

**EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN
MANAGING SUPPLIER RELATIONSHIPS: THE CASE OF UNILEVER,
UK.**

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I, Ann Maria George, declare that this dissertation has been composed by myself, that the work contained herein is entirely my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or qualification, in whole or in part, except as specified.

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Abstract

Supplier relationships are crucial in managing company operations and improving its efficacy. The current study thus examines the role and challenges of managing supplier relationships using Unilever in the UK as an example. The study is sectioned into 5 chapters, including introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion and conclusion and recommendations. The initial chapter denotes the dynamic environment of the global market producing certain challenges for Unilever, as well as adequate objectives and research questions are developed. The literature review has conceptualised the theoretical views on the research objectives, indicating elements like trends in managing supplier relationships, factors influencing the management of supplier relationships, etc. It was found from the literature review that supplier characteristics, industry dynamics, company strategies, technologies and so on are the factors influencing the management of supplier relationships. Based on the results, the conceptual frameworks are also proposed in the literature chapter.

The study utilised a secondary data collection method with a case study as its research strategy. In addition, the study opted for thematic analysis to analyse and form themes related to Unilever company, considering the objectives for examining the role and challenges of managing supplier relationships. On the other hand, challenges like lack of product quality, lack of awareness about standard procedures, lack of sustainable operations, inappropriate monitoring techniques, reduced focus on continuous improvement, and so on were the challenges identified from the findings and discussion. To mitigate these challenges, the study recommends identifying responsible suppliers, continuous monitoring, and maximum use of technology to foster continuous improvement. In addition, the study recommended training the suppliers to develop greater awareness and feedback provision for acquiring quality data and using these ideas for fostering innovation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

Contemporary businesses operate in a dynamic and highly competitive business environment that is characterized by growing complexity and uncertainty. In such scenarios, organisations should consider different proactive strategies to stay competitive and current (Komora and Kavale, 2020). For being competitive in their sector, supplier relationship management emerges as one of the most prominent activities. Much of the business world thus depends on a firm's success in maintaining good relations with its suppliers (Sheth and Sharma, 1997). Similarly, it is also crucial for organisations in proper coordination with their suppliers in case procurement activities are to be effectively accomplished (Carlos, Kim, and Ralf, 2016). Supplier relationship management refers to the management of contacts and relationships between a company and its suppliers toward providing maximum value to every transaction. Companies, by designing more cooperative and intense relationship models, will create more value and minimize the risks (Rose and Moores, 2016).

Setting up robust relations with suppliers is the way to success for businesses (Komora and Kavale, 2020). The importance of supplier relationships can be underpinned by four principal reasons which are cost efficiency, improved effectiveness, enabled use of technologies, and competitiveness (Sheth and Sharma, 1997). A good relationship with suppliers is most needed in efficiently and effectively managing the production and distribution process to satisfy customer needs within the supply chain (Shimpi and Mane, 2018). Commitment, communication, satisfaction, business risk, mutual adoption, and future orientation have been picked because they represent the essential ingredients for relationship quality (Srinivasan, Mukherjee, and Gaur, 2011).

According to Shimpi and Mane, (2018), relationship management with suppliers is complex and important. It has a robust process in place one would need changes in skills and organization of the procurement team and a shift in its attention. Additional time of the management of the organization has to be spent with the suppliers, unlike in the case when the system relies on the procurement team alone (Rose and Moores, 2016). This also underlines the importance of the development of supplier relationships focused on business goals (Cooper, 2024). To consider the role of managing the supplier relationship with the business has to follow effective communication.

The supplier relationship not only provides a role to the business but it has challenges to manage the business. One of the major challenges for any business organization is to align the main suppliers with the company's goals and have an integrated relationship for a long-term period (Khan, 2012). The lengthy relationship with the supplier and business objectives may differ and create problems in the process. Offshoring of supply activities with suppliers and businesses brings supply risks into the system, as any disturbance in the global supply chain may influence the continuity and reliability of the supply (Jose and Rica, 2011). One of the major problems in the relationships of retailers and suppliers is conflict. Both partnerships can either experience dysfunctional or functional conflicts (Bobot, 2011). Functional conflict can serve to improve the quality of the relationship between the retailer and the supplier, especially when the retailers decide to deal with the conflicts collaboratively. Cultural elements of supply chain and operational practices largely impact relationships between suppliers and businesses. Organizations and individuals may be influenced by national cultural values and commitment. Cultural differences influence the operation efficiency of a company as well as the exchange partners' success (Durach et al., 2017).

To consider the business operations with suppliers, the leading business firms face positive as well as negative impacts with the supplier managerial practices. Jain (2023) points out that successful supplier relationship management is one of the vital things that can make multinationals succeed operationally and even be sustainable. For instance, considering the case of the consumer goods sector, the industry produces products acquired for personal or home use rather than for manufacturing or resale (Durach et al., 2017). These products are meant for consumption and include food, beverages, apparel, and household supplies. Supplier relationship management is thus critical for the consumer goods industry since it assures cost effectiveness, supply chain stability, innovation, and sustainability, allowing companies to remain competitive and meet customer demands successfully. Unilever, one of the world's leading consumer goods firms, operates in highly competitive marketplaces, providing a diverse selection of products tailored to fulfill consumers' daily needs (Iglesias et al., 2023). As a result, it is crucial for Unilever to manage these relationships if it is ever to have hopes of not just maintaining supply chains but also attaining sustainability and ethical objectives set out for it (Iglesias et al., 2023). In this scenario, this research study will dive into the roles and challenges associated with managing supplier relationships in the United Kingdom, with particular focus on Unilever's commitment to sustainable procurement and

resilient supply chains. The study will examine at how Unilever addresses these challenges and how it affects their sustainability goals.

Unilever was founded 100 years ago and the company is the world's largest consumer goods company as well the company provides superior performance in its industrial operations (Unilever, 2024). Unilever is one of the consumer goods giants operating throughout the world with the support of an extensive network of suppliers (Iglesias et al., 2023b). Quite importantly, through its supplier network in the UK, the company has been able to accomplish its objectives of sustainability and ensure efficiency in its supply chain activities (Madani, Afef Saihi, and Akmal Abdelfatah, 2024). Sabtika and Marlapa, (2024) highlight that Unilever's Sustainable Living Plan emphasizes reducing the adverse environmental impacts of operations and increasing the positive social impacts. Effective supplier relationship management is not only about managing operational efficiency but also about the whole process of sustainability throughout the supply chain.

According to Meulensteen et al. (2016), Unilever's SRM plays various roles in selecting and developing suppliers that align with and support the vision set up by the company concerning quality, sustainability, and supply risk management. Moeller, Fassnacht, and Klose, (2006) found that the effective SRM would help the organization reduce costs, enhance creativity, and enhance the performance of its suppliers. This is very critical in maintaining the competitiveness of Unilever. For instance, Unilever works in collaboration with its suppliers in sustainable package innovation (Senge, Dow, and Neath, 2006). This is a typical example that shows SRM helping in increasing creativity towards the goals of achieving sustainability.

Authors such as Silva (2022) and Murphy (2017) suggested or argued that, the management of relations with suppliers in Unilever is a challenging task, particularly within the conditions of a dynamic and often unpredictable global market. One of the main challenges concerned by Unilever to ensuring that rigorous standards of sustainability set by the company are adhered to (Murphy, 2017). These are suppliers who must adhere to environmental and social requirements, which will have to be continuously monitored and evaluated. Brexit in the UK adds complexity to these relationships, introducing uncertainty around trading rules and potential disruptions in the supply chain (Shaoping, 2023).

Unilever's diversified supplier base across regions and cultures has different business practices and expectations (Murphy, 2017). The research will be in-depth on how Unilever manages its relationship with suppliers in the UK to deal with the challenges and capitalize

on the opportunities for improving sustainability and operational efficiency (Shaoping, 2023). This will be important research to provide some invaluable insight through the analysis of case studies and existing literature to direct best practices in similar situations.

1.2 Aims of Research Activity

To examine the role and challenges in managing supplier relationships at Unilever in the UK.

1.3 Objectives of Research Activity

- To identify the trends in managing supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry
- To examine the factors influencing the management of supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry.
- To identify the challenges and opportunities in managing supplier relationships of Unilever, UK.
- To provide recommendations for overcoming the challenges in supplier relations with specific reference to Unilever in the UK.

1.4. Research Question

- What are the trends in managing supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry in the UK?
- How do various factors influence the management of supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry?
- What are the challenges of managing supplier relationships at Unilever in the UK?
- What strategic recommendations can be provided for overcoming the challenges and enriching supplier relations of Unilever in the UK?

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide a comprehensive overview of the variable, the supplier relationships, that comprise the research study topic. In addition, the section will analyse various factors influencing the management of supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry. Furthermore, a theoretical model to support the findings will be in the literature section. In addition, role and challenges of managing supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry will be examined. The section concludes with the conceptual framework constructed by the researcher.

2.2 Supplier Relationship Management

According to Migdadi (2021), Supplier relationship management (SRM) involves a systematic and methodical approach to analysing and collaborating with vendors that provide materials, goods, and services to an organisation, which determines each supplier's major contributions to a successful outcome and devising various strategies to enhance their efficiency and performance. SRM aids in determining the value that each supplier delivers, and those are more vital to company continuity and effectiveness (Migdadi, 2021). Van Hoek (2020) mentioned understanding the importance of each supplier may assist managers in building deeper relationships with suppliers. SRM is useful for supply chain professionals who often deal with suppliers in fields which include project management, procurement, and operations (Khan et al., 2022). Further, a supplier relationship management strategy is required in order to ensure that relationships are formed effectively, therefore enhancing the overall resilience and efficacy of the supply chain (Van Hoek, 2020). Supplier performance has an enormous effect on the success of organisations of all sizes. However, the more vendor relationships a company has, and the more complicated those relationships are, the more critical it is for them to be maintained. From the view of (Sharma et al., 2022), supplier relationship management, as part of the overall vendor management practice, assists companies in better establishing and growing their relationships with their suppliers. Besides, it is vital to develop processes that benefit both the supplier and the buyer. This makes sure that the supply chain operates efficiently and aids in determining which relationships bring the most value.

The study of Grant, (2024) found that Clear and effective communication will guard against misinterpretations within the relationships between e-commerce businesses and their

suppliers. This approach encourages a common understanding of expectations and duties, which is essential for fruitful teamwork. Reynolds, (2024) stated that the role of trust in the supplier-business relationship is one of guiding decision-making, teamwork, and success within organizations. There are elements of trust that include cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects, all of which are very instrumental in business activities. Some of the ways through which trust can be built include transparency, good communication, similarity in beliefs, and emotional bonding. Warwick, (2024) highlights that the role of managing the supplier relationship with the business has to avail the benefits of innovation of operation and sustainability initiatives to align with customer preferences and corporate values.

2.3 Trends in Managing Supplier Relationships

Digital Transformation

From the view of Foltean et al. (2019), the major trends in supplier management is the utilisation of digital platforms and tools to automate and streamline numerous aspects of the process. Srai and Lorentz (2019) noted that digital transformation can assist organisation enhance visibility, communication, collaboration, and data analysis throughout their supplier network. Besides, it can also help company to utilise artificial intelligence, cloud computing, blockchain, and various other novel technologies to improve their supplier management capabilities.

Sustainability and social responsibility

As specified by Ghadimi et al. (2018) another significant trend in supplier management involves a rising emphasis on sustainability and social responsibility. In the opinion of Schniederjans et al. (2020) customers, regulators, investors, and society in general are demanding higher accountability and transparency from companies and their suppliers regarding their ESG (environmental, social, and governance) implications. This entails aligning organisations supplier management strategy with their ESG objectives and standards, as well as monitoring and measuring company suppliers' performance in these aspects. Ni et al. (2020) pointed out that companies should also work with suppliers to uncover and resolve any risks or gaps in their ESG practices, and help them adopt efficient practices and innovations.

Supplier diversity and inclusion

Recent trends in supplier management highlight a deeper recognition of how supplier diversity and inclusion can forward competitive advantage and innovation within the supplier

chain (Verma and Gustafsson, 2020). In the opinion of Attaran (2020), supplier diversity and inclusion comprise the practice of procuring from an extensive range of suppliers, which includes minority-owned, women-owned, LGBT-owned, and veteran-owned businesses. Moreover, supplier diversity and inclusion can assist companies get access to emerging markets, consumers, and ideas, while also improving company innovation, reputation, and competitiveness.

Supplier risk management

It can be asserted that, an increased requirement for supplier risk management is emerging trend in supplier management. Srari and Lorentz (2019) mentioned that supplier risk management involves the process of detecting, evaluating, lowering, and monitoring any risks and opportunities that emerge from companies' supplier relationships. Further, supplier risk management can aid the company in avoiding interruptions, liabilities, losses, and reputational harm arising from supplier failures, breaches, fraud, or disasters (Ghadimi et al., 2018). In addition, it can assist company in leveraging the supplier relationships to generate competitive advantages and possibilities.

Supplier innovation and value creation

Also worth mentioning trend in supplier management is the transition from a transactional to a strategic approach to supplier relationships (Ghadimi et al., 2018). This implies that instead of emphasising on quality, cost, and delivery, companies should search for methods to collaborate with suppliers to develop innovation and value. Moreover, supplier innovation and value generation may help companies enhance products, processes, services, and customer experience while lowering costs, waste, and risks.

2.4 Theory and models

- **Supply Chain Operations (SCOR) Model**

According to Chopra et al. (2022), the SCOR model addresses the business operations involved in fulfilling a customer's demand, which comprises plan, source, make, deliver, return, and enable.

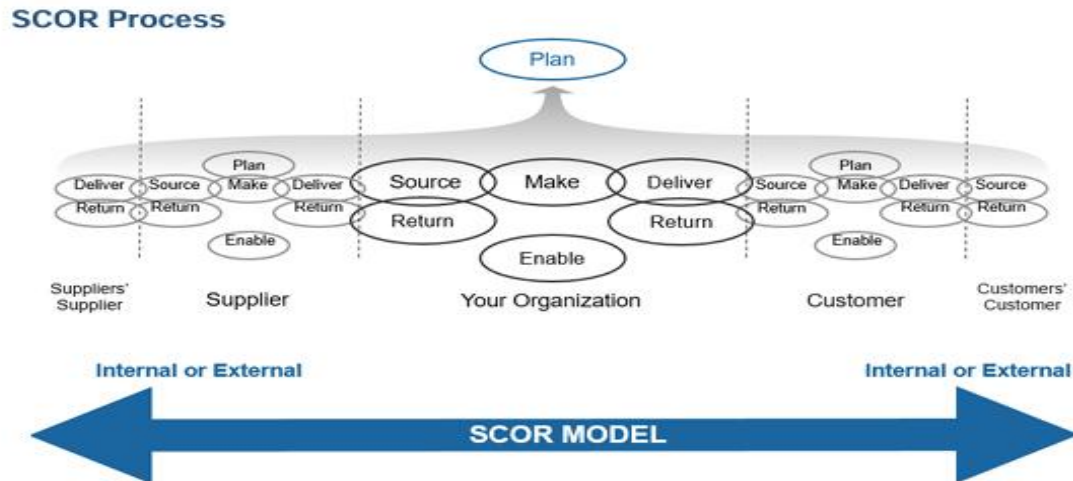


Figure 2.1: SCOR Model

Source: Dissanayake and Cross (2018)

Plan is a process that comprises demand and supply planning, and this entails balancing resources with needs and developing supply chain plans (Kamarudin and Izaidin, 2018). It also includes the management of data collection, business rules, inventories, transportation, capital assets, and regulatory compliance. Source is the category which includes the procurement of stocked, made-to-order, and engineer-to-order items (Abbaspour, 2019). It encompasses organising deliveries, obtaining and transferring goods, authorising supplier payments, and overseeing supplier performance and inbound inventories. Make is the process that emphasises on manufacturing activities like scheduling and overseeing manufacturing, testing, packing, preparing for shipment, and issuing production orders.

Deliver comprises order management, storage, transportation, and shipping activities. It covers everything from processing consumer orders to transporting goods to their final destination. Return is the category which encompasses product returns, whether for defects, obsolescence, or excess, and involves return reception, scheduling, and disposal. Enable is the last process that contributes to the design and administration of planning and carrying out processes (Chopra et al., 2022). It emphasises the growing significance of activities that enable the fundamental processes to run smoothly, including sales operations planning, quality management, and supply chain risk management.

- **Kraljic matrix theory in Supplier relationship management**

In supply chain management, Peter Kraljic developed what has come to be known as the Kraljic Matrix in 1983 as a strategic tool used to evaluate and group procurement goods

based on two criteria of crucial importance, supply risk and profit effect (Garzon et al., 2019). A company can, through the use of the matrix, optimize its procurement strategy and relationship with the suppliers. The products and services are grouped into four quadrants: non-critical, leverage, bottleneck, and strategic (Montgomery et al., 2018).



Figure 2.2: Overview of Kraljic matrix theory

Source: Montgomery et al (2018)

In the first quadrant leverage items the goods have a limited supply risk and a limited profit effect. This is because they are widely available and moderately priced, and the business focus can be directed at controlling the transaction cost and ensuring that ordering processes are efficient (Visani and Boccali, 2020). Similarly, Strategic items are risky, high-impact products, that are essential to the organization. Therefore, with an approach that is collaborative in nature, of collaborative innovatory and risk-sharing, it is important for business organizations to build firm & long-term relations with their suppliers (Putri et al., 2020).

The non-critical items are the products that are low cost and carry low risk. Here, the strategy is to minimise costs and administrative hassle, often through supplier consolidation and the development of transactional relationships (Lenarcic and Faganel, 2021). Finally, the bottleneck items are the products that can create operational disturbance due to their limited availability or fewer numbers of specialized suppliers. They are High supply risk and low profit impact products. Even though slightly higher price, supply continuity needs to be maintained for these commodities (Bianchini et al., 2019).

The Kraljic Matrix is the basis of SRM by guiding how suppliers can be categorized based on the strategic importance of their goods. Strategic and bottleneck suppliers will ask businesses

to invest in collaborations that create mutual advantages, foster innovation, and reduce supply risk (Bianchini et al., 2019). For leveraged and non-critical suppliers, key activities of focus may be performance improvement and cost reduction. In this way, businesses can maintain the right balance between cost, risk, and value creation by amalgamating procurement strategies with the Kraljic Matrix and hence could achieve optimization in supplier relationships to ensure continued success (Montgomery et al., 2019).

Supplier Relationship Management (SRM) strategies in consumer goods companies (A global outlook)

The consumer products companies need to manage complex supply chains, which assure quality, reliability, and sustainability in today's highly competitive global marketplace. Supplier relationship management (SRM) has become a key strategic function that enables continuity of operations at lower costs and fosters innovation (Singh et al., 2017). In addition to traditional procurement methods, SRM will focus on long-term relationship-building with key suppliers. Many leading companies around the world are opting for several SRM methods. This includes a set of methodologies believed to be optimal since it enhances cooperation through offering mutual benefits and hence strengthening supply chains (Soltani et al., 2018).

The most popular strategy for SRM deals with the development of cooperative relationships with suppliers (Branska et al., 2016). In this respect, businesses like Procter & Gamble have moved to adopt an integrated approach in collaborative work between supply partners in the sharing of innovative ideas as well as important insights (Sepehri, 2019). Innovation opportunities have been opened at P&G through the "Connect + Develop" initiative enabling the joint invention of new products by working jointly with suppliers on research and development activities (Andrişan and Modreanu, 2022). They can be enabled to reduce lead times, improve product quality, and speed innovations to market by facilitating openness, collaborative problem-solving, and the free exchange of information. Nestlé, one of the world's largest food and beverage firms, has in place a supplier partnership whereby the company partners with suppliers on sustainability and innovation goals (Gandhi, 2024). Nestlé, together with suppliers, can make the products safer, traceable, and sourced with sustainable agricultural practices by sharing information and collaborating on responsible sourcing (Kalyani et al., 2022). International companies appreciate the importance of continuous supplier performance management. Coca-Cola has an appropriate comprehensive SRM strategy. The company has developed clear KPIs for every supplier in their database

(Klobučar and Erjavec, 2019). These KPIs measure the sustainability process, the cost, the delivery schedule, and quality (Nyakwera, 2019). The Coca-Cola Company assists its suppliers in improving their performance through periodic auditing of the suppliers' facilities and the scorecard usage mechanism to provide valuable feedback to the suppliers (Nyakwera, 2019). It nurtures a culture of continuous improvement and is proactive in addition to ensuring that suppliers' requirements meet those of the company.

COVID-19 revealed weaknesses in the global supply chain as it unfolded, and consumer products firms were forced to adopt and integrate methods regarding Supply Risk Management (Woong and Goh, 2021). Companies like Unilever have done that through multi-sourcing methods, which prevent over-dependence on one supplier or geographic area (Sheffi, 2020). Although Nestlé relies heavily on audits of suppliers regarding ethical and environmental requirements, Unilever on the other hand conducts risk analysis through available tools on the reliability of the supplier and identifies potential risks. Nestlé also keeps tabs on situations of political turmoil and natural disasters in countries where it obtains its supplies. Proactive risk management results in fewer discontinuations with a view to ensuring steady supplies (Kalyani et al., 2020).

Companies lead the digital revolution in SRM by deploying cloud-based platforms, AI, and analytics for managing supplier relationships (Grant, 2024). Companies deliver improvements in supplier visibility, speed in procurement processes, and more effective decision-making related to the selection and performance monitoring of suppliers. In the case of Amazon, it manages its whole value chain through real-time data analytics, supplier portals, and automated procurement systems (Grant, 2024). The result is an agile and flexible SRM system that has optimized efficiency.

In conclusion, top consumer products firms worldwide have adopted SRM tactics running from technology integration to cooperation, risk management, and sustainability (Klobučar and Erjavec, 2019). Such strategies help in the building up of strong, efficient, and ethical supply chains that can successfully enable business houses to compete in the global market. Digital technology incorporation and a focus on sustainability would continue to change the SRM techniques continuously.

2.5 Factors influencing the management of supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry.

According to Dissanayake and Cross (2018), numerous factors affect supplier relationship management in the consumer goods industry, all of which may have a substantial impact on the performance of supply chain operations.

Company goals and strategy is the way in which an organisation manages risk, sustainability, and procurement has an enormous effect on the way in which it manages supplier relationship management. Kamarudin and Izaidin (2018) noted that cost leadership-focused companies may emphasise obtaining the lowest possible costs with suppliers, which leads to deeper transactional relationships. As per Abbaspour (2019), companies that prioritise innovation or quality, on the other hand, can choose long-term relationships with suppliers that can support these tactical objectives. Besides, sustainability goals affect supplier selection and management by directing organisations to collaborate with various suppliers who follow environmental standards and ethical sourcing practices. In addition, Supplier characteristics is the nature of the partnership is profoundly affected by the specific characteristics of the suppliers, which includes their geographic location, capabilities, size, and scope. According to Lo et al. (2018), major suppliers could be reliable and have a wide selection of services, but they might not be able to rapidly adapt to evolving requirements. Even though companies could be more flexible, smaller suppliers may not always be able to satisfy needs of this large-scale. The suppliers' geographical position also has an impact on lead times, shipping costs, and regional hazards like natural disasters or political instability.

As specified by Kannan (2018), emerging shifts in customer preferences, technology breakthroughs, and changing market trends cause the consumer goods sector to evolve swiftly. Further, relationships with suppliers must be responsive and flexible to these developments. Companies need suppliers that can supply sustainable materials and components, for instance, as customers are becoming highly interested in eco-friendly goods (Sharma et al., 2022). In order to accomplish novel requirements created by technology advancements, which include quicker manufacturing cycles and innovative product designs, suppliers must also be flexible. As a result, SRM must be adaptable to allow organisations to take benefit of these changes promptly. On the other hand, Aslam et al. (2021) postulates that effective and proper supplier relationships need an adequate basis of collaboration, trust, performance assessment, and dispute resolution. Yazdani and Masum (2018) in their study noted that increased trust minimises uncertainty by fostering transparent

communication and sustained collaboration. In the opinion of Ghadimi et al. (2018), collaboration typically fosters shared objectives which include cost reduction or improved product quality. Further, frequent performance assessment guarantee that suppliers fulfil expectations, as well as effective dispute resolution procedures assist resolve challenges prior to the escalate, protecting the relationship's integrity. On the word of Sullivan and Kim (2018), supply chain visibility, performance, and risk management are optimised by implementing cutting-edge technologies, which substantially affect supplier relationship management. These technologies entail blockchain, AI (artificial intelligence), and the IoT (internet of things) (Sullivan and Kim, 2018).

2.6 Role and challenges of managing supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry.

Lo et al. (2018) asserted that in the consumer goods industry, maintaining supplier relationships effectively and properly is necessary for attaining sustainability, retaining product quality, and maintaining operational efficiency. Besides that, Mangla et al. (2019) pointed out that strong relationships with suppliers provide a continual supply of materials and components, and this is vital for fulfilling customer demand and preventing delays and interruptions. Further, companies can obtain more favourable terms, ensure prompt delivery, and reduce supply chain risks by fostering strong partnerships (Goworek et al., 2020). Further, Neutzling et al. (2018) mentioned that one of the most important roles of proper supplier management is guaranteeing product quality. Organisations can maintain stringent standards for components and raw materials, minimising the chance of inaccuracies and raising the overall quality of the finished goods, by working closely with their suppliers. As a result, this helps maintain brand loyalty and customer satisfaction. In addition, Kovalevskay et al. (2024) noted that the consumer goods industry, supplier relationship management plays a major role to sustainability initiatives. There is growing demand on this sector to adopt environmentally conscious methods. Besides, companies may fulfil customer demand for eco-friendly products, maintain sustainable procurement and manufacturing practices, and comply with legislation by managing supplier relationships properly (Sharma et al., 2022). Establishing sustainability as a top priority assists companies in achieving their goals while maintaining product quality and operational effectiveness.

On the other hand, managing supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry poses numerous significant challenges. Choosing the right suppliers one of the major challenges in managing supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry. Kannan (2018) mentioned

that without taking the appropriate measures, buyers might stumble at the first obstacle of a supplier relationship by choosing the wrong supplier for their requirements. This challenge may be properly addressed by paying careful attention to detail throughout the supplier selection process. After a procurement requirement has been discovered, potential suppliers need to be thoroughly evaluated to verify that they satisfy all defined criteria and do not pose significant risks (Bressanelli et al., 2019). The demand for quotation process needs to be as well-considered. Entering into a partnership without conducting due diligence might result in substantial long-term harm. Besides that, Villena and Gioia (2018) mentioned that another major challenges in managing supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry is cultural differences. In nowadays globalised business environment, companies often collaborate with suppliers from different nations and cultures. This diversity may pose distinct challenges, which include language barriers, diverse business practices, and disparities in work ethics. Cultural distinctions between the two nations may affect communication, negotiating strategies, and comprehending of quality standards. Additionally, in the opinion of Jia et al. (2019), the risk of supply chain disruptions is also a major challenge in managing supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry. Supply chain interruptions, such as geopolitical conflicts, natural calamities, pandemics, labour Strikes, regulatory changes, and economic recessions, pose major threats to supplier trustworthiness and reliability in the consumer goods industry. Kovalevskay et al. (2024) pointed out that effective and adequate SRM needs various risk management measures such as supplier diversification, contingency planning, inventory buffering, supply chain mapping, collaborative partnerships, real-time monitoring, and supplier audits. Nevertheless, such measures are mainly resource-intensive and do not completely remove risks, leaving companies vulnerable to unforeseen supply chain disruptions (Sharma et al., 2022). Further, another challenge in managing supplier relationships is the communication breakdown. Maintaining transparent and clear communication lines with suppliers is one of the most significant challenges in SRM. Lo et al. (2018) noted that miscommunication can result in misunderstandings, interruptions, and disputes. Consider a case in which a supplier fails to deliver essential information and details regarding a change in manufacturing processes. This breakdown in communication can interrupt the whole supply chain, which leading to delays and even affecting customer satisfaction.

Furthermore, as per Kovalevskay et al. (2024), risk management is another significant challenge in managing supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry. Risk is

primarily inherent in any company relationships, including supplier relationships (Bressanelli et al., 2019). The challenge is to uncover and lower any potential threats to the entire supply chain. From the view of Villena and Gioia (2018), For example, a supplier may encounter economic challenges, natural catastrophes may impede manufacturing, or geopolitical events may impair raw material supply. Moreover, lack of innovation and collaboration is another ongoing challenge in managing supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry. Neutzling et al. (2018) mentioned that relationships with suppliers should not be restricted to transactional interactions. Besides, collaboration and innovation are necessary for long-term growth and success (Kannan, 2018). However, several companies fail to establish an environment of innovation and partnership with their suppliers (Goworek et al., 2020). This can limit the possibilities for joint issue solving, lowering cost, and product enhancement. In addition, maintaining consistent product quality is inevitable challenge in managing supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry. In the consumer goods sector, it is vital to ensure consistent product quality (Lo et al., 2018). In this sector, the dependability and reliability of the product directly affect brand reputation and customer satisfaction. However, Villena and Gioia (2018) pointed out that retaining constant quality throughout the supply chain becomes highly challenging for companies that deal with numerous suppliers. Inconsistencies in the finished goods might arise from variations in the quality of raw materials, manufacturing processes, and quality control procedures (Bressanelli et al., 2019).

2.7 Research gap

The existing research study supplier relationship management, often examines generic methods and practices, but fails to offer in-depth examination of supplier relationship management within particular multinational firms, like Unilever in the UK. Jensen et al. (2019) analysed broad supplier relationship management theories but do not address the particular challenges encountered by major consumer goods firms functioning in an intricate, global supply chain. There has also been little study into the role and challenges in managing supplier relationships. Therefore, this research study intends to address these gaps by exploring the role and challenges in managing supplier relationships at Unilever in the UK.

2.8 Conceptual framework

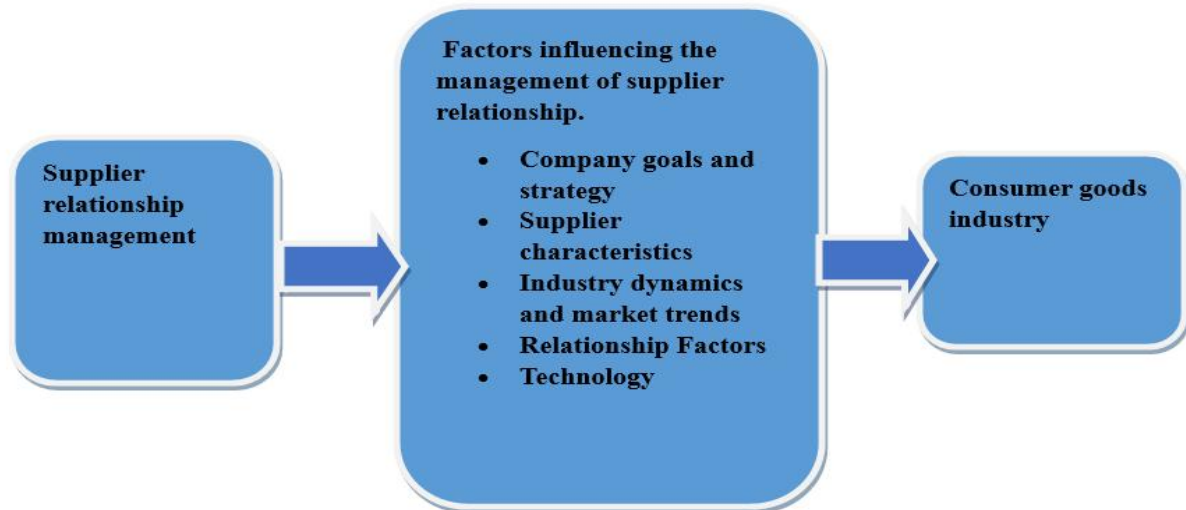


Figure 2.3: Conceptual Framework

Source: Created by author

2.9 Conclusion

The current chapter discussed the literature on the role and challenges in managing supplier relationships at Unilever in the UK. The first section briefly analysed the supplier relationship management and trends in managing supplier relationships. Besides, it has scrutinised the various factors influencing the management of supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry, and also theoretical framework is described. Further, this chapter explained role and challenges of managing supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry. In addition, a conceptual framework was established and also research gap is explored in the present chapter.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The current research design and methodology chapter will deliver a detailed overview of particular theories and methods chosen for carrying out the research study. Besides that, each section will give an adequate and proper justification and insightful reasons for utilising suitable methods to examine the effect of supply chain transparency on sustainability in the food supply chain in the UK. Research philosophy, strategy, approach, and design are the various research methods discussed in the present chapter. Moreover, the current research intends to explore the data analysis in addition to data collection to determine the appropriate data analysis plan to implement in order to preserve the accuracy and reliability of acquired information and data related to the supply chain transparency on sustainability in the food supply chain. The study will discuss ethical concerns and limitations in order to understand major issues impacting the researcher and resolve such issues in the proposed research study.

3.2 Research Philosophy

According to Padilla-Díaz (2015), research philosophy is concerned with how data and information should be acquired and evaluated in order to obtain knowledge linked to the research study. From the view of Winit-Watjana (2016), there are various research philosophies, including positivism, realism, and interpretivism. Interpretivism is commonly implemented in qualitative research (HR and Aithal, 2022). On the other hand, positivism is concerned with the objective perspective of reality, which is concerned with information that may be acquired by objective methods such as quantitative data (Joshi et al., 2023). Contrary to interpretivism philosophy, positivism is usually implemented in quantitative data (Kennedy, 2017). Therefore, interpretivism concerns how people evaluate the physical world depending on experience and context.

In this research, the researcher utilised the interpretivism philosophy because the use of this research method can aid in emphasising the meanings and objectives of the research. Using interpretivism philosophy, the researcher reviews different dimensions and practices related to supply chain transparency in the UK food supply chain context. This philosophy produces sophisticated analysis and provides data with high validity. Interpretivism research philosophy considers interpersonal social contexts and interpersonal dynamics. Further, with the aid of this philosophy, the researcher proposes suitable recommendations for enhancing

sustainability through emphasising supply chain transparency in the UK food supply chain. In this research, the positivism and realism philosophies are not appropriate because these philosophies failed to assess the effect of supply chain transparency on food supply chain sustainability in the UK and scrutinise the implementation of sustainability in the food supply chain. Padilla-Díaz (2015) mentioned that the positivist philosophy failed to deliver observable facts and lacked a reason for the data and information gathered. Similarly, the Realism philosophy ignores the significance of beliefs, emotions, and imagination (Kennedy, 2017). Therefore, the current study applied interpretivism research philosophy, which overcomes all of the challenges of realism and positivism research philosophy, to scrutinise sustainability in the UK food supply chain.

3.3 Research Approach

From the view of Teherani et al. (2015), the research approach is typically the procedure that is selected by the researcher in order to evaluate and interpret the gathered data and information. Alase (2017) pointed out that there are typically three sorts of research approaches depending on data collection include deductive, abductive, and inductive. The deductive research approach involves quantitative data, but the inductive approach incorporates qualitative information and data depending on the research topic. Maher (2018) mentioned that the inductive approach entails the creation of a theory or hypothesis based on particular information and data.

For this study, the researcher employed an inductive approach to assess the effect of supply chain transparency on food supply chain sustainability. Besides, the researcher chose the inductive approach because of the interpretivism philosophy, which primarily takes qualitative data and information. An inductive approach was implemented to gain a thorough understanding of a phenomenon. With the support of this approach, the researcher explores the implementation of sustainability in the food supply chain and reviews distinct dimensions and practices related to supply chain transparency in the context of the food supply chain. The inductive approach will enable the research to assist in the formation of new theories, pay great attention to context, and allow for flexibility (Singh, 2015). The inductive approach is a method for drawing conclusions by moving from specific to general. In this study, the researcher ignored the deductive method because it failed to review distinct dimensions and practices related to supply chain transparency in the context of the food supply chain.

3.4 Research design

The research design is typically referring to the overview of the techniques and methods implemented by the researcher to conduct the research (Wright et al., 2016). According to Bloomfield and Fisher (2019), the primary objective of research design is usually to sharpen the appropriate methods selected for doing research studies. There are three distinct kinds of research designs: explanatory, exploratory, and descriptive, depending on a theoretical perspective (Asenahab, 2019). The exploratory approach aims to find critical aspects or variables which may possess an influence on the study topic in the lack of a fixed framework, needing considerable adaptability (Omair, 2015). The main intention of the exploratory method is to obtain a thorough understanding of an issue in order to innovate or build a hypothesis. The exploratory technique was applied by researchers when there was inadequate knowledge or the research issue was more complex.

The current study applied the exploratory research design to evaluate the effect of supply chain transparency on food supply chain sustainability in the UK. Furthermore, the exploratory approach does not entail hypothesis testing or statistical analysis (Wright et al., 2016). Instead, it emphasised forming patterns and ideas or relationships that could be employed to form a research query for future investigation. With the support of exploratory research design, the researcher scrutinises and reviews various dimensions and practices related to supply chain transparency in the context of the food supply chain and evaluates the implementation of sustainability in the food supply chain.

3.5 Research Strategy

A research strategy involves a plan of action that directs the investigator's thought level (Oliva, 2019). The main intention of the research strategy is to assist the researcher in selecting an appropriate analysis and data collection method approach to carry out the study (Khalifa, 2021). Various research strategies are commonly adopted in research methodology, comprising observation, interview, survey, questionnaire, and case study. The case study strategy entails an in-depth investigation of a specific event, organisation, or case. It is employed to comprehend complex events and to generate new hypotheses depending on research findings (Gorczyński and Brittain, 2016).

The current study employed a case study strategy to examine the research topic. Using a case study method aid in comparing, describing, exploring and comprehending various aspects of supply chain transparency on food supply chain sustainability. The researcher has selected a

case study method because of the presence of an inductive research approach. Using the case study method, the researcher proposes suitable recommendations for improving sustainability by emphasising supply chain transparency in the UK food supply chain.

3.6 Data Collection Method

Moser and Korstjens (2018) mentioned that data collection methods are typically applied to extract data and information for the research study. The data collection method is primarily an unavoidable step in the research study process that aids in ensuring the validity and reliability of extracted data (Sutton and Austin, 2015). Primary and secondary are two categories of data collection methods (Cleary et al., 2014). According to Eyisi (2016), primary data consists of first-hand information acquired directly by the researcher, such as interviews, questionnaires, observations, action research, and focus groups. Secondary data involves second-hand information obtained from collected sources, such as case studies, magazines, news reports, books, journals, and websites (Stieglitz et al., 2018).

Secondary data have been utilised to acquire data for the current study. The data gathered using the secondary data collection method will be structured, and vast data that is easy to obtain will have longitudinal analysis, which aids in saving time and free and low cost (Moser and Korstjens, 2018). (Stieglitz et al., 2018). Books, websites, newspaper articles, journals, online write-ups, and organisational reports are utilised to acquire the secondary data for this research study. By applying the secondary data collection, the researcher effectively assesses the influence of supply chain transparency on food supply chain sustainability in the UK. Secondary sources of data often include comprehensive and large datasets which can encompass extensive time periods, various populations, or several variables (Stieglitz et al., 2018). This aspect helps researchers to analyse data on a large scale. The range of secondary data enables detailed evaluation, the identification of trends and patterns, and the capacity to develop accurate conclusions depending on a broader context. As a result, this study chose a secondary data source to obtain data and information on supply chain transparency on sustainability in the UK food supply chain.

3.7 Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis is typically the process of examining and interpreting the raw data or acquired data to generate relevant and meaningful information (Franke et al., 2017). In research, various analysis methods are used, such as descriptive, thematic, statistical, and inferential analysis (Houben et al., 2014). Thematic analysis was considered to be the most often

employed method in qualitative analysis. Thematic analysis was usually a versatile method because of the use of the exploratory method.

Thematic data analysis was used for the current research study because the data in this research is secondary data and is typically utilised to identify opinions, perspectives, knowledge, experiences, and values. Moser and Korstjens (2018) opined that the adaptability of the thematic data analysis enables numerous analytic options for the research. This research study adopted manual coding for carrying out the thematic analysis. Using thematic analysis, the researcher assesses the effect of supply chain transparency on sustainability in the UK food supply chain. The thematic analysis aids in retaining the richness of data as well as will allow insights which are not usually anticipated. The thematic method of data analysis is primarily systematic; thus, this method will aid the research in identifying the effects on the sustainability of the food supply chain in the UK sector.

3.8 Accessibility and Ethical Consideration

In the current study, the researcher encountered various ethical and accessibility concerns when collecting secondary data and performing a case study. It was critical to collect valid and reliable data in order to prevent issues such as confidentiality and plagiarism. The researcher continued with the research only after the data protection act was met (Char et al., 2018). Because a secondary data collection method was used, the study included publicly available information about a specific person or organisation. The publicly available information gathered will expire after a period of six months because of serious ethical considerations. Aside from academic goals, the investigator has no personal achievement or intention through the proposed study to tarnish any specific person or organisation. The researcher needs to submit a research study ethical application paper to the university departments for ethical permission prior to performing the dissertation in order to move forward with the research. Data for the current study was gathered from various secondary sources. As a result, the secondary data gleaned from secondary sources was appropriately referenced in order to acknowledge the study of the prior researchers.

3.9 Research limitation

The researcher has encountered numerous limitations while carrying out the research. The major limitation encountered by the investigator is the selection of a case study research strategy and secondary data collection method to acquire necessary and accurate details linked to supply chain transparency on sustainability in the food supply chain. The secondary

data permitted the investigator to acquire data from a large volume of information, which may not guarantee efficient outcomes because of the occurrence of bias in the gathered data (Theofanidis and Fountouki, 2018). The researcher has encountered problems with erroneous data gathered from secondary sources such as websites or yearly reports with slight variations in the provided data (Solem, 2015). Another constraint the researcher has is the shortage of sufficient resources or money to acquire the use of paid websites or sources related to the supply chain transparency on sustainability in the food supply chain.

3.10 Conclusion

The current research design and methodology chapter of the investigation has provided relevant justifications and reasons for choosing appropriate research methodologies and theories to assess the effect of supply chain transparency on sustainability in the UK food supply chain. In order to conduct the study, the researcher used appropriate research methods, including interpretivism philosophy, exploratory design, case study strategy, inductive approach, and secondary data collection methods. In addition, thematic analysis was implemented in this research to interpret the data acquired. This chapter also discussed accessibility and ethical issues, as well as the research limitations encountered by the researcher.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussions

4.1. Introduction

The main objective of the chapter is to interpret the findings of the study on the impact of supply chain transparency on sustainability in UK food supply chain, with a special focus on Unilever. The study then compares the outcome of the study with previous studies and literature review of the study.

4.2. Secondary case study of Unilever

The study aims to conduct a case study on the Unilever's supply chain transparency on suitability. In order to collect the data needed for the study, it followed a secondary data collection method and the data was collected from authentic secondary sources such as journals, newspaper articles, books, organisational reports and books. The collected data was analysed thematically and is explained in the following sections.

4.2.1. Unilever

Unilever is one of the largest and popular consumer goods firms in the world and was launched more than 100 years ago. It has more than 4.4 million retail stores, which are assisted by distributors in main 10 developing markets and the products are sold over more than 190 countries. In addition, the turnover of the company in 2023 was €59.6 billion with 58% in developing markets (Unilever, 2024). On the other hand, the international revenue produced by the company as per the personal care product segment (Figure 4.1) summed up to nearly €13.8 billion (Statista, 2024).

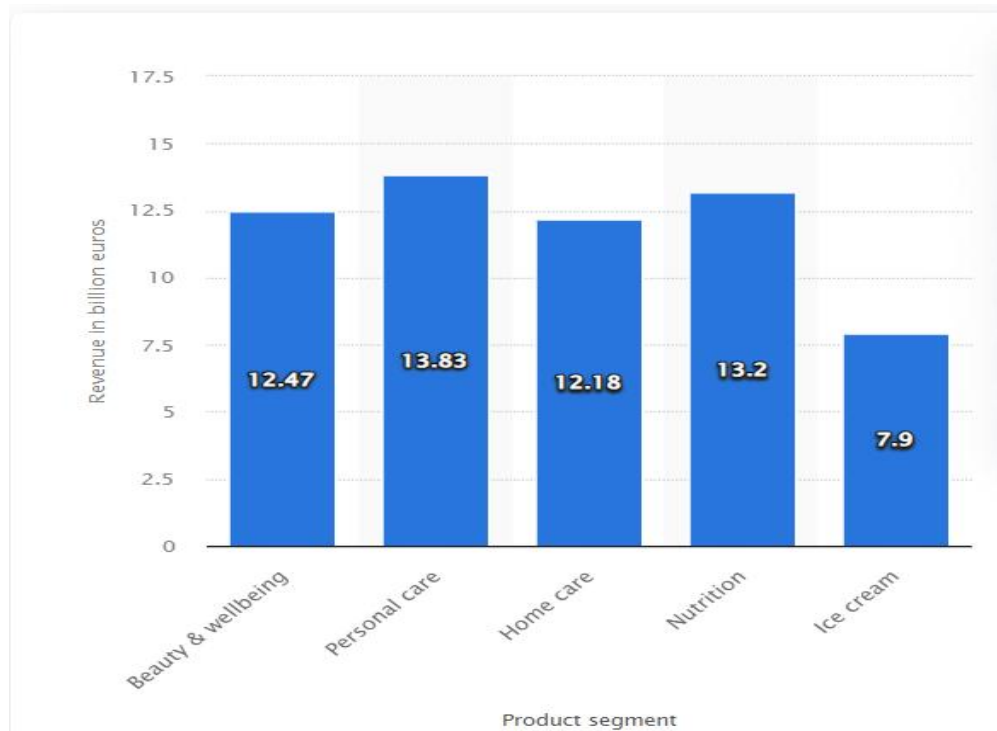


Figure 4.1 Global revenue of the Unilever Group in 2023, by product segment (in billion euros)

Source: Statista (2024)

4.2.2 Supply chain of Unilever

The company is the market leader in its sector and it is mainly owing to its effective supply chain and strategies. Moreover, its strategy on supply chain is depended on main three pillars: supply chain automation, optimisation and digitalisation. By this the firm aims to build a good relationship with its partners and highlights on sustainability, which focuses on minimise waste as well as emissions. The supply chain of Unilever is mainly emphasised on forming further competent as well as agile supply chain, which is resilient and sustainable. It covers the use of digital technologies in order to minimise expense, enhance traceability and transparency, thereby elevating customer experience. It totally spends €43.2 billion on its supply chain and has 52, 000 suppliers as of 2022 and its spread globally (Figure 4.2 and figure 4.3).

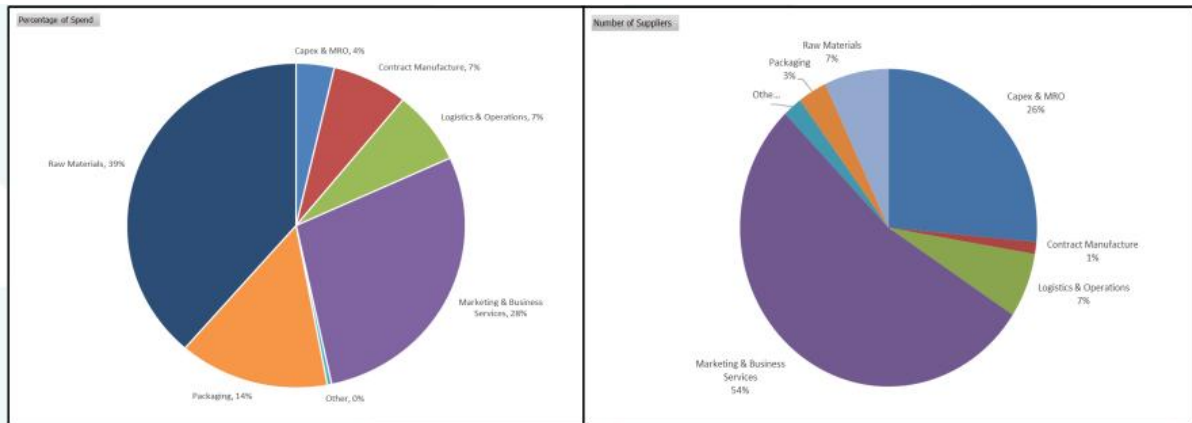


Figure 4.2: Suppliers per spend category

Source: Unilever (2022)

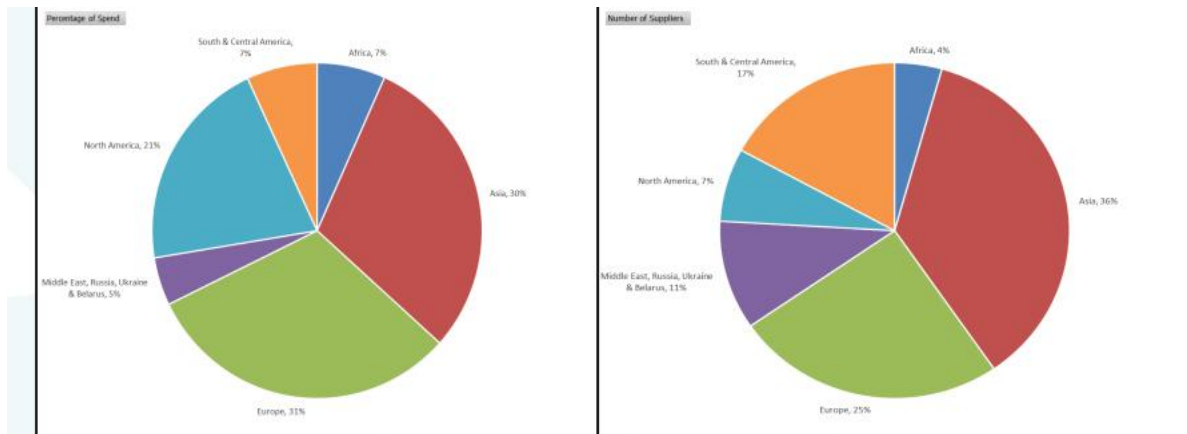


Figure 4.3: Geographic distribution of Suppliers

Source: Unilever (2022)

4.2.3. Supplier relationship practices adopted by Unilever

Unilever prefers to concentrate on creating associations with its suppliers that support the firm to advance a consistent and reliable supplier foundation along with the intention of escalating sustainability and financing in innovation as well as product development. Furthermore, it allowed the firm to minimise costs besides confirming quality products. The relationship of Unilever with its suppliers is grounded on respect and mutual trust, which in turn support the firm in forming long-lasting cooperation with the suppliers. Moreover, it works collaboratively with its suppliers in order to create cutting-edge solutions to minimise expense and escalate quality as well as competency (Unilever, 2023). As per the reports of Unilever (2024) the firm launched a plan named the Growth Action Plan (GAP) in 2023. The main objective is to uphold its position along with its partners as a market leader

while holding sustainability as the foundation of its strategy. Unilever classifies strategic suppliers as those who characterise a vital percentage of its volume or spending.

Improvement in the Unilever approach to sustainable procurement forms an essential area of its supplier strategy. As part of Unilever's commitment to the environment, cutting greenhouse gas emissions, waste, and optimizing resource usage, suppliers have to support these policies (Modreanu et al., 2017). Unilever's sustainability initiatives are furthered when its suppliers adopt ethical business practices. For instance, Unilever collaborated with suppliers to reduce environmental impacts and develop the corporation through the Sustainable Living Plan 2010-2020, which was an important framework (Sanchez-Flores et al., 2020). This program is now the strategy framework developed from this very initiative, putting the protection of the environment first, and taking climate action. Unilever provides a good example of a responsible sourcing policy of how a business could include social and environmental factors into their procurement procedure for sustainability. In the context of a supplier partnership, the importance of sustainability is increasingly respected, and businesses are increasing their demand for high ethical and environmental performance from their suppliers. This is indicative of a trend-a realisation that meaningful collaboration with suppliers is necessary to achieve sustainability objectives, whether related to waste and carbon footprint reduction or improvement of labor conditions (Lawrence et al., 2018). For example, studies carried out on the benefits of sustainable supplier partnerships towards long-term profitability and brand reputation find their case in Unilever's effort to align its suppliers with its objectives in sustainability. Where this step goes further is in the case of Unilever's programs, namely Partner with Purpose and Partner to Win, which are geared towards suppliers in order to stimulate their interaction for innovation and mutually develop either products or technology. In Unilever, all suppliers become co-creators because of building strong relationships and coming up with Joint Business Development Plans when the profits of both sides are a function of technological advancements. These alliances centered around openness and co-creation are the strategic bonds needed for shaping agile and resilient supply chains in the face of severe disruption created by global phenomena like COVID-19 (Cheng, 2021). In addition, this will shorten the time for new product launches and enhance competitive advantage through cooperative invention.

Recognition of the supplier's contribution is, therefore an important strategy for sustaining the competitive advantages, as evidenced by the focus of Unilever to drive innovation through Joint Business Development Plans - JBDP as well as recognition for excellence in supplier

performance. The research evidence to support the above statement shows that product development as well as distinctiveness in the market is greatly influenced by innovation at the supplier level (Unilever, 2024). Innovation among the suppliers strengthens the value chain in the face of obstacles or challenges emanating, for example, from a shortage of raw materials or a change in regulation. It allows for better efficiency and prices.

A more high-priority dimension of supplier partnerships for Unilever is the aspect of digital transformation. Through digital solutions, the company ensured compliance with RSP, increased traceability within the supply chain, and managed procurement in a far more disciplined manner. Technologies like blockchain and AI are being utilized in monitoring the origin of raw material sourcing and ensuring sustainability right from the value chain (Natarajan and Katina, 2021). This, in turn, helps the whole procurement department by reducing wastes of inefficiency, risks, and poor decision-making. Digitalization has contributed much to enabling the company to proceed with visibility and traceability as two key elements that guarantee sustainability and ethical standards among suppliers (Dakshinamoorthy, 2022)

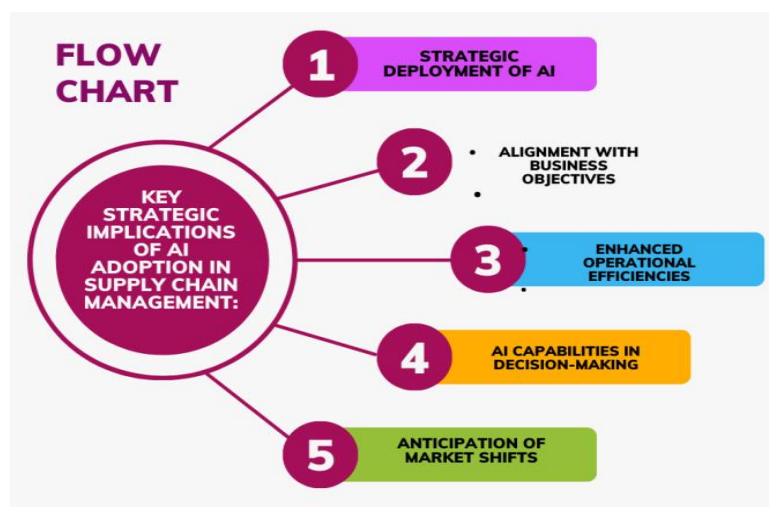


Figure 4.3: Strategic implication of AI technology adoption.

Source: Dakshinamoorthy (2022)

For Unilever, collaboration with suppliers is part of digital transformation, co-innovation, and sustainability. The combination of such components allows Unilever not only to secure the excellence and reliability of its value chain but also to align it with greater social and environmental objectives, allowing the company to position itself as a leader in responsible sourcing and supplier collaboration.

The firm first announced Partner to Win (PTW) in 2011, aiming to bring a change in the approach of procurement from transactional associations to creating strategic partnerships that emphasised collective innovation. Likewise, Joint Business Development Plans (JBDP) is a vital factor of the programme Partner to Win. Every JBDP embarks tactical business plans of Unilever besides offering a strong outline about the ways two firms will work collaboratively to offer the best for the customers in the long run (Unilever, 2024). Recognition of the supplier's contribution is, therefore an important strategy for sustaining the competitive advantages, as evidenced by the focus of Unilever to drive innovation through Joint Business Development Plans - JBDP as well as recognition for excellence in supplier performance. The research evidence to support the above statement shows that product development as well as distinctiveness in the market is greatly influenced by innovation at the supplier level (Unilever, 2024). Innovation among the suppliers strengthens the value chain in the face of obstacles or challenges emanating, for example, from a shortage of raw materials or a change in regulation. It allows for better efficiency and prices.

The plan includes all major areas of purchasing, which covers service, chemicals, commodities and packaging. On the other hand, owing to the fluctuating market conditions, the firm revolved its association approach and embarked on Partner with Purpose in 2020 to replicate its commitments to sustainability. Where this step goes further is in the case of Unilever's programs, namely Partner with Purpose and Partner to Win, which are geared towards suppliers in order to stimulate their interaction for innovation and mutually develop either products or technology.

Moreover, the firm is more than ready to welcome partners, irrespective of size, from start-ups to multinational firms, to partner with it on a one-to-one basis or in partnership in the form of a multi-partner. In the same way, the firm expects all its partners to have the same passion as that of the firm to offer enhanced performance, with a special focus on simplicity, faster growth and productivity along with performance culture (Unilever, 2024).

The first fundamental pillar, faster growth devoted to emphasis on its 30 power brands, influencing its collaborations to make sure reliable in-market execution as well as brand support for its power brands. Moreover, it works collectively with its partners, depending on their proficiency to urge brand advantage besides conveying all factors of the preferences of customers. Likewise, in the productivity and simplicity pillar, the main highlight is on the goals of sustainability, getting advantages of category-based firms and structuring gross margin. In this part, the partners have a vital role in assisting the firm to accomplish its

sustainability goals across, nature, livelihoods, climate along with plastics (IDH, 2017). In addition, it functions collaboratively with partners to augment process efficiency and minimise waste, besides reinforcing cutting-edge roles of customer development to improve productivity. The firm strongly believes that truly competent associations include shared goals, mutual support and collaboration. Its various partnership networks will offer it innovative approaches, best practices and key perspectives with the intention of accumulating its competitive benefits besides supporting in concentrating on clearer and fewer priorities. The determination of the firm is to partnership with its partners along with forming attainable aims, which navigate performance as well as mutual growth (Can Tech, 2024).

The responsible sourcing policy of Unilever is the other practice employed by Unilever to maintain its relationship with partners. It was again restructured in 2017 in order to strengthen its promise of working collectively with its supporters to have an enduring, prolific and sustainable future for all. In addition, the RSP constitutes a series of Mandatory Requirements that all its suppliers are supposed to fulfil in order to partnership with the firm. Apart from this the firm inspires its suppliers to follow Good Practice to Best Practice (Unilever, 2017). The fundamental principles (figure 4.4) of Unilever’s responsible sourcing policy are given below.

- THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES ARE:**
1. Business is conducted lawfully and with integrity
 2. Work is conducted on the basis of freely agreed and documented terms of employment
 3. All workers are treated equally and with respect and dignity
 4. Work is conducted on a voluntary basis
 5. All workers are of an appropriate age
 6. All workers are paid fair wages
 7. Working hours for all workers are reasonable
 8. All workers are free to exercise their right to form and/or join trade unions or to refrain from doing so and to bargain collectively
 9. All workers’ health and safety are protected at work
 10. All workers have access to fair procedures and remedies
 11. Land rights of communities, including indigenous peoples, will be protected and promoted
 12. Business is conducted in a manner which embraces sustainability and reduces environmental impact

Figure 4.4: The fundamental principles of Unilever's responsible sourcing policy

Source: Unilever (2017)

The essence of the fundamental principles of Unilever's responsible sourcing policy explains that the firm endeavours to carry out its functions with openness, honesty and integrity, along with admiration for the rights and interests of its employees. Therefore, the also expects the same from its partners. It also states that by agreeing to become a partner of Unilever, the suppliers also state that they also share the philosophies incorporated in the important principles (Unilever, 2017). Furthermore, the firm, with the assistance and guidance of 54,000 solid supplier ecosystems to direct innovative technologies, underpins its service resilience besides creating advances on the immense problems challenging society and nature. Additionally, the firm inspires and assists the suppliers to have a sustainable journey along with ranking the suppliers. Those who illustrate shared values as well as accountability for the planet and its people by devoting the standards of the firm to sustainability, human rights and responsible sourcing are given priority. As a result, the amalgamation of integrity and expertise of the partners and its values enables Unilever to elevate its industry standards (Unilever, 2024b).

'Partner to Win Awards' is the next practice used by Unilever to appreciate and identify those who remarkably contributed to the development of the firm. The firm presented the awards to various groups of Innovation, Business Integration, Sustainability, Capability Development, and World Class Enterprise Support and Capacity. For instance, Barry Callebaut, a partner in cocoa won the award for innovation, likewise, Ernst and Young, a partner in finance won the award for World Class Enterprise Support. Thus, with the effective and strong practices with its international network of suppliers, the firm was able to become a world leader in its field (New Food Magazine, 2017).

4.2.3. Supplier relationship management challenges faced by Unilever

Unilever's effective relationship management has a significant role in the accomplishing its goals of sustainability and success. However, the firm faces many challenges in maintaining the relationship with suppliers. The main challenges in the supplier relationship management are safeguarding supplier compliance, cultural and regulatory differences, harmonising sustainability with profitability and resistance to change.

a) Cultural and regulatory difference

The main challenge confronted by Unilever is issues faced in piloting the regulatory and cultural disparity throughout its international supply chain. In addition, as the firm functions in various nations, that has distinctive laws, social norms and regulations as well as Inventory management. Furthermore, the cultural as well as regulatory disparity affect the joint profits of the firm. Another challenge faced by the firm is ensuring supplier agreement. The firm should meticulously supervise its wide-ranging supplier network to validate that the firm strictly follows all the set guidelines as well as needs (Unilever, 2023).

b) Resistance to change

The resistance the employees to the changes brought by the firm is a serious issue faced by Unilever. The company failed to change the approach of the employees as well as suppliers when executing a sustainable procurement programme. In order to overcome this the firm has to integrate sustainability values to the core values of the firm, establishing clear goals besides acknowledging the accomplishments of individual employees as well as the team, which in turn supports the success of the firm (Change Management Insight, 2023).

c) Inventory management

Issues related to inventory management is highlighted in the regional market as the market experiences enormously huge demand as well as the demand of e-comm channel is escalating, thus augmenting the demand volatility. The issues of inventory management were handled by the firm using Kinaxis planning system besides enhancing the standards of stock along with minimising slow-moving and non-moving stock, that improves services of the firm, which in turn enhances the satisfaction of the customers as well as channels (Consumer Goods Technology, 2023). Moreover, the firm also faces issues in managing excess as well as aging inventory, which has an adverse impact on the performance of the firm. The firm is handling the issue by financing in technology which restructures approaches to enclose sustainable and circular method to broadening shelf life (Unilever, 2023b).

d) Supply chain disruption

A massive supply chain disruption occurred in the head office of Unilever in Durban, South Africa due to the civil unrest occurred there. In addition, many suppliers of Unilever and two main manufacturing services of the company was affected by the unrest. As a result of the disruption, a major key packaging suppliers of Unilever was severely damaged and it was shut down (Unilever, 2024). Like numerous other industries, Unilever also faces the issues of disruptions in supply chain, increasing currency instability and soaring expenses in the

regions of their suppliers, the firm is aiming to put efforts to create a self-reliant operation in Africa. Moreover, the outburst of pandemic has badly affected the global supply chain of the firm at every level starting from production to distribution. In addition, absence of employees in the factories along with scarcity of drivers made the situation worse (Supply Chain Dive, 2020).

e) Challenges in supplier diversity

One of the main challenges faced by Unilever is the maintaining relationship with its diverse suppliers across the globe. The firm has teams, functioning in a comprehensive atmosphere, which enabled to perform better with agility and quick replying to the varying requirements of the customers. However, structural inequalities and biases can act as a hindrance in the workplace (Unilever, 2024).

f) Product stock-outs and quality issues of Unilever

As per the report by Forbes (2017), Unilever is confronting challenges in the personal care units, which is one of the fast-running divisions of Unilever. Consequently, the sales of the company declined to 2.2 percent from 3.7 percent, which is far behind the expectation which was 2.8 percent. Even more, the company is noted for scaling back its environmental and social responsibilities for the sake of business (The Guardian, 2024). Unilever is more focused on shareholder interests of cutting the cost of the products and improving the stock market performance rather than complying with the environmental and ethical pledges. Besides this, Nina Schrank, the head of plastics at Greenpeace UK, criticised Unilever for their abundant usage of plastics, which is against their sustainability goals of investing in green projects (The Guardian, 2024). The dilution of the ethical stances is leading the company to a crisis leading to a decline of 8 percent from the previous year.

In addition, Greenpeace has brought to light controversies associated with the consumer goods company by publishing that Unilever has made a great contribution to increasing the plastic footprints in the environment, which sells about 1700 plastic sachets in every second (Morning Star, 2023). Even more, the issues caused by inflation bite Unilever, resulting in the fall of their stocks, adversely affecting their business in the UK (IG, 2023). Subsequently, the hike in the price of the food items is discouraging customers from their purchasing intention, adversely impacting the financial performance of the company. Nevertheless, the consumer goods giant is facing challenges due to reduced customer satisfaction and poor product quality. Trustpilot (2024) underlines that most of the customers have complaints about the

Persil washing pods and surf, which ruin clothes by dyeing and bleaching. Even more, the toothpaste offered by Unilever for fighting sensitivity is not working profoundly. Accordingly, size reductions in soap bars and other products are the issues faced by Unilever customers. Additionally, poor customer service, including the blaming attitude of the service executives, is repelling loyal customers from purchasing Unilever products, contributing to the decline in sales.

The Guardian (2024) conveyed by citing the reports of Bloomberg that Unilever is the largest operators of plastic packaging around the globe. The products of Unilever, such as aerosol dry shampoo like Dove have been recalled due to the presence of benzene, which can cause cancer in the customers. It has been identified by FDA that frequent contact to benzene might lead to leukemia as well as other blood cancers. In addition, spray-on personal-care products of Unilever encompass propellants like butane and propane (The Economic Times, 2022). The firm overcomes by consistently supervising and tracing both the consumer as well as customer review in order to take necessary precautions in addressing possible The Economic Times, 2022 problems associated with product quality and safety. Moreover, from the reviews of the customers on Trustpilot (2021) illustrated that most of the customers are not happy with the products by Unilever. For instance, the explosion of Rexona deodorant indicating the issues with the supplier relationship and poor supplier management.

g) Supplier violating sustainable supply chain standards of Unilever

Unilever, mainly focuses on sustainability by creating a long-term obligation to source sustainably through concentrating on the sustainable products and they can have significant impact on nature. However, some of its suppliers are not following its strictly and the firms has to take necessary steps to stop the violation of the suppliers. For instance, Oxfam's report stated that the 50% of its suppliers are not fully aware of the expectations on the labour standards of the firm along with disproportionate working hours as well as risky work atmosphere (Devex, 2013). In order to overcome these issues Unilever guarantee to linger to take practices to mainstream incorporation of the human and labour rights on international as well as regional levels. The practices include promotion of the sustainable lifestyle of all the workers, confirming to fulfil the standards anticipated from its major suppliers. Moreover, making sure that the supplier code of the Unilever is comprehended and approved by all its tier-1 suppliers (Unilever, 2024)

Therefore, it is noted that Unilever faces so many challenges in their supplier relationship management. However, the firm is taking effective measures to overcome these challenges and remain as global leaders in the sector.

4.3. Discussion

In the second section of the current chapter, the findings of the study are compared with the literature review and previous studies in order to draw a conclusion to the study along with its implications.

Supplier relationship management practices of Unilever

Regarding the supplier relationship practices adopted by Unilever, it is revealed from the findings of the study that the firm uses numerous practices to build a good rapport with its suppliers, as it has suppliers around the globe. To begin with it is noted from the outcome of the study that the company ensures that it has a long-lasting relationship with all its suppliers irrespective of the size and region. It does not mean that everyone can make an easy association with Unilever. In order to be a supplier of Unilever, they have to meet certain criteria proposed by the company. The firms have to follow the responsible sourcing policy implemented by Unilever, which is in condensed form, stating that the firms must conduct their procedures with utmost truthfulness, sincerity and morality. In addition, it should not make any compromises in its process to maintain sustainability. In order to keep up the standards of Unilever, the firm consistently evolve the operations of their suppliers closely and rewards those who follow the guidelines strictly to encourage the suppliers to follow the same (Unilever, 2017).

In addition, the Growth Action Plan was implemented by the firm in 2023 with the intention of preserving its values on sustainability and ensuring that its suppliers are also keen to follow them (Unilever, 2024). Moreover, the firm declared Partner to Win in 2011 to transform the procurement methods from transactional relations to form calculated associations that highlighted cooperative innovation. Three main pillars of PTW are faster growth, productivity and simplicity accompanied by performance culture. JBPD is another strategy followed by the company, which is a major feature of PTW that provides a framework on how two organisations must function collectively to deliver the best for their customers consistently. It extends from the shopping of raw materials to the package of the final product. Besides, Partners with Purpose, initiated in 2020, is to reinforce its obligations on sustainability (Unilever, 2024).

According to the annual reports of Unilever (2024b), with the support of its network of suppliers, the firm piloted the use of innovative technologies to reinforce its resilience along with forming progress on the huge issues that risk nature as well as society. Besides, the firm takes effective initiatives to appreciate and acknowledge its suppliers by awarding them in various fields, such as innovation, sustainability, packaging, capability development, and business integration, along with World Class Enterprise Support and Capacity. Subsequently, ensuring that the suppliers also follow the proficiency and integrity of Unilever and uphold the industry standards of the firm. From the literature review also, it is observed that numerous popular firms use diverse SRM procedures to maximise their supply chain thereby elevating the performance of the firm. Expansion of robust partnerships with the suppliers is the main strategy followed by several firms universally (Branska et al. 2016). The use of cutting-edge technologies with the support of suppliers is the other strategy implemented by the firms to maintain their SRM as it provides supplier visibility, makes effective decisions and quick purchasing methods and supervises the performance of suppliers (Grant, 2024). From the case study of SRM of Tesco (2022) also, it is explained that, like Unilever, the firm aims to have a long-term association with its suppliers. The firm also gives importance to sustainability and makes sure its suppliers are fulfilling the criteria proposed by Tesco. In addition, the firm also shares its expectations as well as best practices with its suppliers and ensures the suppliers follow them strictly.

Similarly, ASDA, another popular retailer in the UK, is keen on maintaining a good relationship with its suppliers by having a strategic relationship with its suppliers. The firm initiates to work collectively with its suppliers to have a clear, transparent and fair dealing with them. Its main strategy is local sourcing by assisting the local suppliers to comprehend the expectations of ASDA (ASDA, 2022). Innovative suppliers are the next strategy followed by ASDA to preserve its relationship with suppliers by introducing RangeMe to identify innovative suppliers in order to meet the expectations of the customers (PR Newswire, 2021).

Therefore, as the practical implication of the study, it can be used by supply chain managers of retail firms or other industries to have a good relationship with their suppliers. Furthermore, the study gives clear guidelines on the various practices formed by firms to maintain supplier relations and how firms can benefit from it. Thus, it is interpreted from the findings of the study and existing studies that the majority of the firms, irrespective of the size and sector, use diverse strategies to have a good rapport with their suppliers and long-term along with strategic relationships being the main and common practice. Use of innovative technologies

and providing awareness to its suppliers about their expectations from the suppliers and assessing their practices. Sustainability is another practice that the firms follow and expect family from their suppliers, thus showing the importance of effective supplier relationship management practices.

Supplier relationship management challenges faced by Unilever

When analysing the relationship management challenges confronted by Unilever, it is analysed that despite the numerous benefits and practices followed by the firm, Unilever encounters several challenges in maintaining the relationship with its suppliers. The challenges include cultural and regulatory disparities, resistance to change, inventory management, supply chain disruption, challenges in supplier diversity, product quality and supplier violating sustainable supply chain standards of Unilever.

Due to the widespread supply chain network, Unilever faces issues in maintaining and following the cultural differences in various countries and differences in regulations in different countries affected their supplier relationship (Unilever, 2023a). Another main challenge was the resistance of employees to change, such as the implementation of advanced technologies, where, again skill gap is a main issue. In addition, implementation of new technologies causes huge expense to the firm along with training the employees (Change Management Insight, 2023). Managing old inventory is an issue faced by the firm as it encounters problems with handling ageing and excess inventory, which negatively influence the firm performance (Consumer Goods Technology, 2023). Natural disasters, along with pandemics and unrest in countries, affect the relationship with the suppliers. In addition, disparities along with partialities in the structure of the firm hamper diversity in the workplace (Unilever, 2024). Quality of the raw materials used by the suppliers or provided by them can affect the relationship with suppliers and Unilever, for instance, the ban on dry shampoos by Unilever in the UK (Unilever, 2024). The violation of the supply chain strategies of Unilever by its suppliers is also a main challenge. For example, a report by Oxfam exposed that the majority of the suppliers of the company were not aware of the anticipated labour standards put forward by Unilever (Devex, 2013). From all the challenges it is not that it significantly affects the performance of the firm along with the satisfaction of the customers. The same point is discussed in the literature review of the study by quoting Villena and Gioia (2018), that cultural difference is the main issue faced in handling the partnership with the suppliers. Likewise, the study by Jia et al. (2019) noticed that disruptions in the supply chain are also a vital issue that hinders good relations with the suppliers.

Similarly, Villena and Gioia emphasised that maintaining product quality is indeed a problem between the firm and its suppliers. From assessing the challenges faced by ASDA in handling supplier relationships in comparison with Unilever, it is discovered that ASDA also faces the same issue as Unilever. Inventory management and supplier connectivity were the main risks faced by ASDA in maintaining supplier relationships (ASDA, 2022). Due to the expansion of the company, ASDA finds it hard to manage its inventory along with the circulation centres in order to meet the expectations of the retail stores. As a result, it turned out to be problematic for the firm to store the food products that are prone to expiration in inventories (ASDA, 2024). Likewise, similar points are found when evaluating the challenges faced by Tesco in preserving a good relationship with suppliers. It is identified that maintaining inventory and cultural differences are the main challenges that prevent the smooth collaboration between Tesco and its suppliers. The article by Permutable.ai (2024) noted that Tesco failed to maintain the inventory levels, thereby failing to satisfy the expectations of the customers besides preventing the additional stock, which might lead to waste. Moreover, it is also analysed that handling a universal supply chain results in complications like cultural differences and regulations. The said risks might have emphasised the significance of accountability and transparency among the suppliers and the firms.

Similarly, when analysing the challenges of supplier relationship management faced by Unilever using the Kraljic Matrix Category framework, it is evaluated that it is mandatory for consumer product organisations to have a good relationship with their suppliers. The implications of the challenges and gaps faced by Unilever are discussed in the form of a table (Table 4.1) that is given below.

Kraljic Matrix Category	Challenges Faced by Unilever	Gaps in Supplier Relationships
Leverage Items	The cost maximisation from numerous suppliers Ineffectuality in upholding sustainability highlighted in lucrative procurement	Inadequate utilisation of the control of negotiation Probable overreliance on the limited or selected suppliers The pressure of sustainability on affordable suppliers

Strategic Items	Requirement for a strong and close partnership with all suppliers for innovation in the product	Lack of innovation among the suppliers of the firm
	Restricted choice of suppliers Risks in guaranteeing viable and sustainable sourcing of suppliers	Challenges in depending too much on certain critical suppliers Unreliable implementation of standards that are sustainable
Non-Critical Items	Lack proficiency in procurement Failure in saving costing for procurements of non-expensive items	Complicated process in tackling the suppliers with low-risk Unexploited chances of reducing expenses in reliable areas Little or negligible engagement of suppliers in the initiatives to ensure sustainability
	Incapability in pledging supply security Failure in finding substitute suppliers, particularly for crucial yet cheap products	Restricted substitution of suppliers as well as an escalation in the risk of supply Little cooperation or partition from suppliers owing to low-value Prone to the interruption in the block supply
General Across Categories	Inability to handle the diversity in the suppliers Failure to Position suppliers with international and sustainability practices	Gaps in managing the supplier diversity (for instance, regional or smaller suppliers) Struggle to vary from suppliers in the regions that are not as much linked to sustainability

Table 4.1: The implications of the challenges and gaps faced by Unilever

Source: Created by the author

As per the findings of the study, the failure to maintain environmental sustainability is an underlying challenge. The Report of Ethical Consumers (2024) states that Unilever receives a rating of zero for sustainable packaging and is often questioned by sustainability-promoting organisations. Even more, the company continues to utilise harmful chemical contents like parabens and phthalates in the packaging, which generates harmful reactions in human bodies, thereby staying against the social responsibilities a company needs to abide by. The major implication of the challenge includes brand damage by deviating the loyal customers from the company due to the destruction of reputation. Additionally, the company is more liable to be the victim of controversies associated with sustainability issues and increasing carbon footprint. Besides, an increased plastic footprint can cause climatic changes and loss of biodiversity.

Cost optimisation from different suppliers is another challenge faced by the consumer goods giant Unilever, which can result in the ineffective utilisation of resources and negotiation power. In addition, becoming extremely dependent on a few suppliers is the major implication of this challenge. Alongside this, reduced collaboration with the suppliers for promoting innovations and limited supplier options are problems faced by the company. These challenges can cause innovation fatigue among the suppliers and overreliance on a selected group of suppliers, thereby failing to maintain good supplier relationships with the other group of suppliers, thus arousing the chances of conflicts among the suppliers.

Problems in ensuring sustainable sourcing of the components required for the manufacturing process of the goods are also a challenge for Unilever, which can result in inconsistent enforcement of sustainability policies in the company, which can push the company to dangerous points like resource scarcity, inefficient utilisation of energy, and breaking of the regulatory policies causing huge penalties. In addition, the findings show that weaker procurement efficiency and cost-saving in low-value purchases are the bottlenecks faced by Unilever. The major implication of these challenges includes high complexity in managing the low-risk or over dependent suppliers. Besides, reduced suppliers' awareness about sustainability activities and fewer initiatives in promoting sustainability. Additionally, the organisation fails to utilise the opportunity in the low-risk areas, where cost reduction is not necessary.

Reduced security of the supply of raw materials and goods is faced by Unilever, which can impact by increasing the supply chain risk during critical situations and unexpected events. Even more, Unilever confronts problems in choosing alternative suppliers who supply prominent low-value products. One major implication of the challenge is reduced collaboration with the supplier due to the low value of the item, leading to increased proneness of supply chain disruption. Nevertheless, promoting diversity while choosing the suppliers and aligning the suppliers with sustainability goals are challenging factors faced by Unilever. These challenges result in reduced supplier management diversity especially in the small and regional suppliers. Failure to align the suppliers with global and sustainability goals can generate resistance to innovations which are imminent for the growth of the reputation as well as the financial performance of the company.

Thus, it is evident from the outcome of the study and literature review that Unilever and other consumer product firms confront the same challenges and regulatory and cultural differences along with inventory management issues being the prominent ones. The recommendations to overcome the issues discussed above will be suggested in the following chapter. The implications of the study are that it can be used as a reference by consumer product organisations to overcome the challenges of having a good relationship with their suppliers and effectively implementing supplier management practices.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The chapter deals with a discussion of objectives indicated in the initial chapter to assess how effectively the current study met all the objectives. At the same time, the relevant recommendations for Unilever to manage their supplier relationships in the UK are provided based on the ideas obtained from the results and discussion chapter. In addition, the limitations that the current study faced are discussed and are used to provide relevant recommendations for future research studying similar topics.

5.2 Conclusions

To identify the trends in managing supplier relationships in the UK

In the literature review, Foltean et al. (2019) noted that digital transformation is a key trend in managing supplier relationships. The use of digital platforms for automating and streamlining numerous aspects of supplier management became a trend because of its benefits like enhancing visibility, collaboration and communication with supplier networks. The utilisation of artificial intelligence is a critical aspect in the digital transformation as per Lorentz (2019) in the literature review. technologies like blockchain, cloud computing etc., are other major areas in digital transformation trends in supplier management. The thematic analysis corroborated the aspect of Natarajan and Katina (2021) use of digital transformation by Unilever in the UK as the company ensured RSP compliance and increased traceability. The use of digital transformation in the area was technologies like AI and blockchain in monitoring raw material sourcing. The process was also found to be used in ensuring sustainability. Collaboration with suppliers is another area that Unilever achieved using digital transformation as Dakshinamoorthy, (2022) in the thematic analysis, indicated the use of technologies to achieve co-innovation and collaboration with the suppliers.

Ghadimi et al. (2018), in the literature, mentioned the use of sustainability and responsibility notions as new trends for managing supplier relationships. The compliance with ESG practices and companies and suppliers working with each other to identify and resolve risks in ESG practices are mentioned in the literature of Ni et al. (2020). The earlier ideologies of Natarajan and Katina (2021) indicated that sustainability was a major indicator for Unilever supplier management relationships and this indicates corroboration with the theoretical provisions. Responsible sourcing is also minted in the thematic analysis by Can Tech (2024), indicating corroboration with the literature. Verma and Gustafsson's (2020) view in the

literature mentions the inclusion of supplier diversity as a major trend in supplier relationship management. On the other hand, Ghadimi et al. (2018) further mentioned supplier innovation and value creation as prominent trends in supplier relationships. The case of value creation is also mentioned in the thematic analysis, as New Food Magazine (2017) found the provision of an award for innovation to Barry Callebaut, a partner in cocoa.

To examine the factors influencing the management of supplier relationships in the consumer goods industry

Based on the literature analysis Kamarudin and Izaidin (2018) found that company goals and strategy have a major influence on supplier relationship management. Abbaspour (2019) further indicated that this factor is prominent as companies prioritising innovation and quality look for long-term support from suppliers that can assure relevant contribution to them. Lo et al. (2018) in the literature, however, backed customer characteristics as an important factor. The characteristics indicate that the supplier could be reliable and hold various services and the ability to adapt to evolving requirements. At the same time Kannan (2018) in the literature mentioned industry dynamics and market trends as the pivotal factors affecting supplier relationship management. The literature of Sharma et al. (2022) corroborated the views and indicated the adoption of sustainable materials as a major element in meeting market trends. The assessment of thematic analysis provides significant evidence on the sustainability practices of suppliers, which was one of the premier aspects Unilever used to characterise their suppliers. The company had better collaboration with sustainable suppliers, and the ESG compliance mentioned in the thematic analysis by Ni et al. (2020).

Relationship factors are another main factor mentioned in the literature by Aslam et al. (2021). As per the literature, effective supplier relationships require adequate collaboration basis. On the other hand, Yazdani and Masum (2018) noted that performance assessment, dispute resolution and uncertainty minimisation are crucial elements that assure collaboration and communication with the suppliers. Sullivan and Kim (2018) in addition, noted in the literature that technology is a crucial factor which can influence practices like visibility, risk management and performance metrics. The use of digital solutions mentioned in the theme by Natarajan and Katina (2021) inferring AI and blockchain usage corroborate the technology factor. The process further reduces inefficiencies, risks, inefficacy in decision making, etc, are improved using technological incorporation, and this furthers the relationship factors

mentioned in the literature part. The assessment of the objective indicates that the current research has successfully answered the corresponding research question.

To identify the challenges and opportunities in managing supplier relationships of Unilever, UK

Lo et al. (2018) in the literature indicated that sustainability assurance is a critical challenge in supplier relationships. On the other hand, Mangla et al. (2019) in the literature mentioned that elements like retaining product quality and maintaining operational efficacy are crucial challenges for companies in supplier relationship management. Besides these values should be met along with fulfilling customer demands without any delay. The literature further indicated that these aspects can be easily met by strong partnerships with the suppliers, and proper supplier management is crucial for managing product quality. The sourcing of raw materials and reducing the inaccuracies in products and goods quality can be improved by closely working with the suppliers. Similarly, the thematic analysis considered these variables and theoretical aspects to assess the actual challenges for Unilever when dealing with supplier relationship management.

Supplier violation of sustainable supply chain standards of the company became a crucial challenge as Devex (2013) mentioned that 50% of suppliers are not fully aware of the expectations of labour standards. The process challenges them to accommodate adequate employees that could produce products that meet the standards of the company and hence contribute to accommodating the damages. Addressing the supplier's code and ensuring that these standards are met could be the key way for Unilever to manage these challenges, as mentioned by Devex (2013) in the thematic analysis. Supply chain disruption is another major challenge identified by Unilever (2024) when managing supplier relationships. The soaring economic instabilities affect the supplier relationship, whereas the quality metric of products is often challenged by inadequate monitoring of the supply chain process. This indicates proper collaboration and communication with the suppliers and accurate dissemination of information between the suppliers and the company. The resistance to change from certain suppliers has also been mentioned troubling factor for Unilever, which reduces acceptance of innovative ideas that further damage the overall product and performance quality.

To provide recommendations for overcoming the challenges in supplier relations with specific reference to Unilever in the UK

The overall analysis identified that there exist significant challenges for Unilever to manage supplier relationships in the UK. The challenge of continuous monitoring of supply chain activities, quality of product, compliance of suppliers with Unilever standards etc. are key issues noted by the assessment. Based on these, the research provides relevant recommendations to Unilever for improving its performance in the UK sector and is in the following session. Moreover, these aspects indicate that the research successfully achieved all the objectives and answered the research questions successfully.

5.3 Recommendations

Identification of responsible suppliers and continuous monitoring of compliance with standards: Unilever needs to continue to focus on its strategy to foster sustainable practices by identifying responsible suppliers. The implementation of ESG performance is already implemented by the company however, Unilever is required to ensure that the suppliers maintain the case and assure the sustainability aspect in the final product. Continuous improvement is another aspect that Unilever could perform along with the aspect where the company can work with the suppliers to promote continuous improvement in sustainability aspect. On the other hand, ensuring standard practices and compliance with the insist standards in responsible sourcing are crucial aspects that Unilever should try to implement among their suppliers.

Maximum utilisation of technology to foster continuous improvement: As mentioned in the earlier aspect, continuous improvement is a key process in improving sustainable performant and quality product provisioning. The use of technologies like blockchain and AI are often implemented by Unilever, and the company should use blockchain technology to ensure the tactility of products to ensure the ethics and sustainability of products. The process can be used to improve product quality where the research found product quality as a challenging factor for Unilever. Blockchain implementation and adequate monitoring process thus provide critical information about the product from the sourcing. Hence, the damages or quality challenges in the product can be understood, and then discard the product. Moreover, the efficiency of suppliers can be understood from the process, and Unilever can use the information to manage further relationships with certain suppliers that lack efficacy and proficiency.

Training for bettering awareness, feedback provision to get knowledge, encouragement and collaboration for improving innovation: Incorporation of suppliers in the innovation

and decision-making practice is crucial for Unilever. The challenges like resistance to change and adoption of technologies and other crucial strategies can be made easier with better collaboration. In addition, appropriate leadership management is crucial for avoiding resistance to change issues. For all these aspects, the important facet is collaboration and communication with potential suppliers. Unilever should look for feedback from their prominent suppliers or suppliers with significant potential to improve their innovation aspect. The internal assessment of suppliers and accumulation of relevant data through feedback can be used to develop strategies like training provisions that further aid Unilever's activities. Better decision acceptance and improved suppliers are key to improving product and service quality for Unilever. In addition, these processes can also provide cost optimisation for Unilever.

5.4 Research Limitations

The study used a secondary method to collect information; however, challenges like access to certain grey articles were limited because of subscription issues. A major area of concern is the thematic analysis, as it is open to subjective interpretation and researcher bias. Moreover, a larger selection of data samples is required to improve the quality of data and increase the richness of content. Besides, the process focused on Unilever, and the actions might not provide a generalised solution for the research issue. Besides, challenges in systematic scheduling practice in the initial stages triggered timeliness issues, which were managed successfully during the completion stage. Theme identification and interpretation tasks have consumed considerable time, creating timeliness challenges.

5.5 Recommendations for future studies

A key advice to future researchers who perform similar studies is to utilise the maximum potential of secondary data by improving the data sources. The process contributes to the quality of information and thematic analysis performance. Consideration of scheduling tasks to ensure time management is important. In addition, future studies might consider using primary data collection methods such as surveys or interviews with the employees or managers to understand the supplier management details and perspectives from within the company.

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