



Emerging Research Trends in Sustainable Development Studies

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Abstract

The paper is a deep dive into literature and scholarship on sustainable development. The purpose is to identify emerging research themes that are of growing interest to scholars on sustainability with particular emphasis on management and public policy literature, and the methodology is three-pronged, comprising the following: a content analysis of sustainability scholarship, tracking of patterns and trends over a two-decade period to delineate specific findings, and an exploration of the learnings from the literature review. We have trained our focus largely on the disciplines of management and public policy. The attempt is to distinguish the ideas, the orientation, and the direction of sustainability research longitudinally over time. The paper presents several interesting learnings growing cross-disciplinary trends in sustainability research, the evolutionary nature of sustainability studies, the induction of emerging economies into sustainable development and its reflection in research studies, theorising and the development of frameworks, creation of knowledge and information hubs in industry and the episodic movement from precepts and principles; to protocols and policy; and to practice process, and performance. By suggesting a novel approach to perceiving and classifying sustainability research over time, presenting frameworks for theory building in this field of study, and proposing fruitful areas for future research, we contribute to the body of relevant literature.

Keywords: sustainability; content analysis; literature review; evolutionary research; frameworks; policy

Introduction

Economic, environmental, and social challenges are increasingly intertwined with sustainability. As stakeholder concerns about society, the environment, and the status of the economy as a whole have increased, sustainability has grown in importance for firms and governments. Starik and Kanashiro define sustainability management as "the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of both environmental and socio-economic sustainability-related decisions and actions" (2013, p.12, Elkington, 1998; Golicic and Smith, 2013). Sustainability praxis has had a far longer history than sustainability research. Additionally, as the demand for sustainable development among institutions, governments, business, civil society, and individuals has grown, an increasing amount of research employing different frameworks and theories has been conducted in both academia and industry (Pogutz, 2008; Wiersum, 1995).

Taking a longitudinal historical perspective of sustainability research allows us to discern two broad phases in sustainability research. Academic research on corporate sustainability held limited interest for scholars until the 1990s, but the early 2000s saw the explosion and expansion of sustainability studies in both depth and spread (Montiel, 2008). This growth represents a new era of intense interest in ethical and environmental issues occurring in business organisations in reaction to regulations, stakeholder pressure, and consumer awareness in the early Twenty First Century. Yet the focus of sustainability scholarship has been more on healthy economy, ethical environmental practice, and social fairness from the perspective of customers and corporates, rather than the evolution of the subject matter of sustainability research from the perspective of scholars and students. In our paper, we focus our attention on both aspects.

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Why is a historical perspective important? Shakespeare philosophised about “a tide in the affairs of men” (Julius Caesar, 1599). This is true of scholarship as well. Why do some theories gain currency and become popular at particular times; and what does this ebb and flow of ideas signify for progression of the disciplinary domain itself? This is a significant question deserving of future research in any discipline (Van der Merwe et al., 2007). As Thomas (1999) notes “Understanding the historical, political, social, and material context in which earlier documents were created also helps us be more aware of the web of influences and constraints that affect business communication today, and thus helps us to be better able to assess, and if need be, work to change them” (Locker et al., 1996). Even as the amount and quality of historical research develops, it becomes more valuable to look back, learn from history, and assess the study that has been done so far.

We attempt simultaneously a historical and evolutionary view through a systematic examination of trends in sustainability research, training our scope on sustainability as a widely practised science in both wealthy and emerging economies (Jones and Monieson, 1990; Wiersum, 1995; Bettencourt and Kaur, 2011). We try to give a sense of how the field has changed through time, focusing on public policy and management studies. We examine trends in sustainability across disciplines and authors, demonstrating that sustainability has developed into a science with a nascent and rapidly expanding unified methodology.

Let us proceed to brief gist of our approach. Sustainability research has so far addressed its subject from the angle of providing taxonomies and creating conceptual frameworks. But previous research suffers from the twin issues of subjectivity and singular focus. These concerns are critical because they provide more precise insights into the study of sustainability. Since the year 2000, there has been a shift from a focus on preventing pollution and protecting natural resources to a more balanced view of sustainability that prioritises social and human sustainability. Sustainability is an interdisciplinary idea that necessitates an interdisciplinary approach. Scholars who discuss the need for greater research, talk about how the assimilation of sustainability's economic, environmental, and social objectives is the subject of more and more research. However, sustainability trends are frequently complicated, conflicting, and ill-understood; thus, necessitating further study. There is a need for more study on the connections between these sustainability factors. The current study addresses this gap. Therefore, we will start by taking a deeper look at the development of sustainability research within the public policy and management disciplines in the light of this research challenges. The aim of this study is thus to provide recommendations for future research and enable better understanding of the research trends within sustainability (Quental et al., 2009; Carter and Rogers, 2008; Kates and Parris, 2003; Gold et al., 2010 Croom et al., 2000; Carter and Rogers, 2008; Seuring and Müller, 2008; Plummer, 2006; Wilmshurst and Frost, 2000; Yongvanich and Guthrie, 2005; O'Dwyer et al., 2011; Kaufmann and Cleveland, 1995).

Methodology

The study uses content analysis to conduct a systematic examination of publications on sustainability that have appeared in public policy and management disciplines during the past 20 years. Researchers have long-used content analysis as a descriptive method to pinpoint different facets of a given journal, a pattern in a body of literature, or a particular discipline. It is a method of inquiry that allows for text study and interpretation; but its use in sustainability studies has been limited. To gather information for content analysis, an organised review of articles published over two decades was conducted, in particular, in the disciplines of management and public policy. The accentuation is not being reduced complex analysis to quantifiable data, but rather to qualitative overview of ideas and trends to be delineate (Krippendorff, 2004; Carter and Rogers 2008; Seuring and Müller 2008).

Observations

The results of the content analysis point to two main trends in sustainability research over the past 20 years: in authorship and in research interests. In addition, similarities, and differences between the two different decades were discovered, that is, from 1991 to 2000, the decade in which modern sustainability research was born, and from 2001 to 2010, the decade when sustainability research started to mature. We have not simply stated the observations, but looked deeper at their implications. We will now outline and discuss these patterns.

▪ Authorship Trends

In the first decade, between 1991 and 2000, the cumulative percentage of co-authored publications is 38 percent, compared to 62 percent of single-authored publications. In the second decade, this drastically altered to 33 percent of articles being single-authored and 69 percent of papers being co-authored. Changes in institutional incentives for publication as well as the specialisation of professions explain the trend towards co-authorship (McDowell and Melvin, 1983). There is also the strong possibility that the cross-disciplinary nature of sustainability research is recognised leading to attempts at cross-fertilization. Therefore, it may well be that the shift from a single author to numerous authors is a hint that sustainability research is beginning to span disciplinary boundaries.

Table 1. Authorship Trends



Decade	Percentage of co-authored publications	Percentage of single-authored publications
1991 - 2000	38 %	62 %
2001-2010	69 %	33 %

▪ **Research Interest Trends**

We next look at the research subject trends in the two decades. 101 articles on sustainability were published in business and management journals between 1991 and 2000, with 31 percent of those papers being on economics, 14 percent on tourism and hotel management, 11 percent on sector studies, and 10 percent on strategic management. The second decade saw 1401 published papers, of which only 3 percent were economics-related; while other areas began to receive research attention including technology, management, and social science. Through both decades, tourism and hospitality management have remained popular (Kordestani, 2015).

Table 2. Research Subject Trends

Decade	No. of Articles	Percentage of Economics	Percentage of Tourism & Hotel Management	Percentage of Sector Studies	Percentage of Strategic Management
1991-2000	101	31 %	14 %	11%	10%
2001-2010	1401	3 %	97 %		

In terms of trends in concepts, organizations, management, operations, policy, and technology are the dominant themes, which encompass environmental, social, and economic sustainability. Organisations, and within this, competence, partnering and manufacturing gain traction. Within management, researchers give attention to strategic challenges of sustainability and sustainability performance within company operations. In the second decade, the technological theme and its central idea, innovation, gained importance. Both decades have seen a strong focus on tourism, and research from this field has given sustainability a lot of attention (Elkington, 1998; Möllersten and Sandberg, 2004).

Public policy literature followed its own trajectory. In the early decade, there was a focus on the delineation of underlying principles. In the second decade, this trend evolved into emphasis on policy measures, with especial focus on the construction industry. A manifestation of this was the preservation of land while investing in major projects, and policy guidelines for firms to maintain a balance between these two objectives (Altinay and Hussain, (2005).

An important undercurrent across both management and public policy is theory-building and knowledge creation. Theorists and practitioners alike appear interested in developing conceptual frameworks that help provide structure and direction to practice. While conceptual frameworks around firm performance and strategy, natural resource management, sustainable construction operations and such emerged in the first decade; the second decade saw the emergence of concepts such as innovation technology, knowledge management, supply chain, resource management and so on. This is important in a relatively young domain such as sustainability.

Learnings

It can be may concluded that here are particular trends in authorship as well as research interests in the first two decades of sustainability research. We may sketch out our major learnings as follows:

▪ **Increasing Cross-Disciplinary Trends in Sustainability Research**

Sustainability research appears to span a variety of research disciplines, necessitating a constant effort on the part of scholars to identify ways to collaborate across fields of study as opposed limiting themselves to their individual specialist domains. Over the past two decades, authorship has changed from a single-author approach to the collaboration of numerous authors, suggesting that the area of sustainability research is increasingly more interdisciplinary. This is corroborated by the obvious shift in sustainability research's emphasis from the economics aspects in the first decade to a stronger emphasis on particular sectors such as construction, tourism and hospitality. Similarly, there has been a progression from basic principles to policy and operational aspects such as technology. Therefore, sustainability research can be understood more thoroughly and broadly as



long as we keep looking for methods to collaborate and work across disciplines with multiple authors. One strategy to reach out to those areas of sustainability study that have a narrower focus is to discover opportunities to collaborate with them in the future. Domains such as information technology, operations, marketing, and innovation offer such cross-disciplinary research opportunities.

▪ **Evolutionary Nature of Sustainability Research**

Governments began to prioritise sustainability in the first decade; businesses followed suit in the second decade. In the first decade, the issue was more the responsibility of governmental organisations concentrating on waste management, protecting natural resources and protecting the environment. However, with time, public awareness began to make sustainability a business imperative. As a result, rather than being a public-sector mandate from the government, sustainability is now a private-sector priority, with businesses leveraging it to develop and apply sustainability knowledge in order to add value. Due to their discovery that doing so offers value and thus influences performance, businesses are now using this information to invest in sustainability in order to obtain knowledge. Businesses that discover value socially, environmentally, and economically do better in the market. In contrast to the first ten years, sustainability is not merely a technological concern for businesses. As businesses enter the second decade, it has become increasingly important to build and apply their expanding expertise to boost overall performance. To enable businesses to establish their sustainability strategy, innovative technologies have become the driving force businesses in this direction. In the second decade of sustainability studies, the idea of corporate sustainability has grown in significance. This indicates that businesses became more motivated and inclined to consider sustainability as a crucial business issue. Business see value in addressing sustainability issues as opposed to government lecturing on policy and demanding that businesses be held more accountable. Hence, the move is from regulation and compliance to voluntary and proactive inventiveness.

The change is also reflected in the shift of thematic focus. The first ten years were driven by environmental sustainability, when government policies were used to pressure industry on behalf of citizens and environmental organisations concerned with protecting the environment and natural resources. Corporate policy was revised because of new government laws and used to solve sustainability-related challenges. But as the focus shifted to proactive innovation, businesses started to transform into knowledge hubs as they adopted corporate policies, practising sustainability, and ultimately enhancing performance.

▪ **Induction of Emerging Economies into Sustainable Development**

Sustainability was predominantly a Western industrialised concern over the first ten years. In the second decade, developing nations began to show interest in sustainability-related issues. While businesses in developing nations are still concentrating on policy in an effort to catch up with what businesses in wealthy nations were dealing with in the first decade, these economies are shifting from policy to praxis more quickly. Today, industry is the focus in industrialised nations, but policy and practice are still important in developing nations. Wealthy economies have taken the lead in advancing sustainability from governmental policy to corporate praxis, and developing countries are now following a similar trajectory but doing so more quickly thanks to the road that developed nations have paved for emerging economies.

This development in literature needs to be seen as concurrent with the growth of the outsourcing model in western industry. As businesses in rich nations discovered the benefit of sustainability, they began to move the creation of that value down on the value chain, often to developing nations where the manufacturing arm of that industry's value chain is located. Instead of pressure coming from domestic government legislation, this is essentially the result of pressure that originates in their global value chain. The shift from mandate to market is advantageous for businesses, the government, and society.

▪ **Theory and Frameworks**

Due to the exhortatory nature of early sustainability studies, scholarship may have developed frameworks, which serve for easier communication, understanding and retention. One such framework is the 4-P framework, variously interpreted as People, Planet, Prosperity and Plastics (www.movacolor.com, 2023); the 5 Rs framework: Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Repurpose, Recycle (www.roadrunnerwm.com, 2023); and the most well-known of all- the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) framework of the United Nations. Although the frameworks reflect how practice in business and management disciplines has developed around sustainability, such frameworks can also be utilised to develop theories. In light of this, the frameworks can become the foundation for theory development in the area of sustainability.

▪ **Creation of Knowledge Hubs**

The development of frameworks signals a deeper shift in the focal point of sustainability practice itself. Technology is increasingly being used by businesses to acquire information and enhance performance. Some businesses perform better than others as a means of enhancing overall performance, and they develop into knowledge hubs for sustainability. Only if businesses



can see value in sustainability will they be eager to learn about sustainability through technology. The creation of knowledge centres for sustainability based on scholarship values also harks back to a study of ancient knowledge and praxis in sustainability. This is especially true of emerging economies with long and living tradition of environmental consciousness, and respect for humanity, nature and life.

▪ **From Principles to Policy to Practice**

A growing number of studies concentrate especially on businesses and industries creating and implementing sustainability as a method of doing business. This is an example of the shift from theory and policy to practice and performance. It illustrates how the pressure and the incentives to develop and implement sustainability policies at the corporate level are increasing internationally. In order to further advance sustainability initiatives around the world, sustainability is changing from being merely a concept to more of a way of conducting business. As a result, sustainability literature now serves as a helpful manual for both corporate policymakers and industry practitioners. After 20 years of sustainability initiatives, businesses have discovered a method to create value rather than just comply with regulations. Future research looking at such value creation across various industries in multiple markets can use this shift from principles and policy to practise and performance as a springboard. Therefore, enterprises no longer await stakeholder pressure to become sustainable. Instead, they strive towards sustainable development because of the long-term cost savings from sustainable resource and energy use, as well as the supply chain activities of the businesses involved. For instance, Wal-Mart saved \$200 million by reducing packing and transportation distance by 100 million miles (Porter and Kramer, 2011).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that throughout the first two decades of contemporary sustainability research, environmental sustainability is being replaced by a more holistic social sustainability. The value of organisations implementing solid sustainability plans for their organisations and society has been demonstrated by 20 years of sustainability initiatives. How will the third decade of contemporary sustainability research be then?

First, we posit that that firms in the future decade of sustainability may not require pressure from stakeholders to engage in sustainable activities. Market conditions and economic downturns may still compel certain organisations to engage in short-term practices. Nonetheless, the bigger potential appears to be on long-term sustainability value development. Organisations and the government will be less and less responsible for formulating policies and defining values. Companies will start using and improving their sustainability practices so that they may use sustainability performance as a value-creation instrument.

This in turn will impact research. We as scholars will need to conduct continual study in order to keep up with research so we move further into future decades of sustainability research, looking more explicitly at how sustainability practise and performance creates value may be the next step in taking a more in-depth look at what organisations and industries are doing. Additional research on company sustainability should be done in the future on issues including marketing, economics, operations research, and organisational studies. This will show us whether the triple bottom line of sustainable development will be followed in the business disciplines.

Another fruitful area for future sustainability studies is the impact, both generally and in particular on developing economies, of climate change as well as sustainability policy making and regulation. In his presentation on “India in the Age of Sustainable Development” to senior Indian civil servants, Jeffrey D. Sachs, Director Of The Earth Institute, touches upon heatwaves and drinking water shortage in India, mega-droughts in Brazil, drought and forest fires in Sumatra and pollution in Beijing (Sachs, 2014). The creeping impact of climate change, and the struggle of emerging economies to cope with the disasters unleashed by developed countries alongside poverty and underdevelopment, will be an important area of study (Gadre et al, 2020). This will be the history of environmental activism in the third world, which has been consistent if muted over the past several decades but gaining in energy and voice over the past few years.

It will be interesting to observe where this evolution of concepts, policies, practises, and performance from the first two decades of modern sustainability research will lead us by the middle of the third decade (NLSIU, 18th July 2022). It is a promise of excitement and innovation that both scholars and practitioners can look forward to with eager anticipation.

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Author Contribution Statement:



The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

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