

Intersection of negotiation and sustainability in business: review and future research

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to contribute to the intersection of negotiation and sustainability. These two domains have often overlooked each other's importance despite their shared concerns with cooperation, coordination and value creation. Our study moves beyond descriptive mapping by integrating fragmented research streams and, through a set of original propositions, offers a forward-looking agenda for research and practice.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper relies on a structured review of the literature, using the bibliometric-systematic literature review (B-SLR) framework.

Findings – Our analysis identifies four main clusters. This work indicates a one-sided engagement: most contributions come from sustainability studies, with limited input from negotiation scholars. Highlighting the absence of an integrative theoretical lens, we suggest that stakeholder theory could bridge the domains. The findings confirm that negotiation is a constitutive process through which sustainability goals are pursued, not merely an instrumental tool.

Social implications – For sustainability to move from intention to reality, it must be negotiated. Effective negotiation is vital for firms dealing with internal demands, navigating diverse stakeholder expectations and implementing key initiatives like environmental, social and governance (ESG) practices. This study provides the crucial theoretical framework needed to analyse these processes, ensuring that ambitious sustainability goals are translated into credible, actionable and effective real-world results.

Originality/value – Through our six propositions, the study advances a new understanding of how negotiation and sustainability intersect and mutually shape one another. These propositions reframe negotiation as a constitutive process rather than a transactional tool, linking micro-level interactions with macro-level sustainability outcomes and offering new conceptual directions for future research.

Keywords Negotiation, Sustainability, Stakeholder theory, Literature review, Agenda for future research

Paper type Literature review

1. Introduction

A growing number of companies are embracing more sustainable operations, recognising that short-term profit maximisation must be balanced with a long-term perspective, considering both the resilience of the organisation and the well-being of society and the environment (Alwali and Alwali, 2025; Florez-Jimenez *et al.*, 2024). These commitments should



increasingly influence practices across all levels of the organisation (Lee, 2008), including negotiation processes. As sustainability becomes a new paradigm for conducting business, it seems logical that it will also reshape negotiation, influencing what is negotiated, with whom, and how negotiations are conducted. Sustainability broadly refers to the ability of systems, organisations, or initiatives to endure over time while balancing economic, ecological, and social dimensions and ensuring intergenerational equity (Moore *et al.*, 2017; Ruggerio, 2021). While sustainability is often described as a normative concept that defines desired conditions and values, sustainable development refers to the broader set of practices aimed at integrating ecological, social, and economic dimensions to achieve those conditions (Jabareen, 2008). In this sense, sustainability represents the goal, whereas sustainable development describes the evolving process through which societies and organisations pursue it, shaped by collective norms and contextual dynamics (Parris and Kates, 2003). This distinction matters because the process of sustainable development, which turns objectives into operational realities, depends on negotiation among actors with divergent interests and priorities.

Achieving sustainability, therefore, requires back-and-forth negotiation and coordination among stakeholders to align diverse interests and values. Companies operationalise this process through everyday decisions and agreements that connect strategy to practice. For example, procurement professionals are now expected to source environmentally responsible products (Neumüller *et al.*, 2016), while corporate leaders must form partnerships that meet green standards to secure funding and satisfy growing regulatory requirements and stakeholder expectations. Sustainability, not only expands the range of topics subject to negotiation, such as green supply chains and environmental preservation initiatives, but also transforms the processes and practices through which negotiations are carried out.

Negotiation can be understood as a decision-making process through which two or more parties with differing interests seek to reach mutually acceptable agreements (Fells and Sheer, 2020; Pruitt, 2013). It has long been recognised as a fundamental mechanism of strategic cooperation, enabling parties to coordinate actions, align interests, and jointly define outcomes (Fisher *et al.*, 2011; Caputo *et al.*, 2019). Over time, negotiation has evolved into a multidisciplinary field encompassing psychology, organisational behaviour, legal studies, and public policy (Borbély *et al.*, 2017). This conceptual understanding of negotiation becomes particularly relevant given recent regulatory and market shifts that increasingly make sustainability a mandatory requirement rather than a voluntary aspiration. A prime example is the European Union's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), which legally obligates in-scope firms to conduct due diligence on human rights and environmental impacts across their entire chain of activities (European Commission, 2024). This directive, along with similar reporting and disclosure legislation (Pizzi and Caputo, 2025), requires firms to cooperate with their stakeholders to ensure responsible and sustainable practices. These interactions reflect negotiation as a joint decision-making process (Lax and Sebenius, 1986), where multiple parties collaborate to define responsibilities and coordinate actions in pursuit of shared sustainability goals. In this sense, negotiation becomes the mechanism through which regulatory obligations are translated into concrete actions and aligned with each organisation's values, priorities, and operational realities.

However, recent regulations have made negotiation central to implementing sustainability objectives, yet academic research in both domains has not kept pace. The literature on negotiation and sustainability has largely evolved separately, with limited theoretical exchange between them (Celino and Concilio, 2011; De Prins *et al.*, 2020; Schauer *et al.*, 2023). As a result, insights from negotiation studies have rarely been applied to sustainability contexts, and sustainability challenges have seldom informed negotiation theory. This disconnection has created a gap between the practical challenges organisations face in aligning sustainability objectives with their operational realities and the theoretical frameworks available to explain these processes. To address this gap, the paper examines how negotiation and sustainability are conceptually and empirically connected and what their integration reveals about the mechanisms through which sustainability is achieved in practice.

Given the breadth and multidisciplinary nature of both negotiation and sustainability research, it is necessary first to develop a comprehensive understanding of how these domains intersect. To this end, we employ the combined bibliometric-systematic literature review (B-SLR) approach (Marzi *et al.*, 2025), which enables us to move from a broad, structural understanding to a more precise and interpretive analysis, identifying conceptual inconsistencies (Breslin and Gatrell, 2023) and developing new propositions for future research. The result is a review of 52 papers that address the intersection of negotiation and sustainability, revealing a disciplinary imbalance and theoretical gaps. Most contributions come from sustainability scholars, with only three papers published in negotiation journals and just one (Schauer *et al.*, 2023) explicitly engaging with negotiation theory. Most authors view negotiation as a means of aligning stakeholders around sustainability objectives, emphasising coordination, collaboration, and consensus-building. This perspective reinforces the view that sustainability is inherently collective. Although stakeholder engagement is frequently mentioned, few studies explicitly draw on stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), which could provide a valuable conceptual bridge between negotiation (mostly studied at the micro level) and sustainability (mostly studied at the macro level). Our study contributes to both streams of literature by exploring how negotiation can serve as a mechanism for advancing sustainability, while also showing how sustainability reshapes the context, content, and purpose of negotiation. We believe that negotiation processes and skills are a key component of an organisation's sustainability efforts. At the same time, sustainable development is a new reality that is infusing organisations at all levels and, consequently, redefining the parameters of many negotiation efforts.

In the following section, we present the comprehensive details of our Bibliometric-Systematic Literature Review (B-SLR) methodology and the results of our bibliometric analysis. Based on this analysis, we cluster our papers into four thematic groups, which are integrated with the results of the systematic literature review. Section four presents our discussion, and Section five proposes our agenda for future research. Finally, Section six summarises our conclusion.

2. Methodology

The present study applies the B-SLR framework (Marzi *et al.*, 2025). As a first step, in January 2025, we scrutinised the literature on the intersection of sustainability and negotiation to develop an overview of the research stream and to identify a set of representative keywords for database searches.

Following the B-SLR framework, we established our inclusion and exclusion criteria before initiating data collection. To do so, we leveraged a comprehensive set of key definitions in the field of inquiry (Elgoibar and Shijaku, 2022; Thompson *et al.*, 2010).

As a result, we defined the search query as follows: TITLE-ABS-KEY (negotiation AND sustainability). We conducted a search query in the Scopus database on 12 January 2025, limiting the search to peer-reviewed articles published in English until 2024. We extracted a raw database of 160 units, cross-validating the outcomes of our search with Web of Science, and decided to use only Scopus, which, compared to Web of Science, includes a broader base of academic journals (Caputo and Kargina, 2022). We then removed duplicates and ineligible documents, such as articles originating from unknown journals or those with questionable peer-reviewing practices.

From the raw database, we applied our exclusion criteria, removing studies outside the scope of our selected topic because they did not address negotiation in the context of sustainability. After screening abstracts, we excluded 67 articles, many of which discussed sustainability broadly but did not address negotiation, resulting in a final dataset of 97 documents that constitute what we will, from now on, call "the field" (of the intersection between negotiation and sustainability research).

Next, we conducted a bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer *version 1.6*. (van Eck and Waltman, 2010), adopting bibliographic coupling as the aggregation criterion. For the bibliometric indicators, we relied on the R package Bibliometrix (Aria and Cuccurullo, 2017). This analysis focused on the 52 documents forming the most extensive connected set, each linked by at least one shared reference. This network enabled a coherent structural mapping of the field, which the VOSviewer visualised into four distinct thematic clusters.

After independently reviewing the extracted documents, we identified and confirmed the core research topic within each cluster (resolution = 52; minimum cluster size = 8). To assess and rank the relevance of documents within each cluster, we calculated the Composite Bibliometric Influence Score (CBIS) (Marzi *et al.*, 2025). The CBIS provides a consolidated measure of each paper's influence by combining normalised citations, total links, and link strength in the network. The formula and rationale for this metric follow the approach described in the B-SLR paper by Marzi *et al.* (2025), which highlights its value in identifying the most impactful contributions within bibliometric clusters.

To ensure proportional representation of each cluster and maintain sufficient granularity, the established recommendation is to study at least 10% of the papers in each cluster (Bornmann, 2014; Turzo *et al.*, 2022). Considering the relatively small size of our field, we established our percentile threshold at 33%. Based on the CBIS ranking, we selected a representative subsample of documents for in-depth analysis, prioritising the papers with the highest scores in each cluster to guide our reading and interpretation. This approach supports the identification of the most representative and impactful contributions in each thematic area (Marzi *et al.*, 2025).

Finally, the clusters were reviewed by mapping the state of knowledge and synthesising the literature, following the prescriptions for systematic literature reviews.

The following section first presents the descriptive bibliometric indicators of our sample, then the science mapping and bibliographic coupling analysis, and finally the results of the systematic literature review.

2.1 Bibliometric indicators

The research spans 27 years and draws on 65 journals across diverse disciplines, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the sustainability topic (Feeney *et al.*, 2023). A total of 263 authors have contributed to the field, with each publication receiving an average of 22.53 citations (see Table 1). The field started in 1997 and has shown a growing trend since then. The number of

Table 1. Bibliometric indicators

Category	Detail	Value
Data Main Information	Timespan	1997–2024
	Sources (Journals)	65
	Documents	97
	Annual Growth Rate (%)	8.01
	Document Average Age	8
	Average Citations per Document	22.53
	References	5,416
Document Content	Keywords Plus (ID)	407
	Author's Keywords (DE)	416
Authors	Authors	263
	Authors of Single-Authored Documents	21
Authors Collaboration	Single-Authored Documents	23
	Co-Authors per Document	2.78
	International Co-Authorships (%)	24.74

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

published papers steadily increased from the late 1990s. Publication number reached its peak in 2021. Overall, the number of published papers remains limited, making the study of negotiation and sustainability a niche field.

2.2 Journal overview

An analysis of journals that published two or more papers on the joint topic of negotiation and sustainability reveals that most outlets are strategy journals. Although any categorisation would be arbitrary, aside from Group Decision and Negotiation and the International Journal of Supply Chain Management, all journal titles suggest publishing communities that address the issue from a sustainability perspective. Of the 97 papers in our initial sample, only six are from pure negotiation journals: three in Group Decision and Negotiation, two in Negotiation and Conflict Management Research (NCMR), and one in the Negotiation Journal. This suggests that sustainability scholars focus more on negotiation processes than negotiation scholars when publishing on sustainability (see Table 2).

2.3 Citation analysis

The Journal of Cleaner Production, with 12 articles, ranked first among the 65 journals in the field. Also, in Table 3, three of the most cited articles [Soltani et al. \(2016\)](#) with 96 citations, [Gibson \(2006\)](#) with 58 citations; and [Wu et al. \(2020\)](#) with 57 citations, were published in this journal (see Table 3).

With five articles, the journal “Business Strategy and the Environment” ranked second among 65 journals. [Perey et al. \(2018\)](#) published the most cited paper in our field in this journal, with 133 citations. [Renn et al. \(1997\)](#) also published in this journal, with 34 citations. The journal shows strong impact despite publishing fewer articles in the field.

Table 3 shows, among other things, that papers in the Journal of Cleaner Production and Business Strategy and The Environment have high total citations and normalised citation scores.

The paper by [Mitra and Buzzanell \(2017\)](#), published in Human Relations, has the highest normalised total citation score (3.89), indicating it is the most influential relative to others in the dataset, after adjusting for publication year and field. Additionally, [Perey et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Bals et al. \(2019\)](#) have high normalised scores (3.79 and 3.02), which demonstrate their impactful contributions to the field.

Table 2. Ranked list of journals by number of articles

Rank	Sources	Articles	ABS ranking	ABDC ranking
1	<i>Journal of Cleaner Production</i>	12	1	A
2	<i>Business Strategy and the Environment</i>	5	3	A
3	<i>Global Trade and Customs Journal</i>	3	N/A	N/A
4	<i>Group Decision and Negotiation</i>	3	2	A
5	<i>Journal of Organizational Change Management</i>	3	2	B
6	<i>Applied Geography</i>	2	N/A	N/A
7	<i>Cities</i>	2	2	N/A
8	<i>E-Journal of International and Comparative Labour Studies</i>	2	N/A	N/A
9	<i>International Journal of Production Economics</i>	2	3	A
10	<i>International Journal of Supply Chain Management</i>	2	N/A	N/A

Note(s): ABS refers to the Chartered Association of Business Schools (Academic Journal Guide); ABDC refers to the Australian Business Deans Council (Journal Quality List)

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

Table 3. Citation analysis overview

Rank	Authors, year, journal	Total citations	TC per year	Normalised TC
1	Perey R, 2018, <i>Bus. Strategy Environ.</i>	133	16.63	3.79
2	Ye G, 2012, <i>Organ. Sci.</i>	118	8.43	1.92
3	Bals L, 2019, <i>J. Purch. Supply Manag.</i>	116	16.57	3.02
4	Mitra R, 2017, <i>Hum. Relations</i>	109	12.11	3.89
5	Soltani A, 2016, <i>J. Clean. Prod.</i>	96	9.60	2.25
6	Chan H-L, 2018, <i>Int. J. Prod. Res.</i>	91	11.38	2.59
7	Holden M, 2006, <i>Cities</i>	86	4.30	1.19
8	Ding H, 2016, <i>Int. J. Prod. Econ.</i>	86	8.60	2.02
9	Rodima-Taylor D, 2012, <i>Appl. Geogr.</i>	77	5.50	1.25
10	Sterman J, 2014, <i>Syst. Dyn. Rev.-A</i>	64	5.33	2.78
11	Gibson Rb, 2006, <i>J. Clean. Prod.</i>	58	2.90	0.81
12	König N, 2017, <i>Futures</i>	57	6.33	2.04
13	Wu H, 2019, <i>J. Clean. Prod.</i>	57	8.14	1.48
14	Mitev N, 2009, <i>J. Manag. Stud.</i>	51	3.00	1.00
15	Paschall M, 2012, <i>J. Manag. Educ.</i>	49	3.50	0.80
16	Collins E, 2007, <i>J. Manag. Educ.</i>	43	2.26	1.74
17	Ahmer G, 2013, <i>Simul. Gaming</i>	42	3.23	1.65
18	Ding H, 2015, <i>Int. J. Prod. Econ.</i>	41	3.73	2.85
19	Schwilch G, 2012, <i>Appl. Geogr.</i>	35	2.50	0.57
20	Renn O, 1997, <i>Bus. Strategy Environ.</i>	34	1.17	1.00

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

By comparing [Tables 2](#) and [3](#), we can observe that journals such as *Group Decision and Negotiation* and *Global Trade and Customs Journal*, which each published three papers in this field, do not appear on the most-cited papers list, indicating a focus on niche areas.

2.4 Science mapping

Co-citation analysis is an effective method for investigating the foundations of the intersection between negotiation and sustainability (Caputo *et al.*, 2023). This co-citation analysis ([Figure 1](#)) indicates a highly interconnected research cluster with 21 items and 210 links. This means that across the 21 articles, these papers have been cited together 210 times, reflecting strong conceptual connections among them. According to the analysis, these 21 papers represent the most influential publications within this area (Donthu *et al.*, 2021). However, a total link strength of 420 and an average link strength of 2 per connection suggest that, although the co-cited works share a common foundation, they do not cite each other directly. On average, each paper has been co-cited only twice by others, which is relatively low. Overall, our co-citation analysis suggests that this research area is well-connected and clearly defined but has not yet gained significant attention outside this specialised body of work (Donthu *et al.*, 2021).

2.5 Clustering by bibliographic coupling

Bibliographic coupling occurs when two works use a common third work in their references (Small, 1973). This method, with clustering techniques, is used to evaluate the current structure of a field and allows us to compare recent papers that may not yet have been cited (Caputo *et al.*, 2023).

Of 97 documents, only 52 formed the largest set of connected items. This analysis provides us with 67 direct links between documents, with each document sharing at least one common reference (see [Figure 2](#)). A higher number of links indicates a more prominent position of the

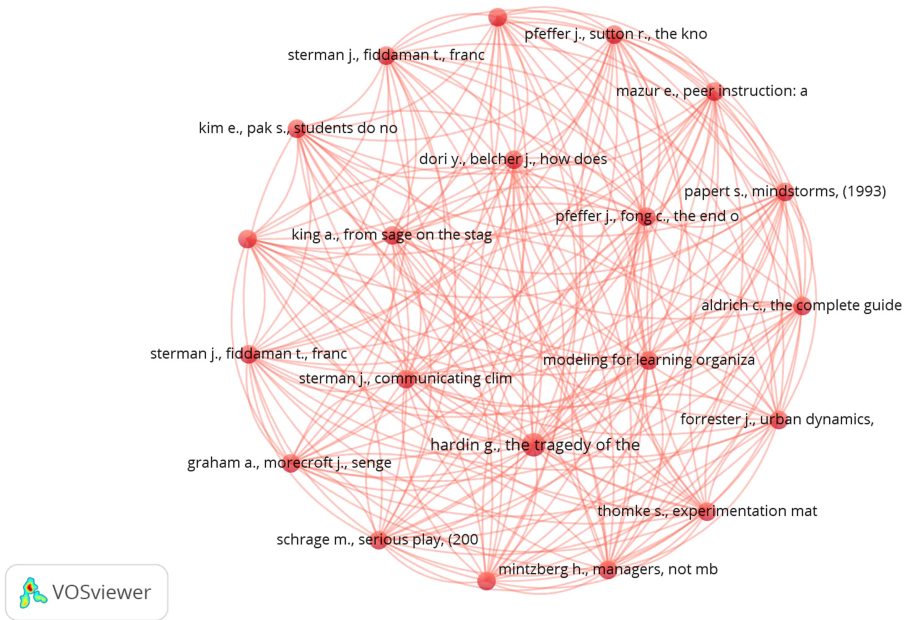


Figure 1. Co-citation analysis. Source: Authors' own elaboration

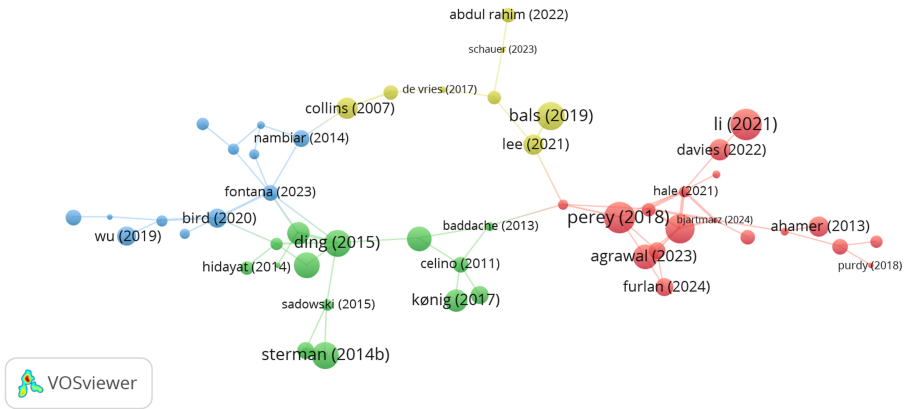


Figure 2. Bibliographic coupling. Source: Authors' own elaboration

article (Marzi *et al.*, 2025). On average, each link has a strength of approximately 1.85 shared references (124 total link strength/67 links).

Clustering analysis provides a comprehensive overview of the knowledge base within a field (Caputo *et al.*, 2018). Using VOSviewer, these 52 papers were clustered into four different colours. The red cluster, with 18 articles, aggregated papers on collaborative approaches to sustainable resource management and the circular economy. The green cluster, with 14 papers, can be summarised under the headline Decision-Making for Sustainability. The blue cluster has 12 items, mainly about the Behavioural Aspects of Sustainability. Lastly,

and Bocken (2024) look at stakeholder interactions at organisations' boundaries when developing sustainable business models. Taken together, these papers study sustainable business models and their impact on management, mostly at the strategic level. Only Pedersen *et al.* (2023) seem to engage with the reality of such negotiation processes, while the other papers discuss their positioning and strategy elements.

Cluster 2—decision-making for sustainability—looks at how decisions are made on sustainable issues. The main papers take the perspective of explaining the terms of choices for individuals and, most often, collective decision-making, mainly relying on game theory and economics. In other words, it looks at how actors behave in the system as the context for potential negotiations among them. Among the fourteen papers in Cluster 2, we identified the following seven as the key contributions, as each achieved a CBIS score equal to or above two.

The oldest paper among those considered most impactful is Celino and Concilio (2011). It looks at participatory processes in land use planning and the role that negotiation may play in crystallising conflict among stakeholders. Sterman (2014) describes the use of “flight simulations” to tackle sustainability issues in business, in which participants must negotiate international agreements or divide resources. Ding *et al.* (2015) is an economics paper that studies how actors define pricing strategies while turning their supply chains sustainable. Ding *et al.* (2016) study how public incentive systems, such as carbon caps, impact the different actors of supply chains and how they allocate value among themselves. Soltani *et al.* (2016) study waste-to-energy processes, in which industries need to define a price to purchase fossil fuel waste produced by the municipality's energy production system. In reviewing the literature on supply chain management, Asrol *et al.* (2018) identify a stream on supply chain negotiations and highlight sustainability as a major focus for future research.

In this cluster, negotiation is considered one of the decision processes used to coordinate actors in a supply chain or around a sustainable project. It is worth noting that Celino and Concilio (2011) is the only study that explicitly mentions conflict negotiations among participants in a project with a strong sustainability component. Their paper explores negotiation in participatory decision-making, particularly highlighting how this process in environmental planning often leads to conflict due to differing socio-environmental values. They found that traditional participatory methods, which focus on highlighting differences, may unintentionally intensify these conflicts. Their case of the *Torre Guaceto Wetland* shows that by focusing on specific and manageable issues, such as olive oil production, rather than broader agricultural practices, they can change from conflict to collaboration in their negotiation. They suggest that negotiation should be reconceptualised not as a process for reconciling differences but as an explorative, action-oriented collaboration focused on decision opportunities.

Cluster 3 – behavioural aspects of sustainability – the main papers look at how to align sustainable values among stakeholders in supply chains, within top management teams, or around environmentally contested projects. Elements such as precontractual signals, ethos, mindsets, and strategic choices are used to explain how environmentalism and/or social values are shared among stakeholders.

In Cluster 3, we adjusted the CBIS threshold to account for the smaller number of papers. Among the twelve papers in this cluster, we set the threshold at a CBIS score of 1.4 or higher to retain five papers as the most relevant contributions. Cherrier *et al.* (2012) study the implementation of corporate environmentalism within organisations, particularly how top managers negotiate internally and adjust their views, manage differing perspectives, and align organisational priorities when dealing with corporate environmentalism. Dhanorkar *et al.* (2019) look at bilateral negotiations on an online marketplace linking suppliers with potential buyers of waste materials, as well as their system-wide effects. They discuss various types of uncertainty in negotiation, including response uncertainty, state uncertainty, and effect uncertainty. According to them, negotiation is a nonlinear, often iterative process where the outcome may not be proportional to the effort expended. In some cases, an exchange might not even take place. The paper emphasises the role of industry homophily in reducing uncertainty

and fostering trust. When buyers and suppliers share knowledge of their respective industries, they develop a common understanding that simplifies negotiations and decreases information asymmetry. Furthermore, the paper applies the theory of Complex Adaptive Systems to the negotiation process, illustrating how buyer-supplier relationships evolve across three levels. At the node level, buyers adjust their behaviours; at the dyad level, negotiations influence trust and decision-making; and at the network level, collective interactions enhance overall efficiency.

[Bird and Soundararajan \(2020\)](#) look at precontractual practices, including cheap talk among parties interested in entering a sustainable supply chain. Cheap talk refers to informal communication that can convey trust and useful information. It helps parties understand each other's interests and willingness to negotiate, fostering a cooperative atmosphere for future agreements. Additionally, cheap talk acts as a filter to identify incompatible parties; if someone avoids casual communication, it may indicate a lack of interest in pursuing a relationship. Therefore, it can be a strategic tool in the early stages of negotiation. [Pickering \(2021\)](#) studies identity alignment and how it may facilitate exchanges between a project manager and the local community around a contested environmental project. The paper extends the behavioural dimensions of sustainability by emphasising how ethos shapes negotiation dynamics, thereby fostering trust and long-term environmental commitment. In this case study, the project manager cited crime reports, environmental damage, and personal observations to frame sustainability as a shared responsibility. By doing so, he created a persuasive and trustworthy ethos, allowing him to influence the community's attitudes toward environmental protection. More recently, [Fontana et al. \(2023\)](#) study how sustainability objectives infuse supply chains and how buyers exert their negotiation power on suppliers. The paper suggests that while buyers' negotiation power is necessary, it is insufficient for sustainable supply chain management. The lack of financial rewards or support for suppliers' proactive social sustainability efforts limits the effectiveness of buyer pressures. Furthermore, horizontal pressures from similar suppliers create a competitive environment that can either encourage collaboration or maintain the status quo, depending on suppliers' willingness and ability to bear the costs.

Cluster 4—negotiation and stakeholder engagement strategies for sustainable development—examines the practical application of negotiation and conflict management in sustainability settings. Its main publications provide guidance on managing conflict (e.g., in clean construction projects) and on negotiating in the context of environmental uncertainty.

Cluster 4, comprising eight papers, represented the smallest cluster. To ensure the inclusion of at least half of the documents, we set the CBIS threshold at 1.5 or higher. Based on this criterion, we identified four papers as the most relevant.

The paper by [Collins and Kearins \(2007\)](#) is the oldest in our subsample of impactful papers. This educational paper examines how to use stakeholder negotiation exercises in the classroom. Environmental issues are often complex, involving technical challenges, scientific uncertainty, and difficult social and economic trade-offs. One way to explore these challenges is through experiential learning, such as simulated stakeholder negotiations. The goal of this exercise is not to teach specific negotiation skills or techniques but to encourage critical reflection on how negotiation processes and outcomes impact individuals, organisations, and society. Participants are assigned a specific role and asked to negotiate a particular outcome, often with certain students serving as facilitators or guardians of the process. [Li and Cheung \(2020\)](#) look at dispute settlement negotiation as a tool used to improve the sustainability of construction projects by increasing the decision-making performance of contracting parties. Since project disputes are common in the construction industry, the efficiency of Construction Dispute Negotiation (CDN) is a key factor in evaluating the success of a project. However, biases in decision-making hinder effective dispute resolution. Reducing bias in CDN enhances sustainability by lowering costs and streamlining the resolution process (economic), minimising resource waste (environmental), and strengthening relationships and collaboration within the industry (social). [Lee et al. \(2021\)](#) offer guidelines for taming conflicts in project-based organisations involved in international sustainable development projects. [Schauer et al. \(2023\)](#) focus on COVID-19

4. Discussion of the literature review results

Our review highlights the remarkable lack of research published in negotiation journals. Among the 52 papers in our sample, just three appeared in such journals, one each in *Group Decision and Negotiation*, *NCMR* and *Negotiation Journal*. Only one of these three papers actively engages with negotiation theory (Schauer *et al.*, 2023). Sustainability, therefore, does not appear to be a topic that negotiation scholars have actively engaged with, revealing a significant gap that awaits filling.

Most papers are authored by sustainability scholars, who view negotiation as a means to align stakeholders around sustainable objectives. This body of work covers stakeholder engagement strategies and collaborative approaches in sustainable projects (such as the circular economy or resource management). It also looks at how decisions are made and how actors behave in sustainable environments. By doing so, this stream of research confirms that pursuing sustainability is rarely an individual endeavour but rather a collective one. Across the papers reviewed, coordination among multiple actors is consistently presented as necessary to achieve sustainable outcomes, highlighting the usefulness of negotiation, among other mechanisms, in achieving sustainability objectives.

Despite this implicit relevance, our analysis shows that the connection between negotiation theory and sustainability remains largely unexplored. While a few studies (e.g., Dhanorkar *et al.*, 2019; Pickering, 2021) explicitly examine negotiation within sustainability contexts, the vast majority address negotiation only tangentially. As a result, negotiation is often treated as a generic coordination device rather than as a theoretically rich process. This limited engagement suggests that negotiation theory has yet to be systematically integrated into sustainability research, a gap that calls for further theoretical reflection on how these two domains can be meaningfully connected. One promising avenue for such integration lies in stakeholder theory and the broader concept of stakeholders.

In our sample, depending on the scenario, negotiation is used among internal stakeholders or to address external ones. Although many papers frequently use the term “stakeholder”, only three explicitly reference R. Edward Freeman, the founder of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984). Although the concept of stakeholders is widely used, stakeholder theory itself remains underutilised as a framework for analysing negotiation processes in sustainability contexts.

Stakeholder theory offers a promising bridge between research on sustainable business and negotiation. Stakeholder theory challenges the view that organisations exist solely to maximise shareholder value, instead emphasising the importance of recognising and managing relationships with a broad set of stakeholders (Freeman, 1984). Sustainability is just that: the acknowledgement that the organisation’s stakeholders (the workforce, regulators, the company’s natural habitat, etc.) should be considered when decisions are made. Importantly, this perspective requires a broad understanding of who qualifies as a stakeholder, extending beyond immediate economic actors to include future generations, the environment, and society.

At the same time, stakeholder theory lends itself to two distinct analytical approaches. The macro-level approach commonly used in strategy research focuses on identifying stakeholders and describing their relationships with the organisation, including their relative power and influence. The second, the micro-level approach, which aligns more closely with negotiation research, examines how individual stakeholder relationships are created, managed over time, and how conflicts among stakeholders are resolved. For example, Porter’s Five Forces model aims to identify which stakeholders hold the most power over the organisation; however, Porter does not address how to negotiate when in a position of power or weakness (Porter, 2008). This macro–micro divide in the application of stakeholder theory has previously been

identified as a factor explaining why strategy and negotiation research have rarely interacted (Borbély and Caputo, 2017).

Our review reflects this division. Sustainability studies largely adopt a macro-level stakeholder perspective, whereas negotiation studies tend to operate at the micro level and are not systematically integrated into sustainability research. This makes sustainability a promising context for linking stakeholder configurations to negotiation processes. From this perspective, the sustainability element of negotiation can be assessed by examining whom negotiators consider relevant: do they focus solely on the short-term interests of the involved parties, or do they also consider the impact of their agreements on external stakeholders such as the workforce (social pillar), the environment (environmental pillar), and the development of their business (governance pillar)?

Taken together, our findings suggest that who is considered in negotiation is not merely a contextual feature, but a core mechanism through which negotiation becomes constitutive of sustainability. The findings of this review offer an important theoretical reflection on the intersection of negotiation and sustainability. Through a series of propositions that set out an agenda for future research, our contribution will develop a micro-to-macro perspective that views negotiation as a constitutive, value-laden process through which sustainability is enacted. This perspective shifts the focus from negotiation as a tool for coordination or stakeholder alignment to negotiation as the process through which sustainability itself takes shape by integrating competing values, reconciling objectives, and managing tensions among interdependent actors. While earlier works, such as Eden and Ackermann (2021), have examined stakeholder interactions to support decision-making, they mainly describe how alignment among actors can be achieved. In contrast, our analysis advances understanding at the intersection of negotiation and sustainability by showing that achieving sustainability requires continuous negotiation among interdependent actors who balance values, interests, and goals.

From a managerial perspective, our findings indicate that achieving sustainability goals requires more than developing negotiation capabilities, as suggested by previous work (e.g., Caputo *et al.*, 2019). While such capabilities are important, our study shows that negotiation goes beyond a skill or tool to be activated as needed. It is part of the way sustainability is built and maintained over time. Managers should therefore see negotiation as something embedded in everyday interactions and decision-making processes, rather than as a discrete capability. This reconceptualisation shifts how managerial action in sustainability contexts can be understood, emphasising the ongoing negotiation of values, priorities, and trade-offs rather than the episodic application of negotiation techniques and strategies. This change in perspective may help organisations manage the tensions and trade-offs among economic, environmental, and social objectives and move towards more durable, participatory sustainability practices.

5. Agenda for future research

Our analysis of the existing literature shows very few contributions that address both negotiation and sustainability, leaving many questions unanswered. We will classify these questions into two broad categories and write our propositions to guide future research.

5.1 What role does negotiation play in sustainability efforts?

This broad question leads to two series of research questions.

Firstly, applying stakeholder theory, it would be interesting to study networks of stakeholders, both internal to an organisation and inter-organisational, and compare those that function based on power dynamics vs. those that are founded on negotiation dynamics (along with the distinction posed by Ury *et al.* (1988)). Certain organisations have developed a negotiation culture, broadly using joint decision-making methods to gather agreements and align stakeholders, while others rely on more unilateral decision methods, often top-down

unilateral decisions based on authority (Borbély and Caputo, 2017). Here, a parallel may be drawn with the change management literature, which distinguishes planned, top-down change from emergent, bottom-up approaches (By, 2005).

These references lead us to posit that it should be easier to embed sustainability through stakeholder negotiation mechanisms rather than through a top-down dynamic (in which the powerful impose directions and the powerless execute them). Resistance and bypass strategies may be triggered when individuals are being coerced, suggesting that negotiation may be an efficient (if not the most efficient) mechanism to promote sustainability.

- P1.* Promoting sustainability in human systems is more efficient when decisions are made through participation and negotiation rather than through unilateral, power-based approaches.

An example supporting this first proposition is the accounting of scope three carbon footprints. According to the Greenhouse Gas Protocol (GHG Protocol, 2024), widely used by S&P 500 companies, companies need to compute their direct emissions (scope 1), their indirect emissions (scope 2, mainly how the energy they consume is being produced), and the CO₂ emitted upstream and downstream of their activity (scope 3). Scope 3 requires companies to either require or negotiate with their suppliers, transporters, and distributors to limit their own CO₂ emissions, as the CO₂ they emit will be included in their own footprint. Companies are therefore required not only to get the best price from their suppliers but also to get the greenest supplies. They are also incentivised to sell locally to limit downstream transportation emissions. These efforts can only be achieved through negotiations with existing commercial partners or through contractual agreements with new partners.

Research could, for example, look at the efficiency of sustainability objectives imposed by top-down, power-based decisions compared to negotiated decisions. It could also look at the different ways sustainability efforts may spread in different decision-making cultures (top-down vs. bottom-up).

Secondly, according to Purvis *et al.* (2019), sustainability rests on three pillars: economic, social, and environmental. According to this theory, sustainability can be achieved only if the focus is not limited to a single pillar (e.g., environmental impact) but encompasses all three. In other words, sustainable green impact cannot be achieved without an economically sound business model and consideration of the venture's social dimensions (Purvis *et al.*, 2019). This framework suggests that a broad focus on sustainability should include healthy industrial relations, a sense of fair distribution of the benefits of work, quality of work life (especially actions against unproductive work-related conflicts), and constructive mechanisms for social dialogue. In stakeholder theory terms, the move toward sustainability will be more efficient when more stakeholders are involved. In this view, negotiation is a cornerstone of building sustainability within organisations and, more broadly, in human societies. In other words, it is not only about negotiating sustainability but also about recognising that negotiation, regardless of the topics it addresses, plays a central role in sustainable development.

Negotiation is a process that requires both soft and hard skills (Chapman *et al.*, 2017). Like most skills, negotiation skills can be acquired through training, with varying degrees of efficiency (Movius, 2008). Developing these skills encourages individuals to use negotiation in every decision-making process. We posit that spreading negotiation skills within an organisation may contribute to its path toward sustainability.

- P2.* As an interpersonal process, negotiation contributes to making organisations more sustainable, primarily within the social pillar and, further, within the other pillars.

An application of this proposition may lie in inclusive processes aimed at preventing occupational illnesses and promoting the quality of work life. At the individual level, the younger generations of workers crave empowerment and participation (Altizer, 2010); setting up the right management philosophy, one that promotes discussion, consultation, and negotiation of work conditions, may therefore be key in developing socially sustainable

organisations. At the collective level, the same goes for healthy social dialogue processes (De Prins *et al.*, 2020).

The role of social dialogue and benevolent human resource (HR) practices is often studied in relation to the organisation's economic performance; it would be interesting to see how these may impact environmental performance. In other words, can a company go green without "modern" human resource practices?

5.2 How sustainability affects negotiations?

Negotiating for sustainability is not negotiation as usual. We could not find any theoretical work that establishes this and clearly defines the specific characteristics of this type of negotiation. This, coupled with the limited literature from negotiation scholars on sustainability, underscores the need for future research on this topic.

Many of the papers we studied in our bibliometric analysis mention the role played by values (and value alignment) in interactions around sustainable issues. However, the way values affect negotiations remains largely uncharted territory. For the past forty years, the dominant model of negotiation has been called "principled" or "interest-based" (Fisher *et al.*, 2011). The parties' motivations are approached broadly as "interests", a term rarely defined precisely and often understood as a catch-all.

It is important to make a clear distinction among the parties' motivators and distinguish between the two distinct sets of motivators that parties aim to satisfy: *interests*, which concern the outcomes of the negotiation, and *values*, which relate to how these outcomes align with the negotiators' identities (Borbély *et al.*, 2022). For example, in a buyer–seller negotiation, the buyer may be interested in paying as little as possible, which is a purely interest-based motivation, whereas the seller may be more concerned with agreeing on a fair price, enabling him to pay his suppliers fairly and to reflect values of equity and justice.

The question of whether sustainability is a value or an interest is not as simple as it seems. Reaching sustainable outcomes may be treated as a value when the organisation defines itself as sustainable or seeks to be sustainable for its own sake. It may be treated as an interest when organisations face consequences (e.g., legal) for not being sustainable or not being sustainable enough. Recent regulatory developments show how sustainability considerations are increasingly embedded in corporate due diligence and risk management. For example, the CSDDD (Directive (EU) 2024/1760) imposes legally binding obligations on firms to identify and address environmental and human rights risks across their value chains (European Commission, 2024). Practitioner reports also document the increasing integration of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) considerations into due diligence and risk management processes (e.g., PwC, 2022). As a result, sustainability may shift from voluntary commitments to legally salient negotiation concerns, blurring the boundary between values and interests in business negotiations. Therefore, voluntary sustainability efforts may concern values, while compulsory sustainability processes may have direct implications on the parties' interests.

Defining sustainability in terms of values is not a new concept; certain articles in our sample employ this approach. Ivanov (2022) mentions values-based approaches to stakeholder management, citing Breuer and Lüdeke-Freund (2019) and Freeman and Auster (2015). Celino and Concilio (2011) also speak of environmental values as principles that parties adhere to and may need to abandon to reach a compromise. Lee *et al.* (2021) define the three pillars of sustainability (economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection) as three potentially incompatible values. This focus on values challenges a purely "interests-based" negotiation approach, as values function differently than interests in negotiation (Borbély *et al.*, 2022).

When negotiators and organisations enter into agreements aimed at promoting sustainability, they must balance their business priorities, such as profit generation, with

motivations aligned with sustainability goals. This is typically done when clear objectives are established for agents in their upcoming negotiations.

One example would be sourcing agents in fast-moving consumer goods: their incentive system is usually linked with the costs of the goods and services they purchase. When asked to buy “green,” they often face tension between finding the best prices and sourcing sustainably. Sustainable products, whether sourced locally or respecting some higher environmental and/or social standards, generally cost more. HR managers may also face a similar tension between hiring as few people as possible at minimum wage and guaranteeing quality of life at work and job safety.

How negotiators navigate these potentially incompatible motivators may be linked with different organisational factors, leading to the following propositions for future research.

- P3. Clear identification of individual motivators and their alignment with the negotiation objectives communicated by their hierarchy helps negotiators navigate potential tensions between routine and sustainable motivators.

It may be interesting, for example, to look at how negotiators address conflicts among multiple objectives, especially when there is an incompatibility between achieving good economic results and sustainable ones. This leads to ethical choices (should I favour my interests against sustainability? Or should I tame the search for my interests’ satisfaction to produce more sustainable results?) Research still needs to address how such dilemmas are dealt with.

- P4. Individual negotiators are more disposed to pursue sustainable objectives in their negotiations when they have actively participated in their organisation’s sustainability initiatives.

This may lead to research efforts to identify how sustainability values are disseminated within an organisation through recruitment, acculturation, and/or shared vision initiatives, and how people who negotiate for a living (e.g., in sales and purchasing) position themselves vis-à-vis their organisation’s sustainability efforts.

Furthermore, the way people identify their value systems regarding the three pillars of sustainability (Purvis *et al.*, 2019) should undeniably affect how they negotiate. People who personally value social responsibility may push for higher expectations regarding worker protection in their negotiation partners and their deals. The same applies to individuals inclined toward environmental protection. Those who value these two elements less may remain centred, in their negotiation efforts, on the economic variables.

- P5. When negotiating for their organisation, individuals who personally value sustainability are more likely to pursue sustainability objectives and less likely to prioritise regular business motivators (their organisation’s interests).

It may also be interesting for research to look at how the interplay between collective values advocated at the organisational level and individual value systems plays out at negotiation tables that include sustainability variables.

Finally, research clearly states that people tend to be more at ease negotiating with people they appreciate. Such an attraction may relate to perceived similarity in values. Here, we may factor in the entire literature on homophily (for a review, see [Ertug *et al.*, 2022](#)). We see no reason why homophily should not apply when it comes to sustainable values. In other words, negotiators will favour negotiating with people who share similar sustainable objectives. They may even look for negotiation partners that also share their value profile. Therefore, displaying one’s efforts toward a sustainable future may serve to select people for one’s network of partners.

- P6. Negotiations will be facilitated when the parties share similar values on sustainability.

Although the previous propositions concerned what is happening within organisations, [Proposition 6](#) looks at the interplay between two negotiators motivated by personal and/or

organisational values, aiming for sustainability. In other words, it pushes research to examine what happens at the negotiation table when negotiators share or do not share sustainability values.

Finally, future research can explore the intersection between sustainability and negotiation in greater depth. For example, scholars can examine how negotiation processes play out specifically in relation to ESG practices, which are increasingly shaping investment decisions and organisational strategies. While ESG is often promoted as a framework for responsible investment and long-term value creation, it remains a contested domain (Zhang *et al.*, 2024). On the one hand, many managers and political figures perceive ESG as a hidden cost or an ideologically driven burden (Martiny *et al.*, 2024), leading to compliance-based or symbolic adoption. On the other hand, ESG is also seen as a catalyst for innovation and access to emerging market opportunities. This tension points to a dual-track reality in sustainability negotiations: one *distributive*, concerned with managing costs, compliance, and resistance; and one *integrative*, focused on co-creating value, innovation, and new green business models. Understanding how these opposing logics are negotiated in practice is essential, despite the difficulty of empirically examining such processes in real business contexts. Moreover, Xue *et al.* (2023) show that corporate ESG controversies significantly reduce the likelihood of sustainable investment, underscoring the fragility of stakeholder trust and the reputational risks involved. Future research can empirically examine how negotiation facilitates the effective internalisation of ESG principles, particularly in distinguishing between symbolic adoption and genuine integration.

6. Conclusion

When it comes to negotiation and sustainability, most of the work lies ahead. Yet this is precisely what makes their intersection so valuable. The insights emerging from this review indicate that negotiation can serve as a key mechanism for internalising sustainability within organisations and societies. Rather than treating sustainability as an external goal to be implemented, negotiation embeds it into how organisations think, decide, and act. Through negotiation, sustainability becomes lived and enacted, rather than merely discussed or reported.

The propositions outlined in the future research agenda aim to highlight the diverse roles negotiation plays in advancing sustainability and to move beyond discussions of sustainability itself. They frame negotiation as a participatory governance mechanism, a social enabler of sustainability, and a space where values and interests intersect and evolve. Together, these perspectives suggest that negotiation is not merely a tool to achieve sustainable goals but a continuous process through which sustainability is constructed, practised, and renewed over time. Different disciplines already offer complementary frameworks to build knowledge and understanding of this topic. Stakeholder theory may offer another useful framework. Acting upon these foundations is increasingly important as sustainability continues to infuse new areas of human activities.

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