



SCHOOL OF  
ECONOMICS AND  
MANAGEMENT

# **Working Towards a Sustainable Future**

How Employee Identification with Sustainability leads  
to Employer Branding Challenges

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## **Abstract**

<b>Title</b>	Working Towards a Sustainable Future: How Employee Identification with Sustainability leads to Employer Branding Challenges
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<b>Purpose</b>	The purpose of this study is to contribute to the understanding of the interconnectedness of organisational identification and employer branding when strong employee identification with corporate social responsibility is prevalent.
<b>Methodology</b>	Our study is based on a single case study at a Swedish manufacturing company. An abductive research approach allowed us to mutually examine the empirical field and the theory in relation to each other. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted following a purely qualitative research approach grounded in interpretivism.
<b>Theoretical Perspective</b>	The theoretical perspective consists of three main concepts: identity and organisational identification, corporate social responsibility, and employer branding.
<b>Contributions</b>	Our research contributes to the limited literature on the relationship between corporate social responsibility, organisational identification, and employer branding. By offering empirical evidence we substantiate the importance of their interconnectedness and enhance the theoretical understanding by establishing an interdisciplinary framework.
<b>Keywords</b>	Organisational Identification; Corporate Social Responsibility; Employer Branding; Employee Branding; Sustainability; Identity; Organisational Control

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## List of Abbreviation

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CSV	Corporate Shared Value
EB	Employer Branding
OI	Organisational Identity
OID	Organisational Identification
SIT	Social Identity Theory
TBL	Triple Bottom Line

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The climate crisis is characterised by the impairment of people's basic needs, such as access to water, food, health, and the environment (Wright et al. 2005). As Stern (2007) states, climate change is the century's most significant economic, political and social challenge. A 2021 global study found that 64% of respondents consider climate change a crisis that negatively impacts their daily lives (UNDP, 2021). The growing concern for natural environment preservation for future generations results in widespread calls for urgent action against the climate crisis (IPCC, 2022).

Since the public discourse around climate change is emerging, the demand for companies to take responsibility is increasing (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Corporate responses to the climate crisis are typically called Corporate Social responsibility (CSR) and have become one of the most discussed concepts in the last decades (Costas & Kärreman, 2013). CSR has many definitions, but one of the most influential is the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) model, which emphasises an organisation's responsibility for people, the planet, and profit (Elkington, 1998; Kuhlmann & Farrington, 2010). It is crucial to acknowledge that CSR is no longer a voluntary endeavour (Collier & Esteban, 2007), and companies must adapt to meet their stakeholders' expectations (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). This shift is evidenced in the fact that in 2022, over 96% of the world's 250 largest companies published a CSR report to inform stakeholders about their sustainability initiatives (McCalla-Leacy, Shulman & Threlfall, 2022).

Most CSR literature concentrates on the corporation's role from a macro-institutional perspective, such as society, politics, image, and reputation (Daudigeos & Valiorgue, 2011; Matten & Moon, 2008; Orlitzky, Siegel & Waldman, 2011). However, the internal perspective, such as the relationship between CSR and employees received little attention so far (Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008; Slack, Corlett & Morris, 2013). It can be seen as surprising since, according to Collier and Esteban (2007), employees are particularly affected by their company's increasing engagement in CSR activities. There has been a recent, growing focus on examining the influence of employees on the effectiveness of an organisation's CSR efforts, although it should be noted that this area of research is still in its early stages and requires further exploration (Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Duthler & Dhanesh, 2018; Schaefer, Terlutter & Diehl, 2019).



Understanding the relationship between CSR and employees is crucial for organisations aiming to promote themselves as desirable workplaces (Chițu, 2020). To influence employees' perceptions of providing such a place of work, companies use the concept of employer branding (EB) (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Chițu, 2020). Establishing a popular employer brand serves the organisation's purpose of attracting potential employees and fostering commitment to the company among existing employees (Foster, Punjaisri & Cheng, 2010). Various studies found that implementing CSR measures positively impacts the organisation's employer brand and, thus, attractiveness and employee engagement (Jones, 2010; Mirvis, 2012; Özcan & Elçi, 2020). This suggests that companies prioritising CSR and embedding its values into their activities are more likely to generate positive effects on job satisfaction, organisational commitment, engagement, and intentions to stay (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Glavas, 2016b; Gond et al. 2017; Rupp & Mallory, 2015). However, the underlying factors and mechanisms explaining these effects remain unclear, as no consensus exists among researchers regarding the theories and processes that mediate the relationship (Rupp & Mallory, 2015; Gond et al. 2017).

Social identity theory has emerged as one of the most influential frameworks for explaining and predicting employee reactions to CSR, with several studies indicating that employees view CSR as a way to showcase unique and desirable characteristics of their organisation, which fosters their pride in membership and willingness to identify with the organisation (Glavas & Godwin, 2013; Gond et al. 2010; Rupp & Mallory, 2015). Thus, CSR can serve as a factor in increasing organisational identification (OID), which is crucial for employees' performance, commitment, and overall satisfaction (De Roeck et al. 2014; Kim et al. 2010; Carmeli et al. 2007; Jones, 2010).

However, despite the growing interest in the relationship between CSR and employees from scholars of different disciplines, many argue that more substantial research is needed in this area (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; He & Brown, 2013; Rupp et al. 2006). Existing literature still provides limited evidence on how employees perceive their employer's CSR activities and the impact of these perceptions on their OID (Gond et al. 2017; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). It is thus crucial to further investigate employees' perceptions and their effects on OID, as researchers argue that the success of an organisation's CSR efforts relies on high levels of employee identification (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012).

Based on this theoretical assessment, our thesis investigates employees' perceptions of a company's CSR efforts. More precisely, we aim to understand the interconnectedness of a company's CSR activities, employee OID and employer brand perception. For this purpose, we have chosen to conduct research within the scope of a case study of the Swedish manufacturing company HETA.

## **1.2 Research Problem and Research Questions**

Throughout our research, we came across phenomena that seemed mysterious and, therefore, interesting to investigate. Within our case organisation, we recognised strong identification with sustainability and the company's CSR efforts. While we conducted interviews, we observed employees' comprehensive understanding of sustainability and recognition as essential issues for themselves and their working relationships. This resulted in a challenging situation for the company, with demands for various engagements to increase sustainability. It was obscure for us to see this strong call for more sustainability whilst the company was already perceived as working towards it. In addition, we found it peculiar to recognise demands for more bureaucracy, as employees saw this as an opportunity for more sustainability at the company.

Examining the above, we intend to contribute to what is already recognised in the literature. By conducting a qualitative case study in our case organisation, we aim to present a comprehensive perspective on the relationship between EB and employees' OID by concentrating on employees' perceptions of a company's CSR efforts. In this context, we found that while there is increasing interest from academics to connect CSR, EB and OID (Bharadwaj & Yameen, 2021; Gond et al. 2017), the relationship between these concepts in literature is still underresearched. Scholars from different disciplines raise the importance of expanding the knowledge about the entanglement between these concepts, as an interdisciplinary view promotes a comprehensive understanding of the issues (Bharadwaj & Yameen, 2021; He & Brown, 2013). Therefore, we would like to contribute to research in OID and EB, especially in the context of CSR.

Therefore, our study aims to gain insight into the role CSR plays in employees' identification with the company and the possible implications this has for EB. We conduct an empirical investigation of the organisational phenomenon as we assume identity cannot be measured and controlled in simple questionnaires. In a theoretical manner, a qualitative, empirical study enables us to enhance the understanding of the differences in how employees perceived the

CSR efforts of the company before and after joining. We hope to gain insight into the expected employment experience suggested through the employer brand and deviations to this promise that may have occurred since. Furthermore, we want to investigate the mutually influencing relationship between OID and EB when employees identify themselves and the organisation strongly with sustainability. Overall, our case study aims to contribute to understanding the connections between CSR, OID, and EB and highlighting the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to investigating these concepts.

We aim to answer the following research questions, which emerged and developed during our abductive research process. We formulated a guiding question for our empirical investigation in advance, which guided our study:

- How do employees perceive their company's CSR efforts, and how does that influence their identification with the company?

Ultimately, we identified and selected the following research questions that will serve as the basis for analysing and discussing our findings:

- *How do a company's CSR efforts affect the perception of the employer brand among employees?*
- *How can employees' identification with sustainability influence a company's employer brand?*

### **1.3 Outline of the Thesis**

This section provides an overview of the thesis by briefly introducing the content of each chapter. **Chapter 1** describes the background of our study leading to the research questions we aim to answer. **Chapter 2** contains the literature review, which sets the theoretical framework for our research and lays the foundation for our discussion. **Chapter 3** outlines our underlying research methodology and describes our case company. We also demonstrate how we collected and analysed the data. In **Chapter 4**, we present the empirical findings of our case in the form of a narrative that provides a direction for the discussion. In **Chapter 5**, we apply literature and theoretical concepts to discuss our findings and develop an interdisciplinary framework to graphically illustrate the relationships between our empirical data and existing literature. We conclude our thesis with **Chapter 6**, where we give a final overview of the essential findings

and state our theoretical and practical contributions as well as limitations and directions for future research.

## 2 Literature Review

This chapter presents the theoretical framework relevant to our study's context. Given the substantial amount of literature on identity and OID, CSR, and EB, we provide a selective literature review that focuses on the key concepts relevant to understanding and explaining the phenomena at our case company. This chapter begins with an overview of identity, covering personal and organisational levels before discussing OID. Subsequently, we examine the theory about the background of CSR, its various definitions and its growing importance for companies and scholars. We then present an overview of the concept of EB, distinguishing between external and internal EB. Lastly, we introduce the interrelations between OID, CSR, and EB. Figure 1 provides a visualisation of our approach to the literature review.

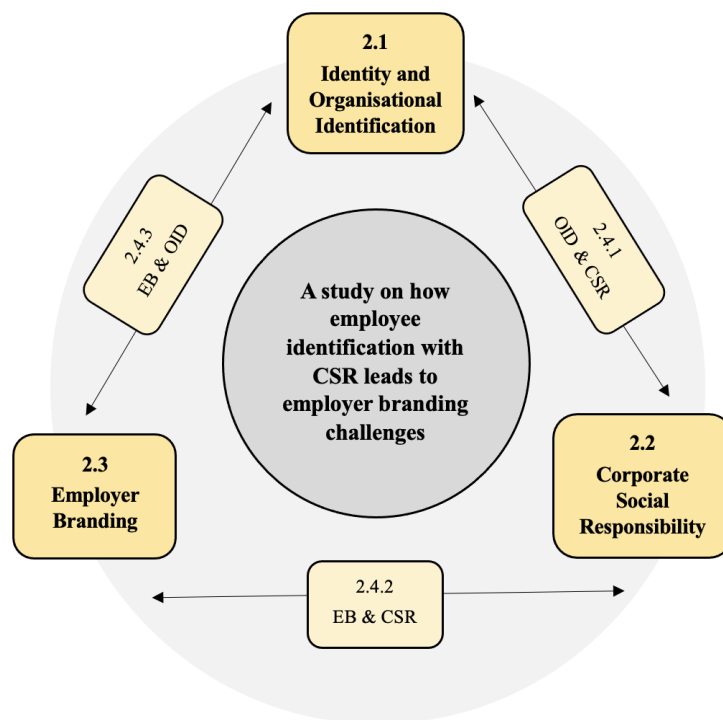


Figure 1: Contextualisation of Literature

### 2.1 Identity and Organisational Identification

Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas (2008) describe identity as essential for understanding the “dynamic relationship between self, work and organisation” (p.8). As there is a variety of differing views and closely related concepts in this area of research, we will only describe the most relevant literature for our study in this section. After outlining personal and social identity, we illustrate organisational identity (OI) before finally presenting the concept of OID.

A reasonable starting point for exploring the topic of identity is personal identity. It refers to an individual's efforts to address the questions "Who am I and how should I act?" (p.6) and describes a person's unique feelings, values, and behaviours (Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas, 2008). Whereas these personal attributes are not understood as labels of group belonging, social identity, on the contrary, describes an "individual's perception of [her or himself] as a member of a group, particularly in terms of value and emotional attachment" (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008, p.10).

The most influential literature on social identity stems from Ashforth and Mael (1989), who show that social identity theory (SIT) enables individuals to classify others and themselves in different social categories. On the one hand, this serves the purpose of sorting and understanding the social environment, but more importantly, it helps a person define herself or himself in the social environment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). They further outline that an individual's self-concept results from the interplay of personal and social identity and that to identify with a specific social group, it is sufficient for an individual to perceive herself or himself as belonging to this group. In this context, Kärreman and Alvesson (2004) emphasise that membership in a social group must have emotional value and significance for an individual's social identity. Furthermore, they note that individuals have multiple social group identities, which result from self-classification into different social categories and vary depending on the occasion.

Similarly to personal identity, OI addresses the question "Who are we?" as an organisation (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p.80). The most widely used and recognised definition of OI comes from Albert and Whetten (1985), who state that an organisation's identity characterises what is of a central character, distinctive to others and enduring about an organisation. Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000) agree that an organisation's identity is what its members collectively perceive as central to the organisation and what distinguishes it from other organisations. However, they reconceptualise the aspect of temporal continuity, as they see an organisation's identity not as enduring but rather unstable and dynamic. This stems from their claim that OI is interrelated with organisational image, defined as the organisational member's belief of how outsiders perceive the organisation (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991, cited in Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000). Thus, in a permanently changing environment, the organisational image requires constant re-evaluation of how members view their organisation and contributes to the fluent character of OI (Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000).

According to Ashforth and Mael (1989), OID is a specific form of social group identification which depicts an organisation as a social category with specific perceived characteristics that individuals seek to identify with. Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994) define OID as the congruence between an individual's self-concept and attributes with the perceived OI. They differentiate between collective OI and perceived OI. Collective OI describes the shared members' beliefs, often specified by organisational leaders and manifested through rituals or stories (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). In contrast, perceived OI describes one individual's belief about the organisation's attributes and influences the degree of identification. Hence, the greater the extent to which a person's self-concept matches the perceived characteristics of an organisation, the stronger the psychological attachment to the organisation.

Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994) note that an individual's identification with an organisation depends on the subjective evaluation of the attractiveness of the OI in combination with three factors: self-continuity, self-distinctiveness, and self-enhancement. According to the first factor, an individual's interest in maintaining a continuous self-concept enhances the attractiveness of an organisation whose identity matches one's values and beliefs. As individuals want to express themselves and act authentically, they are prone to focusing on self-relevant rather than self-irrelevant information about organisations' identities. Furthermore, individuals are attracted to an organisation whose identity accentuates them as distinctive. Additionally, individuals want to identify with organisations that enhance their self-esteem, meaning that if they associate the work of an organisation with qualities such as virtue or moral worth, they perceive the company's identity as attractive. Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) complement their description of OID by stating that the member's perception of an organisation's construed external image also influences the attractiveness of their perceived OI. Accordingly, the construed external image describes the member's belief about how outsiders view the organisational members because of their affiliation to the organisation, and the member's perception of a positive construed external image thus strengthens their OID.

In their review of OI and OID, He and Brown (2013) called for the importance of focusing future research related to OID on under-researched areas. One of these mentioned areas is the combination of OID and CSR. While there is growing literature on how CSR affects employee behaviour, they argue that more research on the relationship between OID, CSR and employees

is needed. Since we will show the connections between OID and CSR later, the next chapter elaborates on the concept of CSR.

## **2.2 Corporate Social Responsibility**

The concept of CSR can be traced back to the Brundtland Report in 1987, where the UN World Commission defined sustainability as "development that meets 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.43). It laid the foundation for the various interpretations of CSR that have emerged. An earlier contributor to the definition of CSR is Davis (1960, cited in Carroll, 1991, p.271), who referred to CSR as "decisions and actions taken for reasons at least partly beyond the direct economic or technical interest of the enterprise".

One of the most significant frameworks in the field of CSR is Carroll's (1991) CSR pyramid. It includes and ranks the dimensions of economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities. The pyramid depicts a hierarchical structure, highlighting the supremacy of economic considerations as the foundation of CSR. Another broadly recognised contribution to the definition of CSR is the TBL model proposed by Elkington (1998). The TBL model includes three dimensions: People, Planet and Profit. In contrast to the hierarchical approach of the CSR pyramid, Elkington's TBL model emphasises giving equal attention to these three dimensions and achieving harmony between them (Elkington, 1998). However, Porter and Kramer (2011) separate profit from their understanding of CSR, as they see CSR and Corporate Shared Value (CSV) as different concepts, with CSV involving profit maximisation, while CSR does not. They claim that CSR is mainly about investments that improve an organisation's reputation, while CSV is a fundamental aspect of a company's profitability. Hence, CSR refers to a company's commitment to practising environmental and social sustainability (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

The growing awareness of the climate crisis has resulted in climate playing an increasingly important role not only in private conversations but also in corporate strategies (Wright et al. 2018). Vogel (2005) sees the main reason for CSR engagement in gaining a competitive advantage as he recognises a correlation between a company's social and financial performance.

According to Kuhlman and Farrington (2010), companies can establish sound sustainability practices by adopting strict thresholds that they will not exceed to serve people, the planet and profit. Without such thresholds, the company's CSR efforts may appear insubstantial and



insincere in their communication. In such cases, companies risk being perceived as greenwashing, a phenomenon Prasad and Holzinger (2013) describe as creating an environmentally friendly image without implementing appropriate measures. Conversely, companies that set strict thresholds can present more authentic CSR efforts.

Traditionally, corporations' CSR strategies merely concentrated on fulfilling the needs of external stakeholders (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). This is also reflected in the literature, as CSR has been commonly studied in the context of marketing, image, branding, and reputation (Sen, Du & Bhattacharya, 2015). Consequently, many perspectives in CSR research focus on how CSR relates to external factors such as various stakeholders, customers and governments (Costas & Kärreman, 2013). An area of CSR that has received relatively little attention is how CSR relates to factors from an internal perspective of the company, such as the impact a CSR strategy can have on employees (Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Glavas & Kelly, 2014; Greening & Turban, 2000; Jones, 2010). One way for companies to show their CSR commitment to employees is to communicate it through the employer brand (Carlini et al. 2019). Due to the interconnectedness of CSR and EB in our case study, the following section outlines the theoretical background of EB.

### **2.3 Employer Branding**

Ambler and Barrow (1996) introduced the concept of EB by applying the marketing principle of 'branding' to Human Resource activities. EB aims to portray the employer as a brand that promises a unique employment experience to current and potential employees (Edwards, 2010). Therefore, they define the employer brand as "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company" (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p.187).

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) provide a significant discussion on EB, stating that it is concerned with attracting, motivating and retaining employees by highlighting the firm's unique values and desirable employment offerings to differentiate it from competitors. Attracting and recruiting employees with company-fitting values is a task associated with external EB (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). On the other hand, internal EB focuses on strengthening commitment, motivation and identification with the brand among existing employees (Foster, Punjaisri & Cheng, 2010). Employee branding, an aspect of internal EB, aims to align employees' values, behaviours, attitudes and thus their identities with the brand (Edwards, 2005b; Cushen, 2009).

Various studies state that employee branding is carried out through internal brand training workshops, posters or in-house magazines to influence employees' lifestyles and identities so that they incorporate and live the brand (Edwards, 2005b; Müller, 2017). Employee branding emerged as a form of culture management and is often mentioned closely with normative control (Müller, 2017; Cushen, 2009; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), a concept that we will discuss in more detail later when we connect the concepts of EB and identity in the sub-chapter 2.4.3.

Many studies emphasise the importance of alignment between the brand's and employee's values, as such value congruency enhances employees' identification with the organisation and emotional attachment and thus provides a competitive advantage (Brown & Williams, 1984; Cheney, 1983; Foster, Punjaisri & Cheng, 2010). Here, the closely related notion of the psychological contract, as discussed by Moroko and Uncles (2008), comes into play. They describe this as a contract between employer and employee built on the promised employment experience of the employer brand. Fulfilment of the promised employment experience, and, thus, an alignment between employee's expectations and perceived experience, leads to committed and loyal employees as well as higher retention (Backhaus, 2016; Foster, Punjaisri & Cheng, 2010; Hoffman & Woehr, 2006). However, when there is a misalignment between expectations and experience, positive or negative disconfirmation can arise (Carlini et al. 2019). Positive disconfirmation occurs when employees' experience with the company exceeds their initial expectations, likely resulting in positive employee outcomes, including positive word-of-mouth, affective commitment, OID, and engagement in CSR-related behaviours (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998). On the other hand, negative disconfirmation, where employees' experience falls short of their initial expectations, possibly results in negative employee outcomes, such as intentions to quit, reduced job satisfaction, decreased organisational trust, and diminished job performance (Morrison & Robinson, 1997).

## **2.4 Clarifying the Relationship between the Concepts**

After presenting the most relevant concepts on each topic separately, the next sections illustrate the connections between OID, CSR and EB in the current literature. We will demonstrate that numerous cross-disciplinary studies found relationships between these concepts before we show that more research is important to deepen the understanding of the complex entanglement between OID, CSR and EB.

### ***2.4.1 Organisational Identification and Corporate Social Responsibility***

Studies have extensively examined the impact of CSR on employee attitude and behaviour, revealing positive effects on job satisfaction, organisational commitment, engagement, and intentions to stay (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Glavas, 2016b; Gond et al. 2017; Rupp & Mallory, 2015). However, the exact factors behind these effects remain unclear, as researchers lack consensus on the theory and mechanisms mediating the relationship (Rupp & Mallory, 2015; Gond et al. 2017).

Research examining the impact of CSR on employees was conducted through reviews and conceptual analysis (e.g. Glavas & Godwin, 2013; Gond et al. 2010; Rupp & Mallory, 2015), as well as empirical studies (e.g., Carmeli, Gilat & Waldman, 2007; De Roeck et al. 2014; Jones, 2010; Kim et al. 2010), indicating that social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) is one of the most influential frameworks for explaining and predicting employee reactions to CSR. These studies conclude that OID plays a crucial role in mediating the effect of CSR activities on various aspects of employee work life, including job satisfaction (De Roeck et al. 2014), commitment (Kim et al. 2010), job performance (Carmeli et al. 2007), and intention to stay (Jones, 2010). De Roeck et al. (2014) furthermore indicate that employees view CSR as a way to showcase unique and desirable characteristics of their organisation, which fosters their pride in membership and willingness to identify with the organisation.

Additionally, several studies have demonstrated that CSR initiatives can strengthen the employee sense of OID (Brieger et al. 2019; Brammer, He & Mellahi, 2015; De Roeck, El Akremi & Swaen, 2016). Brieger et al. (2019) contend that there is compelling evidence that employees are more likely to identify with organisations with strong CSR efforts. Another study by Brammer, He and Mellahi (2015) shows that CSR initiatives create a greater sense of OID among employees, leading to higher creativity among employees. Furthermore, De Roeck, El Akremi and Swaen (2016), state that high levels of CSR initiatives cause its employee's commitment to go up, because of the employee's increased sense of pride and confidence in the organisation. CSR practices can thus serve as a catalyst for increasing OID.

Individuals often highlight the positive aspects of their identity while disregarding the negative ones (Dutton, Roberts & Bednar, 2011; Alvesson, Kärreman & Sullivan, 2015). Hence, people tend to associate themselves with things that are considered favourable. As CSR gains increasing prominence and becomes increasingly important, partly due to its positive perception

and reputation, it is not surprising that companies aim to link their identity with CSR (Balmer, 2011; Clark, 2006; Martínez, Pérez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2014). According to Dutton, Robers and Brednar (2011), these positive perceptions of CSR can contribute to its inclusion in OI, because, as previously mentioned, identity is constructed positively. In addition, if employees perceive CSR as an important and unique aspect of the company, it is more likely to become part of OI. Thus, if a company emphasises CSR, employees likely see it as central to the organisation. This highlights that CSR, when strongly considered by the organisation, potentially influences OI and becomes a key factor in answering the fundamental question: Who are we as an organisation? (Albert & Whetten, 1985, cited in Ravasi, 2016).

Strong identification with a company's CSR efforts may only occur if individuals subjectively perceive the CSR activity as authentic and beneficial to their identity (Gond et al. 2017; Pomeroy, 2017). Thus, companies must meet certain standards, as without them, their CSR may seem insignificant, lack honesty in their communications and possibly result in less employee attraction, engagement and retention (Pomeroy, 2017; Glavas, 2016a).

As previously examined, employees' strong identification with the company is crucial for their performance, commitment and overall satisfaction. By investing in authentic and solid CSR measures, companies can strengthen their employees' identification with the company. This can have a positive impact on employees' perception of the company and the company's reputation. The following chapter further highlights the significant role that CSR plays in enhancing the organisation's attractiveness to employees, by delving deeper into the importance of CSR in employees' perception of the employer brand.

#### ***2.4.2 Employer Branding and Corporate Social Responsibility***

The body of literature combining the concepts of CSR and EB is constantly expanding. The interest in the role of CSR from a human resources perspective goes back to Carroll (1991), who describes the importance for a company to “meet the expectations of consumers, employees, and the community while promoting welfare and goodwill at the ethical and philanthropic levels” (Albinger & Freeman, 2000, p.243). Early studies found that companies participating in CSR activities enjoyed a better reputation, increasing their attractiveness as employers and giving them a competitive advantage in the labour market (Albinger & Freeman, 2000; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Turban & Greening, 1997).

This is also confirmed by more recent studies, with Verčič and Čorić (2018), for example, investigating the relationship between EB, reputation and CSR. In their paper, they argue that investments in CSR possibly improve a company's results, leading to a superior reputation for the company and its brand. Even potential future employees can be influenced by a company's attention to social responsibility, social well-being, and environmental responsibility since establishing a good CSR reputation can help companies harmonise different stakeholder expectations. Thus, Verčič and Čorić (2018) conclude that developing CSR strategies can improve reputation among internal and external stakeholders, attracting talent and building a positive employer brand.

While these studies have primarily focused on attracting potential employees by improving the company's reputation through CSR (Maden et al. 2012), a growing number of literature looks at the interaction between CSR and existing employees. It shows the positive impact of CSR on employee performance, strengthening commitment to the organisation and increase in employee motivation (Jones, 2010; Mirvis, 2012). Similarly, Özcan and Elçi (2020) found that employee-based CSR could positively affect the corporate brand and employees' brand image. They emphasise the importance of employees' CSR perception to motivate employees and suggest that CSR activities positively influence employee attitudes and the employer brand. Furthermore, Özcan and Elçi (2020) suggest that employees who perceive CSR positively have better performance and retention, improving their companies' functioning in the long run.

Carlini et al.'s (2019) empirical study investigates the relationship between CSR and employee attitudes and behaviours. The authors developed a theoretical model that links CSR efforts towards employees with corporate branding and how CSR values are integrated into the company's activity. In their study, Carlini et al. (2019) found that implementing CSR measures positively impacts the organisation's attractiveness and employee engagement. This suggests that companies prioritising CSR and embedding its values into their activities are more likely to attract and retain engaged employees who perceive their organisation positively.

Acknowledging the increasing role of CSR for EB, Kryger Aggerholm, Esmann Andersen and Thomsen (2011) attempted to reconceptualise EB. In their view, EB is a dynamic process of negotiation and co-construction of values between the management and current or potential employees of an organisation. As CSR is favourable for organisations, the strategic process of developing an employer brand should take CSR into account when co-creating sustainable values for individual employees and the organisation as a whole (Kryger Aggerholm, Esmann

Andersen & Thomsen, 2011). According to them, this co-creation of values in the employer-employee relationship encourages potential and current employees to identify with the organisation. This indicates a connection between EB and OID, which will be discussed in the following section.

### ***2.4.3 Employer Branding and Organisational Identification***

Building on the discussion of the relationship between EB and CSR in the previous section, this chapter shows the interconnectedness between EB and OID and how they are related to CSR. As scholars from different disciplines explored connections between EB and OID, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the literature concerned with understanding the interdependent relationship between these concepts.

Lievens, Van Hove and Anseel (2007) attempted to bridge the two research streams of OID and EB, which evolved apart from each other, by examining what determines employees' perception of OID. For this reason, they looked at the factors that attract potential employees and connect current employees to an employer. Their study suggests that the attributes that make an organisation attractive as an employer for potential and current employees also account for the development of OID among employees. The authors noted that future research should investigate how individuals' initial outside perception of the organisation as an employer was carried forward into employment and how this affects OID.

Another study combining EB and OID stems from Maxwell and Knox (2009) and is concerned with employees' reasons for considering their employer brand attractive. They use Ashforth and Mael's (1989) SIT to examine how the employment relationship influences employees' evaluation of their organisation's employer brand. The main results of their study suggest that employees consider the employer brand attractive when the organisation is perceived as successful, when they value the organisation's product, and when they perceive the external brand image as attractive. Xie, Bagozzi and Meland (2015) investigated the link between perceived employer brand attractiveness and job applicants' identity congruency with the organisation's identity. Similar to studies that found an organisation's attractive external image and identity congruency between person and organisation positively related to high organisational identification among current employees (Dukerich, Golden & Shortell, 2002), their study claimed the same applies to applicants. While these above studies already connect EB and identity literature, Lievens and Slaughter (2016) call for more research in this field, as

they see various opportunities for expanding the cross-disciplinary knowledge between these related concepts.

From an identity perspective, much of the literature touching upon the link between EB and OID is found in the context of organisational control (Edwards, 2005a; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Müller, 2017). We elaborate on the issue of normative control in this subsection, as we see the concept as an identity topic related to employee branding, the internal aspect of EB we discussed earlier. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) describe the concept of normative control in the context of organisational control as organisations' attempts to "regulate employees' insides – their self-image, their feelings and identifications" (p.622). In their study, they introduce identity regulation as a form of normative control by arguing that organisations aim to influence employees' self-images in a way consistent with the organisation's objectives. Fleming and Sturdy (2009) contribute to research on organisational control by establishing the concept of neo-normative control. They provide a modified view on organisational control by stating that, whereas normative control is concerned with influencing employees to share the values of the company, neo-normative control calls on employees to "be yourself" (Fleming & Sturdy, p.571). In other words, it encourages employees to bring their real identity to the workplace, which is argued to empower them by enabling authentic feelings at work. Another study in this field comes from Müller (2017), who defines brand-centred control as a new way of normative control. According to her, companies' efforts of employee branding lead to interference in employees' private lives, as they feel controlled and urged to act according to the brand image whenever facing an external audience.

Kärreman and Alvesson (2004) extended the knowledge about organisational control in their case study of technocratic and socio-ideological forms of control in a consulting firm. Their study shows that technocratic control is concerned with controlling employees' behaviour through standardised structures, procedures, and regulations. In other words, this bureaucracy can be seen as acting like a restrictive iron cage on employees' behaviour. On the contrary, socio-ideological control describes management efforts to control employees' beliefs, values and identity formation and depicts a mental cage (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). According to them, organisational control is an interplay of these two control forms, as the mental cage is partly an outcome of bureaucracy but also complements control when the structural iron cage of bureaucracy opens up in modern, post-bureaucratic work contexts.

Brown et al. (2006) recognised that a variety of scholars across distinct disciplines, such as organisational studies, public relations and marketing, address very similar questions, of which the most common is: “What do individuals know or believe about an organisation?” (p.99). For this reason, they adopt a cross-disciplinary view on identity and organisational image by delivering a framework that enables different viewpoints on an organisation. Their first viewpoint describes the perception of organisations’ insiders about what they think the organisation constitutes. Secondly, it is essential to address the qualities and characteristics an organisation wants to convey to its stakeholders, such as employees, customers or competitors. They further state that it is also crucial to consider what members think about how outsiders view the organisation. Lastly, the fourth view represents what outsiders believe to know about an organisation. All these different views, especially the fourth, contain how individuals perceive an organisation they consider a prospective employer (Brown et al. 2006) and thus show the interconnectedness of EB and OID literature. With their article, Brown et al. (2006) aimed to set an interdisciplinary direction for future research and emphasised that developing a comprehensive understanding of such broad topics benefits from combining multiple academic disciplines.

Considering the various connections between EB, OID and CSR outlined in this literature review and taking seriously the suggestions that more research in these areas is needed, it is only logical that scholars begin to combine all three concepts in one framework. One study, which applied a quantitative approach to this issue, stems from Bharadwaj and Yameen (2021). Their research confirmed the positive influence of CSR on employee retention, employer brand attractiveness and OID. They further argue that EB must contain a long-term CSR strategy and that organisations should communicate CSR to employees clearly, as sincere communication promotes identification with the organisation. The study confirms this research area’s underdevelopment and calls for a better understanding of the interconnectedness between the three concepts.

Our practical case study also suggested multifaceted relationships between CSR and employees’ identities and identification with the company. Furthermore, there were indications about CSR’s connection with the perceived employer brand in the empirical material. Moreover, OID seemed closely related to the perceived employer brand as well as organisational control and, thus, aspects of employee branding. For this reason, our study aims



to contribute to a better understanding of the interconnectedness between these cross-disciplinary topics by stating the following research questions:

- *How do a company's CSR efforts affect the perception of the employer brand among employees?*
- *How can employees' identification with CSR influence a company's employer brand?*

### **3 Methodology**

The methodology chapter elaborates on the research methods used in our study. In doing so, we strive for transparency in the approach chosen and how results, discussions and conclusions are derived. Firstly, we outline the philosophical grounding underlying our empirical study and influencing our approach. Secondly, we present our qualitative and abducted research approach. Thirdly, we introduce our case organisation, followed by a description of our data collection process and data analysis. Thereby we explain how we derived the thesis' main themes and narrative. We conclude with a discussion on the reflexivity we applied during our research and the limitations of our study.

#### **3.1 Philosophical Grounding**

Our thesis explores the relationship between a company's employer brand and employees' OID by concentrating on employees' perceptions of CSR efforts. The purpose is to gain insight into the role CSR plays in employees' identification with the company and the possible implications this has for EB. We approached this study by drawing on the subjective meaning of employees to our case company's CSR efforts. By examining the perceptions and identifications of employees, we hoped to gain insight into the interconnectedness of employees' OID, CSR and the EB. We acknowledge that perception and identification are subjective and depend on how individuals participating in our study understand and create meaning of CSR, the case company and their job. Therefore, we chose an interpretive approach to understand the participants and how they interpret their company's CSR efforts. It helped us to gain insights into the subjective meanings of employees' reality construction, the *verstehen*, which is a key principle of this approach (Prasad, 2018).

The interpretive tradition we have been influenced by is Symbolic Interactionism, which "rests on the belief that objects and events have no intrinsic meaning apart from those assigned to them by individuals in the course of everyday social interaction" (Prasad, 2018, p.21). Since individuals take on different roles and behave differently depending on their social situation (Prasad, 2018), we acknowledge that various perceptions of the company's CSR efforts by employees may differ based on factors such as their background, values, jobs, and living situation. By doing so, we seek to understand human behaviour rather than explain it and acknowledge multiple truths that emerge from different people's perceptions (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

As interpretive researchers, we acknowledge that we are involved in knowledge generation as our interpretations influence our empirical material (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). Furthermore, our prior knowledge of concepts and phenomena affects our understanding and contribution to the research (Prasad, 2018). Therefore, we were in constant dialogue with our empirical material and avoided asserting the objectivity of our findings (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018).

In the interpretive tradition, in-depth interviews are usually conducted to discover the meaning behind certain situations by asking ‘how’ rather than ‘what’ questions (Prasad, 2018). To understand how the company and the employees interpret its CSR efforts, we adopted this approach and focused on questions on *how* they perceived things in our interviews. Furthermore, we also sought to explore the self-view of the interviewees, both as individuals and as employees, which is considered crucial for a deeper understanding of the interpretive tradition (Prasad, 2018).

### **3.2 Research Approach**

As previously discussed, our paper is influenced by the interpretive approach to understanding how employees identify with an organisation by focusing on their perception of the company’s CSR efforts and its implications for the employer brand. To achieve this, we selected a qualitative analysis that seeks to capture meaning from the participant's point of view and can gain valuable, comprehensive insights into an individual (Maxwell, 2012). Choosing the qualitative research approach enabled us to examine the social environment of the employees by looking at their interactions, processes, and meanings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

According to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2022), there are three ways to approach business research: induction, deduction, and abduction. While the inductive approach seeks to discover theoretical concepts by analysing empirical findings, the deductive approach aims to validate a theory through them (Bryman, 2012). Abduction, on the other hand, combines both induction and deduction. However, according to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018), abduction is not a simple mix of these two approaches but adds a layer of understanding. They suggest that an abduction is a multifaceted approach that involves a continuous interaction between theory and empirical facts, where both are successively reinterpreted in the light of each other (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018).

We chose the abductive approach to gain a basic understanding of the relevant theories before collecting data while avoiding any undue influence from a particular theory. This approach

enabled us to continuously evaluate our empirical findings by comparing them to the theory and vice versa (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). It supported our aim to attain new meaning and discover new patterns with the gathered data and lessened our influence by particular theories when conducting our research (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). However, we are aware that our prior engagement with theories during our university education may still have impacted our work.

Furthermore, our research focused on identifying breakdowns, defined as clashes between theoretical assumptions and empirical material, uncovering unexpected phenomena and challenging existing assumptions (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). It required us to be open and sensitive to theories, avoiding assumptions of objective truth. When a mystery arises from unexplained phenomena, valuable knowledge is produced by stating and solving the mystery (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), leading to a theoretical understanding that can be applied to similar phenomena in other settings. Thus, finding and solving mysteries allows for effective theorising of empirical material (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) and explains how we aim to contribute to academic literature.

According to Bell, Bryman, and Harley (2022), a single case study on an organisation allows for a more comprehensive analysis of an organisational phenomenon than a multiple-case study approach. Additionally, Yin (2012) suggests case study is appropriate when the research question involves explanatory questions, such as how, what, or why. On this basis, we concluded that a single case study at one company was the most suitable approach to analyse employees' perceptions of CSR efforts.

### **3.3 Research Context: The Organisation**

To conduct our research, we gained access to a Swedish company where we collected the empirical data that served as the basis for the analysis. We have decided to use the pseudonym *HETA* when addressing the company to ensure the company's anonymity. We chose the pseudonym *HETA* at random from the Greek alphabet. Thus, it has no underlying meaning nor any affiliations with any company.

To understand the research's context, we present some background information about *HETA*, which we gathered during the interviews and the visits to the company's headquarters. The Swedish global manufacturing company, which provides products and services for air conditioning, refrigeration, and heating, is based in southern Sweden and employs around 1,000 people in various countries.

HETA's vision is to significantly reduce energy use in heat exchanger solutions by producing systems for a more sustainable heating and cooling supply. We approached HETA primarily because of its focus on sustainability and local anchoring. HETA's business model aims to help maximise energy efficiency and minimise carbon emissions through its products. Besides its sustainable heat transfer solutions, HETA is working on establishing sustainable and ethical manufacturing. In 2021 the company introduced a framework for environmental, social and governmental goals to measure, report and shape its working practices. Additionally, the company set various emission reduction targets, such as achieving carbon neutrality by 2030.

HETA's initiatives include reducing water consumption and emissions, ensuring a transparent supply chain that aligns with the company's values and priorities, and increasing the use of products from recycled sources. In addition to these initiatives within operations and the supply chain, the company encourages its employees to contribute to a more sustainable business. These efforts, such as a bicycle leasing programme, free health assessments for employees and environmental awards recognising employees' efforts in environmental improvements, can be seen as EB activities to encourage employees to adopt more sustainable behaviour. Additionally, HETA strives to associate its brand with sustainability, evident in its public appearance through its website and sustainability reports.

HETA's commitment to promoting a more sustainable heating and cooling supply and its efforts to establish sustainable and ethical manufacturing practices were of interest to us. Furthermore, HETA's CSR initiatives seemed to go beyond operations and the supply chain to encourage employees to adopt more sustainable behaviour in various EB activities. Also, the company's sustainability reports indicated a strong association with sustainability. Given HETA's focus on CSR and its efforts to integrate sustainability into its brand, we saw it as a suitable case study to explore the relationship between OID, CSR and EB.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

The following chapters provide insights into our data collection process. As Styhre (2013) points out, data can be considered the raw material of any study, and all findings are built upon it. However, as interviews as a form of data can be influenced by subjective beliefs, it is essential to be considerate and transparent about the data collection process of empirical data. As outlined above and in line with the interpretivist research tradition, we opted for semi-structured interviews and interviewed ten employees at our case company HETA.

### **3.4.1 Sampling**

As we prepared for the interviews, we had to determine a sampling of relevant interviewees. According to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2022), purposive sampling requires researchers to select participants who can provide insight into answering the research questions based on the empirical material. We began our research by considering different Swedish organisations with a focus on CSR. Through networking on LinkedIn and personal recommendations from contacts in private and academic contexts, we connected with various employees of companies who indicated a strong focus on CSR in their profiles. Among these contacts was an HR representative from HETA, through whom we gained access to the company. We quickly introduced our approach to the study, for which we received a statement of interest.

After scheduling a Zoom meeting with the HR representative to discuss our research proposal and future steps and confirmation from her manager, we were granted permission to proceed with our study. The company was optimistic about our research proposal to give them valuable insights regarding their efforts on sustainability and EB. After the Zoom call with HETA, we did not continue contact with other employees and companies. In this context, it seems to some extent random that we ultimately selected HETA as our case company.

In consultation with the HR representative of HETA, we established some prerequisites for our interview sampling. To effectively achieve our research objective and gather relevant data for addressing our research questions, participants needed to have recent memories of their experiences before joining HETA. Additionally, since our study focused on exploring the potential attraction of CSR efforts, selecting new employees provided valuable insights into their recruitment process and pre-employment experiences, considering that these events had occurred relatively recently. As HETA considers employees as new employees if they joined the company within a timeframe of one year, we decided to specifically target employees who had joined the company within the past year. Therefore, the decision to select employees from this group was in line with HETA's understanding of new employees and our requirements.

Furthermore, we favoured conducting all interviews face-to-face at the company to observe the interviewees' body language and facial expressions, which Vogl (2013) suggests enhances interview quality. Additionally, we wanted to ensure that the respondents felt comfortable and had a safe environment during the interview, which is easier in a familiar environment such as their office. With this in mind, we also added the requirement that we could meet the

participants at HETA's headquarters, as we wanted to conduct the interview onsite. When selecting participants for our study, the representative of the HR department recommended that we include another employee in the sampling, even though she had already been employed at HETA for 1.5 years. This employee was working on the topic of sustainability at HETA and was able to provide valuable insights for our study. Although this employee had been at the company longer than the requirement, we decided to include her in our sampling because of her expertise and focus on sustainability.

In collaboration with the HR representative, we emailed all employees who matched the requirements, inviting them to participate. We were pleased to receive a positive response from various employees in the company and scheduled the interviews. There, we chose those employees that were the fastest to respond and showed interest in our study.

As Bell, Bryman and Harley (2022) note, determining the appropriate number of interviews for qualitative studies can be challenging, especially when deciding when theoretical saturation has been reached. With ten interviews in total, we began to feel that there was a pattern in the respondents' answers, which according to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2022), is a sign of being close to theoretical saturation. Thus, we collected data for our study in an overall sampling size of ten interviews.

### ***3.4.2 Semi-structured Interviews***

Since we decided to conduct qualitative research, we opted for semi-structured interviews. According to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2022), this method is best suited to collecting detailed data and the meaning behind situations. It also allows more flexibility and greater freedom for respondents to express their opinions, thoughts and feelings than structured interviews (Horton, Macve & Struyven, 2004). Semi-structured interviews use an interview guide with predefined questions but remain flexible, with additional questions that can be included during the process (Bryman, 2012).

The interview guide used in our study encompassed eleven open-ended questions with minor adjustments and additional questions added during the process to ensure sufficient data collection. The aim was to avoid leading the respondents towards a specific answer and gather unbiased results. All ten interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 20 and 40 minutes, depending on the participant's responses. As mentioned previously, the interviews were intended to be conducted face-to-face to enable the observation of body language and

facial expressions, and we spent two days at the company's headquarters for this purpose. During these two days, we also gained insights into the company culture and atmosphere, which helped us gather further background information for evaluating the interviews. However, due to scheduling conflicts, some interviewees could not be onsite during this period. Therefore, three interviews had to be conducted online with video and audio. In these online interviews, we could not read their body language as well as in the on-site interviews. Nevertheless, thanks to the video, we were able to observe the facial expressions and body language to a certain extent.

After consultation with the HR representative, we opted for the term "sustainability" instead of "CSR" in our interviews. The HR representative informed us that the company uses "sustainability" to communicate its CSR efforts. This was confirmed in the participants' responses, who, when asked about sustainability in their company, frequently referred to the company's CSR efforts. This terminology is reflected in our interview guide and subsequent data analysis.

To ensure a professional and efficient interview process, we divided our roles during the interview. One of us took on the role of observer, solely focusing on taking detailed notes on the respondent's body language and other nonverbal cues. The other researcher led the interview by asking open-ended questions and keeping the conversation flowing smoothly. In the middle of the interview, we switched these roles. This approach allowed us to capture the nuances of the respondents' answers while closely observing their reactions and impressions. To ensure accurate transcription of the interviews, we obtained permission to record each interview. This allowed us to record the interview and later check it in detail during the transcription. The list of interviewees and the interview guide are provided in the appendix.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

To effectively analyse the data in qualitative research, it is crucial to have a plan for organising and reducing the gathered material into manageable segments (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Once all the data was collected, we transcribed and coded the interviews into overarching themes. Each researcher coded the data individually to prevent potential collective biases and ensure independent analysis.

Throughout the empirical analysis, we focused on gaining deeper insight by concentrating on what the employees communicated and how they said it (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). We accomplished this by analytical bracketing, sorting, and analysing the two layers of



communication - the what's and how's- resulting in a more nuanced analysis (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Therefore, the data analysis includes quotes that reflect what the employees said and some observations of employees' use of language and body language to depict how they are talking.

After sorting the data, we chose to identify key themes in the interviews through open coding when transcribing the material, also known as first-order analysis (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). We then discussed the patterns and themes together and realised that although we had various similarities, we differed in central aspects. To support our discussion, we used online mind-map tools to analyse the differences and similarities of our themes together. These mind maps also helped us with our second-order analysis, where we developed the main themes and interpreted the different dimensions (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). The differences in interpretations of our themes especially showed us the benefit of being two researchers.

Since we aimed for a nuanced analysis, we carefully followed the steps outlined above in empirical data evaluation. Furthermore, we chose to construct excerpt-commentary units as a method of argumentation that effectively demonstrates the intertwining of empirical evidence and theory and argues for the contribution of findings to research (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

### **3.6 Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations**

When collecting qualitative data, several ethical considerations were constantly considered when carrying out this work. It was the explicit intention of the authors to conduct ethically and morally acceptable research.

Given the central role of interpretation in this study, a high degree of reflexivity was crucial. According to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018), reflexive research consists of two characteristics - careful interpretation and reflection. While careful interpretation involves recognising the influence of external factors, such as theoretical assumptions, pre-existing beliefs, and language, on the empirical data interpretation, the second characteristic of reflection involves questioning the researchers' interpretation of the data, which is essentially an interpretation of the interpretation (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018).

To ensure reflexivity in our study, we engaged in frequent discussions and challenged each other's thinking as two researchers. Throughout the writing process of our master's thesis, we questioned and re-evaluated our interpretations, assumptions and actions, adding a richer, more

nuanced understanding of our work. We acknowledged that any readings of findings do not stem from one universal truth but are extracted relative to the contexts of the researchers themselves. We also found it helpful that we had the opportunity to communicate in our mother tongue, German, as this encouraged a more nuanced interpretation and discussion of the data, ensuring that no details were lost in translation.

Using reflexivity allowed us to reassess our research direction and rethink our approach based on the different experiences of our interviewees. Reflective thinking led us to trust in the strengths of the two-way, conversational nature of the semi-structured interview and allow the data to dictate our research rather than our assumptions. Reflexivity helped us overcome the potential limitation of non-generalisability of findings that can occur in studies of single-case organisations.

Ethical principles are crucial throughout the research process to minimise ethical risks (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). For participants to make an informed decision on whether they wished to participate in this research, informed consent was gathered before the interviews were conducted by informing participants of the true purpose and nature of the research being conducted and giving them the freedom to decide whether to consent or decline to participate (Arifin, 2018). We obtained an agreement to participate through direct email communication with participants after the research objective and process had been communicated through a consistent email, and all questions about participation had been answered (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). Consent to record the interviews was also confirmed with the explanation that this would facilitate the transcription process for the authors of this paper, to which participants verbally agreed before the interviews were conducted. Respondents were verbally assured that the recordings of the interviews would be deleted after the successful completion of the work and final confirmation by the supervisor.

Furthermore, we aimed to keep in line with Bell, Bryman and Harley's (2022) emphasis on minimising the risk of harm to respondents. Thus, in the invitation email for the study, we clarified that the company's and interviewees' names would be anonymous. Also, we stated that the employees would be given pseudonyms to ensure that their answers would not be traced back to them. In addition, we are not presenting the unique positions of the interviewees. In this way, we aimed to prevent respondents from overly supporting their company and avoiding problems with their superiors (Horton, Macve & Struyven, 2004).

### **3.7 Limitations and Critique of the Study**

In this study, we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of a complex phenomenon through a qualitative case study approach. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of the research to provide a comprehensive and honest analysis of the findings.

Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that case studies are often misunderstood as a method that cannot contribute to scientific development because one cannot generalise from an individual case. However, case studies can provide groundbreaking knowledge and contribute to scientific innovation in the social sciences. We acknowledge the seemingly limited transferability and external validity of our study, given that it is based on only one case company and its particular characteristics. Although the findings of a case study may not be formally generalisable, contextual knowledge gained from a qualitative case study can be just as valuable as context-independent knowledge gained from quantitative research in providing a deeper understanding of a complex phenomenon (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). Prasad (2018) also emphasises that qualitative research should not be oversimplified due to its complex nature.

Furthermore, we recognise our sample size as another limitation, as we only decided on employees who joined our case company within the last year. While this enabled us to gather a relatively contemporary view, it also limits our contributions to literature as our study is thus only representative of employees with these characteristics.

The subjective nature of respondents' answers is another limitation of qualitative research. The respondents' opinions can lead to misleading answers (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). To maintain the study's validity, we assured all respondents of complete anonymity. This approach minimised incentives for dishonest responses and thus increased the study's validity. The recording and transcription of all interviews prevented the loss of material due to subjective interpretations during the interviews, thus strengthening the reliability of the study.

Bell, Bryman and Harley (2022) argue that qualitative research should not necessarily be based on reliability or validity but rather on authenticity. Therefore, to maintain the authenticity of the study, we presented essential background information about our case organisation HETA, as we felt that these factors were necessary for understanding the empirical findings.

Subjectivity is another criticism of qualitative research, as the results depend on the researcher's interpretation (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). To minimise this, we aimed to evaluate carefully,

question and reflect on our empirical material, which according to Schaefer and Alvesson, is known as "source criticism" (2017, p.1). In doing so, we do not hold our findings as ultimate truths but seek to understand their content. Nevertheless, we must admit that full disclosure of this bias is almost impossible and, thus, a limitation of our research.

## 4 Empirical Findings

The focus of this chapter is to present the empirical findings of our study. By dividing these into three main themes with sub-categories, we aimed to highlight the key areas of interest we discovered during our interviews: the employee’s perception of sustainability at HETA, their emphasis on sustainability for themselves and their work at the company, and lastly, their demand for even more sustainability.

The first theme, ‘Employee’s view of HETA’, focuses on how employees perceived the role of sustainability at HETA before and after joining the company. This provides insight into how sustainability is perceived and valued within the organisation and how it influenced employees’ decisions to work at HETA. The second theme, ‘We make the world better’, delves into the self-view and the feelings employees associate with working at HETA and how it relates to sustainability. Lastly, the third theme, ‘We expect more’, highlights how employees’ emphasis on sustainability creates a demanding situation for the company, as it poses challenges for HETA to meet employees’ expectations. To provide a clear understanding and visualisation, Figure 2 illustrates the structure and reasoning behind our narrative in this chapter.

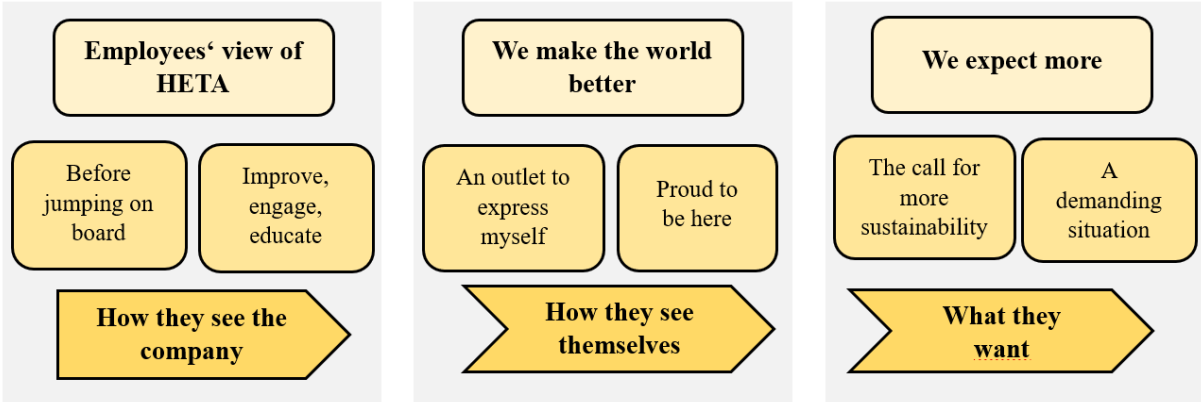


Figure 2: Key Themes Underpinning the Narrative of Chapter 4

### 4.1 Employees’ View of HETA

This theme outlines how HETA’s employees perceive sustainability at the company and consists of two sub-themes. The sub-theme ‘Before jumping on board’ describes how employees saw sustainability before starting at HETA. It shows that sustainability was a reason to join HETA, even though the employees could not identify a focus on sustainability in the company’s communication. The second sub-theme, ‘Improve, engage, educate’, focuses on

employees' perspective on sustainability at HETA after working there for several months. While some employees sensed different aspects of social sustainability since working at the company, most employees justified their view of HETA as a sustainable employer by drawing on the products and especially recognised efforts to improve them. Additionally, some employees saw the newly formed 'ESG team', a team at HETA tasked with addressing sustainability in the company, as trying to engage and educate employees on sustainability.

#### ***4.1.1 Before Jumping on Board***

Our interviewees were new employees at HETA, meaning they had a contemporary outside perspective of HETA and could recall their motives for joining the company. Ulla, an HR manager, stated, "*I wanted to work for HETA because, like, one of the reasons was sustainability*". She stated that her impression was that sustainability was high on the agenda at HETA:

*"I have worked for a company producing heat exchangers before, so I know a bit about the product. So, then it felt safe for me that what we are producing is something good for the world."* – Ulla

According to Ulla, the products gave her the understanding that she was joining a sustainable company.

Alma, a business engineer, expressed that her wish to join a sustainable company was a reason for starting at HETA:

*"I read the sustainability report before I started because it's an interest of mine that I do operate for a company that does better. ... But I had no real perception of HETA. It was more about our competitors and what they did, and their sustainability journey, which is good. And then I just assumed it applied to the same type of products."* – Alma

Alma classified HETA as a company concerned about sustainability because she looked at other companies in the industry and figured that HETA and its products must be similarly sustainable. Lena, an employee of the HR Department, also stated she came across HETA because she "*was first and foremost interested in the industry, and then out of the industry, I looked at companies that have a bigger purpose behind what they do*". Lena further explained that HETA is "*acting*

*in the industry of manufacturing, but I actually see us acting in the industry of clean energy”*. The industry and the products were indicators for Lena that HETA focuses on sustainability.

Julius, an engineer, noted, *"I wanted to know what kind of company it was that I was going to work for"*. After closely researching the company, he concluded that its products met his requirement of working in a business making a difference: *"I mean, using our finite energy resources better is an important thing, it is a step towards maybe a better future"*.

As the statements above show, employees mentioned that they joined the company because of sustainability but, at the same time, did not perceive an emphasis on sustainability in the communication of the company. Freja, a technical engineer, pointed this out:

*"I didn't want to work for a company that does the bare minimum. And I want a company that has sustainability in focus. ... And you do have companies that are very good with marketing themselves as environmentally friendly. ... So, when you think of those companies, you will think, 'Yeah, they're working for the environment'. And I didn't have that feeling with HETA, but I think that HETA under the surface does way more than those companies that maybe just put on a green logo and you think they're environmentally friendly."* – Freja

While mentioning the alleged greenwashing attempts of other companies, Freja furthermore expressed that HETA, in her view, is not strongly enough associated with being environmentally friendly, as the company does more for the environment than can be seen from the outside. She also explained that even after the first interview, her impression of HETA was *"that it was like a very technical company"*. This is closely related to the experience of Hannes, another engineer, who reflected on the first time he heard about HETA at university and how he perceived the company before he started working there:

*"I believe in some courses I studied, people from HETA came over and talked about the company. And so I knew what the products were and what they were doing. ... I knew about the company, and I had a good view or positive view of the company before I finished my studies. ... I don't remember if they talked about sustainability and climate targets or whatever."* – Hannes

Hannes confirmed he knew about the technical aspects but did not connect HETA with sustainability.

In contrast to the majority of employees, who stated that it was crucial to join a company that takes sustainability into account, some interviewees depicted a different view:

*“I kind of read a bit about the company before I went on my first interview. But I didn't know anything. So it's like, ‘Yes, something about heat exchangers’, but that was it. So I didn't pick this company because of their sustainability goals or anything.” - Selma*

Selma mentioned not only that sustainability was not a reason for her to join HETA but also that after reading about the company, she had no association with sustainability. While many employees were attracted to HETA because of its products they perceived as sustainable, they did not see a focus on communicating about the company's sustainability efforts. However, after working at HETA for several months, employees gained a deeper understanding of the company's sustainability measures, which will be analysed in the following chapter.

#### **4.1.2 Improve, Engage, and Educate**

As the employees at HETA settled into their roles, they had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the company and its sustainability measures. At the time of the interviews, they were already part of HETA for a couple of months, which enabled them to deepen or develop a new view towards sustainability at the company. Within the interviews, we recognised that this new view differed from before starting at the company, as many employees acknowledged the company as even more sustainable than they had previously thought.

Several employees expressed that HETA's sustainability efforts are strongly connected to improving the products. Freja phrased this very clearly when she stated:

*“They're working a lot with reducing scrap and looking at how we can actually make our product itself sustainable and not what it does. ... I have only been employed like a year, but it feels like during that year, they made a really big effort with actually trying to be more sustainable and looking at bigger projects.” - Freja*

Julius agreed with this view when talking about the company's initiatives for waste reduction and recycling:

*“HETA works on reducing the material that goes to waste and recycles the waste that you get out from it. So, we've had many discussions on how we can make our*



*division better, how we can try and make our product better, a little bit more environmentally friendly. Or a little less environmentally bad.” - Julius*

He stated that he had been engaged in numerous discussions on improving his division and the products’ environmental friendliness. For him, these initiatives demonstrated a commitment to sustainability and set the stage for further progress in this area.

Alma also saw her company’s efforts in making progress towards sustainability but noted that there are challenges about the products and legislation that HETA needs to continuously address to improve:

*“I would say that HETA as a company is really on the path of being mature in operating sustainably. ... [But] we can always be better. We do have products that require copper, and copper leaching is an issue we have in this world. We also have operations in different parts of the world, which makes it harder for us to have equal sustainable development for all because the legislations and regulations differ in different countries.” - Alma*

Hannes also mentioned some challenges with the company’s products and saw these as a factor not to consider HETA as a sustainable company. However, like many others, he emphasised that the company is trying to be sustainable:

*"Obviously, they use metals, which the production of iron and copper and so on have an environmental impact. ... If we want to have a sustainable product, we would need the raw materials to be sustainable as well. ... We have a way to go. But I do believe we are working towards it. And I think the products we make are essential in a sustainable world.” - Hannes*

Ulla not only drew on the products to explain her view on HETA as a sustainable company but also referred to what she called the internal aspect of sustainability:

*"We have what we produce, but then we also have the internal sustainability, how we work with leadership and work environment and so on. And that's difficult to know when you don't work here because that's something you experience when you have started to work.” - Ulla*

By mentioning leadership and the work environment at the company, Ulla connected a different perspective to sustainability at HETA. She implied that this could only be truly understood and experienced once a person has started working at the company. Lena, an HR representative at HETA, also referred to the working environment when describing how she sees the sustainability efforts at her employer:

*“When it comes to the fluffy HR side where I'm acting, I would say anything connected to creating and defending fair and equal work environments, world-class health and safety metrics, and making sure that anyone in contact with HETA can live a life of dignity. ... That's what we're currently digging into. And to me, that's sustainability as well. We literally make sure that our people sustain.” - Lena*

She also highlighted HETA's current efforts to ensure high health and safety standards and to create decent living conditions as integral parts of her understanding of sustainability at her employer.

When asked about how he perceived sustainability at HETA, Hannes added to Lena's perspective of the connection between sustainability and the work environment:

*“ I had two jobs before I started here ... this is the first time I feel, or this one, it, I think the social dynamic feels a bit different it's hard to pinpoint exactly what it is, but it's the first time where I'm like 'Oh, I can actually be here really long', and I can change positions within the company or whatever.” - Hannes*

Hannes perceived sustainability at HETA through a social dynamic that connected him more strongly with the company. Freja also suggested that sustainability at her company includes a social aspect:

*“If you say something, they will be quiet and listen till the end, even if it's maybe wrong, but then they will still consider it because they notice the value, which I guess comes with the social part of sustainability, but they really do notice the value of the employees.” - Freja*

She noted that the company values and considers the perspectives and contributions of employees, which is in line with her principles of social sustainability.

Furthermore, Freja saw the new ESG team as an example of sustainability activities at her company. She stated that *“they just started a new team, which is supposed to focus on the sustainability of the company”*. Martha, another employee who talked about the new team and its focus on sustainability at HETA, implied:

*“I know that just, not even a year back, we have a new role as an ESG officer. That's a role we have not had before. So I think that also highlights the focus on sustainability and working with sustainability moving forward.” - Martha*

Alma, who is part of the new ESG team, explained that the focus lies on improving sustainability in the environmental, social and governance areas at HETA:

*“What we are doing is that the ESG officer has a team. One person is in charge of E, one for S and one for G. And those have contacts at every site. So they are communicating with those people as well.” - Alma*

Björn, a technical engineer, recognised the ESG team’s efforts *“in informing and educating and driving employees to a certain direction and mindset”*. He sees the team's role as *“encouraging the employees to do stuff for sustainability”*. Many respondents stated that the ESG team engages employees in different activities to increase awareness of sustainability at HETA. Alma mentioned the ESG Days as an example of the initiatives of the new team. After participating in one of these days, the ‘No Car Day’, Björn mentioned a motivation to purchase an electric bike: *“I live outside town. So I took my bike and actually, after that, I bought an electric bike, and I've been riding it for six months now”*. Even though Björn showed throughout the interview that sustainability is not a priority for him, he felt engaged through the ESG team’s efforts to choose a more sustainable way of commuting to work.

Selma, who participated in a different ESG day, the 'save water day', also referred to the team’s efforts in engaging employees by organising such events and activities:

*“And now yesterday they had this water-save day, I think it's called International Waters-Safe Day, that you also could sign up to. They don't check if you do it or not but it's to engage people in that kind of sustainability. They also attached videos and information like what you can refrain from to lower your water consumption [...]. And then a few days before the actual event, they will actually go around the*

*office [... and] encourage people to sign up. [...] They are engaged in trying to engage us in sustainability.” - Selma*

Selma's story demonstrates the ESG team's active approach to educating employees about sustainability at HETA by communicating with them at the office and providing information and videos on reducing water consumption.

Despite acknowledgements of opportunities for improvement, such as product-related issues, HETA was recognised as a company that actively strives for sustainability. Our research indicates that sustainability holds substantial importance for the majority of the individuals we interviewed. Consequently, in the subsequent chapter, we explore employees' self-image and emotional connection with the company and its sustainability efforts, analysing the source of this strong emphasis on sustainability.

## **4.2 We Make the World Better**

During the interviews, it came to our attention that sustainability was of high value for almost every interviewee. For this reason, we considered it important to investigate the origin of this strong emphasis on sustainability by looking into the self-view of the participants and the feelings they connected with sustainability and their employment at HETA. Thus, the first sub-theme, ‘An Outlet to Express Myself’, shows that many employees see themselves as sustainable people and can express this through their work at the company. The second sub-theme, ‘Proud to be here’, focuses on the feelings employees associate with their employment at HETA. It shows that employees were proud of representing HETA and felt good about working for a company that tries to be sustainable.

### ***4.2.1 An Outlet to Express Myself***

As previously elaborated, it was important for most employees to work at a company that has sustainability on the agenda. In this section, we explore how employees justify this for themselves by illustrating how they talked about being sustainable people who want to contribute to making a difference in the world:

*“I see myself as a sustainable person, mostly because of my background in university, I think that's where most of it comes from. And I think that kind of put*

*the awareness on a different level”. ... we develop a product that is supposed to help with the transition from fuel to more environmental solutions, like heat pumps, and so on. So, the company itself is working towards a sustainable future.” – Freja*

Freja states that she developed a sustainable mindset by studying at university and that her work at HETA allowed her to convert this attitude into action. Julius had a similar experience: “I’ve been called a tree hugger by my friends. ... I think I’ve always thought about it [sustainability] without necessarily knowing”. He further explained that he had always unconsciously tried to be careful using resources and that studying had opened up his awareness. Moreover, he stated that working at HETA allowed him to influence the world:

*“[working at HETA] has just given me an outlet to sort of express myself”. And I mean, it’s a business that’s working towards the goal of getting us as human beings a bit better, using less energy to get the same heat, for example.” – Julius*

Another employee, Hannes, shared his story of becoming sustainable with us:

*“I think for me, it was before I started working at HETA when I started finishing my studies and getting a bit more educated on the whole sustainability topics. That is when I sort of changed how I try to live, and so on. Perhaps when I was living abroad, ... and I had only a backpack of clothes and no gadgets or whatever. And I felt really free, not owning anything. So that is I think when I started thinking along those lines of how I want to live my life.” – Hannes*

Additionally, he explained that commuting by train and never buying new things helps him to live a very minimalistic life. He admitted that “there are a lot of emissions that happen just because you live”, but concluded by describing himself as sustainable. Hannes furthermore highlighted that his work allows him to contribute to a better world:

*“Our products are used in a lot of things that enable a sustainable society, and also, our heat exchangers are used in heat pumps that are essentially the way for the world and Europe to decarbonise heating. [...] So I would say our products [...] will be essential in transitioning to a more sustainable world.” – Hannes*

Before starting work at HETA, all employees mentioned previously considered themselves sustainable. The respondent Ulla also belongs to this category and expressed this very clearly:

*“I have many choices in my life, but I don’t think that HETA is the part that makes me sustainable. ... I think maybe more my views, like my values, and the choices that I make due to my values is more what makes me sustainable.” – Ulla*

Ulla, like the others, stated that she chose to join HETA because she saw herself as a sustainable person due to her values. It was important for her to feel that she works *“at a company doing something good for the world”*.

While most employees stated that working at HETA did not influence their self-view of being sustainable, Alma came to a somewhat different conclusion:

*“I wouldn't say that [I'm more sustainable] due to HETA. I would say that's due to my colleagues in the ESG team. ...Because of the people at HETA. Which probably makes HETA.” – Alma*

When reflecting on what makes her a sustainable person, Alma stated that working at HETA has influenced her to see herself as even more sustainable than before joining the company. Lena found even clearer words when she confidently declared that she considers herself more sustainable *“because I work for HETA as a company”*. Both respondents perceived they contribute to a more sustainable future by working at HETA, which Lena described in the following words:

*“I'm not a product engineer, but our product as such, the way I understand it is almost energy positive. [...] We could provide solutions we have created over the last few decades for the burning questions of today and tomorrow.” – Lena*

#### **4.2.2 Proud to Be Here**

The combination of employees’ strong connection with sustainability and their work at HETA triggered a range of feelings and emotions in the interviewees, of which we observed mainly positive ones. Most employees associated a sense of pride with their employment at a company they perceived as positively impacting the world.

Ulla, for example, emphasised being proud to be employed by HETA: *“I feel proud of being here ... we together are doing something good, even though companies are not all good. But still, maybe better than some other companies.”* She strongly linked this to a feeling of doing something good. Ulla also put HETA’s efforts in sustainability in a comparatively positive light, as she acknowledged that other companies might be less committed to sustainability.

Martha, too, felt this sense of pride and saw this primarily connected to the external perception of the company:

*“I’m proud of it, of course. It feels really good when speaking with friends, and family, but also in my role with candidates, that we can really offer them a sustainable company where they can grow and have their future. So I’m proud of it.” - Martha*

She highlighted that she could use the company's sustainability efforts to present HETA to others, for example, in promoting the company to potential recruits. She furthermore showed a strong identification with the company in her private life when feeling proud to talk about her job with family and friends.

Lena draws on the potential positive impact her work could have when expressing pride in working at HETA: *“I feel good and proud about it. ... I’m actually super excited about it, and I can see the impact that we are gonna make.”* Alma, too, saw a positive impact of her work at HETA, which made her feel better about herself: *“I feel like I’m making a change, or I’m driving a change and impact which makes me feel good, and it makes me feel better about what I’m doing.”*

Hannes experienced his work at HETA as meaningful and saw this primarily through the perception that the company’s products help others to be more sustainable:

*“I think it feels really meaningful to work with a company that sort of takes its social or corporate responsibility. And also that our products enable someone else to be. If you have an apartment complex that converts its natural gas boilers to electric heat pumps and their heat pumps use our heat exchangers, we’re helping them as well. So that feels meaningful to work with.” - Hannes*

Julius also saw his company's efforts to improve as a factor that made him feel good about his work and shared this in a story about one of his current projects:

*“And I do especially enjoy participating in projects that have the mindset of trying to make something better. And I do have one of those projects now with an unnamed company which is using our resources better. Using our waste, ... and turning it into an asset gets me enthusiastic. It motivates me to do better ... to go the extra mile.” - Julius*

He stated that HETA's efforts in improving sustainability, especially those focusing on resource efficiency and waste management, motivated him to do better at his job. Furthermore, Julius indicated a desire to do good when he said: *“I can do something good. Isn't that what you want to do? ... for everybody, for us, for me?”*. His statement conveys a sense of purpose and motivation to do good through one's work. He also saw his work as an opportunity to make a positive impact on the world and the people around him.

What was interesting for us was that even the employees who seemed to attach less importance to sustainability were proud to work for a company that is involved in sustainability. For example, Selma addressed her pride in representing HETA:

*“It's always nice that a company has a good sustainability policy. I would say it makes my conscience a bit cleaner and feel even better about representing the company as an employee. So all good things, if they have a good sustainability policy or work for that goal.” - Selma*

In her statement, Selma drew on the image of having a clear conscience that was, according to her, triggered by the company's sustainability policy. A good sustainability policy makes her feel even more comfortable working for HETA and being connected to it as an employee. Björn also recognised that *“it feels good, I mean, somehow it would create some work pride perhaps.”* Olaf mentioned *“being proud that my company is helping contribute to sustainability”*.

Freja seemed to take a different path when talking about her general expectations for a company:



*"I feel like it [working towards sustainability] should not be anything special because all companies should be at that stage. So for me, it's kind of an obvious part that they should have sustainability in focus." - Freja*

Freja's statement highlighted her belief that sustainability should be a standard aspect of all companies' operations, not something extraordinary or exceptional. Rather than seeing HETA's sustainability initiatives as something to be praised, Freja viewed them as a minimum requirement for a company. Freja indicated that she has high expectations towards corporate social responsibility and requires companies to prioritise sustainability as a fundamental aspect of their business.

### **4.3 We Expect More**

Our analysis revealed that sustainability was not just a side issue for our respondents but they claimed it as an essential part of who they are and why they work at HETA. However, this high value placed on sustainability by employees also presented HETA with challenges, as various demands for even more sustainability actions and formalised regulations were raised in the interviews. Further influencing the situation was that employees seemed to have a broad understanding of sustainability. These findings are presented in the first sub-chapter, 'The Call for more Sustainability'. Additionally, many employees stated their willingness to leave the company if they perceived its efforts as insufficient, which stresses the importance of implementing authentic and substantial actions for HETA. This is illustrated in the last sub-chapter of our empirical findings, 'A Demanding Situation'.

#### **4.3.1 The Call for More Sustainability**

Apart from the already discovered impression that HETA's employees attach great importance to sustainability, it also emerged from the responses that they expect more concrete actions and improvements from HETA regarding sustainability. Employees acknowledged the company's efforts but, at the same time, addressed various necessities for increasing sustainability at HETA. They not only included environmental aspects but especially called for more social sustainability, showing a very differing and broad understanding of the term.

As previously demonstrated, many employees recognised the company's efforts to improve the products' sustainability. Hannes was among them. However, he later emphasised that it is not

sufficient enough, as he pointed out that HETA “*should be and could be doing more, especially in terms of the ... materials we use, and we could probably invest more ... in research for those technologies*”.

Freja was concerned that HETA could be tempted to express sustainability exclusively through the products when mentioning that “*sometimes I kind of feel like they ride on the fact that they have a good product and that they're working towards a sustainable future*”. She sensed having products that support a better future should not be a reason to neglect other sustainability efforts. Freja called for more stringent regulations targeting environmental sustainability and was particularly critical of HETA’s transportation policies, which she considers stricter at other companies:

*“I haven't seen a policy about our transportation ... from the point of the environment as in like ‘If it's less than these kilometres, you're not allowed to take the flight. If you're staying less than these days, you should have a Zoom meeting. If it's a conference and you can't have it via Zoom. You should check the train’. More like those type of policies that I know my friend's companies have, I haven't seen it.” – Freja*

Apart from environmental actions, many employees expressed a call for more formalisation within other dimensions of sustainability. For example, Ulla mentioned challenges with what she earlier described as internal sustainability:

*I think there are a lot of things that could - how can I say this in a good way - where [there] are possibilities. And I think we are trying, ... but it has some kind of startup feeling still, so maybe not everything is in place. But in my experience, I think there's a lot of things that we can do.” - Ulla*

She shared a story to exemplify this:

*When I started, it was kind of stressful. I felt like I was just, you know, it was not the calm beginning, like a calm onboarding. It was more like, okay, here is [some work] and I had to just jump into things, without really feeling that I had an introduction. So my first time was quite stressful, I would say, and that is not sustainable.” – Ulla*

In her story, Ulla described the stressful onboarding process as unsustainable. Even though it was not an ideal experience for her, she further stated that going through this was good, as it raised awareness of opportunities for improvement in a sustainable work environment and further formalisation.

When talking about what he called social sustainability, Hannes voiced another suggestion by stating that HETA could be bolder in trying modern working models:

*“At my last company, they tried giving everyone one hour every day to exercise and they saw no change in productivity, and so they kept it. Those types of things I think we could do more of those because for a lot of people, it would probably not impact their performance and it will just make them happier. But we're stuck in this whole ‘Oh, we need to work eight hours a day!’ because that's what we have done for 100 years.” – Hannes*

Hannes's manner of speaking about this topic indicated that he did not understand why HETA is not exploring alternative approaches to move away from old-fashioned practices. He concluded that *“I think we should be a bit more progressive and try those things and see what happens”*.

Julius also added a progressive recommendation to improve sustainability, stating that companies should give employees incentives not to use cars:

*“I know from the Swedish Government you can get a bit of a discount for every mile you have to drive [by car] to work. So if you go over a certain cost, you get something back. I live 40 kilometres away, I bike and I take the train, but I can't get a refund anywhere on my train ticket. ... I do think the company should encourage this somehow. Because I do think more people would use the bus or train or bike. ... Instead of having the incentive "if you have to go far use the car and you get some money back.” – Julius*

He criticised the government's regulation and suggested that HETA should actively intervene by promoting incentives for employees to commute by alternative means of transport.

Julius further mentioned that there is room for other improvements: *“There's a few low-hanging fruits that I don't understand why haven't been [tackled], and that maybe has to do with recycling and stuff like that within the house”*. He cautiously raised the issue of waste recycling on the premises of the office, which we also heard about from another employee. However, they stated that the failure was the fault of HETA's landlord, as he did not provide the infrastructure necessary to recycle office waste.

Martha presented the importance of improving sustainability communication in an HR context when reflecting on recent events:

*“So we have been to student fairs and yesterday, we actually had some students here visiting, and I can really see for them ... that sustainability is a very high priority when they apply for jobs. ... We do employ many engineers, and I think in that engineering population, it's a big focus on sustainability, I think both from their studies but also from their interest in general.” – Martha*

Martha acknowledged that sustainability is of interest to HETA's potential recruits and will become even more crucial in the coming years. However, she pointed out that this needs to be more visible in the company's communication:

*“And I think it will not be less important in the future. So I think for us, and maybe especially in HR, that we really promote this to people, when recruiting, when we meet candidates, when we meet friends, family, you know, employer branding is everywhere. But we need to continue focusing on it in the future, and maybe we need to get even better at telling people about what we actually do.” – Martha*

Freja connected sustainability with corporate culture when stating that she wants sustainability to be part of the culture and added:

*“I want my colleagues being like, ‘I'm not gonna drive today because I will just take the bus or the train, it's easier’, or ‘Let's not waste paper, we'll reuse the paper we're taking’ or like those type of things. And that, I think, it's rooted in the culture of the company or, it's in you, and you will do those things without thinking about it.” – Freja*

We heard from many employees that they already act accordingly. Freja also confirmed this by saying that people automatically think along these lines. Nevertheless, she called attention to the fact that she wants the company to actively promote sustainability in the corporate culture and thus make it more visible.

Lena also stressed the necessity of actively integrating the whole company into the sustainability journey and imposed responsibility for driving the change on the top management:

*“I think the challenge is gonna be to make them [everyone in the company] feel the ownership of what we're currently trying to do. ... And that's just nothing that we, as the representatives in the teams, can do, that needs to come top-down.” – Lena*

Alma, who works with sustainability at HETA, also emphasised the crucial role of executive management in driving sustainability initiatives, stating that *“we will never get anywhere”* without their support. Furthermore, she recognised the complexity of the company’s sustainability challenges and the importance of organising the next steps: *“So what we're doing right now is we're mapping out our KPIs [Key Performance Indicators] and trying to see what is important for us, and where can we make the biggest difference”*. Lena supported this need for prioritising:

*“I think that we cannot just broadly be top-notch in everything, but it needs to be prioritised what we're gonna tackle first. Also, not to overwhelm the organisation with all the changes that are gonna be implemented, and a closer relationship of the communication department and all other kinds of departments throughout the organisation to make sure that we communicate what we wanna communicate.” – Lena*

While acknowledging the need for structuring the sustainability efforts, Lena mentioned that this brings about other challenges for the company, such as clear internal communication.

Ulla clearly expressed the importance of prioritising the actions:

*“I think there are a lot of initiatives ongoing, but also it's hard to focus on everything at the same time. I think that is my feeling a bit, that we have really good initiatives all over. But ... it feels like ‘Okay, one thing at a time’, because otherwise, we will not be ready, and we will not be finalising anything. And then it's not a sustainable work environment.” – Ulla*

She highlighted the situation in which HETA finds itself and stressed the importance of taking the initiative while being aware of the challenge of finding the right approach.

Overall, employees called for more sustainability efforts, especially on regulations and visibility, and showed a broad understanding of the term. The challenges HETA faces in dealing with these sustainability expectations are explored in the following chapter.

#### **4.3.2 A Demanding Situation**

As previously outlined, the participants expressed the expectation for HETA to increase its sustainability efforts in various demands. However, coping with these demands presents significant challenges for the company. One of the most pressing challenges we identified was dealing with the risk of losing employees, as many respondents expressed considering leaving if they were dissatisfied with the company's sustainability efforts. Another challenge for HETA, we discovered, was employees' expectation of being concrete and authentic in these efforts.

Lena summed this up very clearly when talking about her view on HETA's future:

*“I want us to maintain our company's success, and I want this journey to go on. And I see that it won't if we don't do sustainable things, if we don't show how sustainable we are.” - Lena*

In her statement, Lena emphasised the importance of sustainability to the company's success. She recognised that the company's future development depends on implementing sustainable practices and demonstrating a commitment to sustainability. Her statement also indicates a concern about the negative impact on the company should HETA fail to take sustainability seriously.

Julius took this thought further when he stated that he would not work for a company that did not prioritise sustainability:

*“I wouldn't work for a company that didn't give a shit. That's just how it is. [...] It is one of the most important things that you can focus on in any business, basically, due to the fact that we have to do something. So if you're not doing anything, you're not worth my time.” - Julius*

He indicated that prioritisation of sustainability is a non-negotiable aspect of his work values and he *“wouldn't stay there [at the company] if they weren't doing enough.”*. Freja also expressed she would leave a company if unsatisfied with its sustainability: *“If I came to a company that didn't care about it, I guess I wouldn't want to stay.”*. Hannes emphasised the importance of consistency between his values and those of the company he works for: *“It [sustainability] is in line with my core values. And if the company doesn't have the same values as I do, I wouldn't want to work here.”*. Later, he stated that he would express his dissatisfaction with the company and would leave if he felt no efforts towards change.

Furthermore, Hannes added a different perspective to the attractiveness of sustainability:

*“I wouldn't be against working at a company - you can look at it like two ways: you can either work at a company that ... doesn't produce anything, so obviously they have a very low carbon footprint. But if you work at ... a mining company, they have a huge carbon footprint, but there you can actually have an impact. So, I would be okay with working at a company that initially has some big carbon footprint but works on reducing it.” – Hannes*

Hannes explained that it is not a prerequisite for him that the company he works for is considered sustainable per se. Instead, the company's willingness to change for the better, in other words, caring about sustainability and having an impact, is even more important to him.

Freja made a very similar point:

*“That's also an exciting journey to help to make the company better, and not just go into a company that's already finished, because usually the companies that are on top feel as they can somehow relax. ... So I do think there's an attractiveness in trying to join a company that is pushing towards making a difference.” – Freja*

With her statement, Freja expressed clearly that it is not necessarily important whether the company she works for is sustainable. Instead, it is about HETA's commitment to getting better, working towards something good and having the opportunity to make a difference.

Some employees connected their willingness to change to other aspects of sustainability. For instance, Björn considered sustainability in the work environment when he stated that he would change companies if his well-being is affected. He explained, *"If it [lack of sustainability] would affect my well-being at the company, or that I would feel not comfortable or something like that, then I would [change company]."* Ulla also saw the great importance of the work environment when she emphasised the significance of shared values and organisational culture. She explained how these factors were vital for her job satisfaction and illustrated her point by providing examples of reasons for quitting:

*"So if I wouldn't share values - if I come to a company where it will be very hierarchical, like no psychological safety or blaming culture or the kind of leadership where you're just a dictator, that's not me. And then I would not work [t]here." - Ulla*

Ulla's statement suggests that she places great importance on the alignment of her values with those of the company when it comes to sustainability. She indicated a willingness to leave her job if she did not perceive a prioritisation of ethics and social responsibility.

HETA's employees not only expressed the willingness to leave the company if their sustainability expectations were not fulfilled, but they furthermore raised the importance of providing evidence of the company's sustainability efforts. Ulla shared her previous experience with a company where sustainability was only superficially discussed and how it made her leave the company:

*"I think today almost all companies need to have some sustainability strategy, but to me, you can't say that you're doing things when it's not true. So it needs to be some data behind it. ... I worked for a company where I personally felt that they talked about sustainability, but it was more like greenwashing. And for me, that didn't feel good, so I was a bit annoyed, and I didn't feel proud." - Ulla*



In her story, Ulla stressed the importance of data and evidence to support a company's sustainability efforts and avoid greenwashing. She stated that companies cannot claim to be sustainable without providing evidence to support their claims.

Lena expressed concerns about seeing the risk of a similar situation to what Ulla described:

*“But I'm also nervous because, with all upcoming legislation, there come bigger, more profound requirements of how you prove that you're sustainable. ... I wonder if we also should maybe slow down a little bit in how we communicate with the outside when it comes to sustainability because it raises expectations and then maybe in certain locations the tax law or other things require us to do unsustainable things.” - Lena*

Lena addressed increasing sustainability requirements, such as new EU regulations, and how they could raise expectations that the company might not be able to meet. She was also worried that the company might be pressured to do unsustainable things due to these regulations and therefore suggested the need to slow down communication about sustainability to avoid raising expectations and harm on the company's sustainability reputation. Lena also shared her fear that this might have a negative impact on the company's perception among employees:

*"And so that you join [HETA] as an employer and you decided for them maybe because of sustainable first mindsets, and then you are disproportionately disappointed if you see small things that are maybe not the way you interpret sustainability. To me, that would lack authenticity, and it would make me question what we actually work in. [...] I see this as a big thing for the company because what can we stand for as a company if we don't fulfil what we say we stand for? That would feel inauthentic and, uh, wrong and like a dick move.” - Lena*

Lena's statement shows she placed a high value on authenticity in sustainability at HETA. She also states that an employee who joins the company with a strong focus on sustainability has certain expectations about the company's commitment to sustainable practices. According to Lena, the company's failure to meet those expectations would not only lead to disappointment for employees but also raises questions about the company's authenticity and values. Lena

stated that it is essential for the company to fulfil its promises and stand by its values, as failing to do so would not be authentic and might lead to employees' negative perceptions of the company.

## 5 Discussion

In this chapter, we discuss our empirical findings. Using relevant literature, we establish a theoretical context for our material to provide a better understanding of the results. In the beginning, we will discuss how a company's CSR efforts affect the employer brand perception among employees by focusing on psychological contract fulfilment. Subsequently, this leads to the discussion of employees' identity as well as their identification with sustainability and the company. Resulting from this, we examine the challenges and opportunities of employees' demands for more sustainability. Figure 3 summarises these main findings from the analysis to clarify the content of this chapter.

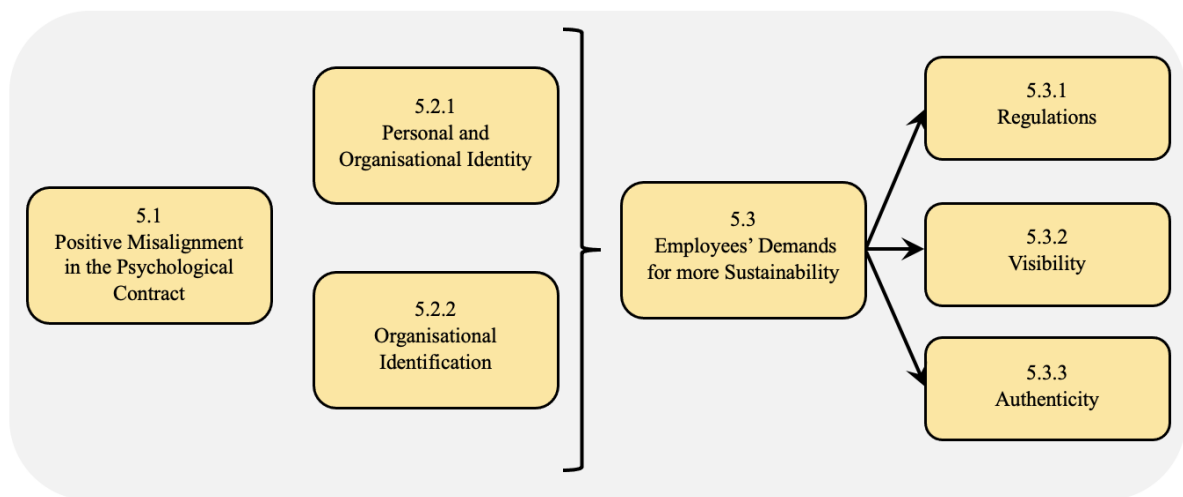


Figure 3: Summary of Main Findings Underpinning Structure of Chapter 5

Finally, we conceptualise a model that integrates the different findings of our study and the interconnectedness of CSR, EB and OID at HETA in an interdisciplinary framework.

### 5.1 'Overfulfillment' of the Psychological Contract

We begin our discussion by analysing the role of CSR for the employer brand of HETA and how this influences employees' perceptions of the company. Firstly, we will show that CSR positively impacts HETA's attractiveness among potential employees, increases motivation and supports retention once employees have joined the company. Then, we examine how employees perceive their employment experience in light of their CSR expectations. Thereby, it becomes evident that HETA engages more in CSR than is promoted through the employer brand and the

psychological contract in terms of CSR is thus overfulfilled. We call this a ‘positive misalignment’ between expected and actual employment experience, as illustrated in Figure 4 at the end of this chapter.

### ***5.1.1 Attraction, Motivation, and Retention***

The literature review has shown that CSR can positively impact a company's and its employees' relationships (Carlini et al. 2019; Özcan & Elçi, 2020). Hence, we decided first to investigate the influence of HETA's CSR efforts on its employees' perception of the company.

As outlined in the empirical analysis, employees who joined HETA referred to perceived sustainability as a motive for joining the company. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have found that implementing CSR measures can positively impact an organisation's attractiveness to employees (Carlini et al. 2019). Our empirical analysis also found that employees at HETA felt proud of their work and were motivated to perform well because they connected their company's CSR efforts with doing something good. This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting the positive impact of CSR on employee performance and motivation (Jones, 2010; Mirvis, 2012). Furthermore, employees at HETA emphasise consistency in values and are willing to leave if these are unfulfilled. They expressed a desire for a strong focus on CSR and viewed this as a factor in their decision to stay with the company. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that companies prioritising CSR and embedding its values into their activities are more likely to retain engaged employees who perceive their organisation positively (Carlini et al. 2019).

In conclusion, HETA's CSR efforts have a positive influence on the attraction, motivation, and retention of its employees. Therefore, it can be argued that CSR is a crucial component of HETA's employer brand, portraying HETA as a brand that offers an employment experience connected to sustainability. This connection between CSR and employment experience at HETA will be examined in more detail in the next chapter by analysing the psychological contract at the company.

### ***5.1.2 The Psychological Contract at HETA***

As discussed in the previous chapter, CSR plays a significant role in shaping the company's employer brand and influencing the employment experience. However, our empirical analysis reveals that although the employees joined the company due to perceived sustainability, they did not recognise a strong emphasis on CSR in the company's communication efforts. Instead,

their understanding of sustainability at HETA was more closely linked to the products themselves, based on technical knowledge or competitor comparison, rather than explicit CSR communication. Consequently, the employees did not initially perceive a strong focus on CSR in the employer brand.

After joining HETA and working for the company for some time, employees' perceptions of CSR efforts shifted. They began to observe and recognise numerous CSR efforts by the company, leading them to define HETA as an organisation actively striving to be sustainable. This shift in perception indicates that employees' initial expectations of the employment experience were not in line with the encountered experiences. According to Foster, Punjaisri, and Cheng (2010), a misalignment between employees' expectations and their actual employment experience can have negative consequences on employee performance, commitment, and loyalty.

Moroko and Uncles (2008) describe this connection between employees' expectations and their actual employment experience as a psychological contract built on the promised employment experience conveyed by the employer through the employer brand. Contrary to their initial expectations, employees at HETA perceived a greater emphasis on CSR than anticipated, which can be seen as an overfulfilment of the psychological contract. Carlini et al. (2019) describe such a gap as positive disconfirmation, occurring when employees perceive outcomes that surpass their initial expectations. It potentially leads to positive word-of-mouth, affective commitment and stronger identification with the organisation (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998).

We locate a positive misalignment between the expected and actual employment experience. To visually represent this positive misalignment, Figure 4 outlines the analysis conducted in this chapter. It highlights the shift in employees' perceptions and the subsequent recognition of CSR initiatives that surpass their initial expectations.

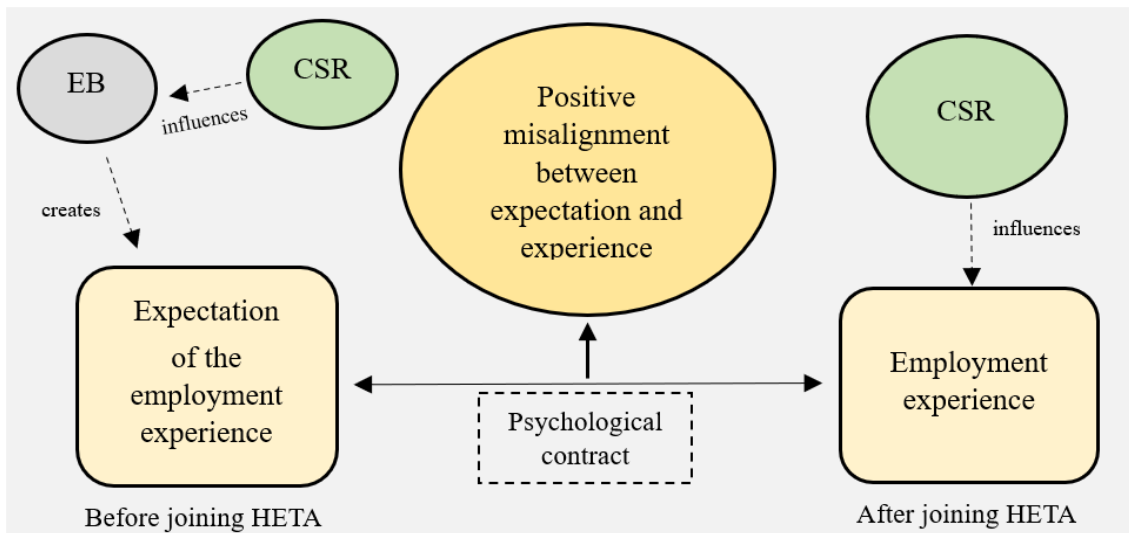


Figure 4: Analysing the Psychological Contract at HETA

In conclusion, the positive misalignment suggests that HETA's CSR efforts have exceeded employees' initial expectations, influencing their perceptions and possibly leading to a stronger identification with the company. In our empirical material, we also observed this strong identification with sustainability at HETA, which is discussed further in the following subsection.

## 5.2 Sustainable Identities

In this chapter, we aim to gain a further understanding of the positive misalignment that was presented previously. Specifically, we examine employees' strong perceptions of CSR by applying concepts from identity literature, further illustrated in Figure 5. Discussing employees' identities and their perceptions of the organisation's identity in relation to CSR, we describe employees' perception of HETA as sustainable through its product. Then, we discuss how sustainability leads to the strong identification of employees with HETA.

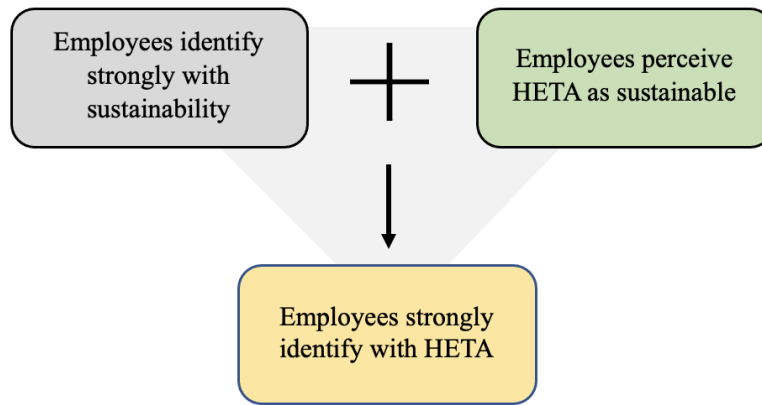


Figure 5: Employees' strong OID with HETA

### 5.2.1 Personal and Organisational Identity

Our empirical material reveals the high significance HETA's employees attach to CSR, though more importantly, shows that they already viewed themselves as concerned with sustainability before starting to work at HETA. Applying Ashforth and Mael's (1989) article on SIT, which describes how individuals classify others and themselves into different social categories, it can be argued that our respondents considered themselves as individuals belonging to the social group of sustainable people, as they stated being sustainable in various arguments. Employees located the origin of their sustainable values and beliefs in university education or personal experience and emphasised that this, rather than HETA, makes them sustainable. Accordingly, it was more a consequence of their self-concept that raised the desire to join a company sharing these sustainable characteristics. It fits with Ashforth and Mael's (1989) argument that individuals search for meaning and empowerment when joining an organisation because, as a specific social group, the organisation can strengthen individuals' self-concepts if it embodies the characteristics they seek. Thus, in the case of our interviewees, who classified themselves as sustainable, joining HETA presented an opportunity to confirm their self-concepts, as they perceived the company as sharing their sustainable values.

As we outlined in the findings, HETA's products were the main cause for our interviewees' association of the company with sustainability. This indicates that they took the products, which they perceived as sustainable, as an inference to conclude that HETA cares about sustainability. Looking at this through Albert and Whetten's (1985) definition of organisational identity, it could be argued that the products are the central and distinctive element of HETA's organisational character. As there is no definitive theory determining what can be defined as

central property for an organisation's identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985), it is debatable whether a product can be considered a characteristic of OI. In the case of HETA, however, our results show that the products were the decisive factor in conveying that sustainability is an essential part of the company's identity since employees stated this as the main reason for their perception of joining and working for a sustainable company. Thus, the perceived OI at HETA or what members believe is distinct and central to the organisation (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994), appeared to be that the company cares about the environment and works towards a more sustainable world.

Our material shows that perceptions of sustainability at HETA appear to have changed throughout employment at the company. This suggests that perceived OI has also changed as employees perceive sustainability as a feature of HETA's OI. This confirms Gioia, Schultz and Corley's (2000) assertion regarding the dynamic nature of an OI, as identity is a social construction that individuals constantly reinterpret. In the case of HETA, this was no different, as employees first perceived the products as the only reason for the company's sustainable identity but later noticed many other efforts of increasing and engaging in CSR, which consequently led to the reinterpretation of the company's OI as even more concerned with sustainability.

In the next chapter, we will discuss the respondents' OID with HETA for a more in-depth understanding of this fluent relationship between HETA's OI and individuals' self-concepts.

### ***5.2.2 Organisational Identification and Sustainability***

The previous chapter suggests that the perception of HETA as a sustainable company matched our interviewees' self-concepts of being sustainable individuals. According to Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994), such value congruence resulting in a cognitive connection between an individual and the organisational OI is defined as OID. Furthermore, they state that identification with an organisation shapes individuals' self-concepts and that the degree to which employees want to identify with their company depends on its perceived attractiveness. For this reason, HETA, a company perceived as attractive through employees' view that it cares about sustainability, provided employees with the possibility to positively influence their self-concept. We discuss this below using the principles of self-continuity, self-distinctiveness and self-enhancement, which determine the perceived attractiveness of an organisation (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994).



### **Sustainability as Self-continuity**

The first principle, self-continuity, describes individuals' perceived attractiveness of an organisation that enables them to maintain or even strengthen their self-concept (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). Throughout the interviews, it became clear that HETA's employees wanted to work for a company that strives for a more sustainable world. They stated that they see this enabled by HETA's products but also through other CSR efforts they have experienced. Hence, employees' membership at HETA confirmed their self-concept and has given them "*an outlet to sort of express [themselves]*". As a result, this can be argued to have added to their sustainable self-concept and simultaneously enhanced the perceived attractiveness of HETA and identification with the company.

### **Sustainability as Self-distinctiveness**

Secondly, organisational members perceive their company as attractive because it enables them to distinguish themselves from others (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). Our respondents at HETA evidenced this by indicating a strong focus on sustainability in their company's OI, which they perceived as different to others. On the one hand, this perceived high importance of sustainability in the OI provided a distinctive characteristic for employees, which again can be argued to have increased HETA's attractiveness and, thus, employees' OI (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). On the other hand, however, employees not only mentioned their own company's efforts towards sustainability but distinguished HETA from other companies by concluding to be "*better than others*". This suggests a hint of moral superiority, which we will discuss comprehensively connected to self-enhancement.

### **Sustainability as Self-enhancement**

According to Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994), when members believe that their organisation's identity contains qualities associated with virtue or moral worth, this enhances their self-esteem. For HETA's employees, sustainability was a quality of such status, as our interviewees disclosed when they described their company as contributing to the "*transitioning to a more sustainable world*". Furthermore, it became clear to us that the moral quality of HETA made employees feel proud about working for the company. However, many statements indicated that not only the perception of contributing to a better world but also the aspect of helping others to be better was what made them "*feel good*" about what they are doing. Some of these statements, for example, the above-mentioned "*better than others*" argument, could

be argued to contain a slight hint of moral superiority. Whether or not employees perceived “*helping others to become better*” and “*doing something good*” as a way of seeing themselves as morally superior, our empirical material shows that they perceived sustainability as a quality of moral worth. This perception increased employees’ perceived attractiveness of HETA, enhanced their self-esteem, and, thus, positively influenced their identification with the organisation (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994).

Following Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994), members’ perception of their organisation as attractive strengthens their identification with the organisation. Indeed, our empirical material indicates that sustainability strengthened employees’ identification with sustainability at HETA, as all three principles we discussed suggested employees’ perception of HETA as attractive. Furthermore, Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994) argue that a high degree of organisational identification implies that individuals use the same attributes they perceive in the organisation to define themselves. Our empirical material also shows that employees use the same attribute, sustainability, to define the company and themselves, which confirms the strong OID among HETA’s employees.

We outlined in this section that our interviewees have a sustainable self-concept that led them to join HETA, as they concluded from HETA’s products that the company shares the value of sustainability in its organisational identity. Furthermore, we discussed that sustainability increased employees’ perception of HETA’s attractiveness and thus strengthened OID. Altogether, this highlights the value our interviewees attached to sustainability. A consequence of this emphasis on sustainability was a multitude of demands by HETA’s employees, as they expected the company to strive for more sustainability constantly. The next chapter examines this situation, its challenges and the implications for HETA.

### **5.3 The Challenges and Opportunities of Sustainability**

So far, we outlined employees’ strong identification with sustainability and HETA, a company they perceived as sustainable through their products and other CSR efforts. However, the respondents’ strong emphasis on sustainability not only led to strong identification with HETA but also contributed to their high awareness and knowledge of the topic. This resulted in employees expecting even more sustainability and thus raised many demands, which created challenges but also opportunities for the company, as we illustrate in the following. First, as employees called for more structure and regulation of CSR, we discuss the concept of

organisational control in this context. Subsequently, we delve into employees' calls for enhanced visibility of sustainability at HETA. To conclude this chapter, we address employees' demands for authentic and substantial efforts across all their requests. The demanding situation for HETA, triggered by employees' various demands for more sustainability, is illustrated in Figure 6.

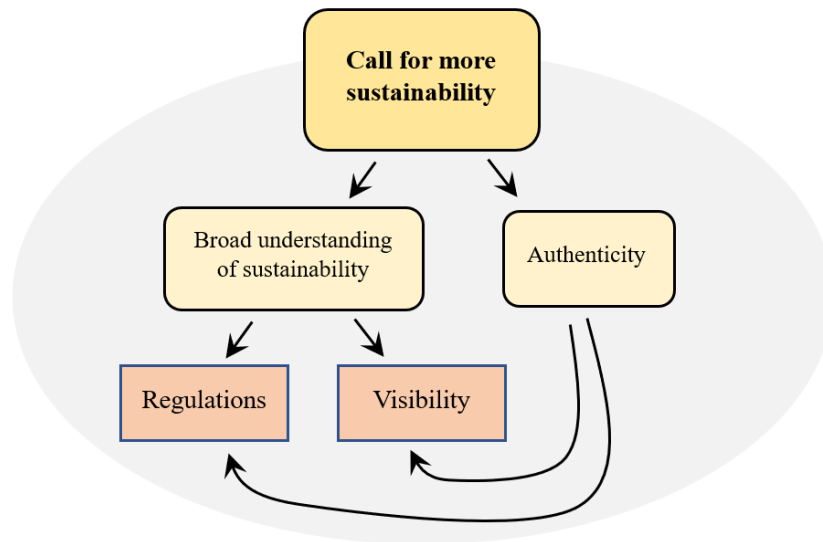


Figure 6: The Demanding Situation for HETA

### 5.3.1 Regulations, Organisational Control and Identification

Our empirical material shows that employees seemed to have a very broad understanding of the term sustainability. Consequently, employees stated various demands on HETA, which in their opinion would further increase CSR at the company. Some of these statements were related to environmental sustainability, for example, the materials used for the products or transportation, while others focused on social aspects of sustainability, such as establishing a sustainable work environment. Central to many of these demands was the call for more formalisation of CSR efforts, or in other words, more bureaucracy (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004).

This demand for more CSR formalisation, expressed by HETA's employees in the form of calls for structures, regulations, and policies, appeared mysterious to us for two reasons. On the one hand, organisations in modern work contexts usually strive for greater flexibility, as they adapt to new practices influenced by society, instead of expanding traditional technocratic forms of control, such as formalised regulations (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). On the other hand, it seemed peculiar to us that the employees were the ones demanding regulations and thus stricter

organisational control in the form of bureaucracy, which we will examine in more detail in the following.

### **Employees' Demand for More Organisational Control**

Modern conceptualisations of organisational control often describe how management aims to influence employees' self-images and, thereby, indirectly regulate their behaviour through normative, socio-ideological control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Müller, 2017). Whereas this depicts organisations' attempts to influence employees, the case of HETA shows an example of employees' attempts to influence the organisation's CSR efforts by calling for more organisational control. This appears somewhat confusing at first glance and will thus be elaborated further.

As we established above, employees' demands for more formalisation emerged from their high identification with sustainability. Accordingly, these demands had the motive of increasing HETA's CSR efforts, as employees perceived stricter regulations and standardised policies as supposedly enhancing CSR by limiting unsustainable practices. Following Kärreman and Alvesson (2004), regulations and policies represent elements of bureaucracy or technocratic control. In contrast to the previously mentioned socio-ideological form of control, technocratic control depicts organisations' attempts to directly regulate employees' behaviour through standardised procedures and regulations. Therefore, by urging HETA to introduce more regulations to ensure more sustainable practices, employees request the company to affect their freedom to act. On the one hand, some of these regulations, such as "*transportation policies*" could restrict employees, whereas, on the other hand, a more sustainable "*work environment*", "*incentives*" or "*prioritisation*" could enable them more flexibility. Of central significance to the demands, however, is that employees see these regulations as a guarantee of increasing CSR at HETA as a whole.

Kärreman and Alvesson (2004) state that technocratic control also has a socio-ideological influence, as it is a possibility to provide employees with meaning and identification. In other words, the implementation of regulations targeting CSR at HETA could increase employees' identification with the company. This connection between identification and organisational control at HETA is discussed in the next section.

### *Organisational Control and OID*

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) point out that bureaucratic forms of control often underestimate the relevance of the concept of identity. In the case of HETA, however, we showed that employees called for more formalisation in terms of CSR as a result of their high identification with sustainability, which requires a consideration of the connection between OID and technocratic control. When mentioning member identification, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) describe that high OID is expected to limit the range of possible decisions in employees' behaviour, as they will act according to their identity. In the case of HETA, when employees call for more regulations, such a limitation in the range of decisions is in the interest of employees, as it supposedly increases CSR at the company. In contrast to the explanation of member identification above, the situation at HETA is distinct in two aspects. First, it is not the organisation's attempt but the employees' desire to align organisational control with identification. Secondly, employees' demands for regulations are technocratic. This highlights the importance of considering the often-neglected connection between technocratic control and identification (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), as technocratic regulations, in this case, would strengthen employees' organisational identification. Therefore, the fact that HETA's employees state these demands also represents an opportunity for the company. Implementing regulations as a reaction to employees' demands could strengthen OID, while simultaneously increasing technocratic control. Furthermore, this clear expression of employees' desire to increase CSR enables HETA to align the organisations' and employees' values (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) and, thus, provides possibilities to increase socio-ideological organisational control.

In summary, this sub-chapter aimed to discuss that employees at HETA demanded more bureaucracy from their company, which appeared peculiar to us as it increases organisational control, which in this case would be in the interest of employees as it supposedly increases CSR. By taking the previously established high identification with sustainability as a reason for their demands, we examined the intricate connection of organisational control and employees' objective to enhance CSR at HETA. Thereby we discussed the link between technocratic control and organisational identification and thus explained that introducing regulations and policies can depict a chance for HETA to strengthen OID.

Another aspect of employees' demands that emerged from their broad understanding of sustainability and the diversity of different demands was greater visibility of sustainability, which is discussed below.

### ***5.3.2 Visibility of Sustainability***

In their demands, employees expressed the wish that sustainability should play a more significant role in both the way HETA is viewed internally and externally. Therefore, in the following sub-chapters, we will examine these calls in both contexts.

#### ***Visibility of Sustainability inside HETA***

Employees expressed their desire for sustainability to be deeply embedded in the company and have a stronger position in the minds of the people and, thus, emphasised the need for sustainability to be an even more fundamental aspect of how the organisation operates. To meet this call for increased visibility, employees expect a more comprehensive integration of sustainability into HETA. This emphasis on the need for sustainability to be a fundamental aspect of how HETA operates suggests that employees are committed to ensuring that sustainability becomes an even more central, distinctive and enduring part of the company's OI (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

Moreover, employees demanded that sustainability should be more embedded in the mindset of each individual within the organisation, affecting their daily actions and decision-making processes, and thus increasing the visibility of sustainability within HETA. To influence such behaviour, companies can utilise normative control, as it is an attempt to “regulate employees’ insides – their self-image, their feelings and identifications” (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p.622). It can be argued that employees’ demands to further integrate sustainability into the mindsets and thus the actions of all employees depict a call on HETA to exercise normative control. Exercising normative control as an answer to employees’ demands on increasing the internal visibility of sustainability could result in stronger OI, as it encompasses a sense of belonging, shared values and connectedness to the organisation (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994).

Furthermore, employees expressed the need for more support and visibility of sustainability initiatives from top management. They stated that a top-down approach emphasises management's commitment to sustainability and thus signals that sustainability is recognised as a key value of HETA. It can be argued that this call for more support from top management directly aligns with their call for more formalisation of sustainability within HETA, as when management is committed to sustainability, it signifies a strong commitment to integrating

sustainability into the organisation's formal structures and processes (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004).

In the following, we will address the need for sustainability to be more visible in HETA's external image, as employees recognised the importance of projecting a sustainable image to the outside world.

### **Visibility of Sustainability outside HETA**

In addition to the internal visibility of sustainability within HETA, employees also emphasise the need for greater visibility of sustainability efforts in the external image of the company.

Employees recognise that this is important for attracting potential employees that care about sustainability and view it as a competitive advantage. It can be seen as the call for connecting sustainability more with the company's employer brand, as it is commonly recognised in the literature that companies participating in CSR activities enjoyed a better reputation, increasing their attractiveness as employers and giving them a competitive advantage in the labour market (Albinger & Freeman, 2000; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Turban & Greening, 1997).

Another aspect of increasing the external visibility of sustainability at HETA could be that it enhances employees' self-concepts and identification with the company. According to Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994), the construed external image of an organisation influences the degree of employees' OID. Consequently, if employees believe that outsiders perceive the organisation's image as attractive, it strengthens their sense of belonging and commitment to the organisation. Therefore, increased external visibility of sustainability could reinforce employees' OID with HETA, as they perceive that sustainability promotes the company's attractiveness to outsiders. Thus, by actively promoting sustainability in its external image, HETA can strengthen employees' OID.

Having explored employees' calls for greater visibility of sustainability both internally and externally at HETA, we now turn our attention to another crucial aspect highlighted by employees - the importance of authenticity in the company's CSR efforts.

### ***5.3.3 Authenticity of Sustainability***

As previously outlined, employees at HETA have raised various demands that reflected their concerns and expectations. Amidst these demands, a prevailing theme emerged - the call for

authenticity in the company's CSR efforts. Employees emphasised the importance of data and evidence to substantiate HETA's sustainability efforts, indicating a desire for more than superficial claims. Thus, it can be argued that authenticity in CSR holds significant value for the employees at HETA, as it aligns with their expectations and perceptions of the company's commitment to sustainability.

Through our empirical analysis, we uncovered the consequences of HETA's failure to meet authenticity expectations. Such a failure would result in employee disappointment and cast doubt on the company's values. Employees expressed the view that HETA must fulfil its promises and stand by its values to avoid being perceived as inauthentic. These findings align with the assertions made by Kuhlmann and Farrington (2010), who suggest that companies risk appearing insubstantial and insincere in their communication when their CSR efforts lack authenticity, potentially leading to accusations of greenwashing. Several employees, drawing on past experiences or highlighting perceived risks, indicated that a lack of authenticity in the future could even prompt them to consider leaving the company. Drawing on the insights of Gond et al. (2017) and Pomeroy et al. (2017), we see a possible explanation for the significant consequences observed before in the close connection between employees' strong identification with HETA's CSR efforts and their subjective perception of authenticity. Thus, if HETA's employees perceive CSR efforts as greenwashing or lacking authenticity, it could diminish their level of OI. This further emphasises the importance of HETA meeting authenticity expectations in its CSR efforts.

We see this emphasis on authenticity as both a challenge and an opportunity for HETA. On the one hand, meeting the authenticity expectations of employees can be demanding. It requires the company to ensure that its CSR efforts are transparent, supported by robust data and evidence, and aligned with its stated values. HETA must consistently demonstrate its commitment to sustainability and avoid any perception of greenwashing. This requires a thorough evaluation and potential revision of its CSR efforts to ensure they meet the authenticity standards set by its employees. On the other hand, embracing authenticity in CSR efforts can allow HETA to strengthen its relationship with its employees and enhance its perception as a socially responsible organisation. Moreover, it can serve as a powerful tool for employee engagement, loyalty, and retention (Glavas, 2016a).

In conclusion, we highlight the significance of authenticity in CSR efforts at HETA for employees. The failure to meet these expectations not only leads to disappointment but also



raises questions about the company's values and authenticity, as employees closely connect authenticity with their OID. Therefore, the employees' call for demands is based on the prerequisite of authenticity.

#### 5.4 Illustrating the Interconnectedness of CSR, OID and EB at HETA

In this last section, we aim to link our previously established discussion points, and thereby show the relationship between CSR, OID, and EB at HETA in a cross-disciplinary framework. We use Figure 7 to illustrate the connections found in our case study of HETA. As the arrows depict, we explored that CSR positively influenced employees' perception of HETA's employer brand. Furthermore, CSR increased the perceived attractiveness of OID with HETA and thus strengthened employees' identification with the company. As a result of employees' strong identification with sustainability and HETA, we located a reciprocal relationship between employee branding and OID. Additionally, we noted a mutual influence between OID and HETA's employer brand. We show these interrelationships in more detail below.

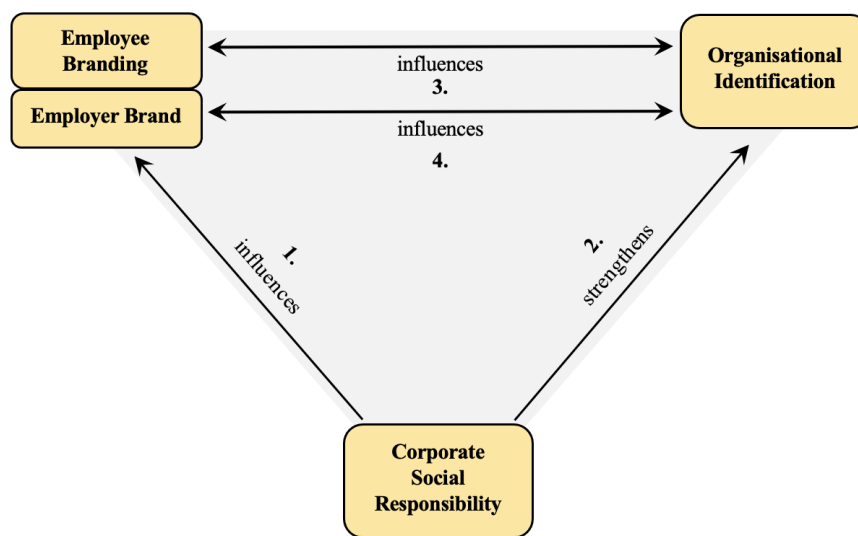


Figure 7: Framework for the Interconnectedness of CSR, OID and EB at HETA

#### **The Relationship between CSR and the Employer Brand at HETA**

As a starting point for our study, we aimed to examine the role of CSR in employees' perception of HETA's employer brand. We specifically focused on employees' attraction, motivation, and retention, which revealed that employees perceived HETA's employer brand as connected to sustainability, increasing their attraction to the company, retention, and motivation to perform. Based on these findings, we suggest that CSR positively influenced employees' perception of

HETA's employer brand, as illustrated by arrow '1.' in Figure 7. This connection is supported by literature, as various studies state that CSR increases employees' perception of a company as a desirable place to work (Özcan & Elçi, 2020; Carlini et al. 2019). Furthermore, as our respondents valued sustainability and perceived this represented in HETA's employer brand, it seemed that identification with the company was strong. Kryger Aggerholm, Esmann Andersen and Thomsen (2011) confirm this when stating that an attractive employer brand represents values co-created through employer-employee relationships, which strengthens identification with the organisation. For this reason, we continued our study by further examining employees' identification with sustainability and HETA, which pointed us to the connection between CSR and OID.

### **The Relationship between CSR and OID at HETA**

Having noted that CSR appeared of high significance to employees, we aimed to develop a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. By applying identity literature, we first discussed that HETA's employees viewed themselves as sustainable people. Then, we noticed that employees perceived HETA as sharing their sustainable values in its OI. During the subsequent discussion of employees' perceived attractiveness of HETA, we discovered that sustainability resulted in a high degree of OID. Therefore, arrow '2.' in Figure 7 depicts that CSR strengthened employees' identification with HETA. This positive influence of CSR on strengthening employees' OID is supported by the literature (Brieger et al., 2019; He & Mellahi, 2015). However, whereas employees' identification with HETA was shown as high, their identification with sustainability itself appeared even stronger. This became evident through employees' variety of demands for increased CSR at HETA, which led to the connection between OID and employee branding.

### **The Relationship between OID and Employee Branding at HETA**

In our literature review, we elaborated on normative control in connection with employee branding in the context of organisational control, as both concepts aim at influencing employees' values and beliefs (Edwards, 2005b; Cushen, 2009). For this reason, we subsequently connect the peculiarities around organisational control at HETA to employee branding.

Since HETA's employees had a very broad understanding of sustainability, their demands for increased CSR were directed at a wide range of environmental and social efforts. A common

feature of various demands was the call for more formalisation and bureaucracy. Therefore, we discussed technocratic control and showed that employees' demands were requirements on HETA to affect the company's and employees' freedom. Then, we demonstrated that the implementation of technocratic control as an answer to employees' demands could offer an opportunity to increase OID at HETA. Following these findings, we argue that there is a mutually influencing relationship between OID and employee branding, which is illustrated by arrow '3.' in Figure 7. On the one hand, it was the employees who called for more bureaucracy at HETA to increase CSR regulations. As this resulted from their high identification with sustainability and the company, this call from employees represents how OID could influence organisational control or employee branding. On the other hand, these demands depict opportunities and could thus influence how HETA attempts to align its employees with the company in the future to strengthen identification, which depicts the influence of employee branding on OID.

We further discussed employees' demands for more CSR as calls for more visibility of sustainability, which brings us to the connection of OID and the employer brand at HETA.

### ***The Relationship between OID and the Employer Brand at HETA***

The intricate connection between technocratic control and identification at HETA indicated employees' expectations of the company to internally embed sustainability as a more central part of the company's OI. This became even more apparent in employees' demands for increasing internal visibility of sustainability, which we saw as promoting the value of sustainability in employees' mindsets and, thus, their actions. Employees' demands were also aimed at increasing the visibility of sustainability to the outside. This is expressed by employees' recognition that communicating sustainability in the employer brand attracts people that share this value. Furthermore, we discussed increased external visibility of sustainability in the context of the construed external image and argued, that it could strengthen employees' OID with HETA, as they perceive sustainability as attractive. Additionally, we identified employees' emphasis on authenticity for CSR efforts at HETA and showed that the failure to meet these expectations would raise questions about HETA's values.

As a result of these discussions, we locate a mutually influencing relationship between OID and the employer brand at HETA, which is illustrated by arrow "4." in Figure 7 and further outlined below.

As shown in our literature review, the employer brand is described as highlighting the firm's unique values (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004) and "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment" (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p.187). Therefore, we see employees' demands on the company to highlight the visibility of sustainability internally and externally as potentially influencing HETA's employer brand. As this evolved from employees' high identification with sustainability and HETA, these demands depict how OID could influence the employer brand. Vice versa, HETA's reaction to the demands for more visibility of sustainability in the employer brand influences employees' OID since sustainability affects the alignment of employees' and HETA's values.

Furthermore, the demand for the authenticity of CSR efforts at HETA constitutes another link between OID and HETA's employer brand. As shown above, employees' high identification with sustainability and HETA results in the expectation of authentic CSR efforts. Subsequently, HETA should avoid communicating insubstantial CSR efforts, as employees could perceive this as greenwashing or lacking authenticity, which would negatively affect their identification with the company. We argue that this represents a mutual influence of OID and the employer brand at HETA, as a failure to meet employees' authenticity expectations in the employer brand communication could result in reduced OID.

## **6 Conclusion**

This final chapter provides a summary of the empirical findings from our study. Subsequently, we present the theoretical contributions and practical implications of the conducted research. Finally, we discuss the study's main limitations and propose potential directions for future research in this field.

This thesis addressed a research problem highlighting the importance of expanding knowledge on the interplay between CSR, EB and OID. We emphasised that a comprehensive relationship between these concepts remains relatively unexplored in the current state of research. By conducting our study at a Swedish manufacturing company with a focus on sustainability, the purpose was to enhance the understanding of the role CSR plays in employees' identification with the company and the possible implications this has for EB. The following research questions guided our investigation:

- How do a company's CSR efforts affect the perception of the employer brand among employees?
- How can employees' identification with sustainability influence a company's employer brand?

In the subsequent sections, we address these research questions by providing an overview of both the empirical findings and theoretical contributions derived from our study. We delve into the specific outcomes and insights gained through our research.

### **6.1 Main Findings**

Our first research question: 'How does a company's CSR efforts affect the perception of the employer brand among employees?' resulted in the findings that CSR positively influences employees' perception of the employer brand at HETA. The company's commitment to sustainability increases employees' attraction to the organisation, enhances motivation, and improves retention. Moreover, we identified a positive misalignment between the expected and actual employment experience in terms of CSR. It highlights the shift in employees' perceptions since joining the company and the subsequent recognition of CSR efforts that surpass their initial expectations, influencing their perceptions and possibly leading to a higher identification with the company.

Following up on this, we aimed to further understand employees' emphasis on CSR by discussing their identities and perceptions of the organisation's identity in relation to CSR, which contributed to examining our second research question: 'How can employees' identification with sustainability influence a company's employer brand?'. We explored that CSR is crucial for strengthening employees' identification with HETA, as it reinforces their sense of shared sustainable values with the company. However, employees' identification with sustainability and HETA led to a challenging situation for the company, as employees expressed various demands to increase CSR further. Among these demands, we identified the three predominant themes regulations, visibility and authenticity. Employees' call for more regulations to increase CSR, resulting from their strong identification with sustainability and HETA, represented their call for more organisational control, which we related to employee branding. However, it also depicted a chance for HETA to align its employees with the company in the future. Thereby, we showed a mutually influencing relationship between OID and employee branding. Furthermore, employees demanded increased internal and external visibility of sustainability at HETA, as they wanted sustainability to be more connected with the employer brand. We located a reciprocal relationship between OID and EB, as we discussed these demands for visibility as potential influence from employees on HETA's employer brand while simultaneously providing HETA with the chance to increase organisational identification by highlighting the value of sustainability in the employer brand. Additionally, employees emphasised the need for the authenticity of CSR efforts at HETA and showed that insubstantial CSR efforts could be perceived as greenwashing and thus negatively affect their OID. We discussed that this represents how OID influences the employer brand at HETA, as a failure to meet authenticity expectations could result in reduced OID.

These findings highlight the interplay between CSR, OID, and EB in the context of HETA. The company's commitment to sustainability positively influences employees' perception of the employer brand and OID, whilst employee identification with sustainability increases the demand for more CSR, potentially leading to challenges for EB.

## **6.2 Theoretical Implications**

The study substantiates the importance of CSR, OID and EB research and offers a few contributions to the limited literature on the relationship between these concepts, which we will present in this chapter. By conducting an empirical study at a company perceived as committed

to sustainability, we believe that our research contributes to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of this understudied field.

On our way to establishing a framework that illustrates the interconnectedness of CSR, OID and EB, we utilised different theoretical concepts. By discussing our company's organisational identity, we applied Albert and Whetten's (1985) definition, showing that the company's character, or what is central and enduring about an organisation, seemed to be derived from the products. Since there is no definitive theory that establishes what can be defined as central property for an organisation's identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985), this highlights the need for further understanding the role of a company's product in the character of an organisation's identity. Furthermore, by applying Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail's (1994) principles of a company's perceived attractiveness, we showed that sustainability was perceived as a quality of moral worth which enhanced employees' strength of identification with the company. This confirms that companies associated with virtue and moral behaviour are likely to be perceived as attractive and indicate an essential role of CSR in OID. Additionally, we followed Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) call for more attention to exploring identity as a dimension of organisational control and confirmed the link between member identification and control. As a consequence, we also applied Kärreman and Alvesson's (2004) study on socio-ideological and technocratic control and confirmed their intricate relationship by showing how it increases organisational identification.

In a theoretical manner, we see our main contribution in enhancing the theoretical understanding of the interplay between CSR, OID and EB. Our research adds to Bharadwaj and Yameen (2021), who analysed the relationship between these concepts in a quantitative study, by applying a qualitative approach. Confirming their findings that there is a connection between CSR, OID and employee retention, our study provides further empirical evidence for the importance of CSR in influencing employee retention and OID. Moreover, our study follows the call for further investigation by Bharadwaj and Yameen (2021, pp.732) "to assess the impact on employee attitudes like intent to join, satisfaction and employee performance". Accordingly, our study analysed CSR's influence on employee attraction and motivation, highlighting the role of OID in the relationship between CSR and EB. When employees identify with an organisation that demonstrates a strong commitment to CSR, they are more likely to feel attracted to the organisation, are more motivated in their work and are likely to stay.

Therefore, our research enhances knowledge and understanding of how a company's commitment to sustainability positively influences employees' perception of the employer brand and strengthens their identification with the organisation. Moreover, by illustrating the interconnectedness of CSR, OID and EB at our company, we established an interdisciplinary framework which can serve as a starting point for other studies in this underdeveloped area of research.

### **6.3 Practical Implications**

Our study has several practical implications, which we now present, derived from our research findings in this chapter. The first implication centres on the role of CSR as a powerful tool to strengthen employee attraction, engagement and retention. Our research highlights that companies should continue to invest in CSR initiatives even if they are already perceived as sustainable. CSR initiatives have a positive impact on employees' perception of the employer brand. Thus, by continuing and expanding their CSR efforts, companies can enhance their reputation as socially responsible companies and further strengthen their employer brand.

Secondly, our findings indicate a positive misalignment between employees' initial expectations and the actual employment experience concerning CSR. To maintain a strong OID, companies need to be aware of this shift in perception. Organisations should ensure that their CSR efforts consistently meet or exceed employee expectations. Regularly assessing and aligning CSR activities with employees' values and evolving expectations can foster a positive perception of the organisation and reinforce the employer brand.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that employees who identify strongly with sustainability may have increasing demands for more CSR regulations, visibility, and authenticity. This implies that organisations need to listen to their employees' expectations and respond to their demands for increased sustainability. By doing so, companies can effectively manage their employer brand and maintain a positive perception among employees. Moreover, addressing these demands for increased sustainability can strengthen employees' identification with the organisation and further enhance the employer brand.

Another practical implication derived from our study is that companies' CSR efforts benefit from being perceived as authentic. As previous research has stated, companies' CSR initiatives can be perceived in different ways, depending on their credibility. We strongly suggest that



companies should strive for genuine and honest CSR activities by carefully managing their communication efforts to maintain transparency and credibility in their CSR efforts.

Lastly, our findings emphasise the interplay between CSR, OID, and EB. Companies should recognise this interconnectedness and consider them holistically when developing strategies and initiatives, as a high commitment to sustainability can positively influence employees' perception of the employer brand and their organisational identification.

#### **6.4 Limitations**

By transparently reflecting on our research, we acknowledge the following limitations of our study. One main limitation to consider is our chosen focus on new employees. As it was essential to obtain a relatively current view of employees on their time before joining the company, we only selected employees who joined the company within the last year. Thus, our findings are based on interviews with a specific group of employees from the company, and it can be questioned whether our results can be generalised across the whole organisation. Accordingly, we cannot disclose and observe the perspectives of all employees at the case organisation. Moreover, our findings are likely to be limited to the manufacturing industry, probably also just to the heating industry. Thus, a limitation is that the findings might not be easily transferable to other industries. While we do not aim to provide an all-encompassing view, it is crucial to acknowledge this aspect to enhance the reader's understanding of our conclusions.

Furthermore, various factors contribute to employees' perceptions, especially in the context of identification. We acknowledge that we cannot present all these factors in this study, as the scope of our research does not allow for an in-depth investigation of all influencing variables. Despite these limitations, we believe they provide interesting insights, allowing for conceptual development and an enhanced understanding of the interconnectedness between CSR, EB and OID.

#### **6.5 Suggestions for Future Research**

Our empirical study aimed to provide insights into the interconnectedness of CSR, EB and OID and contribute to the limited literature in this field (Bharadwaj & Yameen, 2021; Gond et al. 2017). However, we see this subject area as still largely understudied and thus call for further empirical research to extend our findings on the relationship between these concepts.

One area that future research should continue to examine is the internal effects of CSR on OID and EB. It would be interesting to study how employees in companies from sectors commonly not viewed as sustainable perceive their company's CSR efforts. The study could explore whether this perception also affects their employer brand perception and desire to identify with the company as strongly as in our study. It could help organisations understand how their employees perceive their CSR initiatives and whether their efforts have the intended effect.

Another area that requires further research is how specific CSR initiatives impact long-term employee engagement, performance, and identification, as opposed to our study's focus on new employees. It would be interesting to examine how CSR initiatives influence employees who have spent a significant duration with the company. This research could provide insights into whether CSR efforts have a distinctive impact on employees who have developed already a deep connection with the organisation over time.

Lastly, we believe longitudinal studies are required to examine the developments in the area of OID over a longer time frame than we could depict. By examining employees' perceptions of the employer brand and their OID longitudinally, researchers can identify trends and potential shifts in employee identification and understand implications for EB. This research could contribute significantly to the field by providing insights into the stability or evolution of OID over time.

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## Appendix A: List of Interviewees

To ensure the anonymity of interviewees, names have been changed, job positions have been generalised and genders have been allocated randomly.

Interview Nr.	Name	Job position
1	Lena	HR Department
2	Ulla	HR Department
3	Martha	HR Department
4	Björn	Technical Engineer
5	Julius	Business Engineer
6	Olaf	Business Engineer
7	Selma	Controlling Department
8	Alma	Business Engineer
9	Freja	Engineer
10	Hannes	Engineer

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

Introduction about us, our Master's programme and our thesis

### General information

- What is your position at HETA?
- For how long have you been employed at HETA?
- What is “sustainability” for you? (*What do you understand under the term “sustainability”?*)

### Sustainability at the company

- Would you describe HETA as sustainable?
  - Where do you experience this?
  - Why? / Why not?
- Can you think of any specific sustainability actions from HETA?
  - In which are you specifically interested?
  - Why is this interesting for you?
- Does HETA communicate these actions internally?
  - How does HETA communicate these actions?
- Do these actions influence your view towards your employer?
  - How?

### Before starting

- What did you know about HETA before starting to work there?
- How did you see HETA before you started working?
- Was it important that HETA engages in sustainability?

### Current view towards the employer

- Is it important for you that HETA engages in sustainability?
  - Just especially for HETA or for all companies in general?
- Would it be a reason for changing to another company if you're not satisfied with the sustainability strategy?
- How do you feel about working for a company that identifies itself with sustainability?

### Identification

- Do you see yourself as sustainable because you are working for a company that presents itself as sustainable?
- Did working at HETA change you personally? How?