Legitimizing sustainability talk in retail talk

The case of IKEA's sustainability journey

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Large retail organizations play an important role in bringing about more sustainable development, as well as in sustaining unsustainable development, primarily through their position between production and consumption in many different value chains. This position permits them to exercise a great deal of communicative power in shaping how different actors choose to talk about, and hence engage with, the transition toward more sustainable ways of being. It is therefore crucial to understand and critically reflect on how these organizations talk about sustainability as they make it into a legitimate feature of what they do.

By studying the empirical case of IKEA's sustainability journey (1992-2017), using qualitative methods such as interviews and document studies, this thesis shows *how* sustainability talk (and the perspectives on reality it enables) over time is *made* into a legitimate feature of retail talk. Including potential challenges in, and implications of, undertaking such journeys. Something I argue is a far more difficult, complex and problematic endeavor for retailers to undertake than most previous research on the topic would have us believe. The purpose of this study is to reveal what some of these previously overlooked complexities and problematic aspects might be.

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The case of IKEA's sustainability journey

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LUND
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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Abstract:
By looking at the empirical case of IKEA's sustainability journey (1992-2017), using qualitative methods such as interviews and document studies, this thesis shows how sustainability talk over time is made into a legitimate feature of retail talk. Something I argue is a far more difficult, complex and problematic endeavour for retailers to undertake than most previous research on the topic would have us believe.

The purpose of this study is to reveal what some of these previously overlooked complexities and problematic aspects might be. It does so from a theoretical perspective focused on the performative qualities of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication, or CSR talk. Inspired by blind spots in such theorizing, I incorporate the processual concept of legitimation and ground its thinking in an empirical study of how sustainability talk is made into a legitimate feature of retail talk, throughout a retail organization. My approach is to complement and combine previous research on more sustainable retailing and CSR talk theorizing by providing a more nuanced understanding of the kind of work that goes into making retailing more sustainable, and for CSR talk to occur throughout an organization over time.

The findings indicate three overarching complexities and problematic aspects of legitimizing sustainability talk in retail talk. The first is the challenging task of ensuring continuous talk about sustainability within retail organizations over time, something that requires the development of Corporate Sustainability Discourse (CSD), integrated forms of sustainability talk, as well as enabling and identifying business hooks. The second involves recognizing and dealing with how more sustainable retailing may also entail more political retailing, which brings back the moralizing nature of sustainability talk to CSR talk theorizing by providing new empirical insights into the topic. Lastly, the study also shows some of the internal mechanisms that force retailers to discursively repackage sustainability talk into something that entails selling more, not less. This reveals the near impossibility for retailers and their sustainability talk to escape a potentially unsustainable status quo paradigm of sustainable development. All three insights leaves us with food for thought concerning how more sustainable retailing can be understood and pursued.

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mind, and every now and then interrupted my contemplation with an abondance of beauty, constantly reminding me of what is at stake in this grand sustainability challenge we all are facing.

Introduction

In this study, I am interested in understanding how we talk about, and come to talk about, sustainability in our everyday business lives. More particularly, I am interested in understanding how people working in retail organizations come to talk about sustainability and to view it as a legitimate aspect of their everyday retail talk. Here, this kind of talk is seen as constituting a kind of business organization with great potential to help bring about more sustainable development, as well as sustaining unsustainable development, primarily through its position between production and consumption in many different value chains.

By looking at the empirical case of IKEA's sustainability journey, the study will show *how* sustainability talk, and the perspectives on reality it enables, is *made* into a legitimate organizational, textual, and conversational reality for retail employees over time. Including the potential difficulties and implications of undertaking such a legitimation process. The study will do this from a theoretical perspective focused on the performative qualities of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication, or CSR talk. The purpose is to reveal some of the previously overlooked complexities and problematic aspects of such endeavors in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of the kind of work that goes into making retailing more sustainable, and for sustainability talk to occur throughout a retail organization. Complementing and combining previous research on More Sustainable Retailing (MSR) (e.g. Elg et al., 2020; Fuentes, 2011; Lehner, 2015; Vadakkepatt et al., 2021; Wilson, 2015) and CSR talk theorizing (e.g. Christensen et al., 2013, 2021; Girschik, 2020; Penttilä, 2020; Schoeneborn et al., 2020; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013) to extend our knowledge of both. In essence, I will use this study to demonstrate what it takes to talk MSR into existence, and what kind of walk such talk suggests for organizing both retailing and more sustainable development.

In this rather extensive chapter, I first elaborate on the background of this study and its empirical problem of interest on a more general level, going beyond the empirical context of retailing. I then return to retailing and elaborate on this

empirical context and the importance of studying it. I discuss previous research on MSR and problematizing its tendency to explore a black-boxed retail organization in a very empirical, fragmented and largely uncritical manner. I then venture beyond retail research and into the more general CSR literature, arguing for the value of applying theories of CSR talk to explore MSR. Here, this kind of theorizing is labeled sustainability talk, due to the sustainability labels empirical relevance and ties to wider discussions about sustainable development. The current state of this line of thinking is then problematized for its lack of empirical studies, also problematizing studies that do exist for not having explored how sustainability talk spreads throughout an organization and for not fully understanding the conditions under which sustainability talk is able to help "perform" more sustainable organizations, and for not discussing what the consequences are of talking CSR/sustainability into existence are. This leads me to the main thesis, purpose and research questions that guide the remainder of this study. What I essentially argue is that we need to uncover previously overlooked or understated complexities and problematic aspects of trying to bring about MSR by studying the legitimation of sustainability talk in retail talk, and difficulties therein. The chapter concludes with an outline of the subsequent chapters to come.

The empirical problem – Getting people to talk about sustainability

In a speech given in Stockholm on September 8, 2018, Greta Thunberg confessed her initial skepticism towards anthropogenic climate change by noting that, if things really are as bad as they say, then we would surely not be talking about anything else (Thunberg, 2019). Yet in Greta's world, the issue of climate change and its impending doom was hardly talked about at all. It was hardly represented in all the communication that she and many of us encountered as we went about our lives, hardly affecting how we lived those lives. It was, in other words, close to a non-issue in our social worlds, while at the same time being an accelerating one in the material world of nature. This non-representation in the public discourse can be seen as a very serious problem in the social construction of reality, especially regarding the issue of climate change. It is a problem that we have tended to talk a very real issue out of existence by hardly talking about it at all, while that same issue is simultaneously growing to disastrous proportions right before our eyes.

Times have changed quite a lot since then. At least in Sweden, the issue of climate change seems to have climbed ever higher on the agendas of public debate. It now appears to be more represented than ever in many different forms of communication, such as in advertising messages, on the news, and in business school curricula, to name a few (Crane & Glozer, 2016). This has led to greater awareness of the climate change issue that could, potentially, turn into a greater willingness to do something about it and a larger knowledge base to draw on.

It is that change in discourse and communication that I am focused on in this thesis. How it is that sustainability – here seen as a kind of performative talk (i.e., sustainability talk) about for example about climate change – has made its way into ever more fragments of communication that inform our everyday lives. Why do more and more people, in many different social situations, institutions and organizations, deem sustainability talk legitimate enough to bring it up in communication? Communication that we inevitably draw on to make sense of the world in which we find ourselves, including the things, people and other organisms that populate it (Deetz, 1992; Fairclough, 2013; Wittgenstein, 1953). It is this performative quality of communication that I want to draw attention to with the word "talk" as it is used in this study.

Here, "talk" refers to what we do with language, and what language does to us and our being in this world. Put differently, the "talk" label is intended to draw attention to how words define the world, rather than to how the world defines our words (Taylor, 2016). This perspective will be elaborated on at the beginning of Chapter 2, below, providing a theoretical vantage point from which to study how everyday ways of "talking reality into existence" in our day and age seems to become more and more infused with what I call "sustainability talk" – meaning (performative) talk about a socially constructed and constantly evolving idea concerning more sustainable ways of being that can make it into our everyday lives in many different ways, and in many different situations (Ziemann, 2011). This tendency is also visible in many business and retail organizations as they try to find ways of making their operations more sustainable and contributing to more sustainable development (Naidoo & Gasparatos, 2018; Vadakkepatt et al., 2021), a feat that is especially interesting to explore given the often inconvenient basis of such talk, for example, the notion that we need to change, a lot.

As argued in this thesis, there must be a great deal of work that goes into ensuring that people talk the sustainability talk so that they can learn to walk the sustainability walk. Further, and as shown in this study, one of the main problems for those doing this work must be to somehow legitimize

sustainability talk in, for example, retail talk – to see to it that a retail organization's employees deem sustainability talk legitimate enough to incorporate it into everyday retail talk, which, as will be described below, largely makes (potentially more sustainable) retailing happen. What this work entails and implies is essentially what I will explore in the current study.

I want to explore this because we still know relatively little about how retail organizations are working to realize the aspirations of sustainability talk within their own organizations, and to legitimize the vague idea of MSR among their own ranks, that is, among all the retail employees who make (potentially more sustainable) retailing happen on a daily basis. As a consequence, we lack key understandings about what more sustainable development is demanding from retailers and their employees, and about what retailing is demanding from the very idea of more sustainable development itself to, so to speak, happen in the context of retailing. This lack of understanding hampers our ability to critically reflect on whether or not it is ill-advised to realize aspects of more sustainable development under the leadership of retail organizations. We therefore need to gain more knowledge about how, and with what potential implications, retailers are working to legitimize sustainability talk in their own organizations and make MSR happen among retail employees.

To begin unveiling these aspects of MSR, the remainder of this chapter is dedicated to presenting what we already seem to know, and not know, about the particular empirical phenomenon of making retailing more sustainable – thus about the people trying to help bring about more sustainable development in the context of retailing and to accomplish MSR. Although this phenomenon has been explored in previous retail research, it is still in need of novel theoretical understandings and empirical explorations that will allow us to paint a more detailed and complete picture of the undertaking in question.

Given the shortcomings of previous retail literature, this chapter also includes a discussion of theories conceptualizing sustainability and CSR as communication and talk, a theoretical perspective that informs this study to a great degree. Except for demonstrating this perspective's potential for shining new light on MSR, I also problematize the current state of its theorizing. I argue for the need to empirically explore how CSR talk becomes a legitimate feature of organizational life to aid an exploration of the conditions under which such talk can help realize more sustainable organizations. By applying theories of CSR talk to study the empirical phenomenon of MSR, this study thus aims at extending our knowledge of both.

Retailing and More Sustainable Retailing (MSR)

It is quite striking how little retailing and retail organizations have been defined or conceptualized in previous research (Peterson & Balasubramanian, 2002), despite retailing having its own academic field of inquiry and analysis, as well as being considered a specific kind of industry. Instead, most writings within the field seem to define retailing only implicitly, if at all, often by distinguishing aspects of business operations in manufacturing organizations from those of retail organizations. Based on my readings, I would argue that retail organizations can essentially be seen as those that make a range of products available for purchasing to potential customers through physical and/or web-based stores. These products are most often produced by other organizations that sell to retailers, which in turn sell the products to consumers. A retail organization's continued existence is largely contingent on offering products that people want (or are believed to want), in ways that make people buy them, so that the organization sells the products it makes available for purchasing, most often with the primary purpose of increasing sales, profit and growth for whatever reason. How all of this is accomplished on a more abstract and theoretical level will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

One reason for focusing on this empirical context here is that profit- and growth-driven organizations, such as most retail organizations, can play a vital role in how the transition toward more sustainable development plays out (Hahn et al., 2017) – a role they are playing by controlling our means of production and influencing our ways of consumption. Corporations hence possess a great deal of communicative power in contemporary society (Deetz, 1992), meaning that they can potentially have considerable influence in shaping our understandings of what sustainability means because of their dominant role in shaping many of the messages (i.e., communication) we encounter in our everyday lives. This grants them an important voice in how everyday talk, including sustainability talk, develops (Christensen et al., 2015), which is a kind of corporate power that is especially relevant in relation to retail organizations.

Another way of describing retail organizations and their role in sustainable development is to see them as intermediary organizations positioned between consumption and production in many different value chains (Ytterhus et al., 1999). This means that they constitute one of the last links in many different, and often long, chains of value creation that are turning ideas, people's time, and natural resources into the products we, with the help of retail organizations, find readily available for us on store shelves and websites. Retail organizations

are thus intermediaries between the consumption and production of commodities in the sense that they show us what we can buy and signal to others what to produce, giving them a unique position from which to influence how we both produce and consume in more sustainable ways (Elg & Hultman, 2016; Hultman & Elg, 2018).

Exploring the transition toward more sustainable development in the context of retailing is also interesting because it is a kind of social organizing in which ideas about more sustainable development will have to co-exist with other, possibly conflicting, ways of thinking, talking and doing things (Elg et al., 2020) – a kind of (retail) talk that most often is geared toward ensuring ever increasing sales, profit and growth as sensible ends in themselves (Tregidga et al., 2018). Yet this is happening. Sustainability talk is becoming an influential part of how many retail organizations are organizing their retail operations (Naidoo & Gasparatos, 2018; Vadakkepatt et al., 2021) and, as will be shown in this thesis, it is even establishing itself as a given part of the everyday work lives of many retail employees, despite the fact that sustainability talk often seriously questions current production and consumption practices that in many ways are fueled by the current state of retailing (Jones et al., 2005). Exploring how this coexistence of ideas has been made possible, as well as its associated struggles and potential consequences, is what this thesis is all about.

The point here is to show the important role that business organizations in general, and retail organizations in particular, can play in our pursuit of more sustainable development. Not least when seen from a communication-centered perspective like the one taken here. So, what do we know about how retail organizations are contributing to more sustainable development?

MSR - From what and beyond, to how and within

Previous retail research on MSR often conceptualize sustainability in retailing as pursuing a triple bottom line (Wiese et al., 2015). This mean that a "sustainable retailer" is understood as a firm that not only generates positive financial value, but simultaneously provides social and ecological value to facilitate financial profit and growth (as opposed to social and ecological degradation) (Elkington, 1997). This is conceptualization of Corporate Sustainability (CS) that is perhaps best understood as a kind of ideal that many retail organizations can be seen as working toward. What this entails, however, may differ depending on the organization in question and, more generally, this is a contested conceptualization the meaning of which is very much up for

debate (Hopwood et al., 2005). This is a feature of "sustainability" that will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

Nonetheless, and as seen in previous research, this ideal can be operationalized on the retail side of things by, for example, making the transportation of goods and people to and from stores and warehouses more efficient or installing more energy efficient equipment, such as LED light bulbs and more energy efficient cooling and heating systems (Lai et al., 2010). These suggestions are not only positive from an environmental perspective, but they are also likely to contribute to the firm's financial bottom line, as energy savings often translates into cost savings as well – a correlation that seems to be important to stress in both retail research and more general business research on the subject (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). The retail industry is also one of the major employees in many countries and can potentially contribute to their "social value creation" by ensuring good working conditions for their employees (Grayson, 2011; Wilson, 2015). These are just a few ways in which retail organizations can contribute to more sustainable development in their own operations.

Much of the social and environmental impact of the value creation that retail organizations are benefiting from is, however, tied up in the products they sell (Lai et al., 2010), implying that the greatest impact on sustainable development that retail organizations can have is through changes in the assortment they sell. This includes influencing what products their customers consume, how they consume them, and how they dispose of the consumed goods in service encounters in stores (Fuentes & Fredriksson, 2016). In other words, retailers can influence consumer attitudes, intentions and behavior toward becoming more sustainable (Lai et al., 2010). One of the most influential ways in which a retailer can promote sustainable consumption is by utilizing their role as choice editors, meaning that they can choose to include more sustainable products and exclude unsustainable ones in their assortment (Gunn & Mont, 2014). Another, less radical way in which retailers can influence their customers is by promoting sustainable products in stores and advertising (Elg & Hultman, 2016), in this way nudging consumers to make more sustainable consumption choices.

Much attention in the retail literature has also been paid to how retail organizations can influence and drive the adoption of more sustainable practices backwards in their value chains (i.e., on the production side of things) (Wiese et al., 2012). This is an important aspect of MSR, as retailers are often held responsible by consumers for social and environmental misconduct among their suppliers (Wilson, 2015). Retailers can work with sustainability in their supplier relationships by, for example, deploying codes of conduct that

suppliers have to live up to, auditing their suppliers to make sure they follow the code of conduct, and consulting external expertise on international sourcing from a sustainability perspective (Elg & Hultman, 2011). As a consequence of these sustainable supply chain practices, retailers often take a coordinating role in their value chains by driving change far beyond their own organizational boundaries (Lai et al., 2010).

Especially large retail organizations often have an assortment containing a large number of different items (Dawson, 1994), which most often entails dealing with many different suppliers, supply chains, industries, commodity markets, etc., simultaneously – industries that also are dependent on retailers' ability to distribute and sell the products they produce, and to some extent signal when consumption patterns change to adapt supply chains accordingly, thus highlighting their role as intermediary organizations in many different supply chains. Ytterhus et al. (1999, p. 182) explain this characteristic of retailing quite well in relation to accomplishing more sustainable development when they exemplify what they call the "multiplier effect" that especially large retail organizations can have in this regard.; *"Assuming that one large company has 1000 suppliers, and that these 1000 companies have ten different suppliers each, which they are buying their inputs from, how many companies would be affected if supplier pressure along this supply chains were introduced? The answer would be 1000+1000x10= 11 000 companies."*

This example further strengthens the argument made above regarding the communicative power of corporations, in general, and retail organizations, in particular. Moreover, just as especially large retail organizations tend to have many suppliers, they also tend to have many customers (small volume per transaction, but many transactions) (Dawson, 1994). Arguably then, retail organizations also have the potential to change some of the ways in which their customers buy (Elg & Hultman, 2016), consume (Fuentes, 2011) and even dispose of the products sold to them by retail organizations (Lai et al., 2010). This may also have a multiplying effect among consumers, further accentuating the role that especially large and multinational retail organizations can play in influencing how sustainability talk is spoken, including its importance, throughout their many different value chains and in both directions.

We can, however, also expect tensions to arise as retail organizations attempt to become more sustainable and engage with sustainability talk (Elg et al., 2020; Elg & Welinder, 2022; Hahn et al., 2015; Siltaloppi et al., 2020). This concerns, for example, the balancing act of promoting a consistent brand image (by conveying consistent marketing messages, services and assortment) across

different local markets, or even countries and continents for that matter, while also serving more or less local needs and views that dominate in areas where their customers are situated (Burt et al., 2015). This is done because sustainability may mean many different things on different markets, and therefore may pose varying and potentially conflicting ethical expectations on a single retail organization across its markets (Christensen et al., 2015). Knowing what to care about, talk about, and do in terms of sustainability may therefore be difficult for especially large and multinational retail organizations. Naturally, this potential friction between different cultural understandings of the meaning and importance of sustainability talk also applies to employees (Elg et al., 2020; Elg & Welinder, 2022).

In addition, retail organizations tend to have a relatively high turnover rate of employees and many part-time positions (Dawson, 1994), potentially making it difficult to ensure a coherent organizational understanding of how and why MSR ought to be pursued (Elg et al., 2020). The potential influence that retailers can have backwards in value chains may also prove problematic, given that many large retailers source their products in one sociocultural context, while selling them in another (Cerne & Elg, 2017). For instance, we can observe how suppliers often have to adapt their business to codes of conduct that are written to fulfil consumer expectations in western countries, which sometimes contradict the institutional logics that apply where suppliers operate. Lastly, retail organizations tend to be very sales-oriented organizations, meaning that increasing sales has the highest priority, particularly given the often low profit margin per employee and item sold (Dawson, 1994). This can be problematic from a sustainability perspective, as it entails selling, and hence producing, more products rather than less, implying more exploitation of natural resources.

Overall, retailing is a fascinating and multifaceted business that, with its wide range of suppliers and close interaction with customers in buying decisions, can have a great impact on both more sustainable development and continued unsustainable development. It is, however, also a kind of organization that might prove difficult for sustainability talk to exist in, making it likely that tensions will arise between sustainability talk and retail talk. This calls for more research on how retail organizations are dealing with fusing these two kinds of talk, why they might struggle to do so, and what consequences this might have for both retailing and more sustainable development, here regarding what retail talk is doing to the realities conveyed in sustainability talk, and vice versa.

Problematizing the current state of research on MSR

As seen above, most studies have focused on particular aspects of making retailing more sustainable, such as taking on social responsibilities in supply chains (Elg & Hultman, 2011), the role of retailing in circulating more sustainable products and shaping our consumption practices around green retailing (Fuentes, 2011, 2015), retail organizations role as "choice editors" in deciding what goes on the shelves and promoting more sustainable products in stores (Gunn & Mont, 2014; Guyader et al., 2017). Though much of this research has shown that retailers can indeed play a significant role in advancing sustainable development in relation to both production and consumption by showing what they can do, the heterogenous nature of these studies makes it difficult to get an overall understanding of *how* retail firms and their employees actually go about doing all the different things the previous literature has suggested they do. This leaves in the dark much of the 'how' questions and complexity-focused curiosity underpinning this study.

Another adjacent characteristic of previous retail research on sustainable retailing is how much of it has focused on what retailers can do to promote both sustainable consumption and production among actors beyond retail organizations, while to some extent neglecting the promotion of sustainable retailing within the retail organization itself. In a recent article on the subject that takes a general and overarching approach to what sustainable retailing entails, and to some extent demands from the retail organization in question, Vadakkepatt et al. (2021, p. 62) suggest, for example, that retailers can *"enable and legitimize a focus on social issues across supply chains,"* again stressing the coordinating role retailers can play in promoting sustainability talk beyond the organization in question, without telling us much about how such a focus is legitimized within the retail organization itself. Despite suggesting that retailers ought to develop and enforce "new norms" among employees, we get very few clues as to how such a sustainability mindset can be developed, spread and maintained within the organization in question. In other words, we still do not really know how retail employees are "socialized" (Gond & Moser, 2019) into caring about sustainability, in general, and sustainable retailing, in particular.

Arguably, the above reveals something of a "black-boxing" tendency in previous research, where what is going on within retail organizations is largely hidden from view. This blind spot gives room for more explorations of how, over time, sustainability talk is *made* a legitimate feature of work among retail employees doing retailing, rather than, for example, a legitimate feature of purchasing decisions among customers doing the buying.

This knowledge gap is especially problematic from a communication-centered perspective, given the communicative power of retail organizations, which, as argued above, highlights the importance of understanding how retail organizations and their employees make sense of and in a sense define sustainability (i.e., talk the sustainability talk), especially because this is likely to send ripple effects across many different value chains. Still, we know very little about how retail organizations and their employees contribute to talking sustainable development into existence. Speaking metaphorically, we therefore need to open up the subwoofer (i.e., the black-boxed retail organization) to better understand the promotional soundwaves (i.e., its sustainability talk) it is so eagerly set to produce.

Problematic case studies and fragmented clues to the complexities of 'how'

There are of course some retail studies that have looked at what is going on in retail organizations, especially a set of case studies showing how retail organizations, on an overarching and organizational level of analysis, can work to implement sustainability strategies and programs in a check-list-like manner (Grayson, 2011; Jones et al., 2008b; Jones et al., 2005; Wilson, 2015). These studies, however, can be problematized on the grounds that they tend to explore the phenomenon in an empirical and rather uncritical fashion without clear theoretical anchoring. They have often portrayed it, or particular aspects of it, as an unproblematic and almost friction-free change process for retail organizations and their employees to undertake, only giving us shallow clues as to how sustainability talk is legitimized within retail organizations and, in a sense, also concealing the potential complexities of MSR and telling us little about the struggles in, and potential consequences of, pursuing it.

For instance, Jones et al. (2005; 2007; 2005) present a series of early case studies about what some of the largest UK retailers, especially Marks and Spencer, are doing to implement more sustainable retail practices. They show, among other things, that retailers seem to redefine sustainability when setting sustainability strategies (Jones et al., 2008a), thus hinting at the communicative aspects of "greening" retailing from within, but telling us little about how and with what consequences. Another observation is how most retailers operate on the belief that by "*integrating sustainability into their businesses they will be better positioned to provide long-term growth and financial security*" (Jones et al., 2005, p. 213). Promotion of integration continues to be voiced in retail research, though still without telling us much about what such "integration" means, how it can be accomplished, or the complexities involved.

Wilson (2015) builds on Jones et al. (2011) study of retailers' implementation of sustainability strategies and evaluates how well Marks and Spencer's "plan A" is performing in terms of pursuing and integrating a triple bottom line, arguing that this strategy can be seen as a case of a "strong sustainability" approach (an evaluative concept that is further discussed in Chapter 2) to MSR, as it supposedly makes "sustainability" a "natural" part of the organization's value creation. However, this is arguably done with few critical reflections and empirical proofs to support such a claim, perhaps because of a lack of theory in making sense of its empirical observations. Grayson (2011) also presents an account of how Marks and Spencer worked to implement their integrated sustainability strategy "Plan A," showing to some extent what can be done to implement such strategies in terms of knowledge management and training, building partnerships and collaborations, and building up an internal sustainability function with change agents to help drive change internally. Together, these studies provide very practical, though theoretically shallow, accounts of undertaking MSR on an organizational level.

Though all these case studies take a case-study methodological approach similar to the one I take here, they also share the empirical, and often uncritical, character of previous retail research on the subject. For example, they fail to explore potential challenges and struggles in the implementation process as well as to conceptualize the implementation process as such to any great extent. As put by Fuentes (2011, p. 9) *"Many of these studies are descriptive in nature and practical in focus,"* thus giving rise to what can be described as a "check list" account of how retail organizations undertake MSR and, in a sense, saying "do XYZ and more sustainable retailing will happen for the organization." This amounts to portraying such endeavors in ways that risk masking the complexities and challenges of a seemingly unproblematic change process, despite frequent calls for more or less completely overhauling the organizing of retailing and transforming it beyond the particular retail organization in question, thus raising suspicion concerning what these studies might be obscuring.

Another problematic aspect of these case studies is that they explore the issue of 'how' on an organizational level of analysis and do not really account for the experiences and views of those tasked with bringing about MSR, that is, retail employees. By not taking micro-levels of organizing into much consideration, a lack of understanding is again created concerning how all the things done on the corporate level are realized throughout the organization, even though previous studies indicate that there seems to be a "filtering effect" when it comes to, for example, communicating sustainability between the

corporate and store levels of organizing retailing (Frostenson et al., 2011). This reveals a potential rift between the meso- and micro-levels of organizing a retail organization in relation to sustainability talk. Yet we still know little about how organizational levels are linked to micro-levels of organizing and the challenges involved.

Studies exploring the experiences and practices of those involved have, again, looked at particular aspects of organizing MSR, such as facilitating service encounters in stores around sustainability talk (Fuentes & Fredriksson, 2016), developing sustainability marketing communication by constructing images of responsible consumers (Fuentes, 2015), translating sustainability talk in stores to match it with particular customer demands (Lehner, 2015), and only recently dealing with contradictory perceptions that individual managers might have regarding what corporate sustainability means and entails on a more general level (Elg et al., 2020).

These studies do add a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon by exploring the 'how' question on a much more theoretical level than the case studies problematized above have done, thus showing, among other things, the process of incorporating and translating a selection of sustainability discourses and matching these with particular aspects of retailing on micro-levels of organizing (Fuentes, 2015; Lehner, 2015). This is especially true in relation to customer demands and local needs, thus helping to unpack the translation tendency also noted in previous case studies (e.g., Jones et al., 2008a) and further highlighting the value of looking at what retailers do with sustainability words by showing the importance of enabling such translations throughout the organization. Nevertheless, and as noted by Lehner (2015), we still do not know how such microlevel translations are facilitated and/or constrained on the organizational levels of organizing retailing. This makes it difficult to understand how the different changes accounted for on an organizational level tie into the everyday work of retail employees (e.g., their translational acts) and actually "happen" throughout the organization.

These studies, hence, reveal some of the complexities of bringing about MSR that the case studies mentioned above leave in the dark, for example, that perceptions of what sustainability means and entails for employees can vary significantly among them (Elg et al., 2020; Elg & Welinder, 2022), that retail employees on store levels have to translate and match sustainability talk with particular aspects of retailing (Fuentes 2015; Lehner, 2015), and the important role material artifacts such as products and IT infrastructure can play in facilitating service encounters in stores (Fuentes & Fredriksson, 2016). These findings give a deeper understanding of the challenges and means through

which the vague suggestion of communicating sustainability internally can be accomplished, while also emphasizing that such communication attempts may nonetheless lead to diverging perceptions of how to best do MSR, showing that developing and enforcing new norms (Vadakkepatt et al., 2021) can be a much more challenging endeavor to undertake than previous case studies have suggested. The fragmented nature of these studies and the lack of a link between different levels of organizing, however, do create a need to tie together the insights derived from them, thus providing a more encompassing understanding of the complexities involved in the 'how' of MSR.

Another problem with previous research on the topic concerns the implications of MSR for both retailing itself and sustainability as an idea or discourse, a discussion that has only scarcely been brought up in the literature (e.g., Fuentes, 2011; Jones et al., 2005). Despite the aforementioned observations indicating that retailers tend to translate sustainability talk to make it more compatible with retail talk. This suggests that retailers may indeed have a significant discursive impact on sustainability talk overall. Both previous case studies and more micro-level studies tend to share this lack of any critical discussion. Instead, implications are mostly talked about in relation to ensuring the financial payoffs of sustainability initiatives in an instrumental fashion (i.e., using "sustainability" as a tool for financial gain).

But given suggestions to "integrate sustainability" into the organization's identity and culture (Simões & Sebastiani, 2017), business model and overarching business strategy (Grayson, 2011; Wilson, 2015) to name a few areas, there are bound to be implications for both what is integrated and what "it" ought to be integrated with. After all, that is the whole point of retail organizations pursuing MSR; to change, hopefully for the better, but not necessarily. Begging the questions: What is retailing and sustainability changing into? What does retailing demand from sustainability, and vice versa, to "take in" and "become part of" the other? For example, in the filtering and translational acts observed in micro-level studies (Frostenson et al., 2011; Lehner, 2015). These questions reflect what I mean when I speak of the consequences and discursive implications of making sustainability talk a legitimate feature of retail talk.

The point I want to make here is that we should not assume that promoting "sustainable consumption" or pursuing "sustainable retailing" is an inherently good and unproblematic kind of change for retail organizations to try to bring about, above and beyond financial considerations. With a more theoretical and critical gaze on how retail organizations work to bring about MSR, one focusing on how they talk MSR into existence (Schoeneborn et al., 2020), we

might be able to see previously overlooked and problematic aspects of doing so, thus revealing more of the potentially troubling complexities of sustainable retailing that retail practitioners and researchers alike might need to take more into consideration when trying to make sense of the phenomenon (Fuentes, 2011). In other words, it is about time we critically examine how retail organizations have come to play this advised intermediary role in the name of increased sustainable development.

In sum, previous retail research has told us a great deal about what sustainable retailing can entail. It has given us an overarching yet shallow understanding of how MSR is actually accomplished and made a legitimate feature of the everyday work lives of retail employees. Thus, it can offer some fragmented and single level clues as to what complexities and challenges are involved in actually accomplishing MSR within retail organizations close to the actor level. Nonetheless, it tells us close to nothing about what kind of implications undertaking MSR can have for organizing especially retailing, but also more sustainable development overall. This is a problematic state-of-affairs description of retail research on MSR that leaves room for a case study that approaches the phenomenon in a more theoretical, longitudinal and multilevel fashion, by both connecting insights from previous studies to a case of trying to make retailing more sustainable from within and hopefully revealing previously overlooked complexities that both retail researchers and practitioners might need to take into consideration in their work.

CSR talk theorizing

In order to produce a study that sheds new light on MSR and to help paint a more complete picture of what it takes to accomplish it, this literature review now has to venture beyond what can be found in the retail literature. Fortunately, other texts have been written about how business organizations work more generally to make their operations more sustainable and contribute to more sustainable development. In this stream of research, a term that has been used for a long time and widely, and that is still used, is CSR.

It should be noted, however, that, despite their close to synonymous usage, the theoretical roots of the CSR label are quite different from those of the concept of sustainability/sustainable development. Bansal and Song (2017), for example, show that research on sustainable development and sustainability stems from the natural sciences and that it has traditionally focused on

describing the impact of business and society on eco-systems at a systemic level, often looking beyond particular organizations to see the entirety of "*business-driven failures in natural systems*" (ibid., p. 105). CSR, on the other hand, stems from normative theories about the moral responsibility that individual managers and organizations supposedly need to take – theories calling on particular organizations and their executives to "do the right thing" and assume more responsibility for the negative externalities of business operations. Perhaps these differences can be seen as a systemic "nature view on business and society" and a firm-centric, though potentially more sustainable, "business view on nature and society."

In their discussion about what MSR entails, Vadakkepatt et al. (2021) recently used this distinction to make a case for why "sustainability" is the preferable label in the context of retailing. This is largely because of the coordinating role retailers may play in systems of enterprises, calling for a conceptualization that looks beyond the retail organization itself. Arguably incorporating a *social system* thinking into the traditionally eco-system focused sustainability concept. I also make most use of the "sustainability" label for similar reasons, though, given the theoretical perspective adopted here, I focus on the communicative aspects of social life, highlighting that talk about sustainability within organizations will be closely connected to talk about it beyond the particular organization in question (Ziemann, 2011).

In other words, I argue that the sustainability (talk) label better highlights the interconnectedness between sustainability talk occurring "within" organizations and what goes on around them, more so than the firm-centric focus and corporate connotations of CSR. This stresses that the transition toward more sustainable development is a system-level change process that corporations are taking part in through their sustainability initiatives (Christen & Schmidt, 2012), and discursively contributing to with their sustainability talk (Ziemann, 2011). Furthermore, the sustainability label is the one used in the empirical context explored in this study (i.e., IKEA) and is generally the preferred label in business practice (Bansal & Song, 2017). Having said that, the theories I now will introduce still make use of the CSR (talk) label, which is why it will continue to appear below, though always in relation to research using this label.

CSR as communication

The CSR phenomenon has been conceptualized and explored in many different ways over the years, for example, as a "pyramid of corporate responsibilities"

by Carroll (Carroll, 1979, 1991), which is similar to Maslow's hierarchal pyramid of needs, as managing stakeholder relations (Freeman, 1984; Morsing & Schultz, 2006), as the institutionalization of ethics in organizations (Costas & Kärreman, 2013), as a change process (Benn et al., 2014; Maon et al., 2009), and as corporate citizenship (Crane et al., 2008; Matten & Crane, 2005). Moreover, Gond and Moser (2019, p. 2) recently described scholarly investigations of the phenomenon very broadly as being interested in *"how businesses and societies interact."* No matter the conceptualization used, the phenomenon of business organizations more or less voluntarily taking on social and environmental responsibilities, in addition to their economic responsibilities, is becoming an increasingly common and to some extent even a taken-for-granted aspect of doing business (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). Attention has therefore been paid to understanding what this means for society at large (Crane et al., 2008; Scherer et al., 2014), what organizations are and/or should be doing in relation to CSR (Maon et al., 2009; Millar et al., 2012), and to an increasing extent, what the individuals and groups doing it within organizations actually do and how (Girschik, 2020; Gond & Moser, 2019).

The conceptualization of CSR I make use of in this study sees CSR *as* communication. It is a kind of conceptualization that first started becoming formalized in the CSR literature through a series of papers published around 2013 (Christensen et al., 2013; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013; Schultz, 2013; Schultz et al., 2013), and that has since then gained more recognition by, for example, having its own special issue in the Business and Society journal at the beginning of 2020. With growing attention, this perspective is now also starting to be used in empirical studies of the CSR and CS phenomenon within organizations (Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Feix & Philippe, 2020; Girschik, 2020; Hunoldt et al., 2018; Penttilä, 2020; Trittin-Ulbrich, 2022). As will be discussed below, the main reason for applying these theories is because of their demonstrated potential in providing novel understandings, as well as in revealing the complex and paradoxical nature of the CSR phenomenon.

The focus of CSR as communication theories, more recently referred to as theories of CSR talk (Schoeneborn et al., 2020), is on the performative qualities of CSR communication. The idea of *performativity* will be elaborated on in Chapter 2, but in the context of CSR talk theorizing, the main thesis is that it is CSR talk itself that is *"creating, maintaining and transforming CSR practices"* (Schoeneborn et al., 2020, p. 5). In this view, CSR is essentially seen as a kind of perspective that is conveyed, developed and generally constituted in discourse – as a kind of discursive resource that can be deployed

in organizational communication and potentially transform the organizational realities in which it comes into exist.

For example, and as will be elaborated on below, CSR talk can be seen as opening up a forum for ethical debates among employees (Schultz, 2013), setting sustainability related aspirations for the organization to pursue (Christensen et al., 2013), creating ethical seals and discursive closures that put bonds on the ethical thinking of employees (Christensen et al., 2015; Costas & Kärreman, 2013), moralizing organizational communication (Schultz, 2013), perpetuating topical taboos in CSR communication (Feix & Philippe, 2020), talking CSR paradoxes out of existence (Hoffmann, 2018), and more generally filling the concept of CSR and the idea of more sustainable development with meaning (Busco et al., 2018). It is this kind of exploration of what CSR talk does, and how, that this study is drawing on, and also contributing to, in its exploration of MSR. The main value I see with this line of thinking, considering the above problematization of research on MSR, is that it can help reveal the complexities and problematic aspects of pursuing MSR, mainly by challenging our thinking about the CSR phenomenon, in general, and communication about it, in particular.

Challenging assumptions in CSR communication research

An important point of discussion in this literature concerns the relationship between talk and action, that is, between CSR talk and CSR walk. This is because, unlike most studies of CSR communication, which see CSR talk as more or less truthfully representing CSR walk, these theories do not assume such a sharp distinction between the two. For instance, Schoeneborn et al. (2020) recently suggested that studies on CSR talk performativity can roughly be distinguished based on whether they are looking at this relationship as either "talking to walk," "walking to talk" or "t(w)alking" CSR. All perspectives thus stress the intertwined relationship between CSR talk and CSR walk, though the first two still maintain a distinction between the two to focus on how one performs the other. A t(w)alking perspective, on the other hand, assumes that talk and action can be collapsed into one, as one is such an essential and intertwined part of the other, thus abandoning the dominant "talk-action dualism" that dominates most previous CSR communication research to instead focusing on the continuation of CSR talk, or a *"talk-talk continuum",* that continuously does things in and to organizations (Christensen et al., 2021; Penttilä, 2020). This means that the important thing is not to understand how talk leads to action or vice versa, because talk is seen as synonymous with

action, but to understand how CSR talk is constructed and maintained to facilitate CSR t(w)alking.

Similarly, Schultz et al. (2013) argue that a communication view challenges three kinds of biases seen in previous research, especially research on CSR communication: (1) the control bias, (2) consistency bias, and (3) the consensus bias. They argue that these biases need to be overcome in order to understand CSR communication in network societies, due to the very complex communication patterns such societies enables.

The control bias mainly concerns the dominant "transmission view" of CSR communication theorizing, a view according to which CSR communication is seen as the mere transmission of information between a sender (the organization) and receiver (its stakeholders), where the meaning of the intended message remains more or less intact. This, thus, downplays the interpretive aspects of CSR communication and creates the arguably skewed idea that the meanings it gives rise to can be controlled. However, a "communication view" of CSR instead sees CSR as a concept that appears in all kinds of communications happening in all kinds of situations (Trittin & Schoeneborn, 2017). Controlling the meanings that CSR takes on when it is deployed as a discursive resource in organizational communication, and the meanings the organization takes on in CSR communication, is therefore seen as being largely beyond corporate control. The control bias is, thus, from a constitutive communication perspective, argued to largely be an illusion that risks blinding CSR researchers and practitioners from seeing the complexity of their task due to the oversimplifying of reality constructions.

In an attempt to unpack the complexities of trying to control meanings, (Christensen et al., 2015, 2017) for example show that CSR talk in and from organizations can be seen as being more or less discursively open or closed, thus revealing the complex balancing act of deciding how open and vague, or closed and definite, the meanings that make up CSR talk should be. An open kind of talk makes it easy for organizational members to connect with it and to contribute to it, without constructing what Costas and Kärreman (2013) call an "ethical seal." This refers to when the CSR related rules and regulations put in place by top management are so encompassing that they actually risk discouraging ethical thinking and reflection on an operational level, because the many rules leave no room for the (potentially empathetic) "me" in such situations, instead making employees lean on the "morals" of the organization. What these studies show is that it is far from simple to develop a kind of CSR talk that is easy to connect with and build upon, while also keeping things in their "proper" and corporate-sanctioned perspective.

The consistency bias is built around the traditional idea that CSR talk should be consistent with CSR walk. Meaning that inconsistencies between the two are seen as inherently bad and should be eliminated in one way or another (consider the connotations of greenwashing for example). Again, this stems from the belief that CSR walk and CSR talk are inherently separate thing. With a communication view, on the other hand, and as discussed above, this distinction more or less dissolves (Christensen et al., 2013). Perhaps one of the most influential conclusions that can be drawn using this kind of reasoning, especially concerning how CSR talk performs CSR walk (talking to walk), is that of thinking about currently untruthful CSR talk (i.e., talk without the walk) as a kind of "aspirational talk" (Christensen et al., 2013) – as aspirational expectations that the organization now somehow must live up to when moving forward. Hence pulling it in a supposedly "more sustainable" direction somewhere down the line. This, in theory, casts phenomena such as greenwashing in another light, hence producing a novel view of current CSR communication practices by highlighting the performative qualities of such communication (Schultz et al., 2013, p. 687).

Lastly, the consensus bias is that there should be a consensus between the corporation and its stakeholders regarding what sustainability actions to take, how to take them on, and how to talk about them. Building on the critique of the control bias, this is problematic, as an organization cannot always know, let alone control, how it appears in communication. Organizations can therefore not rely on consensus, because consensus among all stakeholders is virtually impossible to achieve when meanings diverge between them (Schultz et al., 2013). Especially when we see the many different stakeholder conversations that constantly shape the meaning both of CSR and of an organization in relation to CSR (Trittin & Schoeneborn, 2017). In contrast, a communication view instead embraces the discursively open, aspirational and polyphonic character of the CSR concept, because "*articulation of new and differing realities drives change, as it enriches perceptions and can produce tensions that prospectively guide actions*" (Schultz et al., 2013, p. 688).

In other words, it is when differences and tensions emerge and are dealt with that change happens. Tensions are thus of central concern to understanding both change and lack of change (Feix & Philippe, 2020; Hoffmann, 2018; Siltaloppi et al., 2020), which is why the previous ideal of controlling the consistency of reality constructions to ensure consensus among stakeholders in fact may hinder people and organizations from identifying and changing unsustainable ways of doing something. This is particularly pertinent given that what it means to be more sustainable and to contribute to sustainable

development is a socially conditioned and constantly moving target to aim for. This is mainly why I, in this thesis, choose to conceptualize both sustainability and CSR as communication. It does not talk inconsistencies, complexities and conflicts out of existence, but embraces and explores them (Hoffmann, 2018).

Another conceptual insight that has been stressed in this field of research is that CSR communication can be seen as a kind of moral and even moralizing communication (Schultz, 2013) – as a kind of communication that, as will be shown in this study, claims moral legitimacy by leaning on moral values to justify its right to exist among us. Even helping to establish "sustainability" as a moral value in its own right (Ziemann, 2011). This means that something can be viewed as morally right or wrong simply because it is perceived as "sustainable" or "unsustainable". "Sustainability" then, when seen as a moral kind of talk, is in a sense becoming something of a "moral proxy" in relation to which we judge right from wrong based on whether or not it, he or she is being sustainable or not. This is interesting, given that the meaning of sustainability is still very much up for debate (Seghezzo, 2009). Making it important to understand who exactly is "filling" this moral proxy with meaning, how and why. Because after all, if granted the status of an end-of-discussion kind of moral value in everyday talk, the meaning of sustainability is likely to have a great impact on what, who and why something is seen as quite simply right or wrong. Though these moralizing characteristics of CSR talk have been discussed conceptually, they have, surprisingly enough, not been extensively explored empirically from a CSR talk perspective. Despite such politicization of corporate communication can be tricky waters for organizations to navigate (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018; Korschun et al., 2016).

Evidently, the focus on CSR communication performativity has led to some interesting insights conceptually. The main point of discussing them here is to demonstrate the potential of CSR talk theorizing for this study, given the problematization of previous retail research provided above. This kind of theorizing lets the complexities of CSR (communication) take center stage, as it explores how sustainability comes to "exist" for us and what it "does" to us in organizational settings. Moreover, as recognized in the more general literature on corporate sustainability (Hahn et al., 2017; Hahn et al., 2015; Tregidga et al., 2018), it is also a suitable perspective for revealing the conflicting, paradoxical, and even hypocritical nature of CSR/sustainability talk as it encounters the realities of organizational life. Further, and as will be demonstrated in the empirical part of this thesis, it can also help reveal the moral and even political aspects CSR engagement that has been discussed by scholars in terms of Political CSR and Corporate Citizenship (e.g. Crane et al.,

2008; Matten & Crane, 2005; Sadler & Lloyd, 2009; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011; Scherer et al., 2014). Hence, CSR talk theorizing helps me provide a more nuanced, theoretical and critical case study of making retailing more sustainable from within – something that retail research currently lacks.

CSR talk theorizing in empirical studies

While we have learned more conceptually about CSR as a kind of talk, I and others (Schoeneborn et al., 2020) still see a need for more empirically grounded theorizing on how CSR talk actually comes to happen within organizations and, importantly, why it may struggle to appear in the everyday talk of employees. Meaning the conditions under which CSR talk can help in performing supposedly more sustainable organizations. However, this blind spot in CSR talk theorizing is understandable given the relatively limited number of empirical studies applying a CSR talk perspective. It is only recently that they have started to appear in the CSR literature (Schoeneborn et al., 2020).

Some key insights that can be drawn from existing studies are, for example, the importance of having people within the organization who talk the CSR talk by "selling" the need to engage with particular social and environmental issues internally (Girschik, 2020) as well as of developing *"a corporate understanding of the [sustainability] logic*". Also ensuring that such "human agents" of CSR talk become part of the organizational infrastructure and have a platform from which to talk the sustainability talk (Hunoldt et al., 2018). Similarly, by focusing on how CSR talk is established during so-called "strategic episodes", Penttilä (2020) reports on the influence external stakeholders may have on CSR talk, and how such talk is connected to other kinds of organizational communication through the production of texts. Stressing the importance of producing "textual agents" of CSR talk to ensure the continuation of CSR talk over time (see also Cooren, 2004). This shows how previous aspirations spawn new ones in a reoccurring fashion, though their pursuit can be seen as dependent on stakeholder recognition of such aspirations (Trittin-Ulbrich, 2022). However, and as shown empirically by Feix and Philippe (2020), these aspirations can also prove to be problematic from a sustainability perspective.

Looking at how CSR, as a social institution, is discursively constituted in organizational communication, Feix and Philippe (2020) reveal three perpetual taboos in CSR talk as spoken among a set of business organizations. The result of such taboos is, according to the authors, that they shield the concept from

changing organizations in any radical way and instead covertly sustain an unsustainable status quo. They show empirically that the way in which corporations tend to talk CSR and sustainability into existence can indeed entail talking eminent paradoxes and frictions out of existence. This is similar to what has previously been shown in relation to writings in the academic CSR literature (Hoffmann, 2018). Also confirming the suspicion mentioned above, namely that retail talk is likely to do things to sustainability talk. Nonetheless, we still need to investigate what sustainability/CSR talk might be doing to retail talk.

Once again, the main point I want to make here is that this perspective has demonstrated good potential in revealing what sustainability talk might be doing in and to retail organizations and how. Primarily by shedding light on the performative qualities of sustainability/CSR communication.

Problematizing the current state of CSR talk theorizing

Though these empirical studies offer some valuable insights into how sustainability talk can come to be spoken within organizations – particularly in relation to stressing the importance of both human and textual agents in making it happen, ensuring "communication infrastructure" for talking the sustainability talk within organizations, and the kind of discursive taboos it might be (re)producing – I would still argue that they provide an incomplete picture of how sustainability talk actually happens within organizations. Particularly incomplete is the picture of how sustainability talk is spread across organizational levels and how it functions and is or is not deemed legitimate beyond the initial initiators of such talk.

For instance, Girschik's (2020) study shows how particular issues can be sold internally through a micro-process of meaning making, but she tells us little about how these new meanings, or "frames," become part of other forms of organizational communication and spread throughout the organization. That is, how they become part of the everyday talk and texts that make up an organization beyond top management. Similarly, and though Penttilä (2020) shows how CSR talk becomes materialized in important textual agents, he tells us little about how these texts then spread and gain legitimacy throughout the organization to fulfill the aspirations they contain. Lastly, though Feix and Philippe (2020) show what business taboos in CSR talk are doing to such talk, they do not explore the other side of the coin, that is, what sustainability talk is doing business talk.

What is missing in the current state of CSR talk theorizing is hence a better understanding of how CSR talk gradually, and actually, comes to be spoken by more or less all organizational members over time, as well as why it might struggle to be talked into existence among them, and the consequences thereof. This is problematic, because the usefulness of CSR talk theorizing in practice, with its focus on better understanding what sustainability communication is doing in and to organizations, hinges on it actually happening in the communication that makes up a particular organization. This means that sustainability talk, as construed by those controlling its aspirations, will struggle to realize these aspirations unless that talk is spoken among most organizational members to begin with. The question of how this happens is still in need of empirical exploration.

Moreover, I would argue that we need to be better understand how sustainability talk is deemed legitimate by those tasked with doing its bidding. Meaning that we need to better understand not only how sustainability talk actually comes to be talked into existence throughout an organization, but also why such talk may be deemed either legitimate or illegitimate by organizational members. To help shed additional light on these aspects of sustainability talk, in the next chapter I add the concept of legitimacy to this kind of theorizing and empirically explore a process of legitimating sustainability talk over time in the remaining chapters. I do this because legitimacy is a concept that is essentially concerned with the right of something to exist in a particular context, for example, in conversations and texts that make up a retail organization (see Chapter 2).

Main thesis, purpose, and research questions

The main thesis I am arguing for in this book is that we should not take the existence of CSR talk and more sustainable retailing for granted and simply assume that it happens once the rather abstract notion of an organization has decided that it should. We should instead assume that there must be a great deal of complex work that goes into actually realizing MSR on multiple levels of organizing and ensuring that sustainability talk is spoken throughout the organization. Into ensuring that an organization's employees talk the sustainability talk and walk the sustainability walk, thus truly making it part of how retailing is organized among them. This involves accomplishing the sought-after integration that has been so strongly suggested in previous studies

of sustainable retailing (e.g. Vadakkepatt et al., 2021), yet poorly explained in relation to theory or studied close to the actor level in a retail context.

We should also not assume that ensuring the presence of sustainability talk and of MSR are unproblematic and smooth endeavors. Instead, we should expect that they are rife with conflicts between that which is, and that which ought to be. That reconciling retail talk and sustainability talk to make them operationally compatible is a complex social endeavor that is likely to demand changes in how both retailing and sustainability are talked into (co)existence, understood and practiced (i.e., discursive implications). This may have implications for how the future of both retailing and more sustainable development plays out. There may, in other words, be a lot more to sustainability talk and MSR than has been illuminated by the current state of research on both.

In light of this thesis and the above problematization of previous retail and CSR talk theorizing, I argue that both strands of literature need each other. They need a study that offers a multilevel empirical exploration of how sustainability talk emerges, and how MSR unfolds, within retail organizations over time – a study aimed at improving our understanding of the problematic, complex and challenging nature of making retailing more sustainable, as well as the consequences of this effort. Such a study would offer new empirical insights into how sustainability talk can become a potentially performative feature of everyday retail talk and beyond, and what the implications of this would be. That is the purpose of this study and what leads me to seek answers to the following research questions:

How can sustainability talk be made into a legitimate feature of retail talk throughout a retail organization?

What kind of challenges might arise in the process and how can these challenges be dealt with?

What discursive implications might this have for organizing both retailing and more sustainable development?

Three key concepts used in these questions (i.e.. sustainability talk, retail talk, and legitimation) will be discussed at length in the next chapter. Further, the three questions are rather descriptive in nature and should be understood as building on each other. Meaning that finding answers to these questions entails

description that is close to the empirical observations made to answer them (found in Chapter 4, 5, and 6). The academic contribution lies in interpreting what the answers found mean in light of the purpose of this study, which is what I do in Chapter 7, the final chapter. The questions above also build on each other in the sense that answering the first one gives an overarching idea about the 'how' question, and when one has an idea about this, it is possible to explore the challenges that arise in the described process, and knowing this, it is possible to explore how these challenges are dealt with. The last question must be answered in light of the answers to the two previous questions. This is because once we have an idea about the 'how,' we can start looking at what this implies discursively, but the challenges that arise in the process and how they are dealt with can have further implications for how both retailing and sustainable development are talked into existence in practice. When taken together, it will be possible to find the kinds of implications that come with making sustainability talk a legitimate feature of retail talk.

Outline of the study

In Chapter 2, I develop a theoretical perspective from which to study how retailing is made more sustainable from within, as well as the associated challenges and consequences. It also provides an alternative conceptualization of what MSR entails and discusses how to best approach the phenomenon empirically, as implied by this perspective. In Chapter 3, I discuss the research methods used in this thesis and present the empirical material used to ground its theorizing, as well as how the material has been both acquired and analyzed. In Chapter 4, 5, and 6, I present and analyze the case under study and discuss insights that can be drawn from it. Relating these insights to previous studies on the subjects of MSR and CSR talk. In the seventh and final chapter, I summarize the findings, discuss the kind of conclusions that can be drawn, and show how they help fulfil the purpose of this study and contribute to previous studies on MSR and CSR talk theorizing, as well as suggesting areas of future research on the basis of the findings and limitations of this study.

Theoretical perspective and conceptual framework

Drawing on CSR talk theories and research, and further motivated by blind spots in CSR talk theorizing, I use this chapter to develop another understanding of what the empirical problem of making retailing more sustainable implies on a more abstract level of understanding. I argue that the problem faced by those who wish to accomplish MSR is to somehow make sustainability talk a legitimate feature of retail talk. Hence, we have the research questions posed in the previous chapter. These questions, however, contain a couple key concepts that have to be described in greater detail and be better linked together, which is why I also use this chapter to clarify what I mean when I write about *sustainability talk*, *retail talk,* and the processual concept of *legitimation* – concepts that can help guide the forthcoming analysis.

Finally, and based on the content of this chapter, I close the chapter by discussing how one can go about studying the legitimation of sustainability talk in retail talk. I do this using insights from *discourse analysis*, especially frameworks focusing on legitimation through talk. This approach offers set of analytical ideas that will help organize both my inquiry into and analysis of the empirical material presented in the next chapter, offering insights that are summarized at the end of the chapter into a more precise idea about what to look for in the empirical world of retailing.

The performative qualities of talk

Before going into the specifics, I want to begin this chapter by describing the overarching theoretical perspective used in this study – a perspective that focuses on the so-called performative qualities of communication. This line of thinking runs like a main thread throughout the thesis, which is why elaborating on some of its core assumptions may be worthwhile. When I use

the term “performativity” in this study, I am referring to how we do things with language, what we do with language, and what language use does to us, particularly with regard to making reality appear to us in the ways it does. This involves adopting a broad understanding of language that includes gestures, images and any other symbolic form that we use to make sense of the world we live in (see for example Taylor, 2016).

Talk is seen, in other words, as being able to ”perform” something. This idea of “performativity” is often attributed to Austin (1975) and his book ”How to do things with words” (Gond et al., 2016). There, Austin argues that we should not only see utterances and other speech acts as either true or false representations of the world, but also as performing something in the world (i.e., being performative). This performance can entail the ability of words to induce and distribute meanings (locution), intending something with an utterance (illocution), or producing an effect beyond the speech act itself (perlocution). For instance, when a judge utters the words ”I hereby sentence you to prison,” the speech act itself does something to the social context in which it is uttered. Meaning that it does not describe reality as such or represent an aspect of reality, but rather that it changes reality – particularly the reality experienced by the person subjected by those words to being a ”prisoner.” Here, saying something does indeed entail doing. In this study, I am particularly interested in understanding how language – especially when viewed as including not only speech acts but also other symbolic forms – can produce, change and distribute certain meanings. Meanings that we then use to make sense of and socially construct our experiences of reality in different ways.

Particularly theories of organizational communication that focus on the performative qualities of communication, in general (e.g. Taylor & Van Every, 2000), and language use, in particular (i.e., discourse) (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Fairclough, 2013; Phillips & Oswick, 2012), adopt this idea and see communication and the use of language as a social practice that is much more than a neutral representation of the world (Craig, 1999). Instead, much of our being in this world is seen as both enabled and restricted by the use of a value-laden language that we “pick up” from our social milieu as we go about our lives (Taylor, 2016). Always (re)producing a particular view of something at the cost of alternative ways of perceiving, making sense of and enacting that something (Deetz, 1992).

Based on this kind of reasoning, our ways of being in this world are not as “individual” as one might think, and even our most private thoughts seem to be utterly diluted by our social life. The language we use to do all these things is something we learn and internalize through interactions with others (Taylor,

1985, 1995; Vygotskij, 2001). From this perspective, our ways of talking about, and being in, the world are largely seen as given to us by the people who surrounds us, and those who came before us, through the communication they teach us (Taylor, 1995). This approach leads to a "*de-centering of the human subject as the center or origin of perspective*" (Deetz, 2003, p. 422) by focusing on what goes on between people (i.e., communication), rather than on what goes on within them (e.g., cognition), thus also revealing a rather nihilistic outlook on reality where "*meaningfulness is a characteristic of human action, not a characteristic of reality itself*" (Phillips & Oswick, 2012, p. 7).

It follows from this that while different people (or the same person at different points in time for that matter) may be looking at the same thing or the same people, they may nonetheless be seeing very different things and people and acting differently in relation to them. Seen from this perspective, this is all due to differences in the communicative conditions of their existence (Fairclough, 2013). For example, intuitively a forest is just a bunch of trees growing in the same place. However, depending on the kind of communication and ways of talking (i.e., discourses) someone is drawing from to make sense of a particular forest, s/he might see very "different" forests and act very differently in relation to the specific forest. If s/he has learned from dominant ways of talking about the world (i.e., dominant discourses) that trees are the material manifestations of ancestral spirits, then s/he might be very reluctant to cut them down. But if s/he instead has been schooled to see the forest as an investment, then the trees can be seen as material manifestations of capital and s/he might be very willing to clearcut the forest, thus sacrificing it to a godlike economy. As Fairclough (2013, p. 2) puts it: *"a property of the social world that differentiate it from the natural world [is that] the meanings and concepts through which people interpret it and the knowledge they have of it are part of the social world and contribute to transforming the rest of it."*

The above points to the importance of studying both constants and changes in how reality is talked into existence, by whom, for what purpose, etc., in the realm of more sustainable development. If one kind of talk dominates, future generations might experience a lush forest that has a "valuable" biodiversity they can wander through, while the domination of another kind of talk might leave them a hole in the ground that contains "valuable" minerals ready to be mined. Similarly, the way we talk about "nature," "the environment" and "sustainable development" will have a very real impact on how we treat the natural environment and pursue more sustainable development (Ziemann, 2011). This is because the meanings produced and distributed in the

communication we draw from to understand and be in our material reality influence how we treat that reality and those in it.

The overarching argument I am trying to make here is that, from this theoretical vantage point, and with the weight it gives to communication and its performative qualities, it follows that changes in the way we talk about the world ought to be fundamental for changing the ways in which we are in that world (Taylor, 2016), thus highlighting the instructive potential of studying talk to understand changes to our ways of being (Fairclough, 2013). For instance, without talking about sustainability, there would be no sustainable development, as we would lack the means, the discursive resources and terminology (i.e., the talk) needed to articulate and see something as "sustainable" or "unsustainable." How we then actually talk about sustainable development also becomes important to study empirically, because language use around it is seen as so intertwined with how we then pursue it. In other words, looking at sustainability talk can give us a good glimpse into *how*, and with what potential *implications*, we tend to make sustainability occur in discourse.

Sustainable development as sustainability talk

To study sustainability talk and apply CSR talk theorizing to explore the phenomenon of MSR from a new angle, I find it necessary to clarify some of the key concepts used to do just that, namely *sustainability talk*, *retail talk,* and the processual concept of *legitimation*. Together, these concepts and their linkages are intended to provide a new theoretical understanding of what making MSR happen within retail organizations entails empirically – namely, and as reflected in the research questions posed in the previous chapter, to somehow *make sustainability talk a legitimate feature of retail talk.*

The first of the three key concepts, sustainability talk, is what I will be discussing in this section. This concept is very much inspired by CSR talk theorizing as described in the previous chapter. However, and given that I use the sustainability label rather than CSR label, I will start by describing the idea of more sustainable development in more detail, as well as relating it to communication about it from a performative perspective. Building on this line of thinking, I argue that it is sustainability talk that somehow needs to be made into an organizational reality among retail employees to realize MSR, under the assumption that sustainability has to be talked about among retail

employees to have the potential to bring about (i.e., perform) MSR. This gives us the first key concept in the new "how" of MSR proposed here.

A word on sustainability

In a speech in Belgium in May 2015, the former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon famously declared that *"we are the first generation that can end poverty, the last that can end climate change"*. Though this remark does not cover the full extent of what Sustainable Development entails, it does capture the urgency and essence of the idea: to take better care of people and the planet while we still have a decent chance to do so. The idea is often used more or less synonymously with the label "sustainability" in both business research and practice (Bansal & Song, 2017). As will be elaborated on below, however, both labels are essentially contested and largely discursive concepts that can have many different meanings and suggest many different ways of achieving more sustainable development. This makes it especially valuable to understand and study our pursuit of Sustainable Development from a communication-centered perspective, as I do here.

This approach frees me from having to define what "sustainability" really means and allows me to, instead, empirically explore how it is "filled with meaning" in a particular social context. Nonetheless, if I am to study it, then I have to find it. To find it, I need to have an idea of what to look for. As will be concluded in this chapter, I am looking for instances of talk about "sustainability." So what is this talk generally about? To answer this question, I will briefly go through some of the ways in which "sustainable development" and "sustainability" have been defined, evaluated, and envisioned, thus providing a general idea of what is mediated and contested in *sustainability talk*.

A very commonly used definition of sustainable development is that used in the Brundtland Report, which was presented at the World Commission on Environmental Development (WCED) in 1987. There, sustainable development is defined as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p. 43). The document can be seen as declaring that "the sustainability problem" (i.e., what is to be sustained?) is to ensure that there is enough "nature" for both current and future generations to exploit in order to fulfill their needs (Seghezzo, 2009). There is, hence, a normative dimension to the definition, in that it promotes both inter- and intra-generational justice in terms of an acclaimed "right" to what the planet earth has to offer (Christen &

Schmidt, 2012). Thus, humans' relationships with each other and with nature are very much the focus of this definition of sustainable development, giving at least a vague idea of what needs to be achieved and why, according to an important orienting text circulating in this kind of talk.

Similarly, sustainability has been conceptualized in business contexts as pursuing a triple bottom line (TBL) (Elkington, 1997). Meaning that organizations aim at creating not only financial value, but also social and environmental "value," as opposed to social and environmental degradation. This conceptualization has been very influential in business, and especially in areas of sustainability accounting, which measure and report on the three pillars of value creation. It is has also been used in research on MSR to define and explore "sustainability" in retailing (e.g. Wilson, 2015). Though commonly used, both conceptualizations of what sustainable development and sustainability entail have been critiqued on many grounds. For example, for being too anthropocentric and suggesting solutions that rely on ideas of continued economic growth and free(r) markets (Seghezzo, 2009), but also on the grounds that these conceptualizations are hard to operationalize for those tasked with making them happen (Hahn et al., 2015). The latter primarily concerning the difficulties involved in deciding what to measure, improve and how.

These conceptualizations have also been critiqued on the grounds of being confined to what is often referred to as "weak sustainability," as opposed to "strong sustainability" and even "absurdly strong sustainability" (Seghezzo, 2009). Very briefly, the difference between the two former evaluative concepts lies in how they treat the tradeoff between human and natural capital. Weak sustainability is when the totality of all capital passed on from one generation to the next does not decline (i.e., sustained), but when limits to the substitution of natural capital for human capital (e.g., making things from natural resources) are not taken into consideration. Strong sustainability, on the other hand, promotes the need to ensure a non-declining stock of capital, but puts limits on how much of the current natural capital can be substituted for human capital. This is largely based on the belief that nature has an intrinsic value per se and is not solely a resource available for human exploitation (Hopwood et al., 2005; Seghezzo, 2009). Given that both the TBL and Brundtland Report anthropocentrically see human welfare as "*the ultimate reason for the protection of natural capital*," these understandings of sustainability can be seen as examples of weak sustainability (Seghezzo, 2009, p. 542), which can arguably be seen as an insufficient path away from unsustainable development.

Similar to the evaluative concepts of strong and weak sustainability, Hopwood et al. (2005) set out to map different ”approaches” to sustainable development and identified three general approaches to solving the problem of unsustainable development, portraying them as groups: supporters of the status quo, advocates of reform, and transformists. Those who support the status quo recognize the need for change, but argue that such change should by no means alter the way we go about our lives in any dramatic fashion. Instead, economies and business organizations geared toward financial profit and growth – the pillars of capitalist ways of currently organizing society – are seen as essential to the solution, meaning that preservation of the status quo is seen as essential to solving the problems we face.

Those advocating reform do not see the need for a complete overhaul of our current economic system, but still call for substantially reforming it. They do accept that *”large shifts in policy and lifestyle, many very profound, will be needed at some point”* (Hopwood et al., 2005, p. 43), especially by giving governments and their legislative power a more central role in this process than those supporting the status quo. Those advocating the more radical stance on transforming our current system see the problem of unsustainable development as being rooted in our current capitalist ways of organizing society. Hence, transformists argue, there is an urgent need to stop treating the symptoms of capitalism as currently constructed, and instead rip the problem up by its roots. They hence reject the anthropocentric ideas of both the status quo and reform, and basically see a need to make nature our number one priority. Man is there for nature, not the other way around.

To conclude, sustainability is evidently a contested and difficult concept to both theorize and practice, and it also suggests many different paths toward a more symbiotic relationship between nature and culture. Knowing which way to talk and walk is not as straight forward as one might have hoped. To understand this divergence of ideas, it can arguably be attributed to the concepts destined to belong to the ”realm of ideas” (Busco et al., 2018). Meaning that this ”discursive concept” is something that only can be talk about, but never pointed at as a particular kind of object, as it defines the world rather than the other way around (Hardy et al., 2000). It is this characteristic of ”sustainability” that has led me and others to adopt a talk- and communication-centered conceptualization of sustainability. Often referred to as sustainability discourse or – as I do here in reference to the CSR talk theorizing that inspires this conceptual framework – as sustainability talk.

Sustainability as discourse and talk

In this thesis, I, like others before me (e.g., Banerjee, 2003; Ziemann, 2011; Allen et al., 2012; Busco et al., 2018; Tregidga et al., 2018), choose to conceptualize sustainability as a kind of talk or discourse – as a kind of perspective that is constructed and mediated through language use (talk) around how we are pursuing, can and should pursue, more sustainable development. This talk, or discourse, is materialized in texts and conversations conveying certain ways of talking and thinking about as well as doing "sustainability" in different settings.

Sustainability talk, and the perspectives on reality it mediates, can be talked into existence in instances of the everyday talk going on both within and between people. Moreover, the word "sustainability" does not even have to be present when such talk occurs. Instead it is more of a socially constructed and constantly evolving idea concerning more sustainable ways of being that can make it into our everyday lives in many different ways, and in many different situations (Ziemann, 2011). For instance, sustainability talk might come to mind when you are grocery shopping and choosing between a carton of organic or regular eggs. It can circulate in discussions with your travel companion concerning whether you really should endure that 15-hour train ride "for the sake of the planet" and skip the otherwise so convenient plane trip. Or it can come to mind when you are about to order food on a first date, wondering if choosing that tasty steak will reveal some immoral sides of you and harm your chances of a second date. These are all hypothetical examples of instances where sustainability talk may, in one way or another, make its way into an everyday life.

If such talk does become present, and as argued in this thesis, if it is deemed a legitimate feature of the discursive activity undertaken (i.e., the talk), it has the potential to do things in and to the conversations in which it occurs (i.e. sustainability talk performativity). It may even do things to the lives of those doing the talking and those who are being talked about. Perhaps you, for better or worse, do choose a vegetarian dish over a piece of meat and even skip the eggs altogether to explore other, "more sustainable" food options. Perhaps you do endure that 15-hour train ride to minimize the environmental impact of your travel plans despite your companion's cries of despair. And perhaps you do all of this because sustainability talk, in one way or another, for some reason or another, has made it into your everyday life and was deemed legitimate enough to do things to that life.

To conclude, when I say “sustainability talk” in this thesis, I am referring to different pieces of texts and conversations that contribute to making sustainability meaningful in particular ways (Ziemann 2011). These instances of talk can also be seen as both influencing and being influenced by what perhaps is better labeled the “sustainability discourse.” I am making a similar distinction to the one Alvesson and Karreman (2000) make when they speak of Big-D Discourse as systems of thought and of small-d discourse as talk around a particular phenomenon (e.g., sustainability) that is constituted in the instances of language use. In other words, the term discourse is commonly used to refer to either a theme of language use (here sustainability discourse), or to one of the many discourses around that theme (here sustainability talk), that are intrinsically connected with each other. Another way of explaining this is that the many different voices and texts explaining what sustainability means, entails and implies (i.e. sustainability talk) amounts to a totality of talk that constitute a “sustainability discourse” (i.e. sustainability Discourse). For a more detailed discussion of the concept of “discourse”, and how to analyze it, see the section on discourse analysis later in this chapter.

In addition to its connotations to CSR talk theorizing, I choose to make use of the sustainability *talk* label here because I am mainly interested in understanding a particular aspect of sustainability talk (legitimation) in a particular context (retail talk) – a ”particular" that is assumed to be both influenced by and to influence wider systems of thought and talk about ”sustainability.” (i.e. sustainability discourse) One does not exclude the other, but the distinction between part and whole is arguably needed to make better sense of both, here by focusing on a particular kind of sustainability talk – a kind that legitimizes its presence in retail talk. By relating both to similar forms of talk more generally, we can better understand what kind of ”sustainable development” the part tends to suggest to the whole, and vice versa.

Retail organizations as retail talk

To begin exploring the makings, struggles and consequences of MSR, we also need to have a somewhat more abstract and theoretical understanding of how retailing itself actually happens, that is, how a retail organization can be seen as organized. This is important because without answering this question, it will be difficult to make sense of what it is that sustainability talk ought to be made present and legitimate in. After all, what exactly is a retail organization if we take the overarching theoretical perspective presented above? To answer this

question, I draw on theories that view organizations as being constituted by communication, namely Communication Constituting Organizations (CCO) theorizing (Cooren, 2004; Kuhn, 2008; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). This line of thinking is also something that often is referred to in CSR talk theorizing in order to arrive at a CSR as communication conceptualization as presented in the previous chapter (e.g. Schoeneborn et al., 2020; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013; Schultz et al., 2013). It is this set of theories that lead me to the second key concept described here: retail talk.

Communication Constituting Organizations (CCO)

An often cited text that is part of CCO theorizing is Taylor and Van Every's (Taylor & Van Every, 2000) book *"The emergent organization - communication as its site and surface."* The book begins with the rather simple, yet paramount question: What is an organization? At first glance this might seem like a rather banal question, but (as with most questions) the more you think about it, the more difficult it becomes to answer. For example, taking a somewhat realist perspective, we might ask whether anyone can show or touch an organization "out there" in reality? Well, you can be shown a building that houses an "organization," but would you not just be touching the brick and mortar that make up the building itself? You can certainly show a member of an organization, but is s/he not a human being in her/his own right? Similarly, you can touch documents proclaiming that an organization exists, but is it not rather what is on those pieces of paper that matters? And I am not talking about the ink here. That is to say, the only material manifestations of organizations seem to be the things proclaiming their existence or the signs of their doings, while the organization itself seems to evade our sensory impressions. Nonetheless, we treat them as "real" and they tend to have very real impacts on our lives (Kuhn, 2008). So, what do these strange entities consist of?

The answer from a CCO perspective is, of course: communication. In these theories, organizations are seen as having to be constantly made real in and through communication, rather than simply being real in and of themselves. It is therefore in communication that we should try to find and study them (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). In essence, organizational communication is seen as more or less the only place (i.e., its site) and the only "touchable" thing (i.e., its surface) where we can find, observe and study the physical evidence of an organization's existence. Communication is the organization, rather than something happening "within" a container-like understanding of an

organization, at least when we adopt this particular conceptualization of (retail) organizations. This begs the question: What is communication?

Communication as Texts and Conversations

Focusing on the organizing potential of the performative qualities of communication, an organization is seen here as emerging from the dynamic interplay between "texts" and "conversations" in "text-conversation cycles." In fact, communication can be seen as consisting of the cycles that produce, reproduce and change the meanings we live by in a given context (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). The terms texts and conversations are therefore central to this study, which is why they and their interplay might need some further elaboration.

A "conversation" can be roughly understood as an instance of language use that occurs within or between people and that helps us make sense of the reality in which we find ourselves. It is in conversations that we gain and maintain the focused, and possibly common, attention, reflection and enactment necessary to see and treat something as something (Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

"Text," on the other hand, should be understood in a broad sense and functions like a conversational support system. This means that texts (e.g., strategy documents, books, CEO presentations, movie characters, etc.) are like social scripts providing us with the common directions, understandings, and underlying assumptions that we so desperately need to be in this world together with others and to engage in organizing conversations (Cooren, 2004). Taylor and Van Every (2000, p. 40) describe the difference and interplay between texts and conversations as follows: *"the finality of conversation is to sustain interaction, the finality of text is to produce a collectively negotiated interpretation of the world,"* and together they *"turn circumstances into a situation that is comprehensible and that serves as a springboard for action."*

In sum, it is in organizational communication (conceptualized here as consisting of texts and conversations) that the intersubjective bedrock for organizing is laid and an organization emerges. Together, texts in conversations, and conversations made into texts, are seen as powering the ongoing organization and reorganization of, for example, retailing among employees in a retail organization. In other words, an organization is *"that which serves to constrain interaction by structuring its occasions of talk [i.e. conversations] and, by so doing, to generate a kind of common accord [i.e. texts] (not necessarily unanimous) as to the objects and agents of*

communication. Organization, as it emerges in communication, both empowers and constrains and, as it does, creates a universe of objects and agents" (ibid., p. 72). It is this organizing communication, and the universe of objects and agents it creates, that I mean to study when I speak of "retail talk."

My use of the term retail talk here is rather novel in the retail literature and thus, following CCO theorizing, refers to communication that constitutes the organizing of retailing. This refers to all the talk that goes on between employees of retail organizations – talk that is creating the common accord needed to do all the different things that make up the organizing of retailing (some aspects of which are described in the previous chapter). Retail talk thus encompasses the communicative aspects of organizing a retail organization.

In the understanding of retailing developed here, looking for how sustainability happens "within" an organization from this perspective means looking at whether, how, why and why not "sustainability talk" appears in the texts and conversations that exist among employees of a retail organization. That is, how sustainability talk becomes represented as a legitimate feature of texts and conversations (or not) among retail employees of a particular retail organization (i.e., retail talk). This leads me to the final key concept necessary for reconceptualizing how MSR can be seen as accomplished: legitimation.

Integration as legitimation

As mentioned in the previous chapter, both retail research and the more general CSR literature have tended to suggest the "integration" of sustainability into everyday business practices. However, what this entails has not been explained conceptually from a communication-centered perspective. Similarly, and when embarking on this study of MSR by interviewing practitioners, they too stressed the importance of "integrating" sustainability into the everyday work lives of employees, though they struggled to explain what this meant and entailed. As I was trying to come to conceptual grips with what such "integration" meant, I drew inspiration from legitimacy theory and started to see integration as a process of legitimation. Meaning attempts to somehow accomplish a kind of organization, a kind of retail talk, in which sustainability talk enjoys a legitimate presence. This allowed me to identify the third key concept for understanding how sustainability talk can be made part of retail talk: legitimation – a processual concept that helps explain the attainment of

legitimacy, making it important to building an understanding of what is meant by "legitimacy."

Legitimacy

Something (e.g., an organization, a kind of talk, a way of doing something, or some other kind of social institution) is legitimate when it is perceived as having the right to exist, and it is illegitimate when that right is seen as forfeited or otherwise nonexistent (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). This implies that if, for example, an organization is seen as illegitimate by important stakeholders such as customers, employees, financial institutions, regulators, media, etc., it will struggle to attain the necessary resources for its continued survival (loss of customer revenue, struggling to recruit employees, attain investment capital, etc.) (Suchman, 1995). For instance, the growing corporate interest in CSR and sustainability has been attributed to a legitimacy crisis, primarily among multinational corporations around the turn of the century (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). In particular, these corporations' moral legitimacy was seriously questioned with changing ethical expectations and damaging news coverage.

Similarly, I would argue, if a particular kind of talk is deemed an illegitimate conversational topic or discursive resource, it will fail to obtain the kind of attention it needs to do the things it is intended to do in and to those conversations, thus harming the performative potential of its existence. The point here is that legitimacy, at its extremes, is a matter of life or death for organizations and other social institutions, because the concept deals with something's perceived right to exist. For this reason, the concept has a long history in both CSR research and organization theory more generally (Johnson et al., 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011).

In search of a definition of organizational legitimacy, Suchman (1995) makes a distinction between the use of strategic and institutional approaches in previous literature on the subject. Recognizing the value of both approaches, he attempts to bridge these opposing views in his concluding definition (see below). From a strategic perspective, legitimacy is understood as a kind of resource that can be attained and managed, mainly through communication, from and in an organization's external environment. For example, from this strategic perspective, the purpose of CSR communication is to use it as a "tool" for managing legitimacy and responding to the social and environmental expectations of the organization's stakeholders (Du et al., 2010). In contrast, institutional approaches to legitimacy do not assume such a sharp distinction between the organization and its environment. Instead, "cultural definitions"

for understanding and enacting reality (similar to "texts" in the CCO perspective described above) will "*determine how the organization is built, how it is run, and, simultaneously, how it is understood and evaluated*" (Suchman, 1995, p. 576). Cultural definitions that are likely to vary over both time and space and are largely seen as being beyond the control of any one organization.

No matter the level of manageability over legitimacy one assumes, something's perceived right to exist can be seen as residing in many areas of life. Scott (1995), for example, sees legitimacy as occurring on three levels: regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive. Regulative legitimacy is when an organization and its practices are seen as conforming to regulations put into place by a superseding organization (e.g., a government or a large retail firm imposing regulations on its suppliers). Normative legitimacy is when something is seen as being in accordance with dominant norms and values concerning what "the right" thing to do is (regardless of regulations). Finally, cognitive-cultural legitimacy refers to the taken-for-granted ease with which something "*can be categorized and understood according to existing cognitive schemas and cultural frameworks*" (Humphreys, 2010, p. 492). Similarly, Suchman (1995) offers a typology over three forms of legitimacy (pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy), basically seeing it as residing in perceptions of being either beneficial to oneself, others, or in a kind of taken-for-granted way. Building on these characteristics of legitimacy, Suchman (1995, p. 574) offers the following and often cited definition of legitimacy: "*legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions*".

Social structures, legitimacy and discourse

Following this understanding of legitimacy, it is clear that something seeking legitimacy (e.g., sustainability talk) needs to secure it in many areas of social life (e.g., regulations, norms, cognitive schemas). This accentuates the need to take context and social structures into consideration when trying to understand how it is attained, in addition to what is said in talk (elaborated on below). Meaning that one needs to look for how the legitimacy of sustainability talk in retail talk is either helped or hindered by social structures owing to some kind of law-like compulsion imposed on its agents. However, focusing on social structures while looking at discourse and communication might seem a bit strange from an ontological perspective (Alvesson & Deetz, 2006). With

discourse theory and analysis often building upon a social constructivist view of reality, while those focusing on structures can be seen as building on realist assumptions about the nature of reality (Kuhn, 1970). I and others (Fairclough, 2013; Hardy et al., 2000; Phillips et al., 2004; Phillips & Oswick, 2012) would argue, however, that reconciling the two focus areas (the "constructivist" potential of discourse and the "realness" of social structures) does not have to be as conflicting as it may appear.

For instance, Austin (1975), talk about the "total situation" to highlight the situational conditions needed for words to be able to do things. The words "I hereby sentence you to prison," for example, must be spoken by a legitimate judge for the subject to be confined to prison. Put differently, the words are clearly linked to the context of their appearance already in Austin's (1975) theories of performativity. Similarly, organization discourse theorists tend to stress the need to take enabling and limiting social structures into consideration when trying to understand the doings of discourse (Oswick et al., 2000; Phillips et al., 2004). With Faircloth (2013) advocating, for example, that three contextual "levels" should be taken into consideration when conducting a critical discourse analysis (CDA). The point I am trying to make here is that a study exploring "the doings of words," especially on focused on ensuring the legitimacy of the words themselves, must take the contextual aspects of their appearance into consideration. Here these contextual aspects are the kind of social structures that could enable or limit the legitimacy of sustainability talk in retail talk.

Legitimation - Legitimacy as a social process

One aspect of legitimacy theory that is problematic in the realm of this thesis is its treatment of legitimacy as some kind of more or less static state that institutions can attain. This is important, as it gives us an idea about what something's legitimacy can be seen as relying on. However, it tells us less about how things become legitimate (Johnson, Dowd et al., 2006). This is problematic, because I am interested in understanding a process of legitimation, and not so much a state of legitimacy or illegitimacy.

In essence, and as suggested by Johnson, Dowd et al. (2006) in their understanding of legitimacy as a social process, attaining legitimacy can be understood as starting with a potential "*problem in the construction of social reality*" (e.g., that we do not talk about unsustainable development) (ibid., p.58), and legitimation can be understood as a crucial part of the solution to such problems, because it is about "*how new patterns of behavior or beliefs*

become widely accepted into the broader cultural framework in the first place so that they become taken-for-granted social features" (ibid., p.60). The core challenge for making sustainability talk a legitimate feature of retail talk, when adopting this understanding of legitimacy and legitimation, is how the former becomes widely accepted into the broader cultural frameworks that dominate the latter. This feat of acceptance is, as will be described later, largely accomplished through discourse and communication and the social structures such legitimating talk can put into place (Van Leeuwen, 2007).

A legitimation process, as suggested by Johnson et al. (2006), can also be seen as unfolding in four consecutive stages. Their stage theory is useful for this study, as it can help organize an analysis of how MSR, here seen as a legitimation process, unfolds over time. Particularly in the analytical stage of constructing a chronological case narrative of this process, which is presented in Chapter 4. According to Johnson, Down et al. (2006), a legitimation process generally begins with (1) an innovation stage in which new discourse is created by a group of organizational members in order "*to address some need, purpose, goal, or desire at the local level of actors*" (ibid., p. 60). This means that some group of people see a need to do something differently for whatever reason (e.g., an existing way of doing something is experiencing a legitimacy crisis). Relating this to CSR talk theorizing, this group of people can arguably be seen as similar to what (Girschik, 2020) calls issue sellers – those who initiate CSR talk and try to "sell" particular and CSR-related issues as being important enough to be dealt with by those in power. This stage is then followed by (2) a local validation stage in which "*local actors must construe it as consonant with and linked to the existing, widely accepted cultural framework of beliefs, values and norms*" (ibid., p. 60). This means that this group of people, whom I, in the realm of this study, would call *human agents* of sustainability talk who are driving the legitimation process, find ways in which the new discourse is related to other practices that are already accepted by those implicated by new discourse (Hardy et al., 2000). This can be related to Penttilä (2020) study of strategic episodes, where issues of an organization's CSR talk are selected and its sustainability aspirations established, thus relating particular aspects of CSR talk to the organization in question, including the cultural frameworks on which its talk is based.

Once new discourse has been created and locally validated, it has to (3) be diffused throughout the organization in the third stage of a legitimation process. This means that, in this case, sustainability talk is spread throughout the organization to convey the perspectives and practical implications it has to offer. Though not fully exploring the "flows" of such communication, (Hunoldt et al.,

2018) study demonstrates the importance of those in charge of the legitimation process having a "communication platform" to speak from. Finally, the new discourse must (4) become generally validated by more or less all members of that organization if it is to actually change old ways of doing something and become more or less taken for granted among them, essentially institutionalizing ethics (Costas & Kärreman, 2013) or at least sustainability talk.

Based on the problematization of CSR talk theorizing provided in the previous chapter, especially the latter two stages have not been sufficiently explored in empirical CSR talk research. Retail research, however, does give us some hints as to how this is accomplished in terms of translation (Lehner, 2015) and material artifacts (Fuentes & Fredriksson, 2016), including the difficulties that can arise with diverging perspectives (Elg et al., 2020; Elg & Welinder, 2022). Legitimation and legitimacy, however, have not been the primary concern of any of these studies.

Agency and discourse in legitimation

Legitimation in discourse and communication can be seen as linguistic, or otherwise communicative, attempts to drive a legitimation process forward in a specific social context. Largely by providing arguments for why something ought to be seen as legitimate or not (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Because after all, and as stressed in the introduction chapter, attempts to legitimate something are bound to run into resistance and should therefore not be seen as a smooth kind of social endeavor. Instead tensions between what is and what supposedly ought to be are likely to arise (Hahn et al., 2015), making it paramount to "argue" for why something ought to be deemed legitimate or not. As suggested by Feix and Philippe's (2020) study, this kind of argumentation can have discursive implications for how sustainability and sustainable development are talked into existence, potentially through translations of sustainability discourse in, for example, retail stores (Lehner, 2015).

This argumentation is in turn seen as happening primarily in discourse and communication, which makes these aspects of constructing reality one of the most important vehicles for legitimation (Luckmann, 1987; Van Leeuwen, 2007). Because it is in linguistic activity (i.e., talk) that explanations for why something should be viewed as legitimate or not are both articulated and justified (Berger et al., 1966; Berger & Luckmann, 1991). This draws attention away from grand regulatory systems and "symbolic universes" that dominate early writings on legitimacy and turns our gaze toward the "*ordinary legitimatory processes of everyday life"* (Luckmann, 1987). Building on this

understanding of legitimation in discourse, Berger and Luckmann (1991, p. 111) define legitimation in discourse as follows: "*Legitimation provides the 'explanations' and justifications of the salient elements of the institutional tradition. (It) 'explains' the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings […]".*"

This view on what legitimation in discourse and communication is, and on its potential for making something legitimate, also implies the assumption that people possess a rather high level of agency over what can be said and how. This means that, though discourse is assumed to (re)create social reality "*through the production of concepts, objects and subject positions, which shape the way in which we understand the world and react to it*" (Hardy et al., 2000, p. 1233-1234), people can still actively intervene in these relationships to construct new discourse. They can do this, for example, by talking a reality into existence such that what a retail organization is doing and what sustainable development demands are a perfect match, thus discursively making it seem as if sustainability talk is a legitimate feature of the organization's retail talk.

This agency over discourse is important to recognize given the assumption that there must be a great deal of work going into legitimating sustainability talk. It helps explain an important aspect of that work, namely developing new discourse from which a new, potentially more sustainable, organization can emerge, created through "*a series of rhetorical moves*" performed by people, where "*new terms, or older ones in new meanings*" come to exist for us (Taylor 2016, p. 281). Some of these terms become institutionalized and so to speak slip into our taken-for-granted ways of making sense of reality (i.e., becoming legitimate). The empirical question to be answered is how this is accomplished in the context of retailing.

Towards an operationalization of the conceptual framework

The main point of the above discussions of the three key concepts of this study has been to clarify what to look for in the empirical study. It can be concluded that I need to look for discursive justifications for the legitimacy of sustainability talk in retail talk in texts and conversations, and the kinds of realities that such justifying pieces of communication construct and suggest, as well as potential organizational and social structures that enable or limit the legitimacy of sustainability in retail talk. Together, I hope that focusing on these empirical aspects of MSR can help develop our understanding of both the phenomenon and CSR talk theorizing, which leads me to the issue of how one should go about studying these things.

Operationalizing the conceptual framework

Based on the above discussion, I will use this concluding section to operationalize the conceptual framework outlined above. The purpose is to discuss how one can go about organizing an empirical inquiry and analysis in line with the key concepts and overarching theoretical perspective developed above. To provide general guidance for such a study, I draw inspiration from discourse analysis: the study of talk and its performative qualities. I focus, in particular, on how legitimation can be seen as being pursued in and with talk.

Discourse can generally be defined here as "*a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world),"* which in organizational contexts consists of "conversations" or "texts" used to *"describe, represent, interpret and theorize what we take to be the facticity of organizational life"* (e.g., "management" of "sustainability") (Oswick et al., 2000, p. 9). Discourse analysis can in turn be seen as a collection of analytical frameworks used to understand processes of social construction – a construction that, from this perspective, is seen as mainly accomplished through particular kinds of language use and other symbolic forms of communication in a given context. Communication, in general, and language use, in particular, can be studied using discourse analytical methods for empirical inquiry and analysis.

The focus of discourse analysis is thus on understanding how, and with what implications, particular uses of language make aspects of reality meaningful to us in certain ways (i.e., processes of socially constructing things as those things). In the context of this study, this entails understanding how, and with what potential implications, "sustainability" is constructed and justified as a legitimate feature of retail talk. Though such an analysis can be accomplished in a plethora of ways (Svensson, 2019), it can generally be described as the *"analysis of* [1] *collections of texts,* [2] *the ways they are made meaningful through their links to other texts,* [3] *the ways in which they draw on different discourses,* [4] *how and to whom they are disseminated,* [5] *the methods of their production,* [6] *and the manner in which they are received and consumed"* (Phillips et al., 2004, p. 636).

There are many things to keep track of in the quote above, but in the present context, this can be translated as identifying and analyzing (1) a collection of texts about sustainability within a retail organization (e.g., written sustainability reports or oral presentations by sustainability managers), (2) how these texts draw on other texts (i.e., inter-textuality) to establish their

legitimacy (e.g., the 2015 SDGs or organizational values), (3) the way texts draw on other discourses such as marketing and management discourses (i.e., inter-discursivity), (4) how they are spread within the organization (e.g., through internal training programs, memos or presentations), (5) how they are produced and by whom (e.g., how information is collected and translated by those who are responsible for creating the texts and why), (6) and how retail employees tend to make sense of and use these texts in conversations (e.g., as an added value used to sell products to customers on the shop floor).

I want to draw special attention to point number 2 above, namely inter-textuality and interdiscursivity, since I will draw a lot on these ideas in the forthcoming analysis. Intertextuality is when and how the talk analyzed more or less explicitly reference to other texts (Fairclough, 1992; Koskela, 2013). For example the way I am attempting to help the reader follow "my" line of thinking with the many references to previous research and literature in this text. Inter-discursivity is a very similar concept to inter-textuality but is referring to different, often more subtle, ways of drawing on others to make a particular kind of talk meaningful in particular ways for particular reasons. That is to use words, metaphors, concepts, a tone of voice and other discursive resources that are common in one context and deploy them in another (Bhatia, 2010). For example the way I here use lingo from the CSR as communication literature when talking about sustainability talk. Signaling connections with this kind of theorizing already in the title of this thesis. Similarly, sustainability talk can be talked about in a "business language", a "hippie language" or, as I recently encountered in a documentary (Scott, 2016), in a kind of "military language". The last for example describing climate change as "an accelerator of conflict" or as "catalyst for civil unrest". Even exercising a kind of third tier interdiscursivity by using "engine parts" to describe an arguably very functionalist view of climate change and its "violent consequences".

The point here is that it is important to look for the way the talk analyzed more or less explicitly refers to and builds on other texts, and the more subtle ways in which it borrows from other discursive contexts, to better understand the talk being analyzed, what it does, and how it does what it does. Not least since it helps connecting the linguistic analysis of texts and talk with the social context in which texts are used and talk occurs (Fairclough 2013). Directing the analysts gaze away from the individual texts and towards the relationships between them and other texts, ways of talking and being etc. Ultimately aiding our understanding of why, how, and with what consequences, for example more sustainable retailing is talked into existence in the empirical pieces of reality construction that we can observe and analyze.

Nonetheless, it is by investigating all of the aspects of discursive activity that are mentioned above (with reference to Phillips et al. (2004), "within" a particular retail organization (i.e., its retail talk), that I hope to paint a picture of how sustainability talk is made into a legitimate feature of retail talk, and to do this while still taking into consideration the socio-historical context of its production and occurrence (Fairclough, 2013). This includes social and organizational structures that here might enable and hinder sustainability talk as regards becoming a legitimate feature of retail talk. Having said that, I will now return to the legitimation strategies that can be sought in the analysis of texts.

Studying legitimizing talk

To look for legitimating attempts in a retail organization's sustainability talk, I draw quite heavily on van Leeuwen's (2007) analytical framework for *"analyzing the way discourses construct legitimation for social practices in public communication as well as in everyday interaction"* (ibid, p. 91). I do this because it helps me understand what to look for in the empirical material and how to begin sorting instances of legitimation seeking in communication. It also helps me make better sense of what sustainability talk might be doing to retail talk and vice versa. It thus helps me organize the analysis undertaken to understand how sustainability talk is legitimized in retail talk empirically. I do this by reformulating the four generic legitimation *categories* discussed below into four legitimation *strategies* used to legitimize sustainability talk in retail talk, based on the specific legitimation *techniques* identified in the empirical material (see Chapter 5).

In essence, the framework suggest that we should look at how social institutions appeal to authority, morals, reason or mythical narratives in communication to justify the institutions existence, thus conveying supporting reality constructions in the process. Theo Van Leeuwen (2007) suggests an analytical framework consisting of four overarching and generic legitimation categories to help identify and study these discursive justifications: (1) authorization, (2) moral evaluation, (3) rationalization and (4) narrativization. The typology can be used as an analytical tool for identifying assumptions that guide answers to the often implicitly stated questions: "Why should we do this?" and "Why should we do this in this way?" I will use this framework as an organizing tool that can help me identify and describe the strategies used to legitimize sustainability talk in retail talk as a first step in discussing the potential implications of deploying such legitimation strategies. It might

therefore be worth elaborating a bit on what they, as generic legitimation categories, entail.

Authorization

Basically, this category answers the 'why' questions by stating: "because I say so," "because they say so," "because that is the way we always do it," "because everybody else is doing it" or "because that is the law." *The Authority* category can be *personal* (i.e., because someone with authority says so) or *impersonal* (e.g., because the law says so). The idea here is to look for how talk in texts and conversations appeals to some kind of claimed authority to justify sustainability talks existence in retail talk.

Moral Evaluation

This category is based on appeals to moral values about what is right or wrong, rather than on reasons imposed by an authority, to construct something as legitimate. In other words, it draws attention to how talk claims legitimacy based on the notion that something is the right thing to do, to be, think. Having said that, the category is often linked to some sort of authority. The question of right and wrong, for example, is often connected to legislation, at least in theory. However, and as van Leeuwen makes clear, this is a rather difficult category to account for in a linguistic discourse analysis of this kind. The reason is that moral values often are so taken for granted that they rarely emerge explicitly in discourse (i.e., this is the morally right thing to do). Instead, words such as "natural," "responsibility," "healthy" or "safe" can be used, which implicitly draws on the belief that, for example, being "natural" is a good thing for whatever unstated reason. As van Leeuwen puts it: *"These adjectives are then the tip of a submerged iceberg of moral values."*

Ziemann (2011) describes this discursive "doing" of moral values in communication quite well: *"Each value is and means a certain preference with universal validity. Something ought to be, something else ought not; this ranking is fundamentally positive and has a desirable connotation. It stands to reason that we have a preference for freedom, justice, peace, health, conservation etc. and it seems obvious that we have attitudes or make assumptions in favour of them."* Ziemann then elaborates on this theme by citing (Luhmann, 1997, p. 343), who argues that "*Values are thus persuasive then because in communication there is a lack of objections; not because one could give reasons for them. (...) Values are the medium for the commonly held assumptions that limit what can be said and what can be wanted, without determining what should be done"* (Ziemann 2011, p. 93-94, l).

Rationalization

This category directs our gaze to how legitimacy is claimed on the basis that something is the reasonable thing to do, be or think. Van Leeuwen distinguishes between two main forms of rational legitimation techniques in discourse: *instrumental rationality,* which appeals to goals, uses and effects (i.e., we do this in order to do, be or have X) and *theoretical rationality,* which appeals to some kind of "natural" order of things (i.e., we do this because it is the way things work). The former is based on whether something is purposeful or effective in achieving a reasonable goal, while the latter instead is based on some kind of explicitly stated "truth" about "the way things are/work."

Narrativization

This category concerns how legitimation can be achieved through narratives and storytelling in which heroes and villains are created in discourse to convey that something is legitimate. This refers to the use of narratives where the outcome either rewards legitimate actions or punishes illegitimate actions. Van Leeuwen's framework primarily distinguishes between moral and cautionary tales. A moral tale involves a story in which the protagonist is rewarded in one way or another by engaging in a social practice (thus legitimating the practice), while a cautionary tale obviously tells the opposite story.

Relating the four legitimation categories

The framework that I elaborated on above will serve as a guide for the linguistic discourse analysis presented in in Chapter 5. However, it is important to note that specific pieces of text can be interpreted in different ways, which can make it difficult to categorize them into a single category, particularly given that different legitimating categories often seem to work together to build a convincing argument for sustainability engagement. For example, a moral tale about how a sustainability role model employee engages with an issue can rely on both moral and rational arguments – a story filled with arguments that are hidden under an authoritarian vail because they are spoken by an authority.

Yet I still believe that a typology of this kind can help me reduce and sort the corpus of text on which I ground the forthcoming analysis and theorization. It aids in focusing, structuring and explaining the description of how sustainability seeks legitimacy in discourse to become a legitimate feature of retail talk. I hope that this description can offer insights into how sustainability talk does things to retailing discourse and vice versa, thus contributing to answering the research questions posed in this study.

Identifying challenges for legitimation - illegitimacy

The last thing I want to better understand are the challenges of legitimating sustainability talk in retail talk according to those tasked with advocating it and those tasked with doing its biddings, thus revealing tensions that arise between what is and what ought to be (Hahn et al., 2017; Hahn et al., 2015), as well as between those tasked with undertaking MSR (Elg & Welinder, 2022): namely retail employees. To do this, I need to collect empirical material that offers clues concerning how retail employees engage with sustainability talk in their everyday work, and why they might experience this as challenging in their everyday retailing work. In other words, there are challenges involved in incorporating sustainability texts into organizing conversations and future text production. In this study, I do this by conducting interviews with retail employees and sorting the material generated according to what helps them in and hinders them from actually incorporating sustainability talk into retail talk as spoken by them. The questions of who to interview and what to ask will also be elaborated into the next chapter.

Approaching the empirical phenomenon

The three main concepts that have been developed and/or described in this chapter, with its overarching focus on the performative qualities of talk and communication, are: (1) retail talk, (2) sustainability talk and (3) legitimacy and legitimation. Together they show one way of understanding what accomplishing MSR can entail in theory, namely somehow making sustainability talk a present and legitimate feature of retail talk – making it part of, and potentially changing, already existing cultural frameworks that enable the intersubjective bedrock through which a retail organization emerges. The question is how this is accomplished empirically.

To sum up, I first need to collect empirical material containing pieces of sustainability talk intended for retail talk that extends over time, enabling me to undertake the textual analysis. This concerns texts in which legitimation techniques, and eventually legitimation strategies, can be identified and analyzed. Something I do to uncover what sustainability talk might be demanding from retail talk, and vice versa, to become part of the other. I also need to develop an overarching understanding of the legitimation process that focuses on uncovering the structural accommodations for and hindrances to making sustainability talk legitimate in retail talk. Lastly, I need to make sense of how sustainability talk travels throughout an organization and becomes part of retail talk on local levels of organizing (i.e., conversations) as well as,

importantly, why it might struggle to do so. This constitutes an approach that delves deeply to make sense of MSR – an approach that is arguably best pursued by looking at one case of the kind of legitimation process that I am focused on in this thesis – one case of making retailing more sustainable by making sustainability talk a legitimate feature of retail talk.

Method

As argued in the previous chapters, this study is built around the idea that making retailing more sustainable entails legitimizing sustainability talk in retail talk. Here, this complex and somewhat problematic feat is assumed to be difficult for retail organizations to accomplish. The purpose of the study is to reveal what these previously overlooked, or downplayed, complexities and problematic aspects of such legitimation processes might be. To do this, I first need to come to grips with the legitimation process itself when seen from a communication-centered perspective. I have done this on a general and theoretical level in the previous chapter. However, how this process actually unfolds, as well as its challenges and implications, is an essentially empirical question that calls for empirical inquiry and analysis, leading me to the following three research questions: (1) How can sustainability talk be made into a legitimate feature of retail talk throughout a retail organization? (2) What kinds of challenges might arise in the process and how can these challenges be dealt with? (3) What discursive implications might this have for the organizing of both retailing and more sustainable development?

The methods for empirical inquiry and analysis that I am proposing in this chapter are intended to help me find answers to these rather descriptive and empirically oriented research questions, findings that I disclose and argue for in the three chapters following this one. However, it should be noted that the theoretical contribution of this study does not reside in these answers alone. Rather, it lies in my interpretive discussion of what these answers mean and imply for our understanding of both more sustainable retailing and CSR talk theorizing. This discussion can be found in the concluding chapter of this thesis, where I propose three previously overlooked, or at least downplayed, complexities and problematic aspects of making retailing more sustainable and for CSR talk to legitimately occur throughout a retail organization. All three are based on the answers I find in the analytical process presented in Chapter 4, 5, and 6.

In the remainder of this chapter, I disclose the epistemological foundation and methodological choices that constitute the research method that I argue can

best help me answer the descriptive research questions posed above. Based on insights from the previous chapter, I argue for the value of studying the phenomenon by applying interpretivist assumptions of scientific research, with a single case study approach, and using qualitative methods for empirical inquiry and analysis. What follows is a description of how, and arguments for why, I went about conducting this particular study in the way I did, including a discussion of how and why I present the empirical material in the way I do. I will begin with the epistemological underpinning of the study.

Applying an interpretivist approach to scientific research

The epistemological approach to scientific research and knowledge creation that I am applying here is an interpretivist one. This means that I am not trying to observe and measure an objective reality ”out there,” but rather relying heavily on my own interpretative capabilities and intuition to understand how subjective and inter-subjective experiences of reality are socially constructed. In this study, I primarily seek these social constructions in communication that I choose to frame as sustainability “talk” and retail ”talk.” This is an epistemological position that I, and others before me (e.g. Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morgan, 1980; Stake, 2010), argue is well suited to making sense of how we socially construct the realities in which we find ourselves, and that can create the deep understanding of the empirical phenomenon that I, given the purpose of this study, am looking for. Focusing on talk, the phenomenon I want to better understand is how something (i.e., more sustainable retailing) is talked into (a legitimate) existence in the social construction of reality, and this feat requires substantial interpretation of empirical observations.

Morgan (1980, pp. 608-609) sums up the assumptions underpinning interpretive studies quite well when he writes the following: *“what passes as social reality does not exist in any concrete sense, but is the product of the subjective and inter-subjective experience of individuals […] The interpretive social theorist attempts to understand the process through which shared multiple realities arise, are sustained, and are changed.”* Put differently, the socially constructed aspects of reality, which are of interest in this study, are the largely invisible fabrics of meaning that we “dress” our sensory impressions with and eventually act upon. They are, in other words, not the

things we actually see, touch, smell, etc. Because the things we want to study with an interpretivist approach do not exist in any concrete sense, the social construction of reality needs to be studied indirectly (Haynes, 2012; Morgan, 1980). This calls for studying these things in their ”natural settings” (Denzin, 2000) by relying on my (i.e., the researcher’s) own understanding and perception of the emergent realities that I am attempting to make sense of (Stake, 2010). I am, in other words, using my own subjective reality to interpret that of others, which makes me the main ”research instrument” used to study the phenomenon of interest in this study.

An important implication of applying this approach to scientific research is the need to recognize that the interpretations I propose here are *“influenced by the assumptions of the researcher doing the research, their values, political position, use of language”* (Haynes, 2012, p. 73), because my own subjective reality is an intrinsic part of the research process. This is why the research cannot be seen as “value-free” and, for example, why I do not try to mask my own subjectivity by excluding the pronouns ”me” and ”I” in my writings. Quite the opposite. I find the inclusion of ”me" to be an important methodological point to make in this kind of research, which is why ”I” am present in the very first sentence of this written work.

The insights generated from the research process should thus be understood as more or less plausible interpretations of the research phenomenon arrived at by applying a “logic of argumentation” as opposed to a “logic of validation” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). This is not to say that the results appear out of thin air. Instead, they have to be grounded in observations of social reality, the experiences of research subjects, and be supported by theory (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). This entails building arguments by matching theory with empirical observations to arrive at transparent and plausible interpretations of the research phenomenon. For this reason, I have chosen to open each of the three empirical and analytical chapters that follow this one by stating what I claim to have found. Those chapters are then dedicated to showing how I arrived at my findings by crafting an argument based on both disclosed empirical observations and theoretical reasoning.

As mentioned, the focus of this chapter is therefore on the methodological choices I have made to gather the empirical material on which I base these arguments and findings. These choices are inspired by the theoretical vantage point and conceptual framework developed in the previous chapter, which I also make use of in the chapters to come.

A single case study approach

A single case study approach to conducting empirical research entails studying "the specific one," rather than studying how multiple retail organizations (i.e., multiple cases) in general legitimate sustainability talk in retail talk (Eisenhardt, 1989; Ragin, 1992; Stake, 2000). This means that I am interested in studying a particular example of how this is done and in generalizing what I see using theory rather than multiple empirical examples. The main reason for applying a single case study approach in this thesis is that context-dependent knowledge is of most value in answering the research questions arrived at in the opening chapter (Flyvbjerg, 2006). I have two main reasons for this belief.

To begin with, case studies are often suggested as a good means for empirically exploring a phenomenon that we know relatively little about (Eisenhardt, 1989). As argued for in the introduction chapter, there is still relatively little empirical research on how business organizations, in general, and retail organizations, in particular, work to make sustainability (talk) a legitimate and performative aspect of retailing (talk) among retail employees. If we are to empirically understand this phenomenon, a deep exploration of such work is called for. An in-depth case study helps in fulfilling this aim, as it has the potential to generate unique and detailed insights into the assumed complexities associated with the phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Second, the research questions guiding this study, when based on the theoretical perspective taken here, are themselves context dependent. Many of the common understandings that help structure and direct the nature of organizational communication are more or less unique to the particular organization in question. In other words, unique firm characteristics, such as intended consumers, geographical location(s), organizational history and culture, etc., can be assumed to entail specific limitations and opportunities regarding how sustainability can be talked about and best be legitimized in a particular retail organization. A detailed description of the case in question is therefore important for understanding how the findings of this study might be applicable to other contexts (Stake, 2000).

To fulfill the purpose of this study, the case has to be an example of the following: a retail organization that is attempting to make sustainability talk a legitimate feature of retail talk. But what is a case? Stake (2000, p. 436) argues that *"boundedness and behavior patterns are useful concepts for specifying the case."* Based on the conceptual framework presented in the previous

chapter, the bounded system under investigation here can be understood as the retail talk that constitutes the organizing of a particular retail organization. However, it is not a retail organization per se that is of primary concern in this study, meaning that the particular retail organization chosen only constitutes one organization, or one site, in which the phenomenon of interest is unfolding (i.e., the legitimation of sustainability talk in retail talk). Instead, it is a retail organization's attempt to legitimate sustainability talk with its version of retail talk that is of primary concern. I therefore call the case in question "a retail organization's sustainability journey," putting particular focus on something unfolding over time, as well as the communicative aspects of such a journey. On a material level, the case in question is hence communication (i.e., texts and conversations) (Taylor & Van Every, 2000) around the theme of sustainability within the bounded system of organizational communication that makes up a particular retail organization.

Introducing the case - IKEA's sustainability journey

The organizational context in which the case itself is situated (i.e., a sustainability journey) is the large multinational retail organization IKEA, which mainly sells home furnishing products under its own low-cost brand. The focus is primarily on its biggest franchisee Ingka Group, formally known as IKEA Group, which is responsible for most of IKEA's retail operations by contributing about 90% of IKEA's total retail sales (Ingka-Group, 2021). The traditional store concept is recognizable throughout the world, the stores looking like big blue and yellow boxes and often being located in the outskirts of cities. The store assortment is partly presented as display spaces showing decorated "homes." Key to the concept is that the customers do most of the "work" involved in purchasing furniture, such as collecting the purchases in store warehouses and then assembling the products themselves at home.

With measures like these, IKEA has successfully positioned itself as a low-cost brand with the vision of "creating a better everyday life for the many people." In their sustainability report covering fiscal year (IKEA, 2021), it is stated that IKEA has around 225,000 people employed, operating on 61 retail markets, and from around 1600 suppliers, selling an assortment of around 9500 products, in 458 retail stores, with 775 million store visits, 5 billion website visits, generating €41.9 billion in revenues. Given the sheer size of its operations, IKEA is unquestionably a large multinational retail corporation that can play a significant role in how its customers and other organizations pursue more sustainable development. How IKEA as a retail organization, and

employees of that organization, talk about sustainability might thus have ripple effects along many different supply chains and consumer markets.

IKEA is made up of many different business entities with different responsibilities. They can broadly be depicted as operating in three different areas: ownership, assortment and supply, and retail operations. The ultimate control and ownership of IKEA is Stitching Ingka Foundation, which can only use its earnings for charity or reinvestment in IKEA operations. This foundation owns Inka Holdings B.V., which in turn owns, among other things, Inter IKEA Holding B.V. This entity has four core business areas. First, we have Inter IKEA systems, which is the owner of the IKEA concept and worldwide franchisor. Second, there is IKEA Industry, which is responsible for producing much of the furniture sold in IKEA stores. Third, there is IKEA of Sweden (IOS), which is responsible for product development and still has its headquarters in Älmhult, Sweden, where IKEA was founded. Fourth, there is IKEA Supply, which is responsible for sourcing and supplying IKEA stores. All four entities have a crucial responsibility for realizing IKEA's sustainability aspirations. In terms of retail firms being positioned between consumption and production, these operational entities can be seen as mainly positioned on *the production side of things*. In terms of sustainability and CSR then, Inter IKEA Group is responsible for codes of conduct and compliance in the supply chain, more sustainable sourcing of natural resources, and not least designing more sustainable products.

As mentioned, the interviews, documents, and observations that make up the empirical material analyzed in this study largely stem from Ingka Group, the largest of IKEA's 12 franchisees, operating 392 stores on 32 retail markets. During the part of IKEA's sustainability journey that is accounted for in this study, functions such as marketing, PR, and Communication were run within INGKA Group and most of what we see of IKEA as laymen is the result of work processes within this organization, which is naturally dependent on the work being done on at the production side of things. However, as of 31 August 2016, one day before I started my PhD studies, a major transaction took place within this constellation of responsibilities and organizations. IKEA of Sweden, IKEA Range and Supply, and IKEA Industry were transferred from Ingka Group and instead became part of Inter IKEA Group. In other words, key operational areas for sustainability work within IKEA had, up until "the transaction" (as it is referred to internally), been the responsibility of Ingka Group. This is important to keep in mind for two reasons. First, the fact that I have focused on Ingka Group despite key responsibilities being within Inter IKEA Group might cause confusion in a longitudinal study. Clearly, a break

in the timeline in late 2016 early 2017 should also be kept in mind when considering the context. Second, and over time, much of the sustainability coordination now happens within Inter IKEA Systems, and the organization's sustainability is now commissioned by Inter IKEA Group.

During the course of collecting the empirical material for this study, Ingka Group was managed through a complex matrix structure tied to strategic level functions such as retail, human resources, communication, and sustainability, which, on a more operational level, were managed through geographically distributed and decentralized service offices on the markets where Ingka Group works with supporting retail stores, managing local communication and sales. Though they are different operational entities, especially IOS and Ingka Group were in tight collaboration in that they coordinated sales of products and product development. Ingka Group's sustainability work was planned, organized and to some extent executed by a team at Ingka Group called Group Sustainability, ultimately led by the Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO). The group functioned as a kind of support function for other functions and is responsible for producing, or at least ordering the production of, much of the documents analyzed here. It is also with the help of Group Sustainability that I gained access to all the empirical material presented in later sections of this chapter.

What is it that makes IKEA a good case context in which to study the legitimation of sustainability talk in retail talk? The short answer is that it is a large retail organization that is attempting to make sustainability talk a legitimate feature of retail talk. I believe this answer must be seen in light of the rather inductive, or perhaps abductive, approach taken in this study, meaning that the research questions and purpose of this study have grown out of a constant iterative process moving between theory and empirics (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). The interests and theories that guide this study are thus results of a rather unstructured matching between reading up on theory and previous research, coupled with continuous interaction with the empirical material presented below

Some aspects, however, do make IKEA especially interesting to look at in this research context. IKEA can potentially have a great impact in the form of contributing to more sustainable development due to the size of its operations; it shares many of the characteristics of retailing discussed in Chapter 1; it has a relatively integrated value chain with tight control of operations among suppliers; and it is often described as a good example and a "good" company, especially in Sweden. In 2022, for example, IKEA was voted Sweden's most sustainable company by Swedish consumers according to the ranking by

Sustainable Brand Index (Sustainable-Brand-Index, 2022). It appears as if IKEA owns a brand that, among Swedish consumers at least, has an associative foundation that seems suitable for pursuing a "green" market position. IKEA also has a strong organizational culture, where the idea of doing good while being big can be dated back at least to the founder's "Testament of a Furniture Dealer" – a document with almost biblical status at IKEA. These aspects of the case in question are important to keep in mind when applying insights from this study to other contexts.

Finally, it is important to note here that this study explores IKEA's sustainability journey between 1992-2017. 2017 is chosen as the end date in part for three reasons. The main reason is the transaction that occurred in 2016 and that started having implications for how sustainability was managed from 2017 onwards. Though the transaction was made in 2016, interviewees often saw the management of sustainability as "falling between the cracks," and as late as 2017 they did not have a clear idea of where the "ownership" of sustainability issues would land. The two other reasons for limiting this investigation to 2017 is that it is the last full year accounted for in the empirical material, since the last interviews were conducted for this study during spring 2018 and the last documents analyzed were published.

This is all important to keep in mind, as the sustainability work discussed in the interviews and documents analyzed below must be understood as products of their time. The topics, issues and solutions mediated in sustainability talk are constantly evolving and are, in that sense, a moving target. New ways of talking about, managing and evaluating sustainability, in general, and at IKEA, in particular, are thus likely to have emerged since the empirical material was collected for this study as well as in the work lives of those interviewed. The point here is that, although I will speak of IKEA's sustainability talk in the present tense below, my arguments are in fact built on observations of the past. Statements from interviewees and in documents should therefore be conceived of as remnants of the past, not products of the present.

Collecting the empirical material

When I embarked on the journey towards my doctoral dissertation, access to IKEA's sustainability team had already been secured by the two researchers who hired me, my two supervisors Ulf Elg and Jens Hultman. From the very start, I was almost "thrown into the field" and conducted my first interview just

two weeks into my PhD studies. Me entering and navigating "the field" has thus largely been an inductive, or at least abductive, approach, involving constant iterations between fieldwork and literature studies. Because of this, it is hard to separate empirical inquiry from analysis, and to separate knowledge gained through empirical observations from that gained through theoretical readings. Nonetheless, the discussions below are meant to give an idea of how I first collected the empirical material, and later analyzed it.

Qualitative methods empirical inquiry and analysis

Clearly, this study can be seen as applying qualitative methods to empirically explore the phenomenon of interest. Qualitative research methods, such as collecting and analyzing documents, fieldnotes from participant observations, and semi-structured interviews, are generally used to generate "rich" empirical material that can be analyzed by using a more or less inductive approach to theorization (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Stake, 2010). I find this richness necessary to answer the research questions guiding this study, which is all about understanding *how* something happens, including the challenges and implications of this "how."

However, the large amount of unstructured "data" that grants qualitative material its potential "richness" also means that the data will not speak for itself (Alvesson, 2010; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Instead, the material has to be sorted, reduced and analyzed in relation to theory by the researcher if it is to "say something" about the researched phenomenon (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). Qualitative research methods are thus far from "value-free" research ideals and are instead closely coupled with the interpretivist epistemology argued for above (Guba and Lincoln 1994).

The task of qualitative researchers is to "*study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them"* (Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 3). This connection becomes even more evident in Stake's (2010, p.11) attempt to describe qualitative research methods, noting that *"[...] each of the divisions of science also has a qualitative side, in which personal experience, intuition, and skepticism work alongside each other to help refine the theories and experiments. By qualitative we mean that it relies primarily on human perception and understanding."* This is in sharp contrast to the more positivistic and realist assumptions guiding quantitative methods, which rely "*heavily on linear attributes, measurements, and statistical analysis"* (Stake 2010, p. 11).

Qualitative research methods are more in line not only with the philosophical underpinnings of this study and its theoretical framework, but also with its research questions and purpose. With their interpretivist foundation, qualitative research methods allow me to approach the phenomenon from many different angles and subjective experiences of it. Given the richness of empirical material collected using qualitative methods, I find that such methods are well suited to investigating the legitimation of sustainability talk in retail talk. The main reason for choosing qualitative methods in this study is thus their potential to provide a thorough empirical basis for gaining and grounding the holistic and communication-centered theorizing that I am striving for in this thesis. Below I discuss the particular kind of qualitative methodologies used in this study.

Document studies

Documents, seen as a kind of text, play a crucial role in structuring the work that goes on in organizations (Cooren, 2004). As discussed in previous chapters, texts are important to study when one is trying to understand how both sustainability and retailing are constituted in discourse (Taylor & Van Every, 2000), especially because texts can be seen as possessing a level of agency in the sense of spawning and structuring conversations about, for example, more sustainable retailing (Cooren, 2004). Further, the communication found in documents can be seen as talk that has been "frozen in time" (Lee, 2012), allowing me to study how sustainability talk, as represented and legitimized in retail talk, has changed over time and giving me more insights into the legitimation *process* that I am interested in here.

What it means to undertake document studies is straightforward, it is a matter of studying documents. However, things get a bit more complicated when questions are asked about what a document is, why you are studying it, and how one can go about studying it. There is no single correct definition of what a document is. Instead it is necessary to explain how I use the term in this particular study (Lee, 2012). When I refer to the 35 documents (with a total of 1617 pages) here, I mean internal and external communication material used to say something about sustainability in relation to IKEA. In short, documents are physically or digitally available pieces of text and other symbols in which the legitimacy of sustainability talk, in general, and IKEA's engagement with it, in particular, are justified and explained. This can be, for example, documents that report on IKEA's social and environmental impact, documents about how consumers perceive IKEA in relation to sustainability, about how

stores should communicate sustainability to customers, or a power point presentation used to teach employees about sustainability (for a complete list of documents analyzed, see Appendix 1).

All of these documents share two characteristics that are of crucial importance to this study. First of all, and as briefly mentioned, documents are, unlike interview transcripts and observation fieldnotes, not bound to the time and place of their production (Lee, 2012), which makes them good sources for conducting a longitudinal study of sustainability talk in retail talk (i.e., the process of legitimizing the former in the latter). Second, the actual texts that appear in documents, unlike fieldnotes and interview transcripts, are "unstained" by my hands as a researcher (Svensson, 2019). That is, the reality constructions and justifications found in document texts were created prior to my reading of them and thus were not influenced by me directly. The text of an interview transcript, on the other hand, is the result of a discursive interaction with between the researcher and the respondent. The researcher, thus, has a considerable influence on how sustainability is talked about in the interview situation (Alvesson, 2010). Documents, on the other hand, can be read more as material that can explicate the discursive workings of IKEA "alone." This renders documents especially suitable for grounding discussions related to the second research question, which is concerned with the discursive implications of making sustainability talk a legitimate aspect of retail talk.

These are the two main reasons why document studies will be the primary empirical grounding for the forthcoming analysis of how IKEA works with communication to legitimize sustainability talk, including how this has changed over time. What I am primarily looking for in these documents are thus genuine and chronologically ordered justifications of sustainability talk in retail talk, as explained in the previous chapter, with reference to, for example (Van Leeuwen, 2007). This analysis is undertaken in Chapter 5 below.

The table in Appendix 1 provides a complete overview of documents collected for this study, with titles of documents, document type prescribed to them by me based on content, as well as number of pages amounting to a total of 1617 pages. The most notable documents in this collection are the sustainability reports, which is something of a favorite document type for CSR communication researchers to study (Adams & McNicholas, 2007; Busco et al., 2018). Sustainability reports, or social and environmental reports as they were called at IKEA up until 2008, are publicly available documents prepared for a very broad target audience. As will be shown in Chapter 5, the documents are packed with sustainability-related information and rhetorical techniques to discursively "dress" the information conveyed, making them especially

interesting for the purpose of this study. Given the focus on employees as the main stakeholder of interest in this study, educational and other internal documents are also of special value.

Participant Observations

With documents being the bulk of the empirical material used for describing the development of IKEA's sustainability talk over time, observations are made to see how this talk is used within IKEA. Participant observation is generally a method used to gain knowledge about the field by participating in organizational activities and taking fieldnotes to record what is observed by the researcher (Brannan & Oultram, 2012). Given its "experiential core," participant observations allows me to record more than language use and to include things such as audience reactions to different statements in a presentation, visual symbols used to reinforce the message, and tone of voice, etc.

There are two main reasons for conducting participant observations in this study. First, it gives me glimpses into how the texts found in the analyzed documents are actually deployed in conversations – glimpses that, together with the interview material discussed next, can provide clues to how sustainability talk becomes part of the text-conversation cycles that make up IKEA's retail talk (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Second, it allows me to observe "contextual elements" of some of the sites in which sustainability talk is spoken as an element of retail talk. As discussed in Chapter 2, context is an important aspect of studying talk itself (Fairclough, 2013), because it "enriches" the other forms of empirical material analyzed in this study.

I have conducted 3 participant observations of internal meetings and presentations, producing 12 pages of fieldnotes to study the use of sustainability talk directly (for a complete list of participant observations, see Appendix 1). In addition to these observations, which are especially valuable for the contextual purpose of making observations, fieldnotes and photos have also been taken during what could be called "store sweeps" and interviews. Store sweeps occurred when I and/or colleagues cataloged pieces of sustainability talk in IKEA stores in Sweden, England, and Ireland, often doing so in relation to conducting interviews with IKEA employees. Similarly, short fieldnotes of observations made during and or around the interviews have also been made. These field notes are not included in the table provided in Appendix 1, but are instead included in the pages of interview transcripts below. These two forms of observations have not been subject to any kind of rigorous analysis. Producing them has, nonetheless, influenced my

interpretations of that material, which has helped me make sense of the context. For example when observing how sustainability communication is used (and especially not used) in store practice, and in relation to making sense of the "IKEA culture" that is often referred to in both interviews and documents.

Participant observations may differ depending on the amount of "participation" that one engages in when observing, and for this study I have conducted what perhaps can be called "complete observer" observations (Brannan & Oultram, 2012). This means that I have been "like a fly on the wall," taking notes while employees discuss or present different aspects of IKEA in relation to the organization's sustainability strategy without my direct interference. It should be noted, however, that my presence may have had an indirect influence on how the observed participants talk and behave (Brannan & Oultram, 2012). It should also be mentioned that the observations undertaken in this study admittedly offer a rather limited set of empirical material, especially regarding complementing the interview material discussed next. Nonetheless, one observation in particular has proved important for the "political performativity" of sustainability talk in retail talk found in Chapter 5. This is an observation from 2017, when a senior sustainability manager is giving a "goodbye speech" at an IKEA office in Malmö, Sweden. This observation is partially accounted for in Chapter 5 to argue for this finding.

Interviews

By conducting semi-structured interviews with IKEA employees, I seek empirical material consisting of several retrospective accounts of encountering, making sense of, and enacting sustainability talk in relation to different employees' everyday work at IKEA. This "enriches" the empirical material, as semi-structured interviews are acknowledged for their potential to provide many different subjective (and intersubjective) perspectives on a specific research phenomenon (Alvesson & Ashdraft, 2012). The primary reason for such enrichment is to understand *how* sustainability becomes a legitimate part of that person's everyday retail talk, and perhaps more importantly, why it does not. In a sense, this involves making discursive justifications for, or for not, talking the sustainability talk in retail talk, and making sustainability texts part of organizing communication, thus primarily helping me answer the first and third research questions (i.e., the *how*, the challenges, and dealing with the challenges).

Except for the more explicit analytical focus on how sustainability talk is or is not legitimated, the interviews also help to provide context for the language

use studied in documents. That is to say that interaction with many of the interviewees has helped me as a researcher gradually build up an understanding of the case itself (i.e., IKEA and its sustainability journey), and its chronology. Not necessarily through formal and rigorous analysis, but by continuously making sense of "the field" in which I find myself. In this way, my own understanding of both the case context and research phenomenon has gradually developed over the course of conducting the interviews, coupled with reading up on previous research and theory, studying newspaper articles from critical points of IKEAs sustainability journey found in Lund University Library databases, as well as writing this manuscript itself. My ambition is to share the most interesting and important aspects of this experience in relation to the purpose of this study and to ground them in transcripts from these interviews, thus enabling me to "dress" the phenomenon in its organizational context as experienced by me and my interpretation of the interviewees' experiences.

Many different interview techniques can be applied to attain different types of information from interviewees, these range from neo-positivism, which is a rather structured interview technique, to un-structured and open interviews, such as romantic interviews (Alvesson, 2010; Alvesson & Ashdraft, 2012). In this study, I use semi-structured interviews, meaning that I prepare the interview by drafting an interview guide with a set of questions organized into themes that I wish to hear each interviewee's perspective on. In other words, I do not follow a strict interview script. Instead, I structure questions according to general themes, in this way leaving room for unanticipated follow-up questions and even for new themes to emerge in the interview situation.

The bulk of the empirical material presented and discussed in this section deals with fieldnotes and transcripts from semi-structured interviews conducted with employees who have various responsibilities, working at different levels and positions, mainly at IKEA Group. In this study, a total of 47 interviews have been conducted, with a total of 50 interviewees, amounting to 35 hours and 10 minutes of recorded material, and 683 transcription pages (for a complete list of interviews, see Appendix 1). The interviews have been conducted by me, Axel Welinder, two research colleagues Professor Ulf Elg and Professor Jens Hultman, and the two Master Students Luis Ibekken and Oliver Åkerman.

Table 1: Number and type of interviewees

Organizational Level	Sustainability Professionals	Communicators	Sales Employees	General Managers	Total
Global	9	7	0	1	17
Country	5	3	2	0	10
Store	1	1	18	3	23
Total	15	11	20	4	**50**

In line with the larger research project encompassing this PhD project, the interviews mainly revolve around how sustainability and sustainability communication are managed within IKEA. That entails, broadly, how employees hear about, spread, or otherwise work with sustainability and sustainability communication, what it is that helps or hinders them for communicating, doing or otherwise integrating sustainability (talk) in their everyday retailing work, and how "sustainability work" has changed in relation to IKEA and employees' particular line of work over time. We have mainly interviewed sustainability, kitchen, and/or communication managers at the global, country (Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Germany), and to some extent store level (stores in Sweden and Germany). The material also includes interviews with general store managers and employees with a special focus on communication and kitchen employees.

All interviews have been digitally recorded with the consent of the respondents and transcribed by a researcher working in the project. The interviewees were promised that the recordings and transcripts would only be read by the researchers, except for extracts used in publications following the direct consent from IKEA representatives. All of this is in accordance with the confidentiality agreement signed with IKEA Group. Most participants had no problem with the interview being recorded, and those who were hesitant were informed about and offered a copy of the confidentiality agreement to establish the necessary confidence and trust.

In some cases, the interviewees asked not to disclose confidential information brought up in the interview for reasons of competition, for example the themes of upcoming campaigns. In such cases, the recorder was turned off and/or a promise was made not to disclose what they believed to be sensitive information. Other risks respondents might identify are disclosure of personal, and possibly controversial, opinions expressed in relation to the inherently moral nature of sustainability talk (Schultz 2013). Being interviewed may also be associated with personal and career stakes if respondents choose to talk

about IKEA and other employees in rather critical and negatives tones, which many did. To establish and honor the trust necessary to create an open atmosphere during the interview situation, I choose to keep interviewees as anonymous as possible, especially in relation to the extracts drawn from the interview material and used in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. This must always be weighed against the potential harms this might do to the credibility of the study. Moreover, the compromise made by me is that I only refer to respondents as either Sustainability Professionals, Communicators, Sales Employees, or Other. I also include the season (spring or fall) and the year the interview was conducted (e.g. Spring 2017).

Sustainability Professionals

With sustainability being part of these respondents' work titles, they all have different aspects of IKEA's sustainability strategy as their key responsibility. What this implies in more concrete terms varies, but broadly speaking, responsibilities have included: senior sustainability managers with overarching responsibility for the sustainability strategy and other sustainability professionals; sustainability communicators responsible for communicating sustainability externally and internally by, for example, issuing the annual sustainability report, gathering sustainability stories, and getting people to use the communication material used. What I term general sustainability professionals can be viewed as internal "change agents," responsible for things such as engaging co-workers by visiting stores and holding sustainability-related workshops or training programs. Finally, we have interviewed a so-called sustainability coordinator at the store level, a store employee with part-time responsibility for the store's sustainability work.

Communicators

Given this study's focus on how sustainability is communicated and talked about within IKEA, interviewing communication managers has proved fruitful. These interviewees work with different aspects of communication without a specific focus on sustainability. This is what makes these interviews valuable. According to the sustainability managers, it is ideally the responsibility of communication managers to ensure that the "sustainability message" is spread from and throughout the organization.

Some of these interviewees work at COMIN, an internal function responsible for communication and decorations in the store. Thus playing a central role in how the IKEA stores look when customers walk through them. The interviewees worked at all three levels of IKEA Group, and the questions

mainly revolved around difficulties or benefits associated with sustainability-related communication in stores. Creative hub communicators essentially serve as a kind of internal communication firm to which other functions can send briefs and from which they can order communication. These interviewees were asked about how they integrated sustainability with their work and about their relation to Group Sustainability. Other communicators have an overarching responsibility for communicating a consistent message across channels and markets (i.e., corporate communication; see, e.g., Christensen and Cornelissen (2011). Here questions revolved around how sustainability could be used for IKEA's global brand positioning, and the difficulty of creating a consistent sustainability message that resonates well across markets. Marketing directors at the country level were also interviewed, because they have the overarching responsibility for how the IKEA brand is communicated on their designated markets.

Sales Employees

As mentioned, at the country level, we also focused on how employees in the kitchen department, who are highly engaged in sales, dealt with sustainability and sustainability-related communication in their everyday work. They can be seen as being part of one of many functions that have to make sense of how to make sustainability talk an actual aspect of their work. These interviews mainly revolved around how this integration happens, has changed, and how they work with sustainability communication in the kitchen department generally. Especially interesting in these interviews are the tensions between their main responsibility of selling as much as possible and, at the same time, advocating for sustainable consumption.

Several employees working mainly on the sales floor in the kitchen department, but also in other departments, were interviewed to get their perspectives on sustainability at IKEA and how they use it in customer interactions. These interviews took a more structured approach so that interviews could be compared, as the interviewees had similar work tasks and the interviews were mainly conducted by two students for their master thesis. The interviews largely revolved around store employees' views of IKEA in general, before going into more sustainability-specific questions, finally asking whether and how they communicated sustainability with customers. In this way, we could see whether or not sustainability came up "naturally" as an important aspect of their work. So-called "shop keepers" or store-based team leaders for the kitchen department were also interviewed, as they are immediate managers for most kitchen employees and thus also play a crucial

role in "setting the tone" here. As they are the immediate managers for most kitchen sales employees and thus also play a crucial role in “setting the tone” here.

General Management

The interviews below also include store managers who have the overarching responsibility for particular, rather autonomous stores. These store managers largely “set the tone” for how to talk about sustainability within their stores and how it should be prioritized in relation to other issues.

Descriptions that cover the first phase of the IKEA sustainability journey are based heavily on mainly three respondents’ accounts of the sequence of events presented at the beginning of Chapter 4. One respondent in particular played a key role in this phase, and the description should therefore be seen as mainly stemming from a conversational interview with this respondent.

Some interviews were conducted in Swedish when the researcher and the respondents shared Swedish as their native language. Some of the quotes presented below have therefore been translated by a professional translator. However, as the translator pointed out, it is sometimes difficult to translate spoken language. Some things risk getting lost in translation – a risk I hope to mitigate by discussing the examples used in the following chapters.

Analyzing the empirical material

The analytic procedure used to make sense of this empirical material can be seen as inspired by mainly Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) ideas for analyzing qualitative empirical material (sorting, reducing, arguing), and unfolding in four stages: (1) building a chronological sustainability journey narrative (grounded in documents, interviews, and newspaper articles), (2) identifying legitimation strategies and supporting reality constructions in official IKEA sustainability communication (grounded mainly in documents, though to a certain degree in interviews and observations as well), (3) understanding how sustainability talk is developed and spread by sustainability professionals and others (grounded in interview transcripts and observational fieldnotes), and (4) understanding how other retail employees find sustainability talk legitimate or illegitimate in relation to their work (grounded in interview transcripts). All of the above was done while applying the ideas and concepts discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

Analytical stage one- Building a case narrative

In the first stage of the analysis, I wanted to get an overview of the case in question (i.e., IKEA's sustainability journey), meaning that I wanted to understand this journey in chronological order and divide it into different "phases." This primarily helped me answer the first and how-oriented research question at an organizational level of analysis, which I did by putting parts of both documents and interview transcripts that dealt with "changes over time" in chronological order, and relating them to Johnson et al. (2006) legitimation stages (discussed in Chapter 2). An analysis that I also complemented with newspaper articles from Swedish newspapers published during important points in time of IKEAs sustainability journey. All in all, I identified three overarching phases in IKEA's sustainability.

All phases are described in Chapter 4 and can be understood as something of a "social context description" that helps put the texts analyzed in Chapter 5 into context, hence refining the document study by helping to explain the kind of structural changes undertaken to facilitate the legitimation process of interest here (e.g., hiring "sustainability professionals" and building up an internal team around sustainability talk). I then relate these changes to findings from previous retail research and CSR talk theorizing.

The first phase is called "How it all started" and stretches from around 1992 to 2002. It is during this time that IKEA employees explicitly start talking about the organization's social and environmental responsibilities and, so to speak, bring the perspectives of sustainability talk into the organization. This is similar to Johnson et al. (2006) "initial legitimation stage," which was discussed in the previous chapter. As mentioned above, it should be noted that the description of this phase is mainly based on a conversation I had with a respondent who played a key role in this phase. Some of what the respondent reported has been confirmed, and nothing ever contested, by other respondents, particularly by a former CEO at IKEA who also played an important role in this stage of IKEA's sustainability journey.

The second phase (2003-2009) of IKEA's sustainability journey is called "Cementing the legitimacy of sustainability talk" and starts when internal sustainability functions within IKEA are endorsed and put into place by top management. This function then starts to produce various texts that begin to constitute and structure sustainability talk at IKEA, enabling me to engage in a discourse analysis of sustainability communication at IKEA from this phase onwards. The function also implemented the changes implied by this kind of

sustainability talk and started to change aspects of how IKEA organized its retail operations (mainly on the production side).

The third phase (2010-2017) is called "Integrating sustainability talk" and starts when IKEA began launching explicit sustainability strategies in 2010. That and subsequent strategies explicitly state that sustainability will become an integrated aspect of what IKEA does and how. This phase is therefore the main phase of interest, given the purpose of this thesis. It is also the phase from which I have the richest empirical material, given that the interviews were conducted during this phase.

Analytical stage two - Legitimation in sustainability talk

In accordance with the description of legitimation in discourse and communication provided in the previous chapter, the first step in this stage of the analysis was to search for justifications in the acquired documents. Finding and analyzing these justifications, and the assumptions and reality constructions that support them, primarily help me answer the second research question, which is concerned with the discursive implications of legitimizing sustainability talk in retail talk. What I did was to go through the corpus of texts and look for legitimation techniques used in them. When I found justifications in the texts, I coded these strings of texts according to: (1) year of production, (2) type of text, and (3) kinds of justifications provided, according to Van Leeuwen (2007) organizing framework (i.e., authoritarian, moral, rational or narrativization). This analysis was based on empirical material that is representative of sustainability talk in Phase 2 and 3 of IKEA's sustainability journey. The reason why I only account for two of three phases described in the previous analytical stage is, as shown in that stage, that it is not until the second phase that principal texts constituting sustainability talk at IKEA began being produced. The document analysis is therefore not undertaken until Phase 2 onwards. The first phase described in Chapter 4 is therefore very much based on interviews with people who worked at IKEA at the time.

Nonetheless, this coding scheme allowed me to go through and compare how sustainability talk is legitimated in these different texts according to the four generic legitimating categories, and to observe how each has changed over time. Going through each category, I began identifying themes, or techniques, in the different references in the material and incorporated them into a first draft of chapter 5. This means that I wrote about and explained the techniques (mainly for myself), went back to the empirical material, then refined and/or

combined technique in text form. Here, both documents and interviews proved helpful complements to the document studies, which is why extracts from these forms of empirical material also are used in chapter 5. This continued until I identified the twelve empirically grounded legitimation *techniques* presented in Chapter 5, eventually leading me to four legitimation *strategies* that better explain how the generic *categories* formulated by Van Leeuwen (2007) take shape in the legitimation of sustainability talk in retail talk.

Analytical stage three - Spreading sustainability talk

Having an idea of what is being talked about, I am also interested in understanding how sustainability talk "travels" throughout the organization, that is,. how sustainability professionals actually work to produce and disseminate sustainability texts at IKEA. Thus, allowing me to provide a more in-depth answer to the how-oriented and first research question and to tie organizational-level insights to more conversational-level insights. This entailed figuring out how sustainability communication is created and how it (ideally) "flows" through the organization, which are important things to study given the problematization of especially CSR talk theorizing in Chapter 1, and in line with the discourse analytical ideas presented in Chapter 2 (Oswick et al., 2000; Phillips & Oswick, 2012).

As an initial reduction of the material, I mainly focused on interviews with sustainability professionals in this stage of the analysis. I specifically focused on parts of these interviews when they talked about how they produced and/or spread sustainability communication. As in the previous stages, writing up the results was very much an iterative process of moving between the empirical material, text production, previous research and theory. The insights gained are presented in Chapter 6 as three different forms of internal sustainability communication that help explain how sustainability talk can potentially become part of organizing conversations, and why it might struggle to do so.

Analytical stage four - Sustainability talk as (il)legitimate

In this final stage of the analysis, I first focused on the challenges of "spreading the sustainability talk," and then legitimizing it, as experienced by those in charge of doing this work (i.e., sustainability professionals). I also looked at what they experienced as helping them in these endeavors. Accordingly, I went through the interview transcript looking for and coding what they saw as helping or hindering them in this work.

I then did the same for interviews with non-sustainability professionals, whom I categorized according to their main responsibilities (i.e., communicator, sales employee or general manager), and the organizational level on which they worked (i.e., global, country and store level). In this way, I can see how these different employees claim to experience sustainability talk in relation to their work, and their employer, and identify why and how they deemed it legitimate or illegitimate in general and in relation to certain situations brought up during the interview. This enabled me to make a comparison between the challenges experienced by sustainability professionals, communicators, sales employees and general managers, eventually leading me to the main challenge of relevance, integrated forms of sustainability communication, and the concept of "business hooks" as ways of dealing with this challenge. These findings are presented in Chapter 6 and primarily help in answering the third research question, which is concerned with challenges and how they are dealt with.

Limitations

Although this study, as discussed above, offers some valuable insights that contribute to both retail research on more sustainable retailing and CSR talk theorizing, it does have some limitations. To begin with, the empirical part of the study is based on one case of attempting to make sustainability talk a legitimate feature of retail talk. Though my hope is that the findings derived from this case offer concepts that can help make better sense of other examples, such processes are still likely to look different in other cases. In relation to this limitation, I would also like to stress that the case explored here concerns a very large and multinational retail organization that has existed for quite some time. It is, in other words, an organization that is attempting to go from less sustainable ways of organizing to other, more sustainable ways of doing the same. Another important limitation of the study undertaken here is that its observations are derived from retroactive accounts of engaging with sustainability talk in different ways, with only few and very talk-focused observations of actual employee behavior in relation to sustainability talk in retail talk.

Outline of the empirical analysis, findings and conclusion

Now that I have explained why studying more sustainable retailing from a CSR as communication perspective helps us better understand both (Chapter 1), and what it is I ought to be looking for and how (Chapter 2), and disclosed how I went about conducting this particular empirical study (Chapter 3), we can now turn to the presentation of the analysis and findings as such (Chapter 4, 5, 6), as well as the conclusions that can be drawn from them (Chapter 7). This part of this thesis thus entails taking a deep dive into the empirical world of making sustainability talk a legitimate feature of retail talk in the case of IKEA's sustainability journey and then surfacing with a greater understanding of what is actually required to talk more sustainable retailing into existence, the complexities involved, and the problematic aspects of such endeavors.

The three chapters that follow should be seen as both empirical and analytical, meaning that I have more or less collapsed the presentation of empirical material with the analysis of that material. I argue for three overarching findings that help answer the three research questions posed in Chapter 1. I therefore title each chapter based on the main finding(s) discussed in them. Each chapter begins by first stating the purpose of the analysis made in the chapter, followed by a description of the results I propose can be found through the analysis, with the remainder of the chapter then being dedicated to showing how I arrived at the presented findings. My intention, however, is to make a clear distinction between what is "said" in the empirical material and what I say about it (i.e., the analysis of what is being said).

Based on these insights, as well as the argumentation and empirical material on which they are based, I close this study with a chapter in which I discuss what we can conclude about the complex and problematic aspects of making retailing more sustainable, and for CSR talk to enjoy, or not enjoy, a legitimate presence throughout an organization. In this way, I underline the kinds of contributions that this study makes to both CSR talk theorizing and research on more sustainable retailing. Moreover, I suggest areas for future research based on both these contributions and the limitations of the study.

Developing a Corporate Sustainability Discourse (CSD)

Trying to answer the overarching question of *how* retailing is made more sustainable on an organizational level of analysis, and using the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2, I use this chapter to argue for the finding presented here. Namely that a central aspect of accomplishing MSR can be for the organization to develop its own kind of sustainability talk, or, as I propose to conceptualize it here, develop a Corporate Sustainability Discourse (CSD). This kind of talk – through the production and authorization of sustainability texts as well as their ties to other important organizational texts – relates and connects general sustainability talk in the public debate to the particular retail organization in question, thus developing into a system of thought, or discourse, around MSR. This dictates when, how and why a sustainability mindset ought to be talked into existence in retail talk. This is the kind of discourse that, as presented in IKEA's sustainability texts, is explored further in Chapter 5.

Another way of understanding this kind of discursive activity is as a continuous social process through which two previously rather different kinds of talk come to produce a third kind of talk. In this sense, the concept of a CSD essentially depicts a kind of fusing mechanism that, through intertextuality and interdiscursivity between two overarching discourses (i.e., sustainability talk and retail talk), creates a third, potentially reorganizing, corporate-specific kind of sustainability discourse. This CSD thus acts as a communicative link that connects macro-aspects of organizing more sustainable development (i.e., general sustainability talk) with the meso- and micro-aspects of organizing (sustainable) retailing (Cooren, 2004). In this way, the texts constituting a CSD help link three levels of organizing by providing a selection of discursive resources (i.e., sustainability texts) that other, more particular and local instances of sustainability talk among employees (i.e., conversations) can build upon (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Schultz, 2013).

A well-developed CSD can hence be seen as aiding the discursive act of locally translating sustainability talk to, for example, develop marketing communication that pushes a sustainability related message (Fuentes, 2015) or helps sales employees talk about sustainability with customers in stores (Fuentes & Fredriksson, 2016), showing that a similar phenomenon also is happening on an organizational level of organizing. Particularly by providing retail employees with something sustainability related to say and sell (discursive resources) in their everyday work (which will be further demonstrated in Chapter 6). It also helps explain how CSR talk is made *"resonant with and becomes connected to other communicative practices, especially those geared to profitability"* (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2012, p. 204), and the kind of work that goes into realizing this on an organizational level of analysis. This improves our understanding of how a talk-talk continuation can be sustained beyond the strategic episodes explored by Penttilä (2020). On a more general level, developing a CSD is a feat that can take a great deal of time, organizational commitment, and resources to realize, revealing some the complexities of making retailing more sustainable and ensuring the occurrence of CSR talk throughout a retail organization.

The remainder of this chapter is intended to demonstrate how this finding can be seen as emerging from the empirical material informing this study. It provides an overarching and chronological description of IKEA's sustainability journey, stretching from 1992 to 2017. It is primarily based on interview accounts with IKEA employees, and to some extent descriptions of this journey in documents analyzed for this study, complemented with newspaper articles. The account should therefore be understood as my interpretation of many other people's interpretation of this journey, though all informants having in common that they either are, or have been, part of the IKEA organization.

The journey is divided into three distinct phases (as explained in the previous chapter), where the first one accounts for how sustainability talk was first initiated within the organization, the second phase for how IKEA first started implementing organizational changes based on such talk and cementing its existence in retail talk, and the third phase for how IKEA worked to accelerate its sustainability work and "integrate" sustainability talk into other forms of retail talk throughout the entire organization. These three empirical legitimation phases are similar to the more general processual stages found by Johnson et al. (2006).

Based on this chronological account of IKEA's sustainability journey provided below, I argue that IKEA accommodates for sustainability talk in retail talk by

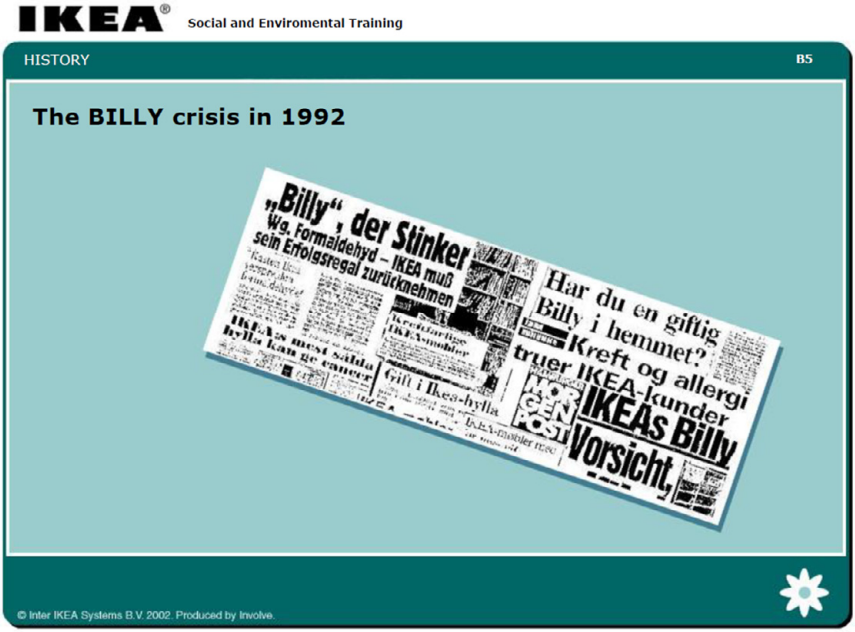
developing and disseminating a CSD. It does this in part by (1) developing a new system of texts about more sustainable development and retailing. These texts are produced and spread with the help of both (2) human and (3) textual agents of sustainability talk, all of which must be (4) authorized by internal authorities such as top management figures. This renders it a kind of talk that other IKEA employees at least ought to adhere to and operationalize in their retail talk, according to these texts.

Phase 1 – How it all started

In this phase, I show how a new kind of talk had to be imported to, and developed in relation to, IKEA's retail talk, marking the start of developing a CSD and initiating the legitimation process as construed and explored in this study. The examples below start with (1) the scandals that shook IKEA in the early 1990s, showing how employees at IKEA identified (2) a need to engage with sustainability talk as spoken in its external environment and overcome resistance to it, because it is (3) by no means a given kind of talk among speakers of retail talk, (4) to gaining top management support, and being translated into an "IKEA language" that is materialized in (5) new organizational texts. This laid the foundation for the continued legitimation process of sustainability talk in retail talk on IKEA's sustainability journey, which will be explored in phase 2 below.

The scandals that shook IKEA

> "Yes that's right, the Billy bookshelves. […] you see we started talking to Greenpeace and you know everything that happened. I think that's the real starting point."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Spring 2017)



IKEA Social and Environmental Training (2002/2007, p. 5)

According to legend, and in a twisted turn of events, a couple of cold Germans seem to have changed the course of IKEA history when they, for some reason, decided to place a Billy bookcase in a sauna back in 1992. As they turned on the heat, they unknowingly released the toxic chemical formaldehyde, which was used in the coating of IKEA's famous bookcase. The chemical intoxicated the Germans more than the beer we only can assume they brought with them into the sauna, leading to serious injury. This disastrous sauna bath set off a chain of events that escalated into a media scandal questioning the use of chemicals in one of IKEA's most iconic products. This issue had surfaced in the Danish media less than a decade earlier (Anderberg, 1986; Enström, 1985). Although I find no evidence for the legendary sauna bathing Germans, the high levels of formaldehyde in the Billy bookcases did cause headlines in the German and Swedish press (Falkkloo, 1992; Johansson, 1992), causing many IKEA customers to ask themselves two paramount questions: How are IKEA products produced? Are they safe enough to have in my home?

Battered with questions about the use of health-threatening and environmentally hazardous chemicals in the production of their furniture, IKEA, much like the sauna bathing Germans, found themselves with their pants down in public. The

retailer struggled to answer questions posed by journalists about the use of chemicals in their products, a practice that risked causing serious harm to the trustworthiness of their otherwise responsible and family-friendly brand image. Motivated by never wanting to experience such humiliation again, and with the help of external experts from non-government organizations (NGOs) such as Greenpeace, IKEA soon began an overhaul of their value chain, working from a health and environmental perspective. The environmental work was driven by newly recruited competencies such as foresters and a newly appointed environmental manager, who initiated new collaborations with external experts, ultimately setting the company off on a journey towards MSR – at least according to one respondent in this study, who soon found herself in the midst of another, possibly worse, kind of media storm. This time, the social responsibility of IKEA was called into question by targeting the alleged use of children in the production of carpets sold at IKEA stores.

In a series of investigative TV shows aired in Sweden, as well as in northern European countries, IKEA and some other major retail firms such as H&M were accused of selling products produced using child labor (Alpzen, 1994; Bergman, 1994; Bratt, 1994; Hobohm, 1994). Much like when the formaldehyde scandal unfolded in Germany, IKEA struggled to answer questions surrounding these serious allegations. It was once again clear that the retailer had little knowledge of or control over how their assortment was produced by independent contractors in their supplier base. Something drastic now had to be done to respond to the increasing demands for social and environmental responsibility made by society, in general, and IKEA customers, in particular.

The point of bringing up these aspects of IKEA's sustainability journey is that this series of events can be seen as the starting point in the process of legitimizing sustainability talk at IKEA. In fact, and as noted in previous research on MSR (e.g., Grayson, 2011), and more generally in the field of CSR (Maon et al., 2009; Millar et al., 2012), the need to engage with CSR and sustainability talk often starts with a legitimacy crisis for the organization as a whole. By not having the knowledge of how to speak sustainability talk, people in the organization not only struggle to respond to difficult questions from the public, but more importantly, they fail to see and/or acknowledge the very problem they are accused of exploiting in the first place. In this case, the supposed use of child labor and overuse of toxic chemicals in their supply chain, ways of conducting business that now start to threaten the moral legitimacy of IKEA as an organization (Suchman, 1995; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011).

From a process of legitimation perspective (Johnson et al., 2006), and as will be shown next, this legitimacy crisis seems to make at least some IKEA employees see a need for creating new discourses to address the new set of issues they are facing. They do this by granting sustainability talk local representation in retail talk among a group of employees who become what Girschik (2020) would perhaps conceptualize as issue sellers – the human agents of sustainability talk who eventually learn to speak it and try to spread its message to key actors within the organization, thus opening the forum for debate that Shultz (2013) describes as an important performative potential of CSR talk.

Consulting sustainability talk

According to and ass stressed by the respondents working at IKEA during this phase of IKEA's sustainability journey, sustainability-related issues and discursive topics (e.g., fair working conditions, polluting toxins, and even the idea of more sustainable development) had by this time also started to become more salient in the public debate. This led to new and sustainability-related expectations being placed on corporations by the public. Pressured to show that IKEA was working to become a more socially and environmentally responsible corporation, middle managers on the retail side of things led the work needed to respond to the changing societal landscape.

In part because it was managers on the retail side who were held accountable in the media, some of them soon teamed up with the environmental officer and started working on drafting a code of conduct for their suppliers to comply with. However, this was completely new territory for both them and IKEA as a whole, creating the need to acquire new knowledge on how to tackle child labor issues. In light of this lack of knowledge, IKEA once again teamed up with external expertise to get a better grasp on these issues. With the help of NGOs such as Save the Children, the International Labor Organization, and academics specializing in business ethics, employees at IKEA now began accumulating the knowledge needed for drafting a code of conduct.

As mentioned, IKEA was not the only company experiencing these kinds of difficulties. For instance, the apparel company Nike and the clothing retailer H&M were also targeted by the media for the poor working conditions in their outsourced factories. Much like IKEA, these companies were also facing a new set of issues that they had little experience of dealing with, and they met regularly to share their experiences and develop knowledge about how to impose self-regulations on themselves and their suppliers.

What this demonstrates is that sustainability talk seems to have been a new kind of talk for IKEA employees to engage with and speak as well as the role external actors played in shaping how it eventually comes to be spoken within the organization. The latter has also been noted in previous CSR talk studies (Penttilä, 2020). However, this new talk was not necessarily seen as a legitimate kind of talk in retail talk beyond a selected few. Instead, other key organizational members and functions resisted the ideas sustainability talk conveyed, suggesting that it by no means was a given kind of talk to use in retail talk.

Not a given kind of talk

Although it was the retail side of the business that faced pressure from the public to change, it was above all the production side that had to change in order to solve the issues of child labor and poor working conditions among IKEA's supplier base. The new ideas about imposing a code of conduct on suppliers, however, was met with great skepticism in the purchasing organization (the first internal function subjected to potential changes). They feared that such measures would lead to higher costs, which would ultimately push up prices on IKEA's products, thus undermining one of IKEA's main competitive advantages.

Top management also showed the same kind of reluctance. Except for a fear of higher prices, they were also questioning the extent to which the company should let itself be affected by media coverage. Some also viewed a code of conduct as a possible intrusion into the entrepreneurial freedom their independent suppliers enjoyed and, thus, as showing a lack of respect for independent businesses. It should be noted here that the IKEA culture very much is built around the myth of Ingvar Kamprad, the founder of IKEA, as an entrepreneurial genius who built a retail empire from scratch. This might help explain why showing respect for how individual suppliers chose to conduct business was so highly regarded by top management, at least according to one respondent who was part of the top management team at IKEA Group around this time and who later would take over the position as CEO.

Despite reservations from the purchasing organization and the lack of top management support, middle managers on the retail side of things continued working on these issues together with internal environmental experts, other companies, NGOs and academics. A key reason for why they could take such initiatives without the explicit support of top management once again had to do with the IKEA culture. In a stroke of irony, it was the entrepreneurial ideals

embedded into this culture that seem to have helped in this endeavor. This concerned how such ideals were used as an internal management philosophy, where employees were encouraged to take and work on their own initiatives to develop the business from within.

Further, key players at the beginning of IKEA's sustainability journey who have been interviewed for this study also stressed the importance of drawing on a key organizational text to justify why IKEA ought to engage with these issues internally, namely the "Testament of a furniture dealer" written by Ingvar Kamprad in 1976, which is often described as THE strategy document at IKEA and sometimes even referred to as its bible. It is a document that in many ways captures IKEA's organizational culture; it explicitly states that IKEA should be a kind of organization that cares about "the many people," as its vision is *"to create a better everyday life for the many people."* For middle managers on the retail side of things, this document was seen as, or at least used as, a kind of proof point that supported their argument that engaging with social issues should be seen as a given part of IKEA's organizational identity and culture - as part of what IKEA is.

What we see here is the emergence of a CSD. More specifically, we can see a creative discursive move in which sustainability talk is tied to an already existing organizational text to legitimize it (i.e., the Testament of a Furniture Dealer). This text conveys cultural values, beliefs and norms that are frequently reproduced in IKEA's retail talk. From a process of legitimation (Johnson et al., 2006) and CSR talk perspective (Shultz, 2013), we can empirically see how new discourse is developed within, tied to, and made resonant with already existing cultural frameworks, as suggested in Johnson et al.'s (2006) second legitimation stage. This particular legitimation technique in communication will be further demonstrated in the next chapter. Here, it is in part intended to exemplify how a corporate-specific kind of sustainability talk can start taking shape and, as will be shown next, how it eventually evolves into a more perpetual kind of discourse, or system of thought, within the organization.

Gaining top management support

Gradually, the CEO now began seeing social issues in another light, and top management started giving these kinds of issues more priority. In 1999, a new CEO, Anders Dahlvig, took over the helm at IKEA Group, which fully supported the argument that it was indeed in IKEA's DNA to take on greater social and environmental responsibilities in its operations. According to Dahlvig and other respondents interviewed for this study, he gave social and

environmental issues very high priority within the organization. As a testament to his dedication to social and environmental issues as an organizational priority, the first couple chapters of his book "The IKEA edge – building global growth and social good at the world's most iconic home store," which was released soon after he resigned as CEO of IKEA Group, are placed under the heading "A vision of social responsibility."

As noted by many respondents in this study, and as demonstrated below, this top management support is absolutely crucial for eventually driving through the changes and new "musts" that the new sustainability texts suggest and impose on organizational members, something that is often mentioned in the more general CSR change management literature (Maon et al., 2009; Millar et al., 2012) and retail research (Grayson, 2011; Wilson, 2015) and important to note in relation to the first phase of IKEA's sustainability journey. Without it, there would perhaps not have been a second phase to explore until much later. The importance of top management support will become more apparent in the exploration of how the sustainability texts, discussed in the next chapter, appeal to authorities to legitimate the sustainability talk they contain.

Launching the first textual agents of sustainability talk

With Dahlvig at the helm of IKEA Group, a team was now assembled to work on summarizing the experiences gained from, for example, the child labor scandal and the subsequent lessons learned from collaborations with other companies and NGOs. This indicated that an internal sustainability function was now starting to take shape within the organization. In a sense, it created a platform that human agents of sustainability talk could now begin speaking from and developing new organizational sustainability texts that, ideally, started infusing retail talk with sustainability talk (Cooren, 2004; Penttilä, 2020)

The result was IKEA's first formal code of conduct, which formulated IKEA's approach to social and environmental responsibility. The code of conduct thus reformulated key lessons learned from the subsequent years by translating these lessons into an "IKEA language" that suited IKEA's organization and culture. As a sign of this translation of meaning, the code of conduct was named IWAY, short for "The Ikea WAY of purchasing home furnishing products." This key top-management-endorsed text was the first major text constituting the emerging CSD to filter, shape and legitimize sustainability talk in IKEA's retail talk.

Phase 1 – discussion

As we have seen, in this beginning of IKEA's sustainability journey, it was not until the organization was confronted with a *new* set of questions from the public and expected by people in its socio-cultural environment to meet a *new*, or at least elevated, set of ethical expectations that some employees experienced the need to consult a *new* set of sustainability-related actors on how to make sense of a *new* set of discursive topics in relation to the organization in question. This meant that people within the organization now needed to learn how to speak a new language (i.e., sustainability talk) if they were to cope with a wider shift in the public discourse. This was a new kind of talk in the sense that it had little to do with the everyday retail talk that made up the organization prior to the scandals that shook IKEA during the mid-1990s.

The case explored here can almost be seen as a textbook example of how (Johnson et al., 2006) describe the first "innovation" stage in legitimation processes, the stage in which new discourse is created by a group of organizational members as a means of addressing "*some need, purpose, goal, or desire at the local level of actors*" (ibid., p. 60). Moreover, this is very similar to accounts of other companies' sustainability journeys presented in previous retail research, which has noted that CSR implementation often begins with public shaming that causes the organization to reach out to sustainability "experts" and change aspects of their operations (Grayson, 2011; Jones et al., 2008b; Wilson, 2015).

The point of bringing this reactive tendency up in light of the CSD finding explained here is to show that a novel way of thinking, talking and eventually doing retailing (i.e. MSR) had to be sought in the organization's external environment. It then had to be imported into the organization with the help of human agents of sustainability talk, and eventually translated and developed into, in this case, an "IKEA language" through textual agents of sustainability talk in retail talk (e.g., IWAY). In a sense, this internalized the external shift in discourse by developing an IKEA-themed form of sustainability talk.

This way of talking and thinking has, twenty years down the line, established its "realness" and cemented its existence in retail talk at IKEA. It did so in part by putting new organizational structures in place, hence claiming a "regulation based" kind of legitimacy (Scott, 1995), that more or less forced sustainability talk into retail talk through a new and sustainability-themed textual agent in the form of a code of conduct – an agent of sustainability talk that, at the end of this phase, is granted authority by top management. This formally infusing ethical considerations into the very important retail talk spoken in the

purchasing organization of IKEA, range and supply, which is a general function in retail organizations that is positioned between the retail side and production side of retailing.

It is these sets of empirical observations that I argue resemble the emergence of a system of thought that Alvesson and Karreman (2000) conceptualize as a big-D Discourse, leading me to the CSD finding argued for in this chapter. However, at this stage of IKEA's sustainability journey, it is far from a dominant Discourse in most employees' retail talk, leading me to the next phase of IKEA's sustainability journey, where the legitimacy of sustainability talk becomes more cemented in the organization's retail talk.

Phase 2 – Cementing the legitimacy of sustainability talk

In this phase of IKEA's sustainability journey, we can see how the organization cements the legitimacy of sustainability talk by (1) building up the internal sustainability function that we could see taking shape at the end of phase 1 and (2) producing new sustainability texts that also start to find their way into the work carried out on the retail side of things. What we see, I would argue, is a growing constellation of both human and textual agents of sustainability talk that help in constituting the emergent CSD.

Building up an internal sustainability function

As mentioned, an internal constellation of employees working with social and environmental issues, mostly with issues concerning the use of chemicals, forestry and areas of supply chain compliance, has been formed by this time. This rather small group of employees is by now receiving considerable support from top management, most notably the new CEO. In an interview for this study, he mentions that addressing these issues both internally and publicly can help send the message that social and environmental responsibility is now an important part of how IKEA conducts business. This demonstrates the importance of securing top management support, which, from a communication-based legitimation perspective (van Leeuwen, 2007), can be seen as important, because it grants an authority-based legitimacy to the work of the newly formed sustainability function within the organization (an argument that will be further developed in Chapter 4).

The responsibility of the first and growing internal constellation of employees was, among other things, to ensure more responsible sourcing of raw materials (mainly wood) and compliance among suppliers in the value chain. These activities were coordinated on a global level, but also implemented in decentralized purchasing offices around the world. Except for having top management support, the compliance officers were now also armed with the newly formulated IWAY document, an important directive for other co-workers to incorporate into their areas of retailing work. However, the new directives were still met with resistance among managers working with purchasing, eventually leading to direct interference from top management to enforce the new directives by "removing stopping blocks." This demonstrates, once again, how the authority and legitimacy these new texts were given through authorization.

Interestingly, and despite these efforts, suppliers in China were initially partly exempted from compliance with the new standards formulated in IWAY. According to Dalhvig, this had to do with the lack of government support in China. He mentions that even though the labor regulations in China were strict in regard to working hours and overtime compensation, for example, government agencies were still very unwilling to enforce them. This could be because the government prioritized having a competitive industrial sector in the country, which suggests a perceived difficulty of accomplishing compliance without the help of external organizations such as government agencies. In other words, no organization operates in a vacuum, but within a larger web of social relations and discursive developments that can both facilitate and hinder sustainability talk from happening within the organization. Nonetheless, implementing the new IWAY standards in the purchasing organization helped get things going and helped the newly formed compliance team gain a great deal of valuable experience in how to accomplish change internally, at least on the production side of things.

An important aspect of this, once again, seems to be the reformulation of IKEA's vision and identity as a company that cares about social and environmental issues, a message that by now was reinforced by top management statements and directives. With this experience gained, the internal compliance organization gradually grew and IWAY was implemented in other parts of the business, with the transportation and distribution organization being next in line. The work done by the internal compliance organization, armed with top management support and textual agents calling for a re-organization of retailing practices, thus helped cement the legitimacy

of sustainability talk on the production side of things by producing organizational structures to support it.

In parallel with the compliance organization, a centralized support team on a global level called "Social and Environmental Affairs" also started taking shape within IKEA during this phase of IKEA's sustainability journey. The responsibilities of this constellation of employees were broader than those of compliance and functioned as a kind of node, around which more or less all sustainability-related work at IKEA was organized under the so-called "group manager for Social and Environmental Affairs," particularly on the retail side of things. This working group was mirrored on the country level by newly appointed social and environmental officers on every retail market, thus further developing the communication platform mentioned earlier (Hunoldt et al., 2018) and allowing sustainability professionals to, in a sense, "sell in" sustainability (Girschik, 2020) or, put differently, lobby for it (described further in Chapter 6).

However, as one respondent noted in regard to these positions on the country level, many of these employees only had this as a part-time responsibility and did not really have a clear "competence profile." Instead, these positions were occupied by employees who showed an interest in these issues. It should be noted, however, that social and environmental responsibility was not really a given part of business school curricula at the time. One of the respondents for this study did take an MBA focusing on sustainability issues, but claimed that this was a rare and very new kind of business program (offered around 2000). Again, no organization exists in a vacuum, but all are contingent on broader societal developments (e.g., educational resources).

The main responsibilities of this group were to explore and coordinate ways for IKEA to become a more socially and environmentally responsible company as well as to communicate these changes internally. Something the company did by gathering sustainability-related information within and outside the organization and producing various forms of communication material based on this information. This material included internal sustainability training programs, product information and other kinds of sustainability-related communication. In a sense then, this constellation of employees was responsible for developing, producing and spreading texts that constitute IKEA's sustainability talk internally (Hunoldt et al., 2018), including on the retail side of things, thus further materializing the CSD being developed within the retail organization.

Producing more textual sustainability agents

From a communication perspective, one important aspect of this work was the production and publishing of IKEA Group's "Social and Environmental Report". The first social and environmental report was published in 2004 and reported on social and environmental impacts of the business, covering the year 2003. These reports are and were publicly available, but are not really used as a form of marketing communication. Rather, the report can be viewed as a reference document explaining IKEA's view on, and work with, sustainability-related issues – a document on which other forms of sustainability-related communication then build, whether directed to internal stakeholders (i.e., employees) or external stakeholders (mainly media and NGOs rather than consumers and customers). Further, and as noted by both previous research (e.g., Adams & McNicholas, 2007) and respondents in this study, the function of the report in terms of internally spreading IKEA's version of sustainability talk is much wider than the finished product itself.

The work going into producing the report also becomes something of an internal communication tool that helps make sustainability talk a reality among employees. This is because an important aspect of writing up S&R reports is that almost every part of the business has to report on CO2 emissions, compliance rates among suppliers, partnerships with NGOs, and other information relevant to producing a S&R report. Gathering this kind of information thus requires employees throughout the organization to apply a social and environmental perspective and use it to reflect on how they are contributing in their part of the business (Adams & McNicholas, 2007). Producing the report can therefore become something of an "eye opener" among co-workers who do not work primarily with sustainability issues. In other words, the production of a social and environmental report forces some co-workers to make sense of and apply a sustainability talk in relation to their work and thus engage with sustainability talk in retail talk. Though they are not textual authorities such as IWAY, which directly stipulates ways of organizing, these reports should still be seen as crucial texts that help constitute the organization's CSD, at least in this early stage of IKEA's sustainability journey.

The main purpose of the report, coupled with its function as a reference document, thus seems to be to see how things are going and to detect areas in need of improvement. As claimed by a respondent in this study who was in charge of producing the report, such documents work best in relation to a sustainability strategy, which provides aspirational talk by setting explicit goals, while the report follows up on these goals. This logic is similar to what was found in Penttilä's (2020) study on aspirational talk during "strategic

episodes." However, no clear sustainability strategy had yet been formulated at the phase discussed in this section. In a sense, the social and environmental report functioned as both strategy and reporting document at this stage in IKEA's sustainability journey. For example, in the early social and environmental reports published by IKEA, there are sections that explicitly discuss various "focus areas" in which IKEA aims at improving their work, though such aspirational talk becomes less explicit in later versions (see Chapter 4).

Phase 2 discussion

To sum up, what becomes apparent in this phase of IKEA's sustainability talk is that there is a growing body of both textual and human agents of sustainability talk (Cooren, 2004; Hardy et al., 2000). Together, they further materialize IKEA's sustainability talk into organizing texts (Taylor & Van Every, 2000) that help constitute IKEA's emerging CSD. However, it is also clear that the success of this work is partly contingent on wider discursive developments in the social environments where the organization operates, highlighting the fact that the organization does not operate in a vacuum, but rather in a wider web of societal and discursive developments in light of more sustainable development (Ziemann, 2011).

As time goes by, these human and textual prerequisites for the performative potential of the emerging CSD seem to be increasingly in place, cementing its legitimacy in IKEA's retail talk. This enables the retail organization to go into the next phase of its sustainability journey and further legitimate the presence of sustainability talk in retail talk by "integrating" the former into the latter in almost all employees' retail talk. At least that is the ambition, realizing it is, however, more challenging than what this organizational level analysis might suggest, something that will be more evident in Chapter 6, where this "integration" of sustainability will be explored on a conversational level of analysis.

Phase 3 – Integrating sustainability talk

During the second phase of IKEA's sustainability journey, we could see how an internal sustainability organization, or rather several different constellations of employees working explicitly with sustainability-related issues, was

established. With sustainability talk being continuously materialized into organizational documents such as the IWAY standards and sustainability reports, and with the help of top management support, these agents of sustainability talk start to "push" it throughout the IKEA organization and further materialize it into new ways of organizing retailing work. However, it is very much the production side of things, such as purchasing and product development, that are affected by the implications of sustainability talk. On the retail side of things, these groups still work more or less in isolation during the second phase, and most employees do not really seem to engage with sustainability talk in their everyday work, according to the respondents in this study.

This creates a need to accentuate some of the key aspects of legitimating sustainability talk and developing a CSD that have been identified in the previous phases of IKEA's sustainability journey, something that ensues by (1) growing the internal sustainability function, (2) producing new and aspirational sustainability texts, with the help of continued and (3) close engagement with external sustainability "advisors", and (4) tying these newly produced texts more clearly to the organization by becoming part of other, and key, organizational texts for the organizing of retailing at IKEA. Eventually, this closes the third phase of IKEA's sustainability journey by attaining very explicit ownership support for sustainability talk, and (5) a transaction that initially seems to split IKEA's CSD into two highly related CSDs.

Growing the internal sustainability function

This phase begins in 2010, when IKEA's first formal sustainability strategy is launched – a strategy that becomes, or at least is aspiring to become, an integrated part of IKEA Group's overall business strategy. However, to enable such integration, it appears to be important to make sure that almost all employees know how IKEA as an organization views and works with "sustainability" (see Chapter 6). This implies that IKEA somehow needs to "spread the words" of sustainability talk throughout the whole organization to an even greater extent. One communication piece that was produced by this team and distributed to all IKEA employees in 2011 was a booklet called "Our never-ending job," which explains what this (sustainability) job supposedly is and why it is important.

However, it soon becomes clear that much more work than a booklet is needed to spread the word and develop sustainability competence within the organization. This, in turn, seems to have called for growing the constellation

of employees working with sustainability and expanding this function to essentially all organizational levels. At least this is what happened shortly after IKEA's first sustainability strategy was launched and a new Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO) was hired. As one sustainability professional explains:

> "Pretty soon after that happened Steve [the CSO hired in 2011] started building up the organization he thought was necessary for IKEA to lead the world in many different areas. So he started building up the entire organization. When he arrived there were about 11 of us, I think, maybe 10, where I was the only person working with communication, up to where we are today. Now on the Group Sustainability team, I think there are 32 of us. So he's like increased the group by like 300%."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Fall 2016)

That is just on the global level within IKEA Group, but the sustainability function matrix extends further. As a sustainability professional declared in an interview for this study conducted in September 2016:

> "So that, within this matrix there are, I think across… including the range and supply part there are around 300 people I think with sustainability in their job title and then many more who do tasks specifically relevant to the sustainability agenda. But in the job title there are about 300 people in this matrix. So we are the group function that works with developing the strategy and the approach and then we have our partners in the different businesses and markets who are in the matrix organization with us."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Fall 2016)

As indicated by these quotes explaining the size of the internal sustainability organization in terms of the number of people involved, and when seen as working with producing and disseminating sustainability-related communication, the role and responsibility of internal sustainability professionals seem to have become elevated by an integrated ambition. This further accentuates the importance of human sustainability agents in enabling the presence and legitimacy of sustainability talk in retail talk. Again this is similar to Girschik (2020) issue sellers, though with the added insight that these individuals also have to "sell in" sustainability both in general and to employees not in top management. This is also similar to Hunoldt et al.'s (2018) communication platform, but with the added insight of how large such a platform can become in terms of both people and texts.

A further clue to the nature of this ongoing work of extending and developing the sustainability function is an observation I made when conducting the interviews for this study. Many of the respondents explained that the sustainability-related work title they now inhabited was a new position that had never existed before they took it, where titles such as "Sustainability engagement officer," "Sustainability development leader," and "More sustainable life at home leader" could be seen. Extending and developing the sustainability function thus seem to constitute ongoing work that revolves around specific issues emerging from the processes of making sustainability talk a legitimate aspect of retail talk.

Another important development for the sustainability function, except for the structural extension and development of it, was the hiring of a new Chief Sustainability Officer in 2011 named Steve Howard. One sustainability professional explains the role Steve Howard played in accelerating IKEA's sustainability journey:

> "Well that's what he does, right. Then of course we've also maybe chosen to do this, it's been a lot about Steve. But there are a lot of other people around. […] With or without Steve we have, we're really in a different place than we were six years ago. […] Like we have good people on hand with clear guidelines for how we work. So if Steve had quit, well maybe, five years ago, then we'd have been in a completely different place. Now we're much more, we have things under our belt, it's just about execution."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Fall 2016)

It seems as though Steve Howard's climate activist background and charismatic character helped propel the importance of sustainability talk internally, most notably by justifying why it is important for IKEA to work on these issues and become a "sustainability leader in retail" (or sustainability "activist," as he put it in a presentation partly exhibited in the next chapter) that does more than is expected and implements "radical changes" instead of taking "incremental steps." That is, he soon became an important figure for promoting sustainability talk as a legitimate and important element of communication constituting what IKEA stands for and does. When he was hired, he also became part of IKEA Group's top management team (called Group Management) alongside the CEO, which at least signaled very clearly to employees that sustainability now had top priority.

The way Steve Howard influenced the way sustainability talk is legitimated internally will be elaborated on more in the next chapter. For now, the important thing to note for this section is that having a charismatic and

ambitious chief sustainability officer helped drive the structural changes explained in this phase. In a sense, he became something of a personification of, or at least a very influential spokesperson for, sustainability talk within the organization, making him an especially important agent of sustainability talk within the organization and bringing some of the character of issue sellers into more light (Girschik, 2020).

New textual authorities - integrated sustainability strategies

In 2010, IKEA launches its first official sustainability strategy containing five explicitly stated priority areas for change. This strategy is intended to provide clear directions and priorities in IKEA Group's "*relentless work with the many challenges we have to solve on our route to becoming a sustainable company*" covering the years 2010-2015 (as explained by the sustainability manager's "message" in the 2009 sustainability report, p. 5). It also marks a milestone in terms of legitimating sustainability talk in retail talk by tying them closer together. The reason for this is that "sustainability" now becomes one of four "cornerstones" in IKEA Group's overall business strategy called "Growing IKEA – together". This means, in the words of the sustainability manager, that:

> "Each and every one of our business strategies – whether local, national or global – must now clearly and systematically integrate sustainability as a part of everyday operations"
>
> - IKEA Sustainability Report (2009, p.5)

In terms of organizing work around sustainability, having an explicit sustainability strategy that clearly ties into the overall business strategy of the company seems to send a clear signal that this is something that essentially everyone in the company now has to contribute to in one way or another. As a new kind of "textual authority" (Cooren, 2004), an integrated sustainability strategy also makes clear that regardless of whether a manager works at the global, country or store level, now sustainability is to be , or at least should be, given priority in strategies for developing the day-to-day business, even on the retail side of things.

Launched in 2012, an updated sustainability strategy called People and Planet Positive replaced the first one just two years after the first was launched. Nonetheless, according to respondents in this study, launching the People and Planet Positive strategy seems to have been an important milestone in terms of legitimating sustainability talk. The strategy is often described by respondents

as being a very ambitious sustainability strategy that unquestionably calls for many changes in the way IKEA organizes its retailing activities. The strategy states, for example, that *"By August 2017, 95% of IKEA co-workers state that 'sustainability is a natural part of the everyday work'"*. Thus, it sets a very concrete "integration goal" to aim for. Further, the strategy signals ambition by setting many "100%" Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to be met by the organization as a whole before specific dates, such as:

> -By August 2020, we aim to source 100% of our wood, paper and cardboard from more sustainable sources
>
> - By August 2015, all cotton used will be sourced from more sustainable sources, such as Better Cotton.
>
> -By August 2015, all home furnishing materials, including packaging, will be either made from renewable, recyclable or recycled materials.
>
> - Maintain 100% IWAY approval of all suppliers of home furnishing and other key products and services
>
> - People and Planet Positive (2012, p. 7)

The advantage of these 100% KPIs is that they left no room for employees not to contribute to the sustainability strategy. Steve Howard explained the following in an interview for this study, talking about making sure that, by 2020, 100% of the wood sourced should be either FCS certified or recycled:

> "Because we knew the 2020 target was 100% so it was clear for the people across the business who would say 'Ah yes, but it's difficult here' or you know, there's all these PSE certified, you just, everywhere is unique, everywhere is unique, and change is hard, and if you don't create absolute clarity about what change looks like together, then people, people, everybody, myself included, you know, everybody comes up with a rationale for why you're not going to change. And you know, any target that is not a 100% target leaves that confusion. So it is a tremendous accelerator. So I think the sort of power of clear bold targets is a hugely important thing to do within a business."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Spring 2017)

This quote further exemplifies how the organization's CSD, through the texts that constitute it, quite forcefully infuses retail talk with sustainability talk (Cooren, 2004), particularly owing to the rather ambitious sustainability aspirations conveyed in the sustainability strategy. Furthermore, and as mentioned, sustainability strategies and reports are also seen as "reference

documents" for essentially all other sustainability-related communication produced at IKEA. As one sustainability professional explains:

> "Yeah I mean that relates to our strategy. So the communication approach is built around the sustainability strategy with our three areas with the strategy for sustainability life at home, people and communities and energy and resource independence… and so this and the strategy is called people and planet positive so that's the kind of overall overarching framework for communication and then you know that is taken into different country plans and… you know in the stakeholder conversation you might talk about it in that way, but then you wouldn't talk about it in that way with a customer in that full pitch away… I would say that's the… that's the kind of baseline for people to use."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Fall 2016)

Again, this stresses the purpose of focusing on these documents in the next chapter, as well as why it is worth elaborating a bit on the process of drafting sustainability strategies below. Further, and as explored by Penttilä (2020), it is during "strategic episodes" such as these that aspirational talk is shaped by various stakeholders. In other words, it is during the development of new sustainability strategies that an organization's sustainability agenda is set and its sustainability talk is largely shaped. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly for the CSD finding argued for here, it highlights how a certain way of talking and thinking about sustainability is being developed within the organization.

Setting the bar and developing a sustainability strategy

During the period in which we conducted the interviews, IKEA was about to launch its third sustainability strategy, which is also called "People and Planet Positive," but stretches to 2030 instead of 2020. This gave us a chance, in one interview, to ask about an ongoing strategic episode:

> "But we've done two now, that I've experienced before, and then it's, it's usually those of us in Group Sustainability who realize that, now it's time to update things because some of the goals aren't relevant, or if some goals have run their course, or 'oops we missed this thing that didn't exist maybe three years ago but that's more important now.' So we take the initiative to update things, then provide information through Steve, the CEO, then we get an okay. Is this a big change or a small one, or where do they think we should position it."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Fall 2016)

The quote above is rather self-explanatory, but a couple of things are worth noting. The initiative, though practically initiated by sustainability professionals, tends to be based on two kinds of observations. On the one hand, it is based on the previous sustainability strategy in the sense that some targets might have been reached, or soon will be, or in some other way are "out of date." This also concerns how sustainability talk is developing on a wider, more societal, level. It seems to be important to be in tune with issues that are being discussed in the public debate and to adapt sustainability strategies accordingly.

This sensitivity to external expectations is further manifested in that the strategy is discussed with a kind of "advisory group," consisting of different NGOs with different "areas of expertise." They come with their input on what it is that seems to be working and on where they think more effort, or different efforts, should be placed. These stakeholders thus have a say in how IKEA's sustainability talk develops through its strategies, that is, in what ought to be talked about in IKEA's CSD. It should be mentioned that this advisory group meets with IKEA once a year and not only when a new strategy is being put together. In addition to this advisory group, the quote below also highlights that a great deal of customer research goes into the drafting new sustainability strategies. Once again, this demonstrates the important role that public debate and customer expectations play in shaping IKEA's CSD.

In the case of IKEA, many internal stakeholders within the organization also seem have more or less of a say during these strategic episodes. As explained by a sustainability professional asked who has the last, and any, say in drafting a new sustainability strategy:

> "Interviewer:
>
> It's corporate management.
>
> Respondent:
>
> "Oh sure, it is. Because they're the ones, they sign off on all our corporate strategies. So they like, if they're not on board or with us then we don't get anywhere. But… well we'll see, how it turns out now. […] Then we'll get an okay there and I'll meet Peter [the CEO]tomorrow so he can sign off on it 'this is what we want to do with this strategy update now,' so we'll see where he's at, and I hope he's where I am […] And then is Inter IKEA Group okay with it, so it's not just IKEA Group that's on board, but even them."
>
> Interviewer:
>
> Yes exactly, it must be that way when it's.

Respondent:

Because they're in charge of the range of products.

Interviewer:

It's based on their, much of their work too, you know

Respondent:

Absolutely. It's the range of products we sell. So they're on board. Then we'll invite them in. And we do quite a lot of internal consultations. So we invite in, not only corporate management, which is anyway a kind of average like of the business, but we'll invite other leaders in and then the question is whether we'll have time this time to do… an employee forum, but I don't think so."

- Sustainability Professional (Fall 2016)

It is not only Group Sustainability at IKEA Group that is involved in developing a new strategy, but also other internal stakeholder groups, such as the top management team, people at Inter IKEA Systems (the IKEA entity responsible for the production side of things and the concept owner), and various managers responsible for different parts of IKEA operations. Top management, led by the CEO, seems to have a great deal to say in how the sustainability strategy develops. As the quote demonstrates, they in a sense "set the bar" for the ambitions reflected in, for example, targets to be met by a certain date. In the end, it is top management that "signs off" on the strategy, thus granting it the necessary and impersonal kind of authority (i.e., "the power of the document") that helps in legitimating sustainability talk at IKEA Group. Inter IKEA Systems also play an important role here, as much of the sustainability work stems from product development, sourcing of raw materials, and managing the supply chain in general, especially following "the transaction" in 2016 (see Chapter 3). Ideally, other parts of the organization should also be consulted in so-called "co-worker forums."

The process of developing a new sustainability strategy, a document that plays such an important role in shaping other forms of sustainability-related communication material, and in extension the organizations CSD, is thus shaped by many different external and internal voices. It is led by senior sustainability professionals and affected by their ability to understand the current state of wider more societal sustainability talk and to predict how this talk might develop in the future as well as the potential internal drivers and limitations that can facilitate or hinder the realization of potential goals.

All in all, there are many voices with differing interests that all take part in shaping a new sustainability strategy and developing the scope and content of IKEA's sustainability talk explored in the next chapter. But this is also something that is organized by the internal sustainability function. Once again, and in relation to structurally accommodating for sustainability talk, it may be important to ensure that there is an internal "platform" for agents of sustainability talk to speak from (Hunoldt et al., 2018), at least within IKEA Group, that is "only" a franchisee in the corporate constellation that makes up IKEA as a whole.

The transaction and gaining ownership support

During the time of the interviews, the concept owner is not really seen by sustainability professionals as a driving partner in this sustainability journey. This IKEA entity is described more as a silent observer, letting its biggest franchisee work with these issues on its own. However, given that most of IKEA operations at this time is organized within IKEA Group, such as product development, sourcing and sales, most aspects of retailing at IKEA are still covered by the first People and Planet Positive strategy and the overall sustainability journey described so far. But this changed in the fall of 2016 when a major restructuring occurred in the IKEA conglomerate.

"The transaction," as it is referred to internally, meant that key operational entities such as "IKEA of Sweden" (responsible for product development) and "Range and Supply" (responsible for sourcing) were transferred from being part of IKEA Group to instead being part of Inter IKEA Group. Contact people at IKEA and interviewees often expressed concerns about how sustainability was "falling between the cracks" in the transaction and perceived the sustainability function to be the last and least important function for top management to consider in this transaction. As noted by them, this was most likely because more operational concerns, such as getting products on the shelves, were given higher priority.

Nonetheless, the transaction arguably made it more important to get the franchise concept owner (Inter IKEA systems) onboard to take a more active role in IKEA's sustainability journey to maintain the momentum and legitimacy of sustainability talk within the company as a whole, in a sense to take over ownership of IKEA's sustainability engagement. Perhaps in light of this, among other things, Inter IKEA Systems updated IKEA's corporate values only months after the transaction, now including "Caring for People and Planet" as one of the highly regarded corporate values. Interestingly, a clear

definition of what this value means and entails, however, is rather hard to come by in the analyzed texts. This may be because IKEA's sustainability talk and ambitions are likely to evolve with the times, and along with this the meaning and implications of this rather vague organizational value.

All in all, including this value can signal that the concept owner now is also onboard for IKEA's sustainability journey and will take a more active role in moving it forward, thus further tying sustainability talk to IKEA's retail talk and cementing the authority of the CSD that has now been developed at the retail organization over time. The transaction and update of IKEA's corporate values also coincide with Steve Howard's resignation. Moreover, in 2017, a new sustainability strategy is once again launched that sets new goals for 2030 instead of 2020, marking the end of the third phase of IKEA's sustainability journey.

Phase 3 discussion

Integrating sustainability seems to require many of things discussed in relation to the previous phases. However, these efforts have to be scaled up substantially in order to make such integration happen. More people are hired to "voice" the sustainability talk among employees, and more sustainability related texts need to be produced, disseminated, and adopted by more or less every employee. Not least due to the more ambitious sustainability aspirations that we see are being proposed in this phase. Most importantly, however, is how especially texts are more clearly linked to other important texts in IKEAs retail talk. For example, by becoming part of overarching business strategies and, perhaps most importantly from a symbolic perspective, to the organizations "values" by becoming a value in and of itself. This intertextuality seems to be key for making it abundantly clear for employees that sustainability now must become part of their retail talk. Though, as will be seen in Chapter 6, this requires more than developing a CSD.

Arriving at the CSD finding

The aim of this chapter has been to describe the CSD finding and show how I arrived at this finding through my interpretation of the empirical material. The chapter also offers the reader an overarching and chronological description of IKEA's sustainability journey on an organizational level of analysis, showing

some of the ways in which sustainability talk has been structurally accommodated for in IKEA's retail talk. Examples of this are establishing, in this case, a rather substantial sustainability function within the organization, having public top management support, producing textual authorities and structuring texts, tying them to other important organizational texts and working toward making sustainability talk (however construed) part of the organizational culture. These insights will now be discussed to further describe the concept of developing a CSD in relation to previous research.

Structural accommodation of CSD - Human sustainability agents

We begin with what I call human sustainability agents, meaning those who are tasked with staying in tune with, speaking and developing the organization's sustainability talk – those who see a need for change, import the new knowledge needed to accomplish change, and who can drive change throughout the organization (Johnson et al., 2006). They have often been referred to as change agents in previous CSR implementation studies (van der Heijden et al., 2012), a term similar to "internal activists" or "issue sellers" in previous CSR as communication research (Girschik, 2020; Hunoldt et al., 2018) or (internal) sustainability professionals in other micro CSR studies (Gond & Moser, 2019).

In short, to turn the organization's CSD into an organizational reality, there must be people talking the sustainability talk and doing the sustainability work. This is made evident in the case of IKEA's sustainability journey by those employees who first found themselves in the media storm that signaled changing expectations among important stakeholders in the organization's external environment. Some of these employees later came to comprise a sustainability function within the organization to organize the changes needed to respond to changing ethical expectations, particularly with respect to producing texts that come to constitute the organization's CSD.

The importance of human agents of sustainability talk seems to have been accentuated as IKEA's sustainability aspirations grew more ambitious during the third phase of IKEA's sustainability journey, particularly with the integrated ambition of expecting virtually every IKEA employee to somehow contribute to IKEA's sustainability agenda in their everyday work. This requires that these employees understand what sustainability entails, in general, and for them, in particular, even though sustainability is not their main responsibility. Hence, it accentuates the need for human sustainability agents

who can "spread the words" of sustainability talk to almost all employees and, as seen in Chapter 6, lobby the many other organizational authorities that are not top management (i.e., "gatekeepers").

Again, this is not necessarily a novel finding as regards pointing out the need for change agents; the main point here is more to explain what they do in relation to the concept of a CSD that I am arguing for and describing here. In doing so, and as elaborated on in Chapter 7, it also shows the kind of work that goes into ensuring a talk-talk continuation of sustainability talk in retail talk beyond the strategic episodes explored by Penttilä (2020). Moreover, it resembles insights from empirical CSR talk studies concerning their importance and the need for a communication platform for sustainability professionals to speak the CSR talk from (Hunoldt et al., 2018; Girschik, 2020), though combining these with the observed need for textual agents of sustainability talk discussed next.

Structural accommodation of CSD - Textual sustainability agents

An important aspect of sustainability agents' work, at least from a communication and legitimation perspective, is how the internal sustainability organization functions as a kind of (sustainability) text producing unit (Hunoldt et al., 2018). This becomes clear already at the very beginning of IKEA's sustainability journey, where the initial sustainability work was leading up to IKEA's first code of conduct in the form of the IWAY document. This document becomes something of a textual sustainability agent, even a kind of "authority," that, with the active support of top management, is starting to do things to the organizing of retailing (Hunoldt et al., 2018; Penttilä, 2020). In this case by giving new sustainability-related directives to people in charge of sourcing the organization assortment. In short, the new code of conduct comes to constitute a new set of "sustainability musts" that, in a sense, force sustainability talk into retail talk among at least some retail employees.

Later, the aspirational talk in sustainability reports, and eventually more importantly in sustainability strategies, started to serve a similar function on the retail side of things, particularly when it became one of four "corner stones" in IKEA Group's overarching business direction, at least formally making IKEA's sustainability agenda on par with other overarching business agendas. This exemplifies how sustainability texts, at least when granted the status of an organizational authority in their own right, can help make sustainability talk happen throughout the organization. Referring to sustainability reports as

"reference documents" also suggests that other, not explicitly authoritative sustainability texts can function as agents of sustainability talk as well, thus helping to inform and guide sustainability talk in retail talk at IKEA by, for example, explaining what sustainability means and entails for the organization, its employees, customers, etc. (according to these texts), especially by discursively justifying the legitimacy of sustainability talk in retail talk.

In fact, when looking at how these texts refer to each other (discussed in Chapter 5), especially in the later stage of IKEA's sustainability journey, a whole system of sustainability "texts" seems to be emerging (e.g., IWAY, sustainability strategies, reports, democratic design principles etc.). This reveals that sustainability talk is in a sense (and increasingly over time) building its legitimacy on itself. That is, through a series of intertextual and interdiscursive moves, sustainability talk is increasingly building its legitimacy on self-referrals (e.g., with its system of sustainability musts), thus establishing itself, and the actors, texts and agendas that circulate in it, as new organizational authorities – at least in the case of IKEA on a textual and organizational level of analysis. This shows that there is a great deal more to communicating sustainability internally than is implied by suggestions in previous case studies of sustainable retailing (Wilson, 2015).

Instead, here such communication is argued to be central to the development of a CSD. Something that, in light of the dual performativity argued for in the following two chapters, does indeed problematize the functionalistic manner in which previous studies have depicted MSR as an unproblematic and inherently "good" undertaking (e.g., Wiese et al., 2012; Wilson, 2015; Vadakkepatt et al., 2021). Also adding to our understanding of what sustainability talk does in texts such as the aspirational talk of sustainability strategies (Penttilä 2020). Particularly by demonstrating the role that these and, importantly, other texts come to play in ensuring the legitimacy of sustainability talk and helping sustain a talk-talk continuation initially explored by especially Penttilä (2020). This also shows that texts are important not only for configuring and evaluating CSR aspirations, but also for continuously legitimating sustainability talk.

Structural accommodation for CSD - Top management authorization

It is important to recognize that top management endorsement of sustainability talk is paramount in legitimating this new organizational discourse, including that of the human and textual agents that help voice it. The voice of the CEO,

for example, is almost always given space in sustainability reports, and top management is implicitly circulating throughout these texts with declarations such as "IKEA has decided X," "IKEA believes X," "IKEA will do X," etc. The importance of top management support is also visible at the beginning of IKEA's sustainability journey, as it never really took off until top management also saw sustainability as an organizational priority, even enforcing the words of the organization's code of conduct by "removing stopping blocks" in the purchasing organization.

Later on in this journey, the top management decision to make IKEA's sustainability strategy one of four cornerstones in IKEA Group's overarching business agenda also helped to legitimate sustainability talk within the organization. At the end of the third phase of IKEA's sustainability journey, making "caring for people and planet" into one of eight corporate values further reinforced the legitimacy of sustainability talk, because it signaled that not only IKEA Group, but also the concept owner, now viewed sustainability as an organizational priority.

The point here is to highlight the importance of long-term commitment and public support from top management for ensuring the legitimacy of sustainability talk, in general, and textual sustainability agents, in particular, within the organization, granting a CSD the authority it needs to start doing things in and to the organization. This finding on the importance of top management support and commitment confirms insights from previous case studies (Grayson, 2011; Jones et al., 2008b; Wilson, 2015) and CSR talk studies (Hunoldt et al., 2018; Girschik, 2020), but here I again put this insight in relation to developing a CSD in terms of authorizing it.

From finding a CSD to explorations of what it performs

Together, these three sets of empirical observations, as well as theory-based interpretations of them, suggest the emergence of a continuously developing CSD – a kind of discourse that helps legitimate sustainability talk within the organization by very much turning it into an organizational reality for retail employees engaged in retail talk.

In the next chapter, I turn away from the metaphorical "brick and mortar" that structurally fortify the legitimacy of sustainability talk in retail talk, and instead look at the sustainability talk itself as developed in the sustainability text analyzed in this study. I do this by focusing on the legitimation strategies deployed in texts that help justify the existence of sustainability talk in retail

talk – as a kind of talk that apparently is worthy of the organizational structures it, as seen in this chapter, is putting into place. I will use the next chapter to show how sustainability talk can be seen as making retailing more political, revealing a complex kind of *political performativity* of sustainability talk in retail talk. This interpretation, based on the theoretical perspective developed in Chapter 2, assumes that a CSD does indeed have the potential to "perform" new ways of organizing retailing through the ways in which it presents more sustainable development and retailing.

Four legitimation strategies and more political retailing

As argued in the theory chapter, it is worth looking at how sustainability talk is legitimated in discourse and communication to better understand the legitimation process under study here, something that is largely based on the assumption that discourse and communication play a vital role in such processes. This is because language, among other things (e.g., products), can help tie new ideas to already existing cultural frameworks (Johnson et al., 2006; Van Leeuwen, 2007). Potentially changing them in the process of legitimation, as these texts help develop a new kind of talking and thinking about *MSR* that IKEA employees are told to incorporate into their everyday retail talk through the CSD – a kind of sustainability talk that is partially constituted by the sustainability texts studied here (e.g., IWAY, sustainability strategies and sustainability reports).

What then, do these texts say about sustainable development and IKEA's role in it? How, in particular, is sustainability talk legitimated in IKEA's sustainability texts? What kind of legitimation strategies are deployed to justify IKEA's sustainability engagement? How do they change over time? And what can we, based on the legitimation strategies presented below, learn about the potential implications of legitimating sustainability talk in retail talk? These are the kinds of questions guiding the analysis presented in this chapter – an analysis that will be organized around van Leeuwen's (2007) four general legitimation categories as a means of identifying and organizing the legitimation strategies deployed in IKEA's sustainability texts.

Based on the particular legitimation *techniques* found under each category in the empirical case of IKEAs CSD, the analysis is driven toward reformulating van Leeuwen's (2007) four legitimation *categories*, developing them into four overarching legitimation *strategies* that better reflect how sustainability talk is legitimized in retail talk in these texts. To clarify the "legitimation terminology" I use in this chapter: legitimation techniques (12 in total) refers to particular ways in which legitimation is sought in IKEAs sustainability talk,

these are identified using the generic legitimation categories suggested by van Leeuwen's (2007) framework, leading me to the four overarching legitimation strategies, on which I base the finding argued for in this Chapter. The analysis undertaken here, hence, leads me to propose the following four legitimation strategies: (1) establishing the retail organization as a sustainability authority, (2) developing a moral and political agenda, (3) presenting MSR as a business imperative, and (4) constructing a narrative in which IKEA becomes an essential enabler of more sustainable development.

Taken together, I argue that these four legitimation strategies found in IKEA's CSD can be seen as politicizing retailing and the retail talk that constitutes it. This entails a kind of "political performativity" that, if we take the reality-constructing potential of talk seriously, suggests that making retailing more sustainable also can entail making retailing more political. Something that is implying a much more moralizing role for retailers than previous research on MSR would have us believe (e.g., Grayson 2011; Wilson 2015; Vadakkepatt et al. 2021). This, thus, sheds light on a previously overlooked complexity and problematic aspect of MSR. The finding also brings the moral(izing) aspects of CSR talk to the fore by empirically demonstrating the political performativity of CSR talk. This is in contrast to previous research in the CSR talk literature, which has only discussed these aspects of CSR talk conceptually (e.g., Shultz 2013).

Scope and content of IKEA's sustainability talk

Before going into the particulars techniques deployed in the legitimation strategies presented above, I will start of by giving a general overview of what is discussed in these texts, that is, the scope and content of IKEA's sustainability talk as written in the texts. I do this because, already in this general overview, we can see indications of the new, and increasingly political, role that the retail organization is presented as having in relation to more sustainable development, according to the texts analyzed here (for an overview of these texts, please see Chapter 3).

The broad scope of sustainability talk

Looking through sustainability reports over time reveals that IKEA's sustainability talk, seen as a kind of whole, always covers more or less IKEA's entire value chain, starting with product development, the sourcing of raw materials (especially wood), the production of furniture, transportation of

goods, warehousing, sustainability work at IKEA stores, product delivery from store to home, consumption and finally products' end of life. IKEA's sustainability talk can in this regard be seen as rather broad in scope, as it covers many different aspects of more sustainable development. This indicates that IKEA's sustainability talk has the potential to influence how a wide variety of organizations, markets and even industries contribute to sustainable development, which is to be expected given the understanding of retail organizations as intermediary organizations and the multifaceted nature of MSR, as discussed in previous chapters.

What is clear from this is not only that sustainability talk at IKEA entails more or less all aspects of retailing, in the sense of making products available for purchasing, but also that it extends beyond the traditional boundaries of IKEA as a retail organization, for example, by dictating conditions for production at independent suppliers, including how they treat their employees. This reflects the broad and external focus on much of the previous research on MSR. Further, and as evident in both the previous literature and the scandals that spawned the legitimation of sustainability talk at IKEA, it is often retailers who are held accountable for misconduct among the other companies in their value chain (Wilson 2015). This can perhaps further explain why IKEA's sustainability talk is so broad in scope and extends beyond IKEA's own organization in this regard.

The point I want to make here, however, is that IKEA's sustainability talk is a far-reaching kind of talk, arguably making it a kind of CSD that is rather broad in scope. This, in turn, also indicates that IKEA's sustainability talk may potentially influence a large number of actors. This is because they are now subjected to IKEA's authority as a player in bringing about more sustainable development, as stipulated by its CSD. What kind of authority this is will be further demonstrated and explained throughout this chapter.

Appeals to authority – IKEA as a sustainability authority

When studying how these texts appeal to authority to legitimate sustainability talk in retail talk, four techniques can be identified that leads me to the overarching legitimation strategy argued for here. These texts tend to (1) draw on, legitimize, and channel the agendas of external sustainability authorities, such as government bodies and NGOs, in order to legitimate IKEA's

sustainability engagement. In a sense infusing IKEA's retail talk with the social and environmental agendas of these actors, and by extension making the nature of IKEA's retail talk more moral and political.

These texts frequently (2) refer to personal authorities such as the CEO to justify IKEA's sustainability engagement. In doing so, key sustainability texts are in a sense authorized by top management, making the texts themselves into authoritative agents. Further demonstrating the authorization aspect of developing a CSD, something discussed in the previous chapter. Furthermore, this authorization allows sustainability texts to increasingly refer to each other, as different kinds of authorities, to justify IKEA's engagement with sustainability talk. This means that the texts analyzed here increasingly draw on their own creation to legitimize their existence. Moreover, this demonstrates that the CSD finding argued for in the previous chapter and the web of texts that constitute IKEA's CSD do indeed help sustain a talk-talk continuation. This development also coincides with decreasing use of external sustainability authorities to justify sustainability talk, which further suggests that IKEA is presenting itself as a key sustainability authority that legitimates its own engagement.

It also seems important to (3) draw on more impersonal authorities, such as IKEA's organizational culture, identity and history. In the process, these impersonal authorities are also partly transformed, or translated, to better suit the agendas of sustainability talk. This indicates that the purpose of doing retailing and the organization's reason for being are partially transformed into a much more politically oriented purpose.

IKEA also (4) presents itself as a sustainability authority that can help and enable customers, suppliers and other stakeholders in its many different value chains to become more sustainable. In this way, IKEA becomes an important driver of sustainability change by assuming a leading role to ensure sustainability-related adaptations in its value creation.

Taken together, I argue that these four legitimation strategies help present IKEA as a sustainability authority that is on a par with other sustainability authorities, such as government bodies and NGOs. In doing so, the purpose of retailing and the organizations organizing it are partially transformed so as to include a much wider set of responsibilities than merely making products available for purchasing. This is an important aspect of the overarching argument I am making in this chapter, which is that sustainability talk can be seen as politicizing retail talk and the business of retailing.

External sustainability authorities

When we look at how these texts refer to authorities to describe and justify IKEA's sustainability engagement, many of these authorities appear to be actors found in IKEA's external environment (e.g., various NGO's, business collaboration initiatives, UN bodies and directives, etc.). The sustainability "experts" mentioned in the previous chapter who played such an important role at the beginning of IKEA's sustainability journey, and who continue to do so through "advisory groups," can also be seen as important means for justifying IKEA's sustainability work in these texts, meaning that IKEA's sustainability approach and engagement are justified on the grounds that these actors are enlightened experts who "say so" (van Leeuwen 2007). This is exemplified in IKEA's 2007 sustainability report (p. 7), which explains how IKEA is "Working Together" with other organizations:

> "IKEA co-operates with companies, trade unions, NGOs and organisations to develop and strengthen the impact on our work within the social and environmental field. By doing this, we are able to learn and share experiences and accomplish more than we could have done by working on our own. IKEA works in partnership with UNICEF and Save the Children to improve children's rights and with the global conservation organisation WWF on forestry, cotton and climate change projects."
>
> - IKEA Sustainability Report (2007, p. 7)

The quote shows how these texts sometimes refer to external sustainability experts such as Save the Children and WWF to "strengthen" and, as I would argue, legitimate the impact of IKEA's sustainability talk. Other partnerships and collaborations are often mentioned throughout the report, and during phase 2 of IKEA's sustainability journey, lists and short descriptions of these collaborations are often provided.

Another point that can be made in the above example is that, because IKEA is supposedly working with these organizations and to some extent sharing objectives, these actors might also help inform IKEA's sustainability talk and potentially its retail talk. In a sense channeling the concerns and views of others through IKEA's own sustainability communication. This is further exemplified in how texts produced by the United Nations and the International Labor Organization are used to justify IKEA's approach to meeting the expectation that the company should take social responsibility in their supply chains with IWAY. This can be seen in IKEA's first sustainability report:

> "IWAY is based on international conventions and declarations. The IKEA code of conduct includes provisions mainly based on the UN Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (the eight core conventions), 1998, and the Rio Declaration on Sustainable Development, 1992."
>
> - IKEA Social and Environmental Report (2003, p. 15)

The quote above is indicative of how the way sustainability talk, as talked by external authorities, becomes part of retail talk that helps organize IKEA through IWAY. Put in more theoretical terms, what we see is an example of an intertextual move that is visible in the texts making up the organization's CSD – a move that connects the organization's retail talk with rather explicitly stated texts developed by external others, making these external texts part of internal organizing texts that help structure and give direction to conversations deploying sustainability talk in retail talk (Cooren 2004; Taylor and Van Every 2000). By drawing on these external authorities to legitimate IKEA's sustainability engagement in the form of IWAY – a text that by this time should be included in communication that organizes the purchasing of home furnishing products at IKEA – these actors are also present in texts stipulating how employees at IKEA ought to go about their work. Actors such as the UN and ILO, and their agendas, are made relevant and legitimate in communication that at least ought to help constitute the organizing of IKEA, in this case through the textual authority of IWAY.

Another very important external form of legitimacy that enters into these texts from 2015 and onwards is the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are to be met by 2030 and were launched by the UN shortly after the 2015 Paris agreement was signed.

> "IKEA Group welcomes the Sustainable Development Goals as a catalyst towards achieving a more sustainable and equal world. We will use the goals to guide and inspire us in developing our sustainability agenda. We have mapped our People & Planet Positive strategy against the goals, and identified seven in particular where we can make the greatest contribution."
>
> - IKEA Sustainability Report (2016, p. 10)

Again, the SDGs offer a more or less universal set of aspirations that are matched with IKEA's own aspirations. In a sense, these SDGs seem to have a similar function to that of the sustainability strategies launched by IKEA. They set a number of goals that should be met by 2030 and on which progress (ideally) can be reported on. From a legitimation perspective, they function as

a kind of reference document that sustainability advocates can point at and say "look here, it has been decided by the UN that we need to do 'this and this' so we have to do 'this and that' to contribute to their agenda," by extension connecting IKEA sustainability talk, and thus in part its retailing talk, with a global sustainability agenda set by the Paris agreement signatories through an inter-textual move in discourse. Once again, this exemplifies how IKEA's reorganization for MSR is, in a rather concrete way, part of the system-level reorganization for more sustainable development.

To conclude this legitimation strategy, and show how it reveals one way in which sustainability talk can be seen as politicizing retail talk, another point should be made. IKEA's sustainability talk, as spoken in these texts, is more or less explicitly legitimized with referrals to external sustainability authorities and experts, who, as was shown in the previous chapter, contribute to shaping how IKEA goes about (re)organizing its retail activities. In appealing to the authority of these actors, I would argue that these sustainability texts also come to legitimate these actors' essentially political concerns and issues among retail employees at IKEA. This means that what these actors stand for and do is something IKEA employees are told, in a sense, to contribute to and even support.

However, this kind of legitimation and channeling of external actors and their views is perhaps an inevitable consequence of contributing to the system-level reorganization for more sustainable development. After all, and according to for example the Paris agreement, accomplishing more sustainable development entails a great deal of collaboration between a multitude of actors. Nonetheless, this is a set of actors who, prior to the advent of sustainability talk in IKEA's retail talk, probably enjoyed less legitimacy in the latter and, hence, less potential to influence the organizing of retailing at IKEA. Relating this to previous retail research, this legitimation technique gives a more complete understanding of what the collaboration with external actors that often is recommended actually entails (Grayson 2011; Wilson 2015). This, taken together with the other strategies identified here, reveals some previously overlooked complexities involved in adhering to such advice.

Interestingly, and returning to the empirical observations of legitimation in IKEA's CSD, explicit listing and mentioning of collaborations and partnerships seem to become less frequent and more subtle in later reports compared to early ones (notably except for the SDGs). For instance, in the "Our never ending job" document, an important internal sustainability document distributed to all IKEA employees around 2011, no reference of this kind is made in to explanations of either IWAY or "The IKEA way of

preventing child labor." Arguably, this indicates that IKEA's sustainability talk is increasingly relying on "itself" as an authority that helps legitimize sustainability talk in retail talk, which will be discussed next.

Authorizing a system of sustainability texts

Top management and textual authorities (i.e., directives) are often referred to more or less explicitly in sustainability texts to legitimate the sustainability talk in them. Doing so more explicitly through public top management endorsements of sustainability texts and parts thereof and more implicitly through statements such as "IKEA has decided," "IKEA believes," "IKEA supports," etc. Sustainability reports in particular draw on their own creation, on their own a system of sustainability texts, to legitimate the sustainability talk presented in them. This means that sustainability talk establishes and conveys its own authority through an inter-textual system of top-management-endorsed sustainability texts that are used to authorize and legitimate its own aspirations – a development that coincides with the less frequent mentions of external sustainability authorities in the previous legitimation technique.

The key insights here are the importance of showing top management endorsement on a textual level, and how sustainability commitment over time can develop into a system of textual authorities that further reinforce the legitimacy of sustainability talk in retail talk, at least on the textual level explored in this chapter. This is because, as will be explored further in the next chapter, there are many more internal authorities (i.e., "gatekeepers") who need convincing to endorse and include IKEA's sustainability talk in retail talk among employees throughout the organization.

Returning to the empirical material and looking at sustainability texts with Van Leeuwen (2007) legitimation sub-category of personal authority, the most visible one is a page or two dedicated to a picture of the CEO accompanied by a "message" or "Q&A" piece, usually followed by a similar piece from the CSO, where he supports and comments on IKEA's sustainability agenda, according to these texts that is. This is shown in the example below, taken from the 2015 sustainability report, where the CEO full heartedly, though humbly, supports IKEA's sustainability agenda.

IKEA Sustainability Report (2015, p. 5)

> "Overall, we are making good progress at putting our sustainability strategy People & Planet Positive to work. In FY15 we achieved our target to source all of our cotton from more sustainable sources."
>
> - IKEA Sustainability Report (2015 p. 5)

Symbolically speaking, the presence of a CEO message that supports IKEA's sustainability talk exemplifies how the CEO is authorizing the sustainability talk that follows, putting his stamp of approval on the sustainability text itself and even on other sustainability texts – in this case IKEA's sustainability strategy. This gives weight to everything said thereafter by authorizing what these sustainability texts say and to some extent demanding support from whoever "we" and "IKEA" may be. It can also be seen as putting a face to the many implicit referrals to internal authorities that can be found throughout these texts, meaning the many propositions about how IKEA, and those doing IKEA, "will do X, must do this, are required to do that, should care about this and believe that" simply because that is "IKEA's" will.

What this means, as will be made more evident in the next chapter, is that sustainability professionals are equipped with a document that is endorsed by top management. The document, in a sense, empowers them when they advocate sustainability talk throughout the firm, because they can refer to it

and essentially say "Look here, we have to do this," just as the IWAY document allowed the compliance monitoring group to do at the beginning of IKEA's sustainability journey. The "performative power of the document" is further strengthened by its ties to other and more general business strategies at IKEA, as also mentioned in the previous chapter.

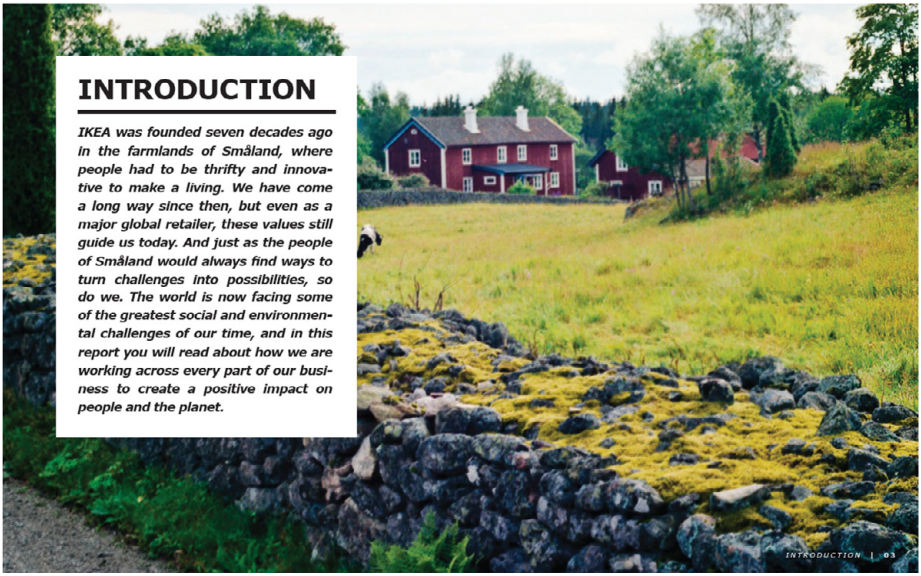
> "Sustainability is one of the cornerstones of growing IKEA together (our long-term business direction) and is included in the annual business plans of every part of the business. Group management and the board of directors receive regular reports on progress towards our key sustainability objectives. Our Chief Sustainability Officer, Steve Howard, is a member of group management and reports directly to the group president and CEO, Peter Agnefjäll"
>
> - IKEA Sustainability Report (2012, p. 75)

The quote above shows that sustainability strategies are not only endorsed by top management, but are also part of a wider network of business strategies providing direction for organizing retailing at IKEA Group. Again, and as seen in the second quote, the authority of these texts is closely connected to more personal authorities such as "the group president and CEO," "Group Management" and "the board of directors." It becomes unquestionable that sustainability, at least in theory, is a top priority within the business, because all levels of the organization now have to report their "sustainability progress." To further tackle non-compliance with the objectives set by the sustainability strategies, the people and planet strategy includes some central "100% goals," meaning that if they are to be achieved, no part of the organization can lag behind. This has been elaborated on more above, but it is important to note that sustainability texts are made "authoritative" by referencing both personal and textual authorities in IKEA's retail talk.

There are others example of textual agent referencing, such as a product development principle called "Democratic Design," which replaced something called the "eWheel method." The point is to show how this cross-referencing, this inter-textuality (Bhatia, 2010; Koskela, 2013) of sustainability texts, seemingly with the support of top management, appears to be important for legitimating sustainability talk in retail talk on a textual level, revealing a relatively new system of sustainability-related "musts" that employees at least ought to encounter in their everyday work (as also concluded in the previous chapter). This has the potential to force sustainability talk, as construed in the organization's CSD, into retail talk within the organization and provides additional clues as to how the sustainability talk, largely shaped during strategic episodes (Penttilä 2020), is spread throughout an organization that

previous empirical CSR talk research has left in the dark (e.g., Hunoldt et al., 2018; Girschik 2020; Penttilä 2020). However, as will be seen in the next chapter, it is not quite that easy.

Making sustainability talk a "natural" part of what IKEA is



IKEA Sustainability Report (2015, p. 3)

The legitimation technique found in IKEA's sustainability talk that I want to discuss in this section shows how IKEA draws on, and to some extend transforms, key organizational texts and discourses to suggest that sustainability talk is a given aspect of what IKEA in a sense "is." What is in "our DNA", as one respondent put it in an interview for this study. This is something that, once again, happens through a series of inter-textual and inter-discursive moves that are visible in the sustainability texts analyzed here, showing *how* sustainability can be seen as being "integrated" with the retailer's organizational identity (Simões & Sebastiani, 2017). Note that this legitimation technique does not deal with external authorities, not internal personal authorities or a system of authorized sustainability texts, but with key organizational texts that help explain "the essence" of IKEA as an

organization, that is, texts that help structure such topics in the organization's retail talk (Cooren 2004; Taylor and Van Every 2000).

I will exemplify this legitimation technique by showing how IKEA relates sustainability talk and particular aspects of such talk to its vision (i.e., the organization's purpose, its why) and its organizational culture (how it is doing what it is doing) in these texts. All of this would seem to be important in legitimating sustainability talk in retail talk, but also for the meaning, purpose and organizing of retailing from a sustainability perspective. Because by transforming the why, the what and the how of retail talk, retailing is here at least discursively transformed in an almost existential way by redefining what it means to "be" a retail organization. This shows that making retailing more sustainable can be a much more transformative endeavor than previous retail research has tended to indicate (e.g., Grayson 2011; Wilson 2015). Also contributing to the overarching argument that I am making in this chapter concerning the political performativity of sustainability talk in retail talk.

Transforming the organizations vision (why we do what we do)

As seen in the previous chapter, internal advocates for sustainability talk drew quite heavily on IKEA's vision to legitimate sustainability engagement from the very start of IKEA's sustainability journey. In other words, they drew a connection between sustainability talk and why IKEA does what it does. This vision was first formulated in the Testament of a Furniture Dealer, as mentioned before. However, realizing this legitimating technique seems to require a translation of what the vision entails, primarily redefining what is meant by "the many people," as in the following quote from IKEA's first sustainability report:

> "To create a better everyday life for the many people. The IKEA vision was first formulated back in 1976. It is now natural to us to refer "the many people" to, not only our customers, but also IKEA co-workers and the employees who work for IKEA suppliers."
>
> - IKEA Social and Environmental Report (2003, p. 6)

As the quote exemplifies, the appeal to tradition discussed in this legitimation technique mingles with personal authoritarian legitimation discussed in the previous one. It is made clear that the vision implies "taking responsibility for people and the environment" in a top-management-endorsed sustainability text. This technique also occurs repeatedly in these documents, and often in more implicit ways by simply using the terminology "the many people" whenever possible.

In fact, this phrase – this particular legitimation tactic of referring to "the many people" – can be used as an example of how IKEA's sustainability agenda is intertextually connected to "The Testament of a Furniture Dealer" as a legitimation technique for sustainability talk. "The many people" is frequently used in many different contexts, making it somewhat hard to trace its meaning in these texts. But it can be argued that the phrase originally referred to IKEA customers: making furniture cheap enough for the many people. This can be seen in the part of this text shown below:


To create a better everyday life for the many people

by offering a wide range of well-designed, functional home furnishing products at prices so low that as many people as possible will be able to afford them.

We have decided once and for all to side with the many. What is good for our customers is also, in the long run, good for us. This is an objective that carries obligations.

Testament of a Furniture Dealer (1976, p. 1)

This phrase, as shown above, is transformed from meaning customers into meaning "people and the environment" and workers employed by suppliers. Eventually the transformation, the vision metamorphism, is completed and, as exemplified in the quote below from the 2016 report:

> "Our vision is to create a better everyday life for the many people. Whoever and wherever they are, everyone shares the same fundamental human rights. We have a responsibility to protect and support the rights of everyone we come into contact with."
>
> - IKEA Sustainability Report (2016, p. 58)

The point here is to show how sustainability talk, whatever it might be about, is linked to important organizational texts to make it seem like a natural part of why the organization does what it does, here exemplified by the Testament of a Furniture Dealer. This is especially important for an organization like IKEA, which describes itself as a "value-led company" with a strong organizational culture. Because, as will be shown below, it is not only through

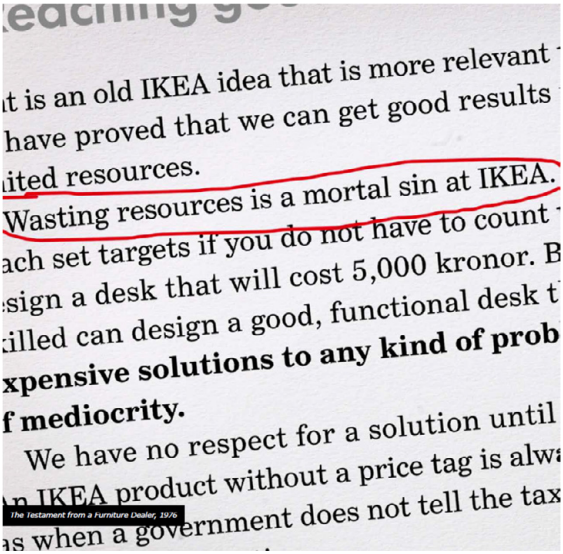
referrals to IKEA's vision statement that attempts are made at this kind of connection between IKEA's vision and sustainability talk, rendering it congruent with already existing cultural frameworks and communication agendas (Johnson et al. 2006; Shultz 2013)

Transforming the organizations culture (how we do what we do)

Another way of connecting sustainability talk with IKEA is by claiming that caring about people and the environment is part of IKEA's culture – part of how IKEA does what it does, something that is visible from the very start. In the first image below, taken from the 6th page of IKEA's first sustainability report, it is stated that sustainability talk is "a natural part of the daily business," and on the right-hand side where IKEA's corporate values are related to social and environmental responsibility:

> "The IKEA culture supports the work [paragraph title]
>
> The IKEA culture is based on a clear and distinctive ser of values which support our work with social and environmental issues.
>
> Doing more with less [paragraph title]
>
> Ever since IKEA was founded in 1943, the company has tried hard to avoid wasting resources – everything from natural resources to other resources such as time and money"
>
> - IKEA Social and Environmental Report (2003, p. 6)

And in the Sustainability Communication Concept (2012, p. 2) document below by referring to an expressive passage of the Testament of a Furniture Dealer:



Sustainability Communication Concept (2012, p. 2)

This technique continues in texts throughout IKEA's sustainability journey, though the ties between sustainability talk and IKEA's culture are made more vivid. This is done, for example, by drawing both textual and pictural parallels between engaging with sustainability and "the rocky landscapes of Småland" where IKEA was founded (seen the example opening this section).

The most important and crucial testament to the claim that sustainability should now be understood as part of IKEA's culture, as part of who IKEA is, came at the end of 2016 when Ingvar Kamprad's three sons updated IKEA's core values. Since this update, one of the eight values, or phrases, that supposedly describe IKEA is "Caring for people and planet," which they explicitly claim is "rooted in The Testament of a Furniture Dealer." This arguably gives sustainability almost unquestionable legitimacy in an organization like IKEA.

To conclude, this legitimation technique justifies IKEA's sustainability talk based on key organizational texts (e.g., Testament of a Furniture Dealer) and discursive practices (serving "the many people"), in effect connecting to and to some extent transforming the meaning of retail talk at IKEA. The point is to show that sustainability texts not only draw on, but also transform key organizational texts that are important symbolic elements of the organization itself. This, I would argue, invites existential discussions about retailing in light

of sustainability talk that are largely lacking in the previous research (Vadakkepatt et al. 2021) and that will be elaborated on in Chapter 7.

Presenting IKEA as a sustainability authority in value chains

The last legitimation technique identified with the authority category of van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation framework concerns the authority of IKEA as an enabler of sustainability-related changes among customers, suppliers and other stakeholders in its many value chains. This can be shown, for example, through the many declarations of how IKEA suppliers "must" or are "required" to do something based on IKEA's sustainability talk. This is an especially common exercise of authority in relation to suppliers, and is perhaps not so strange given that IWAY – one of the most important documents in the system of sustainability texts analyzed here – is a code of conduct that suppliers "must" comply with. In later sustainability texts, however, this rather authoritarian tone becomes somewhat softer.

It has always been emphasized that IKEA aims at working with its suppliers to improve working conditions, and that fostering long-term relationships has been key to this strategy. Yet the quote below exemplifies a changing tone of voice in later texts, where it gets friendlier and more pragmatic than authoritarian. As exemplified by a section in the 2012 sustainability report, where it is explained how IKEA works with compliance among its suppliers:

> "Gaining IWAY approval is a significant step forward, and we worked with suppliers through the process, communicating IWAY requirements clearly and supporting their efforts to improve social and environmental standards. […] Suppliers worked hard to correct these issues and meet the IWAY requirements. Unfortunately, not all suppliers chose to meet the IWAY requirements by the end of FY12 and, as a result, we stopped working with around 70 suppliers."
>
> - IKEA Sustainability Report (2012, p. 78)

In this quote, it is also "unfortunate" when suppliers do not meet IWAY requirements, rather than "unacceptable," and IKEA is "supporting their efforts" rather than imposing IKEA's efforts. In other words, IKEA goes from an organization that imposes other actors' demands on its suppliers at the beginning of its sustainability journey (shown in the first legitimation technique above), to one that knows enough to make up its own sustainability agenda and support its suppliers' efforts to contribute to this agenda. Later in IKEA's sustainability journey, this commitment of support extends to IKEA's suppliers and in some cases even to third-tier suppliers.

A similar tendency can also be seen in relation to IKEA customers, because the way IKEA's sustainability engagement is justified in relation to customers starts to shift at the end of phase two. It goes from offering more sustainable home furnishing solutions to more or less passive customers to responding to customers' ethical expectations, towards (pro)actively "engaging" customers to help and inspire them to lead more sustainable lives. Naturally, this is done mainly with the help of IKEA's growing share of more sustainable products, as exemplified in the picture below, taken from IKEA's 2016 sustainability report (p. 14):

IKEA Sustainability Report (2016, p. 14)

This technique of describing IKEA as "aiding" people in doing something "good" is in fact a common thread throughout many topics during IKEA's third phase. That is to say, sustainability at IKEA is talked about as being about "inspiring," "enabling," "supporting," etc., not only customers, but also suppliers, co-workers, communities, and people in general to "become more sustainable." Essentially, IKEA is helping people care more about each other and the planet, where IKEA serves as their common savior.

I argue that the extensive list of "musts" in the early texts constituting IKEA's sustainability talk, together with later talk about IKEA as a kind of "enabler," and, as will be seen, even an activist, all show how IKEA is establishing itself as a kind of sustainability authority among others. IKEA can, and therefore should, help others become more sustainable and punish those who refuse to buy into IKEA's system of thought around MSR, hence legitimating

sustainability talk in IKEA's retail talk and, in a sense, showing how IKEA is adhering to the frequent calls for this in previous research on MSR (e.g., Vadakkepatt et al. 2021).

Combining the four legitimation techniques – constructing IKEA as a sustainability authority

As a consequence of "taking on" such a wide array of sustainability responsibilities in sustainability talk over time, and of tying such talk to understandings of the organization's very reason for, and way of, being, I would argue that IKEA is establishing itself as a sustainability authority in its own right – one that stands among the external authorities consulted so explicitly, at least at the beginning of IKEA's sustainability journey and one that becomes an important source of legitimacy for IKEA's sustainability talk. Essentially, this signals that what IKEA is saying and doing in relation to sustainability is legitimate because IKEA is one of the good and knowledgeable ones, thus constructing IKEA as an ambitious force to be reconned with in the fight for more sustainable development.

What we see here, I would argue, is something of a transformation in the role IKEA comes to play in these texts. Looking over time, this sustainability journey started in public embarrassment, causing the company to consult and use sustainability talk as spoken by the external sustainability authorities discussed in the first legitimation technique above. In a sense, IKEA learned to talk that sustainability talk by imitating that of others. But as seen in the legitimation techniques identified here, this talk is gradually made into "our" (i.e., IKEA's) sustainability talk and even into a supposed traditionally given part of retail talk at IKEA.

In doing so, IKEA is not only voicing and responding to other actors' sustainability talk, but gradually also describing itself as someone/-thing that stands among and is on par with these other sustainability authorities. That is, over time IKEA establishes itself as a sustainability authority in its own right – as a sustainability-enlightened spider in the web of actors who make not only IKEA's retail organization possible, but also more sustainable development as envisioned by IKEA. And, as seen below, the company even presents itself as a vital authority to listen to if sustainable development is to be achieved.

Appeals to morality – Explicating IKEA's political agenda

A very common way of legitimating sustainability talk in these texts is by drawing on morals in different ways to justify IKEA's sustainability talk in retail talk, in this way highlighting the moral undertones of CSR talk discussed conceptually in CSR talk theorizing (Schultz, 2013). What I will show in this section is how morals manifest themselves in IKEA's sustainability talk. I will offer an empirical account of how, in this case, morals appear in sustainability texts to legitimate IKEA's sustainability engagement, thus complimenting Shultz's (2013) conceptual discussions with an empirical account.

There are essentially three different legitimation techniques used in these texts to legitimate IKEA's sustainability engagement on moral grounds. (1) The first one involves more or less subtle ways of deploying relatively vague moral terminology when describing and justifying IKEA's sustainability talk, in a sense appealing to readers' own moral values. (2) The second way is to more bluntly state what the right things to think, believe and do supposedly are. (3) Lastly, these texts, especially during the third phase of IKEA's sustainability journey, construct IKEA as a retail organization with a morally justified political agenda that its employees are tasked with operationalizing alongside its business agendas. In a sense, this legitimates IKEA's sustainability talk by referring to the organization's increasingly explicit moral values and political agenda.

Given the moral underpinnings of sustainability talk that are empirically exemplified below, together with the CSD finding presented in the previous chapter, I would argue that IKEA's sustainability texts can be seen as bringing morals to the heart of organizing retailing if employees make use of them in retail talk. Much like the first legitimation technique above, where sustainability talk is argued to channel a new set of actors and their world views and agendas into retail talk, the three techniques presented below can be seen as bringing morals into retail talk. Further, this suggests that there may be a kind of moral, or political, performativity of sustainability talk in retail talk, essentially suggesting that making retailing more sustainable also may entail making retailing more political.

Appealing to readers' moral values

Morally righteous words are quite heavily used in these texts, as the word "healthy" demonstrates in the quote below:

> "IKEA strongly believes that taking an environmentally responsible approach is the only sensible way to run a healthy and sustainable business."
>
> - IKEA Social and Environmental Report (2005, p. 36)

The quote is a good example for several reasons. The analyzed texts often appeal to various beliefs that IKEA holds, such as "IKEA believes that good working conditions…," "IKEA believes in long-term relationships…," IKEA believes that we can make a difference…," etc. Further, "IKEA believes" all these things because it is the "only sensible way" of doing something, period, thus displaying an "end-of-discussion" tendency that is characteristic of morals in communication (Ziemann, 2011). Finally, morally righteous words are also used heavily in these texts, as the word "healthy" demonstrates in the quote above. A central feature of using value-laden words like this is that all these things are quite difficult to argue with, at least if you share the same belief system as the one conveyed in the text. In a way, the legitimating trick at play here is that using value-laden words closes the door to any further discussion (Van Leeuwen, 2007; Ziemann, 2011). Though you might wonder what is meant by a healthy business, you of course do not want to be the one advocating unhealthy business practices. The following quotes from IKEA's sustainability communication further demonstrate this point:

> "Wonderful, thirst-quenching and life-giving water! But access to clean fresh water is not a matter of course for everyone. That is why water will be one of IKEA's most important issues in the next few years."
>
> - Our never ending job (2011, p. 31)

Again, one might ask: Who does not want more people to have access to life-giving water? The point I want to make here is that giving moral justifications for sustainability engagement is a very salient and potentially powerful way of legitimatizing sustainability talk. In other words, a common underlying assumption in these texts is that engaging with sustainability issues is simply the morally right thing to do, thus appealing to readers' sense of morality.

However, this is all well and good in theory, where morals are hard to argue against, but things become more complicated in practice (as will be seen in the following chapter). What does it mean, for example, to show respect? How can animal welfare be combined with eating animals? When does safety have to give way to practicality? Few if any clues about how to solve these moral dilemmas are given in the analyzed texts from the beginning of IKEA's sustainability journey, although this changes during the third phase of this journey.

From moral to moralizing

It is visible in the texts that the moral values become somewhat more concrete during the third phase of IKEA's sustainability journey, as they are more clearly tied to specific issues and organizational actions. This can be seen in how the "right" things to do are very explicitly suggested in the first People and Planet strategy from 2012:

> "A sustainable world that provides a great quality of life for many people, respects human rights and protects the environment is possible. We can provide economic opportunities and empower people so they are able to better provide for themselves and their families. We can utilise the massive potential of renewable energy; we can develop exciting new products and services that help people live a more sustainable life at home; we can transform waste into resources; and protect our forests, farmlands, seas and rivers for future generations. We can help lift people out of poverty by providing good places to work throughout our value chain and contribute to creating a fairer and more equal society for the many people. IKEA can be a small, but significant, force in helping to create this more sustainable world."
>
> - People and Planet Positive (2012, p. 3)

I would argue that the above quote is a good example of how texts from this phase make the morally right things to do more concrete, seen above in all the good things IKEA can do, according to this piece of text. However, this also means that these texts are becoming increasingly moralizing. In the previous phase, it was more a matter of appealing to the morality of potential readers, while in this phase it seems to be about telling readers what "the right things" are, thus imposing certain values more explicitly. IKEA can and should, according to this piece of IKEA's sustainability communication, be lifting people out of poverty, protecting forests, and creating a more equal and fair society. Apparently, being a retail organization is about much more than "simply" offering home furnishing products.

As also seen in the example above, IKEA does not only want to "transform" its own business, and not only its value chain, but also entire markets, industries and even society at large. A point also made in an internal marketing document explaining IKEA's general approach to communicating sustainability:

> "While the goal of sustainability communication is to position IKEA as the leader in a sustainable life at home, to dramatically move people's perception of IKEA and sustainability and by leading by example, we also want

> communication to empower people to inspire and influence millions to live a more sustainable life at home."
>
> - Sustainability Communication Concept (2012, p. 2)

The quote not only exemplifies how IKEA actively aspires to "move people's perceptions" and "empower" them to become more sustainable, it also demonstrates the overall shift in how IKEA talks about other actors in relation to IKEA's own sustainability talk, as discussed above – how IKEA is described as "aiding" people in doing something "good." IKEA's version of sustainability talk during this phase is, in a sense, gently moralizing in that it "invites" people to join IKEA's cause, that is, if they want to do "the right thing." It is almost as if IKEA is on a (moral) mission:

> "We're on a mission: to create a movement for sustainable living."
>
> - IKEA Sustainability Report (2015, p. 13)

Explicating a political agenda

In light of what I have shown in the above legitimation technique, I want to draw special attention to an important common thread that runs throughout sustainability texts from the third phase of IKEA's sustainability journey. IKEA's sustainability talk seems to adopt something of a new tone of voice during this phase that is almost political in nature and that expresses more ambition than the communication in previous phases. For instance, it is claimed that IKEA wants to "take a lead" and "transform" both itself and entire industries, that IKEA is "taking a stand" against climate change, and the CEO is even depicted as marching alongside protesters in Paris to tackle climate change by urging world leaders to sign the UN Paris agreement. As the CSO declares in the fieldnote below, IKEA is "going to become an activist." In interviews with IKEA employees, this kind of rhetoric seems to have symbolized a kind of admirable, and hence legitimate, ambition with sustainability talk in retail talk. For this reason, space is given to show this politicization tendency – a legitimation strategy I see as explicating a political agenda, in addition to the moral principles discussed in the previous technique of this section.

I will exemplify this strategy, and the potential performativity of it discussed later, by using a couple of extracts from fieldnotes taken when I observed a speech given by the then current CSO, the charismatic sustainability figure also mentioned in the sustainability journey presented in the previous chapter. It

was one of his last presentations as CSO and can be described as his goodbye speech at INGKA Groups global headquarters (called Hubhult) in Malmö, Sweden. It is a good representation of how IKEA's sustainability talk is legitimated on moral and political grounds during the third phase of its sustainability journey, in addition to exemplifying many of the other legitimation techniques presented in this chapter.

> The speech is taking place at the central staircase on the bottom floor at Hubhult. On display in the room is one of IKEA refugee shelters called "better shelter." In a sense signaling the extended meaning of IKEA's vision to "create a better everyday life for the many people." Something that fits well into Steve's presentation. The whole staircase is packed with people who are waiting for the speech to start.
>
> He begins by saying that he will move on […] and the presentation will be a "re-cap" of his years at IKEA. He starts by explaining that he probably was the first external hire in the Group Management team. He then encourages people to be themselves, just like IKEA's CEO who hired him encouraged him to be on his new position.
>
> […]
>
> He then starts talking about the decision to choice edit out non-LED lightbulbs and explains that by 2020 the CO2 emissions saved because of this will be the equivalent of Sweden's total CO2 emissions. This statement is followed by a round of applause from the audience. He continues by stating that "This is how we build a better future, one lightbulb at the time, one solar panel at the time", etc.
>
> He then goes on to explain the work IKEA has done on solar power and refers to a Reuters news article stating that IKEA's first rooftop installation is "a game changer." Now IKEA has solar panels on half of its stores. He then takes Poland as a new example, a country where climate change apparently isn't high on the agenda, but where IKEA either directly sponsored or used significant subsidies to equip 100 co-workers with solar powered homes. Steve states that "It's a real signal to society when you do stuff like that."
>
> […]
>
> He goes on to explain the work IKEA has done in the cotton industry and begins by stressing what impact it has had on people in their "virtuous value chain" and that "we're probably 10 years ahead of everybody else" when it comes to better cotton."
>
> He then goes on to talk about the people affected by IKEA and states that "about 15 million people are dependent on IKEA" according to his rough estimations, which include all family members dependent on income from IKEA. He praises

IWAY as “a strong base” to build on. He highlights that IKEA has lowered the working hours at their suppliers in China who soon will be at the 60 hours a week mark, the IWAY standard, from over 90 working hours 4 years ago. He is not so humble when he compares the work IKEA has done with the struggle of the working movement for whom, in western societies, “it took about 50 years to do what we did in 4 years.”

He then stresses the importance of IKEA’s vision, “a fantastic vision that I will bring with me.” He relates it to equality, which he sees, together with global warming, as the most important issues of our time. He continues on the equality track and presents a number of examples of how IKEA has raised wages for their employees. […] In the US, IKEA raised the hourly wage across their stores “purely because it’s the right thing to do.” “You can almost always find a business case” “but it starts with wanting to do the right thing,” stressing over and over again that “doing the right thing” should be the primary reason for change.

He also talks about what IKEA is doing for LGBT rights throughout the world and that “now we are much more explicit on diversity inclusion” and “we are going to be an activist” when it comes to global warming and equality. He takes the example of an open letter from the country manager in the US where s/he took a stand against Donald Trumps’ travel ban and how it was the most liked piece on IKEA’s intranet “IKEA inside.” Taking a stand is a reoccurring theme in his presentation, stressing the activist turn that he wants IKEA to continue on.

The speech goes on with the Paris agreement and IKEA’s involvement there. He shows a picture of IKEA’s CEO Peter on an installation on the streets of Paris. Here he stresses the change in business that occurred between the Copenhagen and Paris conference. In the former, business organizations were apparently opposing many of the suggestions, while in Paris they drove a lot of the discussions. He also claims that “representatives of civil society were inspired by our business” to show how a business can be on a par with activists in advocating change.

He then presents a chart showing how experts rank various businesses on their sustainability work, where Unilever tops the chart and IKEA is in fourth place. The goal is to be number one, which he stresses is up to the people in the audience now that he is leaving. He compares the charts with the fact that IKEA barely appeared on the charts when he started, but stresses how the company has improved. Stating that “if you look at the stands we’ve made throughout our value chain” and “what purpose your role has” in improving society.

His speech is then followed by very long applause from the audience before moving on to questions. The first and only question is from a co-worker who states that “sustainability does come at a cost” and asks how they should handle situations where sustainability goals clash with business goals. His answer is not very straightforward, but he explains that he personally has stopped projects

> because they haven't been "commercially viable," such as solar panels on stores located in unsuitable areas where the investment simply wouldn't pay off. But he stresses that "there is still a lot of low hanging fruit" that people should look for. He also stresses that you can almost always find a business case if you look hard enough at an issue. "If you can't find it you haven't looked hard enough for it."
>
> Then another IKEA employee takes the stage and invites the audience to mingle with raw-food chocolate cake and ginger shots, and the presentation is over.
>
> - Extract from participant observation field notes by Axel Welinder (Spring 2017)

There are many examples in the quote above, such as the claim that IKEA in some ways has done more for workers than trade unions, that IKEA is going to become an activist, that it is about doing the right thing, and depicting leading organizational figures alongside climate protesters on the streets of Paris. All of these statements construct IKEA as an organization that not only has a business agenda, but also a moral and political agenda, to guide them in their everyday work. An agenda based on an increasingly explicit set of moral principles that should function as moral lodestars for employees and others. The point here is to show the potential political performativity of sustainability talk in retail talk, thus, to show how making retailing more sustainable can come to entail making retailing more political

However, and as will be seen in the examples below, operationalizing a morally based sustainability agenda alongside a business agenda can be a challenging endeavor. This is particularly true because walking the moral aspirations of the retailer's sustainability talk, and doing so across different local markets with varying moral belief systems, may be like walking through a moral minefield, where one always runs the risk of promoting the "wrong" beliefs.

An empirical sidenote - Walking the morals of sustainability talk

With morals being a kind of "end-of-discussion" argument – something is simply morally right or wrong – the effectiveness of this legitimation strategy might also differ across markets. This can be exemplified with two controversies that came with IKEA walking the morals of its sustainability talk. Especially the latter example highlights the kind of challenges that can arise from having and living up to a set of increasingly explicit and concrete moral principles.

For instance, and in line with IKEA's "belief in diversity", IKEA's country manager on the US market wrote an open letter to Donald Trump condemning his decision to impose a travel ban on citizens from Muslim countries. Similarly, when the US declared that they would withdraw from the Paris Agreement in 2017, IKEA Group posted an official statement on their intranet condemning the action and declaring their continued support for the agreement (in line with IKEA "going all in" to battle climate change). That post actually became one of the most liked posts on their intranet that year with many comments from co-workers, most of whom stated that they were "proud" of working for a company "that cares about improving the world." However, not all comments were positive. Some felt that the agreement was bad from the start and were thus endorsing Trumps decision. Some co-workers also reacted strongly against how other co-workers' comments framed Americans as stupid. Though the reactions varied, the action seems to have stirred up a lot of feelings about IKEA's stand.

Another example of how IKEA's "stands" can lead to controversy is an incident in Poland in 2019 (Lapidus, 2020; Sandberg, 2019; TT, 2019, 2020). A co-worker spoke up against IKEA's view on LGBT rights on their intranet with referrals to that person's religiously based moral values by quoting a passage from the bible. The employee were asked by management to take the comment down, but refused. In the end, that employee was fired for the act with the justification that it was against IKEA's values. Clearly sending the signal that it is IKEA's (moral) way or the highway. This disturbed the conservative Polish government, created calls for boycotts of IKEA, and ultimately lead to prosecution of IKEA's country manager in Poland. However, IKEA stood its ground, showing that it can stand up against powerful external authorities to walk its talk – all based on an increasingly explicit moral belief system defining not only who IKEA should be, but also who IKEA employees should be.

The point of mentioning these examples here is to show that it is not without consequences that IKEA takes an "activist turn" and asserts itself as a sustainability authority among its many stakeholders, as this will inevitably have consequences for how IKEA employees should think and act in their everyday work and perhaps beyond. It also gives rise to a new set of ethical dilemmas that retailers might have to deal with as the company develops an increasingly political sustainability agenda alongside its business agenda. This phenomenon has been hinted at in previous research (Fuentes, 2011),though primarily from a consumer and consumption perspective, but here it is demonstrated to also be happening "within" retail organizations.

Appeals to rationality – It is (IKEA's) business

The two legitimation techniques presented below both appeal to readers' reason, the goal being to legitimate engagement/sustainability talk. This is similar to how appeals to morality have the potential to close the door to any further discussion and, though rationalization, also have a moralizing element, as this way of justifying something appeals more to reason than to morality (van Leeuwen 2007). This occurs, for example, through theoretical rationalization by simply stating "a state of affairs" that calls for sustainability talk. In the texts analyzed here, this largely entails making sustainability talk something that makes good business sense – an overarching legitimation strategy that can be seen as being expressed through two main legitimation techniques.

The first legitimation technique, which I call (1) "the doomsday prophesy", is based on the assumption that if IKEA and others do not engage with sustainable development, then IKEA will not be able to conduct its business. It is therefore ultimately a matter of life and death for the organization, where the clearly reasonable option is to choose life. The second (2) legitimation technique described here is based on the assumption that the changes especially IKEA's customers have to make to contribute to more sustainable development can be facilitated if they choose IKEA products and services. This creates a business opportunity to capitalize on the transition toward more sustainable development.

Together, these strategies portray engaging with sustainability talk as something that makes good business sense. If that is true, then there is no *reason* for a business organization such as IKEA not to engage in sustainability talk, leading these texts to the logical conclusion that IKEA must become as good at sustainability as possible if it is to reap as much of the business benefits as possible. After all, it is a business organization that is in competition with other business organizations for resources and revenues. Once again, this indicates that the retail organization must become a sustainability expert, which, based on the other overarching legitimation strategies found in this chapter, entails it assuming a more political role. Naturally, and as will be seen under the section on legitimating narratives later in this chapter, its political aspirations envision a kind of sustainable development where business organizations are the heroes, not the villains.

The Doomsday prophesy - A business imperative

The way of legitimating sustainability talk that is presented here is probably not unique to IKEA's sustainability talk. It is something that can be encountered in the sustainability talk produced by many different actors. In fact, it is similar to the way in which I open this very thesis as a kind of sustainability text. Namely, I, like IKEA, justify sustainability talk by framing it in a gloomy state of affairs description. In a sense, it "sets the scene" in a story about what will happen unless IKEA, among others, does something about the predicament we know are finding ourselves in. I describe this legitimation technique as "The doomsday prophesy" that demands both our attention and our action. The first couple of paragraphs in IKEA's sustainability strategy People and Planet from 2012 can be used to exemplify this legitimation technique:

> "THERE IS A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD AROUND US
>
> For most of human history the world was sparsely populated and resources, from forests to fisheries, seemed unlimited. We started the 20th century with 1.65 billion people in the world, a population not much greater than that of China or India today. Society used resources and generated waste with little restraint and few concerns. While this helped drive growth and improve the livelihoods of many millions of people, it was a long way from a sustainable society.
>
> The global population has now reached seven billion, resources are increasingly scarce, climate change is a reality and inequality remains a critical issue. The world is on track to warm by four degrees Celsius by the end of this century, which will have a severe effect on weather patterns, water availability and agriculture. We have already lost half the world's forests and degraded an estimated 60% of the world's ecosystems. Climate change is not only having a negative effect on our environment but it is having a significant, negative impact on people in their daily lives. Whether it's a lack of clean water, extreme weather causing damage to people's homes or access to work, it is fast becoming reality for many people. The impact is even more severe for the people living in extreme poverty.
>
> […]
>
> A sustainable world that provides a great quality of life for many people, respects human rights and protects the environment is possible. We can provide economic opportunities and empower people so they are able to better provide for themselves and their families. We can utilise the massive potential of renewable energy; we can develop exciting new products and services that help people live a more sustainable life at home; we can transform waste into

> resources; and protect our forests, farmlands, seas and rivers for future generations. We can help lift people out of poverty by providing good places to work throughout our value chain and contribute to creating a fairer and more equal society for the many people. IKEA can be a small, but significant, force in helping to create this more sustainable world."
>
> - People and Planet Positive (2012, p.1)

The legitimation technique exemplified above is a very scientific kind of rationalization stating the current state of affairs and, importantly, predicting a potential state of affairs if nothing is done. This is a clear appeal to reason. No rational being wants the horrors that come with continued unsustainable development.

The assumption underpinning the legitimation of sustainability engagement here is thus a rational problem formulation that calls for action. However, there are not really any justifications for why IKEA, as an organization, should act in an engaged manner based on these theoretical rationalizations. Instead, such justifications tend to lean on moral (e.g., we have a responsibility to do something), authoritarian (e.g., because we say so or because it is part of our vision and culture) or goal-oriented assumptions (e.g., because we have set this and that goal). At least in this document.

In later sustainability texts from the third phase of IKEA's sustainability journey, the threats of the doomsday prophesy are made even more serious and urgent compared to those from the beginning of this journey. This implies a change in how the problems are framed, namely that engaging with the sustainability talk is no longer "optional," thus creating a greater sense of urgency to fend off a dystopic future by accomplishing "transformational change." This theoretical form of rationalization is thus an important assumption legitimating why IKEA not only should engage in sustainability talk, but why it is crucial for the organization's very survival.

Sustainable development - A business opportunity

A common way of legitimating sustainability talk in these texts, a and very important way of reasoning (as shown further in the next chapter), is that making retailing more sustainable makes good business sense. This can be done, for example, by claiming that reducing the use of raw materials, waste, or empty space in shipping containers reduces costs, which leads to lower prices, which leads to more and happier customers, which leads to sales and financial profit and growth.

Another rational reason for engagement is the claim that customers do not only care about sustainability, they also demand that IKEA take on more social and environmental responsibilities, which is why IKEA has to respond to these ethical demands. In this respect, sustainability is argued to be a good *means* of achieving the ultimate goal: financial growth. This goal, at least when applying a business logic, can be seen as rational.

Taking the example of building a better brand image, the following quotes demonstrates this means-oriented form of instrumental rationality:

> "Customers should always feel confident that products bought at IKEA are safe and healthy to use."
>
> - IKEA Sustainability Report (2008, p. 25)

> "Customers should always feel confident that products bought at IKEA are of good quality and safe and healthy to use. This is why we have increased the number of tests on finished products, and strengthened our testing capacity with a new facility in China."
>
> - IKEA Sustainability Report (2009, p. 36)

There is a strong emphasis on safety and health here. One main objectives of engaging with sustainability issues, especially in relation to designing and producing the assortment, is that IKEA wants to be a trustworthy brand in relation to these things. This is perhaps not so strange, given how IKEA embarked on the sustainability journey in the first place in 1992 when the formaldehyde scandal unfolded. This incident is even part of the Social and Environmental training presentation. But it also shows how the legitimation technique suggests that sustainability talk is a necessary part of staying in tune with the times, something shown in relation to legislation in the following quote:

> "Prepared for legislation against illegal logging [paragraph title]
>
> The lacey Act in the United States prohibited import of products containing illegally felled wood already in 2008. Similar legislation will be introduced in the EU after 2012 and is being discussed in Australia, Switzerland and Japan. IKEA welcomes such legislation, as it helps motivate and drive global improvements in forestry management."
>
> – IKEA Sustainability Report (2010, p. 60)

Given that sustainability issues seem to be climbing ever higher on the public debate agendas, more legislation is assumed to come in the future. This further

strengthens the legitimacy of sustainability talk, as it will enable the organization to stay ahead of such legislation, an assumption that arguably appeals to reason. It is not only legislators who are assumed to demand more from companies in both the present and the future, but also customers and co-workers. At least according to the picture painted in these texts:

> "What's happening in the world? [paragraph title]
>
> […] IKEA co-workers and customers (current and potential) expect IKEA to take a stand on sustainability. Our vision is more relevant today than ever. We really have the chance to create a better everyday life for many more people."
>
> - Sustainability Communication Concept (2012, p. 5)

Given that IKEA is a retail company that prides itself in how well it can satisfy customer demands and expectations by understanding their everyday lives at home, demonstrating that sustainability talk is important to customers becomes a powerful assumption on which to build legitimacy. Sustainability is essentially legitimated when it is described as an opportunity:

> "There are also many other new opportunities ahead of us. Over the coming decades hundreds of million homes around the world will shift to smart home energy management and will produce their own power. The market for solar electric power is set to be worth $130 billion per year for the next decade, close to the value of the global furniture industry. Tens of billions of incandescent light bulbs and hundreds of millions of out-dated appliances exist in homes around the world today, wasting money and energy, and should be replaced with highly efficient, modern solutions that benefit customers and the environment."
>
> - People and Planet Positive (2012, p. 1)

The essence of the examples above is that engaging with sustainability talk is a business opportunity because it will help IKEA cut costs and stay in tune with the changing needs of consumers, among other things. Together with the doomsday prophesy approach to legitimating sustainability engagement, it is safe to say that doing so is presented as a business imperative in these texts. As mentioned, if this is a business imperative, then IKEA had better become good at it if the company is to stay competitive in its markets. This calls for a transformation of IKEA that enables it to respond to a changing environment.

Appeals through narratives – IKEA as a vehicle for change

In this section, I apply the legitimation category "Mythopoesis,", or "narrativization" as I call it here, which essentially means that I look at legitimation in sustainability talk with a focus on stories and narratives (van Leeuwen 2007) – especially on the "heroes" of these stories, that is, the actors who enact IKEA's sustainability talk and the kind of world they operate in. The legitimation techniques presented below very much build on insights from the legitimation strategies, and techniques, discussed above. This is because the stories and narratives identified here are best seen as making the other legitimation strategies more vivid and concrete. In a sense populating particular aspects of IKEA's sustainability talk with actors and objects and putting them on a timeline as well as embedding them in a wider narrative, or "bigger picture" as many respondents in this study saw it.

I will, however, still make use of new examples to show what I am arguing for. In particular, I (1) identify the heroes and non-existing villains in these stories and suggest that IKEA is playing the hero of heroes, (2) reveal an overarching narrative in these texts in which IKEA emerges as a necessary vehicle for change, and, based on the interview accounts from this study, (3) show what such a narrative demands from more grand narratives of (un)sustainable development found in the public debate – at least if, as I will show, it is to make sense for some of the IKEA employees interviewed for this study. When taken together, I argue that these aspects of IKEA's storytelling, or narrativization, also suggest the overarching finding argued for in this chapter. They do so by helping to depict "who" IKEA is "becoming" in these texts, or at least is presented as becoming, and the kind of (more sustainable) world it aspires to create. Essentially, this IKEA is a morally aware and politically active sustainability authority that paves the way for more sustainable development in a world where retailing is a key part of the solution, not the problem.

IKEA as the hero of heroes

The texts analyzed here often make use of "mini-stories" about more sustainable products, righteous work or initiatives from employees, or stories about how less fortunate others are enabled to live a better life thanks to some of IKEA's sustainability initiatives. This makes IKEA's sustainability talk more vivid, tangible and understandable and helps populate this talk with

people and things that do "good things." In this way, these virtuous stories help justify IKEA's sustainability talk. Because in the absence of this talk, all these good deeds would have gone undone. In other words, although these people, "solutions" or other examples are the fronted heroes in most of these mini-stories, "IKEA" is always the hero lurking in the background. This is because all of them naturally stem from the sustainability work and ambitions spawned by IKEA's sustainability talk, making IKEA the hero of heroes.

It is strikingly difficult to find any concrete villains in these texts. If anything, it is mother nature who is about to throw us a punch unless we shape up and change (as in the doomsday prophecy described above). Instead, these texts more often construct a world of heroes without villains, but with the common goal of more sustainable development as conveyed in IKEA's sustainability talk. Again, these heroes are enabled to do what they do thanks to IKEA. This is exemplified in the extract from the "Our never ending job" document below, which describes how IKEA is working to make their cotton-based products more sustainable:

We want more sustainable cotton

Thousands of cotton farmers have joined IKEA and WWF cotton projects in India and Pakistan. They have proven that conventional cotton can be grown in a more eco-friendly way – and with better profits.

Cotton has excellent comfort qualities as it is soft and breathable. At the same time, it is a material associated with major concerns for both people and the environment.

Conventional cotton production relies heavily on artificial fertilisers and on chemicals to control insects, diseases and weeds. Cotton is also very water intensive at certain stages of growth.

This is why we have set out to create lasting and large-scale improvements in conventional cotton cultivation by encouraging farmers to introduce more sustainable farming practices.

IKEA cooperates with WWF to influence farmers in India and Pakistan – two of our main cotton sourcing countries. It started as Farmer Field Schools for 450 farmers in 2005. Today, the projects also involve local organisations in order to reach an even larger number of farmers, and many thousands of farmers are learning better farming methods.

The farmers themselves have proven that it can be done. Their use of pesticides, artificial fertilisers and water has been dramatically reduced, while their earnings have increased significantly.

58

Meet some of the farmers

Better cotton farming methods are spreading from farmer to farmer across several states in India and Pakistan. Meet three Indian farmers in various stages of their journey towards more sustainable cotton cultivation.

"I always felt exhausted"

Tapu Kehar Rangapara has a small cotton farm in Gujarat in western India. Since he joined the project two years ago, it is not only the farm itself that is doing better. The family's health improved dramatically after they replaced chemical pesticides with plant extracts.

"I always felt exhausted. I had a bad skin rash, and my wife and I both had constant headaches. The situation just kept getting worse because the pests became more and more resistant to the chemicals so we'd spray even more. Now life is much better. We are healthy."

"I plan to introduce drip irrigation"

The once lush Godavari river basin in central India is drought-plagued as a result of climate change and decades of poor water management. Farming has become increasingly difficult for **Swarupchand Maher.** The water level in his well is alarmingly low, so he is keen to introduce farming practices that will help him save water.

"I've started to improve the soil by adding organic content. And I used to water every single furrow before instead of every second, which I now know is enough. I then plan to introduce drip irrigation one acre at a time, if only the return on my crop is good enough to pay for it, said willing"

"It's my duty not to waste water"

Dilip Patel in Gujarat started introducing more sustainable farming practices two years ago and his farm is thriving. But groundwater levels have sunk in recent years, and water is becoming an increasingly precious commodity.

"If I had done nothing, my borehole would have been dry by now. The water in the ground is everyone's and I see it as my duty not to waste it. So the best thing I did was to invest in drip irrigation. I have halved my water use and the yield has increased substantially," says Dilip Patel.

IKEA Social Initiative cooperates with UNICEF and Save the Children to strengthen children's rights in the cotton producing areas of India and Pakistan. Read more on page 146.

Our never ending job (2011, p. 58)

According to this piece of communication and in collaboration with the sustainability authority "World Wildlife Foundation" (WWF), IKEA has given cotton farmers the opportunity to cultivate their crops in more sustainable ways. By using mini-stories on the right-hand side of the page, faces and life-changing stories help show and justify IKEA's sustainability talk on the topic of cotton. These farmers are all heroes in these stories; they took the opportunity to improve their lives and did the work of more sustainable cotton production. But the opportunity to do so is of course, at least in part, provided by IKEA in the form of its sustainability talk and the aspirations it contains.

The point here is to show both the lack of explicit villains and how IKEA is constructed as the hero of heroes. This kind of reality construction helps legitimate IKEA's sustainability talk, because it shows something good that could not have been accomplished without this kind of talk. It also shows how morals are drawn upon to further legitimate this talk. After all, what heartless soul would want to take away the opportunity given to Tapu Kehar Rangapara to improve the health of his family? This brings me to the twelfth and final legitimation technique identified in IKEA's sustainability texts, according to which IKEA is a necessary vehicle for more sustainable societal development, and not something causing unsustainable societal degradation.

An overarching narrative - IKEA as a necessity for change

Taken together, the narratives in these texts often describe IKEA as an absolutely crucial and well-equipped part of more sustainable development, rather than unsustainable development. This could be said to be a rather obvious feature of how sustainability talk is written in these texts. It is, after all, IKEA's sustainability talk, and the company's spoken ambition is to bring about sustainable development rather than to undermine it. The quote below is a rather clear example of how IKEA is described as a vital part of the solution. It can be found in the CSO message from IKEA's 2014 sustainability report:

> "The world is in the middle of a clean revolution and I'm convinced any challenge we face can be solved with the solutions we have today. But to be successful, businesses like ours need to 'go all-in' on sustainability, and fully embrace the innovation and reinvention it entails. Sustainability is no longer about being incrementally less bad, but it is about transformational change and making business fit for the 21st century."
>
> IKEA Sustainability Report (2014, p. 7)

The point here is again to show how these texts argue that IKEA can be a vital part of the solution, at least if it goes "all-in on sustainability." This tendency also rests on insights found in the legitimation strategies presented above, for example in the way IKEA constructs itself as a sustainability authority that imposes musts on its suppliers. IKEA is, with this technique, the initiator and enforcer of good. If IKEA failed to do it, perhaps it would never be done. Similarly, the moralizing legitimation technique and the political performativity it helps to demonstrate, also convey that IKEA is part of the solution, because it is an organization with a moral and political mission to drive "transformational" societal change – a mission that people and organizations in and around IKEA are invited or told to join in on. This is the kind of grand narrative that I argue is emerging from these texts.

Whether it is by drawing on authorities and morals or even becoming a moral authority itself or by appealing to our reason and telling us stories of empowered heroes, the legitimation techniques presented in these texts also help create a kind of grand narrative in which IKEA, as the enabler of sustainability heroes, proves its worth as a vital part of the solution in the grand unfolding story that is more sustainable development. IKEA is a force for good in society. This makes it imperative that "IKEA" assume its responsibility and live up to the aspirations of its sustainability talk (Christensen et al. 2013), allowing it to be the hero it claims to be. Essentially, this means that "with all the good we can do and are doing, we have a responsibility to do those things," thus also producing a narrative in which what is good for IKEA is also "positive" for "people and planet." That is the logic used in these texts that I am trying to convey using van Leeuwen's (2007) narrative category.

This also is reflected in what some respondents noted in the interviews. Especially when sales employees are confronted with the impossible challenge of selling less, this kind of narrative can help resolve an apparent paradox and, in a sense, talk it out of existence. This demonstrates something similar to what Hoffmann (2018) and Feix and Philippe (2020) find in their studies, though here it is seen as emerging "within" the organization as well.

Requiring a business-friendly grand narrative of (un)sustainable development

One challenge for retail employees in general, and sales employees in particular, is to deal with the apparent paradox in IKEA's sustainability talk, namely that sustainable development somehow means generating more sales,

profit and growth for IKEA. This is mentioned by the sales employee in the interview account below:

> ”But here, in my role here, my main task is naturally to maximize sales, make sure we sell as many kitchens as possible. But if we work with growth from one year to the next, then next year we’re supposed to sell a little more than we did last year. And that just continues. It’s just that… long-term growth is how a market economy works, so you need to sell more each year. And sure… to be completely transparent here, I feel there is a certain conflict between these goals.
>
> Interviewer:
>
> You mean selling more?
>
> Respondent:
>
> Yes, to say to the customer, “shouldn’t you remodel your kitchen?” At the same time as I want to say “do you really need a new kitchen? Wouldn’t it be enough just to get new knobs, to be a bit more sustainable in this consumption society we live in.”
>
> - Sales Employee (Spring 2017)

As noted by the respondent above, it may be difficult to operationalize sustainability talk that forces the question “do you really need a new kitchen?” with the otherwise given sales question “shouldn’t you remodel your kitchen?” The latter makes increased sales possible, while the former risks making it impossible. As also noted in the example above, selling more is not only seen as an imperative for IKEA, but also for society, or “the market economy” at large. To talk this paradox out of existence, for increased sales, profit and growth to make sense in relation to sustainable development, it would seem to be important to believe that sustainable development needs to be pursued within the general organizing framework of more for the sake of more – a belief that is certainly reoccurring in the interviews for this study, especially when they are asked, as most respondents were, whether IKEA can be seen as a sustainable company. One sustainability professional explains this:

> “Interviewer:
>
> And how would you say, how you can fuse the, I mean you’re still a business where where the founder is one of the world’s richest people. It’s easy to say, I’m not saying this, but this is definitely something that’s out there is that, you’re still a business that makes money for one of the greatest capitalists of all time, and in our time when capitalism is kind of challenged in contemporary

time. How do you get that, how do fuse that we're making money and maximizing our profit, at the same time as we're becoming sustainable?

Respondent:

But I think that's the key.

Interviewer:

Yeah?

Respondent:

I think that's the key to it all. I mean if you have to separate sustainability and being a successful business, then we're all doomed. I mean really. I mean… I think you, you have to show how you can be a sustainable business, using recourses sustainability, not exploiting people but actually strengthen people and communities, and being profitable at the same time. And now IKEA also takes a lot of those profits and puts it back into the business and development and all of that and the amount that, even over the last 20 years that has been spent and invested in sustainability in the company has grown exponentially.

So I mean there is also that, but I mean there is this turning profits gives us resources. You're not going to be able to grow and expand and invest in projects with WWF or etc etc. without profits. But you want, I mean, to show how business can be successful and be, I mean, completely sustainable. Not just seem like you're a good company, you know from a marketing point of view but truly sustainable successful business is what we all want. I think we should all want anyway. I would make no apology for it at all, haha."

- Sustainability Professional (Spring 2017)

According to the respondent, running a successful business that generates constant growth by generating increasing sales and profit is paramount, especially for achieving MSR. It is important to note that the interviewee "makes no apology at all" for IKEA's sustainability talk, nor for the capitalist society mentioned in the question posed by the interviewer. The overarching capitalist framework, however, is the reason why IKEA has to find ways of combining increasing sales with their sustainability aspirations, because separating the two would "doom" everything.

The point I want to make with the two examples above is that, on both an operational and strategic level, sustainability talk must be combined with, and even contribute to, selling more. The complexity revealed here is hence how to combine sustainability and sales in a way that makes sense in relation to both sustainability and sales. This may hinge on the overarching belief that capitalist ways of organizing are not detrimental to sustainable development,

but crucial for achieving it. This kind of narrative is highly visible throughout the sustainability texts that comprise IKEA's CSD. In other words, IKEA's sustainability talk can be seen as having to reinforce what many believe to be an unsustainable status quo (Hopwood et al., 2005; Seghezzo, 2009).

Finding and discussing more political retailing

The aim of this chapter has been to show how the texts produced on an organizational level, and the kind of official IKEA voice on more sustainable development and retailing they constitute (i.e. IKEAs CSD), justify IKEA's sustainability engagement and discursively accommodate for the legitimacy of sustainability talk in retail talk. Twelve legitimation techniques deployed in IKEA's sustainability talk, leading to four overarching legitimation strategies in the context of legitimating sustainability talk in retail talk, have been identified and discussed. These give us an idea of what is said in these texts and lay the foundation for combining them in a final analysis that concludes in the political performativity finding argued for here.

What I see in these texts is a changing societal role that retail organizations might be forced to play as they engage with and incorporate macro-level sustainability talk and the actors, issues and concepts that circulate in it (see also Crane et al. 2008, Scherer and Palazzo 2011). I argue that this is a discursively self-transformed societal role that not only helps in legitimating sustainability talk internally, but also risks moralizing the way retailing work is organized among employees within the organization, thus demonstrating a kind of political performativity of sustainability talk in retail talk illuminated by the theoretical perspective developed for this study. Bringing the politicizing aspects of MSR into focus, as opposed to those related to sustainable consumption, as discussed in previous retail literature (Fuentes, 2011; Jones et al., 2005), as well as empirically showing the moralizing potential of CSR talk, something that has been discussed conceptually in CSR talk theorizing (Schultz 2013).

This is a kind of performativity also brings forth a new set of problem areas that retail organizations, especially multinationals with employees and customers living in many different cultural belief systems, need to acknowledge and deal with. Perhaps primarily by discussing the "moral profile" and "political agenda" of a particular retail organization internally, coupled with discussions concerning how far the organization is willing to go to uphold these new aspects of retailing

(i.e., walking the morals of sustainability talk) (see also Chatterji & Toffel, 2018; Korschun et al., 2016). This aspect of change demonstrates that engaging with sustainability debates, issues and actors in the organization's external environment is a far more conflicting and potentially fundamentally transforming thing to do than previous case studies have suggested (Wilson, 2015), though others have hinted at (Fuentes, 2011). This argument rests essentially on three sets of empirical insights that can be gained from the legitimation strategies described in this chapter, though also building on the CSD finding of the previous chapter.

The first set of insights concerns how a retail organization might experience the need to engage with a new set of external actors to gain new knowledge and perspectives that could help the retailer become more sustainable (Elkington 1998, Grayson 2011, Wilson 2015). In fact, and as shown in Chapter 4, the entire change and legitimation process seems to have been initiated at IKEA based on demands made by the media, consumers and NGOs – actors that continue to shape IKEA's sustainability engagement by, for example, being part of "advisory groups" consulted both annually and during strategic episodes (see Penttilä 2020) or, as seen in this Chapter, lending their authority to sustainability texts to help legitimate the organization's engagement (van Leeuwen 2007). In doing so, the retail organization is also, in a sense, lending its own authority to help legitimize and voice these actors' essentially political world views and convictions within the organization. This means that sustainability engagement can involve channeling external actors' world views and essentially political agendas within the organization through its own sustainability communication.

The notion that it is important for retail organizations (Grayson 2011, Wilson 2015) and other business organizations (Benn et al., 2014; Maon et al., 2009) to engage with external actors, such as various NGOs, and to cultivate partnerships with them is not new. Similarly, the observation that CSR communication within and from organizations will be shaped by external voices during, for example, strategic episodes has also been described from a CSR as communication perspective elsewhere (Penttilä 2020). What is novel in this analysis is the argument that this new set of actors is important not only in helping to bring about change, but also in legitimating and actively supporting their political agendas and even leading the retailer to develop its own political agenda. This problematizes an otherwise acclaimed suggestion in previous research and demonstrates the political performativity of it. One important kind of CSR communication performativity that seems to be at play here is that engaging with sustainability talk brings about a politicization of

retailing by forcing the organization to clarify its own moral values and political agenda.

Therefore, for a retail organization attempting to become more sustainable, it is important to acknowledge that cultivating partnerships with these kinds of organizations also may entail responding to their essentially political demands, most notably by urging the organization to take on a new set of responsibilities in society that previously have belonged to other societal actors, such as government bodies and NGOs (Matten and Crane 2005, Scherer and Palazzo 2007). In light of the CSD concept presented above, these perspectives also help inform a whole system of thought surrounding what MSR entails for employees within the organization.

Secondly, what IKEA stands for, does, as well as how and why it does what it does are partly transformed in the sustainability texts studied here, as exemplified in how this is accomplished through a series of interdiscursive and intertextual moves in IKEA's sustainability texts as they unfold over time. This kind of intertextuality is especially visible in the many claims about how sustainability talk is supposedly justified in key organizational texts, such as the Testament of a Furniture Dealer written by IKEA's founder in 1976, and interdiscursively in, for example, the many uses and broadened meaning of "the many people" found in sustainability texts. In this and other ways, sustainability talk is tied to what the organization stands for and its reason for being. To some degree, this changes what retailing entails for IKEA and its employees (and others) by presenting IKEA and sustainability talk as a match that makes sense in narratives of sustainable development. The way in which IKEA, in these texts, also comes to establish the organization as a sustainability authority in its own right, even exclaiming that "IKEA" should "take the lead" and become "an activist," also suggests that the meaning of "IKEA", and of being an IKEA employee, is partially being recast in light of sustainability talk. In other words, sustainability talk can, at least discursively, serve to transform a retail organization's raison d'être.

The point here is that an organization's CSD can be seen not only as becoming structurally embedded within the organization, but also as becoming culturally embedded in more subtle ways as well, for example, by becoming part of and transforming central organizing texts that are important in this particular organization. More importantly for the argument made here is that both structural and cultural embeddedness are prerequisites for the political performativity of sustainability talk in retail talk that I claim is happening here.

The third set of insights is that reorganizing retailing for more sustainable development may also entail developing, or at least explicating, the organization's own moral and political "profile" in sustainability texts, which is visible in the many appeals to moral values made to legitimate the organization's sustainability engagement and to encouraging such engagement in its employees. Further, and at least in the case of IKEA, over time the tone of sustainability texts seems to become increasingly moralizing (i.e., indicating what is morally right) and, hence, political. This means that the organization starts to communicate to its employees a political agenda alongside its business agenda in an increasingly "loud" voice. It does this, for example, by declaring to employees that climate change and inequality are quite simply the most important issues of our time and that IKEA, supposedly, is doing everything it can to help solve these problems because the organization (with its many employees as foot soldiers) aims to become an "activist" calling for "transformational" societal change. Such a narrative allows the organization, through leading figures, to take political stands in the public debate and to publicly engage in discussions of how to solve politically charged problems, largely based on the notion that it is "the right thing to do."

The analytical point I want to make here is that sustainability texts, at least in the case of IKEA, have always been charged with appeals to moral values (Schultz 2013), and that they increasingly come to crystalize a moral and political agenda for the organization itself. All these things, both the voicing of new actors' views in organizational sustainability texts and developing its own political agenda, suggest that reorganizing retailing for more sustainable development may entail a more political role for retailing than previous research has suggested, though some notable exceptions have hinted at this tendency. Fuentes (2011), for example, discusses the political dimension of consuming more sustainable products as being materially facilitated by a retail organization. Here I show that there may indeed be a political dimension to how retailing is made more sustainable, also within the organization in question.

Discussing more political retailing

There are, however, some potential challenges associated with playing an increasingly political role in value chains and society at large. From a legitimation perspective, appealing to morals is most likely to work if the reader shares the moral convictions expressed in these texts (van Leeuwen 2007). As the morality of an organization becomes more explicit, the risk of

conflicts arising between the morality of the organization and other normative frameworks in an employee's vicinity also becomes more likely. This means that sustainability talk might fail to be seen as legitimate because appeals to morality do not necessarily link it to already existing cultural frameworks of beliefs, values and norms (Johnson et al. 2006). On the other hand, if – hypothetically – morality were absent from CSR talk, then it would not be able to attain legitimacy on moral grounds. This adds a layer of complexity to discussions about how open or closed an organization's CSD ought to be (Christensen et al., 2015).

The risk is that CSR communication will create internal resentment toward, rather than internal support for, an organization's sustainability engagement among employees and customers, at least when they do not share the belief system produced by IKEA through its sustainability texts (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018; Korschun et al., 2016). Another important problem area that this argument and example inevitably lead to concerns whether and how an organization should deal with employees who do not share the organization's imposed morality. This becomes evident in an example above where a Polish employee was fired for refusing to take down a comment on the organization's intranet that expressed a moral view diametrically opposed to IKEA's.

Should employees' political views be suppressed or heard, and if so, how and how much? IKEA supposedly recruits on the basis of values, so what kind of values should an applicant have or adopt to be hired? What kind of activism is the organization expecting from its current employees? How should those working in Russia deal with IKEA's political agenda of promoting HBTQ rights, on the one hand, and the illegality of such agendas in the country, on the other? Should a country or store manager dedicate resources to promoting such a political agenda knowing that many of his or her co-workers and customers might find it offensive? Ultimately, promoting that agenda could potentially result in a loss of revenue and an unfavorable brand image on local markets, all for the sake of maintaining a consistent brand (political) identity across markets.

Above I pose many questions, but answering them starts with recognizing that sustainability engagement may indeed mean a more political role in society for retailers – a role that entails dealing with a whole new set of challenging responsibilities and moral expectations. It is therefore important that those developing an increasingly political and moralizing organizational voice recognize that ensuring the consistency of this voice also means somehow enforcing it. However, and as suggested by early CSR communication theories (Schoeneborn and Trittin 2013), it is not necessarily beneficial to aim for moral

coherence across markets, and one could instead accept the paradoxical nature of sustainability engagement (Hahn et al. 2018) and encourage open-ended discussions around the issue of what the right thing to do really is (Christensen et al., 2015, 2017). All of this shows how making retailing more sustainable may be not only a complex endeavor, but also one rife with potential conflicts and difficult challenges for those making MSR happen.

Materializing and modifying sustainability talk in retail talk

In this chapter, I explore the challenges of making retailing more sustainable on a conversational level of analysis and how these challenges are dealt with. I conclude the Chapter with a discussion of the implications of the findings argued for here. What I find is that, when legitimating sustainability talk on a conversational level of analysis, the overarching challenge is that of *relevance* – of ensuring that retail employees find sustainability talk relevant in their typical kinds of retail talk. To deal with the challenge of relevance and spread the words of an organization's CSD, integrated forms of internal sustainability talk flows seem to be key. This concerns ensuring that sustainability talk becomes part of already existing communication flows by becoming part of organizing texts that direct the attention of more local instances of retail talk, as opposed to the grand organizational texts described in the previous two chapters. Most notably, this is accomplished through the products that sales employees sell, and communicators communicate, which I argue can be seen as important "texts" that help constitute the organization's CSD. Revealing the importance of acknowledging the material aspects of sustainability talk that have largely been overlooked in the text- and conversation-focused state of CSR talk theorizing (e.g., Girschik, 2020; Penttilä, 2020). This is particularly relevant in the context of retailing that is organized to a great extent around the assortment a retail organization makes available for purchasing.

Further, it also appears important to deconstruct and translate particular aspects of the organization's CSD, however it might be disseminated, in ways that allow sustainability talk to "hook onto" already established communication agendas on micro-levels of organizing. This leads me to the concept of "business hooks," which helps explain how sustainability talk can become a legitimate aspect of retail talk. Revealing the importance of enabling and identifying such business hooks and using integrated sustainability communication, demonstrate that CSR talk and walk are indeed inherently tied to each other, as one helps spawn the other in a reciprocal fashion. This is

similar to the t(w)alking understanding of the relationship between CSR talk and walk discussed in previous CSR talk theorizing (Schoeneborn et al., 2020), further explaining how a talk-talk continuation can be ensured (Penttilä, 2020).

Taken together, I finally argue that the act of meeting the challenge of relevance using integrated communication and business books also reveals a mechanism that helps show how, and explain why, retail talk can be seen as commodifying sustainability talk, thus suggesting the commodifying performativity of sustainability talk in retail talk. This is also evident in how sustainability talk is legitimized through reason and narratives in sustainability texts, as shown in the previous chapter, and offers insights into similar discussions in previous research on MSR by, e.g., (Jones et al., 2005).

The chapter is organized as follows, I start by showing how I arrive at the general challenge of relevance by describing five kinds of more particular challenges that sustainability professionals, communicators and sales employees experience when they try to integrate and legitimate sustainability talk in retail talk. Based on this insight, I then turn to how the challenge of relevance is dealt with and exemplify integrated forms of internal sustainability communication and business hooks using interview accounts from the empirical material analyzed here. All of which is especially visible in an extract from an interview with a Sales Employee that is accounted for under the heading "Having something sustainability related to sell" below. Lastly, I conclude this section with a discussion of how the challenges and "solutions" identified here suggest that sustainability talk has to become commodified in order to become a relevant, and hence legitimate, aspect of retail talk.

The main challenge of relevance

I will use this section to show how relevance can be seen as a key challenge for those who aim at integrating and legitimating sustainability talk with retail talk. I do this by showing five challenges experienced by respondent in this study. The first challenge is that of (1) lobbying the many gatekeeping authorities, beyond top management, who need convincing if they are to "allow" sustainability talk in organizing conversations. However, this can be a challenging task because (2) sustainability does not translate well into numbers, talk about sustainability (3) operates on a temporal horizon that is often much longer than the horizons of everyday retail talk among many employees, giving rise to goal conflicts between the two kinds of talk, (4) the

importance and meaning of sustainability differs across markets, and (5) a business case for sustainability initiatives must be demonstrated. In my view, these five challenges, taken together, constitute the main challenge of relevance in the legitimation process on a conversational level of analysis.

Lobbying the many gatekeepers for MSR

> "I work as a development leader for sustainability […] And translated it's like I'm an internal lobbyist? You can say, or that's the easiest way to explain how I work."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Fall 2016)

A very common theme in interviews with sustainability professionals is that they do not really possess the personal authority needed to push their agenda throughout the organization. Instead, they have to lobby for their cause to get other employees, especially gatekeeping authorities (see below), to speak IKEA's sustainability talk in their everyday retail talk, thus in a sense "pulling" rather than "pushing" employees in a more sustainable direction.

This lack of authority is largely due to their role as a "support function" within the organization. This function entails that their main responsibilities, seen from the perspective developed in this thesis, are to develop a CSD and help others make sense of how it can be a legitimate aspect of their everyday retail talk. However, the point made here is that because the human agents of sustainability talk do not have much authority of their own, they have to lobby for the support of many organizational authorities other than those identified in the previous chapter. This is exemplified in the two interview accounts below, where a sustainability professional is asked about how sustainability talk among IKEA employees can, or rather cannot, be ensured:

> "Interviewer:
>
> How can you secure store engagement in regards to sustainability? How do you secure that the stores are in line with the sustainability goals?
>
> Respondent:
>
> I have no power to do anything!! The stores can decide what is important for them. But of course we are going to motivate them and we try to give them the reasons to work towards this and to really make clear how important a sustainable positioning is."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Fall 2016)

> "…at the moment we're still relying on a lot of influencing and lobbying on a regular basis. And… yeah. And it's a bit leadership. Like you have to really be passionate about the agenda and constantly. It's always a bit of an uphill battle. Because it's still not priority right. It's there, it's important, everybody agrees it's important. Not just quite as important as all those other things."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Fall 2016)

Both quotes show that, despite the structural accommodations accounted for in Chapter 4, and despite the different and authority-based legitimation techniques identified in the previous chapter, sustainability talk may still struggle to attain authority-based legitimacy. This is largely because there are so many different people who, due to the "distributed ownership," need to prioritize sustainability talk. However, many of these people, despite supporting this talk, are busy doing "all those other important things," which demonstrates that they can, and often do, deem sustainability talk a non-priority despite all its endorsements and connections to other organizational authorities, as discussed above.

Except for demonstrating the lack of authority experienced by sustainability professionals on different organizational levels, the examples above also reveal the importance of many different authorities within the organization, not just that of top management, especially in a "front led" organization such as IKEA. Though top management support is naturally an important aspect of legitimating sustainability talk as such, the legitimating process might still risk being more or less stopped in its tracks by other organizational authorities, such as country, store or business unit managers. Authorities that who may be more visible and influential in shaping how some of the everyday retail talk making up IKEA is actually spoken – with or without the help of sustainability talk. On the other hand, having such authorities on board can also help drive dissemination and legitimation, especially because an important channel for spreading IKEA sustainability talk seems to be more personal communication on the part of employees closest to managers. This seems to apply in particular to store-level personnel. One employee who has worked in different IKEA stores explains this as follows:

> "Interviewer:
>
> How would you describe the willingness of employees to be engaged in the issue sustainability? What about your engagement?

Respondent:

> This is hard to answer. From what I have experienced it differs a lot. Not only between employees but of course also between different stores in Germany and abroad. As I have worked in many different stores at IKEA Germany and also abroad I can say that the commitment towards sustainability strongly depends on the engagement of the managers. In some stores the issue of sustainability was not very present. And of course the engagement of the managers influences the willingness of employees to be engaged in sustainability."

- Sales Employee (Spring 2017)

The interviews with non-sustainability employees confirm that other authorities also play an important role in this legitimation process, especially regarding spreading sustainability talk, as managers at all organizational levels and in all business units can be seen as very important "speakers" of sustainability talk. Thus, sustainability talk, in the form of local sustainability communication, needs these managers' approval if it is to become part of everyday retailing talk. In a sense granting sustainability talk legitimacy through their authority in ways similar to how the CEO was shown to do this in the previous chapter. Here it is shown, however, that many organizational authorities need convincing other than the potentially distant top management figures.

But in many cases, getting these gatekeepers onboard can be difficult if the sustainability function does not stretch down to the shop floor. In some stores, there are part-time "sustainability coordinators" who help spread sustainability talk in individual stores and help other employees make sense of it in relation to their work. However, it is up to the individual stores to decide whether or not such a position should exist. Once again, this highlights the relative autonomy of authorities such as store managers.

All in all, the "lobbying" is, or at least ought to be, directed to key organizational authorities, or "gatekeepers," with a view to turning them into something like sustainability "advocates" or "ambassadors" who can help reproduce sustainability talk within the organization. Such reproduction gives sustainability talk a chance to transcend the distinct organizational levels and business units in a retail organization such as IKEA.

Sustainability in numbers

It may seem clear that appeals to reason often take the shape of numbers, at least in a business and retail environment. Thus, if the value of sustainability talk can be quantified, such talk would seem to have a better chance of

becoming legitimate. However, and as the respondent below notes, many of the benefits of sustainability engagement do not translate well into numbers:

> "Social value, eh you know, social value and what that, how you translate some of that social value, social capital, into you know.. financial return. […] So it's a little bit of a challenge to keep the sort of… because we have to constantly translate sustainability initiatives to articulate value in a retail environment. So that's how this business articulates value. […] And then you need to articulate that in ways that they understand. Otherwise it's kind of too vague. So it's this constant translation of value."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Spring, 2018)

The point here is to show the challenge of legitimating sustainability talk, which is that it does not always seem to translate well into numbers. This makes it difficult to calculate the "return on investment" of sustainability initiatives and to show the (financial) "value" that supposedly counts in retail talk, essentially making such initiatives rather irrelevant in the numbers game that is a common feature of retail talk, particularly when numbers are seen with on short temporal horizon, as discussed next.

Temporal horizons and goal conflicts

In terms of temportal perspectives, two kinds of time-related challenges can be seen in these interview accounts. The first one concerns tensions between the different temporal horizons of sustainability talk and retail talk, and the other tensions between different organizational levels, both of which give rise to goal conflicts between sustainability talk and retail talk, as spoken among most of the organization's employees on the retail side of things.

The first issue of temporal horizons is that sustainability talk often operates on a very long temporal horizon. The grave dangers of climate change may, for example, not reveal themselves until decades from now. In a similar vein, reaping the financial benefits of, for example, sustainability-related investments, such as more sustainable forestry or solar panels on store roof tops, can take years to realize. This is in quite stark contrast to sales-related numbers that dominate organizational life and yearly bonus systems at IKEA – an issue that can be exemplified with the goal conflict between sustainability talk and retail talk identified and resolved by two senior sustainability professionals. One of them explains this:

> "We just did a risk mapping, and the biggest risk we saw was conflicting goals. If… if we, to take a concrete example that has nothing to do with communication, but… if we say that the real estate department is going to build a building on… well now it goes really slowly, it takes like four five years from when we buy the property until the building opens. So they, they're really controlled by price and time. They have to open a store that's as cheap and functional as possible at a given time. We lose money you know every week we're not open. And then we come with a sustainability goal saying that 'we want to build the world's most sustainable stores' and we don't actually know what that looks like. Instead, we have to do some innovation and a bit of co-creation, and work together. And in some areas, we have to accept increased costs in the building phase to reduce the operative costs during the operations phase. And that conflicts with how they're measured. So that if we don't go in and start working with how they're measured, and how we can bring about a life-cycle way of thinking, then it will like end up being alongside instead of inside the business."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Fall 2016)

As seen in the example above, its seems as though some employees at IKEA property first deemed sustainability talk irrelevant, primarily because it went against incentive systems that were already in place. This revealed a goal conflict that stopped the legitimacy and performativity of IKEA's sustainability talk in this kind of retail talk. As briefly mentioned above, the only way of really getting around these kinds of conflicting goals is to alter the incentive system itself, in a sense structurally transforming an aspect of retail talk to accommodate for sustainability talk on a particular micro-level of organizing. As the other sustainability professional explains in response to the issue raised by the respondent above:

> "But that's true. That's true actually with everything. Yeah so you've got to find a way of incorporating it. You need to integrate sustainability into the way you work. You need to make clear decisions around the standards, you know, to set yourself so. […] So the, but that was, the starting point with, you know, you kind of had one prime metric in property which was kronor by square meter and so the change management that we worked through together was to think about operating costs as well as the capital expenditure. So, you know, you think "ok, we're going to own the store for its entire life" and so we can actually make investments that take 10 years to pay back is not a problem at all. And… that it would be stupid for us not to do that. So we need to change this and we need to actually use a lifecycle cost think for when we are making store decisions."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Spring 2017)

The point I wish to make here is that, as sustainability talk often entails a longer temporal horizon than retail talk, it may be necessary to alter these horizons in the latter to make the former relevant on a conversational level of analysis. In other words, there needs to be some kind of "strategy alignment" between the agendas of sustainability talk and those of retail talk (Elg et al., 2020), thus calling on sustainability professionals to search for synergies that can bring sustainability objectives and financial objectives closer together – in this case by altering the temporal horizons in incentive systems. In this way, sustainability talk can become a legitimate and relevant aspect of retail talk because conflicts between the two in a sense disappear.

Related to the issue of temporal horizons described above is how sustainability talk is seen as a strategic, rather than operational, kind of retail talk. This is explained as follows:

> "The higher up in the company you are, the more strategical you are and the easier, the easier it is to see it. Because you have, you have really a lot of information, and then it's your role to, a managerial group should be thinking like 10-15 years into the future. A steering group has like maybe three years, and a store manager it's right now! He's supposed to execute things, so we convert as many customers into, or visitors into customers as possible. Because they're here, you know."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Fall 2016)

Related to the different temporal horizons is the tendency to view sustainability as a more strategic, rather than operational, issue, for example by relating sustainability talk to brand positioning rather than sales driving communication. All these issues demonstrate the main challenge of making sustainability talk relevant in retail talk. In this case, unless you are dealing with strategic issues that look further into the future than more operational issues, sustainability talk does not seem to be as relevant. This is also seen in the quote below, where a communicator finds sustainability talk much more relevant in long-term communication objectives, such as influencing consumer perceptions of the IKEA brand, than in more short-term communication objectives, such as driving sales and getting people to visit IKEA stores.

> "I can definitely say that when it comes to the more converting and traffic-increasing activities, well, so far it's less important than our branding. […] I think sustainability is really important. You know we have, when we look at the IKEA we want to be in the future, in the consumers' consciousness"
>
> - Communicator (Spring 2017)

Much of the communication produced at the country and store level works with a rather short temporal horizon and aims to get people into the stores and/or to drive sales in specific departments or product categories. Again, sustainability communication is not really seen as relevant in driving sales in the short term, and therefore sustainability talk struggles to become part of such communication. In other words, there is a lack of rational arguments for why it should be an integrated part of such communication, because it does not help in serving its purpose, making sustainability talk irrelevant to the communicator when engaging in those aspects of retail talk.

Talking the sustainability talk across markets

Another challenge found in conversations with especially sustainability professionals and communicators concerns the fluid nature of sustainability talk over both time and space. What sustainability talk entails and how it is valued by customers and the general public may differ over time and across different markets. Clearly, sustainability talk may be seen as more or less legitimate depending on the different cultural contexts in which IKEA is organizing retailing. This is exemplified in how one sustainability professional refers to some markets as more "mature" than others:

> "And then there is that the countries are different in [sigh], sustainability is of course of more strategic importance on our mature markets than in maybe the USA. Right now at least, with Trump. So it is of course… it is easier to drive sustainability issues in some countries than in others."
>
> Sustainability Professional (Fall 2016)

The challenge I wish to illustrate with the above example is how sustainability professionals may find it easier to "drive sustainability" on "our mature markets" than on less mature markets. How important sustainability talk is deemed by IKEA employees is to some extent influenced by how important sustainability talk is in public debate on those markets. Most notable here are perceived customer expectations concerning corporate sustainability engagement – a factor that is an especially important legitimator for communicators, who aim for communication that consumers find both important and relevant. Similarly, the gatekeeping authorities discussed above may be more prone to incorporating sustainability talk into their retail talk if it is positioned high on the agendas of public debate. A country-level sustainability professional in the UK mentioned that the city of London also helped draw attention to the sustainability talk and engagement among her co-workers:

> "Well, so for example London has set out to be the leading city on circular economy, and customer behavior because of its kind of density as a mega city, gateway city, but also technology startups, leading on e-commerce, and there for sharing economy platforms, e-bay, country, all these other platforms are further ahead than in many other markets. The US is kind of in a similar place, but most other countries, particularly say compared to Scandinavia it's, there are much further behind than most in terms of how customers already behave in the market. So then we have a, well there is an expectation, we need to move faster. And we need to capitalize on opportunities and innovations to match and ideally be ahead of, but actually here we are catching up."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Spring 2018)

It seems to be important not to lag behind the competition in terms of sustainability, as well as to stay ahead of customer expectations. The external environment, whether in the form of competitors, customer expectations or public policies, can therefore both help and hinder engagement with sustainability talk within the company. In a sense elevating (or not elevating) the relevance, and thus legitimacy, of it within the company. This adds a layer of complexity when dealing with the challenge of relevance across markets.

This is also a common theme in interviews with communicators. Many of them struggle to see how IKEA's sustainability talk is or can be made relevant for consumers in their customer journeys. And if customers do not find it relevant, it is hardly relevant for communicators in their everyday work.

> "Kungsbacka is like this is made of recycled PET bottles, well, almost everybody understands that, that was so good, easy to understand. Sometimes it's like that, that it's difficult for a customer to understand what the benefit is, or we talk about water-saving faucets that save half your water. So I get that, I'll be using 50% less water, but with the same functionality. That's easy to understand. It's about finding that thing, where the customer understands 'oh I get it, it's good for me and it's good for the environment, so that's what I'll choose'."
>
> - Communicator (Spring 2017)

Some aspects of IKEA's sustainability talk seem to be easier to comprehend and communicate than others. Most notable in this connection is an aspect of the first people and planet positive strategy called "More sustainable life at home." But even this category, which is close to sales employees and the lives of customers due its focus on products, must be made relevant for the consumers if it is to work in consumer-facing communication. For example, LED lightbulbs might convey a message that IKEA is engaging with

sustainability talk. But it is not relevant for consumers, and hence for communicators, until consumer benefits can be demonstrated, such as a lowered electricity bill or that the LED lightbulbs do not get as hot as traditional ones. What this suggests is that sustainability talk has to be made relevant for consumers, if it is to become relevant for many employees, once again demonstrating the challenge of relevance.

In a similar vein, what is talked about in the public debate also varies across both time and space, thus influencing the legitimacy of IKEA's sustainability talk among retail employees and potentially. Something that is giving rise to tensions between ensuring a coherent and consistent brand identity across markets, on the one hand, and responding to the different needs and cultural belief systems on IKEA markets, on the other. This issue has been discussed quite frequently in previous retail research (e.g., (Burt et al., 2015), but not so much in relation to sustainability talk. This is naturally because there are limits to the level of autonomy experienced by country- and store-level managers (discussed at the beginning of this chapter), most notably in relation to the IKEA franchise concept and assortment, which is owned and controlled by Inter IKEA systems. For instance, much of the store layout, assortment and graphic design details are dictated by this franchise system. In fact, these directives may sometimes be troublesome when it comes to adapting IKEA's sustainability talk to the different and changing nature of sustainability talk in the public debate on different markets.

The dangers associated with plastic pollution are one example of an issue that has become a more salient aspect of sustainability talk in the public debate during the past decade. The focus on this issue increased considerably shortly before my interviews with UK employees. The British television channel BBC aired a show featuring the legendary Sir David Attenborough who, among other things, showed how the amount of plastic in our oceans has grown dramatically over the past couple of decades. One especially powerful scene in this documentary is a full sequence showing people pulling a plastic straw out of a turtle's nostrils. This caused an outrage among people, in general, and IKEA customers and co-workers in the UK, in particular. IKEA became one of several targets in a media storm that condemned how IKEA, a company that claims to be very sustainable, could sell single-use plastic straws at such low prices.

> "Yeah and also I think that, so consumers are also, from a sustainability perspective, consumers are. Consumers? People! Are more, generally more aware and quite demanding and have higher expectations on us and you know it's a. For example, in the last few months we've had this plastic straw "gate." You know plastic straws and single-use plastics and in the UK it was first page

> news in January and has been front page news for months. And other countries have just started to have these issues. And here you got massive campaigns. Campaigns against IKEA for not acting."
> - Sustainability Professional (Spring 2018)

> "We have e-mail and letters from children and customers and co-workers everyday, everyday about straws! So it's not a nice thing to do, it's absolutely critical."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Spring 2018)

As seen in the quotes above, country-level sustainability managers in the UK, together with their non-sustainability colleagues, wanted to withdraw single-use plastic straws from their stores as "plastic gate" unfolded. This decision was initially challenged and even stopped by global organizational authorities, the stated reason being the importance of having more or less the same items for sale in all IKEA stores around the world to ensure a consistent brand image across markets. The directive in the above quote perceived as running the risk of seriously undermining much of the work carried out by sustainability professionals at the country level in the UK, particularly as concerns positioning the brand along a perceived sustainability and trustworthiness continuum.

Arguably, this is an example not only of what can go wrong, but also of how fast things can spin out of control if employees, especially sustainability professionals and communicators, do not keep track of and respond to changes in sustainability talk in the public debate – changes that can occur very rapidly and unexpectedly. This once again highlights the importance of sustainability professionals keeping track of what is happening within IKEA so that they can speak a sustainability talk that key stakeholders find relevant.

Having the "right stories" to convey when responding to these changes would also seem to be important, especially for communicators. Such stories are, for instance, a product made out of recycled PET-bottles, a group of co-workers engaging in some kind of social initiative, or something else that can function as "proof points" or "exemplary stories" explaining how IKEA engages with various aspects of sustainability talk. Being able to show such proof points and respond to changing expectations naturally depends on how far-reaching IKEA's sustainability engagement actually is. Having a CSD that is wide in scope, such as IKEA's, may be helpful in this regard. Thus, it may be helpful for retail organizations operating on different markets to develop a kind of

sustainability talk that is wide in scope, as this makes it easier to adapt the talk to the needs of different markets.

Nonetheless, the main point of the above examples has been to show how difficult it is for sustainability professionals to develop a kind of sustainability talk that is relevant across markets, this is, to match aspects of the organization's CSD to the public debate agendas across markets. Such matching may be much easier said than done, given how much sustainability talk can differ across markets.

Finding a business case for sustainability

Lastly, and according to sustainability professionals, sustainability talk always needs to be made relevant to business. It needs to "include a business case". This can be seen in how sustainability professionals need to argue for, and eventually show, how sustainability talk can contribute to the organization's financial bottom line, as exemplified in the two quotes below. In the first quote, the respondent is asked how s/he works to overcome identified goal conflicts (described above), while the latter quote is an answer from another sustainability professional to the question of how sustainability talk has been received among other IKEA employees on a local market.

> "Respondent:
>
> Dialog
>
> Interviewer:
>
> It's a dialog?
>
> Respondent:
>
> Uh huh. And then showing, showing when we actually contribute something, like. When it's about the bottom line or a brand or… it's still trial and error, you know, and show, we really can't… and I don't think we should either, our business case should be just as clear as any other operation. We should be able to show why, why should we invest money in this and not in that. And that…"
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Fall 2016)

> "So I'm getting incredibly positive vibes, in relation to the core issue here, how can we get this into the other operations' everyday lives? Marketing, sales, because that's the key, you know. Sales is the key operation in our entire society's adaptation toward becoming more sustainable. Because that's where everything comes to a head. The PR department and the others were sold long

> ago, if we're talking about the brand and what IKEA does and things. Marketing can be the same. But sales… that's really where it comes to a head. Then you have your KPIs, you have index, volume, sales that constantly too, have to develop in a positive direction. Otherwise we'll have to fire store employees."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Spring 2017)

In both quotes above, the two sustainability professionals stress how crucial it is to find a business case for sustainability if one is to legitimate sustainability talk and engagement in practice. The first one concludes that sustainability professionals need to show a business case, just as for any other kind of investment. The second one discusses how communicators have established a profitable connection between what they do and IKEA's sustainability talk, making them "sold long ago." The same relevance, however, is yet to be seen among sales employees, who always have to strive toward delivering growing sales figures. Unless it can be combined with these overarching sales objectives, sustainability talk may struggle to be "sold" and even do harm to the organization and its employees.

What this indicates is that sustainability talk must conform to the logics of business if it is to become legitimate in a retail environment. Another way of putting this is that sustainability talk has to be translated into a business language, as explained by one sustainability professional:

> "Well that's kind of where they are. And then we come with our fluffy sustainability message, which is 'well we're future-proofing our business 10 years in advance, and that means you'll have to work even more and we'll need to schedule even more people on the floor, and for you things will just get more and more and more difficult right now,' so naturally they say 'what the hell should I do that for?' So we have to talk, we have to speak their language, and we have to get things into their work in their way."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Fall 2016)

Similar to how the code of conduct was first developed in interaction with external stakeholders and then translated into an "IKEA language" (as seen in Chapter 4), so too must more or less any sustainability-related issue be translated into a business language. Even into the specifics of particular employees' everyday retail talk. But this is not always easy, as the examples of sustainability talk in relation to numbers and temporal horizons above exemplified. The point here is, again, that unless a business case can be established, which is still the case with sales according to the respondents' experience at the time, then it will quite simply be deemed illegitimate.

Arriving at the challenge of relevance

One of the main contributions of this study that I argue for in Chapter 1 is to offer an account and analysis of how MSR happens on both an organizational level (Grayson, 2011; Wilson, 2015) and more micro-levels of organizing a retail organization (Fuentes & Fredriksson, 2016; Fuentes, 2015; Lehner, 2015). The former is in focus in Chapter 4 and 5, and the latter in this one. The aim of such a dual-level analysis is partly to reveal previously overlooked challenges that might arise as corporate level ideas about MSR (i.e., the CSD) make their way out to organizational peripheries and into local instances of retail talk throughout the organization, thus becoming not only an organizational reality, but also a conversational reality among retail employees. Another reason for a dual-level analysis, as argued in Chapter 2, is that the many voices on sustainable development and IKEA's own official voice on it (i.e., CSD) will presumably fail to do much to the organizing of retailing unless it is talked about by the employees doing the organizing. Thus, understanding the challenges therein and ways of overcoming them is crucial if we are to understand how sustainability talk actually comes to be spoken in retail talk.

And indeed, what is found in this section is that, despite the entire top-endorsed system of thought that seemingly exists at IKEA (i.e., its CSD), and despite all the claims of its moral righteousness, as shown in Chapter 5, sustainability talk might still struggle to become part of many retail employees' everyday retailing work on micro-levels of organizing. Sustainability professionals, not having much authority as part of an internal "support function," instead need to "lobby" for sustainability rather than "pushing" the discourse onto others, focusing primarily on the many other organizational authorities in the organization rather than on top management to make sustainability talk happen throughout the organization. These gatekeeping authorities often fail to see why all this talk is relevant to them and, importantly, to their customers.

Relevance is the key word here. Sustainability talk will not become a legitimate (let alone a performative) aspect of retail talk unless it is deemed relevant in that talk. This is the notion I am arguing for in this section, that is, that ensuring relevance and battling irrelevance is a key challenge to acknowledge when trying to better understand the (non)occurrence and (il)legitimacy of sustainability talk on micro-levels of organizing retailing. Moreover, as will be discussed more in the commodifying performativity section below, it is also important to understanding one consequence of sustainability talk in retail talk, thus adding to our understanding of the complexities involved in MSR (Elg et al., 2020).

The challenges presented above can be seen as different expressions of the issue of relevance, in that relevance is their common denominator. For example, the lobbying challenge indicates that many organizational authorities need convincing of the relevance of sustainability for them, despite the social structures put into place (shown in Chapter 4) and all claims of authority to legitimate sustainability talk (shown in Chapter 5).

Similarly, and shown next, it is when sustainability talk is made relevant through, for example, the products employees sell, that it actually starts occurring in retail talk and becomes a legitimate feature of organizing conversations. Once again, this shows the importance not only of ensuring organizational relevance by developing a CSD that ties the organization as a whole to sustainability talk, as found in previous retail research and CSR talk theorizing alike (e.g., Jones et al., 2008a; Shultz, 2013), but also of ensuring local relevance. This brings me to some of the solutions that can be identified in the empirical material, namely the importance of enabling integrated forms of sustainability communication and identifying business hooks.

Dealing with relevance - Integrated sustainability communication and business hooks

I will use this section to argue for how integrated forms of internal sustainability talk and the enabling and identification of business are essential to battling, or dealing with, the challenge of relevance. I show how I arrived at these findings by first demonstrating how sustainability talk can be seen as "flowing" throughout the retail organization in three different forms of internal sustainability communication, namely centralized, local, and integrated forms. The latter form will be described in greater detail given its importance for battling the challenge of relevance. However, it is not enough to become part of communication flows, sustainability talk also has to become part of already established communication agendas. Something that calls for employees to deconstruct and translate sustainability talk into something business relevant that can "hook onto" organizing conversations and texts (i.e. business hooks). The integrated communication and business hooks findings are further demonstrated by showing the importance of becoming part of organizing texts, having something sustainability-related to say, and having something sustainability-related to sell. Together with finding the challenge of relevance, these two solutions will also lay the empirical foundation for the argument that

sustainability talk, by necessity, must be commodified if it is to become part of retail talk on a conversational level of analysis.

Three forms of internal sustainability communication flows

Before going into the particulars of integrated sustainability communication and business hooks, derived from the empirical material, that lead me to these findings, I want to take a step back and introduce three forms of internal sustainability communication. I do this to provide a contrast between how we intuitively might think about "communicating sustainability internally" in the form of centralized or local forms of internal sustainability communication and integrated forms which I describe below. Integrated forms of communication would seem to be especially suitable to battling the challenge of relevance and helping others find the "business hooks" that allow sustainability talk to "hook onto" already established communication agendas of retail talk. The business hook concept will be further described at the end of this section.

At the outset of this study, one of the things my colleagues and I wanted to try to glean from the interviews, especially with sustainability communicators, was how such communication in a sense "flows" throughout the organization. However, it soon became apparent that sustainability talk can take many forms and be spread in many ways, making it somewhat difficult to determine how "communication" flows. After all, what communication are we talking about? Examples include sustainability articles on the organization's intranet or public webpage, personal and sustainability-themed presentations, in-store communication, product information, blogs, e-mail, and marketing communication, to mention only a few.

To make better sense of how sustainability talk spreads, here I present three general forms of internal sustainability communication that can make sustainability talk happen throughout the organization. These general forms are: (1) centralized forms of sustainability communication, (2) local forms of sustainability communication and (3) integrated forms of sustainability communication, all of which come with their own set of opportunities and challenges. This illustrates the complex task of communicating sustainability internally to ensure sustainability talk throughout the organization, disseminate and make real the system of thought produced on meso-levels of organizing (i.e., the CSD).

Centralized sustainability communication flows

Centralized sustainability communication, at least in the case of IKEA, is part of a sustainability communication "smorgasbord" produced on the global level, mainly by sustainability professionals together with communicators. This is exemplified by the way in which one sustainability professional talks about sustainability communication:

> "Back to your question, quite of few of these things are things we provide retail with, the seller countries with, things that are more like something of a smorgasbord. Then it's up to them, to choose what they think is suitable, based on their own business strategy and what's relevant for their customers."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Fall 2016)

The respondent above is talking about various kinds of communication materials, such as general in-store communication material, PowerPoint presentation templets, intranet articles, etc. These materials are readily available for any employee to use in their everyday work to help convey aspects of IKEA's sustainability talk to consumers and/or employees throughout the organization. One of the main strengths of this kind of communication is that it is easy to control the coherency and trustworthiness of sustainability messages on different levels and across different markets.

However, this kind of communication would seem to have two main drawbacks. First, it runs the risk of being ignored by employees because it might be seen as irrelevant to the communication needs on more local and operational levels. Second, centrally produced sustainability communication often seems to be seen as yet another message to convey among thousands of other, potentially more relevant messages. In other words, it risks becoming just another and potentially irrelevant thing on a long list of to-do's and thus never being used. Finally, the centrally produced sustainability communication does not always match the way it is spoken on particular markets.

Localized forms of sustainability communication flows

Local forms of sustainability communication in a sense "occur" among employees on the country or store level within the organization, or within particular function matrixes. They can, for example, take the form of a personal presentation by sustainability professionals or close to home managers such as a store manager; they might be an employee workshop or some other form of sustainability training or some kind of communication piece concerning a local sustainability initiative. The common denominator is that they are often seen

as more or less personal forms of communication that are "closer to home" for employees further out in the organizational periphery instead of communication from a sustainability function "silo" on the corporate level that deals with IKEA's sustainability engagement in general.

The main benefit of this local kind of communication is that it can be seen as sustainability communication that is more relevant to employees on local levels of organizing endorsed by more immediate authorities, such as a shop keeper or store manager rather than a distant CEO or sustainability professional. The main drawbacks of this communication are that its creation and dissemination are largely dependent on local authorities prioritizing it despite not having sustainability as a main responsibility (as exemplified by the "lobbying" of sustainability professionals explained above), that it is not necessarily in line with the overarching system of thought as intended by corporate level sustainability professionals (e.g., when making local adaptations to match sustainability talk in public debate on particular markets), or that it might not be as truthful a representation of what IKEA is actually doing in terms of sustainability due to a lack of knowledge about these initiatives.

Integrated forms of sustainability communication flows

Lastly, integrated forms of communication are practically seen as the holy grail of sustainability communication by sustainability professionals (as "integration" is in previous research (Hahn et al., 2015; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015, Hengst et al., 2020). This is the kind of sustainability communication that in one way or another becomes a relatively seamless and natural part of already existing communication flows, such as product information to sales employees, or part of a sales campaign on a country's commercial calendar.

Integrated sustainability communication thus entails sustainability messages that employees encounter "naturally" in their everyday work, as it is part of something they are already doing rather than an added task on a long list of to-dos, or a separate kind of workshop held on local levels. However, and as will be seen below, it is not always easy to incorporate sustainability messages into everyday retailing texts, and doing so often requires a great deal of sustainability work on the production side of things and often also personal guidance offered by sustainability professionals to help employees identify "business hooks."

Because everyday retailing work for sales employees on the country and store level largely revolves around the products they sell, it is important to recognize that products can become important carriers of sustainability-related information and should therefore be seen as useful channels for disseminating sustainability talk throughout the retail organization. What is more, product-related sustainability information comes through channels that employees already use in their everyday work, such as e-mail or computer programs available to employees on the shop floor (Fuentes & Fredriksson, 2016). Sustainability communication that is integrated with product information thus also seems to be an important aspect of disseminating sustainability talk throughout the retail organization. A good example of this kind of communication is presented at the end of this section.

Now that we have an idea of what integrated communication is, I will turn to more particular empirical examples that help illustrate and explain this form of communication in greater detail. In addition to doing this, the examples below also reveal the need to deconstruct this communication further, in ways that allow it to "hook onto" already established business agendas. It is this deconstruction of sustainability talk that leads me to the business hook finding elaborated on after these examples.

Becoming part of local texts in retail talk

In this section, I wish to highlight the challenge of incorporating sustainability texts into texts that are especially important features of retail talk on local levels. This is exemplified below in relation to the importance of getting sustainability talk onto something called the commercial calendar, which seems to be an important organizing text on at least some markets. This is a challenge that seems to be dealt with primarily by deconstructing sustainability talk and matching aspects of it with already established communication agendas in retail talk.

The commercial calendar is an important kind of impersonal authority on both the country and store level. This calendar is an especially important part of communicators' everyday retailing work, as it sets the communication agenda on both the store and country level. It is also important for sales employees, as it focuses on and supports sales at different business units throughout the year. Integrating aspects of IKEA's sustainability talk into this agenda is thus important if it is to become an integrated part of communication that constitutes the organizing of retailing on these organizational levels.

> "And then when it comes to engagement and communication through that commercial calendar, there are now for instance four launches [of new products], rather than one big fat launch up. So we focusing on how do we make sure that when we go, you know together with the communication and commercial team, think before the launches; how do we really choose in a simple way a way of communicating with those stakeholders. […]. So it's got this story of how to make it yourself, and so we trying not to really get the communication then to down the shop floor. Mainly in the range and the launch period for that focus, for that, for one kitchen there is a focus in the commercial calendar within those four launches. So then go big commercially externally and then we also go internally to get that message across co-workers so they "oh ok!" and you know that this is something I work with every day, this is something that I need to touch up, and you know then tell the story to the customer."
>
> - Sustainability Professional (Spring 2018)

The quote above demonstrates the importance of incorporating sustainability talk into normal work flows of communication to co-workers, highlighting the rather synonymous nature of integrating and disseminating sustainability talk. As in the case of building new stores (discussed under relevance above), the key seems to be to make aspects of sustainability talk relevant to other aspects of retailing. In the case of new stores, this is accomplished by relating energy production and savings with cost savings and, based on this, incorporating a longer time perspective into incentive systems (which can be seen as important organizing texts on local levels of organizing retailing). In the case of the commercial calendar, this seems to be accomplished by, for example, relating a specific product in the kitchen department with issues of recycling and food waste. In this way, employees can incorporate sustainability talk into their everyday work (e.g., communicating and selling IKEA's assortment) by becoming part of texts that stipulate how this work ought to be conducted.

Having something sustainability related to say

Another theme in IKEA's sustainability talk that was discussed in the previous chapter is the frequent use of stories to legitimize it. Sustainability-related stories also seem to play an important role in sustainability professionals' attempts to spread sustainability talk through the work of communicators.

> "Respondent:
>
> Storytelling I think there is, well if you think about how many amazing stories there are, that we sit on, that we don't put out there.

Interviewer:

There is a lot of talk about stories. About collecting stories and communicating stories.

Respondent:

Yeah but people respond to stories you know. And that's how you connect with people emotionally you know. If you connect with them emotionally, you're going to build a relationship with them for a long long time"

- Communicator (Spring 2017)

The communicators interviewed for this study often expressed the large number of great sustainability stories available for use in getting the sustainability message "out there" to help reposition the IKEA brand, both internally and externally. They also expressed the value of sustainability professionals' knowledge in relation to the changing nature of public debate and that constant collection of stories helped them in producing more relevant sustainability-related communication.

Using stories and examples is also an important aspect of how sustainability professionals are deconstructing and translating IKEA's sustainability talk, or aspects thereof, into more relevant terms and practices for non-sustainability professionals. This points to the business hook argued for here. Further, and also mentioned above, the benefits of sustainability engagement do not always translate well into numbers. This makes stories and examples of sustainability initiatives and engagement even more important in relation to legitimating sustainability talk in retail talk. As one sustainability professional explains:

"Yeah yeah! To sell in the strategy. Then also use storytelling to provide examples of what something might mean. Because sustainability can still be seen as, well most people aren't experts on sustainability so it's about giving good examples, showing what other companies are doing, ehm even when we have done something it is then to capture it in videos or… case studies so that people understand what it is. It's absolutely essential. Because if it's just words or just kind of, well it would never just be words, but if it's just strategic it doesn't bring it alive. And to get the buy in we have to tell stories essentially."

- Sustainability Professional (Fall 2016)

Sustainability stories are thus important in many different respects. They help inform employees about sustainability as a concept and as a strategy, and they show how things can be done by bringing the rather abstract concept of sustainability closer to individuals and operations and by making the discourse

tangible so that it comes "to life." This demonstrates in concrete and tangible ways how employees can engage with sustainability talk and shows the benefits it can have for other aspects of retailing, thus helping sustainability professionals to legitimate sustainability talk in retail talk through their lobbying activities.

This also bring to the fore the importance of the sustainability function as such. As seen in Chapter 4, the sustainability function grew significantly during the third phase of IKEA's sustainability strategy. This seems to have been crucial in legitimating sustainability talk owing to the sheer manpower needed to collect and convey sustainability stories, as well as demonstrating the relevance and value of sustainability talk for other employees, such as communicators, and helping them make sense of how to incorporate sustainability talk into other communication agendas.

The point I wish to make here is the importance of having sustainability stories to deploy in order to make sustainability talk tangible and relevant in retail talk, that is, to give communicators something to talk about in relation to sustainability.

Having something sustainability related to sell

In an interview with a sales employee, I stumbled upon a quote that I believe clearly exemplifies how sustainability talk can become part of everyday retailing talk by being a rather integrated, and thus legitimate, feature of the everyday work life of a sales employee, specifically through the products and services offered at IKEA's kitchen department. I argue that this is possible due to the long-term commitment, aspirations and outcomes of IKEA's sustainability talk. Though the interview account below largely concerns how, rather than why not, sustainability talk comes into this employee's everyday retail talk, it also reveals the challenge of actually having something to incorporate, most importantly in the form of product and service offerings.

> "Interviewer:
>
> Yeah then we come into, where does sustainability come into your work?
>
> Respondent:
>
> Into my work? Yeah I mean it's, at the minute it's much more than it used to. I think over the last probably, and I've been in this role for 18 months, but within kitchens for nearly 5 years. I think when I first joined kitchens it probably wasn't on the agenda five years ago that much.

Now we were pretty much every other day or week we're discussing something connected to sustainability in terms of appliances, energy labels that need to be visible on the products, and to make sure customers are really aware of how much they're using from an energy point of view, how much they're saving. And other things like LED-lighting within the kitchen itself and how we work with smart lighting and really making sure that customers are saving as much energy as they can do within their kitchen and lighting it up in the right way so that the lighting is in a way that meets their needs.

Something we do work with a lot more now is with recycling solutions. Especially across the country there are hundreds of different councils, so they all require different kinds of recycling solutions. Which is like, I don't know how many in total but there's just hundreds. So like for example one customer may need six different bins and another might need three, depending on how much recycling is combined and how much that has to be separated.

[…]

So we have different sized bins to meet that and the bins are also made out of recycled plastics, which also then supports the from a sustainability perspective. That not only what we put into them, but the bins are also from recycled plastic. Also then we also then, we knew that between 9, over the next 5 to 10 years IKEA will try to move all of our door fronts in kitchens to being made from PET-bottles.

Interviewer:

Oh like the Kungsbacka

Respondent:

Yeah. So today we already have Kungsbacka in black and then we have white that will be introduced in August. No actually June. So yeah we will have two door fronts made from PET-bottle.

Interviewer:

And the goal being that

Respondent:

Yeah that all door fronts will be made from PET-bottles within the next 5 to 10 years or so, I'm not sure how globally that is. But yeah the idea is to move in that direction. I'm not too sure if you've been to the shop floor?

Interviewer:

Yeah

Respondent:

Have you seen Kungsbacka?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Respondent:

How we presented it. So we take a massive stand point, probably about 14 months ago, to say ok, Kungsbacka is coming in the range and we would really go after it from a sustainability perspective. So we've put it in every single store has a massive room setting. The biggest room setting in the department, focused on Kungsbacka and like healthy living, cooking, and how we cook and how we store food and how we really manage waste in right way. So then we made a pretty large statement there to go after the Kungsbacka.

[…]

Interviewer:

That's really interesting. Because then it becomes a way of communicating the brand more than selling products. It's not the main objective.

Respondent:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

But how does that, how is that balanced and met by you sales people?

Respondent:

Yeah I mean of course there has to be a balance. But then when you already have, in IKEA [city], you have 12 room settings. So using one room setting to really talk about sustainability and then have a wow factor connected to it, so you get the balance of the rest of the department to then support the commercial side of the business. But when it comes to the, having such a key location within the layout, we've created a real strong flow for the, that room set would be one of our hottest room sets in the whole layout. So there's a lot of people that see that.

Interviewer:

Like one of the hot spots

Respondent:

Yeah, very very hot. And that's, yeah, I mean we actually, we've predicted within the UK that we will meet 1.5% of sales from that door front, out of all of our door front sales, and we actually take over 3,5%. So that's taking a lot more money than we actually thought. So we will focus sometimes around sustainability and it comes back to our appliances and really drive that message.

And then other times it might be more focused around like a different story, and it's working with them to understand I suppose when the customers, when it's in focus when there are things happening in the world. So we talk a lot about plastic bottles now. Yeah yeah, right now. So the Kungsbacka message is really important right now. On how we really support reusing single-use plastic in the right way. So yeah, it's quite a good message to send out but I mean it's not just to do the store channel, it's a multichannel environment that we work in so."

Interviewer:

It comes a lot through the range is

Respondent:

But also services. So I don't know how much you've touched on our service offer in other meetings?

Interviewer:

No.

Respondent:

So we have a recycle service for appliances. So we charge a small fee to pick up the customers' appliances and we drive it away and recycle them for them. So we offer a recycling service on white goods.

Interviewer:

Right, ok. So it's a take-back scheme.

Respondent:

Yeah it's a take-back scheme for appliances. And we're also then working with, closely with our service business colleagues to find new ways of working with. Because we have third party installers we work with to install our kitchens, and we're working closely with service business colleagues to what it would look like, especially in London, for our installers to start driving and using electric vehicles rather than diesel vehicles that they use today. So it's not only internally in the store, but working with our kitchen installers to see how they can also support the complete agenda. And then also using public transport more where they can, so it also helps. And how we deliver our kitchen as well, so we're also looking at how we not just deliver the right kitchen, but deliver products, using electric vehicles instead of diesel. There is a much bigger picture of it."

Sales Employee (Spring 2018)

There is a great deal that can be unpacked from the interview account above, given its length. But I choose to include it here because it shows that

sustainability talk, despite the challenges presented in this chapter, can indeed become a legitimate aspect of retail talk, even among people whose overarching task is to sell more, not less.

One interesting observation that can be made at the beginning of quote above is that sustainability talk has increasingly become part of this particular employee's everyday retail talk. I would argue that this again helps demonstrate how sustainability talk in a sense ensures its own legitimacy though the "walk" stemming from this "talk," a point that is a reoccurring theme in this example. This is visible, for instance, in how this respondent sees sustainability talk as something that will become more, not less, important in his work over time, at least in the case of kitchen doors made out of recycled plastic. In a sense, the aspirations of IKEA's sustainability talk help legitimate such talk, because it is something that will become more important, not less important, in the foreseeable future.

The particular product "Kungsbacka" referred to in the example above is also a reoccurring case in the interviews for this study. Sustainability professionals, communicators and sales employees have all talked about this product and, much like the respondent above, see it as an important symbol of IKEA's sustainability talk. It is even deemed so symbolic that it has been given store space for this sole purpose, overriding the dominating "increasing sales" logic. Further, if given priority, sustainability communication in stores can, according to this respondent, yield results, here exceeding the sales expectations for this particular product of IKEA's sustainability talk by more than twofold.

This decision to "take a massive stand" on sustainability, in part because of this particular product being released, may have been made by a set of important organizational and gatekeeping authorities who support IKEA's sustainability talk and make such talk happen throughout the organization. Though the importance of balancing this with other communication agendas is still recognized by the respondent here.

In the quote above, external sustainability actors and initiatives also help legitimate sustainability talk, here owing to the different recycling systems that exist on this particular market. This fact forces sales employees to consider sustainability talk in general (e.g., on recycling) and to match this with particular aspects and products of IKEA's sustainability talk (e.g., minimizing waste and offering recycling solutions). It shows that it is relevant for sales employees to engage with sustainability talk if their customers have to engage with it. This is further manifested by the more sustainable feature of

Kungsbacka kitchen doors, which is that they are made from recycled plastic. This makes them a good and relevant manifestation of IKEA's sustainability talk in a time and cultural context where plastic quickly "sailed up" as an important aspect of sustainability talk on this particular market (see the "plastic gate scandal" described above).

Finally, and important for the business hook finding argued for here, it is not only products such as Kungsbacka and IKEA's recycling solutions that make sustainability talk relevant for this employee, but also services. Many aspects of IKEA's sustainability engagement can be materialized and made relevant in the design of new service solutions. The service of taking back old kitchen appliances for customers, discussed in the above example, has a clear connection to IKEA's ambition of having a more circular value chain. In a sense, this aspect of IKEAs sustainability talk (becoming "circular") is here deconstructed into a service for customers. Making it relevant for customers, and hence for the sales employee. Further, this also shows that IKEA's sustainability talk and its aspirations can be pushed onto other actors, even on the retail side of things. Here this is exemplified with how the employee quoted above and other IKEA employees are "working with" service providers to ensure more electric vehicles are used for home deliveries and IKEA's take-back scheme, for example.

I would argue that all these things show how sustainability talk can become part of retail talk for sales employees, highlighting in particular the importance of having something to sell to customers and revealing the challenge of actually having something to sell. This reveals the importance of making sustainability talk a long-term commitment for the retailer in question, and of being ambitious enough to have something sustainability-related for sales employees to sell and consumers to buy. This shows, once again, how the legitimacy and performativity of sustainability talk in retail talk is increasingly being built on the fruits and ambitions of the latter. However, the insight that sustainability talk among sales employees hinges on having something to sell also reveals another challenge that retail employees, in general, and sales employees, in particular, may encounter.

Arriving at the integrated sustainability communication finding

As seen especially in conversations with sales employees, one of the most important kinds of "initiators" of sustainability talk in retail talk, both among employees and with customers, is of course the products they sell and buy – a form of integrated sustainability communication. The more products sales

employees have to sell that in some way or another are "more sustainable," in part constructed as such with the help of supporting communication material and "sustainability stories" attached to them, the more relevant sustainability talk can become in their retail talk. Similarly, if communicators have a great deal of sustainability talk to draw from, if there are many products of this kind to show and talk about, then such talk may have a better chance of becoming part of this work. This is not the only factor (Fuentes & Fredriksson, 2016), but having something to legitimate is an absolutely crucial aspect of legitimation, that is, having something sustainability related to talk about and sell in retail talk. If this aspect is not in place, there is a risk that nothing but fuzzy ideas will be talked about by "others."

This highlights the value of recognizing products as an important form of integrated internal sustainability communication flows. This refers to the material manifestations of IKEA's sustainability talk – the fruits and proofs of its existence within the organization over a period that is long enough to accomplish these things.

The point here is to stress that, given the importance of having something to talk about and sell, making retailing more sustainable is not something that is likely to happen overnight. For instance, it is not until the end of phase three of IKEA's sustainability journey that talk about it becomes a frequent feature of retail talk for the sales employee cited above, even though this interviewee is working on one of the most sustainability "mature" markets served by IKEA Group. Instead, the existence and legitimacy of sustainability talk largely seem to hinge on the fruits of its labor – on actual materializations of the organization's sustainability talk, at least among employees on the retail side, as studied here. Once again, this highlights the importance of long-term organizational commitment to ensure that the organization has something to show for it – something to talk about and sell in its retail talk. This demonstrates that the sustainability work occurring on the production side of retailing is essential not only for the legitimacy of the retailer (Kim et al., 2014), but also for the legitimacy of sustainability within the retailer itself.

Arriving at the business hooks finding

Similar to how particular aspects of sustainability talk (e.g. inequality) are connected to key organizational texts and discourses (e.g. The Testament of a Furniture Dealer and "the many people") on a textual level of analysis (see Chapter 5), a similar kind of deconstruction and matching process seems important on a conversational level of analysis. Though instead of general

sustainability talk being deconstructed and aspects of it matched with retail talk to develop a CSD, it is on local levels that the CSD itself is being deconstructed and matched with particular aspects of retailing. A feat that I call "identifying business hooks". This can be seen in how sustainability professionals express a need to translate IKEAs sustainability talk into something business relevant, and communicators need to deconstruct into something that is relevant for consumers.

It is common in previous CSR and retail literature to discuss potential "business cases" for sustainability engagement to describe "win-win" situations when sustainability initiatives makes "good business sense" (Hahn et al. 2015). For example that sustainability engagement entail using less resources that will translate well into cost-savings and ultimately improve the financial bottom line (Wilson 2015). However, I believe such a conceptualization takes a very broad stroked approach towards understanding how sustainability engagement can be translated into financial benefits. Instead I want to draw attention to how very particular aspects of a retailers sustainability agenda can become part of very particular aspects of retailing on operational levels. Further, business hooks do not necessarily create new business benefits, but in one way or another compliments already existing aspects of creating these benefits. Potentially making sustainability talk relevant in retail talk and enabling its occurrence and legitimacy on a conversational level of analysis.

The point I want to make here is that while there might be a "business case" for retailers to become more sustainable, this business case will most likely have to be realized through the identification of many "business hooks". Bridging sustainability priorities (e.g. becoming more circular) and business priorities (e.g. offering good customer service) by enabling a particular aspect of sustainability talk (e.g. circular economy) to "hook onto" something that employees already find business relevant in their everyday work. Thus legitimating sustainability engagement on local levels of organizing and legitimating sustainability talk in retail talk by making the former relevant in instances of the latter.

However, this will also require some hands on collaborations on local levels of organizing, which in turn highlights the importance of having an internal organization of sustainability professionals throughout the organizations discussed in Chapter 4, and of having a CSD that is wide enough to enable many business hooks, while still being concrete and consistent enough to give a clear direction to what sustainability talk ought to lead to in the organizations retail talk.

Discussion – Commodifying sustainability talk in retail talk

Taken together, the findings argued for in the chapter (i.e. the challenge of relevance, as well as the importance of integrated sustainability communication flows and business hooks to deal with this challange), coupled with insights from the Chapter 5, also help answer the question of what retail talk might be doing to sustainability talk in general. Where the answer is, namely, that retail talk seems to commodify sustainability talk on both a textual and conversational level of analysis, meaning that sustainability talk must conform to the logics of retailing, rather than retail talk conforming to the logics of sustainability. This largely preserves the status quo in the reality aspired to in the texts analyzed here, confirming similar arguments made in CSR talk theorizing (Feix & Philippe, 2020). This observation rests on the sets of observations from the empirical chapters presented below.

As especially visible from a narrative perspective when exploring the legitimation techniques deployed in IKEA's sustainability talk, but also in how IKEA relates sustainability talk to its organizational identity, in how the texts establish IKEA as a sustainability authority among others, and how they draw on morals to legitimize the organization's CSD, these texts construct a reality in which what is good for IKEA is also good for sustainable development. In this reality, IKEA is an important vehicle for morally justified social change and a vital part of the solution, which is more sustainable development. This contrasts with a narrative in which IKEA is one of the many corporate villains in the story of unsustainable development – a narrative that, incidentally, seems to have helped initiate IKEA's sustainability journey in the first place.

For example, IKEA is constructed as a sustainability authority that drives change globally, as one that takes stands in the public debate, that can influence how (the) many people lead their lives at home, that can develop and sell more sustainable products that are also perceived as better products in general so that the many people actually use them, that can choice edit away unsustainable products such as traditional lightbulbs and keep them away from (the) many people's homes, a company that invests in renewable energy and buys so much natural resources and products that it can scale up more sustainable production solutions. All of the above supports a narrative in which the more impact IKEA can have in society, the bigger and stronger IKEA is in society, the more positive an impact it will have on achieving more sustainable development. As explained by the former CEO in an interview for this study: Perhaps the most

sustainable thing would be if no one produced, sold or bought home furnishing products, but as long as people continue to buy home finishing products, it is more sustainable if they buy them from IKEA, because IKEA is doing the most in terms of sustainability.

The point here is to show that it might be necessary for a retail organization to produce a narrative in sustainability talk that counters other narratives suggesting that what the organization is doing is the very root of unsustainable development. Instead, a story is told in which the pursuit of increasing sales, profit and growth, in general, and for the organization, in particular, is essential to bringing about more sustainable development. As seen in conversations with sales employees regarding the impossible challenge of selling less in a retail organization, this narrative also seems to be an important narrative or reality construction on a conversational level of analysis. It helps in talking the otherwise eminent paradox of sustainability talk in retail talk out of existence (Hoffmann, 2018), namely, the notion that sustainable development should perhaps entail selling less, not more. This also reproduces taboos found in previous CSR talk studies (Feix & Philippe, 2020).

As also seen in this chapter, and highlighted with the above finding indicating that enabling and identifying business hooks are essential to ensuring sustainability talk on a conversational level, it is sustainability talk that has to contribute to retail talk and not the other way around. In other words, and though doing "the right thing" may indeed be desirable among employees, that desire must in most cases be subordinated to the pressing need for ever increasing sales, profit and growth.

Together, I would argue that these sets of observations strongly suggest that retail talk is commodifying sustainability talk, as such a commodifying performativity is an absolutely necessary part of making sustainability talk a legitimate feature of retail talk from a communication perspective. This seriously calls into question the validity of, for example, Wilson's (2015) conclusion that Marks & Spencer's sustainability strategy will help bring about "strong sustainability." Naturally, that is another case, but it is an organization where the task of employees, just as in the case of IKEA, is primarily to ensure the financial success of the organization. Instead this finding suggests that a retail organization's sustainability talk in many ways has to be geared toward more or less preserving the status quo (Feix & Philippe, 2020), with a view to ensuring that the organization can continue to sell more stuff and encourage people to buy more stuff. Although this may well be more sustainable stuff, it is still an operation aimed at ensuring that more stuff is taken from the natural environment and turned into things we, according to these organizations,

supposedly need. This points to the potential incompatibility of realizing the idea of a more sustainable kind of social and environmental development when individual business organizations and their employees are so heavily constrained by the logics of capitalism.

Conclusions and contributions

The overarching conclusion that can be drawn from the findings of this study is that legitimating sustainability talk in retail talk is indeed a complex and far from unproblematic legitimation process to initiate and sustain. Building on this initial thesis, the main contributions of this study lie in revealing what these previously overlooked or understated complexities and problematic aspects of MSR might be. Such insights, when gained from exploring the empirical phenomenon of MSR through a CSR-talk-inspired conceptual framework, help fulfill the purpose of extending our knowledge of both fields of research, which I have attempted to do by answering the following three interrelated research questions: (1) How can sustainability talk be made into a legitimate feature of retail talk throughout a retail organization? (2) What kind of challenges might arise in the process and how can these challenges be dealt with? (3) What discursive implications might this have for the organizing of both retailing and more sustainable development?

The answer to these descriptive research questions can be found in the findings disclosed and argued for in Chapter 4-6, and the chapter summaries below. The theoretical contribution of this study, however, does not primarily lie in the findings that answer these questions. Instead, it lies in the following discussion, where I interpret what these findings mean and imply for our understanding of both MSR and CSR talk theorizing. That is the essential purpose of this concluding chapter. Before engaging in this discussion, I will open it by re-capping what I have done in the preceding chapters.

Thesis summary

To answer the research questions and fulfill the purpose of this study as restated above, I first developed a novel theoretical understanding of how MSR can be seen as having been accomplished within retail organizations. I do so by drawing on CSR talk theorizing and, motivated by blind spots in such theories, adding the processual concept of legitimation to CSR talk theorizing.

My main argument being that attaining legitimacy is an essential condition for CSR talk performativity. Based on this line of thinking, I suggested that one of the main problems for those wanting to make retailing more sustainable from within is to somehow make sustainability talk a legitimate feature of retail talk, that is, to socially construct organizational realities in which sustainability talk is deemed a legitimate feature of organizing a retail organization among retail employees. To understand how this is accomplished in the empirical world of retailing, as well as the challenges therein and consequences thereof, I drew inspiration from discourse analysis and legitimation theory to guide my empirical inquiry and analysis.

In Chapter 3, I also argued for answering the research questions by studying the case of IKEA's sustainability journey as a legitimation process that has unfolded over a little more than 20 years as well as of employing qualitative methods for empirical inquiry and analysis. This resulted in three analytical chapters, with corresponding findings (i.e., the importance of *developing a CSD*, the notion that MSR may also entail *more political retailing*, and battling the challenge of *relevance* with *integrated communication* and *business hooks*) that all help answer the research questions posed. Next, I summarize these findings and outline the remaining part of this chapter, suggesting three main contributions to, and implications for, both CSR talk theorizing and research on MSR.

In Chapter 4, I developed a chronological and communication-focused account of IKEA's sustainability journey, showing how, over time, sustainability talk became structurally embedded in retail talk through the development of what I call a *Corporate Sustainability Discourse (CSD)*. This development means that human agents of sustainability talk began building up and authorizing a system of sustainability texts that, by tying them to other and partially transformed organizational texts and discourses, came to constitute a system of thought around more sustainable development, in general, and MSR, in particular. That is, a mindset that retail employees are more or less forced to incorporate into their everyday retail talk, creating a common direction, and motivation, for sustainability talk in retail talk.

However, in Chapter 6 I also found that the main challenge for the legitimacy of sustainability talk in retail talk is that of *relevance*, that is, for the CSD developed over time on an organizational level, or rather aspects of it, to become relevant in already established communication flows in retail talk by contributing to their communication agendas. To meet this challenge, it is important to make use of *integrated communication* that renders sustainability talk part of the already established communication flows of organizing texts as

well as to enable and identify what I call *business hooks* that can "hook onto" already established conversational agendas. This refers to deconstructing an organization's CSD, as an overarching discursive resource, into something more concrete and business relevant for texts and conversations on local levels of organizing. A discursive activity that, at least in the case of retailing, seems to be especially centered around the products it makes available for purchasing, rendering them important carriers and legitimators of sustainability talk in retail talk.

Building especially on empirical insights from Chapter 5 regarding how the legitimacy of sustainability talk in retail talk is discursively sought, I also find that a previously overlooked aspect of infusing sustainability talk into retail talk can be that the former moralizes the latter. This implies that *making retailing more sustainable may also entail making retailing more political*. Further, and coupled with the need for business hooks to battle the challenge of relevance on local levels of organizing, I also find that *retail talk can exercise a commodifying performativity on sustainability talk* that steers it toward pursuing sustainable development within the status quo. A direction which implies that it is sustainability talk that must conform to the logics of retailing if it is to enjoy a legitimate presence in retail talk among employees.

As mentioned, I will now use this concluding chapter to discuss how these findings, taken together, can be considered to suggest three main and previously overlooked complex and problematic aspects of legitimating sustainability talk in retail talk, namely: (1) sustaining a sustainability talk-talk continuation in retail talk, (2) dealing with more political retailing, (3) and selling sustainability or escaping a status quo paradigm of more sustainable development. I also discuss the kind of implications these conclusions have for, and hence how they contribute to, the literature on MSR and CSR talk theorizing. Finally, I suggest future research that, based on the contributions and limitations of this study, can help further our knowledge of both.

Sustaining a sustainability talk-talk continuation in retail talk

The first challenging and somewhat problematic aspect of making retailing more sustainable is to ensure the continuation of sustainability talk in retail talk, and to do so on multiple levels of organizing retailing. This includes the feat of accomplishing continuous explorations of what MSR means for the

organization as a whole (Christensen et al., 2021; Penttilä, 2020), and for more narrow groups of employees engaged in communication on local levels of organizing. This process unfolds gradually over time and entails developing a CSD, enabling integrated communication through material artifacts, and identifying business hooks that make sustainability talk business relevant and by extension "sellable" for retail employees. Ideally, this chain of communicative events can turn into a spiral of talking about MSR, resulting in, for example, more sustainable products and services, which in turn spawn renewed sustainability talk, leading to new sustainability "actions", and so on, in a reoccurring fashion. This empirically demonstrates the intertwined relationship between sustainability talk and walk, and what the far-from-easy feat of accomplishing more sustainable t(w)alking throughout an organization entails (Schoeneborn et al., 2020). From such a t(w)alking perspective, CSR talk can be seen as being on a "talk-talk continuum", hence the idea of sustaining a talk-talk continuation described here.

This talk-talk continuation is, to an increasing extent, initiated and fueled by the products of its labor (e.g., new organizational texts, ties to other organizational texts, more sustainable products etc.), as opposed to being kick-started by a sustainability professional in the room, the materiality of CSR talk comes into light when exploring this challenge. It remains important to materialize sustainability talk through the production of authoritative textual agents of sustainability talk (Cooren, 2004; Penttilä, 2020), and to employ human agents who voice sustainability talk and help others do it as well (Girschik, 2020; Hunoldt et al., 2018). This kind of materialization is something that is also accentuated in light of the findings of this study. I would argue, however, that the findings also call for extending our view of how CSR talk is constituted – moving beyond documents and conversations to also include human interaction with other material artifacts such as products. Doing so can allow us to better understand how sustainability talk is legitimated within and throughout a retail organization, and hence potentially help perform more sustainable organizations by being present in the talk that constitute them.

Sustaining a talk-talk continuation is not only a previously overlooked challenge of MSR; it can also be seen as problematic when directing a critical gaze at the undertaking. The problematic aspects of this are not so much the share cost and commitment that it seems to take to pursue MSR. Though they are likely significant, I have made no calculations of such costs, nor of the kind of financial gains that exist and can be expected to be reaped from sustainability-related investments. Instead, and in line with the theoretical focus on how discourse helps construct social reality and demand things from

those in it, we can also see the kind of future an organization's CSD envisions for itself. In the case studied here, this future is one where retail organizations are more political, and where sustainable development is pursued within the status quo.

These two doings, or performances, of sustainability talk in retail talk will be discussed more below, but the point here is that developing, and especially disseminating, a CSD more or less force retail employees to prescribe to certain political views concerning how the future of social and environmental development should play out. This is something that may be necessary for an organization to rally its troops to pursue MSR, as it offers an inter-subjective basis for collective action. But it is nonetheless problematic that being a retail employee at least in part requires buying into the political world view of the organization, or at least silencing one's own view if it runs contrary to that of the organization. This has perhaps always been the case, but the issue surely becomes accentuated in a work environment where retail talk is infused with the morality of sustainability talk, thus, forcing whole organizations, and their "parts", to walk the morals of sustainability talk as construed in their CSD. Even though, and as will be elaborated on below, a retailer's promoted world view can be seen as far from ideal. I will now discuss how uncovering this challenging and problematic aspect of MSR and CSR talk performativity helps contribute to knowledge on both.

Contributions, implications, and future research

This conclusion adds to previous retail research on how retail employees engage with sustainability talk and make it happen in different aspects of retailing on a more micro-level of analysis, improving our understanding of the complexities involved in such engagement as regards, for example, to dealing with competing and contradictory views of sustainability internally (Elg et al., 2020; Elg & Welinder, 2022). In particular, this study shows that the translational tendencies observed in stores (Lehner 2015), the construction of responsible consumers (Fuentes, 2015), and service encounters in stores (Fuentes & Fredriksson, 2016), are enabled and restricted by the CSD developed on an organizational level. Adding a level of understanding to these studies by showing how they relate to the organizational-level insights in this and previous case studies (e.g. Grayson, 2011; Wilson, 2015). The overarching point here is that understanding how the (in)fusion of sustainability talk and retail talk sustain a talk-talk continuation can help us better understand

important aspects of making sustainability talk a legitimate and occurring feature of organizing a retail organization.

However, the complexity of the task does not end with developing a CSD. Despite its textual agents, sustainability talk might still struggle to become part of organizing conversations on local levels of organizing (Frostenson et al., 2011). To disseminate sustainability talk in retail talk, it is also important to ensure that it becomes part of already established communication flows and agendas among retail employees through integrated communication that can be translated into business hooks. Not only does this require human sustainability agents, and hence human resources, it also depends on the "products" spawned by the organization's engagement with retail talk. Adding another layer of understanding to the kinds of challenges retailers might experience as they embark on sustainability journeys that previous case-study accounts of MSR have neglected (e.g., Grayson 2011; Jones et al. 2008; Jones et al., 2005; Wilson 2015). This applies particularly to ensuring that the implementation of sustainability strategies and programs unfolds throughout more or less the whole organization, revealing how resource intense accomplishing "integrating sustainability" can be on local levels (Naidoo & Gasparatos, 2018; Vadakkepatt et al., 2021). Further, and given the important role products seem to play in enabling both integrated communication and business hooks, the importance of what the retail organization does on the production side cannot be understated. It is above all there that the necessary proof points, and initiators of sustainability need to be sought if we are to better enable sustainability talk on the retail side of things, thus bringing the material aspects of sustainability talk into view in our understanding of making MSR happen (see also Fuentes, 2011; Fuentes & Fredriksson, 2016).

In the realm of retail research on sustainable retailing, the idea of integrated communication and the concept of business hooks in a sense confirm the translational tendency observed in previous and more micro-level studies (Fuentes, 2015, Lehner, 2015). Arguably, these studies can be seen as observing similar measures taken to ensure the relevance of sustainability in retail talk. While they explore particular aspects of retailing, however, the concept of business hooks is instead intended to explain a general approach to creating relevance among employees – a kind of interpretive process that might take the shape of constructing a responsible consumer (Fuentes, 2015), matching sustainability talk with consumer demands in store (Lehner, 2015), or providing sustainability service in store (Fuentes & Fredriksson 2016). This also highlights that local instances can be seen as being based on texts and other materializations of the organization's CSD, rather than directly on

general sustainability talk in the public debate, thus demonstrating both the enabling and limiting potential of an organization's CSD. One implication of this is that the concepts make it possible to determine how business hooks can best be enabled and identified in relation to the organization's CSD, and what consequences this might have for local level translations.

This is also relevant for CSR talk theorizing (Christensen et al., 2021; Schoeneborn et al., 2020). Because the development of a CSD and enabling both integrated communication and business hooks, also suggests that it can require long-term commitment, a lot of resources and some CSR "walking" for CSR talk to enjoy a legitimate presence in retail organizations. In other words, it can take a lot of work to ensure conditions on a "talk-talk continuum" under which CSR talk has the potential to become a performative feature of talk throughout organizations by being present in them.

Showing what this work entails has helped confirm insights from previous empirical explorations of CSR talk. One example of this is the important role internal activists and issue sellers play in initiating, developing and formalizing CSR talk within the organization on an organizational level of analysis (Girschik 2020). It is also essential to get top management onboard, construe a corporate understanding of CSR that justifies change, and establish formal organizational structures around CSR talk within the organization (Hunoldt et al. 2018). Moreover, there is the importance of authorizing aspirational texts that help sustain a talk-talk continuation on an organizational level of analysis over time that add to for example Penttilä (2020) and e.g. Trittin-Ulbrich (2022) in their quest for empirically uncovering the conditions under which CSR talk can help "perform" more sustainable organizations and pursue its aspirations, or fail to do so.

What this study adds to these studies, and to CSR theorizing overall, is that it creates a better understanding of how a talk-talk continuation is sustained in between strategic episodes (Penttilä, 2020; Trittin-Ulbrich, 2022), and how it travels beyond organizational levels (Girschik, 2020; Hunoldt et al., 2018) throughout an organization to multiple levels of organizing. Just as this study contributes to research on MSR, it also adds to CSR talk theorizing by finding a chain of measures that entails developing a CSD, enabling integrated communication, and identifying business hooks. Given that especially products become important carriers and legitimators of CSR talk due to their relevance in retail talk, an important contribution of this study is that it reveals the materiality of such events, and hence of initiating CSR talk itself. This is something that has not been explored much in previous CSR talk theorizing beyond texts in the form of documents (e.g., Penttilä 2020). This is an

especially important contribution to our understanding of how sustainability talk travels throughout organizations, and as it does, it also transforms both the organizations, and the talk itself, in the process. The latter aspect of this is, however, not without its problems, as will be discussed soon. But first, I want to suggest some future research paths that could help shine further light on the challenging and problematic aspects of sustaining a talk-talk continuation of sustainability talk in retail talk.

One limitation of this study, which comes with its focus on sustainability talk and its dissemination, is that it does not observe the actual process of translation of words into action. It does show that measures taken, such as producing more sustainable products, help spawn more talk. But it does not show how talk ultimately helps spawn more sustainable practices. Therefore, to get a better idea of the material doings of sustainability talk, it would be interesting to explore when and how sustainability talk translates into actions, and, importantly, when it does not. This is similar to what Austin (1975) would categorize as a "perlocution" kind of performativity, as opposed to the reality construction potential of talk that is mainly explored here (i.e., locution).

Arguably, such a study would need to employ other kinds of qualitative methods, such as ethnographic observations of how employees, for example, interact with more sustainable products, the goal being to better understand the material aspect of CSR talk that has been uncovered in this study. Though observations have been used here, they have been limited and focused on how sustainability talk has been spoken, but not as much on how it is enacted beyond meetings and presentations. Exploring this could develop our understanding of how business hooks are identified in practice, thus giving us a better idea of how to develop a CSD that maintains its relevance for employees and to help create engagement with sustainability talk in ways that translate into more sustainable practices. This, in turn, would also shed more light on how sustainability talk can leave the realm of discursive reality to also influence material reality. This is an absolutely crucial aspect to understand, given that it is in its effect on material reality that the ultimate value of CSR talk lies. After all, though it is a social challenge we are facing in transitioning away from unsustainable development, the reasons for this challenge lie in the impact we have on material reality. Therefore, it would be valuable to gain further empirical insights into the mechanics of sustainability t(w)alking.

Dealing with more political retailing and the morality of CSR talk

By applying a legitimation-focused perspective, especially when looking at how legitimacy is sought in discourse and communication as seen in Chapter 5, the moral aspects of sustainability/CSR talk become very evident, particularly its moralizing potential in relation to laboring to become a moral proxy on which to judge right from wrong (Ziemann, 2011, Schultz, 2013). This is one aspect of CSR talk theorizing that has previously only been suggested conceptually (Ziemann, 2011, Schultz, 2013), but to my knowledge not well explored empirically. This study hence contributes to CSR talk theorizing by bringing the moralizing tendencies of CSR talk back into focus by offering new empirical insights, adding to, for example, Feix & Philippe's (2020) study of what business talk can be seen to do to CSR talk (reproducing restricting taboos about how it can be talked) by revealing the other side of the coin. This refers to what, in this case a retail organization must emerge as, or become, in communication to engage with sustainability talk.

Having empirically demonstrated the moralizing tendency of CSR talk, it is possible to problematize the performative potential of CSR talk in relation to, for example, bringing about more socially just ways of conducting business (Christensen et al., 2013). Rather, and with a more critical gaze on what CSR talk empirically suggests, CSR talk can also be seen not only as conforming to the moral expectations, as they are construed by people in one socio-cultural context, but also as pushing this morality onto people in another context. Corporations and their dubious moral reasons for being might, in other words, become not only moral promotors, but also moral enforcers through the organizational realities that CSR talk can perform. This, as mentioned in relation to sustaining a talk-talk continuation discussed above, can give rise to new ethical dilemmas for researchers to explore further, and tricky moral waters for practitioners to navigate.

Having empirically shown how making retailing more sustainable can also mean making retailing more political also contributes to retail research on MSR by demonstrating that sustainability talk not only makes consumption more political (Jones et al, 2005, Fuentes, 2011), but also makes retail organizations themselves more political. After all, it is quite striking how fast a retail organization can go from being a money-making machine to also being a moral enforcer with an increasingly explicit political agenda and moral profile to live up to. Such a development seems to give rise to a new set of

challenges that not only retailers need to acknowledge (discussed in Chapter 5), but perhaps also society, and even democracy, at large (Deetz, 1992).

Because what happens when profit- and growth-maximizing organizations such as IKEA become primary arenas for political deliberations? How democratic are these corporate forums when they are governed by employers with the power to take away the livelihood of participants if opinions deviate too much from the corporate line of thinking? For example, already back in 1958, Theodore Levitt observed how a self-flattering business community seemed to be taking on ever more social responsibilities, warning business and society against what he called "A new feudalism". He argued that the persuasive voices of those advocating CSR masked a dystopian future where the logics of business would eventually govern every aspect of our lives. He wrote: "*The danger is that all these things will turn the corporation into a twentieth-century equivalent of the medieval Church. The corporation would eventually invest itself with all-embracing duties, obligations, and finally powers – ministering to the whole man and molding him and society in the image of the corporation's narrow ambitions and its essentially unsocial needs*" (Levitt, 1958, p. 44). Given the conclusions made in this study, coupled with the rise of neo-liberalism in 1980s (Sadler & Lloyd, 2009) and observations of how corporations increasingly seem to be "colonizing" our life worlds through their growing share of representation in public communication (Deetz, 1992), it is perhaps not so far-fetched to assume that Levitt's dystopian prediction is, for better or worse and more or less, becoming a societal reality. To paraphrase Levitt in the twenty-first century, perhaps we are now praying for salvation against global warming, poverty and the sixth extinction in a corporate church built on the visions of corporate sustainability talk.

Contributions, implications, and future research

Evidently, it is my contention that the moralizing and politicizing aspects of sustainability talk need to be explored further in both retail research and CSR talk theorizing. I am not trying to argue that retail organizations should not pursue MSR due to it potentially making them more political, but I am arguing that we need to acknowledge the problematic aspects of this. The contribution of this study thus lies in giving us food for thought and discussions concerning what the political role of retailing is and should be – discussions and research with the overarching aim of findings ways to deal with this increasingly political role in an ethical manner. This is particularly important for retailing, given the communicative role such organizations can play in their intermediate

position between production and consumption, having great potential to influence both, but to what extent and in what ways? This could in part be further explored by conducting new studies on the political realities construed in CSR talk, but also with the help of other strands of CSR literature that have contemplated the political role of corporations in the 21st century (e.g. Crane et al., 2008; Matten & Crane, 2005; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011). For instance, Scherer et al. (2014) lay out a research agenda for building a political theory of the firm to complement the dominant economic theory of the firm. It is arguably time that both retail research and CSR talk theorizing start engaging in similar discussions.

Selling sustainability or escaping the status quo

Though retailing is becoming more political, the sustainability talk explored here does not seem to want to change society in any radical way, but instead envisions a future where profit and infinite growth continue to guide human action and where business organizations are given an even more central role in the organization of society. This is what Hopwood et al. (2005) would categorize as a status quo approach to sustainable development, one pursued within our current economic system, which could arguably be a problematic road map to follow in our pursuit of more sustainable development (Seghezzo, 2009).

Similarly, when sustainability talk is legitimized through the identification of business hooks, it also becomes commodified when it emerges in retail talk. Essentially, this means that sustainability discourse, or rather aspects of it, is discursively repackaged as something sellable and buyable. Continuing the religious analogy above, just as the medieval catholic church offered to cleanse people of their sins in return for a monetary contribution to the church, retailers today can be seen as offering salvation from unsustainable development through their sustainable product range. Regardless of whether this product range eventually entails a retailer's whole assortment, the sales it brings must still be more than if they were offering an unsustainable product range. In other words, in realm of retailing, sustainable development must entail selling more, not less.

Contributions, implications, and future research

The commodifying and status quo preserving performativity found here confirms arguments made in previous complexity- and problem-seeking

studies of MSR (Jones et al. 2005, Fuentes 2011). Fuentes (2011, p. 229), for example, makes the case in relation to retailers' role in promoting more sustainable consumption, writing that "*promoting green consumption as a viable political practice serves to replace or crowd out more collective non-commercial modes of political action […] seeking to impose a buyer-seller paradigm, making environmental action an individual consumer matter.*" This study, especially through its business hooks finding, reveals how a similar reality construction is necessary to make sustainability talk relevant, and hence legitimate, in retail talk among employees. That is, because sustainability talk more or less has to conform to the logics of retailing, rather than the other way around, it comes to produce a reality in which unsustainable development becomes a problem that is solved with more consumption.

Developing, selling and finally buying other, potentially more sustainable, products is of course an important part of bringing about a more sustainable future. It is, for example, probably a good thing for people to buy LED lightbulbs rather than traditional ones when their old ones die out. However, the matter becomes more problematic when there is not such an apparent need for a new bulb to light your home. When a customer feels an urge to buy a new kitchen, for example, it is inevitably appealing for employees of a retail organization such as IKEA to help encourage these urges, even though the customer's kitchen works perfectly fine as it is. It is, in other words, very unlikely that a retail sales employee will urge a potential customer not to buy a new kitchen. Instead, they might claim, based on the retailer's CSD, that a new kitchen is the most sustainable option because the new kitchen cupboard fronts are made from recycled plastic.

The risk I want to highlight here is that, in the process of developing and disseminating a CSD, retail organizations might push us onto an unnecessarily crooked path toward a more sustainable future, and do so in an age when we urgently need to accomplish "transformational change" (to borrow a common catchphrase from IKEA's CSD). Put in more theoretical terms, retail organizations risk co-opting sustainability talk and making it meaningful in ways that sustain a currently unsustainable status quo. This phenomenon is described quite well by consumption sociologist Peter Corrigan (1997, p. 72): *"Take a social movement or an idea that look as it is in opposition to the capitalist world as currently constructed, use it to sell more capital goods, and thus strengthen the system the social movement or idea was supposed to subvert*." The point here is that retail organizations are perhaps not the best educators as concerns what a sustainable future demands from the present,

because they are likely to make sustainability meaningful in ways that do not lead to less consumption, but to more.

This is not a new discussion to have in either the retail literature or CSR talk theorizing (e.g. Feix & Philippe, 2020; Jones et al., 2005), but what this study contributes, especially through the concepts of integrated communication and business hooks, is to identify a mechanism through which this commodification of sustainability talk happens within retail organizations. It can be argued that tying sustainability talk to products is an important aspect of reproducing taboos in CSR talk. For example, it is likely difficult to escape "*the taboo of the noncongruency between corporate profit objectives and societal needs*" in CSR talk when the CSD structuring is so tied to products, as it clearly can be in retail organizations (Feix & Philippe 2020). Arguably, this indicates an unavoidable paradox associated with MSR and CSR talk, at least if one takes the position that sustainable development must entail selling fewer, not more, commodities. This position is talked out of existence when, on the other hand, supporting a status quo approach to sustainable development is discursively produced, once again indicating that although sustainability talk in retail talk might lead to more sustainable development, it is doubtful that it will lead us to sustainable development.

It is, in other words, rather obvious how this might be problematic, especially in relation to employees having to buy into and promote such a world view and the fact that there are dangers associated with this approach to sustainable development. But what is the alternative here? It is understandable that the logics of retail talk today revolve around the continued growth of sales. They do not exist in a vacuum, but are rather products of the economic environments in which they exist. Retail organizations must conform to the logics that dominate our current economic system, which forces them to develop a kind of sustainability talk that conforms to the sales-oriented logics that therefore dominate retailing. Therein lies the problem. But the difficult thing to bring clarity to is understanding what reformist, or even transformist, approaches to MSR would look like. What does truly sustainable sustainability talk in retail talk look like? And by extension, what does truly sustainable retailing look like? Here, once again, retailing might prove an interesting empirical context for CSR talk theorizing, and vice versa.

Given that the essential problem solved by retailing will most certainly persist – having goods for sale for people to buy and consume – how can this be reconciled with not promoting overconsumption? The salespeople interviewed in this study recognized this as a paradoxical challenge that is difficult to deal with. It is, in other words, a very real challenge that arises, when retail talk and

sustainability talk are made into one and the same talk. Future research could approach this challenge both conceptually and empirically to help shed light on alternative routes for action: conceptually, by developing a better understanding of what sustainable sustainability talk and retailing can look like from different perspectives and, empirically, by identifying and exploring how the challenge is dealt with in reality, or alternative retail practices that do not revolve around the logics of more for the sake of more.

An example of the latter is the Swedish government-owned retail organization "Systembolaget," which sells alcoholic beverages on a monopolized market. This organization operates on an essentially diametrically opposed logic to that of ensuring a steady growth of sales. This is because of its somewhat paradoxical purpose of making alcohol available to people in Sweden, while at the same time encouraging responsible consumption of alcohol in ways that ideally lead to selling less. For instance, this can be observed in stores where it is common to have shelfs by the cash register that encourage customers to leave their purchases if they have "changed their mind" – a store feature that is hard to imagine in an organization built around the idea of increasing sales.

The point here is that there do exist alternative ways of doing retailing. These could be explored in greater detail to give further clues as to what MSR that escapes the status quo needs if it is to happen. Whether such examples are scalable and applicable on other markets remains to be seen, but we should not conceive of escaping the status quo as something unattainable for retailing. This gives some hope for fruitful discussions among researchers and practitioners on what the future of MSR can look like, at least if we allow the currently tabooed aspects of sustainability talk to be legitimately voiced in retail talk.

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Appendix 1
– Lists of empirical material

List of Documents

Name of document	Type of document	Number of pages	Year of publication
The Testament of a Furniture Dealer	Strategy document	14	1976/2013
IKEA Social and Environmental Training	PowerPoint Presentation	46	2002/2007
IKEA Social and Environmental Training diploma	Education material	1	2002/2007
IKEA Group 2003 Social and Environmental Report	Report	88	2004
IKEA Group 2004 Social and Environmental Report	Report	51	2005
IKEA Group 2005 Social and Environmental Report	Report	60	2006
IKEA Group 2006 Social and Environmental Report	Report	65	2007
IKEA Group 2007 Social and Environmental Report	Report	39	2008
IKEA Group 2008 Sustainability Report	Report	50	2009
IKEA Group Sustainability Training PowerPoint	Educational material – PowerPoint Presentation	40	2010
The IKEA Group approach to Sustainability	Best pracice document	23	2010
IKEA Group 2010 Sustainability Report	Report	91	2011
Our Never Ending Job	Educational material	115	2011
Store [sustainability] communication guideline	Best practice document	40	2011
IKEA Group 2011 Sustainability Report	Report	53	2012

IKEA Group People and Planet Positive	Strategy document	21	2012
Sustainability communication in the store	Best practice document	29	2012
Sustainability communication concept	Best pratice document	51	2012
IKEA Group 2012 Sustainability Report	Report	98	2013
IKEA Group 2013 Sustainability Report	Report	84	2014
Sustainability message in store	Best practice document	27	2015
Show it! IKEA price and product communication	Best practice document	43	2015
Inter IKEA Systems – Sustainability and customer engagement	Best practice document	35	2015
IKEA Group 2015 Sustainability Report	Report	94	2016
Activating Sustainability with Consumers	Best practice document	70	2016
IKEA Group - Sustainability in Store	Best practice document	17	2016
Inter IKEA Systems - Update of IKEA Key values – Q&A	Educational material	5	2016
INGKA Group 2016 Sustainability Report	Report	97	2017
Mediemall – Kampanjer med hållbarhetsprofil	Best practice document	3	2017
Media – Sustainable solution of the week	Best practice	3	2017
Sustainability Ambassadors Guidelines	Best practice document	4	2017
The USA withdraws from the Paris Agreement + comments	Intranet article	12	2017
INGKA Holding 2017 Sustainability Report	Report	45	2018
Ingka Holding 2018 Annual & Sustainability Summary Report	Report	84	2019
Inter IKEA Systems – People and Planet Positive	Strategy document	19	2018

Total number of documents: 35
Total number of pages: 1617

List of Observations

Sort of event observed	Place	Date and time	Pages of fieldnotes
Internal presentation of marketing research report	IKEA Group global headquarters “Hubhult”, Malmö, Sweden	2016-10-24 between 09:30-10:30	5
Internal presentation of financial report for employees	IKEA Group global headquarters “Hubhult”, Malmö, Sweden	2016-12-07 between 08:30-09:45	3
Internal “good bye speech” by Steve Howard to IKEA employees	IKEA Group global headquarters “Hubhult”, Malmö, Sweden	2017-03-09 between 14:00-14:45	4

Total number of participant observations: 3
Total of 12 pages of field notes

List of Interviews

Organizational Level	Profession and responsibility	Interviewer	Duration (min)	Seasong and Year
Global	Sustainability Professional Communication	Axel Welinder and Jens Hultman	55	Fall 2016
Global	Sustainability Professional Communication	Axel Welinder	75	Fall 2016
Global	Sustainability Professional “Internal lobbyist”	Axel Welinder	67	Fall 2016
Global	Sustainability Professional Communicator	Axel Welinder and Ulf Elg	74	Fall 2016
Global	Sustainability Professional Senior Management	Axel Welinder	48	Fall 2016
Global	Sustainability Professional Compliance	Axel Welinder	67	Spring 2017
Global	Sustainability Professional Communication (sustainability report)	Axel Welinder	51	Spring 2017
Global	Sustainability Professional Former employe, senior management	Axel Welinder and Jens Hultman	61	Spring 2017
Global	Sustainability Professional Chief Sustainability Officer	Axel Welinder and Ulf Elg	38	Spring 2017
Global	General Management Former Chief Execuive Officer	Axel Welinder	27	Spring 2017

Global	Communicator Communication leader interior design	Axel Welinder	38	Fall 2016
Global	Communicator Corporate Communication	Axel Welinder	41	Spring 2017
Global	Communicator Copywriter and Strategic planing	Axel Welinder	47	Spring 2017
Global	Communicator Copywriter and Strategic planing	Axel Welinder	75	Spring 2017
Global	Communicator Customer experience and organizational change	Axel Welinder	84	Spring 2017
Global	Two Communicators Sales and Common Store Planning	Axel Welinder	79	Spring 2017
Country (Sweden)	Sustainability Professional Country Sustainability Manager	Axel Welinder and Jens Hultman	62	Fall 2016
Country (Germany)	Sustainability Professional Country Sustainability Manager	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	38	Spring 2017
Country (United Kingdom)	Sustainability Professional Country Sustainability Manager	Axel Welinder	50	Spring 2018
Country (United Kingdom)	Sustainability Professional Sustainability engagement officer	Axel Welinder	60	Spring 2018
Country (United Kingdom)	Sustainability Professional Health and Sustainability Leader	Axel Welinder	63	Spring 2018
Country (Sweden)	Communicator Marketing Director	Axel Welinder	38	Spring 2017
Country (United Kingdom)	Communicator Marketin Director	Axel Welinder	39	Spring 2018
Country (United Kingdom)	Communicator Country leader for Communication and interior design	Axel Welinder	72	Spring 2018
Country (Sweden)	Sales Employee Kitchen sales leader	Axel Welinder	58	Spring 2017
Country (United Kingdom)	Sales Employee Kitchen sales leader	Axel Welinder	33	Spring 2018
Store (Älmhult, Sweden)	Sales Employee and Sustainability Professional Sustainability Coordinator and kitchen	Axel Welinder	32	Spring 2017

Store (Älmhult, Sweden)	Communicator Interior design	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	21	Spring 2017
Store (Kalmar, Sweden)	General Manager Store manager	Axel Welinder	39	Spring 2017
Store (Älmhult, Sweden)	General Manager Store Manager	Axel Welinder	70	Spring 2017
Store (Helsingborg, Sweden)	General Manager Store Manager	Axel Welinder	57	Spring 2017
Store (Helsingborg, Sweden)	Sales Employee Shopkeeper, Kitchen	Axel Welinder	13	Spring 2017
Store (Älmhult, Sweden)	Sales Employee Customer Support	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	25	Spring 2017
Store (Hamburg, Germany)	Sales Employee Bedroom	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	23	Spring 2017
Store (Älmhult, Sweden)	Sales Employee Kitchen	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	36	Spring 2017
Store (Berlin, Germany)	Sales Employee Intern	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	18	Spring 2017
Store (Älmhult, Sweden)	Sales Employee Lighting	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	33	Spring 2017
Store (Berlin, Germany)	Sales Employee	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	38	Spring 2017
Store (Hamburg, Germany)	Sales Employee Kitchen	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	28	Spring 2017
Store (Dresden, Germany)	Sales Employee Kitchen	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	42	Spring 2017
Store (Dortmund, Germany)	Sales Employee Bedroom	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	26	Spring 2017
Store (Älmhult)	Two Sales Employees Lighting	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	30	Spring 2017
Store (Göteborg, Sweden)	Sales Employee Kitchen	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	29	Spring 2017
Store (Kalmar, Sweden)	Sales Employee Lighting	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	23	Spring 2017

Store (Kalmar, Sweden)	Sales Employee Kitchen	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	27	Spring 2017
Store (Kalmar, Sweden)	Sales Employee Kitchen	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	23	Spring 2017
Store (Älmhult, Sweden)	Two Sales Employees Kitchen	Luis Ibbeken and Oliver Åkerman	37	Spring 2017

Total number of interviews: 47
Total number of interviewees: 50
Total number of minutes: 2110 minutes, or 35 h 10 minutes
Total number of transcription pages: 683

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147. Ziad El-Awad (2019): *Beyond individuals – A Process of Routinizing Behaviors Through Entrepreneurial Learning: Insights from Technology-Based Ventures*
146. Carys Egan-Wyer (2019): *The Sellable Self: Exploring endurance running as an extraordinary consumption experience*
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144. Anamaria Cociorva (2019): *Essays on Credit Ratings*
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