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The Absence of Internal Sustainability Communication in Sustainable Organizations

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Abstract

Title: The Absence of Internal Sustainability Communication in Sustainable Organizations

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Key words: Sustainability, Sustainable Organizations, Internal Branding, Internal Communication, Value Alignment

Research question: *How do sustainable organizations view the role of sustainability in their internal branding effort?*

Purpose: The study aims to explore how sustainable organizations conduct internal branding with regard to sustainability, as well as to theoretically refine and challenge existing theories on internal branding, internal communication, and the utilization of sustainability within these strategies.

Methodology: To achieve the purpose of the study, a qualitative approach was adopted, specifically an abductive approach. The empirical data is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with eight employees from sustainable companies.

Theoretical perspectives: In line with the research question, the study takes its starting point in exploring theories regarding the importance of sustainability in business contexts, internal brand building, internal communication, and ultimately illustrating the utilization of sustainability within these theoretical strategies.

Result: The empirical findings indicate that sustainable organizations do not engage in internal brand building or incorporate sustainability into internal communication. This phenomenon seems to stem from a trust in the inherent value of "sustainability," which automatically creates value alignment and ultimately renders internal brand building efforts unnecessary. Whether the inherent value of "sustainability" is strong enough to rationalize the absence of sustainability in their internal branding efforts is further discussed with two different perspectives: firstly that the non-usage is fruitful and secondly that it is problematic.

Conclusions: The current literature emphasizes the importance of internal branding and communication for sustainability in organizations. However, our findings suggest that sustainable organizations either neglect internal branding or they rely on sustainability itself for motivation and commitment. Sustainability's persuasive power challenges the need for explicit internal strategies. While sustainability alone may create cohesion, and sustainable organizations' current internal strategies may present challenges as the industry evolves. Thus, future research should explore the unique strategies of sustainable organizations and their impact on internal branding.

Sammanfattning

Examensarbetets titel: The Absence of Internal Sustainability Communication in Sustainable Organizations

Seminariedatum: 2023-06-02

Ämne/kurs: Ange kurskod (FEKH49), Examensarbete i organisation på kandidatnivå VT23, 15 högskolepoäng

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Fem nyckelord: Hållbarhet, Hållbara Organisationer, Internt varumärkesbyggande, Intern Kommunikation, Värdeöverensstämmelse

Forskningsfråga: *Hur ser hållbara organisationer på hållbarhetens roll i sitt interna varumärkesuppbyggande?*

Syfte: Studien syftar till att undersöka hur hållbara organisationer genomför internt varumärkesbyggande med hänsyn till hållbarhet, samt att teoretiskt nyansera och utmana befintliga teorier om internt varumärkesbyggande, intern kommunikation och användningen av hållbarhet inom dessa strategier.

Metod: För att uppnå studiens syfte genomfördes en kvalitativ studie, vilken antar en abduktiv ansats. Empirin baseras på semistrukturerade intervjuer med åtta anställda från hållbara företag.

Teoretiska perspektiv: I linje med frågeställningen, tar studiens sin utgångspunkt i att utforska teorier kring vikten av hållbarhet i affärssammanhang, intern varumärkesbyggande, intern kommunikation, för att slutligen åskådliggöra användningen av hållbarhet inom dessa teoretiska strategier.

Resultat: Empirin visar att hållbara organisationer arbetar inte med internt varumärkesbyggande eller implementerar hållbarhet i intern kommunikation. Fenomenet verkar bero på ett förtroende för den inneboende nytta som finns i "hållbarhet", som automatisk skapar värdeöverensstämmelse och i slutändan gör internt varumärkesbyggande ansträngningar överflödiga. Frågan om det inneboende värdet på "hållbarhet" är tillräckligt kraftfullt för att rationalisera frånvaron av hållbarhet i deras interna ansträngningar är vidare diskuterad med två olika perspektiv: att icke-användningen är givande eller problematiskt.

Slutsats: Litteraturen betonar vikten av intern varumärkesbyggande och kommunikation för hållbara organisationer. Våra resultat antyder dock att hållbara organisationer antingen försummar internt varumärkesbyggande eller förlitar på hållbarhet som värdering i sig för motivation. Hållbarhetens övertygande kraft ifrågasätter behovet av explicita interna strategier, och hållbara organisationers nuvarande interna strategier kan innebära utmaningar när branschen utvecklas. Därför bör framtida forskning utforska hållbara organisationers unika strategier och deras påverkan på intern varumärkesbyggande.

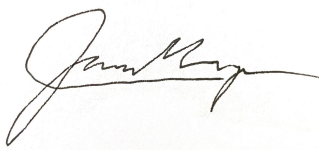
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Thank you, we hope you enjoy your reading!

Lund, 29 May 2023



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1. Introduction

In this introductory chapter we aim to acquaint the reader with our reasonings for choosing our selected empirical area. We will also clarify in what way we strive to contribute to existing theoretical concepts within the organizational domain as well as an empirical contribution for the rise of sustainable organizations.

1.1 Background

There is no denying the fact that sustainability permeates all different sectors of our modern world. As the world has undergone rapid industrialization, businesses now face numerous challenges in mitigating the environmental impact of their operations. Sustainability has not only changed the world we live in today, but also contemporary business practices. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (UN, n.d.), including Agenda 2030, outline comprehensive plans for implementing sustainable changes, one of them being innovation for sustainable industrialization. Moreover, consumer behavior has shifted significantly, as evidenced by a statistical report by Simon-Kucher & Partners (2022), with a majority of shoppers worldwide now opting for more sustainable products due to increased awareness of climate change and a demand for environmental responsibility from companies. Apart from consumers, state authorities are also demanding sustainability action. For example, the European Union is in the process of incorporating the *European Green Deal* into law, aiming for an overall climate-neutrality by 2050 (European Council, n.d.). Additionally, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) introduced in 2023 requires large and listed companies to disclose information on their social and environmental impact, reinforcing the need for transparency and accountability in sustainability practices (European Commission, n.d.). Therefore, the combination of global initiatives, shifting consumer preferences, and regulatory demands highlight the undeniable importance of embracing sustainable practices for organizations in today's business landscape.

When asking a representative for Nordea, a company that does not primarily have a sustainable foundation, about their internal sustainability practices and how they motivate employees to pursue more sustainable actions, they provided these insights:

Yes we at Nordea not only talk about the economic aspects of sustainability but also behavior. We prefer biking to work rather than using the car. When we developed the

sustainability strategy and set our goals. Then a task was assigned to each unit. How can sustainability be implemented there? [...] As an employee, you could download an app. There, you would receive daily tips. If you completed the daily challenges, you could earn some points. In that way, you could compete a bit with each other, and challenge yourself. It is not mandatory, but when a company works a lot on these issues, it has a spillover effect. It affects private life. - A Nordea representative

After this enlightening conversation, we were prompted to delve deeper into the internal sustainability practices of sustainable organizations. Thus, our study primarily focuses on environmentally and socially sustainable organizations, as they do not only incorporate sustainability into their business model, but also offer sustainable products and services as a central part of their contribution. “Sustainable organizations” might be an ambiguous concept with a lot of connotations, as there is no universally agreed upon definition (Munguia Vega, 2019). However, as mentioned, our study will focus on the environmental and social aspect of sustainable organizations. When organizations like Nordea, whose primary focus is not sustainability, invest significant resources in internal sustainability efforts, it raises questions about the internal sustainability strategies adopted by sustainable organizations.

1.2 Purpose

An evident trend can be identified is that more companies have adopted more sustainable initiatives, both internally and externally, in response to the growing consumer and market sustainability demand (Lakitsch, 2022). The interplay between the rise of national commitments towards Agenda 2030 and reporting laws, an increase of customer demands leads to the expansion of the industry in which sustainable businesses reside. While some organizations and businesses today have comprehensive sustainability initiatives, it is important to note that their main product or service may not have a direct connection with sustainability. In this study, we will narrow it down to sustainable organizations, whose operations have a sustainable service or product and aim to have a direct positive sustainable impact. The outcome that these organizations produce, in one way or another, expedites the process of becoming a more sustainable society.

We would like to study how the practice of internal communication is executed at these sustainable organizations. An essential aspect to explore is the integration of sustainability

within the organization, particularly for those whose core value is sustainability itself. Understanding how sustainability permeates their operations and how it aligns with their internal communication becomes crucial in assessing their sustainability practices as a whole. Sustainability will become increasingly more crucial for the survival of future generations. As a result, we believe that the rise of sustainable organizations are inevitable and also essential when it comes to effectively using our planet's limited resources.

Lastly, the aim of our study is to theoretically nuance and challenge current theories about internal branding, internal communication and the utilization of sustainability within those practices. The theories present the assumption that internal efforts are essential and will lead to employee commitment, employee motivation and finally to organizational success. Therefore, we question whether the presence of a strong value as sustainability will affect internal branding and communications practices. In doing so, we aim to give practical implications for the growing sector of sustainable organizations as their longevity and success is in our best interest - because when they prosper, we all prosper.

1.3 Research Question

The goal with our thesis is to study how sustainable organizations rationalize the usage or non-usage of sustainability-focused internal branding efforts, as a tool to create value alignment and employee commitment.

For that reason, we aim to answer the following research question;

How do sustainable organizations view the role of sustainability in their internal branding effort?

1.4 Disposition

- Introduction** In this chapter, our aim is to provide the reader with a clear understanding of the rationale behind our chosen empirical area, specifically focusing on how sustainable organizations approach internal branding in relation to sustainability. Furthermore, we seek to enhance and challenge existing theories pertaining to internal branding, internal communication, and the integration of sustainability within these strategies.
- Methodology** In this chapter, we provide a justification for and explore the methodological choices we made throughout our research, along with their implications in the study itself.
- Literature Review** In line with the research question, the study takes its starting point in exploring theories regarding the importance of sustainability in business contexts, internal brand building, internal communication, and ultimately illustrating the utilization of sustainability within these theoretical strategies.
- Empirical Analysis** The empirical findings indicate that sustainable organizations do not engage in internal brand building or incorporate sustainability into internal communication. This phenomenon seems to stem from a trust in the inherent value of "sustainability," which automatically creates value alignment and ultimately renders internal brand building efforts unnecessary.
- Discussion** This chapter examines the relationship between our empirical analysis and the existing literature. It highlights potential areas that may be challenged by the intrinsic nature of sustainability and whether the sustainable organizations have gone too far with solely relying on sustainability as an internal strategy.
- Conclusion** The final chapter presents the conclusions of the study, presented along with its practical implications and suggestions for future research.

2. Methodology

The following chapter offers an overview of our methodological choices, explaining our ongoing considerations, stances, and decisions made throughout the thesis. The chapter concludes by evaluating the influence of these choices on the overall quality and credibility of the study.

2.1 Methodological foundation & perspective

In order to fulfill our research goal of exploring organizations' internal branding of their sustainable core, our study adopts a qualitative interview methodology that aligns with the constructivist and interpretivist approach. The interpretivist tradition highlights the significance of individuals as social actors and their subjective experiences and meanings attached to objects and social phenomena (Bryman & Bell, 2017). In our study, this entails studying how members of an organization perceive and interpret the internal branding efforts surrounding sustainability. Therefore, adopting an interpretive perspective allows for valuable insights regarding how social actors understand their environment (Bryman & Bell, 2017). In our study this will apply into how members of the organization understand and enact their sustainability values in their daily practices and decision-making processes. According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), the interpretative approach goes also beyond merely clarifying and structuring what interviewees have said. Instead, it aims to reveal the underlying structures and relationships of meanings that may not be immediately evident (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Hence, the interpretative approach will aid us in gaining a nuanced and deeper understanding of how sustainable organizations view the role of internal branding and communication regarding their sustainability practices.

Rather than relying on pre-existing theoretical frameworks and literature, our study utilizes an abductive approach that aims to nuance the current literature to uncover new theoretical perspectives that can help us understand the relationship between sustainability communication and internal alignment. This abductive methodology, built on the continuous and dynamic interplay between the empirical findings and literature, allows for the discovery of unexpected observations and what Alvesson and Kärreman mentions as "mysteries", namely new contributions, in the empirical data (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007).

2.2 A Multi-Method Sampling Approach

As our study aims to examine the relationship between sustainable companies and their internal alignment of sustainability values, our sample will consist of individuals working for sustainable organizations (see *8. Appendix* for more information). Considering the study's time limitation, our sample consists of eight employees that have influence within their organizations. Their positions range from founders, managers, coordinators and chairmen of the board. The total number of interview subjects are eight from five different organizations, of which two are from non-profit and the remaining from profit driven companies. Furthermore, an interview was conducted with Nordea, a Scandinavian bank, to obtain general information that was incorporated into our introduction. However, please note that this interviewee will not be included in our empirical analysis as they do not fulfill the required qualifications set for our sample.

The limitations of our sample include the predominance of organizations in either their early or scale-up phases, which may impact the generalizability of our findings. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the industry of fully sustainable organizations is itself in its early stages.

2.2.1 Capturing the Role of Sustainability in Internal Branding

To gather in-depth data into our research topic within the study's scope and time limitations, as advised from Bryman and Bell (2017) we utilized a combination of three sampling methods: convenience sampling, purposive sampling, and snowball sampling. By selecting the study's participants from these sampling methods, we were able to gain a broad perspective on the role of sustainability in each organization's internal branding efforts. Additionally, it facilitated in gathering insights that helped us contribute and nuance current literature and theoretical perspectives.

Purposive sampling is a method where the researchers use a random sampling method with a specific target (Bryman & Bell, 2017). This was used to select four participants from different sustainability-focused organizations. These participants, both from non-profit organizations and profit-seeking companies, were contacted and selected solely based on the criteria that they work for a sustainability-focused organization, without any prior knowledge of their individual characteristics or experiences.

In addition to the use of the purposive sampling method, we also saw the value in utilizing convenience sampling to select three additional participants. One of the participants had previously been working with one of us in a prior research project, while the other was referred to us from a contact within our personal network. To minimize the risk of limited generalizability of convenient sampling as Bryman and Bell (2017) states, we took measures to ensure that the majority of our participants were selected through purposive sampling, which helps to increase our study's diversity of perspectives and external validity.

Lastly, we were able to conduct two additional interviews by utilizing the snowball sampling method, where an existing participant identified two other individuals in their organization who were suitable for our study. This approach further supported and strengthened our empirical findings, as we had the opportunity to also visit their workplaces physically. Snowball sampling is described by Bryman and Bell (2017) as an additional form of convenience sampling. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge that these participants may share similar characteristics or experiences as the participant who referred them, which can limit the diversity of perspectives and experiences within the study and thus impact the generalizability of the findings (Bryman & Bell, 2017). However, despite the potential limitations of convenience and snowball sampling methods, it is important to highlight the valuable contribution made by these interviewees. By conducting the interviews in person at their office, we were able to gather more comprehensive empirical data and gain insights into their subjective experiences, which although were not included in the empirical data analysis, provided meaningful perspectives in order to better understand their chosen internal strategies. Moreover, our interpretive approach reinforces the importance of exploring the personal experiences and interpretations of organizational values and norms by its members. Hence, the use of three sampling methods has facilitated the collection of nuanced and detailed data that may not have been possible through purposive sampling alone, contributing to the overall depth and complexity of our findings.

2.3 The Collection of Empirical Data

Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) emphasize how qualitative research is centered around human interactions and relies heavily on the analyst's perception and interpretation. Elements that are crucial in this type of research, but also leaves it open to potential ambiguities. To

collect empirical data for this study, semi-structured interviews were utilized. This approach was chosen in line with our constructivist approach and facilitated a nuanced perspective in exploring the participant's perception of the value of internal branding and communication in their respective organization. According to Bryman and Bell (2017) semi-structured interviews provide a flexible and open-ended approach, which enabled our study to follow-up on interesting points raised by the participants and in addition gave them the freedom to elaborate on their experiences and attitudes related to the research topic.

As we adopted an abductive approach, the research question was continuously specified and therefore affecting what we choose to highlight in our data. Alongside this process of interpretation of the data, we continuously revised the interview guide along with the research question. The abductive approach is best suited for studies that aim to discover something new and different (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). It entails an interplay between the empirical material, the theoretical framework and the explanations we conclude from it. This flexible process gave us enough leeway to find the most suitable research question and therefore make the most use of our empirical material. The revision of the interview guide was to ensure that the questions were comprehensible to the interviewees and adapted to the narrowing of the research question. This was done as we deemed it necessary to excavate the most abundant information from the interviewees in relation to the mission with our study.

2.3.1 Exploring Individual Perceptions of Organizational Values

As Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) point out, discourses around themes surrounding one's perception, such as the role of sustainability within an organization, as in our case, may be individual and depend on the individual's own understanding. The questions were therefore kept rather open-ended and broad, which allowed the interviewees to freely discuss their views in various directions. The interview participants were given an overall description prior to the interviews, which described how the interview was about exploring the extent to which they understand their organization's sustainability values along with their own view on sustainability in their private life. This allowed the interview participants to reflect upon their views and what they wanted to say beforehand and prevented the participants from getting stuck in their thoughts. Instead, it gave them a chance to prepare to some extent beforehand and possibly gave them a sense of comfort and security throughout the interview. This

approach allows the respondents to themselves determine the direction and their answers, which allows researchers to receive a vast variety of responses from the participants (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

Moreover, the interview guide, which was based on various prepared themes and questions, consisted of introductory questions and potential follow-up questions that could be used during the interviews. Although the provided structure served as a backbone for the interviews, the nature of the semi-structured approach meant that some questions were omitted, while others were added in order to obtain additional information (Bryman & Bell, 2017). As Kvale and Brinkmann (2015, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) accentuate, the analysis does not necessarily begin in the analysis, but may already commence during the interviews as follow up questions are asked or when the interviewee is asked to clarify or elaborate on certain things.

The guide was formulated both in Swedish and English, depending on what language was preferred by the interviewee. Additionally, depending on the interviewees' position, such as sustainability manager, communications manager, CEO or other position, the questions were slightly altered to better fit and understand any potential dynamic depending on their position.

2.3.2 The Process of Retrieving Valuable Findings

Majority of interviews were conducted digitally through Teams or Google Meets, depending on the interviewee's location and preferences, with the exception of three interviews at one company, which were conducted in person at their office. Prior to recording the interviewees, they were all asked for consent under the conditions that they would remain anonymous in this study. The interviews were all voice recorded with consent from the interviewees prior to the interviews, which facilitated in the transcription process. This guaranteed a more accurate transcription of the participants' responses. In addition, the use of technical aid provided us with the flexibility in identifying and analyzing patterns of how participants discuss the role and value of sustainability in their organizations' internal branding. The transcriptions were divided equally among the researchers and were done in a detailed and word-for-word manner. Transcriptions are beneficial as to ensure that the empirical material is correct and that nothing is omitted (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

All three researchers participated in the interviews, where usually two were responsible for interviewing the participants, whereas the third researcher took notes, but was as well allowed to put in questions. Having all the researchers engaged in the interviews allows for multiple perspectives and understandings of the interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2017). This active involvement and collaborative approach allowed us to understand the interviews in different perspectives for analysis.

2.4 Analytical process

In this section we will provide a comprehensive overview of the methods and choices we took when analyzing our research's empirical data. We have primarily utilized Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) formula of sorting, reducing and arguing to facilitate our analytical process.

2.4.1 Establishing the Order

To structure and organize our empirical material, we began by coding the data. Qualitative research involves interpreting the data, as emphasized by Bryman, Bell and Harley (2023). We relied heavily on transcriptions of the eight individual interviews for our decoding process. Transcribing the material allowed us to thoroughly examine it and revisit it for further insights. Transcriptions offered notable benefits by serving as reminders of the interview content and facilitating accurate interpretations. With the transcriptions, we created an overview and could systematically review the material. When sorting the material, it is important to maintain openness, as emphasized by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), as it can significantly influence the study's direction.

The sorting process happened continuously, as the interviews were conducted throughout three weeks. To become acquainted with the material means to repeatedly read through the material and sort them into different categories (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The transcriptions were printed out to facilitate highlighting and noting of interesting quotations and continuously revisited. When sorting the material we were actively trying to be open to finding any interesting or contradicting statements. Becoming familiar with the material leads increases the chances of finding interesting details and underlying relationships between the labels (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). When sorting all the quotes from every interview into different labels, we identified overarching themes and interesting discrepancies.

2.4.2 Delineating the Data

Through the sorting process a rough sorting of the material we deemed the most fruitful and interesting was created. Categorical reduction, as stated by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), implies that the sorted material could be further reduced by prioritizing some categories while simultaneously excluding certain labels of material. By further reducing that material the focus of the study became increasingly more apparent, as the links between certain categories materialized. Reducing the data facilitates the process of finding interesting focal points to further analyze the material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This method left us with several labels, with three overarching themes of positioning, assumptions and absence. We found these labels most suitable in our pursuit of understanding how the studied sustainable organizations view the need for internal communication of sustainable core values.

When the delineation of the data was achieved, it facilitated our ability to analyze our findings. In line with Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) a part of reducing the material entails choosing data whose very existence questions and problematizes the theoretical framework. Therefore, we highlighted the empirical material that acted contradictory to the existing literature. Through the interplay of acquainting ourselves with the data and adjusting our research question, we continued to code the material into more specific and focused labels. Focused coding leads to the sense-making and expedites the analysts' process of understanding the material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

2.4.3 Finding the Arguments

Through the process of sorting and reducing the final aim was to voice and argue for our findings. According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) the analytical process's conclusive outcome is to be able to theorize and argue for one's findings. In a way the theorizing process has already commenced during the labeling phase, when the analysts define and categorize the empirical material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Through the study we continuously researched a variation of subjects, before landing on our specific theoretical domain of internal branding efforts. By doing that we increase our vocabulary with the relevant terms - both in academic terms as well as organizational terminology.

First, the labels should be defined to create meaning of what the category consists of (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011) - which we have done by providing an introductory

paragraph under all our labels that explain what we have found in the material including relevant terminology. Furthermore, combining one's definitions with other existing concepts in the field facilitates the process of arguing, according to Rennstam & Wästerfors (2011). This was accomplished by using the literature and then relating it to recurring happenings suggested that we have interpreted. As mentioned by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2011) it is important to nuance, reflect and be self-critical. We have achieved reflection over our findings, by offering different and contradictory explanations to the rationalization behind certain choices sustainable organizations make.

2.5 The Creation of Good Qualitative Research

Qualitative methods are often criticized for their subjectivity, lack of transparency and low generalizability (Bryman & Bell, 2017). However, there's no other method quite as sufficient when it comes to garnering an understanding for the context and meaning (Yardley, 2000). As we are interested in how sustainable organizations view the role of internal branding efforts especially in regard to sustainability, we wanted their subjective account of how they rationalize their strategies. As our study is adopting a social constructivist and interpretive approach, we will not be able to generalize empirically but our aim is to theoretically contribute.

According to Bryman and Bell (2017), to ensure good qualitative research one could use Yardley's four criterias. Yardley (2000) proposed these four different criterias for researchers wanting to generate good qualitative research and those principles were taken into consideration when conducting our research. Remaining sensitive to the context is crucial according to Yardley (2000), which is built on the notion that social interactions have a huge impact on how individuals create meaning. Sensitivity also entails actively seeking out and examining data that might contradict the theoretical assumptions the researcher has (Yardley, 2000). Sensitivity to the context in which the interviewees occupy will therefore be achieved through letting the subjects freely describe their organizations, what strategies they've chosen and for what reason. The shared meanings, as stated by the studied sustainable organizations, can further our understanding for how they view the organizations sustainability practices. In that way the study will take their social environment into consideration.

To attain rigor and commitment, researchers shall be thorough when collecting data and to reach depth in the analysis, all while being deeply engaged in the topic (Yardley, 2000). In our study we have continuously educated ourselves within the topic to ensure familiarity with the concepts. Subsequently our knowledge of the topic has facilitated our analysis of the data material. Meticulous data collection was achieved by having all researchers present at the data collection occasions. Having all researchers participate in the interviews leads to different perspectives and interpretations, resulting in a fuller analysis of the material (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Through that, three individual experiences and understandings of the interviews lead to a more nuanced analysis of the material.

The third criteria is transparency and coherence, and according to Yardley (2000) that involves creating clarity around a phenomena, being persuasive with the descriptions and arguments as well as making a convincing account for a certain version of reality. We have established transparency by clearly accounting for our analysis process and, therefore, explaining how we ended up with our interpretation of how they rationalize the usage or non-usage of internal brand efforts. Coherence is specifically about the match between a research question, the chosen method of data collection and analysis (Yardley, 2000). Therefore, we obtained coherence by adopting the abductive approach where we continuously updated the research question, literature and methods depending on the data material.

Impact and importance is the final criteria presented by Yardley (2000), and it suggests that good qualitative research is attained if the study can have an enriching result on the already existing theoretical concepts or lead to practical and useful information for the community that the results are relevant to. As earlier stated, sustainability is continuously permeating all aspects of modern life and business. With the increase of organizations with sustainable output we aim to create a meaningful study that might nuance the concepts of internal branding efforts and communication, with the perspective of a sustainable organization.

3. Literature Review

The following section presents a detailed overview of the existing literature within our research area. The purpose and aim of this chapter is to understand the existing research and identify the current assumptions regarding best-practice in this field. This chapter will comprehensively explore theories about communication and branding efforts and eventually connect it to the context of sustainability.

3.1 Sustainability as the Integral Component of Businesses

The following section presents the existing literature that defines and explains sustainability practices in the context of business. Through this section we aim to provide, in accordance with our research purpose, a thorough overview of sustainability practices and their potential impact on both businesses and society. Additionally, this section underscores the importance of sustainability by highlighting the broader discourse surrounding this topic, emphasizing its relevance for businesses and society.

3.1.1 Sustainability; Buzzword or Necessity?

The concept of sustainability emerged in the 1980s as a reflection of the increasing recognition of the ecological and economic limitations to growth, and was formally introduced in the UN's Brundtland Report of 1987, as cited by Lakitsch (2022). Since then sustainability has gained a more or less normativity based on growing ethical demand from the public, especially in Europe (Lakitsch, 2022). The recent waves of environmental activism, such as Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movement in 2018, have inflicted much greater attention and popularity on the term sustainability (Lakitsch, 2022). According to Nidumolu, Prahalad and Rangaswami (2009), in recent times, there has been an unprecedented surge of both existing and new companies that are wholeheartedly embracing sustainable business strategies, firmly establishing them as the foundation of their operations. As Danciu (2013) mentions, this shift towards sustainability has gained remarkable traction, underscoring its significance like never before. Additionally, there is a notable transition from operational sustainability to an emphasis on environmental sustainability, which has accelerated rapidly and become essential for a company's survival and long term success as customers, regulators and investors all closely monitor organizations environmental impact (Markopoulos et al. 2020). Thus, the pursuit of sustainability has now been universally

recognized as a critical and inevitable aspect of modern business operations, reaching unparalleled levels of urgency and importance.

Although sustainability is commonly associated with environmental protection, it has also become an integral aspect of corporate identities across global enterprises, companies and smaller businesses (Lakitsch, 2022). Paradoxically, the sense of urgency surrounding sustainability may sometimes result in a superficial pretense that permeates mainstream practices (Lakitsch, 2022). According to Weder, Krainer and Karmasin (2021), sustainability is viewed by many as an ambiguous, empty or buzz word present on corporate websites. Organizational campaigns, as observed in CSR communication, carry the potential risk of greenwashing, as they falsely portray the organization as being more environmentally friendly or socially responsible than they truly are (Elving, 2021). While companies have made increasing efforts to become greener and corporate social sustainability has gained increased recognition, so too have the complaints of greenwashing (Chen & Chang, 2013).

Greenwashing, as a term emerged from the early 21st century and indicates a form of corporate disinformation (Zych et al. 2021). Zych et al. (2021) accentuate, that greenwashing as a concept is constantly expanding due to the numerous examples of activities it may entail but can in general terms be described as any behavior that involves deliberate miscommunication about environmental actions or achievements. It is the symbolic communication of environmental issues without substantially addressing them in actions (Walker & Wan, 2012). Greenwashing may arise from pressure as well as incentives from external factors such as state authorities or authorities of international organizations, private investors or the public consumers (Zych et al. 2021). With the rising concern for environmental issues and a continued escalation of sustainable practices, the emergence of greenwashing is posing a notable challenge for stakeholders in the assessment of companies' credibility.

3.1.2 The Significance of Brands Promoting Sustainability

According to Arvidsson (2008), brands can foster a sense of community and make people feel like they are part of a larger, more meaningful, and influential entity. Consumers are attracted to brands that provide a sense of significance, shared values, and social connections with others (Arvidsson, 2008). Thus, brands represent one of the contemporary symbols of

self-identification, meaning that individuals can use brands to construct their identities, who they can be or become in their subjective environment (Arvidsson, 2011). Lehner and Halliday (2022) thereby argue that brands are one of the most practical and influential approaches in our capitalist society, to serve as a catalyst for social change and promote sustainable consciousness and action.

Additionally, Cova and Dalli (2010) argue that consumers are not passive recipients in the branding process, but instead are “active agents” who play a crucial role in creating and linking value between the brand and themselves. As sustainability awareness has grown, brands should demonstrate a sense of social and ethical responsibility, serving as a moral compass (Arvidsson, 2008). Brands that incorporate sustainable practices and values into their core identity and values can help consumers align their values with their purchasing decisions, thereby promoting sustainable actions and enabling consumers with similar ethical beliefs to self-identify with such actions (Arvidsson, 2008).

As social beings, humans' behaviors are influenced by their social networks (Foxall, Goldsmith, and Brown, 1998). In the context of tribal marketing, Cova and Cova (2002) describe these networks as “tribes” which can engage in collective action and whose members are not solely consumers, but also advocates. Brands that prioritize sustainability and communicate their efforts transparently can establish a strong emotional connection with consumers, which can lead to increased brand loyalty and advocacy (Cova & Cova, 2002). Additionally, according to Maffesoli (1996) consumers are more likely to share their positive experiences with sustainable brands within their social networks, expanding the brand's sustainable reach and impact. This viral spread of sustainable practices within social networks helps to normalize and encourage sustainable behaviors among a wider audience, creating a ripple effect of positive change (Lehner & Halliday, 2022).

3.1.3 Sustainability; Profitable Approach & Positioning Strategy

Given that our study primarily focuses on interviewing individuals in managerial roles, it is particularly relevant to examine sustainability from a managerial and profitable standpoint. Alderman and Sabini (2021) argue that by acknowledging sustainability as an ethical responsibility and incorporating it into their operations, organizations can achieve favorable economic outcomes while remaining in alignment with the diverse interests of stakeholders. In fact, research from Whelan and Fink (2016) suggests that business sustainability initiatives

can bring about cost savings, risk reduction, improved brand reputation, and foster innovation. When a company invests in energy-efficient technology, for instance, it not only reduces its carbon footprint but also realizes financial benefits through lower utility bills (Whelan & Fink, 2016). Similarly, sourcing raw materials from sustainable suppliers not only reduces the environmental impact but also mitigates risks associated with potential disruptions in the supply chain. Thus, by integrating sustainability as an ethical responsibility, organizations can make informed choices that positively impact both their longevity, financial performance and their stakeholders (Nidumolu et al. 2009).

Sustainability, particularly Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), can also be a powerful tool for brand positioning and differentiation. CSR is the broader concept that encompasses a range of sustainability aspects, such as social, environmental, and ethical initiatives that can be specifically undertaken by companies (Du, Bhattacharya and Sen, 2007). According to Du, et al. (2007), brands that embrace CSR as a core value and integrate it into their operations can foster a unique identity that resonates with their consumers. This sustainability-centered identity can go beyond traditional positioning strategies and humanize a brand, establishing a deeper connection with consumers and allowing consumers to connect with the brand on a personal level (Du et al., 2007). As consumers identify with a brand's CSR initiatives, it often leads to the development of long-term loyalty and an increased likelihood of becoming brand advocates (Du et al., 2007). Thus, from a managerial perspective, the strategic integration of sustainability into every aspect of a company's practices and positioning the brand towards sustainability is not only a responsible choice but also a highly profitable long-term approach (Glavas, 2016). Incorporating sustainability into an organization's strategy, products, and services while actively communicating it internally can have a significant positive impact on employee and brand commitment as well as motivation (Glavas, 2016).

3.2 The Normative Power of Internal Branding

In line with our abductive approach, we have included this section on the premise that our interviewees and their organizations possess a strong sustainable brand. To provide a comprehensive analysis of this subject later in the discussion, this section aims to delve into the existing literature on internal branding and brand centered control.

3.2.1 Exploring the Value of Internal Branding

For companies to maintain the long-term success of their brand, organizations need to focus not only on external factors such as customers, but also on the internal factors, namely employees (Ahmed & Hashim, 2022). According to Müller (2018), internal branding is a strategy for organizational culture management, centering around existing employees with the objective of ensuring that employees accurately represent the brand to external audiences. Brand communications, which enhances employee knowledge about the brand values, plays a pivotal role in internal brand management (Ahmed & Hashim, 2022). A well-managed internal brand communication, can help strengthen employee commitment, developing a more engaged and dedicated workforce (Ahmed & Hashim, 2022). Internal branding encompasses activities aimed at fostering intrinsic motivation, as it holds significant importance in creating positive employee behaviors and helps in making strong relationships with the organization (Ahmed & Hashim, 2022). While there is no universal guide to achieve brand commitment, Burmann and Zeplin (2009) emphasizes the importance of integrating brand-centered human resources (HR) activities, brand communications and brand leadership. When these are managed cohesively, employees are given the necessary resources to act accordingly to a consistent brand experience (Burman & Zeplin, 2009). Besides, employee commitment is widely regarded as a crucial factor in attaining organizational performance and goals (Sencherey et al. 2022; Kataria, Kataria & Garg, 2013). According to Sencherey et al. (2022), organizations that have skilled and motivated employees experience enhanced overall performance. Additionally, various aspects such as employee retention are positively influenced, creating a sense of safety and fostering a strong sense of community within the organization (Sencherey et al. 2022).

According to Müller (2018), advocates of internal branding highlight the importance of aligning employees' behaviors, attitudes, outward appearances and language use with the company brand. They highlight the crucial role of employees embodying the brand and acting as "living brands" to effectively promote it to customers. Brand-centered activities may include for example internal training activities, setting of standard procedures and provision of necessary skill sets to deliver an organization's values (Sujchaphong et al. 2020). The internal branding programs need to align employees' comprehension, dedication and behavior with the brand itself in order for them to offer a consistent brand promise to the customers (Ahmed & Hashim, 2022). As employees gain more knowledge about their

organization's brand values, the activities in turn lead to creation of employee brand support as they aid the brand through their behavior (Sujchaphong et al. 2020). Hence, these brand-centered activities may influence employee behavior and possibly foster increased support among employees.

As a result, internal branding reinforces organizations to focus on their brand values by conveying and communicating a coherent brand message for employees to comprehend the brand value and fully deliver the promise of the brand to the customers (Müller, 2018). Moreover, among advocates of internal branding, terms such as 'employee empowerment', 'passion' or 'creation of meaning' are often highlighted as driving forces behind internal branding efforts (Müller, 2018). Nevertheless, the connotations also suggest that employees are being controlled by the brand and since internal branding is an important concept within normative control, it is crucial to understand how it influences the organization and also its employees (Müller, 2018).

3.2.2 Sustainability-Driven Internal Branding

As mentioned, the fundamental principle of cultivating brand commitment and motivation within an organization is to ensure that employees align their behaviors, attitudes, outward appearances, and language use with the company brand (Müller, 2018). Emphasizing the employees' role as "living brands" is essential for effectively promoting the brand to customers (Müller, 2018). In such an environment, employees are united by a shared purpose and demonstrate a high level of consistency in their thoughts, actions, and decision-making processes, thus representing the brand in the desired manner (Kiaos, 2023; Rennstam, 2017).

According to Glavas (2016), integrating sustainability as a core value into internal branding efforts has a substantial impact on employee engagement and motivation. When employees not only feel connected to the brand but also understand their role in promoting sustainability, they develop a heightened sense of pride, purpose, and ownership in their work (Glavas, 2016). This alignment with the brand's sustainability values enhances employee job satisfaction and commitment, leading to increased productivity and lower turnover rates (Pascoe et al. 2021). Employees who are motivated by sustainability principles become more inclined to deliver excellent performance and actively contribute to the overall success of the organization (Glavas, 2016). By integrating sustainability into internal branding, organizations tap into a powerful source of employee motivation and commitment

(Biedenbach & Manzhynski, 2016). Employees feel that their work aligns with a greater purpose, as they contribute to environmental and social responsibility through their daily activities (Biedenbach & Manzhynski, 2016).

Furthermore, Ahmed and Hashim (2022) argue that integrating sustainability into internal branding initiatives has been shown to enhance internal communication and collaboration. When employees have a shared understanding of the brand's sustainability values and goals, they can unite and work towards a common purpose (Genç, 2017). This collaborative environment fosters knowledge sharing, idea generation, and equips the organization with the adaptability required to thrive in a dynamic and ever-changing landscape (Ahmed & Hashim, 2022).

3.3 Internal Branding Through Internal Communication

Given that internal branding holds a significant role in our research question, the following section aims to provide a comprehensive overview of how internal communication plays a role with internal branding. Employees are often regarded as reliable sources of information about the organization as they embody the corporate brand and communicate its value to stakeholders through interactions (Chong, 2007). As previously mentioned, brand communication, or in other words, internal communication, is a crucial aspect of internal branding. Effective internal communication plays a vital role in promoting and embedding the brand values within an organization (Ahmed & Hashim, 2022).

Organizations embody communication systems through both formal and informal forms. The existence of informal communication systems in organizations are unavoidable since employees resist being treated as means to an end and seek to interact while bringing their own purposes, interests and problems, which brings about spontaneous behavior that affects their conditions of work (Kandlousi et al. 2010). These interactions are typically held in shared offices, common areas, corridors, copy rooms and entrance halls, but likewise via phone, text message or virtual communication (Koch & Denner, 2022). During these communications that employees engage in, they may discover similar attitudes, opinions and values, which consequently allows for a more friendly work environment and may also enhance employee commitment and engagement (Kataria et al. 2013). The interpersonal interaction of informal communication is also a great source of information about employees'

morals and problems which may guide managers to lead the employees successfully (Kandlousi et al. 2010). Since informal communication may potentially break organizational boundaries, it allows for the exchange of information and experiences beyond specific teams and titles, hence becoming central for defining social norms, values and conventions (Brennecke & Rank, 2016).

Just like informal communication, formal communication plays an inevitable role in an organization (Kandlousi et al. 2010). In contrast with informal communication, when employees engage in formal communication, they interact in professional roles to achieve work-related goals (Koch & Denner, 2022). Formal communication is often recognized through official channels that are passed as instructions and information through the organization downward and upward (Kandlousi et al. 2010). Organizations that prioritize internal communication, such as through the establishment of a dedicated internal communications department, tend to experience increased levels of employee engagement (Chong, 2007). Additionally, Chong (2007) accentuates that values that are not internalized may cause employees to say one thing in each situation, while actually doing something different altogether. A company's brand values are communicated from the top to the rest of the organization through marketing and relationship-oriented perspectives. This is achieved through formal channels such as internal communications, training, and development programs (Ahmed & Hashim, 2022). Therefore, it is of importance for management to assist employees in internalizing the organizational and brand values in their attitudes and behaviors. This can be achieved through formal communication efforts, such as training programs (Chong, 2007).

Formal and informal structural elements often complement each other in the sense that informal structures are used to support formal procedures or to compensate for weaknesses in the formal organization (Brennecke & Rank, 2016). Kandlousi et al. (2010) highlight the importance of formal internal communication. If communication from the management transmitted through a formal system is insufficient or ambiguous, informal communication systems tend to compensate and fill in these gaps that formal communication fails to address (Kandlousi et al. 2010). This may cause disruptions in internal branding efforts, and become damaging to the organization (Ahmed & Hashim, 2022). Therefore, as Kandlousi et al. 's (2010) findings show, managers' responsibility is to handle and manage the informal communication since too much reliance on informal communication may damage employees'

sense of security and satisfaction. As Pye (2005) emphasizes, it is crucial that leaders and managers facilitate a collective sensemaking within organizations to achieve a shared understanding of the environment and goals. Pye (2005) defines sensemaking as the process of making sense, interpreting and giving meaning to information and experiences. It is the foundation for dealing with decision-making, strategy formulation, as well as dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity. Hence, this shows the importance of formal communication channels, particularly in ensuring that internal branding initiatives are implemented consistently across the organization (Ahmed & Hashim, 2022).

3.4 The Link Between Effective Internal Communication & Sustainable Internal Branding

According to Genç (2017) Sustainability can play a strategic role and become an integral part of a company's internal branding efforts, as the value can embody and strengthen the bond between employees and the brand, creating a shared sense of greater purpose and responsibility. However, Genç (2017) also emphasizes that implementing and integrating sustainability necessitates effective internal communication. Newig et al (2013) argues that sustainability issues are often complex and uncertain, requiring clear and transparent communication channels to convey the importance of sustainability initiatives. Furthermore, sustainability goals often involve conflicts of interests and values (Newig et al. 2013). In this context, efficient communication becomes indispensable in establishing a collective understanding of societal values related to sustainability and defining tangible objectives that necessitate unified action (Newig et al., 2013). Therefore, according to these researchers mentioned above, internal communication plays a crucial role in enabling employees to comprehend the concept of sustainability, recognize its relevance, and identify their role in contributing to the organization's sustainability objectives.

3.5 Identifying Assumptions: Challenging the Scope of Existing Literature in Internal Branding & Sustainability

The integration of sustainability into business strategy is widely advocated in the existing literature. It is acknowledged that sustainability offers the potential to create a competitive advantage and drive long-term profitability, making it an essential aspect that cannot be overlooked by companies (Genç, 2017). The potential benefits have led to the assumption that organizations should embrace and integrate sustainability into their operations.

Kataria et al. (2013) also emphasizes the importance of internal branding in cultivating commitment and engagement among employees. Internal branding serves as a critical tool for organizations to reinforce their brand values and align employees with the brand's mission (Ahmed & Hashim, 2022). By fostering a sense of greater purpose, internal branding contributes to a lower turnover rate and a more committed workforce (Pascoe et al. 2021).

Furthermore, the literature emphasizes that organizations that integrate sustainability should communicate and market its values internally. Ahmed and Hashim (2022) claims that internal communication plays a vital role in enabling employees to understand and make sense of the concept of sustainability, recognize its significance, and identify their role in contributing to the organization's sustainability objectives. By internally branding and communicating sustainability, employees develop a shared sense of purpose, which in turn motivates them to deliver excellent performance and contribute to the overall success of the organization.

Based on our abductive method and empirical data, it is evident that organizations in their early stages and characterized by having a sustainable product do not actively utilize internal branding or engage in internal communication about sustainability. Thus, these findings raise the following questions: Is it possible for organizations, particularly those with sustainability as a fundamental aspect of their products or services, to achieve success without effectively communicating sustainability internally? If sustainability is at the core of their operations, should internal communication and branding efforts play a more significant role in ensuring their longevity?

The decision of sustainable organizations to refrain from actively engaging in explicit internal branding and communication of their core value sparks curiosity. It is worth considering if

this choice is influenced by their perception of themselves as inherently and morally good, given the widely accepted notion implied by the literature that sustainability is indeed a positive and desirable attribute. The inherent value associated with sustainability may lead these organizations to believe that internal strategies focused on communicating sustainability are unnecessary or redundant. Alternatively, it is possible that these sustainable organizations, that are in their early stages of development, have overlooked traditional strategic aspects highlighted in the existing literature by sustaining from implementing internal communication and branding efforts.

The exploration of these questions and challenging the assumptions presented in this chapter are contributions we aim to make. By examining the relationship between internal branding and sustainability, we seek to shed light on whether the integration of these aspects lead to longevity, or if the existing literature's scope is missing the significance of these factors.

4. Empirical Analysis

In the following chapter we will present our empirical findings and the subsequent analysis of it. To reiterate, the data stems from eight interviewees with the ability to influence the usage of internal communication within their organization. The material is divided into different themes to easily illustrate interesting patterns we have identified, and the chapters are consequently divided into subcategories which represent the final product of our labeling process.

4.1 Positioning within the Realm of Sustainability

The sustainable organizations that we have interviewed are operating within the sustainability industry - where their main output has a considerable impact on sustainability. Their operations produce either products or services that range from creating sustainable alternatives to spreading information that cultivate awareness around sustainability. The following subchapter aims to illustrate how these organizations seem to rationalize their way of positioning themselves.

4.1.1 Acknowledging Sustainability

To start off the exploration of the empirical material, we initially noted that there was a consensus among our respondents about sustainability and its growing role in our society. They seem to acknowledge that sustainability has become increasingly more all-encompassing in our modern day and age, ranging from how much we should think about it overall to the demands of their stakeholders.

The whole debate and the society has moved towards that direction. Everybody has thought about it, maybe not everybody, but everybody should in any case. - Interviewee 1

Now we see a lot more interest and more investments coming in. [...] A lot of questions we get from investors are about the sustainability impacts of our company and the projects we're building. - Interviewee 4

We are a non-profit association, and we receive funding primarily from public

sources, which includes a significant amount of taxpayer money. This, in itself, places even greater demands on us to operate in a responsible manner and make the most of the resources we receive. – Interviewee 7

The hype surrounding sustainability has not gone unnoticed by our study subjects, leading us to interpret this as them clearly understanding the comprehensive stronghold sustainability has today - both on a societal level as well as on their own business practices. Meaning that there is a heightened sense of responsibility when it comes to their operations. The empirical material suggests that the respondents are aware that the relatively new field they are in, consisting of sustainable organizations, is getting more popular in the wake of the general interest spike in sustainability. This is further strengthened when they reflect upon their own practices and the new sustainable industry they have taken part in as a sustainable organization - showing that their awareness of operating within the realm of sustainability.

It's pretty hot to work with what we're doing. - Interviewee 3

Once again, they acknowledge that the sustainability industry is growing and that there is hype surrounding the phenomena - making their chosen field a “hot” one as sustainable organizations are to some extent very fashionable at the moment.

Tuning into the demands set by the external environment has made its mark on how organizations today manage their operations. An identified theme is the awareness of how sustainability's new-found significance has impacted actual business practices in these sustainable organizations as well the demands that our respondents are faced with. There is an acknowledgment of the sustainability demands from shareholders and customers, which creates a compelling incentive to conform to the established standards.

I'm not saying that all companies does it, but all companies talk about sustainability today. There's no company with a little self-respect that does not do it. - Interviewee 3

In today's business landscape, organizations cannot afford to ignore the sustainability movement, as it has become an undeniable force shaping their operations. They also seem to feel that it is inescapable to talk about sustainability, which might be interpreted as fear of the

consequences of not appearing to be sustainable, unless there is explicit communication about it. In this case, the absence of external sustainability communication appears to be understood as a characteristic for low self-respect, meaning that it is an integral part of the business. With the increasing importance of sustainability, these new demands go beyond the constraints of the individual organizations, as it also has created relatively new roles that have seemingly altered the organizational structure for organizations overall.

Ten years ago there was no head of sustainability in companies. Now they're everywhere. - Interviewee 1

The number of positions offered as the head of sustainability has increased according to our respondent, which we interpret as them accepting that sustainability has altered the business landscape and the roles within. However, the tone in which they delivered that statement makes it clear that they view it as a fad - a popular title that organizations must include to remain on trend.

Nonetheless, a response from Interviewee 4 supports the idea that sustainability is reshaping the industry as they stated that their role of the head of sustainability has grown in significance over time. According to them this is due to the accumulated effect of the heightened sustainability demands of the investors. The sustainable organizations are aware of their positioning as opportunistic - as the sustainability industry is perpetually gaining momentum.

4.1.2 Beyond Sustainability

Interestingly, despite their awareness of sustainability's hype and their field being regarded as "hot", the respondents had a tendency of abstaining from using the word "sustainability". If they have previously acknowledged sustainability's significance, then one could question why they are evading its grasp. It appears that this occurrence is due to the common notion that these sustainable organizations are finding the term overused and wanting to position themselves as something beyond sustainability.

Yeah, it creates a bunch of noise and inflation in the words, so in the end they don't mean anything. - Interviewee 3

Yeah, we don't talk alot about that, because everybody is talking about it. [...] It doesn't mean anything since everybody is saying it. Some mean it when they say it, but since everybody is talking about it. It has no value. - Interviewee 3

These sentiments are echoed by Interviewee 5, as they refrain from using sustainability as a term when describing their organization. They believe it is preferable to be specific, as interpretations of the word “sustainability” vary due to its numerous connotations. This perception suggests their wariness of the term's diluted meaning across different contexts. While recognizing the need to discuss sustainability to maintain stakeholder approval, they also aim to distance themselves from the term, acknowledging its lack of usefulness. Being more particular with what they do is better as to “Not just throw the word and say that we are sustainable.” (Interviewee 5).

An unease of using the term “sustainability” could partly be due to its lack of meaning, but also suggest an ambition to avoid adding to the oversaturation of the term. This makes it seem like sustainable organizations are conscious, and avoidant, of greenwashing - as they do not want to unceremoniously throw around the word “sustainability”. One respondent stated that “[...] it's about not contributing to greenwashing, it's pretty important.” (Interviewee 2). There is a will to create a genuine sustainable impact, through transparency and understanding - and in such a way bypassing the stamp of greenwashing. Avoiding greenwashing is equivalent to avoiding appearing inauthentic, as that could eventually negatively impact the organization's image. We interpret this as their reasoning for trying to position themselves as authentically sustainable, by essentially omitting sustainability from their communication.

And then I believe that you have shown that you've gone beyond, not just formulating pretty sentences of how you would like to change the world. - Interviewee 3

One could say that communicating sustainability can have a negative sound. ... That it feels mucky and so on. - Interviewee 6

These two quotations exemplify the feeling of sustainability being something that is plastered on just for the sake of it, leading it to feeling disingenuous. All these negative connotations

surrounding the word could explain the organization's skepticism and pessimism regarding the term. Nonetheless, the discrepancies exist. These sustainable organizations are fully conscious of sustainability communication being an essential part to modern business conduct, whilst simultaneously trying to position themselves in a way that differentiate them from other organizations that use sustainability as a simple add-on to their existent business operations. They seek to avoid being associated with those who merely use the label of "sustainability" as a trendy facade. By intentionally distancing themselves from the term, they aim to position themselves as something more, transcending the boundaries of sustainability.

Furthermore, we have observed a significant absence of sustainable core values in their internal communication, which stems from their reliance on the organization's sustainable core. This reliance is based on the inherent merits of sustainability as a core value. The studied sustainable organizations heavily lean on the fact that they create a sustainable impact by simply conducting their business'. Meaning that they believe themselves to be inherently sustainable, therefore there is no need to use sustainability when positioning as they find it redundant.

We have not developed any goals or values. Our whole operation is a sustainability effort. So we haven't thought about the 2030 goals that much. - Interviewee 1

Our whole product is a sustainability initiative. - Interviewee 3

Sustainability is kind of the core part of the business. - Interviewee 4

So everything we do is only about sustainability, actually. - Interviewee 6

When asked about the sustainable core values of the organization their neglect of it is apparent. However there is a clear reliance on the core service and products of these sustainable organizations. In their opinion the brunt of the sustainability efforts are solely carried by their core operation and, therefore, they in some cases do not have any further goals or values internally communicated in regards to sustainability. When it comes to sustainability, they are already doing their share by operating as a sustainable organization according to the interviewees. As of this reliance on their core products and services, it seems like they find internal communication of sustainable core values redundant.

4.1.3 Opting for Alternatives

Considering the perceived saturation of the term “sustainability”, there is a notable inclination to avoid using it casually and instead explore other terms that have preserved its integrity. When asked about using the term sustainability, respondents opt to use other terms, which could be another reason for dodging sustainability communication. By opting for alternatives to sustainability, these sustainable organizations can position themselves, by clearly differentiating themselves from other organizations with a sustainability mission.

And then there's no point in talking about it with those terms anymore, I think. But rather that we talk a lot more about impact and so on. - Interviewee 6

Circular, it has a lot of connotations. The thing we start of with is reduce, then reuse and then recycle. - Interviewee 2

By deliberately opting for alternative words, sustainable organizations demonstrate their belief that the term “sustainability” lacks value and authenticity. This could be viewed as a strategy to achieve differentiation between sustainable organizations such as themselves, and organizations with a sustainability agenda. A prevailing theme is that the studied sustainable organizations apply a more mechanistic and data-driven approach. They counteract the hype surrounding sustainability by presenting quantifiable numbers and coherent metrics that demonstrate their actual positive impact on sustainability.

Until they can actually quantify it, it's only words. - Interviewee 3

... so [sustainability metrics] will be a very good tool for us to show that it's not only bullshit. - Interviewee 3

Their aim is to show their genuine and tangible impact by presenting their measurable data when it comes to sustainability. Waltzing around with the term has become an insufficient way for sustainable organizations to seem trustworthy in regards to their sustainability efforts, as the word has become inflated and overly used. Sustainable organizations that create a genuine impact with their core product or service, but solely focus on sustainability when communicating values might even come across as flippant according to our respondents.

They can have impact, but I personally think that there's a lot of green washing. -
Interviewee 3

When they defer from presenting what actual type of impact they have, it can easily be misjudged as greenwashing - as it is such a common practice today. By being able to present quantifiable data of their impact, it has become the most credible way to use the term sustainability, otherwise the words lose their meaning and are simply perceived as “bullshit” as expressed by Interviewee 3. Therefore, they use this method to differentiate themselves from other organizations that simply claim to be sustainable, without showing any metrics to support that claim. Conclusively, our empirical analysis suggests that their shown awareness for the importance of sustainability is overshadowed by their aim to position themselves as something beyond sustainability, by opting for alternatives that differentiates them from other organizations.

4.2 A Multitude of Assumptions

There is a theme within our empirical material that shows an array of assumptions being made by our respondents. A vast quantity of the assumptions being made regards the persuasiveness of sustainability as a value and that sustainability already is an innate value among their employees. This could further explain their reasoning of not finding it necessary to explicitly communicate sustainability internally, as everybody is assumed to be on the same page.

4.2.1 Inherent Motivational Power of Sustainability

A clear conviction among these sustainable organizations is that working with sustainability, and thus creating a tangible impact, is making the world into a better place. Working with sustainability is such a great contribution to society, hence the belief that there is an inherent power in sustainability that creates intrinsic motivation among employees.

We notice that the opportunity to build a better world, a more sustainable [retracted for anonymity] industry, is motivating - Interviewee 2

If you apply for [a sustainable company], then hopefully you're interested in doing something good. - Interviewee 1

So I think everybody that we have in [our company] is generally... or, want to be good members of society. That's probably one of the reasons they applied to us. - Interviewee 3

All the quotes paint a picture of sustainability being inherently good and that employees are aware of that. By working for these sustainable organizations, the employees are contributing to sustainability, which consequently makes them good members of society. The fact that sustainability is morally good seems to be non-negotiable according to the studied sustainable organizations. Consequently, that belief leads to them assuming that the value is strong enough to attract and motivate their employees to do good. They see sustainability, and the core of their operations, as motivating enough as it is coaxing out the intrinsic motivation among their employees.

One needs to find the motivation in the fact that we are working with something innovative and that it makes the world a better place, to be able to cope with many other parts of the work. - Interviewee 2

It quickly becomes apparent that the interviewees, with their positional power, assume that those who gravitate toward sustainable organizations have the motivation to do something good for society and the planet as a whole. A respondent agreed that there is surely a connection between the employees' personal commitment to sustainability and their

organizations sustainable brand. Once again reiterating how sustainability, and thus their own operations, is creating an impact that is fundamentally positive. Here the Head of Sustainability presumes that there is intrinsic motivation to be found, when working at sustainable organizations - simply because they are making the world into a better place. There is a common notion that sustainability is valued to be substantial and intrinsically motivating enough to aid employees in doing other parts of their work - that does not necessarily have to do with the sustainable core product or service. Assumptions are then made that sustainability has an inherent power that has the ability to create motivation. They are relying on an idea that their employees' have altruistic motives created by the sheer goodness of sustainability, which in turn garner intrinsic motivation when working in a sustainable organization. They also assume that people want to work with sustainability in one way or another, as it makes the world a better place.

We must think that most of the people work for a company that they... Or, not wanting to go to an occupation and make the world worse. If you feel like you did that, then you would not work there anymore. - Interviewee 2

Sustainability is such a persuasive and authoritative force in itself, that they assume that people would simply not be a part of an organization that makes the world into a bleak place. The power they seem to see in sustainability is strong enough to control the whims of people, as it is morally superior in relation to other values. Their faith in the inherent power of sustainability value seems to be extensive.

The respondents also seem to think that sustainability in of itself is so fundamentally and morally good that it has the power to attract people to their organizations. This becomes apparent with the perception, of Interviewee 1 and 3, that people that apply to them are "interested in doing something good" and want to be "good members of society".

And then, I think, that it becomes a natural selection that the ones that work here have a very strong drive and passion for circularity and sustainability already before they come here. - Interviewee 6

But generally, like people who join us, they are interested in sustainability. So I think it happens naturally. - Interviewee 8

And hopefully we've recruited people that already have that in them when we talk to them in the first recruitment meetings, and that you're on board with that and think that it is important, that it is a reason why you want to start working here. -

Interviewee 6

It seems like there is an assumption that people are attracted to their sustainable organization because of the inherent power of sustainability, because sustainability is a value already embedded in the hearts of many. They believe that sustainability is not a value that people simply have, but rather something that is so strong that it makes them passionate to a degree that is outwardly visible. In a way, they seem to assume that sustainability is so powerful that it naturally draws out altruistic motives among their employees.

4.2.2 Automatic Value Alignment & Employee Commitment

The inherent persuasive power of sustainability, as well as the inherent value of it, is so all-encompassing that these managers and people with influence assume that the employees within the organizations have the same sentiments as themselves. Sustainable organizations seem to have a certain assumption of where their employees' values lie. They assume that when people work at sustainable organizations, they have a predisposition for caring greatly about sustainability and internalizing it in their private lives as well at the workplace.

Everybody who works with us are spirited by sustainability. - Interviewee 2

Everyone seems to have really the same core values in mind. - Interviewee 4

So I think that a lot of people that apply to us have a natural outlook on this being important and that this is cool and that I want to work with that. - Interviewee 3

The quotes symbolize sustainable organizations' assumptions that their employees are enamored with sustainability and that it is a "natural" occurrence. Once again they acknowledge the hype surrounding sustainability by calling it "cool", hence making the organization attractive for employees. When assuming that everybody that works for these organizations have already internalized the value of sustainability, there might arise a certain

reliance on it. The studied sustainable organizations seem to rely on the notion that their employees already care deeply for sustainability and assume that their behavior matches their perceived values.

It's obvious that recycling is good and waste sorting is a good thing, sort of. That is not that strange, I think - Interviewee 2

But yeah, I think that us that works here are pretty... kind of, sustainability nerds. - Interviewee 6

And then, I think, that it becomes a natural selection that the ones that work here have a very strong drive and passion for circularity and sustainability already before they come here. - Interviewee 6

It seems like they are convinced that everybody is on board with sustainability, as it is “not that strange” and that they are already “sustainability nerds” - people who are extremely interested and engaged in particular sustainability. The quotes highlight the assumption that all employees share the same perspective on sustainable practices and possess a pre-existing commitment as well personal engagement. In addition to assuming employees’ passion for sustainability, they underscore the significance of aligning the workforce with the organization's values.

We keep coming back to the fact that we are a sustainable company with circularity and sustainability, with decreased impact in focus and that's why there's extra high expectations on us as coworkers to make responsible choices - Interviewee 2

It is very important that one... I mean I believe in values, that we have the same value base if you're supposed to work with each other. - Interviewee 1

This sentiment is echoed by Interviewee 6, who emphasizes the importance of sharing sustainable core values and having an open and clear outlook, collectively striving towards a common direction. The quotes highlight the recognition of the significance of aligning employees' values with sustainability within these organizations. They acknowledge that being part of a sustainable organization places certain demands on employees to exhibit

“responsible” behavior. The assumptions of employees’ aligned values lead to the expectation that the shared values create direction and facilitate the work process.

Another common theme in the empirical material is the assumption that their employees’ assumed aptitude for sustainability is not a behavior confined to the workplace - they see it as a personality trait of the employee.

But for my part, and I think for most, there’s no oddities. We don’t have to shift personality between the workplace and private life [...] - Interviewee 2

When exploring whether sustainable organizations expect their employees to practice sustainable behavior in their private lives, it becomes evident that Interviewee 4 and Interviewee 6 share the belief that such alignment is not only beneficial but also crucial. Given that sustainability is at the core of these organizations, the expectation of thinking sustainably in one’s private life ensures that everyone is “working in the same direction” (Interviewee 4). There is an assumption that all employees have internalized sustainability, and that the value is so ingrained in them that their sustainable attitude remains the same, outside and inside the workplace. Thus, the subsequent quotes show existing assumptions that everyone in the company has a like-minded outlook on being sustainable as the value is presumed to be so inherently good, that it transcends work-life borders.

4.2.3 The Power of Attraction

In this study, it was discovered that the studied sustainable organizations all placed great emphasis on thoroughly selecting individuals who they assume already hold the values and beliefs that align with their sustainable mission. This meticulous recruitment process could also be interpreted as a strategy for these organizations to position themselves as a sustainable organization that lets sustainability wholly permeate the organization and their workforce.

If we’re going to employ somebody then it shall naturally be somebody that thinks like us - Interviewee 1

We want to take in people that have their natural instinct aligned with the culture we want to build up. - Interviewee 3

The personality that people we take in have, should reflect the vision we have of the culture [...] We know who we recruit. - Interviewee 3

When discussing the recruitment process, there was a general perception that the people that apply for the job and subsequently get employed are like-minded. This careful procedure of picking compatible individuals might be reinforcing their assumptions of their employees' passion for sustainability and altruistic will to improve the world. These managers assume that other employees share the same altruistic outlook on sustainability and motives for working for these sustainable organizations.

And hopefully we've recruited people that already have that in them when we talk to them in the first recruitment meetings, and that you're on board with that and thinks that it is important, that it is a reason why you want to start working here. – Interviewee 6

Oh, it's a dilemma, and it's something we discuss a lot. Every time we hire someone, which doesn't happen very often, but when it does, this is a discussion. Maybe not specifically about values. We assume that everyone who comes to us has roughly the same fundamental values regarding it. Sustainability. – Interviewee 7

They seem to think highly of their ability to sift through their applicants and find those who would easily assimilate into their culture of values. It seems to be of high importance to ensure that a new hire's values are closely aligned with the organization's values. Interestingly, the organizations do not explicitly discuss values during the hiring process, assuming that applicants would not apply unless they already hold sustainability values. Assuming that their employees are as captivated by sustainability as the managers and people with respectable positions themselves, might not be fully unwarranted given that their recruitment process is diligent enough.

But generally, like people who join us, they are interested in sustainability. So I think it happens naturally. – Interviewee 8

And then, I think, that it becomes a natural selection that the ones that work here have a very strong drive and passion for circularity and sustainability already before they come here. – Interviewee 6

However, it seems that these assumptions are deeply ingrained in their recruitment process as well. In this case, it seems to be a natural process - which contradicts the notion that they are highly meticulous when it comes to selecting future employees. The act of applying to these organizations alone is considered a strong indicator for the organizations that the applicants' values are already aligned. This suggests that the emphasis on employees' altruistic motives, as expressed in the interviews, may not be solely rooted in a rigorous recruitment process - but rather based on even more assumptions.

The interviewees express a collective desire to conduct thorough candidate evaluations. However, it appears that they select individuals based on an assumption that these candidates naturally align with the organization's values, believing that sustainability can attract like-minded individuals. There is an assumption that the applicants and employees alike are drawn towards these sustainable organizations, because they have the same outlook on what they find motivating and that they want to partake in the impact generated by the company. They seem to believe that it is intrinsically motivating to make the world into a better place, and that it consequently means that they rely on the power of attraction. Therefore, the interviewees seem to trust that applicants, as well as employees, believe that they can indirectly better the world by working for a sustainable organization. Additionally, interviewees also assume that the values assessed during the recruitment process will persist without active reinforcement. Thus, the main mechanism for actively socializing employees and ensuring their alignment of values, primarily lies in the recruitment process within these sustainable organizations, where the interviewed managers hold the assumption that new hires will naturally embrace and reinforce the existing values of the company.

4.3 Absence of Internal Sustainability Branding

A surprising finding was discovered when conducting our research; sustainable organizations seem to not have any internal branding efforts whatsoever and especially not in regards to specifically sustainability. In the following subchapter we will present this counterintuitive phenomenon and in what ways the respondents rationalize the absence of internal branding efforts.

4.3.1 Reliance on Core Operations

We have seen that reliance on their sustainable core product or service, which leads to the absence of specific sustainability values. This, in turn, results in neglect of sustainability as part of their internal communication. Being a sustainable organization, with an obvious awareness of sustainability being trendy at the moment, one might assume that that specific aspect should be highlighted in their communication. However, this expectation is contradicted in the material we have collected.

We have not talked alot about values. - Interviewee 1

We have not really discussed any values in our organization - Interviewee 8

But I would say that we do not always speak explicitly about core values. - Interviewee 5

This indicates that even if the organization has core values, these have neither been discussed nor talked about at all. It seems like they fall back on the fact that the operations of the organization are creating sustainable impact and that everybody in the organization is aware of that - making explicit communication of those sustainable values unnecessary.

It's a given, or at least I hope our financiers see it as a given, that we should do it. However, it's not something we package in a communicative manner. I hope our work speaks for itself. – Interviewee 7

Discussing their choice of not talking about their values, they countered with; “The core operation is as it is” (Interviewee 1). We interpret this as the reliance of the core product and

service as their contribution to sustainability. It seems like they assume that any sustainability efforts beyond their core operations is superfluous, as they believe their impact on sustainability through their operations alone is sufficient. Interviewee 5 also stated that the values are something they work with daily in their business and that is why “We don’t talk about it but in my experience it is something we have in common, so we don’t talk a lot about it”, which strengthens the notion of them believing that it is enough that the communication of sustainable values happens implicitly.

We don't want to guilt people taking the car, we are working with [retracted for anonymity; explanation of their core product]. That's where our greatest impact is. So right thing first - Interviewee 2

Interviewee 2 expresses reliance on the core product that trumps their perceived need for internally trying to align their employees with their sustainable values. In such a manner, they seem to find that their sustainable efforts are entirely carried by their product, rendering any additional internal sustainability communication excessive.

It appears that the lack of differentiation in communication within the organization stems from a perception that additional communication on sustainability is redundant - as their operation in itself is enough. A few of the respondents do not make a differentiation between values externally communicated to stakeholders and those internally communicated to employees. “We have used the exact same for both...” (Interviewee 4), in regards to their vision and values. The organization's internal communication primarily focuses on organizational principles and business conduct, rather than explicitly communicating their core sustainability values to employees. This non-specific communication of values might induce the feeling of the message being both generic and mainly for the sake of the external stakeholders. However, as stated by the respondent, this internal communication only occurs when onboarding new employees. This strategy could be interpreted as a passive approach to internal communication of their sustainable values, relying solely on operations to convey the organization’s commitment to sustainability.

Sustainable organizations seem to have a strategy in place when it comes to corporate sustainability, using the UN's global goals as a foundation. Yet, the strategy only seems to include ways in how their organization can scale up. The values that are derived from those

strategies tend to be more operational in nature, rather than encompassing the softer sustainability values.

We've used the global goals as a starting point to map our impact and how we shall think to scale up in a responsible way from the impact that we have - Interviewee 2

We have no direct goals beyond scaling up and selling our product. - Interviewee 2

However, the absence of internal sustainability efforts and communication is apparent. Leading us to believe that internal sustainability practices are non-existent because of a reliance on the core product and assumptions of everybody sharing the same sustainable values. The sustainability efforts and values that exist have a more numerical approach and solely pertain to the operations of the organization as well as their position in the external environment.

[...] Remind us of what we're working towards. What our values are. - Interviewee 3

Upon further investigation of this statement, those values were based on operational goals and specific business performance, rather than communication sustainability values - which was confirmed to be non-existent. It becomes apparent that sustainability is not at the forefront of the respondents' minds, as they immediately shift the conversation towards operational and financial goals in response to questions about organizational values. The absence of internal strategies for communicating their sustainable core values is evident, as they rely on the belief that their core operations are sufficiently communicative in itself.

4.3.2 Relying on their Assumptions

As previously presented, there are findings that suggest a belief in shared understandings about sustainability among the employees. For that reason, the assumption that everybody finds it equally important, leads them to defend the action of neglecting sustainability in internal communication. An explanation for the absence, when it comes to the assumptions that these organizations have, is that they may not want to appear as if they are imposing their values on others - leading them to be more inclined to assume inherent sustainability passion in employees and applicants.

The thing is that nearly everybody thinks the way we do, you should too. Nobody should have be against this idea... - Interviewee 1

We don't talk about it but in my experience it is something we have in common, so we don't talk a lot about it - Interviewee 5

These findings signify a reliance on the assumption that everybody has the same interpretation of “the idea” and that an inherent passion for sustainability is something everybody has “in common”. With this statement they rationalize their lack of internal communication, as apparently everybody has the same idea of sustainability overall. Furthermore, both Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 5 noted the presence of underlying sustainable values within their respective organizations, even without explicit internal communication of these values. This further confirms the suggestion that sustainable values exist within the intangible norms of the organization, rather than in concrete communication. Thus, it appears that many sustainable organizations do not explicitly state their sustainable values, but rather acknowledge the values’ existence implicitly and express them covertly through other forms of internal communication channels, such as their code of conduct. They assume that everybody is on the same page, therefore they rationalize the absence of internal branding efforts in regards to sustainability.

Additionally, it is possible to observe an avoidance to control and influence employees in regards to their respective sustainability efforts, specifically in their private lives. The reluctance to appear controlling could offer a plausible explanation for the absence of strong internal communication efforts to enforce their sustainability agenda.

You can't demand that from people. - Interviewee 1

It's not like we hammer it into people that “you have to be more sustainable”, but rather that everybody thinks of it unconsciously and that creates an effect. - Interviewee 6

It seems like they do not expect their employees to have sustainable behavior, as they cannot possibly demand that. However, they do assume that everybody is already on board and,

therefore, they do not need the encouragement to exercise sustainable behavior. This ends up being a discrepancy, as they on one hand dismiss the idea of trying to control the employees' behavior, but simultaneously take for granted what type of value their employees should have. Interestingly, some of the studied sustainable organizations appear to find it important that employees behave in accordance with the organization's sustainability actions - whilst not having any explicit communication that informs their employees of those expectations.

Yes, I think so. Although as I said before, it goes very much in accordance with how I myself think and think about sustainability, but the shift is between being a student and starting to work at the association. I started to think more about how I spoke and how I kind of behaved and communicated in different contexts, but it's not that difficult because it goes hand in hand with how I think myself – Interviewee 7

[...], but you should behave yourself at work and work in line with the company's values and general stuff. Then again, we don't monitor people in their private life after that. - Interviewee 2

While expectations exist for employees to align their behavior with the company's values, there is a conscious effort to avoid overstepping or exerting control over their private lives. This rationale could explain their decision to not have internal sustainability communication, as they do not want to force these values upon their employees - as they should already be there according to them.

So something so that you don't feel like your employer is an annoying supervisor of your lifestyle and brain, but that helps me and inspires me to do and become better. The pride to do better. - Interviewee 2.

Once again, the organizations assume employees possess altruistic motives and take pride in working for a sustainable organization, while also avoiding the perception of being an overbearing supervisor. The absence of internal sustainability communication reflects their reliance on these assumptions and their desire to avoid appearing controlling by dictating employee values.

4.3.3 Awareness of Absence

We have concluded that the studied sustainable organizations' vision is growth. Growth usually calls for change of some sort. Hereby we will introduce findings that show that the managers and those with influential positions are aware that with growth, they will have to implement changes. In all the interviews, the study subjects uttered their vision of growing the organization in size. This inadvertently means a growth in the number of employees. These aspirations can be distinguished through expressions like their goals to “gear up” and “employ more people”. The repetition of those goals and the following comment of increasing the size of the organization, leads us to interpret this as them being attentive to the fact that such visions imply an inevitable contextual change. Thereby, there is an awareness of the impending change the organization might have to go through and that it might have an effect on the need for internal value communication.

When presenting a hypothetical situation, in which the organization would be a lot bigger according to their vision, we asked the respondent if they felt that there would be certain pressure to behave a certain way as the face of the brand. The subsequent response followed;

Absolutely, I think that for sure. Then it becomes even more important that one lives their brand and that one lives according to the values that one communicates. - Interviewee 1

This suggests that even though they do not use internal communication to try to align values and foster coherence, there is an understanding of how important the concept is - especially when the organization would grow in size. The respondents seem to be more inclined toward the idea of implementing internal sustainability communication when talking about the future, where their organization has hypothetically experienced growth.

We're in the construction phase of our internal sustainability efforts, we're thinking a lot about it and how we shall become better. - Interviewee 2

This statement suggests that the reliance of employees intrinsic motivation in regards to sustainability, assumptions of altruistic motives and the subsequent neglect of internal sustainable efforts might not uphold in the long run - which they seem to be aware of. They

express the desire to become “better”, indicating an understanding that as the organization grows, more internal sustainability efforts will be necessary. With this growth, there is an awareness that sustainability is a part of the organizations’ development - but that it should be done correctly, as they are keeping their wariness towards inauthentic sustainability work. Our interviewees highlight certain demands that organizations must meet to be considered good employers, including accountability for their actions and authenticity in their sustainability efforts.

The thing with greenwashing and such, there will be scandals. Companies will have to change the way they do business. - Interviewee 1

If you’re supposed to be a good employer then you have to be accountable for what you do - Interviewee 1

This shows an awareness of the demands from both the employees and the external environment in regards to sustainability. The studied sustainable organizations seem to acknowledge that employees also have expectations, especially in the context of growth. The accumulated interpretation of the empirical data leads us to believe that there are definite discrepancies in how they view sustainability on an industry-level and how they choose to omit sustainability from their internal communication.

5. Discussion

The following chapter will explore how our empirical findings relate with the existing literature. We can identify a discrepancy between the empirical findings and the existing literature's view on internal communication and the value of sustainability. Despite having a strong sustainable mission and core, sustainable organizations demonstrate an absence of internal communication and internal branding. This leads us to discuss and explore if this is influenced by the strong inherent value of sustainability, as mentioned both in the literature and empirical findings.

5.1 Successful albeit Unconventional Strategies

Following section aims to examine the existing literature presented in the literature review, highlighting potential shortcomings or areas that are potentially challenged by the inherent and persuasive value of sustainability. “Mysteries”, according to Alvesson & Kärreman (2007, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) is the occurrence of unexpected observations in relation to existing research. Despite the literature saying that internal communication and branding are crucial for organizations, the empirical findings reveal a discrepancy among the studied sustainable organizations. These sustainable organizations, despite their lack of active internal branding and communication practices, still demonstrate a seemingly noteworthy level of brand commitment and growth, as mentioned by their managers and influential employees that we have interviewed. This is surprising considering the emphasis placed by several authors on the importance of brand communication and effective internal communication in reinforcing commitment and aligning values.

5.1.1 The Inherent Power of Sustainability

A multitude of the theories presented by the literature review emphasize the need for internal communication of sustainability efforts and values, as it creates an array of positive outcomes for the organization. According to Cova and Cova (2002), to be able to create brand loyalty among customers it is crucial to prioritize sustainability in their communication. Furthermore, as Glavas (2016) mentions, it is important to incorporate sustainability in organizations' internal communication to be able to garner commitment and motivation from the employees. The benefits seem to be endless when it comes to internal branding efforts as mentioned by Chong's (2007), whose observation shows that an absence of internal communication can

lead to inconsistencies between employees' words and actions. However, it appears that the studied sustainable organizations place their trust in the inherent power and appeal of sustainability itself when rationalizing their non-usage of internal branding efforts. They seem to disregard conventional internal strategies by doing so. The organizations seem to take advantage of sustainability as a substitute for internal communication and branding, whilst also using its influence as a driving force for employee commitment and value alignment.

A coherent brand message is important to create a shared understanding and comprehension of the brand among the employees (Müller, 2018). These sustainable organizations' language when it comes to talking about sustainability might not be coherent, as they use a variety of different words because of their general distaste for the term "sustainability". However, it might not be necessary to have a cohesive language when the internal communication is lacking - because everybody seems to understand the abstract, yet completely tangible idea of sustainability without explicit communication of it. Our interviewees rely on their operations - that their sustainability efforts are made simply by existing. As they are successful in this current moment, one might believe that the premise of the brand is already received and correctly comprehended among employees without internal brand communication - contrary to the theories presented by Müller (2018).

As Kiaos (2023) and Rennstam (2017) stated, it is important that employees have a shared purpose and have a high level of consistency in their thoughts and actions to make them feel united - as previously argued, this appears to be in place without using explicit internal branding efforts. Our empirical findings suggest the employees in these sustainable organizations seem to have a shared understanding of the organizations sustainable mission, which seems to unite them and motivate them - much like the theories Genç (2017) presented regarding the need for shared understanding when creating motivation. According to Sujchaphong et al. (2020) the more knowledgeable the employees are about the organization's brand values; the more employee brand support will be created. However, our interviewees themselves greatly support their brand and they seem to believe that all their committed employees do as well. As mentioned, this is done without internal communication of the sustainable brand values that they have had.

Sustainability as a value is so all-encompassing and fundamental, that even though the studied sustainable organizations choose to go beyond sustainability and opt for other options in their positioning, sustainability is still the obvious fundament to their organization. Müller (2018) highlights that internal branding is central when it comes to aligning attitudes, behaviors and language use. However, attitudes and behaviors are perceived to be aligned according to our respondents - as they say that everybody is a “sustainability nerd” and “spirited by sustainability”. Again, fortifying the shared idea that sustainability as a value has such power and stronghold over their employees, that they do not need internal branding efforts. Therefore, employees’ behaviors may be successfully aligned, even without the internal branding that Müller (2018) deems necessary.

5.1.1.1 Employee Commitment & Motivation

Sustainability, aided by its moral high ground, garners enough support and commitment by itself and it seems like that support extends to the sustainable organization seamlessly. Once again, supporting the argument that sustainability in of itself is strong enough to create support for the organization - that does something so inherently good by contributing to sustainability. Pascoe et al (2021) also states that it is important that sustainability is in the internal branding efforts - for the job satisfaction, commitment and retention of the employees. As previously stated, the studied sustainable organizations seem to not have a problem with those areas. The respondents describe that they have a committed employee base that already had their values aligned prior to arriving at the organization - as those who want to join them “naturally” have the same values as them.

With employees highly committed to the brand, they might not find it necessary to put a lot of effort into brand communication - contradictory to the theories presented by Burmann and Zeplin (2009) who highlight the essential role of brand communications in creating brand commitment. This is seen as employees presumably find the industry “hot” and “cool”. Furthermore, if sustainability is already permeating the entire operation and the workforce, then they might still receive the positive impact that Glavas (2016) talks about, as sustainability in internal communication raises employee commitment and motivation, without internal communication of sustainability. If an organization has employee commitment, they have the essential component of attaining organizational performance (Sencherey et al. 2022; Kataria et al. 2013). The studied sustainable organizations state that

their employees are committed to the brand, thus, they already have the crucial factor to unlock organizational performance and goals.

Ahmed and Hashim (2022) argue that internal branding is also imperative when organizations want to create intrinsic motivation and foster positive employee behavior. These outcomes are already achieved within these sustainable organizations we have studied, as they state that their employees are very intrinsically motivated. It seems like everybody is aligned with the values prior to coming to the company, as they presume that those who feel passionately about sustainability are attracted to their organizations. The respondents perceive sustainability as something that garners intrinsic motivation, as they state that “We notice that the opportunity to build a better world, a more sustainable industry, is motivating”. In other words, sustainability in of itself creates intrinsic motivation and committed employees - without internal branding activities.

According to our respondents, all their employees are passionate about sustainability - “a very strong drive and passion for circularity and sustainability already before they come here”. They also believe that all of them are there because sustainability is so powerful and that it is motivation to work for a sustainable company “that it makes the world a better place”. The studied sustainable organizations presume that their employees possess altruistic motives, and their assumption may indeed be valid. According to Müller (2018), internal branding efforts create passion and employee empowerment - but if that is already existent in the first place, then it seems like it is redundant for them to have internal branding efforts. That internal branding efforts might not be applicable on organizations whose value is so inherently good that it transcends the need for communication.

According to Glavas (2016), employees that work with promoting sustainability do not only feel connected to the brand, but they get an increased sense of pride and purpose. In our empirical findings it seems like the ability to be able to promote sustainability is the biggest reason the employees were drawn to the organization in the first place. The accounts of our interviewees fortify this idea of pride and purpose, because they feel like their employees are glad to be there as they make the world a better place. They find that sustainability draws out the altruistic motives of their employees, which in turn leads to purpose in their work. Glavas (2016) also states that employees that are motivated by sustainability are more willing to perform and contribute to the organization. This seems to be true according to our

interviewees, as previously mentioned, they view their workforce as engaged. If the employees are intrinsically motivated by sustainability, they might already be willing to perform and contribute without having to explicitly be encouraged to align themselves with the organization's values. Motivated employees not only enhance overall performance, but they inevitably foster a strong community within the organization, according to Sencherey et al. (2022). Sustainability might be so powerful that it creates a sense of community in of itself. In that way the sustainable organization reap the benefits of internal branding, without executing any activities - as the momentum of sustainability carries their efforts.

5.1.2 Rationalizing the Non-usage of Internal Branding Efforts

The utilization of sustainability as a replacement for internal strategies is perceived by the interviewees as justified and rational. This substitution can be attributed to the increased awareness and general demand for sustainability, as acknowledged by the interviewees. This is evident in the way they choose to rely on their core sustainable operations, when talking about why they do not have internal communication of their internal values. In many instances, the interviewees state that they essentially let their operations do the talking. As Nidumolu et al. (2009) mentions, there has been a surge of both existing and new companies embracing sustainable business strategies, indicating that sustainability is more relevant than ever. Hence, the current momentum in sustainability has led the interviewed respondents to perceive their chosen field as highly attractive and fashionable, with them regarded as pioneers in contemporary business practices.

Perhaps, this shows the reasoning behind their abstinence from internal communication and branding efforts. The inherent value of sustainability itself may serve as a powerful motivator for employees. Thus, based on the managers and employees with influence, we observe that the persuasive power of sustainability is evident. This is particularly considering that these organizations aim towards and have a tangible and sustainable impact through their core products. The growth of the organizations further suggests that their current internal strategies, which are not characterized by internal communication, are working.

To summarize, by demonstrating the discrepancy between the empirical findings and the literature, we challenge the conventional assumption in the existing literature that internal communication and branding are crucial for organizations. The sustainable organizations we

studied demonstrate an alternative approach that appears to be efficient for their operations, as evident from their potential or existing growth. They rely on the inherent goodness of sustainability, which enables them to disregard conventional strategies mentioned in the literature. Rather they view sustainability as a guiding force that automatically aligns employees' actions and values, eliminating the perceived need for additional communication and branding efforts.

This challenges the scope of the existing literature and sheds light on the distinctive dynamics observed within sustainable organizations. The studies organizations might be on the right track, and the theories might not apply to these particular organizations, but it does not mean that the theories are in any way faulty. Not all brands, with different kinds of core values might be able to neglect internal communication and achieve longevity - as these sustainable organizations seem to attain. Sustainability's importance is all-encompassing and has a urgency to it, unlike other values organizations might have. Therefore, our empirical findings suggest that sustainable organizations might differ from organizations that simply use sustainability as an add-on to their regular business practices.

5.2 The Pitfalls of Overreliance

In this section we will problematize whether sustainable organizations have placed excessive reliance on sustainability as the sole foundation for their internal strategies. Thus, this section will not be as centered around the existing literature as the first section does. In contrast to the preceding section that challenges and sheds new light on the assumptions made in the existing literature presented in the literature review, the focus of this section is to explore the possibility of sustainable organizations excessively relying on the inherent positive aspects of sustainability. Specifically, whether sustainable organizations in this study have gone too far by solely relying their internal strategies on a single concept.

5.2.1 The Dangers of Assumptions

Throughout our empirical findings, we consistently observed a prevalent reliance on the assumption of altruism as a primary driver of employee motivation in sustainable organizations. This assumption reflects a deep-seated belief that individuals who choose to work in these organizations are intrinsically motivated by a genuine desire to make a positive impact on society and the environment through their professional pursuits. These findings

highlight the strong assumptions regarding the inherent power of sustainability values and employee motivations within sustainable organizations.

Interestingly, sustainable organizations have a dual belief: that sustainability is not only a professional value but also a deeply ingrained personal trait among their employees. They assume that individuals who join their organization already harbor a profound and altruistic dedication to sustainability and circularity, transcending mere professional obligations. This assumption creates an atmosphere where employees are perceived to be self-motivated, going above and beyond their assigned tasks to contribute to the larger cause. In essence, the studied sustainable organizations hold the belief that employees have already internalized the values of sustainability even before becoming part of the organization, thereby reflecting the managers' ingrained trust in their employees' alignment with the organization's mission and objectives.

Despite not engaging in any internal communication and branding activities, the interviewees emphasize the role of the recruitment process and assume that the carefully selected candidates will inherently embody and uphold the organization's values. There is a belief that the carefully assessed values during the recruitment process will persist without the need for internal efforts to ensure employees uphold the values. Thus, this assumption suggests a level of confidence in the recruitment process as a mechanism for ensuring internalization of values within the organization.

While the reliance on the recruitment process in these sustainable organizations reflects their confidence in its effectiveness, it also presents potential challenges. The assumption that employees will naturally uphold the organization's values without active reinforcement through internal communication can be seen as naive. There is a risk that candidates may tailor their responses during recruitment to match the desired values solely to satisfy the recruiter. This assumption overlooks the possible diversity of motivations. While altruism is significant for many, there may be other factors, such as the innovative nature of sustainability practices, that attract individuals to these organizations. Therefore, this could potentially result in a superficial alignment where employees may not genuinely internalize and embody the organization's values. The absence of internal branding and effective communication further limits opportunities for employees to deeply understand and embody

the organization's values. As a result, it may hinder the establishment of a cohesive and effective organizational culture that uniformly reflects the organization's values.

5.2.2 The Absence of Conventional Internal Strategies

As stated in the empirical analysis, sustainable organizations view the internal communication and branding of their core sustainability values as redundant. This perception is rooted in their firm reliance on the inherent sustainability ingrained within their core operations. However, this raises the question of whether this reliance, although unconscious, may indicate an overreliance of the inherent sustainability of their operations. Our empirical findings repeatedly indicate an overreliance, where the companies excessively depend on their status as a sustainable organization, as well as their inherent intrinsic mission and purpose.

It is crucial for organizations to recognize the evolving normativity of sustainability. As noted by Lakitsch (2022), sustainability has acquired a normative status due to the increasing ethical demands from the public and the heightened sustainability regulations imposed by entities such as the European Union. Sustainable organizations understand that the concept “sustainability” has become widely used and can sometimes be employed superficially or insincerely, thus diluting its true meaning and impact. The sustainable organizations’ conscious choice of avoiding the use of the word “sustainability” and adopting an alternative language, may be driven by the desire to distinguish themselves from the buzz surrounding sustainability communication. Therefore, the deliberate decision reflects their aim to position themselves uniquely and differentiate their approach from organizations that merely treat sustainability as an add-on or buzzword. Once again, this illuminates sustainable organizations’ reliance on the inherent goodness of sustainability and specifically their distinctive contribution to it.

However, it remains uncertain whether these sustainable organizations that are relatively young and rely their internal and external strategy on the moral high ground of sustainability, will remain effective in the long run. As sustainability becomes more normalized and a requirement, their unique selling point and differentiation may lose some of its novelty and appeal. They will need to adapt and discover new ways to differentiate themselves and maintain a competitive edge in an environment where sustainability is widely embraced. Furthermore, as these organizations grow and sustainability becomes increasingly normative,

relying solely on the inherent goodness of sustainability may no longer suffice to sustain their competitive advantage or serve as a viable internal strategy. Therefore, when sustainable organizations grow, they should go beyond their assumption that the inherent goodness of sustainability will guarantee success and may need to evaluate and develop their internal strategies.

In addition, according to Newig et al. (2013) sustainability is an ambiguous and uncertain concept that requires continuous sensemaking and transparent internal communication. This is essential to foster a shared understanding of the demands and expectations from stakeholders in relation to sustainability (Pye, 2005). As sustainability transitions from a niche to the norm, driven by increasing government regulations, sustainable organizations may face new challenges. These challenges necessitate the development of a more comprehensive internal strategy and internal branding approach to effectively align the workforce with the evolving sustainability landscape. Internal branding, as highlighted by Ahmed and Hashim (2022) and Müller (2018), plays a vital role in fostering intrinsic motivation and building strong relationships between employees and the organization's core. When the core value of sustainability is not adequately communicated internally, there is a risk of employees losing their sense of direction and commitment (Sencherey et al., 2022; Kataria et al., 2013). Thus, in a business landscape where sustainability is becoming the norm, brand commitment and internal communication are argued as essential strategic components that unify the organization and align everyone around a shared mission.

According to the existing literature, neglecting internal communication and branding strategies is not a viable approach for any organization. Our empirical analysis has revealed that sustainable organizations often demonstrate reluctance and fear when it comes to exerting normative forms of control over their employees, particularly in the context of fostering internal sustainability practices. Instead, as mentioned, these organizations place their trust and rely on the inherent altruistic nature of sustainability, believing that these factors should be sufficient to motivate commitment and drive sustainable actions. In essence, by delving into the absence and “non-happening” of the otherwise widely encouraged use of internal communication and branding strategies, we acknowledged that the *overreliance* on sustainability may not be feasible in the long run for these organizations as they strive for growth.

5.3 Outlook of the Sustainable Business Landscape

Lastly, to conclude the discussion, we would like to offer insights into the outlook of sustainable organizations in relation to the existing literature. In such a way, we will comprehensively discuss the implications and potential directions for sustainable organizations considering the findings.

The addressed lack of internal communication and branding efforts demonstrated by the studied organizations, nothing suggests that their approach is ineffective. The managers exhibit pride, commitment, and confidence in their work and their employees' intrinsic motivation. Despite the absence of formal strategies and established internal branding methods, these companies claim to have high employee brand commitment. This suggests that their current approach is yielding favorable results, thereby challenging the assumptions put forth in the literature. However, while their current strategies appear to be effective, the notion of “non-happening” in regards to internal branding and communication, as revealed by our empirical findings may be problematic. It raises the question whether their actions are rational as the industry is maturing and their organizations expanding. The current strategies may be effective for young organizations that are not yet in the process of formalizing their internal strategies. Therefore, they may have neglected conventional strategic aspects highlighted in the literature.

As the managers avoid the usage of the word “sustainability”, acknowledging that the current hype of sustainability will disappear and becoming a standard in the business market, they are implying that they are trying to find a niche in this area. Nevertheless, while relying on the inherent goodness of sustainability can be a starting point, the sustainable organizations need to communicate their unique positioning effectively to ensure their distinctiveness. The impact of relying on the inherent goodness diminishes, since the occurrence of sustainable organizations or incorporating sustainability practices into existing business strategies is becoming the norm, which makes it no longer a competitive advantage in the long run.

Ultimately, organizations committed to sustainability need to carefully consider the viability of their sustainable niche and acknowledge the limitations of solely relying on the inherent goodness. It is essential for them to recognize the role of internal communication and

branding. Considering that sustainability is becoming increasingly prevalent and mainstream, these internal strategic efforts will gain importance, underscoring the necessity for continued efforts to align and engage employees. This is especially essential in a future where sustainability is to a greater extent adopted across industries. By directly taking on these challenges, organizations can harness the full potential of their employees, optimizing their workforce, which can enhance their positioning and sustain their influence, especially in the dynamic business landscape they operate on. As Ahmed and Hashim (2022), point out through internal branding efforts, the collaborative environment fosters knowledge sharing, idea generation, and provides the organization with the adaptability required to thrive in a dynamic and changing landscape.

Yet, the discrepancy between the current literature and our empirical findings also brings attention to the potential need and opportunity for the literature to embrace the intrinsic value of sustainability. It calls for a nuanced approach to literature on internal branding, brand commitment and related concepts, considering the significance of different values and brands. The studied organizations seem to demonstrate an overreliance on the inherent goodness of sustainability, while neglecting internal communication and branding efforts. This in turn raises questions about whether such a strong intrinsic value renders internal strategies redundant. As a result, sustainable organizations may be developing unique business models, diverging from conventional approaches, and strategically leveraging on the value proposition of sustainability. Ultimately, we encourage the literature to acknowledge the significance of the intrinsic value of sustainability and question whether internal strategies still hold the same importance in sustainability's presence.

6. Conclusion

The literature extensively emphasizes the importance of internal branding and its ability for fostering brand commitment and employee motivation, especially regarding sustainability as it offers a multitude of beneficial outcomes. However, our empirical findings suggest that sustainable organizations often either neglect internal branding efforts and fail to leverage the potential of sustainability in their internal branding; or they deviate from conventional strategies outlined in the literature and distinctively rely on sustainability as inherently good and intrinsically motivating.

The persuasive and intrinsic power of sustainability, with its universally recognized attributes, challenges the conventional notion that organizations must rely on internal communication and branding efforts to effectively align their employees. This is particularly for organizations that leverage the inherent moral goodness of sustainability as a core aspect of their product or service. Consequently, it becomes possible to argue that the inherent powers embedded within sustainability render the combination of internal branding and sustainability communication seemingly unnecessary. These organizations appear to achieve their desired outcomes without explicitly employing these internal strategies.

While sustainability alone may not be the sole factor in fostering a cohesive workforce, our findings challenge the existing literature and call for a reevaluation of its perspective in light of the intrinsically persuasive nature of sustainability. It is crucial to revisit and reconsider the current understanding of sustainability's impact on organizational dynamics and employee engagement. This also implies practical implications, suggesting that sustainable organizations may not neatly fit within the frameworks presented by existing theories, as they may develop their own unique business models that leverage the value of sustainability. Our research does not undermine the importance of sustainability as an integral component of internal communication in achieving desired outcomes. On the contrary, it emphasizes the significance of sustainability and its potential impact on organizational dynamics. By recognizing the intrinsic value of sustainability, organizations can leverage it as a powerful driver of employee motivation, engagement, and alignment with the organization's mission.

However, we do want to emphasize the possibility that sustainability, in and of itself, possesses such an influence that it may not always necessitate explicit internal branding

efforts to reap the benefits outlined in the literature. In addition, despite the apparent effectiveness of their current strategies characterized by the absence of internal branding and communication, this poses potential problems. It leads us to question the rationality of their actions, especially considering that the industry is maturing and their organizations are expanding. While their current strategies may be effective in their current phase as young organizations, it is possible that they have neglected the traditional strategic aspects of internal communication and branding emphasized in the literature.

Considering our limited time frame, our suggestion for future studies involves further investigation on sustainable organizations and how their strategies might differ from those recognized as best-practice. Ultimately, we encourage new research that aims to acknowledge the significance of the intrinsic value of sustainability and question whether internal strategies still hold the same importance in sustainability's presence. Conducting a comparative study between sustainable organizations and mature organizations that have recently incorporated sustainability as an add-on could shed light on these aspects. Specifically, regarding how sustainability is communicated between a non-sustainable and sustainable organization. Such research endeavors may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of sustainability in organizational strategies.

To conclude our findings and answer our research question, we found the unexpected observation that the studied sustainable organizations view the role of sustainability in their internal branding effort as redundant. They rationalize that the inherent goodness of sustainability as a core value is sufficient to create value alignment and employee commitment - as it is so inherently powerful. The non-usage of sustainability in internal strategies, as discussed, can be seen as problematic in some aspects and fruitful in others. Although sustainability alone may be sufficient to create alignment among employees, it is plausible that the current internal strategies utilized by sustainable organizations might face challenges as the industry continues to evolve. On the other hand, if a value has a societal stronghold, then the internal strategies recommended by existing literature might not be applicable, which calls for a theoretical reevaluation.

7. References

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8. Appendix

<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Position in Organization</i>	<i>Duration of Interview</i>
1	Co-founder	42 minutes 6 seconds
2	Head of Sustainability	41 minutes 28 seconds
3	Co-founder & CEO	30 minutes 52 seconds
4	Head of Sustainability	55 minutes 55 seconds
5	Research Coordinator	55 minutes 19 seconds
6	Head of Communication	56 minutes 51 seconds
7	Project Manager	44 minutes 22 seconds
8	Chairman of the Board	32 minutes 19 seconds