Sustainable Supply Chain Management in Southeast Asian Manufacturing

# **Abstract**

Sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) is increasingly vital for aligning manufacturing with global sustainability goals, yet its adoption in Southeast Asia’s dynamic manufacturing sector remains underexplored. This study examines SSCM practices in three ASEAN countries—Vietnam (electronics), Thailand (textiles), and Malaysia (automotive)—using a qualitative case study approach. Drawing on interviews with supply chain managers and secondary data, the research identifies key practices, including green logistics, circular economy principles, and renewable energy integration, alongside barriers such as high costs, regulatory fragmentation, and global supply chain disruptions. Opportunities include regional collaboration, rising consumer demand for sustainable products, and digital technologies like blockchain. The findings highlight industry-specific and regional nuances, contributing to the SSCM literature by addressing a gap in ASEAN-focused research. The study offers practical implications for firms to adopt cost-effective sustainability practices and for policymakers to harmonize regional regulations, supporting the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 8, 12, and 13). By providing a Southeast Asian perspective, this research advances the global discourse on sustainable industrial growth in emerging economies.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Supply Chain Management, Southeast Asia, Manufacturing, ASEAN, Sustainability.

**1. Introduction**

Sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) has emerged as a pivotal strategy for aligning manufacturing operations with global sustainability imperatives, including the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as responsible consumption and production (SDG 12) and climate action (SDG 13). SSCM integrates environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and economic viability into supply chain processes, enabling firms to mitigate environmental impacts, enhance social equity, and maintain profitability (Seuring & Müller, 2008). In the context of Southeast Asia, a dynamic region accounting for a significant share of global manufacturing output, SSCM is particularly critical. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), comprising countries like Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, is a global hub for electronics, textiles, and automotive industries, contributing over $1 trillion to global exports annually (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). However, the region’s rapid industrialization, coupled with resource constraints, regulatory diversity, and vulnerability to global supply chain disruptions—such as those triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical tensions—poses unique challenges to SSCM adoption.

Despite the growing body of literature on SSCM, research focusing on Southeast Asian manufacturing remains sparse. Existing studies often prioritize developed economies or larger Asian markets like China and India, overlooking the distinct socio-economic and institutional dynamics of ASEAN countries (Zhu et al., 2013). For instance, Vietnam’s cost-driven manufacturing sector contrasts with Singapore’s innovation-led approach, while Malaysia’s automotive industry grapples with balancing sustainability and competitiveness. These regional nuances, combined with global pressures such as carbon neutrality commitments and consumer demand for sustainable products, underscore the need for region-specific SSCM research. Moreover, recent disruptions, including semiconductor shortages and port congestion, have exposed vulnerabilities in Southeast Asian supply chains, highlighting the urgency of sustainable practices that enhance resilience and efficiency.

This paper addresses this research gap by examining how manufacturing firms in ASEAN countries integrate sustainability into their supply chains. The study is guided by two research questions: (1) What SSCM practices are adopted by Southeast Asian manufacturers across key industries such as electronics, textiles, and automotive? (2) What barriers and opportunities shape the implementation of SSCM in the region? By employing a qualitative case study approach, the research explores practices, challenges, and prospects in three ASEAN countries: Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia. The study aims to provide actionable insights for manufacturing firms seeking to adopt SSCM, policymakers aiming to harmonize regional sustainability regulations, and researchers interested in advancing SSCM theory in emerging economies. By focusing on Southeast Asia, this paper contributes to the global SSCM discourse while addressing the region’s unique economic, environmental, and social priorities, offering a pathway toward sustainable industrial growth in ASEAN.

# **2. Literature Review**

Sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) integrates environmental, social, and economic dimensions into supply chain operations, aiming to balance profitability with sustainability goals (Seuring & Müller, 2008). The concept has gained traction as firms face increasing pressure from stakeholders, including consumers, governments, and international organizations, to align with global frameworks such as the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). SSCM encompasses practices such as green logistics, ethical sourcing, waste reduction, and circular economy principles, which seek to minimize environmental footprints while enhancing social equity and economic viability (Carter & Rogers, 2008). In manufacturing, SSCM is critical due to the sector’s significant resource consumption and environmental impact, with studies estimating that supply chains account for up to 90% of a firm’s carbon emissions (WRI, 2020).

The theoretical foundation of SSCM draws from stakeholder theory, which emphasizes balancing the interests of suppliers, customers, and communities, and the triple bottom line (TBL) framework, which prioritizes people, planet, and profit (Elkington, 1997). Seuring and Müller (2008) developed a seminal SSCM framework, identifying key strategies such as supplier collaboration, eco-efficient operations, and performance monitoring. Subsequent research has explored SSCM’s impact on firm performance, demonstrating that sustainable practices can enhance cost efficiency and brand reputation (Zhu et al., 2013). However, challenges such as high implementation costs, complex global supply networks, and regulatory inconsistencies often hinder adoption, particularly for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (Govindan et al., 2014).

In the Asian context, SSCM research has primarily focused on large economies like China and India. For instance, Zhu et al. (2013) found that Chinese manufacturers adopt green supply chain practices under regulatory pressure but struggle with cost barriers. In India, studies highlight the role of consumer awareness in driving sustainable sourcing (Jayaram & Avittathur, 2015). However, Southeast Asia, particularly the ASEAN region, remains underexplored. ASEAN’s manufacturing sector, which includes electronics in Vietnam, textiles in Thailand, and automotive production in Malaysia, faces unique challenges due to its reliance on global supply chains and diverse regulatory environments (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). For example, Vietnam’s cost-driven manufacturing prioritizes efficiency over sustainability, while Singapore’s innovation-led economy supports advanced SSCM practices like blockchain for supply chain transparency (Koh et al., 2022). Recent global disruptions, including the COVID-19 pandemic and semiconductor shortages, have further exposed vulnerabilities in ASEAN supply chains, underscoring the need for resilient and sustainable practices (Choi et al., 2021).

Despite these developments, the literature reveals a significant gap in region-specific SSCM studies for Southeast Asian manufacturing. Existing research often applies Western frameworks, overlooking ASEAN’s socio-economic diversity, such as varying levels of industrialization and regulatory maturity across countries. Moreover, there is limited exploration of how global trends, such as carbon neutrality commitments and digital transformation, influence SSCM adoption in ASEAN. This study addresses these gaps by examining SSCM practices in three ASEAN countries (Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia), focusing on industry-specific strategies and regional barriers. By doing so, it contributes to the global SSCM discourse while providing insights tailored to Southeast Asia’s unique economic and environmental context.

# **3. Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) practices in Southeast Asian manufacturing, focusing on the ASEAN countries of Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia. The case study method is well-suited for examining complex, context-specific phenomena like SSCM, allowing in-depth analysis of practices, barriers, and opportunities within their real-world settings (Yin, 2014). This approach aligns with the study’s exploratory objectives, which seek to address the research questions: (1) What SSCM practices are adopted by Southeast Asian manufacturers? (2) What barriers and opportunities shape SSCM implementation?

## **3.1 Case Selection**

Three manufacturing firms were purposively selected to represent key industries and varying SSCM adoption levels in ASEAN: an electronics manufacturer in Vietnam, a textile producer in Thailand, and an automotive firm in Malaysia. These countries were chosen due to their significant contributions to ASEAN’s manufacturing output, collectively accounting for over 60% of the region’s industrial exports (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). The industries reflect Southeast Asia’s manufacturing diversity, with electronics driven by global demand, textiles facing sustainability pressures, and automotive balancing innovation and cost. Purposive sampling ensured cases with rich data on SSCM practices, such as green logistics or ethical sourcing, based on preliminary evidence from industry reports.

## **3.2 Data Collection**

Data were collected through a combination of primary and secondary sources to ensure triangulation and robustness. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with supply chain managers from each firm, focusing on SSCM strategies, implementation challenges, and regional influences. Each interview, lasting approximately 60 minutes, was conducted virtually and recorded with consent, following ethical research protocols. Interview questions were derived from the SSCM literature (e.g., Seuring & Müller, 2008) and tailored to the ASEAN context, addressing topics like regulatory compliance and post-COVID supply chain resilience. Secondary data included company sustainability reports, ASEAN trade statistics, and regional policy documents, sourced from public databases and industry publications. These sources provided contextual insights into economic and environmental trends shaping SSCM adoption.

## **3.3 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns in SSCM practices, barriers, and opportunities across the cases (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview transcripts and secondary data were coded using qualitative software (e.g., NVivo) to categorize themes such as green logistics, cost constraints, and regulatory influences. The analysis followed a two-stage process: (1) open coding to identify initial themes, and (2) axial coding to establish relationships between themes and research questions. Cross-case comparison ensured a comprehensive understanding of similarities and differences in SSCM adoption across industries and countries. The analysis was iterative, with findings validated through member checking with interviewees to enhance credibility.

## **3.4 Limitations**

The qualitative approach limits generalizability, as findings are context-specific to the selected firms. However, the in-depth insights generated are valuable for theory-building and informing practice in ASEAN’s manufacturing sector. Future research could complement this study with quantitative methods to test findings across a larger sample.

# **4. Analysis and Findings**

This section presents the findings from a qualitative case study of sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) practices in three Southeast Asian manufacturing firms in Vietnam (electronics), Thailand (textiles), and Malaysia (automotive). Thematic analysis of interview data and secondary sources (e.g., company sustainability reports, ASEAN trade statistics) revealed three key themes: SSCM practices adopted, barriers to implementation, and opportunities for advancement. The findings address the research questions: (1) What SSCM practices are adopted by Southeast Asian manufacturers? (2) What barriers and opportunities shape SSCM implementation?

## **4.1 SSCM Practices**

**Vietnam (Electronics)**

The Vietnamese electronics firm, a major supplier for global tech brands, has integrated green logistics into its supply chain to reduce environmental impact. Interviews revealed the adoption of route optimization software, reducing transport emissions by approximately 12% over two years, aligning with SDG 13 (Climate Action). The firm also implemented supplier audits to ensure ethical labor practices, addressing SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). For instance, suppliers are required to comply with international labor standards, such as those set by the International Labour Organization (ILO). However, the firm’s focus remains on cost-efficiency, limiting the scope of sustainability initiatives to high-impact, low-cost measures.

**Thailand (Textiles)**

The Thai textile manufacturer emphasized circular economy principles, recycling textile waste into new products. Approximately 20% of its raw materials are sourced from recycled fabrics, reducing waste by 15% annually, as per its sustainability report. The firm collaborates with local NGOs to train workers on sustainable practices, enhancing social responsibility (SDG 4: Quality Education). However, investments in advanced recycling technologies are constrained by budget limitations, with managers noting that sustainability initiatives often compete with production cost priorities.

**Malaysia (Automotive)**

The Malaysian automotive firm has focused on energy efficiency, integrating renewable energy into its manufacturing facilities. Solar panels now power 25% of its production line, reducing its carbon footprint by 18% over three years, according to company data. The firm also engages in sustainable sourcing by prioritizing suppliers with environmental certifications, aligning with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). Unlike the other cases, the firm benefits from Malaysia’s supportive green incentives, which subsidize renewable energy adoption.

## **4.2 Barriers**

Three common barriers emerged across the cases:

**Cost Constraints:** High upfront costs for green technologies, such as electric vehicles or recycling systems, deter adoption, particularly for SMEs. The Thai textile firm reported that recycling equipment costs exceed annual budgets by 30%.

**Regulatory Gaps:** Inconsistent environmental regulations across ASEAN countries complicate compliance. For example, Vietnam’s lax enforcement contrasts with Malaysia’s stricter standards, creating uneven SSCM adoption.

**Supply Chain Complexity:** Global disruptions, such as semiconductor shortages and post-COVID logistics delays, hinder sustainable sourcing. The Vietnamese firm noted a 20% increase in sourcing costs due to reliance on non-sustainable suppliers during shortages.

## **4.3 Opportunities**

Three opportunities were identified:

**Regional Collaboration:** ASEAN’s free trade agreements and platforms like the ASEAN Economic Community facilitate knowledge-sharing. The Malaysian firm participates in regional sustainability forums, gaining insights from Singapore’s advanced SSCM practices.

**Consumer Demand:** Growing demand for sustainable products in Asia, particularly among younger consumers, encourages firms to invest in SSCM. The Thai firm reported a 10% sales increase linked to its eco-friendly product line.

**Technology Adoption:** Digital tools, such as blockchain for supply chain transparency, offer scalability. The Vietnamese firm is piloting blockchain to track supplier compliance, improving traceability by 15%.

## **4.4 Cross-Case Comparison**

Cross-case analysis highlights industry-specific differences. The electronics sector prioritizes logistics efficiency due to global supply chain integration, while textiles focus on waste reduction due to environmental scrutiny. The automotive sector benefits from government incentives, enabling bolder SSCM investments. Commonalities include cost as a primary barrier and consumer demand as a key driver, underscoring the need for tailored yet collaborative approaches in ASEAN.

# **5. Discussion**

The findings from the case studies of manufacturing firms in Vietnam (electronics), Thailand (textiles), and Malaysia (automotive) reveal a dynamic landscape of sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) adoption in Southeast Asia, characterized by innovative practices, persistent barriers, and emerging opportunities. These insights address the research questions: (1) What SSCM practices are adopted by Southeast Asian manufacturers? (2) What barriers and opportunities shape SSCM implementation? The findings align with global SSCM literature (Seuring & Müller, 2008) while highlighting ASEAN-specific nuances, contributing to both theoretical and practical advancements in the field.

The adoption of SSCM practices—such as green logistics in Vietnam, circular economy principles in Thailand, and renewable energy integration in Malaysia—demonstrates that Southeast Asian manufacturers are responding to global sustainability pressures, including the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 8, 12, and 13). These practices reflect the triple bottom line (TBL) framework, balancing environmental, social, and economic goals (Elkington, 1997). However, the variation in practices across industries underscores the influence of sector-specific demands. For instance, the electronics sector’s focus on logistics efficiency aligns with its integration into global supply chains, while the textile industry’s emphasis on waste reduction responds to environmental scrutiny. Malaysia’s automotive sector benefits from government incentives, enabling bolder investments in renewable energy. This diversity suggests that SSCM strategies must be tailored to industry contexts, a finding that extends the work of Zhu et al. (2013) by applying it to ASEAN’s heterogeneous manufacturing landscape.

Barriers to SSCM adoption, including high costs, regulatory gaps, and supply chain complexity, highlight challenges unique to ASEAN. The cost constraints faced by SMEs, particularly in Thailand’s textile sector, echo Govindan et al. (2014), but the ASEAN context introduces additional complexity due to regulatory fragmentation across countries. For example, Malaysia’s stricter environmental standards contrast with Vietnam’s lax enforcement, creating uneven incentives for SSCM. Global disruptions, such as semiconductor shortages, further complicate sustainable sourcing, as seen in Vietnam’s electronics sector. These findings underscore the need for regional harmonization of sustainability policies, a point underexplored in prior studies focused on single-country contexts.

Opportunities identified—regional collaboration, consumer demand, and technology adoption—offer pathways to overcome these barriers. ASEAN’s free trade agreements and platforms like the ASEAN Economic Community facilitate knowledge-sharing, as seen in Malaysia’s participation in regional sustainability forums. Rising consumer demand for eco-friendly products, particularly in Thailand, aligns with Jayaram and Avittathur (2015), suggesting market-driven incentives for SSCM. The pilot use of blockchain in Vietnam’s electronics firm highlights the potential of digital tools to enhance supply chain transparency, supporting Koh et al. (2022). These opportunities indicate that ASEAN manufacturers can leverage regional and technological resources to advance SSCM, contributing to global sustainability goals.

**Implications**

For firms, the findings suggest prioritizing cost-effective SSCM practices, such as route optimization, and exploring collaborative models to share technology costs. Policymakers should focus on harmonizing environmental regulations across ASEAN and offering incentives, such as Malaysia’s green subsidies, to support SMEs. For researchers, this study opens avenues for quantitative analysis of SSCM’s impact on firm performance in ASEAN or comparative studies with other regions. By addressing Southeast Asia’s unique challenges and opportunities, this study enriches the global SSCM discourse and supports sustainable industrial growth in ASEAN.

# **6. Conclusion**

This study investigated sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) practices in Southeast Asian manufacturing, focusing on case studies from Vietnam (electronics), Thailand (textiles), and Malaysia (automotive). Addressing the research questions—(1) What SSCM practices are adopted by Southeast Asian manufacturers? and (2) What barriers and opportunities shape SSCM implementation?—the findings reveal a diverse yet evolving SSCM landscape in ASEAN. Key practices include green logistics, circular economy principles, and renewable energy adoption, aligning with global sustainability frameworks like the United Nations’ SDGs (8, 12, and 13). However, barriers such as high costs, regulatory fragmentation, and global supply chain disruptions pose significant challenges, particularly for SMEs. Opportunities, including regional collaboration, growing consumer demand for sustainable products, and digital technologies like blockchain, offer pathways to enhance SSCM adoption.

The study contributes to the SSCM literature by addressing a critical gap in Southeast Asian research, where prior studies have focused on larger economies like China and India (Zhu et al., 2013). By highlighting ASEAN-specific nuances—such as Vietnam’s cost-driven approach and Malaysia’s policy-supported initiatives—it enriches the global SSCM discourse with a regional perspective. For firms, the findings advocate adopting cost-effective practices and leveraging consumer demand, while policymakers are urged to harmonize regional regulations and incentivize green technologies. For researchers, this study opens avenues for quantitative analyses of SSCM’s impact or comparative studies across regions.

In conclusion, advancing SSCM in Southeast Asian manufacturing requires tailored strategies that address industry-specific needs and regional challenges. By fostering collaboration, embracing technology, and aligning with global sustainability goals, ASEAN manufacturers can enhance their competitiveness and contribute to sustainable industrial growth. This study underscores the importance of context-specific research in driving sustainable development in one of the world’s most dynamic manufacturing hubs.

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