

# Modern slavery in supply chains: toward a theoretically based research agenda

Nicolle A. Montgomery

*School of Economics and Finance, Massey Business School, Massey University,  
Albany, New Zealand*

International  
Journal of Ethics  
and Systems

Received 12 December 2023  
Revised 25 August 2024  
Accepted 17 January 2025

## Abstract

**Purpose** – Although the literature on modern slavery (MS) is continually increasing, there remains a paucity of theory-driven research. Hence, this study aims to develop a multitheoretical framework and research agenda for MS.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study comprised two steps. First, it reviews the literature on supply chain (SC) social sustainability to identify the typically used theories. Six of them were selected for this study: institutional, stakeholder, resource-based, resource dependence, principal agent and transaction cost economics theories. Second, it conducts a systematic literature review using the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses guidelines to analyze relevant literature on social issues in SCs, and thematically synthesizes the findings. The six theoretical perspectives and key themes that emerged from the literature were used to develop future research directions (RDs) for MS.

**Findings** – This study develops a multitheoretical framework and research agenda comprising 20 theory-driven RDs for MS, focusing on the environmental, firm and transaction levels.

**Research limitations/implications** – This study provides a reference for future MS research. Although the study used only six theories, future studies can develop further research agendas for MS based on diverse theories.

**Practical implications** – Practitioners can use this framework to understand MS from varied perspectives and identify and mitigate MS risks in SCs.

**Originality/value** – To the best of the author's knowledge, this study presents the first comprehensive and theoretically grounded research agenda that positions MS research onto a stronger theoretical foundation.

**Keywords** Modern slavery, Organizational theory, Research agenda, Theoretical framework, Supply chains, Social sustainability, Institutional theory, Stakeholder theory, Resource-based view, Resource dependence theory, Principal agent theory, Transaction cost economics

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Research on modern slavery (MS) in supply chains (SCs) is recently proliferating (e.g. Crane *et al.*, 2022; Emberson *et al.*, 2022; Flynn and Walker, 2021; Pinnington *et al.*, 2023; Schaper and Pollach, 2021; Sokat and Altay, 2022; Stevenson, 2022; Stringer and Michailova, 2018). Despite the recent increased attention, research on MS in SCs (hereafter referred to as MS) remains relatively limited (Caruana *et al.*, 2021; Han *et al.*, 2022; Mehmood *et al.*, 2023).

© Nicolle A. Montgomery. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

The author would like to express gratitude to Z. Shailer for reading an earlier draft of this manuscript.

*Declaration of interest statement:* The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.



International Journal of Ethics and  
Systems  
Emerald Publishing Limited  
2514-9369  
DOI 10.1108/IJOES-12-2023-0278

This is untenable because MS is an important social and business concern, posing risks of litigation, reputation damage, consumer boycotts and financial losses (Monciardini *et al.*, 2021; Sokat and Altay, 2022). Hence, this study used six organizational theories at the environmental, firm and transaction levels to develop a multitheoretical framework and research agenda for MS.

This study was conducted to bridge the following four gaps. First, literature reviews on MS conducted by Han *et al.* (2022), Mehmood *et al.* (2023) and Strand *et al.* (2023) reported that despite the rapid increase in MS publications, there remains a dearth of theory-driven research, and in-depth theoretical understanding of MS is lacking. Second, as the literature in a field expands, research must shift focus from exploratory to theory-driven analyses (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). Most extant MS studies explicitly state that they are exploratory (Liu *et al.*, 2022; Monciardini *et al.*, 2021; Robb and Michailova, 2022; Stevenson and Cole, 2018). Other studies are also predominantly descriptive and exploratory in nature, examining MS using news reports (Sokat and Altay, 2022; Stevenson, 2022), interview data (Lafargue *et al.*, 2022; Simpson *et al.*, 2021), case studies (Crane *et al.*, 2022) and secondary data such as firms' MS statements (Meehan and Pinnington, 2021; Schaper and Pollach, 2021). While these studies significantly help understand MS, they lack theoretical analyses. Deficiency of theory use as literature grows can lead to intellectual stagnation and hinder knowledge development in a field (Moller and Halinen, 2022). Third, the "theoretical toolbox" approach has been used to develop research agendas for strategic sourcing (Shook *et al.*, 2009) and pandemics and SCs (Craighead *et al.*, 2020), among others. However, a systematically applied organizational theory to develop a theoretical toolbox for MS research is lacking. Fourth, research on social concerns in SCs has evaded MS (Nakamba *et al.*, 2017; Stevenson and Cole, 2018), which is complex, criminal and illicit (Crane *et al.*, 2022), unlike other social concerns. MS requires specific and targeted research (Stevenson and Cole, 2018).

Therefore, this study developed a multitheoretical framework and research agenda for guiding future MS research. The study proposes research directions (RDs) for MS based on institutional, stakeholder, resource-based, resource dependence, principal agent and transaction cost economics (TCE) theories. This study poses three research questions:

- RQ1. What are the predominant theories used to examine social issues in SCs?
- RQ2. What are the crucial themes emerging from the included studies that examined social issues in SCs using the theories selected for this study?
- RQ3. Based on the application of the selected theories and thematic analysis of the relevant literature, what are the possible research opportunities for MS?

The unit of analysis is the focal buying firm, i.e. large multinational corporation (MNC), and the context is its global SC (GSC).

This study contributes to the existing literature in the following ways. First, it bridges the literature gap regarding MS (Caruana *et al.*, 2021; Han *et al.*, 2022). Second, it responds to calls for theory-based MS research (Caruana *et al.*, 2021; Crane *et al.*, 2022; Strand *et al.*, 2023). Third, using a multitheoretical framework for MS, this study facilitates a multifaceted analysis consistent with MS, a complex and multilevel governance problem in GSCs (Burmester *et al.*, 2019; Meehan and Pinnington, 2021).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the background, definitions, overview and examples of MS. Section 3 presents the study's methodological approach. Section 4 presents the literature review findings. Section 5 is the major portion of the paper, it applies the selected theories to MS and draws on the themes that emerged from the relevant literature reviewed to develop a theoretical framework and research agenda for

MS, comprising 20 RDs. The discussion follows in Section 6. The research, practical and policy implications of the study are presented in Section 7. The limitations of the study are outlined in Section 8. Finally, the paper concludes by inviting research on MS using the proposed RDs and theories.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Modern slavery definitions

The International Labor Organization (ILO) identifies two primary MS categories: forced labor and forced marriage [International Labour Organization (ILO) *et al.*, 2022]. This study solely considers forced labor. The terms “MS” and “forced labor” are frequently used interchangeably (Robb and Michailova, 2022). This study focuses on MS in the SCs of corporations and uses the definition “the exploitation of a person who is deprived of individual liberty anywhere along the supply chain, from raw material extraction to the final customer, for the purpose of service provision or production” (Gold *et al.*, 2015, p. 487). This definition is suitable for this study because it solely focuses on MS in SCs and excludes other forms of slavery. Table 1 presents some of the numerous definitions of MS in the literature. Based on these definitions, MS is characterized by forced, bonded, trafficked and child labor; labor exploitation, hazardous working conditions, human and labor rights violations, exploitative recruitment practices, dehumanization of workers and restricted or loss of freedom of movement [Caspersz *et al.*, 2022; Flynn and Walker, 2021; International Labour Organization (ILO) *et al.*, 2022; Strand *et al.*, 2023]. Nevertheless, no single specific

**Table 1.** Definitions of MS

Definition	Source
“Refer to situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or cannot leave because of threats, violence, deception, abuse of power or other forms of coercion”	ILO <i>et al.</i> (2022, p. 2)
“Constituting control over a person in such a way as to significantly deprive that person of his or her individual liberty, with the intent of exploitation through the use, management, profit, transfer or disposal of that person. Usually this exercise will be supported by and obtained through means such as violent force, deception and/or coercion”	Bellagio-Harvard Guidelines (2012, p. 16)
“The recruitment and subsequent exploitation of a person ... who is deprived of their individual liberty anywhere along the product, human or labour supply chain to the final customer for service provision or production”	Strand <i>et al.</i> (2023, p. 2)
“Modern slavery involves one party forcing another party to work, controlling them through threats, restricting their movement, treating them as a commodity and financially exploiting them”	Flynn and Walker (2021, p. 296)
“‘modern slavery’ describes various forms of severe relational labour exploitation. In the realm of global value chains and global factories that are led by multinational enterprises, modern slavery encompasses practices such as forced labour and debt bondage”	Caspersz <i>et al.</i> (2022, p. 178)
“‘modern slavery’ to encompass bonded labour, forced labour, human trafficking, slavery and other forms of exploitative labour relations”	Burmester <i>et al.</i> (2019, p. 140)
“Central to understandings of modern slavery are loss of free will, immobility, the use of violence (or the threat of violence) and economic exploitation, emerging primarily through debt-bondage and ‘contract slavery’ in hazardous manual labour”	Brown <i>et al.</i> (2021, p. 192)

**Source:** Author’s own work

definition clarifies its scope and different forms, causing possible impediments to tackling MS because “identifying instances of modern slavery remains difficult given the lack of a hard and unequivocal definition” (Caspersz *et al.*, 2022, p. 181).

### 2.2 *Brief overview of modern slavery*

Historical slavery was centered on the transatlantic slave trade, and slaveholders had legal ownership of slaves (Strand *et al.*, 2023). Conversely, enslaved people are not owned in contemporary forms of slavery (Strand *et al.*, 2023). The phrase “modern slavery” gained prominence recently (Stringer and Michailova, 2018) to clarify and elucidate contemporary forms of exploitation. Approximately 28 million people are in forced labor in the private sector worldwide, and services, manufacturing, construction and agriculture are the most affected sectors [International Labour Organization (ILO) *et al.*, 2022]. The ILO estimates that MS generates US\$150bn in illegal profits annually [International Labour Organization (ILO), 2024]. Across regions, Asia Pacific, Europe, Central Asia, Africa and the Americas have the highest MS prevalence [International Labour Organization (ILO) *et al.*, 2022].

Several international legislations and initiatives prohibit MS. The United Nations (UN) outlawed slavery through the 1926 Slavery Convention [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 1926]. The 1956 UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery extended the original definition of slavery to include all forms of slavery, the slave trade and “institutions and practices similar to slavery” [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 1956, p. 1]. Article Four of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 prohibits slavery in all forms [United Nations (UN), 1948]. In 2000, the UN adopted the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking, especially Women and Children, also referred to as the “UN Trafficking Protocol” [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2000]. The updated Protocol of 2014 of the Forced Labor Convention of 1930 prohibits forced labor (ILO, 2014). The UN sustainable development goals (SDGs), specifically UN Target SDG 8.7, aim to eradicate MS [United Nations (UN), 2015]. Regulators from various jurisdictions have enacted legislation to combat MS, including the UK Modern Slavery Act [United Kingdom (UK) Government, 2015], Australia Modern Slavery Act (Australia Government, 2018), French Duty of Vigilance Law [European Trade Institute (ETUI), 2017], Dutch Child Labor Due Diligence Act (Amfori, 2019) and California Transparency in Supply Chains Act (State of California, 2010), among others. As more MS laws are enacted, corporations that are found to have MS in their SCs will face litigation risks.

### 2.3 *Examples of modern slavery in supply chains*

The literature reports numerous cases of MS. In 2013, Rana Plaza, a Bangladeshi commercial building that housed five garment factories and supplied to major European and US MNCs, brands and retailers, collapsed, killing 1,134 and injuring 2,500 workers (Frenkel *et al.*, 2022). Unsafe working conditions, worker rights violations and worker exploitation concerns were observed in the factories (Frenkel *et al.*, 2022). This disaster highlighted the extremely exploitative labor practices in the global garment SC, of which Bangladesh is a significant supplier (Frenkel *et al.*, 2022). Recently, a case study of workers in Bangladeshi clothing factories linked to global clothing SCs found evidence of workers’ rights violations, which worsened during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (Uddin *et al.*, 2023). The Thailand fishing industry faced an MS crisis characterized by severe labor abuse of primarily migrant workers (Stringer *et al.*, 2022; Wilhelm *et al.*, 2020). This industry is a significant segment of the global seafood SCs, providing for some of the largest MNCs, retailers and seafood brands worldwide (Stringer *et al.*, 2022). Stringer *et al.* (2016) found

---

evidence of forced labor in foreign vessels fishing in New Zealand waters, including deceptive recruitment, debt bondage, labor exploitation, dangerous work, low or no wage payment and confiscation of documents such as passports.

The Ghanaian cocoa industry – a segment of global cocoa SCs – had labor exploitation and child labor and trafficking (LeBaron and Gore, 2020). The world's leading chocolate companies that source cocoa from Ghana have faced child slavery lawsuits in the USA [Business and Human Rights (BHR), 2023]. Marshall *et al.* (2022) investigated sandstone global value chains linked to India's Rajasthan sandstone quarries and found evidence of child and bonded labor, meager wages and significant worker health and safety concerns. GSCs of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)-mined cobalt are associated with child labor, dangerous working conditions and human rights abuse (Sovacool, 2021). MS was identified in the DRC–UK cobalt SC (McQuilken *et al.*, 2022) and the Brazil–UK beef and timber SCs (Emberson *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, prior studies and reports suggest MS risks in SCs of various products, including electronics, footwear, shrimp, tea and diamonds [e.g. International Labour Organization (ILO) *et al.*, 2022; LeBaron, 2021].

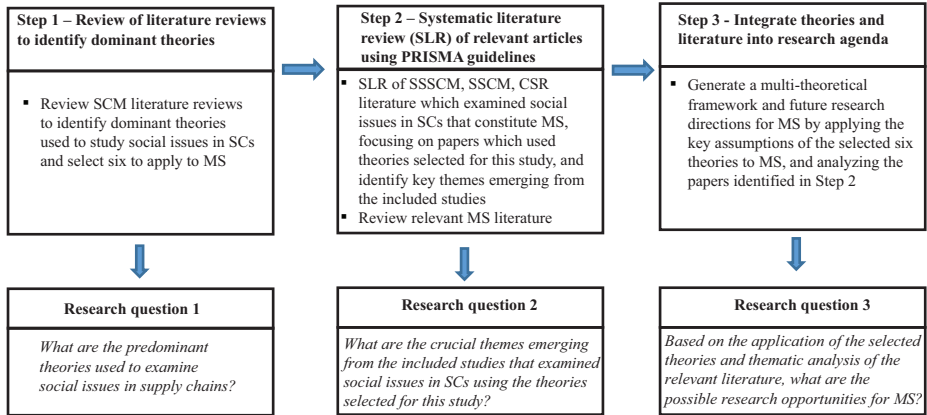
Considering the nascent MS literature and lack of theory use, this study aimed to review literature review studies on SC social sustainability to identify the typically used theories in examining social concerns representing or associated with MS and select six among them to use in this study. Furthermore, the study aimed to systematically review relevant literature on social concerns in SCs and synthesize the findings thematically. Then the study aimed to build on these theories and thematic findings to develop a research agenda and directions for future studies focused on MS.

### 3. Methodology

This study analyzed relevant literature review studies to identify and select six theories to use and conducted systematic literature review (SLR) of relevant studies using the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Liberati *et al.*, 2009; Page *et al.*, 2021). Drawing on the selected theories and identified themes from SLR, the study develops a multitheoretical framework and future RDs for MS. Figure 1 illustrates the primary steps followed and the research questions in this study. The primary steps are detailed in the following sections.

#### 3.1 Review of literature reviews

Literature reviews can be used as a research method to compile and summarize available information in a field and facilitate the evaluation of combined or cumulative evidence (Snyder, 2019). Extant literature reviews on (socially) sustainable supply chain management (SSSCM/SSCM) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) have identified the most frequently used theories for studying social concerns in SCs. To identify the theories to be used, this study reviews extant SSSCM/SSCM and CSR literature to gain a high-level summary of the primary theories used to study SCs' social concerns. Social concerns in SCs, such as forced or child labor, labor exploitation and human or labor rights violations, are constituent elements of MS (Stringer *et al.*, 2022). These have been studied in the SSSCM/SSCM and CSR contexts without necessarily being labeled “modern slavery.” Therefore, these previously used theories can be extended to explicitly study MS. Organizational theory is an interdisciplinary body of principles used to study and explain organizational behaviors, operations and phenomena (McKinley, 2010). Although organizational theory has been applied to green SC management (Sarkis *et al.*, 2011) and GSCs (Connelly *et al.*, 2013) to identify future RDs, its application to MS has been neglected. This study follows the



**Source:** Author's own work

**Figure 1.** Main steps followed in the study

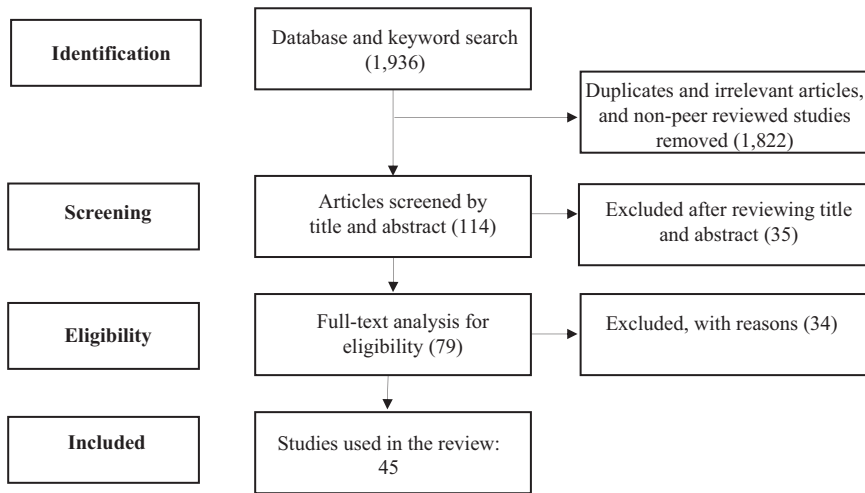
approach of Craighead *et al.* (2020) and Sarkis *et al.* (2011) in using organizational theory to develop a research agenda for MS.

A systematic review process was used to identify, select and analyze relevant review studies (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003). This process comprised three steps. The first step was to identify the search terms to be used as follows: “social sustainability” OR “socially sustainable” OR “corporate social responsibility” OR “socially responsible sourcing” AND “supply chain” OR “value chain” AND “literature review” OR “systematic literature review.” Subsequently, searches were conducted in several academic databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight and JSTOR. Publications obtained after this search were individually screened to identify those that summarized the predominantly used theories regarding social concerns in SCs. The inclusion criterion was solely peer-reviewed journal studies, which were literature reviews on social sustainability or social issues in SCs. Book chapters, conference studies and nonpeer-reviewed studies were excluded. Finally, five literature review studies were deemed suitable for this study’s aims because they reviewed the typically used theories to study social issues in SCs representative of MS, as presented in Table 3 in subsection 4.1.

### 3.2 Systematic literature review process

This study identified key themes emerging from the extant literature that examined social concerns in SCs using the selected theories. To review relevant literature, SLR was conducted following the PRISMA guidelines. A flow diagram of this study using PRISMA guidelines is illustrated in Figure 2. Computer-assisted searches were conducted in several academic databases – Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight and JSTOR.

The main search terms used were “social sustainability,” “supply chain” and “theory.” Table 2 presents the synonyms and related terms for these keywords. All search terms were combined with “AND” and “OR” in the search queries, and the terms were used in various combinations to obtain all possible studies. The search yielded 1,936 studies, of which 1,822 were identified as duplicate, irrelevant and nonpeer-reviewed studies such as book chapters



Source: Author's own work

Figure 2. Flow diagram of searching and selecting relevant studies

Table 2. Keywords, synonyms and related terms used in the search

Social sustainability	Supply chains	Theory
Socially sustainable	<i>Synonyms and related terms</i>	Institutional theory
Corporate social responsibility	Global supply chains	Stakeholder theory
Social issues/concerns	Global value chains	Resource-based view
Ethics/Ethical	Global production networks	Resource dependence theory
Human rights	Global commodity chains	Principal agent theory
Labor rights	Global sourcing	Transaction cost economics
Child labor		
Forced labor		
Forced overtime		
Labor exploitation		
Health and safety		
Low wages		
Bonded labor		
Debt bondage		
Sweatshop		

Source: Author's own work

and conference papers. Subsequently, the remaining 114 studies were screened by title and abstract to identify only those relevant to this study.

Studies were included if they focused on social sustainability or responsibility in SCs; mentioned social issues such as forced, child or bonded labor, labor exploitation, human or labor rights violations and worker health and safety; and used (at least) one of the theories used in this study. An article had to state explicitly that a specific theory was used, mention

**Table 3.** SSSCM, CSR and SSCM literature review studies and predominant theories used

Authors of literature reviews	Focus	Social issues examined	Most commonly used theories
<i>SSSCM literature</i>			
Govindan <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Social sustainability in multistier supply chains	“Violations of human rights and labour rights, child labour, forced labour, discrimination, forced overtime, low wages” (p. 7)	Stakeholder, institutional, resource-based view, transaction cost economics and resource dependence theories
Nakamba <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Social sustainability in supply chains	“Child/forced labour,” “excessive working time,” “human rights,” “occupational health and safety” and “compensation” (p. 540)	Resource-based view, stakeholder, rough set, institutional, transaction cost economics and resource dependence theories
Zorzini <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Socially responsible sourcing	“Human rights: labour conditions such as child and forced labour, discipline, working hours and freedom of association” (p. 68)	Resource-based view, stakeholder, institutional, transaction cost economics and resource dependence theories
Chiesa and Przychodzen (2020)	Social sustainability in supply chains	“Child labour, health and safety, modern slavery” (p. 1131), “working and human right issues, including health and safety, child or forced labour, freedom of association” (p. 1132)	Stakeholder, resource-based view, global value chain, transaction cost economics, principal agent, institutional, global production network theories
<i>CSR literature</i>			
Quarshie <i>et al.</i> (2016)	CSR	“Labor and human rights issues, such as wages, working hours, and child or forced labor” (p. 85)	Stakeholder, social network, resource-based view, dynamic capabilities view
<i>SSCM literature</i>			
Carter <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Sustainable SCM	CSR	Transaction cost economics, resource-based view, knowledge-based view, stakeholder theories
Koberg and Longoni (2019)	Sustainable SCM	Not specified	Transaction cost economics, resource-based view and institutional theories
Touboulic and Walker (2015)	Sustainable SCM	Not specified	Resource-based view, stakeholder, institutional and transaction cost theories

**Source:** Author’s own work

---

the theory several times or state that it drew insights from the theory for it to be included. Studies were excluded if they did not directly mention social sustainability in SCs or any of the social issues, did not explicitly use theory or focused on other types of sustainability, such as environmental sustainability. Although the criteria excluded environmental or green sustainability studies, [Sarkis et al. \(2011\)](#) were included because of their high relevance to this study. After the screening phase in which the inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, 35 studies were excluded. Next, a comprehensive analysis was conducted on each of the remaining 79 studies to confirm their eligibility, leading to the exclusion of 34 studies because they merely mentioned social concerns without explicitly analyzing them using the theory, or their findings did not provide valuable and pertinent insights to guide future research for MS. The remaining 45 studies were selected for review and thematic analysis. The main themes that emerged from the selected studies are presented in subsection 4.2. A separate search was conducted using the keyword “modern slavery” to identify MS studies that used the theories selected for this study.

## 4. Results of literature review

### 4.1 Reviewing literature review results

[Table 3](#) presents the selected literature review studies that identified the typically used theories (column four) to study social concerns in SCs representative of MS (column three). This study chose to use institutional, stakeholder, resource-based, resource dependence, principal-agent and TCEs theories. These theories are suitable for this study because they have been used to examine social concerns in SCs that are constituent elements of MS ([Stringer et al., 2022](#)). Furthermore, in studying SC-related problems, it is logical to use theories previously validated and proven in prior comparable studies ([Halldórsson et al., 2015](#)). In addition, the selected theories are recommended as suitable for future MS research ([Han et al., 2022](#); [Mehmood et al., 2023](#); [Stevenson and Cole, 2018](#)). This analysis addressed the first research question. These six theories were used to develop a research agenda and direction for MS, as presented in Section 5. For completeness, literature review studies that identified dominant theories within the broader SSCM field were also reviewed and presented in [Table 3](#) ([Carter et al., 2020](#); [Koberg and Longoni, 2019](#); [Touboullic and Walker, 2015](#)).

### 4.2 Systematic literature review results

Relevant studies were systematically reviewed and thematically analyzed, and the main themes that emerged from the literature review were categorized according to the theories used, as presented in [Table 4](#), to gain insights into potential thematic directions for future research focused on MS.

This analysis addressed the second research question. The themes identified in relevant studies were used to develop future RDs focused on MS, as presented in Section 5.

## 5. Application of organizational theories to modern slavery: multitheoretical framework and research agenda

[Figure 3](#) presents a multitheoretical framework, and [Table 5](#) presents 20 theory-driven RDs for MS based on six theories, focusing on the environmental, firm and transaction levels of analysis. [Table 5](#) lists theories, disciplines, fundamental premises and potential RDs. The following subsections focus on each of the theories. Each subsection presents a brief overview of the theory, its suitability for MS research, analysis of relevant literature and RDs for MS using the theory.

**Table 4.** Key identified themes and insights for MS

Theory	Key themes	Sources	Key insights for MS
Institutional theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional pressures and sustainability practices of firms</li> <li>• Firms' heterogeneous response to institutional pressures</li> <li>• Symbolic response to institutional pressures</li> <li>• Institutional voids and uncertainty can impede socially sustainable practices in SCs</li> <li>• Conflicting institutional logics may cause supplier decoupling from sustainability compliance</li> <li>• Institutionalization of sustainable practices in firms at macro, meso and micro-levels</li> <li>• Resistance to institutional pressures for sustainability</li> </ul>	<p><a href="#">Kauppi and Hannibal (2017)</a>, <a href="#">Mani and Gunasekaran (2018)</a>, <a href="#">Moxham and Kauppi (2014)</a>, <a href="#">Paulraj et al. (2017)</a>, <a href="#">Silvestre et al. (2020)</a>, <a href="#">Lafargue et al. (2022)</a></p> <p><a href="#">Kelling et al. (2021)</a>, <a href="#">Silvestre (2015)</a>, <a href="#">Silvestre et al. (2018, 2020)</a></p> <p><a href="#">Nath et al. (2020)</a></p> <p><a href="#">Schultz and Wehmeler (2010)</a></p> <p><a href="#">Nath et al. (2020)</a>, <a href="#">Lafargue et al. (2022)</a></p> <p><a href="#">Gualandris et al. (2015)</a>, <a href="#">Hofmann et al. (2014)</a>, <a href="#">Huq et al. (2016)</a>, <a href="#">Mani et al. (2018b)</a>, <a href="#">Meixell and Luoma (2015)</a>, <a href="#">Rudyanto and Siregar (2018)</a>, <a href="#">Uttam et al. (2024)</a>, <a href="#">Weber and Marley (2012)</a></p>	<p>Institutional pressures can drive MNCs to adopt MS-free practices in their SCs; MNCs' heterogeneous responses and symbolic responses to institutional pressures</p> <p>How institutional voids may hinder the adoption of MS-free practices in SCs in emerging and developing economies, or impact the effectiveness of institutional pressures on MNCs to address MS in SCs</p> <p>Institutionalization of MS-free practices at different levels of MNCs, and their SCs</p> <p>Institutional resistance in the adoption and implementation of MS-free practices in SCs</p> <p>How stakeholder pressure can prompt MNCs to adopt MS-free practices in SCs and increase compliance with MS laws</p>
Stakeholder theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stakeholder pressures and SC sustainability</li> </ul>		

(continued)

**Table 4.** Continued

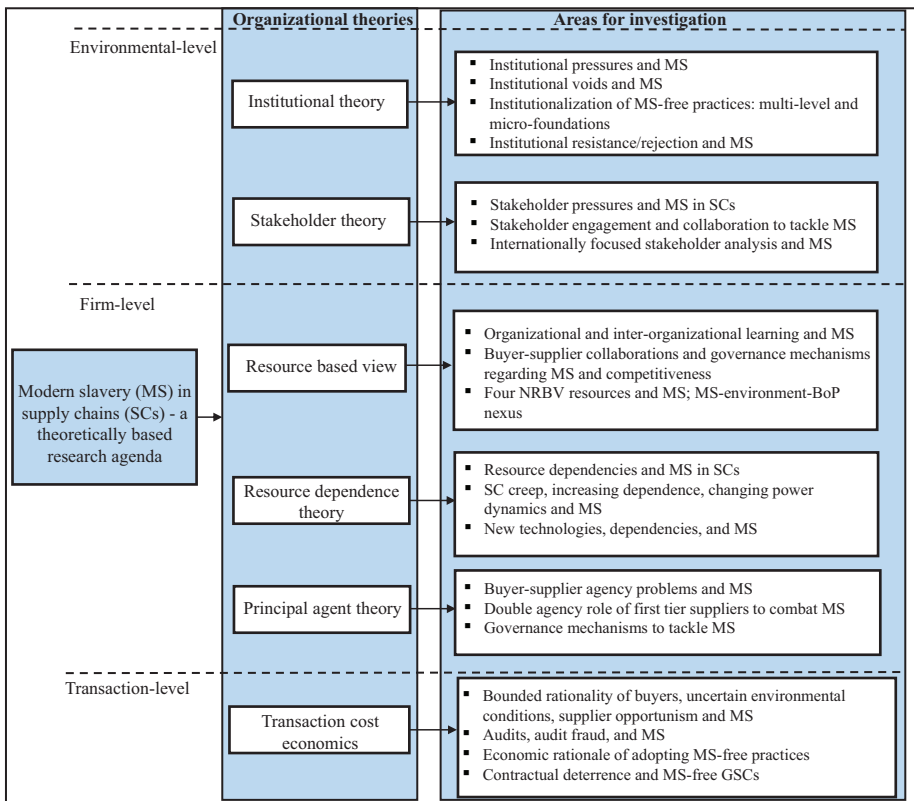
Theory	Key themes	Sources	Key insights for MS
Resource-based view	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stakeholder engagement and collaboration to address sustainability issues</li> </ul>	Gualandris <i>et al.</i> (2015), Roscoe <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Stakeholder engagement and collaboration to achieve MS-free SCs
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Internationally focused stakeholder analysis in SCs</li> </ul>	Sarkis <i>et al.</i> (2011)	Global stakeholder analysis in international SCs to address MS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interorganizational learning and competitive advantages</li> </ul>	Sarkis <i>et al.</i> (2011), Yadlapalli <i>et al.</i> (2018)	How organizational learning related to MS can be a strategic resource for attaining competitive advantages
Resource dependence theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Buyer–supplier collaborations and governance mechanisms, sustainability and competitive advantages</li> </ul>	Luzzini <i>et al.</i> (2015), Mani <i>et al.</i> (2018a), Pagell <i>et al.</i> (2010), Yadlapalli <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Buyer–supplier collaborations and governance mechanisms to achieve MS-free SCs and gain competitive advantages
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Natural resource-based view (NRBV) and competitiveness</li> </ul>	Benstead <i>et al.</i> (2022)	How MNCs can achieve competitive advantages through MS-free SCs, environmentally and societally sustainable operations
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resource dependence in SCs and sustainability</li> </ul>	Gorton <i>et al.</i> (2023), Hollos <i>et al.</i> (2012), Mani <i>et al.</i> (2018a), Sarkis <i>et al.</i> (2011), Schmitfeld and Busch (2016), Touboullic <i>et al.</i> (2014)	MNCs have environmental dependency: their reputation is partly influenced by perceptions of stakeholders, and their suppliers' actions can affect their reputation. Resource dependence may affect MNCs' ability to attain MS-free practices in SCs
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supply chain creep and increasing dependencies in SCs</li> </ul>	Connelly <i>et al.</i> (2013)	Rising dependencies on suppliers may increase MS risks, and reduce focal firms' ability to address MS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New technologies, resource dependence dynamics and sustainability in SCs</li> </ul>	Long <i>et al.</i> (2023), Nandi <i>et al.</i> (2021)	New technologies such as blockchain can impact resource dependence dynamics and sustainability in SCs. How the technologies can help tackle MS in SCs

(continued)

Table 4. Continued

Theory	Key themes	Sources	Key insights for MS
Principal agent theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agency problems can hinder socially sustainable practices in complex global SCs</li> <li>Double agency role of first tier suppliers in addressing sustainability issues in multitier SCs</li> <li>Governance mechanisms can address agency problems and enhance social sustainability in SCs</li> </ul>	<p><a href="#">Yadlapalli et al. (2018)</a>, <a href="#">Yu (2008)</a></p> <p><a href="#">Wilhelm et al. (2016)</a>, <a href="#">Emberson et al. (2022)</a></p> <p><a href="#">Yadlapalli et al. (2018)</a></p>	<p>Agency problems in complex global SCs may increase MS risks</p> <p>How buying firms' first-tier suppliers can assume a dual agency role to address agency problems and help eliminate MS from multitier SCs</p> <p>Governance mechanisms that can be used to address agency problems which cause MS in SCs</p>
Transaction cost economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bounded rationality, uncertain environmental conditions, supplier opportunism and sustainability in SCs</li> <li>SC contracts, audits, audit fraud and sustainability in SCs</li> <li>Economic rationale for sustainability in SCs</li> <li>SC contracts as governance mechanism</li> </ul>	<p><a href="#">Huq et al. (2014)</a>, <a href="#">Meinlschmidt et al. (2018)</a>, <a href="#">Sancha et al. (2016)</a>, <a href="#">Wang et al. (2015)</a></p> <p><a href="#">Jiang (2009a, 2009b)</a>, <a href="#">LeBaron et al. (2017)</a>, <a href="#">Meinlschmidt et al. (2018)</a></p> <p><a href="#">Sancha et al. (2016)</a></p> <p><a href="#">Jiang (2009a, 2009b)</a>, <a href="#">Cao et al. (2024)</a>, <a href="#">Huq et al. (2014)</a></p>	<p>The relationship between firms' bounded rationality, environmental uncertainty, supplier opportunism, transaction costs and MS requires understanding</p> <p>The role and effectiveness of audits in addressing MS in SCs, and MS audit fraud risks</p> <p>Economic rationale for implementing MS-free practices in SCs</p> <p>How to structure buyer-supplier contracts to reduce MS risks</p>

**Source:** Author's own work



Source: Author's own work

Figure 3. A Multitheoretical framework and research agenda for MS

### 5.1 Environmental level

5.1.1 *Institutional theory.* Institutional theory (IT) posits that firms are embedded in and influenced by the institutional contexts within which they operate (Scott, 1995). Organizations face coercive, normative and mimetic institutional pressure from their environments (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Oliver (1991) suggested five organizational responses to institutional pressures: defiance, avoidance, compromise, acquiescence and manipulation. To attain and maintain legitimacy, organizations must comply with the norms, values and standards of their institutional environments (March and Olsen, 1983). IT is a typically used theory in MS research (Diab, 2022; Flynn, 2020; Flynn and Walker, 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Stevenson and Cole, 2018). This is because it facilitates examining MS legislation, corporate obligations and responses and the effect of institutional settings on MS (Strand et al., 2023). Nevertheless, IT can be further applied to advance knowledge on MS by examining how institutional quality may influence the effectiveness and enforcement of MS laws (Mehmood et al., 2023). As MS concerns are becoming increasingly prominent in business and society, corporations face rising institutional pressures to address these concerns to maintain their social legitimacy (Flynn and Walker, 2021).

**Table 5.** Summary of theories applied to MS and research directions

Theory, discipline, key premise	Potential research directions (RDs) for MS
<p><i>Environmental level</i></p> <p>Institutional theory <i>Sociology</i> Firms are embedded in and influenced by institutional contexts within which they operate</p>	<p>RD1: Investigate and measure direct and indirect institutional pressures for MS-free SCs across different products, services and industries, and analyze the response of firms to these pressures</p> <p>RD2: Analyze how institutional voids affect the adoption, implementation and monitoring of MS-free practices in GSCs</p> <p>RD3: Examine institutionalization of MS-free practices at different firm levels; investigate multilevel (micro–meso–macro) and micro-foundations (individual-level) of institutionalization of MS-free practices in MNCs and their SCs</p> <p>RD4: Explore institutional resistance or rejection of adopting MS-free practices in SCs; analyze antecedents and consequences of institutional resistance using case studies of SCs in different industries; and investigate the strategies MNCs may use in response to institutional pressures to tackle MS</p> <p>RD5: Examine how pressures from different types of stakeholders with different salience attributes can catalyze the adoption of MS-free practices in SCs</p> <p>RD6: Investigate how firms can use stakeholder engagement and collaboration to address MS in GSCs in various industries</p> <p>RD7: Apply international stakeholder theory to empirically analyze MNCs and their local and global stakeholders in GSCs; the relationships between the stakeholders, how they influence each other dependent on their salience, how they can exert pressure and prompt MNCs to adopt MS-free practices in GSCs and how they can help MNCs to tackle MS</p>
<p>Stakeholder theory <i>Strategic management/business ethics</i> Firms generate externalities that affect stakeholders who apply pressure on firms to minimize negative and maximize positive effects</p>	<p>RD8: Examine how firms can use MS reporting as an opportunity for organizational learning and make substantive changes to address MS and achieve competitive advantages</p> <p>RD9: Empirically investigate how MNCs can gain competitive advantages from MS-free SCs through buyer–supplier collaborations and governance mechanisms such as supplier selection, monitoring and development</p> <p>RD10: Using the four NRBV resources, investigate how firms can achieve competitiveness from MS-free, and ecologically and societally sustainable operations. Explore firm competitiveness at the MS-environment–BoP nexus</p> <p>RD11: Investigate the relationship between resource dependence and social sustainability performance of</p>
<p><i>Firm level</i></p> <p>Resource-based view <i>Economics/strategy</i> Firms create competitive advantages by owning valuable and rare resources</p>	<p>RD11: Investigate the relationship between resource dependence and social sustainability performance of</p>
<p>Resource dependence theory <i>Organizational studies</i></p>	<p>(continued)</p>

**Table 5.** Continued

Theory, discipline, key premise	Potential research directions (RDs) for MS
<p>Firms are dependent on external parties for resources they need, and aim to reduce this dependence</p>	<p>supply chains (i.e. supply chains free from MS); how MNCs' resource dependence in SCs influences their ability to have MS-free SCs, and how MNCs could reduce their dependence on suppliers with high risks of MS</p>
<p>Principal agent theory <i>Economics</i> Agency problems exist between principals and agents, necessitating contracts to align interests and prevent opportunistic behavior</p>	<p>RD12: Investigate SC creep, increasing dependencies, and changing power dynamics in SCs, and their impact on MS risks for focal firms RD13: Analyze how new technologies such as blockchain may impact resource dependence dynamics in the SC, facilitate MS-free resource acquisition by MNCs and improve implementation and monitoring of MS-free practices in the SC RD14: Examine buyer–supplier agency problems in complex and multitiered GSCs, how they cause or enable MS to exist, and how these agency problems can be solved to address and eliminate MS RD15: Explore the double agency role of first-tier suppliers in combating MS and helping MNCs overcome the agency and institutional challenges associated with disseminating MS-free practices in GSCs, and how focal firms can incentivize their first-tier suppliers RD16: Scrutinize governance mechanisms to address agency problems that contribute to or facilitate the use of slave labor in SCs, and suggest the most effective governance mechanisms that MNCs can use to tackle MS</p>
<p><i>Transaction level</i> Transaction cost economics <i>Economics</i> Firms consider all costs involved in economic transactions, and aim to minimize costs and maximize benefits</p>	<p>RD17: Investigate how buying firms' bounded rationality, environmental uncertainty and supplier opportunism may lead to high transaction costs associated with MS, and explore governance mechanisms firms may use to combat MS RD18: Investigate the effectiveness of audits in tackling MS in SCs across various industries and jurisdictions, and the risk of audit fraud and its antecedents and consequences in GSCs RD19: Analyze the economic rationale for adopting MS-free practices in SCs, and the commercial justification of MS-free initiatives in different industries RD20: Examine contractual deterrence and MS-free GSCs; how MNCs can structure contracts to deter the use of slave labor, and the moderating effect of institutions</p>

**Source:** Author's own work

IT has been used in SSCM (Nath *et al.*, 2020; Paulraj *et al.*, 2017; Silvestre *et al.*, 2020; Wu and Jia, 2018), SSSCM (Kauppi and Hannibal, 2017; Kelling *et al.*, 2021; Mani and Gunasekaran, 2018; Moxham and Kauppi, 2014) and CSR (Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010). Insights from these studies help to develop RDs focused on MS. IT can be used in four RDs for MS, as presented in Table 5 (RD1-4) and Figure 3. An analysis of the selected literature and directions for future MS research follow.

The SSSCM literature shows that regulatory compliance pressure from legal authorities can force corporations to behave in a socially responsible manner in their SCs (Mani and Gunasekaran, 2018). This implies that, in the context of MS, laws can pressure MNCs to eliminate MS from their SCs. As outlined earlier, numerous legislations have been enacted to combat MS. Focal firms face increasing legislative pressure to address MS (Monciardini *et al.*, 2021). Despite existing legislations, MS persists in MNCs' GSCs (Ishaya *et al.*, 2024; Stringer and Michailova, 2018), suggesting that legal and regulatory institutions are not sufficient in preventing MS. Empirical research is required on how institutional pressures from governments and regulatory bodies in home and host countries and international regulatory institutions such as the UN and the ILO can pressurize MNCs to adopt MS-free practices in their SCs. Kauppi and Luzzini (2021) developed a scale to measure institutional pressures for sustainability in the SC context. Thus, future MS studies can investigate and measure the impact of institutional pressures on MNCs' adoption of MS-free practices in their SCs.

Prior SSCM research has identified numerous sources of institutional pressure for sustainability in SCs, including external stakeholders, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), social activists, local governments and the media (Mani and Gunasekaran, 2018). Due to complex GSCs and the hidden nature of MS (Pinnington *et al.*, 2023), solely coercive pressure from governments or regulatory institutions may not sufficiently influence the adoption of MS-free practices in MNCs' SCs. The effectiveness of MS regulations may be limited by the complexity and opacity of GSCs, the power MNCs exert in their SCs, the challenges MNCs present to transnational labor governance and the limitations of nation-states in monitoring labor standards in their countries (Burmester *et al.*, 2019; Stringer and Michailova, 2018). There is limited knowledge regarding the various sources of institutional pressure that influence MS-free practices in SCs. The SSSCM literature also suggests that third-party voluntary certifications can directly and indirectly exert institutional pressure on MNCs to improve social sustainability of their SCs (Kauppi and Hannibal, 2017). Extant MS research suggests that because of the complexity of MS in SCs, public legislation and private initiatives are both required to tackle this issue more effectively (LeBaron and Rühmkorf, 2019). Future studies can empirically investigate how combined direct and indirect institutional pressures from different actors can generate substantial institutional pressures for the adoption of MS-free practices in MNCs' SCs.

Prior SSCM studies indicate that response to institutional pressure depends on corporate motives and performance outcomes of sustainable practices; corporations respond differently to institutional pressures for SSCs depending on their instrumental, relational and moral motivations; and whether such practices can improve their financial performance (Paulraj *et al.*, 2017). This implies the importance of understanding the relationship between institutional pressures for adopting MS-free practices, corporate motives and the subsequent performance outcomes. There is a need to understand how firms' motives and potential performance outcomes of MS-free practices shape their response to institutional pressures to address MS.

Moreover, institutional pressures for sustainability can cause symbolic rather than substantive adoption of sustainability standards, leading to corrupt SC practices (Silvestre *et al.*, 2020). Applying this to the context of MS implies that institutional pressures may not

---

result in tangible changes or improvements for addressing MS. Several MS studies show that some firms' responses to the UK MS Act (2015) are symbolic and ineffective in addressing MS (Flynn and Walker, 2021; Monciardini *et al.*, 2021). Prior studies examined firms' responses to MS legislation in construction (Liu *et al.*, 2022), food and tobacco industries (Monciardini *et al.*, 2021) and those listed on the UK stock exchange (Flynn and Walker, 2021). Nonetheless, future studies must evaluate institutional pressures and corporate responses, specifically how such pressures may lead to symbolic responses in various industries.

Collectively, these SSSCM/SSCM studies can inform and guide future research on MS, a complex, significant and urgent SC concern. There is a need to analyze and understand the sources of coercive, normative and mimetic pressures faced by MNCs to address MS and the effectiveness of these institutional pressures. The cause-and-effect relationship between institutional pressures and the adoption of MS-free practices is critical in highlighting how institutions can be used to influence MNCs to implement anti-MS policies and practices in their businesses and SCs. Studies can investigate and measure direct and indirect institutional pressures for MS-free SCs across different products, services and industries and analyze the firms' responses to these pressures (RD1). This RD can catalyze policy interventions to address MS through more effective and enforceable MS laws. The RD can also generate knowledge that can help NGOs, activists, customers and the media to gain a deeper and nuanced understanding of how they can more effectively exert pressures on MNCs to address MS. This RD can help understanding how MNCs could be more influenced by their surrounding institutions and anti-MS laws, to eradicate MS in their SCs.

The SSSCM literature shows that institutional voids, characterized by absent, weak or poorly functioning institutions, are a common concern in emerging or developing economies where most low-tier SCs are located, hindering social sustainability in the SCs of MNCs (Kelling *et al.*, 2021; Silvestre, 2015). The lack of or ineffective law enforcement, corruption and opportunistic behavior can reduce SC sustainability (Silvestre *et al.*, 2018, 2020). Regarding MS, empirical research is required on how institutional voids can affect MNCs' abilities to implement anti-MS policies and practices in their SCs. A few MS studies have already explored this path and have shown that complex multitiered GSCs that span diverse institutional contexts, including those characterized by institutional voids, present challenges for tackling MS (e.g. Diab, 2022). There is a need to comprehensively examine the nature of institutional voids in emerging economies and their effect on MS in GSCs. Studies show that institutional voids can cause conflicting institutional logic and supplier decoupling from sustainability compliance (Kelling *et al.*, 2021; Nath *et al.*, 2020). The lack of, weak, or uneven law enforcement by local governments can cause conflicting institutional logics that allow low-tier suppliers to engage in corruption and decouple the implementation of sustainable practices in SCs using various decoupling strategies, such as concealment, misleading presentation and symbolic adoption (Nath *et al.*, 2020). Suppliers in inefficient institutional environments intentionally hide nonconforming activities such as the use of forced and child labor (Huq *et al.*, 2014). These SSSCM studies provide valuable insights for future research explicitly focused on MS. As MS persists in low-tier SCs, it is necessary to conduct in-depth investigation of how suppliers may decouple the implementation of MS-free practices in challenging institutional contexts characterized by weak or undeveloped formal institutions.

Considered together, these SSSCM studies provide directions for future MS-focused research on how institutional voids can affect the adoption and implementation of MS-free practices in SCs. An in-depth understanding of the institutional voids confronting MNCs is urgently required, to enable them to successfully tackle MS in their GSCs. In-depth empirical

research must analyze how high institutional voids affect the adoption, implementation and monitoring of MS-free practices in GSCs (RD2) to provide actionable knowledge for MNCs.

[Schultz and Wehmeier \(2010\)](#) examine the institutionalization of CSR practices at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels. This suggests that, regarding MS, corporations must institutionalize anti-MS laws and policies in their organizational cultures and practices across all levels. Research must examine how to institutionalize anti-MS practices at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels within organizations and in SCs in contexts with high institutional voids. Future MS studies may conduct multilevel analyses of the institutionalization and diffusion ([Deephouse and Suchman, 2008](#)) of anti-MS laws, standards and practices. If MS laws are not established as institutional norms in organizations and their cultures, this can hinder their abilities to tackle MS. Lack of institutionalization and dissemination of MS laws across all levels of the organization and SCs can cause ambiguity regarding the laws and their interpretation and implementation, creating challenges in addressing MS. Extant SSCM research has examined micro-foundations of SC sustainability practices relating to individual behaviors and choices ([Dias et al., 2023](#)). There is a lack of research on the micro-foundations of MS-free SC practices, focusing on individual-level behaviors, motivations and choices (e.g. employees and managers) and how these aggregate and affect the organizational or macro-level performance on MS. Studies must examine the institutionalization of MS-free practices at different firm levels. They can investigate the multilevel (micro–meso–macro) and micro-foundations (individual-level) of the institutionalization of MS-free practices in MNCs and their SCs (RD3). Findings from these studies can help MNCs institutionalize MS laws and practices in their organizations and SCs. Such studies can generate knowledge MNCs can use to institutionalize, disseminate and communicate their anti-MS values and principles at different organizational levels. Knowledge of the micro-foundations of MS-free SC practices can help MNCs understand how individuals' actions and behavior can enhance or diminish sustainability outcomes (i.e. MS-free practices) at the organizational level. MNC executives can also use this knowledge to better understand ways to operationalize MS-free standards and obligations effectively, and motivate their employees and SC partners to adopt slavery-free standards and values.

The SSSCM literature shows that low-tier suppliers can resist socially sustainable practices ([Nath et al., 2020](#)). Explicitly for MS, there is a literature gap regarding organizational resistance to institutional pressures to adopt MS-free practices in SCs of various products where MS persists despite the MS legislation and institutional pressures. According to IT, acquiescence to institutional pressures increases organizational legitimacy ([Oliver, 1991](#)). Thus, future empirical research must explore how institutional resistance or a lack of acquiescence to institutional pressures may impact organizational legitimacy of MNCs from the perspectives of their stakeholders. [Lafargue et al. \(2022\)](#) suggest potential institutional rejection regarding MS, stating that, to a certain extent, the chocolate industry has rejected legislative coercive and consumer normative pressures to address child labor in its SCs, demonstrating how firms' profit objectives may overshadow sustainability considerations and institutional pressures. There is limited understanding regarding how MNCs' active (or passive) resistance to institutional pressures regarding MS practices manifests, and how this resistance could be addressed.

Future research must investigate the effect of institutional pressures on adopting MS-free practices in SCs of various products and industries, and examine MNCs' resistance to such institutional pressures. [Gold et al. \(2015\)](#) encourage researchers to “investigate why and how slave-holders can continuously resist mimetic, normative and coercive isomorphic pressures towards more legitimate forms of business” (p. 491) to enable SC practitioners to “see more

---

clearly which actions to take (also in collaboration with other non-economic actors) to weaken this resistance, with the ultimate aim of making their supply chains slavery free” (p. 492). Drawing insights from these studies, future empirical studies can explore institutional resistance or rejection of adopting MS-free practices in SCs and investigate the strategies MNCs may use in response to institutional pressures to tackle MS (RD4). This line of inquiry can shed more light on how to address institutional resistance, exert adequate institutional pressure on MNCs and influence them to adopt MS-free practices in their SCs.

*5.1.2 Stakeholder theory.* Freeman (1984) defines a stakeholder as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization’s objectives” (p. 46). Firms’ stakeholders can be categorized as direct and indirect (Freeman, 1984) or primary and secondary (Key, 1999). Mitchell *et al.* (1997) advanced the theory of stakeholder identification and salience based on three qualities: power, legitimacy and urgency. Mitchell *et al.* (1997) identified seven types of stakeholders based on their characteristics: definitive, dominant, dangerous, demanding, dependent, discretionary and dormant. Firms must identify and prioritize the most significant stakeholders influencing their operations and formulate strategies to respond to their needs (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell *et al.*, 1997).

Few MS studies have used stakeholder theory (ST) (Liu *et al.*, 2022; Robb and Michailova, 2022; Sokat and Altay, 2022). Although MS is gaining increasing attention from MNCs’ stakeholders such as policymakers, governments, NGOs, consumers and activists, only a few studies have used ST to examine corporations’ stakeholders (Han *et al.*, 2022). Strand *et al.* (2023) argued that “there are a range of actors and stakeholders found within and outside the supply chain. They all play a role in either preventing, facilitating or experiencing the occurrence of MS and forced labor within supply chains. Stakeholders include the focal firm, first-tier suppliers, other upstream suppliers, workers, governments, third parties such as NGOs, recruitment agencies, auditing companies, social activists and consumers” (p. 8). ST helps examine the different types of MNCs’ stakeholders, their salience and their roles in tackling MS. Some corporations are part of multistakeholder ethical associations, such as the Ethical Trading Initiative (Ishaya *et al.*, 2024). ST can help explore the effectiveness of these multistakeholder alliances and initiatives in tackling MS. ST can be used in three RDs for MS as presented in Table 5 (RD5-7) and Figure 3.

Extant SSSCM literature has used ST to show that corporations must address stakeholders’ demands for social sustainability in their SCs to gain legitimacy in the society wherein they operate (Mani *et al.*, 2018b). This suggests that if MNCs fail to meet their stakeholders’ expectations regarding tackling MS, they may lose their legitimacy. As stakeholders’ awareness of MS increases, they will pressurize MNCs to disclose more information regarding their efforts to combat MS. This is supported by legislated MS reporting requirements from various legislations, such as the UK Modern Slavery Act (2015) and the Australia Modern Slavery Act (2018). Prior SSSCM studies demonstrated that suppliers in emerging or developing economies may respond to stakeholders’ demands for social sustainability through compliance or avoidance (Uttam *et al.*, 2024). Thus, although there is increasing stakeholder pressure on MNCs to address MS in their SCs, this does not guarantee that their suppliers will adopt MS-free practices. Hence, it is imperative to understand suppliers’ perspectives on implementing MS-free practices, the challenges they may face and the assistance or incentives MNCs may offer to ensure adoption and implementation of these practices.

In addition, coercion from stakeholders can propel corporations to increase their sustainability awareness and adopt and implement socially sustainable practices in their SCs (Meixell and Luoma, 2015). NGOs and the media are the most influential stakeholders in

---

corporations' SC sustainability, followed by intermediate managers and employees within a firm (Meixell and Luoma, 2015). The diverse types and roles of stakeholders and their salience in the adoption of MS-free practices by MNCs must be understood. Future studies can investigate how different types of stakeholders may influence MNCs differently when adopting MS-free practices in SCs. Furthermore, SSSCM studies show that focal firms require "social management capabilities" to respond effectively to stakeholder pressures for sustainability in SCs, resolve legislative gaps appropriately and enhance their social performance (Huq *et al.*, 2016, p. 1). There is a need to empirically investigate how MNCs can develop these capabilities and use stakeholder pressure as an opportunity to evaluate their SCs to identify any MS risks, make necessary changes in their operations and SCs, and check their compliance with MS legislations.

Prior SSSCM studies showed that stakeholders hold MNCs accountable for sustainability in SCs; if social concerns such as forced or child labor are found, stakeholders such as customers, NGOs, shareholders, labor unions, investors and the media can punish MNCs by boycotting, withdrawing their support or selling stock, resulting in financial losses and brand and reputational damage (Hofmann *et al.*, 2014). Future empirical studies must explore how stakeholders might penalize MNCs with MS in their SCs and the financial and reputational damage they may suffer. Stakeholder salience and pressure influence corporate sustainability and sustainability reporting (Rudyanto and Siregar, 2018; Weber and Marley, 2012). Stakeholders' power, legitimacy and urgency vary across GSC locations, and MNCs tend to focus on the highly salient stakeholders in their home countries (Kovacs, 2022). Stakeholders have pressed MNCs, such as Apple and Nike, to address child labor and worker exploitation in their SCs (Gualandris *et al.*, 2015). Sokat and Altay (2022) showed that customer and investor stakeholders can boycott firms with MS in their SCs and impact their economic performance and corporate reputation. The collective insights from these previous studies can help future studies empirically examine how pressure from different types of stakeholders with different salience attributes can catalyze the adoption of MS-free practices in SCs (RD5). This can help MNCs to better understand and prioritize the expectations of their most salient stakeholders regarding MS, and identify stakeholders who can assist in identifying and addressing MS risks in their SCs.

Engaging with external stakeholders and developing collaborative capabilities between firms and stakeholders can help firms address sustainability concerns in their operations (Roscoe *et al.*, 2020). In the context of MS, empirical evidence is required on how stakeholder engagement can help MNCs identify and resolve early warnings of MS risks. Future studies must investigate how stakeholder engagement and collaboration can increase awareness, knowledge creation, organizational learning (OL) and capability development, thereby helping MNCs to tackle MS. Stakeholders can assume different roles depending on their capabilities and help MNCs improve the sustainability of their SCs, including evaluating and verifying suppliers (Gualandris *et al.*, 2015). Globally dispersed SCs make it challenging for MNCs to implement anti-MS policies and practices. It is important to understand how MNCs may engage and collaborate with external stakeholder experts to evaluate and verify their suppliers' sustainability and better manage MS risks in SCs in different industries and countries. Liu *et al.* (2022) showed that stakeholder engagement and collaboration with different types of stakeholders can help firms tackle MS. MS is a multistakeholder problem requiring a multistakeholder approach and effort to resolve (Robb and Michailova, 2022). Firms can collaborate with stakeholders such as NGOs, governments, trade unions and competitors to combat MS (Stevenson and Cole, 2018). Future empirical studies should investigate how firms can use stakeholder engagement and collaboration to address MS in GSCs in various industries (RD6). This can inform MNCs

---

regarding proactive engagement of external stakeholders to gain knowledge about MS and how to best eradicate it from SCs.

Sarkis *et al.* (2011) suggested future studies using globally oriented ST to examine SCs' sustainability. To best capitalize on ST when analyzing GSCs, the theory must be applied beyond traditional stakeholder categorization in SC management (Kovacs, 2022; Sarkis *et al.*, 2011). Sarkis *et al.* (2011) argued that "internationally focused stakeholder theory may also be more relevant as the globalization of supply chains have caused the stakeholder sphere to continue expanding" (p. 10). Focal firms and their head offices are typically located far from their SCs, and specific stakeholder groups in the SCs' immediate environment may have better awareness of local sustainability concerns than focal firms (Kovacs, 2022). The author argues that "looking at stakeholders in various locations, and in the global supply chain, could indeed contribute to the rise of global product, process, but also environmental and social standards" (Kovacs, 2022, p. 317). From a global ST perspective, there is a need to understand how firms' local and global stakeholders as well as SC partners can collaborate in shaping and fostering MS-free practices in GSCs, and work toward eradicating MS worldwide. Globally-focused ST analysis in MS research is logical given the globalized production and markets, global value chains led by MNCs that enable MS to occur, global reach of MNCs and increasing demands for global accountability of MNCs (Caspersz *et al.*, 2022).

The stakeholder attributes of power, legitimacy and urgency vary across locations in GSCs (Kovacs, 2022). Therefore, research on MS and stakeholder salience across GSCs is required. Studies can explore how MNCs' salient stakeholders can effectively contribute toward the formulation, adoption and implementation of anti-slavery standards and practices in geographically dispersed SCs. Future studies can use a globally-focused ST to identify and analyze the stakeholders involved in MS concerns in SCs, their diverse needs and expectations and how the different stakeholders' capabilities could help MNCs tackle MS. There is a need to use international ST and empirically analyze MNCs and their local and global stakeholders in GSCs; the relationships between the stakeholders, how they influence each other dependent on their salience, how they can exert pressure and prompt MS-free practices in GSCs and how they can help tackle MS (RD7). This can foster an increased global stakeholder perspective, providing a comprehensive empirical understanding of the concerns and interests of diverse stakeholders regarding MS in SCs.

## 5.2 Firm level

### 5.2.1 Resource-based view.

The resource-based view (RBV) theorizes the firm as a package of resources, and suggests that differences in firms' performance are due to the heterogeneous tangible resources and intangible competencies they possess (Barney, 1991). The RBV also considers a firm's reputation and image as a crucial intangible strategic resource, representing a vital source of competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Although a few studies argue that the RBV is a suitable theoretical perspective for MS research (Geng *et al.*, 2022; Mehmood *et al.*, 2023; Stevenson and Cole, 2018), the theory has not yet been widely used. A firm's resources and capabilities influence its capacity to address MS in its SCs (Geng *et al.*, 2022). Corporations with more or better resources and capabilities can input more efforts into tackling MS in their SCs and may have better corporate sustainability performance (Geng *et al.*, 2022). The RBV is relevant to MS research because it can help investigate the resources and capabilities MNCs require to address MS. The RBV has been used in CSR (Yadlapalli *et al.*, 2018), SSCM (Benstead *et al.*, 2022) and SSSCM (Mani *et al.*, 2018a; Moxham and Kauppi, 2014) literature. These studies provide insights for future

research using the RBV and explicitly focusing on MS. Future studies can use the RBV in three RDs for MS, as presented in [Table 5](#) (RD8–10) and [Figure 3](#).

Interorganizational learning (IOL) in SCs involves sharing and disseminating information and co-creating knowledge to gain competitive advantages ([Sarkis et al., 2011](#)). According to [Yadlapalli et al. \(2018\)](#), “when suppliers and buyers work together, they develop valuable, rare and hard-to-copy resources that improve social, environmental and economic performance” (p. 144). Nevertheless, it remains poorly understood how IOL and knowledge sharing about MS between firms and their SC partners can create resources and capabilities that provide competitive advantages to firms. MS is a relatively unfamiliar problem for firms and requires them to engage in OL ([Simpson et al., 2021](#)). As MS legislation requires firms to produce MS statements, firms must engage in OL to familiarize themselves with the new MS reporting requirements ([Schaper and Pollach, 2021](#)). The OL associated with MS reporting can provide competitive advantages to firms ([Schaper and Pollach, 2021](#)). Therefore, firms must perceive MS reporting as a catalyst ([Hampton, 2019](#)) to implement changes toward MS-free SCs. Although OL is crucial for change toward MS-free SCs, there is a lack of understanding of how corporations can use it as a valuable strategic resource that provides competitive advantages. Future studies can examine how firms can use MS reporting as an opportunity for OL and make substantive changes to address MS and achieve competitive advantages (RD8). This can provide insights into buyer–supplier learning and knowledge-sharing opportunities through MS reporting, helping MNCs tackle MS more effectively and gain competitive advantages.

Studies show that buying firms can gain competitive advantages through buyer–supplier collaborations in addressing social concerns in SCs ([Luzzini et al., 2015](#)), which can foster reliable long-term relationships, mitigate opportunism and unethical or illegal supplier behavior, and create unique capabilities that provide sustained competitive advantages to firms ([Mani et al., 2018a](#); [Pagell et al., 2010](#)). [Liu et al. \(2022\)](#) reported that low-tier suppliers often lack the resources and capabilities to implement MS-free practices; buying firms must collaborate with suppliers, invest in their operations and provide the necessary training. Nonetheless, there is a lack of clarity on how buyer–supplier collaborations can help firms tackle MS and gain competitive advantages. There is a literature gap regarding how MS can be tackled through relationship-based sustainable sourcing strategies. Studies also show that MNCs can gain competitive advantages through governance mechanisms that promote sustainability in SCs, such as supplier selection, monitoring and development ([Yadlapalli et al., 2018](#)). Regarding MS, how sustainability governance mechanisms can help firms achieve MS-free SCs and gain competitive advantages must be understood. The collective insights from these previous studies can provide future directions for MS research. Future studies can empirically examine how MNCs can gain competitive advantages from MS-free SCs through buyer–supplier collaborations and governance mechanisms, such as supplier selection, monitoring and development (RD9). This can provide insights for MNCs to gain competitive advantages from MS-free SCs through buyer–supplier collaborations and various governance mechanisms.

The natural RBV (NRBV) examines how firms can derive competitive advantages based on their interaction with the natural environment and the low-income people worldwide ([Benstead et al., 2022](#)). Scholars have linked MS to environmental destruction, climate change and exploitation of the poor ([Brown et al., 2021](#); [Gold et al., 2015](#)), and emphasized the need to examine SSCM at the base of the pyramid (BoP) ([Khalid et al., 2015](#)). It is necessary to empirically demonstrate that SCs that are MS-free; avoid exploitation of poor and vulnerable people; and avoid environmental destruction are crucial sources of competitive advantage for MNCs. Researchers may use NRBV to investigate how firms can

---

achieve competitiveness from MS-free, and ecologically and societally sustainable operations, focusing on the MS-environment–BoP nexus (RD10). Recently, concerns regarding the environment, the poor and global socioeconomic imbalances have increased (Benstead *et al.*, 2022). There is increasing societal pressure on MNCs to address labor and human rights violations in SCs (Vandenbroucke, 2024). Hence, this proposed RD can provide insights for MNCs to address these societal pressures and concerns.

*5.2.2 Resource dependence theory.* Resource dependence theory (RDT) posits that firms have limited resources and become dependent on others, leading to interorganizational power relationships centered on resource exchange (Hillman *et al.*, 2009). RDT is pertinent to SC research because it facilitates the examination of buyer–supplier relationships and risks of dependence (Mani *et al.*, 2018a). RDT has not yet been extensively used in MS research, except Liu *et al.* (2022), who briefly used it to argue that collaborative and effective interdependent relationships between buyers and suppliers can help tackle MS. Gorton *et al.* (2023) argue that corporate reputation (CR) is a crucial intangible resource that is not directly under a firm’s control. CR is a resource dependence because it is partly determined by stakeholders’ perceptions and actors external to the firm, creating environmental dependency (Gorton *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, the actions of suppliers of a firm can negatively impact its reputation and brand (Gorton *et al.*, 2023). Socially SSCs can enhance a firm’s reputation and performance (Moxham and Kauppi, 2014), while allegations or evidence of MS can damage its reputation and corporate brand (Sokat and Altay, 2022). The RDT is applicable to MS research because it can help examine MNCs’ environmental dependencies resulting from suppliers using slave labor in SCs, negatively impacting MNCs’ reputation and brands. RDT has been used in SSCM (Hollos *et al.*, 2012; Schnittfeld and Busch, 2016; Touboullic *et al.*, 2014) and SSSCM (Mani *et al.*, 2018a). The RDT can be used in three RDs for MS, as presented in Table 5 (RD11–13) and Figure 3.

The existing literature used RDT to show that corporations can improve resource dependence and sustainability in SCs through effective collaboration with suppliers (Sarkis *et al.*, 2011), control mechanisms for managing suppliers’ sustainability (Schnittfeld and Busch, 2016) and long-term investments in suppliers in emerging economies who typically face financial challenges in implementing socially sustainable practices (Mani *et al.*, 2018a). Sustainable suppliers are valuable resources which buying firms depend on, and firms develop suppliers’ capabilities to obtain preferential, long-term access to sustainable resources (Hollos *et al.*, 2012). Corporations’ sustainability can be constrained by their resource dependencies, and they must reduce their dependence on unsustainable suppliers (Connelly *et al.*, 2013). Developing a supplier portfolio can reduce dependencies in SCs (Shook *et al.*, 2009). Human and labor rights violations or poor treatment of workers by suppliers can damage MNC reputation (Gorton *et al.*, 2023). MNCs face high environmental dependence because they are judged by society based on the social impacts of their businesses and their SC partners (Gorton *et al.*, 2023). Insights from these studies suggest that future studies can investigate the link between resource dependency and MS-free SCs. From the RDT perspective, MNCs must depend on and collaborate with suppliers that provide the essential resources they need for survival and growth. There is a literature gap regarding the entanglement of MNCs in MS, considering their dependency on suppliers for MS-free practices. Future studies must investigate the relationship between resource dependence and the social sustainability performance of SCs (i.e. SCs free from MS), how MNCs’ resource dependence in SCs influences their ability to have MS-free SCs and how MNCs could reduce their dependence on suppliers with high risks of MS (RD11). This RD can help generate actionable knowledge for MNCs to stipulate MS-free practices that suppliers must adhere to, which in turn can help MNCs prevent legal and reputational risks

associated with MS. Such future studies can also offer insights into how MNCs can develop effective interdependence and collaboration with suppliers, use control mechanisms to manage suppliers' social sustainability and make long-term investments in suppliers, all of which can give MNCs access to MS-free resources.

Connelly *et al.* (2013) observed a "supply chain creep" (p. 234), whereby suppliers from countries with relatively low production costs, such as China, are progressing upward in SCs, not only supplying raw materials but also conceptualizing, designing and manufacturing products for focal firms, thereby increasing MNCs' dependencies and altering power dynamics in SCs. Studies show that emerging economies, such as China, have high MS risks and human and labor rights violations (Simpson *et al.*, 2021). While increasing dependency on suppliers in some countries or regions are economically justifiable decisions by MNCs, from an RDT perspective, the potential risks associated with MS in MNCs' SCs must be considered. Excessive dependence on suppliers that are moving up the SC and are located in countries with high MS risks can present challenges in tackling MS. Power dynamics between firms and suppliers influence the management of sustainability concerns in SCs (Touboulis *et al.*, 2014), suggesting that "supply chain creep" may reduce the power of MNCs over suppliers and MNCs' ability to influence sustainable practices within the SC. SC creep can also obscure the responsibilities of MNCs to ensure that their products are MS-free. Studies must investigate SC creep, increasing dependencies and changing power dynamics in SCs and their impact on MS risks for firms (RD12). This can help MNCs and their SC managers identify SC creep and the potential risks of MS in their SCs.

New technologies such as blockchain can have an impact on resource dependence dynamics in SCs (Nandi *et al.*, 2021). Blockchain can improve transparency and traceability in SCs, which in turn can enhance sustainability (Long *et al.*, 2023). As new technologies such as blockchain facilitate more traceability, visibility, transparency and trust in SCs (Rogerson and Parry, 2020), they may enhance information accuracy and sharing between SC partners, impacting the power structures and dynamics. With respect to MS, improved visibility can help SC managers resolve some of the underlying causes of MS, such as information asymmetry. Blockchain can help reduce deceptive recruitment of migrant workers (Christ and Helliard, 2021). There is a need to examine how blockchain can facilitate end-to-end SC digitization, MS-free resource acquisition and improve the implementation and monitoring of MS-free practices in SCs. There is a literature gap regarding how blockchain may impact resource dependence dynamics in SC and help improve MNCs' relative dependence and power to ensure their SCs are MS-free. Future empirical studies must examine how new technologies such as blockchain may impact resource-dependence dynamics in the SC, facilitate MS-free resource acquisition by MNCs and improve implementation and monitoring of MS-free practices in SCs (RD13). Understanding the benefits of SC digitization can help practitioners make better decisions regarding investing in new technologies to improve SC visibility and eradicate MS.

*5.2.3 Principal agent theory.* Principal agent theory (PAT) explains the relationship between two parties, where one party (principal) commissions another party (agent) to undertake work, typically through a contract (Eisenhardt, 1989). Agency problems such as information asymmetry and goal conflict may occur, leading to opportunistic behavior and necessitating governance mechanisms to monitor the agent (Eisenhardt, 1989). Regarding SC relationships, PAT is centered on purchasing or sourcing activities, making it suitable for examining buyer-supplier relationships and SC phenomena (Fayezi *et al.*, 2012). Except Liu *et al.* (2022), who briefly applied PAT to MS, the literature lacks the use of PAT to study MS. Although PAT can examine SC relationships and the impact of agency problems on implementing social sustainability in SCs (Yadlapalli *et al.*, 2018), it has limitations when

---

extended to complex, multitier SC networks (Zsidisin, 2022), which may explain its limited use in MS research. There is a need to apply PAT beyond buyer–supplier dyads; with GSCs as the level of analysis, to examine multiple principal–agent relationships in SC triads and networks (Fayezi *et al.*, 2012; Zsidisin, 2022). The increasing MS legislation means that PAT becomes gradually more relevant for MS research as MNCs strive to minimize agency and litigation costs in SCs through governance mechanisms such as increased supplier monitoring, improved contracts and enhanced audit quality. PAT is applicable to MS research because GSCs span different contexts, including geographical, institutional and cultural, exacerbating agency problems between firms and suppliers, which can increase MS risks. PAT has been used in SSCM (Wilhelm *et al.*, 2016) and CSR (Yadlapalli *et al.*, 2018; Yu, 2008). Scholars can use PAT in three RDs for MS, as presented in Table 5 (RD14–16) and Figure 3.

Extant SSSCM research suggests that implementing socially sustainable practices in complex GSC networks can be challenging due to agency problems, such as goal conflicts and information asymmetries, causing opportunistic supplier behaviors (Yadlapalli *et al.*, 2018). The principal and agent may have divergent attitudes toward risk, and suppliers may behave opportunistically and engage in socially unsustainable practices in their operations (Yadlapalli *et al.*, 2018). Suppliers may engage in mock compliance with labor regulations to pass audits (Huq *et al.*, 2016), or transmit inaccurate information regarding the implementation of socially responsible standards stipulated by the focal firm (Mani *et al.*, 2018a). Due to information asymmetries, it is challenging for focal firms to verify suppliers' actions, and firms lack timely and accurate information on whether suppliers' operations are socially sustainable (Yadlapalli *et al.*, 2018). Focusing specifically on MS, future empirical studies must explore buyer–supplier agency concerns in complex and multitier SCs and how they contribute to MS. Research on MS has shown that the complex, extended, fragmented, multitiered and opaque nature of GSCs makes them prone to MS risks (Gold *et al.*, 2015). The cost and time pressures applied to suppliers also increase MS risks in SCs (Schaper and Pollach, 2021). Hence, future studies can examine buyer–supplier agency problems in GSCs, how they cause or enable MS to exist and how these agency problems can be solved to eliminate MS (RD14). This can help MNCs better understand agency problems in their SCs, how they contribute toward MS and how to address them.

Addressing agency concerns in multitiered SCs requires focal firms to delegate social responsibility to their first-tier suppliers who assume a dual agency role: in the primary agency role, they satisfy the buying firm's sustainability obligations, and in the minor agency role, they disseminate sustainability practices to lower-tier suppliers and monitor them (Wilhelm *et al.*, 2016). Firms must provide incentives to first-tier suppliers to fulfil both agency roles (Wilhelm *et al.*, 2016). With respect to MS, this suggests that the double-agency role of first-tier suppliers can help MNCs tackle MS in globally dispersed and multitiered SCs. Studies demonstrate that institutional voids can lead to supplier decoupling from sustainability compliance (Kelling *et al.*, 2021; Nath *et al.*, 2020), suggesting that by assuming a double agency role, first-tier suppliers can help disseminate MS-free standards in the SC and monitor low-tier suppliers to ensure adoption of MS-free practices in their operations. This is critical because low-tier suppliers or subcontractors are typically small- to medium-sized operations situated in remote locations, with private operations shielded from institutional pressures (Wilhelm *et al.*, 2016). Nevertheless, the double-agency role of first-tier suppliers raises concerns regarding whether they have sufficient bargaining power to influence lower-tier suppliers to adopt MS-free practices. Although Emberson *et al.* (2022) briefly mentioned the double-agency role of first-tier suppliers in combating MS, a more in-depth empirical analysis is required. Future research must explore the double agency role of

first-tier suppliers in combating MS and helping MNCs overcome the agency and institutional challenges associated with disseminating MS-free practices in GSCs, and how MNCs can incentivize their first-tier suppliers (RD15). This can generate meaningful and actionable knowledge for MNCs to manage their multitiered SCs and delegate the implementation of MS-free practices to first-tier suppliers.

Studies show that numerous governance mechanisms can help address agency problems and improve social sustainability in SCs. These include (a) multiprincipal–supplier relationships with shared codes-of-conduct, incentives to dissuade opportunism and penalties or sanctions when necessary (Delbufalo and Bastl, 2018), and (b) supplier selection and development and buyer–supplier collaboration (Huq *et al.*, 2014; Huq *et al.*, 2016; Yadlapalli *et al.*, 2018). In the context of MS, in-depth empirical research is required on how MNCs can collaborate and use shared codes of conduct with their shared suppliers to tackle MS. To implement socially responsible practices in SCs successfully, corporations must identify and select suitable and sustainable suppliers, develop and manage relationships with them and monitor their performance (Yadlapalli *et al.*, 2018). There is an empirical literature gap regarding how MNCs can use supplier selection and development as governance mechanisms to mitigate agency problems in SCs and ensure that suppliers implement MS-free practices. It is noteworthy that the effectiveness of governance mechanisms suggested in the SSSCM literature may be limited because MS practices are illicit and usually covert or invisible and involve many labor intermediaries (Crane *et al.*, 2022; Stevenson and Cole, 2018).

Few MS studies suggest various governance mechanisms to detect and combat slavery in suppliers' operations, including supplier auditing, third-party certifications and codes of conduct (Flynn and Walker, 2021; Liu *et al.*, 2022). By integrating diverse insights from previous studies, future research can scrutinize governance mechanisms to address agency problems that contribute to or facilitate the use of slave labor in SCs, and suggest the most effective governance mechanisms that MNCs can use to tackle MS (RD16). This can guide MNCs' SC managers in their sourcing activities on the most effective governance mechanisms to address agency issues such as information asymmetry, goal conflicts and risk aversion and ensure the implementation of MS-free practices by suppliers.

### 5.3 Transaction level

**5.3.1 Transaction cost economics.** TCE explains the cost and effort required for two parties to complete an economic transaction (Williamson, 1981). Transaction costs can be ex ante or ex post, and governance mechanisms can minimize these costs (Williamson, 2008). The TCE is based on two central assumptions of human behavior: opportunism and bounded rationality (Williamson, 1981). It considers transactions as the primary unit of analysis and uses contracts to minimize opportunistic behavior and transaction costs (Williamson, 1981). TCE has yet to be used in MS research and can be usefully applied. Due to the bounded rationality of buying firms and supplier opportunism, slave labor may be used in SCs. Therefore, TCE can help examine the different mechanisms that MNCs can use to manage their outsourcing relationships and mitigate opportunistic supplier behavior and the use of slave labor. TCE can examine critical elements of buyer–supplier relationships – transactions, transaction environments and suppliers – and the most suitable governance methods to minimize MS risks. TCE has been used in SSCM (Jiang, 2009a, 2009b; Meinschmidt *et al.*, 2018), SSSCM (Huq *et al.*, 2014; Sancha *et al.*, 2016) and CSR research (Yadlapalli *et al.*, 2018). TCE can be used in four RDs for MS, as presented in Table 2 (RD17–20) and Figure 3.

---

SSSCM studies used TCE to show that bounded rationality of buying firms, environmental uncertainty and suppliers' opportunistic behavior can cause problems in lower-tier SC sustainability management, resulting in high SCs transaction costs (Huq *et al.*, 2014; Meinschmidt *et al.*, 2018; Sancha *et al.*, 2016; Wang *et al.*, 2015). Some buying firms have thousands of lower-tier suppliers in their SCs, making it costly and nearly unattainable for them to monitor these suppliers (Meinschmidt *et al.*, 2018). Implementing socially sustainable practices is associated with high uncertainty due to ex ante information asymmetry (e.g. the risk of selecting unsustainable or unsuitable suppliers owing to bounded rationality) and ex post costs (e.g. suppliers' opportunistic behavior and monitoring suppliers) (Huq *et al.*, 2014). Firms typically focus on the social sustainability of their immediate suppliers, neglecting lower-tier suppliers and subcontractors, which creates high transaction costs for firms (Huq *et al.*, 2014). Future research must explore the ex ante and ex post costs of establishing and monitoring SC contracts to ensure MS-free SCs. TCE can be applied to investigate the potential costs, including reputation and brand damage, resulting from MS in SCs. Environmental uncertainty and lack of legal safeguarding increase the risk of supplier opportunism in SCs in emerging and developing economies (Wang *et al.*, 2015). This implies that weak legal systems and unstable environments can increase supplier opportunism and the use of slave labor in SCs.

Suppliers may conceal violations and engage in mock compliance to pass audits; they hold two sets of timesheets, one that seems to comply with regulations and is shown to buying firms and auditors and one that reflects actual practice, which hinders SC sustainability (Huq *et al.*, 2014). Mock compliance can lead to reputational damage for focal firms if leaked to the media (Huq *et al.*, 2014). Suppliers may behave opportunistically to obtain cost advantages; their self-interest and deception can lead to the use of child labor and a failure to offer safe or healthy working environments (Sancha *et al.*, 2016). Currently, there is a literature gap regarding the antecedents and consequences of supplier opportunism, the use of slave labor and the institutional contexts that enable opportunism. The extant SSSCM literature suggests numerous governance structures to minimize supplier opportunism (Sancha *et al.*, 2016; Yadlapalli *et al.*, 2018). Building upon insights from these studies, opportunities exist for researchers to investigate how buying firms' bounded rationality, environmental uncertainty and supplier opportunism can cause high transaction costs associated with MS, and explore the mechanisms firms may use to combat MS (RD17). Such research can offer valuable insights into how MNCs can implement MS-free practices in their SCs located in emerging or developing economies characterized by environmental uncertainties and supplier opportunism and minimize transaction risks and costs.

Studies show that audits may not effectively detect or rectify social concerns in SCs or sufficiently monitor suppliers' sustainability performance, specifically for low-tier suppliers (Jiang, 2009a, 2009b; LeBaron *et al.*, 2017; Meinschmidt *et al.*, 2018). Although MNCs use audits to monitor suppliers' labor conditions and identify noncompliance, audits have become symbolic implementations that do not improve labor conditions (Vandenbroucke, 2024). For instance, Meinschmidt *et al.* (2018) state that "although the Italian chocolate and confectionery producer Ferrero had banned child labor in its code of conduct and its suppliers had been independently audited, Ferrero was severely accused of exploitation and child labor at a sub-contractor in Romania" (p. 1889). Little is known about the effectiveness of audits in minimizing transaction costs due to buying firms' bounded rationality and supplier opportunism which causes the use of slave labor. Moreover, previous studies have raised concerns regarding the capacity of buying firms to audit all their suppliers, considering the vast, multitiered and globally dispersed SCs (Meinschmidt *et al.*, 2018). Suppliers may

subcontract work to subcontractors or unregulated factories without the buying firm's cognizance (Stevenson and Cole, 2018).

Prior research also shows that supplier deception is common in auditing processes; to fulfill sustainability requirements from buying firms without incurring overhead cost increases, some supplier factories engage in audit fraud and double bookkeeping and train their workers to provide satisfactory or allowable answers in audit interviews, resulting in inaccurate audit results and lack of sustainability improvements (Jiang, 2009a, 2009b). Although MNCs may stipulate audits as part of their contracts with suppliers, the effectiveness of these audits in tackling MS requires further investigation. Thus, drawing on insights from prior literature, opportunities exist to investigate the effectiveness of audits in tackling MS in SCs. In addition, as MS legislation, reporting and auditing frequency increase in the future, this could lead to audit fatigue (LeBaron *et al.*, 2017). There is a need to conduct in-depth empirical analysis of the effectiveness of audits in tackling MS in SCs across various industries and jurisdictions, and the risk of audit fraud and its antecedents and consequences in GSCs (RD18). This can help MNCs improve the effectiveness of their supplier audits and eliminate MS in their SCs.

Studies show that sustainable practices offer numerous benefits to firms, including mitigating reputational risks, strengthening brands and gaining new customers and markets (Sancha *et al.*, 2016). However, TCE analyzes decision-making from an economic perspective and undervalues other triple bottom-line elements – social and environmental considerations (Connelly *et al.*, 2011). Nevertheless, markets and economic transactions can be influenced by the “market for virtue” and socially responsible business practices; consumers may consider sustainable products superior (Connelly *et al.*, 2011, p. 89). Firms implement sustainable practices when it makes economic sense to do so (Connelly *et al.*, 2011). Although firms may economically perceive sustainability initiatives as costs and liabilities, they might view them to be worthwhile if they consider the markets' social consciousness (Connelly *et al.*, 2011). Currently, there is a lack of clarity regarding the economic justification for implementing MS-free practices in SCs. Banerjee (2021) argues that “the market for forced labor is vast both in terms of supply and demand, and it dwarfs any market for virtue that may exist for “slave-free” products” (p. 415). Similarly, LeBaron (2021) argues that MS is a structural phenomenon driven by wider business and societal issues that create demand for and supply of exploitable workers. The fundamental underlying dynamics that drive the demand for slave labor are concentrated MNC power, outsourcing, irresponsible sourcing practices and governance gaps, while the dynamics that drive supply are poverty, vulnerability and limited labor protection (LeBaron, 2021). This raises the question of whether the production, consumption, sale and purchase of “slave-free” products can overcome the significant underlying issues causing MS.

Furthermore, there is limited understanding of whether or how a market for virtue (i.e. slave-free products) could influence labor standards in SCs; how such a market could be created and function; and how MNCs can effectively signal their slavery-free products to the market. From a TCE perspective, managers must adopt a holistic approach to sourcing decisions, move beyond short-term transactions and costs and ensure that sourcing decisions provide economic value at the firm level long-term (Shook *et al.*, 2009). Future studies can extend TCE by applying it to MS because such analysis goes beyond transaction costs to consider the benefits of MS-free SCs and products, and provide a more comprehensive analysis of the benefits that firms can gain. Future evidence-based studies could analyze the economic rationale for adopting MS-free practices in SCs and the commercial justification of MS-free initiatives in different industries (RD19). This knowledge can help corporations understand the commercial justification for MS-free initiatives in their SCs, which is

---

important considering consumers' increasing demand for products that are not tainted by slavery.

Prior research raises concerns regarding contracts' effectiveness in ensuring suppliers' social sustainability (Huq *et al.*, 2014). Solely formal contracts may not ensure supplier adherence to social sustainability and human rights standards in GSCs; focal firms must also use informal relational mechanisms (Cao *et al.*, 2024). The efficacy of supplier codes of conduct in enhancing labor conditions in GSCs is disputable, as their effectiveness is inconsistent and fails to improve labor conditions (Vandenbroucke, 2024). Studies also show that some buyer–supplier contract terms, such as low prices, shorter lead times and shorter contract duration, hinder suppliers' ability to meet sustainable practice standards set by the buying firms, cause suppliers to enforce excessive overtime labor, disregard workers' physical limits and underpay them (Jiang, 2009a, 2009b). Vandenbroucke (2024) states that “supplier opportunistic behavior may be caused by the purchasing practices of buyers, whose economic incentives drive them to choose cost-efficient suppliers and put important price pressure on their subcontractors. Unreasonably high and increasing production demands or high-powered productivity incentives also impact SC compliance, as incentives to cut corners to produce more and quicker are associated with inferior labor practices” (p. 320).

There is a lack of knowledge regarding how MNCs can structure their contracts with suppliers to dissuade or prevent use of slave labor. Future research must explore how SC contract terms may lead to labor exploitation in SCs and how contracts should be structured to minimize the risks of MS. MS studies show that price pressures cause suppliers to use cheap labor, and short lead times force them to hire short-term workers through unregulated labor intermediaries or subcontract to non-audited factories (Stevenson and Cole, 2018). However, little is known about contractual deterrence and MS-free GSCs, how MNCs can structure contracts to deter the use of slave labor by SC partners and the effectiveness of these contracts in diverse institutional settings. Legal enforceability and government support in different institutional contexts influence the effectiveness of contracts (Bai *et al.*, 2016). Future studies can examine contractual deterrence and MS-free GSCs, how MNCs can structure contracts to deter the use of slave labor and the moderating effect of institutions (RD20). This research avenue can produce actionable knowledge necessary to improve contractual agreements between MNCs and their SC partners, make contracts effective in addressing MS and ensure that contract terms do not contribute toward MS risks. This is a worthwhile investigation because most SC activities are located in developing or emerging economies with institutional voids (Kelling *et al.*, 2021), which increase MS risks and impact the effectiveness of SC contracts and MNCs' ability to enforce the terms of contracts in courts.

## 6. Discussion

This study used six well-established organizational theories to develop a multitheoretical framework and agenda for future research on MS. Literature reviews on MS reported that despite the increasing attention on this topic, there is a lack of theory-driven research (Han *et al.*, 2022; Mehmood *et al.*, 2023; Strand *et al.*, 2023). Han *et al.* (2022) reported that “there has been relatively little theoretical research into modern slavery” (p. 15). Mehmood *et al.* (2023) argued that “there is a vast scope for future study on the subject of modern slavery, and such work should be driven by theory” (p. 18). Similarly, Strand *et al.* (2023) stated that “modern slavery research is on an upward trajectory” (p. 1), but, “there is a lack of theoretical underpinning across the articles” (p. 11). Although these literature reviews report a lack of theoretical foundations in MS research, there is a paucity of guidance on theories to be used in future MS studies. Mehmood *et al.* (2023) called for theoretical framework studies

to provide directions for future MS research. MS scholars have advocated for borrowing theories from other domains to study MS (e.g. [Gold et al., 2015](#)). In this study, theories originating from sociology, strategic management, business ethics and economics were applied to MS to identify research opportunities. Investigating MS from different theoretical perspectives can deepen our knowledge of this phenomenon and advance the research field.

Researchers can investigate the proposed RDs using various methods and units of analysis. The literature review studies presented in subsection 4.1 ([Table 3](#)) identified the dominant methodologies and units of analyses used to study social issues in SCs ([Govindan et al., 2021](#); [Nakamba et al., 2017](#); [Quarshie et al., 2016](#)). Based on these reviews, the typically used methodologies are interviews, surveys, case studies and archival data. The dominant levels of analysis are government, organization, SC, group (e.g. organizational departments, customers, shareholders, activist groups and the general public) and individual levels (e.g. leaders, SC managers, purchasing executives and employees). These methodologies and analysis units can be extended to MS research. This is consistent with [Strand et al. \(2023\)](#), who argue that MS scholars should align their research with established theories and methodologies within the broader SC research field. [Strand et al. \(2023\)](#) lament the overreliance on secondary data in MS research but acknowledge the challenges associated with collecting primary data. [Strand et al. \(2023\)](#) state that “more studies collecting primary data with the direct voices of people with lived experiences of modern slavery, unions and workers are needed in the field. We strongly suggest getting away from secondary data analysis by introducing first-hand accounts and experiences” (p. 11). Primary data must also be collected from low-tier suppliers involved in production to gather their perspectives regarding MS, which is currently lacking in the extant MS research ([Strand et al., 2023](#)). Future studies must consider diverse products, industries, corporations, countries and regions.

Some theories may be more important than others for investigating MS. A recent review of MS literature found that IT is the typically used theory in the field ([Strand et al., 2023](#)) because it facilitates examining the influence of institutional contexts, institutional pressures on corporations and their responses ([Christ et al., 2019](#); [Diab, 2022](#); [Flynn, 2020](#); [Flynn and Walker, 2021](#); [Gold et al., 2015](#)). ST has been used in several MS studies ([Liu et al., 2022](#); [Robb and Michailova, 2022](#); [Sokat and Altay, 2022](#)). MS is a significant business and societal problem that must be collectively addressed by all stakeholders ([Robb and Michailova, 2022](#)). The introduction of MS laws in various jurisdictions over the past few years has generated external institutional and stakeholder pressures on MNCs to address MS in their SCs. Consequently, IT and ST have provided significant and relevant insights for studying MS.

The remaining theories used in this study – RBV, RDT, PAT and TCE – lack extensive use in MS research. This may be because these theories are primarily focused on the organization level, and corporations have only started addressing MS, which is becoming increasingly crucial in mainstream business ([Flynn and Walker, 2021](#)) and an urgent managerial concern ([Rogerson et al., 2024](#)). This indicates that organizational-level theories, such as the RBV, RDT, PAT and TCE, are becoming relevant and useful for studying MS and how corporations can tackle it.

Although the six theories have been individually applied to MS, future studies could combine multiple theories to perform more detailed and nuanced analyses. [Halldórsson et al. \(2015\)](#) argue that SC-related problems are typically complex. They cannot be adequately analyzed and explained by one theory, and studies must use several theories or one main theory complemented by one or more secondary theories. Furthermore, theories such as the RBV, PAT and TCE complement each other and facilitate a detailed analysis from multiple

---

perspectives, advancing the understanding of SC-related phenomena (Halldórsson *et al.*, 2015; Treiblmaier, 2018). Sarkis *et al.* (2011) argue that SC sustainability concerns must be examined within the context of the relationship between internal capabilities (as highlighted by the RBV) and external pressures (as emphasized by IT). Thus, future MS studies may combine the RBV and IT to examine how focal firms can invest in their internal capabilities to respond to institutional pressures more effectively. Mani *et al.* (2018a) and Sancha *et al.* (2016) used TCE and the RBV, which future MS studies can use to examine how focal firms may balance the short-term costs of supplier investment and development and the long-term benefits of such initiatives and competitive advantages that could be gained. Wilhelm *et al.* (2016) combine IT and PAT to examine how dissimilarities in institutional environments affect agency issues in SCs, which future MS studies can follow to investigate how different institutional contexts can create different agency problems hindering MS-free practices in multitiered SCs. Stakeholders can be external or internal to the MNC; thus, although this study applies ST at the environmental level, future studies can include firm-level analysis.

The literature review studies presented earlier in subsection 4.1 also identified infrequently used theories in studying SCs social issues – contingency theory, social network theory, population ecology theory, paradox theory, leadership theory, signaling theory and relational view theory. Future MS studies could also apply them or use them as secondary theories to conduct more detailed and nuanced analyses of MS.

## 7. Implications

### 7.1 Research implications

This study makes several contributions to the MS literature. It develops a multitheoretical framework and research agenda comprising 20 theory-driven RDs for MS. This theoretical framework and the proposed RDs contribute to shaping future theory-driven MS research, bridge MS literature gaps and advance research on MS, a crucial problem impacting businesses and society. The theories presented in this study can help conduct empirical and theoretically rigorous research on MS in the SCs of various products, industries and firms. This study provides 12 secondary RDs presented in Appendix, along with the 20 theory-driven RDs.

The study facilitates the development of MS research from the nascent to mature stages, helps to ensure congruence between existing MS literature and theory application and advances the research field (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). This study addresses the need for theory-based MS research (Caruana *et al.*, 2021; Han *et al.*, 2022; Strand *et al.*, 2023).

### 7.2 Practical implications

This study's results have several important implications. The proposed framework can be used as a practical tool to understand and manage MS risks. By considering MS through six theoretical perspectives, each with different assumptions, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of MS and provides diverse practical insights for practitioners, such as corporate leaders, SC managers and purchasing executives. The framework shows diverse, managerially pertinent concerns. It can help practitioners evaluate their SCs and develop strategies for tackling MS. It also brings MS – a critical social concern affecting SCs – to the forefront of firms' strategic concerns. Examining social issues in SCs using the same theories as those applied to other organizational phenomena can make them central and crucial to organizational agendas and strategies (Moxham and Kauppi, 2014). Considering the globalization of production, MS is a major risk for focal firms (Caspersz *et al.*, 2022). By using multiple theoretical lens to analyze MS, this study helps practitioners understand and manage MS risk in GSCs and create more comprehensive and integrated strategies for

combating this problem. The six theoretical perspectives can equip practitioners with conceptual frameworks to guide their decisions, actions and strategies regarding MS risks, evaluate their SCs and formulate initiatives to tackle MS.

### 7.3 Policy implications

Future research inspired by this study could generate insights to enable regulators to formulate more rigorous laws for combating MS and explore ways to ensure these are adopted and enforced in countries with high MS risks. The proposed RDs can provide actionable knowledge for policymakers. For example, one RD suggests investigating and measuring institutional pressures for MS-free SCs across different products and industries and the responses of firms and their implications for MS. Such future studies may reveal the effectiveness or weaknesses of MS laws. Policymakers may benefit from such studies in improving MS laws and their enforcement. Another RD proposed researching how institutional voids affect the adoption, implementation and monitoring of MS-free practices in GSCs in different institutional contexts. This can inform policymakers on how to formulate effective laws for combating MS in contexts with institutional voids.

## 8. Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, it used only six theories. Future studies could develop further research agendas for MS based on different sets of theories. Second, each theory is limited to a single-level analytical perspective. Future studies should apply theories to multiple levels of analysis. MS presents a multilevel governance challenge, it can have multilevel impacts at the global, national, organizational and SC levels (Burmester *et al.*, 2019). Third, this study uses well-established theories to develop a research agenda. Extant theories may be limited in their capability to analyze MS because it differs from other social issues in SCs (Caruana *et al.*, 2021). Future studies using the suggested theories can identify limitations and facilitate the development of new MS theories. Finally, this study did not combine and contrast the theories applied to MS. Future MS studies could use several complementary or contrasting theories.

## 9. Conclusion

MS is a contemporary and pressing global concern affecting focal firms, and is gaining increasing attention from governments, NGOs, the media, consumers and the general public. Hence, this study developed a theoretical framework and research agenda to provide a broad and robust theoretical foundation for future MS studies. Increased empirical research on MS in SCs is required in numerous contexts, such as in different products, industries, corporations, countries and regions. Strand *et al.* (2023) show that industry-focused studies have investigated MS in low-skilled and labor-intensive industries such as agriculture, fishing, forestry and textiles. Strand *et al.* (2023) argue that research is required in industries producing goods with a high risk of MS and those using recruitment agencies. As presented in subsection 2.2, International Labour Organization (ILO) *et al.* (2022) identified the sectors most affected by MS as services, manufacturing (i.e. extraction or transformation of raw materials in agriculture, fishing, forestry, mining and quarrying), construction and agriculture (i.e. farming agricultural commodities for agri-food SCs, and fruit and vegetable harvesting). Future MS studies must consider these industries. To date, most MS studies have been centered on the UK, USA and Australia, linked to country-specific MS legislation, neglecting to investigate MS offences in lower SCs directly (Strand *et al.*, 2023). As presented in subsection 2.2, MS is prevalent in Asia-Pacific, Europe, Central Asia, Africa

and the Americas [International Labour Organization (ILO) *et al.*, 2022]. Future studies must investigate MS in SCs by using country-specific case studies from these regions. These studies may use various methods and units of analysis.

The six theories presented in this study provide a solid and broad foundation for future research on MS in SCs and offer practical insights for SC managers. Future studies can use these six theories individually or in combination to conduct more in-depth and nuanced studies. By applying insights from institutional, stakeholder, resource-based, resource dependence, agency and TCEs theories, this study provides 20 RDs on MS in SCs. The study also presents 12 secondary RDs for MS in [Appendix Table A1](#). This study invites future research on MS using the suggested theories and RDs, to advance knowledge about this problem and contribute toward addressing it.

## References

- Amfori (2019), “Dutch child labour due diligence law”, available at: [www.amfori.org/sites/default/files/amfori-2020-26-02-Dutch-Child-Labour-Due-Diligence-Law.pdf](http://www.amfori.org/sites/default/files/amfori-2020-26-02-Dutch-Child-Labour-Due-Diligence-Law.pdf) (accessed 19 March 2024).
- Australia Government (2018), “Modern slavery act 2018”, available at: [www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2018A00153](http://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2018A00153) (accessed 19 March 2024).
- Bai, X., Sheng, S. and Li, J.J. (2016), “Contract governance and buyer–supplier conflict: the moderating role of institutions”, *Journal of Operations Management*, Vol. 41 No. 1, pp. 12–24, doi: [10.1016/j.jom.2015.10.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jom.2015.10.003).
- Banerjee, B. (2021), “Modern slavery is an enabling condition of global neoliberal capitalism: commentary on modern slavery in business”, *Business and Society*, Vol. 60 No. 2, pp. 415–419, doi: [10.1177/0007650319898478](https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650319898478).
- Barney, J. (1991), “Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage”, *Journal of Management*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 99–120, doi: [10.1177/014920639101700108](https://doi.org/10.1177/014920639101700108).
- Bellagio-Harvard Guidelines (2012), “Bellagio-Harvard guidelines on the legal parameters of slavery”, available at: [https://glc.yale.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/the\\_bellagio\\_harvard\\_guidelines\\_on\\_the\\_legal\\_parameters\\_of\\_slavery.pdf](https://glc.yale.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/the_bellagio_harvard_guidelines_on_the_legal_parameters_of_slavery.pdf) (accessed 18 March 2024).
- Benstead, A.V., Mwesummo, D., Moradlou, H. and Boffelli, A. (2022), “Entering the world behind the clothes that we wear: practical applications of blockchain technology”, *Production Planning and Control*, Vol. 35 No. 9, pp. 1–18, doi: [10.1080/09537287.2022.2063173](https://doi.org/10.1080/09537287.2022.2063173).
- Brown, D., Boyd, D.S., Brickell, K., Ives, C.D., Natarajan, N. and Parsons, L. (2021), “Modern slavery, environmental degradation and climate change: fisheries, field, forests and factories”, *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 191–207, doi: [10.1177/2514848619887156](https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848619887156).
- Burmester, B., Michailova, S. and Stringer, C. (2019), “Modern slavery and international business scholarship: the governance nexus”, *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, Vol. 15 Nos 2/3, pp. 139–157, doi: [10.1108/cpoib-02-2019-0011](https://doi.org/10.1108/cpoib-02-2019-0011).
- Business and Human Rights (BHR) (2023), “USA: Rights group brings lawsuit against mars, Mondelez and Cargill over continuing use of child labour on cocoa plantations”, available at: [www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/usa-6/](http://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/usa-6/) (accessed 16 April 2024).
- Cao, Y., Lawson, B. and Pil, F.K. (2024), “Social sustainability and human rights in global supply chains”, *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 44 No. 1, pp. 370–390, doi: [10.1108/IJOPM-10-2022-0670](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOPM-10-2022-0670).
- Carter, C.R., Hatton, M.R., Wu, C. and Chen, X. (2020), “Sustainable supply chain management: continuing evolution and future directions”, *International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management*, Vol. 50 No. 1, pp. 122–146, doi: [10.1108/IJPDLM-02-2019-0056](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPDLM-02-2019-0056).

- Caruana, R., Crane, A., Gold, S. and LeBaron, G. (2021), "Modern slavery in business: the sad and sorry state of a non-field", *Business and Society*, Vol. 60 No. 2, pp. 251-287, doi: [10.1177/0007650320930417](https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650320930417).
- Caspersz, D., Cullen, H., Davis, M.C., Jog, D., McGaughey, F., Singhal, D., Sumner, M. and Voss, H. (2022), "Modern slavery in global value chains: a global factory and governance perspective", *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 64 No. 2, pp. 177-199, doi: [10.1177/00221856211054586](https://doi.org/10.1177/00221856211054586).
- Chiesa, P.J. and Przychodzen, W. (2020), "Social sustainability in supply chains: a review", *Social Responsibility Journal*, Vol. 16 No. 8, pp. 1125-1148, doi: [10.1108/SRJ-11-2018-0301](https://doi.org/10.1108/SRJ-11-2018-0301).
- Christ, K.L. and Helliari, C. (2021), "Blockchain technology and modern slavery: reducing deceptive recruitment in migrant worker populations", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 131, pp. 112-120, doi: [10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.03.065](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.03.065).
- Christ, K.L., Rao, K.K. and Burritt, R.L. (2019), "Accounting for modern slavery: an analysis of Australian listed company disclosures", *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 32 No. 3, pp. 836-865, doi: [10.1108/AAAJ-11-2017-3242](https://doi.org/10.1108/AAAJ-11-2017-3242).
- Connelly, B.L., Ketchen, D.J. and Hult, G.T.M. (2013), "Global supply chain management: toward a theoretically driven research agenda", *Global Strategy Journal*, Vol. 3 No. 3, pp. 227-243, doi: [10.1111/j.2042-5805.2013.01041.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2042-5805.2013.01041.x).
- Connelly, B.L., Ketchen, D.J. and Slater, S.F. (2011), "Toward a "theoretical toolbox" for sustainability research in marketing", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 39 No. 1, pp. 86-100, doi: [10.1007/s11747-010-0199-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-010-0199-0).
- Craighead, C.W., Ketchen, D.J., Jr and Darby, J.L. (2020), "Pandemics and supply chain management research: toward a theoretical toolbox", *Decision Sciences*, Vol. 51 No. 4, pp. 838-866, doi: [10.1111/dec.12468](https://doi.org/10.1111/dec.12468).
- Crane, A., LeBaron, G., Phung, K., Behbahani, L. and Allain, J. (2022), "Confronting the business models of modern slavery", *Journal of Management Inquiry*, Vol. 31 No. 3, pp. 264-285, doi: [10.1177/1056492621994904](https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492621994904).
- Deephouse, D.L. and Suchman, M. (2008), "Legitimacy in organizational institutionalism", in Greenwood, R., C. Oliver, K. Sahlin. and R. Suddaby (Eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, SAGE, London pp. 49-77.
- Delbufalo, E. and Bastl, M. (2018), "Multi-principal collaboration and supplier's compliance with codes-of-conduct", *The International Journal of Logistics Management*, Vol. 29 No. 4, pp. 1237-1254, doi: [10.1108/IJLM-09-2017-0222](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJLM-09-2017-0222).
- Diab, A. (2022), "Modern slavery, accountability and technology: evidence from a west Asian context", *Journal of Accounting in Emerging Economies*, Vol. 12 No. 5, pp. 908-933, doi: [10.1108/JAEE-05-2021-0149](https://doi.org/10.1108/JAEE-05-2021-0149).
- Dias, G.P., Silva, M.E. and Gold, S. (2023), "Microfoundations of supply chain sustainability practices: a social capital perspective", *International Journal of Production Economics*, Vol. 263, pp. 1-30, doi: [10.1016/j.ijpe.2023.108947](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpe.2023.108947).
- DiMaggio, P.J. and Powell, W.W. (1983), "The iron cage revisited: institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 48 No. 2, pp. 147-160, doi: [10.2307/2095101](https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101).
- Edmondson, A.C. and McManus, S.E. (2007), "Methodological fit in management field research", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 32 No. 4, pp. 1246-1264, doi: [10.5465/amr.2007.26586086](https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2007.26586086).
- Eisenhardt, K.M. (1989), "Agency theory: an assessment and review", *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 57-74, doi: [10.5465/amr.1989.4279003](https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1989.4279003).
- Emberson, C., Pinheiro, S.M. and Trautrim, A. (2022), "Adaptations to first-tier suppliers' relational anti-slavery capabilities", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 575-593, doi: [10.1108/SCM-10-2020-0505](https://doi.org/10.1108/SCM-10-2020-0505).

- 
- European Trade Institute (ETUI) (2017), "French duty of vigilance law", available at: [www.etui.org/publications/french-duty-of-vigilance-law](http://www.etui.org/publications/french-duty-of-vigilance-law) (accessed 19 March 2024).
- Fayez, S., O'Loughlin, A. and Zutshi, A. (2012), "Agency theory and supply chain management: a structured literature review", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 17 No. 5, pp. 556-570, doi: [10.1108/13598541211258618](https://doi.org/10.1108/13598541211258618).
- Flynn, A. (2020), "Determinants of corporate compliance with modern slavery reporting", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 25 No. 1, pp. 1-16, doi: [10.1108/SCM-10-2018-0369](https://doi.org/10.1108/SCM-10-2018-0369).
- Flynn, A. and Walker, H. (2021), "Corporate responses to modern slavery risks: an institutional theory perspective", *European Business Review*, Vol. 33 No. 2, pp. 295-315, doi: [10.1108/EBR-05-2019-0092](https://doi.org/10.1108/EBR-05-2019-0092).
- Freeman, R.E. (1984), *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, Pitman, Boston, MA.
- Frenkel, S.J., Rahman, S. and Rahman, K.M. (2022), "After rana plaza: governing exploitative workplace labour regimes in Bangladeshi garment export factories", *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 64 No. 2, pp. 272-297, doi: [10.1177/00221856211063924](https://doi.org/10.1177/00221856211063924).
- Geng, R., Lam, H.K. and Stevenson, M. (2022), "Addressing modern slavery in supply chains: an awareness-motivation-capability perspective", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 42 No. 3, pp. 331-356, doi: [10.1108/IJOPM-07-2021-0425](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOPM-07-2021-0425).
- Gold, S., Trautrim, A. and Trodd, Z. (2015), "Modern slavery challenges to supply chain management", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 20 No. 5, pp. 485-494, doi: [10.1108/SCM-02-2015-0046](https://doi.org/10.1108/SCM-02-2015-0046).
- Gorton, M., Kastenhofer, K., Lemke, F., Esquivel, L. and Nicolau, M. (2023), "Resource dependencies and the legitimization of grocery retailer's social evaluations of suppliers", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 192 No. 4, pp. 1-16, doi: [10.1007/s10551-023-05509-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-023-05509-7).
- Govindan, K., Shaw, M. and Majumdar, A. (2021), "Social sustainability tensions in multi-tier supply chain: a systematic literature review towards conceptual framework development", *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 279 No. 2021, pp. 1-22, doi: [10.1016/j.jclepro.2020.123075](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2020.123075).
- Gualandris, J., Klassen, R.D., Vachon, S. and Kalchschmidt, M.G.M. (2015), "Sustainable evaluation and verification in supply chains: aligning and leveraging accountability to stakeholders", *Journal of Operations Management*, Vol. 38 No. 1, pp. 1-13, doi: [10.1016/j.jom.2015.06.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jom.2015.06.002).
- Halldórsson, Á., Hsuan, J. and Kotzab, H. (2015), "Complementary theories to supply chain management revisited—from borrowing theories to theorizing", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 20 No. 6, pp. 574-586, doi: [10.1108/SCM-06-2015-0228](https://doi.org/10.1108/SCM-06-2015-0228).
- Hampton, D.B. (2019), "Modern slavery in global supply chains: can national action plans on business and human rights close the governance gap?", *Business and Human Rights Journal*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 239-263, doi: [10.1017/bhj.2019.16](https://doi.org/10.1017/bhj.2019.16).
- Han, C., Jia, F., Jiang, M. and Chen, L. (2022), "Modern slavery in supply chains: a systematic literature review", *International Journal of Logistics Research and Applications*, Vol. 27 No. 7, pp. 1-22, doi: [10.1080/13675567.2022.2118696](https://doi.org/10.1080/13675567.2022.2118696).
- Hillman, A.J., Withers, M.C. and Collins, B.J. (2009), "Resource dependence theory: a review", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 35 No. 6, pp. 1404-1427, doi: [10.1177/0149206309343469](https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206309343469).
- Hofmann, H., Busse, C., Bode, C. and Henke, M. (2014), "Sustainability-related supply chain risks: conceptualization and management", *Business Strategy and the Environment*, Vol. 23 No. 3, pp. 160-172, doi: [10.1002/bse.1778](https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.1778).
- Hollos, D., Blome, C. and Foerstl, K. (2012), "Does sustainable supplier co-operation affect performance? Examining implications for the triple bottom line", *International Journal of Production Research*, Vol. 50 No. 11, pp. 2968-2986, doi: [10.1080/00207543.2011.582184](https://doi.org/10.1080/00207543.2011.582184).

- Huq, F.A., Chowdhury, IN. and Klassen, R.D. (2016), "Social management capabilities of multinational buying firms and their emerging market suppliers: an exploratory study of the clothing industry", *Journal of Operations Management*, Vol. 46 No. 1, pp. 19-37, doi: [10.1016/j.jom.2016.07.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jom.2016.07.005).
- Huq, F.A., Stevenson, M. and Zorzini, M. (2014), "Social sustainability in developing country suppliers: an exploratory study in the ready-made garments industry of Bangladesh", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 34 No. 5, pp. 610-638, doi: [10.1108/IJOPM-10-2012-0467](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOPM-10-2012-0467).
- International Labour Organization (ILO) (2014), "Protocol of 2014 to the forced labour convention, 1930", available at: [www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:P029](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:P029) (accessed 19 March 2024).
- International Labour Organization (ILO) (2024), *Reporting on Forced Labour and Fair Recruitment: An ILO Toolkit for Mongolian Journalists*, ILO, Geneva, available at: [www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/WCMS\\_752054/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/WCMS_752054/lang-en/index.htm) (accessed 19 March 2024).
- International Labour Organization (ILO), Walk Free, and International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2022), "Global estimates of modern slavery: forced labour and forced marriage", Geneva, available at: [www.walkfree.org/reports/global-estimates-of-modern-slavery-2022/](http://www.walkfree.org/reports/global-estimates-of-modern-slavery-2022/) (accessed 20 July 2023).
- Ishaya, B.J., Paraskevadakis, D., Bury, A. and Bryde, D. (2024), "A systematic literature review of modern slavery through benchmarking global supply chain", *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, Vol. 31 No. 2, pp. 558-589, doi: [10.1108/BIJ-09-2022-0554](https://doi.org/10.1108/BIJ-09-2022-0554).
- Jiang, B. (2009a), "Implementing supplier codes of conduct in global supply chains: process explanations from theoretic and empirical perspectives", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 85 No. 1, pp. 77-92, doi: [10.1007/s10551-008-9750-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-008-9750-z).
- Jiang, B. (2009b), "The effects of interorganizational governance on supplier's compliance with SCC: an empirical examination of compliant and non-compliant suppliers", *Journal of Operations Management*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 267-280, doi: [10.1016/j.jom.2008.09.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jom.2008.09.005).
- Kauppi, K. and Hannibal, C. (2017), "Institutional pressures and sustainability assessment in supply chains", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 22 No. 5, pp. 458-472, doi: [10.1108/SCM-01-2017-0004](https://doi.org/10.1108/SCM-01-2017-0004).
- Kauppi, K. and Luzzini, D. (2021), "Measuring institutional pressures in a supply chain context: scale development and testing", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 27 No. 7, pp. 79-107, doi: [10.1108/SCM-04-2021-0169](https://doi.org/10.1108/SCM-04-2021-0169).
- Kelling, N.K., Sauer, P.C., Gold, S. and Seuring, S. (2021), "The role of institutional uncertainty for social sustainability of companies and supply chains", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 173 No. 4, pp. 813-833, doi: [10.1007/s10551-020-04423-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-020-04423-6).
- Key, S. (1999), "Toward a new theory of the firm: a critique of stakeholder "theory", *Management Decision*, Vol. 37 No. 4, pp. 317-328, doi: [10.1108/00251749910269366](https://doi.org/10.1108/00251749910269366).
- Khalid, R.U., Seuring, S., Beske, P., Land, A., Yawar, S.A. and Wagner, R. (2015), "Putting sustainable supply chain management into base of the pyramid research", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 20 No. 6, pp. 681-696, doi: [10.1108/SCM-06-2015-0214](https://doi.org/10.1108/SCM-06-2015-0214).
- Koberg, E. and Longoni, A. (2019), "A systematic review of sustainable supply chain management in global supply chains", *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 207, pp. 1084-1098, doi: [10.1016/j.jclepro.2018.10.033](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2018.10.033).
- Kovacs, G. (2022), "Stakeholder theory", in Tate, W.L., Ellram, L.M. and Bals, L. (Eds), *Handbook of Theories for Purchasing, Supply Chain and Management Research*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Northampton, MA, pp. 310-319, doi: [10.4337/9781839104503.00024](https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839104503.00024).

- Lafargue, P., Rogerson, M., Parry, G.C. and Allainguillaume, J. (2022), "Broken chocolate: biomarkers as a method for delivering cocoa supply chain visibility", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 27 No. 6, pp. 728-741, doi: [10.1108/SCM-11-2020-0583](https://doi.org/10.1108/SCM-11-2020-0583).
- LeBaron, G. (2021), "The role of supply chains in the global business of forced labour", *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, Vol. 57 No. 2, pp. 29-42, doi: [10.1111/jscm.12258](https://doi.org/10.1111/jscm.12258).
- LeBaron, G. and Gore, E. (2020), "Gender and forced labour: understanding the links in global cocoa supply chains", *The Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 56 No. 6, pp. 1095-1117, doi: [10.1080/00220388.2019.1657570](https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2019.1657570).
- LeBaron, G. and Rühmkorf, A. (2019), "The domestic politics of corporate accountability legislation: struggles over the 2015 UK modern slavery act", *Socio-Economic Review*, Vol. 17 No. 3, pp. 709-743, doi: [10.1093/ser/mwx047](https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwx047).
- LeBaron, G., Lister, J. and Dauvergne, P. (2017), "Governing global supply chain sustainability through the ethical audit regime", *Globalizations*, Vol. 14 No. 6, pp. 958-975, doi: [10.1080/14747731.2017.1304008](https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2017.1304008).
- Liberati, A., Altman, D.G., Tetzlaff, J., Mulrow, C., Gøtzsche, P.C., Ioannidis, J.P., Clarke, M., Devereaux, P.J., Kleijnen, J. and Moher, D. (2009), "The PRISMA statement for reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses of studies that evaluate health care interventions: explanation and elaboration", *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology*, Vol. 62 No. 10, pp. e1-e34, doi: [10.1016/j.jclinepi.2009.06.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclinepi.2009.06.006).
- Liu, T., Suprun, E., Stewart, R.A. and Duran, S. (2022), "Developing a framework for assessing the readiness of entities in the construction industry in addressing modern slavery", *Sustainable Production and Consumption*, Vol. 31, pp. 139-151, doi: [10.1016/j.spc.2022.02.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.spc.2022.02.003).
- Long, Y., Feng, T., Fan, Y. and Liu, L. (2023), "Adopting blockchain technology to enhance green supply chain integration: the moderating role of organizational culture", *Business Strategy and the Environment*, Vol. 32 No. 6, pp. 3326-3343, doi: [10.1002/bse.3302](https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.3302).
- Luzzini, D., Brandon-Jones, E., Brandon-Jones, A. and Spina, G. (2015), "From sustainability commitment to performance: the role of intra-and inter-firm collaborative capabilities in the upstream supply chain", *International Journal of Production Economics*, Vol. 165, pp. 51-63, doi: [10.1016/j.ijpe.2015.03.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpe.2015.03.004).
- McKinley, W. (2010), "Organizational theory development: displacement of ends?", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 31 No. 1, pp. 47-68, doi: [10.1177/0170840609347055](https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840609347055).
- McQuilken, J., Shirgholami, Z. and McFarlane, D. (2022), "Understanding and addressing 'modern slavery' in DRC-UK cobalt supply chains", *Routledge Handbook of the Extractive Industries and Sustainable Development*, pp. 514-541, doi: [10.4324/9781003001317](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003001317).
- Mani, V. and Gunasekaran, A. (2018), "Four forces of supply chain social sustainability adoption in emerging economies", *International Journal of Production Economics*, Vol. 199, pp. 150-161, doi: [10.1016/j.ijpe.2018.02.015](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpe.2018.02.015).
- Mani, V., Gunasekaran, A. and Delgado, C. (2018a), "Enhancing supply chain performance through supplier social sustainability: an emerging economy perspective", *International Journal of Production Economics*, Vol. 195, pp. 259-272, doi: [10.1016/j.ijpe.2017.10.025](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpe.2017.10.025).
- Mani, V., Gunasekaran, A. and Delgado, C. (2018b), "Supply chain social sustainability: standard adoption practices in Portuguese manufacturing firms", *International Journal of Production Economics*, Vol. 198, pp. 149-164, doi: [10.1016/j.ijpe.2018.01.032](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpe.2018.01.032).
- March, J.G. and Olsen, J.P. (1983), "The new institutionalism: organizational factors in political life", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 78 No. 3, pp. 734-749, doi: [10.2307/1961840](https://doi.org/10.2307/1961840).
- Marshall, S., Taylor, K., Connor, T., Haines, F. and Tödt, S. (2022), "Will business and human rights regulation help Rajasthan's bonded labourers who mine sandstone?", *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 64 No. 2, pp. 248-271, doi: [10.1177/00221856211052073](https://doi.org/10.1177/00221856211052073).

- Meehan, J. and Pinnington, B.D. (2021), "Modern slavery in supply chains: insights through strategic ambiguity", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 41 No. 2, pp. 77-101, doi: [10.1108/IJOPM-05-2020-0292](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOPM-05-2020-0292).
- Mehmood, W., Ahmad, A., Aman-Ullah, A. and Mohd-Rashid, R. (2023), "Modern slavery: a literature review using bibliometric analysis and the nexus of governance", *Journal of Public Affairs*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 1-22, doi: [10.1002/pa.2832](https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2832).
- Meinlschmidt, J., Schleper, M.C. and Foerstl, K. (2018), "Tackling the sustainability iceberg: a transaction cost economics approach to lower tier sustainability management", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 38 No. 10, pp. 1888-1914, doi: [10.1108/IJOPM-03-2017-0141](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOPM-03-2017-0141).
- Meixell, M.J. and Luoma, P. (2015), "Stakeholder pressure in sustainable supply chain management: a systematic review", *International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management*, Vol. 45 Nos 1/2, pp. 69-89, doi: [10.1108/IJPDL-05-2013-0155](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPDL-05-2013-0155).
- Mitchell, R.K., Agle, B.R. and Wood, D.J. (1997), "Toward a theory of stakeholder identification and salience: defining the principle of who and what really counts", *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 22 No. 4, pp. 853-886, doi: [10.5465/amr.1997.9711022105](https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1997.9711022105).
- Moller, K. and Halinen, A. (2022), "Clearing the paradigmatic fog – how to move forward in business marketing research", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 102, pp. 280-300, doi: [10.1016/j.indmarman.2022.01.021](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2022.01.021).
- Monciardini, D., Bernaz, N. and Andhov, A. (2021), "The organizational dynamics of compliance with the UK modern slavery act in the food and tobacco sector", *Business and Society*, Vol. 60 No. 2, pp. 288-340, doi: [10.1177/0007650319898195](https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650319898195).
- Moxham, C. and Kauppi, K. (2014), "Using organisational theories to further our understanding of socially sustainable supply chains: the case of fair trade", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 413-420, doi: [10.1108/SCM-09-2013-0332](https://doi.org/10.1108/SCM-09-2013-0332).
- Nakamba, C.C., Chan, P.W. and Sharmina, M. (2017), "How does social sustainability feature in studies of supply chain management? A review and research agenda", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 22 No. 6, pp. 522-541, doi: [10.1108/SCM-12-2016-0436](https://doi.org/10.1108/SCM-12-2016-0436).
- Nandi, S., Sarkis, J., Hervani, A. and Helms, M. (2021), "Do blockchain and circular economy practices improve post COVID-19 supply chains? A resource-based and resource dependence perspective", *Industrial Management and Data Systems*, Vol. 121 No. 2, pp. 333-363, doi: [10.1108/IMDS-09-2020-0560](https://doi.org/10.1108/IMDS-09-2020-0560).
- Nath, S.D., Eweje, G. and Sajjad, A. (2020), "The hidden side of sub-supplier firms' sustainability—an empirical analysis", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 40 No. 12, pp. 1771-1799, doi: [10.1108/IJOPM-05-2019-0403](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOPM-05-2019-0403).
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (1926), "United nations slavery convention 1926", Geneva, available at: [www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/slavery-convention](http://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/slavery-convention) (accessed 18 March 2024).
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (1956), "Supplementary convention on the abolition of slavery, the slave trade, and institutions and practices similar to slavery 1956", Geneva, Switzerland, available at: [www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/supplementary-convention-abolition-slavery-slave-trade-and](http://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/supplementary-convention-abolition-slavery-slave-trade-and) (accessed 19 March 2024).
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2000), "Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons especially women and children, supplementing the united nations convention against transnational organized crime", Geneva, available at: [www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons](http://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons) (accessed 19 March 2023).
- Oliver, C. (1991), "Strategic responses to institutional processes", *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 145-179, doi: [10.5465/amr.1991.4279002](https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1991.4279002).

- 
- Page, M.J., McKenzie, J.E., Bossuyt, P.M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T.C., Mulrow, C.D., Shamseer, L., Tetzlaff, J.M., Akl, E.A., Brennan, S.E. and Chou, R. (2021), "The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews", *BMJ*, Vol. 2021 No. 372:n71, pp. 1-9, doi: [10.1136/bmj.n71](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71).
- Pagell, M., Wu, Z. and Wasserman, M.E. (2010), "Thinking differently about purchasing portfolios: an assessment of sustainable sourcing", *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, Vol. 46 No. 1, pp. 57-73, doi: [10.1111/j.1745-493X.2009.03186.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-493X.2009.03186.x).
- Paulraj, A., Chen, I.J. and Blome, C. (2017), "Motives and performance outcomes of sustainable supply chain management practices: a multi-theoretical perspective", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 145 No. 2, pp. 239-258, doi: [10.1007/s10551-015-2857-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2857-0).
- Pinnington, B., Benstead, A. and Meehan, J. (2023), "Transparency in supply chains (TISC): assessing and improving the quality of modern slavery statements", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 182 No. 3, pp. 619-636, doi: [10.1007/s10551-022-05037-w](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05037-w).
- Quarshie, A.M., Salmi, A. and Leuschner, R. (2016), "Sustainability and corporate social responsibility in supply chains: the state of research in supply chain management and business ethics journals", *Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management*, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 82-97, doi: [10.1016/j.pursup.2015.11.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pursup.2015.11.001).
- Robb, B. and Michailova, S. (2022), "Multinational enterprises' narratives about and approaches to modern slavery: an exploratory study", *Review of International Business and Strategy*, Vol. 33 No. 2, pp. 199-218, doi: [10.1108/RIBS-10-2021-0128](https://doi.org/10.1108/RIBS-10-2021-0128).
- Rogerson, M. and Parry, G.C. (2020), "Blockchain: case studies in food supply chain visibility", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 25 No. 5, pp. 601-614, doi: [10.1108/SCM-08-2019-0300](https://doi.org/10.1108/SCM-08-2019-0300).
- Rogerson, M., Scarpa, F. and Snelson-Powell, A. (2024), "Accounting for human rights: evidence of due diligence in EU-listed firms' reporting", *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, Vol. 99, pp. 1-19, doi: [10.1016/j.cpa.2024.102716](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpa.2024.102716).
- Roscoe, S., Subramanian, N., Prifti, R. and Wu, L. (2020), "Stakeholder engagement in a sustainable sales and operations planning process", *Business Strategy and the Environment*, Vol. 29 No. 8, pp. 3526-3541, doi: [10.1002/bse.2594](https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.2594).
- Rudyanto, A. and Siregar, S.V. (2018), "The effect of stakeholder pressure and corporate governance on the sustainability report quality", *International Journal of Ethics and Systems*, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 233-249, doi: [10.1108/IJOES-05-2017-0071](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOES-05-2017-0071).
- Sancha, C., Gimenez, C. and Sierra, V. (2016), "Achieving a socially responsible supply chain through assessment and collaboration", *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 112 No. 3, pp. 1934-1947, doi: [10.1016/j.jclepro.2015.04.137](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2015.04.137).
- Sarkis, J., Zhu, Q. and Lai, K.H. (2011), "An organizational theoretic review of green supply chain management literature", *International Journal of Production Economics*, Vol. 130 No. 1, pp. 1-15, doi: [10.1016/j.ijpe.2010.11.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpe.2010.11.010).
- Schaper, S. and Pollach, I. (2021), "Modern slavery statements: from regulation to substantive supply chain reporting", *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 313, pp. 1-12, doi: [10.1016/j.jclepro.2021.127872](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2021.127872).
- Schnittfeld, N.L. and Busch, T. (2016), "Sustainability management within supply chains—a resource dependence view", *Business Strategy and the Environment*, Vol. 25 No. 5, pp. 337-354, doi: [10.1002/bse.1876](https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.1876).
- Schultz, F. and Wehmeier, S. (2010), "Institutionalization of corporate social responsibility within corporate communications: combining institutional, sensemaking and communication perspectives", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 9-29, doi: [10.1108/13563281011016813](https://doi.org/10.1108/13563281011016813).
- Scott, W.R. (1995), *Institutions and Organizations*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

- Shook, C.L., Adams, G.L., Ketchen, D.J. and Craighead, C.W. (2009), "Towards a "theoretical toolbox" for strategic sourcing", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 3-10, doi: [10.1108/13598540910927250](https://doi.org/10.1108/13598540910927250).
- Silvestre, B.S. (2015), "Sustainable supply chain management in emerging economies: environmental turbulence, institutional voids and sustainability trajectories", *International Journal of Production Economics*, Vol. 167, pp. 156-169, doi: [10.1016/j.ijpe.2015.05.025](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpe.2015.05.025).
- Silvestre, B.S., Viana, F.L.E. and Sousa Monteiro, M.D. (2020), "Supply chain corruption practices circumventing sustainability standards: wolves in sheep's clothing", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 40 No. 12, pp. 1873-1907, doi: [10.1108/IJOPM-06-2019-0454](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOPM-06-2019-0454).
- Silvestre, B.S., Monteiro, M.S., Viana, F.L.E. and de Sousa-Filho, J.M. (2018), "Challenges for sustainable supply chain management: when stakeholder collaboration becomes conducive to corruption", *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 194, pp. 766-776, doi: [10.1016/j.jclepro.2018.05.127](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2018.05.127).
- Simpson, D., Segrave, M., Quarshie, A., Kach, A., Handfield, R., Panas, G. and Moore, H. (2021), "The role of psychological distance in organizational responses to modern slavery risk in supply chains", *Journal of Operations Management*, Vol. 67 No. 8, pp. 989-1016, doi: [10.1002/joom.1157](https://doi.org/10.1002/joom.1157).
- Snyder, H. (2019), "Literature review as a research methodology: an overview and guidelines", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 104, pp. 333-339, doi: [10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039).
- Sokat, K.Y. and Altay, N. (2022), "Impact of modern slavery allegations on operating performance", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 28 No. 3, pp. 470-485, doi: [10.1108/SCM-08-2021-0387](https://doi.org/10.1108/SCM-08-2021-0387).
- Sovacool, B.K. (2021), "When subterranean slavery supports sustainability transitions? Power, patriarchy, and child labor in artisanal Congolese cobalt mining", *The Extractive Industries and Society*, Vol. 8 No. 1, pp. 271-293, doi: [10.1016/j.exis.2020.11.018](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2020.11.018).
- State of California (2010), "The California transparency in supply chains act", available at: <https://oag.ca.gov/SB657> (accessed 19 March 2024).
- Stevenson, M. (2022), "Hidden in plain sight: the bystander effect and the mobilisation of modern slavery whistleblowing", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 27 No. 1, pp. 128-139, doi: [10.1108/SCM-08-2020-0373](https://doi.org/10.1108/SCM-08-2020-0373).
- Stevenson, M. and Cole, R. (2018), "Modern slavery in supply chains: a secondary data analysis of detection, remediation, and disclosure", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 81-99, doi: [10.1108/SCM-11-2017-0382](https://doi.org/10.1108/SCM-11-2017-0382).
- Strand, V., Lotfi, M., Flynn, A. and Walker, H. (2023), "A systematic literature review of modern slavery in supply chain management: state of the art, framework development and research opportunities", *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 435, pp. 1-20, doi: [10.1016/j.jclepro.2023.140301](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2023.140301).
- Stringer, C. and Michailova, S. (2018), "Why modern slavery thrives in multinational corporations' global value chains", *Multinational Business Review*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 194-206, doi: [10.1108/MBR-04-2018-0032](https://doi.org/10.1108/MBR-04-2018-0032).
- Stringer, C., Burmester, B. and Michailova, S. (2022), "Modern slavery and the governance of labor exploitation in the Thai fishing industry", *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 371, pp. 1-11, doi: [10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.133645](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.133645).
- Stringer, C., Whittaker, D.H. and Simmons, G. (2016), "New Zealand's turbulent waters: the use of forced labour in the fishing industry", *Global Networks*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 3-24, doi: [10.1111/glob.12077](https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12077).
- Touboulic, A. and Walker, H.L. (2015), "Theories in sustainable supply chain management: a structured literature review", *International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management*, Vol. 45 Nos 1/2, pp. 16-42, doi: [10.1108/IJPDLM-05-2013-0106](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPDLM-05-2013-0106).

- 
- Touboulic, A., Chicksand, D. and Walker, H. (2014), "Managing imbalanced supply chain relationships for sustainability: a power perspective", *Decision Sciences*, Vol. 45 No. 4, pp. 577-619, doi: [10.1111/deci.12087](https://doi.org/10.1111/deci.12087).
- Tranfield, D., Denyer, D. and Smart, P. (2003), "Towards a methodology for developing evidence-informed management knowledge by means of systematic review", *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 14 No. 3, pp. 207-222, doi: [10.1111/1467-8551.00375](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.00375).
- Treiblmaier, H. (2018), "The impact of the blockchain on the supply chain: a theory-based research framework and a call for action", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 23 No. 6, pp. 545-559, doi: [10.1108/SCM-01-2018-0029](https://doi.org/10.1108/SCM-01-2018-0029).
- Uddin, S., Ahmed, M.S. and Shahadat, K. (2023), "Supply chain accountability, COVID-19, and violations of workers' rights in the global clothing supply chain", *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 28 No. 5, pp. 859-873, doi: [10.1108/SCM-07-2022-0280](https://doi.org/10.1108/SCM-07-2022-0280).
- United Kingdom (UK) Government (2015), "Modern slavery act 2015", available at: [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/pdfs/ukpga\\_20150030\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/pdfs/ukpga_20150030_en.pdf) (accessed 19 March 2023).
- United Nations (UN) (1948), "Universal declaration of human rights", available at: [www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights](http://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights) (accessed 19 March 2024).
- United Nations (UN) (2015), "Sustainable development goals", available at: [www.unodc.org/roseap/en/sustainable-development-goals.html](http://www.unodc.org/roseap/en/sustainable-development-goals.html) (accessed 18 March 2024).
- Uttam, N., Dutta, P. and Singh, A. (2024), "Influence of stakeholders on supply chain social sustainability: new insights from small suppliers in the Indian manufacturing sector", *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 444, pp. 1-25, doi: [10.1016/j.jclepro.2024.141015](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2024.141015).
- Vandenbroucke, S. (2024), "The portrayal of effectiveness of supplier codes of conduct in improving labor conditions in global supply chains: a systematic review of the literature", *Regulation and Governance*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 307-327, doi: [10.1111/rego.12514](https://doi.org/10.1111/rego.12514).
- Wang, Z., Huo, B., Tian, Y. and Hua, Z. (2015), "Effects of external uncertainties and power on opportunism in supply chains: evidence from China", *International Journal of Production Research*, Vol. 53 No. 20, pp. 6294-6307, doi: [10.1080/00207543.2015.1053578](https://doi.org/10.1080/00207543.2015.1053578).
- Weber, J. and Marley, K.A. (2012), "In search of stakeholder salience: exploring corporate social and sustainability reports", *Business and Society*, Vol. 51 No. 4, pp. 626-649, doi: [10.1177/0007650309353061](https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650309353061).
- Wilhelm, M.M., Blome, C., Bhakoo, V. and Paulraj, A. (2016), "Sustainability in multi-tier supply chains: understanding the double agency role of the first-tier supplier", *Journal of Operations Management*, Vol. 41 No. 1, pp. 42-60, doi: [10.1016/j.jom.2015.11.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jom.2015.11.001).
- Wilhelm, M., Kadfak, A., Bhakoo, V. and Skattang, K. (2020), "Private governance of human and labor rights in seafood supply chains—the case of the modern slavery crisis in Thailand", *Marine Policy*, Vol. 115, pp. 1-8, doi: [10.1016/j.marpol.2020.103833](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2020.103833).
- Williamson, O.E. (1981), "The economics of organization: the transaction cost approach", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 87 No. 3, pp. 548-577, available at: [www.jstor.org/stable/2778934](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2778934)
- Williamson, O.E. (2008), "Outsourcing: transaction cost economics and supply chain management", *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, Vol. 44 No. 2, pp. 5-16, doi: [10.1111/j.1745-493X.2008.00051.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-493X.2008.00051.x).
- Wu, Z. and Jia, F. (2018), "Toward a theory of supply chain fields—understanding the institutional process of supply chain localization", *Journal of Operations Management*, Vol. 58-59 No. 1, pp. 27-41, doi: [10.1016/j.jom.2018.03.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jom.2018.03.002).
- Yadlapalli, A., Rahman, S. and Gunasekaran, A. (2018), "Socially responsible governance mechanisms for manufacturing firms in apparel supply chains", *International Journal of Production Economics*, Vol. 196, pp. 135-149, doi: [10.1016/j.ijpe.2017.11.016](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpe.2017.11.016).

Yu, X. (2008), "Impacts of corporate code of conduct on labor standards: a case study of reebok's athletic footwear supplier factory in China", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 81 No. 3, pp. 513-529, doi: [10.1007/s10551-007-9521-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-007-9521-2).

Zorzini, M., Hendry, L.C., Huq, F.A. and Stevenson, M. (2015), "Socially responsible sourcing: reviewing the literature and its use of theory", *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 60-109, doi: [10.1108/IJOPM-07-2013-0355](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOPM-07-2013-0355).

---

Zsidisin, G.A. (2022), "Agency theory in purchasing and supply management", *Handbook of Theories for Purchasing, Supply Chain and Management Research*, Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 186-198, doi: [10.4337/9781839104503.00017](https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839104503.00017).

Appendix 1. Secondary research directions for MS

Table A1. Secondary research directions for MS

Theory	Extant SSCM related study and source	Secondary research direction for MS
Institutional theory	<p>(1) Normative pressure from media coverage can compel firms to address MS in their SCs (Sokat and Altay, 2022). Activists have become proficient in using social media to hold MNCs accountable for unsustainable practices (Paulraj et al., 2017)</p> <p>(2) Low-tier suppliers decouple implementation of sustainable practices due to conflicting institutional logics; they use various decoupling strategies such as concealment, misleading presentation and symbolic adoption (Nath et al., 2020)</p> <p>(3) Institutional pressures for sustainability can cause symbolic rather than substantive adoption of sustainability standards, leading to SC corruption practices (Silvestre et al., 2020)</p> <p>(4) Firms with SCs in countries with weak and/or deficient institutions must engage in institutional work to create institutional infrastructure for proper functioning of their SCs (Wu and Jia, 2018)</p>	<p>(1) Analyze the role of the media in applying normative pressure on firms to address MS</p> <p>(2) Examine how conflicting institutional logics can cause low-tier suppliers to decouple implementation of MS-free practices, and the decoupling strategies they may use</p> <p>(3) Investigate how institutional pressures may cause symbolic rather than substantive adoption of MS-free practices</p> <p>(4) Using the concept of institutional work, investigate how firms can create or enhance institutions that foster MS-free practices in their SCs in countries with weak, deficient, absent or corrupt institutions</p>
Stakeholder theory	<p>(1) Media reports of allegations of MS can have detrimental impact on the firms involved (Sokat and Altay, 2022)</p>	<p>(1) Future empirical research may investigate the media as a stakeholder group and how it can influence firms to address MS</p>
Resource-based view	<p>(1) Socially sustainable SCs can enhance firm reputation and performance (Moxham and Kauppi, 2014). Allegations or evidence of MS can damage firm reputation and tarnish corporate brands (Sokat and Altay, 2022). A well-maintained corporate reputation is a valuable, rare and inimitable resource (Barney, 1991)</p> <p>(2) Firms can use blockchain technology to ensure traceability of products in SCs and gain competitive advantages (Rogerson and Parry, 2020). Blockchain</p>	<p>(1) Future empirical research can analyze how slavery-free SCs can be a valuable resource that enhances corporate reputation and competitiveness</p> <p>(2) More empirical research is required on how firms can use new technologies such as blockchain to combat MS and gain competitive advantages</p>

(continued)

Table A1. Continued

Theory	Extant SSCM related study and source	Secondary research direction for MS
	can increase transparency which helps to protect workers' rights (Benstead <i>et al.</i> , 2022), and reduce deceptive recruitment of migrant workers (Christ and Helliar, 2021)	
Resource dependence theory	(1) Power dynamics between firms and suppliers influence management of sustainability issues; although powerful firms can enforce suppliers' sustainability, asymmetric power relations can impede sustainability efforts (Touboulic <i>et al.</i> , 2014)	(1) Analyze power dynamics in buyer–supplier relationships and how they affect dissemination and implementation of slavery-free practices in SCs
Principal agent theory	(1) New technologies can address agency issues, for instance, blockchain technology can increase SC visibility, information transparency and trust (Rogerson and Parry, 2020). Biomarker technology can improve visibility and traceability (Lafargue <i>et al.</i> , 2022) (2) Suppliers' ability to implement buying firms' social standards is influenced by agency problems embedded in institutional, social and cultural settings in which they are located (Yu, 2008)	(1) Empirically investigate how new technologies such as blockchain could address agency problems in SCs and help eliminate MS. (2) Examine how agency problems in diverse settings can contribute toward MS, and influence the implementation of MS-free practices
Transaction cost economics	(1) Technologies that reduce the cost of implementing sustainable practices in SCs are likely to be adopted (Connelly <i>et al.</i> , 2011). Some researchers have explored new technologies that can help tackle social issues and MS in SCs (e.g. Lafargue <i>et al.</i> , 2022) (2) TCE focuses on how firms and their managers can maximize gains and minimize costs (Williamson, 1981). Low-tier suppliers or subcontractors can introduce slavery into SCs, unbeknownst to firms (Liu <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	(1) More empirical research is required to understand how innovative technologies may reduce transaction costs of implementing slavery-free practices in SCs (2) In-depth empirical research is required on how minor parties such as low-tier suppliers can become the centre of influence in transactions costs in SCs through the use of slave labor

Source: Author's own work

### About the author

Nicolle A. Montgomery completed her PhD in the School of Economics and Finance at Massey University in Auckland, New Zealand. Montgomery has received an Emerald Literati Award. Her research interests include modern slavery, knowledge management, disruptive innovation theory and PropTech. Montgomery has published in the *Journal of Knowledge Management* (ranked A by ABDC) and *Property Management* (ranked B by ABDC). Prior to postgraduate study, she worked as a management consultant in the Auckland office of a global consulting firm listed on the Helsinki Stock Exchange and headquartered in Vantaa, Finland. She has a strong track record in delivering high-quality consulting assignments world-wide, having conducted market, industry and financial analyses for companies of all sizes across New Zealand, Australia, Asia, Europe, USA, South America and South Africa. Nicolle A. Montgomery can be contacted at: [n@nicollemontgomery.com](mailto:n@nicollemontgomery.com)