



Organizational sustainability identity: Constructing oneself as sustainable

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ABSTRACT

In the literature, *organizational sustainability identity* tends to be treated as something that is 'engineered' within business organizations through control, reporting, target setting, strategic communication, and other instruments. Through a case study of a company mainly active within the recycling industry, an alternative understanding is given. A distinct organizational sustainability identity is, rather, a social construct based on perceptions of the core operations as "sustainable in themselves" and collaborative work with customers that is perceived as entailing sustainable solutions. Understood in this way, organizational sustainability identity has relatively little to do with formal controls such as codes, policies, reports used by management to position the company as sustainable. Rather, for organizational members, the process of constructing oneself as sustainable builds on convictions about the core operations and the possession of specific capabilities manifested in customer relations. The article adds to current literature through its constructivistic approach and through identifying underlying beliefs that condition the process of forming an organizational sustainability identity.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, scholars have taken an interest in *organizational identity*. Several studies have contributed to our understanding of how members of organizations perceive the organization, and how they relate to its distinctive features in the sense of what is central, enduring and distinguishing about the organization (e.g., Albert and Whetten, 1985; Hatch and Schultz, 1997; Gioia et al., 2000; Balmer and Greyser, 2002; Whetten, 2006; Balmer et al., 2007; Gioia et al., 2013). Over the years, if not already in the foundational works about organizational identity, a more constructivist approach that acknowledges the socially constructed nature of identity has become dominant (Carlsen, 2016). Organizational identity is not something that is necessarily static or durable but relates to an ongoing construction among individuals and groups within organizations.

As the discussion has evolved and following the massive interest in *sustainability* in contemporary business, sustainability has become an aspect of organizational identity construction (Chong, 2009; Frandsen, 2017; Glavas and Godwin, 2013; Onkila et al., 2018; Simões and Sebastiani, 2017). It is an important aspect that partly defines what a business organization is and should be. One may even talk about *organizational sustainability identity* as a concept of its own, denoting how

organizational members perceive, feel and think about their organization's commitment to and achievements with regard to sustainability. An overarching question is, however, how such identities are formed (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2011; Carlsen, 2016), implying an understanding of the nature and reasons for the construction that results in a strong sustainability identity; 'strong' in the sense of being an explicit self-understanding shared by managers and employees with motivational force for further engagement in sustainability work (cf., Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Klemm Verbos et al., 2007; see also Baumgartner, 2009; Pei, 2019).

That is, given an understanding of identity as something that is socially constructed, primarily within the organization, organizational sustainability identity naturally relates to *what* the internal constituents make sense of when constructing the organization *qua* sustainable. Clues to this can be found in the literature. Scholars within the sustainability field have pointed to tools for creating more sustainable organizations (Chong, 2009; Frandsen, 2017; Onkila et al., 2018; Simões and Sebastiani, 2017). Such tools may be, for example, codes of conducts (Frostenson et al., 2012), reporting (Onkila et al., 2018), and target setting (Simões and Sebastiani, 2017). That suggests that sustainability identity can be 'created' by management through such tools. Of course, it cannot be excluded that managerial measures have effects on identities. But a

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deeper understanding of organizational sustainability identity requires understanding more profoundly the relationships between work, organization and self (Alvesson and Empson, 2008; Alvesson et al., 2008). To get insights into the formation of identities, one must go into the organization and capture the perceptions of its internal constituents. In particular, it has been suggested that it is necessary to go into organizations and understand *why* internal stakeholders identify themselves in a particular way (Phillips et al., 2020). Through such a ‘bottom-up’ perspective, it may be possible to identify what it is that causes sustainability identities to be constructed.

Reflecting this, the purpose of this article is to understand how an organizational sustainability identity is constructed, in the sense of identifying (a) which underlying beliefs that the organizational members base their construction on, and (b) how these beliefs condition the process of identity construction. It will be argued, based on a case study, that the construction builds on two specific convictions; namely an understanding of *core operations as sustainable* per se (being a practice that contributes automatically and by virtue of its nature to sustainability) and *customer relations as the arena for developing sustainable solutions and value-adding activities*. We see that constructing oneself as sustainable reflects these convictions – beliefs that can be contested and questioned, but that to a high degree, and in combination, are strong enough to sustain and bolster a common identity. The article contributes through adopting a constructivist perspective on organizational sustainability identity, and, more in detail, through identifying underlying beliefs that underlie and condition such an identity.

The article is structured as follows: First, the notion of organizational sustainability identity is discussed and problematized. A methodology section follows. In the combined empirical and analytical section, the organizational sustainability identity of the case company is identified and examined in terms of the underlying convictions sustaining it. The article ends with a concluding discussion.

2. Organizational sustainability identity

From a more traditional perspective, organizational identity has been related to how members understand the organization in relation to other organizations, as to what is central, enduring and distinguishing (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Whetten, 2006). Organizational identity has been understood as something that “refers broadly to what members perceive, feel and think about their organizations. It is assumed to be a collective, commonly-shared understanding of the organization’s distinctive values and characteristics.” (Hatch and Schultz, 1997, p. 357). An organizational identity is a collective manifestation, distinguishing it from personal views or self-understandings (Gioia et al., 2000). Fundamentally, it is not equal to an external image of the company but emerges through a process within the organization. In the words of Phillips et al. (2020, p. 209), (corporate) “identity refers to the core character of a corporation and the features that appear most relevant to internal stakeholders (i.e., employees)”.

Relatively recently, scholars have begun to question the idea of identities as enduring over time, being skeptical of the tendency to equate identity with specific qualities or features that last for long and that are considered representative of the organization. Organizational identities, it is claimed, are not fixed but changing over time. Several scholars propose a *dynamic view* of identity. Gioia et al. (2000), for example, point to the reciprocal relationship between identity and image, implying that identities are not necessarily enduring but may change over time. Identities, rather, have a dynamic character and could best be seen as ongoing constructions of the relationship(s) between self, work and organization (Alvesson and Empson, 2008; Alvesson et al., 2008). Identity work is a way of defining oneself and the organization (Coupland and Brown, 2012). Essentially, this is a matter of sense-making among employees (Onkila et al., 2018). As shown in the literature (Onkila et al., 2018), identity is non-static and created in contexts that are of complex nature (Baumgartner, 2009; Klemm Verbos et al.,

2007). It has even been suggested (Schultz et al., 2012) that organizational identities have more to do with emerging processes rather than specific states. These processes can be understood in an active sense; “becoming” when actively learning, “expressing”, “reflecting”, and “claiming” – rather than as specific qualities or features that are durable and seen as unique.

At any rate, organizational identity is the result of a dynamic process where individuals and groups within the organization are somehow active (Carlsen, 2016). Ashforth et al. (2011) describe a trajectory of the formation of collective identities, stretching from “I think” to “we think” and on to “it is”. That is, individual cognitions about identity tend to be the roots of shared cognitions that may over time become institutionalized in the sense that they transcend particular individuals. Identities, in other words, exist at various levels that are interconnected. To understand organizational identities, one must see them as connected to and/or preceded by individual and group identities.

Increasingly, issues of *sustainability* have been mentioned as having an impact on organizational identity (e.g., Glavas and Godwin, 2013; Onkila et al., 2018). That, however, does not mean that *organizational sustainability identity* has been clearly defined or problematized. When issues of identity have been discussed in relation to sustainability, they have been related to lifestyle choices through consumption (e.g., Niinimäki, 2010; Soron, 2010; Kieffhaber et al., 2020) or individual identity work of specific professional groups, such as sustainability managers (Carollo and Guerri, 2018; Wright et al., 2012). In other words, these understandings have concerned other levels of analysis than the organizational one. More organizationally oriented approaches can be found in the literature. One is the notion of ethical (organizational) identity (Klemm Verbos et al., 2007; see also Balmer et al., 2007; Fukukawa et al., 2007; Simões and Sebastiani, 2017; Venturelli et al., 2017). Ethical identity “emerges from the multiplicative interaction of authentic leadership, aligned organizational processes, and ethical organizational culture (Klemm Verbos et al., 2007, p. 19), suggesting a rather technical and managerial view of controlling the organization to behave in an ethically responsible manner.

In other cases, it has been suggested that sustainability is brought into identity as an important ingredient through, for example, strategic means or change programs (cf. Balmer and Soenen, 1999; Balmer and Greyser, 2002; Cornelissen and Elving, 2003; Fukukawa et al., 2007). Thus, a suggestion in the literature is that a sustainability identity can be affected by corporate approaches to sustainability. Backer (2008), for example, shows how the oil company Shell reconstructed its organizational identity in a sustainable direction from being an oil company to a renewable energy company. Through managers’ talk, or narratives, Backer (2008) argues, they “achieve revision of the wider corporate actor (organizational identity) by way of external stakeholder pressures, or to protect the identity from these same pressures.” (p. 42). Managers acted in relation to external stakeholders’ demands in order to reconstruct organizational identity.

Also, participation in various managerial activities and programs related to sustainability have been assumed to reinforce the employees’ experiences of a corporate identity and, as a consequence, the development of a sustainability identity in a self-reinforcing mutual process (Onkila et al., 2018; see also Chong, 2009; Hatch and Schultz, 2013; Frandsen, 2017). Reasonably, organizational identity can turn into a more elaborated sustainability identity through the use of various means, for example sustainability reporting (Onkila et al., 2018; cf. Frostenson and Helin, 2017). Onkila et al. (2018), for their part, point to the instrumental value of sustainability reporting in changing organizational identity into a sustainable one. Rather than being a decoupled instrument, sustainability reporting may affect identities both through its internal relevance, relating to the organization’s welfare and self-enhancement, and external significance, when satisfying important stakeholders’ demands and expectations. Frostenson et al. (2012) suggest that such (sustainability) identities may be sustained and manifested in a more indirect way through tools such as codes of conducts,

since such tools may convey an understanding of the organization as a morally trustworthy and respectable. Carmeli et al. (2017) claim that organizational ethics of care infuses the organizational system in the sense that employees' motivations to engage in workplace sustainability behaviors are heightened.

Despite this research, that relates to sustainability identity in the sense of describing *what it is* or *how it comes about*, aspects still stand out as not really settled. First, if (sustainability) identity is truly socially constructed by organizational members, it is problematic to equate it with certain relatively static qualities or features of the organization. It is not the labels or concrete issues that form the identity of an organization. Rather, it is formed as a consequence of what organizational members perceive. Glavas and Godwin (2013) also point to the significance of *perceived* corporate social responsibility behaviors on employees' organizational identification. Thus, organizational sustainability identity must be traced to jointly developed self-understandings and sensemaking within the organization. That also means that implementing structures, tools, strategies, codes and other aspects of sustainability work is not the same as constructing an organizational sustainability identity. The construction of such an identity should be understood from the perspective of the internal constituents themselves. That is also of importance for researchers in order to articulate what one is searching for. To be clearer about what organizational sustainability identity is, one could, in line with Hatch and Schultz (1997), define the *sustainability identity* of an organization as *what its members perceive, feel and think about their organization's commitment to and achievements with regard to sustainability*. It relates to the general idea of sustainable business and the role of the firm within sustainable development, present in society and relevant to contemporary business. Such an understanding of identity suggests that internal constituents make sense of sustainability as part of their identity, which would serve as a vantage point for empirical investigations.

Second, although we may recognize organizational sustainability identity as jointly constructed within companies, that does not mean that we have an explicit understanding of how it is formed and comes about. We do see references to, for example, managerial measures that tend to enhance employee awareness of sustainability and perhaps making it part of an identity. But we see relatively little of the actual construction of organizational sustainability identity and what it builds on. Even though, for example, Glavas and Godwin (2013) talk about perceived CSR as important to organizational identity and locate it to employee perceptions, we have no obvious idea of which perceptions or underlying beliefs that form an organizational sustainability identity. To understand this, one must go into the daily work of the firm to understand how employees make sense of sustainability in practice (Hatch and Schultz, 2013). From research (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2011), we have a general understanding of individual, collective and institutionalized cognitions as aspects of identity formation. But that does not necessarily mean that we are aware of the specific contents of those thoughts, cognitions, and so on, that form the basis of identity construction. It remains a more or less open question what such an identity builds on, as understood by those who enjoy that identity, the internal constituents of the business organization (Phillips et al., 2020).

These two aspects will be guiding the rest of this article, as the ambition is to further understand how an organizational sustainability identity is constructed within a business organization. That means that we approach an empirical case through a constructivist lens and identify what the internal constituents of the organization under study relate to when constructing their sustainability identity. It will be of importance to identify the specific basis of such an identity, and more specifically the underlying convictions about what it is that makes a company sustainable and how these condition the process of sustainability identity construction.

3. Methodology

A single case study was carried out in order to gain in-depth insight into which underlying beliefs that the organizational members base the construction of their sustainability identity on, and how these beliefs condition the process of identity construction. The case study methodology was chosen due to the complexity of the phenomenon (Gomm et al., 2000; Yin, 2009). Gerring (2004) defines a case study as "an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units". According to Eisenhardt (1989) and Merriam, 2009 a strength of case studies is their ability to handle and combine multiple kinds of data collection methods. In this study we have used different kinds of data collection methods such as documentation, interviews and observations. As we argue, this is much a task of finding out how the organization and its members reflect on new ideas about sustainability present in society, ideas that are partly to be seen as "discontinuities" (Alvesson & Empson, 2008; Dutton et al., 1994) that are internalized and related to organizational realities and practices in a sensemaking process. Following Ashforth et al. (2011), it is important to find out how the socially constructed identity is not just an individual issue, but is part of the formation of collective identities, transcending the individual state, onto the organizational and establishing itself as a 'true' description of the organization in the sense of being an established understanding of what the organization actually is. Notably, the constructivistic aspects of this study are twofold. First, our own methodological approach is constructivist since it does not assume a 'fixed' reality, static qualities or simple causal relationship. Rather, it is a description based on interpretations of realities as conveyed within the company under study. Second, the 'object of study', relating to the formation of identities, is a construction process among the organizational members where they form their identities on the basis of certain beliefs that condition the very process of establishing an identity in relation to sustainability.

Choice of case company/organization

The authors came in contact with the chosen case company at a network meeting for sustainability managers. At this meeting the Group Sustainability Manager at the case company raised the challenge of securing compliance for sustainability-related initiatives such as the code of conduct and sustainability targets within the organization. The authors perceived this company as particularly interesting because the organization, having problems with compliance for sustainability initiatives internally, was at the same time viewed from the outside as a sustainable company as recycling was at the core of its business. The apparent discrepancy raised a curiosity, the company had the image of being sustainable but struggled to implement sustainability initiatives and get acceptance from within. How did this come to be and how did the organizational members look upon themselves from a sustainability identity perspective? Was there a sustainability identity and, if so, how was it formed? Through contacts with the Group Sustainability Manager, the authors were allowed to conduct a case study in the company. Furthermore (see below), later site visits indicated somewhat contradictory images. The informants testified to the sustainability of the company, but the very process of recycling used goods and materials did not appear to be particularly sustainable in terms of working conditions and the general visual impression of the physical premises. That also triggered questions about what it was that made the organizational members see their company as sustainable.

Research setting and data collection

The case company⁴ is of Swedish origin but operates on an international scale, with several subsidiaries within seven business areas, primarily in Europe. Most of its operations and business areas are environmentally sensitive, including recycling, oil, steel, aluminum, components and raw materials. These different business areas are contained within one privately owned group, controlled by a strong owner. In total, its number of employees exceeds 3000. The company has been strongly decentralized with clear subsidiary mandates to run one's own business. To a high extent, this also goes for the sustainability work of the group. In recent years, a common sustainability strategy has been developed, including all business areas and subsidiaries. From a structural point of view, the work has been coordinated from the head office, but pursued together with sustainability coordinators representing the various subsidiaries. Responsibility for setting sustainability targets and reaching these has been strongly decentralized and up to managers in the subsidiaries to deliver.

The company was followed from late 2017 to early 2020. During this time interviews, observations at site visits and document studies were conducted. The study can be described as a qualitative and longitudinal case study (Englund and Gerdin, 2015) with recurrent interviews with a key informant and interviews over the years with different managers from different positions in the company, providing the empirical basis, together with different formal documents, for analysing the construction of the sustainability identity in the organization. In particular, the sustainability function of the group and persons responsible for sustainability within the different subsidiaries were targeted. The interviews were facilitated by the Group Sustainability Manager, granting access to a number of sustainability coordinators and others within the group, reflecting the ambition to interview both head office staff as well as representatives of different subsidiaries. The respondents include occupational titles such as Group Sustainability Manager, Sustainability Coordinators, Environmental, Health and Security Managers, Subsidiary Sustainability Manager, Local Site Manager (see Appendix A). The recurrent interviews with the Group Sustainability Manager made it possible to get a second reflection on certain happenings and actions taken in the company over the years.

In total, 13 interviews were carried out, mostly by two or three of the researchers together. On three interview occasions, two respondents participated. Questions were designed to find out how the respondents reflected on the sustainability work of the group in general and of the local business area in particular (see Appendix B for the Interview guide). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The languages used in the interviews were both Swedish and English, depending on circumstances. In case the transcriptions were in Swedish, relevant translations were made by the authors.

The researchers were also allowed to visit two of the company's major sites, situated in Sweden. During those visits, being guided around the sites, observations were made and notes taken that was later transcribed and part of the empirical data being analysed. Importantly, the site visits had the function of being eye-openers to the researchers in the sense of being physical environments where the recycling of equipment, goods and materials were handled, partly through manual work. Being a hard and laborious work, and perhaps risky, the issue of seeing oneself as sustainable (which the respondents kept doing) became paradoxical and interesting.

That is, the site visits were a trigger to go further into how people reasoned about sustainability in general, the company's sustainability efforts and challenges as well who was driving sustainability issues inside the company. Before making interviews, formal documentation such as the sustainability report was studied to get an understanding of

the corporate approach to sustainability. The company's sustainability strategy and activities were contrasted with what managers and employees understood as being sustainable in the company's operations and relations.

Data analysis

As the research approach was to find out the organizational member's underlying beliefs as the base for their sustainability identity construction, the interviews were the most important data source. For the analytical procedure, three dimensions were of paramount interest. Firstly, to capture the issue of identity, a central issue was to understand the "who we are issue", that is, what the respondents perceived, felt and thought about their organization's sustainability commitment and achievements (cf. Hatch and Schultz, 1997). Secondly, to capture the "why we are sustainable issue", that is, the arguments used by the respondents to explain why the company should be seen as sustainable. In a third dimension, the underlying beliefs for this construction were chiseled out as an analytical step. Explanations were also given for how those beliefs condition the process of constructing a sustainability identity.

The analysis was theoretically guided by an understanding of sustainability identity as a general issue in the organization followed by a subsequent analysis aimed at finding underlying beliefs for it. In practice, these beliefs are reasons that are concrete points of reference within the company that sustain the perception of it as sustainable.

The interview transcripts were firstly read and structured in themes by one of the researchers. Four different first-order themes (van Maanen, 1979; Nag et al., 2007) were identified and labeled.

- Sustainability as the core operation (respondents related to the 'inherent' sustainability of recycling).
- Sustainability as a strategic idea (respondents related to the strategic ambitions of management to position the company as sustainable).
- Sustainability as a response to and in collaboration with stakeholders (respondents related to the collaboration with customers and other stakeholders).
- Sustainability as attainment of targets or objectives within operations (respondents related to specific ambitions in the sustainability field and the company's efforts to achieve them).

Interview sections were marked where the interviewees expressed that the company, explicitly or implicitly, was or struggled to be sustainable. The sections with the quotes were gathered together under label expressing some common idea. The following quote shows, as an example, a quotation that was part of forming of the first (first-order) theme, "Sustainability as the core operation": "I mean recycling: our whole business concept is to be sustainable in itself." (Sustainability coordinator III). Further examples of quotations leading up to the first-order themes are given in Table 1. The interview transcripts were also read by the other two researchers to validate the themes. In the discussion among the researchers, the number of themes was reduced into two second-order themes (Nag et al., 2007; van Maanen, 1979). This was because one of the themes, "Sustainability as attainment of targets or objectives within operations", had limited relevance since it was not specifically mentioned by the respondents as relevant to being sustainable. In addition, the theme "Sustainability as a strategic idea" got limited attention apart from being claimed to be driven by customers. Rather, the remaining two second-order themes are the ones described in the empirical section, labeled as "Constructing sustainability identity based on understandings of core operations" and "Constructing sustainability identity together with customers". This is also shown in Table 1.

The two (remaining) second-order themes are further described and, consequently, analyzed in the article. Within them, the underlying beliefs of why the organizational members of the company see it as

⁴ 'The company' refers to the entire group if not specified as a specific subsidiary or business area.

Table 1
Analytical process.

Example of quotation	First-order theme	Second-order theme	Second-order theme (remaining) of relevance for sustainability identity construction
“It [sustainability] is the business [...] We are sustainability. [...] Recycling IS sustainability.” (Local Site Manager)	Sustainability as the core operation	Core operations seen as ‘sustainable in themselves’	Constructing sustainability identity based on understandings of core operations
“Recycling had customers with high demands on us, and the CEOs were sitting there, conjuring up something about writing some kind of sustainability strategy.” (Group Sustainability Manager)	Sustainability as a strategic idea	Strategy developed in response to customer demands	(Not applicable) (Strategy developed in relation to customers, see below)
“So, it is different stakeholders that will impact on how we work with sustainability. [...] So, in short, I think that [the company] has been driven by society and what the customer demands from us.” (Environmental, Health and Security Manager II)	Sustainability as a response to and in collaboration with stakeholders	Customer-related activities contributing to sustainability identity, building on relations and value-adding potential	Constructing sustainability identity together with customers
“Everyone has their own way of setting goals. In some cases, there are goals from the top-level and everyone must report on that; in other cases, each company has developed its targets. The ones that have worked best are the ones from bottom up.” (Sustainability coordinator I)	Sustainability as attainment of targets or objectives within operations	(Limited focus)	(Not applicable)

sustainable are found. We deepen this explanation in the following.

4. Findings and analysis

Understanding oneself as sustainable

The case company defines itself as sustainable in many ways. For example, in its sustainability report of 2017–18, sustainability is communicated as a business idea, reflecting an ambition to “create value for shareholders, customers, partners, and society at large in the development of a circular economy”. It seeks to make its “operations contribute to the development of the circular economy. In collaboration with customers and partners, sustainable services and products create values that benefit the climate and efficient resource utilization.”, as argued on the company’s webpage.

That is a way of creating an image of the company as sustainable.

Strikingly, the understanding of the company as sustainable holds in the organization, to judge from the empirical material. It is expressed by managers and employees when asked about what sustainability means to and within the company.

“I mean recycling; our whole business concept is to be sustainable in itself.” (Sustainability coordinator III).

Being sustainable is a self-understanding that has developed over the years, following the general debate on sustainability. Now, many issues are understood as relating to sustainability:

“If we go back ten years, no one was even thinking about sustainability. [...] [Back in time] I don’t think we have thought about recycling as sustainability.” (Local site manager)

In other words, the very issue of placing the company and its operations within the context of sustainability is relatively new and reflecting overarching societal trends and the significance of sustainability. General ideas about business and the role it should play are, so to speak, internalized and the operations of the company are linked to them. Also, sustainability is something that is important on a personal level, as one respondent explains:

“Of course, it is something important to me as a person, but I think that I have always worked with sustainability issues.” (Environmental, Health and Security Manager II)

That is, being sustainable is not possible to reduce to a strategy or tactics formulated by management. Going into the organization, employees and managers also express concerns for sustainability and understand themselves in relation to it. From an identity perspective, some anecdotal evidence refers to the advantages of working for a sustainable company:

“When I was out at bars meeting ladies and said I worked with demolition, it was thumbs down. But when I said I was into recycling it was something else. But now I’m too old for that.” (Coordinator, local site)

However, an overarching understanding of being sustainable or identifying oneself as a person for which sustainability is important, does not necessarily imply a clear conception what it is that makes the company sustainable or what it is that contributes to the formation of the experience of working for a sustainable company. To judge from the empirical material, there is no simple or single explanation for why managers and employees consider the company to be sustainable. For example, neither managerial activities, such as target-setting, sustainability control measures, communication, et cetera, nor specific sustainability achievements cause people in the organization to see themselves as working for a sustainable company. There is actually some uncertainty about how one should work strategically with sustainability. It is not obvious how to set and meet goals, how to follow up, or how to organize sustainability work. Exactly how to act, what to measure, what to aim at, and so on, is an ongoing process. Rather, the organizational members seem to construct the organization as sustainable on certain grounds.

Also, when going into the organization, it is obvious that the organizational members construct their sustainability identity from different viewpoints. Autonomy within the group is high. The issue of understanding oneself as sustainable relates, in other words, to a relatively decentralized context of subsidiaries. Each company within the group must set targets, make a gap-analysis, validate, get feedback from stakeholders and send their reporting structure to the corporate level to synchronize. But arguably, despite the ongoing sustainability work and the existence of sustainability KPIs, such issues have relatively limited significance when it comes to constructing an identity of being a sustainable company. KPIs, for example, fill only a limited function:

“I don’t think that you should be chasing KPIs too much, I think it is much more important to create an understanding, integrating it into the other

business processes and slowly step by step, driving things in the right direction." (Sustainability coordinator III)

Even though the self-understanding of the company as sustainable is present and accordingly part of a sustainability identity, constructing oneself as sustainable builds on something else. In the following sections, we identify two aspects that form the basis of why the managers and employees within the company look upon it as sustainable and that seem to condition the process of constructing oneself as sustainable. First, we point to an understanding of core operations, basically recycling, as something that is sustainable 'per definition'; second, we focus on how managers and employees interact with customers and see sustainability as something that develops through and during such collaborations.

4.1. Constructing sustainability identity based on understandings of core operations

The first aspect of the sustainability identity construction in the company has to do with how organizational members look upon the business as such, the core operations. What constitutes core operations may, of course, differ. But most respondents relate it to recycling, and there is an overall tendency to see recycling as sustainable 'per definition'. It is worth repeating one of the above quotations.

"I mean recycling; our whole business concept is to be sustainable in itself." (Sustainability coordinator III)

This voice is, however, not the only one expressing this. An even more straightforward view is expressed by a local site manager:

"It [sustainability] is the business [...] We are sustainability. [...] Recycling IS sustainability." (Local Site Manager)

When describing the business, this seems to be more or less an axiom. Since you are operating within a business, recycling, that is understood as sustainable, you simply become sustainable as a company. The core business of recycling stands out, also since it is by far the largest business area within the group. The construction of a sustainability identity, building on the underlying belief of recycling being sustainable "in itself" is also sustained through the internal and external discourse. Organizational members are fed by information that recycling is synonymous with being sustainable, both from peers within the company and from stakeholders such as customers. Also, the media highlight recycling, the core business, as something that contributes to sustainable development. Recycling is further viewed as something good by society in general. This influences people working at the company and it affects them in constructing the belief that they are working for a sustainable company. Through talk within the company it is also possible to substantiate the 'definitional' sustainability of the core operations through figures. Examples include pointing to the fact that 99 % of a refrigerator is recycled and that the remaining 1 % is taken care of in an environmentally friendly way (Coordinator, local site). Both the internal and external discourses sustain the self-understanding.

One can easily conclude that there is relative consensus when it comes to understanding core operations as sustainable. But there are nuances. The Group Sustainability Manager, for example, claims core operations are contributing to sustainable development, but also acknowledges that the company has a lot of work to do regarding other aspects of sustainability, such as complying with the code of conduct, improving diversity, getting better at collecting energy data and reducing the use of energy, to mention a few examples.

All core operations of the company do not involve recycling, however. That means that there is a complexity when it comes to the self-understanding of the company as sustainable in itself. It is hard to share the self-understanding of sustainable recycling if you are not into it:

"I don't know too much about what the other companies do. What I know is that recycling has really managed to present itself as a sustainability

company and make sustainability their core business." (Subsidiary Sustainability Manager)

From the perspective of other business areas and subsidiaries in the group, employees of the recycling subsidiary are better suited to work with sustainability, or rather, to identify themselves as sustainable given their specific context and their resources.

"Yes, they are. Mainly in two ways. One way, to begin with, is that sustainability is their core business already. They are working with recycling and we are working with steel. And another way is of course resources, they are a couple of thousand employees, so it is easy to have muscles in this type of support function. We are a much smaller company." (Subsidiary Sustainability Manager)

As said, all subsidiaries within the group are not into recycling. Collaboration is called for, perhaps it could be possible to do some things together to improve sustainability, it is claimed (Subsidiary Sustainability Manager). And in addition to the fact that all parts of the company are not into recycling, the very idea of recycling as sustainable in itself is put into perspective:

"I know this is a very typical view, that recycling is environmentally friendly. I could have another lesson as to why it is not. This is an industrial process where we serve our customer, and we could be more sustainable by guiding our customers to sort their waste and together with them have ideas about how to produce less waste. [...] So, there is a lot we can do at the moment. But, this is an industrial process like in the food industry or so, but we happen to be in the recycling business which is seen as environmentally friendly." (Environmental, Health and Security Manager I)

Here, it is not questioned per se that recycling can be sustainable, but the idea is contextualized. The context is more holistic – to understand the 'good' that you do also includes customer relationships and what they do with their waste – and how you act in response to it. There are also inherent tensions within recycling. For example, if you recycle more material, your industrial processes for doing so require more energy consumption (Sustainability coordinator III). And even though the recycling rate may be high, it goes hand in hand with the issue of how much waste that is recycled. Overall consequences (much waste) may thus be negative even though the recycling rate is high. Furthermore, when you have recycled and sell the material on to downstream customers, it matters where customers are situated. Selling to the Far East, for example, involves more transportation and other socio-economic issues than selling to Europe (Environmental, Health and Security Manager I).

To sum up, to understand how sustainability identity is constructed within the company, an understanding of *how employees perceive of core operations is necessary*. Several of them seem to treat the core operations of the company as "per definition" sustainable, which spills over to a more general understanding of working for a sustainable company. Recycling has been the core business activity for decades but has now become a foundational element for constructing the sustainability identity of the company. Also, through its core business, the company distinguishes itself from most other companies in terms of sustainability. But to judge from some of the respondents, core operations within recycling are not enough, how you *work* with sustainability also matters.

In other terms, several organizational members do understand the company as sustainable and construct their identity accordingly – on the basis of an underlying belief of recycling as sustainable in itself. But it is within a *collaborative context* with customer interaction that they get confirmation of possessing a certain value-adding expert knowledge or competence, foundational to their sustainability identity. Feedback from customers affects people working at the case company in constructing the belief of being experts within recycling, circular solutions, and sustainability in general. To that aspect of the sustainability identity construction, the next section is devoted.

4.2. Constructing sustainability identity together with customers

Even though recycling seems to be seen by some as ‘sustainable in itself’, other voices are more doubtful to that idea. Even at higher levels, recycling comes with a cost, literally and figuratively, due to the resources that it demands. In other words, seeing yourself as sustainable also requires something more, above all how you *work* with sustainability. This is an active aspect of the identity construction. When constructing the company as sustainable, organizational members, however, rarely mention targets, codes of conduct, and other instruments for sustainability. Rather, they relate to relational aspects. That is, working with sustainability is understood in a *relational* context, linking the issue to the stakeholders of the company, and particularly *the customers*. Customers, particularly high-profiled ones in terms of sustainability, have been a driving force for the company to develop a sustainability strategy in the first place.

“So, it is different stakeholders that will impact on how we work with sustainability. [...] So, in short, I think that [the company] has been driven by society and what the customer demands from us.” (Environmental, Health and Security Manager II)

That is also why the strategic approach of the company is so tightly linked to the customer context of the company. Without the customers, there would never have been the same kind of emphasis on and work with sustainability:

“Recycling had customers with high demands on us, and the CEOs were sitting there, conjuring up something about writing some kind of sustainability strategy.” (Group Sustainability Manager)

But that is not just a central thing, for the head office. Customer demands for sustainability are felt within the subsidiaries. And those demands are not seen as problematic. Rather, they are a natural part of doing business.

“We very frequently receive sustainability Q&As from our customers, which puts pressure on the sales force, and they require us to answer before they do business with us.” (Sustainability Coordinator III)

“There are areas where we believe that we have to meet our customers’ requests to make them satisfied. I don’t think that is a problem. If we make them happy, our business will go on and we do even better.” (Sustainability coordinator II)

Importantly, within recycling, customers exist both upstream and downstream; the ones the company works with in order to handle their recyclable material and the ones that it sells the recycled products or material to, respectively. Collaboration, in many cases, relates to the upstream customers. It is claimed that sustainability, so to speak, arises in the context of collaboration with the customer.

“We have collaboration with our customers, and we challenge them on their recycling rate. Perhaps we have a customer that has a large amount of waste for disposal and we have a rate of recycling for them. If they want to have a better environmental impact, it would be a better solution to recycle.” (Sustainability Coordinator IV)

Working together with customers and developing the relation to them is key to being sustainable, also on local level. This is something that has developed over the years. Basically, the processes of working with customers have changed. They have become qualitatively better than they used to be.

“When I started seven and a half years ago, it was like, any idiot could place a can collecting paper and metal and junk, doing something and then reselling it. We have left that today.” (Local Site Manager)

That the customers are viewing the business unit as a recycling expert contributing to sustainability is a kind of *confirmation* that affects the construction of the belief of the company as sustainable. Customers are using the case company in marketing activities to promote their own

sustainability.

“We have a deal right now; they are pushing us to account for what we are doing from a sustainability point of view. Then they can use it in marketing.” (Local Site Manager)

The company obviously gets confirmation of its own expert knowledge. It has the knowledge and competence to help others, which also forms its self-understanding. As experts, they assist customers, for example in finding circular solutions.

“Going from linear to circular economy. It’s also with the customers. How can we help a customer to work in a circular way? There are examples when we go into their procurement process. We look at, for example, ‘do you choose the blue one or the red one?’ The function is more or less the same but if you choose the red one, we can collect and reuse it, but that doesn’t work for the blue one.” (Local Site Manager)

Customer collaboration is, primarily, *value-adding*. Developing sustainability involves working together with the customer, in the sense of upcycling in the waste chain. Much is about educating the customer. Within recycling, you take qualitative steps, going from deposition or burning the waste to reusing materials completely. The case company, together with the customer, improves in a qualitative way the sustainability operations:

“So, instead of burning it, we deconstruct it here and send it to recycling, which makes us climb two steps in the waste chain. Then you have created value. In terms of what we achieve, we cannot achieve it on our own, but must do it together with the customer.” (Local Site Manager)

The idea is to not just passively recycle goods from customers but to actively cooperate with them in their operations, contributing to *their* sustainability performance. And the customer is a required partner in this process. Furthermore, value does not just refer to financial or economic value, but also to sustainability. It is about driving the customer to a better solution in recycling.

“We want to drive the customer to a better solution in recycling. Not just [for the] money, we want to know how they can be better [...] in environmental management of resources, how they can reuse and recycle all types of resources.” (Sustainability coordinator IV)

Thus, and to sum up, the impact that the company has and that helps in creating an understanding of the company as sustainable, tends to emerge in the active relationships with the customers. It is a matter of *value creation* together with the customer, building on the specific skills and competences of the company. Through collaboration, the company adds value and reshapes processes in the sense of reaching higher levels in the waste chain (value both in terms of sustainability and money). Thus, it provides a solution to how you can become even more sustainable through the customer relations. The issue concerns process quality and levelling, that one recycling activity is more sustainable than another when you climb the ladder, that is, the waste chain.

The construction of the company’s sustainability identity, thus, is intimately linked to its relational context — with the company as an active part. The company becomes a change agent. There is an underlying belief, that the company possesses knowledge of how to become more sustainable and that such knowledge can affect others to become more sustainable. The knowledge is manifested in the collaborations with customers, where there is a potential of realizing sustainability gains. Thus, if the organizational members are convinced that close collaboration involves value-adding activities and makes it possible to climb up the waste chain, and if they get confirmation of this in their daily work, the self-understanding of the company as sustainable is sustained. The process of constructing oneself as sustainable is conditioned by such an underlying belief, and we see an ongoing realization and incorporation of success with customers in terms of sustainability as central to the process of construction.

5. Concluding discussion

To recapitulate, the purpose of this article is to understand how an organizational sustainability identity is constructed, in the sense of identifying (a) which underlying beliefs that the organizational members base their construction on, and (b) how these beliefs condition the process of identity construction. We see a collective understanding and interpretation of the activities and operations of the company that make managers and employees reflect on the nature of the organization as sustainable. Arguably, the organizational members base their construction of sustainability identity on certain convictions or understandings relating to the organization.

In Table 2, we specify and explain the underlying beliefs that sustain and condition the construction of the company as sustainable.

The sustainability identity of the company is based on interpretations of both the corporate reality and the context in which it is situated. The core operations of the company (as sustainable “in themselves”) together with how one understands the relational and value-adding aspect of customer collaborations are beliefs that condition the construction of the organizational sustainability identity of the company.

These beliefs are expressed in an ongoing communicative process of construction where it is iterated – within the company and by important others – that core operations are sustainable and that one provides expert knowledge and capabilities in relations with customers that result in reaching higher levels of sustainability. These beliefs condition the discourse and sensemaking within the company and condition how the organizational members construct their understandings of the company, finally leading to a specific organizational sustainability identity. The identity is sustained both by organizational members and in the communication with customers where it is reiterated.

All this is, however, to some extent ambiguous. If your core business is not recycling or if you do not have value-adding collaboration with customers, you do not necessarily take an active part in constructing such an identity. For example, if you are not into recycling but into manufacturing or trade, you may not see yourself as sustainable per se. But still, most people that have been interviewed express and share the idea that the company is truly sustainable, and that they themselves are an active part of this. One explanation may be that they share at least one of the underlying beliefs visualized in Table 2, either that recycling explicitly contributes to sustainable development or that you subscribe to the idea that within the company there is, after all, knowledge of how to become more sustainable that is enacted in customer relations, as a capability or resource.

The contribution of the article is twofold. *First*, through the constructivist perspective we are able to illustrate how organizational sustainability identity comes about within a corporate context. *Second*,

we contribute through being more specific about which underlying beliefs, or in other words, what there is that actually makes organizational members form a collective sustainability identity.

As for the first contribution, we believe that the constructivist perspective involves a deeper understanding of identity inasmuch as it points to the ongoing and dynamic character of identity formation. That differs this analysis from other more “traditional” ones that focus on more or less static factors typical of an organization, claiming that what are central, enduring and distinguishing features that distinguish the company from others (cf. Albert and Whetten, 1985; Whetten, 2006) constitute identity. What we see, rather, are aspects that condition the process of sustainability identity construction as actively formed within the organization. That construction is an identity formation on the basis of certain interpretations, not distinct features that are in themselves equated with identity. How the managers and employees finally see themselves is made sense of in a process where reality is interpreted. And the result seems to be a specific sustainability identity of the company that is “real” and present – in the sense of being an explicit self-understanding shared by managers and employees that, reasonably enough, has motivational force for further engagement in sustainability. Importantly, the identity referred to is an organizational identity, not an individual one, but relating to certain underlying beliefs about the organization and the context within which it works (see Table 2). Thus, it is constructed in relation to the company, not necessarily to colleagues or oneself. The formation of a sustainability identity within the organization relates to interpretations and understandings of reality, shared and enacted jointly (Ashforth et al., 2011).

As for the second contribution, we identify what there is that forms the basis of organizational sustainability identity (see Table 2) – of course limited to one specific case, but still. As stated earlier in the article, there is limited knowledge about which perceptions or underlying beliefs that form an organizational sustainability identity, even though, for example, perceived CSR performance and reputation have been suggested as such (e.g., Glavas and Godwin, 2013). Fundamentally, such underlying beliefs also condition the construction of organizational sustainability identity. We thus see little of other potential explanations for sustainability identity as presented in the literature. When the respondents expand on the idea of being sustainable, few if any refer to a more technical approach of “creating” sustainability through goals, targets, controls, numbers, et cetera (cf. Balmer and Greyser, 2002; Onkila et al., 2018). In fact, such metrics and controls are relatively underdeveloped in the case company. It is not an “engineered” identity that is strategically and instrumentally orchestrated through managerial ambitions and activities (cf. Simões and Sebastiani, 2017). Even though such measures also exist in the case company, it is clear that it is not through them that the sustainability identity is created (cf. Balmer and Soenen, 1999; Balmer and Greyser, 2002; Cornelissen and Elving, 2003; Fukukawa et al., 2007). Thus, we offer an at least complementary explanation that goes beyond seeing organizational sustainability identity as a “managerial invention”.

Practical implications of the paper relate to how a company perceives of itself. “Being sustainable” is (part of) an identity that seems to have more to do with general sensemaking than specific detailed work, for example with KPIs, targets or formal structures (cf. Onkila et al., 2018; Balmer et al., 2007). Sustainability identity is not a ‘technicality’ that you create through, for example, increased reporting or detailed control. On the other hand, a strong identity may be treacherous since it does not provide accurate and sufficient action-guiding principles for identifying specific issues and solutions of importance for sustainability in a material sense. A strong sustainability identity does not necessarily provide guidance or an understanding of the self in relation to specific challenges of sustainability (reducing energy consumption, diversity in the organization, and so on).

In suggesting future research, we point specifically to a limitation of this article, focusing on one specific company within, primarily, recycling. Doing so, a specific context is described and analyzed, where the

Table 2
Foundations of an organizational sustainability identity.

Construction characteristics	Characteristics related to the company as sustainable in itself	Characteristics related to customer relationships
<i>Making sense of the firm as sustainable given underlying beliefs</i>	Ongoing references to core operations as sustainable, building on own convictions and confirmation by important others	Ongoing experiences of successfully assisting customers to value-adding activities in terms of sustainability
<i>Interpretation</i>	Core operations are situated within an industry that is seen as sustainable by its very nature	Customer collaboration involving value-adding activities and climbing up the waste chain
<i>Underlying beliefs within the organization</i>	Recycling explicitly contributing to sustainable development	Knowledge of how to become more sustainable present in the company and affecting others when shared

creation of a sustainability identity is contextual and not necessarily generalizable. For that reason, other companies should be examined and compared with this one. That would provide an opportunity to identify other roots of sustainability identities. We also admit that our constructivist ‘bottom-up’ perspective on sustainability identity does not preclude other perspectives, where, for example, sustainability strategy as developed by management could have stronger implications on identity than shown in this paper.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Magnus Frostenson: Conceptualization, Investigation,

Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft preparation, Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Funding acquisition
Sven Helin: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology; Writing – original draft preparation, Writing – review & editing
Katarina Arbin: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology; Writing – original draft preparation, Writing – review & editing.

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Appendix A

Case interviews

Date (YYMMDD)	Male / Female	Position	Company within group
171109	F	Group Sustainability Manager	Group level
171204	F	Group Sustainability Manager	Group level
180306	F	Group Sustainability Manager	Group level
180306	M	Sustainability coordinator I (with Group Sustainability Manager)	Recycling
180306	F	Sustainability coordinator II (with Group Sustainability Manager)	Components
180416	F	Sustainability coordinator III	International
180425	F	Sustainability coordinator IV	Recycling
180608	M	Coordinator, local site	Recycling
181023	F	Group Sustainability Manager	Group level
191212	M	Environmental, Health and Security Manager I	Recycling
191212	F	Environmental, Health and Security Manager II	Recycling
191219	F	Subsidiary Sustainability Manager	Steel
200217	M	Local Site manager	Recycling

Appendix B

Interview guide

Could you begin with telling us about your position and role within the company/group, particularly related to sustainability?
 How do you understand the company as a sustainable company?
 Which are the most significant sustainability challenges when it comes to recycling?
 Some would see recycling as sustainable in itself. How is it possible to improve sustainability in something that is, “in itself”, already sustainable?
 How would you describe the company’s work with sustainability over time?
 What are the main differences relating to sustainability work within the group, that is, between the different companies/business areas?
 In your opinion, what brings about sustainable change within the company?
 What (and who) has driven the changes in recent years? Top-down? Bottom-up?
 What is the role of different stakeholders when it comes sustainable change?
 Is the company active or reactive when it comes to sustainable change?
 What can you do to improve sustainability in your specific role as a manager?
 Can you describe and give an opinion of the formal sustainability coordination structure?
 How does that structure relate to your company’s sustainability work?
 How do you establish KPIs and objectives at your company and how do these relate to the group’s sustainability work? Examples?
 How are you/they held accountable for meeting targets? Are there any consequences for not meeting targets?

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