The rugged landscape of product stewardship: Does it invoke the double-edged effect of knowledge acquisition?

ABSTRACT

Purpose: That knowledge acquisition from external sources can play a pivotal role in product design is a well-known fact. However, knowledge acquisition need not play a pivotal role in every context; it is also documented to have a dark side (i.e., negative impacts). Specifically, given that product stewardship, by definition, calls on each party in the product life cycle – including suppliers – to share responsibility for the environmental impact of products, we ask "whether knowledge acquired from suppliers plays a beneficial role in the context of product stewardship?"

Design/Methodology/Approach: In this study, we focus on the effect of knowledge acquisition on product stewardship and its subsequent effect on environmental performance. Given that the effect of knowledge acquisition could be moderated by firm-specific and relational factors, we also study the moderating role of knowledge exploitation and supplier opportunism. Using primary data, we test our hypotheses using two-stage hierarchical ordinary least squares regression models involving valid instruments.

Findings: Though extant research doubts that knowledge acquisition will always be beneficial, we adhere to the tenets of knowledge-based view and hypothesize that knowledge acquisition is pivotal to product stewardship and its subsequent impact on environmental performance. But our results suggest an intriguing double-edged effect of knowledge acquisition; while its direct effect on product stewardship is nonsignificant, it seemed to have a significant positive moderating effect on the relationship between product stewardship and environmental performance. But whenever knowledge exploitation and supplier opportunism are maintained at ideal levels, this double-edged effect of knowledge acquisition is successfully negated.

Originality/Value: While knowledge acquisition is key for new product design, its specific role in the product design that incorporates environmental considerations is still not clear. By proposing that knowledge acquisition could instead have a double-edged effect within the unique the context of product stewardship, our study makes an invaluable contribution to extant literature on knowledge management within supply chain relationships.

Keywords: Product stewardship, knowledge acquisition, double-edged effect, knowledge exploitation, supplier opportunism.

Introduction

The knowledge-based view (KBV) showcases the central role that knowledge acquired from external partners could play in the design and development of products (Grant 1996; Katila and Ahuja 2002; Laursen and Salter 2006; Nickerson and Zenger 2004; Szulanski et al. 2016; Zahra and George 2002; Zhou and Li 2012). Simply put, the more the knowledge that can be gained from external partners, the better the design and development of products. While it is irrefutable that knowledge gained from suppliers could be beneficial for firms in incorporating innovative design changes (Ardito and Messeni Petruzzelli 2017; Flor et al. 2018; Hofmann et al. 2020; Liu et al. 2018; Zhang et al. 2018), extant research has been relatively silent when it comes to the effect of knowledge acquisition on product stewardship in particular. This is interesting as product stewardship could be defined as the integration of input from all external parties involved in each step of the product life cycle (including suppliers) in the product design and development process (Hart 1995). Different terminologies – eco-design, design for environment, life cycle design, and design for sustainability – have been used to refer to the incorporation of sustainability into product design (Abele et al. 2009).

Product stewardship is complex involving different groups and legal entities in that it represents a multi-peaked rugged landscape[1] that is very different in comparison to general product design and development (Levinthal and Warglien 1999; Matos and Hall 2007). Product stewardship also requires the integration of a diverse set of stakeholders (Hart 1995; Sharma and Vredenburg 1998); these stakeholders could have a conflicting set of motivations and/or emphasis on different sustainability issues (Dangelico et al. 2013; Pujari et al. 2003). Specifically, while customers attribute great importance to environmentally sustainable products, their willingness to pay more for such products is debatable (Luchs et al. 2010; White

[1] For a graphical representation of a multi-peaked rugged landscape as opposed to a single-peak smooth landscape, we request readers to refer to Figure 1 of Levinthal and Warglien (1999) and Matos and Hall (2007).

et al. 2019). In other words, the commercial success of product stewardship in several industries is considered a fallacy (Dangelico and Pujari 2010; White et al. 2019). Firms that still choose to pursue product stewardship must contend with numerous complexities given that product stewardship is a more comprehensive initiative as it takes into consideration the entire life cycle of the product (Hall and Vredenburg 2005; Hart 1995; Hart and Dowell 2011; Matos and Hall 2007). Apart from involving the application of new approaches to product design, product stewardship efforts must also contend with conflicting interactions among the economic, environmental and social dimension (Dangelico et al. 2013; Hall and Vredenburg 2005; Matos and Hall 2007; Pujari et al. 2003). The conflicting interdependencies between these performance domains create great uncertainty about how even simple design decisions could affect performance, in general. Accordingly, product stewardship presents a unique context within which to study the role of knowledge acquisition.

Against this backdrop, we contend that more research is required to understand whether knowledge acquisition could be conducive for product stewardship efforts. The key question is: as is the case with general product development efforts, will knowledge acquisition complement internal knowledge components and assist firms to successfully design products that incorporate sustainability aspects? With greenwashing being widely spread across industries (Blome et al. 2020; Pimonenko et al. 2020), firms might just acquire knowledge from suppliers superficially without engaging, in a detailed manner, with the acquired knowledge, thereby not actually designing environmentally friendly products. Particularly, given the ambiguity of environmental performance standards as well as sustainability accounting standards that cross boundaries from one organisation to the next (in our case, the supplier), firms might be getting away with just talking the talk instead of walking the talk (Lee and Hageman 2018; Pizzetti et al. 2021). This forms the main thesis of our study.

Additionally, we also conjecture that the direct effects of knowledge acquisition on product stewardship could be amplified or attenuated by moderators. First, though sharing of complementary knowledge between partners could be beneficial, there is an increased chance that the partners could end up losing their proprietary knowledge. Therefore, firms' inclination to share as well as assimilate external knowledge could be predicated by their relationship characteristics. Second, once successfully acquired, the benefits derived from externally acquired knowledge is subsequently contingent upon the firms' ability to utilize it. Accordingly, the effect of knowledge acquisition could also by moderated by other firm-level characteristics. As a guiding framework for identifying a parsimonious set of moderators, we separate the process of knowledge acquisition into two distinguishable parts: (1) learning the knowledge and (2) application of the knowledge; this conceptualization adheres to the works of Zahra and George (2002) and Law (2014). Specifically, we forward two moderators that could impact these two distinguishable parts of knowledge acquisition. First, since knowledge acquisition is basically a social process (Yli-Renko et al. 2001), we consider supplier opportunism as a key "debilitating" moderator that can present a social dilemma and deter the "learning of knowledge" from external partners, thereby impeding the mobility of such knowledge. Second, since knowledge exploitation capability reflects the presence of processes and routines that could facilitate the successful integration of the acquired knowledge (Zahra and George 2002), we consider knowledge exploitation as a key "facilitating" moderator that can enhance the "application of the knowledge" acquired from external partners. While the notion of absorptive capacity could be considered to subsume both knowledge acquisition and exploitation capabilities (Roldán Bravo et al. 2018; Roldán Bravo et al. 2020), in this study we consider them as distinct factors and study their effects on product stewardship.

By pursuing these aspirations, our research makes significant contributions to extant literature as well as the theoretical discourse on knowledge management related to product

stewardship. Though the role of knowledge has been broadly touted in literature, there are doubts that have been cast on the ability of knowledge acquisition to be beneficial in all settings (Alcacer and Oxley 2014; Zanarone et al. 2016). Also, while some firms might be good at acquiring as well as utilizing external knowledge, others might not. Therefore, it is also pertinent for both supply chain researchers and practitioners to understand what firm-level and/or relationship characteristics would assist firms to benefit more from knowledge acquisition. Following this line of thought, we study the effect of knowledge acquisition as well as the role of knowledge exploitation and supplier opportunism in augmenting the productive or destructive effect of knowledge acquisition on product stewardship. Our contention is that the rugged landscape of product stewardship makes these questions salient in this context. Rightly so, our results shed light on an intriguing double-edged effect (i.e., negative) of knowledge acquisition (Alcacer and Oxley 2014; Rossetti and Choi 2005; Zanarone et al. 2016). Using the concept of fitness landscape, we showcase that product stewardship presents a unique context within which the very benefits attributed to knowledge acquisition could turn out to be either non-existent or detrimental. Understanding the double-edged effect of knowledge acquisition on product stewardship has significance beyond the buyer-supplier relationship. Given the growing need for environmental-friendly products, all parties along the entire product life cycle (including suppliers) need to work together to optimize the environmental impact of the product. Therefore, even though we study the specific context of strategic buyer-supplier relationships, our findings have implications for the entire supply chain.

Theoretical background

Product stewardship

Incorporating sustainability aspects into product design signals a proactive posture wherein firms aspire to reduce the negative environmental impacts of their products (Aragón-

Correa and Sharma 2003; Hart 1995; Sarkis et al. 2010). As such a design approach entails the integration of the "voice of the environment" into product design, Hart (1995) adopts a broader term of product stewardship instead. No matter the terminology, the major objective of product stewardship is to ensure that the firms' products have a minimal impact on the natural environment in addition to meeting the needs of the customer (Hart 1995; Sarkis et al. 2010). It promotes reuse, recycle, as well as recovery of component materials and parts (Zhu and Sarkis 2004; Zhu et al. 2008). While products are designed with environmentally friendly materials and components in mind, the incorporation of easy disassembly in the early design stages also facilitates reuse and recycle of products. More importantly, product stewardship involves the application of life cycle analysis to minimize the product's environmental impact through its entire useable life (Hart 1995; Liu et al. 2017; Sarkis 2001). Hart (1995) originally envisioned life cycle analysis, as part of product stewardship, to focus only on environmental aspects. But when it comes to life cycle analysis, other scholars suggest that it should also consider social aspects (Dreyer et al. 2006; Gauthier 2005; O'Brien et al. 1996); specifically, social life cycle analysis encompasses social impact on all stakeholders (workers, consumers, local communities, etc.) throughout the life cycle of the product. Given that we focus predominantly on the acquisition of technical knowledge from suppliers, we conceptualize product stewardship to specifically focus only on the environmental aspects.

Product stewardship adheres to the principles of sustainable development in that it aspires "to meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs" (WECD 1987: 43). In other words, our conceptualization of product stewardship subsumes some of the social considerations indirectly, even if not directly. Specifically, the increased attention to reduce environmental impact through reduced consumption as well as environmental-friendly material could also benefit the society, at large. Therefore, product stewardship initiatives are fraught with a high

degree of ambiguity, uncertainty as well as complexity (Hall and Vredenburg 2005; Matos and Hall 2007). Among others, this could be driven by the adoption of new materials and/or technologies wherein their potential impacts are hard to ascertain. The complex interdependencies among the environmental, social and economics dimensions increases the ambiguity pertaining to the performance impacts of any design decisions; in doing so, it also increases the bounded rationality of the decision makers. Product stewardship also involves the participation of external stakeholders with diverse needs (Hall and Vredenburg 2005; Hart 1995; Sharma and Vredenburg 1998). Accordingly, using the idea of fitness landscape, Matos and Hall (2007) suggests that product stewardship represents a multi-peaked rugged landscape that requires careful coordination between the different performance dimensions as well as the diverse stakeholders.

The concept of fitness landscape has its origin in the literature of biology (Wright 1931). In the context of organizations, Kauffman (1993) indicates that the topography of a landscape is influenced by two variables: the number of elements that characterize the concept is denoted as "N" and the number of interactions each element is subjected to is denoted as "K". In the case of product stewardship, N denotes the individual indicators that measure the economic and environmental domains. These indicators could span quantitative (e.g., emissions, quality, cost, etc.) and qualitative (e.g., stakeholder input, customer requirements, etc.) aspects (Matos and Hall 2007). Alternatively, in this context, an interdependency could be related to the choice of new material which could reduce the environmental impact of the product while simultaneously increasing the cost as well as reducing the ability to maintain high quality. In effect, the lower the number of interdependencies (i.e., K), the smoother the landscape (inverted U-shape with a single peak). Alternatively, the landscape becomes more rugged and multi-peaked as the interdependencies increase. In a smooth landscape, the global optimum is related to the single peak; any improvements will eventually lead to global

optimum (Levinthal and Warglien 1999). On the contrary, in multi-peaked rugged landscapes, the search for global optimum (or peak) – overall high sustainable development performance – is not that straightforward.

Accordingly, product design that encompasses a simultaneous pursuit of sustainability is not an easy task as it requires a completely different mindset as well as the incorporation of creative product development processes (Aragón-Correa and Sharma 2003; Sarkis et al. 2010). It also requires a better understanding of the complex interactions between the conflicting objectives spanning the environmental and economic dimensions (Hall and Vredenburg 2005; Matos and Hall 2007). More importantly, to contend with and to subsequently smoothen the rugged landscape, product stewardship requires higher-order learning from various supply chain partners; the successful smoothening of the rugged landscape could also result in the development of tacit as well as casually ambiguous organizational capabilities (Hart 1995; Sharma 2000; Sharma and Vredenburg 1998). Given product stewardship practices create the potential for strategic pre-emption, they could help firms achieve as well as maintain competitive advantage in the long run (Aragón-Correa and Sharma 2003; Hart 1995; Hart and Dowell 2011; Porter and van der Linde 1995; Sharma and Vredenburg 1998). Numerous researchers provide sufficient evidence for the fact that product stewardship could lead to superior triple bottom line performance outcomes (Dangelico et al. 2013; Lee et al. 2016; Pujari et al. 2003; Seuring and Müller 2008; Zhu and Sarkis 2004).

The role of knowledge acquisition

Guided by the tenets of the KBV (Grant 1996; Nickerson and Zenger 2004), we forward knowledge acquisition as a key determinant of product stewardship as well as its subsequent effect on environmental performance. While deep domain-related knowledge that resides within a firm could be a significant source of sustainability-related product innovations, it also creates a cognitive inertia that could constrain firms' ability to pioneer innovative

improvements in their product design (Levinthal and March 1993; Tripsas and Gavetti 2000). To overcome this drawback, scholars suggest that firms should rejuvenate their internal knowledge base by actively seeking knowledge components that reside outside their organization (Laursen and Salter 2006; Zhou and Li 2012). Termed as knowledge acquisition, this capability signifies the degree to which firms can seek, identify and acquire knowledge generated beyond its boundaries (Zahra and George 2002). Among others, knowledge acquired from external partners is touted to help firms to improve their capability to design and develop innovative products (Yli-Renko et al. 2001; Zahra and George 2002; Zhou and Li 2012).

Alternatively, the knowledge that is acquired from partner firms is not always easily used by the recipient; the effectiveness of knowledge acquisition is often predicated by the ambiguity inherent in the knowledge that is acquired (Grant 1996; van Wijk et al. 2008). This ambiguity could relate to the knowledge components themselves and/or the effect of the knowledge components (Law 2014; Simonin 1999). If the external knowledge components are either abstract or complex, then they might hide from the recipient firms, thereby impeding the learning process. Alternatively, the difficulty in understanding the effect of the knowledge components – i.e., connections between actions and outcomes – might also preclude the learning as well as applicability of those knowledge components (Law 2014). These complexities could amplify the double-edged effect of knowledge acquisition, wherein it might prevent the use of knowledge acquired in product development efforts. In addition to the negativity related to knowledge ambiguity, scholars also suggest that while exchanging knowledge, firms are also exposed to the risk of knowledge leakage as well as undesirable learning races (Hamel 1991; Kale et al. 2000; Li et al. 2008). So, firms are equally compelled to protect their knowledge resources due to the belief that undue appropriation or imitation could be detrimental to their competitive advantage. This signifies another double-edged effects of knowledge acquisition as it could also expose firms to their partner's potential rent-

seeking behavior (Zanarone et al. 2016). Therefore, even if knowledge is successfully acquired, this dark side of knowledge acquisition could present a dilemma for firms as there is no guarantee that the knowledge acquired could be successfully utilized in product design.

Hypothesis development

Please refer to Figure 1 for the conceptual model depicting the hypothesized relationships. Though extant research brings out the good and bad sides of knowledge acquisition, in our conceptual model we adhere to the positives of knowledge acquisition in developing our hypotheses. Specifically, we contend that the ability to acquire knowledge is of paramount importance to the incorporation of sustainability aspects into product design due to the very fact that product stewardship requires a careful coordination across the different conflicting domains (Hart and Dowell 2011; Pujari et al. 2003). As pointed out earlier, product stewardship represents a rugged landscape wherein the interdependencies between environmental, social, and economic decisions are ambiguous and difficult to ascertain. Accordingly, deciphering the benefits of product stewardship could be elusive given that the design decisions are fraught with increased complexity, uncertainty, ambiguity, and bounded rationality (Hall and Vredenburg 2005; Pujari et al. 2003; Simon 1996).

When it comes to product stewardship, knowledge captured through supply chain relationships could play a significant role (McDougall et al. 2021). Specifically, knowledge acquisition from suppliers could help firms to overcome these challenges as it could increase the number as well as variety of external knowledge components that they can access (Fleming 2001). As the knowledge pool increases in terms of number of knowledge components, firms can gain a better understanding of the various aspects and implications of product stewardship. The breadth and depth of the diverse knowledge gained from suppliers could also enable firms to continuously renew and enrich their existing knowledge base (Ardito and Messeni Petruzzelli 2017; Flor et al. 2018; Zhou and Li 2012). More specifically, firms could acquire

new product-related or process-related knowledge from their suppliers. Within the purview of product stewardship, this could include knowledge pertaining to life cycle assessment, new materials as well as clean technology, and remanufacturing, among others (Hart and Dowell 2011; Matos and Hall 2007; Mihelcic et al. 2003; Pujari et al. 2003; Sarkis 2001; Zhu and Sarkis 2004). Specifically, we conjecture that knowledge acquisition from suppliers can lead to novel recombinations of internal and external knowledge components, thereby enhancing firms' ability to understand as well as incorporate novel sustainability aspects into their product design (Laursen and Salter 2006; Zhou et al. 2014).

H_1: *Knowledge acquisition from suppliers will have a positive effect on product stewardship.*

Given that superior environmental performance could enhance the firm's image in the eyes of the consumers (Porter and van der Linde 1995), it is increasingly becoming a mainstream performance concern rather than just a good to have. There is sufficient empirical evidence suggesting that when firms design their products in a sustainable fashion, the products will result in less environmental degradation (Lee et al. 2016; Pujari et al. 2003; Seuring and Müller 2008; Zhu and Sarkis 2004). While product stewardship can enhance the environmental performance of the firm, its subsequent performance effects could be significantly higher in the presence of certain contingencies. Specifically, we purport that in addition to increasing the scope of incorporation of sustainability in product design, knowledge acquisition could further serve as a catalyst in enhancing the effect of product stewardship on environmental performance. When it comes to product stewardship, the environmental impact of the product is not about the product itself; it is also about the entire lifecycle of the product including its manufacturing process (Dangelico et al. 2013). Also, innovating for sustainable development is often challenging due to the conflicting pressures as well as complex interactions between different performance domains as well as stakeholders. These ambiguities could hinder not only the design decisions themselves, but also the ability to ascertain the potential impact such

decisions could have on different performance measures. Accordingly, the rugged landscape of product stewardship initiatives requires well-informed cognition pertaining to the numerous interacting parameters as well as their potential outcomes (Hall and Vredenburg 2005; Matos and Hall 2007). While transforming this rugged landscape by simplifying the system (i.e., not aspiring for lofty stewardship initiatives in product design) is a tempting alternative, Levinthal and Warglien (1999) propose that the rugged landscape could rather be smoothened through the acquisition of appropriate knowledge. The number and variety of knowledge gained from external partners could help firms to acquire a nuanced cause-and-effect understanding and strengthen their related cognitive structures as well as competencies. As a result, firms could effectively reconfigure their knowledge resources for the smoothening of this rugged landscape (Subramaniam and Youndt 2005; Yang et al. 2010; Zhou and Li 2012). Accordingly, we forward the following hypothesis for formal testing:

> ***H_2:*** *Knowledge acquisition from suppliers will positively moderate the effect of product stewardship on environmental performance.*

While strategic supplier relationships could serve as effective platforms for acquiring valuable as well as complementary knowledge from supply partners, they also pose an inherent dilemma given there is a chance that firms could end up losing their proprietary knowledge to their partners. Therefore, we focus on the role that supplier opportunism, a fundamental relationship characteristic, could play on the relationship between knowledge acquisition and product stewardship. When it comes to inter-firm collaboration, opportunism can have serious consequences no matter the context (Blome et al. 2023; Luo 2006). It can not only preclude confidence building, but also escalate conflicts. Therefore, the presence of opportunism could be considered as detrimental to almost all aspects of inter-firm exchanges (Oliveira and Lumineau 2019). Consequently, opportunistic behavior has also been widely identified as a key deterrent to the sharing of knowledge (Cabrera and Cabrera 2002; Nickerson and Zenger 2004). A self-interest seeking supplier could become increasingly protective of their

knowledge and would not only deliberately withhold key information, but also wilfully provide false information with the intent to mislead the buyer (Nickerson and Zenger 2004; Simonin 1999; Wathne and Heide 2000; Williamson 1985). Therefore, while firms understand external knowledge could be good for their competitive advantage, they would be cautious in acquiring knowledge from a supplier if they doubt that the supplier might be shirking or cheating (Wang et al. 2010). Any acts of guile or misuse from the supplier could further cast a shadow of doubt about the authenticity of the acquired knowledge. Therefore, in addition to preventing the mobility of knowledge, opportunism could also preclude the application of the knowledge that is successfully acquired. Accordingly, supplier opportunism may emerge as a potential hazard as it can turn on the dark side of knowledge acquisition; in doing so, it could limit the application of the acquired knowledge as the buyer might be uncertain as well as wary about the supplier's rent-seeking behavior as well as malfeasance (Zanarone et al. 2016).

The negative effects of supplier opportunism could be particularly damaging when it comes to the application of sustainability-related knowledge. Specifically, product stewardship initiatives are ambiguous in nature as it is hard for firms to ascertain the potential impact that their design decisions could have on the different conflicting performance measures; this increases the bounded rationality of the related design decisions (Hall and Vredenburg 2005; Matos and Hall 2007). Therefore, higher levels of opportunism could exacerbate the complexities, uncertainties and ambiguities that are associated with designing sustainable products. Additionally, as pointed out by Williamson (1985), the detrimental effects of opportunism is even greater when joined with bounded rationality. Therefore, higher levels of opportunism would make it particularly hard for the buying firm to verify the accuracy, appropriateness as well as value of the sustainability-related knowledge acquired from the supplier. Higher levels of supplier opportunism could also escalate the conflicts while subsequently reducing the confidence among the exchange partners (Wathne and Heide 2000;

Williamson 1985). Hence, the partners will not be inclined to work together to understand the interdependencies of their knowledge bases as well as the applicability of the knowledge acquired. Accordingly, we forward that supplier opportunism could act as a significant deterrent in not only learning the knowledge, but also the effective incorporation of the acquired knowledge in the design of sustainable products (Zanarone et al. 2016). Based on this discourse, we hypothesize:

H_3: *Supplier opportunism will negatively moderate the effect of knowledge acquisition on product stewardship.*

Once firms acquire external knowledge, it is important that this new knowledge is internalized, juxtaposed, and, if needed, combined with existing knowledge to realize the related benefits. The extent of benefits derived from knowledge acquisition could be contingent upon the firms' ability to utilize as well as exploit this acquired knowledge. Specifically, to realize new opportunities from the acquired knowledge, firms need to possess the ability to solve novel problems (Nickerson and Zenger 2004). This organizational capability, termed knowledge exploitation, is developed through established processes, routines, and structures that facilitate the ongoing dissemination as well as synthesis of firms' knowledge resources (Foss et al. 2013; Zahra and George 2002). It also mandates the development of coordination devices such as cross-divisional communication channels so as to ensure the deployment of knowledge gained from external sources (Foss et al. 2013). Among others, this capability can be honed through local searching as well as experiential refinement of knowledge bases that reside within the organizational boundaries (Baum et al. 2000; Gupta et al. 2006; Li et al. 2010b). In this study, we refrain from the temporal separation of acquisition and exploitation activities (i.e., firms need to acquire knowledge before exploiting it); instead, we envision knowledge exploitation as a complementary, yet stand-alone, capability (Gupta et al. 2006; Katila and Ahuja 2002; March 1991; Rosenkopf and Nerkar 2001).

While we acknowledge that knowledge acquisition could lead to product stewardship, we also contend that this effect will be augmented significantly by the firms' knowledge exploitation capability. Specifically, a well-developed knowledge exploitation capability signifies the presence of appropriate structural and procedural mechanisms that facilitate easy assimilation as well as synthesis of diverse knowledge components. Accordingly, the ability to exploit knowledge can enable firms to not only refine, extend, and reuse existing knowledge resources, but also create new knowledge components by translating and integrating externally acquired knowledge (Zahra and George 2002). It could also help firms to gain a much deeper understanding of the acquired knowledge as well as its possible use in catering to the needs to conflicting performance objectives of product stewardship, thereby enabling them to combine the diverse knowledge bases effectively as well as creatively. Specifically, we contend that only through such an active integration of these internal and external knowledge bases could firms fully realize the benefits that are offered by both (Zhou and Li 2012). Against this backdrop, we conjecture that firms can significantly augment the incorporation of sustainability into their product design by combining both knowledge acquisition and exploitation capabilities. Specifically, through the nuanced exploitation of diverse sustainability-related knowledge acquired from suppliers, firms could gain a better understanding of the complexities and ambiguities associated with product stewardship (Levinthal and March 1993; Li et al. 2010b; March 1991; Zahra and George 2002). Based on this discourse, we hypothesize:

H_4: *Knowledge exploitation capability will positively moderate the effect of knowledge acquisition on product stewardship.*

Methodology

Data Collection

Given that our study aims to test theory by proposing theoretically grounded hypotheses, we follow the positivist paradigm in our research. Our research also assumes that the constructs measured in our study are real and not socially constructed (e.g., through

interpretation). While different methods to measure such constructs exist, we opted for survey research as we can more closely and rigorously measure the variables of our research study (Roth and Rosenzweig 2020). Also, survey research is particularly powerful in directly measuring latent constructs that are otherwise difficult to measure. Once we designed the survey instrument, it was pretested using a total of eight supply chain experts (including both practitioners and academicians). The experts were asked to assess the readability, appropriateness as well as the completeness of the survey questions (Dillman 2007); based on their input, some minor changes were made to the instrument. Except for performance-related questions, most other questions were measured using a 5-point Likert scale; the anchors used were "1 = strongly disagree" and "5 = strongly agree". The respondents were asked to answer performance-related questions in response to their direct competitors; they answered these questions based on 5-point Likert scale with anchors "1 = much worse" and "5 = much better". The survey included both firm-level and relational-level items; so we sought respondents that held senior purchasing positions. For the supplier relationship related indicators, we requested the respondents to answer them with respect to the top supplier selected based on dollar amounts and/or importance of materials purchased.

We obtained the sampling frame of US manufacturing firms from the Institute for Supply Management (ISM). The sampling frame consisted of 3000 members working in industries covered under multiple SIC codes. Since we did not receive the email address for these members from ISM, we adopted a two-step data collection approach. In the first step, we contacted 1500 randomly selected respondents (from a sampling frame of 3000 potential respondents) regarding our research study and asked them to mail a consent form if they were willing to participate in the study. Out of these 1500 survey questionnaires, 30 were returned undelivered. Though 580 respondents returned the consent form, only 305 respondents consented to participate in our study. The other 275 declined to participate in the study;

majority of them stated reasons such as company policy or lack of experience. We gave the interested participants the option to complete either a paper version or an electronic version of the survey. The effective sample size was 1195 (1500 contacted – 30 undelivered – 275 declined to participate). From the effective sample of 1195, we received a total of 241 completed surveys resulting in an effective response rate of approximately 20% (241/1195). While we acknowledge that 20% is a low response rate, there have been numerous publications with operations and supply chain management discipline that have had a response rate much lower than 20% (Ambulkar et al. 2015; Bode et al. 2011; Jansen et al. 2006; Paulraj 2011; Rexhausen et al. 2012).

To ensure that only key respondents participated in our study, we asked two questions assessing the respondent's (1) knowledge relating to the survey questions and (2) level of confidence in answering the questions. The two questions were measured using a 5-point Likert scale with endpoints of 1 = 'not at all' and 5 = 'significantly'. The average score for these two questions were 3.97 and 4.04 suggesting that the respondents were appropriate to participate in our study. More importantly, majority of our respondents (approximately 65%) held senior positions in their firms (e.g., president, vice president, or director). As for the profile of the responding firms, we found that nearly 59% of the respondents worked for firms employing more than 1000 employees while approximately 20% of the respondents worked for firms with less than 250 employees. Still, we had an adequate representation of firms across all sizes.

Bias Check

As a preliminary step, we address the issues of non-response bias and common-method bias. First, non-response bias could be minimized by having a higher response rate (Groves and Peytcheva 2008; Wright and Armstrong 2008). Though our response rate was only 20%, this was comparable to prior research published in our discipline. Therefore, we assessed potential non-response bias by using the wave analysis (Rogelberg and Stanton 2007), in which

the early responses were compared to late responses (Pace 1939). The responses were split based on their receipt date (early respondent group had 131 responses; late respondent group had 110 responses). We included company size as well as ten indicators that were selected randomly. The group comparison test did not reveal any difference between the two samples. Apart from this statistical testing, we also manually assessed the range of responses received for the ten indicators across the two groups; there were no apparent differences in the range of responses received for these indicators. As an added test, we also adopted the follow-up approach suggested by Rogelberg and Stanton (2007. Specifically, we contacted 200 randomly selected firms from the list of non-responding firms and collected minimal data related to number of employees and annual sales volume. Comparison of these demographic variables between the 200 non-responding firms and our sample yielded no significant differences at the 95% confidence level. Finally, we also compared the distribution of industries (SIC codes) across the randomly selected sampling frame (i.e., the 1500 firms initially contacted), the total consent forms received (i.e., those willing/unwilling to participate), and our final sample. In addition to all industries in the sampling frame being represented in our final sample, the proportion of responses for the different industries in our final sample was consistent with the proportion of industry representation in the sampling frame as well as the list of total consent forms received. These results suggest that non-response bias might not be a concern in our study.

We adopted both procedural and methodological approaches recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2003) to ensure the absence of common methods bias. The potential for common method bias was minimized through the methodological separation of the non-performance and performance indicators into separate sections as well as different response format; this reduces method bias caused by commonalities in the scale endpoints. Verbal labels were provided for the midpoints of the measurement scales with the ambition of minimizing

acquiescence bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003). When combined with the length of the survey instrument, there is an increased possibility that these design considerations could ensure that the respondents do not link the non-performance and performance indicators (Paulraj et al. 2014). As for methodological approaches, we follow Olson et al. (2005) and compared our measurement model involving five factors with a measurement model involving a single latent factor (representing the method factor). The fit for the single method factor model (CFI = 0.59, NNFI = 0.55, RMSEA = 0.25) was found to be considerably worse in comparison to our measurement model (CFI = 0.97, NNFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.051). Finally, as suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003), we adopted the single-common-method-factor approach. According to this approach, we first ran trait-based measurement model (Mod 1). Subsequently, we modified this model by including a method factor to the model and linking all the measurement items to this method factor (Mod 2) as well (Ketokivi and Schroeder 2004; Podsakoff et al. 2003; Williams et al. 1989). From these two measurement models, we found that the method factor accounted only for 4% of the total variance (Widaman 1985). In addition, the significance of the paths from the measurement items to their respective trait were similar between Mod 1 and Mod 2. So, we can safely conclude that in spite of the inclusion of the methods factor, Mod 1 was robust. Collectively these procedural and methodological approaches suggest that common methods bias might not be a concern in our study.

Measures

Knowledge acquisition relates to gaining access to and acquiring pre-existing knowledge from collaborating partners. Accordingly, we used five indicators that measure the extent to which valuable technical knowledge and know-how are received from the key supplier. The items were developed based on the studies by Dess et al. (2003) and Yli-Renko et al. (2001). Supplier opportunism implies whether the supplier tries to mislead, distort, disguise, obfuscate, or confuse the buying firm. It occurs when the supplier indulges in

inequitable actions that violate promises concerning its required behavior. Accordingly, we used five items measuring the focal firm's perception of the opportunistic behaviour of its supplier (Katsikeas et al. 2009; Lado et al. 2008). Knowledge exploitation is an organizational capability that is oriented towards innovating through the exploitation of firm's existing knowledge components. Accordingly, we used measurement items to capture the firm's capability of utilizing as well as exploiting (1) know-how, patent, and new product design, (2) newly introduced advanced technologies, and (3) techniques, equipment, and establishment. This four-item scale was adopted from Li et al. (2010b). Product stewardship include the extent to which the design of products focuses on (1) reduction of hazardous material, energy, and resource consumption, (2) disassembly, reusability, and recyclability, and (3) environmentally-oriented life cycle analysis. The six-item scale was developed based on the studies of Aragón-Correa and Sharma (2003), González-Benito and González-Benito (2005) and Zhu and Sarkis (2004). Environmental performance was operationalized to measure the firm's ability to use reduced energy as well as minimize pollution, waste, environmental accidents, and the use of natural resources. While researchers have come up with several scales to measure environmental performance, we developed a six-item scale based on the works of De Giovanni and Vinzi (2012) and Zhu and Sarkis (2004).

We included multiple control variables that might impact product stewardship as well as environmental performance. First, we controlled for the market share held by the company in comparison to its competition (measured using a 5-point Likert scale with endpoints 'much smaller' and 'much larger'); market share could relate to not only the extent of resources available to a firm, but also the motivation to engage in environmental sustainability initiatives (Boulding and Staelin 1993). The level of competition in a product market could also explain the ambition of a firm to engage in sustainability initiatives. Specifically, increasing competition will not only put pressure on a firm, but might also motivate them into seeking

first-mover advantage related to environmental sustainability (Khilji et al. 2006). Therefore, we also controlled for the level of competition; it was captured using the indicator 'In your major product/product line, the intensity of competition is very high' measured using a 5-point Likert scale with end-points of "not at all" and "significant".

As pointed out earlier, product stewardship is considered a proactive initiative (Aragón-Correa and Sharma 2003; Hart 1995; Sarkis et al. 2010); accordingly, the extent of environmental proclivity within a firm could be a key predictor of product stewardship as well as the ensuing environmental performance. Therefore, we included environmental proclivity measured using a single question "our organization has a proactive posture to the environmental market"; this Likert-scale question was measured using end points of "1 = strongly disagree" and "5 = strongly agree". Finally, the extent of incorporation of sustainability aspects into product design could also be driven strongly by the ability of a firm to integrate perspectives from its customers (Hart 1995). Therefore, we included the item "we conduct joint planning to anticipate and resolve sustainability-related problems with our key customers" as an additional control variable. This item was measured using a Likert scale with end points of "1 = strongly disagree" and "5 = strongly agree".

Measurement Instrument Development

The dataset was initially assessed for the assumption of multivariate normality using the Mardia's test (Mardia 1970). The Mardia coefficient for our dataset was 1.00 which was within the recommended limits of -1.96 and 1.96. We tested the measurement instrument using the confirmatory factor analysis. The results of the measurement instrument development process is presented in Table 1; this table also includes the items (questions) we used to measure the constructs. As evident from the model fit indices included in Table 1, our data fit the measurement model well (Hu and Bentler 1999), thereby establishing unidimensionality.

The standardized loading values and t-values clearly indicated the convergent validity of our measurement items.

-- Insert Table 1 about here --

We established discriminant validity using the Fornell and Larcker (1981) approach. The correlation values and the square root of AVE values provided in the upper part of Table 2 suggests that our measurement items exhibit discriminant validity. Additionally, we validated this using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) analysis; this approach is considered more reliable in comparison to the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Henseler et al. 2015). To exhibit discriminant validity, the HTMT values should be lower than 0.85. The HTMT values were well below this limit (between 0.045 and 0.452), suggesting that our measurement items exhibit discriminant validity. We used multiple measures to establish the reliability of the measures. Initially, reliability was assessed using coefficient alpha (Nunnally 1978) and coefficient omega (McDonald 1999). Given that none of the constructs were found to be tau-equivalent, coefficient omega is considered to yield a consistent estimate of reliability (Deng and Chan 2017). As given in Table 1, coefficient alpha and omega values were all above 0.80. We also calculated the (1) confidence intervals for alpha and omega using the bootstrapping approach, and (2) robust alpha and omega values that are appropriate for missing data (Zhang and Yuan 2016); all these values were well above 0.80. Finally, we also used the composite reliability score (Bagozzi and Yi 1988) to ensure the reliability of the constructs. The composite reliability values were also above 0.80 for all theoretical constructs. In addition, all constructs also had AVEs above 0.50. Overall, these results clearly established the reliability, validity, and unidimensionality of our measurement items.

-- Insert Table 2 about here --

Results

When it comes to product design as well as innovation literature, knowledge acquisition is mostly considered an antecedent to innovation and product design (Dyer and Singh 1998; Yli-Renko et al. 2001; Zahra and George 2002). But the reverse relationship could also be plausible given that a firm that is good at designing innovative and sustainable products might be keen on actively acquiring knowledge from suppliers as well. This would make knowledge acquisition endogenous in our hypothesized model (Antonakis et al. 2010). With this in mind, we conducted two-stage hierarchical ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions involving valid instruments to correct for potential endogeneity (Hamilton and Nickerson 2003). We incorporate two instruments for knowledge acquisition; while the appropriateness of the instrument variables is statistically determined, our selection of instruments was also motivated theoretically. First, the level of confidence that a firm has on its supplier's behavior could be considered a key driver of knowledge acquisition (Das and Teng 1998; Dyer and Singh 1998; Kale et al. 2000; Li et al. 2010a). Given that the level of confidence in a partner could reflect the embeddedness, trustworthiness, certainty, as well as compatibility in the exchange relationship, it could be a significant predictor to the exchange of knowledge. Therefore, we used the "level of confidence" the firm has on its key supplier as an instrument for knowledge acquisition; we adopted a Likert scale with anchors of "1 = strongly disagree" and "5 = strongly agree" to measure this indicator "the supplier is a company that we have great confidence in". Additionally, firms would be more inclined to acquire knowledge from suppliers that are innovative (Azadegan and Dooley 2010; Kotabe et al. 2003). Therefore, we used a second instrument related to supplier innovativeness; this indicator "we achieve our innovation target through joint innovation projects with this supplier" was measured with end points of "1 = not at all" and "5 = significant".

In the first stage, we regressed knowledge acquisition on confidence, supplier innovativeness and all the control variables. Since the Breush-Pagan test was found to be

significant, we used robust standard errors to overcome the issues of heteroskedasticity. We found both confidence (b = 0.32; t = 5.24; p < 0.001) and supplier innovativeness (b = 0.52; t = 8.02; p < 0.001) to be significantly related to knowledge acquisition. Subsequently, in the second stage, we used the predicted scores of knowledge acquisition from the first stage in subsequent models (models M1-M4 and M6 in Table 3) to test our hypotheses. Since both the Breush-Pagan and White tests were found to be nonsignificant in all our models, there were no issues of heteroskedasticity. But given that the standard errors generated in this second stage do not account for the fact that we used the predicted value of knowledge acquisition, the standard errors may be underestimated (Hamilton and Nickerson 2003). Therefore, we corrected for this issue by using the bootstrapping approach employing 5000 replications to determine the standard errors and the significance of the coefficients; we have also reported the bias corrected confidence intervals wherever appropriate.

-- Insert Table 3 about here --

The descriptive statistics and bivariate correlation values are presented in Table 2. We mean-centered all variables that were used in the creation of interaction terms; this was done with the ambition of reducing nonessential multicollinearity as well as the ill-conditioning in the data (Dalal and Zickar 2012); the individual variance inflation factor (VIF) values were all below 2. The regression results for the different models evaluated are provided in Table 3. As evident from the results of M1, knowledge acquisition was found to have a marginally significant positive effect on product stewardship (b = 0.12; z = 1.90; p < 0.10), thereby not providing support for hypothesis H_1. The other three hypotheses tested different interaction effects. Hypotheses H_2 focused on the moderating role of knowledge acquisition on the relationship between product stewardship and environmental performance. As evident from M6 (in Table 3), we found the moderating effect of knowledge acquisition to be statistically significant (M6: b = 0.26; z = 3.28; p < 0.01; 95% Bias Corrected CI: LL = 0.1359; UL =

0.4944), thereby providing support for hypothesis H_2. Hypotheses H_3, and H_4 focused on the moderating role of supplier opportunism and knowledge exploitation on the relationship between knowledge acquisition and product stewardship, respectively. As evident from model M3, we found the moderating effects of supplier opportunism (M3: b = -0.11; z = 1.87; p< 0.10) was not significant. On the other hand, we found the moderating effect of knowledge exploitation (M2: b = 0.16; z = 3.23; p < 0.01; 95% Bias Corrected CI: LL = 0.1087; UL = 0.4071) to be significant. In summary, while H_4 was supported, H_3 was not supported. Please refer to Appendix A for the effect sizes and practical significance of our results.

Additional analysis

We corrected for potential endogeneity by using a two-stage hierarchical OLS estimation approach involving valid instruments (Hamilton and Nickerson 2003). Even though we took necessary steps to ensure rigour, the OLS estimator could still be considered biased when involving troublesome endogenous variables. Therefore, we assessed the robustness of our results using other estimation approaches. The results of the robustness analysis are presented in Appendix B. Additionally, to shed further light on the significant as well as nonsignificant moderation effects, we conducted further conditional effects-based analyses; details of these analyses are presented in Appendix C.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

Our central thesis was that knowledge acquisition is pivotal to product stewardship initiatives as well as its subsequent impact on environmental performance. This premise of ours was based on the tenets of knowledge-based view which advocates the superior role that newly acquired knowledge from external partners could play in enhancing the product design capabilities of the focal firm (Grant 1996; Laursen and Salter 2006; Szulanski et al. 2016; Zahra and George 2002; Zhou and Li 2012). Specifically, product stewardship requires considerable

amount of technical know-how and new knowledge about product components, characteristics and performance impacts (Dangelico et al. 2013; Hart 1995; Hart and Dowell 2011; Pujari et al. 2003). Therefore, adhering to the KBV, we conjectured that firms that acquire more knowledge from their supply partners could be in a better position to engage in product stewardship initiatives. But our results turned out to be intriguing in that, while its direct effect on product stewardship is nonsignificant, knowledge acquisition seemed to have a significant positive moderating effect on the relationship between product stewardship and environmental performance. This could, on the one hand, be explained by the fact that knowledge acquisition need not directly influence the willingness to become more sustainable. Accordingly, knowledge acquisition, by itself, might not lead to product stewardship. But, once a firm aspires to become more sustainable and incorporate stewardship in its product design, knowledge acquisition could allow the firm to be effective in product stewardship, thereby improving its effect on environmental performance.

Before delving deeper into the implications of our results, we would like to first highlight the important role that the two instruments – level of confidence and supplier innovativeness – play when it comes to knowledge acquisition. Specifically, the results from the first stage of our two-stage hierarchical OLS approach suggests that the level of confidence in the supply partner could signal trustworthiness as well as compatibility in the relationship, thereby leading to increased acquisition of knowledge from the partner (Dyer and Singh, 1998). The significant effect of supplier innovativeness on knowledge acquisition further validates our belief that firms would be more inclined to acquire knowledge from suppliers that are more innovative in nature (Azadegan and Dooley 2010; Kotabe et al. 2003). In the remainder of this section, we focus our attention on the intriguing results surrounding the effect of knowledge acquisition on product stewardship.

Product stewardship is fraught with a high degree of ambiguity and complexity which is driven by the intricate interactions among the diverse performance domains as well as the involvement of a wider range of stakeholders (Hall and Vredenburg 2005; Hart 1995; Sharma and Vredenburg 1998). Accordingly, the acquired knowledge components related to product stewardship might themselves be complex in that they might relate to the application of new material, new technology and/or new approach to product design; accordingly, these knowledge components could suffer from the "liability of newness" (Stinchcombe 1965) which could hinder the mobility of such knowledge components (Law 2014). Additionally, the complexities surrounding product stewardship could rather create a façade wherein firms might consider external knowledge components to be either imperfect or inappropriate (Matos and Hall 2007), thereby wanting neither to understand the performance implications nor apply even the not so complex design considerations (Law 2014; Simonin 1999). The rugged landscape of product stewardship impedes the understanding of the knowledge components as well as their performance impacts, thereby limiting the applicability of the acquired knowledge. In other words, the rugged landscape of product stewardship amplifies the double-edged effect of knowledge acquisition, wherein knowledge acquisition from supply partners need not necessarily have a significant positive effect on product stewardship.

Alternatively, even if firms are reluctant to incorporate specific design changes based on the new knowledge acquired, they could rather use the learning from external knowledge to understand the potential effects of their internal knowledge components. Specifically, based on the medium to large effect size of the moderation as well as the conditional indirect effects of knowledge acquisition (section on additional analysis) and product stewardship (please refer to Figure 1 in Appendix C) on environmental performance at different levels of knowledge acquisition, we can safely purport that the new knowledge gained from external partners, when above a threshold, could enable firms to deepen their own thinking and understand the

interdependencies between the different performance domains. Accordingly, external knowledge, new or redundant, could assist, indirectly, in deciphering the performance implications of their internal product design decisions. In other words, we forward that even if the acquired knowledge may not lead directly to design changes, it could help firms to find unforeseen combinations of already known, but previously unearthed knowledge elements that resides within the firm (Cohen 1981; Levinthal and Warglien 1999). Accordingly, through acquired knowledge firms can potentially enhance the performance impacts of their own product stewardship efforts (Levinthal and Warglien 1999).

As for the contingent effects, our results suggest that knowledge exploitation plays a pivotal role in the relationship between knowledge acquisition and product stewardship. While knowledge exploitation positively moderates the relationship, opportunism does not negatively moderate the relationship as we had hypothesized. Based on a detailed post-hoc analysis, we find knowledge acquisition to have a significant positive effect on product stewardship only at low levels of supplier opportunism (please refer to Panel B of Figure 2 in Appendix C) and moderate to high levels of knowledge exploitation (please refer to Panel A of Figure 2 in Appendix C). We also find the combined moderating effects of these contingencies to be significant at the 99% confidence level (please refer to Figure 3 in Appendix C). Our results, including the practical significance of the moderating effect presented in Appendix A (i.e., medium effect size), suggest that through well-established processes, routines, and structures (Foss et al. 2013), knowledge exploitation can help firms in understanding the complexities and ambiguities associated with product stewardship (Levinthal and March 1993; Li et al. 2010b; March 1991; Zahra and George 2002). By facilitating the synthesis of external and internal knowledge components, knowledge exploitation capability can also help firms to use the acquired knowledge to smoothen the rugged landscape.

Taking the nonsignificant moderating effect of supplier opportunism and the conditional indirect effect of knowledge acquisition on product stewardship in the presence of supplier opportunism (Figure 2 – Pane B in Appendix C) together, even at slightly elevated levels of supplier opportunism, knowledge acquisition does not lead to product stewardship. Specifically, if firms suspect a supplier to be opportunistic, there is an increased chance that they will perceive that the supplier might not only withhold knowledge deliberately, but also go to the extent of providing false information (Wathne and Heide 2000). In other words, supplier opportunism seems to act as a significant obstacle to "learning the knowledge" from suppliers even at slightly lower levels. Additionally, given that opportunistic behavior could also escalate conflicts in relationships (Wathne and Heide 2000; Williamson 1985), firms will not be motivated to take the effort to jointly understand the performance effects of the acquired knowledge. Though the negative moderating effect was not significant, the conditional effects of opportunism suggest that it could still have a strong debilitating effect on the application of the knowledge that could be acquired. Even the slightly elevated levels of opportunism, in itself, seem to invoke the dark side of the external knowledge that is acquired (Zanarone et al. 2016), wherein it prevents the firm from using such knowledge in its own internal product design decisions.

When looking at the combined effect of both knowledge exploitation and supplier opportunism, we find that moderate to high levels of knowledge exploitation combined with low to slightly moderate levels of supplier opportunism provides the ideal environment that will facilitate both learning as well as the application of knowledge, thereby maximizing the benefits that could be accrued along the rugged landscape of product stewardship. In other words, when maintained at their ideal levels, these contingencies could negate the double-edged effect of knowledge acquisition wherein firms can synthesize the acquired knowledge successfully. On the contrary, low levels of knowledge exploitation combined with moderate

to high levels of supplier opportunism will rather serve as the undesirable breeding ground for the double-edged effect of knowledge acquisition.

Practical implications

Our study offers some key implications for practicing supply chain managers. First, managers should be cognizant about the double-edged nature of knowledge acquisition. While knowledge acquired from suppliers is generally seen as beneficial, the negativities surrounding product stewardship could make it challenging for managers to successfully integrate the knowledge acquired. At the same time, companies that want to take a pro-environment stand and aspire to overcome such challenges should rest assured that knowledge acquisition could be beneficial in not only improving the sustainability-related design aspects of their products, but also in improving their environmental performance. More importantly, managers need to understand that they must control the double-edged effect of knowledge acquisition given that it is pivotal to subsequently smoothen the rugged landscape inherent in product stewardship. For this to work seamlessly, other firm-specific capabilities as well as appropriate relationship governance mechanisms are a must. Specifically, in addition to ensuring that the knowledge exploitation capabilities are properly honed, managers also need to adopt appropriate formal and/or informal governance mechanisms that could minimize the level of opportunism in their relationship with key suppliers. If so, they could successfully negate the double-edged effect of knowledge acquisition and subsequently maximize the benefits that could be accrued along the rugged landscape of product stewardship.

Conclusion

Given the importance of environmental sustainability is increasing exponentially, companies could stay ahead of their competition by engaging in product stewardship initiatives. Product stewardship requires diverse input from supply chain partners. Therefore, external knowledge acquired from suppliers may benefit firms in their stewardship efforts and

their subsequent impact on environmental performance. With this belief, we study the effect of knowledge acquisition along with two key contingencies – knowledge exploitation and supplier opportunism. Specifically, in addition to selecting these contingencies based on the split process of knowledge sharing between firms, we also considered choosing one facilitating and one debilitating contingency in our theoretical model. Our study offers some interesting findings that could significantly augment the theoretical discourse surrounding the role of knowledge acquisition in product stewardship. Specifically, our study showcases a potential double-edged effect of knowledge acquisition that could be specific to complex contexts such as product stewardship. Additionally, it also shows that specific levels of knowledge exploitation and supplier opportunism could help to negate this double-edged effect. More importantly, the medium to large effect sizes for the moderating role of knowledge acquisition and knowledge exploitation also showcases the practical relevance of our findings.

We now discuss some of our study's limitations that might pave way for future research opportunities. First, owing to parsimony, we considered only two contingencies in our model; we encourage future research to consider other aspects of knowledge management as well as relationship management and evaluate their role in enhancing or inhibiting the effect of knowledge acquisition within the context of sustainable development. Second, when it comes to product stewardship, we follow Hart (1995) and conceptualize it to include only the environmental considerations; this seemed appropriate as we focused specifically on technical knowledge acquisition. But life cycle assessment of products could include social considerations as well (Gauthier 2005; O'Brien et al. 1996; Traverso et al. 2012). Additionally, through knowledge acquisition, firms could also learn about novel social practices from their suppliers. Accordingly, we believe that it is important to assess how knowledge acquisition could impact product stewardship after taking social considerations into account. Therefore, we recommend future research to evaluate our research model by broadening the scope of both

knowledge acquisition and product stewardship to include social aspects. Third, though product stewardship should cater to the economic, environmental, and social aspects of the triple bottom line, given our ambition to focus predominantly on the specific effect of knowledge acquisition on product stewardship, we focused only on environmental performance. But we acknowledge that it will be interesting to see how knowledge acquisition could impact the effect of product stewardship on all three performance domains. So, we recommend future research to take a triple bottom line approach towards performance measurement (Paulraj and Blome, 2017). Finally, even though we took procedural as well as methodological efforts to minimize common methods bias, data on independent and dependent variables were collected from a single respondent; future research could validate our results using data collected from multiple respondents. Despite these and other potential limitations, we believe that our study makes an invaluable contribution to literature on knowledge management in general, and product stewardship in particular.

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