Sustainability and Corporate Branding:

Shotgun wedding or match made in heaven?

by

Roosmarijn Morgans & Teodora Hertanu

May 2021

Master's Programme in International Marketing & Brand Management

Supervisor: Veronika Tarnovskaya
Examiner: Ulf Elg

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this thesis is to gain a better understanding of the interplay between sustainability and corporate branding internally in organisations. By studying how internal communication contributes to the employees' perception of these concepts, we aspire for this research to result in a greater comprehension of the role of internal communication in relation to sustainability and corporate branding.

Theoretical Perspective: The two main theoretical perspectives are the internal brand management theory by Burmann and Zeplin (2005) and stakeholder theory, developed by Freeman (1984). Based on an in- depth review of the existing literature and theory, a research framework has been developed to guide the study.

Methodology: A qualitative multiple case study with an abductive approach was applied based on the research philosophy of social constructionism. The empirical data was collected through 15 in-depth interviews with employees from the companies Ørsted and Arla. The interviews were semi-structured allowing theoretically-based as well as empirically-led questions. The primary findings are complemented by secondary textual data.

Findings: Sustainability and corporate branding are internally communicated through a mix of central, cascade and lateral communication. The employee perception of the integration of sustainability communication in brand communication depends on the organisation's business format and implementation strategy. Our study established a positive connection between sustainability and brand commitment. The feeling of contributing to a bigger cause plays a role in this connection. Enabling relevant employee roles in the organisation's sustainability journey can increase the connection further. The integration of sustainability into the brand identity presents the opportunity for a strong corporate brand that lives up to the urgent societal demands.

Contributions: By focusing on the role of internal communication in the connection between sustainability and corporate branding we contribute to the understanding of an important current topic. We are refining Burmann and Zeplin's (2005) internal brand theory by suggesting to add bottom-up communication to their internal communication model and include brand pride in the brand citizenship behaviour construct. The managerial implications focus on the channels that should be used for sustainability communication internally and on the management's role in aligning a sustainable company vision with the employees' jobs.

Keywords: Sustainability, Corporate Branding, Internal Communication, Employees

Acknowledgements

We would first and foremost like to thank our supervisor Veronica Tarnovskaya, Senior Lecturer and Associate Professor at Lund University, for her guidance in the past few months. She was always readily available and offered constructive feedback, while at the same time allowing us to develop the thesis writing process in our own style.

We also want to thank Ørsted and Arla for allowing us to interview their employees and dig deeper into their organisational practices. We are confident we have done our best to honour this collaboration through valuable contributions in this thesis. And of course, to the respondents who shared their time with us, you were invaluable to our research.

Lastly, we are offering our thanks in advance to Ulf Elg, Professor of Marketing at Lund University, who will be reviewing our thesis. We are looking forward to hearing your thoughts.

After a very strange Master's education conducted entirely in front of a screen, we are overwhelmed by how connected we felt with our colleagues, teachers and our own networks in conducting this master thesis. Here is to hoping that the following year will bring more healthy and safe face to face interactions.

Best regards,

Teodora Hertanu

Roosmarijn Morgans

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Abbreviations

B2B: Business-to-business
B2C: Business-to-consumer
CS: Corporate Sustainability
CSR: Corporate Social Responsibility
OCB: Organisational Citizenship Behaviour
SDG: Sustainable Development Goal
GDPR: General Data Protection Regulation
Q&A: Questions and Answers

1. Introduction

Welcome to the first chapter of this study. We will take you on a journey about one of the most important, if not critical aspects of our society in the 21st century: living sustainably. Higher on companies' agenda than ever, we are determined to study how this affects their corporate brand. We will first give some background to the research topic, followed by the problematisation, which together form the initial positioning of the research. We will then postulate the purpose of this study and the research question. We are ending this chapter with delimitations of the study, intended contributions and the outline of the thesis.

1.1 Background

April 23rd, 2021. The Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen is addressing President Biden's Leaders Summit on Climate:

> *Today, more than 50 percent of Denmark's electrical grid is powered by wind and solar energy; by 2027, we expect renewables to meet 100 percent of our electricity needs. We have also set ambitious climate goals for the future: Denmark hopes to achieve a 70 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and reach climate neutrality – that is, net-zero greenhouse gas emissions – by 2050. We are confident we can do it. Why? Denmark's green edge has a 50-year-strong foundation. Since the 1973 oil crisis, Danish research and innovation have led the charge in the global clean energy transition – a tradition we proudly carry on to this day" (AmCham Denmark, 2021, n.p.).*

Sustainability has increasingly drawn the attention of policy makers, companies and scholars since its definition by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987: "Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (1987, n.p.). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for people and planet, with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) being an urgent call for action (United Nations, 2021). Focusing on the five categories of people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership, the SDGs are used worldwide as guidance by organisations of different sizes and with different

scopes in order to pin-point the areas in which they engage to bring upon change and improvement. With less than 10 years left to achieve the SDGs, we are in the decade of action.

In the last decades, the necessity for companies to implement sustainable practices for future prosperity has understandably gained considerable importance. Companies increasingly recognize that their actions or inactions have effects of varying scales on diverse stakeholder groups and the expectations for companies to act sustainably are higher than ever. It is not only the customers and shareholders anymore who expect them to 'do good', but the pressure is now also coming from other stakeholders such as governments, policy-makers, suppliers, media, competitors, communities and citizens. And this pressure for companies to implement sustainable practices will keep rising. Young sustainable changemakers like Greta Thunberg are increasingly raising their voice. Striking against inefficacy in fighting climate change led her to speak to United Nation leaders, shaming them for not holding corporations accountable for the damage they are doing to our environment (Gajanan, 2019). By that point, 196 countries around the world had been part of the Paris Agreement for three years, committing to take actions in order to reduce their nations' greenhouse gas emissions. In 2020, studies have shown that some countries have been too ambitious in promising this reduction, and the goals of the Paris Agreement might fall short (The Ecologist, 2020). Consumers are increasingly boycotting companies that demonstrate unsustainable practices. For example, shoppers from all around the world have started boycotting giant retailer Amazon in the last year due to increasing suspicions of tax fraud, unethical working conditions and immense carbon emissions – buyers do not want their money to go to a company whose small prices come with a black mark (Cooke, 2020).

As a result of the building pressure and high awareness of these issues, corporations have, as increasingly influential citizens in our societies, embedded sustainability into their internal practices, corporate culture and company values. This transformation impacts the corporate brand, which is constructed around their vision and core values. A strong corporate brand has a singular identity that characterises the company as a whole. This coherency can only be achieved if the values are rooted in the corporate culture and there is buy-in from all the employees. Embedding sustainability in the brand can thus only be successful if the people in these companies understand their role in this transformation and are committed to it. Internal communication on sustainability plays a crucial role here, as it is the main driver in ensuring that employees are part of this vision and are aligned with the sustainability strategies. The employees' involvement is vital in companies' journey towards a more sustainable strategy, operations and overall activity. Only when the employees' culture and behaviour are aligned with the company's vision and image, the corporate brand performs at its best (Hatch & Schultz, 2001).

This research into the connection between corporate branding and sustainability will explore the discourses of two major subjects that are highly relevant for scholars and practitioners in the

present and future. More specifically, this study will focus on the internal communication about sustainability from the employees' perspective.
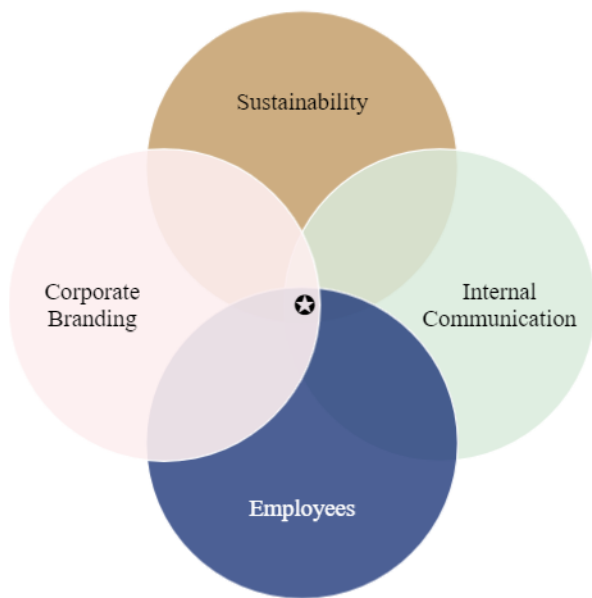
Figure 1: Positioning of research

1.2 Problematisation

Existing studies on sustainability and branding confirm that they are connected, but present different suggestions for effective implementation. Employees' involvement and commitment to their companies' sustainable activities are also debatable, with influencing factors such as the seniority of the employee or the industry of activity of the company.

One of the reasons why this branch of research is still difficult to integrate in organisational studies is that sustainability is difficult to define and it relates in different ways for different stakeholders. The following section will include a deeper dive into the various understandings of sustainability, but it is safe to say that its many facets can lead to this concept yielding a personal meaning for each individual. Just considering the 17 SDGs, they span areas as varied as eliminating poverty to achieving gender equality, clean waters and economic growth (United Nations, 2021). Since the focus of this thesis is on how employees perceive the internal communication on sustainability, we find it relevant to understand what sustainability means in their opinion in relation to their company.

The other aspect this thesis focuses on, corporate branding, is broadly studied, and there are multiple frameworks and theories to support its understanding. However, the existing research relating it to sustainability is mostly focused on how the corporate brand is affected financially or

in terms of consumer reputation (Hockerts, 2015; Porter & Kramer, 2006; Sheth & Sinha, 2015). We believe that the topic of corporate sustainability is one that cannot be left out of organisational management studies, and that its relation to the corporate brand will add to existing research. Furthermore, the standards used for sustainability rankings differ greatly, and the measurement criteria are often inconsistent (Porter & Kramer, 2006). Companies want their sustainability agendas to be highly visible, so their belonging to these rankings gives them a certain seal of approval. However, how do they communicate about this internally? And to what extent is this also the view of the employees? Bittner-Fesseler and Weicht (2020) also emphasize that the research on internal sustainability communication is still lacking, and the studies that can be found yield conflicting views. The key element that this thesis will focus on regarding the relationship between sustainability and corporate branding is the internal communication. As will be presented in the theoretical framework of this thesis, the employees' view will guide this study, and will be based on theories of internal communication, internal branding and stakeholder management.

1.3 Research questions and purpose

Embedding sustainability in the corporate brand can only be successful if the employees understand and support this. The company's internal communication about sustainability plays a crucial role in making this happen. There is currently little in-depth understanding of how companies communicate internally about sustainability and how employees – in this case meaning everybody that works for the company – perceive this internal communication and act upon it. The purpose of this thesis is to gain a better understanding of the interplay between sustainability and branding and how internal communication contributes to the employees' perception of these concepts. This will result in a greater comprehension of the role of internal communication in relation to sustainability and corporate branding.

The research questions of this thesis are:

RQ1: How are sustainability and branding communicated to employees?

RQ2: How do employees perceive and act upon this communication?

To answer these research questions, we are engaging in a qualitative study, analysing two companies that are heavily engaged in sustainable practices and also have a strong performing corporate brand.

1.4 Delimitations

Sustainability and corporate branding are broad phenomena. For the purpose of this study, we decided to focus on internal communication on sustainability and the perception of the employees, leaving aside any external components of corporate branding. In terms of the research design of this thesis, one limitation is the geographical focus on Scandinavian companies with Danish headquarters, although both our case studies are operating abroad as well. Denmark has for a long time been internationally recognised as a leader in its approaches to live more sustainably (Environmental Performance Index, 2020), as exemplified in our introduction quoting the Danish Prime Minister's speech. We are aware that data from some of the other countries that the companies are present in might be different. Despite these exclusions from the scope of our study, we consider that answering our proposed research questions within this frame will elicit valuable insight into the connection between sustainability and corporate branding through internal communication.

1.5 Intended contributions

With this study, we aim to deliver insights to both academics and practitioners. Theoretically, this thesis contributes to the understanding of the connection between sustainability and corporate branding by focusing on the role of internal communication on sustainability and its relationship to internal branding. By exploring how employees perceive internal communication on sustainability, we are adding to an area that is currently under-researched. We will develop knowledge of the ways that companies that score high on both sustainability and branding practice their internal communication. The practical contributions we aim for are providing managerial insight of best practices and ways of communicating with employees about sustainability that can contribute to a stronger corporate brand.

1.6 Thesis outline

This thesis is separated into six sections. The first chapter is the introduction, which sets the scene for the study and introduces the research phenomena. In the second chapter we systematically review the existing academic literature on the research topic and finalise it by presenting our own research framework. Chapter three explains the methodology of the study. In chapter four we present the empirical findings from our case studies. In the fifth chapter we analyse and discuss our findings. The final chapter is the conclusion, where we summarise our findings and evaluate limitations and contributions. Additionally we propose directions for future research.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

The purpose of this chapter is to present findings from existing literature and set the theoretical basis of this thesis. The systematic literature review covers the topics of sustainability, corporate branding and internal communication. At the end of this chapter we present the research framework that is based upon the reviewed literature and theory.

2.1 Sustainability

2.1.1 Defining sustainability

The term Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) emerged in the 1950s (De Bakker, Groenewegen & Den Hond, 2005). CSR is a broad concept and has no one true definition, but the fundamentals are consistently accepted and can be defined as "maximising the long-term contribution of business to society and taking care to minimize adverse impacts" (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2000, p.3). From rather uncoordinated voluntary practices, CSR has evolved, due to stakeholder pressure, to much more defined and measurable commitments (Maon, Lindgreen & Swaen, 2009).

The term sustainability is also open to much interpretation. Over 30 years ago, the Brundtland commission coined the term, defining it as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p.8). Corporate Sustainability (CS) is the common term used when applying the sustainability concept in an organisation.

Corporate Social Responsibility is often used as a synonym for Corporate Sustainability, but sometimes it differs by having a greater focus on the social element rather than the environmental one (Baumgartner, 2014). In contemporary business practices, the term Corporate Sustainability seems favoured over Corporate Social Responsibility. Van Marrewijk (2003) studied the debate on the definitions and concepts of CSR and CS and his research shows that CS is indeed more often used as the overarching term, possibly because of its more holistic view. He argues that there is no standard recipe and companies should choose which definitions and concepts work for them, matching their goals and aligning with their strategy.

In this thesis, to avoid confusion for the reader, we decided to consistently use the term sustainability (and not CS or CSR) from now on. The scope of our research, applying sustainability to businesses, naturally assumes that it refers to Corporate Sustainability.

2.1.2 An integrative view of sustainability

In the past decade, research on sustainability has rapidly increased. Academics from different business disciplines have generated different terms to describe sustainability components. It is broadly agreed that sustainable development consists of three elements: an economic, social and environmental one (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

The three dimensions are also applied in the concept of triple bottom line (Elkington, 1997). Elkington (1997) introduced the concept to recommend sustainability as a cultural revolution for organisations and encouraged them to use a three-tier approach to return on investment: financial return, social impact and environmental responsibility. In other words, companies can use the triple bottom line as a sustainability framework to examine their social, environmental and economical impact. The first element, people, refers to companies' social responsibility in aiding the societies they are part of, as well as offering appropriate work conditions to their own staff. Actions of what is traditionally called philanthropy are also included here (Elkington, 1997). The second element, planet, is concerned with protecting the environment. Here, the companies' role is to minimise their impact on the planet, manage their resources in an environmentally conscious way and generally ensure that their operations do not negatively impact any ecosystems around them (Elkington, 1997). Lastly, profit relates to the economic pillar and refers to the company's business and tax behaviour, transparency and accountability (Elkington, 1997). To summarise, according to the triple bottom line, companies should be profitable while doing business in a way that respects the society and environment. However, there is currently no decisive research on whether a sustainability approach is guaranteed to aid a company's financial performance, as results vary greatly (Hockerts, 2015; Porter & Kramer, 2006; Sheth & Sinha, 2015).

More recent literature on this strand of research has addressed the relationship between the three dimensions. This has resulted in a more integrative view of sustainability that emphasises the importance of simultaneous integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions without prioritizing one over the other, even if contradictions or tensions arise (Hahn, Pinkse, Preuss & Figge, 2015). This goes beyond the triple bottom line in the way that it recommends to embrace tensions between the dimensions rather than eliminate them. This integrative view requires paradoxical thinking and thus depends on the ability of the decision-makers of companies (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Porter and Kramer summarise this by stating that "there is no inherent contradiction between improving competitive context and making a sincere commitment to bettering society" (2002, p.68).

In this thesis, we refer to sustainability in accordance with the integrative view of the economic, social and environmental dimensions. This approach demands integration of sustainability in the strategy of an organisation and leans on the stakeholder concept, which will be discussed later in the literature review.

2.2 Corporate branding

2.2.1 What is the corporate brand?

In the 1990s, the shift towards the idea of the corporate brand appeared as a response to the increased difficulty of product differentiation, and the decade saw a strong rise of the corporate brand over the product brand (Roper & Fill, 2012). According to Kapferer (2012), this was also due to consumers' increasing requests from corporations in terms of transparency, responsibility and visibility – they wanted to know 'the brand behind the brand'.

Van Riel and Fombrun define the corporate brand as the attempt to "personalise the company as a whole in order to create value from the company's strategic position, institutional activities, organisation, employees and portfolio of products and services" (2007, p.4). Consumers' fundamental relationships are tied with the corporation itself more than the brand, which means the company must become the brand (Kapferer, 2012). This is in line with what Urde (1999) calls 'brand orientation'. He states that "a product can be objectively described, explained and analysed while a brand with emotional and symbolic value is experienced and interpreted" (1999, p.124).

Companies that wish to develop their corporate brand construct it around their vision and values. This creates a singular identity and can ensure longevity and trust (Roper & Fill, 2012). According to Balmer and Gray (2003), the corporate brand creates a halo effect over everything around itself, including products, people, communication and many more. Legitimacy is thus increased, and the halo effect also functions in partly absorbing the negative experiences that the reputation might suffer in times of crisis (Roper & Fill, 2012). Chandler (2019) argues that brands that drive their sustainability initiatives are more trusted by stakeholders and therefore perform better at adapting to the complex global environment they operate in.

Companies which embrace their corporate brand are constantly striving for a wider perspective and value implementation, since associations are based on deeper emotional connections (Roper & Fill, 2012). An important aspect in this regard is the wide array of stakeholders that the corporate brand must appeal to. These can be internal, where the employees have the greatest power, as well as external. In today's market, external stakeholders cover a larger base than in the past – it is not all about financial investors, customers and suppliers. State and business agents,

the media, as well as other non-business organisations all play a role in building a stakeholder network when managing corporate brands (Tarnovskaya, Elg & Burt, 2008). In looking at companies' view on sustainability, Fombrun and Shanley (1990) state that a company's reputation is heavily influenced by the public's perception regarding their social responsiveness and goodwill.

2.2.2 Employees and the corporate brand

The corporate brand is a great asset for a company when it comes to recruiting and keeping the right employees, as well as differentiating themselves from competitors that might attract the same talent (Roper & Fill, 2012). Brand values act as a key element in recruiting new employees (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Davies & Chun, 2002; Tarnovskaya, Elg & Burt, 2008; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006). Ind argues that "employees have the potential to make or break the corporate brand" (1998, p.324). This includes employees at all levels, not just those in customer-facing roles (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Davies & Chun, 2002; Tarnovskaya, Elg & Burt, 2008). For this reason, they need to be convinced of the meaning of the brand as well as their role in the brand's success, to 'touch and feel' the brand (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006). Buy-in from employees has two critical elements of engagement: intellectual and emotional (Thomson & Hecker, 2000). When both work together and are communicated efficiently through the organisation, employees will understand what their gain is, as well as their contribution to the brand (Thomson & Hecker, 2000). Vallaster and de Chernatony's findings confirm that "many internal brand-building efforts fail to be effectively implemented due to a lack of convincing communication" (2006, p.771). This is related to the internal brand management theory by Burmann and Zeplin (2005), which we will discuss in the next section.

Employees are also an important factor in Hatch and Schultz's (2001) vision-culture-image model (see figure 2). The authors state that the corporate brand performs at its best when these three elements are aligned. Culture refers to the way the employees perceive the company in its entirety, their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. Hatch and Schultz (2001) warn of the gap between the culture and the company's vision, which appears when the management either fails to communicate the company's aspirations to the employees, or they do, but the people do not support it. This means that if sustainability is an important value for the company, employees should]embody and live it. Vallaster and de Chernatony's study found similar results in analysing employees' engagement in brand-supporting behaviours: "we found that successful internal brand building rests on a foundation of interplay between strategic vision, organisational culture and corporate identity" (2006, p.767).

Figure 2. The corporate branding tool kit (Hatch & Schultz, 2001)

In relation to brand equity, Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010) explain three vital concepts. The first is internal brand commitment, explained as the employees' attitude towards behaving in a brand-consistent way. This is followed by internal brand knowledge, which essentially measures the degree of knowledge the employees have about the brand. Lastly, internal brand involvement relates to the resulting state the employees have, based on the personal relevance the brand has on them. Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010) conclude that in B2B brands that engage in a brand-oriented strategy, these three aspects influence the employees' relation to the corporate brand. Vallaster and de Chernatony (2006) agree that the corporate culture contributes to minimising the risk of brand-inadequate behaviours, and emphasize on the managers' role in 'energising' the employees in living the brand values.

2.2.3 Internal brand management

A framework that we consider valuable to study internal communication on sustainability in relation to the corporate brand is the holistic model for internal brand management by Burmann and Zeplin (2005). It is based on the organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) theory coined by Dennis Organ in 1988. He defines OCB as "individual behaviour that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organisation" (1988, p.4). With discretionary behaviour, Organ means

that it is the personal choice of the employee rather than an enforceable requirement of the job. Thus, OCB presumes that employees engage with their company and show 'gestures of goodwill' in ways other than those that elicit external, formal incentives. These voluntary behaviours contribute to an informal reward system and eventually to enhancing employee satisfaction and organisational performance (Organ, 1988).

Burmann and Zeplin (2005) argue that brand citizenship behaviour goes one step further, as it includes both internal and external behaviours that contribute to corporate branding. Their model for internal brand management (see figure 3) is rooted in the identity-based brand management approach and assumes that "a brand – just like a person – needs to have a consistent and continuous identity in order to be trusted" (2005, p.279).

An example of organisational and brand citizenship used together is in Bravo, Buil, de Chernatony and Martinez's (2017) study, where they analysed brand identity's effect on employees in British financial corporations. They concluded that the employees' self-identification with their organisation is positively influenced by a well-managed brand identity. Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010) also use Burmann and Zeplin's model in analysing the performance of internal brand commitment, involvement and knowledge, and how these are positively related to the corporate brand. Vallaster and de Chernatony focus on the leaders' role in enabling employees to live the brand values, stating that "employees need to have a particular feeling of belonging to an organisation" (2006, p.776).
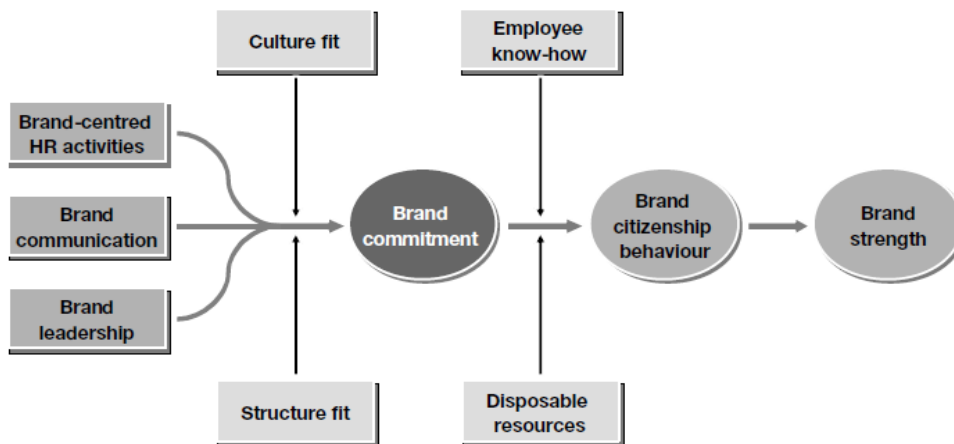
Figure 3. Holistic model for internal brand management (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005)

The model presents two behavioural constructs based on the employees' role in guaranteeing consistency of the brand identity. The first is brand citizenship behaviour, which is a construct that describes seven employee behaviours that enhance the brand identity (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). In other words, it refers to what it means for the employees to 'live the brand'. The seven

employee behaviours are: brand citizenship behaviour: helping behaviour, brand consideration, brand enthusiasm, sportsmanship, brand endorsement, self-development and brand advancement (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). The second construct is brand commitment, which can be understood as the willingness to employ brand citizenship behaviour. In the model, brand commitment is presented as the key driver of brand citizenship behaviour.

Burmann and Zeplin (2005) argue that in order to generate brand commitment, three levers can be used: brand-centred HR activities, brand communication and brand leadership. They add that these will only result in brand commitment if the contextual factors of corporate culture, corporate structure, employee know-how and disposable resources are aligned with the brand identity. For the purpose of our research, the second lever, brand communication, is most relevant. In this context brand communication is best explained as "generating brand awareness and understanding through internal communications" (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005, p.288). The authors argue that it is crucial for companies to professionally manage their internal communication around the brand identity concept. They present three forms of internal communication that need to be aligned.
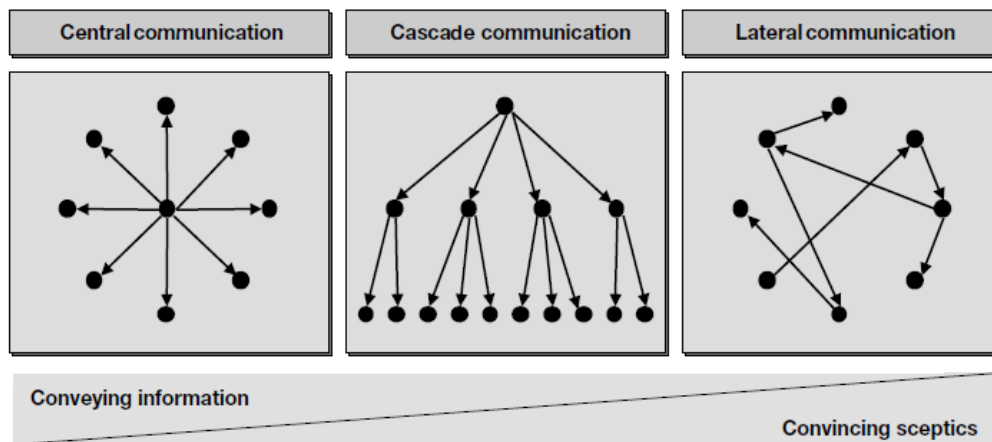
Figure 4. Three forms of internal communication (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005)

Central communication is usually distributed by the communication department, mostly according to the push principle, through traditional channels like emails or newsletters (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). The authors explain that this communication should be complemented by using the pull principle (e.g. intranet) and interactive communication (e.g. centrally organised events). Cascade communication is described as the distribution of top-down communication. The authors argue that this is more time consuming, but more efficient for employees who are sceptical, because the information is likely to be perceived as more relevant and credible. The third form of communication mentioned by Burmann and Zeplin is lateral communication, which is "the informal transmission of information between employees regardless of their position in the hierarchy or division, commonly referred to as the 'office grapevine'" (2005, p.291). As can be

seen in figure 4, this is the most effective form of communication to convince sceptics. The authors add that it is however also the most difficult to control, and mention organisational storytelling as a promising approach to convey the brand identity. It is important to add that although lateral communication is regarded as the best way to generate brand commitment, the three forms of communication are complementary and Burmann and Zeplin (2005) argue that companies should use them all.

To summarise, in this thesis we are focusing on the internal view of corporate branding. A singular brand identity constructed around vision and values is a requirement to ensure longevity and trust. In line with Hatch and Schultz's (2001) study, we recognise that any gaps between the vision, culture and image can have negative effects on the corporate brand. If sustainability is an important value for the company, the employees should embody this. Burmann and Zeplin's (2005) internal brand management theory provides an understanding of the role of communication and brand commitment in this matter. Their suggestion is that communication can drive brand commitment, which in turn enables brand citizenship behaviour. This will provide us with guidance during the collection of empirical data, where we will explore if the interviewees are showing voluntary behaviour that indicates brand commitment. In the following section we will explore the connection between sustainability and corporate branding, and the employees' role in bridging the two.

2.3 Sustainability and corporate branding connected

2.3.1 The relationship between sustainability and corporate branding

Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between the corporate brand and sustainability practices in organisations, and there is increasing consensus that the two are connected (Flores-Hernández et al., 2020; Grubor & Milovanov, 2017; Kumar & Christodoulopoulou, 2014; Lai et al., 2010; Miller & Merrilees, 2013; Sheth & Sinha, 2015; Vallaster, Lindgreen & Maon, 2012; Werther & Chandler, 2005).

The connection between sustainability practices and the corporate brand creates the opportunity for one to influence the other in various ways. Miller and Merrilees (2013) describe the connection as a link in the form of a brand association, which in turn positively influences consumers' attitudes towards retailer corporate brands. Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010) argue that in the B2B market, strong associations between the corporate brand and sustainable practices are even more important, as they have higher stakeholder impact and relationship building is more crucial than for B2C companies. Sheth and Sinha (2015) advise B2B marketers to establish their role as 'stewards of society' and make sustainability a purposeful part of their corporate brand. Lai et al.'s (2010) study shows that industrial buyers are positively influenced by the supplier's

corporate reputation, and intangible assets such as brand association and trust contribute to strengthening reputation. Biedenbach and Manzhynski (2016) conducted a study on industrial companies in Belarus, focusing on how sustainability is integrated with internal branding. They conclude that internal brand commitment is positively linked to the company's sustainability performance and decision-making, and that sustainability programmes are more successful when internal branding is perceived well by the employees. Flores-Hernández et al.'s (2020) study of the retailing sector in Peru shows that sustainability practices can have a positive impact on the corporate brand, which in turn can lead to higher customer satisfaction and an increase in word of mouth. Grubor and Milovanov (2017) also propose that a sustainable brand strategy, with the right implementation, can potentially lead to a win-win situation for consumers, companies and society.

2.3.2. The implementation of sustainability practices

Several authors conclude that brand reputation can be enhanced through creating positive brand sustainability associations and that implementing sustainability practices is thus in the commercial interest of companies (Flores-Hernández et al., 2020; Grubor & Milovanov, 2017; Kumar & Christodoulopoulou, 2014; Lai et al., 2010; Miller & Merrilees, 2013; Sheth & Sinha, 2015). The most effective way of implementing sustainability practices and connecting them with the corporate brand is however still debatable. Below we are presenting multiple frameworks, models and sets of guidelines.

An often encountered view on this branch of research is the importance of a holistic view of the connection between sustainability and branding. Based on Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, which will be discussed in the next section, several authors state that sustainability practices are best integrated into the corporate brand by taking all stakeholders into consideration. Werther and Chandler (2005) emphasize on the contribution that internal stakeholders have on brand legitimacy, and explain that in the case of multinationals, this must permeate equally in all the markets a company is present in. Sheth and Sinha (2015) propose a conceptual model that includes a shift to stakeholder orientation for companies to leverage sustainability to build their corporate brand. This also relates strongly to the necessity of a company to take the triple bottom line approach and to refuse the either-or dogma of firm versus societal benefits.

Knox and Maklan's (2004) findings state that most sustainability programmes stem from companies' mission and values, even if this is not developed as part of a formalised framework. Another useful model in this regard is developed by Grubor and Milovanov (2017), who connect sustainability to profitability, positioning the brand as a powerful driver. Aligning the internal culture with the brand image is identified as the main challenge. Vallaster, Lindgreen and Maon (2012) argue that sustainability leadership does not make sense for all companies and propose

four different strategies based on the firm's level of involvement. They introduce a framework to help companies act strategically in their sustainability and branding activities.

For the purpose of our research, we find the implementation framework (see figure 5) by Kumar and Christodoulopoulou (2014), that is grounded in the triple bottom line, most useful. They state that brands can be built on "the impact of their sustainability actions for helping the planet and mankind" (2014, p.13). To integrate sustainability in a company's operations, they separate the elements of strategy, operation, marketing and branding, eventually leading to firm performance.
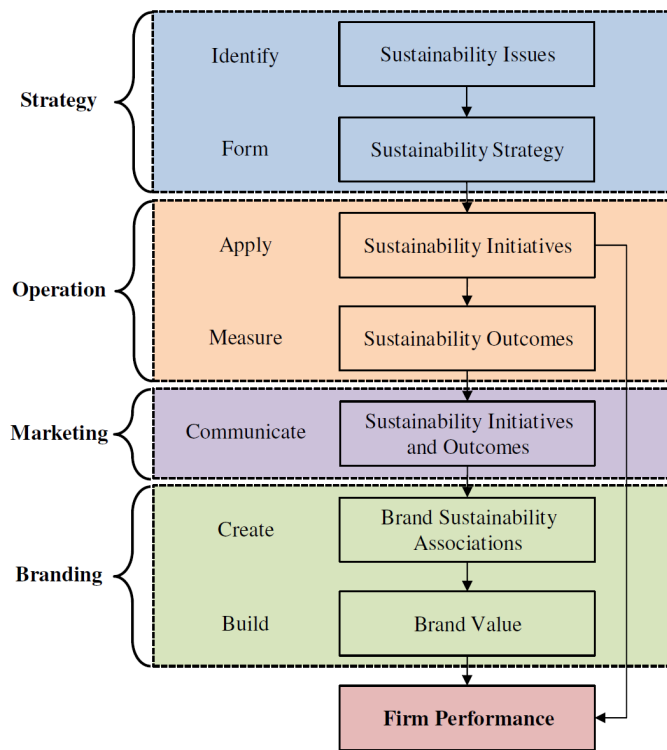
Figure 5. Integration for sustainability – implementation (Kumar & Christodoulopoulou, 2014)

Kumar and Christodoulopoulou (2014) explain the implementation in three steps. The first one is identifying sustainability issues and forming a strategy, taking concerns from all stakeholders into account. What follows is applying sustainability initiatives and measuring the outcomes. The third and most crucial step is the communication of sustainability initiatives and measurable outcomes. As visible in the framework, firm performance can be improved in two ways: indirectly through marketing communication that enhances brand value, and directly through optimization of operations or lowering costs. For successful implementation, the authors argue that sustainability must be made an important goal within the organisation and plans must be organised for the long-term.

In this study, we are researching the connection between sustainability and corporate branding. We found a strong growing consensus that the two are positively connected, but the most effective way of implementing sustainability practices and connecting them with the corporate brand is still debatable. This is where we want to make a contribution. Of the suggested frameworks, we think the one by Kumar and Christodoulopoulou (2014) is currently the most helpful to understand how companies that have made sustainability a priority, can potentially strengthen the corporate brand by applying sustainability initiatives. It also provides insight into the position of communication in this process. In the next section we will elaborate on the role of internal communication in this scope.

2.4 Internal communication

Internal communication is a large branch of organisational management studies, and research is constantly trying to understand its benefits, challenges and the best ways to manage it in order to satisfy all internal stakeholders. There is however little research focused on communicating sustainability to employees. Kataria, Kataria and Garg mention that "previous studies on sustainability communication have mainly centred upon external communication i.e. how sustainability practices are reported to external stakeholders" (2013, p.47). In this section we will start with the theoretical background of our internal communication focus in this thesis, namely stakeholder theory. We will then continue with an overall description of internal corporate communication, focusing on the existing research on internal communication on sustainability.

2.4.1 Employees as stakeholders

Based on the literature review so far, we decided that understanding stakeholder management is important in answering our research questions. We therefore found the stakeholder theory, developed by Freeman in 1984 in the book 'Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach', very useful. The book came out as a response to the insufficient stakeholder theories at the time, which managers were not able to apply to the increasingly volatile business environment of the last century.
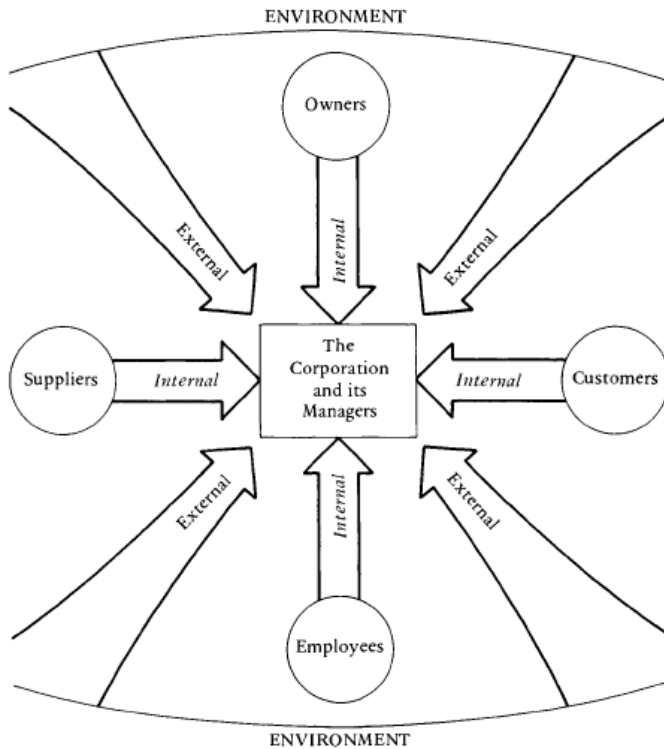
Figure 6. Internal and external change (Freeman, 1984)

Freeman (1984) defines stakeholders as the entire social environment in which the company operates, emphasizing that they cannot be handled in isolation. This includes both the internal and the external environment (figure 6), as he stresses that in order to work strategically with their stakeholders, a company needs to assess their needs individually and understand each group's issues. This contributes to the view that the stakeholder approach is part of the company's strategic management, by providing a single strategic framework (Freeman, 1984). Freeman mentions that, in defining the organisation's stakeholder map, "employees are oftentimes customers, stockholders, and members of special interest groups" (1984, p.10). Employees are the ones that shape any daily transactions with other stakeholder groups, which is why they need to be taken into consideration from the first to the last stage.

In reporting on their sustainability activities – we are keeping this denomination as it was the commonly used one in the 1980s –, Freeman (1984) mentions that rules and policies can be both helpful and a hindrance. Although companies have been checking boxes for years so they can comply with regulations and be included on international sustainability rankings, consensus on the standardisation of the reporting and measuring of these activities is still lacking (Knox & Maklan, 2004; Porter & Kramer, 2006). When it comes to employees, the internal culture plays a major role in shaping the organisational processes, which in turn will affect other external stakeholders.

The business landscape nowadays expects companies to be active citizens in the society around them, which means the addition of new stakeholder groups. Companies engaging in sustainability initiatives do so in order to satisfy a range of external stakeholders: environmental groups, government agencies and regulators, representatives of causes they are aligned with, but also consumers. Vallaster, Lindgreen & Maon (2012) mention that highly visible and strong brands are under intense scrutiny from external stakeholders for their sustainability activities. According to Freeman, sustainability initiatives are aimed at non-traditional stakeholders, which means managers act in a way in which "less emphasis is put on satisfying owners and comparatively more emphasis is put on the public or the community or the employees" (Freeman, 1984, p.38).

In analysing the changes in the stakeholder approach since 1984, Freeman and McVea (2001) mention that four management research streams emerged in the past decades. For the purposes of this study, we will take a closer look at the corporate social responsibility aspect. The development of the stakeholder approach meant that organisations started including multiple stakeholder groups that were disregarded in the past, which was a major contribution to the development of their sustainability engagements (Freeman & McVea, 2001). Freeman (1984) stresses the importance of sustainability not being conceptualised as residual, but seen as a central part of the value creation of the business through the triple bottom line model. He also states that there must be "some 'fit' between the values of the corporation and its managers, the expectations of stakeholders in the firm and the societal issues which will determine the ability of the firm to sell its products" (1984, p.107). However, this strategic integration did not come without difficulties. One critique on stakeholder theory is that it makes it difficult to prioritise stakeholders, making managers consider all of them as having the same importance. Knox and Maklan's results support this issue: "companies are clear on their most important stakeholders but are less able to set priorities among the rest" (2004, p.513).

While exploring the connection between sustainability practices and corporate branding, this study will focus on an internal key stakeholder group: the employees. We look at this group from a stakeholder perspective in which it is important to align stakeholders, have a joint purpose and move in the same direction to create value. The following section will develop more on how this is achieved through internal corporate communication.

2.4.2 Internal corporate communication

In analysing the vast existing literature on internal communication, for the purpose of this thesis, we focused on research which connects it to corporate brand theories. Burmann and Zeplin's (2005) internal brand management theory and Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory constitute the basis for our review of internal corporate communication research.

Several authors studied the connection between internal communication and internal brand management and how they can both contribute to employee brand awareness, engagement and support (James, Hartman, Stebbins & Jones, 1977; Punjaisri, Evanschitzky & Wilson, 2009; Hiscock, 2002 cited in Roper & Fill, 2012). A useful internal communication model which takes an employee-centric approach was developed by Welch and Jackson (2007) – see figure 7. Their work is based on corporate levels present in organisations, from line management, team peer communication, project peer communication and lastly internal corporate communication. The fourth dimension, represented below, is the most complex one. It attempts to fill in the gap of internal communication, which sometimes fails to take all employees in scope. It also involves external factors that might affect internal communication management. In the middle we can see the strategic managers and their four different roles in communication: employee commitment, a sense of belonging, awareness of environmental change and understanding from the employees on how they can adapt to said change. The arrows that stand for these messages are enclosed within the company's internal environment, but as it can be seen, there is also a two-way communication happening between the internal and the external micro and macro environment. The authors state that the delimitations between the three areas are not always exact, and that they all influence each other: "changes in the macro, micro and internal environment result in the need for change in the organisation" (Welch & Jackson, 2007, p.190). One critique brought to Welch and Jackson's model is that the direction of the strategic messages is one-way. Although they do suggest that two-way communication is more efficient, depending on the strategic component of the message, one-way communication is at certain times required (Welch & Jackson, 2007).
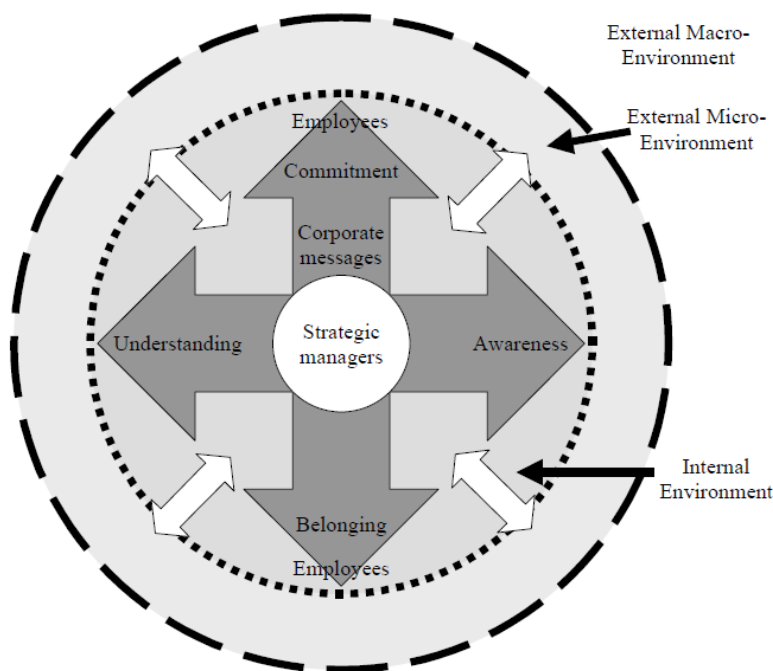

Figure 7. Internal corporate communication (Welch & Jackson, 2007)

Welch and Jackson (2007) agree with Biedenbach and Manzhynski (2016) that different employee groups need different communication approaches, adding that controlled or uncontrolled channels may be appropriate depending on the case. In terms of the management's role, Vallaster and de Chernatony conclude with advice on communicating the corporate brand internally: "leaders play an active role during the brand building process when it comes to translating the brand's promise into action" (2006, p.772). This stems not only from their symbolic status in the company, but also from their seemingly insignificant daily actions, such as meeting employees face-to-face instead of over the phone, or non-verbal communication such as dress code, language used within the company and others (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006). The next section will focus on the existing research on how sustainability is communicated internally in organisations and what its effects are.

2.4.3 Internal communication of sustainability

Maon, Lindgreen and Swaen (2009) classify employees as primary internal stakeholders for a strong sustainability performance, and argue that in implementing sustainability, the first step is to increase the awareness of employees in order to root it in the corporate culture. Managing this becomes more complex due to the diversity of employees in a company, and their differing attitudes towards the sustainability initiatives. Such a segmentation of employees was done by Hiscock (2002 cited in Roper & Fill, 2012), who mentions that in the UK, brand support is split between brand-neutral employees, brand saboteurs and brand champions. Biedenbach and Manzhynski (2016) also identify different involvement degrees in employees when it comes to the company's sustainability values. They claim that the three groups are uncommitted sustainability laggards, committed sustainability followers and committed sustainability leaders, and that they each need different communication techniques in order to be reached.

In communicating sustainability, there are different views on the direction and style of communication. According to Welch and Jackson, one way communication is "both unavoidable and necessary" (2007, p.187), especially in the case of strategic decisions. Kataria, Kataria and Garg (2013) have analysed employees' perception on communication on sustainability and concluded that even those who have a high awareness of their company's sustainable initiatives and would like to be involved need pragmatic communication from the managers in order to feel welcome to speak up. The management involvement is also clear from Werther and Chandler's (2005) study, which recommends a top-down structure when communicating sustainability values. They argue that business leaders are in charge of creating commitment throughout the entire organisation.

Other researchers however state that sustainability initiatives will only be successful with involvement from the entire company, and that communication should also run horizontally or bottom-up (Banerjee, 2002; Bednárik, 2019; Sheth & Sinha, 2015). Bednárik states that "internal

business communication can only be successful if both parties strive for it, meaning the company management, as well as other workers" (2019, p.49). Collier and Esteban argue that it is the employees who "carry the main burden of responsibility for implementing ethical corporate behaviour in the daily working life of the company and the achievement of those outcomes will largely depend on employee willingness to collaborate" (2007, p.20). The authors state that employees' commitment to sustainability is influenced by corporate contextual factors as well as their individual perceptions. Their findings show that it is not sufficient for an organisation to have a clear vision and code of ethics, but that sustainability should be embedded in both the cultural core of the organisation and the "hearts and minds" (2007, p.30) of the employees. They add that this integrative sustainability culture must be enabled by the ones responsible for the strategic direction of the organisation, and that these ethical leaders must create live communication channels to nurture the sustainability capital.

In deciding to take an employee-centered approach in this thesis, we consider their role as strategic stakeholders for internal communications to be crucial in answering our research questions. We are also aware that employees in different roles should be reached by different means, but following the analysed literature, their involvement is equally important when the company wants to create internal awareness about sustainability. In the following section, we are presenting our own research framework based on the analysed literature and the purpose of our thesis.

2.5 Research framework

We have now presented four literature areas which provide an understanding of what has been studied, and identified where we want to contribute with our research. To guide this study about the internal communication of sustainability and internal branding, we have developed a research framework (see figure 8) that builds upon the existing research of sustainability, branding, internal communication and employees. It visualises how we, at the start of data collection, view the relationship between these concepts.
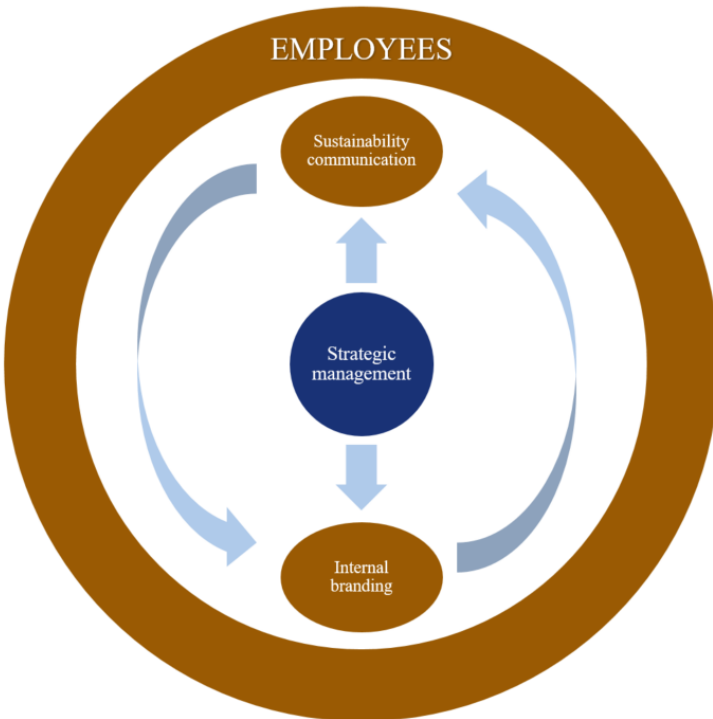
Figure 8. Research framework

The outer ring of the framework represents the employees, following Freeman's (1984) theory that they are the most important internal stakeholder. Their perceptions and actions on sustainability communication and internal branding are the unit of analysis in this study. The literature review shows that there is a growing consensus that the two are connected, but there is no definitive answer on how. Therefore, sustainability communication and internal branding have separate but connected positions in the framework. To explore the topic of internal branding as well as its connection to sustainability communication, the research is guided by Burmann and Zeplin's (2005) internal brand management theory. Their holistic model for internal brand management (figure 3) provides a comprehensive understanding of the concept. In the middle of the framework we positioned strategic management as the place where sustainability communication and internal branding is decided, following Welch and Jackson's (2007) model.

By using this framework to guide us, we are not assuming any results in our data, rather investigating the relation between these concepts in order to answer our research questions, all under the umbrella of the employees' perception.

3. Methodology

In this section we will describe the methodology of the thesis. The chapter starts by introducing the research philosophy, research approach and research design in which we explain our chosen methodological path. The next sections are data collection and data analysis, where we clarify in a transparent way how we gathered the data and how we analysed it. To complete the chapter, we discuss the reliability, validity and ethics of our research.

3.1 Research philosophy

Hunt and Hansen state that "all research projects have philosophical foundations" (2010, p.111). This guides the researcher throughout the study in approaching the topic, collecting, analysing and interpreting the data. In this section we will present the two elements of the research philosophy: ontology and epistemology. This will clarify our stand and will be the basis of all our methodology choices.

3.1.1 Ontology

The first element of research philosophy is ontology, or the nature of being (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson & Jasperson, 2018). Ontology is situated on a continuum between realism, which assumes that the world is independent of our perception of it, and nominalism, which argues that there is no one truth, and that everything around us is human interpretation (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). As we move away from the extremes, we find internal realism, which admits that the truth exists but that due to our personal constructs it is vague, and relativism, where people are thought to construct any phenomena around themselves through their own lens (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

For the purpose of this research, we consider the relativist ontological view the most appropriate. This assumes that people construct any phenomena around themselves through their own lens (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). In analysing the corporate brand, marketing studies have been attempting to measure this concept for decades, in the form of brand equity, repeated customer purchase or market reputation (Kapferer, 2012). However, we do not consider that the employee-centric view of branding we are taking in this thesis can elicit just one single truth.

Employees form their perception based on multiple personal or contextual factors, which leads to very individual interpretations (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019) argue that inside an organisation, people's realities form the firm's reality, which makes them socially constructed environments.

In taking the relativist ontological approach, we understand that our role as researchers will influence the interpretation of the empirical data and thus our attempt to answer this study's questions. This is also based on relativism's grounding in postmodernist philosophy, which states that knowledge is constructed through language (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). In our case, this could manifest itself in our phrasing of the questions during our interviews, or in any kind of communication and interaction between us and the respondents. Reflexivity will thus be of great importance for us in understanding our role before, during, and after our contact with the participants. However, we consider that a relativist ontology will ensure a higher data quality, as we will enable participants to reflect on their own judgement of the communication about corporate branding and sustainability, rather than encasing them in a truth versus no-truth duality.

3.1.2 Epistemology

One step after ontology, research philosophy is also based on epistemology, or the understanding of what knowledge is (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). In business research, epistemology allows the researcher to decide what the best way to conduct research is (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

Based on our relativist position, the epistemological view of this thesis will be social constructionism, which Easterby-Smith et al. define as viewing reality as "determined by people rather than by objective and external factors" (2018, p.71). Bell, Bryman and Harley mention that "social reality has a meaning for human beings and therefore human action is meaningful" (2019, p.32). The purpose of this thesis is understanding employees' perception of internal communication about sustainability and branding and their subsequent actions, and in our work we are aware that their own experiences contribute greatly to this. We are therefore concerned with the 'how' and 'why' of their socially constructed reality.

In the organisational context, this also relates to the importance of corporate culture. Culture is created by the people inside an organisation, and can consist of behaviours, experiences, beliefs and values (Roper & Fill, 2012). Moreover, employees are in constant interaction, and thus continually shape each other's and their own understanding of corporate culture (Roper & Fill, 2012). In the internal brand management model presented before by Burmann and Zeplin (2005), culture fit is crucial for the brand commitment levers to be successful. We therefore argue that the social constructionist epistemological view will enable us to understand employees' constructed reality in relation to their corporate brand and sustainability communication.

3.2 Research approach

We have chosen a qualitative research approach for this study. Qualitative research is generally concerned with studying human elements in social and natural science such as behaviour, opinions, relationships and beliefs (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). This approach aligns with our research questions, because we are focusing on understanding employees' opinions and thoughts about the studied topic. As opposed to a quantitative approach, qualitative studies are particularly useful for understanding what causes behaviour and the dynamics underlying the relationship between behaviour and communication (Eisenhardt, 1989). Rather than just clarifying behaviour, we want to understand why employees act in a certain way: "When a relationship is supported, the qualitative data often provides a good understanding of the dynamics underlying the relationship, that is, the 'why' of what is happening (Eisenhardt, 1989, p.538). Eastherby-Smith et al. (2018) mention that quantitative methods are most suitable for describing a defined population, but in our research we want to get an in-depth view into the topic of sustainability communication rather than general conclusions. The methods we chose in our qualitative approach, as will be described in the next section, allowed us to gain input from the participants to the maximum extent, which we are convinced a survey could not have supported us to do. Furthermore, a qualitative research approach allows for more flexibility in the research process, for example to make adjustments as new information emerges (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

In business research, the two most used logics of inquiry are induction and deduction (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Deductive research aims to generate theory from existing literature, whereas inductive research uses a grounded theory approach (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Recently, a third mode of reasoning has grown in popularity in business research: abductive reasoning. Bell, Bryman and Harley state that "abduction is proposed as a way of overcoming the limitations associated with deductive and inductive positions" (2019, p.24). They explain that abductive reasoning starts with a 'puzzle' and involves a search to observe and determine the terms that can possibly explain the research phenomenon. This approach requires moving back and forth between the literature and the social world as an empirical source (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). When doing case study research, Dubois and Gadde (2002) refer to this process as systematic combining. They suggest to systematically combine theory, the case, the empirical world and the research framework to result in findings that contribute to theory refinement. Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) argue that it is important to have a continuous dialogue between a researcher's pre-understanding of the topic and the data. We follow their standpoint that it is crucial to keep an open mindset to allow for the data to surprise the researcher, rather than just confirm assumptions. We therefore consider the abductive approach to be most suitable for answering our research questions, as it will allow us to contribute to and refine theory, rather than create generalisable inferences.

3.3 Research design and methods

This chapter introduces the framework that will be used to collect and analyse data, also referred to as the research design. We will elaborate on our choices and the reasons behind them. Our research design guides the execution of research methods and the techniques for collecting data, which are also included in this chapter.

3.3.1 Multiple case study

Case study design is widely used in business research (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Some authors argue that qualitative case studies are the best way to find answers for questions researching the 'how' and 'why' (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1984). It is based on an intensive examination and is concerned with the particular characteristics of the chosen case (Stake, 1995). Case studies distinguish themselves from other research designs by the focus on a defined situation or entity for which the researchers are providing an in-depth clarification (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Thus, the result can be an in-depth picture of the case and its interpretation in the context of the analysed phenomena (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). In our search for the appropriate research design for this study, our main priority was to find the best way to gain a holistic understanding of the internal communication of sustainability and branding in a real-life context. We consider a case study to best allow us to get this comprehensive understanding from the subjective perspective of the people involved.

An extension of single case study research design that has increased in popularity in business research is multiple case study (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The advantage of multiple case studies is that it allows for comparison by analysing differences and similarities across cases, which puts researchers in a better position to build or reflect on theory (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1984). We think that our study will benefit from analysing multiple organisations and having the possibility to compare and contrast our research findings. In turn, this will allow us to make a stronger theoretical contribution.

Although multiple case studies are common in business research and we consider them the best match for this study, we find it important to also acknowledge its criticism. Yin (2018) argues that the greatest concern for the method of case studies is it not being rigorous enough. He warns that if a case study is not carefully conducted, it can lead to rich descriptions with unnecessary information and a lack of meaningful conclusions. Dyer and Wilkins (1991) mention that researchers in multiple case studies focus too much on finding contrasting information and too little on the specific context. An explicit focus at the point of departure can be a concern in terms of maintaining contextual insight (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).With this criticism in mind we made some decisions to face these challenges. We delimited the study of our cases to the internal

communication of sustainability and branding and developed a framework with the concepts of study to provide guidance without making the focus too explicit. Furthermore, we decided to use an abductive approach, which for case studies means moving back and forth between the empirical world, the framework, the theory and the case (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). This continuous process of systematic combining (see figure 9) enables us to increase our understanding of both the theory and the empirical phenomena with the objective of matching them. This approach also allows us to redirect the study, which will support us in staying focused on contextual insights.
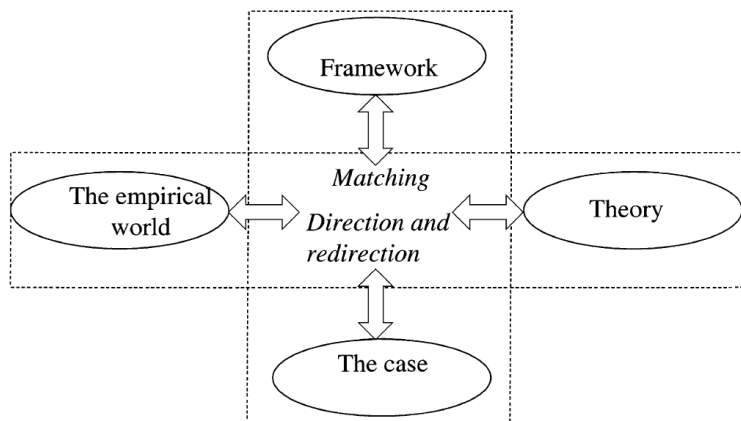
Figure 9. Systematic combining (Dubois & Gadde, 2002)

We followed the suggestion of Stake (1995), who takes a constructivist approach to case studies, to base the selection of our cases on the potential of the greatest learnings. Choosing cases where the process of interest is transparently observable is also referred to as critical cases (Yin, 1984) or extreme cases (Eisenhardt, 1989). The learning potential for this study is greatest within organisations that perform well on sustainability and corporate branding and are very actively engaged in both. An important criteria for us was that the company made significant efforts on implementing sustainability throughout the entire organisation. Such a holistic approach makes it highly likely that there is a high volume of internal communication on sustainability and branding and that it reaches all employees. This is essential, because our unit of analysis is the people that work for the organisations.

In selecting our cases, we wanted to consider top players in both the B2B and B2C areas. In terms of sustainability performance, we analysed the ranking of Danish companies on several renown platforms such as the Sustainable Brand Index™ and the Corporate Knights Global 100™. When looking at corporate branding, there are many measurements that can be applied, which may make corporate brands difficult to compare and contrast. We decided to follow up on the industry landscape of the top 10 organisations identified as most sustainable on the Danish market, and see their performance from a brand reputation perspective. In the B2B domain, we decided to study renewable energy provider Ørsted which is in the top 10 preferred employers in Denmark in 2020

(Universum, 2020) as well as number 13 in the European Renewable Reputation Index in 2019 (Tamarindo Group, 2019). In the last three years, Ørsted also scored as the most sustainable energy company in the world according to Corporate Knights Global 100™ (Ørsted, 2021a). As for B2C companies, we secured an agreement with dairy producer Arla, which the Sustainable Brand Index™ ranks as the seventh most sustainable Danish corporation in 2021 (Sustainable Brand Index, 2021). Their employer brand performs in the top 10 in the country (Universum, 2020), and Brand Finance™ places them at number five in the category of most valuable dairy brands in 2020 (Brand Finance, 2021). We will elaborate further on our sampling methods in chapter 3.4.

The possibility to use multiple data sources, leading to higher data credibility, is one of the strengths of case studies (Yin, 2018). In the next sections we will explain which methods we used to collect primary and secondary data.

3.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

For the collection of primary data, individual interviews were selected. Qualitative interviews attempt to understand the point of view of the interviewees and can provide in-depth knowledge about a certain topic (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). To answer the research questions we need to access information in context and learn about the internal communication of a company. Interviews will allow us to gain an understanding from the perspective of the respondents and give us the opportunity to answer why they perceive things as they do.

There are many different interview techniques, and for our research questions we found semi-structured interviews the most suitable (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). It allows us a certain flexibility, which we are contributing to through an interview guide (see Appendix A). The guide includes easy to understand broad open questions about the main topics, while at the same time allowing participants to present their personal opinion on the subject. With the interviews we are aiming to collect data about the internal communication practices on sustainability and branding and how employees perceive and act upon this communication. These different topics, that have their foundation in our research questions and research framework, are represented by different questions in the interview guide. In chapter 3.5.2 we explain the process of formulating the questions in further detail.

At the time of research, the COVID-19 pandemic required us to conduct remote interviews. Block and Erskine (2012) argue that semi-structured interviews may result in fewer differences than other types of interviews when done remotely. In the studies they analysed, "the information gathered was equally robust with respect to breadth and depth" (Block & Erskine, 2012, p. 432). Sullivan (2013) also mentions that as a result of today's extensive social media use, individuals'

online interactions are increasingly similar to real life contexts. This also contributes to people being more comfortable with expressing their authentic persona through online communication. According to King, Horrocks and Brooks (2019), different formats of qualitative remote interviewing have been increasing in recent years. Research shows that remote interviewing is the best choice when it is done not just due to circumstances but also resonates closely to the sample chosen (King, Horrocks & Brooks, 2019). In that respect, we are aware that employees in Ørsted and Arla have been working away from the office for the better part of the last year, so we assume that they are comfortable with their remote work set-up and are used to communicating through video calls. In order to reflect that the context of this research is closely related to their constructed identity at the workplace, we conducted all interviews during the interviewees' work hours, at their most preferred convenience. Together with choosing their preferred video conferencing platform (Microsoft Teams), we believe all these decisions contribute to an appropriate and safe space for them to express their opinions about the topic of this study.

3.3.3 Secondary data

While semi-structured interviews are the primary source of data for this study, we have also used secondary textual data in order to understand our case companies better. Eastherby-Smith et al. (2018) define secondary text data as sources of information that are available to the researcher but which were not created for the scope of the present study. Given the large online availability of different kinds of text sources, our role as researchers is to be critical in the information we extract from them.

Scott (1990) specifies two types of documents to be used as secondary sources: personal and official documents. In this study we focused on official documents about the organisations studied, which can contribute to our research purpose. As will be explained later in the sampling section, this data helped us decide which companies to select for our case study. In order to not demand any internal company information from our interviewees that they may not be able to disclose, we only used publicly available text data, in the form of organisational documents and media outputs (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Some examples of organisational documents are their annual reports, sustainability reports, or information on their public-facing website (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Media outputs include content from newspapers, magazines, TV and other mass media that are relevant for conducting the research (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Here we made use of publicly available national and international publications about sustainability and branding in order to better understand the company's position in relation to these concepts.

In the initial stages of this study, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of the secondary data in order to identify recurring themes and get a better understanding of our case companies and their perspective on sustainability. Since the interviews were the primary and most important

data of our research, we considered the textual secondary data only as supportive material in understanding our respondents' input and the overall context of how sustainability and corporate branding are connected at Ørsted and Arla.

3.4 Sampling

Once the research design of this study was decided upon, our role was to identify the best candidates for our study. This was the sampling part of our work, and in this section we will follow Robinson's (2014) steps for making sampling decisions when using interviews as a methodology.

3.4.1 Sample universe

Robinson (2014) mentions that the first step in sampling is defining the sample universe, or study population. This is based on the researchers' established criteria of inclusion and exclusion, which will help narrow down a large pool of choices to a selected group (see figure 10).
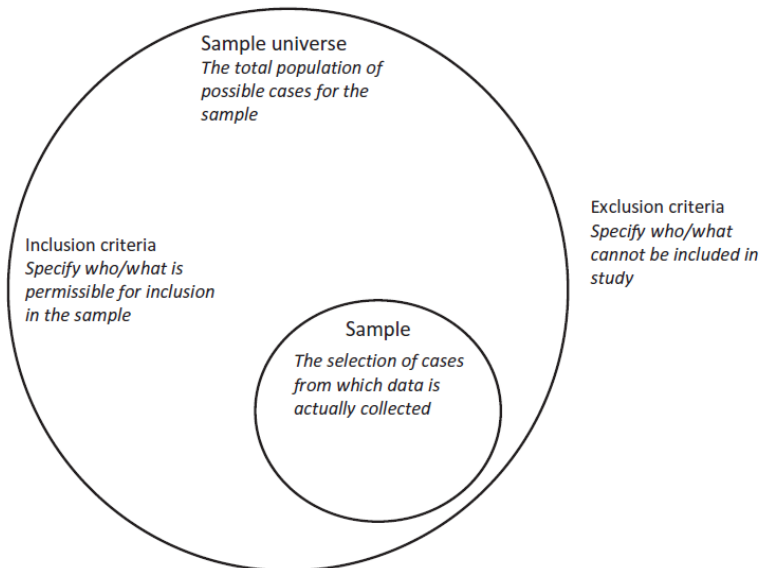

Figure 10. Sample universe, inclusion / exclusion criteria and sample (Robinson, 2014)

In our case, the largest level of criteria was the companies chosen for the study. As mentioned before, we focused on extreme cases, namely companies that perform best both in terms of sustainability and corporate brand performance. We also decided to keep geographical

homogeneity by selecting companies located in Denmark only. At the same time, we chose not to limit ourselves to a particular industry of activity, which increased the level of heterogeneity of our sample population. We think that this will contribute to this study's validity and allow us to benefit from the advantages of multiple case study design. Our next chapter will delve in more into the profiles of the case companies of this study.

3.4.2 Sample size

Deciding on the size of the study sample is the second step. Establishing the perfect number of participants in a qualitative study from the offset is almost impossible, as many factors only become apparent throughout the process (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Robinson (2014) mentions that the initial sampling specifications shouldn't be so strict as to not allow for further development later on in the process. At the same time, it is important to have a provisional number to work with. He states that in order to reach a certain complexity of the data collected when working with specific case studies, a sample between three and sixteen participants should be constructed. We are confident that our sample of 15 qualitative interviews is appropriate for the scope of this study. In the next section we will describe our sampling strategy.

3.4.3 Sampling strategy

The third step in qualitative study sampling is deciding on the sampling strategy. Once our study universe was defined, we engaged in non-probability sampling in order to identify respondents in the companies chosen. This means that it is not possible to predict the probability of any member of the sample population to be chosen for the study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). We considered this to be the right choice, as the opposite, namely probability sampling, would offer too random a selection of participants, which might result in a lack of confident statements in the data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Furthermore, non-probability sampling strategies are recommended when the study takes a subjective point of departure, which is in line with our research philosophy (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2015).

From the non-probability sampling options, we decided on a purposive sampling strategy. This involves the selection of participants based on certain attributes they may have in order to fulfill the purpose of the study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). The respondents are thus knowledgeable in the research subject and their views can contribute to answering the research questions. Moreover, purposive sampling in qualitative studies increases the depth of the data gathered, as opposed to the breadth (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2015).

As a secondary sampling strategy, we also engaged in convenience sampling, focusing on accessibility in reaching our respondents (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). One of the researchers

was employed at Ørsted at the time of this study, and thus had easy access to its employees, as well as knowledge of their roles and responsibilities. This helped narrow down the pool of candidates and allowed us to reach the people with the most relevant input to bring to our topic. Arla was also approached through our own networks, which eased the process of entering the company environment as externals.

For our study, we went through two decision-making stages in assessing what the criteria for the respondents should be. From the beginning, we knew that we wanted to reach a diverse sample of employees, but also kept in mind the involvement that different roles and departments may have with the topics of corporate branding, internal communication and sustainability communication. Another important aspect we had to consider was the international reach of the companies. Both Ørsted and Arla are present outside of Denmark, but we chose to limit our search to employees from the Danish headquarters. This was due to our time and effort limitations, but also based on the ease of contacting respondents in Denmark through our own networks. Given the focus on sustainability and corporate branding only in the country of origin, a more extensive study should research the organisations' international position on these two factors.

In a pilot study for this thesis, we interviewed several employees that worked in middle management. This was in line with some of the previous research we encountered, which emphasized managements' role in communication on sustainability (Flores-Hernández et al., 2020; Grubor & Milovanov, 2017; Kumar & Christodoulopoulou, 2014; Lai et al., 2010). However, we soon realised that the managers would be offering a different perspective than non-leading employees, as they would consider their own role in disseminating internal communication in the company. While we consider this input interesting and relevant, we decided to expand our focus and add employees from all hierarchical levels in our sample. We kept our research framework in mind during this decision, as well as Burmann and Zeplin's (2005) internal brand management theory. Their three types of internal communication – central, cascade and lateral – consider all employees in the company as fulfilling a certain role in the model.

An overview of our sampling can be seen in the table below.

Table 1. Overview of interviewees

Nr.	Department	Company
1	Human Resources	Ørsted
2	Agile Processes	Ørsted
3	Information Management	Ørsted
4	Human Resources	Ørsted
5	Capacity Management	Ørsted
6	Reporting and Forecasting	Ørsted

7	Foundation Installation & Heavy Lifting	Ørsted
8	Regulatory Affairs	Ørsted
9	Agile Processes	Arla
10	Human Resources	Arla
11	Global Marketing	Arla
12	Regional Exporting	Arla
13	Group Strategy	Arla
14	Change Communication	Arla
15	Human Resources	Arla

3.4.4 Sample sourcing

Once the purposive sampling strategy was established and the appropriate respondents from Ørsted and Arla were defined, the last step was securing their participation in the study. Our first concern was obtaining legal permission from the companies to interview their employees, which was secured through non-disclosure agreements and individual consent forms that were prepared prior to the interviews (Appendix B). As previously mentioned, our own networks played a big role here, and we decided to reach out to participants via email communication and the platform LinkedIn. We kept each other updated on the progress through our shared online project management tool, where we confirmed the current stage of booking each participant, and registered the interview appointments in a calendar overview.

One of our selection criteria was that the participants should be able to communicate fluently in English, for both their benefit and ours. We are aware that in many cases this may not be their native language, but given that both Ørsted and Arla are international companies, our premise was that most employees use their business-level English skills on a daily basis. All email exchanges were done with the participants' work email, and from our own work and Lund University student emails. We decided against using any incentives for respondents, as these can influence the authenticity of their answers (Robinson, 2014). The study being related to opinions on their place of employment, we did not want to draw any implications between us as researchers and the companies studied.

One drawback of this sampling strategy that Robinson (2014) mentions is self-selection bias, namely the high probability that only individuals who are generally open and interested in the topic will volunteer to participate in the study. This may lead to the exclusion of more negative or indifferent views, as those employees would not agree to be part of the study. We attempted to counteract this effect by reaching out to a varied group of employees and initially giving them

only a general impression of our study, assuring them that they can join the study regardless of their opinion on the topic.

We are confident that our choice of case companies fits the purpose of this thesis and allows us to gain an in-depth understanding of internal communication in two organisations which are sustainability leaders in their industries. With regards to the respondents, we are satisfied with the number of interviews collected, although we are aware that they are only a fraction of the large number of employees at both Ørsted and Arla. We are elaborating more on the aspect of research validity in section 3.7.

3.5 Data Collection

After presenting our decisions in designing this research paper and sampling our respondents, this section will elaborate on how the semi-structured interviews at Ørsted and Arla were conducted. We consider this a crucial step in ensuring the quality of our data and its appropriateness to our research goal.

3.5.1 Role of the interviewers

As previously mentioned, we chose to conduct the interviews for this study through the respondents' preferred video-conferencing platform, namely Microsoft Teams. Once the last step of sampling our participants was successful, we booked the virtual meetings in their work calendars based on the information they gave us and at their best availability.

During the interviews we used primary and secondary interviewer roles. Since one of us is employed at Ørsted, we realised that in our interaction with the Ørsted employees this might influence their attitude and answers in the presence of a colleague. We tried to mitigate this by assigning the primary interviewer role to the researcher not working for Ørsted. The secondary researcher did an introduction, asked for consent to record the interview and explained the handover. The primary researcher then led the conversation based on the interview guide while actively listening and paraphrasing. Meanwhile, the secondary researcher listened carefully and provided instant follow-up via a shared online document. This division of tasks helped identify topics that needed further explanation as well as make sure to cover all the essential topics. In the case of Arla, the roles were reversed, since none of the researchers had work contacts with the selected interviewees.

We planned a short meeting before and after every interview, to prepare and reflect. The researcher employed at Ørsted gave a short introduction about the employee who was about to be

interviewed. The roles of the respondents from Arla were only known based on their LinkedIn descriptions, but in both cases we asked our interviewees to shortly present themselves and their position. After the interview, we discussed our general impressions, self-criticized the execution and made a list of possible improvements. The interviews were transcribed as quickly as possible after the call. To ensure accuracy, the researcher who did not transcribe, listened to the audio file and edited the transcript if necessary. We had planned for the interviews to last 1 hour, but the average duration was 45 minutes to reach saturation.

3.5.2 Interview guide

We used an interview guide during all our interviews (see Appendix A). An interview guide can be helpful for semi-structured interviews to ensure covering specific topics, but still give respondents a lot of freedom in how to reply (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The questions in the guide do not have to be followed up in the outlined way and additional questions may be asked, but in general for every interview all the questions from the guide will be asked and similar wording is used by the interviewers (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

Doing multiple case study research, we found the use of an interview guide helpful for ensuring cross-case comparison. It also provided us with the necessary structure for every interview, while at the same time allowing for flexibility. During the preparation of this guide we followed Lofland and Lofland's advice to ask ourselves "Just what about this thing is puzzling me?" (1995, p.78). This initiated a very natural process of creating topics, primary questions, follow-up questions and clarifying examples. During this process we used our research framework to create topics under which we categorized the questions. The topics that followed from our framework are: internal brand communication and the employee role, internal communication on sustainability, internal branding and brand commitment, and forms of internal communication. The first research question – How are sustainability and branding communicated to employees? – is answered by the first, second and third topic. We based our questions on the existing research by Burmann and Zeplin (2005), who elaborate on the importance of brand communication in creating brand commitment, as well on their proposed three levels of internal communication. While we tried to not ask any leading questions, we guided our conversations with the respondents so that their answers regarding forms of communication would enable us to parallel them with the central, cascade and lateral definitions of Burmann and Zeplin (2005). The second research question – How do employees perceive and act upon this communication? – is mostly visible in the third topic, internal branding and brand commitment. Here we also took departure in Burmann and Zeplin's (2005) model, while also encouraging employees to reflect on their role as internal stakeholders, as presented to us by Freeman (1984).

We chose to lead the interview with primary questions that belong to different topics. We tried to put ourselves in the shoes of the interviewees to understand what is important for them in relation

to our topics and use wording that they are familiar with and is relevant to them. We also trusted that in some cases, the flow of the conversation will take different turns based on the interviewees' input, and ensured that as long as all our areas of interest were accounted for, this representation is one that is true to this particular respondent. In other words, we decided to let interviewees speak as freely as possible, but used the interview guide to keep them on topic. This resulted in rather differently structured interviews, but overall covering the same topics. During our pilot study, we reformulated the wording of our questions several times to steer clear of assumptions and closing off alternative avenues of inquiry, because it is of great importance with our research approach that we start with as few preconceptions as possible.

During the empirical work the interview guide was adjusted several times after reflecting on the conducted interviews, but only on minor details. The changes we made were mainly done to improve the flow of the interviews. We also added some follow-up questions and clarifying examples after gathering more insights about the company's way of working.

3.6 Data Analysis

3.6.1 Constructivist grounded theory

To analyse qualitative data, the most widely used framework is grounded theory (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Grounded theory can be explained as a method where theory is developed through systematically gathered and analysed data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Having decided on an abductive research approach and aiming for theory refinement rather than developing theory, we are using grounded theory as an inspiration during data analysis. Glaser and Strauss introduced the concept of grounded theory in 1967, but it has since encountered many changes. One of the writers developing the concept further is Charmaz (2006). She advocates for their approach to generate theory, but rejects the idea that theory can be discovered through the method of grounded theory (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). Instead, she argues social phenomena are always in an evolving stage and thus grounded theory is a method of constructing theory and getting a better understanding of it instead of discovering new theory (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). This view of placing priority on the phenomena of study suggests a constructivist approach, which agrees with the research philosophy of this study. Charmaz explains that "a constructivist approach means more than looking at how individuals view their situations. It not only theorises the interpretive work that research participants do, but also acknowledges that the resulting theory is an interpretation" (2006, p.130). This means that the theory is dependent on the view of the researchers. The constructivist approach to grounded theory takes a reflexive stance throughout the research process and the researchers consider how their theory evolved (Charmaz, 2006). Following this research philosophy means that during the data collection and

analysis we have put a large focus on continuously reflecting on how we, as researchers, and the interviewees, as research participants, interpret meanings and actions.

Iteration is a defining aspect of grounded theory, meaning that there is repetitive interplay between the data collection and analysis (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). We started analysing the empirical data as it was being collected, rather than waiting until the desired number of interviews was reached. This enabled us to adjust and improve several times before collecting more data. One example of this is that during early analysis, we found that some employees argued that part of the internal communication on sustainability was only found if you are interested and proactively looking for it. To make sure we would collect data about these information sources, we applied theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006) and supplemented our data collection with two interviewees that were very proactively engaged with sustainability. The data that came out of these interviews turned out to be very valuable as, among other things, we discovered a very active sustainability committee that was self-started by employees.

3.6.2 Sorting, reducing and arguing

After deciding to take a constructivist approach inspired by grounded theory for the data analysis, we have adopted the practical method by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) for the analysis of qualitative data. Their proposed way of working can be applied regardless of the philosophical underpinning and leaves room to include elements of Charmaz's view on grounded theory. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) suggest to divide the analysis in three key stages: sorting, reducing and arguing.

Dealing with the problem of chaos is the first phase of the process (Rennstam, 2021). In this sorting stage it is important to get 'intimate' with the material by reading, engaging with and re-reading the empirical material before categorising it (Rennstam, 2021). It is important to gain an understanding of what is talked about, and how the participants talk about it (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). After writing the transcripts, we brought this into practise by reading the text slowly and carefully and colour coding content that, based on our pre-understanding, would be relevant for the four topics that we had based our interviews on: internal brand communication and the employee role, internal communication on sustainability, internal branding and brand commitment, and forms of internal communication. One researcher colour coded the Ørsted transcripts and the other researcher the Arla transcripts. After the last interview, the researchers exchanged the work and checked each other's coding, discussing corrections where needed. During this process, where we tried to stay as free as possible from perceptions and expectations, we found recurring content within the three categories that we marked as a theme. Charmaz (2006) refers to this stage as initial coding. After we spent a lot of time with the data, the sorting became more selective and focused. An important step in succeeding during this stage was

attempting to keep ourselves away from confirmation bias and only select parts of our data that fit our initial assumptions.

Rennstam (2021) explains the second stage, reducing, as dealing with the problem of representation. He suggests categorical reduction, in other words, reducing the material to certain categories or themes. We applied this by prioritising themes at the expense of others, focusing on not the most frequent but the most interesting themes to answer our research questions. For all three categories we decided which themes would be presented in our findings section. We also decided to combine a few themes that had a lot of overlap. Charmaz (2006) suggests focusing on perspectives which challenge the existing literature, while at the same time contribute to answering the study's research questions. We therefore decided to, with our preliminary themes in mind, have another look at our literature review. This resulted in some small changes in every category.

As Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) predicted, this process resulted in a data set that we thought was theoretically interesting and more manageable to work with. We consider that our in-depth analysis of the empirical data enabled us to only focus on the aspects most relevant for reaching our goal. However, we were also aware to not fall into the trap of looking for novel discoveries and therefore embellishing our data, a research bias known as neophilia (Chambers, 2017). Our research framework (figure 8) was our constant guidance in reducing our data, and helped us achieve a balance between searching for interesting patterns and staying on topic.

After creating order (sorting) and deciding what to use (reducing) the third and final stage of our data analysis is arguing, which Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) explain as the stage where the analysts contribute to the research field in different ways by saying something about the data and creating an independent position in relation to authorities. To deal with this problem of authority, Rennstam and Wästerfors suggest that the ideal way to politely, but freely argue for your case is to create an "empirical and imaginative conversation in the academic halls where the researchers are located" (2015, p.144).

For us, the stage of arguing has resulted in chapter four, where we present our findings and chapter five in which we present our analysis and discussion. These results are inspired by Charmaz's (2006) view that social phenomena are ever-evolving and theorising should be done by getting a better understanding of it rather than 'discovering' it. One example of how our theory and research framework influenced our data categories can be noticed in the large emphasis on internal communication channels on sustainability. This was guided by Burmann and Zeplin's (2005) internal brand management theory and their categorisation of central, cascade and lateral communication. During our interview this topic came through clearly, which helped us in the reducing and arguing stage. Brand citizenship behaviour was also strongly represented in our data, and therefore made it easy for us to connect it with our research framework. During the analysis, we applied our abductive approach by moving back-and-forth between the findings and

the literature. For most of our themes we found conditions in the literature review that lead to explanations. Only for a few surprising findings that had no basis in the literature review, we looked up new information to understand and explain the theme.

3.7 Research quality

Having explained the methodology of our research, we would now like to reflect on the topic of research quality. According to Easterby-Smith et al., "one of the key justifications for doing research is that it yields results that are more accurate and believable than common everyday observations" (2018, p.134). It is therefore crucial that the research is of high quality. The technical terms that are often used for measuring quality in business and management research are reliability, replicability and validity (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Depending on the research philosophy and research design, these criteria can mean different things. Johnson, Buehring, Cassell and Symon (2006) argue that in qualitative research it is most important that the quality criteria are in line with the philosophical assumptions of the study. We will explain which criteria we think are relevant to our research and how we aim to live up to the quality expectations.

In qualitative research, there is consensus that reliability and validity are important quality criteria (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). However, there are many suggestions from qualitative researchers to adapt the meanings of these terms so that they are more appropriate to measure qualitative research. We think that the adapted criteria that fit the assessment of our study best are proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1994, cited in Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Based on the idea that there is no one single truth of social reality, but rather the possibility of multiple perspectives, they propose two quality criteria: trustworthiness and authenticity. Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited in Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019) explain that trustworthiness can be reached through the four aspects of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility measures how believable the findings are (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). To ensure the credibility of our study we practised triangulation of data sources. By using interview transcripts as well as secondary data we were able to combine and cross-check our materials in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the internal communication on sustainability and the employee perception. Within our collection of primary data, we chose to interview employees from different departments and different hierarchical levels to generate as many perspectives as possible. To enhance our credibility further we also practised respondent validation, as introduced to us by Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019). To confirm that we interpreted the answers of the interviewees correctly, the researcher with the primary interview role asked confirmation questions with summarised information during each interview.

Transferability measures if the findings can be applied to other contexts (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Within qualitative research, generalisability is usually considered very limited (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). We are aiming for particularisation rather than generalisation, which is suggested by Lee, Collier and Gullen (2007) as the biggest advantage of case studies. By focusing on creating what Geertz (1973) named a 'thick description' we are aiming for our findings to be used by other researchers who can judge the transferability of our data for their studies (Lincoln and Guba 1985, cited in Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). For this reason we decided to present the findings separate from the analysis and discussion in this study. Through our managerial recommendations, we will also offer suggestions on how internal communication on sustainability and branding can be successfully executed within an organisation. In terms of research, we gather that the results of this thesis can contribute to the existing literature on the study of internal communication, communication about sustainability and corporate branding.

Dependability measures if the findings are likely to apply at other times (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). To enable the possibility for others to repeat our study as well as explain our contextual circumstances, we are keeping records of the different research phases, such as recordings and interview transcripts as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited in Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). We aim to be as transparent as possible by meeting the criteria for dependability, however following GDPR guidelines.

Confirmability measures to which degree the researchers have allowed their own values to intrude. (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). We demonstrate confirmability by showing reflexivity throughout the study. Complete objectivity is a utopia, but we are aiming to prevent any form of bias as much as possible. We will elaborate on the ethical considerations of this thesis in the following section, but we consider that the accountability we demonstrated in the data collection previously presented also contributes to this aspect.

The fifth and last criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba is authenticity (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019), which is concerned with social and political impact. It implies that the researcher has the responsibility to give a fair representation of the various points of view within a social setting. To meet this criteria we will consider all perspectives of the interviewees in a structured and transparent manner during the data analysis phase, ensuring that no conflicting statements were dismissed and the findings are a fair representation of the empirical data.

3.8 Research ethics

When conducting business research, several aspects related to politics, power and ethics should be considered (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). During this study, we

constantly ensured awareness of our influence over the respondents and the organisations involved, as well as mitigating any potential risks for them and for us.

Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019) and Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) mention that one of the first aspects to consider when conducting business research are politics of access, namely how do the researchers gain access to the organisations and people they wish to study. As already mentioned in this chapter, an important part of our sampling strategy was complying with all the legal requirements of Ørsted and Arla in order to be able to interview their employees. This took the form of non-disclosure agreements and consent forms signed both by us and by the participants. In this process, we also made our motivation for this research known to the interviewees. We stressed that the data gathered and their involvement in the process was strictly to be used for academic purposes and as part of this master thesis. In the case of Ørsted, given that one of us was an employee at the time of this study, we ensured that we are communicating and interacting with the participants from our position as students, and that there are no work-related purposes to this study for either the researcher or the interviewee, even though they are colleagues in the same company.

We made sure to maintain our high ethical principles in this study by following Diener and Candall's (1978) four areas of focus: harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy and deception. Harm to participants may come in many forms: physical, psychological, harm to their development, career or self esteem (Diener & Crandell, 1978). While there was no risk for physical harm in conducting interviews for this study, we ensured there is also no risk to the participants in relation to their position of employment. The most efficient way for this was guaranteeing anonymity throughout the study and keeping their identity confidential. We decided not to hide the identity of the organisations in this study, as their profile was a crucial part of our multiple case study approach. As can be seen in the sampling section, we only identified respondents based on their team or department in the company, which we are confident is not at risk of exposing their identity.

The second element relates to the participants being properly informed about the study prior to participation, in order for them to be able to make as informed a decision as possible (Diener & Crandell, 1978). This was achieved in the sampling sourcing stage, when we approached our contacts through the methods described previously, and presented to them the premise and scope of our study. We explained that this is part of our education at Lund University and that no part of this study is funded or influenced by any external parties or in relation to either Ørsted or Arla. We also described the interview process and how this will be conducted, and ensured them they are not obligated to disclose any information they may consider sensitive. This was also mentioned in the consent forms they signed, therefore we consider we allowed them full freedom to make an informed decision before agreeing to participate in this study.

Strongly connected with the possibility to give informed consent is the topic of invasion of privacy. In the context of business research, privacy refers to the participants' right to be treated with respect and dignity throughout the process (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). We guaranteed complete transparency to our interviewees before as well as during the data collection, which offered them full understanding of what participating in this research process entails. We also steered away from any questions that were at risk of being too sensitively related to either their work or personal life, and ensured they were aware of this during our conversations.

The last element in Diener and Crandall's (1978) approach is deception, or the unethical practice of leading the respondents to believe the research project is something different than in reality. Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019) mention that, unfortunately, this is a widespread problem in business research, which affects the credibility and the status of scholars at a large scale. As previously mentioned, our communication and transparency with the interviewees prior to the data collection stage eliminated this risk.

We consider that our methodological approach in relation to both the respondents and the organisations involved guarantees the ethical standards of business research were met in our project.

4. Empirical findings

In this chapter we will present our empirical material. To assure that the reader has a good picture of the two companies we chose for the case study, we start with a brief company profile of Ørsted and Arla (section 4.1). Afterwards, the empirical findings will be presented in three themes: internal communication on sustainability (section 4.2), internal branding of sustainability (section 4.3) and brand commitment (section 4.4). This is the result of the data analysis stages of 'sorting' and 'reducing' the data from 15 in-depth interviews.

4.1 The cases of Ørsted and Arla

4.1.1 Ørsted

Named after Danish scientist Hans Christian Ørsted, who discovered electromagnetism, Ørsted is a Danish energy company that is today mainly producing green energy through wind power in Northern Europe. Harvard Business Review named it the biggest transformation of the last decade in Europe, following the company's shift from oil and gas to almost entirely renewable energy sources in 2017 (Anthony, Trotter & Schwartz, 2019).

DONG Energy, standing for Danish Oil and Natural Gas, was a merger of six power companies established in 2006. Back then, the power and heat production mix consisted of approximately 85% fossil fuels, accounting for a third of the greenhouse gas emissions in Denmark (Ørsted, 2021b). Several industry trends in the 2010s made the company take a strategic change of direction towards wind power and bio energy production, and slowly exit fossil fuels. In 2016 the company went public, with the second largest Initial Public Offering that year (Ørsted, 2021b).

In 2017, the company underwent a massive branding transition and committed itself even more to their sustainable energy production goals. It dropped the name DONG Energy for that of Ørsted, and established a new vision: creating a world that runs entirely on green energy (Ørsted, 2021b). Since then, Ørsted reached many of its targets, and set new, ambitious ones. They are currently the biggest offshore wind company in the world, and reached 85% energy production from renewable sources in 2019 (Ørsted, 2021b). Their 2025 target is complete carbon neutral energy generation, and a carbon neutral supply chain by 2040 (Ørsted, 2021b).

Ørsted is very active nationally and globally in their fight against climate change. In 2019, the company's then CEO spoke at the UN Climate Summit (Ørsted, 2021c), and in 2021 the current CEO was part of a group of global leaders who urged US President Joe Biden to take the action necessary to become 'the climate president' (Climate Power, 2021). Ørsted has a strong position in the Danish energy industry and is constantly leveraging this with the country's government. In 2020, the Danish Crown recognised their transformation and awarded them the Danish CSR Prize for their work with sustainability (Ørsted, 2021d). Corporate Knights Global 100™ named them the most sustainable energy company worldwide three years in a row, from a total of 7.000 companies analysed (Ørsted, 2021a), and TIME Magazine™ featured them in their TIME100 Most Influential Companies list for 2021 (TIME, 2021).

4.1.2 Arla

Starting from the 1800s, dairy farmers in Denmark and Sweden have been working in cooperatives in order to produce milk more efficiently and profitably (Arla, 2021a). Their number grew during the last century, and in 2000 the two national cooperatives joined and formed Arla Foods (Arla, 2021a). The company is now one of the largest dairy producers in Europe, owned entirely by farmers and handling more than 25 brands of milk, butter, yoghurts and cheeses worldwide (Arla, 2021b).

Arla's focus has always been on promoting the benefits of milk and accrediting their production through audits and heavily regulated animal welfare. In 2019, they set on an ambitious sustainability journey: becoming carbon net zero by 2050 and reducing emissions by 30% in their transportation, production and offices by 2030 (Arla, 2021c). Their sustainability strategy is two-fold: 'stronger people' and 'stronger planet'. Arla is focusing on 'stronger people', by offering a healthy, nutritious and sustainable diet through organic carbon-neutral dairy products and their new plant-based drink (Arla, 2021c). They also provide school children with farm visits and are involved in several international development projects through community partnerships in Nigeria, Indonesia and Bangladesh (Arla, 2021c).

On the 'stronger planet aspect', Arla focuses on implementing sustainability in its entire value chain: farm, operations, logistics, packaging and food waste (Arla, 2021c). This is done at farms through checks on cow feed, crop production and fertiliser use. In operations and logistics many initiatives contribute to reducing CO_2 emissions, such as buying 100% renewable energy for production sites, or experimenting with trucks running on biogas from cow manure (Arla, 2021c). Arla is also aiming at having fully circular packaging by 2030. During 2020 they introduced a completely fibre-based packaging for their Unika cheese and eliminated plastic lids from all milk cartons in Denmark (Arla, 2021c). At the end of the value chain is food waste, which the company is combating through initiatives such as donating surpluses to food banks and selling short-shelf life products at discounted prices in Denmark, Sweden and the UK (Arla, 2021c).

Arla has been repeatedly praised as an innovative company that is leading the sustainability journey in the dairy industry. Starting from 2019, they equate their environmental, social and governance parameters with financial performance in order to provide full transparency and accountability (Arla, 2021d). They were awarded the best CSR reporting performance as an unlisted company in Denmark in 2020 (Arla, 2021e), and in 2021 they won the British Dairying Cream Awards, "as the most esteemed in the industry, taking into consideration production, operations and welfare across the nation's top dairy businesses" (Arla, 2021f). Brand Finance™, the world leader in independent brand valuation consultancy, named them as the fourth most valuable dairy brand worldwide in 2019 (Brand Finance, 2021) and at number 16 in the top 50 most valuable food brands in the world in 2020 (Brand Finance, 2021).

4.2 Internal communication on sustainability

The first theme of our findings focuses on presenting data about the way companies communicate internally on sustainability and how employees perceive this communication.

4.2.1 Sustainability communication as part of brand communication

In the first part of our discussion with our respondents, they related to the high-level communication they receive about sustainability in the company, which helped set the ground for the insights we were searching for. This first theme refers to how, in both companies, sustainability communication is strongly connected to internal brand communication.

The common aspect is that interviewees in both companies believe sustainability to be a very important part of the way Ørsted and Arla communicate their brand to the employees. An Ørsted employee working in Capacity Management states that *"Ørsted as a brand to me speaks sustainability"*, and several others attribute this to the rebranding from 2017. They explain that they would have a hard time thinking of the Ørsted brand as anything other than sustainable, especially due to the new company vision:

> *"Whenever someone is explaining something, the 'why' behind why we're doing something, you'll often see the sentence 'Let's create a world that runs entirely on green energy' embedded there."* (Agile Processes employee)

Despite the very different industry Arla operates in, respondents here also believe that sustainability is an important part of their vision: creating the future of dairy to bring health and inspiration to the world, naturally. Many respondents show good knowledge of the company's

sustainable processes, with one employee working in Global Marketing mentioning: *"we're not only looking at our products [...] it means everything from the cow to the consumer"*.

One employee working with Change Communication emphasizes how the vision permeates through all the projects and products in the company:

> *"It has to appeal to one of the three elements: to design the future of dairy, somehow it needs to be natural or be for our farmer owners. This is very very important for everyone in Arla."*

We can however conclude that this correlation between sustainability and brand communication is stronger in Ørsted. The rebirth as a completely green energy company allowed it to include sustainability in all the corporate communication targeted for employees in a way that feels natural. The following quote from an employee in Agile Processes explains this very well:

> *"It is something that is embedded in everything we do, just like in all our official meetings. It's not something we necessarily make a big deal of, I think also because we want it to be something we are constantly, maybe even semi-unconsciously thinking about, and take into consideration, more than something you put in your to-do list..."*

In Arla however, we noticed that sustainability communications and brand communications are perceived as more separated. The Arla employees consider sustainability to be an important strategic goal. One employee working in Agile Processes paints a clear picture of the differentiation of sustainability communication internally:

> *"There's two different things on filtering these articles. For example there's different articles very much set on small slices of the strategy, of the sustainability strategy, so they're split."*

4.2.2 Channels for internal sustainability communication

In assessing the channels used for communicating sustainability internally, the top two responses at both Ørsted and Arla were the intranet platform and management town halls. Although these channels are generally regarded as one-way communication, employees seem to agree that these kinds of news and updates about the sustainability journey should be communicated as such. The main sender entity on the intranet platforms in both cases is identified to be the corporate communication department in collaboration with the sustainability department. Below are some quotes focused on this aspect:

"I would say our Intranet [is the most important channel]. We also have town halls where the Executive Committee talks and also local town halls, like one for IT [...] where someone physically talks." (Information Management employee in Ørsted)

"We have this internal Intranet where we have different articles, and we have the communication straight from the CFO or CEO, and of course they talk in broader terms, but there's articles set for each of these topics." (Agile Processes employee in Arla)

Other mentioned channels are internal inspirational talks and peer-to-peer communication, as well as the enterprise social network Yammer.

"Another example was a workshop on the impact of offshore wind farms on marine mammals. I guess the share of sustainability related meetings overall is quite large. So someone forwards an invitation to a workshop or to an internal seminar and so it happens that quite a bit out of it is about sustainability." (Regulatory Affairs employee in Ørsted)

"[we are working on] implementing sustainability initiatives like building up a community and Teams channels and inviting for presentations around different topics, that touch on what's our role, what can we do, how can we get inspired by others." (Regional Exporting employee in Arla)

In Ørsted, several respondents point out the company CEO as being very vocal in this matter on Yammer, and doing so in an informal way that differentiates it from the corporate style of the intranet articles:

"I think the CEO is quite focused on that. He's doing that on his own Yammer channel, it's like the internal twitter." (Reporting and Forecasting employee)

In Arla we were made aware of a tool called CalTalk, where live discussions and Q&A sessions with senior management are held on different sustainability topics. One respondent in Group Strategy shares positive opinions about this:

"I don't think it's revolutionary in any way but I think that concept works well because it's interactive and also live, which means people seem to prioritise it quite a lot."

4.2.3 The effectiveness of the communication channels

This section will present how efficient, accessible and clear employees in Ørsted and Arla consider the internal communication they receive about sustainability. While some opinions, needs and suggestions were similar in the two cases, we also identified several differences. Below

we are presenting our findings by dividing them into three categories: centrally-distributed communication, cascaded communication and lateral communication.

Before presenting the first category, there is one overall aspect we want to mention that surfaced in almost all our interviews. The access to information, regardless of whether it is coming from a central point, via management or through more informal channels, depends highly on the employee's personal interest and willingness to find information. This can be on the company's intranet, like one Human Resources employee in Ørsted states: *"if you're interested in something I think the information is out there, it's available"*. One respondent in Arla's Global Marketing department also mentions a recent ambassador program for employees interested in learning new ways to reduce their carbon footprint: *"It's of course voluntary but it's just an example of how this almost wants to become a culture"*.

Centrally-distributed communication

The perception of all respondents on the amount of sustainability communication is that it is enough. Some add that more communication would not be desirable as it would lead to information overload and an inability to include it in their busy schedules. In both companies, several respondents emphasized the room for improvement in the balance between form and content. This would allow them to understand the information better and also to be reached easier. A Human Resources employee in Ørsted explains:

> *"The information is there but how do you make sure people are using that information? And I don't think that's by pushing more and more content… then it's kinda overwhelming, then you don't even know where to start and you see there's so much choice and you're like I dunno, I'd rather not even watch any of it."*

In Arla, one interviewee from Group Strategy shares this thought:

> *"The question is whether we're really using the channel to get close to people. I actually think we have the content, it's more whether we are using the right channels […] Is an old school intranet really the right way going forwards? How do you get that message across in a way that… a person is bombarded with information everyday, so it's a bit tricky."*

Other than the quantity and style of the communication on sustainability, our interviewees also mention the most efficient media in their opinion. In Ørsted, several employees talk about motivational videos as having the most impact. A respondent working in the Agile department exemplified this:

> *"We had a video that more or less tells the 'why' of why we're here, so what lies behind Let's create a world that runs entirely on green energy, and Love your home. In that video*

you will see people being thoughtful of the environment and how we can take care of nature, and it's a voice over of people taking care of our world."

The topic of 'nudging' also comes up in several interviews, and we concluded that this is used more in Ørsted than in Arla. In Ørsted, many respondents mention small initiatives in their daily work life, such as stickers in the bathrooms encouraging people to use less paper towels, or listing plant based lunch options on top of the menu in the company canteen. An employee that works in Reporting and Forecasting elaborates on this:

"Not patronising people with communication is super important, and making the sustainability communication less in your face. [...] especially to people who feel they can't make these sustainable choices, and they feel guilty and judged. Just making the whole communication very positive, instead of saying this is so bad if you do this, it's a lot nicer if you say that Hey this is a nice way to reduce your carbon footprint, and it's not too difficult, just try it."

In Arla, one employee in Change Communication points out that this would be an improvement in making the communication about sustainability a bigger part of the employees' lives:

"I think we need to specify, regardless of what position you have and which department you're in, there are some basic things we can all do, not only in our work but also in our private life. And Arla could try to nudge this behaviour, so I think that's what's missing."

One final aspect that we find interesting in terms of centrally distributed communication is that in Arla, due to the major efforts since the new sustainability strategy in 2019, the position of a sustainability change manager has been created, together with a team of sustainability change agents. As one respondent from Regional Exporting mentions

"I think there's a central workgroup that decides what to focus on and what needs to be cascaded down in the organisation and make sure the sustainability change agents organise events and workshops to inspire people to get more excited about sustainability in their daily job."

Cascade communication

The involvement of managers in the internal communication on sustainability was discussed in both companies. Although we could see a slightly bigger role for them in Ørsted than in Arla, this was still very limited. In terms of employees feeling comfortable bringing up their thoughts on sustainability communication to their manager, we received conflicting answers in both Ørsted and Arla, and concluded this varies greatly from team to team.

We also noticed that the respondents in our study who are themselves in charge of employees consider their role an important one, as they are the 'last link' to the individual employees. This was present in Ørsted, as exemplified by a leader working in IT:

> *"My level here, which is the lowest management level, we are the ones touching the most employees you could say. [...] maybe more guidance on how to adapt to the employees, meaning how do you make it relevant for them? They know me so if I'm saying something, that will give them another feeling or sense of importance than if just my manager or my manager's manager does that."*

We have a similar quote from an Arla strategy manager:

> *"[sustainably adjusted ROI business calculations] is also something the individual employee needs to do differently and that comes from the line manager. So in that sense the main communication channel when it becomes a bit more tangible is the manager close to you."*

Lateral communication

The respondents identified different opinions on the use of the 'office grapevine' in both companies. Almost all of them state that sustainability values are something that is being discussed in informal settings, especially the 'water cooler talk' that was easier to engage in before the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the insights we got into this interaction between colleagues were *"a lot of it starts up as coffee talk, saying Hey, you should talk to this and that guy…"* or *"I talked to some colleagues about how we can include sustainability in the recruitment process and also in business development"*.

However, for many of them this is where it ends. Some of the respondents in Ørsted point to an employee-driven channel dedicated to sustainability on the internal platform Yammer. It became clear from our interviews that not all employees are aware of its existence or that it could be a contact point on the topic of sustainability. We talked with one member of this community, who mentioned that people's personal involvement is crucial in this, and that it is mainly a place for employees who think Ørsted can, and should, do more in their sustainability journey, both internally and externally:

> *"A lot of people have done that [joined the community] without having any resources, so they're sneaking an hour here and stealing an hour there and that makes sense. It's also some sort of selection mechanism, if you're willing to find that hour then you're welcome."*

In Arla's case we did not get any direct input from members of informal sustainability-focused communities, but several showed awareness of such platforms on Teams or on the Arla intranet.

We also noticed a common perception that success stories and role models, either from the business or from other peers, seem to work especially well for Arla employees. This was the first thought for many of them regarding the most efficient ways to bridge the Arla brand, their sustainability objectives and the person's own involvement in this journey. One respondent working in Human Resources gives such an example of an internal inspirational session that can be considered peer-to-peer communication:

> *"I just listened to one of these inspirational sessions where an employee from the UK talked about how she's trying to reduce waste and she has a family with two children and they created this whole session about it. [...] So I think it's also a bit of a grassroot thing, that these guys who work with it find other guys that are really passionate about the topic and they also take these private discussions and they make something out of it."*

Another powerful example comes from an interviewee in Change Communications, for whom the direct relation with the Arla owners, namely the farms, has the biggest impact:

> *"For example we visited a farm and in that farm, the farmer, I think he is a genius man. He was showing us all the things he does to use all the resources of his farm. He'd say these crops I give to the cows in the summer, but then what is left by the cows I use to make energy and then their poop goes to produce biogas. [...] He really thought it very round and he became very sustainable and he also thought about small things, like in the future I want to use this and that for water and so on. And I'm sure he's not the only example."*

These role model examples are not as clear in the Ørsted interviews, but one respondent did mention an internal competition initiative in the company based on personal stories:

> *"We had this one phase where people were encouraged to post their own sustainability stories online on the intranet and it was really cool to hear about people who built insect hotels and people who just took the bike and changed that, someone started ordering this green foodbox with ugly vegetables, it was really cool way to not only have official communication but also have people share these things."*

Our findings underline the diversity of the communication channels and paths used in Ørsted and Arla for internal communication on sustainability. Our respondents mentioned several improvements that could benefit them in how internal communication is handled, but overall they all know where to find this information. In terms of bringing their own ideas and suggestions to the table, they all have different input about what the best route would be. Although they are all confident that their thoughts would be listened to and that finding the right person to approach would not be too difficult, in both companies there is a desire for a single point of contact that would make things easier.

4.3 Internal branding of sustainability

This second theme focuses on presenting data related to internal branding of sustainability. We will present the value alignment on sustainability that employees have with the corporate brand and their perceived personal role in the company's sustainability journey.

4.3.1 High alignment on sustainability awareness and corporate brand value

The term sustainability is a broad concept and open to much interpretation. As an ice-breaker to the interview we asked the respondents what sustainability means to them. A variety of explanations and definitions was the result. The content of the answers and the speed with which the explanations were given show that the level of awareness on sustainability among employees is high. Some focused on the environmental part, others talked about all three dimensions (economic, social, environmental) but most talked about moving forward in a way that does not affect future generations:

> *"Living a life in a way that makes sure to not overuse the planet's resources, to be mindful about your way of living and your way of consumerism."* (Reporting and Forecasting employee in Ørsted)

> *"Creating a world that is sustainable, that works in the long run, and in order for the world we live in to be sustainable in the long run we need to do a lot of things differently than we do now in terms of how we work, live, consume and travel."* (Group Strategy employee in Arla)

We also identified in all our respondents a deep alignment between these values and their own. They feel part of their companies' sustainability values first and foremost because these resonate with them. Some also mention that they could not work for these companies without this strong belief that correlates with their workplace. These attitudes can be seen in quotes such as *"I think it definitely correlates nicely with what I think about my own identity"* or *"I think it's really important both for me personally and in a work context"*.

In the case of Ørsted we find it very clear that, as mentioned in the previous section, the company's business model of producing renewable energy weighs heavily in people associating it with a sustainable brand. The explanations include *"we are a 360 degrees sustainability company"*, *"it's in our DNA"*, *"it's the whole strategy"* and *"our business format is intrinsically sustainable"*.

There is however one outlier in the response of an employee working directly with the business, in the Foundational Installation department, who has a more critical view on the alignment:

> *"We just happen to be sustainable, it's not the other way around. The business format is intrinsically sustainable and then we just happen to have a vision along the same lines, it's not like we had a vision and then transformed towards it. That's at least how I perceive it, although I don't think that's how they want us to see it."*

In Arla, employees do not necessarily see sustainability as an inherent part of the business, and this seems to mainly be due to them being aware that dairy production cannot be a fully sustainable endeavour, at least at the present moment. As one employee in Human Resources explains:

> *"We are a dairy company, which can never be CO2 neutral. We do everything we can to become CO2 neutral through other initiatives."*

However, every single employee considers that Arla is making huge efforts to include sustainability in its strategy and practices, and they see it as a priority on all fronts. The following is mentioned by an employee in Group Strategy:

> *"[I am working on] defining a new five-year strategy, looking at all kinds of trends with sustainability being one of the most primary ones. [...] We're looking at what the vision tells us as an overall direction and what we should do to live up to it."*

4.3.2 The employee's role

The second topic under internal branding on sustainability is the employees' perception of their own role in the company's sustainability journey, and how this is being communicated and explained to them. The results varied greatly in both companies, and we could not find any causation based on work profile or seniority level. Almost all respondents make it clear in a definitive way that they are aware and well-informed of their role in Ørsted's and Arla's vision and sustainability objectives.

> *"I think my role is pretty much supporting the overall role that we have in HR, so to make sure that we attract and retain the talent that can support this vision."* (Human Resources employee in Ørsted)

> *"It's part of my everyday work because I have lots of packaging projects and some are initiated as a consequence of these [sustainability] policies. Implementing new formats, for example with lower footprint, that reduce plastic, communicating about the content of recycled glass and aluminium and so on."* (Global Marketing employee in Arla)

However, the more the conversation continued on this topic and the respondents became more and more engaged in telling their story, two aspects became clear. The first is that, despite these positive attitudes, there are no clear expectations from them about how their individual role can contribute to the company's sustainability objectives, either from a personal or work-related perspective. The quotes below show this belief:

> *"We have these statements, stronger people stronger planet, but how do I as an individual contribute to this? That's not clear. So we have to talk about it."* (Human Resources employee in Arla)

> *"I have been hugely lucky that I have a manager that supports me in this and lets me do things that are really not part of either mine or the department's description. Sustainability has been a separate part in my development plan. It's not in my job description. I'm not even sure I know what my job description is."* (Foundation Installation employee in Ørsted)

The second important aspect we noticed is that the deeper our respondents get into the operational aspect of Ørsted and Arla, the more ambiguous their personal involvement becomes. Some suggestions around this aspect are *"make it tangible and be specific about what is the effect today and in the future"* or *"make it more clear how certain actions contribute to the strategy and thereby to the sustainability vision"*.

Almost everyone makes a clear wish for the sustainability objectives to become more operational and tangible, and even measurable. Our Ørsted interviewee in Foundation Installation explained:

> *"I would first make it a KPI of every manager to work with sustainability. Because some of these guys and women won't do it unless they're rewarded for it, I would make it mandatory."*

Another similar suggestion came from a Group Strategy employee in Arla:

> *"We need to tie it somehow to each role, each function. And then bring it down to a point where you in your role understand how you contribute to the greater good. And that's what I think right now is not visible. [...] I think that 90% feel like that's something that needs to take place in a different area than where they're sitting in."*

Between the two companies, we concluded that in Arla people are slightly more aware of their participation to the company's sustainability objectives, and this is in large part attributed to the sustainability strategy implemented in 2019, which seems to be a guiding star that many of our interviewees keep referring back to. Several of the interviewees make it clear how they take their job one step further in order to implement sustainability day to day, even if it's not expected of them. One respondent in Human Resources mentions:

"We don't bring folders anymore [to career events], we want to try with QR codes. [...] I kinda went in with my idea about not bringing folders anymore. So it wasn't Arla telling me about it, it was my personal drive for sustainability combined with my knowledge about sustainability being important for Arla."

4.4 Brand commitment

The third and last theme focuses on presenting data about the way that employees feel about and act upon the internal communication on sustainability and branding. This was visible in respondents expressing how their company's communication relates to them. The main topics under this theme are a clear sense of pride in the brand, a feeling of contributing to a larger cause, and voluntary engagement.

4.4.1 A sense of pride

One of the recurring statements from all respondents when asked to relate to their employer as a sustainable brand was a great sense of pride. In the case of Ørsted this comes through clearly due to the company's business activity in the domain of green energy, which is an important piece in the global fight against climate change. One respondent working in Human Resources mentions:

"I'm really proud of working at this company where I see myself contributing to more than just the profit. So it's something that I think the whole society is benefitting from."

In the case of Arla, pride in working here is just as high, with an employee in Agile Processes sharing the following:

"It gives you a really good feeling that Arla is looking after the environment and cares about sustainability. It's a global trend and I'm happy we jumped on it quite fast and we're very reactive to it and we also have high ambitions to reach these goals."

When thinking about informal conversations about sustainability they have at their workplace or in their private lives, two aspects are highlighted. The first is that about half of the respondents in each company engage in this behaviour with their personal network. The Ørsted employees mostly do so from a business perspective, as one Regulatory Affairs employee states:

"...when I discuss it outside I use it more like a case study [...] Depending on the person I talk to they find it quite good or even partially boring. [...] so if I talk about Ørsted and its values I would mostly talk about it from that business lens."

In Arla our data shows that these conversations are more defensive, and people take the stand of explaining the good that Arla is doing in an industry that is overall considered on the bad side of environmental protection. One employee working in Global Marketing explains:

> *"Dairy is a favourite target for everything from documentaries to social media, so I do engage with friends, bringing the view from the other side. I think it's more about putting all the arguments very objectively on the table to be honest."*

The second aspect of these conversations that can be seen in both companies is that even the most arduous and committed people consider that preaching to others – inside the company and out – does not work and is not the right way to engage people. The goal should be a common ground based on facts, so that those around them can make their own informed decisions.

> *"If you're too radical then people don't see your actions as feasible for themselves. But if you find a balance you can say that I'm not sustainable all the time and I make my conscious choices, then they think Hey, that's something I can do."* (Reporting and Forecasting employee at Ørsted)

> *"I don't like to convince others of something they already believe in, if you're a vegan you probably already have your own assumptions and beliefs and I don't think it's my place to say No no you should eat dairy because I work in a dairy company."* (Change Communication employee at Arla)

The last example of pride in the workplace was exemplified through several strong cases of employer branding for the two companies. Some examples of this are *"sustainability is the main reason why I chose Ørsted"* or *"I think people even join Arla for this reason, so naturally you have people that have sort of the same interest or values"*. However, in both cases, some of the respondents debated whether this should be a hiring criteria as that may risk excluding highly talented candidates.

> *"It's not a company only for sustainability geeks like me, but also for people who just want to do a good job."* (Reporting and Forecasting employee at Ørsted)

> *"How do we include that in recruitment? Should we use that as a screening criteria? But it's really difficult because we also hire for potential right?"* (Human Resources employee at Arla)

4.4.2 Contributing to a bigger cause

During our discussions, without asking about this specifically, several employees mentioned that through their work at Ørsted and Arla they feel like they are contributing to a bigger cause.

Throughout the interviews we noticed that this is a stronger aspect in Ørsted, most likely due to energy production having a big impact on the environment at a large scale. This can be seen in the quotes below. e3q

> *"I want to have a career with impact and I believe that impact in sustainability is essential to so many things. [...] On the environmental front I feel like it's even more urgent to do something about it because we never had this point in time where we even threaten the existence of life on this planet."* (Regulatory Affairs employee at Ørsted)

> *"It's definitely a purpose that you get out of sustainability and that is always nice."* (Global Marketing employee at Arla)

One interesting aspect is that all interviewees show a deep understanding of the multiple facets of sustainability and of how this is handled at their workplace. Several respondents were keen to challenge whether the business model and activities are always the most efficient ones, and even stated that in some cases the goals could be even more ambitious. The quotes below explain that, and show that some of the employees have a very good knowledge of how sustainable their company's processes are.

> *"I think it comes more down to how do we do it? I mean is sorting trash the way forward? Now we have Renescience in Ørsted as a tryout, which is basically a hypothesis in saying that it's too old fashioned to sort trash locally because we have a sort of machinery doing it for us."* (Agile Processes employee in Ørsted)

> *"The way we produce milk here is five times more efficient than some places abroad in carbon emissions. Should we really feel bad or should we feel it as our duty to educate others and make them more sustainable in the way they produce dairy? [...] I'm really torn in terms of, like... what is my role and what is Arla's role in this sustainability game in dairy globally. I do think we are on a quite honest mission and have a role to play, but man it is going to be uphill and a long journey!"* (Regional Exporting employee in Arla)

4.4.3 Voluntary engagement

The last topic under the brand commitment theme is the employees' own engagement, to varying degrees. Our findings show that there is a dichotomy between 'big' and 'small' acts towards sustainability, both from a personal and a work perspective. Some respondents in both companies mostly point out choices in their private lives that they have control over and how this was influenced by their workplace and 'brought home'.

> *"Last year when I decided to get a car, I actually decided I wanted to get an electric car. So in that way of course Ørsted is paying my salary and it's possible to charge the car at*

the office, so I would definitely say it's a big plus because that also makes my life easier, so that's part of the decision that I took." (Human Resources employee in Ørsted)

"For example a few years back I was working on a project about flexitarianism and it was a big project set up around it, and in a matter of months after working on that project I also started to make changes personally." (Global Marketing employee in Arla)

One commonality among the employees in this group is that they all felt like they could do more, but that the biggest obstacle in that sense is their personal lifestyle, be it having a family with small children or not being able to completely remove travel from their life.

The other group of respondents are the ones focused on larger scale actions. They strongly believe that their company should allocate their resources to more strategic initiatives that would have a much bigger environmental impact. The similarity we identified is that this input came from the employees working more closely with the business, as opposed to support functions.

"I would make it mandatory, do everything we can to include green options in our tenders. So the next time we bid for a Dutch or German wind farm we can do it more expensively or more green. So if they activate that option we should also have money to execute that. Because right now we have ideas but no money." (Foundation Installation)

"There are many things that are being procured for a company like Arla and if you manage that 2% better it could make a big impact. Instead of trying to make everybody super excited to separate waste, spend time elsewhere on things that have more impact to focus on. But it's easier for some people to pick low hanging fruits." (Regional Exporting)

What is clear from most respondents' input was that even though some personal decisions – such as buying an electric car – were partially influenced by their workplace, the same cannot be said about their mindset in this regard, as most of them already had this commitment when they started working there. Some employees do however mention that the high exposure to climate change topics has taught them how to engage in these personal behaviours in a more effective way:

"That process was completed before. I just got new ideas and found a balance of not being too radical." (Reporting and Forecasting employee in Ørsted)

"[Working here] underlined the importance of sustainability, not just for me individually but also for different workplaces. So it just made the feeling of prioritising sustainability even stronger." (Human Resources employee in Arla)

4.5 Overview of findings

To finalise this chapter and before we move on to the analysis and discussion, we have summarised our most important findings in the table below.

Table 2. Overview of findings

THEME	FINDINGS
4.2 Internal communication on sustainability	
4.2.1 Sustainability communication as part of brand communication	At Ørsted the sustainability communication is perceived as embedded in the brand communication. At Arla, sustainability communication is mainly perceived as separate from the brand communication.
4.2.2 Channels for internal sustainability communication	The most dominant channels in both Ørsted and Arla are the intranet and management town halls. Other mentioned channels are: workshops, internal social networks (e.g. Yammer), inspirational talks, live discussions with Q&A.
4.2.3 The effectiveness of the communication channels	The perception in both Ørsted and Arla is that there is plenty of communication, but the accessibility depends on the employee's willingness and interest to find it. Also, the balance between form and content can be improved.
Centrally-distributed communication	At both Ørsted and Arla the employees think there is a large amount of centrally-distributed communication and this can be difficult to digest. At Ørsted, nudging and motivational videos are considered to be effective.
Cascade communication	The involvement of managers in sustainability communication in both Ørsted and Arla is considered limited and the amount of cascade communication thus low.
Lateral communication	There is 'water cooler talk' in both Ørsted and Arla. At Ørsted there is an employee-driven internal sustainability platform that functions as a voluntary community. At Arla, success stories and role models are considered to be effective.

4.3 Internal branding of sustainability	
4.3.1 High value alignment between sustainability awareness and the corporate brand	There is high awareness of sustainability amongst the employees. At Ørsted sustainability is perceived as part of the corporate brand. At Arla sustainability is perceived as a strategic goal.
4.3.2 The employee's role	At both Ørsted and Arla employees explain their role in the company's sustainability journey well. However, there are no clear (formal) individual expectations (although in Arla employees are slightly more aware of their contribution). In both companies the employees would like the sustainability objectives to be translated to their personal roles to know how they can contribute.
4.4 Brand commitment	
4.4.1 A sense of pride	At both Ørsted and Arla sustainability is a clear reason for the employees to feel proud of working for their employer.
4.4.2 Contributing to a bigger cause	Sustainability is, at both Ørsted and Arla, making the employees feel like they are contributing to a bigger cause and giving them purpose.
4.4.3 Voluntary engagement	In both Ørsted and Arla employees are showing voluntary engagement. There is a dichotomy between small acts (e.g. recycling) and big acts (e.g. trying to make a big impact inside the business).

5.   Analysis and discussion

This chapter provides an analysis and discussion of the findings we presented in the previous chapter. We will answer the research questions by dividing the analysis into four parts. First we will look at how sustainability and branding is communicated to employees (section 5.1). Then we will analyse how employees perceive this communication (section 5.2), followed by how they act upon it (section 5.3). Finally, we will reconnect to the purpose of this research by presenting a final framework (section 5.4).

5.1 Effective internal communication on sustainability

The empirical data provides good insight into how Ørsted and Arla communicate internally about sustainability and how it is connected to internal branding. Based on the findings, the analysis of this theme will present effective internal communication on sustainability.

5.1.2 Sustainability communication as part of brand communication

Guided by our framework, we start this theme by analysing the relationship between sustainability communication and internal branding. The findings suggest that in both companies there is a strong connection between sustainability communication and internal brand communication. This is consistent with the findings of prior research (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Biedenbach & Manzhynski, 2016; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005) that demonstrate the importance of internal branding for successful implementation of sustainability within the company.

However, we observed a difference in employee perception between Ørsted and Arla when looking closer at this connection. At Ørsted, the sustainability communication is perceived as embedded in the brand communication. The interviewees could not give any examples of one without the other. At Arla, the sustainability communication is mainly perceived as separate from the brand communication, and we noticed that in most cases employees could categorise the communication as part of one or the other. The difference in perception can be explained by looking at the way that sustainability has been implemented in the company. Since Ørsted's transformation in 2017, their business model is intrinsically sustainable. Being a renewable

energy company with the mission to "create a world that runs entirely on green energy" (Ørsted, 2021b n.p.), sustainability is the core of the brand and that is reflected in all the brand communication. There is thus a strong fit between the sustainability objectives and the business, as advised by Knox and Maklan (2004) and Freeman (1984). Arla, being a dairy farmer cooperative, has had a different and slightly slower journey in integrating sustainability in its practices. They have set a more concrete plan in 2019, creating ambitious targets and implementing sustainability in their entire value chain, which internally they refer to as 'from cow to consumer'. Their integration of sustainability exemplifies the implementation framework by Kumar and Christodoulopoulou (2014), which suggests the order should be strategy, operation, marketing and branding. Consistent with the framework, the Arla employees perceive sustainability as a strategic goal. They do recognise brand sustainability associations (Miller & Merrilees, 2013), but unlike Ørsted employees they do not see it as embedded in their corporate brand. Perhaps the word 'yet' could be added here, as they are only two years into their sustainability journey. Returning to their perception of sustainability communication with the implementation in mind, it seems logical that at this point in time they mainly perceive it separate from brand communication. In following Yin's (2018) criticism of case studies, by mentioning the difference between the two companies, we are being aware that these cases must be looked at contextually. We are confident that this adds to the meaning and rigour of our data.

Based on the findings, there is no indication whether the integration of sustainability communication in the brand communication makes a notable difference in receptiveness or effectiveness. This is, on a broader level, consistent with existing literature (Knox & Maklan, 2004; Kumar & Christodoulopoulou, 2014; Sheth & Sinha, 2015; Werther & Chandler, 2005) that indicates that sustainability and branding are connected, but there are different ways for effective implementation. Based on our findings, we can argue that a business model that is strongly rooted in sustainability enables a company to integrate sustainability fully in the corporate brand. For companies that add sustainability practices to their existing business model, the journey to integrate it in the corporate brand is longer and harder.

5.1.3 Forms of internal communication on sustainability

Looking at the different forms of internal communication on sustainability, the findings indicate that there is a combination of central, cascade and lateral communication in both our cases, which is consistent with Burmann and Zeplin's (2005) model for internal communication. We will discuss each of the three communication forms separately.

Central communication

The two most mentioned channels in both companies were the intranet and town hall meetings. Both are part of central communication, which is important for sharing current information and

creating awareness (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). The findings suggest that the consequence of using the intranet as a dominant channel for sustainability communication is that the findability of the information depends on the employee's interest and willingness to search for it. In the literature this is referred to as the pull principle (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). The benefit of using the pull principle is avoiding overloading employees with information. In both companies this information overload was mentioned as a potential danger, as employees considered their daily jobs to be very busy. Mainly using the pull principle was therefore perceived as the right choice. The employees were satisfied with the total amount of central internal communication on sustainability and the general perception was that it should not be more in quantity, but might be improved in quality. This suggests that more customized messages to selective employee groups, especially in push communication, could add value (Biedenbach & Manzhynski, 2016; Kataria, Kataria & Garg, 2013; Welch & Jackson, 2007). Segmentation can for example be based on level of involvement. According to Biedenbach and Manzhynski's (2016) study, who separate employees based on their level of brand commitment and sustainability support, there should be customized communication for sustainability laggards, sustainability followers and sustainability leaders. Committed sustainability followers already have a high level of awareness but need to be actively involved in sustainability practices, while committed sustainability leaders need to be motivated that their actions are in line with the company's goals. None of our interviewees could be categorised as uncommitted sustainability laggards, and they also could not identify such attitudes in their colleagues. It is worth mentioning however that this might be an effect of our sampling strategy, which made it easier for employees who are actively involved in this topic to participate, at the expense of those with a more neutral or negative perspective.

The management town halls, also part of central communication, are referred to in the literature as interactive communication (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). We noticed that the direct contact with business leaders was very much appreciated by all employees. This supports the findings of Welch and Jackson (2007), who emphasize that face to face meetings are of great importance in the internal communication strategy. Combined with the presence of high business leaders, who are in charge of creating commitment through the entire organisation (Werther & Chandler, 2005), this makes town hall meetings an important strategic tool to communicate about sustainability.

The employees also referred positively to business leaders being vocal about sustainability on internal channels (e.g. Yammer) as well as external social platforms (e.g. LinkedIn and Twitter). This supports Werther and Chandler's (2005) findings that leaders have an important role in creating sustainability awareness through a dialogue with the organisation. The internal social channel was perceived as a very accessible platform for this dialogue. In Arla, a great combination of live engagement and leadership was facilitated through CalTalks, a tool where senior management sessions were held, followed by direct Q&A's with the employees. According to Collier and Esteban (2007), these live channels enable leaders to bridge the company's vision

and the culture, which then translates positively into employees 'living' these sustainability values.

In central communication, apart from the pull principle and interactive communication, companies can also apply the push principle where communication is centrally distributed, regardless of whether employees receive it (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Our findings in Ørsted suggest that push communication such as videos – and more specifically motivational videos – are perceived as most effective by the employees. They consider it to have more (emotional) impact as opposed to written materials. It is interesting to note here that the videos they were referring to were often produced for external purposes, but made a big impact internally.

Cascade communication

Moving on to cascade communication, which is hierarchically passed on down in the organisation (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005), the findings suggest that this form of communication plays a much smaller role for sustainability. The employee perception in both companies is that the amount of communication on sustainability coming via their managers is almost nonexistent. During our literature review, we identified researchers who advise on management's involvement when communicating internally about sustainability (Werther & Chandler, 2005; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006), and were thus surprised to find it so limited in our case companies, given that the employees' reported understanding and awareness was high. The middle managers considered themselves, as the direct link to the employees, important role models when it comes to sustainability. However, they also stated that to be able to make sustainability values or objectives relevant in every employee's role, more guidance was necessary. The importance of their role as an integrating force between the corporate brand and the employees is emphasized by Vallaster and de Chernatony (2006). The findings suggest that the lack of cascade sustainability communication and the limited involvement of managers in sustainability communication is explainable by the absence of a translation of sustainability to each individual role. This touches upon an important theme that emerged during the research and will be discussed in the next section.

Lateral communication

The third form of communication, lateral, represents the informal communication between employees no matter their position in the company. This peer-to-peer communication is considered the most powerful form of internal communication to generate brand commitment, but also the hardest to control (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). The employees of both companies refer to 'water cooler talk' or 'coffee machine chats' about sustainability, but the COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably reduced this to a minimum. At Ørsted there is a lateral employee-driven sustainability initiative on the internal social platform Yammer. It functions as a voluntary community, which people can join if they are interested and can find the time. Monthly meetings are hosted by an employee who is very passionate about sustainability and whose manager allows

them to spend time on this regardless of it not officially being part of their role. This sustainability initiative is an uncontrolled channel (Welch & Jackson, 2007) from the company's perspective.

At Arla, employees pointed out success stories and role models as effective lateral communication. They gave several examples of being inspired by colleagues and farmers sharing their stories in different communication channels. This supports Burmann and Zeplin's (2005) suggestion that storytelling is a promising approach to convey brand identity. Their view on storytelling combined with our findings suggests that storytelling is a powerful and effective way to generate brand commitment because of the combination of it being lateral but still controllable by the company.

Not recognised by Burmann and Zeplin (2005), but based on our findings, we consider bottom-up communication also an important part of lateral communication. The employee perception in both companies was that if they had an idea on anything sustainability-related in the company, they would probably be very welcome to speak up, but the route to do so was unclear. Some of the thoughts on this included their direct leader, the sustainability department or the strategy department. Our findings are consistent with Kataria, Kataria and Garg's (2013) suggestion that even employees with high awareness of sustainability initiatives need pragmatic communication in order to be encouraged to share their ideas.

Nudging

One last mention that we cannot fit into any of Burmann and Zeplin's (2005) categories and has no basis in our literature review is nudging, which was mentioned repeatedly in Ørsted, and suggested in Arla. Nudging communication is based on behavioural science and aims at influencing people's behaviour in a passive way, either through rewards or punishments (French, 2011). Although it was not present in our literature review, nudging communication is an established concept. Studies have shown that nudging initiatives can have behavioural effects on people in acting more sustainably, especially in terms of policies and other high-level regulations (Lehner, Mont & Heiskanen, 2016). The employees in our study considered small nudging initiatives, such as stickers encouraging using less paper towels in the bathroom, to be an effective and even 'fun' message that reinforced the power of small acts. They were not aware whether this was organised by a central communication department or an individual team, but they generally considered it a good idea to be used more often in the future. In line with Lehner, Mont and Heiskanen's (2016) findings, placing certain food items at the top of a menu is a highly efficient method of reducing meat consumption, and this was recognised by employees in Ørsted as such. It is generally agreed that nudging works best when it is aimed at intuitive or automatic actions, and when it offers an incentive to the user, such as social or psychological (French, 2011).

5.2 A relevant sustainability role for employees

The second recurring theme in the findings was the employees' perception of their role in the company's sustainability journey based on the communication they received and the alignment between the employee and the corporate brand. We will first discuss the alignment, followed by the employee role.

5.2.1 Vision and culture alignment on sustainability

There is a high awareness of sustainability amongst the employees in both companies, in terms of the organisation's efforts as well as their own interpretation of the subject in a broader scope. The employees are knowledgeable about the company's vision and sustainability objectives, and also able to explain what it means for them on a more personal level. The findings on high awareness in both companies suggest that sustainability is rooted in the corporate culture. Maon, Lindgreen and Swaen (2009) identify this as an important requirement for a strong sustainability performance, because employees are the primary internal stakeholders (Freeman, 1984). Our findings further suggest that the employees of both companies consider themselves part of the company's sustainability journey. Some employees refer to sustainability as also being very important for them personally. At Ørsted, our data shows that some employees even joined the company for that reason. This is in line with previous research stating that strong corporate brands use their brand values as an attractive element in recruitment (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Davies & Chun, 2002; Tarnovskaya, Elg & Burt, 2008; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006). We observed different degrees of sustainability involvement amongst the employees (Biedenbach & Manzhynski, 2016; Vallaster, Lindgreen & Maon, 2012), but the lowest observed level can be described as followers of the sustainability journey.

These findings suggest a high alignment between the vision and culture of Hatch and Schultz's (2001) vision-culture-image model (figure 2) and a good interplay between the strategic vision and organisational culture (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006), which can partly explain the high brand performance of both companies. Employees are a vital factor in bridging the gap between vision and culture. In the case of Ørsted and Arla, respondents state that these two elements are connected through the everyday life at the office, where sustainability is embedded in their work and regular communication. According to Vallaster and de Chernatony (2006), this translates into brand-supporting behaviours. In the next theme we will elaborate on how this leads to brand citizenship behaviour.

5.2.3 The employee's role in the company's sustainability journey

With good value alignment in place, it is no surprise that the employees in both cases were easily able to describe their role in the company's sustainability journey. This is consistent with Vallaster and de Chernatony's (2006) findings that employees not only need to be convinced of the meaning of the brand, but also of their role in its success. The explanations varied greatly as some employees worked practically with sustainability on a daily basis (e.g. packaging of Arla products) and others worked in supporting functions (e.g. IT) that only had a secondary connection to sustainability. However, digging deeper into this topic, the general employee perception was that there are no clear (formal) sustainability expectations when it comes to their role. The ways they were trying to contribute were voluntary and done in a way of which they thought would be appreciated and matching with the company's objectives. Our findings reveal the desire of the employees for the company's sustainability objectives to be translated into their roles and be made more clear, tangible and relatable.

The lack of this translation to individual roles can partly explain the limited involvement of managers in the (cascade) communication of sustainability. When tasks become more tangible, the main communication channel is the manager close to the employee, but with these tasks formally missing, the communication is also absent. Previous research by Vallaster and de Chernatony (2012) emphasises the importance of the active role of managers during the brand building process to translate the brand's promise into action. Thomson and Hecker's (2000) findings stress the importance of not just focusing on the intellectual buy-in (awareness and alignment with the company's objectives), but also on the emotional buy-in (engaging employees and building commitment by giving them a concrete role in reaching the objectives). This can be achieved by effectively communicating about their role in the bigger picture. Our findings show an inconsistency on this front and this suggests a missed opportunity for an even better sustainability performance and stronger corporate brand. By connecting the company's sustainability objectives and the employee's job, individual responsibility will be enabled (Kataria, Kataria & Garg, 2013). This will be in line with the employees' wish to contribute in a practical way and will give them a stronger position in the company's sustainability journey.

5.3 Sustainability as a driver for internal brand commitment

In this third and last theme we will analyse how employees act upon the sustainability communication. There are several clues in the data that sustainability leads to internal brand commitment, which drives brand citizenship behaviour. It is important to note that brand commitment cannot be measured in qualitative research. However, we could not ignore the

recurring topics about brand commitment in our findings. Inevitably, they will all need further research to make definitive conclusions.

5.3.1 Brand citizenship behaviour

An important construct in the internal brand management theory by Burmann and Zeplin (2005) is brand citizenship behaviour. They argue that brand citizenship behaviour is made up by seven employee behaviours supporting the brand identity. Our findings include numerous examples of these behaviours which are specifically related to sustainability. Employees talked about sharing the attractiveness of their employer in their private lives (brand endorsement), taking responsibility for tasks outside of their job description (helping behaviour), upskilling themselves about sustainability (self-development), reflecting on brand impact in their actions (brand consideration) and generating ideas to contribute to the adaptation of the brand identity concept (brand advancement). This also coincides with what Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010) call brand-consistent intra-role or extra-role behaviours, which employees engage in voluntarily in the workplace and outside in order to support the brand image. The employee acts in our study range from small (e.g. recycling) to big (e.g. setting up an employee-driven sustainability platform). What drives these behaviours and acts, according to Burmann and Zeplin (2005), is brand commitment which can be explained as the psychological bond between the company and the employee.

Our findings suggest that for Ørsted and Arla, sustainability plays a key role in initiating employee behaviours that, multiplied, form brand citizenship behaviour. In other words, we observed sustainability as a positive influence on their willingness to voluntarily help the company reach their brand goals without this being formally expected of them. This shows what Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010) call high internal brand commitment and brand involvement, which are shown to have positive effects on corporate brand image.

5.3.2 Brand pride

By expressing it in words, but also by talking about the way they act, the employees of both companies displayed the feeling of pride to work for a sustainable brand. Brand pride emerged solely from our empirical data and has no basis in our literature review. It is a less explored construct, but recent findings from Helm, Renk and Mishra (2016) show that brand pride can positively affect brand citizenship behaviour. However, brand pride currently plays no role in the seven employee behaviours that Burmann and Zeplin (2005) describe. Our findings are consistent with Helm, Renk and Mishra's (2016) research and we share their suggestion to determine the role of brand pride in brand citizenship behaviour in further research.

5.3.3 Contributing to a bigger cause

The third and last recurring topic in our findings of both companies related to brand commitment is that working for a sustainable brand makes the employees feel that they are contributing to a bigger cause and this gives them a sense or purpose. Our findings suggest that this feeling is influenced by their broad understanding of sustainability, coupled with their own beliefs, and the increasing societal expectations. Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010) talk about internal brand knowledge, which refers to employees gaining knowledge and learning about the brand in a cognitive way. They also conclude that this stems from a culture where there is high internal brand involvement, which is also noticed in our data.

The employees expressed high demands from their employers in terms of sustainability actions. Several of them stated that they would not have joined a company where sustainability strategies are not at the forefront, and in the case of Arla some even mentioned that it was due time for such a large dairy producer to be involved in more sustainable practices. As presented in our literature review, Freeman (1984) mentions that an important factor in assessing employees' roles as stakeholders in a company is understanding the internal and external changes they are subject to. Although many of the sustainability objectives companies set are done in order to satisfy external stakeholders, the employees' role here is vital. They are themselves affected by societal trends, to an extent which translates in their workplace too. Several authors (Calabrese, Costa, Menichini & Rosati, 2013; Gadenne, Mia, Sands, Winata & Hooi, 2012; Silva, Nuzum & Schaltegger, 2019) state that employees and managers are often the most vocal stakeholders of sustainability practices, and those with the strictest demands.

This feeling of being part of something bigger, something important for the world, seems to motivate the employees to engage in brand citizenship behaviour. In their responses they often combine brand citizenship behaviour, pride and the sense of purpose, which assumes the three elements are interlinked. Based on our findings we can argue that the feeling of contributing to a bigger cause plays a role in establishing the positive connection between sustainability and brand commitment.

5.4 Final framework of analysis

The purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the interplay between sustainability and branding and of how internal communication contributes to the employees' perception of these concepts. The analysis enabled us to establish a positive connection between sustainability and brand commitment. Effective internal (brand) communication on sustainability plays a crucial role in the alignment of the employees with the corporate brand and in stimulating brand citizenship behaviour.

We have restructured the research framework to include the findings of this thesis and to visualise the relationship between them (figure 11). What remains from the research framework is the outer ring of employees and the position of strategic management in the middle. Between strategic management and the employees we have, based on our analysis, placed four constructs. Between the constructs we have placed four connectors that support the relations between them. It is important to note that the constructs are interchangeable and the connectors are interchangeable. The framework should be seen as a holistic model. Every construct and every connector plays a part in the bigger picture and all are relying on each other.
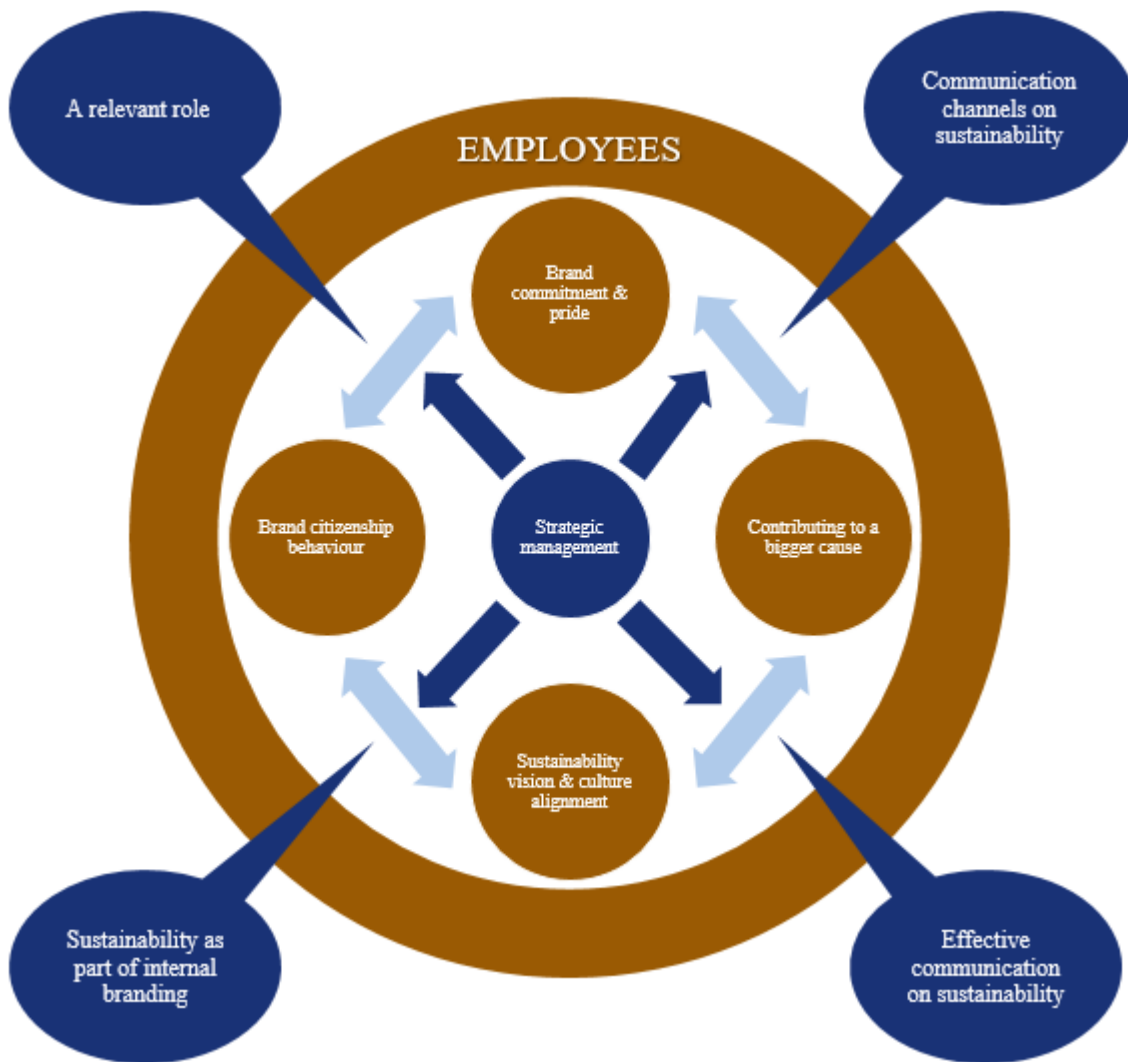
Figure 11: Final framework of analysis

We will start by explaining the four constructs in the framework. They represent important outcomes of our analysis. In random order they are: brand commitment and pride, contributing to a bigger cause, sustainability vision and culture alignment, and brand citizenship behaviour. They are all placed inside the employees' ring, as they are behaviours, feelings and desires that the

employees engage in as part of their role at Ørsted and Arla. The constructs can be explained as building blocks for the interplay between sustainability and internal branding.

The four connectors in the framework are drawn as arrows between the constructs. Their explanation can be found in the text clouds outside of the employee ring. In random order they are: effective communication on sustainability, sustainability as part of internal branding, a relevant role and communication channels on sustainability. The connectors also represent important outcomes of our analysis, but have a different role. They can be seen as requirements for the constructs and explained as forces that can weaken or strengthen the constructs. In their capacity to impact the constructs, it is the connectors strategic management can focus on. An example: by communicating effectively (connector) and giving employees a relevant role in the sustainability journey (connector) the sustainability vision & culture alignment (construct) and brand commitment & pride (construct) will be strengthened. Thus, by improving the connectors the constructs can be strengthened. Looking at the constructs as building blocks for the interplay between sustainability and branding, this strengthening can enable their integration.

6. Conclusion and contributions

This final chapter will conclude our study and investigate if the intended purpose is fulfilled and the research questions answered. We will also discuss the theoretical and managerial contributions and reflect upon implications as well as present suggestions for further research.

6.1 Conclusion

At a time when expectations for companies to act sustainably have skyrocketed, and they are increasingly integrating sustainability in all organisational layers, we started our work on this thesis with a desire to understand how this affects their corporate brand. A strong corporate brand is coherent and meaningful for all its stakeholders. It has a singular identity with core values that are rooted in the corporate culture. The sustainability transformation requires everybody that works for the company to understand their role and commit to it. Given the important role of internal communication to make this happen and the limited research on this front, we decided to study the internal communication of sustainability and branding from the perspective of the most important internal stakeholder: employees. In order to understand this at a deeper level, we also decided to focus on the effects of this communication on employees. Following a thorough literature review and creating our own theoretical framework, we conducted a qualitative multiple case study of the companies Ørsted and Arla, both leaders in sustainability and corporate branding. Having presented our findings and analysis in the previous chapters, we are ready to answer our research questions.

RQ1: How are sustainability and branding communicated to employees?

RQ2: How do employees perceive and act upon this communication?

Sustainability is increasingly communicated to employees as part of brand communication. Depending on the business model, the way that sustainability has been implemented in the company and the stage of implementation, sustainability can be perceived as fully integrated in internal brand communication or as separated but linked. For companies with an intrinsically sustainable business model, the integration is faster and easier than for companies that implement sustainability into their existing business model.

The internal (brand) communication of sustainability is a combination of three elements. First, *centrally* distributed communication weighs heavily in raising awareness and sharing current information. Employees argue for a focus on quality rather than quantity, using mostly pull communication and customising the push communication. Business leaders have an essential role in central communication by being vocal about the topic and raising awareness through interactive events with employees. Secondly, *lateral communication*, especially when uncontrolled, is important to increase employee trust and empowerment. Role modeling and sharing of success stories are effective in creating brand commitment. There is an employee desire to add a clear bottom-up route to lateral communication for sharing ideas or feedback on sustainability. Lastly, *cascade communication*, using management layers, is currently lacking. This can be explained by the absence of a translation of the sustainability goals to each individual employee role, which brings us to the second research question.

Based upon the internal (brand) communication, the employees showed high awareness of and alignment with the company's vision and sustainability objectives. Their perception is that they have a role in the company's sustainability journey. However, they revealed the desire to have a more relevant role that is translated from the company's sustainability objectives into their daily work. Enabling these more explicit individual contributions, with their managers acting as the translators, can significantly contribute to their brand commitment.

The employees act upon the internal (brand) communication by showing different behaviours that together can be classified as brand citizenship behaviour (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). It is brand commitment that drives these behaviours. Our study established a positive connection between sustainability and brand commitment. The feeling of contributing to a bigger cause plays a role in this connection.

Finally, effective internal (brand) communication is vital for raising awareness, creating a high alignment and brand commitment. High internal brand commitment is shown to strengthen the corporate brand (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). With sustainability identified as a positive influence on brand commitment, the integration of sustainability into the brand identity presents an opportunity for a strong corporate brand that lives up to urgent societal demands.

6.2 Theoretical contributions

The findings of this study contribute to the existing research on the connection between sustainability and corporate branding in organisations. Distinguishing our research by concentrating on the role of internal communication in this connection, we add to the understanding of an important and current topic. While we acknowledge that there is prior

research on the connection of internal communication, sustainability and branding, we believe that our study makes a valuable contribution to this field. With a multiple case study of Ørsted and Arla, we have provided an in-depth picture of two leading companies in sustainability and branding by putting our research phenomena in real-life context. The empirical data presents significant insights into the perception of employees about internal communication on sustainability.

We consider our research to contribute to Burmann and Zeplin's (2005) internal brand theory. By analysing the role of sustainability in relation to their model, we established a positive connection between sustainability communication and brand commitment. We are also suggesting two refinements to their theory. First, our findings show that lateral communication should also include clear routes for bottom-up channels. Otherwise, employees may feel confused or resort to methods that are inefficient for them and for their managers. Secondly we found that brand pride can positively affect brand citizenship behaviour. Brand pride currently plays no role in the seven employee behaviours that Burmann and Zeplin (2005) describe.

Finally, our findings support the increasing consensus in existing literature that implementing sustainability practices can lead to a stronger corporate brand if positive brand sustainability associations can be created. We participate in the debate about the most effective way of implementation by arguing that it is easier and faster for companies with an intrinsically sustainable business model to integrate sustainability in the corporate brand.

6.3 Managerial contributions

For the many companies that are implementing sustainability practices and connecting them with their corporate brand, this study has several takeaways. First, organisations should carefully reconsider their internal communication strategy when including sustainability. To engage employees, we advise a mix of central, lateral and cascade communication. In central communication there should be a focus on quality over quantity, using mostly pull communication and customising the push communication. Business leaders should be vocal on sustainability to raise awareness and interactive events with employees are recommended. Lateral communication should be allowed to run mostly uncontrolled. Managers should encourage employees to act as role models and share success stories, as both are effective in creating brand commitment. The bottom-up route, for employees with ideas or feedback on sustainability, should be specified.

The third communication mode, cascading from managers, is vital from many points of view. Our study showed the employees' desire to have a relatable role in the company's sustainability journey. Line managers should therefore have a proper understanding about how they can

contribute. If translating the company's sustainability goals into every employee's role is too big of a challenge, an alternative that can be considered as a stepping stone is to start by formulating goals for the team. Another result of our study is that employees are most aligned with the corporate brand when they feel as if they are part of a bigger cause through their work, which means organisations focused on sustainability should keep in mind 'the big picture', but translate it to each employee.

Finally, we can also draw conclusions from the identified differences between the cases of Ørsted and Arla. For companies whose business model is rooted in sustainable practices, the employees' perception of the integration of sustainability in the corporate brand comes more naturally. This enables the internal communication to be centred around sustainability without it seeming out of place. This poses the question: what about companies operating in industries that are traditionally not perceived as sustainable? Our advice here is two-fold. First, for any organisation that wants to integrate a comprehensive and company-wide change of strategy towards a sustainable future, the time is now. Second, while it is unrealistic to hope for an immediate shift in all employees' attitudes, the case of Arla shows that a few years are enough to bring most colleagues on a committed path towards the new journey, even if this is at its beginnings. If organisations are committed to their goals and approach them from a practical stance that is relatable to all employees, achieving an alignment between the corporate brand and sustainability practices is possible for all.

6.4 Limitations and further research

We made several limiting decisions in the structure of this research, which in turn leave room for further exploration on this subject. First, by adopting a qualitative methodology, we gathered in-depth data from a small number of employees on their perception of internal communication on sustainability. We examined only two companies, headquartered in Denmark, which prevents us from generalising the findings to other organisations. We also decided to focus on employees working at their headquarters, and a comparative study in some of the other countries that these two companies operate in could provide interesting contrasting insights. Future studies can explore the phenomenon in companies of different sizes, in different industries and countries, to help design local as well as global communication strategies. Considering the lack of cascade communication on sustainability in both our case companies, it would also be interesting to study a company that has already created relatable roles for all their employees to understand the effects.

Secondly, for the purpose of this study we decided to focus on the internal communication on sustainability from the perception of the employees and we have therefore only analysed the connection with the internal part of the corporate brand. It is important to note here that the

corporate brand is only successful when all its elements are aligned in a holistic manner, and therefore limiting to the employees' perception does not characterise the entire corporate brand. Future research could include the perception of other stakeholders like customers, suppliers or non-business actors such as NGOs and political groups..

Thirdly, we established a positive connection between sustainability and brand commitment, which in turn can lead to a stronger corporate brand. However, the qualitative nature of our research prevents us from measuring the degree of brand commitment. A quantitative study could gather input from a larger pool of respondents and research to which degree sustainability is driving brand commitment among employees. We encourage the inclusion of brand pride and the feeling of contributing to a bigger cause in this research.

Lastly, we propose further research on the use of nudging as a method for communicating about sustainability internally. This could include how nudging is perceived by employees, measurements on its efficiency or other suggestions on how it can improve awareness and behaviour on sustainability internally.

References

Alvesson, M. & Kärreman, D. (2007). Constructing Mystery: Empirical Matters in Theory Development, *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 32, no. 4, pp.1265–1281.

AmCham Denmark. (2021). Prime Minister Frederiksen to Address Leaders Summit on Climate, Available Online: https://amcham.dk/news/prime-minister-frederiksen-to-address-leaders-summit-on-climate/ [Accessed 29 April 2021].

Anthony, S. D., Trotter, A. & Schwartz, E. I. (2019). The Top 20 Business Transformations of the Last Decade, *Harvard Business Review*, Available Online: https://hbr.org/2019/09/the-top-20-business-transformations-of-the-last-decade [Accessed 5 May 2021].

Arla. (2021a). History, Available Online: https://www.arla.com/company/unser-unternehmen/history/ [Accessed 11 May 2021].

Arla. (2021b). All Our Brands, Available Online: https://www.arla.com/our-brands/all-our-brands/ [Accessed 11 May 2021].

Arla. (2021c). Corporate Sustainability Report 2020, Available Online: https://www.arla.com/492ee1/globalassets/arla-global/company---overview/responsibility/csr-reports/2020/en_csr_arla_2020.pdf [Accessed 11 May 2021].

Arla. (2021d). Arla Equates Climate with Financial Performance, Available Online: https://www.arla.com/company/news-and-press/2021/pressrelease/arla-equates-climate-with-financial-performance/ [Accessed 12 May 2021].

Arla. (2021e). Arla Wins Prestigious Danish CSR Award, Available Online: https://www.arla.com/company/news-and-press/2020/pressrelease/arla-wins-prestigious-danish-csr-award/ [Accessed 12 May 2021].

Arla. (2021f). Arla Recognised as Industry Leader in Prestigious Awards, *Arla Foods News*, Available Online: https://news.arlafoods.co.uk/news/arla-recognised-as-industry-leader-in-prestigious-awards [Accessed 12 May 2021].

Balmer, J. M. T. & Gray, E. R. (2003). Corporate Brands: What Are They? What of Them?, *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 37, no. 7/8, pp.972–997.

Banerjee, S. B. (2002). Corporate Environmentalism: The Construct and Its Measurement, *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 55, no. 3, pp.177–191.

Baumgarth, C. & Schmidt, M. (2010). How Strong Is the Business-to-Business Brand in the Workforce? An Empirically-Tested Model of 'Internal Brand Equity' in a Business-to-Business Setting, *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 39, no. 8, pp.1250–1260.

Baumgartner, R. J. (2014). Managing Corporate Sustainability and CSR: A Conceptual Framework Combining Values, Strategies and Instruments Contributing to Sustainable Development, *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, vol. 21, no. 5, pp.258–271.

Bednárik, J. (2019). Change of Paradigm in Personnel Strategy – Corporate Social Responsibility and Internal Communication, *Communication Today*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp.42–57.

Bell, E., Bryman, A. & Harley, B. (2019). Business Research Methods, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Biedenbach, G. & Manzhynski, S. (2016). Internal Branding and Sustainability: Investigating Perceptions of Employees, *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, vol. 25, no. 3, pp.296–306.

Bittner-Fesseler, A. & Weicht, J. (2020). Beyond Sustainability Communication: Sustainability-Integrated Corporate Communications, vol. 15, no. 1, pp.93–101.

Brand Finance. (2021). Food & Drink 2020 | The Annual Brand Value Ranking | Brandirectory, Available Online: https://brandirectory.com/reports/food-and-drink-2020 [Accessed 6 May 2021].

Bravo, R., Buil, I., de Chernatony, L. & Martínez, E. (2017). Managing Brand Identity: Effects on the Employees, *International Journal of Bank Marketing*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp.2–23.

Burmann, C. & Zeplin, S. (2005). Building Brand Commitment: A Behavioural Approach to Internal Brand Management, *Journal of Brand Management*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp.279–300.

Calabrese, A., Costa, R., Menichini, T. & Rosati, F. (2013). Does Corporate Social Responsibility Hit the Mark? A Stakeholder Oriented Methodology for CSR Assessment, *Knowledge & Process Management*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp.77–89.

Chambers, C. (2017). The Seven Deadly Sins of Psychology a Manifesto for Reforming the Culture of Scientific Practice, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Chandler, D. (2019). Strategic Corporate Social Responsibility, 5th edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Charmaz, K. (2006). Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis, [e-book] SAGE Publications, Available Online: http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/lund/detail.action?docID=585415 [Accessed 8 April 2021].

Climate Power. (2021). An Open Letter to President Biden, *Climate Power*, Available Online: https://climatepower.us/world-leaders/ [Accessed 6 May 2021].

Collier, J. & Esteban, R. (2007). Corporate Social Responsibility and Employee Commitment, *Business Ethics: A European Review*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp.19–33.

Cooke, B. (2020). Why You, Too, Should Boycott Amazon -, *The Focus*, Available Online: https://www.thefocus.news/opinion/why-you-too-should-boycott-amazon/ [Accessed 30 March 2021].

Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (2015). Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory, 4th edn, California: SAGE Publications.

Davies, G. & Chun, R. (2002). Gaps Between the Internal and External Perceptions of the Corporate Brand, *Corporate Reputation Review*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp.144–158.

De Bakker, F. G. A., Groenewegen, P. & Den Hond, F. (2005). A Bibliometric Analysis of 30 Years of Research and Theory on Corporate Social Responsibility and Corporate Social Performance, *Business & Society*, vol. 44, no. 3, pp.283–317.

Diener, E. & Crandell, R. (1978). Ethics in Social and Behavioral Research, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dubois, A. & Gadde, L.-E. (2002). Systematic Combining: An Abductive Approach to Case Research, *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 55, no. 7, pp.553–560.

Dyer, W. G. & Wilkins, A. L. (1991). Better Stories, Not Better Constructs, to Generate Better

Theory: A Rejoinder to Eisenhardt, *The Academy of Management Review*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp.613–619.

Easterby-Smith, M., Thorpe, R., Jackson, P. R. & Jaspersen, L. J. (2018). Management & Business Research, London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building Theories from Case Study Research, *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 14, no. 4, pp.532–550.

Eisenhardt, K. M. & Graebner, M. E. (2007). Theory Building From Cases: Opportunities And Challenges, *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp.25–32.

Elkington, J. (1997). Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business, Oxford: Capstone.

Environmental Performance Index. (2020). 2020 EPI Results, Available Online: https://epi.yale.edu/epi-results/2020/component/epi [Accessed 19 April 2021].

Etikan, I., Musa, S. A. & Alkassim, R. S. (2015). Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling, *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp.1–4.

Flores-Hernández, A., Olavarría-Jaraba, A., Valera-Blanes, G. & Vázquez-Carrasco, R. (2020). Sustainability and Branding in Retail: A Model of Chain of Effects, 14, *Sustainability*, vol. 12, no. 14, p.5800.

Fombrun, C. & Shanley, M. (1990). What's in a Name? Reputation Building and Corporate Strategy, *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp.233–258.

Freeman, R. E. (1984). Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Freeman, R. E. & McVea, J. (2001). A Stakeholder Approach to Strategic Management, Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, Available Online: https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=263511 [Accessed 28 March 2021].

French, J. (2011). Why Nudging Is Not Enough, *Journal of Social Marketing*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp.154–162.

Gadenne, D., Mia, L., Sands, J., Winata, L. & Hooi, G. (2012). The Influence of Sustainability Performance Management Practices on Organisational Sustainability Performance, *Journal of Accounting & Organizational Change*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp.210–235.

Gajanan. (2019). 'You Have Stolen My Dreams and My Childhood': Greta Thunberg Gives Powerful Speech at UN Climate Summit, *Time*, Available Online: https://time.com/5684216/greta-thunberg-un-climate-action-summit-climate-speech/ [Accessed 30 March 2021].

Geertz, C. (1973). The Interpretation of Cultures, New York: Basic Books.

Grubor, A. & Milovanov, O. (2017). Brand Strategies in the Era of Sustainability, *Interdisciplinary Description of Complex Systems*, vol. 15, pp.78–88.

Hahn, T., Pinkse, J., Preuss, L. & Figge, F. (2015). Tensions in Corporate Sustainability: Towards an Integrative Framework, *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 127, no. 2, pp.297–316.

Hatch, M. & Schultz, M. (2001). Are the Strategic Stars Aligned for Your Corporate Brand, *Harvard business review*, vol. 79, no. 2, pp.128–34.

Helm, S. V., Renk, U. & Mishra, A. (2016). Exploring the Impact of Employees' Self-Concept, Brand Identification and Brand Pride on Brand Citizenship Behaviors, *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 50, no. 1/2, pp.58–77.

Hockerts, K. (2015). A Cognitive Perspective on the Business Case for Corporate Sustainability, *Business Strategy and the Environment*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp.102–122.

Hunt, S. D. & Hansen, J. M. (2010). The Philosophical Foundations of Marketing Research: For Scientific Realism and Truth, in *P. Maclaran, M. Saren, B. Stern & M. Tadajewski (Eds), The SAGE Handbook of Marketing Theory*, London: SAGE Publications, pp.111–126.

Ind, N. (1998). An Integrated Approach to Corporate Branding, *Journal of Brand Management*, vol. 5, no. 5, pp.323–329.

James, L. R., Hartman, A., Stebbins, M. W. & Jones, A. P. (1977). Relationships Between Psychological Climate and a Vie Model for Work Motivation, *Personnel Psychology*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp.229–254.

Johnson, P., Buehring, A., Cassell, C. & Symon, G. (2006). Evaluating Qualitative Management Research: Towards a Contingent Criteriology, *International Journal of Management Reviews*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp.131–156.

Kapferer, J.-N. (2012). The New Strategic Brand Management: Advanced Insights and Strategic Thinking, 5th edn, London: Kogan Page Publishers.

Kataria, A., Kataria, A. & Garg, R. (2013). Effective Internal Communication: A Way Towards Sustainability, *International Journal of Business Insights & Transformation*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp.46–52.

King, N., Horrocks, C. & Brooks, J. (2019). Interviews in Qualitative Research, 2nd edn, Los Angeles: Sage.

Knox, S. & Maklan, S. (2004). Corporate Social Responsibility:: Moving Beyond Investment Towards Measuring Outcomes, *European Management Journal*, vol. 22, no. 5, pp.508–516.

Kumar, V. & Christodoulopoulou, A. (2014). Sustainability and Branding: An Integrated Perspective, *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 43, no. 1, pp.6–15.

Lai, C.-S., Chiu, C.-J., Yang, C.-F. & Pai, D.-C. (2010). The Effects of Corporate Social Responsibility on Brand Performance: The Mediating Effect of Industrial Brand Equity and Corporate Reputation, *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 95, no. 3, pp.457–469.

Lee, B., Collier, P. & Cullen, J. (2007). Reflections on the Use of Case Studies in the Accounting, Management and Organizational Disciplines, *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp.169–178.

Lehner, M., Mont, O. & Heiskanen, E. (2016). Nudging – A Promising Tool for Sustainable Consumption Behaviour?, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, vol. 134, no. A, pp.166–177.

Lofland, J. & Lofland, L. H. (1995). Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis, 3rd edn, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Lüscher, L. S. & Lewis, M. W. (2008). Organizational Change and Managerial Sensemaking: Working Through Paradox, *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 51, no. 2, pp.221–240.

Maon, F., Lindgreen, A. & Swaen, V. (2009). Designing and Implementing Corporate Social Responsibility: An Integrative Framework Grounded in Theory and Practice, *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 87, no. 1, pp.71–89.

Miller, D. & Merrilees, B. (2013). Linking Retailer Corporate Brand and Environmental Sustainability Practices, *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, vol. 22, no. 7, pp.437–443.

Organ, D. W. (1988). Organizational Citizenship Behavior: The Good Soldier Syndrome, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Ørsted. (2021a). World's Most Sustainable Energy Company | Three Years Running, Available Online: https://orsted.com/en/sustainability/our-stories/most-sustainable-energy-company [Accessed 6 May 2021].

Ørsted. (2021b). Our Green Business Transformation: What We Did and Lessons Learned, Available Online: https://orstedcdn.azureedge.net/-/media/www/docs/corp/com/about-us/whitepaper/our-green-business-transformation---what-we-did-and-lessons-learned.ashx?la=en&rev=32e00a9058f14269946142348c0916fe&hash=2ee2ae8f69521dd2f7d1b4d6315b10f1 [Accessed 4 May 2021].

Ørsted. (2021c). From the UN Climate Action Summit: Henrik Poulsen Urges World Leaders to Replace Fossil-Based Energy with Green, Available Online: https://orsted.com/en/media/newsroom/news/2019/09/un-climate-action-summit [Accessed 6 May 2021].

Ørsted. (2021d). Ørsted Wins Denmark's Most Prestigious Sustainability Award, Available Online: https://orsted.com/en/sustainability/our-stories/orsted-wins-denmarks-most-prestigious-sustainability-award [Accessed 6 May 2021].

Porter, M. E. & Kramer, M. R. (2002). The Competitive Advantage of Corporate Philanthropy, *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 80, no. 12, pp.56–69.

Porter, M. E. & Kramer, M. R. (2006). Strategy and Society: The Link Between Competitive Advantage and Corporate Social Responsibility, *Harvard Business Review*, Available Online: https://hbr.org/2006/12/strategy-and-society-the-link-between-competitive-advantage-and-corporate-social-responsibility [Accessed 28 March 2021].

Punjaisri, K., Evanschitzky, H. & Wilson, A. (2009). Internal Branding: An Enabler of Employees' Brand‑supporting Behaviours, *Journal of Service Management*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp.209–226.

Rennstam, J. (2021). Lecture: Analyzing Qualitative Data, BUSR31, Powerpoint Presentation.

Rennstam, J. & Wästerfors, D. (2015). Analyze! Crafting Your Data in Qualitative Research, Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Robinson, O. C. (2014). Sampling in Interview-Based Qualitative Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp.25–41.

Roper, S. & Fill, C. (2012). Corporate Reputation, Brand and Communication, Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.

Scott, J. (1990). A Matter of Record: Documentary Sources in Social Research, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Sheth, J. N. & Sinha, M. (2015). B2B Branding in Emerging Markets: A Sustainability Perspective, *Industrial Marketing Management*, vol. 51, pp.79–88.

Silva, S., Nuzum, A.-K. & Schaltegger, S. (2019). Stakeholder Expectations on Sustainability Performance Measurement and Assessment. A Systematic Literature Review, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, vol. 217, pp.204–215.

Stake, R. E. (1995). The Art of Case Study Research, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Sullivan, J. (2013). Skype: An Appropriate Method of Data Collection for Qualitative Interviews?, *The Hilltop Review*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp.54–60.

Sustainable Brand Index. (2021). Ranking Denmark, *Sustainable Brand Index*, Available Online: https://www.sb-index.com/denmark [Accessed 6 May 2021].

Tamarindo Group. (2019). Renewables Reputation Index 2019, Available Online: https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/3372701/TC-RRI/RRI-EU-2019/RRI-Europe-2019-Web-v01.pdf?__hstc=68972430.6b3ebecdbf82350397759d59317c9f94.1618829636870.161945

4958877.1620064413221.3&__hssc=68972430.1.1622280777301&__hsfp=2892878044
&hsCtaTracking=15371279-bc87-405e-afe7-e6e8bb697136%7Cd634579c-8051-4d01-84
70-932d57064fa7 [Accessed 6 May 2021].

Tarnovskaya, V., Elg, U. & Burt, S. (2008). The Role of Corporate Branding in a Market Driving
Strategy, *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, vol. 36, no. 11,
pp.941–965.

The Ecologist. (2020). Five Years after the Paris Agreement, Available Online:
https://theecologist.org/2020/may/07/five-years-after-paris-agreement [Accessed 30
March 2021].

Thomson, K. & Hecker, L. A. (2000). The Business Value of Buy-in: How Staff Understanding
and Commitment Impact on Brand and Business Performance, in *Internal Marketing:
Directions for Management*, London: Routledge.

TIME. (2021). TIME100 Most Influential Companies 2021: Orsted, *Time*, Available Online:
https://time.com/collection/time100-companies/5950003/orsted/ [Accessed 6 May 2021].

United Nations. (2021). The 17 Goals | Sustainable Development, Available Online:
https://sdgs.un.org/goals [Accessed 31 March 2021].

Universum. (2020). Ranking Denmark 2020, Available Online:
https://universumglobal.com/country-ranking-page/ [Accessed 6 May 2021].

Urde, M. (1999). Brand Orientation: A Mindset for Building Brands into Strategic Resources,
Journal of Marketing Management, vol. 15, no. 1–3, pp.117–133.

Vallaster, C. & de Chernatony, L. (2006). Internal Brand Building and Structuration: The Role of
Leadership, *European Journal of Marketing*, vol. 40, no. 7/8, pp.761–784.

Vallaster, C., Lindgreen, A. & Maon, F. (2012). Strategically Leveraging Corporate Social
Responsibility: A Corporate Branding Perspective, *California Management Review*, vol.
54, no. 3, pp.34–60.

van Marrewijk, M. (2003). Concepts and Definitions of CSR and Corporate Sustainability:
Between Agency and Communion, *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 44, no. 2, pp.95–105.

van Riel, C. B. M. & Fombrun, C. J. (2007). Essentials of Corporate Communication, London:
Routledge.

Welch, M. & Jackson, P. R. (2007). Rethinking Internal Communication: A Stakeholder
Approach, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, vol. 12, no. 2,
pp.177–198.

Werther, W. B. & Chandler, D. (2005). Strategic Corporate Social Responsibility as Global Brand
Insurance, *Business Horizons*, vol. 48, no. 4, pp.317–324.

World Business Council for Sustainable Development. (2000). Corporate Social Responsibility:
Making Good Business Sense., Geneva, Switzerland: World Business Council for
Sustainable Development.

World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). Our Common Future, New York:
Oxford University Press.

Yin, R. K. (1984). Case Study Research: Design and Methods, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE
Publications.

Yin, R. K. (2018). Case Study Research and Applications, [e-book] SAGE Publications,
Available Online:
https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/case-study-research-and-applications/book250150
[Accessed 16 April 2021].

Appendix A: Interview guide

This interview guide was used to guide the semi-structured interviews that were done to answer the research questions:

RQ1: How are sustainability and branding communicated to employees?

RQ2: How do employees perceive and act upon this communication?

Structure:
1. Introduction of researchers and interview topic
2. Consent by participant
3. Ice-breaker question
4. Topic guide

1. Introduction of researchers and interview topic
   We are Teodora Hertanu and Roosmarijn Morgans and doing a research project about sustainability and corporate branding as part of our Master in International Marketing & Brand Management at Lund University. The reason we would like to interview you is because we are trying to understand how companies communicate internally about sustainability.

1. Consent by participant
   We would like your consent to record this interview. We will use the recording only to transcribe your answers for our study.

2. Ice-breaker question
   What does sustainability mean for you?

3. Topic guide for employees

Topic	Primary question	Follow up questions	Clarifying examples
Internal brand communication and the employee role	Arla's vision is: *Creating the future of dairy to bring health and inspiration to the world, naturally.* How is this vision communicated to you? Ørsted's vision is: *Let's create a world that runs entirely on green energy.* How is this vision communicated to you?	In which channels is this vision communicated? Can you give examples of the media format it is communicated in? Do you feel that you are a part of this vision? How would you describe your role in this vision?	- Intranet - Magazine - Newsletters - Email - Staff meetings - Workshop
Internal communication on sustainability	When you started working for Arla / Ørsted, what communication did you receive about sustainability? What kind of communication about sustainability do you receive regularly at Arla / Ørsted? Does the communication make it clear what is expected of you and your colleagues in order to be part of the company's sustainability objectives? Does it make you feel welcome to add your own opinions?	How did you receive this communication? What did you think of this communication? Do you know where to go if you have an idea about sustainability?	- Training - Welcome pack - Brand guide - Workshop
Internal branding and brand commitment	Does the internal communication about sustainability make you feel differently about working at Arla / Ørsted? Sustainability is an important value for Arla / Ørsted. Do you share this value?	Do you feel like you have a stake in this? Do you discuss Arla's / Ørsted's sustainability values with other colleagues? Are there any colleagues that are sceptical about the	- Coffee machine talk

	If they say yes: how do you think this manifests for you as an Arla / Ørsted employee?	subject? Do you discuss Arla's / Ørsted's sustainability values with any people outside of the company? Has it changed your behaviour outside of work in any way?	
Forms of internal communication	Now that we've talked about the internal communication of sustainability for a while: Do you think the communication you receive is coming mostly from a central point, via your manager or is there maybe a third way of receiving this communication?	Within the mentioned method, which media channel is most dominant? And can you specify this further in media type? Do you think this is working well? Is the internal communication about sustainability that you receive enough for you? If you would have to think of any improvement, what would it be?	- Newsletters - Intranet - E-mail - Written text - Video - Livestream

4. Closing

Is there anything at all that you would like to add or that you think would be interesting for us to know?

Thank you so much for your time! We really appreciate your input.

Appendix B: Participants consent form

LUND UNIVERSITY
School of Economics and Management

Sustainability and corporate branding

Roosmarijn Morgans & Teodora Hertanu

Interview Consent Form.

I have been given information about <u>Sustainability and branding</u> and discussed the research project with <u>Roosmarijn Morgans & Teodora Hertanu</u> who are conducting this research as a part of a Master's in <u>International Marketing and Brand Management</u> supervised by <u>Veronika Tarnovskaya</u> .

I understand that, if I consent to participate in this project I will be asked to give the researcher a duration of approximately <u>1 hour</u> of my time to participate in the process.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research as it has been described to me. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for thesis and journal publications, and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Name: ……………………………………………………………

Email: ……………………………………………………….

Telephone: ……………………………………………….

Signed: …………………………………………………………….

LUND UNIVERSITY
School of Economics and Management

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick the appropriate box):

1.	I understand the information about the project.	☐
2.	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation.	☐
3.	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.	☐
4.	I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.	☐
5.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me/	☐
6.	If applicable, separate terms of consent for interviews, audio, video or other forms of data collection have been explained and provided to me.	☐
7.	The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me.	☐
8.	I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form.	☐
9.	Select only one of the following: ● I would like my name used and understand what I have said or written as part of this study will be used in reports, publications and other research outputs so that anything I have contributed to this project can be recognised. ● I do not want my name used in this project.	☐ ☐
10.	I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.	☐

Participant:

_____   _____   _____

Name of Participant   Signature   Date

Researcher:

_____   _____   _____

Name of Researcher   Signature   Date