Tampere University

SONJA LAHTINEN

Reframing the Role of Companies in Sustainability

Toward business sustainability transitions

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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION
To be presented, with the permission of
the Faculty of Management and Business
of Tampere University,
for public discussion in the Paavo Koli Auditorium
of the Pinni A building, Kanslerinrinne 1, Tampere,
on 26 June 2020, at 12 o'clock.

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To my family
and to the sustainable future
of the planet and its species

Acknowledgements

As I am writing these words, humankind is facing a global crisis. While the many layers of the COVID-19 crisis are only just beginning to unfold, we are witnessing a life-saving phenomenon: collaboration. Effective, extensive, and unbiased collaboration between countries, governments, scientists, companies, communities, and individuals is likely to bring victory not only over the coronavirus but also over some of the world's other grand challenges such as climate change. Throughout the course of history, collaboration has enabled human flourishing in times of crisis, in times of change, and especially in times of rebuilding the good life. I believe this time will be no different.

To me, writing this doctoral dissertation has been helpful in recognizing the limitations of what can be done in isolation and the extent of what can be achieved in collaboration: a young researcher like me could never put together a book like this on her own. This project has taught me that success in any collaboration rests on the quality of relationships. Thus, I am forever grateful for having had the opportunity to build such remarkable relationships during this journey. These pages are dedicated to them.

First, I would like to thank my supervisors, Professor Hannu Kuusela and Dr. Mika Yrjölä. A good relationship challenges and supports both parties. To me, you have done this by asking the right questions, ensuring that I stayed on track (which was not always easy), and giving me the freedom to find my own way of doing research. Moreover, writing articles together has taught me the standards of conducting research, and get it published, at an international level. Hannu, thank you for trusting in me and encouraging me in those critical moments. Mika, thank you for your double dose of patience in listening to my contemplations of life on the threshold of your office. They were often delivered on Monday mornings and were never short, but you always had the time.

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name, it would be his. I also wish to thank my relatives for providing me with much needed distractions from work every time we met. Hopefully, this will happen more often now that this work is finished.

Finally, thank you Toni, for defining the most profound of relationships. After you appeared into my story, the pages gained a whole new meaning. Not a single day goes by without you making me see things from a new perspective or things that would otherwise go unnoticed. You are my best friend in cultivating alternative thinking, exploring new mountaintops and valleys, and making a little bit too much coffee on Sunday mornings, so that we have a (brewed) excuse to linger with our morning conversations just a little bit longer. I look forward to all those Sundays in Switzerland together. Your love makes me a far better person than I ever thought myself of becoming.

From the upstairs of my childhood home in Tampere, April 1st, 2020,

Sonja Lahtinen

Abstract

The ways in which companies address sustainability today shape the future for businesses, societies, and ecosystems at large. Yet, companies keep addressing the world's most serious evolving challenges with varying degrees of concern, urgency, and strategic importance for as long as their role in relation to sustainability remains unclear. To develop a broader business commitment to sustainability and participate in tackling grand challenges such as climate change, human rights violations, the widening wealth gap, and disease outbreaks, companies need to rethink their current role of being in relation with the world that is facing mounting environmental, social, and economic pressures.

The purpose of this dissertation is, therefore, to explore the role of companies in relation to sustainability from multiple viewpoints. The four articles comprising the dissertation represent such viewpoints—strategy, management, co-creation, and holistic—that, together with this introductory part, provide a broad and timely outlook on companies' role.

Theoretically, this dissertation combines the previously disconnected fields of marketing and sustainability transition to create a lens through which companies' role is explored. Methodologically, the articles use different methods but are bound together by a social constructionist research philosophy and a qualitative research strategy. Altogether, the primary data were generated from interviews with 13 managers and top executives and 25 millennial consumers in the Finnish business environment. The secondary data consist of annual reports, sustainability documents, and other public materials.

Basing on the insights gleaned from the articles, this dissertation proposes reframing as a method for companies to break out of their old roles and enact new responses to sustainability. Reframing can expand horizons and capacity for action by bringing the two frames of *business* and *sustainability* together. Reframing—that is, making new interpretations of a current situation and creating novel responses—is suggested to be particularly useful in three organizational areas, namely business strategies, management activities, and co-creation practices.

By conceptualizing a new construct, *business sustainability transition*, the dissertation makes its main theoretical contribution to the sustainability transition literature. The new construct captures the fundamental, system-wide sustainability improvements that companies can initiate in their business environment through purposeful marketplace interactions.

The key managerial takeaways are provided in the form of the *Reframing Cube*. As a metaphorical tool, the Cube can help managers think and address sustainability in new ways that can readily be translated into actions. While letting go of the old ways of being in relation with the world is not easy, it is suggested that by reframing their role in sustainability, companies can reap strategic advantages while facilitating much-needed business sustainability transitions. Therefore, companies are key actors in shaping our common future for economically healthier, environmentally friendlier, and socially more balanced modes of production and consumption.

Tiivistelmä

Kestävästä tulevaisuudesta on tullut ääneen lausuttu yhteiskunnallinen tavoite. Ottaen huomioon yritysten merkittävän aseman tämän päivän yhteiskunnissa, se, miten ne kehystävät oman roolinsa suhteessa kestävään kehitykseen ja käsillä oleviin kestävyyden haasteisiin, kuten ilmastonmuutokseen, ihmisoikeusrikkomuksiin ja tautipandemioihin, vaikuttaa keskeisesti tavoitteen toteutumiseen.

Kestävän tulevaisuuden tavoittelu edellyttää laaja-alaisia muutoksia nykyisiin tuotanto- ja kulutustapoihin, mikä johtaa myös yritysten roolin uudelleentarkasteluun. Tutkimukseen perustuva ymmärryksemme yritysten uudenlaisista rooleista ja toimista kestävyyden edistämiseksi on kuitenkin vielä jäsentymätön. Vaikka kestävyys näkyykin yhä useamman yrityksen arvoissa, ovat yritysten aikaansaamat parannukset kestävyyden kentässä vielä melko pienimuotoisia ja siten usein riittämättömiä. Myös kestävyyteen kytkeytyvät liiketoimintamahdollisuudet pysyvät useimpien yritysten ulottumattomissa.

Tämä tutkimus tarkastelee yritysten roolia suhteessa kestävyyteen moninäkökulmaisesti. Neljä toisiaan täydentävää näkökulmaa (strategia, johtaminen, yhteisluominen ja holistisuus) luodaan erillisjulkaisuissa, jotka yhdessä tämän kokoomaosion kanssa muodostavat väitöskirjan. Erillisjulkaisut tarttuvat tutkimusilmiöön eri metodologisin keinoin, jotka sosiaalisen konstruktionismin paradigma ja laadullinen tutkimusote sitovat yhteen. Teoreettisesti yritysten roolia tarkastellaan markkinointi- ja transitiokirjallisuuden muodostamien linssien läpi.

Kokonaisuutena väitöstutkimus tarjoaa näkökulmia siihen, miten yritykset voivat uudelleenkehystää (reframe) roolinsa suhteessa kestävyyteen kolmella keskeisellä osa-alueella. Nämä osa-alueet; liiketoimintastrategia, johtamisen aktiviteetit ja yhteisluomisen käytänteet, toimivat joko uudistumisen lähteenä tai sen esteenä yrityksissä. Tutkimus ehdottaa, että uudelleenkehystämällä roolinsa yritykset voivat vahvistaa strategista asemaansa tulevaisuuden markkinoilla sekä edistää nykyisten tuotanto- ja kulutustapojen siirtymiä kohti taloudellista, ekologista ja sosiaalista kestävyyttä markkinoilla tapahtuvan vuorovaikutuksen kautta.

Näitä siirtymiä kuvaamaan tutkimuksessa luodaan käsite *liiketoiminnan transitio kestävyyteen*, joka muodostaa työn teoreettisen kontribuution. Liikkeenjohtajille väitöskirja tuo uusia keinoja tarttua yhteiskuntia ja liike-elämää koetteleviin kestävyyden ongelmiin ja mahdollisuuksiin. Tutkimuksessa luodaan uudelleenkehystämisen kuutio, joka toimii metaforisena työkaluna johtajille. Kuutio kokoaa yhteen kestävyyden eri osa-alueet, jotka yritysjohtajien tulee tunnistaa ja saattaa tasapainoon, ja joiden avulla he voivat johtaa liiketoiminnan transitioita kohti kestävyyttä. Väitöstutkimuksen tuloksia hyödyntämällä yritykset voivat menestyksekkäästi kasvaa kestävän tulevaisuuden ajureiksi.

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Original Publications

Article I   Lahtinen, S., Kuusela, H., & Yrjölä, M. (2018). The Company in Society: When Corporate Responsibility Transforms Strategy. *Journal of Business Strategy*, 39(4), 11–18.

Article II   Lahtinen, S. & Yrjölä, M. (2019). Managing Sustainability Transformations: A Managerial Framing Approach. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 223, 815–825.

Article III   Lahtinen, S. & Närvänen, E. (in press). Co-Creating Sustainable Corporate Brands: A Consumer Framing Approach. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*.

Article IV   Saarijärvi, H., Sparks, L., & Lahtinen, S. (2019). Food, Health, and Data: Developing Transformative Food Retailing. In: J. Byrom & D. Medway (eds). *Case Studies in Food Retailing and Distribution*. Duxford: Woodhead Publishing Series in Food Science, Technology and Nutrition, 189–204.

Reframing is the conscious effort to size up a situation from different points of view and then find a novel way to handle it. In times of crisis and overload, you will inevitably feel confused and overwhelmed, if you are stuck with only one option. That is the time to go to the balcony and contemplate your alternatives.

(Bolman & Deal, 2010, 3)

1 Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the role of companies in relation to sustainability from multiple viewpoints. As a practical motivation, this dissertation seeks to assist managers in entering the realm of the unknown, the unclear, and the unfolding—that is, addressing sustainability in business.

Sustainability, as a key concept of the research, is conceptualized as the harmonized integration of environmental protection, social justice, and economic prosperity. Yet, considering the current operating space of companies, it is acknowledged, rather than dismissed, that tensions between the environmental, social, and economic dimensions occur more often than not (Hahn, Pinkse, Preuss, & Figge, 2015). In order to ease these tensions, companies have come to use different approaches—a notion that is key in the debate on the so-called *weak* versus *strong* sustainability[1]. By adopting and developing the *strong* standpoint, this dissertation holds potential in yielding an alternative approach for companies to address sustainability. This alternative approach is captured in a new construct—*business sustainability transitions*.

The dissertation is placed within the marketing discipline; therefore, it scrutinizes the research phenomenon—the role of companies in sustainability—from a somewhat unconventional but promising line of marketing thinking. It draws on the strengths of marketing to connect companies' role with the actual needs of the marketplace, the inclusive needs of society, and the needs of future generations. The role of companies is explored vis-à-vis sustainability transitions to find new ways of being in relation with the world that is facing mounting economic, social, and environmental pressures.

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1   In this debate, *weak* sustainability denotes approaches that prioritize economic value over environmental protection and social justice. By contrast, in *strong* sustainability such tradeoffs are not possible, as the economy is seen to rely on the thriving environment and society for its success (see Bonnedahl & Heikkurinen, 2019; Ekins, 2014; Landrum, 2018; Neumayer, 2012).

1.1 Sustainability through marketplace interactions

Grand sustainability challenges such as climate change, human rights violations, the widening wealth gap, and disease outbreaks are sweeping across societies and the business world. Grand challenges are "complex, uncertain and highly significant problems … which affect vast numbers of individuals in often profound ways" (Eisenhardt, Graebner, & Sonenshein, 2016, p. 1115). Because of their complex nature and evolving mix of technical and social elements, these persistent problems typically resist simple solutions and thus require less conventional approaches (Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015).[2]

Looking at all the potential ways grand sustainability challenges affect the business world and vice versa makes this interface a relevant and critically important topic of study within the marketing discipline (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). By exploring linkages between the two broad fields of marketing and sustainability, the dissertation suggests a way in which the often-separate literatures can learn from each other. In this dissertation, marketing is understood as a holistic approach to marketplace interactions (Grönroos & Voima, 2013) that extends beyond the traditional yet narrow focus on the dyadic interactions between companies and their customers (i.e., exchange). Within this broader approach, marketing is considered the environmental, social, and economic sum of all the interactions in the marketplace (Achrol & Kotler, 2012).

On this basis, the dissertation focuses on marketplace interactions as a catalyst for sustainability. To separate marketplace interactions from other kinds of interactions that also play a significant role in raising sustainability standards (e.g., interactions in the field of politics or civil society), the marketplace is defined as the terrain where commercially driven interactions between companies, consumers, regulators, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), non-profits, and universities and other research institutions take place. Through different types of marketplace interactions, these actors engage with one another for the purpose of integrating resources—whether material, mental, financial, or informational (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). In today's liberal market economies, marketplace interactions have emerged as a powerful mechanism for these actors to influence one another (Heikkurinen, 2013).

By using different types of marketplace interactions, sustainability-oriented companies can advance sustainable options over and above unsustainable alternatives in the market. In general, such types of interaction refer to companies' addition of new, sustainable resources to their market offering and/or business functions. Specifically, such resources could include goods, product features, service activities, brand communities, and feedback loops, as well as open access to data, information, and advice (Saarijärvi, Puustinen, Yrjölä, & Mäenpää, 2017). Finding that companies have so many potential outlets in use

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2   Based on their common features, grand challenges bear a resemblance to the concept of *wicked problems*, for which there is typically no directly-traceable causes nor objective criteria to judge a solution right or wrong (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

corroborates the notion that businesses act as significant harbingers of a sustainable future (Heikkurinen, 2013).

Against this background, the previously tense relationship between marketing and sustainability could be seen in a new light. Thus far, marketing has faced substantial criticism in the field of sustainability for encouraging overconsumption, enabling unsustainable systems of cheap mass production, and serving only corporate interests[3] (Kemper, Hall, & Ballantine, 2019). Yet simultaneously, marketing is also recognized for its ability to facilitate behavioral changes, both individual and collective, in the market (see Hall, 2018; Peattie & Belz, 2010). Regarding sustainability, marketing can bring companies closer to the actual needs of the target market (real needs beyond mere preferences and wants), the inclusive needs of society (individual needs taking collective wellbeing and coexistence in consideration), and the needs of future generations (Bonnedahl & Heikkurinen, 2019). Through marketplace interactions, marketing can foster the development of new, sustainable patterns of production and consumption (Achrol & Kotler, 2012), which are currently considered the precondition for large-scale sustainability improvements in any industry, market, or territory (Kanger & Schot, 2016).

While the scholarly debate has yet to fully grasp the vanguard role of marketing in advancing sustainability (Achrol & Kotler, 2012; Hall, 2018; Kemper et al., 2019), frontrunner companies are starting to realize that by purposefully using marketplace interactions, they can both meet their business needs and tackle the world's most serious evolving challenges (Kumar, 2018). Consider examples such as Lego's use of sugarcane as a biodegradable alternative to plastic (Locker, 2018), Cisco's Networking Academy offering primary IT education to the underprivileged (Dennis, Duffy, & Cakir, 2010), and the French luxury house LVMH converting its perfume factories to make hand sanitizers and giving hydroalcoholic gel for free to the French hospital system during the outbreak of COVID-19 (Winston, 2020). With examples like these, we are already witnessing how companies are favorably influencing other marketplace actors through different (inter) actions in pursuit not only of a unique competitive advantage but also of a strongly sustainable society.

In a strongly sustainable society, companies are clearly not the only actors working to combat grand challenges, but their position is pivotal (e.g., Heikkinen, 2014; Heikkurinen, 2013; Porter & Kramer, 2019; Quarshie, 2017). Companies are uniquely positioned to scale up sustainability, as they have emerged as key sources of innovations in society (Planko, Cramer, Chappin, & Hekkert, 2016) and as productive forces in the liberal market economy (Bansal, 2005). Moreover, they can use their superior resources and global reach to develop and diffuse solutions for sustainable production (Esty & Winston, 2009) and to alleviate tensions with sustainable consumption (Pecoraro & Uusitalo, 2014). In practice,

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3   Critical conversations about the relationship between marketing and sustainability have been going on since the 1960s with publications such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), the Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* (1977), and Arthur Elkins' *Toward a Positive Theory of Corporate Social Involvement* (1977).

whether it is creating substitutes for plastics, developing vaccines for life-threatening diseases, reinventing food systems, coding ethical artificial intelligence, or advancing equal human rights and opportunities, companies are key actors in designing, manufacturing, distributing, and selling sustainable market offerings (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019) and facilitating sustainable consumption (Peattie & Peattie, 2009).

Notably, although companies can advance sustainability through different types of marketplace interactions, these interactions represent only an opportunity for companies to do so and are not a direct antecedent of inevitable improvements. In fact, there are many critics of companies as drivers of sustainability (Banerjee, 2003; Springett, 2003, 2013; Tregidga et al., 2013). For instance, Springett (2003, 2013) criticized the so-called business interpretation of sustainability for encompassing merely the kinds of environmental and social commitments that companies are comfortable with. Similarly, Banerjee (2003) claimed that companies, by default, aim to sustain the corporation rather than seek sustainability. With less criticism for companies' integrity, Esty and Winston (2009) identified a core set of problems why company-led sustainability initiatives can fall incremental, even if they had been put forward with the best of intentions.

Acknowledging the promising opportunities but also the challenges and limitations influencing companies' commitment to and achievements on sustainability, the next chapter elaborates the different roles that companies assume in such endeavors.

1.2   Roles of companies in addressing sustainability

Regardless of the pivotal position of companies in today's society, the ways in which they address sustainability vary greatly in terms of concern, urgency, and strategic importance (Porter & Kramer, 2019). Today, only a minority of companies are harnessing their marketplace interactions to proactively advance solid, *strong* sustainability; the majority of companies continue to make compliance-driven, incremental adjustments to certain business functions in order to minimize some of the harms their businesses are linked to (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016). Unfortunately, this latter approach, aligned with *weak* sustainability, is lowering the bar for what sustainability means and could mean for business (Luke, 2013).

To allow the analysis of different approaches through which companies address sustainability, the concept of *role* is operationalized for this research. Role, as a concept, is situated *in between* the individual actor and society and can be used to explain the self–society relationship (Callero, 1994).[4] The individual actor can mean a person, company, institution, and so forth. For example, we see many roles in our communities—those of mothers, fathers, professors, ministers, central banks, the army, and the state, to name

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4   The concept of role has a long history in social interaction research. For an extensive review of role theory, see Biddle (1986) or Lynch (2007).

a few. This dissertation focuses on the role of companies and treats this role as a set of socially constructed understandings within a particular community, forming recognizable attitudes and actions through which companies address recurring situations (Wittmayer, Avelino, van Steenbergen, & Loorbach, 2017).

As social constructions, roles are negotiated within specific historical, cultural, political, and economic conditions. This means that roles are not an accurate representation of reality but a reflection of the situation and context within which they come to prominence (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Because of their context sensitivity, roles appear different based on the respective societal structure, political ideology, economic system, cultural values, and time period within which they are negotiated (Harnisch, 2011). As grand challenges continue to shape societies in the 21st century, the role of companies in tackling these challenges is likely to change (Winston, 2020).

In constructivist role theory, changes in roles cannot be thought of or theorized about without reference to other roles (Stryker & Statham, 1985). *Role conceptions*, a core concept in understanding the dynamics of roles, refer to "actors' perceptions of their own position vis-à-vis others (the ego part of a role) and the perceptions of the roles of others (the alter part of a role) as signaled through language and action" (Harnisch, 2011, p. 8). As such, role conceptions build on *role expectations* that encompass ego expectations regarding what the appropriate role is and what it implies for self, and alter expectations, that is, others' implicit or explicit demands (Harnisch, 2011). Role conceptions are thus inherently contested because they are closely related to the roles of others, here, for instance, those of multi-lateral organizations, states, and civil society.

The different role conceptions of companies are analyzed with the help of concepts of weak and strong sustainability (Bonnedahl & Heikkurinen, 2019; Ekins, 2014; Heikkinen, 2014; Laine, 2009; Landrum, 2017; Neumayer, 2003, 2012). In general, these two concepts relate to the differing assumptions underlying interpretations of what is considered sustainable and what is not (Heikkurinen, 2013).

Heikkurinen (2013, p. 20) elaborated these two standpoints further: "Whereas 'weak' sustainability assumes that natural resources (e.g. fossil fuels, biodiversity, ecosystem services) and human-made resources (e.g. infrastructure, labor, knowledge) are substitutable … 'strong' sustainability considers natural and human-made resources as complements". In other words, strong sustainability suggests that natural resources cannot be replaced by human-made solutions and should therefore be preserved. Moreover, weak sustainability perceives the current environmental and social issues less severe than strong sustainability does; the issues are acknowledged, but they are not believed to cause any fundamental problems to the continuity of society (Laine, 2009). Therefore, weak sustainability assumes that these issues can be solved with the current means, whereas strong sustainability emphasizes the need for fundamental, large-scale transitions across all sectors of society (Loorbach, van Bakel, Whiteman, & Rotmans, 2010).

It is argued that the majority of companies' current responses reflect weak sustainability and build on old role conceptions rather than questioning them or proposing new ones (Wittmayer et al., 2017). These old role conceptions are largely based on legal compliance, enacted through one-off projects that fall under the siloed umbrella of corporate social responsibility (CSR)[5], and set up so that companies appear legitimate (Luke, 2013). Rather than creating radically new means or changes in any business functions, companies improve eco-efficiencies and introduce end-of-pipe solutions as a response to tightening regulations and growing stakeholder pressures (Dyllick & Muff, 2016). While these actions can only achieve incremental improvements in sustainability (Halme, Rintamäki, Knudsen, Lankoski, & Kuisma, 2018), they also generate little to no strategic benefits, such as differentiation, as most companies are enacting similar responses (Ioannou & Serafeim, 2019).

By contrast, those companies, which deem that a paradigm shift in business is necessary reflect strong sustainability (Porter & Kramer, 2019). These companies organize their businesses around finding solutions to the most serious evolving challenges in the space within which they operate, and they build a competitive advantage in doing so (Esty & Winston, 2009). For instance, companies driving the development of electric vehicles (e.g., Tesla), urban farming (e.g., AeroFarms), or decentralized renewable energy solutions (e.g., Tiko Energy Solutions), represent examples of companies renegotiating role conceptions for the business world. Such recent examples prove that the roles of companies are, indeed, neither static nor predefined but can be deconstructed, reconstructed, and co-constructed in any industry, market, or territory (Wittmayer et al., 2017).

At this juncture, there is a growing consensus that if sustainability is to be achieved, then more companies need to rethink their current role and the *modus operandi* of how they address sustainability and do business (see the reviews of Dyllick & Muff, 2016; Kemper & Ballantine, 2019; Tourais & Videira, 2019). However, the problem is that companies seeking alternative ways to address sustainability might not yet possess the knowledge or means to do so (Halme et al., 2018). As a large part of the existing research on business sustainability is still built on the mainstream roles of companies, states, and civil society, our understanding of the alternative roles of business actors remains underdeveloped and disconnected (Quarshie, 2017). The present dissertation is intended to advance this understanding.

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5   It is important to note that CSR can also serve as a tool to achieve strong sustainability. It is only when CSR is led through economic instrumentalism that it falls flat with strongly sustainable goals and outcomes. See Heikkurinen (2013) for a detailed analysis of different CSR approaches.

1.3   Purpose of the dissertation

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the role of companies in relation to sustainability from multiple viewpoints. In doing so, it seeks to connect the role of companies with the actual needs of the marketplace, the inclusive needs of society, and the needs of future generations. Toward that end, the research is motivated by the following questions:

1. Which roles do companies assume in addressing sustainability?
2. How can companies reconstruct their role in sustainability?
3. How is the role of companies co-constructed in the marketplace?
4. How can companies use marketplace interactions to advance transformative changes for sustainability?

The four articles, together with this introductory part, fulfill the research purpose and answer the research questions by addressing four different viewpoints on the research phenomenon. Article I adopts a *strategy viewpoint* to recast the role of corporate responsibility in corporate strategy in order for a company to engage in more transformative sustainability efforts. Article II takes a *management viewpoint* and formulates nine transformative management activities as an alternative toolbox for managers to spearhead these efforts. Article III implements a *cocreation viewpoint* and apprehends how the transformative role of companies is co-constructed with consumers in the marketplace. Finally, Article IV uses a *holistic viewpoint* by bringing together the strategy, management, and co-creation viewpoints to conceptualize how a company can initiate transformative changes through marketplace interactions in a food retailing context.

Table 1. Articles answering the research questions

Research question	Article	Viewpoint	Purpose
1. Which roles do companies assume in addressing sustainability?	Introductory section	The research context	To distinguish alternative roles of companies in the context of sustainability.
2. How can companies re-construct their role in sustainability?	<u>Article I</u>: The Company in Society: How Corporate Responsibility Transforms Strategy	Strategy	To identify and analyze new roles for corporate responsibility in corporate strategy.
	<u>Article II</u>: Managing Sustainability Transformations: A Managerial Framing Approach	Management	To explore and analyze transformative management activities in mobilizing sustainability transitions.
3. How is the role of companies co-constructed in the marketplace?	<u>Article III</u>: Co-creating Sustainable Corporate Brands: A Consumer Framing Approach	Co-creation	To analyze how consumers participate in co-creating the role of corporate brands in society.
4. How can companies use marketplace interactions to advance transformative changes for sustainability?	<u>Article IV</u>: Food, Health, and Data: Developing Transformative Food Retailing	Holistic	To explore the key elements of transformative food retailing and identify its implications for consumers, companies, academics, and society.

In the dissertation, the unit of analysis is not companies themselves but their role in relation to sustainability. As roles are situated in between the actors and society, this dissertation is also situated at the meso level in the business sustainability literature, complementing sustainability inquiries at the macro level (e.g., changing the nature of capitalism) and the micro level (e.g., changing the individual choices, attitudes, and motivations of marketplace actors) (Köhler et al., 2019).

1.4 Outline of the dissertation

Figure 1 illustrates the outline of the dissertation. The articles act as windows onto three organizational areas that emerged from the empirical research as the most potential ones for role reframing (Articles I, II, and III). An exploration of companies' existing role conceptions and actions in these areas is conducted in order to yield them a new approach for addressing sustainability. It is suggested that an alternative approach could be built around marketplace interactions (Article IV). This alternative approach is captured in a new construct, namely business sustainability transitions (introductory part).

The dissertation is explorative in nature; therefore, the role of theory is to provide guidance and not to serve as a restrictive straitjacket (Gummesson, 2006). In building the

theoretical framework, the previously disconnected fields of marketing and sustainability transition are combined, as both have put considerable emphasis on the systems of production and consumption and, more recently, on the role of companies in making these systems sustainable. The main argument for bringing these two fields together in this dissertation is simple: marketing creates a basis for understanding marketplace interactions as a way to connect the company with the actual needs of the marketplace, the inclusive needs of society, and the needs of the future generations, while transition research lends itself to understanding the much-needed transitions in society that can move an unsustainable system toward an economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable one (Köhler et al., 2019).
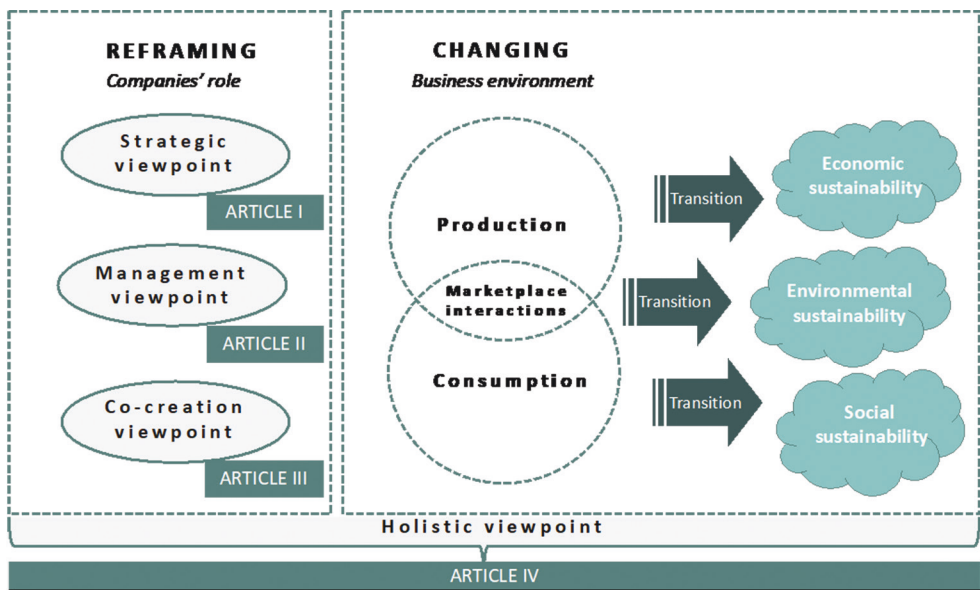
Figure 1. Outline of the dissertation

The dissertation is structured into five chapters. The introductory chapter describes the research phenomenon and the research setting and offers a brief overview of the four articles. The second chapter illustrates the evolving role of companies in relation to sustainability and disentangles the elements of business sustainability transitions. The third chapter presents the methodological choices of the dissertation by elaborating the social constructionist paradigm, the qualitative research strategy, and the subsequent methods used in the individual articles. The fourth chapter introduces the four articles in more detail, focusing on their key findings and on the role of the current author in compiling the articles. The fifth chapter answers the research purpose by bringing together the multiple viewpoints and presenting reframing as a method for companies to reconstruct their role

in sustainability. Finally, the concluding remarks specify the theoretical contributions and managerial implications of the dissertation, evaluate its quality, and provide suggestions for future research.

2 Conceptualizing the Role of Companies in Sustainability

This section prepares the conceptual ground for the discussion of the role of companies in addressing sustainability. Section 2.1 combines insights from different reviews and illustrates how this role has changed in the past, is changing in the present, and will likely change in the future. Section 2.2 zooms in on the potential future and provides a conceptualization of business sustainability transitions. By disentangling the particularities of business sustainability transitions in a systematic way, it aims to differentiate business sustainability transitions from other types of business-led sustainability changes. Altogether, this section provides conceptual tools to consider companies' role from an alternative perspective.

2.1 The evolving role of companies

Today, companies are held to higher ideals of environmental conservation and social stewardship than ever before (Achrol & Kotler, 2012; Porter & Kramer, 2019). These higher ideals follow not only from their economic, social, and environmental footprint but also from their unique resources and global reach (Quarshie, 2017). To provide one example of the influence of companies on global sustainability, more than 70% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions since 1988 can be traced to just 100 corporate entities (The Carbon Majors Database, 2017). Because of their influence, growing calls have been made for companies to become sustainable and contribute to a strongly sustainable society and a global ecosystem (see Bonnedahl & Heikkurinen, 2019; Chang et al., 2017; Dyllick & Muff, 2016; Kemper & Ballantine, 2019; Quarshie, 2017; Tourais & Videira, 2019). These calls extend beyond any industry, market, or territory.

The present dissertation treats the role through which companies relate to sustainability as a socially constructed set of understandings within specific historical, cultural, political, and economic conditions (Wittmayer et al., 2017). Because of companies' context

sensitivity and the changes in their contextual conditions, understanding how their role has evolved both in theory and in practice is important. Figure 2 outlines the key aspects of this evolution, illustrates the main shifts between the roles, and situates the dissertation along these evolutionary lines. The figure is based on the typology developed by Dyllick and Muff (2016) and complemented with insights from the extensive literature reviews of Chang et al. (2017), Kemper and Ballantine (2019), Marcus, Kurucz, and Colbert (2010), and Tourais and Videira (2019).

Society
(Outside-in)

The starting point for sustainability initiatives

Company
(Inside-out)

Bringing the transition approach to sustainability

TRANSFORMATIVE
- *Creating value for shareholders, stakeholders, and the common good*
- *Managing sustainability transitions*
- *Focusing on changing the existing domain through new modes of business*

Extending the stakeholder perspective

REFORMATIVE
- *Creating value for shareholders and stakeholders*
- *Managing the triple bottom line*
- *Focusing on changing existing modes of business*

This dissertation

Broadening business concerns

REACTIONARY
- *Creating value for shareholders*
- *Managing unsustainability*
- *Focusing on change within the existing domain*

THE CURRENT ECONOMIC PARADIGM

Smaller
(Incremental change)

The relevance and potential to resolve sustainability challenges

Greater
(Transformative change)

Figure 2. Typology of the evolving roles of companies in addressing sustainability (Adapted from Chang et al., 2017; Dyllick & Muff, 2016; Kemper & Ballantine, 2019; Tourais & Videira, 2019)

The first role is labeled *reactionary*. In a reactionary role, a company recognizes some environmental, economic, or social concerns that affect its business and integrates these concerns into its operations (Dyllick & Muff, 2016). The focus is on minimizing the negative impacts of its business by making compliance-driven changes within the existing environment. Initiatives such as reducing the use of harmful materials or improving employee diversity are implemented (Laszlo, 2008). Despite the company's recognition of some relevant concerns, the starting point for sustainability initiatives remains within the company (inside-out approach), and the strategic focus remains on creating shareholder value (Friedman, 1970). This role encapsulates much of the present-day business sustainability, although it is more often about managing unsustainability (Gorissen, Vrancken, & Manshoven, 2016).

The second role, dubbed *reformative*, broadens the company's view on environmental, economic, and social concerns and lends strategic importance to employees, customers,

governmental actors, NGOs, local communities, and other stakeholders (Chang et al., 2017). In a reformative role, multi-stakeholder partnerships allow the company to recognize sustainability issues other than those related to its direct operations, such as unsustainable levels of consumption (Laszlo, 2008). In response, initiatives such as launching multi-sector collaborations or demarketing harmful products are implemented (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). While the starting point for sustainability initiatives still remains with the company (inside-out), the strategic focus broadens to include both shareholder and stakeholder value creation (Horisch, Freeman, & Schaltegger, 2014). In this role, the company manages the triple bottom line, meaning that it is ready to improve the environmental, social, and economic aspects linked to its business (Elkington, 1997).

The third role, *transformative*, describes the company leveraging its core business and the scale advantages it offers to bring fundamental changes to the business environment within which it operates. The company "shifts its perspective from seeking to minimize its negative impacts to understanding how it can create a significant positive impact in critical and relevant areas for society and the planet" (Dyllick & Muff, 2016, p. 166). Initiatives such as designing new business models around circular economy or influencing funding flows and policies among sectors are implemented. The company also invites consumers to co-create sustainable modes of consumption (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). This role combines both the company (inside-out) and society (outside-in) as a holistic starting point for sustainability initiatives and widens the strategic focus to create value for shareholders, stakeholders, and the common good. This role represents the company managing transitions toward system-wide, strong sustainability (Markard, Raven, & Truffer, 2012).

Along these evolutionary lines of company roles, the present dissertation zooms in on the most recent one, the transformative role. It is argued that through the transformative role companies are most likely to achieve strong sustainability because as the term "transformative" implies, companies assuming this role aim to contest and bring fundamental changes to their established environment (Loorbach, 2010). By deliberately dedicating their complementary assets[6] to resolve societal and environmental challenges and by purposefully using marketplace interactions to introduce sustainable resources for others to integrate, these companies seek to influence system-wide transitions of sustainability.

Such transformative actions are at the core of transition research (Köhler et al., 2019). Transition research is a nascent stream of literature that explains, describes, and analyzes how systemic changes can be influenced toward sustainability in society (Markard et al., 2012). This literature stream moves beyond analyzing sustainability problems to finding solutions. These solutions are built around potential pathways for desirable and just environmental and societal transitions (Hölscher, Wittmayer, & Loorbach, 2018). Some

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6   Complementary assets refer to the special resources and capabilities of a company, such as specialized manufacturing capabilities, access to distribution channels, complementary technologies, networks, and finances, as well as the unique expertise of personnel (Geels, 2011).

researchers talk, fairly ambitiously, about *transition theory*. However, in this dissertation, transition research is perceived as an umbrella for multi-disciplinary research studying the intentional changes in society, rather than representing a single theory or a restrictive dogma. This dissertation draws on the key points of convergence under this transition umbrella.

It is important to note that other research streams could also provide useful insights to understand this latest transformative role of companies. These streams include, among others, general theories, such as evolutionary economic theory (Nelson & Winter, 1982), stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), actor network theory (Latour, 2005), and institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), as well as theoretical frameworks with a more managerial focus, such as CSR (Carroll, 1999), corporate citizenship (Matten & Crane, 2005), and shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2006, 2019).

While these streams have, to some extent, overlapping ideas, concepts, and content, transition scholars take a more systemic approach to sustainability, meaning that each business sector is viewed as a socio-technical system and scrutinized in terms of the structures, cultures, and practices that form the system (Loorbach et al., 2010). Moreover, transition scholars are "typically interested in how companies contribute to (or slow down) transitions and how changes in the organizational and business dimension affect transformation more broadly, i.e., institutional, political, or societal change" (Köhler et al., 2019, p. 11), which is a less common approach in management and organization studies.

As a systemic yet actor-oriented approach to sustainability, transition research lends itself particularly well to exploring the role of companies from a new perspective (Loorbach & Wijsman, 2013). Exploring the role of companies vis-à-vis sustainability transitions provides theoretical understanding of how companies can bring forward transformative changes in their operating space, in a time when this is considered a worthy endeavor. This exploration provides an alternative to a more mainstream role, which typically leads to incremental improvements in sustainability and modest strategic benefits for the company, reflecting weak sustainability. The broader commitment to transitions, combined with a marketing insight, and a strong sustainability standpoint, form the foundation of a new construct—business sustainability transitions.

2.2   Conceptualizing business sustainability transitions

This dissertation develops a conceptualization for business sustainability transitions. They are conceptualized as:

> *fundamental, long-term change processes in cultures, structures, and practices, initiated by companies through marketplace interactions, that shift the established business environments to more economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable modes of production and consumption.*

This conceptualization builds on the widely used definition of sustainability transitions given by Markard et al. (2012)[7] but supplements it with the business perspective, featuring marketplace interactions. It includes several particularities that make business sustainability transitions a unique topic to study and manage. Therefore, for companies seeking to advance strong sustainability, it is critical to understand these particularities in greater depth and adjust their business sustainability agenda and actions accordingly. These particularities are described in detail in this section.

Fundamental, long-term change processes

> [...] *fundamental, long-term change processes in cultures, structures, and practices* [...]

To achieve sustainability, many existing sectors need fundamental restructuring. The problem is that many of these sectors, such as fossil-fuel based transportation, are deeply entrenched systems with vested interests and locked-in production and consumption patterns that create inertia, stability, and path dependency (Köhler et al., 2019). Because of path dependency, certain technologies, market offerings, and business models survive long after they should have been abandoned and replaced by better-performing alternatives (Walker, 2000). In order to challenge path-dependent trajectories, companies with radical sustainability innovations need to destabilize and *unlock* existing systems of production and consumption so that they can scale up new market offerings (Farla, Markard, Raven, & Coenen, 2012).

In many sectors, new sustainable market offerings are built around technical innovations. For example, in the energy sector, technical innovations such as solar panels show significant potential in reducing fossil fuel dependency (Altenburg & Assmann, 2017). Blockchain technologies also look promising across environmental applications, enabling peer-to-peer trading of resources, supply chain transparency, and new financing models for environmental outcomes (World Economic Forum, 2018). Yet, companies need to acknowledge that unlocking existing systems and bringing fundamental changes forward in a given sector require not only technical innovations but also simultaneous changes in the organizational, institutional, political, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions of that sector (Markard et al., 2012). Therefore, companies advancing system-wide changes must pay attention not only to the development of technical innovations but also to other aspects of the given system.

Typically, such system-wide transitions are long-term change processes that unfold over considerable time spans, usually decades (Farla et al., 2012). However, with the accelerating pace of sustainability problems, societies need innovations to be developed

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7   Markard et al. (2012) defined sustainability transitions as "long-term, multi-dimensional, and fundamental transformation processes through which established socio-technical systems shift to more sustainable modes of production and consumption" (p. 956).

and diffused more rapidly and become equally accessible and affordable for all users in the marketplace in a shorter span of time. In this regard, companies need to accelerate the pace of development and diffusion of radical technologies from their early emergence in small niches (e.g., subsidized pilot projects) to widespread applications in the marketplace (Köhler et al., 2019).

Cultures, structures and practices

> [...] *change processes in cultures, structures, and practices* [...]

The fundamental changes that are needed in a given sector can be divided into three levels: cultures, structures, and practices (Rotmans & Loorbach, 2009). According to Rotmans and Loorbach (2009), *cultures* refer to shared values and meanings and the prevailing paradigms; *structures* pertain to the current physical, technical, economic, and regulatory infrastructures; and *practices* relate to the normal routines, habits, actions, and lifestyles of different actors. These three dimensions encapsulate the alternative ways of thinking (cultures), organizing (structures), and doing (practices) that companies need to advocate in their business environment.

To illustrate the changes across all three of these levels, electric vehicles (EVs) provide an instructive example. With automobile technology at its core, the breakthrough of EVs requires the complementary development of charging stations, different maintenance and repair services, renewed regulations and government incentives, and the adaptation of user mindsets and practices. Therefore, it is not only the current technology of the internal combustion engine that will need to change; the emergence and breakthrough of EVs also require a holistic rethinking of the entire transportation system (Kanger & Schot, 2016).

Hence, according to systems thinking, a system does not only refer to, and encompass, the formal or physical structures but also the actors, and their patterns of interpreting, relating and practicing (Quarshie, 2017). Indeed, Senge, Lichtenstein, Kaeufer, Bradbury, and Carroll (2007, p.51) argue that truly systemic change requires "enacting new ways of thinking, creating new formal structures and, ultimately, transforming relationships." Therefore, while groundbreaking sustainable technological innovations are needed, it is equally important for companies to help align the cultures, structures, and practices of their business environment in order to pave the way for a system-wide change.

Business environments

> [...] *shift the established business environments* [...]

Companies are embedded in dynamic business environments constituted of different actors, institutions, material artifacts, and knowledge. Using the lexicon of transition

research, business environments are treated as socio-technical systems (Markard et al., 2012). Consider socio-technical systems of energy, agro-food, or transportation, where the different elements constituting a given business environment are tightly interrelated and dependent on one another; together, they offer an environment enabling businesses to operate. Therefore, companies seeking to shift their business environment toward sustainability will need to acknowledge that they operate in webs of interdependence (Senge et al., 2007).

However, it is not easy for companies to introduce changes in their current business environment, let alone seek to shift entire systems. Indeed, such actions are likely to threaten the economic positions of some of the biggest and most powerful incumbent corporations dominating the system (Köhler et al., 2019). Some of these incumbents are equipped to protect their vested interests and resist the transitions that could lead to the decline of their business (Geels, 2004). Several studies show how incumbent actors are hampering major technological and societal changes in their sectors (see Hess, 2014, 2016; Smink, Hekkert, & Negro, 2015). Notably, though, the resistance to business sustainability transitions can also come from other marketplace actors, for instance, as with social movements generating opposition to wind farms in the energy sector (Phadke, 2011).[8]

It is useful to recognize the transitions in each business environment as questions of power shifts. Therefore, transitions will require collaborating rather than competing with different marketplace actors (Senge et al., 2007). Cross-sector collaboration includes actors from incumbent corporations to start-ups and from grassroots movements and consumer-citizens to policymakers in order to minimize the experienced threat of power losses (or gains by someone else). In this regard, some of the more recent studies demonstrate the collaborative nature of transitions. For instance, when sustainability transition is the aim, incumbent actors can develop and push cleaner technologies together with start-ups in the transportation sector (Dijk, Wells, & Kemp, 2016) and collaborate with social movements in advancing services regarding renewable energy or car sharing (Ornetzeder & Rohracher, 2013). Business environments are only viable, and can become sustainable, when actors perceive the benefits of collaboration.

Production and consumption

> [...] *modes of production and consumption* [...]

In modern Western societies, most business environments have developed based on centralized production (Beniger, 1986). This centralized, production-driven development has strongly emphasized the creation of knowledge, technologies, and innovations while paying less attention to the diffusion and use of such innovations—markets and users are

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8   In Europe and the US, nearly three quarters of proposed wind farms are never built because of the successful petitions of individuals and organizations (Phadke, 2011).

just assumed to be *out there* (Geels, 2004). This has led to separate clusters of production and consumption and left a rather passive role for consumers in the innovation activities of a given sector (Ornetzeder & Rohracher, 2013). A typical example of such a centralized, production-driven system is the energy sector, in which consumers have had limited opportunities to reconfigure their own energy consumption (see Juntunen, 2014).

In strongly sustainable societies, a closer collaboration between companies and consumers exists, as both systems of production and consumption need parallel changes (Geels, 2004). Loorbach at al. (2010) stated that this collaboration is essential for transitions, as "it helps to develop knowledge about root causes, linkages and patterns, to construct shared meanings, and to clarify common ground and differences in perspectives, interest and needs" (p. 135). In a similar vein, Närvänen, Mesiranta, and Mattila (2018) argued that companies can no longer treat production as a separate function preceding consumption because sustainable technologies and innovations need consumers who are willing and able to embed these new offerings into their daily lives. To facilitate this, some companies (e.g., Tesla) already collaborate with consumers to reconfigure collective practices that both accelerate the phase-out of unsustainable offerings and support the usage of new, sustainable alternatives.

Another topical example illustrating the need for convergence of production and consumption is the reduction of food waste. Currently, 25% to 30% of food produced is lost or wasted (The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2019). Several companies have emerged to target this sustainability challenge by developing online marketplaces for surplus food (Mattila, Mesiranta, & Heikkinen, forthcoming). However, while such companies can facilitate changes in the food system by creating technologies and tools aimed at reducing food waste, the actual outcome necessitates consumers deciding to use these tools (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). This example, together with the example of small-scale decentralized energy technologies democratizing the energy sector,[9] highlight the effective collaboration and co-creation between producers and consumers in pursuit of sustainability (Senge et al., 2007).

In recent years, marketing scholars have made significant contributions to co-creation thinking. In the current marketing literature, consumers are treated as active participants, rather than passive users, who contribute to the development of companies' offerings (see Saarijärvi et al., 2017). Active co-creation is facilitated through different types of interactions in the marketplace, and the heterogenous needs of different consumer groups for co-creation are recognized (see e.g. Kuoppamäki, Uusitalo, & Kemppainen, 2017, for the role of age in digital domestic technology consumption). As another example, consider how Tesla involves both its potential and current customers in developing its market offerings to speed up the transition to EVs (Ward, 2017). Tesla lends itself as a topical example of a

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9   Today, the development of small-scale decentralized energy technologies is changing the business environment for energy producers and democratizing consumption for energy users by blurring the boundaries between production and consumption (Juntunen, 2014).

company purposefully using marketplace interactions to address both the changing needs in the market and persistent environmental challenges.

Marketplace interactions

[...] *initiated by companies through marketplace interactions* [...]

For companies to be the sources and forces of business sustainability transitions, the dynamic interactions *within* and *between* marketplace actors become a key medium. Despite the anti-marketization attitudes that are gaining prominence among some sustainability groups (Zavestoski, 2002), business sustainability transitions do not seek to eschew marketplace interactions in the name of sustainability—in fact, they seek to do the opposite. Thus, the marketplace is considered here as a critical site where companies can leverage interactions with other actors to co-create economically healthier, environmentally friendlier, and socially more balanced modes of production and consumption.

For companies to leverage marketplace interactions in advancing sustainability, conceiving a notion of the dualistic nature of interaction is necessary. This duality is best captured in the structure–agency dilemma, famously conceptualized in sociology (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984). According to the dilemma, on the one hand, marketplace actors are embedded in larger structures that direct their preferences, strategies, and actions. On the other hand, these actors have much room for agency (i.e., they can act consciously, strategically influence one another, and even transform their surrounding structures) (Geels, 2004). This means that while marketplace interactions are suggested as the key medium for companies to exert influence on their business environment, this very environment also shapes such interactions.

Acknowledging the duality and leveraging the interactions in both cases of structure and agency, companies can combine both outside-in and inside-out orientations—a classic thinking tool in marketing literature (Saeed, Yousafzai, Paladino, & De Luca, 2015). As applied here, an *outside-in orientation* describes the established business environment (the structure) as the starting point for sustainability. The company's focus is on interpreting marketplace signals, such as competitor behavior, geopolitical interests, or consumer trends, and sensing new opportunities in the changing business environment (Saeed et al., 2015). Such outside-in interactions create valuable assets for the company in advancing sustainability, such as deeper market insight and improved stakeholder relationships (Lahtinen, Kuusela, & Yrjölä, 2018).

These improved insights and relationships are then combined with the company's market offerings to influence changes in the current business environment (the agency). An *inside-out orientation* identifies and leverages the unique strengths of the company, such as leadership, expertise, technologies, or distribution channels. Companies can favorably influence other marketplace actors by introducing sustainable resources for others to

integrate that support the transition. Examples of such resources are goods (e.g., solar panels), product features (e.g., real-time feedback on gas mileage), service activities (e.g., recycling programs), information (e.g., transparency of the supply chain and labor rights), feedback loops (e.g., online think tanks), or access to advice (e.g., inclusivity training).

Today, the ways companies can interact with other marketplace actors keep expanding. Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, virtual reality, the internet of things, and decentralized technologies such as blockchain, are enabling entirely new forms of (virtual) interaction. These emerging technologies are also democratizing the marketplace by building greater autonomy from centralized institutions such as big corporations (Juntunen, 2014). However, they are creating new threats regarding unethical automated machines, data ownership, and privacy issues (World Economic Forum, 2018). In sum, if companies learn to use these new technologies effectively and securely, they will find themselves in a position of even greater interaction with other market actors, fueling the shift together toward a strongly sustainable society.

Economic, environmental, and social sustainability

> [...] *more economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable modes* [...]

Among the numerous definitions of sustainability, many researchers and practitioners base their perspective on the report titled *Our Common Future* by the United Nations' Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987). In the report, 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" (p. 43). Furthermore, sustainability is defined in the report as a tridimensional construct, which assumes that for development to be sustainable, it must meet economic, environmental, and social standards. As the WCED definition remains the most agreed-upon definition of sustainability today (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019), it also forms the basis for the construct of business sustainability transitions.

However, while this definition draws attention to equal concerns related to economic prosperity, the natural environment, and social welfare, companies rarely address these dimensions with equal attention or resources in practice (Gao & Bansal, 2013). This is plausible considering the reality of companies, in which tensions between the different desirable but seemingly incompatible sustainability dimensions occur more often than not (Hahn et al., 2015). In their systematic framework, Hahn et al. (2015) acknowledged these tensions as something that companies need to accept and manage rather than dismiss by pretending they do not exist. The idea of business sustainability transitions can enable companies to manage these conflicting dimensions, as it presents the systemic approach to sustainability.

The particularities described in this section, forming the system-wide business sustainability transitions, can be summarized with a mechanical metaphor: "All social phenomena have an impulse value for transitions, but only some provide a flywheel force" (Rotmans, Kemp, & Van Asselt, 2001, p. 17). In other words, for business sustainability transitions to succeed, these particularities must come together. Thus, companies that integrate these particularities in their sustainability agenda can become such a flywheel force.

3   Research Strategy

This dissertation is a compilation of four different articles, each applying a different methodological approach. However, these approaches are bound together by similar perceptions of reality and eligible ways of apprehending them—that is, ontological and epistemological assumptions. This section focuses on justifying the selected qualitative methodological approaches and rendering their ontological and epistemological assumptions transparent in light of their philosophical roots in a moderate social constructionist paradigm (Burr, 2015).

3.1   The social constructionist paradigm

All research is underpinned by philosophical assumptions that form a scientific worldview. This particular way of looking at the world can also be termed a paradigm (Kuhn, 1962). A paradigm guides all research-related philosophical choices for its holder, from problem setting and theory selection to data generation and interpretation of the findings. Metaphorically, Gummesson (2005) visualized a *research edifice* to illustrate the different research-related choices, in which the paradigm forms *the basement* upon which all research builds. The research edifice for this dissertation is illustrated in Figure 3 (p. 43).

   Arndt (1985, p. 11) conceptualized paradigms as social constructions "reflecting the values and interests of dominant researchers in science and their reference groups". Viewed as social constructions, different paradigms cannot be evaluated as being better than another or as offering more accurate views on reality (Arndt, 1985). Instead, different paradigms can be seen as alternative windows to the world (Morgan, 1980). Among the windows of positivism, critical realism, and constructionism, this dissertation looks at the world through the last one.

   The moderate social constructionism applied in this dissertation is based on the idea that reality and knowledge are socially constructed, rather than discovered, by human beings (Schwandt, 2000). Unlike strong forms of social constructionism, which deem all

knowledge claims as relative and thus equally good, moderate social constructionism accepts that there are certain local, personal, and communal forms of knowledge (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010). However, according to Burr (2015), no single definition could adequately describe moderate social constructionism; instead, she introduced four key assumptions that act as its foundation. The moderate social constructionism that is accepted and adopted in this dissertation is elaborated next through these four assumptions.

First, social constructionism takes a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge. By contrasting its views about the world with positivism, social constructionism encourages us to be suspicious about our default assumptions about how the world appears to be (Burr, 2015). This means that the concepts, models, and categories that we, as humans, use to apprehend the world are human made rather than representing the natural division of things (Schwandt, 2000). On this basis, this research takes a critical stance toward the role of companies in relation to sustainability: rather than being a reflection of a naturally occurring division of entities in society, that role is considered a social construction built on normative prescriptions and values in a given culture.

Second, social constructionism assumes historical and cultural specificity. Therefore, our way of knowing about the world is a product of the prevailing cultural, political, social, and economic circumstances (Burr, 2015). Again, set in the context of this research, the societal role of the private business sector has taken many different forms in Western culture over different time periods. The evolution of this role is illustrated in Section 2.1. Therefore, the role of companies needs to be analyzed and reflected in their historical and cultural context, instead of aiming to establish universal principles of companies' societal functioning across cultures and eras.

Third, social constructionism assumes that knowledge is sustained in social processes. In other words, instead of knowledge mirroring the true nature of the world, it is built up in social interaction (Burr, 2015) against a backdrop of shared understandings, meanings, and language (Schwandt, 2000). As social constructionism trusts in the potential of language in shaping the views we have about the world, the roles of discourse, dialogue, and social interaction are central in reconstructing the role of companies in society. This is encapsulated here in the use of framing—both as an analytical approach and as a proposed managerial method.

Fourth, knowledge and social action go together. This means that each different construction of knowledge brings forward different patterns of social action and excludes others (Burr, 2015). Consequently, the new social discourse around the role of companies in addressing sustainability challenges is likely to trigger new action when consumer-citizens and policymakers change their expectations of the appropriate responses from companies, and companies need to act accordingly. This notion of the performative role of discourse (Austin, 1962) further motivates the use of framing.

To sum, in moderate social constructionism, the ontological position is based on the idea of reality as a social construction that is dependent on and continuously reproduced

by individuals (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). The epistemological position then sees knowledge as culturally constructed in interactions with others (Longino, 1990). Taken together, research that is rooted in moderate social constructionism treats neither reality nor knowledge as neutral or disinterested but recognizes them as ideological, political, and value laden to some extent (Schwandt, 2000). This is the paradigmatic position taken in this research.

3.2 The qualitative research strategy

To continue with the metaphor, the research strategy forms *the middle floors* of the research edifice (Figure 3 in p. 43). A qualitative research strategy is considered suitable for research like this, which is positioned more in a context of discovery than in a context of justification (Schickore & Steinle, 2006). Whereas a context of justification accommodates research that aims to predict, control, and measure, a context of discovery hosts research that aims to generate new ideas, new concepts, and new relationships between established ideas and concepts (Yadav, 2006). Along the justification–discovery continuum, this dissertation is situated more in the context of discovery and is thus theory building rather than theory testing in nature, opening up new viewpoints on the role of companies in sustainability.

In the context of discovery, the qualitative research strategy is suitable for the purposes of this dissertation particularly for three reasons. First, this dissertation focuses on generating rich, deep, and nuanced understandings of how and why actors perceive, frame, role-take, interpret, and interact (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Second, it emphasizes the understanding of the complex processes (i.e., framing) underlying companies' roles (Granot, Brashear, & Motta, 2012). Finally, the emergent nature of the research phenomenon benefits from a qualitative research strategy, which is directed toward understanding complex and elusive phenomena in a systematic and holistic way and is, by default, sensitive to the embeddedness of the phenomena in their context (Gummesson, 2005).

Figure 3 illustrates the research edifice of this dissertation, bringing together all the different choices that guided the empirical research process. In the research edifice, moderate social constructionism, as a paradigm, forms the basement upon which the entire research is built. Then, the qualitative research strategy, operationalized through the triangulation of different methods, forms the middle floors of the research edifice. Finally, the novel framework for reframing the role of companies in sustainability that was created as a result of the iterative research process depicts the highest level of the research edifice, the *penthouse*.

PENTHOUSE
THE OUTCOME
Presentation of the results:
Framework for companies to
reframe their role in relation to sustainability

MIDDLE FLOORS
DATA GENERATION AND ANALYSIS
Research strategy:
Qualitative research in the context of discovery
Methodological approaches:
Triangulation of in-depth interview, focus group, and multiple
qualitative case study methods

BASEMENT
THE FOUNDATION OF THE RESEARCH
Paradigm:
Social constructionism (moderate)
Ontology:
Reality is a social construction, which is dependent on
and reproduced by individuals.
Epistemology:
Knowledge is culturally constructed through interactions
with others sharing their subjective views.

Figure 3. Research edifice of the dissertation (Adapted from Gummesson 2005)

To sum up, the research process in this dissertation can be described as the iteration between theory and practice, reflecting the incrementally increasing understanding according to what was learned on the way. Furthermore, the intrinsic involvement of the researcher in the entire process is acknowledged. To elaborate this iterative, dialogic process, the researcher used the theoretical pre-understanding about the phenomenon to guide the research design for Article I. After the first empirical study, an increased understanding of the research phenomenon was developed conceptually in Article IV. This step was followed by two other empirical studies that further deepened the understanding of the phenomenon in Articles II and III. Next, the article-specific methodological approaches are briefly discussed.

3.3   Article-specific methodological approaches

A qualitative research strategy allows the use of a wide variety of different methodological approaches (i.e., selected positions with harmonized choices for research design, research

questions, data generation, and analysis) (Köhler et al., 2019). While the four articles address the research purpose from four different viewpoints, they also apply different methodological approaches. These approaches are outlined in Table 2.

Combining different methodological approaches to study the same research phenomenon is called *triangulation* (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966). In an article-based dissertation, it is fairly easy to use one or more of the four types of triangulation: data, instructor, theory, and/or methodology (Denzin, 1978). This dissertation takes advantage of all four forms; each article has diverse data sets, several co-authors, different theoretical perspectives, and multiple methods, as shown in Table 2. Triangulation is used to gain richer and thicker data and thus deepen the understanding of the research phenomenon.[10] Triangulation also stimulates more creative ways of generating, analyzing, and interpreting data that is now called for in sustainability transition literature (Köhler et al., 2019). The triangulation used in this dissertation is known as *within-methods triangulation*, which refers to the use of either multiple quantitative or multiple qualitative approaches, as opposed to *between-methods triangulation*, which involves the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Denzin, 1978). Here, the within-methods triangulation refers to the decision to stick with a qualitative research strategy.

Following the qualitative research strategy, the reasoning in each methodological approach primarily used inductive logic. Here, using inductive logic means that the analysis mainly drew theoretical understanding from the observed phenomena and that the findings in each article are therefore strongly linked to the data. Eisenhardt et al. (2016) suggested that inductive logic is especially helpful in advancing knowledge in the context of grand challenges, which "require novel ideas and unconventional approaches" (p. 1113). They further argued that induction excels "in situations for which there is limited theory and on problems without clear answers" (Eisenhardt et al., 2016, p. 1113)—as is the case with the research phenomenon of this dissertation.

However, it is important to note that researchers can rarely free themselves of their theoretical commitments, which refer to using deductive logic in reasoning (Braun & Clake, 2006). Thus, while some individual studies could rely on nearly pure induction, a multi-year research project, such as an article-based dissertation, cannot be conducted in a theoretical vacuum. Therefore, the present dissertation, while being primarily informed by inductive reasoning, is recognized to have some deductive traits, as well. For many researchers, this division is impractical, as pure induction or pure deduction seldom exists. Rather, what exists in between is the third logic of reasoning, called *abduction* (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Abductive logic is closest to describing the way the phases of induction and deduction vary in this dissertation and together inform the reasoning of the findings.

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10   In research rooted in a social constructionist paradigm, triangulation is not used in an attempt to converge upon the truth, which is usually the rationale given for triangulation, as there is no single truth about reality.

Table 2. Methodological approaches chosen for the articles

Article	Methodological approach	Rationale for the choice
I: The Company in Society: How Corporate Responsibility Transforms Strategy	**Method**: Multiple qualitative case study **Data generation**: Four case companies **Data analysis**: Content analysis; categorizing and classifying the data	Offers access to investigate the timely issue of corporate responsibility within its immediate real-life context Differentiates the study from the vast archive of single case studies in sustainability transition literature Focuses on the content of the data rather than the narratives, discourses, or semiotics
II: Managing Sustainability Transformations: A Managerial Framing Approach	**Method**: In-depth interviews **Data generation**: Unstructured interviews with 10 sustainability managers **Data analysis**: Primarily inductive thematic analysis with ATLAS.ti	Enables rich descriptions of how managers frame their activities Captures the complexity, context, and persona in managerial framing Develops broader themes from recurrent codes, which are data-driven rather than theory-driven
III: Co-creating the Sustainable Corporate Brand: A Consumer Framing Approach	**Method**: Focus groups **Data generation**: Four focus groups with 25 millennials **Data analysis**: Primarily inductive thematic analysis	Focus on the social interaction between participants Reveals unexpected views on an unexplored and emergent phenomenon in a social setting Develops data-driven themes from recurrent codes, capturing the similarities and differences in framings
IV: Food, Health, and Data: Developing Transformative Food Retailing	**Method**: Conceptual paper No empirical data	Brings together three complementary theoretical perspectives to understand the emergent phenomenon of transformative food retailing

Table 3 provides a closer look at the specific methods and how they were used in each of the articles. For Article I, a multiple qualitative case study method was used because theory development from case studies is "most appropriate in the early stages of research on a topic" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 548). In Article II, in-depth interviews were used as an explorative method to capture managers' own voices. In Article III, a focus group method facilitated social interaction in group discussions about a phenomenon of a strongly social nature. For Article IV, an extensive literature review was conducted to develop a conceptual framework.

Table 3. Summary of the methodologies used in the articles

Article	Method	Description of data	Context
I	Multiple qualitative case study method	Four cases with two data sets: 1) semi-structured interviews with sustainability managers (50–80 min) 2) annual reports, sustainability reports, other public material, – Each researcher analyzed the data	Food & beverage, forestry, pulp & paper
II	In-depth interviews	10 unstructured interviews with sustainability managers (50–80 minutes) – ATLAS.ti utilized in the beginning of analysis to code the extensive data (68 transcribed pages)	Consumer goods, energy, food & beverage, forestry, paper & pulp, retail, service business, transportation
III	Focus groups	Four focus groups with 25 millennials (65–95 minutes) – Analysis about the transcribed group discussions and researcher's notes made during the discussions	Millennials born between late-1970s and mid-1990s, interested in societal issues
IV	Conceptual paper	Extensive reading of the three theoretical perspectives and their implications for transformative food retailing	Literature on customer-dominant logic, reverse use of customer data, and transformative service research

This dissertation is interested in various types of marketplace interactions in different industries and markets, rather than comparing different sectors with one another (e.g., how sustainability is addressed in the food vs. energy sectors). Therefore, as the last column in Table 3 shows, the research contexts vary from business-to-business to business-to-consumer and from manufacturing to service businesses. The purpose is to overcome one of the current deficits in sustainability transition research, namely the tendency to focus on only a single case, industry, or socio-technical system at a time (Köhler et al., 2019). The industries and markets that the participating companies represent are the ones where business sustainability transitions are most needed (IPCC, 2019).

4 Summary of the Original Articles

This section provides summaries of the four articles that form the dissertation. As the articles are independent studies with different publication outlets, they have some variance in terms of research design, lexicon, and writing style. However, in this section, they are summarized in light of the specific research questions that aim to deliver on the general purpose of this dissertation, which is to explore the role of companies in relation to sustainability from multiple viewpoints.

4.1 Article I: The Company in Society: How Corporate Responsibility Transforms Strategy

RQ2: How can companies reconstruct their role in sustainability?[11]

The first article takes *a strategic viewpoint* on the role of companies and analyzes corporate responsibility as a part of business strategy. The article acknowledges that while one of the biggest challenges for companies when committing to sustainability is the strategy work (Bonn & Fisher, 2011), top executives who are willing to advance strong sustainability need to make it a strategic issue in the boardroom. Set in this context, the article answers the call to empirically examine the strategic practices of companies as they address sustainability (e.g., Ioannou & Serafeim, 2019).

As it is top executives who craft and shape business strategies, the article focuses on top executive decision making regarding sustainability. Therefore, the theoretical background of the study builds on the strategic decision-making literature, specifically focusing on two strategic decision-making dimensions:

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[11] The first research question (RQ1) is targeted by the introductory section and not by any of the individual articles; therefore, it is not presented here.

1. an inside-out (company-focused) versus outside-in (market-focused) orientation
2. an emphasis on leveraging (existing) versus prospecting for (new) resources

The first dimension (1) identifies two orientations—inside-out and outside-in—that guide strategic decision making. The inside-out orientation means that the starting point for strategic decisions lies in the current strengths of the company and that the company leverages its unique assets, such as cutting-edge research and development, deep market intelligence, new technologies, or transformative leadership, to direct its business strategy. The outside-in orientation, by contrast, means that the market or society more broadly acts as the starting point for strategy, and the company focuses on interpreting market signals and sensing new opportunities in the changing business environment to provide a sense of direction for strategy (Day & Moorman, 2013).

The second dimension (2) proposes that strategic decision making is directed to either leveraging the already existing resources and capabilities of the company or prospecting for new ones (March, 1991).

A multiple qualitative case study method is applied (the methodology is discussed in Section 3.3) to empirically explore strategic decision making regarding sustainability. The four case studies uncover how four different companies address sustainability strategically, each revealing different strategic aspects in their decision making. The four cases act to show that instead of *one size fits all*, there are different ways and rationales for companies to make sustainability a strategic issue.

The article yields the characterization of four new strategic roles for corporate responsibility: corporate responsibility as (1) *a process for engaging stakeholders*, (2) *a practice informing business performance*, (3) *a platform creating business innovation*, and (4) a *perspective transforming the market*. The strategic roles are characterized in terms of the two previously discussed dimensions of strategic decision making. Specific strategic initiatives that are linked to each role and create momentum for sustainability across the company are outlined to assist top executives in their decision making. Furthermore, strategic outcomes related to the specific roles are elaborated to help top executives understand the opportunities that sustainability can offer and how the company, together with its stakeholders, are likely to benefit from it.

The article contributes to the literature by formulating four different strategic roles for corporate responsibility and by developing a roadmap for companies to rethink the current role of corporate responsibility[12] in their strategy. By expanding the relevant strategic horizons, sustainability can become a driver for business rather than a *retroactive addition* that is compliance driven and merely integrated into the existing business strategy (Alberti & Garrido, 2017). As a practical implication, the developed roadmap can act as a discussion-facilitating tool and help top executives think in new ways about sustainability.

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12 In this article, corporate responsibility is used as a concept to refer to the organizational function in charge of sustainability issues. This is in accordance with the terminology preferred in the publication outlet.

In doing so, it can help top executives move beyond a focus on incremental improvements in the company's operations toward systemic challenges and opportunities in their business environment. Taken together, rethinking business strategies based on sustainability is a crucial part of fostering business sustainability transitions.

This article was co-authored. The current author took part in planning the research design, reviewing the literature, and conducting the data analysis. She also built the cases and wrote most of the article. In addition, as a corresponding author, she was responsible for the submission process, including one revision and one response letter.

4.2 Article II: Managing Sustainability Transformations: A Managerial Framing Approach

RQ2: How can companies reconstruct their role in sustainability?

The second article takes a *management viewpoint* on the role of companies and analyzes, from a manager's perspective, transformative management activities in bringing business sustainability transitions forward. Sustainability managers across different sectors are looking for new ways to manage sustainability, as conventional management appears ill-suited for tackling complex sustainability issues and, at the same time, inadequate for seizing the inherent business opportunities that sustainability can offer. The article answers the call to empirically investigate managers' efforts vis-à-vis sustainability transformations[13] (Etzion, Gehman, Ferraro, & Avidan, 2017) by developing a framework of nine transformative management activities as an alternative to *management as usual*.

The article uses theoretical triangulation by combining two complementary research streams. The theoretical approach of management activities (e.g., Zott & Amit, 2010) creates a basis for understanding resource utilization in the context of sustainability management and highlights the action-oriented nature of managers' job, whereas transition management (e.g., Loorbach, 2010) builds an understanding of how business sustainability transitions can be mobilized and managed. Together, these two literature streams create a lens through which the real-world phenomenon of sustainability management can be empirically explored.

In the empirical study, unstructured in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 sustainability managers in medium to large global companies based in Finland (the methodology is discussed in Section 3.3). The rich and detailed descriptions of managers' activities that were generated in these interviews were treated as different managerial framings (i.e., how these managers make sense of their actions, role, and purpose in managing sustainability). Framing was chosen as an analytical tool to understand how

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13   In this article, sustainability transformation is used as a concept to refer to the outcome of sustainability transitions.

perceptions of social reality are constructed, how these perceptions then create action, and how these perceptions can be reconstructed in order to change the course of action (Werner & Cornelissen, 2014).

Based on the managerial framings, nine transformative management activities were formed that could help managers advance business sustainability transitions. These activities are (1) *challenging the dominant environment through reflexivity*, (2) *creating a space for multi-vocal collaboration*, (3) *aligning collaborators' future visions*, (4) *restructuring principles, processes, and practices*, (5) *removing mental, physical, and cultural barriers*, (6) *designing effective feedback loops*, (7) *influencing public discourse and action*, (8) *ensuring the transparency of sustainability efforts*, and (9) *co-constructing a new environment*.

The article contributes to the literature by revealing the breadth and depth of managers' professional capacities required in strong sustainability. In this respect, the nine transformative management activities are situated along a continuum between the two dimensions of (1) different management levels (strategic, tactical, operational) and (2) different management styles (more analytical, more intuitive). As a practical implication, this taxonomy can help sustainability managers reframe their management activities by first identifying the levels and styles they currently operate in (framing) and then develop their capacity in both dimensions (reframing). As a methodological contribution, the study is among the few to apply the framing approach to honor managers' own voices, and it increases the understanding of business sustainability transitions from managers' own perspective.

This article was co-authored. The current author conducted the literature review, carried out and transcribed the interviews, and analyzed the interview data. Furthermore, she was responsible for writing most of the article. As a corresponding author, she was responsible for the submission process, including two revisions and two response letters.

4.3   Article III: Co-Creating Sustainable Corporate Brands: A Consumer Framing Approach

RQ 3: How is the role of companies co-constructed in the marketplace?

The third article takes a *co-creation viewpoint* on the role of companies and explores how that role is co-constructed in a marketplace. While some companies are extending their role from the business sphere toward actively influencing society, this role extension can be a risky endeavor for them if it is deemed unacceptable, unethical, or untrustworthy by others in the marketplace. Thus, the article addresses the call to explore how other marketplace actors interpret, understand, make sense of, and potentially co-construct companies' transformative role (Biraghi, Gambetti, & Schultz, 2017).

Companies typically use corporate brands as vehicles in making this role extension visible in the marketplace. Therefore, the article builds on brand co-creation theory and

uses the recent conceptualization of sustainable corporate brands. The brand co-creation theory is used to understand brands as social constructions (Närvänen & Goulding, 2016), and the concept of sustainable corporate brands (SCBs) (Stuart, 2011) is operationalized to capture how brands purposefully use marketplace interactions to advance sustainability.

The article focuses on a consumer cohort of millennials as marketplace actors. Four focus group sessions were conducted to empirically explore how millennial consumers frame SCBs (the methodology is discussed in Section 3.3). Millennials were chosen as the informants in the study, as they are characterized as civic-minded and wellbeing-oriented consumers who are more critical toward corporations than their previous generational counterparts were (Sullivan & Heitmeyer, 2008).

Based on the focus groups, three different framings of SCBs were developed: SCBs (1) *as signs of corporate hypocrisy*, (2) *as threats that increase societal fragmentation*, and (3) *as signals of corporate enlightenment*. As the findings show, even if a company were to have good intentions in addressing some of the major sustainability problems, consumers are likely to frame its actions differently. Therefore, the role of companies is not determined deliberately by the company but rather co-constructed in social interaction among the company facilitating societal and environmental actions, the consumers (and other marketplace actors) framing these actions, and the wider societal and environmental context where the shared concerns and actions take place.

The article furthers the sustainable corporate branding literature (see Arbouw, Balantine, & Ozanne, 2019). It shows that companies that move beyond their traditional economic role and seek to become political–moral actors need to expand their view on the role, purpose, and priorities of corporate branding by acknowledging that SCBs are co-constructed in the marketplace, not at the company headquarters. The more open-minded a company is on validating different points of view during the development process, the more likely it is to effectively raise its voice to resolve or even take command of specific sustainability issues through its corporate brand.

This article was co-authored. The current author took part in crafting the research design, conducting the literature review, and analyzing the data. She was also responsible for writing most of the article, and as the corresponding author, she spearheaded the submission process, including one revision and one response letter.

4.4 Article IV: Food, Health, and Data: Developing Transformative Food Retailing

RQ4: How can companies use marketplace interactions to advance transformative changes for sustainability?

The fourth article takes a *holistic viewpoint* on the role of companies by bringing together the previously discussed viewpoints of strategy, management, and co-creation to explore how companies can bring transformative changes forward through marketplace interactions. This article studies the phenomenon in the context of food retailing.

Food retailing was chosen as the context for three reasons. First, food retailing has system-wide influence throughout society due to its large scale in terms of outlets, suppliers, employees, and customers. Second, food retailing has given rise to extensive criticism regarding environmental, economic, social, and health issues (Lavorata & Sparks, 2018). Third, food retailers have a real business interest to address this criticism and reframe their role in society in order to stay relevant in the marketplace. To facilitate this reframing, a conceptual framework for transformative food retailing is developed through which the article answers the call to take the conventional food system on a strongly sustainable trajectory (Forssell & Lankoski, 2018; IPCC, 2019).

As a conceptual paper, the article is built around three complementary perspectives offering valuable theoretical insights for the emerging practical phenomenon: (1) transformative service research (TSR; Anderson & Ostrom, 2015), (2) the reverse use of customer data (Saarijärvi, Grönroos, & Kuusela, 2014), and (3) customer-dominant logic (Heinonen & Strandvik, 2015).

The article contributes to the field of TSR by suggesting that food retailers have an opportunity to use marketplace interactions in bringing transformative changes forward in their business environment by bringing together transformative service delivery, emerging technologies, and the reverse use of customer data. The theoretical proposition is illustrated with the case example of Nutrition Code, an online-based service of a major Finnish retailer, Kesko Corporation. Nutrition Code combines customers' food purchase data with the nutritional recommendations provided by the authorities and offers this information to customers to support them in making better-informed purchase decisions.

A food retailer aiming to improve individual and collective health through its core business needs to rethink its business in different organizational areas. According to *the strategic viewpoint*, top executives are involved in initiating strategic changes with a stronger focus on consumers' well-being, as discussed in Article I. Consistent with *the management viewpoint*, new service systems are created, managed, and monitored to support transformative changes, as proposed in Article II. As informed by *the co-creation viewpoint*, these service systems require consumers who decide to use these tools and resources after framing them as acceptable and useful, as observed in Article III. Thus, this fourth article looks at the role of a food retailer from a holistic viewpoint and combines the

understandings from the three previously discussed articles to outline what it takes for a food retailer to assume a transformative role in sustainability.

This article was co-authored. The current author was a part of iteratively developing the research setting. She was also responsible for the conceptualization of the transformative element in the paper. Besides writing the theoretical discussion on TSR, she conceptualized the implications of transformative food retailing for different stakeholders.

It should be noted that while the articles were discussed here as individual studies, their key findings and main contributions are brought together in the next section as complementary viewpoints on the research phenomenon. In the next section, a novel framework for reframing the role of companies in guiding business sustainability transitions is developed.

5   Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the role of companies in relation to sustainability from multiple viewpoints (*research purpose*). Multiple viewpoints were used instead of a single perspective to gain a holistic understanding of companies' role in sustainability (*research phenomenon*). The need for multiple viewpoints followed from the novelty of the research phenomenon and from the complex, evolving, and systemic nature of sustainability (*research context*). The presented viewpoints emerged from the empirical research, yet it must be acknowledged that the researcher's interpretation of the findings was not conducted in a theoretical vacuum but was guided by the most recent and relevant literature in the fields of marketing and sustainability transition (*theoretical framework*). As a result, the four viewpoints (strategy, management, co-creation, and holistic) complement one another and together provide a broad and timely outlook on the role of companies in sustainability.

5.1   Reframing as a method to reconstruct the role of companies in sustainability

As discussed in the introduction, tackling grand challenges such as climate change, human rights violations, the widening wealth gap, and the disease outbreaks requires novel ideas and unconventional approaches from anyone joining the forces to resolve them (Ferraro et al., 2015). However, what might prevent these novel ideas from emerging is that we, as humans, become easily trapped in a single way of framing the issue at hand (Palmer & Dunford, 1996). Now, as companies consist of human beings who operate with ideas, interpretations, and framings, they are likely to be affected by the same limitation.

This dissertation argues that the current role of companies is embedded in particular framings. *Framing*, as an ongoing act of constructing and negotiating what is going on (Goffman, 1974), demarcates how people interpret, understand, and label occurring issues,

relations, and situations[14]. For Entman (1993), framing means to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient than others" (p. 52). Moreover, framing is seen to have *action significance* (Palmer & Dunford, 1996), which means that actors do not only categorize an issue in their minds but also decide what action to take in practice, based on their entrenched ways of framing. On this basis, framing has immense contributions to human life, as it makes certain aspects instantly obvious to us while keeping other aspects hidden from the view.

Thus far, being trapped by a single, "one best way" of framing might have limited companies' ability to respond in new ways to the complex, ambiguous, and quickly changing issues of sustainability, and instead respond with obvious solutions sustaining the (unsustainable) status quo. To expand the repertoire of creative, alternative responses, the existing framings underpinning companies' current roles need to be deconstructed, reconstructed, and co-constructed (Wittmayer et al., 2017). It is proposed that this can be done—even in rapid succession—as motivated actors negotiate alternative interpretations and actions in social interaction with one another[15]. This is called *reframing*.

The dissertation suggests reframing as a method for companies to step out of their old role conceptions and envision a new role. In times of crisis or in need of change, reframing is a useful process for looking at the current situation from multiple points of view and then creating a new response to the situation at hand (Bolman & Deal, 2010, 2017). As Bolman and Deal (2017) discovered, managers' inability to consider multiple perspectives undermines their efforts to change organizations. Regarding business sustainability transitions, reframing can enable managers to see the transition through multiple lenses and thus realign discrepancies between different marketplace actors (Dewulf, Gray, Putnam, & Lewicki, 2009).

As an envisioning method, reframing can extend managers' scope beyond *what is* to *what could be* in terms of sustainability. More than knowledge building, reframing is about the ongoing vision building and perspective building (Saarinen, 2008). By using words, concepts, questions, ideas, associations, comparisons, and other instruments of the verbal dimension in new ways in ordinary everyday human interaction, managers can find previously hidden perspectives of what is possible (Saarinen, 2008). Because of its enabling nature, reframing is seen as an ally for managers in the midst of the "elusive phenomena" (Roethlisberger, 1977) that business sustainability very much is.

In reaching out to managers, reframing is conceptualized here as a process in which managers bring two seemingly distinct and previously disconnected frames together—a business frame and a sustainability frame—to understand systemic issues from multiple perspectives. This reflects *frame blending* to distinguish it from frame shifting. Whereas

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14   Scholars tend to focus on frames as cognitive representations or framing as interactional co-construction; the latter is adhered to here (Dewulf et al., 2009).

15   "Motivated" is added because reframing means dealing with extra cognitive, linguistic, and social efforts to negotiate new understandings in interaction while already multitasking in life (Gordon, 2008).

frame shifting would mean favoring one frame over another, for instance, prioritizing the economic perspective over the environmental and social ones in decision making, frame blending encourages the use of the two frames of business and sustainability simultaneously to increase perspectives (e.g., Werner & Cornelissen, 2014). Together these two frames of business and sustainability can trigger new, alternative, and creative ways of thinking and acting.

Through the reframing process, managers can expand their horizons and capacity for action (Palmer, Dunford, & Buchanan, 2016), which serves in assuming the new, transformative role for companies. As this dissertation aims to show, the roles of companies are not static; they are neither states of the world nor states of the mind but rather dynamic social phenomena that are embedded and can therefore be renegotiated in ordinary everyday social interactions. It is assumed that by reframing their role vis-à-vis critical sustainability transitions, companies can better understand and then serve the actual needs of the marketplace, the inclusive needs of society, and the needs of future generations.

Table 4 combines theoretical insights with the empirical findings to provide a procedural scheme for reframing the role of companies in sustainability. The left-hand column presents the three organizational areas that emerged from the empirical research as the most potential ones for role reframing. In the right-hand column, the different role conceptions are captured.

Table 4. Procedural scheme for reframing the role of companies in relation to sustainability

Areas for reframing	Previous roles	Transformative role
Business strategies	Responsive, reactive, company-centered	Creative, proactive, systems-oriented
	→ Strategy as a source of inertia	→ Strategy as a source of change
Example from Article I	Sustainability is integrated into the existing strategies as an "add-on" element	Sustainability triggers changes in the strategy through the four new strategic roles
Management activities	Linear, hierarchical, well-ordered, compliance-driven	Emergent, collaborative, creative, systemic
	→ Management-as-usual	→ Transformative management
Example from Article II	Economic, social, and environmental conditions of the business environment are treated as given and exogenous to the management activities of the company	The business environment can be favorably influenced through marketplace interactions, and the conditions are treated as endogenous to the management activities of the company
Co-creation practices	Collecting feedback on the existing market offering, adapting the offering	Inviting users to co-create the market offering, continuously developing the offering together
	→ Consumers as passive receivers	→ Consumers as active collaborators
Example from Article III	Production and consumption are viewed as separate functions, leaving a passive role for consumers	Production and consumption are drawn closer together, consumers are treated as active co-creators

To visualize this process, Figure 4 builds a novel framework for reframing the role of companies in guiding business sustainability transitions. The first three articles reconstruct role conceptions and actions in the three organizational areas of *business strategies, management activities*, and *co-creation practices*. The articles introduce new solutions in these areas in the form of roadmaps, frameworks, and taxonomies. The fourth article then brings these organizational areas together and conceptualizes how a company can use marketplace interactions to bring transformative changes forward. It is proposed that by purposefully using marketplace interactions, companies can contribute to shifting the established business environment toward economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable modes of production and consumption—that is, initiate business sustainability transitions.
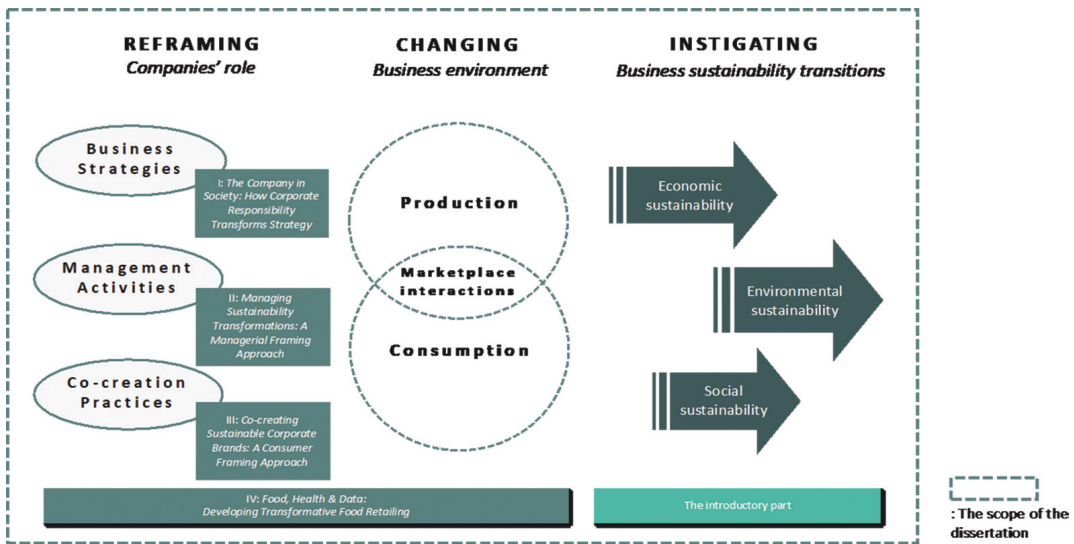
Figure 4. A novel framework for reframing the role of companies in guiding business sustainability transitions

While this dissertation recognizes the role of companies as key drivers of business sustainability transitions, by no means does it neglect the fact that the idea of companies as drivers of sustainability is largely contested (e.g., Banerjee, 2003; Bonnedahl & Heikkurinen, 2019; Laine, 2009; Springett, 2003, 2013; Tregidga et al., 2013). Furthermore, the dissertation does not underestimate the observation that dissolving companies' current role and creating a new, transformative one may involve severe stumbling blocks (Esty & Winston, 2009; Wittmayer et al., 2017). Thus, adopting the strong sustainability standpoint as a corporate entity has both theoretical and practical challenges, which translate into a management challenge for business actors assuming the new role.

Regarding theoretical challenges, critics argue that in the end, business sustainability is "based on, and thus restricted by, the business logic of maximizing shareholder returns and therefore always prioritizes this goal over sustainability goals" (Heikkinen, 2014, p. 48). Even a more philosophical criticism can be found for the liberal market economy as a profoundly unsustainable system—a criticism in which market-driven technologies and solutions are seen as only reinforcing and thus rewarding the current Western, capitalist, neo-liberal system that got societies into the brink of sustainability crises in the first place (see e.g. Bonnedahl & Heikkurinen, 2019; Springett, 2003, 2013; Urry, 2013).

While a certain degree of criticism toward business sustainability can be expected from the critical school of thought, this is not, however, the purpose of this dissertation nor the focus of the literature streams upon which this research builds its theoretical lens. Moreover, as demonstrated by those managers who participated in this research, capitalist goals are not the only motivation for business actors to engage with sustainability. Instead, personal commitment to sustainable thinking, core values, including care for the future

generations, and beliefs about the difference that business can make in society are strongly shaping their framing (see also Hampton, 2018; Heikkinen, 2014; Kujala, Lämsä, & Riivari, 2017; Williams & Schaefer, 2013).

Apart from the theoretical debates, the dissolution and creation of a company's role are not just theoretical exercises but also come with practical challenges. Inside an organization, hurdles such as silo thinking, inertia in the corporate culture, and middle-management squeeze, can impede role change (Esty & Winston, 2009). Outside the organization, different marketplace actors are likely to have different opinions about what is problematic, or desirable, about existing actor interactions and roles, as well as what kinds of new roles might be necessary (Wittmayer et al., 2017). Finally, the highly important yet challenging changes take place in the ordinary everyday social interactions of the individual, that is, managers' patterns of relating, framing, interacting, and operating (Senge et al., 2012).

Recommendations to managers to overcome at least some of these challenges, with a specific guidance on strategy, management, and co-creation, are given in Section 5.3. However, before moving to the practical implications, the theoretical contributions of the dissertation are discussed first.

5.2 Theoretical contributions

The knowledge creation process in research, in general, can be characterized along the discovery–justification continuum (Schickore & Steinle, 2006). On this continuum, this dissertation is situated more in the context of discovery—that is, conceiving a new reality for the first time. Research that is situated in the context of discovery has the ability to advance knowledge either by generating new ideas and new constructs, by creatively synthesizing existing ideas, or by building new relationships between established constructs and ideas (Yadav, 2006).

This dissertation makes its main theoretical contribution by generating a new construct—business sustainability transitions—to depict the fundamental, system-wide sustainability improvements that companies can initiate in their business environment through marketplace interactions. MacInnis (2011) defined *constructs* as "abstract, hypothetical concepts that are defined in a sufficiently precise manner (often along some dimension) to be operationalized or measured" (p. 141). Theoretical contributions pertaining to construct development play a significant role in knowledge advancement because constructs, as the basic units of knowledge, are at the center for how we, as human beings, see the world (MacInnis, 2011). Therefore, new constructs can serve to expand our worldviews.

MacInnis (2011) suggested four forms of conceptual contribution, labeled as (1) envisioning new ideas, (2) relating ideas, (3) explicating ideas, and (4) debating ideas. Research, which sees that something new exists and states why it is important, falls under the *envisioning* category. This dissertation does just that by perceiving new aspects of the

relationship between business and sustainability and capturing them in the new construct of business sustainability transitions. The metaphorical role of a researcher who contributes through envisioning is that of an astronomer, and his or her metaphorical tool is the telescope, illustrating the goal of identifying and making known something that is yet unknown.

However, the telescope is not enough to accomplish such an ambitious endeavor. The researcher also needs to be willing to examine related disciplines in order to see the research phenomenon from complementary viewpoints (Zaltman, 2000). Thus, developing the new construct was facilitated by climbing up to new theoretical vantage points to creatively combine relevant ideas primarily from two previously disconnected fields—marketing and transition research. Yet, the multiple viewpoints emerged from the empirical research without any predetermined perspective in mind, retaining the important possibility of seeing something new. The articles seizing the viewpoints, along with their key findings and main contributions to the respective literature in each study, are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Summary of article-specific findings and contributions

Article	Key findings	Contribution
I: The Company in Society: How Corporate Responsibility Transforms Strategy	A roadmap of four new roles for corporate responsibility in strategy, helping top executives to reframe sustainability in their strategic decision-making.	1) Identifies four new strategic roles for sustainability in top executive decision-making 2) Concretizes strategic initiatives and outlines strategic outcomes linked to the different strategic roles
II: Managing Sustainability Transformations: A Managerial Framing Approach	A framework of nine transformative management activities, helping sustainability managers to reframe their current activities in managing sustainability.	1) Develops an alternative approach of transformative sustainability management, characterized as emergent, systemic, creative, and collaborative 2) Gives credence to sustainability managers' own voices and perspectives in understanding sustainability transitions
III: Co-creating Sustainable Corporate Brands: A Consumer Framing Approach	Three framings of sustainable corporate brands, showing how corporate brands that embody a newly-adopted sustainability orientation are co-created together with consumers.	1) Demonstrates the sustainable corporate brands as co-created in social interaction between the company, other marketplace actors (e.g. consumers), and societal context 2) Deals with millennials as an important consumer group for societally and environmentally active corporate brands
IV: Food, Health & Data: Developing Transformative Food Retailing	A conceptual framework for transformative food retailing, reframing the role of food retailers in society.	1) Conceptualizes the food system transition by combining three theoretical approaches 2) Presents potential implications of business sustainability transitions for consumers, companies, academics, and society within the food system

As Table 5 shows, the dissertation integrates multiple viewpoints. Thus, it also builds bridges between different research areas. The scholarly conversations concerning the role of companies in sustainability are plentiful and widely dispersed, so it would not be possible to aim for multiple viewpoints but draw from only a single literature stream. Therefore, each of the four articles draws from and contributes to several and slightly different streams within the broader fields of marketing and sustainability transition. Section 4 takes a closer look at the individual articles and the specific theoretical debates to which the articles contribute.

Overall, by integrating the different viewpoints and introducing the new construct of business sustainability transitions, the dissertation as a whole contributes to both fields of marketing and sustainability transition. First, within the marketing literature, sustainability has remained a fringe topic. The existing marketing literature has remained limited in terms of understanding, conceptualizing, and, indeed, utilizing marketplace interactions as valuable catalysts for creating favorable changes in the business environment, society, and ecosystem at large. By proposing that marketing—through the field's essence— is inextricably linked to business sustainability transitions, the dissertation provides new insights into the transformation of marketing toward sustainability and alleviates the previously fraught relationship between the two theoretical fields of marketing and sustainability transition (Achrol & Kotler, 2012; El-Ansary, Shaw, & Lazer, 2018; Kemper & Ballantine, 2019; Lim, 2016).

Second, sustainability transition research lacks a suitable vocabulary and theoretical understanding to analyze the roles, relations, and interactions of actors as a part of these transitions (Wittmayer et al., 2017). By conceptualizing marketplace interactions as an influential vehicle through which companies can initiate business sustainability transitions, the dissertation provides new insights into the centrality of social interactions in such transitions (Köhler et al., 2019). Furthermore, extending the use of framing/reframing both as an analytical approach and as a managerial method from social interaction research to the sustainability transition field can assist in filling blind spots in the field's understanding of how perceptions of social reality and the subsequent actions can be shaped.

According to MacInnis (2011), research that seeks to see something that is not obvious— in other words, one that envisions—can greatly benefit from the use of metaphors. By definition, a metaphor is a "figure of speech in which a word literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them" (Cleary & Packard, 1992, p. 230). Organization scholars have advocated the use of metaphors in reframing because of their ability to provide fresh perspectives and create new realities (Palmer & Dunford, 1996). As metaphors are considered useful in generating new ideas, alternative interpretations, and new responses to organizational situations, especially complex ones (Bolman & Deal, 2010), a metaphor for reframing companies' role in sustainability is created in the next section.

5.3   Managerial implications

The dissertation serves to deliver one managerial implication over any other: to enable managers to think in new ways about the role of companies in sustainability. As managers enter the realm of the unknown, the unclear, and the unfolding—that is, business sustainability—the dissertation aims to enrich their perspectives, dissolve the complexity involved, and provide a systemic approach. The dissertation seeks to be particularly useful in situations of figuring out what can no longer be solved by conventional approaches. While it is not easy to let go of the old ways of being in relation with the world, reframing (i.e., expanding horizons and the capacity for action) is among the most important processes in bringing business sustainability transitions forward. Therefore, this section gives further guidance for business actors in doing this.

The *Reframing Cube*, as a metaphorical tool for reframing, is provided in Figure 5. Depicted as a Rubik's cube, a widely known and used three-dimensional combination puzzle, the Reframing Cube draws managers' attention to the interconnectedness of the different elements that the new, transformative role involves. As most people are familiar with the original Rubik's cube, the Reframing Cube can act as a discussion-enabling tool and a facilitation technique in heterogeneous teams, groups, and organizations, irrespective of the participants' backgrounds, in nearly any industry, market, or territory. So far, based on my personal experience with business actors, the Reframing Cube has proved to be an accessible and evocative facilitation technique at different workshops and seminars.

In managerial practice, metaphors stimulate creativity and imagination, and in times of change, they act as "guiding images of the future" (Cleary & Packard, 1992). Change metaphors are liberating, as they offer a sense of choice and new alternatives and ideas (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Change metaphors help managers build their mental outline as a three-dimensional image when dealing with abstract matters, challenging situations, or complex problems (Palmer et al., 2016). Metaphors are effective in unlocking hidden knowledge and breaking habitual thinking; they can therefore help de-construct the current "one best way" of framing. In the studies of Morgan (1986) and Bolman and Deal (2017), reframing through the use of metaphors is a skill to enrich the management tools available to individual managers.

In terms of the particular transition for which the Reframing Cube is created, the Cube can be seen as a balancing act, interlinking and balancing those dimensions that managers need to take into consideration when addressing sustainability. As such, it can encourage managers to think of sustainability from a systemic approach, question their current understandings and actions, and help identify and then realign the necessary elements. As Sackmann (1989) argued, metaphors, such as the Reframing Cube, can be helpful as they "influence employees' thinking, feelings, and their construction of reality in ways that facilitate organizational transformation [and can] trigger a perceptual shift" (p. 468).

To champion the above-described virtues of reframing and to consider business sustainability transitions from different perspectives, the Cube is built around the principle

of the 'Five Ws and How' to make the reframing endeavor complete. The Five Ws and How was first established in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics as the "elements of circumstance" or *Septem Circumstantiae* (Sloan, 2010). Currently, it is a widely used approach in problem solving. Of the Five Ws and How, this dissertation focused especially on the organizational areas (how), but it also touched upon the systemic areas (where) and the sustainability areas (why). These three areas are depicted in the Cube:

- *Organizational areas* showing how reframing can happen in practice: business strategies, management activities, and co-creation practices (HOW)
- *Systemic areas* of the business environment where reframing is most needed: cultures, structures, and practices (WHERE)
- *Sustainability areas* that supply the reason for reframing and that need to be harmonized in the reframing process: economic, environmental, and social (WHY)

In addition to responding to questions of *how, where*, and *why*, the questions of *when*, *who*, and *what* should also be answered to make the reframing process complete. While these elements were not directly discussed in this dissertation, it is proposed that the other three sides of the Cube might include the following:

- *Temporal areas* for outlining sustainability goals and actions: short-, mid-, and long-term (WHEN)
- *Actor areas* denoting those actors who should be involved in the reframing process: top management, internal stakeholders, and external stakeholders (WHO)
- *Marketing areas* demonstrating the market-oriented areas that need to be redesigned: value creation logic, business model, and market offering (WHAT)
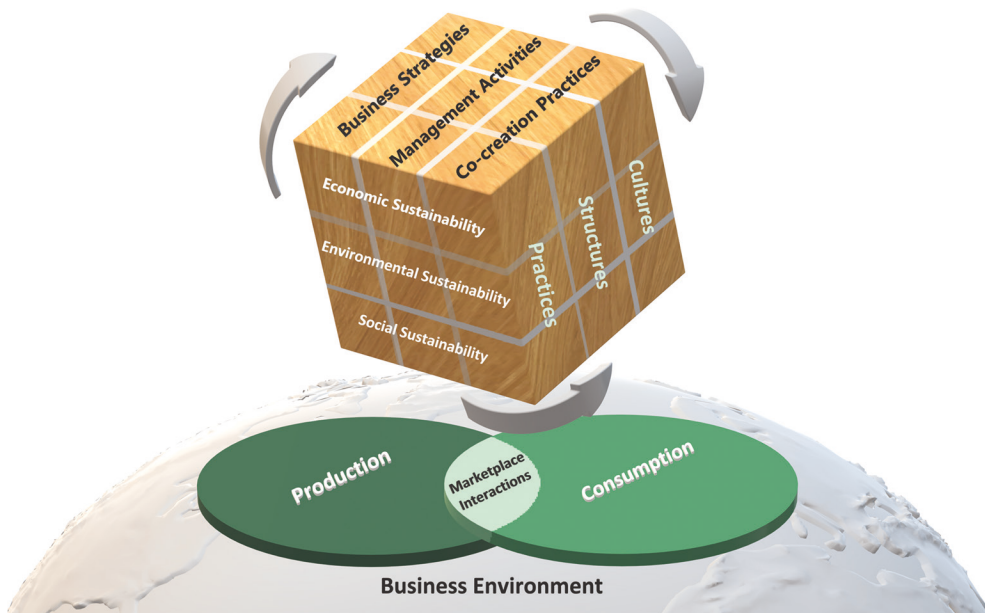
Figure 5. The Reframing Cube

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It must be noted that the reframing process needs to be tailored for each company. While the "elements of circumstance" in the Cube remain the same, the content of the elements depends on the unique company specificities. By solving the Reframing Cube in a way that is most meaningful for the company per se, the reframing process can reveal new kinds of solutions to and opportunities in sustainability. It is proposed that some of the most promising business opportunities in the field of sustainability rely on figuring out how best to bring the different elements of the Cube together.

The individual articles provide more concrete tools reaching beyond discursive benefits into changing the course of action in the different organizational areas (business strategies, management activities, and co-creation practices). As the three organizational areas form the core of this research, more specific managerial implications for these areas are also outlined in Table 6.

Table 6. Summary of managerial implications

Organizational area	Managerial implications
Business strategies	Enhancing strategic decision-making concerning sustainability
	Offering a roadmap to critically assess the current role of corporate responsibility in business strategy and develop new roles along two strategic decision-making dimensions
	Motivating top executives in the strategy work
Management activities	Arguing why conventional management is ill-suited for sustainability management
	Offering a framework of nine transformative management activities to overcome the deficiencies of conventional management approaches
	Revealing the breadth and depth of managers' professional capacities needed to initiate business sustainability transitions
Co-creation practices	Highlighting the co-creative nature of corporate brands that embody a newly-adopted sustainability orientation
	Demonstrating how co-creation takes place in dialogues between companies, consumers, and societal contexts
	Uncovering the three framings of sustainable corporate brands

To sum up, reframing is proposed as a key process for managers to use when aiming for strong sustainability and contributing to business sustainability transitions. The findings indicate that both frames of business and sustainability are critical in initiating such transitions. As the blending of the two frames happens in social interaction, it is managers' duty to create situations in which these two frames are both present and enacted simultaneously. This could mean, for instance, facilitating multi-disciplinary workshops or

online think tanks, building networks that include actors across the business environment, and inviting experts from different fields to take part in companies' sustainability work. Effective collaboration is needed to co-construct a transformative role for companies vis-à-vis sustainability transitions.

5.4   Limitations and future research

Besides the theoretical contributions and the managerial implications that this dissertation aims to provide, it also comes with certain limitations that can inspire interesting future research opportunities. The limitations are discussed by focusing on (1) theory, (2) context, and (3) method. The future research opportunities are collated in Table 7.

First, regarding theory, the research adopted multiple viewpoints and multi-disciplinary literature. This was done to address the research phenomenon, which was complex and theoretically underdeveloped. The complexity of the research phenomenon made it challenging to build a research setting that was sufficiently exhaustive yet exclusive enough.

While multi-disciplinary research is heavily encouraged in studying sustainability transitions (Köhler et al., 2019), it also comes with major challenges in the forms of conceptual obscurity and ontological incompatibility. In this dissertation, what was gained in the richness of the viewpoints was unfortunately lost in the conceptual sharpness. It is recognized that the plurality of the concepts can be demanding for readers. Still, the selected studies hold similar ontological assumptions of the key concepts like company (the actor in society), role (in between the actor and society), society and environment (endogenous to the efforts of the company), and their relations (socially constructed). Nevertheless, the different roots of these research traditions can appear as a limitation for the dissertation when compared with studies anchored in one research stream and a single theoretical standpoint.

Second, regarding context, this dissertation was placed in the context of sustainability. One contextual limitation relates to the emergent and non-linear nature of sustainability; it is difficult to say where sustainability starts and where it ends. While investigating actual sustainability transitions was beyond the scope of this research, it is important to note that there might be reasons explaining business sustainability transitions other than companies' intentional use of marketplace interactions, such as the maturity of sustainability in different sectors. For example, the whole energy sector is shifting toward the use of renewable energy sources, making business sustainability transitions slightly easier to achieve for an energy company than for a company that is the first or the only mover in its sector.

Also, the sample of companies in this research is by no means representative of all companies in any industry, market, or territory. The dissertation focused on companies that have already engaged in proactive sustainability, which can be seen as contextual simplification. Here, the companies were selected from the 2017 Sustainability Brand Index and the Global 100 Most Sustainable Corporations Index, and they represented

industries where business sustainability transitions are most needed. This was justified by the principle of theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt et al., 2016): the sample in the present study was selected because such companies were more likely to generate insights into the phenomenon. However, it is recognized that including companies that have not yet engaged in strong sustainability could have offered important insights, too. The current dissertation might therefore provide a too optimistic view.

Moreover, all the companies represent medium to large companies that are based in Finland. The cultural, legal, and organizational similarity of the companies is likely to influence their approach to sustainability. While globalization has been deemed to homogenize such aspects as the culture, values, and processes of internationally operating companies (Carr, 2005), the national and cultural context, together with some systemic path dependencies, likely affects how sustainability is adopted in these companies. Furthermore, while the companies represent multiple industries, the research fell short in understanding how these industries differ from one another in terms of addressing sustainability. Besides industrial differences, company size and structure, organizational culture, decision-making styles and policies, strategy and market position, history, and company-specific path dependencies were also likely to influence how they view their role in relation to sustainability.

Third, considering methodology, the social constructionist paradigm made the research highly reflexive in nature, meaning that the researcher was an inextricable part of the research process and the creation of new knowledge. Therefore, the interpretations presented in this dissertation represent subjective understandings of the researcher, limiting the applicability and generalizability of the findings to other contexts. As social constructionist research, however, this dissertation did not aim to provide generalizations or objective truths but to discover new perspectives and provide a rich and deep description of what is discovered.

The theoretical, contextual, and methodological limitations discussed above are tied to a set of choices made by the author. Therefore, they provide room for many other research directions for others to build upon, as suggested in Table 7.

Table 7. Summary of suggested future research opportunities

Domain	Future research opportunities
Theory	– Utilize single theoretical approach, such as institutional theory or stakeholder theory as a theoretical starting point
	– Intensify research at the intersection of strategy and sustainability transition literature as a strategic approach to transitions
	– Seek novel theoretical departures to investigate the fundamental change in business logic
Context	– Recognize the context-specificity by comparing different companies/industries/markets/or territories
	– Identify the best practices of executives and managers for reframing in different organizational areas/companies/industries/markets/or territories
	– Focus on each organizational area in-depth to uncover the specificities of strategy, management, and co-creation
Method	– Gain in-depth insight into reframing through a single case study method.
	– Explore how reframing happens in practice by conducting an ethnographic study or action research.
	– Utilize other interactionist analytical approaches such as rhetorical, narrative, or discourse analysis to explore a similar setting.

In future studies on companies' commitment to and achievements on sustainability, the business sustainability transition construct is proposed as a useful conceptual tool. Yet, more empirical research is needed to obtain a deeper understanding of how, why, and when these transitions succeed, as well as when they fall flat despite the good intentions. Case studies could be conducted on companies that are already speeding up such transitions.

The theme of collaboration between different marketplace actors is an interesting one and is an area for future research. Especially, the collaboration between incumbent and newcomer companies is of fundamental interest for transitions scholars (Hess, 2016; Rosenbloom et al., 2016). This collaboration between the niche and regime players is needed to develop and diffuse sustainable technologies, speed up socio-technical solutions, and eventually advance business sustainability transitions in society. Fellow researchers are encouraged to explore this niche–regime interaction further.

5.5 Evaluation of the research

The quality of the research process is evaluated through the concepts of trustworthiness, credibility, authenticity, and relevance. The *trustworthiness* of this dissertation was enhanced through a systematic and transparent research process using theoretical

sampling (Eisenhardt et al., 2016) and applying rigorous methods to generate and analyze data systematically. By meticulously documenting the research process and making each step transparent to readers, the author attempted to increase research trustworthiness (Gummesson, 2005).

In terms of improving the *credibility* of the research, the dissertation was carried out by following good research practice. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested three ways of improving the credibility of research. First, a *prolonged period of engagement* was fulfilled, as the entire research process lasted for four years, during which the author familiarized herself thoroughly with the subject being studied, both in theory and in practice, increasing the likelihood of apprehending the phenomenon in depth. Second, *persistent observation* facilitated the identification of the different viewpoints on the research phenomenon. Third, different forms of *triangulation* stemmed from the article-specific viewpoints and displayed multiple realities simultaneously.

To ensure the *authenticity* of the research process, the author encouraged the participants to speak about the themes in the interviews and focus groups from their own perspective and in their own language, staying faithful to how they frame the issue at hand (Granot et al., 2012). Giving credence to the participants does not, however, mean that the researcher wished to be excluded from the process of knowledge creation—quite the opposite. In effect, to stay true to the data and the participants' views, the framework was iteratively built in a constant dialogue between the voices from the field and insights from theory.

Finally, in assessing the research quality, the author asked herself, "So what?" regarding the *relevance* of the research. To bring researchers' attention to the relevance of research, Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) encouraged researchers to identify and question current assumptions underlying the existing literature. The present dissertation stepped away from the current underlying assumptions and took a new standpoint on the role of companies in sustainability, and this is where the dissertation fights its corner. Furthermore, the chosen qualitative methodologies supported the relevance of the research by allowing the generation of new and innovative ideas, the use of inductive logic without a theoretical straitjacket restricting the analysis, and the inclusion of contextual understandings, all of which are critical in addressing grand challenges (Eisenhardt et al., 2016).

To conclude, companies have much to contribute to the sustainable world. Yet, when unprecedented developments change the world as we know it, old ways of doing business become obsolete in the current and in the foreseeable future. Therefore, as the 21st century unfolds, companies are entering into an era of deep rethinking of their role of being in relation with the world that is facing mounting changes in the economic, social, and ecological spheres. It is time for companies to reconsider whether their current sustainability practices are applied to their maximum potential or whether they could leverage their core business and the scale advantages it offers to resolve some of the world's most serious evolving challenges. Being in tune with what is emerging around, they can seize immense, but not instantly obvious, business opportunities. Reframing is proposed as

a useful method for companies to do so, opening a door to a new realm of alternative ways of thinking, acting, and doing business—that is moving toward business sustainability transitions.

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Original Publications

PUBLICATION
I

The Company in Society: When Corporate Responsibility Transforms Strategy

Lahtinen, S., Kuusela, H., & Yrjölä, M.

The company in society:

When corporate responsibility transforms strategy

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Abstract

Purpose

This study aims to identify and analyze the different roles corporate social responsibility (CSR) can play in corporate strategy. By acknowledging that one of the biggest challenges for companies in committing to sustainability is the strategy work, the authors outline specific strategic initiatives to achieve these roles and the strategic outcomes that will follow such initiatives.

Design/methodology/approach

Four illustrative case examples show how companies are recasting the role of CSR. The new CSR roles are characterized through two strategic dimensions: an inside-out (firm-oriented) vs outside-in (market-oriented) orientation, and an emphasis on leveraging vs prospecting activities.

Findings

The findings show that to realize the opportunities of CSR for business, environment and society at large, the role of CSR in the boardroom must be reconfigured. By recasting its role, CSR can become a driver for the strategy process and a transformative force generating strategic changes.

Practical implications

This paper aims to encourage top executives to take a proactive stance toward sustainability, recognize the new roles and potential impact that CSR can have in corporate strategy and assist strategic decision-making regarding CSR.

Originality/value

The paper aims to move beyond integrating sustainability into existing strategies and business models by demonstrating how sustainability can also inspire strategic changes *a priori* when the role of CSR is recast in companies. By viewing CSR as a driver of corporate strategy and strategic initiatives, the authors suggest that besides helping the environment, the community and society, CSR can help corporate strategy.

Keywords

corporate social responsibility, executive, strategic decision-making, strategy, sustainable business, sustainability

1. Introduction

Top executives' decision-making is strategic in nature: it includes considerations of the company's long-term viability and the ability to answer multifaceted challenges in the global environment. One of the domains increasingly attracting the attention of top executives is the strategic decision-making concerning corporate social responsibility (CSR). While most top executives today are recognizing the environmental, economic and social challenges related to their business and making necessary changes to their business operations, a clear understanding of the role of CSR in corporate strategy remains a challenge for many. Prior research has widened our understanding of the strategic nature of CSR by focusing on integrating issues regarding sustainability and responsibility into existing strategies and business models. In this paper, we demonstrate how sustainability issues can also inspire new strategic initiatives and drive strategic changes a prioriwhen the role of CSR is recast in companies.

The purpose of this study is therefore to identify and analyze the different roles that CSR can take in corporate strategy. By acknowledging that one of the biggest challenges for companies in committing to sustainability is the strategy work (Bonn and Fisher, 2011), we outline specific strategic initiatives that companies can undertake and propose well-defined roles for CSR that might help companies to understand the opportunities sustainability can offer. We also shed light on the strategic outcomes that companies might expect when they undertake these initiatives.

This paper addresses the call for a new approach to strategy regarding sustainability issues (McPhee, 2014). We argue that through role recasting, CSR can become a transformative force generating strategic changes rather than only an "ingredient" – or a "retroactive addition" (Alberti and Garrido, 2017) – that needs to be integrated into the existing corporate strategy. Thus, we encourage companies to take a proactive stance toward sustainability in their strategy, and we characterize the new CSR roles through two strategic dimensions:

1. an inside-out (firm-oriented) vs outside-in (market-oriented) orientation; and

2. an emphasis on leveraging vs an emphasis on prospecting activities.

We use illustrative case examples to show how four different companies, each operating in challenging industries regarding corporate responsibility, are recasting the role of CSR by approaching it as a strategic opportunity to make an impact on business, people and the planet, also known as the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1997).

2. The evolving role of corporate social responsibility

Mirroring the changing landscape of business and the society and environment at large, the concept and usage of CSR is constantly evolving and taking new forms. Building on to the ideas of Carroll (1999), we propose that CSR consists of legal, economic, ethical and operational dimensions, which are complementary – rather than contradictory – ways of viewing the concept. In this paper, we show that CSR, as a definitional construct, also has a strategic dimension.

As stated by Matten and Moon (2008, p. 405), "at the core of CSR is the idea that it reflects the social imperatives and the social consequences of business success." By following the recent strategic turn in CSR literature, we propose that CSR also reflects the strategic opportunities for business success, amplifying the strategic imperative for responsible business decisions. As the evidence presented in previous studies shows (Bonn and Fisher, 2011; McPhee, 2014; Palmer and Flanagan, 2016), approaching CSR as a strategic issue is pivotal for companies today. However, to

realize the multifaceted opportunities of CSR for business, its role in corporate strategy needs clarification. As top executives are responsible for shaping sustainable corporate strategies, we analyze their strategic decision-making to uncover how the role of CSR can be reconfigured.

3. Dimensions of strategic decision-making

In analyzing the different roles that CSR can take in corporate strategy, it is necessary to distinguish two strategic dimensions:

1. an inside-out (firm-oriented) vs outside-in (market-oriented) orientation; and

2. an emphasis on leveraging vs an emphasis on prospecting activities.

First, top executives must balance the two orientations in their strategic decision-making: inside-out and outside-in (Saeed et al., 2015). An inside-out orientation involves making the organization's current strengths, products and capabilities the starting point for the strategy. This type of decision-making starts with identifying the unique assets and capabilities of the organization and then searching for potential markets and strategies to leverage these unique resources. The focus is on choosing the core businesses or product categories to operate in, using assets, improving productivity and maximizing market share. Inside-out decisions include, for example, cost control, human resource management and technology development.

An outside-in decision-making orientation takes the market as the starting point for the strategy. The focus is on interpreting market signals, such as competitor behavior, consumer trends and customer processes (Saeed et al., 2015). These insights are then used to anticipate, influence and meet marketplace changes by developing new capabilities and offerings (Day and Moorman, 2010). According to this view, companies' interactions with market actors and stakeholders create valuable assets, including relationships, market insights and goodwill (Day and Moorman, 2010; Saeed et al., 2015).

Second, top executive decision-making can aim to either leverage current resources and capabilities or create new ones (March, 1991). In this study, the former type of thinking, concerned with emphasizing current (and more certain) resources, capabilities and revenues, is labelled "leveraging". It can involve elements such as efficiency, refinement and execution (March, 1991). Leveraging can be targeted at internal aspects, such as improving production processes, or external ones, such as using the brand to generate more revenue. The latter type of thinking, which we label "prospecting", is more explorative in nature and concerned with future resources, capabilities and revenue streams. Hence, prospecting is more risk-seeking in nature. It can include aspects such as discovery, innovation and experimentation (March, 1991). Prospecting can involve internal possibilities, such as new technology development, or external ones, such as seizing new market opportunities.

We argue that top executives must balance these two dimensions in their strategic decision-making regarding CSR. For instance, because of an overemphasis on internal processes, the inside-out orientation might distance the organization from its market and stakeholders. On the other hand, the outside-in orientation might be inefficient or cause the organization to lose its distinctive resources and capabilities if too much effort is put into chasing market trends or pleasing all outside stakeholders (Day and Moorman, 2010). Similarly, prospecting for new opportunities will take resources away from improving existing competencies (March, 1991).

4. Empirical study

4.1 Methodology

The qualitative case study method allowed us to investigate the contemporary and complex issue of CSR within its real-life context, offering a practical and accessible format for the study (Yin, 2014). The four case studies presented below explicate the ways companies are recasting the role of CSR in their strategy, the strategic initiatives through which these roles are achieved and the strategic outcomes that this role recasting can provide to proactive companies. In studying these cases, we used two different kinds of data. The primary data were generated through semi-structured interviews (varying from 50 to 80 min) with senior sustainability and CSR managers who are involved in the strategic decision-making of the executive teams. The secondary data consist of annual reports, sustainability reports and other public materials from these companies. An interpretive approach was used to analyze the central qualities of the data. To ensure anonymity, companies are identified by the letters A-D.

4.2 Illustrative case examples

Given the complex, extensive and long-term nature of strategic decision-making, we provide a roadmap, which aims to assist senior managers and top executives in rethinking the role of CSR in their corporate strategy (Figure 1). The roadmap captures the dimensions identified in our previous theoretical discussion. The illustrative case examples represent companies in both B2B and B2C sectors, operating in the alcoholic beverage, food manufacturing, paper, and forest industries, each experiencing high pressure in terms of CSR. To engage stakeholders, enhance business performance, stimulate innovation and transform the market based on sustainability, these companies are moving from merely integrating responsibility in their existing business models to transforming the way they do – and value – business.

4.2.1   Case company A

One of the greatest challenges in CSR strategy comes from adjusting the operations of the company to the expectations of a broad network of stakeholders. Company A, a national alcoholic beverage retailer, operates with multiple stakeholders and has been struggling to balance the conflicting expectations toward the company and its special role in society. The company has a state-granted monopoly to sell alcoholic beverages containing more than 5.5 per cent alcohol per volume, and in 2015, its retail sales amounted to €1.2bn. Naturally, selling products with harmful effects is the primary challenge for the responsible management of the company, but while the requirement for the company's responsibility comes from legislation, it has been active in looking for other ways to go beyond normative compliances to emphasize its role as a responsible player in the community.

Company A has implemented several strategic initiatives to work on environmental, economic and social issues that are important and meaningful to its multiple stakeholders. To enable idea-sharing among all its stakeholders, the company invited all 12 key stakeholder groups – including customers, suppliers, owners, employees, authorities and the media – to take part in the process of planning, developing and implementing the responsible actions of the company. With over 1,300 ideas originating from its key stakeholders, the "Online Think Tank" has become an exceptional source of ideas and opportunities. By investing in issues that are recognized as important by stakeholders, Company A is embracing the concept of "stakeholder democracy" (O'Dwyer, 2005).

In terms of role recasting, Company A approaches CSR as a process for engaging stakeholders. As shown in Figure 1, by making the market the starting point for the CSR strategy and seeing the collaboration with stakeholders as an opportunity to create valuable assets, Company A is following the outside-in orientation and leveraging existing resources, in the form of stakeholder relationships. Strategic outcomes, such as greater stability within different stakeholder relationships, a minimized risk of conflict between divergent objectives and an increased flow of market insight, create value for both the company and its stakeholders, as stakeholders can now influence rather than be influenced by Company A's responsible actions.

Figure 1 Roadmap to reconfiguring the role of CSR
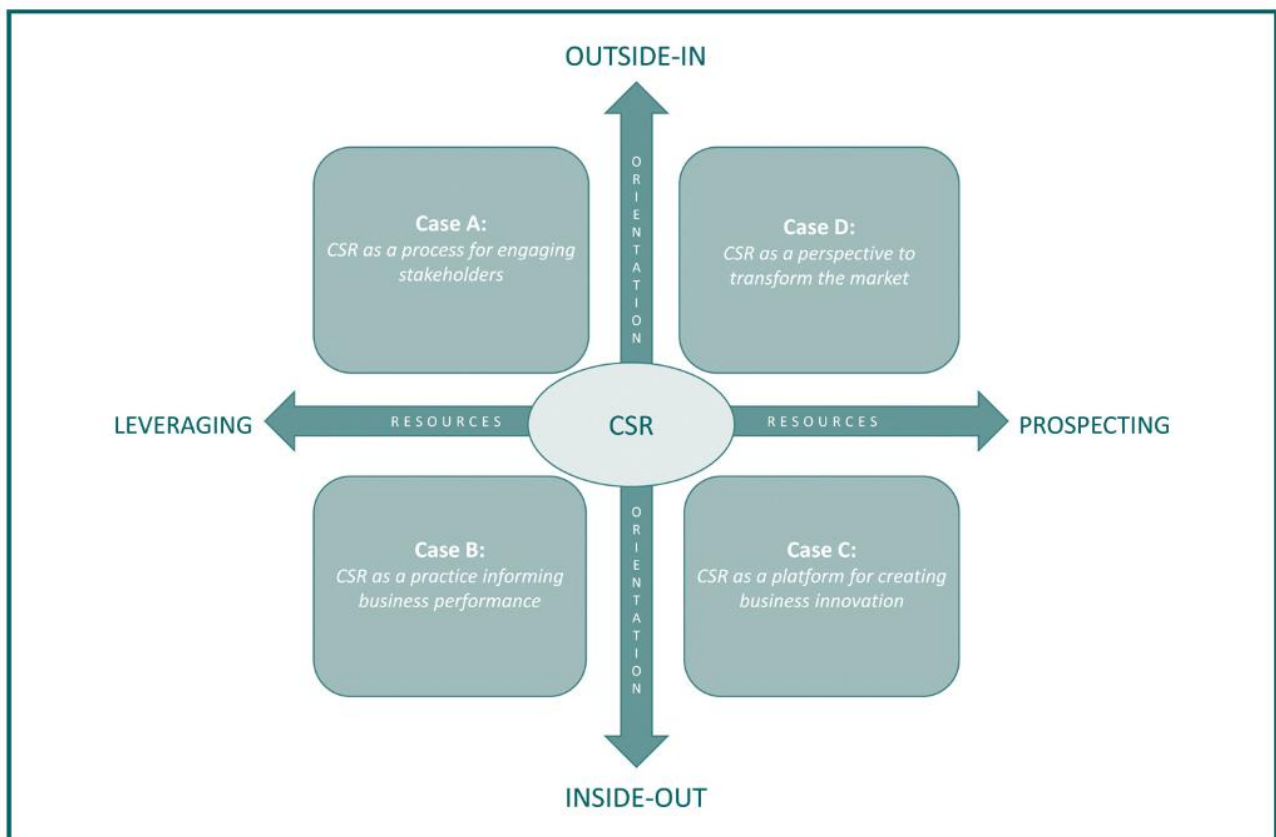
4.2.2 Case company B

Goal-setting and measurement are prominent but difficult components of any CSR strategy (Palmer and Flanagan, 2016). The case of Company B, a leading globally operating paperboard company, shows how the company has been struggling to measure, manage and promote the impacts its sustainability operations have on the overall business performance, even though it is recognized as one of the world's leading companies in sustainable forestry and responsible business. As a listed company with sales of €2.0bn in 2015 and operating in an industrial sector with a huge influence on global forests and sustainability, the company decided to tackle the challenge of measurement and turn the intangible benefits into measurable value for business.

Company B has undertaken several strategic initiatives to reveal the competitive advantage and improved business performance resulting from its sustainable actions, impacts and achievements. One of these initiatives is conducting a materiality assessment through which the company has

recognized the relative importance of its environmental and social activities, the ten goals that have been developed based on this assessment and the set of key metrics that have been defined to assess its effectiveness in achieving these goals. The company has also integrated sustainability goals into the overall business performance objectives. By enlisting the senior management group in goal-setting and training all employees to understand how these goals can be achieved in their jobs, the company has ensured rigorous engagement with sustainability at all levels and has illustrated explicitly the advantages of CSR activities for its business.

Company B is recasting the role of CSR by viewing CSR as a practice informing business performance. Figure 1 illustrates how the company is leveraging its current resources and emphasizing the inside-out orientation by refining the existing sustainability program in terms of goal-setting and measurement. The new role of CSR provides strategic outcomes, such as decreased costs of raw material, water and energy use; an increased capability to differentiate the company from other, less responsible pulp and paper operators; and enhanced access to new markets and customer segments, valuing measurable sustainability performance. The integrated goals and the established metrics are used for motivating, evaluating and diagnosing sustainability's influence on overall business performance (Palmer and Flanagan, 2016) while establishing the business legitimacy.

4.2.3   Case company C

One drawback of current CSR strategies stems from companies focusing on incremental adjustments, instead of innovating new business opportunities based on sustainability. The case of Company C, a leading forestry company, shows how taking an innovative approach to sustainability can create value for the business, stakeholders and society. With sales of €9.8bn in 2015, the company has moved from focusing on gradual improvements in sustainability to finding innovative and radical solutions to global problems. To address systemic innovations, it has created a completely new business concept based on sustainable solutions, bringing the company at the forefront of developing a modern forestry industry.

To envision and implement new sustainability-driven business innovations, Company C has undertaken several strategic initiatives at the production, product and organizational levels. At the production level, the company has invested in cleaner technology and resource efficiency, meaning that as natural resources are used in a judicious manner, cost efficiency has improved. By allocating resources to developing sustainable products, the company has launched unique products and solutions aligned with their "eco-design" approach, which guarantees that when products reach the end of their life cycle, they can be used for new purposes. At the organizational level, the radicalness of sustainable innovations has enabled the company to innovate new business models by recognizing that its activities are linked to the larger ecosystem of which it is part of (Boons and Ludeke-Freund, 2013).

By taking a systemic approach to responsibility, Company C is recasting the role of CSR by seeing CSR as a platform for creating new business innovations. As illustrated in Figure 1, the company is prospecting for new, future resources and capabilities in the form of innovation and taking an inside-out orientation by improving its production processes, developing new products and crafting new business models. Sustainable innovation is defined as "a process where sustainability considerations (environmental, social, and financial) are integrated into company systems from idea generation through to research and development and commercialization. This applies to products, services and technologies, as well as to new business and organizational models" (Boons and Ludeke-Freund,

2013, p. 3). The strategic outcomes of engaging in sustainable innovations represent the improved utilization of resources and raw materials, an enhanced ability to attract innovative and motivated employees and increased opportunities to develop new businesses and harness the potential of sustainability as a competitive advantage.

4.2.4 Case company D

In today's CSR strategies, companies are expected to move beyond meeting the national product safety requirements toward making a positive impact through its product/service offering. Company D, a food industry group with net sales of €330m in 2015, has been greatly influencing consumers' well-being through its convenience food products for decades. Indeed, many factors related to convenience food, such as poor nutritional content, heavily processed products and the use of harmful additives, might damage consumer health. Recognizing its role in contributing to the long-term health of the nation, the company has developed its CSR program to better address issues related to nutrition and balanced eating habits.

Company D has implemented a number of strategic initiatives to support customers' present and future well-being. After recognizing that some of its food products did not meet the national objectives, the company drafted new nutritional guidelines for its products and launched a new, nutritionally balanced meals brand. The company has also improved consumers' access to nutritional information, which is regarded as one of the most promising instruments in promoting healthy choices. It has also fortified its nutritional expertise by hiring a nutrition specialist and intensified its collaboration with the National Nutrition Council. The company recognized that as a food manufacturer, it can promote not only healthier products but also healthier eating habits.

By expanding its responsibility to transform consumer behavior toward healthier eating, Company D approaches CSR as a perspective to transform the market. It is prospecting new resources by seizing the market opportunity of consumers' health consciousness and following the outside-in orientation by influencing the ways consumers choose and eat food (Figure 1). The new role of CSR embraces transformative action, which "aims to improve life in relation to the myriad conditions, demands and potentialities of a fundamental problem" (Mick, 2006, p. 2). Strategic outcomes – such as greater influence on consumers' wellbeing, increased revenue stream from new products in the product portfolio and reduced risk of negative image and reputation – show the potential of transformative actions to create competitive advantage in the marketplace and go beyond individual well-being toward a collective, positive impact (Saarijärvi et al., 2015).

5. Discussion

This paper addresses the call for a new approach to strategy regarding sustainability (McPhee, 2014). We have argued that the role of CSR in the boardroom needs to be reconfigured, and we have illustrated potential new roles for CSR through two strategic dimensions:

> 1. an inside-out (firm-oriented) vs outside-in (market-oriented) orientation; and

> 2. an emphasis on leveraging vs an emphasis on prospecting activities.

Four case examples illustrate how frontrunner companies are tackling this challenge. By reconfiguring the role of CSR, they are recognizing opportunities in measuring performance, innovating new business, engaging stakeholders and transforming the market toward true sustainability. These companies are not limited to such CSR fundamentals as complying legislation, improving product safety, or using less harmful materials, which often leads to "managing

unsustainability". Instead, they further harness the transformative potential of CSR to drive strategic initiatives that result in impactful strategic outcomes. In other words, they are leading sustainability (Table I).

Table I	The roles, strategic initiatives and strategic outcomes of role recasting		
Case/role	*Strategic initiatives*	*Strategic outcomes*	*Illustrative quote*
Case A: CSR as a process for engaging stakeholders	Enabling idea-sharing among all stakeholders in an online think tank Investing in sustainability issues recognized as meaningful by multiple stakeholders Embracing stakeholder democracy through two-way information flow	Greater stability in different stakeholder relationships Minimized risk of conflict between divergent objectives Increased market insight	"All our stakeholders have high expectations regarding our responsible actions. We see it as a prerequisite to our existence that we can keep up with and fulfill those expectations, which are constantly growing and changing"
Case B: CSR as a practice informing business performance	Creating a set of goals and metrics based on materiality assessment Integrating sustainability goals into business performance objectives Ensuring senior management engage in sustainability goal-setting, and training employees	Decreased costs of raw material, water, and energy use Enhanced access to new markets and customers Improved marketing position	"It is necessary for us that investing in sustainability also builds our competitive advantage and increases profitability. However, the benefits of CSR actions to profitability are as difficult to measure as measuring marketing ROI"
Case C: CSR as a platform for creating new business innovations	Investing in cleaner technology and resource efficiency Allocating resources for developing ecological and renewable products Innovating business models to harness the potential of sustainability	Improved utilization of renewable resources and raw materials Enhanced ability to attract innovative and motivated employees Increased opportunities to develop new businesses	"Our responsibility program doesn't only mean numbers and figures about how much we are reducing or improving certain indicators year-on-year. For us, this entire company is a responsibility program"
Case D: CSR as a perspective to transform the market	Drafting new nutritional guidelines for developing healthier products Investing in recruiting a nutritional specialist and collaborating with the National Nutrition Council Improving access to product information	Greater influence on consumers' wellbeing Increased revenue stream from new products in portfolio Reduced risk of negative image and reputation	"It is easier to recognize the effects of responsible actions retrospectively, than to operate prospectively, toward the future. However, I feel we are getting there, taking greater responsibility of our customers' well-being"

The key contribution for top executives aiming for this transformation lies in recognizing the plurality of roles that CSR can take in corporate strategy, instead of the single, most common one. Also, identifying the strategic initiatives leaves top executives better equipped to enact these roles. Reflecting on Figure 1, executives can critically assess the current role of CSR in their organization and evaluate the most relevant roles for their organizational context and aspirations. Building on this, we encourage executives to view CSR as a driver of corporate strategy and strategic initiatives. Viewed this way, we suggest that CSR can assist executives in evaluating and defining the critical elements of their strategy statements, namely, the objective, scope and advantage of the business (Collis and Rukstad, 2008). Knowing what the business aims to achieve (objective), the means of getting there (advantage) and the domain where the company will operate (scope) are all important for an effective strategy (Collis and Rukstad, 2008), and they can be crystallized by adopting CSR as a strategic tool.

We argue that CSR is, by nature, multifaceted and multipurposive. This is evident not only in the multiple roles CSR can take in corporate strategy but also in other organizational functions. CSR influences all domains of business, and thus, it should not be thought to belong to just one organizational function (e.g. Public Relations) or hierarchical level. Furthermore, CSR involves ways of thinking, ways of doing, and ways of organizing. We have analyzed CSR from a strategic

perspective and argue that when seen as a strategic tool, CSR can offer more than guidance to mission statements or ethical values. It can help executives carry out new strategic initiatives involving resource and energy efficiency, sourcing, and stakeholder engagement that create value in various ways. For instance, these initiatives may give the company a more transparent image, help build a favorable brand position in consumers' minds, and open up new markets.

Scholars and practitioners have long viewed CSR as a way of taking care of the environment, community and society (Kudlak and Low, 2015) that is separate from strategy. We propose that CSR should be viewed next as taking care of corporate strategy. As Porter identified, tradeoffs are fundamental to strategy, but as Alberti and Garrido (2017) show, sustainability and profit goals can co-exist and turn traditional trade-offs into new business strategies. More than co-existing, we suggest that by reconfiguring the role of CSR, sustainability and profit goals can cooperate in corporate strategy and lead companies to promising business opportunities and truly sustainable trajectories.

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PUBLICATION
II

Managing Sustainability Transformations: A Managerial Framing Approach

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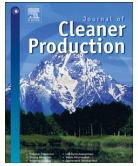
Managing sustainability transformations: A managerial framing approach

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ABSTRACT

This study explores, from managers' perspective, transformative management activities in mobilising sustainability transformations. Sustainability transformations are fundamental changes in cultures, structures and practices that move socio-technical systems towards more sustainable forms of production and consumption. Sustainability managers across different sectors are increasingly searching for new ways to advance such transformations, as conventional management appears ill-suited to tackling complex sustainability challenges, such as climate change. This research posits transformative management activities as an alternative approach. The framework of transformative management activities is based on an explorative study of managerial framing; that is how managers make sense of their actions, role, and purpose in managing sustainability initiatives. Data were generated from in-depth interviews with 10 sustainability managers who had facilitated sustainability transformations in their respective contexts. The nine activities were framed as: challenging the dominant environment through reflexivity; creating space for multi-vocal collaboration; aligning collaborators' future visions; restructuring principles, processes and practices; removing mental, physical and cultural barriers; designing effective feedback loops; influencing public discourse and action; ensuring the transparency of sustainability efforts; and co-constructing a new environment. Categorising these activities according to different management levels and management styles reveals the breadth and depth of managers' professional capacities required to mobilise such transformations. The research extends previous literature on sustainability transformations by combining a transition management (TM) perspective with management activities and by introducing the managerial framing approach. The nine transformative management activities help practitioners reframe their management activities vis-à-vis TM principles, gaining alternative means of mobilising the sustainability transformations needed in this era.

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1. Introduction

Sustainability, as a strategic part of any business today, should be addressed through transformative management. Sustainability challenges (e.g. climate change, resource depletion, global injustice) are characterised by high complexity, structural uncertainty and resistance to simple solutions, so they are difficult to tackle with *management as usual* (Van Den Bergh et al., 2011; Olsson et al., 2014; Eisenhardt et al., 2016; Gaziulusoy and Ryan, 2017). However, to date, companies largely respond to these challenges by using conventional management practices, leading to incremental, rather than fundamental, changes that are insufficient (Markard et al., 2012). A recent survey showed that more than half of corporate executives were troubled about how to manage sustainability and respond to the grand challenges their companies are facing (McKinsey, 2014). As traditional well-ordered, linear and hierarchical management activities are ill-suited to managing such complex issues, their widespread use might explain the lack of success in capturing the full value of sustainability for companies, stakeholders and the wider society (Etzion et al., 2017). Companies are thus searching for alternative ways to manage sustainability and contribute to the necessary sustainability transformations (Loorbach and Wijsman, 2013; Hörisch, 2018). This research suggests transformative management activities as an alternative.

Sustainability transformations are defined in this study as fundamental changes in societal cultures, structures and practices through which established socio-technical systems shift to more

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sustainable modes of production and consumption (Markard et al., 2012; Loorbach and Wijsman, 2013). Given that sustainability transformations call for innovative ideas and action (Eisenhardt et al., 2016; Etzion et al., 2017), managers need to use new methods of dealing with sustainability (Cagnin, 2018). Management activities, as the key components of any organisational strategy (Moorman and Day, 2016), involve the use of different resources to serve organisational purposes (Zott and Amit, 2010). Hence, by reframing conventional management activities, managers may reconfigure their actions, roles and purposes in dealing with persistent sustainability challenges, and generate proactive and innovative action. When managers 'become conscious of their roles in reproducing structures and elect to make new, imaginative choices to challenge dominant patterns', a transformative effect occurs (Blocker and Barrios, 2015, 268). Challenging the dominant patterns implies fundamental changes in ways of thinking (cultures), ways of organising (structures) and ways of doing (practices) (Gorissen et al., 2016), suggesting that managers may mobilise sustainability transformations by framing their activities in new ways.

This research therefore takes a relational perspective on sustainability. As one of the three metatheoretical perspectives on sustainability, the relational perspective emphasises framing as a mechanism for sustainability transformations (Garud and Gehman, 2012). It is important to note that the definition of sustainability may vary because it is context specific and subject to interpretation. As this research focuses on managers in commercial organisations, the concept of *business sustainability 3.0* (Dyllick and Muff, 2016) is used, asserting that a truly sustainable business shifts its focus from minimising its negative environmental and social impacts to understanding how it can create a significant positive impact on the challenges that society confronts. One prime example of such a shift in focus is illustrated by frontrunner companies, which are moving from a linear to a circular economy. For example, a leading forestry company, UPM, has moved from focusing on incremental improvements in sustainability to finding innovative and radical solutions to resource depletion. Based on its circular eco-design approach, it has created a whole new business concept, *Biofore*, and simultaneously helped to develop the modern forestry industry as well as transform its own business (Lahtinen et al., 2018).

Against this background, the purpose of this research is to explore and analyse, from managers' perspectives, transformative management activities in mobilising sustainability transformations. As this phenomenon is new in the literature, theoretical triangulation is used, combining the theoretical approaches of management activities (e.g. Zott and Amit, 2010) and transition management (TM, e.g. Loorbach and Rotmans, 2010). To understand the real-world phenomenon of sustainability management from managers' perspectives, the research draws on the foundational work on framing (Goffman, 1986). Framing describes the process of how perceptions of social reality can be shaped and how these perceptions then mobilise actors and further influence their actions (Benford and Snow, 2000). This managerial framing approach on sustainability transformations is so far lacking in the literature. Furthermore, empirical research that examines managers' efforts vis-à-vis sustainability transformations remains under-developed (Loorbach and Wijsman, 2013; Etzion et al., 2017; Gorissen et al., 2016; Cagnin, 2018). This study aims to address this gap by answering the following two questions: (1) How do sustainability managers frame their management activities in running sustainability initiatives, and (2) how do these activities relate to one another in terms of mobilising sustainability transformations? In doing so, the research contributes to the sustainability transformation literature by developing a framework of nine transformative management activities and an organising taxonomy for

sustainability managers seeking to proactively engage with sustainability transformations.

2. Literature review

The research draws theoretically on recent advances in two complementary research streams. The theoretical streams of management activities and TM are combined to build a theoretical framework for transformative management activities in the context of sustainability transformations. The former creates a basis for understanding resource utilisation in the context of sustainability management and highlights the action-oriented nature of managers' jobs. The latter provides an understanding of the means of advancing transformations. Hence, as the research is explorative in nature, the role of theory is to provide guidance, not to act as a straitjacket (Gummesson, 2006). The theoretical framework links these two streams of literature to create a lens through which the real-world phenomenon of transformative management activities can be empirically explored.

2.1. Management activities

Management is generally described as planning, organising, commanding, coordinating and controlling (Fayol, 1949; in Watson, 2006). This widespread description of management functions suggests that management is a relatively linear and control-based activity (Etzion et al., 2017). This approach positions an organisation as an essentially exogenous environment, where predicting, planning and goal-setting are fairly straightforward (Wiltbank et al., 2006). This study refers to such an approach as conventional management, of which a famous example is Kaplan and Norton's (2008) *balanced scorecard* (Etzion et al., 2017).

The management functions approach provides a conceptual toolbox to address the concrete actions of managers (Manser et al., 2016). However, this study uses the term *activities* instead of *functions* to highlight their action-oriented nature. Management activities are considered the basic elements of any organisation and are central to strategy (Moorman and Day, 2016). Manser et al. (2016) used a similar approach, proposing that management activities are highly interdependent and that different combinations of activities lead to different outcomes. Thus, depending on a company's desired outcome, it must apply a specific set of existing management activities or create new ones (Närvänen et al., 2018). Specific activities require different management styles, calling for either a more data-driven and analytical approach, or a more intuitive and creative one (Ogilvie, 1998). In summary, management activities are action levers that utilise different resources to serve a specific company purpose (Zott and Amit, 2010).

As stated earlier, conventional activities are ill-suited to managing sustainability initiatives dealing with grand challenges and aiming to achieve fundamental changes in the systems of production and consumption. Conventional management activities may even push sustainability initiatives in the wrong direction because relying on pre-selected goals, ready-made plans and well-ordered processes could lead managers to miss emerging, unseen future solutions (Svensson and Wagner, 2011). In effect, the particularities of transformations require management that is more proactive (Etzion et al., 2017), disruptive (Gaziulusoy and Ryan, 2017) and creative (Cagnin, 2018). Few scholars have suggested promising approaches as alternatives to conventional sustainability management. Ferraro et al. (2015; see also Etzion et al., 2017) introduced a sociological concept of robust action to promote sustainability transformations. Gaziulusoy and Ryan (2017; see also Mok and Gaziulusoy, 2018) presented a design thinking approach to lead such transformations. A group of scholars (e.g. Rotmans et al., 2001;

Loorbach et al., 2010) developed a theoretical approach of TM, drawing on transition thinking and dynamics of change to proactively manage transitions towards sustainability. In this study, we use the latter approach of TM to elevate conventional management activities into action levers mobilising sustainability transformations.

2.2. Transition management

TM is a nascent research stream that provides a process approach to managing changes in the dominant ways of thinking, organising and doing in unsustainable socio-technical systems (Loorbach et al., 2010). TM has so far been applied primarily to the activities of governmental organisations aiming to accelerate transformations (Hölscher et al., 2018), but it can also provide a viable approach to the management activities of business organisations aiming to advance such changes (Loorbach and Wijsman, 2013). TM distinguishes four different areas of activity required for transitions: strategic, tactical, operational and reflexive; these are briefly outlined in Table 1 (for an extensive description, see Loorbach et al., 2010).

In addition to different areas of activity outlined in Table 1, there are four lenses that TM recognises as essential in accelerating transitions: *multi-level*, *multi-actor*, *multi-phase* and *multi-pattern*. The multi-level lens addresses the dynamics of change within and between different levels of the operating environment—the macro level of societal trends and evolutions (landscape); the meso level of dominant cultures, structures and practices (regime); and the micro level of new technologies, new rules and new organisational arrangements (niche) (Geels, 2011). The multi-level lens is necessary for understanding transformations, as systemic changes are considered innovations at the micro level for competing with dominant structures and practices at the meso level, aiming to positively influence developments and trends at the macro level (Gorissen et al., 2016). Thus, managers need to critically scrutinise the entire system—existing trends, dominant structures and barriers to change, as well as social and cultural practices.

Second, the multi-actor lens requires relevant actors to collaborate, recognising the reach of sustainability issues extending beyond a wide range of stakeholders (Gorissen et al., 2016). TM suggests that relevant actors be invited into interactive innovation spaces, *transition arenas*, and, as informal networks, these spaces enhance the understanding of differences in interests, activities and needs (Olsson et al., 2014). These spaces can also act as initial incubators within which actors co-design and co-produce new systemic solutions (Loorbach and Rotmans, 2010). Thus, managers should create space for prolonged teamwork between relevant actors within and outside the organisation in order to broaden ideas (Olsson et al., 2014).

Third, the multi-phase lens describes the different phases through which transitions arise (Loorbach et al., 2010). Because of the evolving nature of sustainability issues, the actual design of transitions has a high degree of emergence, in contrast to a linear process and a predictable outcome (Gorissen et al., 2016). However, whilst transitions emerge non-linearly and iteratively, this is not to say that sustainability transitions do not have a goal: they are purposive in the sense of addressing persistent problems (Gaziulusoy and Ryan, 2017) and having a shared vision for a desirable and sustainable future (Taanman et al., 2012). This means that managers need to handle uncertainty and complexity whilst modifying the problem, defining the goal and designing the actions throughout different phases (Etzion et al., 2017).

Finally, the multi-pattern lens describes new patterns emerging from a range of innovative sources (Gorissen et al., 2016). Instead of relying only on existing resources and competencies as the starting point for sustainability initiatives, TM promotes the creative use of different sources to unlock existing path-dependent and self-reinforcing systems that often lead to *sustainability as usual* (Gaziulusoy and Ryan, 2017). TM thus encourages managers to use their imagination and embrace an ambiguous environment as a catalyst for creative action, rather than implementing only rational—logical activities designed to reduce uncertainty by collecting and analysing more data (Ogilvie, 1998).

Fig. 1 presents the research approach used with regard to the aforementioned transformative management activities. The research approach proposes that sustainability managers can mobilise sustainability transformations by framing their current management activities vis-à-vis TM principles and engaging what is labelled here as transformative management activities. Although the core in Fig. 1 is sustainability manager → transformative management activities → sustainability transformation, the research approach recognises this as a dynamic and iterative process, in which learning from successful (and unsuccessful) transformations refine management activities and offer input for managers' reframing.

Taking the conceptual insights together, the previous literature on management activities suggests that transformative management activities, as action levers, may utilise or create resources (mental, social, physical, capital) to serve the purpose of sustainability initiatives in mobilising sustainability transformations. In addition, the previous literature on TM indicates that these activities can be categorised into four areas of activity: strategic, tactical, operational and reflexive. These activities need to consider (1) the trends and challenges at multiple levels, (2) the multitude of different actors involved, (3) the non-linear phases through which transitions emerge and (4) the innovative range of sources for new patterns to emerge.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data generation through in-depth interviews

The research is positioned in the context of discovery and thus uses an explorative methodological approach. To explore and

Table 1
Four areas of activity required for transitions.

Area of activity	Characteristics	Illustrative example
Strategic	Relating to long-term goals and visions	Reformulating strategy, introducing new technologies, products and services
Tactical	Relating to the breakdown and build-up of system structures	Aligning investments, rules, incentives and infrastructure with the new vision, initiating collaborations
Operational	Relating to short-term and everyday decisions and actions	Changing system structures through experiments, changing everyday practices
Reflexive	Relating to the evaluation of the existing situation in various areas	Debating, evaluating and researching means by which cultures, structures and practices may be reframed

Source: Modified from Loorbach and Rotmans (2010) and Gaziulusoy and Ryan (2017).
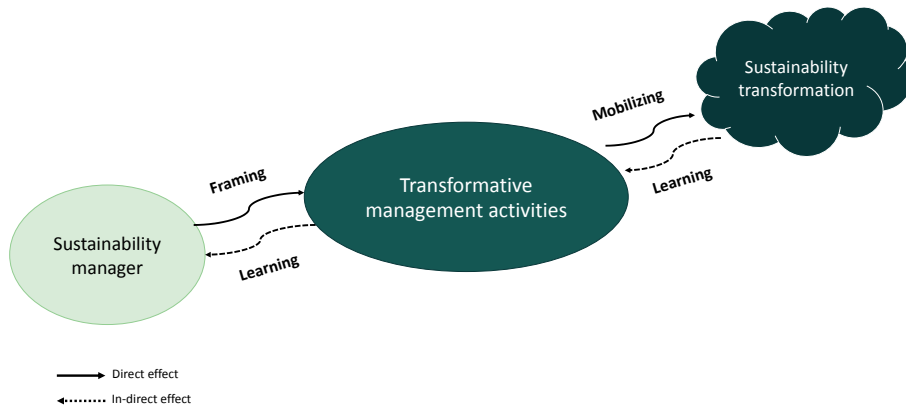
Fig. 1. A theoretical foundation for exploring transformative management activities.
Source: Authors' synthesis of the literature on management activities and TM

capture the complexity, context and persona in managerial framing, qualitative in-depth interviews (Gummesson, 2006) were conducted with 10 sustainability managers who spearhead sustainability initiatives in medium to large global companies based in Finland. In-depth interviews enabled detailed and rich descriptions (Granot et al., 2012) of how these managers make sense of their actions, roles and purposes. Sustainability managers were considered a relevant group to study because they have the responsibility of strategising, making decisions and executing sustainability initiatives in companies. For reasons of confidentiality, only details of the participants' positions and industry are given, together with the nature of the sustainability transformation mobilised by the respective companies (see Table 2).

Because of the explorative nature of the research, the interview protocol was unstructured (Corbin and Morse, 2003). It did not use a predetermined list of specific questions to be discussed with the participants; instead, a few open-ended guiding questions relating to the research phenomenon being explored were used. These guiding questions consisted of two types (Spradley, 1979) regarding the management of sustainability initiatives: general questions, such as 'What is the role of sustainability in this company?' and 'Take me through a day in your job', and more specific questions, such as 'How does sustainability management differ from other types of management in your opinion?' and 'Describe the most recent sustainability initiative you managed'. Direct questions concerning management activities, or transformative traits, were not asked, but every time a participant mentioned an activity or transformation, follow-up questions were asked to gain a better understanding of how the activity was framed or where the transformability stemmed from, such as 'How do you see this as transformative?' The in-depth interviews were conducted between October 2017 and May 2018, with each interview lasting from 50 to 80 min and totalling to 68 transcribed pages.

Saturation is central to qualitative sampling. Saturation forces the researcher to combine data generation and analysis, rather than treat them as separate stages in a linear process because knowing the number of interviews needed in advance is difficult (Baker and Edwards, 2012). Following the basic rule in qualitative research, the study did not aim to establish frequencies within the data but to elicit a rich range of responses (Baker and Edwards, 2012). Interviews were conducted for as long as new themes continued to emerge, that is, until the understanding of the phenomenon deepened and the saturation point was achieved (Granot et al., 2012). As meanings in human life are often shared and patterns of action are repetitive (Saldaña, 2016), recurrent framings started to emerge at an early stage, and the saturation point was reached.

The participants were selected through theoretical sampling, that is, they were selected because they were able to generate insights into the phenomenon (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Eisenhardt et al., 2016). The sampling criteria included both organisational and personal factors. First, the participants needed to represent companies that operate in domains where sustainability transformations are most needed or relevant, such as the energy, retail and food industries (Geels, 2011). These companies should be medium to large in size and hold strong positions with *complementary assets* (Rothaermel, 2001), making them powerful

Table 2
Study participants.

Participant	Position or title	Field of business	Nature of transformation
A	Senior vice president, sustainability communications	Food & beverage	Product/service innovation
B	Senior vice president, corporate responsibility	Retail	Process innovation
C	Senior vice president, sustainability	Retail	Process innovation
D	Director, design management, responsibility	Consumer goods	Influence on public discourse
E	Director, corporate responsibility	Forestry	Process innovation
F	Senior vice president, communications, sustainability	Service business	Influence on public discourse
G	Director, quality, responsibility	Food & beverage	Product/service innovation
H	Vice president, environment, responsibility	Paper and pulp	Process innovation
I	Director, corporate responsibility	Energy	Product/service innovation
J	Director, sustainable development	Transportation	Process innovation

Source: Compiled by the authors from the participants' data

actors in terms of accelerating system-wide changes compared with social-purpose start-ups. Focus was placed on companies that had proven success in relation to sustainability transformations. Here, success was defined as an assessment based on the social, environmental, technical and commercial performance of their sustainability initiatives (Manser et al., 2016). This assessment was made using the companies' reported results, together with the 2017 Sustainability Brand Index, and The Global 100 Most Sustainable Corporations Index, to provide complementary insights into the quality and quantity of the sustainability efforts. In relation to personal characteristics, the participants' organisational roles and experiences had to be relevant to the study, and they had to have been involved in successful transformations. Finally, these participants brought about sustainability transformations in different ways: either by developing product/service innovations, creating process innovations or influencing public discourse and action. An example of each of these types of transformation is given in Table 3.

3.2. Framing as an analytical approach

Framing was chosen as an analytical tool to understand how managers frame their management activities and how these activities might help or hinder their respective companies in mobilising transformations. Scholars tend to focus on frames as content or framing as action (Benford and Snow, 2000); the latter approach was followed here, with framing being used to describe the socially situated process of meaning construction (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014). Goffman (1986) famously defined framing as the active task of figuring out what is going on, without which no utterance could be interpreted. Although framing shapes how actors interpret what is going on, it also shapes the behaviour that follows. This means that framing has a performative role in mobilising actors and shaping their actions (Benford and Snow, 2000). As shown by Cagnin (2018), changing the course of an action happens by framing the problem and future pathways in new ways—that is, reframing. Reframing, then, requires fluidity of thought between what is and what could be (Werner and Cornelissen, 2014).

Different framings were developed through thematic analysis by coding, categorising and reporting themes within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). By referring to developing themes rather than identifying themes as pre-existing truths, the active role that the researcher plays in thematising meanings was acknowledged (Holloway and Todres, 2003). Themes are defined here as 'meaningful entities constructed from recurrent codes that unify disparate data, and capture something important about the data in relation to the research question' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 82). When conducting thematic analysis through a constructionist paradigm, themes are seen as socially constructed rather than inherent in an individual's mind (Burr, 1995). In thematic analysis, themes can be developed in an inductive *bottom up* way or a

deductive *top down* way (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This study followed the inductive method, meaning that our thematic analysis was data driven rather than theory driven. Inductive logic implies that the developed themes are strongly linked to the data and are not squeezed to fit into a pre-existing coding frame motivated by previous research (Patton, 2015). However, as Braun and Clarke (2006) importantly note, researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical commitments even in inductive thematic analysis. As themes cannot be developed in an epistemological vacuum, our analysis is therefore recognised to have some deductive traits also.

Thematic analysis began by entering the transcribed interviews into a qualitative data analysis program, ATLAS.ti. As the goal of the research is to develop a new theory instead of testing existing theory (Yadav, 2010), the codes used were based on the language and expressions used by the participants, instead of using *a priori* codes drawn from previous research (Saldaña, 2016). In addition, as the purpose of the research is to explore and analyse transformative management activities in mobilising sustainability transformations from managers' own perspective, managers' own voices were honoured, and the analysis was grounded in their perspectives, starting from coding.

Table 4 exemplifies the coding and thematisation of the data. Multiple coding methods were used to capture the subjective (in vivo codes), action-oriented (process codes) and deep (concept codes) essence of the data. Our electronic coding scheme combined in vivo and process coding as the first-cycle coding methods, as well as concept coding as the second-cycle coding method. As a meaning-driven coding method, in vivo codes use participants' own words and expressions as codes rather than researcher-generated codes (Saldaña, 2016). As an activity-driven coding method, process coding uses only gerunds (-ing words) as codes to capture action in the data. By using in vivo and process coding, the study was aligned with managers' perspectives and thus refrained from applying preconceptions about sustainability management and its related codes to the data. These first-cycle codes were then transcended into concept codes to extract a *bigger picture* beyond a single feature or action. In effect, concept coding proceeds from particular codes towards more abstract-level ideas. The coding and thematisation procedure was iterative until themes became exhaustive and mutually exclusive (Bailey, 1994). Finally, the managerial framings were developed based on these themes, representing the transformative management activities.

3.3. Assessing the quality of the research process

The quality of this research is assessed through the concepts of trustworthiness, authenticity, credibility and relevance. The trustworthiness of this research was enhanced through a systematic and transparent research process, including the use of theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt et al., 2016) and the general principles of

Table 3
Examples of the three types of transformations from the data.

Type of transformation	Sustainability initiative	Purpose of the initiative
Developing a product/service innovation	Drafting new nutritional guidelines for healthier, nutritionally balanced convenience meals and educating consumers about healthy eating (Participant G)	To transform the convenience food sector by facilitating consumers to choose and eat healthier meals, eventually contributing to the long-term health of the nation in an obesogenic environment
Creating a process innovation	Innovating a new, sustainable business model and ancillary production processes based on a systemic approach (Participant H)	To transform the pulp and paper industry by implementing circular economy principles and utilising side streams, eventually cultivating the well-being of the larger ecosystem with limited resources
Influencing public discourse/action	Taking a visible societal stand on gender issues in brand positioning, series of marketing campaigns and a new collection launch (Participant D)	To transform the socio-cultural imagery of femininity by empowering women from all walks of life, eventually improving the state of public discourse and action on gender norms

Source: Compiled by the authors from the empirical data

Table 4

Example of the coding and thematisation of the data.

Data: Quotation	Coding	Theme	Framing
'Earlier, we communicated about our sustainability initiatives mainly on our website, but now, we are moving from one-way communication towards having active discussions with all our key stakeholder groups in these regular meetings. Who has time to read those website articles these days?'	In vivo codes: "one-way communication", "active discussion", "all our key stakeholder groups", "regular meetings" Process codes: moving from, having active discussions Concept codes: Appreciating real dialogue	Facilitating a more active collaboration with key stakeholders	Creating space for multi-participant collaboration

Source: Compiled by the authors from the data analysis

analysing qualitative interviews (Granot et al., 2012). For the purpose of ensuring the authenticity of the interviews, the participants were encouraged to speak about the themes from their own perspective and in their own language, staying faithful to how they make sense of the phenomenon (Granot et al., 2012). The transparency of the study was established by recognising the potential limitations of subjective interpretations; the processes for generating and analysing the data were therefore described in detail, and the related data extracts were presented and discussed together with the study's findings (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). In terms of improving the credibility of the findings, the various ways in which the managerial responses reflected different activities were discussed. The objective of the data analysis was to reach a shared understanding and interpretation of the data (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). Finally, applying a qualitative, inductive approach enhanced the practical relevance of the research; qualitative approaches are known to generate new and innovative ideas, cope with complexity and use contextual understanding to analyse constructs that are difficult to measure, all critical factors in addressing grand challenges and the particularities of sustainability transformations (Eisenhardt et al., 2016).

4. Findings and discussion

Based on the managerial framings, nine transformative management activities were formed to answer the first research question, 'How do sustainability managers frame their management activities in running sustainability initiatives?' These activities are shown in Table 5. To answer the second research question, 'How do these activities relate to one another in terms of facilitating sustainability transformations?', the activities are organised in a taxonomy based on two dimensions of management levels and styles. This taxonomy is presented in Fig. 2.

The activities presented in Table 5 are discussed in detail in Sections 4.1–4.10.

4.1. Challenging the dominant environment through reflexivity

The participants framed the challenging of existing institutions, structures and practices as essential for sustainability transformation, instead of just accepting them as de facto. Participant D summarised this point: 'More of the same will lead to more of the same, and that won't lead to any real progress in this industry'. The participants showed optimism in challenging the status quo on

Table 5

Transformative management activities based on managerial framing.

Transformative management activity	Driving question	Illustrative quote
Challenging the dominant environment through reflexivity	How can we improve the current conditions?	We're not just accepting the environmental problems caused by the meat and dairy industry as an unavoidable part of our business, but we're constantly developing new technologies to challenge the status quo in the industry (Participant A).
Creating space for multi-vocal collaboration	Who do we want to include?	To enable idea sharing, we invited 12 key stakeholder groups to take part in designing our sustainability program. With over 1300 ideas, the online think tank has become an ongoing source of ideas (Participant F).
Aligning collaborators' future visions	How do we want the future to look?	We conducted interviews with different actors (from design and logistics to non-governmental organisations and customers), and basing on the themes raised in these interviews, we had workshops in which we then built our shared vision and three different scenarios (Participant E).
Restructuring principles, processes and practices	How else could this be done?	We've restructured the whole way we operate. Someone asked me what our sustainability program is like, and I answered that this whole company is a sustainability program (Participant H).
Removing mental, physical and cultural barriers	What stops us from doing this?	For many of our customers, it's like a learned behaviour that when they come to our shop, they come for alcoholic beverages like wine; they don't come to buy non-alcoholic drinks even if the selection is superb. We need to overcome that (Participant B).
Designing effective feedback loops	When do we know we are succeeding?	Especially with new initiatives, we strive to obtain ongoing feedback to provide fast and accurate information on how we're doing, compared with measuring only the outcome (Participant J).
Influencing public discourse and action	How can we affect the ways others think and act?	By taking social stances, we're setting up discussions about equality issues. It's at the core of this company, and we aim to bring it to the core of society by being an active conversation partner (Participant C).
Ensuring the transparency of sustainability efforts	How do we ensure that people know what we know?	Our customers expect transparent, concrete actions rather than aspirational promises. We need to walk the talk and show the path we walk (Participant I).
Co-constructing a new environment	How do we redefine the new environment through our actions?	As a part of our pro-environmental business, I'm personally lobbying more than before in an attempt to influence policy decision-making in Brussels and in industry organisations in Finland (Participant E).

Source: Compiled by the authors from the empirical data

different levels and as business actors bringing improvements to the way things are currently done:

> We need to be brave in challenging the status quo, the way things are done in our industry—even more so, because the status quo often lies. A common misconception is that consumers want performance and low price, which we see every day as not being the case with our organic products; so, I try to encourage our team to challenge the status quo first in their own thinking and then in the industry we operate in (Participant C).

As shown in the quotation above, the participants used reflexivity in framing their operating environment as endogenous to the efforts of the company, that is, extending their reach of influence. This is the opposite of non-reflexive management approaches that view the environment as exogenous, given and beyond their reach (Wiltbank et al., 2006).

4.2. Creating space for multi-vocal collaboration

The participants framed their management as extending across traditional silos within the company and between other relevant actors. Collaboration is of fundamental value because relevant knowledge is dispersed across many individuals and is not fully accessible to any one actor (Hayek, 1945 in Sarasvathy and Dew, 2005). The participants described means of initiating collaboration (e.g. facilitating workshops or online think tanks), allowing collaboration (e.g. being open to differing perspectives and developing mutual understanding), facilitating collaboration (e.g. building networks and ecosystems) and prolonging it (e.g. creating a shared purpose):

> By collaborating with our key stakeholders, we have gained access to much wider knowledge about environmental degradation, which is one of the key issues in our sustainability program. If we relied only on the knowledge inside our company, we would have been likely to choose less-relevant targets and less-effective means to get there (Participant H).

As Participant H describes, multi-vocal collaboration can develop new capabilities with respect to sustainability. In addition to fact-based knowledge, skills and attributes (e.g. creativity and courage) were also discussed: 'Finding ways to put technology, life sciences, legislation and our business together requires creativity, but you also have to be bold to do that' (Participant A). The participants largely framed collaboration as a way to build common ground and create change that extends outside the company.

4.3. Aligning collaborators' future visions

The participants framed the alignment of actors' objectives across different domains (e.g. policy-making, NGOs, customers) as a key issue in achieving a desired future state. As there is no single preferred version of the future, it is likely that the priorities for sustainability visions vary across actors (Gaziulusoy and Ryan, 2017). The participants recognised their managerial role in achieving a shared vision by first encouraging collaborators to develop their future visions regarding the targeted issue (for example, gender equality), and then developing a shared future vision building on the individual visions:

> We have learned that everyone involved needs to be united by the same mutually created vision; otherwise, collaboration will later become difficult, and conflicts will arise. We have also

learned that you can never impose your own vision on everyone else no matter how aspirational or desirable it is (Participant D).

The diverse visions were seen to serve as a useful source of creativity in anticipating alternative future directions. As stated by Participant B, involving actors outside the organisation was also considered helpful in activating imagination: 'Otherwise, our vision would look much like the vision of the people working here, and the scope of the challenges is a bit wider' (Participant B).

4.4. Restructuring principles, processes and practices

To engage in innovative sustainability initiatives addressing grand challenges, the participants discussed the need to restructure principles, processes and practices. The participants framed restructuring as questioning the established ways of their management. It was related to roles and responsibilities, rules and norms, tasks and decision-making, as well as to priorities and performance indicators, the influence of which could span collaborators, as Participant A stated:

> Through our quality and production renewal, we have introduced new sustainability criteria for our suppliers, and we start to reward them progressively when they restructure their own manufacturing step by step to meet our standards. Thus, our restructuring affects theirs.

The organisational culture needs to be open and responsive to restructuring ways of thinking and doing (Loorbach et al., 2010). To create such a culture, the participants described management efforts, such as promoting a self-leading structure, implementing distributed decision-making and using longer time horizons, as well as developing practices to incite new ideas, promote experimentation and support the scaling-up of viable innovations.

4.5. Removing mental, physical and cultural barriers

Relative to restructuring, the participants discussed obstacles that stall transformative actions. Obstacles were identified both inside and outside the organisation. The participants discussed mental barriers (e.g. fear or reluctance to do something differently), physical barriers (e.g. lack of time, budget or knowledge-intensive resources) and cultural barriers (e.g. an existing organisational culture that did not enable systemic innovations). In addition, current socio-cultural preferences were recognised, as Participant A described:

> Driven by our aim to improve national health, we are doubling the amount of low-sugar and sugar-free products by 2020. Now, we are conducting many taste experiments with consumers to get the taste right so that it won't become a barrier to choosing healthier products. We consider the taste as an even greater barrier than price for consumers when they choose healthier products.

Framing their management efforts to remove barriers, the participants discussed the importance of becoming aware of tangible and intangible obstacles. The participants recognised that people are usually aware of tangible barriers (e.g. regulations, extra costs) but are less aware of intangible ones (e.g. managers' mental models, conflicting values or socio-cultural practices that might hinder behavioural change). When searching for innovative solutions to sustainability problems, managers need to determine the barriers and understand how these can be overcome (Van Den Bergh et al., 2011).

4.6. Designing effective feedback loops

The participants framed feedback as a key resource in modifying the vision, redesigning actions to move towards this vision, reducing the misallocation of resources and anticipating windows of opportunity. The participants framed their management efforts in terms of continuous improvement, and effective feedback loops were considered important in providing real-time information about the links between current means and the future vision, as Participant F stated:

> As we move forward with our sustainability program, the expectations of our stakeholders increase, and previous expectations turn into hygiene factors. We need to get continuous feedback from the field, instead of measuring the final outcome to show we're going in the right direction.

The participants pointed to the need to rethink current feedback mechanisms, such as traditional sustainability reporting that might sustain certain technological or paradigmatic *lock-ins* (Loorbach et al., 2010). The participants referred to several effective feedback loops, such as social media channels (Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp), customer surveys, third-party assessments, 360° appraisals and experiments. Participant C stated, 'I try to trigger this *learning by doing* mentality with our people because, after all, we have little prior knowledge of how we should solve problems, such as inequality. I see small failures that might follow from experiments as one important way of offering feedback to do things better'.

4.7. Influencing public discourse and action

The participants framed business actors as important influencers in society, who produce and reproduce public discourse and socio-cultural practices. The participants framed their societal and environmental stewardship in two ways: either by taking stances on societal issues with an aim to influence public discourse, or by acting as role models to inspire others to change their course of action. These societal stances were practiced in various forms, including marketing campaigns, product launches and civil endeavours. Participant D stated the following:

> I'm challenging our people to be active in speaking up and getting involved in public discourse. I think it's not an option to have *no opinion* these days; it's an opinion already, in itself, if you stay silent. We have a voice, as all companies do, and I firmly believe we should use it.

The participants described improving societal and/or environmental well-being as the ultimate objective of their sustainability initiatives. However, *quasi-governmental* (Biraghi et al., 2017) actions on issues over which people are often divided might be controversial or even risky. Acknowledging this, the participants emphasised the need to understand societal issues and their root causes thoroughly before taking any action.

4.8. Ensuring the transparency of sustainability efforts

The participants described their ambitions for transparency in terms of exceeding the norm, which focuses only on the favourable aspects or beneficial outcomes of companies' actions. The participants emphasised the importance of disclosing unfavourable aspects, challenges or failures that almost unavoidably follow an experimental approach in order to be truly transparent. This kind of balanced transparency (Basu and Palazzo, 2008) was considered important in fostering credibility amongst different collaborators.

> Doing something good here, which happens to get into a sustainability report, doesn't compensate for the majority of the business doing something bad over there. I think transparency for the whole business is really important, as the aim is to make the entire business sustainable, not just those areas we decide to include in the reports (Participant H).

As the quotation above shows, the participants obliquely criticised traditional sustainability reporting, as it might not, in all cases, reveal the true nature of a company's sustainability engagement. Sustainability communications that allow full disclosure were seen as necessary for creating systemic change because omitting important information would limit the necessary feedback from the market, dampen stakeholders' trust and create a vacuum of frontrunners who openly share which of their innovative experiments worked and did not work.

4.9. Co-constructing a new environment

The participants showed confidence that their sustainability initiatives can and should bring systemic change within their operating environment. This was recognised to happen in three ways: developing new offerings to improve the well-being of individuals and communities, innovating and implementing solutions to enhance the functioning of society and influencing public discourse and government decision-making to increase the resilience of the wider ecosystem. The participants' positive impact was thought to be leveraged if they ended up as role models for others in the industry, acting as catalysts for co-constructing a new environment:

> We have still so much to do in terms of accepting diversity and eradicating racism in Finland. I wish, as our company is almost like an institution in Finland, that when we stand behind certain values, we are jointly creating a new, multi-ethnic Finland. New Finland is about accepting diversity. We are building that future (Participant D).

As in the quotation above, the participants acknowledged their opportunities to contribute to the creation of a new environment through transformative efforts in fighting against climate change or resource depletion, as well as in supporting gender equality or minority rights. However, the participants perceived the management of these efforts as difficult because of the unavoidable time lags and unpredictability of efforts *ex ante*. New environments take a long time to develop, if they ever do so (Sarasvathy and Dew, 2005).

4.10. A taxonomy of transformative management activities

A taxonomy, shown in Fig. 2, answers the second research question, 'How do these activities relate to one another in terms of mobilising sustainability transformations?', by organising the nine transformative management activities along the following management dimensions:

(1) Whether the activities relate to the strategic, tactical or operational management levels
(2) Whether the activities call for more analytical or more intuitive management styles

Fig. 2. Taxonomy of transformative management activities.
Source: Compiled by the authors from the empirical data analysis

The taxonomy aims to help managers in carrying out the nine transformative management activities by distinguishing different levels and styles of managerial action. As Olsson et al. (2014) assert, often, the reason for sustainability initiatives falling short in creating a systemic change is not the lack of individuals' innovative and transformative capacity but how this capacity is used. The taxonomy can support sustainability managers in unleashing their transformative capacity by helping them grasp and appreciate the breadth and depth of the transformative management activities. In effect, whilst managers might typically focus on one management level and emphasise one of the two management styles, the taxonomy shows that in order to mobilise sustainability transformations, they need to use activities at all the three management levels and use both styles of management.

First, the nine transformative management activities can be organised according to strategic, tactical and operational levels. This division follows the four areas of activity required by transitions (Loorbach and Rotmans, 2010). As the fourth area, reflexive relates to a reflective evaluation of the current situation in various areas; it was not included as its own level in the taxonomy but was included in all the other three levels on the vertical dimension. As summarised by Gaziulusoy and Ryan (2017), *strategic activities* involve the formation of a future vision with a group of innovative thinkers that will lead to changes in the cultures, structures and processes of a socio-technical system. Then, *tactical activities* implement these changes by creating suitable circumstances for multi-participant collaboration and by overcoming inhibiting barriers. Finally, *operational activities* create new everyday practices through experiments and the learning by doing mentality. Thus, the nine transformative management activities operate at the level of strategic envisioning, tactical implementation and operational execution, which are all needed to advance sustainability transformations (Fiss and Zajac, 2006).

Second, these activities can be placed on a continuum of management styles, reflecting more analytical or intuitive management orientations. Those activities that reflect a more analytical orientation involve managers in carefully scrutinising the situation, making assumptions and taking action with an optimisation mindset. Conversely, those activities with a more intuitive

orientation involve diagnosing, interpreting and shaping a new action with an imaginative mindset. At the strategic level, activities were slightly leaning towards more intuitive orientation, benefiting from creative thinking and the generation of new ideas through imagination, whereas at the operational level, activities slightly inclined towards the more analytic end, relying on analysing data and taking action accordingly. When it comes to management styles, managers are likely to differ in terms of their natural tendencies. For instance, managers who are analytical probably prefer data-driven metrics and numerical targets, whereas their counterparts who are intuitive probably appreciate envisioning the goals and proposed action in more creative ways (Pauwels et al., 2009). However, managers aiming to mobilise sustainability transformations need to balance their intellect and imagination, as different activities demand different management styles.

5. Reflections and conclusions

The purpose of this research was to explore and analyse, from managers' perspectives, transformative management activities in mobilising sustainability transformations. To meet this purpose, the research gave voice to sustainability managers by using framing as an analytical approach to understand how managers frame their management activities, that is, how they make sense of their purpose, roles and actions in managing sustainability initiatives. The article demonstrates the kind of interactive reframing approach suggesting that it is through framing the problem, the alternative solutions and the activities in between, in new ways, that brings managers closer to mobilising sustainability transformations. By addressing the mechanisms of framing and reframing in bringing these transformations forward, the research is in line with those studies taking a relational metatheoretical perspective on sustainability (Garud and Gehman, 2012).

The research makes several contributions to the current literature of sustainability transformations. The study is amongst the first ones to apply the framing approach to honour managers' voices and to increase the understanding of managing sustainability transformations from managers' own perspective. Basing on the managerial framings, the research establishes a qualitative

framework of nine transformative management activities. By linking the theoretical approach of TM to management activities, the study sheds light on the conceptual nature of these activities. The activities are characterised as systemic, collaborative, emergent and creative, reflecting their transformative qualities. They are also conceptualised as action levers that can utilise or create resources (mental, social, physical, capital) to mobilise sustainability transformations, reflecting their action-oriented nature.

In practical terms, given that the framework of nine transformative management activities is an initial attempt to offer a contemporary expression of sustainability management, mapping the sector-wide implications of implementing this framework in practice is too early. However, the framework provides insights for managers into reframing their activities in dealing with persistent sustainability challenges. The taxonomy that organises these activities according to the previously specified management levels and management styles also reveals the breadth and depth of managers' professional capacities needed to create a system-wide change. By becoming aware of the strategic, tactical and operational levels, as well as the more analytical and intuitive management styles that transformative management implies, managers can first identify the levels and styles that they currently operate in and then expand their capacity in both dimensions. Taken together, the article aims to help managers overcome the current culpability in sustainability management—the incremental, rather than fundamental, impact of their actions—which can lead to reinforcing entrenched unsustainable lock-ins, be it in the ecological, social or economic sense (Dyllick and Muff, 2016).

Besides the theoretical contributions and the practical implications this research offers, it also comes along with some limitations that open up interesting future research opportunities. The research applies an inductive data-driven approach, making the subjective interpretation of the authors an unavoidable, yet important, part of the analysis. Next, as the research was conducted in Finland, the cultural similarities of the interviewees, who had the same nationality, might influence the activities developed on the basis of the managers' framings. Yet, globalisation has been deemed to homogenise such aspects as the culture, values and processes of internationally operating companies (Carr, 2005). Context-wise, although theoretical sampling was used to form a diverse group of interviewees, the research falls short in understanding how the implementation of these activities might look for different companies in different sectors. Such an implementation may depend, for example, on company size and structure, organisational culture, decision-making styles and policies, strategy and market position, as well as history and path dependencies. Other reasons might also explain the success of sustainability transformations for the respective companies than implementing these activities. For example, the whole energy sector is shifting towards renewable energy sources, making sustainability transformations easier to achieve for an energy company than for a company that is the first or the only mover in its sector. Furthermore, the internal dynamics of these companies are likely to play a role. As companies are often given a mandate by their board, moving beyond incremental impact towards creating a systemic change might not be in the hands of sustainability managers. More research is needed to understand these contingencies better, and we suggest the following future research opportunities to build upon and expand our findings:

- exploring the context specificity of transformative management activities by conducting similar studies in different sectors and/or organisations
- exploring how each of these activities is implemented in depth through a case study approach

- exploring how reframing of management happens in practice by conducting an ethnographic study or action research or by observing managers *in situ*
- identifying best practices for carrying out each of these activities
- measuring the impact of implementing these activities in practice through quantitative examination
- comparing the activities at other layers of companies, such as the board of directors, top management teams, line managers and workers

As expressed at the beginning of this study, sustainability initiatives that target persistent sustainability challenges cannot be addressed through conventional management approaches. Managers need to think outside their narrow specialisms (Gaziulusoy and Ryan, 2017) and translate that thinking into transformative management activities. The research suggests that this translation can be done by reframing current management activities vis-à-vis TM principles. A final, yet necessary, reflection of this research corroborates the notion that there is an urgent need for alternative means of sustainability management not only because sustainability challenges are pressing but also because the current ways of managing them have not been effective in mobilising the sustainability transformations needed in this era.

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PUBLICATION
III

Co-creating Sustainable Corporate Brands: A Consumer Framing Approach

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Co-creating sustainable corporate brands:

A consumer framing approach

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Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore how consumers co-create *sustainable corporate brands* (SCBs) by framing brands with a newly-adopted sustainability orientation.

Design/methodology/approach

The qualitative data were generated from four focus groups consisting of altogether 25 Finnish millennial consumers. The data were analysed using thematic analysis and the resulting themes were classified as different framings.

Findings

The findings indicate three ways of framing SCBs: as *signs of corporate hypocrisy*, as *threats that increase societal fragmentation,* and as *signs of corporate enlightenment*. These framings are based on two components: the perceived attributes and activities of the corporate brand.

Originality

The theoretical contribution is twofold: firstly, the paper extends the sustainable corporate branding literature by demonstrating how SCBs are co-created through an interactive framing process between the corporation and primary stakeholders and, secondly, it contributes to the constitutive approach to corporate social responsibility communication (CSRC) research by showing how millennial consumers frame corporate brands that communicate corporations' newly-adopted sustainability orientation.

Practical implications

The role of corporate brands is expanding from the business sphere towards actively influencing society. Yet, sustainability activities can be risky if consumers, as primary stakeholders, deem them unacceptable, unethical, or untrustworthy. This research supports brand managers to succeed in co-creating SCBs as contributors to societal and environmental well-being, at a time when multiple stakeholders consider this a worthwhile endeavour.

1. Introduction

An increasing number of corporate brands rally behind sustainability issues. Brands raise their voices to fight against environmental problems, such as Apple's 'Earth – Shot on iPhone' campaign in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris agreement, or to promote diversity like Mars Chocolate's recent 'Look on the Light Side' campaign, which aimed to overcome disability discrimination. Among many other examples of issue-driven communication, these major brands taking visible stances on sustainability show that corporate brands are no longer mere mediators of cultural meaning (McCracken, 1988), but play active roles in developing meanings, values, and norms in society (Schultz *et al.*, 2013). Joyce Stuart (2011) conceptualised brands that lead this trend as *sustainable corporate brands* (later SCBs) and defined them as 'corporate brands whose promise or covenant has sustainability as a core value' (Stuart, 2011, p. 139).

SCBs extend the role and purpose of corporate branding (Aßländer and Curbach, 2014). From the role perspective, SCBs can be seen as a response to the widespread critique that condemns multinational corporate brands as emblems of the downsides of commercialisation and globalisation (e.g. Klein, 2000). Regarding the purpose, then, SCBs signal the reorientation of corporate social responsibility communication (later CSRC) from information provision towards impact orientation (Tuan *et al.*, 2019).

However, the link between corporate branding and sustainability is not always congruent or straightforward. On the one hand, SCBs may yield many advantages for the parenting corporation such as new value creation opportunities, improved reputation, increased employee engagement, and strengthened relationships with a vast group of internal and external stakeholders (Biraghi *et al.*, 2017). On the other hand, the highlighted sustainability orientation can attract scepticism, cause offence, or even lead to conflict. This can happen if primary stakeholders, such as consumers, deem SCBs illegitimate or untrustworthy, or perceive their sustainability activities as unacceptable or unethical (Garcia and Greenwood, 2015; Rodríguez *et al.*, 2017). In this context, a corporate brand with a newly-adopted sustainability orientation may experience a mismatch between consumers' existing perceptions of the brand and the new orientation. A topical example illustrating such potential discrepancies is McDonald's attempting to associate its brand with a sustainable and healthy lifestyle (Arbouw *et al.*, 2019).

While sustainable corporate branding is increasingly gaining attention among CSRC and corporate branding scholars, a large part of the existing research is focused on the company perspective (e.g. Stuart, 2011; Rindell *et al.*, 2011; Vilá and Bharadwaj, 2017). As a result, our understanding of the processes through which consumers, and other stakeholder groups engage in dialogues on SCBs, remains underdeveloped (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010). This article focuses on building this understanding.

The purpose of this research is, therefore, to explore how consumers co-create SCBs by framing corporate brands with a newly-adopted sustainability orientation. The empirical research focuses on the consumer cohort of millennials: young consumers born between the 1980s and the early 2000s. In order to analyse how the participating millennials interpret, understand, and make sense of SCBs, the analysis is guided by a framing approach (Goffman, 1974).

The paper is structured as follows: First, previous studies on sustainable corporate branding are reviewed, after which the framing approach is described and discussed. Then, the methodology and data are elaborated in detail, and the findings of the empirical research are presented, focusing

on the three ways of framing SCBs. Finally, the theoretical and managerial implications of the study are provided, together with the limitations and future research opportunities.

2. Co-creating corporate brands with a newly-adopted sustainability orientation

Corporate branding emphasises the culture and values of the entire corporation, whereas product branding focuses on the functional, emotional, or symbolic attributes of the product *per se* (Pace, 2017; Schroeder, 2017). Hence, corporate branding operates at a more abstract, even metaphorical level, enabling dialogues between the corporation and its primary stakeholders. In brand co-creation theory, corporate brands are seen as co-created in these dialogues (Hatch and Schultz, 2010), giving credence to the role of consumers and other stakeholders in constructing brands through interactive processes of meaning-making (Diamond *et al.*, 2009; Närvänen and Goulding, 2016).

Brand co-creation theory aligns with a constitutive approach to CSRC, which considers CSR as communicatively constructed in dynamic processes between the corporation and multiple stakeholders in today's networked societies. (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2012; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010; Schultz et al. 2013; Tuan et al. 2019). According to these two streams of theoretical insight, brand meanings for SCBs are not exclusively created through the corporation's own voice, but they are, instead, collectively constituted in various communicative practices. Collectively constituted SCBs are hence owned by society, not the corporations alone (Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Rindell et al. 2011).

Set in this context, SCBs make 'a contribution to the (sustainable) development of society' (Weder *et al.*, 2019, p. 370). Such brands move from being a mere face of the corporation for its stakeholders into being an interface facilitating dialogue between several actors, such as consumers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), policymakers, and civil society (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2012). These dialogues are facilitated through different brand activities; SCBs may participate, for instance, in public discourse, civil endeavours, political rulemaking, and/or concrete problem solving (Aßländer and Curbach, 2014).

Compared to traditional CSR programmes, SCBs can become significant vehicles for corporations to translate their sustainability concerns and ambitions into enacted citizenship. This is due to the influential position that corporate brands hold in the marketplace; they are well recognised among different stakeholders and have multiple touchpoints in consumers' lives (Balmer, 2012). Recent developments in the sustainable corporate branding literature suggest that by joining forces on societal and environmental issues, and hence creating alignment between the corporation and a wider scope of stakeholders, SCBs can eventually turn into political-moral actors (Schultz *et al.*, 2013; Schroeder, 2017).

As political-moral actors, SCBs can achieve a transformative role in society. By definition, a transformative role implies that actors (i.e. corporate brands) 'become conscious of their role in reproducing structures and elect to make new, imaginative choices to challenge dominant patterns' (Blocker and Barrios, 2015, p. 268). This role goes far beyond traditional corporate branding issues, such as brand image, identity, and loyalty, and focuses instead on the impact of corporate branding on society and the environment. Accordingly, a transformative role for an SCB may consist of shaping the current ways of thinking, ways of organising, and ways of doing in the communities in which it operates, thus contributing to the much-needed sustainability transitions in society (Geels and Schot, 2007; Köhler *et al.*, 2019).

In order to contribute to sustainability transitions, brand managers need to be able to negotiate with primary stakeholders about sustainability issues and activities in ways that move their corporate brand beyond information provision towards making a positive impact (Golob et al., 2013, Tuan *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, as sustainability issues can be controversial among stakeholders with diverse viewpoints, and even end up even hurting the corporate brand (Johnson-Young and Magee, 2019), brand managers need to pay attention on how their primary stakeholders, especially consumers, frame their corporate brand with a newly-adopted sustainability orientation.

3. The framing approach

Framing, as an analytical approach, supports an understanding of how different actors, such as corporations, the news media, or the public, interpret, understand, and label issues (Etter and Vestergaard, 2015). A general review on the relations between the news media and CSR communication, for instance, highlighted how companies may work with the press to garner interest for their CSR efforts through framing them in a press-friendly manner (Carroll, 2011). In line with this, Weder et al. (2019) identified different communication strategies that energy corporations use to frame the ongoing transition to renewable energy. With a special case of human rights issues, Meriläinen and Vos (2013) addressed framing as a way to understand, shape, and manage issues that attract public debate. Similarly, research by Ravazzani and Maier (2017) demonstrated how corporations may deliberately legitimise and delegitimise selected perspectives in social media through framing. As a unique platform, Etter and Vestergaard (2015) compared public framings of a corporate crisis in social media with those of the news media, NGOs, and corporate communication and underlined the necessity of tailored responses to reach the online public because of its distinct crisis framing.

Yet, despite its wide application as an analytical approach within CSRC literature, framing represents an important yet overlooked approach for informing brand co-creation theory in general and the co-creation of SCBs in particular. Framing, as a 'socially situated process of meaning construction' (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014, p. 183), challenges the sender-dominated conduit models of communication that focus on the alignment between what the corporation communicates its brand to be and how the brand is perceived by its stakeholders. Instead, framing acknowledges the active role of consumers and other stakeholders in de-constructing, co-constructing, and re-constructing meanings for corporate brands, including SCBs.

Against this background, framing is adopted here as an analytical approach, since it can enable a nuanced understanding of the reciprocal interaction processes through which consumers contribute to the co-creation of SCBs. Accordingly, consumers are seen as 'signifying agents' (Snow and Benford, 1988), re-signifying SCBs and their actions in relation to public discourse, societal values, and global concerns. SCBs, then, are neither treated as vehicles to convey the corporations' intended sustainability message, nor as representations in the consumers' minds, but as phenomena that emerge in the social interaction between the corporation and multiple stakeholders. Based on the framing approach, the research is motivated by the following questions:

RQ1: How do millennial consumers, as a key stakeholder group, frame SCBs?
RQ2: How are these framings constituted?

4. Methodology

Methodologically, this research is inspired by the interpretive paradigm (see Tuan *et al.*, 2019), which views reality as subjective and socially constructed (Burr, 2015). To capture the constitutive processes in which the corporation and consumers negotiate different viewpoints, values, and meanings for SCBs, qualitative focus groups were conducted. In general, focus groups are considered a suitable method for exploring research questions that are based on a social constructionist research philosophy and have interest in social interaction (Tadajewski, 2016), since they enable natural dialogues and can thus reveal unexpected understandings in a group (Malhotra and Birks, 2007). In this study, focus groups, compared to individual interviews, gave participants an opportunity to voice their opinions and views in a social setting.

Altogether, four focus groups with 25 Finnish millennials were conducted. Today, millennials are considered an attractive consumer group for many brands (Rissanen and Luoma-Aho, 2016), but especially for those brands incorporating sustainability in their covenant. In effect, millennials are characterised as civic-minded, well-being oriented, as well as 'in tune with social issues' and 'willing to show their support for socially responsible businesses while turning against companies that are not' (Furlow, 2011, p. 62). Furthermore, millennials are active in social media, where they can freely level their criticism against brands that do not meet their standards. As a result, millennials are uniquely positioned to exert control in the marketplace by calling for a new consciousness from corporations regarding sustainability (Weder *et al.*, 2019).

In recruiting millennials to participate in the focus groups, a principle of 'purposive sampling' was used. Purposive sampling is recommended for focus group studies, in which it is important that the participants are knowledgeable about the subject being studied and willing to take part in the conversation (Gummesson, 2017). While the exact years defining millennials vary between researchers, a widely-adopted time frame ranging from the early-1980s to the early-2000s was used as a guideline (Valentine and Powers, 2013). Table 1 provides detailed information about the focus groups.

Table 1. *Dataset of the study*

	Focus group 1	Focus group 2	Focus group 3	Focus group 4	Total
Number of participants	5	8	7	5	25
Participants' birth years	1989–1994	1984–1993	1991–1994	1990–1994	1984–1994
Duration	1 h 5 min	1 h 33 min	1 h 17 min	1 h 24 min	319 min

The focus group sessions were divided into two parts. The first part was guided by two types of open-ended questions (Spradley, 1979): the 'grand-tour' questions, such as: 'which values in life are important to you?' and the 'mini-tour' questions, like: 'how do you see corporate brands taking stances on sustainability?' The second part was built around selected campaigns that embody corporate brands' intended sustainability stances. The brand campaigns were selected from the participants' immediate cultural milieus for their familiarity, topicality, and relevance. The brands represent different industries, such as fashion, food retail, home interior, and telecommunications. These industries, which closely relate to consumers' everyday life, have seen more sustainability

stances than industries in general in Finland, where the study was conducted. Due to the copyright restrictions, images of the selected campaigns could not be included in the paper, but a detailed description of each campaign is given in Table 2.

Table 2. Detailed description of the selected brand campaigns discussed in the focus groups

Brand campaign	Industry	Issue and stance	Description of the material
Untamed Beauty by Kalevala Jewellery	Fashion	Embracing equality by challenging the stereotypes of womanhood	The film (1min52s) embraces a diversified imagery of female figures; young, old, tattooed, disabled, and lesbian women, who are engaged in their own hobbies and passions. Audio track *Ken on heistä kaikkein kaunein* (*eng. Who is the prettiest of them all*) is known as the Miss Finland beauty contest theme song.
Christmas Peace by HOK-Elanto	Food retail	Opposing racism by embedding people of different ethnic backgrounds to the Finnish society	In the film (2min23s), a multi-ethnic choir sings a famous Finnish rock ballad *Murheellisten laulujen maa* (*eng. A land of sad songs*). Multiple short scenes show the participation of non-white people in the everyday Finnish life, such as in teaching, parenting, enjoying the sauna, fishing, and hunting in the forest.
17% discount to women only by Finlayson	Home interior	Highlighting the gender wage gap in the Finnish society	The print (one page) promotes women-only discounts for one month. The text states that women are charged only 83% of the full retail price when shopping at Finlayson, reflecting the fact that women in Finland earn 83 cents on average for every euro earned by a man.
Mating belongs to all by K-Group	Food retail	Promoting biodiversity by improving the management of Finland's fish population	The educational film (2min42s) addresses threats, such as dams and other human-made barriers, to endangered migratory fish. The film seeks to entertain, but also educate people about how these obstacles may block the natural passage to the mating grounds of certain fish species.
Stay in touch, stay together by Elisa	Telecom	Strengthening family ties by encouraging interaction between parents and teenagers	The film (2min25s) depicts a troubled relationship between a single-dad and a teenage son. The dad tries to painstakingly reach out to his son, who keeps ignoring his attempts. Until one evening, when the son ends up in a street fight, and has no-one else to turn to but his dad. The dad comes to rescue his bleeding son.

The data analysis began by transcribing the focus group recordings and continued by reading and re-reading the transcribed data. Different framings were developed through thematic analysis by coding, categorising, and reporting themes within the data (Braun and Clake, 2006). Themes are defined here as 'meaningful entities constructed from recurrent codes that unify disparate data, and capture something important about the data in relation to the research question' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82). By referring to 'developing' rather than 'identifying' themes, the authors acknowledge

their own role in thematising meanings, instead of cherry-picking pre-existing truths (Holloway and Todres, 2003).

The thematic analysis followed an inductive logic, which means that the analysis was data-driven rather than theory-driven (deductive logic). In other words, the developed themes emerged from the data instead of being forced to fit into any pre-existing framework (Patton, 2015). By grounding the analysis in participants' perspectives, their own voices were honoured throughout the research. However, since researchers cannot completely free themselves from their theoretical commitments, even when following an inductive logic (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the analysis is recognised to have some deductive traits as well.

Table 3 exemplifies the coding and thematisation of the data. As illustrated with the selected excerpt, multiple coding procedures were used to capture the subjective, action-oriented, and deep essence of the data. As the first-cycle coding procedure, descriptive coding and action coding used codes that stemmed from the participants' own language and expressions, instead of being drawn from previous research (Saldana, 2016). As the second-cycle coding procedure, concept coding proceeded from the participant-generated codes towards more abstract-level ideas; concept codes were used to extract a deeper meaning beyond a single subjective opinion, view, or interpretation (Saldana, 2016).

Table 3. Example of the coding and thematisation of the data

Data: Quotation	Coding	Brand attributes and activities	Framing
I got stuck in your point that if the brand takes a stance on a specific moral issue, does it take the position of a political party? Maybe not here in Finland, but at least in the US, there are terrible fights between the political parties. Brands stepping into this arena might think they attract people but could unexpectedly end up separating them.	Descriptive codes: moral, political, powerful, unexpected Action codes: take a stance on a specific moral issue, take the position of a political party, attract people, separate people Concept codes: fear of unhoped-for polarisation caused by corporate brands	Brand attributes: powerful Brand activities: influencing mind-sets	*SCBs as threats that increase societal fragmentation*

The analysis continued until exhaustive, yet mutually exclusive framings were established (Bailey, 1994). The three developed framings are introduced in the next section.

5. Findings

The focus group participants framed SCBs in three different ways: *as signs of corporate hypocrisy*, *as threats that increase societal fragmentation*, and *as signs of corporate enlightenment*. These framings were based on two components: the perceived attributes of the brand and the perceived activities of the brand, which the participants used to differentiate SCBs from conventional corporate brands that have no sustainability orientation. Since a single participant could adopt different framings, the analysis did not aim to differentiate between participants, but rather between the

different framings. In this section, the findings are structured around these three framings and the two framing components, which are discussed first.

Firstly, participants based their framings on perceived brand attributes (Table 4). Altogether, 16 attributes were mentioned in the data. In the analysis process, these were integrated into four main categories: *dialogic*, *contemporary*, *sincere* and *powerful*. Of the four categories developed, the first three were seen positive, while the fourth was considered more worrisome as such a brand could also have a negative impact on society.

Table 4. Perceived brand attributes of SCBs

Brand attribute	Description	Illustrative quote
Dialogic	Participants expect brands to interact with the public and would like to see SCBs having a dialogue with consumers and society	*Today, consumers may also challenge companies and ask their opinion of a sustainability issue. As consumers, we demand real answers, not just words.* (Focus group 4)
Contemporary	Participants expect brands to be up-to-date and advocate liberal values, such as equality, justice, sustainability, and empathy, which resonate with their own worldview	*This company might have wanted to be seen as relevant, and by breaking certain boundaries, they are pointing out that they are up-to-date.* (Focus group 3)
Sincere	Participants insist brands to be authentic and transparent. SCBs are evaluated in terms of integrity and high intolerance for green-washing and purpose-washing.	*Taking visible social stands creates pressure for integrity. In today's environment, brands may be caught red-handed if they create only illusions about their benevolence instead of acting accordingly.* (Focus group 2)
Powerful	Participants recognize brands as powerful vehicles in society and are concerned that SCBs could increase societal polarisation by misusing their power.	*I begin to think about freedom of speech. If everything is allowed, could some brands use that to spread racist or otherwise morally wrong thoughts in society?* (Focus group 4)

In addition to brand attributes, participants formed their framings around perceived brand activities (Table 5). From the nine initial activities mentioned, four categories were formed: *doing good*, *distributing information*, *influencing mind-sets,* and *providing resources*. It is noteworthy that none of these activities is directly intended to communicate the brand image, nor to increase consumers' purchasing intentions, which can be considered as traditional corporate branding tasks. This corroborates the theoretical notion that SCBs move away from the brand–customer dyad towards wider societal concerns (Schroeder, 2017), transcending the traditional role and purpose of corporate branding.

Table 5. Perceived brand activities of SCBs

Brand activity	Description	Illustrative quote

Doing good	Participants expect the whole business model of SCBs to be based on doing good, like the company committing to circular economy; or advancing physical, mental or financial well-being of the community.	*Instead of a company advertising that they are a sustainable company, the ethical and sustainable principles should be so deeply entwined with the actual business model that their whole business benefits society.* (Focus group 1)
Distributing information	Participants experience added value when SCBs deliver useful information for them, such as tips for recycling or reducing their ecological footprint.	*It's great when brands make things easier for us, for example, sharing information on how our choices affect the environment. I think this adds an awareness of sustainable consumption in the everyday lives of consumers.* (Focus group 2)
Influencing mindsets	Participants are affected by branding efforts beyond their purchasing intentions and assess SCB's communications in terms of how their reasoning is affected, their emotions touched or even how they experience personal transformation.	*I've never shopped at this clothing boutique fighting against fast fashion and selling only classical pieces, but their slogan, 'slow fashion', has made me think, 'Do I really need new clothes for every party and season?', so it has changed my attitude towards consumption.* (Focus group 3)
Providing resources	Participants awaits SCBs to address communal concerns through providing resources, such as financial means, time, talent, networks and other capabilities the brands possess.	*We have to think about the best ways of being sustainable. ...Sometimes the best way might be to address a social need by donating money, for instance, for World Vision.* (Focus group 1)

The differences between the three framings of SCBs followed from participants emphasising brand attributes and brand activities differently. Firstly, framing these brands as *signs of corporate hypocrisy* denoted that the corporations positioned their brands as sustainable, but lacked real and transparent activities that showed the brands to be fulfilling their sustainability promises in practice. Secondly, framing these brands as *threats that increase societal fragmentation* communicated that some of the brand activities were in place, but without the appropriate sustainability orientation, suggesting the brands might be misusing their position as political-moral actors. Finally, framing the brands as *signs of corporate enlightenment* indicated a symmetry between the perceived brand attributes and brand activities, reflecting a sustainability orientation that was carried out in real and transparent societal and environmental actions. These framings (Table 6) are discussed next.

Table 6. *Summary of the participants' framing of SCBs*

Framing	Description	Framing components Attributes	Activities	Illustrative quote
Signs of corporate hypocrisy	SCBs use false claims of sustainability and unsuitably extend their commercial role	Brands are dialogic and contemporary actors but not sincere nor powerful, due to the lack of real efforts	Brands do not enact any sustainability activities, and in part, are not even expected to do so	*I think the only goal for such corporate brands is to look good in the eyes of others, and they do these things just because they have realised it's a trick to gain more money.* (Focus group 3)
Threats increasing societal fragmentation	SCBs increase polarisation and misuse their power and freedom of speech	Brands are powerful actors, but not dialogic, contemporary, or sincere, which causes fearful doubts	Brands use their position to influence social climate, but not necessarily for the good	*It can create problems when brands start to use similar tools to influence people as politicians do. I'm afraid this accelerates the fragmentation and ideological struggles in society.* (Focus group 4)
Signals of corporate enlightenment	SCBs become value leaders in society, replacing the political parties that are losing trust	Brands are dialogic, contemporary, sincere and powerful actors	Brands engage in several sustainability activities that advance the common good	*The most important thing for brands is to act in a way that is universally right. I feel these brands are like us, humans, they know how to act right, and they should harm no-one. (Focus group 1)*

A sign of corporate hypocrisy

This framing presents SCBs as commercial actors promoting inauthentic sustainability stances. Within this framing, SCB's integrity was questioned for two main reasons: (1) lack of trust in the SCB's altruism and (2) SCBs crossing boundaries between the public and private domains. Firstly, participants perceived SCBs as only maximising profit by taking advantage of the consumers' willingness to pay a premium for sustainable brands, without any real sustainability commitments. Therefore, their actions were mainly considered as 'green-washing' or 'purpose-washing', as one of the focus group participants described:

> 'I think these corporate stances should create pressure for transparency. Today, many brands get caught in action for green-washing, I mean they only create illusionary sustainability claims instead of changing anything in their behavior. To me, that's hypocritical.' (Focus group 3)

In the second reasoning, society and corporations were seen as two inherently separate entities, meaning that corporate brands should not even attempt to extend their actions as commercial actors into the societal sphere. This view was justified with the legal purpose of a corporation: to yield profits for its shareholders. One focus group participant expressed their opinion as follows:

> 'In my opinion, it's weird when a corporate brand takes a stand on immigration and the questions related to it. I don't think it's their responsibility at all to act like that. I feel it's just hard-nosed marketing communications'. (Focus group 1)

To summarize this framing, participants stated that SCBs should leave the societal and environmental problem-solving for traditional public institutions, such as states and governments, and NGOs, which are characterized by different rights and responsibilities in society and have different *raisons d'etre* than commercial corporate brands. But if the corporate brands still decide to join forces on sustainability, their actions were expected to speak louder than words.

A threat that increases societal fragmentation

This framing presents SCBs as powerful political-moral actors, whose societal and environmental stances can come with undesirable consequences. The participants raised concerns for two main reasons: (1) SCBs increasing polarisation in society and (2) SCBs misusing their power. Firstly, SCBs were assumed to have good intentions, but cause unhoped-for side effects by taking stances on sensitive, value-based issues in the public debate. One focus group participant pondered:

> 'Maybe these kind of stances will accelerate social polarisation even more, and that doesn't sound too good to me'. (Focus group 4)

The second reasoning revealed a fear that corporate brands might use their significant foothold in society to advocate questionable stances, such as racism, inequality, or climate scepticism. SCBs were seen as powerful actors that could potentially fuel conflicts based on differing values in the communities they operate, as expressed by one focus group participant:

> "If someone reads the free paper Kauppasuomi, (eng. TradeFinland), they can't escape the political manifestations that this neo nazi dude writes to his own paper, which he then publishes under the brand name of his department store Kärkkäinen. The polarization of thoughts can be accelerated just like this." (Focus group 2)

To summarize this framing, participants brought up their misgivings about the increasing significance of corporate brands in today's society. They found it worrisome that commercial brands start to compete in the marketplace with moral values, especially when it is nearly impossible for consumers to know the true reasons behind corporate brands' newly-adopted sustainability orientations.

A sign of corporate enlightenment

Like in the previous framing, also in this framing SCBs we significant political-moral actors in society, but with a much more positive impact. The impact of SCBs was felt on both macro and micro levels. On the macro level, SCBs were seen to replace political institutions as value leaders. Participants felt that the trust in the political system is crumbling and, therefore, political opinions are no longer having a similar foothold in shaping society's values. They saw that SCBs advocating sustainable values could fill the vacuum by assuming the role of opinion leaders. As one of the focus group participants said:

> 'I believe that brands can take the role of some kind of value leaders when our political system is starting to break up'. (Focus group 2)

On the micro-level, SCBs were perceived as interactive tools for identifying and reconfiguring a person's own values. Here, the participants recognised that SCBs have the required power, publicity, and resources to highlight the often-sensitive sustainability issues. While the participants admitted that they seldom contemplated their own values unless someone contested them, they felt that SCBs

made them a favour by bringing certain issues into their awareness, as demonstrated by one focus group participant:

'A corporate brand can symbolise certain ideologies or values, which we, as consumers, can then adopt as our own'. (Focus group 4)

To summarize this framing, participants were ready to treat SCBs as opinion leaders in society, if they were aligned with their creed and supported by real, concrete, and transparent actions. Based on this framing, it can be deduced that the most likely way for corporate brands to advance sustainability in their communities, and appear as enlightened, is to guarantee a symmetry between the perceived brand attributes and brand activities.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Corporate brands make headlines with their intentions to combat the environmental crisis or fight inequality, yet participants in the focus groups framed these brands differently. The participants, representing a generation of millennial consumers, were deeply worried about the current state of society and the future of the planet. They shared a view that they live in an era of major challenges, and they recognized new actors, such as corporate brands with newly-adopted sustainability orientations addressing these challenges, yet with varying efforts.

This paper argues that in order for SCBs to succeed in their sustainability efforts, they must be seen as a joint construction. Thus, it is not enough for a corporate brand to embody sustainability at its epicentre; how consumers, and other key stakeholders, frame sustainability issues and actions determines the success or defeat of SCBs. Accordingly, the paper proposes that sustainable corporate branding should no longer be seen as a company-driven development process; instead, it relates to how the brand becomes relevant for the key stakeholders, such as consumers, vis-à-vis the prevalent sustainability issues and the public debate in society.

Building on the recent developments in the sustainable corporate branding literature, this paper corroborates the notion that SCBs do not merely promote the corporation to its customers and other stakeholders; instead, they use their coverage to address prevalent sustainability issues through participating in the public debate, and through engaging in activities that advance the common good (Schroeder, 2017). This shift in the role and purpose of corporate branding highlights the need to conceptualise, manage, and measure these brands in new ways.

On the basis of this shift, the paper contributes to the existing literature in two ways. Firstly, the research extends the sustainable corporate branding literature by using a framing approach to understand and illustrate how brand co-creation happens *in situ*: how consumers co-create SCBs through their framing in the context of the current public discourse and in relation to the prevalent sustainability issues. The three framings complement the current understanding of consumers' perceptions of corporate brands with a newly-adopted sustainability orientation (e.g. Arbouw *et al.*, 2019) by revealing the breadth and depth of different ways of re-signifying such brands. The study also elucidates the components of these framings: the perceived attributes and activities of SCBs. Based on the insights gleaned from the empirical research, these two components may differentiate SCBs from conventional corporate brands.

Secondly, the paper complements existing studies on framing in the CSRC research by enabling a nuanced understanding of the interaction processes between the corporation and consumers. Rather than focusing on the frame-setting efforts of the corporation or the stakeholders

per se, or treating framing as a strategic organisational activity (Etter and Vestergaard, 2015; Meriläinen and Vos, 2013; Ravazzani and Maier, 2017), the paper demonstrates framing as a less intentional, but still influential, negotiation process in co-creating corporate brands that embody a newly-adopted sustainability orientation.

7. Managerial implications

This paper provides practical insights for brand managers who are in the process of developing corporate brands with an initial sustainability orientation, or who hope to revitalize their existing brands. Firstly, the brand managers are encouraged to engage in two-way dialogues with consumers to capture the essence of their values and concerns. This is essential for co-creating brands that are relevant to consumers, since as the findings show, even if an SCB would be well intentioned, consumers can frame its sustainability stances as inauthentic, inappropriate, or even worse, harming the social fabric. Secondly, brand managers are advised to thoroughly educate themselves on the sustainability issues they aim to address. One way to gain deeper knowledge on the issues at hand is to establish partnerships with actors who work on the front lines of such issues (e.g. NGOs, grassroot movements). Thirdly, brand managers should ensure that their sustainability stances are aligned with the entire business strategy and business model. If they are not, discrepancies are likely to follow. Table 7 provides more detailed implications of each framing.

Table 7. Implications for brand managers per framing

Framing	Driving question	Recommendations for managers
Signs of corporate hypocrisy	How to avoid?	Integrate sustainability into all aspects of corporate branding, not just single marketing campaign
		Act first, communicate only real efforts after
		Be transparent in communicating about sustainability efforts
		Avoid overpromising and false claims of sustainability in catchy campaigns
Threats increasing societal fragmentation	How to prevent?	Understand the underlying controversies of a given issue, there are always some
		Enable idea-sharing among all stakeholders, acknowledge also the marginalized groups
		Take responsibility for the consequences of raising an issue
		Avoid aggressive language and hostile visuals to minimize the risk of misunderstandings
Signals of corporate enlightenment	How to foster?	Be specific about the brand values
		Adhere strictly to a sustainable business model
		Use the brand as an environmental and societal steward, but choose the battles wisely
		Ensure consistency with what the brand stands for, even when the business struggles financially

The key contribution for brand managers aiming to co-create SCBs lies in recognizing the plurality of framings for SCBs. Table 7, providing specific action recommendations, leaves brand managers better equipped to deal with these framings.

8. Limitations and future research

Besides the theoretical contributions and the managerial implications that this paper aims to provide, it also comes with certain limitations that open interesting future research opportunities. Firstly, although the current and potential consumers are key stakeholders for SCBs, they are not the only ones framing the sustainability stances of such brands. Therefore, future research should apply the framing approach to consider how other stakeholders, such as the news media, NGOs, or policymakers, engage in framing SCBs. Secondly, while this research focused only on the consumer group of millennials, all of which shared the same nationality in the focus groups, subsequent studies are needed to compare the framings of different consumer groups in different cultural contexts. Thirdly, this research applied an inductive data-driven approach, making the subjective interpretations of authors an unavoidable, but important, part of the analysis. To improve the generalisability of the findings, quantitative examination of the different framings would offer an important opportunity for further inquiry. Finally, compared to the popularity of the phenomenon, little systematic study of sustainable corporate branding has been conducted so far, especially from the brand co-creation perspective; therefore, this paper calls for more researchers to contribute to this development.

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PUBLICATION
IV

Food, Health, and Data: Developing Transformative Food Retailing

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Food, health, and data: Developing transformative food retailing

13

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13.1 Introduction

The food retailing sector in many countries is undergoing considerable restructuring (Sparks, 2016). One of the catalysts for this has been the penetration of the hard discounters, which have established unprecedented levels of price competition. Whilst enhanced price competitiveness is one response from existing food retailers, direct head on competition with the hard discounters is not seen as a sustainable strategy. Many food retailers instead are searching for new initiatives through which they can engage themselves further into their consumers' lives, thus serving consumers in ways that go beyond traditional "simple" selling of groceries "cheaply." In this endeavor, data, digitalization in general, and mobile services play pivotal roles, as they allow retailers to integrate additional personalized resources—such as menu-planning guidance, help in tracing product origins and dietary information advice—with their consumers' everyday processes (O'Hern & Rindfleisch, 2009; Saarijärvi, Mitronen, & Yrjölä, 2013b; Saarijärvi, Kuusela, & Rintamäki, 2013c).

At the same time, it is recognized that consumers' ethical considerations and alternative dietary preferences, along with the renaissance of local food, are driving alterations in consumers' food choices. Food healthfulness has emerged as a movement influencing structures, processes, and resources in the food retailing industry. Consumer health and wellbeing are growing concerns for consumers, industries, and governments (IGD Retail Analysis, 2016). Food purchase and consumption have the potential to influence, for example, obesity rates (CDC, 2013; Cohen & Lesser, 2016), which in turn have been linked to health issues including high blood pressure, coronary heart disease, increased risk for type-2 diabetes, and several cancers (Andrews, Lin, Levy, & Lo, 2014). Food retailers thus face pressure to reconfigure their role and responsibility for health, either contributing to national health objectives or facing possible restructuring legislation, taxation, and other restrictions. Sparks and Burt (2017) provide a review of previous research in this area, focusing on potential interventions of in-store retail operations, with the aim of improving consumer choices. Their report adds a retail dimension to the often

medically or health inclined systematic reviews already published (see Adam & Jensen, 2016; Afshim et al., 2017; Escaron, Meinen, Nitzke, & Marinez-Donate, 2013; Gittelsohn, Rowan, & Gadhoke, 2012; Glanz, Bader, & Iyer, 2012; Liberato, Bailie, & Brimblecombe, 2014).

This rising interest in the relationships amongst food retailing, consumption, and diet and health points to the significance of this area for health policy as well as retailers, who might increasingly feel under threat from this new emphasis. However, this emphasis also means that food retailers have an opportunity to take on a greater role and greater responsibility regarding consumers' health and wellbeing. The digital and innovative use of customer data—including point-of-sale (POS) and customer loyalty data, but possibly also data from the health services—can facilitate this paradigmatic transition, as well as developing new means to customer loyalty (Møller, 2011; Wansink, 2017). This suggests a new proactive, transformative role for retailers, arising not only from recognition of the weaknesses of current practices (in some eyes) but also from the opportunities of directly engaging more deeply with consumers' lives.

This potential new role of the food retailer necessitates an in-depth understanding of its origins, as well as its diverse implications. This chapter explores the key elements of transformative food retailing, analyses its potential, and identifies implications for consumers, companies, academics, and society. To achieve this, we discuss three key theoretical perspectives of the phenomenon, reflect on the potential opportunities and pitfalls through food retailing's four evolutionary phases, and propose a conceptual framework for transformative food retailing.

13.2   Theoretical framework

The theoretical proposition is that retailers have an opportunity to transform their role and relationship with consumers around the space of food, health, and diet. This implies the need to join together aspects of data, customer focus, and transformative service delivery. Three complementary theoretical perspectives are thus discussed. First, *transformative service research (TSR)* combines transformative consumer research and service research to identify and address the role of services in enhancing consumers' wellbeing (Mick, 2006). Second, the *reverse use of customer data* refers to the process of converting customer data into such information that directly supports customers' value creation (Saarijärvi, Grönroos, & Kuusela, 2014). Third, *customer-dominant logic (CDL)* introduces a business perspective based on the primacy of the customer (Heinonen & Strandvik, 2015).

Taken together (see Fig. 13.1), these perspectives offer a theoretical foundation for discussing, defining, and exploring transformative food retailing; i.e., they offer complementary lenses through which the evolving transition toward transformative food retailing can be viewed.
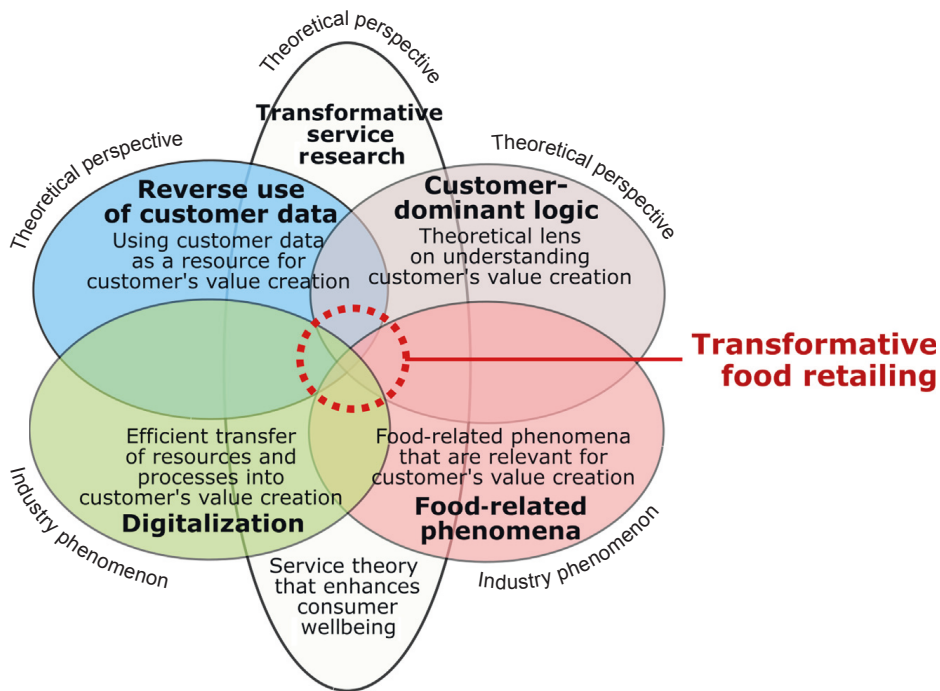
Figure 13.1 Theoretical perspectives to transformative food retailing.

13.2.1 *Transformative service research*

The concern for consumers' individual and collective wellbeing is increasingly gaining attention amongst service providers, as well as amongst service researchers. A specific research area, labeled TSR, is characterized by its focus on service outcomes that increase or decrease the wellbeing (physical, mental, social, and financial wellbeing) of those engaged in the service under study (Anderson & Ostrom, 2015). By definition, transformative services focus on creating "uplifting changes" to improve the wellbeing of individuals, families, communities, society, and the ecosystem at large (Anderson et al., 2013). Within TSR, transformation occurs when actors "become conscious of their roles in reproducing structures and elect to make new, imaginative choices to challenge dominant patterns" (Blocker & Barrios, 2015: 268). Current dominant patterns created and sustained by food retailers are seen to promote obesogenic environments that undermine consumers' balanced diets or overall national health (Sparks & Burt, 2017). While some food retailers are becoming aware of their role in producing these structures and experimenting in change (e.g., Adam, Jensen, Sommer, & Hansen, 2017; Wansink, 2017), being the first movers they often lack the information, examples, and guidance on what really works. We aim to elaborate the key elements that transformation in food retailing should/could entail.

Much of the current service research and practice draws on service-dominant logic (S-D logic) to highlight customers' participation in cocreating services

(Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Mende and van Doorn (2015) recognize one critical limitation in this research stream, namely that the outcomes of cocreation are predominantly linked to organizational benefits or customer responses that increase loyalty or positive word-of-mouth for the organization. To bring the wellbeing of consumers into the epicenter of value cocreation, Blocker and Barrios (2015: 268) introduce the concept of *transformative value*, which they define as "an intervention, aimed to advance greater wellbeing by facilitating enduring changes among actors." The authors point out that most of the value creation in the marketplace is *habitual* in nature, meaning that organizations focus on satisfying domain-specific, existing, everyday needs of their customers and other stakeholders. Habitual value creation sustains current patterns, practices, and structures; i.e., continues "business as usual." Transformative value creation alternatively is an option for those service providers who are willing to go beyond habitual value creation, and who can see their service system as a springboard for change in micro and macroenvironments. Transformative value not only reflects changes in beliefs, attitudes, and values, but also requires alterations in resources, processes, and practices (Blocker & Barrios, 2015). Over time, if successful, transformative value creation would become new habitual provision.

Given the centrality of customers in value cocreation (Vargo & Lusch, 2008), transformative value also requires participation from consumers. Thus, while a service provider, such as a food retailer, can facilitate transformation by creating resources, capabilities, and tools that aim to increase consumer wellbeing through its service system, the actual transformation necessitates individuals deciding to use these tools and resources to create desired outcomes (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). Mende and van Doorn (2015) investigated drivers of cocreation in transformative services by drawing from self-determination theory (SDT), developed by Ryan and Deci (2000). They point to three drivers of cocreation by providers and consumers in transformative services: service literacy (competence in SDT), involvement (autonomy in SDT), and attachment styles (relatedness in SDT). In the context of food retailing, this could imply that cocreation of transformative value may be affected by consumers' nutritional literacy, how important they see the change for a healthier diet, and the interpersonal ties with, for example, service provider, nutritional advisor, health services, and other consumers. These determinants should be considered when segmenting the customer portfolio, designing digital tools for different segments, and measuring the objective and subjective wellbeing of these service users.

13.2.2 Reverse use of customer data

Reverse use of customer data refers to the process of harnessing the potential of customer data for the benefit of the customer, not only for the benefit of the company (Saarijärvi et al., 2014). Traditionally, companies' customer data usage has focused on various customer relationship management (CRM) activities, including cross- and up-selling activities, and segmentation or identifying the most profitable and unprofitable customers. Customer data has thus been used as a

resource for the company's processes: the customer has been perceived as the source of data and a passive objective of the company's diverse set of CRM activities (Saarijärvi, Karjaluoto, & Kuusela, 2013a). Loyalty schemes are a good example of this.

However, customer data holds direct potential to be used as an input resource for the customer's value-creating processes. Banking, insurance, retailing, telecommunications, or energy are examples of industries that could—and increasingly do—convert vast amounts of customer data into meaningful information; for example, related to consumers' insurance needs, real-time energy consumption, or most suitable teleoperator contracts. Customer data is thus turning into customer's data; it is converted into a resource that has potential to be used for the customer's value creation. Digitalization enables new forms of data collection, analysis, and utilization, which further exerts pressure on harnessing customer data in contemporary businesses, including food retailing. This may eventually reconfigure also the company's role: it is not only a supplier of goods or services but also serves customers through their own data.

In the context of food retailing, reverse use of customer data offers ample opportunities and space for differentiation. Food retailing is a data-driven business, but customer data is traditionally used to optimize logistics and maximize return for the business, being used as an input resource for supply chain management and retail merchandising. While these are of critical importance, they offer a narrow approach to the potential of customer data. Food retailers' customer loyalty programs and POS data, together with databases including grocery product nutrition content information and health services data, offer unique opportunities to build information that consumers could find relevant and useful for their own purposes. Moreover, information that is about the consumers (based on consumers' purchases) and for the consumers (i.e., information that supports consumers' value-creating activities) could have an impact by changing behavior—another characteristic of information. This becomes especially powerful when datasets from various domains (food retailing, health services, exercise regimes, for example), but linked by the customer, can be drawn together.

13.2.3   Customer-dominant logic

The success of transformative services is heavily dependent on in-depth understanding of the consumer's context. Recent paradigmatic initiatives in marketing and service theory, including S-D logic (e.g., Vargo & Lusch, 2004; 2016), service logic (Grönroos & Ravald, 2011, Grönroos & Voima, 2013), consumer-dominant logic (Anker, Sparks, Moutinho, & Grönroos, 2015), or service science (Maglio & Spohrer, 2008), have collectively shifted attention from a product orientation toward a customer value creation context and sphere. More recently, CDL has complemented scholarly discussion (Heinonen & Strandvik, 2015). In contrast to other established service perspectives, CDL emphasizes "how customers embed service in their processes rather than how firms provide service to customers" (Heinonen &

Strandvik, 2015: 472). As a perspective, it operates through five fundamental features.

First, *customer logic* refers to those actions, reactions, practices, preferences, and decisions accomplished by the customer to live their life. Food retailing has a key role in consumers' activities. Second, a *business perspective* refers to companies shifting focus on understanding customers' logics. In the context of food retailing, this would necessitate companies building key competence on understanding consumers' activities, experiences, and preferences, together with their goals, tasks and reasoning, and how to support them through food retailing. Third, *offering* refers to what the provider, or food retailer, offers. Service scholars (e.g., Heinonen & Strandvik, 2015) do not make any distinction between products/services or service. For example, the food retailers' offering is not only related to the product category or place of the store, but is also a combination of groceries, brand and people, offline and online services, and customized information and promotions. Fourth, *value formation* refers to the process through which value emerges. Heinonen and Strandvik (2015: 479) define it as "customers emerging behavioral and mental processes of interpreting, experiencing and integrating offerings in their everyday lives." In food retailing, this can be reflected as various dimensions of value emerging as consumers engage in different activities related to food—e.g., menu construction. Finally, *ecosystems* consist of different actors and elements that are contributing to service. In the context of food retailing, ecosystems can consist, for example, of offline and online services, suppliers, and POS data systems, but could go beyond that in their linkage to other non-retail service providers.

Table 13.1 synthesizes and summarizes the discussion thus far. These theoretical departures, i.e., TSR, reverse use of customer data, and CDL, together with their respective key concepts (consumer wellbeing, customer's data, customer logic, business perspective, offering, value formation, ecosystem), demonstrate the potential of transformative food retailing.

13.2.4   Toward a framework for transformative food retailing

Digitalization is reconfiguring the boundaries of retailing. Consumer-to-consumer e-commerce, desire for food healthfulness, and smart shopping are examples that are driving retail evolution. It can be argued that parts of food retailing are beginning to evolve toward an approach built on the insight generated from TSR, reverse use of customer data, and CDL.

The evolutionary transition can be considered through four phases that share different characteristics. During these phases, food retailing has faced varying emphases in terms of what type of customer data is being used and how, and the key challenges and strategic priorities facing food retailers and how these have contributed to shaping the food retailer's role. Table 13.2 illustrates this shift and—though not being all inclusive—illustrates the direction toward viewing food retailing as a transformative agent.

Our interest is in the fourth phase, i.e., food retailing as transformation. The key concepts of TSR, reverse use of customer data, and CDL help us explore

Table 13.1 Implications of theoretical perspectives for transformative food retailing

Theoretical perspective	Implications for transformative food retailing
Transformative service research	• ***Shifts attention toward viewing service businesses as vehicles for enhanced consumer wellbeing*** • Exerts pressure on reconfiguring food retailing's *raison d'être* and consequently, respective executive mental models • Emphasizes the understanding of the antecedents of consumers' subjective and objective wellbeing in given industries • Reduces asymmetry between consumers and service providers by bringing consumers' wellbeing to the epicenter of value cocreation in food retailing
Reverse use of customer data	• ***Shifts attention toward harnessing the potential of customer data for healthier food consumption*** • Provides alternative approach to customer data usage by serving customers through their own data • Exerts pressure on digital services, modernized data infrastructures, and managing consumers' willingness to share data • Emphasizes the understanding of what kind of data and how this data can support consumers' value creation
Customer-dominant logic	• ***Shifts attention toward consumers embedding service in their own value-creating processes*** • Provides conceptual tools to explore and analyze consumer perspective to transformative food retailing • Exerts pressure on extending focus from products and processes to people; gaining in-depth understanding of how food retailing influences consumers' lives • Emphasizes the understanding of customer logic, business perspective, offering, value formation, and ecosystem in uncovering how customers engage service in their everyday lives

systematically and analyze the potential of transformative food retailing. Table 13.3 is a synthesized conceptual framework for transformative food retailing. In order to illustrate the implications of transformative food retailing, we use a case example of nutrition code, an online-based service by a major Finnish retailer, Kesko Corporation. The service combines POS data of food grocery purchases with customer loyalty data, and the nutritional recommendations provided by the authorities (see, for example, Saarijärvi, Kuusela, Kannan, Kulkarni, & Rintamäki, 2016). This information is then offered to consumers through the online-based service. As a result, consumers are provided with information that has potential to support

Table 13.2 Illustrating the shift toward transformative food retailing

	Phase I Food retailing as supply	Phase II Food retailing as logistics	Phase III Food retailing as a service	Phase IV Food retailing as transformation
Theoretical orientation	Production-dominant	Goods-dominant	Service-dominant	Customer-dominant
Customer role	Passive object of generic supply	Passive object of different groceries	Active, individual consumer	Cocreator of multidimensional value
Type of customer data	POS data	POS data, loyalty program data	POS data, loyalty program data, consumer surveys, social media	POS data, loyalty program data, social media, consumer surveys, phenomenon related data (e.g., nutritive substance, CO_2 emissions, food origin, health data, locations data)
Main data usages	Ordering and delivery, inventory velocity	Store investments, category management, customer lifetime value, lean management	Consumer profiling, consumer lifestyles, personalization, customer loyalty program incentives	Supporting consumers' value-creating processes and practices, goals and desires, and consumers' wellbeing
Key challenges	Adequate level of production, balancing supply, and demand	Logistical optimization, efficient delivery system, global supply chain management, inventory management	Increasingly heterogeneous customer preferences, customer segment determination, and selection	Data infrastructure, data systems, consumers' willingness to share data, ethics, and security

Table 13.3 Conceptual framework for transformative food retailing

	Transformative food retailing	Illustrative case example: nutrition code
Consumer wellbeing	Consumers' health and wellbeing are at the epicenter of value cocreation. Wellbeing is understood both as objective wellbeing (e.g., healthfulness and nutritional balance of dietary intake) and subjective wellbeing (e.g., reduced stress and increased human agency)	Through tailored food healthfulness information, consumers have a concrete means to enhance their food dietary decisions. This influences consumers' wellbeing
Customer's data	POS data and loyalty program data combined with nutrition information of the groceries from national databases can be converted into information that supports consumers' food healthfulness. Customer data is converted into food healthfulness information; customer data becomes customer's data	Customer data is put into use for the benefit of the customer. It is converted into such information that is meaningful for consumers. *Customer's* data becomes *customer's* data, the use of which they control
Customer logic	Consumers employ a multitude of food retailing related actions and practices, such as cooking, dietary practices, both utilitarian and hedonic aspects of consumption, and social eating and dining activities	Food healthfulness information is an increasingly important and useful resource that supports various of these consumers' activities
Business perspective	Food retailers place focus on understanding how they can engage in supporting consumers' wellbeing. This necessitates defining what consumer wellbeing is and offering customers vehicles for enhanced wellbeing through altered food choices (new uses of customer data, product category selections, educational activities). This alters food retailers' role: from grocery provider toward food healthfulness provider	Food retailer establishes new means for enhanced service and building customer loyalty. The more consumers concentrate their shopping to the food retailer, the more accurate food healthfulness information they receive. The food retailer's role develops into supporting consumers' wellbeing
Offering	Food retailers' offering is extended from groceries toward serving information that can be delivered to consumers through digital services. Information (resulting from innovative use of customer data) related to how consumers can enhance food-related wellbeing complements traditional offering	Food healthfulness information is a complementary element to the food retailing offering. In addition to traditional food groceries and additional services (e.g., click and collect, delivery services, etc.), consumers are serviced through meaningful information that has transformative potential for their wellbeing

(Continued)

Table 13.3 (Continued)

	Transformative food retailing	Illustrative case example: nutrition code
Value formation	Customers' value creation consists of combining various resources and processes in their everyday lives. In their endeavor toward healthier lives, food retailers can provide additional resources (information related to food healthfulness) to this process of value formation. Transformative value necessitates resource integration, where individuals are willing to use these tools to pursue better wellbeing	Customer data becomes a resource not only for the food retailer's value formation but also for the consumer's value formation. It is an additional resource to be integrated with various consumer processes centered around food consumption
Ecosystem	In addition to traditional food value chains, a food retailer's ecosystem will be characterized by various front-end and back-end data systems, food health professionals, and other service providers	Various resources and actors, e.g., POS data, customer loyalty scheme, data infrastructure, nutritional recommendations, and third-party service providers constitute an ecosystem with value and cocreative potential

various value-creating processes and consequently, enhance consumers' food healthfulness.

13.3 Discussion

Recent technological developments—together with innovative initiatives in harnessing the potential of customer data for the benefit of customers—uncover vast value potential for both consumers and food retailers. Among other things, this amplifies the transition toward transformative food retailing, i.e., reconfiguring food retailers' role from supplying groceries to supporting consumers pursuing healthier lifestyles. This evolutionary transition provides revolutionary opportunities to reconfigure the food retailer's role, not only in relation to competition but also in a societal context. This shift generates several implications for (1) consumers, (2) companies, (3) the academic community, and (4) society at large (see Table 13.4).

13.3.1 Transformative food retailing and consumers

Implications for consumers follow from the reduced information asymmetry between producers and consumers. First, this democratization of information inspires human agency, which enhances the individual's capacity to act and exert

Table 13.4 Implications of transformative food retailing

Stakeholder	Implications of transformative food retailing
Consumers	Enhancing value creation; increasing human agency; elevating identity projects; creating a sense of safety and certainty; granting access to information; assisting in informed choices; improving dietary intake; promoting healthy lifestyles
Companies	Offering a way for differentiation; establishing new markets for start-ups; motivating role reconfiguration; initiating strategic changes; inspiring new service design; reformulating service offering; engaging with different stakeholders; innovating new marketing processes; humanizing brand image; cultivating social responsibility
Academic community	Stimulating new retailing research avenues; advancing multidisciplinary collaboration; spurring new research methods; bridging the gap between scientific knowledge, business practitioners, and society; increasing research relevance and social impact
Society	Increasing the role of businesses in solving societal challenges; capturing societal potential of retailing; altering dominant social structures; stimulating social action; informing decision-making; raising public awareness of the impact of dietary choices for health; addressing socioeconomic differences; improving public health; providing new retailing-led public policy guidelines

control over their choices (Blocker & Barrios, 2015). A sense of greater agency represents a type of eudaimonic wellbeing (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008), as opposed to hedonic pleasure, and can lead to enhanced self-identity. Second, when consumers obtain the access to information that the service provider has traditionally held in their own hands, their sense of safety to operate with this provider rises. Third, since most people are unaware of the nutritional content of their dietary intake, information provided by retailers can support consumers' ability to make informed choices, holding the potential of furthering healthier eating while preserving their freedom of choice (Grunert, Bolton, & Raats, 2012). This becomes especially powerful if combined with other datasets about the consumer and their lifestyle. However, this transition requires active participation from the consumers' side; thus, consumer's competence, autonomy, and relatedness play a vital role for transformative value to be realized.

13.3.2 Transformative food retailing and companies

Implications for companies concern both traditional food retailers and new start-ups that can benefit from the transition. New start-ups that build transformative food retailing infrastructure (e.g., online services, back-end systems) can be established to target market segments that have been so far underserved. Data-driven start-ups are pioneering in acquiring, calculating, and interpreting the dietary data of groceries on behalf, and for the benefit, of consumers. Traditional food retailers are also developing their business through differentiation. Insight from transformative food retailing can provide input for initiating strategic changes, designing new service systems and offerings, engaging with different stakeholders, and innovating marketing processes. The transformative agenda can also be used as a branding tool for the retailer. By reconfiguring the role that the company plays in the community, social responsibility becomes an integral part of the company strategy and not an add-on element. However, contemporary and conservative executive mental models may hinder, or slow, the transition toward perceiving the greater role of food retailers in transforming the market. Companies may also be concerned whether the shift toward transformative food retailing is more profitable than traditional food retailing. While transformative food retailing may be a strong strategic initiative, focusing on product margins of healthy vs unhealthy products may in some cases discourage food retailers from taking an active role in facilitating behavioral changes toward healthier food consumption. However, retailers who lack in activity toward this direction could eventually meet stronger government legislation, restricting traditional retail operations and practices (Sparks & Burt, 2017).

13.3.3 Transformative food retailing and the academic community

Transformative food retailing inspires an array of new theories, concepts, methodologies, and research approaches, while encouraging multidisciplinary collaboration.

The research questions arise from real-life phenomena, addressing issues that have a great influence on individual and collective wellbeing. It is widely acknowledged that what makes research interesting and influential is its ability to challenge our current assumptions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). By way of comparison, "transformative" studies in parallel fields, such as "transformative learning" or "transformative leadership," represent research streams that focus on challenging the current assumptions and altering existing patterns in their respected fields (Blocker & Barrios, 2015). Promoting wellbeing through research in the context of food retailing is a worthy endeavor and can explain, but also inspire changes in the marketplace. While retailers are being increasingly seen as part of the global health problem, transformative food retailing offers the potential to be part of the solution. Moreover, while the distance between scientific knowledge, business practitioners, society, and ordinary consumers is often described as long and wide, transformative food retailing represents context that can bring these parties closer to each other, while increasing the relevance and social impact of the research. However, transformative studies still represent a minority view, and researchers have to show courage and determination in order to further the transformation within academia.

13.3.4   *Transformative food retailing and society*

Implications for society are not only primarily linked to the concern of public health and wellbeing, but also to the influential role of food retailers. Despite increasing customer orientation, food retailers still have extensive power in determining what kind of groceries consumers eventually consume in respective markets. Especially in highly concentrated food retail markets, such as the Nordic countries, two or three companies may have 85%−90% of the market, which amplifies their role as major influencers of local food consumption behavior. Their in-store activities can promote unhealthy consumption; or as Sparks and Burt (2017: 3) articulate: "consumer 'desire' for unhealthy products has been encouraged and manipulated by the in-store and retail environment." However, in a similar way, in these highly concentrated markets, a single food retailer initiative, in terms of food healthfulness, can have a major societal impact on national health. Through transformative food retailing, society as a whole can benefit from addressing health problems linked to unhealthy food consumption, such as high blood pressure, increased type-2 diabetes, and several cancers. Furthermore, this has direct positive effects on public costs, work wellbeing, and productivity, further characterizing the societal potential of transformative food retailing. Finally, we referred earlier to the energized human agency at the individual level, which can aggregate to a collective moral agency, reflecting the proactive responsibility to "do good" (Bandura, 2002). Thus, we suggest that at the societal level, transformative value can cultivate uplifting social change.

13.4 Conclusion

Food retailing is at a crossroads. It is viewed increasingly as part of the problem of health and diet in society. It need not, however, be like this. There is a choice to be made between a battle over regulation or an embrace of digitalization, data availability, and health concerns. Transformative food retailing offers new venues for value creation, both for firms and customers, and points toward potential areas of strategic differentiation. New uses of customer data play a pivotal role and provide a new means for building customer loyalty. Changes in consumer behavior toward healthier food consumption at the individual level contribute to potentially major impacts at the societal level. Taken together, transformative food retailing has multiple value potentials and can extend the food retailers' role from supplying products and services toward facilitating consumers' personal and societal transformation toward healthier lives. This redefines and concretizes the importance of food retailing in contemporary society.

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