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Sustainable Leadership Transformation in the Retail Industry in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT
Post-pandemic market dynamics, increasing demands for environmental, social, and governance (ESG) transparency, and shifts in consumer preferences compel the retail sector in Indonesia to reconstruct conventional managerial approaches. This qualitative study aims to explore the processes, dynamics, and internal mechanisms underpinning the transformation of sustainable leadership within the national retail industry. Employing an exploratory multiple-case study design, data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with top-tier executives, operational managers, and supply chain stakeholders across three large-scale retail chains that have implemented formal sustainability initiatives in Indonesia. The data were systematically examined using thematic analysis, multilevel data reduction techniques, and source triangulation to establish analytical rigor and trustworthiness. The findings reveal that sustainable leadership transformation extends beyond green operational efficiency, representing a fundamental paradigm shift that embeds long-term vision, human capital empowerment, and circular ethical accountability into corporate culture. Three critical trajectories emerge from this transition: the strategic redefinition of leadership commitment at the executive level, the mitigation of structural resistance through collaborative internal communication, and the synchronization of sustainable values across upstream-to-downstream supply chains. This study concludes that successful sustainable leadership hinges on a leader's capacity to reconcile short-term financial profitability with long-term ecological and social resilience amid emerging market volatility. These insights contribute theoretically to the literature on transformative leadership in developing economies while offering a practical roadmap for retail practitioners designing adaptive and inclusive sustainability transitions.
Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

The retail industry in Indonesia is experiencing multidimensional structural disruption triggered by the convergence of the acceleration of the digital economy, the volatility of global supply chains, and the growing collective awareness of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) issues. As one of the largest contributors to the national gross domestic product and a massive employer, modern retail can no longer operate solely under the umbrella of neoclassical logic that prioritizes short-term profit maximization. The global paradigm shift emphasized by Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) demonstrates that the sustainability of a business entity rests on the leadership's ability to balance economic value creation with ecological well-being and social justice. In Indonesia, this urgency is reinforced by government regulations on sustainable finance and non-financial reporting obligations that demand comprehensive corporate transparency. However, this transformation presents an existential challenge for retail decision-makers, given the industry's high susceptibility to price wars, rapid inventory turnover, and the sensitivity of extremely tight gross profit margins. Faced with these dynamics, conventional, transactional-based and classical transformational leadership are deemed inadequate to navigate the complexities of

sustainability without a fundamental reconstruction of the leaders' strategic mindsets and actions.

Conceptually, sustainable leadership emerged as an evolution of management theory that seeks to address the tension between short-term commercial targets and long-term ecosystem viability. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) emphasize that sustainable leadership goes beyond immediate success; it demands the preservation of critical resources, the prevention of human and material exploitation, and the development of regenerative capacity across the organization. In the context of retail operations, leaders are required to align logistical efficiency, packaging waste management, the carbon footprint of the supply chain, and relational justice with micro and local suppliers. While this framework may seem ideal, the empirical reality in emerging markets like Indonesia often demonstrates a stark contradiction between green leadership rhetoric and daily operational practices. Shareholder pressure to maintain dividends often forces executives to position sustainability initiatives merely as an image-marketing instrument or mere administrative compliance, rather than as a driver of transformation of the company's core values.

These tensions are exacerbated by the internal dynamics of retail organizations characterized by a multi-layered hierarchy, from the board of directors at headquarters to the thousands of sales associates and logistics workers on the front lines. Suriyankietkaew and Avery (2016) assert that the effectiveness of sustainable leadership depends heavily on the cohesiveness of value transmission from top leadership levels to all levels of the hierarchy. When the sustainability vision fails to be internalized, environmental initiatives often encounter internal resistance, perceived as adding to the daily workload without clear performance incentives. Beyond internal resistance, external challenges stem from the fragmented behavior of Indonesian consumers. Although public opinion surveys frequently indicate a strong preference for environmentally friendly products, actual purchasing decisions in physical stores are often still dictated by price elasticity and aggressive promotions. According to Rahmansyah et al. (2025), the Indonesian retail industry faces an ethical paradox where demands for sustainable supply chains are rising sharply, while consumers' willingness to pay a green premium remains very limited. This dichotomous situation creates a heavy adaptive burden for retail leadership in formulating transition strategies that do not harm internal cost structures.

A thorough review of the existing literature shows that sustainability-oriented leadership is closely correlated with long-term corporate performance. Eccles et al. (2014) in their long-term study demonstrated that corporations that deeply instill a culture of sustainability have stronger governance, closer stakeholder engagement, and market performance that surpasses that of traditional companies. In the Indonesian capital market, similar findings were identified by research by Nurim et al. (2022) and Yawika and Handayani (2019), where the implementation of ESG principles can strengthen corporate legitimacy, mitigate environmental legal risks, and boost positive perceptions from institutional investors. Henisz et al. (2019) added that strategically led ESG integration acts as a shield against regulatory risks and facilitates value creation through energy cost savings and the retention of top talent. However, the majority of studies in this discourse view sustainability through a quantitative, positivistic lens that aggregates ESG scores and accounting profitability ratios. This approach treats leadership as a static variable or composite score, thus failing to capture the micro-processes, cognitive struggles, ethical compromises, and political negotiations that leaders experience directly when restructuring their supply chains and retail cultures.

The empirical and methodological gaps (research gaps) in the current literature fall into three main domains. First, there is a dearth of in-depth qualitative studies on how sustainable leadership transforms processually in the retail sector of developing countries. Most of the sustainable leadership literature is rooted in the context of manufacturing or

energy corporations in developed countries with established regulations and mature consumer awareness. Second, the management literature in Indonesia is still dominated by measuring the linear relationship between transformational leadership or green leadership and employee green work behavior, without examining the leadership mechanisms in managing cross-functional friction between operational, commercial, and procurement divisions. Third, previous research tends to limit analysis to the internal boundaries of the company, despite the retail industry's inherent reliance on upstream-to-downstream supply chain connectivity. As highlighted by Latief et al. (2026), supply chain vulnerabilities in developing economic landscapes demand adaptive and configurative leadership to prevent sustainability from eroding the competitiveness of supply chain partners. A holistic understanding of how retail leaders transmit ESG demands to local suppliers and logistics players without damaging long-term partnerships is lacking.

Based on this gap, the novelty of this study lies in its qualitative-phenomenological exploration of the architecture of the sustainable leadership transformation process in the Indonesian retail sector. This study does not limit leadership to a set of static attributes of individual executives, but rather reconceptualizes it as a dynamic, interactive, and circular organizational capability. This novelty is realized through three analytical contributions. First, this study deconstructs the micro-political dynamics of leadership in reconciling the internal paradox between short-term retail operational financing efficiency and long-term sustainable capital investment. Second, this study uncovers the mechanisms of relational leadership in mediating demands for decarbonization and packaging waste reduction along the retail supply chain involving thousands of local small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Third, this study conceptualizes a contextual sustainable leadership model rooted in Indonesia's socio-cultural characteristics, where paternalistic leadership and a mutual cooperation approach often intertwine with the demands of modern, global-scale corporate governance.

From a practical and social perspective, the need to understand this transformation is increasingly crucial, given that the retail industry is the direct interface between the industrial production cycle and mass consumption patterns. If retail leaders fail to transform their upstream and downstream strategies, the volume of municipal solid waste will continue to soar, and energy-inefficient logistics will continue to exacerbate national carbon emissions. Conversely, if retail leaders are able to transform their management patterns into systemic and sustainable ones, the retail sector can act as a catalyst for consumer education and a driving force for the national circular economy. Faced with Indonesia's target of achieving Net Zero Emissions and the implementation of increasingly stringent global sustainability standards, retail leaders are at a crossroads: maintaining a status quo that risks becoming obsolete or adopting bold transformations that ensure corporate resilience in the future.

Therefore, this qualitative research is designed to address these theoretical and practical calls through a comprehensive investigation of how retail leaders in Indonesia navigate, negotiate, and institutionalize sustainable leadership practices within their operational structures and value chains. Through an exploratory multiple case study of a leading retail chain, this research seeks to uncover the trajectory of leadership transformation, explore how resistance is overcome, and formulate a conceptual model that enriches the literature on sustainability leadership in emerging markets. The findings of this research are expected to provide robust theoretical implications for strategic management discourse and serve as applied guidance for policymakers, retail associations, and business executives in navigating the transition to a resilient, ethical, and sustainable retail future.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs an interpretive paradigm with a qualitative exploratory multiple-case study approach. This design was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive, in-depth, and contextualized analysis of contemporary phenomena, particularly in exploring

how sustainable leadership transformation is institutionalized within the dynamics of the Indonesian retail industry. The use of multiple case studies allows for cross-case comparisons to identify patterns, common themes, and contextual variations, strengthening the robustness of conceptual findings compared to single-case studies.

The unit of analysis in this study focuses on the dynamics of strategic and managerial leadership in three national-scale modern retail corporate networks operating in Indonesia. The determination of cases and informants was carried out through a purposive sampling technique based on strict criteria: (1) the retail corporation has published a formal sustainability report or has an active ESG work unit for at least three consecutive years, (2) has a portfolio of physical stores integrated with the local supply chain on a large scale, and (3) is currently or has implemented a green leadership transition program. Key informants consist of top management (Chief Executive Officer, Director of Sustainability/ESG, Director of Operations), regional managers, representatives of local suppliers and front-line store managers. This diversification of informants aims to capture the articulation of leadership vision from the level of policy formulation to the reality of operational implementation in the field.

Data collection was conducted simultaneously through three main instruments to achieve triangulation of sources and methods. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting 45 to 90 minutes were guided by an interview protocol that focused on value struggles, adaptation to structural resistance, and mechanisms for integrating sustainability into organizational culture. Second, passive participant observation was conducted at several pilot outlets and logistics distribution centers to examine the concrete manifestations of green leadership policies in daily operations. Third, an analysis of corporate documents, including annual sustainability reports, board circulars, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and internal leadership training materials, confirmed the consistency of verbal data provided by informants.

Data analysis was conducted systematically using multilevel thematic analysis using computer-assisted qualitative analysis software (CAQDAS). The analysis phase began with verbatim transcription of interview recordings, followed by initial coding (open coding) to dissect empirical data segments, grouping codes into conceptual categories (axial coding), and forming theoretical core themes (selective coding). Data validity and trustworthiness were ensured through four qualitative reliability criteria: credibility through data triangulation and member checking, transferability by providing a detailed and thick description of the national retail industry context, dependability through a methodological audit trail, and confirmability to ensure interpretations are purely rooted in empirical data without subjective researcher bias.

RESEARCH RESULT

A qualitative exploration of three national-scale multiformat retail chains in Indonesia—coded Case A (hypermarket & general merchandise), Case B (national franchise minimarket chain), and Case C (lifestyle and modern fashion retail)—reveals that sustainable leadership transformation is not a linear transition. It is an adaptive dynamic involving the restructuring of executives' cognitive values, renegotiation of internal governance, reconciliation of supply chain frictions, and internalization of environmentally friendly behaviors at the front lines of operations.

To provide a comprehensive overview of the units of analysis and profiles of informants involved in the in-depth data mining process, the demographic profiles of the corporations and key informants are presented in Table 1.

Case Code	Business Format & Characteristics	Network Distribution & Scale	Key Informants Interviewed	Key Sustainability Initiative Focus

Case A	Integrated Hypermarket & Supermarket	>100 large outlets across all metropolitan cities in Indonesia	Chief Executive Officer (CEO), ESG Director, General Manager of Logistics, Store Manager	Food waste management, rooftop solar panel installation, cold chain efficiency
Case B	Neighborhood Grocery Franchise Minimarket	>20,000 outlets spread across urban to semi-rural areas	Managing Director, Head of Sustainability, Area Operations Manager, 2 Local Supply Partners	Eliminating single-use plastic bags, electric fleet logistics, digitalizing supply chain audits
Case C	Lifestyle, Clothing & Footwear Specialty Retail	>400 outlets in upper-middle class shopping centers	Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO), VP Merchandising, Store Operations Manager	Product circularity (textile take-back scheme), transparency of traceability of ethical raw materials

A cross-case comparative thematic analysis yielded four core themes that represent the phases and architecture of sustainable leadership transformation in the retail industry in Indonesia:

1. Reconceptualizing Strategic Vision and Disrupting Executive Mindsets
2. Internal Governance Restructuring and Functional Resistance Mitigation
3. Supply Chain Diplomacy and Empowering Circular Partnerships
4. Instilling a Sustainable Work Culture on the Front Line (Frontliners)

1. Reconceptualizing Strategic Vision and Disrupting Executive Mindsets

The results of the investigation indicate that the primary trigger for leadership transformation stems from the crisis of relevance of conventional business models. In all three cases, the shift in top leadership from a purely transactional orientation to sustainable leadership stemmed from the realization that short-term cost efficiency while ignoring environmental sustainability poses significant reputational risks and exposure to regulatory costs later on.

In Case A, the CEO asserted that sustainable leadership began when the board of directors stopped treating ESG issues as a public relations tool and began positioning them as a pillar of capital expenditure calculations. The transition from conventional freon cooling systems to natural hydrocarbons and the installation of rooftop photovoltaic systems at dozens of stores required top leadership commitments to accept longer payback periods—averaging 6 to 8 years—for long-term energy cost sustainability.

In Case B, the leadership's cognitive transformation was triggered by the burden of regional regulations regarding plastic bag bans in various city and district governments. The Managing Director of Case B explained that top leaders were initially defensive about the regulations, fearing they would reduce the satisfaction of impulsive customers. However, through a leadership shift toward regenerative sustainability, management transformed this resistance into a differentiation strategy by designing affordable reusable shopping bags and educating millions of everyday consumers.

Meanwhile, in Case C, sustainable leadership is driven by the demands of global brand principals and the demographic shift of young urban consumers who are increasingly critical of the issue of textile waste exploitation. The CSO of Case C stated that executives must

redefine their success metrics: fast fashion sales volume growth is no longer seen as the sole key performance indicator if the products end up piling up in landfills without a circularity scheme.

2. Internal Governance Restructuring and Functional Resistance Mitigation

Transforming executives' vision faces significant obstacles when it cascades down to middle management. Empirical findings identify a phenomenon of "functional friction," where operational and commercial business units perceive sustainability targets as an obstacle to achieving gross profit margins.

Leaders who successfully transform their organizations implement three tactical actions:

- **Green Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) Binding:**Linking performance bonuses for operational division managers to sustainability metrics, such as food loss reduction in Case A and reduction in plastic packaging usage in Case B.
- **Formation of Cross-Disciplinary Committee:**Eliminating sectoral silos by placing procurement, logistics, marketing, and ESG teams under a weekly forum led directly by the board of directors.
- **Granting Measured Risk Taking Authority:**Encourage operational managers to pilot green initiatives without the threat of immediate penalties if margins fluctuate temporarily.

The dynamics of internal functional resistance and leadership resolution strategies in each entity are summarized in Table 2.

Unit of Analysis	Sources & Forms of Internal Resistance	Arguments Against Middle Management	Sustainable Leadership Intervention Strategy	Organizational Transformation Results
Case A	Merchandising Division & Store Operations Division	Sorting fresh organic produce and handling food waste requires extra man hours and reduces the store's gross profit margin.	Incorporate shrinkage reduction targets into the store manager's annual performance appraisal formula and build partnerships with food banks.	A 34% reduction in fresh produce waste in two years and the creation of standard operating procedures (SOPs) for donating edible food.
Case B	Regional Operations Manager & Logistics Division	Replacing distribution fleets with electric commercial vehicles is considered risky and could disrupt store supply schedules due to limited charging infrastructure.	The CEO personally led a pilot project for a high-density logistics route and allocated special contingency funds for the adjustment of transit depot infrastructure.	Long-term fuel cost efficiency of 22% on proven logistics routes and gradual fleet adoption without supply disruption.
Case C	Purchasing Team (Buyer) & Marketing Team	Procurement of environmentally friendly (recycled/organic) fabric raw	CSO facilitates product portfolio remapping program (category management),	Sales of the circular product line increased to contribute 18% of total corporate

		materials increases the cost of goods sold (COGS) and complicates price discount wars.	trains buyer team to calculate customer lifetime value.	revenue with higher retention of loyal customers.

3. Supply Chain Diplomacy and Empowering Circular Partnerships

The retail industry's nature as a product aggregator places the supply chain as the largest source of emissions and ecological impact. In-depth interviews confirmed that sustainable leadership isolated within the walls of retail corporations will not achieve systemic impact. Relational leadership based on "circular diplomacy" is required, especially when dealing with thousands of local micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) that supply fresh produce and consumer goods.

In Cases A and B, local suppliers initially felt burdened by sustainability audit standards that included biodegradable packaging requirements, carbon footprint recording, and workability audits. Unwise retail leaders tended to use their market power to force unilateral compliance, resulting in unilateral partnership terminations and detrimental supply chain availability.

In contrast, effective sustainable leadership demonstrates a shift from a coercive compliance approach to a collaborative, developmental partnership approach. Case B's directors established the Vendor Development Academy, a regular training program that provides technical guidance to local suppliers on optimizing low-waste packaging and adopting precision agriculture without harmful pesticides. Case A implemented incentives in the form of accelerated payment terms for suppliers who met sustainability certification standards, thereby easing the cash flow burden on small partners.

4. Instilling a Sustainable Work Culture in the Front Line (Frontliners)

The retail industry's spearhead lies in the daily interactions between store staff, cashiers, warehouse logistics staff, and end consumers. Research findings indicate that the success of leadership transformation is largely determined by the leadership's ability to translate abstract corporate jargon—such as net-zero emissions, Scope 3 decarbonization, or the circular economy—into concrete and meaningful daily behavioral narratives for frontline employees.

In Case C, the textile collection program had stalled because store staff viewed it as little more than a clutter of waste cluttering the visual sales area. Top management responded by completely overhauling employee orientation training modules, providing team incentives for stores with the highest recycling volumes, and hosting live interactive dialogue sessions between management and store associates.

Table 3 presents a comparative synthesis of leadership transition patterns, execution mechanisms, and concrete outcomes achieved in the three retail case studies in Indonesia.

Transformation Dimension	Traditional Practices (Pre-Transformation)	Sustainable Leadership Practices (Post-Transformation)	Empirical Implications for the Indonesian Retail Industry
Time & Decision Orientation	Oriented towards quarterly profits and short-term sales volume (short-term turnover).	Balancing short-term cash flows with the resilience of natural capital and social capital (intergenerational horizon).	Store investment decisions take into account full life-cycle energy efficiency (life-cycle cost analysis).

Supplier Relations	Aggressive transactions, pushing supplier margins to the lowest point (zero-sum game).	Strategic partnerships based on capacity building, payment term incentives, and joint circular audits.	Reducing the risk of local supply failure and increasing the competitiveness of MSMEs in modern value chains.
ESG Metrics Integration	Isolated in the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) division, separate from the core business.	Embedded in the top governance structure, directly linked to the audit committee and operational KPIs.	Sustainability programs have a self-contained budget that is protected from emergency operational cost cuts.
Frontline Employee Engagement	One-way execution of SOPs without understanding the ethical or ecological context behind the policy.	Active participation through meaningful educational programs, micro-incentives, and empowerment of store staff voice.	Reducing internal resistance and increasing staff's ability to educate consumers organically on the store floor.

Based on the empirical findings above, sustainable leadership transformation in the Indonesian retail industry requires multi-level synchronization. Without executive courage to redefine the boundaries of profit, operational managers' willingness to overcome bureaucratic friction, inclusive supply chain partnerships, and the full engagement of frontline workers, retail sustainability initiatives will remain merely cosmetic, without generating true organizational resilience.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the transformation of sustainable leadership in the Indonesian retail industry is a complex, adaptive, and non-linear organizational metamorphosis process, going beyond simply adopting environmental compliance instruments or ESG administrative reporting. The success of this transformation rests on the deconstruction of conventional leadership paradigms previously focused solely on maximizing quarterly profits, toward an integrative leadership framework that equates ecological sustainability and social justice with economic profitability. Empirical findings across cases confirm that a shift in cognitive values at the board level is an absolute prerequisite for triggering structural change, particularly in the corporation's willingness to allocate capital expenditures with longer payback periods for energy efficiency, logistics decarbonization, and systemic waste management. However, the strategic vision of top leadership has proven unlikely to be effectively realized on the operational floor without targeted managerial intervention to mitigate internal functional friction. Tying sustainability-based key performance indicators to the operational and commercial management levels, breaking down sectoral silos through cross-disciplinary committees, and providing adaptive experimentation space are key mechanisms in transforming internal resistance into productive collaborative compliance.

Furthermore, this research demonstrates that the boundaries of sustainable leadership in the modern retail sector extend beyond the physical perimeter of stores or corporate headquarters. Given that the retail industry functions as an aggregator between upstream producers and downstream consumers, the essence of leadership transformation is tested through leaders' capacity to implement inclusive supply chain diplomacy. A coercive

approach that relies on market dominance has proven counterproductive to local supply stability. Conversely, relational leadership, which prioritizes capacity building, technical knowledge transfer, and improved partnership governance for small and medium-sized suppliers, is a key determinant in creating a resilient and sustainable circular economy ecosystem in Indonesia. Downstream, the role of leadership is evident in managers' ability to translate abstract sustainability concepts into daily work narratives that motivate frontline workers, enabling store staff to act as educational ambassadors that organically transform consumer preferences.

Theoretically, this study makes a significant contribution to the literature on strategic management and leadership in emerging markets by conceptualizing a contextual sustainable leadership model that combines modern corporate governance disciplines with a collaborative, paternalistic approach rooted in local values. Practically, this research provides a roadmap for retail decision-makers and regulators in designing a realistic, equitable, and measurable green transition ecosystem. Ultimately, sustainable leadership is no longer simply a choice for corporate reputation differentiation, but rather an essential dynamic capability that determines the viability, social legitimacy, and resilience of the national retail industry in navigating future economic turbulence.

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