, related organizational structures, and operational practices that are required to fulfill sustainability goals in the supply chain level. Finally, I will discuss the role of power in managing sustainability beyond organizational boundaries, as the power also lies in the core of Foucauldian thinking. Altogether, this section conceptualizes the current state of theory and practice in the SSCM field, allowing to place new knowledge in the appropriate context.

2.2.1 Transition towards Sustainability in Supply Chain Management

Supply Chain Management (SCM) is one of the most important paradigms in management sciences in the 20th century (New, 1997). According to its original definition “*Supply Chain Management covers the flow of goods from supplier through manufacturing and distribution chains to end user*” (Oliver & Webber, 1982). The basic idea behind SCM is that companies aim to coordinate activities and relationships beginning from suppliers until to end-customers, for efficient utilization of resources, reduction of costs and risks, ensuring quality to satisfy customer needs, and creating value for supply chain participants (Klassen & Vachon, 2003; Lindgreen & Wynstra, 2005; Axelsson & Wynstra, 2003). Since more than a half of modern companies turnover is transferred upstream supply chain to suppliers (e.g. Liker & Choi, 2004), especially the role of supplier relationship management (SRM) has gained momentum in SCM, since relationships specific assets, knowledge sharing, complementary resources, and efficient governance structures are potential sources of inter-organizational competitiveness and competitive advantage (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Gold et al., 2010; Carter & Ellram, 2003). As a result, the role of purchasing and supply chain management in companies has broadened considerably from a supportive function to a strategic one (Axelsson & Wynstra, 2003).

SCM has been also been discussed in relation to sustainability (e.g. Seuring & Muller, 2008; Beske & Seuring, 2014; Carter & Rogers, 2008). In the globalized economy, the supply chain and purchasing operations play a remarkable role in the constitution of companies’ societal and environmental footprint (Klassen & Vachon, 2003). For example, around sixty to eighty percent of consumer goods producers, capital goods makers, and other manufacturers’ carbon footprint lies upstream in their suppliers’ operations (Brickman & Ungerman, 2008). Hence, in addition to its economic importance, the supply chain and purchasing function plays a pivotal role in the controlling of companies societal and environmental impacts (Carter & Rogers, 2008). However, traditional view on SCM has been almost solely characterized by economic targets such as costs, quality and profitability (Qi, Zhao & Sheu, 2011) which makes it fundamentally environmentally and societally hostile management approach (Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014). From this perspective, companies that are looking to minimize, for instance, a waste in their supply chain operations, are not primarily interested in decreasing societally or environmentally harmful impacts but to maximize their profits (Sarkis, Zhu & Lai, 2011).

This kind of singular focus on maximizing economic performance and shareholder value has been questioned in the societies around the world (e.g. Porter & Kramer, 2006), and companies have been increasingly held responsible, not only impacts of their intra-organizational operations, but for all the environmental, societal and economic impacts caused by their entire supply chain system (Hartman & Moeller, 2014; Seuring & Müller, 2008). This idea of “*boundaryless responsibility*” (Amaeshi, Osuji & Nnomid, 2008) views that supply chain is an intrinsic part of the company, which has caused pressures from a range of stakeholders, including legislation by governments, sustainability demands by customers and non-governmental organizations, and competitive pressures by other companies (Zhu & Sarkis, 2006) to integrate societal and environmental concern along the entire supply chain system (Linton et al., 2007). Therefore, supply chain performance is no longer measured just by profits, but also considering the supply chain impacts on environmental and societal systems (Beske-Janssen, Johnson & Schaltegger, 2015). This has caused a paradigm shift from traditional SCM towards Sustainable Supply Chain Management (Morali & Searcy, 2013).

2.2.2 Overview on Sustainable Supply Chain Management

Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM) is a comparably young field of research that has emerged in the intersection of Supply Chain Management and Sustainability disciplines (Carter & Easton, 2011). SSCM began to gain momentum in the early 2000’s and has since then risen a growing topic among researchers and practitioners (Touboulic & Walker, 2015; Seuring, Sarkis, Müller & Rao, 2008; Burgess et al., 2006). There are also similar streams of research such as *socially responsible purchasing*, *green supply chain management*, *closed loop supply chain*, and *global value chain management* only with small nuances between them and SSCM (Krause, Vachon & Klassen, 2009; Carter & Easton, 2011). It is also widely accepted that SSCM is a theoretical and practical broadening of SCM (Svensson, 2007; Ahi & Searcy, 2013; Beske & Seuring, 2014). Therefore, as the adoption of sustainability agenda across organizations makes sustainability a dominant paradigm also in the supply chain setting (Linton, Klassen & Jayaraman, 2007), it is suggested that the distinction between SCM and SSCM research is becoming irrelevant (Halldórsson, Kotzab & Skjoett-Larsen, 2009).

The basic idea of SSCM is to integrate SCM and Sustainability in a way that addresses societal concerns and ensures business performance (Ahi & Searcy, 2011). SSCM relies basically on TBL approach (Elkington, 1998) and recognizes “*The strategic, transparent integration and*

achievement of an organization's social, environmental and economic goals in the systematic coordination of key organizational business processes for improving the long term-economic performance of the individual company and its supply chains" (Carter & Rogers, 2008). Thereby, when the focus in the traditional SCM is economic dimension of sustainability including lowering costs, managing uncertainty and reducing supply risk (Klassen & Vachon, 2003), from SSCM perspective companies have also to pay attention into societal and environmental dimensions of sustainability to be successful (Seuring & Müller, 2008; Beske & Seuring, 2014; Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014; Vermeulen & Seuring, 2009). However, SSCM still follows the instrumental logic of sustainability where the primary goal is economic performance rather than environmental and societal ones (Montabon, Pagell & Wu, 2016).

A central characteristic of SSCM is that buying companies, typically original equipment manufacturers in a global supply setting, are considered initiators of SSCM practices that integrates sustainability goals in the supply chain system (Seuring & Müller, 2008). Compared to traditional view on SCM, focuses the current view of SSCM mainly on upstream supply operations such as purchasing (Seuring, Beske, Gold & Schreiber, 2014), even if manufacturing, distribution and reverse logistics are also mentioned (Diabat & Govindan, 2011). However, operationalization of SSCM in global supply setting is challenging (Van der Heijden, Cramer & Driessen, 2012), as it involves the integration of economic, environmental and social considerations within and between organizations, among the large amount of supplier relations in diverse economic, cultural and political context (Gold et al., 2010; Harms, Hansen & Schaltegger, 2013; Pedersen, Mette & Andersen, 2006). Current SSCM literature generally highlights collaborative initiatives (Carter & Rogers, 2008) in the implementation of sustainability efforts, but in practical level, companies tend to favor non-collaborative approach in ensuring supplier compliance (Brockhaus, Kersten & Knemeyer, 2013; Harms et al., 2013) rather than establishing "*truly sustainable supply chains*" (Pagell & Shevchenko 2014).

2.2.3 Strategies, structures, and processes for SSCM

After having presented these general features of SSCM, I will focus on the implementation of sustainability goals in the supply chain setting, since there are certain practices that may result in higher performance. To put SSCM more concrete, companies have to reconsider their

strategic orientation, supply chain structures, and operational processes⁸ (Beske & Seuring, 2014). SSCM has widely recognized as a cross-cutting issue that should be managed at a strategic level in organizations (Gavronski, Klassen, Vachon & Machado de Nascimento, 2011; Seuring & Müller, 2008). This means that dedication to Sustainability and Supply Chain Management have to be incorporated into the overall business strategy and values of a company (Beske & Seuring, 2014; Seuring & Müller, 2008; Pagell & Wu, 2009). Especially executive commitment is a critical factor for success of SSCM (Walker, Sisto & McBain, 2008). These strategic values and high-level commitments create the foundation to integrate Sustainability and SCM approaches in operational decision-making in companies supply chain operations (Pagell & Wu, 2009; Beske & Seuring, 2014). However, as will be seen, strategic benefits of SSCM are not so obvious than operational ones (Wittstruck & Teuteberg, 2012).

Another antecedent for SSCM is the structure, or cooperative attitude, between the supply chain actors. It is widely known that the performance of supply chain is dependent on its every link (Gold et al., 2010). For example, traditional SCM practices such as supplier selection and supplier development play an important role in ensuring supply chain performance (Seuring & Müller, 2008; Vachon & Klassen, 2006). They also create favorable conditions for long-lasting relationships where trust, transparency, similar value base, information sharing, and related infrastructures such as IT-systems are likely to develop (Beske & Seuring, 2014). These kinds of structural circumstances are also likely to enable collaborative behaviors between actors (Beske & Seuring, 2014) that are viewed as a key facilitator of sustainability (Gold et al., 2010). Examples of collaborative behaviors that are geared towards sustainability include joint product development (Sarkis et al. 2011) or enhancement of logistics integration with the company and its supplier and customers (Vachon & Klassen, 2008). Continuity in supplier relationships can also be a potential source of competitive advantage as they help to develop capabilities that are hard to replicate as well as reduce costs and uncertainty in a supply system (e.g. Gold et al., 2010; Carter & Rogers, 2008; Vachon & Klassen, 2006; Beske, 2012).

When it comes to processes in managing sustainability in the supply chain setting, risk management has become an increasingly important practice considering globalization of supply chains (Seuring & Müller, 2008). Typical means for managing sustainability risks are the

⁸ The idea of this section is adopted from Beske and Seuring (2014), who proposed that companies have to reconsider their strategic orientation, supply chain structure, as well as operational processes to achieve economic, societal, and environmental performance at the supply chain level.

adoption of a certain sustainability standards and requiring the same standards from suppliers (Vachon & Klassen, 2008). These standards are often written in the form of a supplier code of conduct that aim to transfer companies' sustainability values upstream to suppliers (Pagell & Wu, 2010; Srivastava, 2007; Seuring & Müller, 2008; Vachon & Klassen, 2008). They do not only help to integrate suppliers to a buying company, but also add legitimacy to business (Müller, Santos & Seuring, 2009). In addition, these standards are used for building performance measurement systems to ensure suppliers' sustainability performance (Hassini, Surti & Searcy, 2011). However, suppliers may have unwilling to adopt these practices for different reasons, including a high initial investment without a corresponding return (Tate, Dooley & Ellram, 2011) or limited resources and capabilities of smaller suppliers (Pedersen, 2009). At the same time, increased cooperation between parties reduces the complexity of the supply chain system, which may lead to risk reduction (Sarkis et al., 2011).

In addition to risks preparedness, a pro-activity has been characterized companies SSCM activities (Pagell & Wu, 2009) since it can create opportunities to cope with sustainability challenge (Seuring & Müller, 2008; Van Bommel, 2011). Companies can foster sustainability in the supply chain setting basically in two ways (Beske & Seuring, 2014). Firstly, they may attempt to develop sustainability performance along the supply chain, for example, by means of calculating and reducing carbon footprint (Harms et al., 2013). On the other hand, they can adopt a strategy for sustainable products that is associated with development and cooperation with suppliers to achieve sustainability-oriented innovation⁹ (Seuring & Müller, 2008) which fit the growing market demand for sustainable products and services (Carter & Easton, 2011). Both of these cooperative practices reflect companies' ability to exploit newfound knowledge (Vachon & Klassen, 2006) and promote learning-oriented organizational cultures (Beske & Seuring, 2014). In addition to obvious reputational gains, proactive companies have excellent opportunities to reach first-mover benefits and even competitive advantage by reaching out to new customers and developing new markets (Srivastava, 2007).

⁹ For instance, Barbieri et al. (2010) defined sustainability-oriented innovation as “*the introduction of products, production processes, management or business methods, new or significantly improved, that bring economic, social and environmental benefits when compared with relevant alternatives.*”

2.2.4 Role of power in buyer-supplier relations

Power is an important concept for understanding the governance structures and management of buyer-supplier relationships (Maloni & Benton, 2000; Caniels & Gelderman, 2005). Basically, power denotes the capacity to affect the behaviors of others. It can be defined in behavioral terms, explaining that “*A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do*” (Dahl, 1957). Power plays also a prominent role in any social organization or social structure, and it can be viewed as a key instrument for inter-organizational coordination (Achrol, 1997). In the management literature, power is approached from a relational perspective that emerges from dependencies between organizations (e.g. Medcof, 2001; Caniels & Gelderman, 2005). In the SCM literature, power has been defined as “*the capacity to optimize the behavior of suppliers and subcontractors in accordance with desired performance objectives*” (Stannack, 2006). Hence, the use of power to influence supplier actions is taken for granted in the SCM literature (Maloni & Benton, 2000)

Resource Dependency Theory (RDT) provides an established approach to understand power circumstances in a buyer-supplier interface (e.g. Hillman, Withers & Collins, 2009). It is based on an assumption that organizations are forced to enter in exchange relationships to gain access to resources they need for survival (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). In a supply chain setting, RDT is interested in how organizational behavior, decision-making and inter-organizational structures are affected by external resources, such as raw materials that are controlled by suppliers. It basically views that relational power is a function of the degree of dependency between companies and their suppliers (Ramsey, 1996; Ulrich & Barney, 1984). Accordingly, if a buying company is dependent on resources owned by a supplier, it has fewer possibilities to exercise power over the supplier, for example to gain better contracts, and vice versa. From the wider sense, companies' power over suppliers depends on the criticality of a certain resource, as well as the availability of alternative suppliers to source similar resources (Cox, 1999; Ulrich & Barney, 1984). Hence, the nature and availability of resources owned by suppliers determine the degree of dependency and the nature of power relations in the supply chain setting.

Much attention has also been given to understanding the characteristics of power (e.g. Benton & Maloni, 2005; Maloni & Benton, 2000). Traditionally, the power over suppliers has been seen as a key factor for buying companies' success (Pfeffer, 1981). Controlled use of power, for example, promotes supply chain integration and has positive effects on the supply chain

performance. Excess use of power, instead, may lead, dissension, and reduction in a supply chain performance (Maloni & Benton, 2000). It has also been found that non-coercive power strategies produce positive outcomes in cooperation, while coercive power strategies are counterproductive in encouraging cooperation in supplier relationships (Hausman & Johnston, 2010), which can become less stable and less trusting (Terpend & Ashenbaum, 2012). Balanced power, instead, refers to the situation where buying companies and suppliers rather influence each other than use relies on the use of power (Ramsay, 1996). As a rule, powerful companies tend to act opportunistically against their suppliers and make agreements that will favor their interest and encourage suppliers the make majority relationship-specific investments (Ramsay, 1995). Hence, there must be an understanding of appropriate power circumstances for managing preferred outcomes in supplier relationship (Maloni & Benton, 2000).

In the SSCM setting, the traditional view on relational power becomes contested (Pagell & Wu, 2010). Even if buying companies power dominance over their suppliers has been found important factor to ensure supplier's compliance with sustainability matters (e.g. Pedersen & Andersen, 2006; Touboulic, Chicksand & Walker, 2014), collaborative approach is mentioned the most important facilitator to enhance a supply chain sustainability (e.g. Brammer, Hoejmosse & Millington, 2011; Beske & Seuring, 2014). As found earlier, substantial use of coercive power can potentially prevent collaboration (Terpend & Ashenbaum, 2012; Touboulic et al., 2014) as well as impedes inter-organizational learning and knowledge diffusion and undermines sustainable supply chain policies (Hall & Matos, 2010). It has thus been argued that companies exercising solely relational power and coercive mechanisms to foster sustainability agenda among their supplier base can easily become as "*a bully rather than champion*" (Boyd, Spekman & Kamauff, 2007). In this sense, RDT needs to be continued exploration to remain relevant in the SSCM setting (Singh, Power & Chuong, 2011)

2.3 Disclosing supply chain sustainability

Sustainability reporting has become an institutionalized practice for companies to respond to stakeholders' expectations, manage their public identities, and engage in the societal sustainability discourse. However, it has its special character and production process that should be considered when conducting a discourse analysis (Dobers & Springett, 2010). For that, I will first provide an overview of sustainability reporting practice. Then, I will explore the natures of sustainability discourses occurring at different levels, and consider the strategic characteristic

of corporate sustainability discourse taken place in the reports. Lastly, I will give an overview of supply chain disclosures based on the GRI G4 guidelines. This all taken together, broadens the societal context, and outlines the situational context for empirical analyses. Since current understanding on the SSCM phenomenon from discourse perspective is lacking, the section is mainly based on the literature on sustainability reporting and sustainability discourses.

2.3.1 Framing sustainability reporting practice

Sustainability reporting has gained prominence over the last few decades, since stakeholders' demands have forced companies to communicate their sustainability performances in a more strategic manner (Herzig & Schaltegger, 2006; Allen, 2015;). In general, remembering the system view on sustainability, such a reporting practice works as “*a pragmatic and constitutive vehicle used to shape our understanding of the environment as well as relationships to the natural world*” (Cox, 2012). Companies' motivations for sustainability reporting arise mainly from a voluntary basis to maintain and develop dialogue with their stakeholders, but there are also emerging regulatory forces pushing towards a mandatory reporting practice (Bini & Belluci, 2019). The main idea of sustainability reporting practice is to show how companies have performed and what they are currently doing to address stakeholder concerns as well as to describe company's values, governance model and sustainability strategies, and how they are planning to achieve them (MacLean & Rebernak 2007; Carroll, 2008; Kolk, 2003)

From a historical perspective, sustainability reporting practice has developed since 1970's, since the public concern about environmental and societal issues have been increased (Ziek, 2009). While sustainability reporting is increased among small and middle-size companies, such a reporting practice has become the norm for most large companies (Herzig & Schaltegger, 2006). For instance, in 2013, over 95 percent of the largest 250 global companies reported on their sustainability stance. For comparison, in 1993, only 10 percent of global companies published reports (KPMG, 2014). Due to the discretionary nature of sustainability reporting practice, the names of the reports vary between corporate responsibility, sustainability, and corporate social responsibility reports (Roca & Searcy 2012). By the end of the 1990's boundaries between mandatory financial reporting and voluntary based environmental and societal reporting has been blurred, and transition towards new forms of integrated reporting has been relatively rapid (Herzig & Schaltegger, 2006). This trend can be linked to the development of the Global Reporting Initiative (Vormedal & Ruud, 2009).

Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) has become almost a de facto international standard especially for large companies to conduct their sustainability reports. For example, in 2013 over 79 percent of large companies referred to the GRI framework (KPMG, 2014). Since the preparation of sustainability reports has moved closer to accounting and audit practices (KPMG, 2014), the GRI guideline facilitates companies in the evaluation and disclosing of their economic, societal and, environmental impacts at the local, regional and global levels (GRI, 2014). The GRI framework has also criticized for being too generic and lacking detailed, quantifiable measures (Levy, Brown & De Jong, 2010). Therefore, the newest GRI G4 version initiated in 2014, focuses especially on materiality issues and provides sector-specific reporting principles consisting of several indicators to measure and communicate sustainability performance systematically. In addition to qualitative measures, GRI relies heavily on narrative disclosures in the representation of sustainability stance (GRI, 2014). However, GRI guideline mainly focuses on environmental and social measures, and detailed financial information is still disclosed by tradition financial reporting frameworks (Hahn & Kühnen, 2013).

2.3.2 Sustainability disclosures in corporate reports

Sustainability reporting practice is not only a form of communication but consists of multiple discourses with aim combine diverging views of sustainability in a socially accepted way to conduct business (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2014). Sustainability, in general, is an ambiguous concept where different discourses¹⁰ around the economic, societal, and environmental paradigms are joined together (Hajer, 1995). It is characterized by constructive ambiguity, meaning that multiple interest groups are gathered behind the same broad goal, but their objectives and interest are not fully compatible, or they are conflicting (Robinson, 2004). There is a widespread consensus that societal sustainability discourse centers around 1) *development of economic systems*, 2) *preservation of global ecologic processes*, and 3) *considering societal equity all over the world* (Carruthers, 2001). The form of discourse is shaped by socio-economic and political context in which the discourse takes place, but also by various actors, including business organizations and NGO's seeking to influence it (Nielsen & Thomsen, 2007). Since

A term discourse is confusing and there are significant differences to what a term discourse means depending from academic, theoretical and cultural stance (Kärreman, 2014). Here, discourse could be simply defined as a particular way of talking about a certain phenomenon (Foucault, 1972).

these actors have different perceptions how sustainability should be framed, the discourse on sustainability is not a fixed but a subject of discursive struggles (Dryzek, 2013).

Organizational sustainability discourse shares the same broad goals with the societal discourse but leaves room for interpretations on how to achieve them (Dobers & Springett, 2010; Dryzek, 2013). For that reason, multiple different discourses have identified at the organizational level (e.g. Hume et al., 2013; Alexius, Furusten & Löwenberg, 2013; Baden & Harwood, 2012; Dryzek, 2013; Salzmann, Ionescu-Somers & Steger, 2005). For example, Hume et al. (2013) distinguish between three interrelated discourses, according to which sustainability is conceived as 1) *the pragmatic integration of economic and environmental goals*, 2) *the idea of limitations on human activities*, 3) *and a process of directed change or transition*. They concluded that the common aim of these discourses is to dissolve the conflict between environmental, social, and economic objectives in business, or in other words, to integrate them (Hume et al., 2013). It is also recognized that the constitution of sustainability discourse at the organizational level is anchored and dependent on contextual elements such as the size of the company, industry, and specific stakeholder groups (Nielsen & Thomsen, 2007).

Sustainability reporting practice is not only a passive describer of organizational life but serves as a discursive strategy¹¹ through which companies engage to broader sustainability discourse to achieve their interest in societal level (Vallentin, 2006; Allen, 2015; Deegan, 2002). One commonly stated goal is to legitimization of companies' activities (Deegan, 2002). In accordance with legitimization theory (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975), legitimization can be considered as a resource that companies are dependent for their survival. The idea here is that companies employ the sustainability reporting practice to ensure the stakeholders that they are operating within the bounds of the law and societally recognized norms. Therefore, sustainability reports often contain various discourses that reflect different interpretations over the roles and responsibilities of companies in the society (Allen, 2015). It also is argued that large companies are powerful agents in advancing the discourse on sustainability with the ability to maintain the dominant discourse on sustainability in the society in a way that may be

¹¹ Discursive strategies refer to the intentional use of a discourse to reach certain goals (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). According to Deegan & Unerman (2011), there are many different strategies used depending on what is needed, and one thing that all legitimization strategies rely upon is disclosure.

advantageous for companies (Tregidga, Kearings & Milne, 2013). Therefore, the societal discourse on sustainability is becoming increasingly corporatized (Banerjee, 2003).

Sustainability reporting practice is not without critics. It is widely acknowledged that companies tend to emphasize their most advantageous side in external communication, and sustainability reporting practice is not an exception (Allen, 2015). For that, sustainability reporting is criticized for its self-laudatory, selectivity and strategic character. Traditional concerns relate to discrepancies between disclosures in reporting and actual practices in society (Prasad & Elmes, 2005). There is also evidence that if companies focus too intensively on communication on sustainability, stakeholders may believe that they are trying to hide something severe (Brown & Dacin, 1997). For instance, there has been found a negative relation between actual environmental performance and reports, for example, where high-level polluters often release more information about their environmental initiatives (Clarkson, Overell & Chapple, 2011). There are also “*silenced truths*” (Kallio, 2006) that are rarely expressed in sustainability reports. For instance, companies never admit that the underlying motive behind sustainability is gaining legitimacy as a respectable and responsible actor in society

2.3.3 Sustainable supply chain reporting

Supply chain operations play a remarkable role in the constitution of companies’ societal and environmental impacts (Tate et al., 2010). Alongside with the demand by stakeholders, regulatory requirements for greater transparency along the supply chain have been increased. For example, the European Parliament and Council (2014) necessitates companies with over 500 employees to report annually on environmental and social issues, also with regard to their supply chain sustainability. The GRI G4 framework focuses on “*significant impacts that are caused or contributed by the organization, or that are linked to its activities, products, or services by its relationship with a supplier*”. It provides reporting requirements aligned with internationally recognized standards (e.g. UN guiding principles on business and human rights) for procurement practices and checklist for investigations, including screening, impacts assessment, and grievances at the supply chain level (GRI, 2014). The framework includes fifteen voluntaries, a more or less supply chain-related indicators, that companies can use on disclosing issues that are most relevant to their operations. Those few mandatory supply chains and purchasing specific disclosures and measures that are required are (GRI, 2014):

- **Company profiles disclosure** that describes the organization's supply chain narratively, and it may include instance, for example, the total number of suppliers, the monetary value of purchased products, materials and services, and locations of supplier.
- **Generic management disclosure on management approach**, which provides information on policies for supplier selection as well as management and termination of relationships, practices for product and service design and procedures for certification, and audit of suppliers.
- **Aspect specific disclosures on management approach**, including reviewing of economic aspects of procurement practices which focus on promoting economic inclusion throughout the supply chain and labor specific aspect which concern supplier's employees working conditions and labor protection overall.
- **Numerical indicators in economic category** to describe procurement practices and several measures related to screening and assessment/remediation of suppliers' compliance in environmental, human rights, and society related categories.

While the GRI framework provides a holistic approach to supply chain reporting, promoting transparency in the supply chain setting has been found to be a challenge, especially for companies with a large and global supplier base. Therefore, only a minority of companies have been able or willing to demonstrate their supply chain impacts in a comprehensive manner (Ahi & Searcy, 2015). For example, companies tend to focus on disclosing their operating policies, such as means for controlling suppliers in the social and environmental matters, rather than demonstrating actual results that have put in place along the supply chain (Gwilliam-Beehare, Busian & Rutten, 2016). The main reason lies in companies considerably discretion to decide their reporting scope, but also their incapability to recognize materiality issues that are specific to their supply chain, and difficulties in gathering and analyzing a vast amount of supplier-related data, and integrate it with the rest of non-financial information (Ahi & Searcy, 2015). Hence, improvement of transparency in sustainability reporting requires standardized metrics complemented with company-specific measures, and access to good data which, in turn, requires companies to develop their data collection methods (GRI, 2014).

2.4 Relevance of studying the SSCM discourse

In this chapter, I have discussed three larger topics in order to contextualize the research phenomenon, the construction and consequences of the discourse on SSCM in sustainability reports, allowing thus to place the new findings in the appropriate context. I have drawn from the numbers of studies from the several fields of research. The chapter began with the presentation of sustainability as a business case, explaining the underlying rationale behind the SSCM approach. Then, in the second section, I focused in more detail on the SSCM phenomenon. I put emphasis on supplier relationship management, as it seems to play crucial role in extending companies sustainability initiatives across the supply chain system. In addition, I examined characteristics of the relational power and its role in supplier relationship management, as it seems to be relevant, at least for comparison purposes, considering the central role of power in the FDA. In the third section, I provided a short review of sustainability reporting practice, showing that beyond the communication role, it also serves as a tool for legitimization and contributing companies' private interests in a broader society.

This conceptualization serves several purposes. When it comes to investigating the construction of SSCM discourse, I showed that sustainability is a subject of discursive struggles (Hajer, 1995). For instance, there is no consensus what sustainability means and how it can be achieved at a company level (Dryzek, 2013). As the roots of the SSCM phenomenon are deep in sustainability (Ahi & Searcy, 2014), its operationalization within and between organizations indeed faces a broad range of complexities, uncertainties, and tradeoffs (Abbasi & Nilsson, 2012). This kind of constructive ambiguity is also shaped in sustainability reporting practice (Leitch & Davenport, 2007), aiming combine diverging views of sustainability into coherent stories and constructing shared meanings for what is socially accepted way to conduct business (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2014). Therefore, as the discourses are always connected to other discourses (Phillips & Hardy, 2002), it is evident that SSCM disclosures in companies' sustainability reports are not unambiguous, but consist on different interpretations, for example, to dissolve the conflict between economic performance and societal responsibility. Thus, scrutinizing the construction of the SSCM discourse could provide new perspectives on how companies consider sustainability agenda their purchasing and supply chain operations.

When it comes to exploring the consequential nature of discourse use, I demonstrated that SSCM is characterized by the integration of environmental and societal goals in the supply

chain system (Beske & Seuring, 2014), which forces companies to rethink their approach on SRM (Pagell et al., 2010). Even if the relational power is an important facilitator ensuring suppliers compliance with companies' sustainability requirements, plays collaboration increasing role in the establishment and development of sustainable supplier relationships (Brammer et al., 2011), for instance, by gearing towards joint-development of sustainability-oriented innovations (Sarkis et al., 2011). However, despite the increasing significance of sustainability for companies, traditional business aims such as reduction in purchasing costs and management of supply risks are still prevailing objectives of SSCM (e.g. Klassen & Vachon, 2006). Due to these diverging objectives, it is evident that function of supplier relationship, roles of supply chain actors, and power relations between them are likely to be reconstructed when operating in a sustainability domain. Therefore, it seems to relevant to scrutinize the construction of the buyer-supplier relationships in the SSCM setting. Here, a discourse perspective and a FDA could provide alternative views to the current research.

3 CONDUCTING THE STUDY

In the previous chapter, I have discussed contextual elements of the study to arrive at the conceptual starting point for empirical analyses. The aim of this third chapter is threefold, to describe, discuss, and justify various philosophical, methodological, and theoretical choices I made during the research process to generate results. The first section discusses the ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundation of the study. Then, the second section provides an overview of the chosen methodological and theoretical tools that will guide the empirical analyses and discuss their potential to provide insights into SSCM research. The third section builds the analytical framework and describes the analysis process. At the end of the chapter, I will present some personal reflections regarding the research process.

3.1 Research approach

This study tends to be qualitative by its nature. In its broadest sense, qualitative research can be defined as “*a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). I adopted a qualitative stance because the prior research on SSCM from a discourse perspective was lacking, and it has potential to provide an explorative understanding about the researched phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). There are also certain philosophical choices in qualitative research that shape the direction of a study. The most fundamental choice is a worldview. It reflects *a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied*” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Even if a worldview remains hidden in actual research, its recognition is important as it comprises ontological and epistemological assumptions and outlines potential methodologies (Creswell, 2013). While ontology and epistemology both relate to nature of reality and the way how researcher come to know it, methodology relate to tools and nature of results that can be achieved (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Together, these assumptions provide *the architectural backbone* (Polit & Beck, 2012) of a study.

In qualitative research, and in the social sciences in general, there are three alternative worldviews; positivism, critical theory and constructionism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I will adopt a social constructionist approach in studying the discourse on SSCM. It is one form of constructionist approaches and emphasizes socially created nature of the social reality. It particularly focuses on how social reality is created, structured, and maintained by social beings

in interaction with others (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Regarding ontology, social constructionism assumes a relativistic view, considering that society consists of multiple realities, and a subjectivist epistemology, viewing that there is no absolute truth, but the reality is subjective experience allowing multiple interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These assumptions also bring some constraints and limitations along to the study. The chosen approach seems to be relevant, since different approaches on organizational discourse analysis, and business research in broader terms, usually operates within the constructionist framework (Grant & Hardy, 2004; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Phillips & Oswick, 2012).

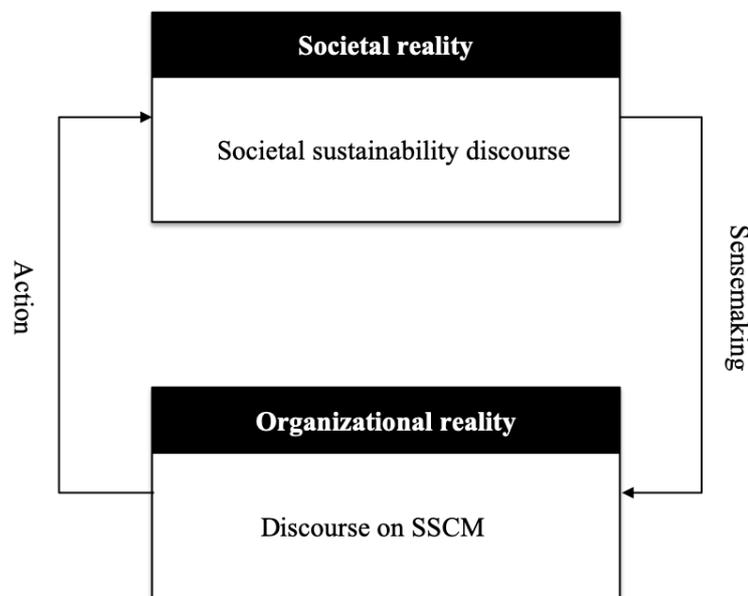


Figure 3. Social construction of an organizational reality (adapted from Gjersvik, 2012).

The constructionist approach views that construction of reality is culturally and historically specific (Burr, 2015), in this case for particular conditions and values in society. With this regard, as discussed in the second chapter, sustainability represents “*a space of dissension and sociopolitical struggle*” (Hajer, 1995) and leaves room for the interpretation in the process of construction of a reality. The SSCM is essentially related in decision-making in organizations (Pagell & Wu, 2010; Gold et al., 2010) that place people's behaviour and decisions at the centre of the construction of the organizational reality. Therefore, the way how organizational actors make sense on the social reality, and also those of discursive struggles over sustainability, is shaped in the organizational reality, which in turn, shapes organizational discourses, also those of SSCM ones. Societal reality and discourses are also further up shaped by organizational actions and discourses. The idea of social construction of organizational realists is showed in

figure 3. Therefore, as the discourse and reality go together (Burr, 2015), the discourse on SSCM is constructed through the social processes in organizations and understanding of organizational reality is a product of those (Allen, 2015; Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

Investigations of socially constructed phenomena have employed a variety of methodological approaches to understand a researched phenomenon (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It is claimed that “*organizations exist only in so far as their members create them through discourse*” (Mumby and Clair, 1997). In the same spirit, this study views that business organizations are discursive constructions and language use is the foundation upon which organizational attitudes and behaviour are built (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2014; Grant et al., 2004; Burr; 2015). From this perspective, sustainability reporting practice as a part of corporate communication cannot merely understood as a collection of texts that only passively describes the existing reality, but also as a constructive practice of organizational reality that actively creates knowledge, brings objects and subjects into being, and gives them meaning through a discourse (Foucault, 1972). Since the language and language use plays an active role in constructing, structuring and maintaining an organizational reality, various discourse research approaches provide empirically grounded tools to investigate an organizational or/and inter-organizational phenomenon that is socially constructed by its nature (Phillips & Oswick, 2012).

3.2 Analysis of an organizational discourse

The interest of studying organizations from a discursive perspective has expanded over the last two decades (Phillips & Oswick, 2012). The term organizational discourse broadly covers the collections of texts and language that are able to bring organizational life into being (Fairclough, 2005). There are a range of qualitative research methods that could be employ in studying organizational discourse (Merkl-Davies, Brennan & Vourvachis, 2014). Since qualitative studies are often said “*solving a mystery through different methods*” (Alasuutari, 1995), relies this study on the combination of thematic content analysis and organizational discourse analysis, and the Foucauldian approach on discourse analysis (FDA) in particular, in studying the construction and consequences of the SSCM discourse. This section begins with a demonstration of a thematic content analysis and how it differs from discourse analytical approaches. Then, I will discuss briefly on different approaches of organizational discourse analysis. A substantial part of this section is devoted to Foucauldian approach on discourse analysis and considerations of its potential to yield new insight in the SSCM research.

3.2.1 Thematic content analysis

The first method employed in this study is thematic content analysis. Various content analysis-based techniques have been used to scrutinize different facets corporate narratives including sustainability reports (e.g. Joutsenvirta, 2009; Tate et al., 2010). The method refers to a family of different techniques for the systematic and replicable analyses of texts as well as other forms of visual media (Stemler, 2001). Thematic content analysis is one form of content analysis, focusing on analyzing text with the aim to find emerged similarities from the material and group them under coherent themes. Terminologically, “*a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set*” (Braun & Clarke, 2006). They can be determined inductively, deductively or by the combination of these. Regardless of a reasoning approach, the categorization of themes must be rigidly and consistently applied so that analysis is reproducible by another researcher with the same results (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In comparison to discourse analysis approaches, these analysis methods differ on their underlying philosophical assumptions (Merkl-Davies et al., 2014) as described in Table 1.

Table 1. Content analysis and discourse analysis (adopted by Merkl-Davies et al., 2014).

Perspective	Content analysis	Discourse analysis
View of language	Positivistic, language reflects social reality.	Constructionist, language constructs social reality.
View of corporate reports	Single reported reality or multiple understandings of reported reality.	Multiple discursively constructed realities.
Focus on analysis	Patterns of word use or verbal behavior. Identifying codes and themes.	Patterns of discursive strategies and discourses. Identifying meanings and ideologies.
Researcher stance	Detached, objective.	Involved, subjective.
Role of context	Context is mainly ignored from analysis.	Context is involved in interpretation.

Especially their view on language differs substantially. From the positivistic stance, language can be seen as a passive descriptor of existing reality, that can be analyzed using tools based on positivistic approaches including content analysis. Still, content analysis fails to delve into a deeper analysis of a language, and it tells a little, of what organizations mean with their

disclosures (Thomson & Bebbington, 2005). Constructive view rejects the positivistic assumption and considers a language as the constructive activity (Phillips & Oswick, 2012). Hence, while reflective approaches attempt to describe and interpret reality as it exists, constructive approaches endeavor to uncover how the reality is produced (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Compared to discourse analysis approach, content analysis-based methods are far more accessible as they have clearly defined procedures rather than relying on “*researchers’ craft skills*” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Thus, it is well suited to be combined with other analysis methods when analyzing organizational discourse, for instance, providing an empirical starting point for actual discourse analysis by generating descriptive information of a researched phenomenon (Merkl-Davies et al., 2014). In this study, thematic content analysis is employed to describe the organization of the SSCM discourse.

3.2.2 Premises of organizational discourse analysis

The second methodological and theoretical approach of the study is based on organizational discourse research¹², and more precisely, Foucauldian approach on discourse analysis, which is described in detail later. They both provide interpretive tools for deconstructing and interpreting corporate disclosures. Organizational discourse analysis (ODA) has received growing interest during the last decades since frustration with mainstream theories and methodologies has encouraged scholars to seek alternative ways to describe, analyze and theorize practices that constitute an organization (Grant, Hardy, Oswick & Putnam, 2004). Rather than considering language as a neutral describer of organizational reality, ODA is interested on the constructive effects of language (Phillips & Oswick, 2012) to understand how organizations “*are talked into being*” (Kärreman, 2014). The focus of an analysis is on organizational discourse itself, for example, on how it is organized or what it is doing (Fairclough, 2005). Therefore, the main idea of ODA is to recognize the socially constructed nature of organizational life. Due to these assumptions, ODA is rather complementary to a more conventional approaches, not replacement for them (Phillips & Oswick, 2012).

Beyond these general similarities, the conduct of ODA comprises a broad range of different approaches derived from various socio-political disciplines (Phillips & Oswick, 2012). A

¹² Discourse analysis analysis and organizational discourse analysis encompasses a number of domains of study, a variety of methodological approaches and epistemological perspectives that are available for conducting such analyses. However, they are not discussed in this study in a greater depth.

commonly used categorization is made between the studied level of language and methodological approach as presented in the figure 4. The underlying idea here is that a discourse operates at different but non-competing levels of language. While micro-level analysis focuses on single text with emphasis on linguistics or vocabulary, is macro-level analysis interested in a discourse as a broader societal phenomenon that appears across the range of organizational texts (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Alternatively, from a methodological perspective, critical approaches aim to conceptualize a discourse as the construction of power relations and reproduction of domination in an organizational setting (Fairclough, 2005), while constructionist approaches view discourse as a communicative action that constructs organizational realities (Heracleous, 2006). Choosing a proper standpoint is highly dependent on the researched phenomenon, although combinations of different elements are possible and even usual when conducting the ODA (Phillips & Oswick, 2012).

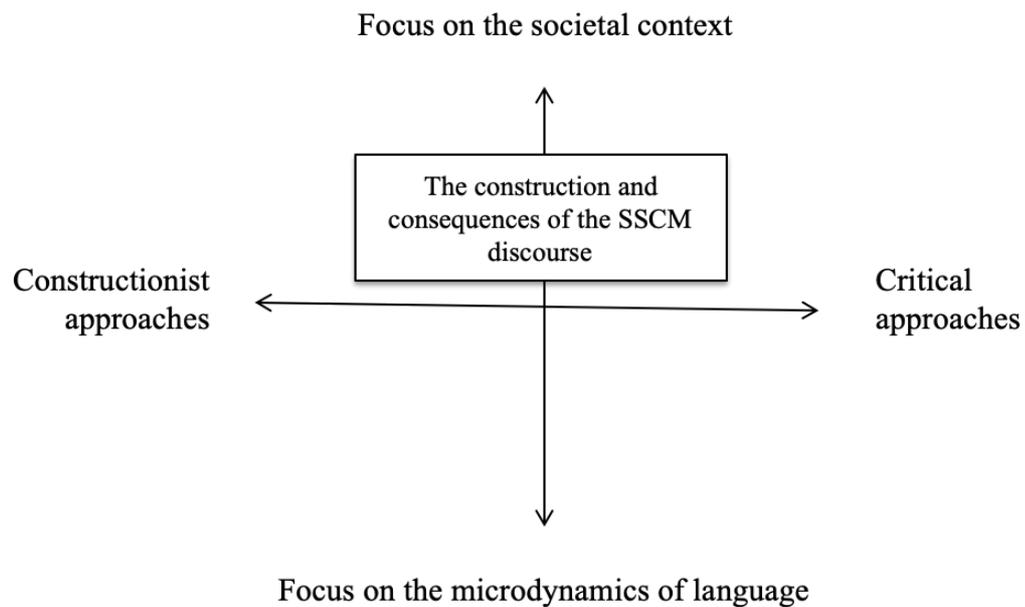


Figure 4. Perspectives of Organizational discourse analysis (Phillips & Oswick, 2012).

This study would be located in the middle of the upper half in figure 4. On the level of language, as the examination involves contextual elements in which the SSCM discourse occurs, this study could be considered as a meso-level approach, “*being relatively interested sensitive to language use in context but interested in finding broader patterns and going beyond the details of text*” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Methodologically, the study draws both from constructionist and critical approaches. From a constructionist view, the study focuses on the

SSCM discourse as “a way of constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice” (Hall, 2001), while the critical stance arises from its interest to examine the role of language use and social interaction in the constitution of subject and power (Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Hardy & Clegg, 2006). Hence, discourse research approach, and FDA in particular, are difficult to understand as an analysis method in the traditional sense, but rather as a methodology or theoretical perspective, or even philosophy, that will both guide analysis and interpretation of findings (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Next, I will discuss FDA in theory.

3.2.3 Foucauldian approach on discourse analysis

Discourse analytical approach and theoretical guidance of the study draws on the ideas of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984)¹³. Foucault was famous not only of intellectual works but especially for innovative methodologies and theories that he developed in writing them. His thoughts have provided inspiration, concepts, and analytical guidance in several areas of social sciences, and also increasingly among organization and management scholars (Phillips & Oswick, 2012; Välikangas & Seeck, 2011; Knight, 2001). However, Foucauldian approach on discourse analysis is not an integrated way of doing research, and it can be better understood as a loose framework that focuses on the organization of a discourse and the constitution of subject and power (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). These three core concepts of FDA are also involved, in a way or other, in the organization of social and economic relations, which make sense to employ the FDA in the organizational setting (Knight, 2002). I will rely on four cornerstones of Foucauldian thinking, that organize the analyses in this study: 1) *Language can be broken into discourses*, 2) *there is an order of discourse*, 3) *discourse use constitutes subjects* and 4) *power relations*. In the following, I will briefly explain the core ideas of these cornerstones of FDA and continuity between them.

1. Foucauldian approach focuses on the language use in a certain community at a particular time. It views that language organizes and structures the social reality in specific ways, and it can be thus broken into different discourses. The concept of discourse, in Foucauldian terms, can be defined as “a group of statements that belong together and

¹³ My presentation to Foucault’s work is by no means exhaustive, but sufficient distillation considering the aim of this study. For example, philosophical backgrounds of the Foucauldian notions, and their role in his archeological and genealogical phases of career are not discussed. In addition, representations of these notions are mainly based on interpretations of other researchers from various social scientific disciplines, not Foucault himself.

construct a particular version of reality through recurrent themes [...] they are a way of representing knowledge about a particular topic at a particular moment” (Foucault, 1972). As a discourse use constitute knowledge, it consequently permits and restricts the ways, how a certain phenomenon can be put in practice in the social reality (Grant et al., 2004). Therefore, a discourse use work as vehicle through which meanings¹⁴ are constituted (Hall, 2001; Fairclough, 2005). Meanings are always a context specific and reflect socially shared understanding of a discourse (Phillips & Hardy, 2002).

2. Foucauldian approach assumes that in a certain community, there exist parallel discourses operating at the same time. When these discourses refer to the same object, share the same style, or serve the same strategy, they belong to the same discursive formation. Discursive formations are composed of intertwined discourses that are often contradictory and contrasting by their nature (Hall, 2001). Therefore, there is “*an orders of discourse*” that reflects relations of discourses, dynamics how discourses may influence each other, and their relative importance within a discursive formation. From this perspective, some discourses are more dominant than others and constitute conditions for the existence of other discourses that would be, for example, marginal, oppositional, or alternative (Fairclough, 2003). Therefore, a meaning of a certain phenomenon is never fixed but depends on the discourse (Phillips & Hardy, 2002).

3. Foucauldian concept of discourse is closely related with the constitution of subject and power. In this sense, language use has consequences in organizational reality. FDA views that discourse use constitute social structures, where power defines the means to regulate the conduct of others (Hall, 2001). Therefore, discourse use determines how the otherness, or a subject is constituted, in other words, who it is possible to be and what it is possible to do (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkeline, 2008; Foucault, 1982). While a subject could be considered as an actor within a certain discourse, subject positions refer to identities that are available for subjects in relation to other subjects (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Central to this view is that as discourses within the same discursive formation are

¹⁴ A meaning is somewhat complex concept. It is a discourse specific point of view of a certain phenomenon, reflects underlying values and preferred identities, and shapes a space of actions in the social reality (Hall, 2001).

intertwined and contradictory by their nature (Hall, 2001), a same subject may be positioned differently depending on the discourse (Törrönen, 2001).

4. Foucauldian approach views that it is not possible to study subjects without studying a power. His view on power challenges many traditional conceptions of power claiming that; 1) power appears into being in non-equal relationships between subjects rather than being something possessed by any subject, 2) power is complex form of strategy that operates through social practices that are available for subjects when trying to shape behavior of others, 3) power should be seen as a way to modify, direct and guide the actions of other subjects rather than viewing it solely from negative, coercive and repressive perspective; and 4) knowledge is always a form of power (Hall, 2001; Gaventa, 2003; Foucault, 1982; Välikangas & Seeck, 2011). In conclusion, it would be summarized that the constitution of subject, categories of power, and a way how power operates between subjects, are discourse relative in the Foucauldian approach – they only exist within a certain discourse but not necessarily in others.

Foucauldian, or any other approach to discourse analysis, is not “*a research machine*” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002) that churns out qualified results. Instead, they all tend to be ambiguous, hard to understand and difficult to implement (Sharp & Richardson, 2001). Even if there are several guidelines (e.g. Willig, 2008; Kendall & Wickham, 1999; Sharp & Richardson, 2001) to facilitate FDA, they are more or less a discipline specific. For that reason, in conducting the FDA, researcher has to develop an approach which fits to the research aim. It is also approved to combine and adapt different elements of a certain tradition to establish a proper analysis approach (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001). As Phillip and Hardy (2002) noted “*it is not a method itself but a conduct of interpretative analysis providing understanding of a discourse and its role in constituting social reality*”. Hence, also the results of discourse analyses are subjective interpretations of the researcher and there is not absolute truth (Joutsenvirta, 2009). As will be demonstrated in the following section, FDA can be easily adapted in the field of organization and management studies (Knights, 2002), to question conventional thinking, and especially studying the construction and consequences of the SSCM discourse.

3.2.4 Potential of Foucauldian approach in yielding new insights

A Foucauldian approach on discourse analysis has received some popularity in the field of organizational and management studies (Väläkangas & Seeck, 2011). However, studies in the SCM field have been characterized by the use of methods grounded in a positivistic view of reality. As found in the first chapter, considering qualitative approaches, for example thematic content analysis has been employed to categorize rhetoric themes in companies' sustainability reports (e.g. Tate et al., 2010; Closs et al., 2011). Even if the findings of these studies are relevant on their own, they fail to delve into deeper analysis of language, for instance, to understand how companies are talked in to being or what ideological meanings language use serves. As Fairhurst (2009) noted, "*asking what discourse is, or what it is doing, is a totally different theoretical question than focusing on how things are represented*". Therefore, I believe that organizational discourse research approach based on FDA provides many conceptual and practical opportunities to move from structural descriptions towards functional analysis to broaden and deepen the current understanding of the SSCM phenomenon.

When it comes to studying the construction of the SSCM discourse, it seems that FDA allows scrutinizing the SSCM phenomenon from different angles by identifying different types of discourses constructed and constructing the organizational reality. The idea here is that discourse research approach recognized the constitutive nature of discourse use (Fairclough, 2003). As the discourse use both permits and restricts the ways of talking about SSCM phenomenon, it consequently set inherent boundaries for behavior in the organizational reality (Grant et al., 2004). Therefore, scrutinizing the SSCM phenomenon through a discourse lens could yield practical views on the ways how companies consider sustainability agenda in their supply chain operations (Carter & Easton, 2011), and more abstractly, the insights in different meanings (Heracleous, 2006) attached to the SSCM phenomenon. These kinds of perspectives seem to be relevant as there are no consensus how sustainability is perceived at different levels in companies purchasing and supply chain operations (Carter & Easton, 2011). Overall, the analyses in this study focuses on the characteristics of the SSCM phenomenon that would go unnoticed working with conventional approaches employed in the SSCM field.

Moreover, as FDA considers language as a medium of social structures and power, it can be used to explore the organizational interaction. Discursive approach has been widely used to reveal critical aspects of organizational life (Vaara & Laine, 2006), for instance, to show how

power operates in different relations between employees (Hardy & Clegg, 2006). In the supply chain setting, it is suggested that the roles of buying companies and suppliers, as well as power relations between them, are likely to be changed when moving towards SSCM (Pagell & Wu, 2010). Since FDA views a power as a strategy that operates through the social practices in trying shape a behavior of others (Foucault, 1982), it can be used to scrutinize not only the constitution of subject and power between supply chain actors, but also re-evaluating how power is exercised between them (see Ellis et al., 2011; Heracleous, 2006). Especially the Foucauldian assumption that power is not necessarily negative, repressive or coercive, but it has also productive and positive characteristic (Hall, 2001) seems to expand the traditional view of power in the SCM field. Hence, the Foucauldian view can provide alternative perspectives in the construction and governance system of buyer-supplier relationships.

3.3 Research process

This section describes the empirical research process and demonstrates that it's all stages are done thoroughly and transparently. The research design of the study follows a case study approach, where the idea is to choose particularly interesting cases to provide insights in the research phenomenon (Yin, 2011). The actual research process follows the general stages of discourse analysis, including devising research questions, acquiring a material, familiarization and coding, interpretation and reporting findings, and finally validating them (Phillips & Oswick, 2012). As the research questions were already devised in the first chapter, this section begins with the explanation how the empirical material was generated. Then I will introduce my analysis framework developed for analyzing narratives in corporate reports using the FDA. Finally, I will describe its application in practice. Describing in detail these stages of the research process, I strive to reduce "*a methodological slurring*" (Suddaby, 2006) that may affect the quality of study. The quality criteria for the study is discussed in chapter five.

3.3.1 Generation of the material

I decided at an early stage of the research process that the study would be conducted working with sustainability reports from companies from the Nordic Region. I found the use of sustainability reports attractive because they provide a credible, naturally occurring, and easily accessible source of material (Kolk, 2004; Grant et al., 2004). This is also consistent with common practice in organizational discourse research field to utilize organizational

communication as a material (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Compared, for example with interviewing of company representatives, sustainability reports offer access to companies *ecotalk* without any interventions by a researcher or interviewee (Joutsenvirta, 2009). They also consider the potential to use secondary sources in the SCM field (Calantone & Vickery, 2010). Most importantly, the reporting practice provides insights on organizational practices, and especially on those how sustainability agenda is approached in companies purchasing and supply chain operations (Tate et al., 2012). Therefore, it seems that sustainability reports constitute an applicable source of material to explore the discourse on SSCM.

Also, the Nordic region provides interesting opportunities from the perspective of this study. Nordic countries consist of five independent countries; Finland, Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Denmark, forming the geographical region in Northern Europe and North Atlantic. These countries have much in common in their way of life, history, language, social structure as well as business culture (May et al., 2007). They are all recognized as world leaders in developing and utilizing sustainability policies, being all above average regarding sustainability and ranked in the top eight among the 59 countries in sustainability metrics assessed by RobecoSAM (2013). Nordic companies are also frequently recognized as high-level performers in sustainability matters by DJSI and FTSE4Good indexes (May et al., 2007). They perform better than average companies, especially in supply chain sustainability, climate strategy, and responsibility reporting (RobecoSAM, 2013).

I focused on companies that are advanced both in sustainability and SCM (following the ideas of Tate et al., 2012). Companies' advancement in sustainability was weighed up based on their placement in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index¹⁵ (DJSI) in 2014. The DJSI measures publicly listed companies' long-term value creation potential combining economic, environmental, and social perspectives on sustainability from 60 different industries. The index uses primarily company surveys, internal and public documentation, and stakeholder analyses in assessing companies' sustainability performance. In addition to general sustainability factors, DJSI considers industry specific characteristics, such as energy consumption, corporate governance, knowledge management and stakeholder relations (RobecoSAM, 2015). Since companies' advancement in supply chain sustainability was not observed directly by DJSI, I preferred companies from supply intensive sectors such as manufacturing and retailing. Starting from

¹⁵ The DJSI ranking has been widely used in the case selection in prior academic research.

twenty-six companies listed by the DJSI, twenty of them were taken into the closer examination. Since was primarily interested in companies working with tangible product, six companies were excluded because they operated in the banking or insurance sectors.

Once the material source, geographical setting and companies were chosen, an appropriate time period for the researched phenomenon was necessary to define. I decided to use sustainability reports from 2014, as they represented the most recent source of material that was available when the material acquirement and the analysis stage of the study began. The reports from the same year were used because sustainability discourse is likely to be embedded at a certain time (Livesey, 2001). Keeping in mind the recommendations for a manageable corpus of material (Phillips & Hardy, 2002), I decided to analyze a single report per organization¹⁶, and when both annual report and standalone sustainability reports were available, I chose a latter one. Finally, I downloaded reports from the Sustainability Disclosure Database (2015) or directly from companies' internet pages. I also eyed the reports and especially their supply chain related sections before analyses to ensure the quality and richness of the material.

3.3.2 Description of the material

Totally twenty companies and their sustainability reports were included in the actual analysis phase. These companies represented a variety of sectors, including chemical industries, machinery, retailing, electrical equipment, forestry & paper, and utilities, producing a broad range of products, materials, and services. All companies originate and have their headquarters in the Nordic region. Nine of them are from Finland, six from Sweden, four from Norway, and three from Denmark. Even if supply chain operations represent a core activity for all companies, demands for supply chain sustainability depends on a variety of issues such as industry sectors, supply intensity, stakeholder expectations, business strategy, and organizational culture (UN, 2014). Therefore, it is evident that supply chain sustainability plays a more remarkable role for some companies than others. List of companies, their country of origin, industrial classification based the DJSI index, and approach for sustainability reporting are described in Table 6.

¹⁶ I also had some inherent limitations for the amount of material. Foucauldian studies tend to rely on a relatively small number of texts, in part due that fact, that the approach is laborious and time-consuming. An appropriate amount of material depends on research questions, but as a rule thumb in organizational discourse studies, ten to fifteen cases should provide adequate material (Phillips & Oswick, 2012).

Table 2. Overview of studied companies.

	Company	Industry	Country	Reporting approach
1	Nokia Oyj	Technology Hardware & Equipment	Finland	Sustainability report
2	Volvo Ab	Capital Goods	Sweden	Sustainability report
3	Sandvik Ab	Capital Goods	Sweden	Sustainability report
4	SKF Ab	Capital Goods	Sweden	Integrated report
5	Atlas Copco Ab	Capital Goods	Sweden	Integrated report
6	Norsk Hydro Ab	Materials	Norway	Integrated report
7	Novozymes a/s	Materials	Denmark	Integrated report
8	Novo Nordisk a/s	Materials	Denmark	Integrated report
9	Neste Oyj	Energy	Finland	Integrated report
10	UPM Oyj	Materials	Finland	Integrated report
11	Electrolux Ab	Consumer durables & Apparels	Sweden	Integrated report
12	Hennes & Mauritz Ab	Retailing	Sweden	Sustainability report
13	Valmet Oyj	Capital Goods	Finland	Integrated report
14	Orkla	Food, Beverage & Tobacco	Norway	Sustainability report
15	Outokumpu Oyj	Mining	Finland	Sustainability report
16	Kesko Oyj	Retailing	Finland	Integrated report
17	Outotec Oyj	Capital Goods	Finland	Sustainability report
18	Statoil	Energy	Norway	Sustainability report
19	SCA	Material	Sweden	Sustainability report
20	Wärtsilä	Capital Goods	Finland	Integrated report

All reports were prepared in accordance with the GRI G4 guideline. Considering the widespread use of GRI, were the reports quite similar to their scope, content and structure, even if industries between companies vary significantly. Nine reports were standalone sustainability reports, typically named after “*sustainability report*” or “*corporate social responsibility report*”. Remaining reports, totally eleven of them, were integrated *annual reports* combining financial statements and sustainability information. Their content mainly consists of qualitative data. Hence, these reports provided rich descriptions of companies’ supply chain strategies, organization of supply chain function, and operational purchasing practices under the supply chain dedicated section. These sections were typically named after “*Sustainable Supply Chain*”

(Atlas Copco), “*Responsible Purchasing*” (Valmet) or “*Responsible Value Chain*” (Volvo) depending slightly on the chosen perspective. Averagely, sustainability reports or sustainability-related sections of integrated reports contained sixty pages. The relative amount of supply chain specific information varied between ten to fifteen percent measured as the total length of sustainability reports or sustainability related section in integrated reports.

3.3.3 Analysis framework

I have discussed earlier Foucauldian ideas of discourse, subject, and power in theory. In this section, I will refer to a method to analyze the construction and consequences of SSCM discourse. Framework for the empirical analyses is divided into three iterative phases consisting of 1) *description*, 2) *(de)construction*, and 3) *interpretation* of the discourse on SSCM. Since the Foucauldian approach itself does not provide proper analytical guidance, chosen analysis framework draws considerably from the typology originally proposed by Merkel-Davies et al. (2014), who argued that similar framework is suitable in the comprehensive analysis of corporate texts. In this study, these three analytical phases include isolation of the discourse, analysis of thematic and discursive construction of the discourse, and finally interpretation of construction of buyer-supplier relationship. In this sense, each analysis phase is a methodological and theoretical exploration, commenting one, and takes also into consideration of preceding phases. Before explaining the concrete steps of analysis, I will present the analysis framework in relation to analysis methods and research questions in Figure 5.

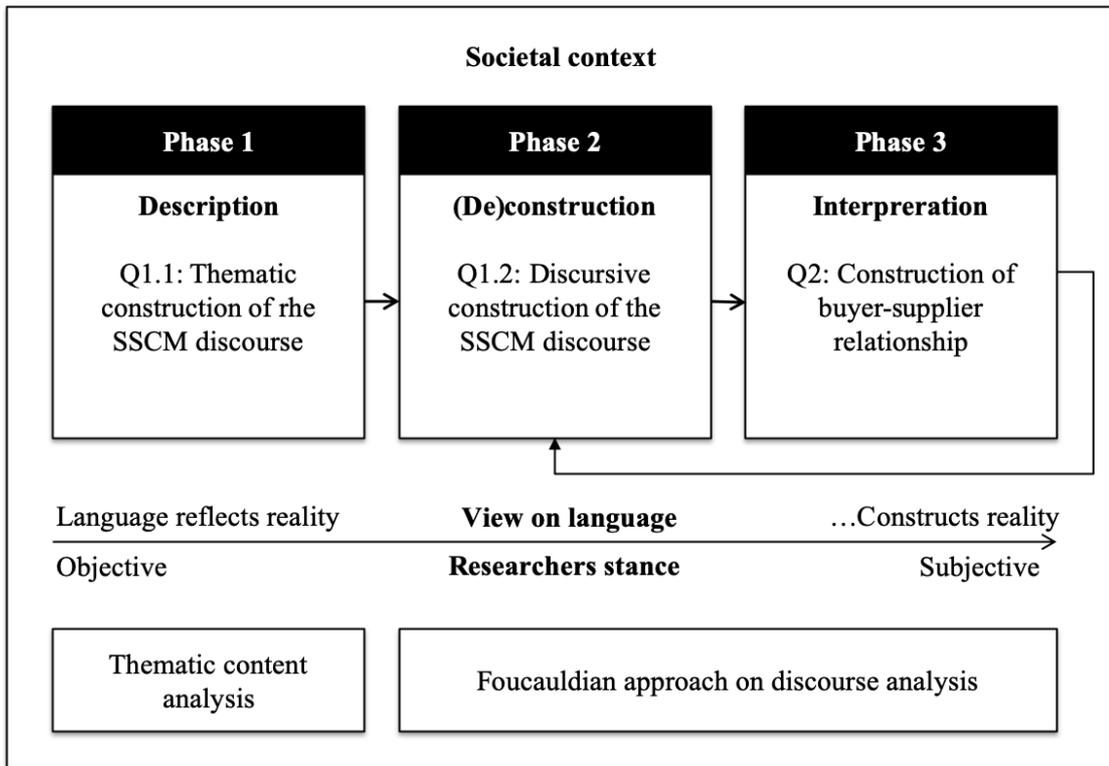


Figure 5. Framework for analyzing corporate texts (adapted from Merkel-Davies et al.2014).

This analysis framework can be seen as a deepening epistemological and ontological continuum where the emphasis is first on the structural level on the material, moving gradually towards *beyond the word* analysis, and ending with the intertextual interpretation that also takes consideration the contextual elements of the study. Even if the framework is somewhat mechanistic, I found it suitable for purposes of this study, as it captures a comprehensive approach for analyzing organizational discourse; beginning from the isolation of a discourse, (de)construction of different types of discourses, and interpretation of the organizational reality that the discourse use constructs. It should also be remembered that a notion of discourse serves two separate analytical functions in this framework. In second phase, discourses are independent constructions of organizational reality with their unique meanings, or in Foucauldian terms “*a particular way of talking*” (Foucault, 1972), while in third phase, discourse use work as a vehicle that constructs and governs buyer-supplier relationships. After choosing the analysis framework, I followed several steps in the analysis of the material.

3.3.4 Analysis of the material

The analysis was the iterative process and conducted via several rounds of reading, classification, and interpretation of the material. In the first phase of analysis, I began with classifying the material according to the research aims. Remembering the limitations of the study, I was particularly interested in the purchasing related text, rather than considering a supply chain in its broadest sense. During the familiarization of the reports, I recorded text extracts related to SSCM in a separate file. I also used some keywords such as sourcing, supplier and purchasing to locate the proper extracts. To reduce the corpus of the analysis, I removed the remaining materials. Neither pictures, figures nor tables were not included in the analysis. After that, I employed a thematic content analysis to study the extracts, as my initial interest was to reveal the thematic structure of SSCM discourse. The analysis was based on the inductive approach suggested (e.g. Miles and Huberman, 1994), including the non-linear process of reviewing, coding, and synthesizing the material. This across-case analysis provided a rough idea of the descriptive themes and the organization of SSCM discourse. Findings of this stage also serve an empirical starting point for actual discourse analytical stages

In the second stage of analysis, I returned to work with original text extracts¹⁷ to identify the discursive construction of SSCM discourse. The total amount of material in this stage was approximately 60 pages transformed into plain text format, which tends to be relatively large for discourse studies. At first, the extracts were subjected to the question *what they are talking about*, and then looking for variability and consistency in the answers. Gradually, discursive statements, which could be considered as building blocks of discourses (Foucault, 1972), began to emerge in the material. Once these statements had been organized, the analysis proceeds through the identification of initial discourses by merging of the statements with similar meanings, narrowing the focus by combining initial discourses into a structured whole, iterative development of discourses, and finally naming them. I also used broad range of earlier sustainability related discourse studies (e.g. Itänen, 2011; Kecskemeti, 2011; Laine, 2009; Onkila, 2009; Hüge et al., 2014; Allen et al., 2012; Ellis & Higgins, 2005; Tregidga et al., 2007)

¹⁷ The total amount of material in this stage was approximately 60 pages transformed into plain text format, which tends to be relatively large for discourse studies.

as a reference in the identification of SSCM discourses. I also attempted to maintain the original neutrality of discourses (Foucault, 1972) as it served the horizon for analyses in the third stage.

In the third stage of analysis, I focused on the interpretation of the discourses,¹⁸ in other words, making sense of their consequential nature. I discovered at the early phase of the analysis process, that each discourse emerged through the interaction between companies and their suppliers and constituted different natures of buyer-supplier relationships. In the closer analysis of these relationships, I followed the theoretical and methodological ideas by Foucault (1982), focusing on 1) *a function of each relationship*, 2) *system of differentiation as a source of relational power*, 3) *identities between actors*, and 4) *means to bring subject and power into action* in managing sustainability aims. Through this interpretation, different constructions of buyer-supplier relationships, including the function of relationship, subject positions occupied by companies and suppliers, and power relation between them, appeared into being. Accordingly, subject positions entail different rights, obligations, and possibilities for action, and contain implications on the power relations, as they constrain and shape how subjects can use power in the relationship (Burr, 2015; Foucault, 1982; Hall, 2001).

Due to the relatively large amount of material, especially the first two stages of the analysis process, were facilitated by Atlas TI qualitative analysis software to manage the large material base, classifying text extracts and providing thus transparency in the analysis process. During these first stages, it also became clear that conducting discourse analysis requires a contextual and intertextual interpretation, for instance, reading between the lines, and it cannot be conducted through the computer-assisted coding. Otherwise, (de)construction of discourses their interpretation was a constant dialogue between examined material, contextual literature, Foucauldian methodology, as well as my general experience on life in the supply chain and sustainability management. Even if the critical approach is not the heart of this study, due to generally critical nature of sustainability research, a critical perspective was kept in mind through the analysis process. The findings of the analyses, or better said, well-grounded interoperation of the researched phenomenon (Joutsenvirta, 2009), are presented in the following chapter. The quality of this study is further discussed in the chapter five.

¹⁸ Interpretation process here can be best understood as reading the reports and initial discourse constructions over and over again and reflecting them with the conceptual part of the study.

3.4 Reflections on the research process

I would like also to provide some reflections on the research process. This is typical practice in discourse studies, as the approach relies considerably on researchers' choices, intentions and interpretations during the research process. I originally interested in a discourse research approach and discourse analysis in general, because I had a kind of ambition to try out something new, something that has been earlier marginal in the SCM research field. I was originally inspired by some of marketing and organization related discourse studies that I had read during my studies in LUT University. I had also found some potential research gaps in the SSCM field that would be able to fulfill employing a discourse research approach. As a result, I presented an initial research proposal for this study in the spring 2015. I had then an intention to examine the SSCM phenomenon through a strategic lens, using discourse analysis as a method. I was in particular interested in the representation of companies' sustainability strategies and their implementation at the supply chain level. On the basis of the initial exploration of sustainability reports and discourse analysis as a methodological tool, I assumed that they would provide answers to those considerations in a somehow meaningful way.

The reality was much more complicated than I was expected. During the first few months in 2015, my initial assumptions held up. I found that my original research aim that I had planned was incoherent and either strategic topics per not been comprehensively discussed in companies' sustainability reports. Most importantly, I discovered that the notion of discourse analysis is rather a cover term for many loosely connected methods and theoretical views, and there was not any easy entry point for a discourse research approach or conduct such an analysis, especially considering my initial research objective. This was also little paradoxical situation, because to understand what topics are reasonable to study using discourse analysis, I had to first understand the principles of discourse research approach. Therefore, I had to go back to the starting point and to reconsider research aims, methodological and theoretical stance, and especially my motivation to be a trailblazer. These considerations, however, took some time, and I finally restarted conducting this study from a clean slate somewhere in the first quarter of 2016, about a year after presenting the original research proposal.

I began to familiarize myself with various discourse analytical approaches, previous sustainability-related discourse studies, and the current state of research on SSCM. I especially found that SSCM is a complex phenomenon, and it cannot be approached from a single

standpoint. At the same time, I considered various theoretical and methodological ideas to understand the SSCM phenomenon realizing that multidimensional nature of SSCM would be an excellent opportunity to employ a discourse analytical approach in a sensible way. Foucault and Foucauldian approach entered my point of interest, because his name appeared regularly in the discourse studies that I read. As time passes by, my interest in Foucault's work deepened. I found that his several works provided a number of ideas and possibilities that would be applicable in investigating the SSCM phenomenon. An excellent example here is its applicability to examine buyer-supplier interaction and governance mechanism of relationships that a discourse use constructs. In this respect, the research aims, research framework, analytical approach, and theoretical lens of this study evolved in tandem during the research process.

Foucault, or any other author, did not offer any practical framework for conducting discourse analysis and even less in the SSCM setting. For that reason, I spent considerable time to develop a meaningful research framework and tailor an analytical approach, which would be reasonable and useful considering the research aims. Afterwards, I do not claim that my choices are a rigid way of doing discourse research, but at least they reflect those difficult decision that must be considered when conducting such a research. In the level of the practical analysis, different discourses on SSCM were surprisingly difficult to construct and interpret. It was especially a kind of achievement to wade through the repetitive text extracts over and over again, and looking for consistencies, differences and various meanings. I considered also other categorizations of discourses, but I ended up working with my first impressions. Finally, distinctions between different discourses become quite clear, which also made an examination of buyer-supplier relationships much easier. In fact, a whole idea to investigate the construction of buyer-supplier relationships emerged in parallel with the second stage of analysis. After three years break in research between 2016-2019, I gave a final touch to the study in autumn 2019, with some adjustments throughout the report. But not even Rome was built in a day.

In conclusion, this was my first discourse study, and as far as I know, one of the first ones conducted in the SCM and SSCM research fields. I found that as qualitative research usually, especially a discourse research approach in an organizational setting, requires a lot of motivations, training and experience. In addition to building my personal discourse research skills, I had to develop the proper research approach and find the appropriate tools to analyze the SSCM discourse in a way that makes a sense in the light of research aims. In practice, this

also meant that when I found something methodologically or theoretically interesting, I had to consider and test it in practice. Partly because of this, the study proceeded through a trial and error, and rather slowly, but it also became more coherent after every round of considerations. It was also rewarding to see the study continually evolving all way through the research process. This process continued, even with major breaks, until I felt that the study was “*good enough*”. Considering the starting point, I would say I succeed - but if I could restart, I would probably do the study from the different standpoint. In the next chapter, I will present my findings

4 FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

This study explores the construction and consequences of SSCM discourse. This fourth chapter presents and discusses the findings of the study. The findings are divided into three sections following the analysis framework presented in the previous chapter. In the first section, I will show the thematic organization of SSCM discourse. Then, I will present the discursive construction of the SSCM discourse consisting of three separate discourses to show how companies actualize the sustainability agenda in their purchasing and supply chain operations. This section adds depth to the analysis and goes beyond the surface of the textual presentation. At the end of this section, I offer some insights on different meanings, or simply how the SSCM phenomenon is represented within these discourses and consider dynamics between them. Then, drawing from these discourses, I will provide my interpretation of the construction of supplier relationships, including the investigation on the role of subject and power in managing sustainability aims. Finally, the findings are summarized and further discussed.

4.1 Organization of the discourse on SSCM

The first research question was to reveal the construction of the SSCM discourse. As noted in the first chapter, I decided to make the distinction between the thematic and discursive constructions. The use of thematic content analysis resulted the list of constructive themes that constitutes the discourse on SSCM. In addition to constructive themes, their chronology and appearance in the examined reports was taken into consideration. Even if industries and reporting approaches differed between companies, the basic structure and idea of the SSCM discourse remained the same; to represent companies as economically viable and societally committed actors when it comes to their purchasing and supply chain operations. The discourse on SSCM is organized around seven larger themes that occurred in various sections of companies' reports. This thematic organization provides an overview of the discourse on SSCM and answers to the first part of the first research question, *what are the main themes of SSCM discourse?* The identified themes, their rough appearance in the examined reports, and illustrative quotations of corporate rhetoric in each theme are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Constructive themes and their appearance in the reports.

Appearance	Theme	illustrative quotation
Strategy, objectives and key materiality areas – Purchasing and supply chain disclosures – Performance metrics	1. Recognizing drivers for corporate sustainability	<i>“Global macro trends, from population growth and higher standards of living to resource shortages and climate change, have a major impact on SCA’s business operations.”(SCA)</i>
	2. Defining strategic approach on sustainability	<i>“The mission is to achieve sustainable, profitable development. Sustainability plays an important role in Atlas Copco’s vision and it is an integral aspect of the Group’s mission. An integrated sustainability strategy, backed by ambitious goals, helps the company deliver greater value to all its stakeholders in a way that is economically, environmentally and socially responsible.” (Atlas Copco)</i>
	3. Identifying supply chain impact on business and societies	<i>“SKF purchases goods and services for around SEK 39 billion annually, which is around half of SKF’s net sales. This means that the impact from purchasing and supply chain management on SKF’s performance is crucial. [...] we recognize that our activities impact the societies in which we operate and we have a long tradition of conducting a dialog with the relevant parties affected by our activities.” (SKF)</i>
	4. Engaging suppliers in a stakeholder dialogue	<i>“Multi-form networking with suppliers requires that all parties to the supply chain accept the common values, objectives and working principles. We are together responsible for ensuring that our customers can rely on our expertise, services and the quality and safety of our products.” (Kesko)</i>
	5. Setting the goals for sustainable supply chain	<i>Global supply chain management has been defined as a key strategic pillar for Outotec, and supply has been a prioritized development area for the company since 2010 [...] Outotec’s supply chain includes approximately 3,500 direct and active suppliers globally. [...] 95% of major suppliers committed to Outotec’s Supplier Policy.” (Outotec)</i>
	6. Managing sustainability in supply chains	<i>“We will incorporate sustainability criteria into our entire value chain and improve risk management by integrating new proactive tools and processes into the procurement practices. The new processes, which include implementation of the Sustainable Supply Chain Policy, supplier sustainability risk assessment, procurement personnel training, and supplier self-assessment and auditing practices, were piloted in China in 2014.” (Valmet)</i>
	7. Reviewing the results	<i>“In 2015, overall adherence to Novozymes’ supplier program for responsible sourcing was 100%. The program includes an evaluation of suppliers based on commercial, quality and sustainability performance.” (Novozymes)</i>

The discourse on SSCM emerges in the introductory sections of reports, where companies describe their underlying attitudes to conducting business. These sections were dominated by manifests that portrayed companies' long-term vision, mission, and strategy along with their core values. In many cases, sustainability was described, in a way or other, as the underlying value that determines the foundation of business strategy. The discourse on SSCM continued to take its shape in subsequent sections of reports when companies' sustainability targets were defined. These targets were usually based on materiality assessments whose basic idea is to evaluate various environmental, societal, and environmental issues with regard to their relative impact on companies, their stakeholders and relations between them. The supply chain and especially supplier related topics were assessed typically among the top three materiality areas, as they have a significant impact both on businesses and the society around. Alongside, as stakeholder's engagement is a key element of sustainability efforts, were suppliers assessed as one of the most important stakeholders, as their performance plays an important role to reach companies sustainability targets and to ensure the continuity of their businesses.

All the studied reports contained specific sections dedicated to purchasing and supply chain related topics. The common purpose of these sections was to describe in detail how sustainability strategies were linked and implemented in intra and inter-organizationally at the level of supply chain operations. As the reports represented various industries, areas of emphasis and way how they were presented varied significantly between companies. Even if the environmental and social ambition was seemingly prevalent, provided reports plenty of relevant information with a traditional economic-oriented emphasis on SCM. These sections described in-depth and detail the ways of interaction between companies and suppliers to manage economic, societal and environmental goals. In this sense, they also offered interesting material from the perspective of the second research question. Overall, the content of these supply chain and sourcing specific sections covered over two-thirds of the overall scope of the discourse on SSCM. In addition, the SSCM related themes occurred to some extent within sections related to product development, risk management, and stakeholder relations.

As a summary, all studied reports were similar in their scope, content, and structure in accordance with the recommendations of the GRI guidelines. It seems that the discourse on SSCM is a large abstraction that appears into being through several themes in connection with three larger sections in sustainability reports, rather than occurring solely, for instance, in the

purchasing and supply chain related sections. The common aim of SSCM discourse is to represent a coherent and easily understandable story of companies' supply chain and especially purchasing related attitudes, impacts and performances considering all three dimensions of sustainability. The constrictive themes were both descriptive and argumentative by their nature and their rhetoric reflects what is called a business interpretation of sustainability. It is also evident that the production of SSCM discourse is anchored at different units in organizations, as it takes place in different types of sections in the reports. Together, these textual pieces related to various constructive themes throughout the reports comprise the complex puzzle of the discourse on SSCM, which is the primary interest and focus of this study.

4.2 Three discourses on Sustainable Supply Chain Management

Then, I focused on a discursive construction of the SSCM discourse. I identified in the material three discourses and named them after; 1) *ruling discourse of sourcing excellence*, 2) *opposite discourse of commitment to sustainable supply chain*, and 3) *alternative discourse of building opportunities*. These discourses carry broad representations about companies' strategies, organizational structures and operational practices, containing different interpretations over the meaning of SSCM. Broadly speaking, the ruling discourse of sourcing excellence entails an idea that economic performance in purchasing and supply chain operations, and in business in general, is an absolute prerequisite for sustainability. The opposite discourse of commitment to sustainable supply chain both challenges and complements the first discourse and manifests companies' strong engagement to foster societal and environmental sustainability in their supply chain system. The discourse of building opportunities provides an alternative view, where sustainability challenge is transformed into business opportunities with fewer numbers of strategic suppliers. These discourses represent the most significant findings of this study and should be seen as an overarching construction that includes all the other findings. Constructive topics of these discourses and an initial framing of SSCM are summarized in Table 9.

Before presenting the construction of these discourses, few comments on the material are in order. The concept of Sustainable Supply Chain Management was rarely discussed in the studied material as such, but the phenomenon took its shape in various disclosures related to corporate sustainability strategy, purchasing, supply chain management, supplier relationship management, risk management, product development, social responsibility, and economic performance related reporting topics. Hence, strong conceptual knowledge and situational

sensitivity was needed to construct these discourses. In addition, as the study relies both on integrated and standalone reports, there were some variations on appearances of these discourses in the material. Especially the discourse of sourcing excellence occurred exclusively in the integrated reports and was absent in standalone sustainability reports. Otherwise, all three discourses took their place in the examined material, with various emphases, depending on the reporting scope and industry that companies were involved in. Finally, studied reports were not considered to be objective in a sense that they would have given access to organizational reality, but they were considered as a medium, through which given reality is constructed.

Table 4. Summary of the three discourses on SSCM.

Discourse	Constructive topics	Framing of SSCM
Ruling discourse of sourcing excellence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritizing economic goals • recognizing strategic significance of purchasing and supply chain function • Pursuing sourcing efficiency • Managing supply chain risks 	SSCM is to serve economic business goals.
Opposite discourse of commitment to sustainable supply chain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committing in sustainable supply chain • Engaging suppliers to sustainability dialogue • Aligning intra-organizational capabilities • Managing sustainability in supplier relationships 	SSCM is to ensure the environmental and societal responsibility in the supply chain system.
Alternative discourse of building opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking new ways to cooperate • Strengthening relationships • Creating shared value 	SSCM is to foster sustainability-oriented innovation

In the following sections, I will present these three SSCM discourses through identifying topics constructing and constructed within these discourses. These considerations as a whole answer to the second part of the first research question: *How the discourse on SSCM is discursively constructed?* The discourses are presented in their relative order so that the ruling discourse of sourcing excellence is to be first. Each of these discourses constructs a bounded, and a little sharpened version of the organizational reality. The presentation of discourses aims to follow their appearance in the studied material making them more transparent and understandable. Discourses are presented through their constructive topics, whose share the underlying meaning of the particular discourse. Some of these topics are similar with constructive themes in the

previous section. Even if discourses are placed here in single stalls, they overlap significantly in the material, and even the same sentence may contain all three discourses. The analysis and interpretations are opened up through a vast range of rhetoric quotations presented in companies' reports. After reviewing all three discourses, I will outline how these three discourses belong together to create and maintain a meaningful organizational reality.

4.2.1 Ruling discourse of sourcing excellence

The ruling discourse of sourcing excellence was the most representative expression on how SSCM was framed in the reports. As the name implies, the focus of discourse is in locating and maintaining the most efficient supplier base. Studied reports relied to a great extent on TBL in approaching business sustainability, and my presentation here shares the same view. Accordingly, the discourse views that societal and environmental dimensions of sustainability come alongside with economic performance, which is why the purchasing and supply chain operations are needed to be managed according to economic priorities. For this reason, the environmental and societal topics were mostly lacking. The discourse consists of four, more or less independent topics, whose reflect the neoclassical view to business, and describes those underlying attitudes and practices, how the sourcing excellence can be achieved; 1) *Prioritizing economic goals* 2) *recognizing strategic significance of purchasing and supply chain function*, 3) *pursuing sourcing efficiency*, and 4) *managing supply chain risks*. As will be seen, all these topics emphasize, in particular, companies' ability to reach sourcing excellence.

Prioritizing economic goals

The first topic identified in the material was prioritizing economic goals in purchasing and supply chain operations. In the discourse of sourcing excellence, the SSCM phenomenon is approached from a neoclassical economic perspective. The discourse emerges alongside with executive letter¹⁹, where the necessity to balance the economic, social and environmental performance to meet sustainability needs in the conduct of business is recognized. However, even if sustainability was represented, almost without exception, a fundamental component of overall business strategy, in this discourse economic business goals were prioritized over those

¹⁹ These kinds of executive statements are prevalent in the whole discursive formation on SSCM, and they are repeated with a slightly different emphases in every single discourse.

of the environmental and social ones. These underlying assumptions that construct the foundation of this business-oriented discourse are illustrated in the extracts below:

1. *An absolute prerequisite for success in business is financial profitability. The most important value created by the company for shareholders is the generation of economic value added. (Kesko)*
2. *“Operational excellence is a prerequisite for sustainable profitability. Electrolux is leveraging its global strength and scale to increase efficiency and lower the cost base.” (Electrolux)*
3. *“Our goals aim at continuously delivering sustainable, profitable development for the Group. This means an increased economic value creation and, simultaneously, a positive impact on society and the environment, thus creating shared value.” (Atlas Copco)*

However, prioritization of the economic objectives²⁰ does not imply that environmental and societal dimensions of sustainability are considered irrelevant. Even if the relationship between these three dimensions of sustainability was discussed in hierarchical terms in the reports, companies widely agreed that environmental and societal performance are the key elements in seeking long-term economic success. In this sense, it seems that in short-term responsibility is viewed as somehow unprofitable activity even if absolutely necessary. The following excerpts demonstrate the way how companies approach the integration of sustainability objectives:

4. *“Sustainability and good business go hand in hand” (Novozymes)*
5. *“Personally, I believe that sustainability aspects must be integrated into everything we do, and that this is crucial to Sandvik’s long-term success (Sandvik)*
6. *“Hydro is committed to a proactive, strategic business approach aimed at strengthening the company’s ability to add value [...] Hydro believes that sustainable business practices improve the company's ability to create shareholder value while making a positive difference wherever it operates” (Norsk Hydro)*

Recognizing strategic significance of purchasing and supply chain function

Second topic views that certain organizational resources are determinants of sourcing excellence and in that way also of business profitability. Since companies rely in increasing extent on suppliers’ inputs and contribution throughout their operations, the discourse

²⁰ Understanding these priorities and how their relationships are understood at a company level is an important starting point in developing an understanding regarding the dynamics of the SSCM discourse.

recognizes the strategic significance of supply chains in competition, and emphasizes the role of purchasing and supply chain management function, in particular, to drive down costs, manage various business risks, enhance operational excellence, competitiveness, and profitability in the global market. Following quotations illustrate the way how the strategic significance of the purchasing function was convinced in the examined reports:

7. *"Procurement is an important strategic area that has a direct effect on company's operational excellence, competitiveness, and profitability". (Valmet)*
8. *"Our suppliers contribute significant value to us, to our partners, and to our customers" (Statoil)*
9. *"Suppliers and business partners are an important and integral part of the total value chain of the products and services of Wärtsilä". (Wärtsilä)*

The strategic significance is also reflected in the organization of purchasing and supply chain management function. The discourse views that a way towards sourcing excellence requires the development of a broad range of organizational competencies, individual skills, and cooperative attitudes. In addition to the continuous development of the purchasing and supply chain management function and purchasing professionals, especially increasing cooperation with other business functions was seen as necessary to develop mutual understanding and competencies to respond to the change in the global business environment and ensure the value transfer from suppliers to customers. Again, the discourse suggests that actions that may enhance economic performance are prioritized, as the following excerpts will demonstrate:

10. *"The work in order to streamline Metso's procurement was started at a strategic level in 2012, and the current program follows the developments already achieved. Aligned with Metso's strategy to become a more integrated company, Metso now has a joint procurement organization." (Metso)*
11. *"Human resource development and training is crucial for ensuring a high performing purchasing organization. Training in areas such as risk management, Lean/Six Sigma, responsible sourcing, strategic sourcing and project management is available through the SKF Purchasing Academy. Both internal and external training programmes are used for ensuring the organization benefits from leading purchasing and supply chain management practices". (SKF)*

12. *“UPM Sourcing professionals, with their full understanding of supply market dynamics, are one of the key resources of UPM... “This calls for close co-operation between UPM sourcing professionals and UPM businesses.” (UPM)*

Pursuing sourcing efficiency

The discourse views that pursuing the sourcing efficiency determines the design and management of upstream supply chains. This is considered crucial since materials and services represented the largest cost item for the majority of the examined companies. For instance, Valmet reports that its direct and indirect purchases were 56% of its net sales in 2014. To reach their profitability targets, companies highlighted their capability to orchestrate sourcing operations and especially establish and maintain the efficient supply base as their role is crucial in global competition. These kinds of targets were also usually justified, for instance, by a weakening global economy or intensified competition. The following excerpts illustrates the efficiency-oriented approach to design and manage global supply chains:

13. *“The sourcing of all necessary products and services is results in a significant cost element UPM business. Cost efficiency is leading principle in UPM sourcing, including price and other cost elements” (UPM)*
14. *“Suppliers will win Outokumpu business based on lowest total cost of product or service. Total cost means the total amount spent on a particular commitment, including, among other things, the initial contract price, life cycle cost of investment, effect on Outokumpu’s production efficiency and quality, commission fees, as well as other transaction costs.” (Outokumpu)*
15. *We select and evaluate business partners on the basis of objective factors including quality, delivery, price, and reliability, as well as commitment to environmental and social performance. (Atlas Copco)*

The discourse highlights companies’ expertise by demonstrating various ongoing purchasing and supply chain management related development projects, achieved results, and a desire to achieve even better results. Even if the monetary information was rarely used as evidence of sourcing excellence, the scale of potential economic benefits was represented to be large. Therefore, this topic, in a sense, justifies the economic prioritization of the discourse and rationalizes the use of global supply strategy. As the following excerpts will demonstrate, sourcing efficiency and especially cost reductions, that are the heart of this discourse, are often realized through improved capital efficiency, reduction in direct purchasing costs, improved coordination of sourcing operations, and rationalization of the supply base:

16. *“In 2014, Novozymes expanded co-sourcing initiatives together with large global companies to include additional companies and new categories. Co-sourcing initiatives aim at generating considerable savings and supporting business growth through larger volume discounts from suppliers.” (Novozymes)*
17. *“SKF is running several projects for reducing overall direct and indirect material costs [...] One of the key activities 2014 was establishing a regional and local supplier base. This led to reduced overall costs and increased supply chain flexibility. The work included supplier rationalization, the identification of synergies across all spending areas and businesses and signing strategic long-term partnerships with key suppliers. It was also important to secure supply capacity and to work with suppliers on products and process innovations as well as to improve cash flow through payment terms and process improvements.” (SKF)*
18. *We will continue consolidating the number of suppliers for developing a strategic supplier base. In addition, we need to continue reducing overall sourcing costs by standardizing both products and processes and we need to improve our flexibility” (SKF)*

Managing supply chain risks

The discourse portrays that the achievement of sourcing excellence is closely linked with risk management, and if chain supply risks are not managed efficiently, their realization can lead to reputational and economic losses. This perception is evident because the global supply strategy requires efficient risk management in order to achieve planned outcomes. However, companies accept some risks to generate returns from the global supply strategy, and extensive risk management against vulnerabilities was seen as a key driver in capturing the potential benefits. Hence, to reach sourcing excellence, some risks have to be taken, but they were represented definitely to have something that can be managed, as can be seen in the excerpts below:

19. *“We believe that the ability to take risks and manage them effectively is an essential element of business success and shareholder value creation” (Valmet)*
20. *“A large share of the Group’s production has been moved from high-cost to low-cost areas. Restructuring is a complex process that requires managing a number of different activities and risks [...] When relocating, Electrolux is also dependent on the capacity of suppliers for cost-efficient delivery of components and semi-finished goods. (Electrolux)*

21. *“The availability of many components is dependent on suppliers and if they have interruptions or lack capacity, this may have an undesirable effect on deliveries”.* (Atlas Copco)

Supply chain risks were typically described to have strategic or operational by their nature, and include, for instance, dependence on supplier, unexpected price adjustments, interruption of material supply, or geopolitical challenges. Major financial impacts of materialization of the risks were taken obvious. The management of the risks relied without exception on the comprehensive processes and frameworks to reduce vulnerability and ensure continuity of businesses. Sustainability perspective was also built in these frameworks, as will be seen in the next discourse. The reports typically described some of the key risks, displayed how they were managed, and estimated their potential impacts, as shown in the following excerpts.

22. *“Reputational, regulatory and sustainability risks can potentially impact Electrolux ability to successfully conduct business. There are a number of processes in place to control these risks such as internal and supplier auditing, environmental management and certification, the Ethics program and the safety management system.”* (Electrolux)
23. *“The Volvo Group’s costs for raw materials and components can vary significantly over a business cycle. Cost variations may be caused by changes in world market prices for raw materials or by an inability of our suppliers to deliver.”* (Volvo)
24. *“We have built a comprehensive framework to assess the intangible risks that our current and potential suppliers may be exposed to, risks such as issues in human and labor rights, environmental impacts and product stewardship.”* (Metso)

To short conclude, the discourse of sourcing excellence draws from the management language and frames the SSCM to serve the economic business aims. Environmental and societal dimensions of sustainability, instead, are viewed as a necessary in seeking the long-term business success. The construction of the discourse recognizes the strategic role of purchasing and supply chain function in global supply setting, calls for sourcing efficiency to ensure competitiveness, and especially views that operating in a global supply market requires a good understanding and preparing against strategic and operational supply risks, acknowledging that well-managed risks may also add value to business. Overall, all these topics resonate with the traditional view of SCM and builds the perception that supply chains are needed to manage according the economic priorities. Therefore, the environmental and societal related issues were

marginalized in this discourse, or they were solely seen from the perspective of economic risk management. The next discourse, instead, takes an opposite view to SSCM.

4.2.2 Opposite discourse of commitment to sustainable supply chain

The second discourse, which emerges alongside the first one, is the discourse of commitment to sustainable supply chain²¹. This discourse constructs the opposite view to first discourse and announces companies' strategic commitment to environmental and societal responsibility along their supply chains. However, the discourse can also be seen complementary to the first discourse, considering the fact that companies need to position themselves as socially compatible actors, and balance economic, environmental, and societal objectives in their business operations. In this sense, being non-sustainable is seen as a threat, and transition toward sustainability is required for survival. The discourse entails perhaps the most obvious themes that have flavored any discussions related to SSCM. It is built around four larger topics, including; 1) *Committing to sustainable supply chain*, 2) *engaging suppliers to sustainability dialogue*, 3) *aligning intra-organizational resources*, and 4) *managing sustainability in supplier relationships*. These constructive topics emphasize companies' commitment to sustainability and view that the way towards sustainability is continuous process,

Committing to sustainable supply chain

Even if companies tend to prefer traditional economic goals, as showed in the previous discourse, they are forced to take sustainability into account for survival, as well as look internally at their attitudes before requiring them from others. Hence, transition towards sustainability in the supply chain system is central concern in this discourse. As executive support is considered one of the most critical success factors in achieving organizational sustainability, this discourse appears, through executive statements and announces companies' strategic commitment to promote sustainability throughout their operations. Compared to the previous discourse, sustainability is here viewed as the integral part of organizational values and attitudes, rather than just one of the means to achieve the economic objectives. As following excerpts will demonstrate, the discourse emphasizes companies' deep commitment to societally

²¹ This discourse is also partially the result of the GRI reporting framework, as it shares many mandatory supply chain related disclosures and measures described in the first chapter.

recognized sustainability values throughout their businesses, and considering the nature of this study, especially in their purchasing and supply chain management operations:

25. *“Sustainability leadership is crucial to realizing Electrolux strategy”*. (Electrolux)
26. *“We think it is very important that sustainability is completely integrated into the business and part of the company’s DNA and values”*. (H&M)
27. *We hold ourselves accountable not only for the sustainability practices at our own factories but carry responsibility towards the societies and the people we impact along the value chain”*. (Nokia)

The discourse builds a strong contrast to previous discourse, viewing that companies’ functional strategies, and those of purchasing and supply chain management related, need to align to serve sustainability agenda. This is due the fact that purchasing and supply chain management function participates in the constitution of environmental and societal impacts more than any other business function through a choice of supplier, materials, technologies, manufacturing and transport modes. These alignments were justified²² especially by their necessity to secure long-term success, show the commitment to global responsibility, meet customers and other stakeholders’ transparency expectations, and reduce sustainability related risks that may damage company’ reputation. In this setting, sustainable supply chain management, becomes normalized practice, a part of everyday business, as demonstrated in following excerpts:

28. *“Respect for people and the environment is part of our values and we rely on stable sourcing markets with skilled workers for our future growth. We want to use our influence to promote better-working conditions and environmental consciousness throughout our value chain.”* (H&M)
29. *“Atlas Copco’s supply chain also represents a large portion of the Group’s environmental footprint since much of the resource intensive activities, such as steel manufacturing, are carried out by business partners.”* (Atlas Copco)
30. *“It is important for us to take responsibility for the impact we have on our stakeholders, on the communities where we operate and in our value chain.”* (Sandvik)
31. *“Our ambition is to contribute to the socio-economical development of communities where we have long-term development activities [...] Hiring and buying goods and*

²² These kinds of justification were not solely supply chain specific but widely used in many different contexts and sections in the examined reports.

services locally creates jobs and builds and enhances local capacities and capabilities”.
(Statoil)

Engaging suppliers to sustainability dialogue.

The discourse recognizes that companies' sustainability footprint is increasingly generated in their supply chains around the globe, which pressurizes them to work with socially responsible suppliers to fulfill their commitments. Buying companies are here represented as the initiators and change agents in the implementation of sustainability objectives in the supply chain system, and they expect nothing but environmental and societal performance from their suppliers. These expectations were described to be equal with companies' value base, ethical standards, strategic objectives, and even with operational practices. Therefore, to ensure the supply chain sustainability, companies engage with their suppliers to sustainability dialogue, that is represented an approach or process to ensure that supplier's diverging sustainability attitudes are congruent with buying companies' ones, as demonstrated in the next excerpts:

32. *“We go to great lengths to implement sustainable and ethical working practices in our operations and we expect the same from our suppliers” (Nokia)*
33. *“We seeks to develop relations with business partners that uphold a commitment to values and ethical standards similar to ours [...]We are committed to using suppliers that maintain high standards of integrity, safety, security and sustainability [...] We expect our suppliers and partners to commit to performing work in accordance with our standards and ethical values when working for us and with us (Statoil)*
34. *“Close collaboration and dialogue with suppliers is crucial to assure the Group's continued success”. (SKF)*

However, the complexity of the operationalization of SSCM was also acknowledged. Discourse shows that companies are aware that since their supply chains, especially the global ones, are complex and geographically diverse, expansion of sustainability dialogue beyond the first-tier suppliers becomes challenging. For the economic reasons alone, this expansion would be probably needless. In relation to this, companies are willing to restrict their sustainability dialogue, and with that too, responsibilities, only for first-tier suppliers. In other words, companies expect that their first-tier suppliers extend the dialogue and transfer sustainability values and standards to their lower-tier suppliers, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

35. *“We expect our suppliers to comply with this policy in their dealings with Outotec, their own employees, suppliers, and with other third parties. Furthermore, they are expected to ensure compliance with Outotec policy, identify deviations, manage corrective actions, ensure the transparency of these actions and communicate in a systematic manner.” (Outotec)*
36. *“Tier 1 suppliers are expected to work to safeguard Atlas Copco’s standards for Tier 2 suppliers.” (Atlas Copco)*
37. *Our Supplier Requirements form part of our contractual agreement with suppliers, and we encourage them to apply the same standards to their own suppliers, our sub-suppliers. (Nokia)*

These kinds of large-scale, multi-level, and obligatory engagements in the sustainability dialogues were justified typically by identification, control, and avoidance of societal and environmental risks in the supplier base. In this sense, sustainability, or rather being non-sustainable was presented as a threat for business continuity. This is also one of the few settings when this discourse refers the economic dimension of sustainability. Some companies target their efforts for suppliers with highest environmental and societal risks, although they were mentioned usually mandatory for all suppliers. Hence, supplier’s engagement in sustainable supply chain extends the traditional view on supply chain risk management presented in the previous discourse. Without the focus on supply chain sustainability, companies’ reputation and ability to conduct business can be at stake, as showed in the excerpts below:

38. *“Reputational, regulatory and sustainability risks can potentially impact Electrolux ability to successfully conduct business.” (Electrolux)*
39. *“We are proactive in our interact actions with counterparties and our supplier requirements regarding integrity and compliance form an integral part of our procurement process.” (Norsk Hydro)*
40. *“Atlas Copco prioritizes follow-up activities with suppliers who represent the bulk of the annual purchase value as well as the highest risk in order to safeguard that the Business Code of Practice is being followed while still using our resources efficiently.” (Atlas Copco)*
41. *“Responsible supply chain management enables the Volvo Group to meet growing customer expectations and reduce the risk of incidents that may interrupt supply flow or damage the Group’s reputation.” (Volvo Group)*

Aligning intra-organizational competencies

The discourse views that the conduct of SSCM requires different types of individual skills and organizational competencies than traditional cost oriented SCM approach. For that reason, the significance of developing and aligning intra-organizational resources and competencies to better serve the societal sustainability agenda was highlighted. The discourse, in particular, views that a holistic company level approach for supply chain sustainability is the essential prerequisite for efficient SSCM execution. This can be achieved by establishing an appropriate governance structures including, for example, steering groups or other centralized functions to oversee the implementation and development of sustainable supply chain policies and ensuring common ways of working in the organization, as can be seen in following excerpts:

42. *“A new Volvo Group CSR Supply Chain Steering Group was formed in September 2013 to oversee the work of the Volvo Group CSR Supply Chain Network. The steering group’s membership comprises management team members from the Group’s different purchasing organizations as well as the chair of the Group’s CSR and Sustainability Committee.” (Volvo Group)*
43. *“The Group’s responsible sourcing programme is driven by SKF’s Responsible sourcing committee – whose task it is to ensure a strong governance structure plus the overall coordination and development of SKF’s approach. This decision body is headed by Senior Vice President, Group Purchasing and includes other relevant functions and supply chain managers. The purpose of this committee is to ensure that the responsible sourcing strategy and approach is effectively developed and deployed, and that appropriate measures are taken when suppliers’ code of conduct and other deviations occur.” (SKF)*
44. *“In 2014, the Sandvik Sustainable Supplier Management Team was formed to further integrate sustainability in the purchasing process for the benefit of our organization, suppliers and other stakeholders”. (Sandvik)*

The crucial role of professional purchasing and supply chain management employees was also highlighted to ensure sustainability in the supply chain system. However, the discourse views that they do not necessarily have the skills to conduct SSCM, and therefore, various training activities that engages employees with companies’ sustainability values and policies as well as ensures their SSCM skills were needed. Typical means mentioned in the reports to improve employee’s sustainability readiness were e-learning tools and personal training activities. In addition, as the sustainability management in the supply chain setting crosses many internal

and external organizational boundaries, development of employees' cooperative aptitude was emphasized. The following excerpts from the examined reports will clarify the situation:

45. *“To develop their performance, Outokumpu provides the Group personnel with regular training. The principles underlying sustainability, responsible business practices and good corporate governance are integrated into the materials used in commercial training, all the way from introductory courses to training courses designed to enhance contracting and procurement skills.” (Outokumpu)*
46. *“To implement the new tools and requirements, we focused on awareness rising and training of employees [...] Training on supply chain related human right issues was provided for employees in relevant procurement roles.” (Statoil)*
47. *“The Principles and Practice of Socially Responsible Trading guide has been prepared to help Kesko's buyers in purchases from high-risk countries. The guide provides basic information about Kesko and its purchasing principles. [...] Online training courses on responsible purchasing practices have been developed to ensure all buyers' competencies in this.” (Kesko)*

Managing sustainability in supplier relationships

The discourse underlines companies' ability to manage sustainability in supplier relationships, building the perception, that sustainability is not only an attitude, but definitely something that can be managed. For that, companies are built comprehensive supplier programs, processes, and frameworks to recognize, mitigate and avoid sustainability-related risks. They are represented as tools, which not only ensure sustainability in the supply base but also gradually build up a more sustainable way to operate with suppliers. In this sense, they are integral part and a way to ensure the efficiency of supplier dialogue. The idea of continuous improvement in managing sustainability in supplier relationships is demonstrated in the excerpts below:

48. *“We have developed advanced systems for managing our supply and helping suppliers to improve their sustainability performance. And we continue to advance them further every day.” (H&M)*
49. *The implementation of the programme takes place through supplier invitations and registrations, assessments of social and environmental performance, improvement plans, supplier workshops and audits. (Maersk)*
50. *“Wärtsilä has defined its processes for choosing suppliers, determining their requirements and developing the supply relationship.” (Wärtsilä)*

However, even if the rhetoric in the studied reports emphasized the cooperative nature of buyer-supplier interactions to ensure supply chain sustainability, in practical level, companies tend to define the sustainability requirements for suppliers and ensure their compliance rather unilaterally. For that purpose, buying companies use, almost without exception, non-negotiable suppliers' code of conducts as a primary way to encapsulate their sustainability policies, ethical principles, and environmental standards to make the value transfer to suppliers and thus form the basis for the relationship. The use of these kinds of mandatory requirements were described in detail in the examined reports, as noted in the following quotations:

51. *"We expect all of our suppliers to meet the high ethical, labor and environmental standards set out in our Supplier Requirements before we will work with them"* (Nokia)
52. *"Before placing any orders, suppliers must sign our Code of Conduct and undergo an initial screening process."* (H&M)
53. *"Our supplier must agree to Metsä Group's Supplier Code of Conduct"* (Metsä)

To ensure the effectiveness of suppliers' code of conducts and other binding standards, the importance of auditing practices conducted in-house or together with third-party partners was stressed in the reports. These kinds of mechanisms were represented as standard tools initiated in a supply base to identify risks or gaps in suppliers' sustainability performance, and to react discrepancies when needed. However, it was acknowledged, that they provide a snapshot of a situation, and do not predict the past or the future. Still, when operating in a complex and multi-tier supply chain setting, companies can not be sure what is happening at the other end of the supply chain, but at least they try their best. Idea here is mentioned in the excerpts below:

54. *After selection, Neste Oil continuously monitors its feedstock suppliers. Where certified suppliers are audited by an independent, third-party body annually, Neste Oil reviews the supply chain as part of its own customer audits.* (Neste Oil)
55. *"An essential element in ensuring Outokumpu's sustainability is regular evaluation of our suppliers' sustainability policies, practices, and related performance."* (Outokumpu)
56. *"These assessments provide us with snapshots of current supplier performance and are used as a basis for understanding root causes of non-compliance and in driving corrective actions and improvements"* (Nokia)

The focus of these monitoring practices is not primarily to improve supplier's sustainability performance, but correct observed discrepancies in their operations. When needed, corrective actions within a specific timeframe are typically required until companies' standards are met. The discourse views that buying companies are willing to help their suppliers in these issues, or otherwise provide advice in the development of suppliers' own codes and training processes based on companies' knowledge and experience in sustainability. In the same time, companies are also ready for rewarding well-performed and committed suppliers with better business including continuing contracts, increased purchasing amounts, or better supplier status. Companies also remind that they have reserved the right for terminate contracts with suppliers who cannot or are otherwise unwilling to comply with supplier standards. The following excerpts illustrate how companies approached these issues in their rhetoric:

57. *"Our aim is to continue business with suppliers who can successfully address areas of improvements. When supplier audits reveal non-compliance, corrective actions are initiated to close non-compliance and a plan put in place for follow up."* (Eriksson)
58. *"When deviations are confirmed, suppliers are encouraged to prepare and implement a plan of corrective measures within a specified timeframe. Sandvik provides support and training for these suppliers to assist in planning and implementing the necessary improvements."* (Sandvik)
59. *"In 2014, two suppliers were banned because of non-compliance with Wärtsilä's requirements for environmental, health and occupational safety management, or through non-compliance with legislation."* (Wärtsilä)
60. *"We commit to choose and reward responsible partners who share our values and who are willing to work transparently with us to improve their social and environmental performance. However, if a supplier shows an unwillingness to work with us on improvements or does not comply with our minimum requirements, we will, for example, reduce order volumes as warning or – as a last resort – terminate our business relationship".* (H&M)

Furthermore, related to this topic, the discourse highlighted the achieved results of SSCM efforts, emphasizing thus companies' role as credible reporters. These measures were typically represented in qualitative and to some extent also in quantitative terms, such as reviewing percentage suppliers committed to code of conducts, numbers of supplier audits conducted, or natures of discrepancies revealed in the audits. However, the demonstrations of negative impacts that have put in place along the supply chain were barely existent, and also the

discussion of benefits was almost lacking. In this sense, when companies focus mainly on reporting their operating policies, it would be questioned whether they are interested in the actual impacts of their purchasing and supply chain operations. As can be seen, reported measures were not linked with to the actual requirements of suppliers' code of conducts:

61. *“We measure our performance with the percentage of suppliers that were screened using labor practices criteria.” (Outotec)*
62. *“In 2014 alone, 84% of our supplier factories were audited at least once”. (H&M) [...] On average, each active first-tier factory was audited 1.5 times. All in all, we performed a total of 3,623 audits (head audits and follow-up audits) in 2014. (H&M)*
63. *In 2015, overall adherence to Novozymes' supplier program for responsible sourcing was 100%. The program includes an evaluation of suppliers based on commercial, quality and sustainability performance. Novozymes increased its responsible sourcing efforts during the year to include specific measures to combat net deforestation in the supply chain. (Novozymes)*

As a summary, this discourse moves away from economic motives and emphasizes companies' commitment to promote sustainability along their supply chains. The construction of the discourse describes activities that companies have been taken in pursuing sustainably in their purchasing and supply chain operations, highlights their active role in educating suppliers in sustainability matters, and describes in detail how sustainability is managed in supplier relationships. All these topics emphasizes that sustainability is taken seriously, and companies are constantly developing their purchasing and supply chain operations to become a more sustainable. It was also notable, that even if the cooperative nature of the supplier dialogue was emphasized, at the end of the day, companies tend to define sustainability requirements for suppliers unilaterally. Hence, supply chain sustainability and dialogues around sustainability are imperative and not just an option for suppliers. Justifications in this discourse are closely related to risk management topics with the previous discourse, even if this view was not actively brought out in the reports. In this sense, sustainability was integrated with existing purchasing and supply chain management practices rather than replaced by the new ones.

4.2.3 Alternative discourse of building opportunities

Third discourse that emerges in the material, is the discourse of building opportunities. This forward-looking discourse underlines benefits and a vast potential of collaborative behaviors

with fewer numbers of strategic suppliers to foster sustainability agenda in the society. As the name already implies, this discourse approaches the SSCM phenomenon from the alternative perspective, and challenges other two, obviously risk-oriented discourses, by presenting an opportunity-oriented view, where the economic, environmental and societal dimensions of sustainability are better aligned, or at least they are not considered as trade-offs. The discourse extends the scope of other two discourses, and implicitly involves their underlying ideas, especially those ones that companies have both economic and societal objectives, and they are not discussed here separately. The discourse of building opportunities is loosely built around three topics; 1) *Seeking new ways to cooperate*, 2) *strengthening relationships*, and 3) *creating shared value*. It is notable that the discourse is not as well-developed as other two discourses, but it builds the perception that companies are ready to take a step forward.

Seeking new ways to cooperate

The discourse of building opportunities is closely linked to societal chance. It is built around the idea that changing societal conditions pose not only a threat or challenge, but also provides new business opportunities for businesses. By using the opportunity image, sustainability change is constructed here as a positive development. Again, this idea emerges through executive statements. In fact, almost all examined reports shared the view that sustainability is at the same time challenge and opportunity, and it can harness to serve traditional business goals. This discourse in particular recognizes that there are opportunities to cooperate with suppliers in a way that not only foster supply chain sustainability but also enhances a broader societal sustainability. In this sense, purchasing and supply chain management function has a special role in sustainable value creation, as can be seen through the following excerpts:

64. *“Our vision is a public commitment to social, economic and environmental sustainability that not only helps us to manage risks, it creates business opportunities and builds trust. This supports us in developing lasting relationships with customers, employees, suppliers and other stakeholders”*. (Volvo)
65. *[...] There are close links between our core values, our business strategy and our sustainability activities. This builds on the conviction that sustainability represents a key business opportunity that can contribute to profitable growth for us and our stakeholders”*. (Sandvik)

66. *“For the Volvo Group, creating shared value²³ involves the development of practices that enhance our competitiveness while simultaneously advancing the economic, environmental and social conditions of the societies in which the Group operates. We see this not only as a responsibility, but an opportunity.” (Volvo)*

The discourse highlights the opportunities of strategic cooperation, or collaboration, with the suppliers who are able to seize with the sustainability originated opportunities and enhance buying companies’ business performance. Naturally, the discourse also regrets, that with some suppliers, there are better opportunities to collaborate than others. To redesign a supplier relationship, companies call for deeper engagement to dialogue from a particular node of suppliers, in other words, strategic suppliers or key suppliers, or group of suppliers included in processes that span with the value chain. These dialogues inherently include shared sustainability stances and they emphasize participants’ willingness, and ability to collaborate to deepen the relationship and release its full potential. This progress is linked with new and innovative ways to cooperate to develop new business. Hence, this discourse expands considerably the view on supplier engagement compared to previous discourses.

67. *“Close collaboration and dialogue with suppliers is crucial to assure the Group’s continued success”. (SKF)*

68. *“We will form partnerships and networks with customers, consumers, governments, suppliers, academia and others around us to make a sustainable difference”. (Novozymes)*

69. *“We encourage our suppliers to take a more active role in the cooperation and re-design work and to challenge us. The traditional way of thinking needs to be re-tuned towards authentic business partnerships involving a shared effort and fruitful results for both parties”. (Valmet)*

These bridging actions focus on suppliers, that are bringing, or have the potential to bring considerable value both from economic and societal perspectives, or otherwise facilitate to solve the tradeoff between economic, environmental and societal performances. In contrast to the other two discourses that maintained a risk and cost oriented view on SSCM, this discourse emphasizes the value-adding potential of SSCM and especially those of suppliers’ relationships. The ultimate aim here is to combine supplier’s innovation strengths, resources

²³ Concept of Shared value relates enhancing competitiveness while advancing the socio-economic conditions of the communities in which a business operates (Porter & Kramer, 2006)

and capabilities with buying companies' ones in order to gain best results in the market, and simultaneously enhance sustainability agenda from a wider societal perspective. These underlying objectives are described in following excerpts from the reports:

70. *“Being at the forefront of technological development is important to remain competitive. Hydro is engaged in the development of new next generation cell and smelter technology together with key suppliers. We may fail to develop these technologies on a timely basis or they may not be commercially feasible, thereby resulting in a negative impact on our growth opportunities and competitive position.”* (Norsk Hydro)
71. *“Volvo Group researchers, together with key suppliers in both countries, are looking at many innovative solutions to meet the program's aggressive targets.”* (Volvo)
72. *“We work closely with our suppliers to be prepared for stricter environmental regulations and explore new technologies for improved energy efficiency”.* (Statoil)

Strengthening relationships

The discourse, in a sense, represents the buyer-supplier relationships as resources, viewing that they are needed to continuously develop and strengthen in order to maintain, and reach their full value-creation potential. Compared to other two discourses, it is viewed that favorable conditions for buyer-suppliers collaboration arrive through mutually agreed interaction models, and shared objective and values rather than rules set by buying companies. For instance, since the potential of collaborative relationship may not be realized overnight, buying companies are likely to sign relatively long-terms contracts with strategic suppliers, as it affects positively on many inter-organizational and cultural matters such as trust, commitment, openness, knowledge sharing, and partnership attitude. Without a focus on conditions that promote collaboration, relationships would be challenging to maintain, as also noted in the excerpts below:

73. *“We invest substantially in research and development and maintain close cooperation with our customers and suppliers.”* (Sandvik)
74. *“By partnering with others, we can make an even greater contribution to a more sustainable and socially responsible world. We drive improvements by working with suppliers, industry peers, universities and NGOs.”* (Nokia)
75. *“Long-term cooperation plans based on mutual commitment and openness between companies are in place with key suppliers. The aim of this co-operation is to work*

together to optimize the entire value chain, while sharing best practices in areas such as supply chain, manufacturing and product development.” (UPM)

The discourse highlights the need to develop complementary resources and capabilities as well as mutual working methods to gain best result in the market. Compared with other two discourses, buying companies were described, for example, to be willing to investigate much more tangible and intangible assets in developing relationships to strengthen supplier’s capabilities. These kinds of development activities were described, in general, to leverage suppliers’ competencies, stimulate their innovation abilities, and improve collaboration skills. From the wider perspective, practices that focus to strengthen buyer-supplier relationships, are aimed to enhance supply chain actors’ mutual innovation capacities, reduce risks involved in collaboration, secure the competitive potential and ultimately to increase the preparedness to respond opportunities that the societal change may offer. Hence, as described in the excerpts below, the discourse builds totally different view on SRM than previous ones:

76. *“Atlas Copco’s long-lasting relationships with suppliers also allow the group to leverage their competence in order to further develop product and service offerings. Nurturing long-term relationships with suppliers is mutually beneficial, securing the group’s competitive edge and development potential in a responsible and sustainable way.” (Atlas Copco)*

77. *“We build networks and clusters to further extend our knowhow, skills and capabilities by committing to long-term relationships with suppliers, engineering companies, university partners, and with licensees and other Original Equipment Manufacturers”.* (Wärtsilä)

78. *“Values long-term relationships, and the transfer of knowledge and understanding of each other’s processes, procedures and values.” (Volvo Group)*

Creating shared value

While the other two discourses focused reducing purchasing costs and managing supply chain risks operating through arm’s -length relationships, adopts this discourse a value-creation perspective. The discourse relies on the power of innovation, viewing that ultimate aim of buyer-supplier collaboration is to become a forerunner, for example, in developing new energy-efficient technologies. The collaboration may increase the rates of innovation, faster time to market and decrease development costs. This may lead first-mover advantages, improve mutual profitability, and strengthen competitive edge. However, companies also recognize that

sometimes they fail to develop new technologies. From the sustainability perspective, there is potential, for instance, to enhance the commercialization of novel technologies that are aimed to decrease carbon dioxide emissions or improve water purification, when three dimensions of sustainability becomes better aligned. These ideas are demonstrated in the excerpts below:

79. *“Being at the forefront of technological development is important to remain competitive. Hydro is engaged in the development of new next generation cell and smelter technology together with key suppliers. We may fail to develop these technologies on a timely basis or they may not be commercially feasible, thereby resulting in a negative impact on our growth opportunities and competitive position.”* (Norsk Hydro)
80. *“SKF has a close collaboration with its key suppliers, focusing on operational performance and new product development. This helps strengthen competitiveness for both SKF and its suppliers”* (SKF)
81. *“With our supply chain sustainability activities, we seek innovative solutions that holistically combine environmental, social and economic goals and increase the positive impact of our efforts.”* (Nokia)

Previous discourses have represented buying companies as rightful owners of the value, and their sustainability efforts have been mostly separated from their economic goals. This discourse assumes an intertwined perspective to sustainability by representing that collaborative behaviors would even result a win-win-win situation, where value is shared between buying companies, their strategic suppliers, and the society around. Maybe for that reason, more sophisticated measurements were used in demonstrating achieved results. Such measurements captured, for instance, the numerical quantifications how the adoption or commercialization of environmental technologies have impacted on companies bottom line while simultaneously improved the societal and environmental circumstances. From this perspective, these kinds of collaborative SSCM initiatives are better aligned with companies' economic objectives. This approach is loosely described in the following excerpts:

82. *“The objectives are to improve freight efficiency by 50 percent, compared with 2009 truck models, and to demonstrate a technology pathway to improve engine efficiency by over 30 percent. Volvo Group researchers, together with key suppliers in both countries, are looking at many innovative solutions to meet the program's aggressive targets.”* (Volvo)
83. *“By continuously enhancing our offering to customers, actively working with our suppliers, minimizing our environmental impact, providing a safe, innovative and*

diverse workplace and engaging in the community, we ensure that we add value for all of our stakeholders, now and for many years to come.” (Sandvik)

84. *“Our trusted suppliers must balance reliability, quality and efficiency with a passion for sustainability and innovation. We partner closely with them in efforts to innovate and implement responsible solutions that have an impact on the world.” (Novozymes)*

To sum up, the discourse of building opportunities focuses on value creation with fewer numbers of strategic suppliers. Compared to previous discourses, it moves beyond the transactional characteristic of the supply chain system and extends considerably traditional roles reserved for the supply chain actors. The construction of the discourse emphasizes, in particular, the importance partnerships, alliances, and other forms of collaboration between buying companies and their suppliers, as they are portrayed the vital mechanisms to advance sustainability agenda, for example, through the co-development of sustainability-oriented innovations in order to reach out mutually beneficial economic, environmental and societal goals. This kind of win-win-win construction built upon the collaboration is viewed as a potential source of profitable growth, competitive advantage and shared value that reconciles the traditional tension between the business success and societal wellbeing. Even if the discourse was not nearly as uniform and well-developed than other two discourses, and appeared mostly in the manufacturing industry, its core ideas contain development potential both in the organizational life and as a part of the sustainability reporting practice.

4.2.4 Creating and maintaining a meaning for SSCM

Any discourse study stays incomplete without the considerations of meanings of discourses. In previous section, I recognized and presented three discourses on SSCM through their constructive topics, and showed that each discourse constructs a different perspective on SSCM, at the same time hiding certain facets of the phenomenon while reinforcing others. When these discourses are compared to each other, it is possible to distinguish different kinds of reasoning and argumentation that challenges, complements and justifies the existence of each discourse with relation to other discourses, making their occurrence meaningful. Together these discourses reflect those fundamental values that are traditionally linked to corporate sustainability communication; to represent companies as an economically viable and societally compatible actors. In other words, they aim to build organizational legitimacy. Presumably for this reason, each SSCM discourse relies on legitimacy-based augmentation in the creation and

maintaining of meaning, embodying those underlying values upon which the SSCM is built. The creation of the meaning for the SSCM within these discourses and a way how they belong together in order to constitute meaningful organizational reality are discussed below.

The ruling discourse of sourcing excellence entails an idea that SSCM is to support companies to achieve their economic goals. As the name sourcing excellence already suggests, discussions around topics of reducing purchasing costs, ensuring stable supply flow and managing supply chain risks are at the heart of this discourse. The discourse builds a rational view to SSCM relying on neoclassical argumentations that are not in conflict with traditional business aims. For that reason, companies' expertise, efficiency in operations, continuous development, and especially "*can-do attitude*" were emphasized. It is also viewed that sourcing excellence lies at the core of companies' competency portfolio making a tone of the discourse very self-confident. As the discourse mainly maintains the perception of what SSCM is from the business perspective, it is evident that the societal sustainability concern was consciously absent, or it was rather seen driven by external factors such as legislation. However, companies avoid sounding capitalistic arguing that environmental and societal dimensions of sustainability, in a way or another, comes alongside with the economic performance, which also justifies the existence of this discourse from the perspective of corporate social responsibility.

The opposite discourse of commitment to sustainable supply chain challenges and complements to the first discourse. The phrase commitment represents internally driven engagement to the socially recognized sustainability values, and therefore, fostering the environmental and societal sustainability along the supply chain in very essence of the SSCM in this discourse making its tone worried. Constructive topic such as engagement of suppliers and managing sustainability in supplier relationships, view companies as responsible actors, still emphasizing that the way towards sustainability is not just an attitude, but ongoing process and something that can definitely be managed. However, justifications behind these topics were not necessarily recognized to be relevant from economic perspective and companies rather hoped that they would be rewarded for "*doing something good*". Therefore, the discourse mainly produces and maintains the moral view to SSCM, where the organizational values are aligned with the societal ones, but which are partly external to companies, and thus poorly fitted with the economic business aims. However, the discourse also shares, even not mentioned actively in

the reports, the same neoclassical economics perspective of the first discourse, because managing sustainability in supply chain is basically about management of economic risks.

The discourse of building opportunities challenges previous discourses and provides an alternative, and even fresh, view to SSCM. As the phrase building opportunities implies, arises the existence of the discourse from changing societal conditions and values, which creates new business opportunities. As the discourse is positive and future-oriented, its tone is highly optimistic. The discourse particularly recognizes unleashed potential involved in the supply chain system, where sustainability threat can be transformed into business opportunities in a deep collaboration with carefully selected strategic suppliers. Therefore, constructive topics including engaging strategic suppliers, developing relationships, and value co-creation, are at the core of this discourse. From the wider perspective the discourse, in its ways, builds a perception, not only of responsible and viable company, but also as a vital one for actively promoting sustainability goals in the broader society. Hence, the discourse combines moral and rational views of other two discourses, and manifests that companies “*can do well, by doing good*” attitude to SSCM, since it strives to demonstrate the compatibility between value added supply chain activities and societal wellbeing. Overall, the discourse produces desirable contrast to other two discourses, that are soon presented to be obsolete way to operate.

These discourses and their meanings are not mutually exclusive and independent of the others, but constitute the discursive formation connected in a specific way. While at a first glance, all three discourses, especially the first two, seems to be opposite to each other, but they are nevertheless complementary. The reason is because economic performance is considered the prerequisite for sustainability performance, and while their meanings represent two distinguishable approaches to manage supply chains, their relation might be called causality, thereby opposing but also complementary at the same time. In addition, while these two discourses represent different approaches in managing supply chains, are they reciprocal also in a sense, that they are principally interlinked by the same supplier base. Third discourse, instead, implicitly involves the societal and economic goals of other two discourses and extends considerably their scope and manifests compatibility between business success and societal wellbeing bringing an alternative value creation perspective in otherwise so risk and cost-oriented discourse formation. Due to this hierarchy, I decided the discourse of sourcing excellence to be most representative discourse in this discursive formation.

4.3 Construction of buyer-supplier relationship

This study has so far recognized the three discourses on SSCM; 1) *Ruling discourse of business excellence*, 2) *opposite discourse of commitment to sustainable supply chain*, and 3) *Alternative discourse of building opportunities*, and further discussed their constructive topics, different meanings constituted for the SSCM phenomena within these discourses, and how they belong together. In addition to identify the construction of the SSCM discourse, I was interested the consequential nature of discourse use, in other words, how interaction between the buying companies and their suppliers represented within these discourses' shapes their identities, relationships between them, and ultimately organizational realities. With regard to FDA, I was interested in the construction buyer-supplier relationships and the role of subject and power in managing companies' sustainability aims. This kind of question seems to be relevant, since all three discourses emerged, either directly in the interaction between buying companies and their suppliers, or indirectly, through the descriptions of attitudes towards supplier relationship management. In this sense, the discourse use has power to construct relationships.

I found that each discourse, or better said, the interactions that constitutes these discourses, normalizes the function of relationship, and encapsulates the positioning and power structure between supply chain actors making the occurrence of relationship meaningful. In the discourse of sourcing excellence, sustainability matters are not in the first stance and coercive power conception with asymmetric positioning of actors serves mainly the transactional function of relationship. In the discourse of commitment to sustainable supply chain, buying companies authoritarian role as sustainability heralds was emphasized and disciplinary power conception serves educative function of the relationship. In the discourse of building opportunities, equivalent positions combined with the integrative power conception allows collaborate in order to develop sustainability-oriented innovations. However, these archetypes of relationships should be considered as functional unities of relationships system, and they do not necessarily exist in isolation. A basic construction of relationships in terms of their function, positioning of subjects, and nature of power relation are presented in Table 10.

Table 5. Construction of the buyer-supplier relationships.

Discourse	Relationship function	Subject positions	Power conception
Discourse of sourcing excellence	Transactional relationship	Master – Slave	Coercive power
Discourse of commitment to sustainable supply chain	Educative relationship	Teacher – Student	Disciplinary power
Discourse of building Opportunities	Collaborative relationship	Fellow – Fellow	Integrative power

In following sections, I will present my interpretations on the structures of buyer-supplier relationships that discourse use constitutes. These findings as a whole answer to the second research question: *How are buyer-supplier relationships constructed through a discourse use?* Following the ideas of Foucault (1982), I will first focus on the function of each relationship that discourse use constitutes, as it constructs the basis for the analysis of subject and power. Then, I will investigate nature of dependencies to reveal the system of differentiation as a source of relational power and constitution of identities. Finally, I will show how the positioning of actors and nature of power relations shape the actions, that companies are able, or allowed, to put in the practice to manage sustainability in supplier relationships. I do not give rhetoric quotations here because this section is a more interpretative than previous one. Again, I want to point out, that interpretation process was not as straightforward as one might think. For example, the notions of power relation or subject position were not used in the rhetoric, and they were expressed as implicit meaning in the studied material. I will divide my interpretations in each section into three groups, according to the discourse they will represent.

4.3.1 Function of relationship

The function that a buyer-supplier relationship serves appeared to be different depending on the discourse. In the discourse of sourcing excellence, the supplier relationship is characterized by buying companies' strategic intent to exert competitive pressures to suppliers to keep purchasing costs low with maximized quality. Traditional supply risks such as availability and price volatility are managed by leveraging market base with aim to reduce the probability that risk will actualize. Interactions with suppliers were portrayed to be transactional rather than cooperative or long-term. From the supplier's perspective, it is hard to change the situation, as there are likely to be numbers of substitutive suppliers in the market. Sustainability was

resigned almost entirely from buying companies district court of interest. Hence, the primary function of this transactional relationship is to leverage supplier base to gain maximum value appropriation, and therefore, there is very little room to advance sustainability.

In the discourse of commitment to sustainable supply chain, a more cooperative buyer-supplier relationship is established. The relationship emphasizes the importance of supplier dialogues as a way to reduce information asymmetry and ensure supplier compliance in sustainability to reduce reputational risks. The relationship embodies the idea that there will be continuous learning and improvement especially in the supplier side when it comes to sustainability matters. Buying companies experience suppliers' willingness and capacity to make sustainability adaptations to their operations inappropriate. Hence, the discourse underlines the companies' capability to measure, prevent and react suppliers' societal and environmentally hostile behavior. At the same time, these practices also got to buying companies know their supplier better and thus took the first step in building closer relationships. Therefore, the primary function of this educative relationship is to transfer the sustainability values beyond the boundaries of a buying company upstream to suppliers and ensure their compliance.

In the discourse of building opportunities, a buyer-supplier relationship is constructed in a different way. While the other two other risk-oriented discourses put emphasis on preventing the negative impacts in interactions and exchanges with suppliers, focuses this opportunity-oriented discourse exploiting sustainability originated opportunities working together with fewer numbers of strategic suppliers. This necessitates the collaborative relationship where participation and contribution are encouraged. As such, this kind of collaboration can be understood as one step further than cooperation. The collaborative relationships emphasize the reciprocal activities as relationship objectives are described to be achieved based on developing trust, long-term orientation, collaboration and mutual understanding. The relationship is described as stimulating, rewarding and a learning experience where the value is being shared. The discourse of building future opportunities, therefore, proposes new boundaries to responsibilities and roles of discourse actors. Hence, the main function of this collaborative relationship is to foster sustainability-oriented innovation in a collaborative framework.

4.3.2 Question of subject and power

These discourses also work as vehicles through which power and subject are constituted. In the discourse of sourcing excellence, subject positions. In the interaction portrayed in the reports, buying companies are positioned in the role of masters, who are able to leverage their authority to promote transactional goals in relation with suppliers. As buying companies and their suppliers can be considered as an opposite pair, where the position of one depends on the other, suppliers are framed in a less privileged position of slaves. Accordingly, a master provides reasonable standards of living to slaves, while captures the majority of the benefits in a relationship. Buying companies' dependency on suppliers is likely to be low as there are a number of substitutive suppliers in the market. This kind of positioning constitutes the coercive power relation to the favor of buying companies. Buying companies are also likely striving to maintain these positions, because entering long-term or more cooperative relationship would potentially increase the dependency on supplier and lead a loss of power.

In the discourse of commitment to sustainable supply chain, buying companies are represented as indispensable agents in guiding their suppliers towards socially recognized sustainability goals. It highlights buying companies' privileged possession of knowledge in sustainability matters, which places them in the position of teacher. At the same time, suppliers are left the position of students, who are expected to align their attitudes and behaviors' in line with buying companies' sustainability stance. Even if the rhetoric emphasizes a cooperative nature of a relationship, from the perspective of relational power, buying companies are dominating role in the same way than in the transactional relationship, because they are not dependent on suppliers, at least in the short term. However, compared to previous discourse, buying companies' power derives from their knowledge on sustainability matters, and appears into being as a disciplinary by its nature, serving thus an educative function of the relationship. It is also worth remembering that buying companies are mainly operating with same supplier base than previous discourse, which requires them to separate the roles of master and teacher, rather than allowing them to coexist, as they serve two different functions.

In the discourse of building opportunities, buying companies' authoritative position was foregrounded, and the relationship between the actors was constituted to be equal, providing thus opportunity in participation and working together. Suppliers, especially those strategic ones, were represented as fellows, since their expertise and knowledge were illustrated to be

complementary to promote common goals. Consequently, buying companies were positioned also as the fellows in relation to suppliers. Even if these equal roles not appeared strongly in the rhetoric, interaction patterns in the discourse provides strong indications of equal roles. As a result, the loss of company's power dominance is evident, and the dependence in a relationship is characterized as interdependency or power balance. The reason for this is that companies are dependent on suppliers' knowledge, resources and capabilities, and especially those ones that may enhance the sustainability agenda. In this sense, relational power serves collaborative agenda and can be thus considered integrative by its nature. In fact, the integrative power stems those changing societal conditions that pushes actors towards collaboration. Compared to other two discourses, buying companies are operating with limited numbers of a strategic supplier, allowing these roles and power circumstances to exist.

4.3.3 Putting subject and power into action

Finally, I will demonstrate how these subject positions and power relations shape the means for managing sustainability in the buyer-supplier relationships. It seems that available means are framed by the function of relationship, actors mutual positioning, and the nature of power relation between them. Hence, in the transactional relationship, in its purest form, buying companies seek to resign the sustainability by all means from their scope of interest, because perceptions to pay attention to sustainability are not representative. Instead, institutional support such as legislation is likely to play a crucial role in defining the proper behavior for suppliers, what it comes to sustainability, even if buying companies can contribute to the society indirectly through their business activities. Hence, unlike the other discourses, the discourse of sourcing excellence cannot be considered as a sustainability discourse per se, since the emphasis on managing sustainability is not in the first stance. However, once established, these serfdom-like relationships granted buying companies a license to educate their supplier in sustainability matters as the following discourse demonstrates.

In the discourse of commitment in sustainable supply chain, a disciplinary power operates through educative relationship and is constraining by its nature. As found, the means of bringing a subject and power into being are characterized by the inundating supplier with various artefacts such as questionnaires, supplier code of conduct, and other clauses for the contractual purposes. Suppliers are also obliged for regular audits and another subject for monitoring practices. In the case of non-compliance, buying companies have reserved one-sided right to

terminate contracts. The common aim of these means is to influence the supplier's actions and attitudes to ensure supply chain sustainability. The only way the suppliers were allowed to relate with buying companies was displaying almost complete obedience in sustainability matters. In this sense, a disciplinary power seems to leave a little space for suppliers to resist buying companies' authoritarian position. However, dutiful suppliers are being rewarded by, for example, larger purchasing quantities and renewal of contracts. In this sense, disciplinary power is not merely a form of power which commands, but it also rewards for achieved the results.

In the discourse of building opportunities, the subject and relational power plays a less prominent role than in other two discourses. The integrative power operates in the collaborative framework and is constitutive by its nature. The subject and power no longer serve the means to manage sustainability risks but leading the fellows towards their common objectives in a subtle way. An integrative power takes its shape through permission, allowing combine complementary resources and capabilities, and rewarding those suppliers who share their ideas with buying companies. This kind of permitting or even stimulating heterogeneity is seen an important precondition to contribute sustainability-oriented innovation. Suitable conditions for collaboration arrive through commitment in shared objectives, values, trust and openness, and partnership attitude in order to strengthen the relationship. From this perspective, managing this kind of collaborative relationship cannot be approached as a result of power use through subject positions in the traditional sense or strictly rules set by the buying companies.

4.4 Summary of the findings

Before continuing to discuss the findings of the study, I will summarize them briefly. The objective of this study was twofold; first, to analyze the construction of SSCM discourse, and second, to interpret the consequential nature of discourse use, focusing on the construction of the buyer-supplier relationships and their role in the management of sustainability aims in the supply chain setting. The central findings of the study are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Summary of the findings.

Discourse and the meaning of SSCM	Function of a buyer-supplier relationship	Structural conditions of a relationship	Means for managing sustainability
Discourse of sourcing excellence frames SSCM as the competence to advance the economic performance. Builds the rational view on SSCM that is not conflict with tradition business aims.	Transactional relationship that serves traditional economic objectives of SCM, with the focus on on optimizing cost and quality and reducing risks. Sustainability is not in the first stance.	Buying companies' dominance as they are not dependent on supplier and there are number of substitutive suppliers in the market. Power is coercive by its nature. Buying companies are positioned as masters and suppliers as slaves.	Sustainability is mainly driven by legislation and other institutional forces, being thus out of the buying companies court of interests.
Discourse of commitment to sustainable supply chain represents SSCM as the process to ensure compliance along the supply chain. Builds the moral view on SSCM where organizational values are aligned with the societal ones.	Educative relationship that focuses on managing reputational risk by the means of transferring companies' sustainability values upstream to suppliers and ensuring their compliance.	Buying companies' dominance but suppliers' power tends to increase as a learning occurs in sustainability matters. Power is disciplinary by its nature. Buying companies are positioned as teachers and suppliers as students.	Actors positioning and power relation are constraining by their nature. Buying companies uses disciplinary power to incorporate sustainability attitudes in supplier relationships and ensure their compliance
Discourse of building opportunities views SSCM as the opportunity to transform sustainability challenge into business opportunities. Combines moral and rational views by demonstrating the combability between economic performance and societal wellbeing.	Collaborative relationship that focuses on value creation through the development of sustainability-oriented innovations with the strategic suppliers.	Power balance, as buying companies and suppliers resources and capabilities that may enhance sustainability agenda, complements each other. Power is integrative by its nature. The supply chain actors are positioned as fellows in relation to others.	Actors positioning and power relation are constitutive by their nature. Suitable conditions for collaboration arrive through integrative power that stimulates especially the development of sustainability-oriented innovations.

The study began with isolating the discourse on SSCM from the broader content in the examined material. The analysis showed that the discourse on SSCM is a large abstraction and it overlaps with a broader organizational sustainability discourse occurring in companies' sustainability reports. While the broader discourse outlines the guidelines for conducting sustainable business at the company level, the discourse on SSCM tends to show, how those are implemented strategically and operationally at the level of purchasing and supply chain operations. The common aim of the SSCM discourse is to tell a coherent and easily

understandable story of companies supply chain and especially purchasing related attitudes, performances and impacts, considering to all three dimensions of sustainability. Even if the studied industries differed between companies, the basic structure and idea of the discourse on SSCM remained the same; to portray companies as economically viable and societally committed actors, when it comes to their supply chain and purchasing operations.

The deconstruction showed that the discourse on SSCM consists of three struggling discourses of which each constructs a bounded version of organizational reality. In the discourse of sourcing excellence, companies' competency to conduct traditional, risk and cost oriented SCM was emphasized, and sustainability was not seen as a priority. However, economic performance in the conduct of business was considered as an important prerequisite for societal and environmental dimensions of sustainability. The discourse of commitment to the sustainable supply chain both challenges and complement the first discourse, and manifests companies' strategic commitment to foster environmental and societal responsibility along their supply chains. The discourse views that sustainability management in the purchasing and supply chain setting is an iterative and continuously developing process that focuses ensuring sustainability compliance especially in supplier relationships. Ignorance of sustainability agenda was presented as a threat to business continuity. The alternative discourse of building opportunities adopts intertwined view to sustainability and moves beyond the transactional characteristics of supply chain system viewing that sustainability threat can be turned into business opportunities in collaboration with a fewer numbers of strategic suppliers.

The interpretative analysis uncovered that these discourses emerged through interactions between supply chain actors and consequently constructed the three archetypes of buyer-supplier relationships. Transactional and educative relationship represent buying companies' dominance over their suppliers. While transactional relationship serves mainly economic aims relying coercive power and master-slave positioning, educative relationships seeks to ensure suppliers compliance in sustainability matters utilizing disciplinary power through authoritarian teacher-student positioning. What separates coercive and disciplinary conceptions of power in these relationships, is that they serve two different functions, sharing still the same supplier base. Collaborative relationship was represented as a power balance between fellows, where the integrative power pushes actors to develop sustainability-oriented innovations. Compared to transactional and educative relationships, where relational power emerges mainly from

dependencies between actors, the integrative power stems from the changing societal conditions, that creates a seedbed for collaboration. It is worth of mentioning, that these archetypes of relationships, especially transactional and educative ones, should be understood as functional unities of a certain relationship, and they do not necessarily exist in isolation.

4.5 Discussion of the empirical findings

The studies of the organization and sustainability have increasingly focused on the use of language. This study, inspired by them, has provided an attempt to employ the FDA with the SSCM research. The primary motivation for this study was to find out alternative ways to scrutinize the SSCM phenomenon from the perspective of language and language use. The Empirical material of the study, and also the situational context, consisted of twenty sustainability reports from the supply chain intensive companies recognized as sustainability leaders in the Nordic region. They provided an interesting medium where the discourse of SSCM appear into being through a language. I have focused two inter-related questions: 1) *the construction and 2) consequences of the SSCM discourse*. The findings of the study showed that the discourse on SSCM occurring in sustainability reports is multidimensional construction, as it consists of three different types of discourses, which consequently constructs various natures of buyer-supplier relationships. In following, I will discuss the central findings in relation to existing SSCM research, make some observations reflecting discourse theories, and consider relevance of discourse research approach in the SSCM field.

The most significant finding of this study was to reveal the tensional dynamics of SSCM discourse, as it obviously portrays companies' attempts to reconcile and align a traditional tension (Dobers & Springett, 2010) between their business and sustainability goals. As Foucault (1972) suggested, discursive intervention revealed two contradictory and at the same time complementary discourses; The ruling discourse of sourcing excellence building the rational view to SSCM, and the opposite discourse of commitment to sustainable supply chain producing a moral view to SSCM. These discourses seem to appear separately, and have their opposite characteristic, because companies are still incapable of combining the business and sustainability goals in their purchasing and supply chain operations. However, this does not imply that companies necessarily fail to achieve sustainability goals from the societal perspective, as these discourses together are able to provide reasonable view to overarching goals of the SSCM. In addition to these struggling discourses, the study uncovered the

alternative discourse of building opportunities, which succeed to demonstrate a missing link between business and sustainability goals, and to bring opportunity and value creation-focused perspective in otherwise so risk and cost-oriented discourse formation. Compared to the conventional SSCM research, this discursive formation as a whole recognizes, for instance, the risk and opportunity-oriented strategies for SSCM (Seuring & Müller, 2008).

From a broader perspective, the discourse on SSCM seems to engage in a broader societal sustainability discourse (see Burchell & Cook, 2006; Tregidga, Milne & Kearing, 2007; Tregidga, Kearings & Milne, 2013). Different meanings constructing and constructed within these three discourses strive to represent companies as an active, continuously learning and socially compatible actors, especially when it comes to their purchasing and supply chain operations, without forgetting the fact that companies' fundamental goal is to generate profits. Despite the ideological differences in single discourses, together they can be considered to reflect a common approach for corporate sustainability (e.g. Hüge et al., 2013) in trying to construct shared meanings for what is socially accepted way of conduct business. However, even if these discourses could be considered implying a more active role for companies in engaging sustainability, the discourse formation as a whole does not propose a radical change to underlying goals of the SCM. Instead, a sustainability sophisticated discourses are linked with a traditional business-oriented discourse. Therefore, rise of a business-oriented discourse in the top of the discursive formation is not a huge surprise, and also reinforces the conception that SSCM follows the instrumental logic on sustainability (Montabon et al., 2016).

Foucault (1972) pointed out that discourses are not stable, but they develop over the time through the process of social construction. Hence, it could be argued that also the discourse on SSCM continue to evolve as companies adapt their operations to changing circumstances in the society (see Zadek, 2004; Holton et al., 2010). From a historical perspective, there seem to be certain discourses, constructions of buyer-supplier relationships, as well as subject positions and power relations, which tend to be privileged. For example, one may think that the ruling discourse of sourcing excellence is so entrenched that it cannot be challenged, or that the opposite discourse of commitment in sustainable supply chain suppliers must have to be oppressed to achieve sustainability aims. They are so obvious and taken for granted that one cannot see any other way of doing things. However, also dominant discourses come and go, and they even can disappear (Foucault, 1972). Hence, it would be argued that over to time this

discourse formation continue to develop, and these discourses will be gradually replaced by a more compatible discourses, for instance, evolved from the discourse of building opportunities, where sustainability goals are integrated in a desirable way (see Hugel et al., 2010). As a discourse and action go together, this necessitates adaptations also in the practical field.

These discourses provided an interesting view to inter-organizational conditions that the discourse use constitutes. I took a critical view on the construction of supplier relationships by investigating their governance structures. It seems that power has mostly understood as one-dimensional construct in the SCM research (e.g. Pagell & Wu, 2010; Toubolic et al., 2014) without recognizing its various dimensions. Findings of the study provide a complementary perspective, viewing that power is not inherently coercive, but it has also a disciplinary and integrative capacities. Combined with the proposed functions and subject positions, these findings help to conceptualize the multidimensional nature of the construction of buyer-supplier relationships in the SSCM setting. In relation to this, raises some questions concerning positioning of buying companies. In the transactional and educative relationships, remembering that companies are mainly operating with the same supplier base, subject and power are a bit problematic conception, since these relationships serve two different functions. In this setting, buying companies are required to act through multiple subject positions and conceptions of relational power. Overall, these findings definitely agree with Beske and Seuring (2014), who noted that it is too naive to view SSCM solely from the cooperative perspective.

Just like discourses, it also seems that construction of buyer-supplier relationships is not static in the SSCM setting, since subject positions and power relations are to some extent negotiable, and they can be changed over the time. For example, the discourse of commitment in sustainable supply chain demonstrated, that when operating in the educative relationship, as the subject position of student implies, possess supplier at least some learning capabilities. In the same time, as buying companies encourage suppliers to make the majority of relationship-specific investments to reach their sustainability standards, provides it opportunity for suppliers to develop their capabilities and knowledge in sustainability matters. When buying companies are becoming increasingly dependent on their supplier's capability to enhance sustainability performance (e.g. Toubolic et al., 2014), supplier's increased knowledge in sustainability improves their negotiation power. Hence, the expected way of interacting could reconstruct the governance system of the relationship. This insight demonstrates that a relational power, as

Foucault (1982) suggested, is not necessarily a binary like trait, that supply chain actors have or not have, but it is rather something that circulates in the relationship.

It would be questioned, is it meaningful to categorize supplier relationships based on the discourse they represent. These kinds of classifications have been traditionally rested, for instance, on the nature of purchased product or service (e.g. Kraljic, 1983). In this sense, the findings partially fall under the concept of supplier category management. Even if my categorization here involves strong simplifications and assumptions, it is reasonable one, and broadly recognizes the prior research on supplier relationship management in a sustainable domain (e.g. Pagell, Wu & Wassermann, 2010; Beske & Seuring, 2014; Govindan, Seuring, Zhu & Azevedo, 2016), and especially shares the view that companies prefer imbalanced relationships to drive sustainability, rather than to strive develop shared initiatives (e.g. Touboulic & Walker, 2014; Brockhaus et al. 2013; Harms et al., 2013). Hence, this categorization turns out to be useful in trying to understand what kind of relationships naturally emerges and how they should be established (Gold et al., 2010) in the SSCM setting. Also, the reflection on the subject positions, or identities, of supply chain actors provides a useful starting point to consider, what kind of capabilities and cooperative patterns within purchasing organization, and between companies and suppliers are needed in the conduct of SSCM.

Alongside with my actual research aims, I had an intention to demonstrate the potential of discourse research approach in the SCM research field. Is there any sense to investigate the SSCM phenomenon using organizational discourse research approach? As Phillips and Hardy (2002) argued, “*While there are many practical reasons for not conduct discourse analysis, the advantages of such an analysis outweigh the problems*”. Even if this study cannot be seen by any means as a conventional approach to conduct the Foucauldian analysis, methodological and theoretical view of Foucault proves to be interesting, but definitely not easily digestible set of tools for scrutinizing many hidden issues both from conceptual and practical standpoints in the SSCM research field. Nevertheless, I was able to bring ‘*discursive sensitivity*’ in the field of SCM research that has been so long compartmentalized (Srivastava, 2012). Phillips and Hardy (2002) continued “*discourse analytical approach plays an increasingly important role in the management research as it provides new ways of studying old topics and effective approaches for exploring new topics*”. Against this background, I believe that organizational discourse

analysis will continue to receive interest in the future, as a discursive approach allows to consider the complex SSCM phenomenon from a higher stance.

To summarize and conclude this discussion, the SSCM is a nascent and continually evolving strategic direction with the aim to align the concepts of SCM and Sustainability. Everything that has been discussed in this study demonstrates the paradigm shift from traditional supply chain management towards a more sustainable supply chain management catalyzed both by a risk and opportunity-oriented strategies. In managing these different business aims, together with diverging objectives of sustainability, there cannot be a single strategy that is appropriate in all circumstances. Findings of this study, and especially those ones that companies approach the SSCM phenomenon through three contradictory discourses in their sustainability reports, reinforced the conception that the SSCM is complex and somewhat challenging phenomenon for practitioners. Even if inevitable changes have already taken place in companies purchasing and supply chain management strategies, structures and operations for a sustainable supply chain, the traditional view on SCM is still deeply rooted in the discourse on SSCM, and the sustainability perspective is rather an enlargement to the traditional business-oriented view. Is this enough to achieve truly sustainable supply chains, especially when sustainability agenda is increasingly in the hands of corporations (Banerjee, 2003), is another question.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This study has investigated the construction and consequences of SSCM discourse in sustainability reports. In this concluding chapter, I will provide answers to the research questions, discuss theoretical contributions, recommend some managerial implications based on the findings, consider quality criteria associated especially with discourse analytical phases of the study, recognize the limitations of the study, and offer evidence on which issues have to be addressed in the future research. At the end, I will present short concluding comments.

5.1 Answering the research questions

This study has taken a discursive view on the SSCM phenomenon. The aim was to explore the construction of discourse on SSCM and to investigate the constitution of buyer-supplier relationship as consequence of discourse use. Organizational discourse research approach, and more precisely, the FDA was adopted as a primary theoretical and methodological perspective to investigate the research phenomenon. I studied totally twenty stand-alone or integrated sustainability reports from sustainability-oriented companies representing several supply intensive industries originated from Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark. In the previous chapter, I have described and discussed my findings in relation to existing research. Again, it should be remembered about subjective nature of this study, which means, that these findings represent only single interpretation of multiple possible alternatives, even if they are well-informed ones. Hence their generalization must be then approached with a caution. Based on these findings, I have attempted to fulfill the research objective. Two valuable insights, in line with my original research questions, need to be emphasized in this respect.

I was initially interested in the construction of the SSCM discourse. For that, the first research question was set:

RQ1: How is the discourse on SSCM constructed in sustainability reports?

In approaching this question, I reconstructed the SSCM discourse. The findings revealed that the discourse on SSCM in sustainability reports is large abstraction and is tensional by its nature. I identified three struggling discourses that companies use in departing the management of sustainable supply chains; 1) *The ruling discourse of sourcing excellence*, 2) *The opposite*

discourse of commitment to sustainable supply chain, and 3) *The alternative discourse of building opportunities*. All these three discourses are ideological, and represent SSCM from different angles, at same time hiding certain facets of the phenomenon, while reinforcing others. Overall, this discursive formation implies that underlying idea of SSCM is to support companies in achieving their economic aims. Alongside, companies view SSCM as the way to ensure societal and environmental sustainability along the supply chain. From the alternative perspective, with certain strategic suppliers, SSCM comes with an opportunity to foster sustainability-oriented innovation. These three discourses provide together a comprehensive and reasonable view to the construction of SSCM phenomenon in the global supply chain setting. Overall, the discourse on SSCM does not stand in isolation from the broader organizational sustainability discourse, and companies engage with the SSCM discourse to legitimate their actions in the society and maintain the business favorable view on sustainability. This research question is answered more deeply in sections 4.1 and 4.2.

In connection with these three discourses on SSCM, I was also interested, in accordance with the second research question;

RQ2: How are buyer-supplier relationships constructed through a discourse use?

In examining this question, I explored the structural conditions of relationships that discourse use constitutes. The findings showed that a buyer-supplier relationship in the SSCM setting is not a one-dimensional construct, but embraces inherently 1) *transactional*, 2) *educative* and 3) *collaborative relationships*. These archetypes of relationships should be considered as the functional unities of a certain relationship, and they do not necessarily exist in organizational reality, as they are represented in this study. Each relationship embodies a certain governance structure in terms of the function, roles of supply chain actors, and power relation between the actors that makes the occurrence of relationship meaningful when managing diverging aims of business. The relational power operates through subject positions which are shaped both by the dependencies between the supply chain actors and function of the relationship. For example, in the educative relationship, disciplinary power conception entangled with teacher-student positioning focuses transferring companies' sustainability values upstream to suppliers and ensuring their compliance. From a broader perspective, identified subject positions and power relations are constitutive as well as constraining by their nature, and help companies to manage

their preferred outcomes in supplier relationship, whether they are sustainability related or not. This research question is answered more specifically in the section 4.3

5.2 Theoretical contributions

This study makes some methodological and theoretical contributions, mainly to the current SSCM research. The main contribution lies in a novel methodological approach (Sarkis et al., 2011), utilizing discourse analytical approach, and the FDA in particular, in the analysis of language and language use (Ellis et al., 2006) in the SSCM setting. Revealing three types of discourses, their constructions and ideological meanings, and further up interpreting the constitution of buyer-supplier relationships, is an excellent example of such a novelty. The study has then demonstrated that a discursive view, and especially the FDA, is useful and valuable lens to scrutinize the SSCM phenomenon. In particular, the contribution of the FDA was to open up the black box of the structural conditions of the buyer-supplier relationships in a way, that other qualitative or quantitative methods would not necessarily provide. In unison with Grant et al. (2004), I have been able to “*analyze, engage with and interpret*” a variety of the SSCM related issues “*in ways that would not have been otherwise achievable*”.

This study also contributes theoretically to the SSCM research. Through the deconstruction of SSCM discourse, it demonstrated in the sophisticated way how companies actualize sustainability agenda in their purchasing and supply chain operations (Carter & Easton, 2011). From a broader perspective this deconstruction contributes the research that focuses interpreting business view on sustainability (e.g. Dryzek, 2013). Since sustainability is approached in different ways in different contexts (Bebbington et al., 2014), exploration of meanings contributes the understanding of different values (see Vaara & Laine, 2006) that are attached to the SSCM phenomenon. In relation to this, the study also made an interesting perception how companies discursively set boundaries to their societal and environmental responsibility in multi-tier supplier relationships, as demonstrated in the discourse of commitment to sustainable supply chain. This perspective has been in a marginal in the current SSCM research, and might be relevant, since the sustainability debate is increasingly in the hands of large businesses (Dobers & Springett, 2010). Hence, this perception provides again an excellent example of the sort of contribution that a discursive intervention can make.

Furthermore, the study theorized to some extent about the constructions and governance structures of buyer-supplier relationships, and the ways how subject and power shape the actions that companies are able to conduct to reach their sustainability goals. This discursive intervention provides alternative perspectives to the constructions of supplier relationships (e.g. Gold et al., 2010), integration of sustainability goals in supplier relationships (e.g. Pagell & Wu, 2009) and especially clarifies the characteristics of power in the SSCM setting. It was not a huge surprise, that roots of relational power lie in resource and knowledge dependencies, but the contribution here stands on the perception, that relational power is not inherently coercive, but it also has the disciplinary and integrative capabilities. In this regard, nature of relational power depends not only dependencies between supply chain actors, but also a function that relationship serves. In the same breath, the study proposed identities for supply chain actors to clarify their roles in buyer-supplier interaction. This kind of alternative conceptualization constitutes a valuable addition and contrast to the existing SSCM research, especially when SRM in the SSCM setting is a complex issue (e.g. Beske & Seuring, 2014)

5.3 Managerial implications

The findings of this study have some implications for managers and other practitioners working with supply chains in a sustainable domain. The main implication is that managing sustainability in supply chains, especially global one, is a complex mission and it cannot be approached from a single standpoint. This kind of multiplicity revealed in this study, especially when it comes managing sustainability in supplier relationships, creates considerable challenges for companies to develop and maneuver between the SSCM strategies, organizational structures, and operational practices. At the same time, these findings may also help to structure this multiplicity in the practical field. For instance, as a supplier relationship management appears to be as key aspects when discussing the SSCM, findings of the study particularly clarifies which kind of buyer-supplier relationships naturally emerges and companies are dealing with in a global supply chain setting. In this sense, understanding the construction and consequences of SSCM discourse may be helpful for managers to derive strategies for managing sustainability in supplier relationships. Again, it is worth of remembering that the reality is still much more complex than I presented in this study.

The findings in particular reinforces the conception that there cannot be a single approach for managing supplier relationship that is appropriate in all circumstances. It is paramount for

managers to understand the different functions of supplier relationship and sources of relational power, and then adopt the appropriate subject position and practice repertoire to manage preferred outcomes in the relationship, whether they are sustainability related or not. It is particularly notable that companies might take up several different identities, or subject positions, even with the same supplier, depending on the function of relationship. However, this kind of multiple positioning could also pose problems, if companies cannot separate the roles that are meant to serve different relationship functions. In this regard, proposed functions, subject positions and power relations constructed within different discourses on SSCM, may help managers to better establish supplier relationships that are needed to align economic, societal and environmental goals in SSCM setting. Even if the findings of this study cannot be used as a guidebook for managing sustainability in supplier relationships, they easily provide insights about how things are done differently compared to traditional view on SCM.

It would be also worth to remind that sustainability matters more to some companies and supply chains than others. Even if this study provided an overview to the contemporary SSCM practices in global supply setting through their respective discourses, it is neither practical nor logical for all companies to conduct the same style of SSCM. The strategies, structures and practices constituted within these discourses are driven by diverse factors, such as industry that companies are involved, motivation and expertise of executive management, and societal environment in which companies operate. Thereby, in developing their approach to conduct SSCM, companies must adapt their business strategies, organizational structures and operational practices somewhere around these discourses, making them consistent with a company's value base, business goals, and operational environment, rather than putting all eggs in the one basket. Considering the tensional nature of SSCM discourse showed in this study, companies must recognize that most of the SSCM related activities generate benefits for companies themselves, some of them benefit also for suppliers, while more and more of them are able to create value for the society around, even if almost then are intended to do so.

Finally, the findings of the study are also applicable in developing communication and especially reporting practices considering sustainable supply chains. As found earlier, purchasing and supply chain operations plays a pivotal role in the constitution of companies' societal and environmental impacts and in achieving their sustainability objectives. Thus, it is not irrelevant how companies discuss and communicate their SSCM efforts to stakeholders.

Especially, as the study focused on language use in sustainability reports, the findings can be used in benchmarking and further developing external communication related to companies purchasing and supply chain operations. The study highlighted, in particular, current trends and tensions of the SSCM discourse, allowing companies thus to develop better aligned sustainability disclosures in the future. Especially transition and development of integrated reporting provides opportunities to mitigate the tension between discourses in order to better demonstrate their mutual dynamics. This could yield a more sophisticated, informative and transparent sustainability reports. Again, as a discourse and action go together, radical changes in corporate sustainability disclosures necessitates also changes in the practical field.

5.4 Evaluation of the study

The quality of academic research can be evaluated with various criteria. In natural scientific research, and quantitative research in general, evaluation criterion has been traditionally rested on validity and reliability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In qualitative research, applicability of these criterions has been questioned, as it rests upon an interpretation in a systematic manner (Silverman, 2015), abandoning an idea of generalization of results (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This study relied primarily on FDA, despite the first stage of analysis that was carried out using thematic content analysis. As discourse analysis is contentious approach (Phillips & Hardy, 2002), I will put the emphasis on assessing the quality of discourse analytical approach employed in this study. There are no generally agreed criteria for assessing the quality of the discourse analysis since there are several approaches and a countless number of different ways to conduct discourse research (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Nevertheless, an evaluation criterion here is based on the approach originally proposed by Potter & Wetherell (1987) and further developed by Merkl-Davies et al. (2014). They present that the evaluation of discourse studies should focus on three criteria, namely authenticity, coherence, and fruitfulness.

Authenticity relates recognizing researcher's role as the primary tool for material collection, analysis, and especially interpretation. Strategies for satisfying authenticity criterion include acknowledging researchers' subjectivity, knowledge, assumptions and personal values. These underlying motives are inherently "*guiding the analysis towards the analyst's preconceptions*" (Wodak & Mayer, 2009). However, as the constructive approach assumes, differences in interpretations are not seen problematic but rather constituted as a source of material (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Coherence refers to, in terms of Merkl-Davies et al. (2014),

a soundness of analysis process in order to demonstrate “*how discourse fits together and how discourse structure produces affect and function*” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Strategies for satisfying this criterion include using some systematic approach to analysis (e.g. Foucauldian approach) and supporting findings by text extracts and clarifications of interpretations. Fruitfulness refers to the ability to increase the understanding of the researched phenomenon and thus, contributing to the production of new knowledge. These quality criteria, their short descriptions, and the fulfillment in this study are described in Table 7.

Table 7. Quality of the study.

Criteria	Achievement
<p>Authenticity Transparency of researchers' biases in the analysis.</p>	<p>I have taken into consideration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meta-theoretical considerations including the research approach. • Discourse analytical approach was located to the work of French social theorist and historian Michael Foucault. • The active voice was adopted to acknowledge the researcher's role in constructing and interpreting the findings. • I have briefly mentioner my bias and experience in sustainability management and supply chain management. • The inherent subjectivity of findings is acknowledged. <p>Result: Researcher plays an active role in the research process and constitutions of the findings.</p>
<p>Coherence The extent to which to chosen approach is methodologically sound.</p>	<p>The study relies on agreed reference frameworks and methods of argumentation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central analytical categories including discourse, relational power and subject position, and their interrelations were defined and used in line with the Foucauldian approach on discourse analysis. • The rationale for selection of case companies and use of their sustainability reports as a material for the study was comprehensively explained. • The analysis was based on established framework and explained how it relates to Foucauldian analytical categories used in the study. • In-depth and transparent description of all analysis stages including of the framing, deconstruction and interpretation were provided. <p>Result: Study was carried out systematically and being transparent way</p>
<p>Fruitfulness The extent to which findings generate new knowledge.</p>	<p>The study provides new insights in the field of SSCM research in the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of discourse research approach brings new sensitivity in the field of SSCM research. • Construction and meanings of the SSCM discourses taken place at companies' sustainability reports. • Various ways of establishing supplier relationships in the SSCM setting, • The role of subject and power in managing sustainability in the supplier relationships. <p>Result: Research increases conceptual and practical understanding on the phenomenon of SSCM.</p>

To increase the credibility of the findings of the study, I have endeavored to take these criterions into account throughout the research process. What it comes to the authenticity, I acknowledge that the findings are influenced by choices I made during the research process. Especially the

deconstruction and interpretation phases were guided by my personal perceptions based on the general experience of life in areas of sustainability management and supply chain management. Hence, I attempted to use active voice through the study to remind a reader about that. Even a slightly different research approach, analysis method, or another researcher could yield in totally different findings. To ensure a coherency criterion, I paid attention to the transparency of the research process including generation of the material, explaining analysis framework and conducting actual discourse analysis. The findings are also supported by textual evidences and detailed account of the interpretation to ensure transparency and allowing the reader to evaluate the credibility of analyses and form their own opinion. When it comes to a fruitfulness criterion, this study particularly extends the methodological framework applied in the SSCM research field. The theoretical and practical contributions of this study were discussed more detail earlier in this chapter. Based on what is discussed above, I suppose that my study meets the quality criteria for discourse studies proposed by Merkl-Davies et al. (2014).

5.5 Limitations and future research

This study has taken a leap forward in exploring the language and language use in SCM and SSCM research fields. Due to the explorative nature of study, some inherent limitations should be taken into consideration. Some of these limitations also provide great opportunities for the further research. First, the framework of this study consists of conceptual and methodological discussions rather than hard theories that are usually applied in the management studies and especially in the field of supply chain management. This choice could be seen as a theoretical and analytical limitation, even if my decision to focus the analysis without strict theoretical boundaries was justified in the first chapter. In this regard, the future research needs to build on stronger theoretical basis (Carter & Easton, 2011). Especially the use of organizational theories is still infancy in the SSCM research field (Sarkis et al., 2011) and they could provide stronger explanations also when studying the SSCM discourse. For example, it would be interesting to explore the SSCM discourse more deeply from legitimization perspective to find out what kind of legitimization strategies are used in these discourses. Also, FDA provides many interesting theoretical broadenings that were consciously ignored in this study.

Second, empirical materials play a significant role in discourse research. By deriving material only from companies' sustainability reports, I focused only on one specific site of discourse production. As this study solely relies on the companies' reports, it shares the limitations of

similar studies, namely that words might speak louder than actions. In addition, the discourse on SSCM has likely reflected not only the perspectives of companies, but also those who defined the GRI framework and especially agencies who wrote the actual reports. However, these limitations were acknowledged in introduction chapter, and it was not seen to be a great problem. From this perspective, I believe that future research could be rooted more closely for practice, and examining how SSCM is discussed in companies, far beyond the sustainability reporting practice. For example, to gain a better understanding of corporate behavior, involvement in different workshops, contract negotiations and another kind of naturally occurring interaction related to SSCM would definitely bring richer and deeper insight into research phenomenon. Only then it would be able see how “*social reality is discursively constructed and maintained through language*” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000).

Third, this study focused on companies originated from the Nordic region that are advanced in supply chain sustainability to ensure quality and richness of the material. This choice limits the applicability of the findings, and they cannot be generalized to other contexts. However, chosen methodological approach does not aim for generalization of the findings. The aim here was rather to build an explorative understanding on the construction and consequences of SSCM discourse. Even if the findings of this study are not generalizable, similar research designs could be adapted to other settings. For example, the findings constitute comparable data set of SSCM discourses in the Nordic region that allows, for instance, in seeking similarities and differences between within larger regions such as Central Europe and the US. In addition, as the sustainability discourse is tightly rooted in time, it would be interesting to study the evolution of SSCM discourse during the certain period using the longitudinal approach in research. Finally, a comparative study between different industry sectors could be conducted, as there seem to be differences between them, but definitely with much smaller material source.

5.6 Closing comments

At the end, I would like to say that organizational discourse analysis is an exciting area of research that provides an alternative approach (Grant et al., 2004) to scrutinize a wide range of a management and organization related issues. Therefore, I believe that there is room for new discourse research studies as well as all kinds of out-of-the-box thinking that goes beyond the boundaries of the traditional SCM research, especially when studies of organization and sustainability have been increasingly focused on the constructive nature of language use. Since

the SCM has been sometimes mentioned rather compartmentalized field of research (Srivastava, 2012), a lot of open-mindedness, completely new competencies and interdisciplinary initiatives are needed to better be suited the field to the research on beyond the word. In person, I strongly agree with Potter and Wetherell (1987) who stated that conducting discourse analysis is like "*learning to drive a bicycle*" - It requires a lot of motivation, training and time, but when you familiarize with it, you are able to reach new milestones.

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