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**SHAPING BUSINESS SUSTAINABILITY
THROUGH STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**
A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Bianca Diniz Salvatori: Shaping Business Sustainability Through Stakeholder Engagement – A Case Study
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Business sustainability is a topical issue in the current literature and practice. Sustainability in business is becoming imperative for preserving society and the planet and for companies to maintain competitiveness and survival in the market. However, becoming more sustainable demands overcoming the business-as-usual mindset and changing the shareholder-centered strategy to a stakeholder-centered orientation. Organizations cannot make sustainability alone; they must engage with multiple stakeholders to sustain change. Stakeholder engagement can be a means to support companies to adopt and embed sustainable practices within the firm and throughout their systems of production and consumption.

This master's thesis explores how stakeholder engagement can shape business sustainability. It aims to enhance research on business sustainability through the stakeholder theory lens and fulfill the need for more case studies of stakeholder engagement. To meet those aims, this research examines a real-life case study of a Finnish multinational enterprise that supplies machinery and technology for the pulp and paper industry, which has a high implication for sustainability due to its economic importance and connection to environmental and social impacts. Specifically, this thesis analyzes the engagement between the focal company and its stakeholders through a stakeholder engagement means, the sustainability stakeholder survey. The survey is the company's official and systematic means of collecting feedback from stakeholders, maintaining dialogue, and assessing materiality for sustainability reporting and strategy.

This study utilizes a qualitative single-case study approach to examine how stakeholder engagement can shape business sustainability through the sustainability stakeholder survey. Considering that, the main research question is "How does stakeholder engagement shape business sustainability within the focal company?", which unfolds into two questions. The first question is, "How does business sustainability relate to stakeholder engagement?". This question aims to examine the intersection between the two concepts. The second question is, "How does the focal company utilize the sustainability stakeholder survey as a means of stakeholder engagement for business sustainability?". This question enables the researcher to identify and examine the phases of stakeholder engagement regarding the interaction between the focal company and its stakeholders through the sustainability stakeholder survey.

To answer the research questions, this master's thesis first develops a theoretical framework to conceptualize stakeholder engagement for business sustainability. Following that, data collection gathers primary and secondary data. Primary data consists of 11 interviews with internal stakeholders from the focal company. Secondary data consists of 10 documents, of which eight are publicly available and two are private. To analyze the data, this thesis deploys general inductive and thematic analysis methods, in which it considers the interviewees' perceptions and the documental data to identify themes related to how the focal company utilizes the survey as a means for shaping sustainability.

As a result, this master's thesis meets its aims and answers the research questions by proposing a framework for stakeholder engagement for business sustainability. The framework builds on previous research and is twofold into examining the dimensions and the phases of stakeholder engagement for business sustainability. Regarding the dimensions, this study argues that stakeholder engagement for business sustainability can be moral, strategic, and pragmatic. As for the phases, these are: examining stakeholder relations, understanding stakeholder sustainability value creation, and shaping business sustainability. Each phase comprises themes that highlight the critical aspects of stakeholder engagement for business sustainability. In the building of the framework, this research also suggests the concept of stakeholder sustainability value. In addition, this study proposes a series of managerial implications for stakeholder engagement for business sustainability. Finally, this thesis provides the research evaluation and suggests a number of future research opportunities.

The focal company did not commission this case study.

Keywords: business sustainability; stakeholder engagement; stakeholder value creation; stakeholder sustainability value; survey

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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Secondly, I want to thank my loving family and friends for supporting me and understanding my eventual absence. I have given all of me in this thesis and throughout my master's studies, which could not have been possible without their support. My husband, who has supported me in so many ways to pursue my so-dreamed master's. My daughter, who, at the height of her four-year-old, makes the effort to understand mom's absence on evenings and weekends and still expresses words of joy and motivation, "mom, you can do it!". My parents-in-law, who have supported me with words and actions. My late mother, who, at the height of her limitations, succeeded in teaching me that education is the key to freedom. My beloved ones, this is a team effort, this degree is ours.

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Lastly, I hope the reader enjoys my thesis. I am passionate about this research topic and hope the paper reflects that. May my words work for the good and spark others to support change somehow, somewhere, for businesses (and our society and planet) to become more sustainable.

From my home office in the sunny and lovely Pori, Finland, 6th May 2022

Bianca

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List of Abbreviations (A to Z)

B2B – Business-to-business

CDP – Carbon Disclosure Program

DSJI – Dow Jones Sustainability Index

ESI – Ethibel Sustainability Index

GRI – Global Reporting Initiative

MNE – Multinational enterprise

NDA – Non-disclosure agreement

NGO – Non-governmental organization

PPI – Pulp and paper industry

SSS – Sustainability stakeholder survey

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Business sustainability is gaining a central role in the business landscape. Tapaninaho and Kujala (2019) argue that sustainability is currently the most critical topic to society, the planet, and the business environment, and thus companies and organizations must involve in business sustainability and pursue proactive strategies with long-term impact. In that sense, engaging with stakeholders can be a means to enhance sustainability in business (Tapaninaho & Kujala, 2019). However, how the engagement between companies and their stakeholders supports the enterprises to become more sustainable demands further research (Lahtinen, 2020).

Literature has extensively debated the concept of *sustainability*, and despite the various interpretations, a consensus is that it is vital to the performance and maintenance of organizations in business (Weiss et al., 2014; Bansal & DesJardine, 2014). Authors have argued that the pursuit of sustainability strategies is a means for companies to maintain competitiveness, create new opportunities, shape the market, and meet stakeholders' expectations (Winsemius & Guntram, 2002; Porter & Kramer, 2006). In addition, Bansal and DesJardine (2014) suggest that *business sustainability* enables companies to create value through addressing the triple bottom line — economy, society, and environment— for intergenerational equity, enabling short-term results and long-term value.

However, the shift from business-as-usual to business sustainability demands change in the structures of firms and their systems of stakeholders. Dyllick and Muff (2016) argue that companies must pursue sustainability as a core driver of the business strategy, inspired by the needs of external stakeholders. Lahtinen (2020) suggests that organizations can play a transformative role in business

sustainability through marketplace interactions. In other words, companies can contribute to transforming their production and consumption systems towards more sustainable models through engagement with stakeholders.

In this vein, companies cannot engage in sustainability and make a true impact alone (Wagner & Svensson, 2014). Engaging with stakeholders is a vital means to support companies in embedding sustainability within their structures and their broader system of stakeholders (Tapaninaho & Kujala, 2019). On the one hand, stakeholder engagement is pivotal to the success of business sustainability strategies by guiding companies on the development and deployment of such strategies. On the other hand, if companies cannot meet sustainability stakeholders' expectations, they will no longer be competitive. (Pedersen et al., 2013.) Considering that, achieving sustainability demands the engagement with multiple stakeholders in the value chain.

However, how stakeholder engagement shapes business sustainability strategies demands further examination. The analysis of such influence aligns with Lahtinen's (2020) call for further investigation on the intersection between business sustainability and strategy through the lens of stakeholder theory. Furthermore, Kujala and Sachs (2019) have called for more case studies to enhance the stakeholder engagement literature by conducting more real case studies to support bringing together theory and practice.

Considering that, this master's thesis pursues a case study methodology to examine stakeholder engagement for business sustainability. To do so, the backdrop of this research is the case study of the engagement between the focal company and its stakeholders through a stakeholder engagement means. The following sub-sections introduce the case study by providing the industry context, the focal company, and the stakeholder engagement means.

1.1.1. Introducing the Case Study

Although the focal company requests to remain anonymous in this thesis, it is possible to introduce the case study respecting the enterprise's anonymity. To do so, this sub-section contextualizes the industry in which the enterprise operates and provides information about the company. Due to the anonymity, the latter information is referenced through codes (please, see p. 38 for the codes).

The focal company is a leading player in the global forest-based market (D10). More specifically, the company is a Finnish multinational enterprise (MNE) that supplies machinery and technology for the pulp and paper industry (PPI). The PPI is a large and growing industry known for its connection with several environmental problems, such as global warming, water pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions (Bajpai, 2010). However, it is an industry with great potential to benefit from sustainability initiatives (Söderholm et al., 2019).

In this vein, the focal company has received recognition for its sustainability efforts. It is included in the Ethibel Sustainability Index (ESI) Excellence Europe (D2, p.3) and has figured in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DSJI) for eight consecutive years. In addition, the MNE has received the B rating in the CDP's (Carbon Disclosure Program) climate program ranking 2021 and develops other sustainability initiatives such as collaboration with the Save the Children and Plan International (D9, p.54).

Furthermore, particularly in the PPI context, authors have agreed that stakeholders can be drivers for sustainability. Researchers suggest that stakeholders are a driver that enhances sustainability (Feng et al., 2021) and leads companies in the PPI supply chain to adopt more sustainable practices by pressuring them (Pätäri et al., 2016). As the focal company of this thesis is at the meso-level of the PPI, it is directly connected to several stakeholder groups regarding sustainability topics, with an emphasis on business-to-business (B2B) relations.

In that tone, the focal company pursues several stakeholder engagement initiatives. For instance, sustainability reporting according to the GRI (Global Reporting Initiative) standards, sustainability events with customers and suppliers, the supplier sustainability engagement program, and internal and external surveys (D1; D8). Amongst these stakeholder engagement methods, this thesis examines a particular means, that is the firm's sustainability stakeholder survey. The following sub-section explains what the stakeholder engagement means is and why it has been selected for this study.

1.1.2. The Sustainability Stakeholder Survey

This sub-section builds on literature and all public information regarding the sustainability stakeholder survey (SSS) to introduce what it is and why it is an important study subject. After an extensive literature search, it is possible to identify that little research has addressed surveys as stakeholder engagement means. For instance, Salvioni and Almici (2020) argue that surveys can be a means of stakeholder engagement for circular economy. Romenti (2010) considers surveys as a means to capture stakeholders' perceptions about the focal company. In a similar tone, Ferrero-Ferrero et al. (2018, p. 332) point out that surveys are one of the most common techniques used to raise the most important topics for stakeholders to be addressed in sustainability reporting. However, these studies have not examined the phases of stakeholder engagement through surveys and how they impact business sustainability.

This thesis looks at the SSS as a stakeholder engagement means (Salvioni & Almici, 2020) and the backdrop to explore how stakeholder engagement may shape business sustainability within the focal company. The SSS becomes an interesting subject to study as the enterprise claims it to be its primary systematic means for stakeholder dialogue (D1, p. 15). The SSS collects feedback from stakeholders' perceptions about the focal company's sustainability performance on a yearly basis. In

addition, the SSS assesses the most important sustainability topics for the enterprise's stakeholders. (D1, p. 15; D6; D8, p. 15.) Ultimately, the enterprise publicly claims that the survey informs its sustainability agenda and materiality for sustainability reporting (D6; D9).

To do so, the focal company argues that the SSS is open to all stakeholder groups that relate to or are interested in the firm's sustainability performance (D6). The survey consists of an anonymous qualitative online form available in English on the focal company's website. The SSS has 14 rating-scale questions, ranging from 1 (least important) to 5 (very important) to each question and one open-ended question. The rating-scale questions consist of 14 sustainability topics, which respondents can rate as less or more critical to sustainability regarding the focal company's activities. The open-ended question is the last one and invites respondents to share their perceptions regarding sustainability in the organization's activities. (D5.)

1.2. RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

This study aims to explore how stakeholder engagement can shape business sustainability. Exploring that aims to advance research and the understanding on how businesses can engage with stakeholders for sustainability, create mutual value, and enhance sustainability in business strategy. In that sense, this master's thesis contributes to previous researchers' calls on business sustainability and stakeholder engagement literature and to the lack of studies on how surveys serve as stakeholder engagement means for business sustainability.

Firstly, this research addresses Lahtinen's (2020) call for further investigation on the intersection between strategy and business sustainability through the lens of stakeholder theory. This thesis explores the potential influence that a stakeholder engagement means exerts on business sustainability strategies within the focal company. Figure 1 below illustrates stakeholder

engagement for business sustainability as the intersection between business, sustainability, and stakeholders.

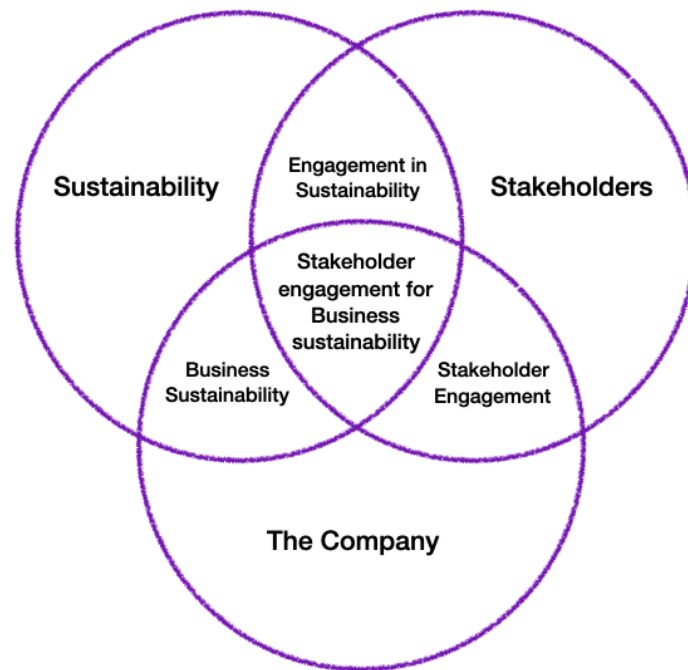


Figure 1: The intersection between business, sustainability, and stakeholders

Figure 1 demonstrates the intersection between three key factors in the business sustainability discussion: sustainability, stakeholders, and the focal company. Sustainability is a topical issue regarding businesses and stakeholders (Tapaninaho & Kujala, 2019). Whereas business sustainability is the incorporation of sustainability in businesses (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014), each organization can consider sustainability in different ways. Furthermore, the focal company naturally engages with multiple stakeholders, which can also foster the pursuit of sustainability in businesses (Lahtinen, 2020). Therefore, this master's thesis aims to fill the literature gap on how stakeholder engagement can shape business sustainability.

Secondly, this study aims to address Kujala and Sachs's (2019) call for further case studies regarding stakeholder engagement. The authors suggest that literature demands more case studies to

enhance understanding of stakeholder engagement and support bringing together theory and practice. To answer Kujala and Sachs's (2019) call, this master's thesis provides a case study of the SSS as a stakeholder engagement means for business sustainability. To do so, the main research question is:

1. How does stakeholder engagement shape business sustainability within the focal company?

The main research question explores how stakeholder engagement may shape business sustainability in the focal company, using a specific stakeholder engagement means as a backdrop, that is the SSS. Additionally, the following two questions support the main research question:

2. How does stakeholder engagement relate to business sustainability?

3. How does the focal company use the sustainability stakeholder survey as a means of stakeholder engagement for business sustainability?

The literature review in chapter 2 addresses the second question in order to provide an understanding of the connection between stakeholder engagement and business sustainability. To do so, the theoretical framework investigates both themes separately and subsequently the intersection between them. For its part, the empirical research informs the second question and supports answering the third question by examining the stakeholder engagement phases encountered in the SSS. In doing so, this thesis also contributes to filling the literature gap on how surveys can serve as a means of stakeholder engagement for business sustainability.

1.3. MAIN CONCEPTS

This section points out and summarizes the main concepts related to this thesis topic. These are critical concepts regarding the contextualization of stakeholder engagement for business sustainability.

Sustainability: Sustainability is the consideration of the environmental, social, and economic dimensions for intergenerational equity (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014). The environmental dimension relates to the management and preservation of the natural environment. The social aspect relates to the equality of resources and opportunities in society. Finally, the economic facet refers to guaranteeing decent financial conditions and living standards for all. (Bansal, 2005.)

Business sustainability: Business sustainability is the management and orientation of companies towards the consideration of the environment, society, and economy in the business process (Dyllick & Muff, 2016) for intergenerational equity (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014).

Materiality: Materiality is the level to which the environmental, social, and economic impacts of a topic "substantively influence the assessments and decisions of stakeholders." The most material topics are those with the most impact on stakeholders' decisions. (Global Reporting Initiative, 2016, p. 10.)

Stakeholder: The concept of stakeholder refers to any individual or group that can affect or be affected by a determined organization in the past, present, or future. Stakeholders can be internal, working within the company, or external, representing the stakeholders outside the firm. (Freeman, 1984, p. 46.)

Stakeholder engagement: Stakeholder engagement consists of any interaction between a determined organization and its stakeholders (Kujala & Sachs, 2019) to positively involve them in its activities (Greenwood, 2007).

Stakeholder value creation: Stakeholder value creation is fulfilling the economic and other "needs and expectations of various stakeholders" (Kujala et al., 2019, p. 125).

1.4. STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

This master's thesis includes five chapters: Introduction, Conceptualizing Stakeholder Engagement for Business Sustainability, Methodology, Findings, and Conclusions. The Introduction chapter provides the research background, introduction to the case study, research aims and questions, and main concepts that permeate the research. The Conceptualizing Stakeholder Engagement for Business Sustainability chapter examines the literature on business sustainability and stakeholder engagement to analyze the intersection between the themes, namely stakeholder engagement for business sustainability. The Methodology chapter provides the research design and explains the empirical data collection and analysis processes. The Findings chapter contains the empirical data and its analysis. Finally, the Conclusions chapter discusses the study's theoretical contributions and managerial implications, evaluates the thesis, points out the study's limitations, and suggests future research avenues. The Appendix provides the semi-structured interview questions.

2. CONCEPTUALIZING STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT FOR BUSINESS SUSTAINABILITY

This chapter conceptualizes the intersection between sustainability, companies, and their stakeholders through the theoretical lens of stakeholder theory, particularly focusing on stakeholder engagement. Doing so begins by reviewing the literature that contributes to the understanding of business sustainability in section 2.1. After that, section 2.2 proceeds with the literature review of stakeholder theory that focuses on stakeholder engagement and its empirical implications in the business context. Finally, section 2.3 considers the intersection between business sustainability and stakeholder engagement, focusing on the strategic aspects of such a relationship.

2.1. BUSINESS SUSTAINABILITY

Literature has intensively discussed the concept of *business sustainability* and provided various interpretations. Dyllick and Muff (2016) scrutinize business sustainability as the depth of organizations' consideration of the environment, society, and economic dimensions of sustainability in their strategic orientation. Bansal and DesJardine (2014, p. 71) depict business sustainability as "the ability of firms to respond to their short-term financial needs without compromising their (or others') ability to meet their future needs." The researchers argue that business sustainability implies considering the long-term perspective, enabling short-term results and long-term value. Bansal and DesJardine (2014) add that business sustainability is not moral but aims at elaborating trade-offs considering a long-term prospect. In light of that, one could infer that business sustainability is solely about pursuing strategies and decisions that would enable the organization to succeed in the

long run. However, business sustainability implies that companies consider the three facets of sustainability concerning their system of production and consumption (Bansal & Roth, 2000).

The interdependence between business, society, and nature is critical to business sustainability (Dyllick & Muff, 2016; Gao & Bansal, 2013; Kane, 2010; Bonn & Fisher, 2011). Companies must recognize that they are a part of an ecosystem composed of nature, society, and businesses themselves (Dyllick & Muff, 2016). Therefore, corporations must develop business models to address the three dimensions of sustainability (Bonn & Fischer, 2011; Dyllick & Muff, 2016; Winsemius & Guntram, 2002) and systematically consider their performance on all the three dimensions (Bansal, 2005; Gao & Bansal, 2013). In addition, Gorissen et al. (2016) argue that businesses must shift their business strategy from managing sustainability risks to creating sustainable products and solutions. In other words, companies must iteratively aim for decision-making and business models that secure the welfare of the next generations while providing short-term results and long-term value.

In pursuing business sustainability, companies can benefit at various levels. Researchers argue that businesses can benefit from pursuing sustainability by increasing competitiveness, legitimation, and ecological responsiveness (Bansal & Roth, 2000; Kane, 2010). Other authors add that focusing on sustainability enables companies to innovate, create new opportunities and business models, and shape the market (Porter & Kramer, 2006; Loorbach & Wijsman, 2013). Nonetheless, scholars argue that pursuing sustainability as a driver is not only a matter of giving back to society or enhancing competitive advantage but a strategy of survival for businesses and, particularly, the planet (Bansal et al., 2021; Dyllick & Muff, 2016; Weiss et al., 2014).

2.1.1. Deploying Business Sustainability

Companies can pursue diverse orientations to implement sustainability in their business strategy (Lahtinen et al., 2018). Dyllick and Muff (2016) argue that this orientation depends on how businesses manage and process the sustainability inputs they receive. In that sense, Dyllick and Muff (2016) suggest a framework for pondering the sustainability orientation in businesses. Figure 2 below illustrates the process of considering sustainability orientation in businesses.

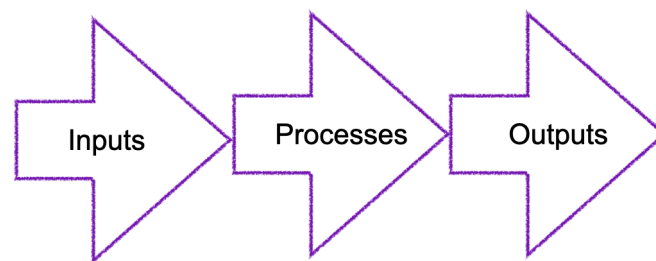


Figure 2: A framework for considering different approaches of business sustainability (adapted from Dyllick & Muff, 2016)

Figure 2 demonstrates a framework for observing the sustainability orientation of companies, which encompasses the management of sustainability inputs, processes, and outputs. The *inputs* are the sustainability concerns and needs that stakeholders present. The *processes* are the organizational perspective, the internal sense-making, and the management of the company's stakeholders' needs. Finally, the *outputs* are the results or values created through the organizational process. (Dyllick & Muff, 2016.)

In this vein, companies can pursue sustainability strategies according to internal or external inputs. An inside-out orientation implies that companies leverage their internal assets and sustainability demands to impact the market. In contrast, an outside-in positioning means that businesses assume inputs impressed by external sustainability issues. (Lahtinen et al., 2018.)

Dyllick and Muff (2016) suggest that companies must drive business strategy by the latter outside-in approach, developing business models according to the market's needs.

However, Lahtinen et al. (2018) argue that a balance between outside-in and inside-out positioning may better support companies to become more sustainable. This proposition seems reasonable from the perspective that different industries, countries, and regions may present different realities, demands, and conditions or accessibility, leading to distinct needs and forms of interacting with society and incorporating sustainability into business processes. In addition, several authors have discussed and proposed business sustainability orientations (see, for instance, Dyllick & Muff, 2016; Winsemius & Guntram, 2002; Lahtinen et al., 2018). Integrating such literature based on Dyllick and Muff's (2016) framework for considering business sustainability orientations, it is possible to identify three main business sustainability orientations: reactive, functional, and integrative. Figure 3 below expresses the relation between business and the market through those three business sustainability orientations.

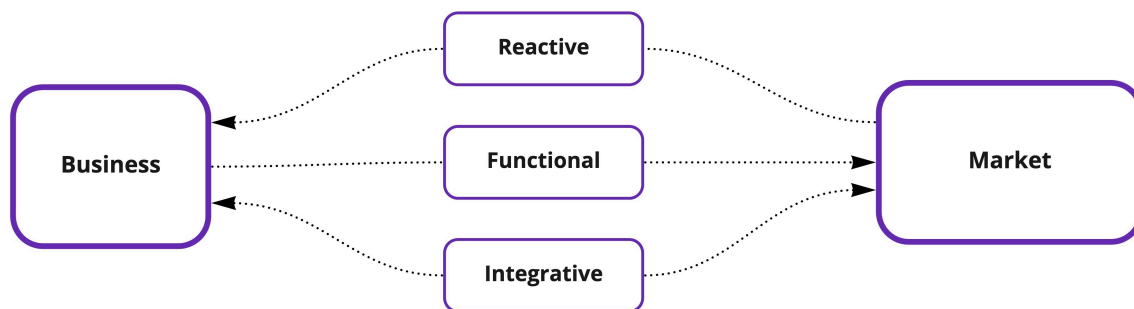


Figure 3: Business sustainability orientations

Figure 3 showcases three business sustainability orientations: reactive, functional, and integrative. These positionings reflect the strategic sustainability focus of businesses on pushing inputs to or receiving inputs from the market. In addition, the orientations encompass the organizational process of making sense of inputs. Finally, the sustainability positionings also refer to their possible results.

Reactive business sustainability orientation

The reactive business sustainability orientation relates to the business-as-usual: attending to outside inputs but focusing on shareholder value. Winsemius and Guntram (2002) argue that companies only comply with legal obligations or react minimally to the market's sustainability needs in the reactive posture. In contrast, Dyllick and Muff (2016) argue that those corporations in fact, focus on an inside-out approach. Specifically, they are interested in leveraging internal assets to provide shareholder value. Weybrecht (2013) notes that those organizations may still be in denial of the criticality of pursuing sustainability, attending strictly to mandatory requirements, or considering sustainability solely as an extra cost. Winsemius and Guntram (2002) argue that the result of the pursuit of a reactive posture is providing merely short-term impact. Dyllick and Muff (2016) add that such orientation neglects outside market stakeholders and the eventual risks and opportunities that arise from the relationship with them.

Functional sustainability orientation

The functional sustainability orientation refers to companies that leverage internal inputs to impact the market. Winsemius and Guntram (2002) argue that firms consider the cost-effectiveness of sustainability efforts in the functional posture, adopt additional initiatives but do not change the organizational structure. In other words, firms may consider sustainability as a support to optimize costs, a risk management tool, or ponder its positive side-effects such as attractiveness to employees and investors (Weybrecht, 2013). Dyllick and Muff (2016) suggest that despite the inside-out orientation, these companies can recognize and respond to social and environmental issues beyond economic value, managing the three dimensions of sustainability. For Weybrecht (2013), such firms are in the process of realizing the strategic aspect of sustainability for business. As a result, Dyllick

and Muff (2016) argue that these corporations proactively set and report sustainability goals and consider different stakeholders. However, the functional orientation still provides only short-term impact (Winsemius & Guntram, 2002).

Integrative sustainability orientation

For its part, an integrative sustainability orientation relates to firms that process internal and external inputs to impact and create value in tandem with the market. Winsemius and Guntram (2002) argue that an integrative approach implies that companies permeate sustainability throughout their organizational structure. To do so, Dyllick and Muff (2016) suggest that corporations must pursue an outside-in positioning. In other words, the authors claim that companies must address and solve external societal and environmental issues, these being their starting point and the profit a consequence. In contrast, Winsemius and Guntram (2002) advance that firms must attend to issues that arise from both internal and external sustainability needs. Lahtinen et al. (2018) build on that and suggest that firms can create sustainable value in tandem with stakeholders by addressing internal and external needs. To do so, businesses can explore new market opportunities, invest in sustainability reporting, integrate sustainability goals at all organizational levels, and pursue a continuous improvement culture towards sustainability (Weybrecht, 2013). However, Winsemius and Guntram (2002) highlight that companies must proactively change their organizational structure to work based on purpose in order to provide long-term results.

2.1.2. Towards Transformation

Becoming sustainable can be a challenge that demands organizations to transform their strategy and production and consumption systems. First, to enable transformation towards sustainability, authors claim that enterprises must change their organizational culture towards a focus on sustainability (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014; Bonn & Fischer, 2011; Loorbach et al., 2010). Bansal and DesJardine (2014) suggest that the current short-termism culture compels managers to focus on short-term results, neglecting sustainability. In that sense, managers can make decisions based on short-term results to the detriment of sustainability. In contrast, Bansal and DesJardine (2014) argue that a long-term culture enables companies to provide short-term results and long-term value by considering sustainability in decision-making, making it essential to shift the business culture to a long-term mindset. In addition, other authors argue that businesses must change their strategic focus from shareholder value to meeting stakeholders' needs and creating mutual value (Freeman et al., 2010; Hörisch et al., 2014).

Second, scholars suggest that companies can play a crucial role in changing their systems of stakeholders towards sustainability (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014; Loorbach et al., 2010; Lahtinen, 2020). Kemp and van Lente (2011) argue that the transition towards sustainability implies two premises: a) change in criteria to evaluate sustainability in value chains; and b) change of systems involved in the lifecycle of products. Firstly, the change in criteria refers, for instance, to regulations, codes of conduct, and sustainability requirements that companies can deploy in the procurement process and can, therefore, pressure suppliers to adopt more sustainable practices. Secondly, the change of systems involves the products' production and consumption chains. (Kemp & van Lente, 2011.) That is, improving existing processes or products or developing new ones that follow the sustainability orientation of the company. In that sense, technology is a key sustainability enabler. For instance, product life-cycle management can be a means to access a product's overall

impact from the raw material sourcing to the end of a product's lifetime. (Bonn & Fischer, 2011.) Considering that, businesses can lead their value chains to become more sustainable (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014).

In this vein, Lahtinen (2020) suggests that companies can also promote change for sustainability through marketplace interactions. The researcher proposes the novel concept of *business sustainability transition* as the activities that a company undertakes to manage sustainability and potentially transform its system of stakeholders. Lahtinen (2020, p. 62) depicts the sustainability transition from the business perspective as "the fundamental, system-wide sustainability improvements that companies can initiate in their business environment through marketplace interactions." In other words, the concept of business sustainability transitions implies that companies can influence other stakeholders to become more sustainable through commercially driven interactions.

To transition toward business sustainability, companies must primarily recognize the sustainability issues linked to them (Loorbach et al., 2010). In detail, a company must recognize the sustainability issues connected to it and which of them the company can tackle and is accountable for (Schaltegger, 2018). To do so, for instance, organizations can deploy *materiality* analysis of these issues. Materiality analysis is the process of identifying the most relevant sustainability topics that the company should focus its efforts on, based on "stakeholder inputs and company insights." (Epstein & Buhovac, 2017, p. 79.) Identifying the most important sustainability issues for the company and its stakeholders can enable the company to take action to tackle such matters.

In conclusion, businesses can play a transformative role in their production and consumption systems. Rather than being followers, companies can lead and influence other businesses, customers, competitors, and society at large. Organizations can foster sustainability discussion and exert sustainability within their system of stakeholders (Winsemius & Guntram, 2002; Lahtinen, 2020). To do so, companies must acknowledge they cannot make sustainability alone (Loorbach et

al., 2010) and must engage with the relevant stakeholders in their system of stakeholders (Wagner & Svensson, 2014).

2.2. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Stakeholder theory establishes that the concept of *stakeholder* refers to any individual or group that can affect or be affected by a determined organization in the past, present, or future (Freeman, 1984, p. 46) The stakeholder theory expands the business focus on shareholders to a broader perspective, considering the company's system of stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2010). Businesses are part of systems that encompass other stakeholders in the marketplace and society in general (Wagner & Svensson, 2014). The stakeholder theory implies that companies must create value with and for all stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2010). In that sense, organizations and their stakeholders are social actors that mutually interact (Friedman & Miles, 2002).

Kujala and Sachs (2019) conceptualize the interaction between companies and other actors as *stakeholder engagement*. Greenwood (2007) depicts stakeholder engagement as any activity or interaction the company undertakes to positively involve its stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement is a process that consists of establishing, developing, and maintaining relationships with stakeholders (O’Riordan & Fairbrass, 2013).

Scholars have examined the dimensions of the relationship itself between stakeholders. Based on an extensive literature review, Kujala et al. (2022) identified three dimensions of stakeholder engagement: moral, strategic, and pragmatic. The following paragraphs look into these three dimensions separately.

For the moral part, Greenwood (2007) argues that stakeholder engagement itself is morally not positive nor negative, in fact, it depends on the type of relationship between the company and its

stakeholders. However, Noland and Phillips (2010) argue that companies should pursue a respectful, honest, and ethical posture when engaging with stakeholders. In addition, Kujala et al. (2012) note that the ethical and strategic dimensions of stakeholder engagement are dynamic as the relationship evolves.

In this vein, Noland and Phillips (2010) claim that it is essential to understand the strategic nature of stakeholder engagement for businesses. The perception that only the firm affects stakeholders has given place to the notion that stakeholders and companies influence each other mutually (Sulkowski et al., 2018). Therefore, stakeholder engagement is intrinsically embedded in the everyday activities of a firm and thus should be considered consciously in the strategy-making process (Noland & Phillips, 2010).

Finally, considering stakeholder engagement, the pragmatic dimension seeks to provide an evaluation of its practical results. Kujala et al. (2022, p. 18) argue that the pragmatic dimension captures "the acknowledgment of various stakeholders and the measurement of the practical consequences of stakeholder engagement." In other words, it can be possible to measure the results of a stakeholder engagement and identify the stakeholders' inputs, the processes within the company, and outputs produced based on the stakeholder engagement.

2.2.1. Stakeholder Engagement Framework

This section builds on previous literature to develop a framework for stakeholder engagement. Freeman et al. (2017) provide a framework depicting four main themes to study stakeholder engagement: examining stakeholder relations, communicating with stakeholders, learning with and from stakeholders, and integrative stakeholder engagement. Figure 4 below depicts Freeman et al.'s (2017) framework.

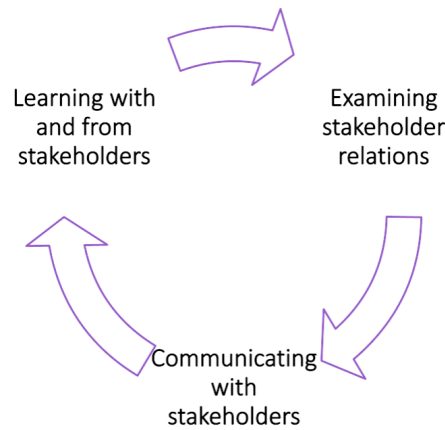


Figure 4: The stakeholder engagement framework (Freeman et al., 2017, p. 5)

Kujala and Sachs (2019, p. 228) argue that this framework considers stakeholder engagement as a process that naturally evolves over time, which causes the themes to naturally overlap. However, such overlap can eventually confuse the readers and make the case study repetitive. To develop a concise conceptualization, this section revisits and rearranges the themes of Freeman et al.'s (2017) stakeholder engagement framework. In doing so, this study develops three themes of stakeholder engagement: examining stakeholder relations, understanding stakeholder value creation, and stakeholder value creation.

For Freeman et al. (2017), *examining stakeholder relations* encompasses identifying stakeholders and understanding stakeholder value creation. However, the authors separate *communicating with stakeholders* and *learning from and with stakeholders* from understanding stakeholder value creation, which results in the repetition of the sub-themes of dialogue and learning throughout their framework. In contrast, this thesis considers that examining stakeholder relations relies exclusively on identifying stakeholders and their relationship with the focal company, whereas *understanding stakeholder value creation* depends on communication and learning. Finally, Freeman et al. (2017) argue that integrative stakeholder engagement is the result of the implementation of the previous themes. However, this thesis's framework adds the pragmatic dimension of stakeholder engagement (Kujala et al., 2022) to interpret the integrative stakeholder

engagement as *stakeholder value creation*. Figure 5 below depicts this thesis' stakeholder engagement framework as a process, which the next paragraphs further discuss.

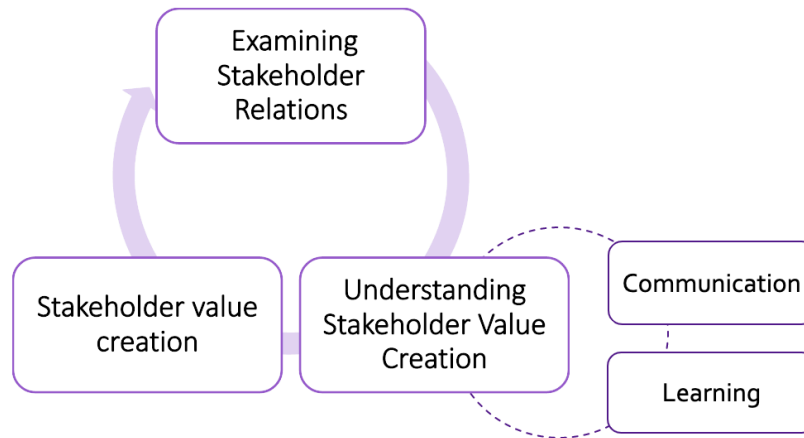


Figure 5: A framework for stakeholder engagement

Examining Stakeholder Relations

To understand how an organization creates value with and for stakeholders it is vital to *examine stakeholder relations* (Freeman et al., 2017). This theme builds on a *relational practice* lens to investigate stakeholder relations. Kujala and Sachs (2019) argue that such an approach emphasizes the relational process nature of stakeholder engagement and the need to examine how these relations are built and fed. First, it is necessary to identify key stakeholders in order to enhance stakeholder engagement (Freeman, 1984). Second, it is crucial to understand the relationship between the firm and its stakeholders (Myllykangas et al., 2010).

To identify stakeholders, Mitchell et al. (1997) proposed the salience model, one of the most important theoretical contributions to the responsive approach literature (Kujala et al., 2019). The salience model evaluates stakeholders according to their power or capacity to affect the company and other stakeholders, the urgency of their demands, and the legitimacy of such requests (Mitchell

et al., 1997). Mitchell et al. (1997) suggest that companies must prioritize engagement with stakeholders that represent more risk.

However, examining stakeholder relations demands a broader consideration of stakeholders. Kujala and Sachs (2019) point out that examining stakeholder relations implies that stakeholder engagement creates value for all stakeholders of a determined organization. In that sense, rather than only identifying stakeholders, it is necessary to understand how the relationship between the company and its stakeholders creates value (Myllykangas et al., 2010). To do so, Myllykangas et al. (2010) argue that the history of the relationship, the objectives of stakeholders, the interaction in the relationship, the information sharing, and the trust between stakeholders are characteristics that should be considered when examining stakeholder relations. In conclusion, in addition to identifying stakeholders, examining stakeholder relations demands understanding the relationship between the company and its stakeholders.

Understanding Stakeholder Value Creation

Kujala et al. (2019, p. 125) argue that, although there is discordance in the literature regarding the construct of value, value creation in light of stakeholder theory aims to fulfill economic and other "needs and expectations of various stakeholders." Stakeholder values are, therefore, these needs and expectations. In order to meet such stakeholder values, it is fundamental that organizations understand the process of stakeholder value creation.

Understanding stakeholder value creation depends on communication and learning. *Communication* can be either one- or two-way practice. The one-way communication takes place through reporting and codes of conduct, for instance. In contrast, the two-way communication implies that stakeholders engage in dialogue in which they mutually interact and hear each other. (Kaptein & Van Tulder, 2003.) On the one hand, the one-way approach is an important tool in the

structure of communication (Kaptein & Van Tulder, 2003) to inform determined stakeholder groups. On the other hand, two-way communication is the means to develop and enhance transparent relationships and stakeholder engagement. (Lane & Devin, 2018.)

Lehtimaki and Kujala (2017) argue that dialogue is any two-way interaction between the company and its stakeholders. They suggest that dialogue can be oral or written, directly (company-stakeholder) or indirectly (via third party-stakeholder). Freeman et al. (2007) highlight that it is critical for establishing a dialogue that companies develop a two-way communication and are accountable for their discourse (Freeman et al., 2007). As a result, Kaptein and Van Tulder (2003, p. 210) depict stakeholder dialogue as "a structured interactive and proactive process to create sustainable strategies."

Learning has an intrinsic relation with dialogue and is the basis to enable the creation of sustainable strategies. Dialogue enables learning (Burchell & Cook, 2006) by allowing companies to learn from and with stakeholders (Kaptein & Van Tulder, 2013). O'Riordan and Fairbrass (2008) suggest that involving stakeholders in dialogue permits companies to understand the demands of stakeholders, their relevancy, and how to address them. Therefore, companies that create and maintain a continuous dialogue with stakeholders are more successful in value creation (Freeman et al., 2007; Kaptein & Van Tulder, 2003).

However, companies should be mindful of the bottlenecks in communication and learning. First, Freeman et al. (2007) highlight that dialogue with diverse stakeholder groups is crucial. They argue that even the critics are important stakeholders to engage in dialogue. According to the authors, critics offer a comprehensive view of the market and the unmet demands. In that sense, Freeman et al. (2007) argue that dialogue with critics enhances the business strategy by offering a better picture of the market's perception of the company and the threats and opportunities within the company and the market.

Second, Kaptein and Van Tulder (2013) argue that the focal company and its stakeholders must trust each other and engage in dialogue regarding a common area of interest. To do so, the dialogue rules must be clear and agreed upon by both parties. The scholars point out that dialogue rules are, for instance, how often and through which channels stakeholders will communicate and the purpose of such engagement. Kaptein and Van Tulder (2013) add that all parties must be competent to participate in a dialogue and bring relevant and valid information to discussions. Finally, Kaptein and Van Tulder (2013) highlight that feedback of results is valuable to contribute to building and reinforcing trust and stakeholder engagement.

Stakeholder Value Creation

In considering the previous themes of stakeholder engagement, companies can co-create and sustain value with and for stakeholders (see Kujala & Sachs, 2019; Sulkowski et al., 2018; Kujala et al., 2012; O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2008). For instance, Kaptein and Van Tulder (2003) argue that communication *per se* is not an end but a means to create value for all stakeholders. However, the pragmatic dimension of stakeholder engagement implies that companies act based on the values they identify through stakeholder engagement (Kujala et al., 2022, p. 18).

To do so, O'Riordan and Fairbrass (2008) argue that stakeholder engagement has two phases: planning and implementation. In the planning phase, organizations develop a stakeholder engagement strategy. The authors suggest that enterprises must find common values and goals with stakeholders and develop a strategy to support them. For its part, the implementation phase represents the deployment of the stakeholder engagement strategy. It is in this phase that the results of stakeholder engagement emerge. (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2008.)

Furthermore, researchers and practitioners can address stakeholder engagement from multiple perspectives. Kujala and Sachs (2019) point out three views: firm-, stakeholder-, and issue-

based. The firm-based approach focuses on the agency of the focal company in leading engagement. A stakeholder-based view observes stakeholders as the leaders of engagement. An issue-based approach, for its part, involves multi-stakeholders to tackle a specific societal issue. (Sachs & Rühli, 2011.) This master's thesis considers a firm-based focus of stakeholder engagement, departing from an engagement strategy led by the focal company.

In conclusion, stakeholder value creation demands the consideration of examining stakeholder relations, understanding stakeholder value creation, and taking action based on the stakeholder values identified through stakeholder engagement. To sustain value, companies must proactively engage with stakeholders, fostering collaboration and agency (Sulkowski et al., 2018). In addition, Myllykangas et al. (2010) emphasize that sustaining stakeholder engagement demands communication and dialogue throughout the engagement.

2.3. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT FOR BUSINESS SUSTAINABILITY

Stakeholder engagement can enable business sustainability. Companies cannot engage in and make a positive impact on sustainability alone. Stakeholder engagement plays a strategic role in business sustainability. (Wagner & Svensson, 2014.) Stakeholder engagement can be a means to support companies to embed sustainability within their structures and their broader system of stakeholders (Tapaninaho & Kujala, 2019). To do so, it is fundamental that enterprises identify their stakeholders and how they influence business sustainability within the company, understand their stakeholder values in relation to sustainability, and pursue decision-making based on that to enhance business sustainability.

2.3.1. Stakeholders in Business Sustainability

The concept of sustainability emerged in the business context in response to stakeholder's demands (Herremans, 2016). Stakeholders have been pressuring companies to be accountable not only for their own impact on the environment, society, and economy, but also for their production and consumption systems (Touboullic et al., 2014; Schaltegger et al., 2017). In that sense, Worthington (2013) argues that stakeholders drive companies to become greener.

Businesses must meet multiple stakeholders' needs (Schaltegger et al., 2017). To do so, enterprises have first to identify their stakeholders and how they can influence business sustainability. Whereas former models defend that the key stakeholders are those who are more salient (Mitchell et al., 1997; Pedersen et al., 2013), there are other vital aspects to consider. Myllykangas et al. (2010) point out that stakeholder engagement evolves throughout time, and so does the salience of stakeholders. Considering that, companies must engage with all relevant stakeholders. Businesses must apply a holistic view that enables them to observe all the possible stakeholders implied in their business sustainability strategies within the system of stakeholders. In doing so, organizations do not overlook stakeholders that can potentially contribute to business sustainability. (Wagner & Svensson, 2014.)

In this vein, internal and external stakeholders can influence business sustainability. Internal stakeholders' sustainability needs may affect the capacity of the firm to attract and maintain talents, once these are becoming mindful of sustainability and prioritizing working for more sustainable companies (Weybrecht, 2013; Hörisch et al., 2014). Employees can also influence business sustainability by pointing out the challenges and opportunities for sustainability within the firm (Attanasio et al., 2021). Regarding external stakeholders, if a company does not meet their sustainability demands, they are most likely to protest and withdraw from engagement (Schaltegger et al., 2017). In contrast, Attanasio et al. (2021) suggest that suppliers can positively influence

business sustainability by sharing and adopting sustainable practices and materials, whereas customers do so by exercising their power of choosing more sustainable products. Therefore, internal and external stakeholders represent a force that requires companies to adopt sustainable practices and strategies.

Schaltegger et al. (2017) suggest that businesses can pursue a reactive or creative engagement orientation to address stakeholders' influence. According to the authors, companies merely attend to the stakeholders' demands by acting reactively to stakeholders' demands. In contrast, a creative orientation implies co-creation, innovation, and collaboration between organizations and multiple stakeholders to create sustainable solutions (Schaltegger et al., 2017). To do so, it is imperative to identify stakeholder values by understanding stakeholder value creation.

2.3.2. Understanding Stakeholder Value Creation for Business Sustainability

Through stakeholder engagement, stakeholders can exert sustainability as a driver of stakeholder value creation. Freeman et al. (2010) argue that value creation in sustainability is not about trade-offs but providing value to various stakeholders at the same time. In that sense, stakeholder engagement is the key to value creation (Kujala et al., 2019).

Stakeholder value creation in sustainability implies multiple meanings for value. Tapaninaho and Kujala (2019) suggest that although scholars have studied stakeholder value creation from numerous perspectives, a multiple value perspective is crucial to address stakeholder value creation in sustainability. Freudenreich et al. (2019) argue that stakeholder engagement for business sustainability creates different types of value according to the stakeholders involved and their interests. In other words, value is subjective, has a different meaning for each stakeholder, and accordingly emerges from stakeholder engagement.

Stakeholder value creation in business sustainability is a process. The evolving nature of stakeholders' expectations demands that strategies also evolve accordingly (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2013). Although there are several approaches to study stakeholder engagement for business sustainability, a consensus is that organizations must find and promote sustainability as a collective value (Kujala et al., 2019; Hörisch et al., 2014). To do so, companies must find joint sustainability interests with their stakeholders, which will enable the creation of value for all parts (Hörisch et al., 2014). Joint interests are at the center of the value creation process in stakeholder engagement (Freeman et al., 2010; Freudenreich et al., 2019).

Finally, companies can deploy diverse stakeholder engagement means to create stakeholder value. In practice, stakeholder engagement for sustainability may take place through any activity that discusses the theme, such as sustainability reporting, discussion forums, and dialogue (Herremans, 2016). The critical points for such engagement for sustainability to be successful are building joint interests and trust (Kujala et al., 2019). However, it is also imperative that companies guide decision-making and take action based on stakeholder values identified in understanding stakeholder value creation.

2.3.3. Decision-making for Business Sustainability

Stakeholder engagement can influence business sustainability by supporting the decision-making process (Kujala & Sachs, 2019). The engagement of stakeholders in sustainability activities can provide inputs to support decision-making (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2013) to meet stakeholders' sustainability needs (Schaltegger et al., 2017). Foremost, stakeholder engagement for business sustainability is vital to create value and avoid obsolescence in the business environment (Kujala & Sachs, 2019; Pedersen et al., 2013; O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2013; Kujala et al., 2019).

In that sense, stakeholder engagement is a strategic approach that can enhance and affect business sustainability (Konadu et al., 2021; Wagner & Svensson, 2014). From a strategic perspective, Freeman et al. (2010) argue that business decisions should consider stakeholders and be based on ethical standards. In this vein, Hörisch et al. (2014) argue that sustainability in business requires expanding the short-term shareholder value mindset to a stakeholder-oriented culture.

Supportive to that, Konadu et al. (2021) suggest that the level of stakeholder engagement affects directly and proportionally all the dimensions of sustainability in business. The authors found out that companies in which the board of directors presents higher levels of engagement for sustainability, business sustainability strategies achieve higher performance than firms with boards with lower engagement. Reflecting on their findings, shifting from short-term shareholder value to focusing on creating value for all stakeholders can enhance the three dimensions of sustainability from a pragmatic perspective, enabling business sustainability strategies to be effective.

In conclusion, stakeholder engagement can serve as a mechanism to support decision-making (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2013). Loorbach et al. (2010) argue that the collaboration between the company and multiple stakeholders can eventually transform business models towards sustainability. Noland and Philips (2010) argue that involving stakeholders in decision-making is strategic to align the firm and stakeholders' expectations and goals. Finally, a stakeholder orientation in decision-making potentially enhances sustainability in ethical, strategic, and pragmatic ways.

2.4. SYNTHESIS

The theoretical framework is built on stakeholder engagement and business sustainability literature to conceptualize the intersection between them, that is stakeholder engagement for business

sustainability. In doing so, the theoretical chapter aimed to answer the research question of how stakeholder engagement relates to business sustainability. In addition, the theoretical framework enables building a foundation for understanding how stakeholder engagement can shape business sustainability. Figure 6 below synthesizes the building of the theoretical framework, which the following paragraphs further elaborate.

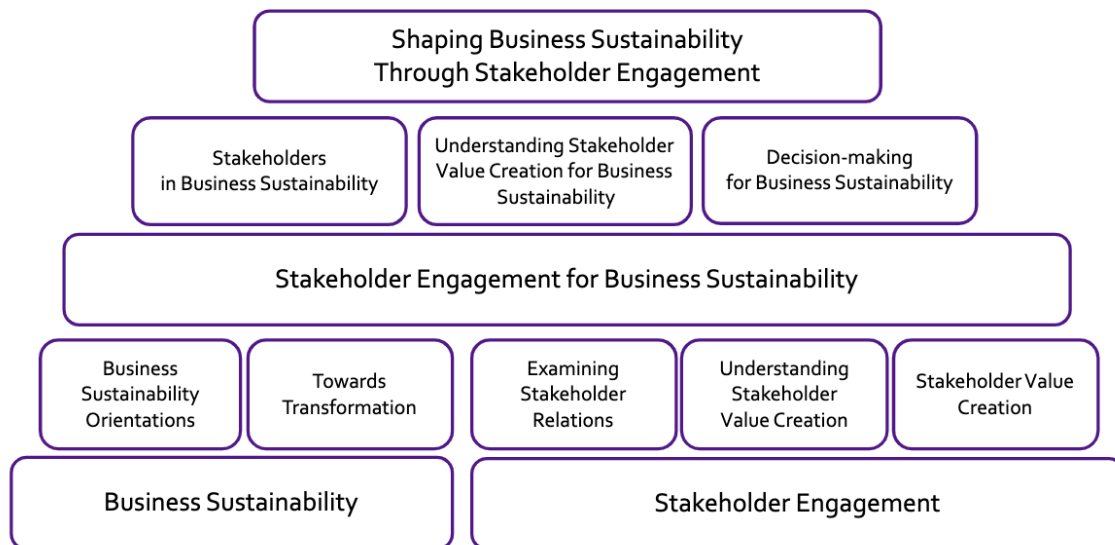


Figure 6: Synthesis of the theoretical framework

To begin with, *business sustainability* demands that companies pursue an integrative orientation. Such orientation implies that enterprises develop their sustainability practices based on their own needs but also on stakeholders' needs. In addition, business sustainability should address the three dimensions of sustainability –environmental, social, and economic– in decision-making (Wagner & Svensson, 2014; Dyllick & Muff, 2016).

However, it is pivotal to shift the organizational mindset from a shareholder- to a stakeholder-oriented perspective. In that way, companies could and should create mutual value for multiple stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2010; Hörisch et al., 2014). In contrast, making businesses more sustainable can be a challenge considering the focus on short-term results imperative in

organizations currently (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014). Stakeholder engagement can be a means to overcome the short-term focus as it enables organizations to understand stakeholders' sustainability needs, create stakeholder value, and avoid obsolescence (Kujala & Sachs, 2019; Pedersen et al., 2013; O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2013; Kujala et al., 2019).

Deploying stakeholder engagement demands *examining stakeholder relations*, *understanding stakeholder value creation*, and the actual *stakeholder value creation*. The first theme looks at identifying stakeholders and understanding how they relate to the company. The second theme relates to identifying stakeholder values through communication and learning. The third theme regards the creation of value itself.

Furthermore, Kujala et al. (2022) claim that *stakeholder engagement* has three dimensions: moral, strategic, and pragmatic. The moral dimension relates to the ethical aspects of the relationship between the firm and its stakeholders. The strategic dimension relates to the impact that stakeholder engagement has on the business strategy and survival of the company in the market. Finally, the pragmatic dimension is the assessment of the "practical consequences of stakeholder engagement" (Kujala et al., 2022, p. 18).

Considering that, *stakeholder engagement for business sustainability* could be positively moral, strategic, and pragmatic. Noland and Phillips (2010) support the argument that businesses should hold good intentions when engaging with stakeholders. In addition, Hörisch et al. (2014) highlight that firms should pursue an ethical position in engagement for sustainability. It is fundamental to highlight that business sustainability demands the observation of good practices in dialogue. Specifically, companies should make the objectives of the engagement clear for stakeholders, inform them how often they will communicate, and provide feedback to stakeholders. (Kaptein & Van Tulder, 2003.)

As for the strategic part, enterprises should acknowledge that at the same time they affect stakeholders, these also influence the company (Noland & Phillips, 2010). The theme of

stakeholders in business sustainability may support the strategic dimension of stakeholder engagement by identifying the stakeholders that influence the business sustainability within the firm and the value chain and understand the roles these stakeholders play in influencing the focal company's sustainability.

Finally, for the pragmatic part, it is necessary to recognize that firms must create value (Freeman et al., 2010), so being able to assess the results of the engagement becomes fundamental. In light of that, the theme of *understanding stakeholder value creation for business sustainability* can enable the company to identify its stakeholders' multiple values for sustainability. However, the *decision-making for sustainability* theme emphasizes that to create value, companies must pursue stakeholder-oriented decision-making processes and aim for acting based on the stakeholder values identified through the previous theme.

In conclusion, *shaping business sustainability through stakeholder engagement* requires observing a set of four premises. First, it demands creating value for and engaging with multiple stakeholders. Second, it is necessary to identify the roles stakeholder groups play in shaping business sustainability within the firm and the value chain. Third, dialogue and learning can enable the identification of stakeholder values, opportunities, and risks for the firm. Finally, giving feedback to stakeholders by acting based on the engagement with them can enhance stakeholders' trust in the company and stakeholder engagement itself.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

This master's thesis utilizes a qualitative single-case study to examine how stakeholder engagement can shape business sustainability. Qualitative research generates rich insights by providing flexibility to collect data, enabling the researcher to collect real-life data, analyze complex real-life problems, and increase credibility (Walle, 2015). In this thesis, the complex real-life issue is stakeholder engagement for business sustainability and how it affects the focal company's sustainability. The case study method, for its part, enables the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of a case by providing freedom to select the analysis procedure to address the "how" and "why" questions relevant to that case (Yin, 2018). In that sense, this case study explores *how* the focal company utilizes a specific stakeholder engagement means to influence business sustainability within the focal company.

The selection of the case was based on a set of criteria (Yin, 2012). Although the focal company remains anonymous in this thesis, it is possible to point out the criteria for selection and compose the case study respecting the firm's anonymity. First, the focal company belongs to the PPI, which is concerned with several sustainability issues and, therefore, has a high appeal to launch and engage in sustainability-related initiatives (Bajpai, 2010). Second, the enterprise is a leading player in market share and sustainability within the global and Finnish PPI contexts (D10). Third, the enterprise is connected to several stakeholders, once it is at the meso-level of the PPI.

3.2. DATA COLLECTION

This study aims to analyze the influence of the SSS as a stakeholder engagement means on the focal company's business sustainability. Considering that, the thesis collected interviewees' perceptions about the survey and stakeholder engagement between the enterprise and its stakeholders in order to examine the potential impact of the SSS internally in the organization. In addition, secondary data provided further information to contextualize the case and on the survey results and utilization. Altogether, primary and secondary data gathered information on how the company makes sense of the survey results and thus how the SSS may impact decision-making regarding business sustainability within the focal company.

3.2.1. Primary Data Collection

Due to the exploratory nature of this research, the primary data consists of semi-structured interviews with internal stakeholders. Although interviewing requires communication skills from the interviewer, the semi-structured method is a dynamic data collection means that provides the researcher with the outlines of the research and the flexibility to adapt and gain a deeper understanding of the case as the interviewees point to additional relevant information during the interview process (Haenssger, 2019). Ultimately, the semi-structured interviews of this study gathered empirical material about how interviewees perceive the SSS, how they make sense of the survey results, and how they perceive the potential impacts of the SSS on business sustainability within the focal company.

Semi-structured Interview Themes

The semi-structured interviews were based on predetermined themes (Given, 2008) that emerged from the research purpose and documental data (D1; D2; D4). Figure 7 below depicts the process of developing these semi-structured interview themes.

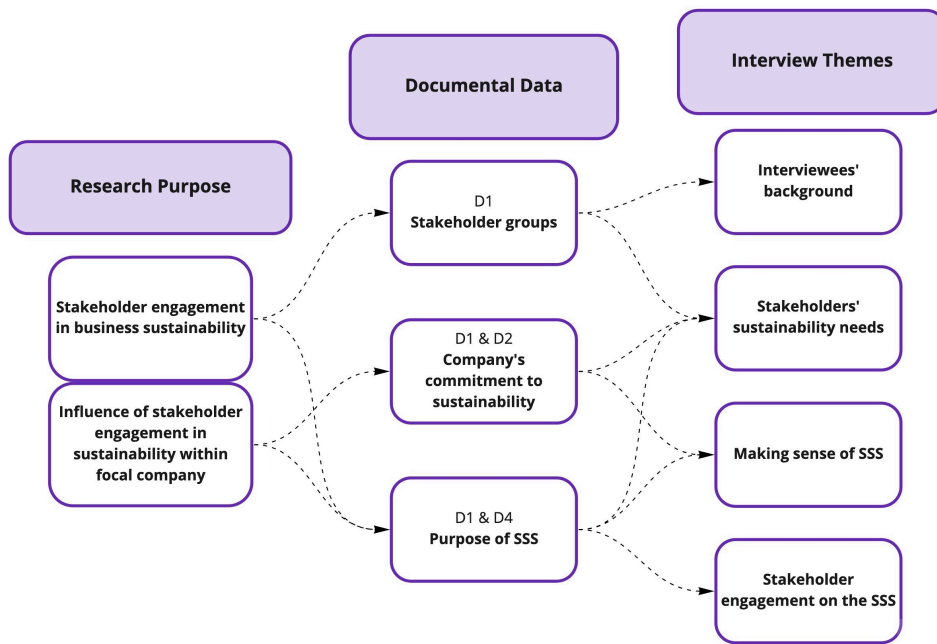


Figure 7: Developing the semi-structured interview themes

Figure 7 points out the linkage between the research purpose, the documental data collected during a preliminary investigation, and the semi-structured interview themes. Firstly, to understand stakeholder engagement for business sustainability between the company and its stakeholders, D1 provided the stakeholder groups that the focal company considers critical in their sustainability affairs. In addition, D1 and D4 provided insights on the company's approach to stakeholder engagement for business sustainability through the SSS. Secondly, D1 and D2 supported exploring the influence of the survey within the focal company by providing content on the firm's approach to

sense-making of sustainability and stakeholders' needs. Additionally, D1 and D4 provided insights into stakeholders' sustainability needs and how the firm utilizes the SSS.

Considering the analysis of D1, D2, and D4, the semi-structured interviews totaled 22 questions, which are available in Appendix 1. The questions comprised four key topics: interviewees' background, stakeholders' sustainability needs, stakeholder engagement in the SSS, and making sense of the SSS results. The background questions investigated the role of interviewees in the company and sustainability and their connection to stakeholder groups. The stakeholders' sustainability needs theme investigated stakeholder values and how the interviewees learn about these values. The stakeholder engagement in the SSS theme examined the interviewees' perceptions about the survey. Finally, the making sense of the SSS results theme investigated how interviewees make sense of the survey and if and how they perceive it impacts business sustainability within the focal company.

Sampling

The purposive and snowball sampling methods were deployed to select potential interviewees. The participants are various internal stakeholders involved in business sustainability that engage with other stakeholder groups. The sampling methods and interviews continued until the sample reached saturation, which means the point where no new themes emerged (Guest et al., 2006).

Firstly, the purposive sampling technique was deployed in order to select the relevant interviewees that may contribute to the investigation. Pre-research on the firm's organizational structure and documental data (D1) supported the purposeful selection of interviewees. (Black, 2013.) As a result, the first interview was conducted with the company's Head of Sustainability (I1) to deepen understanding of the SSS background and find out other potential interviewees connected to the survey results directly or indirectly. Moreover, the purposive sampling method provided two

additional interviews (I5 & I7) to complement the investigation. I5 and I7 were selected based on social media posts regarding sustainability in the focal company and stakeholder engagement.

Subsequently, the snowball sampling method provided eight interviews. The snowball technique enables the researcher to amplify the initial sample by identifying additional relevant respondents through the referral of other respondents (Black, 2013). Therefore, the snowball method complemented the purposive sampling technique by identifying relevant stakeholders for business sustainability within the focal company.

All interviewees were volunteers, consented to record the sessions, and authorized the use of the data for this thesis and eventual future scientific purposes. The thesis maintains the participants' identities anonymous and refers to them utilizing codes according to Table 1 below that conveys the details of the interviews.

Table 1: Details of interviews

Code	Date	Sampling method	Source	Means	Length	Amount of text transcribed	Role
I1	15.02.2022	Purposive	D1	Microsoft Teams	34 minutes	24 pages	Head of Sustainability
I2	17.02.2022	Snowball	I1	Microsoft Teams	39 minutes	33 pages	Key Account Manager
I3	21.02.2022	Snowball	I2	Microsoft Teams	60 minutes	57 pages	Sales Director
I4	21.02.2022	Snowball	I2	Microsoft Teams	58 minutes	44 pages	Business Development Director
I5	22.02.2022	Purposive	LinkedIn post	Microsoft Teams	38 minutes	34 pages	Operations Development Manager
I6	24.02.2022	Snowball	I3	Microsoft Teams	28 minutes	14 pages	Key Account Manager

I7	25.02.2022	Purposive	LinkedIn post	Microsoft Teams	45 minutes	22 pages	Business Line Vice President
I8	03.03.2022	Snowball	I1	Microsoft Teams	40 minutes	30 pages	Global HR Communications Manager
I9	09.03.2022	Snowball	I5	Microsoft Teams	34 minutes	24 pages	Global Mobility Manager
I10	09.03.2022	Snowball	I7	Microsoft Teams	21 minutes	21 pages	Global Operations Director
I11	11.03.2022	Snowball	I1, I5	Microsoft Teams	25 minutes	17 pages	Procurement Development Manager

As Table 1 above points out, there were a total of 11 interviews. The length of the interviews varied between 21 and 60 minutes, with a total of 422 minutes recorded and an average length of interview being 38 minutes. The total amount of text transcribed summed 320 pages. The interviews were recorded and transcribed between February and March 2022 through Microsoft Teams online meeting platform. The majority (9) of interviews were held in English and two interviews in Portuguese, which transcripts were translated into English with Google Translator.

The interviewees hold various positions within the focal company. Each of them relates to one or more key stakeholder groups, and all of them influence or are influenced by the organization's business sustainability strategies. Additionally, the interviewees' geographical location is distributed amongst several European countries and the United States. However, the exact location of each participant is not revealed, considering the preservation of the interviewees' identities and the fact that geolocation is not a core to this research's purpose.

3.2.2. Secondary Data Collection

The secondary data consists of publicly available and internal documents. Documents are a means to complement data gathered from interviews, and support, contextualize, and inform findings from interviews (Haenssger, 2019). The documental data supported the contextualization of the case study, provided the themes to guide the semi-structured interviews, and complemented the insights gathered in the interviews. Table 2 below points out the details of the secondary data collected.

Table 2: Details of secondary data

Code	Date of retrieval	Title of the document	Type of document	Source
D1	10.12.2021	GRI Supplement 2020	Public report	Company's website
D2	10.12.2021	Annual Report 2020	Public report	Company's website
D3	15.12.2021	Sustainability Stakeholder Survey Results 2020	Internal report	Company's responsible
D4	15.12.2021	Sustainability Stakeholder Survey Results 2021	Internal report	Company's responsible
D5	10.02.2022	Sustainability Stakeholder Survey	Public link	Company's website
D6	10.02.2022	Stakeholder Survey	Public link	Company's website
D7	08.03.2022	Company's Executive Team	Public link	Company's website
D8	09.03.2022	GRI Supplement 2021	Public report	Company's website
D9	09.03.2022	Annual Report 2021	Public report	Company's website
D10	04.05.2022	Press Release	Public link	Business Finland

The secondary data presented in Table 2 consists of public and internal reports. As the focal company requested to remain anonymous in this study, all documental data is cited as a code in

accordance with the table above and not mentioned in the references list. To comply with confidentiality issues, both parties, the researcher and the focal company, signed a non-disclosure agreement (NDA).

Detailing the secondary data, D1 and D2 are the reports that the company launched in 2021 that regard the performance of 2020 and provided this master thesis' beginning and development with identification of a research subject, contextualization, and identification of the first interviewee. D1 is the 2021 sustainability reporting in accordance with the GRI requirements and external assurance, whereas D2 is the 2021 Annual Report that gathers financial and sustainability data. D3 and D4 are the focal company's internal reports on the sustainability stakeholder survey of 2020 and 2021. D3 and D4 supported data collection and analysis by pointing out sustainability topics that are relevant for the company and its stakeholders. D5 is the public link to the SSS that provides information about the survey structure. D6 is the company website's public link that informs about the purpose of the sustainability stakeholder survey. In addition, data analysis demanded examining the firm's executive team, thus D7 is a public link from the company's website that details the executive team's composition. Furthermore, at the end of the primary data collection and during the data analysis period, the focal firm released the latest versions of the GRI supplement (D8) and the Annual Report (D9) that stand for the company's performance in 2021. These reports did not vary greatly from the previous versions, however, they brought new information about the organization's sustainability recognition. Finally, D10 is a press release that helps to contextualize the relevance of the focal company for sustainability and the Finnish and global markets. Altogether, the documental data supported the data collection and analysis process.

3.3. DATA ANALYSIS

The case study is a research method that enables researchers to pursue versatile data analysis methods arrangements (Yin, 2018). This master's thesis relies on thematic and inductive data analysis techniques. Thematic analysis is a method that considers context-related themes, enabling the researcher to base the study on pre-existing themes or frameworks (Haenssger, 2019, pp. 68–69). Based on the pre-existing themes, thematic analysis can utilize deductive or inductive methods to identify themes from the data. The deductive approach is theory-driven, implying that themes relate strictly to the pre-determined theoretical framework and may eventually provide less richer insights than the inductive method. The inductive approach, for its part, is data-driven, meaning that themes can deviate from the interview questions and thus generate richer insights than the previous method. This thesis utilizes the latter inductive approach, departing from pre-themes and developing further themes based on the data. (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 8.) Figure 8 below depicts the process of data analysis, which the following paragraphs elaborate on further.

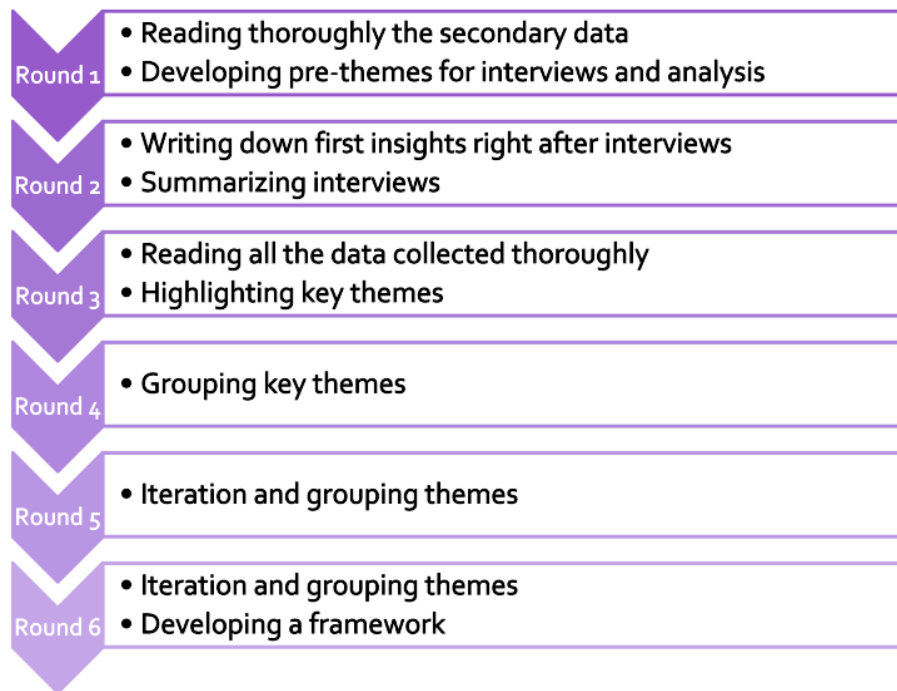


Figure 8: The data analysis process

The data analysis process took place through six rounds. Round one began by analyzing secondary data and developing pre-themes for interviews, as approached in the previous section 3.2.1, which also served as pre-themes to start analyzing data. Furthermore, secondary data provided information about the results of the SSS, their reflection on business sustainability initiatives at the focal company, and the critical stakeholders and sustainability topics for the case. (Haenssger, 2019, pp. 68–69.)

Round two focused on primary data. To begin with the primary data analysis, first thoughts and insights were written down right after the interviews. After that, each interview gained a summary informing the pre-themes. (Thomas, 2006.) In addition to the pre-themes, the interview summaries also had a "highlights" session to allocate themes or quotations that did not relate to the pre-themes or stood out in the interview (Braun & Clarke, 2006, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017, p. 8). Table 3 below demonstrates an example of an interview summary.

Table 3: Example of interview summary

Highlights
<p>"We should push the limits and push sustainability to our customers and peers"</p> <p>"The problem is that we (as businesses) are driven by fear, not opportunity"</p> <p>"I use it (the SSS) as feedback to improve the discussion with customers"</p>
Background
<p>Sustainability advocate in professional and personal life</p> <p>Manager leading a team, function intrinsically related to sustainability</p> <p>4 years at the company</p> <p>Engage with customers, employees, research institutions</p>
Stakeholders' sustainability needs
<p>Must be taken into account and are taken sufficiently already</p> <p>Should evaluate the whole value chain and not just one segment at a time</p> <p>Needs and opportunities usually are "add-ons" to customers' existing businesses: should be easy to find</p> <p>Come from various sources: legislation, business intelligence, meetings with various stakeholders, marketing, surveys</p> <p>Appear in technology, new business areas, tech, and processes</p>
SSS
<p>It needs to be worked one-to-one, with account managers talking directly to customers key persons and asking them to fill in the surveys</p> <p>Needs to be addressed to those who really are implicated in sustainability and decision-making</p>
Making sense of SSS
<p>Survey serves as insights for account managers to work further with customers, in addition to other engagement tools</p> <p>"I use it as feedback to improve the discussion with customers"</p> <p>Thinks that yes, people use it throughout the company</p>

After finalizing all interviews and their summaries, it started the phase of revisiting all data collected. Round three was dedicated to reading through the interview transcripts and summaries to double-check if no information was missing. In addition, key sentences were highlighted.

In round four, the coding and grouping of themes started. To do so, the highlighted sentences were allocated into six codes (Haenssger, 2019, p. 69; Nowell et al., 2017, p. 8). The codes identified were: the sustainability stakeholder survey origins, stakeholders, stakeholder value creation, other stakeholder engagement means, decision-making, and business sustainability

orientation. *The stakeholder survey origins* aggregated sentences related to information on the SSS purposes, utilization, and implementation. The *stakeholders* code grouped all information about who are the focal company's stakeholders and how they influence and relate to the enterprise in terms of business sustainability. The *stakeholder value creation* code encompassed all data that referred to stakeholder values and the process of understanding them. The *other stakeholder engagement means* code gathered all information about forms of interaction with stakeholders for business sustainability other than the SSS. The *decision-making* code aggregated data on how the company processes the SSS results and decides based on them. Finally, the *business sustainability orientation* code gathered data on what behavior stakeholders expect from the focal company and how it acts in terms of business sustainability.

In round five, the codes and highlighted sentences were revisited. Reading through and analyzing the sentences and codes enabled the development of 12 themes, which Table 4 below demonstrates.

Table 4: The codes and themes of data analysis

Codes	Themes
Sustainability stakeholder survey origins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SSS purpose • Reach out to stakeholders
Stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key stakeholders • Stakeholder roles
Stakeholder value creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dialogue and learning • Survey quality and limitations • Stakeholder values <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Environmental ○ Social ○ Economic
Other stakeholder engagement means	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other stakeholder engagement means

Decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense-making • SSS utilization
Business sustainability orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholders' expectations from the focal company • How the company handles stakeholders' expectations

Further analysis of the codes and themes led to the development of two main themes to group the themes. The two main themes are *the sustainability stakeholder survey* and *stakeholder engagement*.

Finally, round six consisted of the last iteration of data and grouping of themes to develop a framework. Conducting various rounds of iterations and grouping is crucial to minimizing overlapping of themes and developing a refined thematic analysis (Haenssger, 2019, p. 69). As a result of round six, *the sustainability stakeholder survey* remained isolated as one main theme, and the other main theme *stakeholder engagement* was divided into three new themes: examining stakeholder relations, understanding stakeholder value creation, and shaping business sustainability. These three new themes depict the phases of stakeholder engagement that emerged from data analysis in round six. The former themes were then placed as sub-themes under each of the three new themes, creating a framework as Table 5 below depicts (Thomas, 2006).

Table 5: Themes and sub-themes of stakeholder engagement for business sustainability framework

Themes	Examining stakeholder relations	Understanding stakeholder value creation	Shaping business sustainability
Sub-themes	Promotion	Communication	Sense-making
	Key stakeholders	Challenges in understanding stakeholder value creation	The stakeholders' roles impact
	Stakeholders' roles	Stakeholder values	The stakeholders' values impact

First, the theme *examining stakeholder relations* consisted of three sub-themes: promotion, key stakeholders, and stakeholders' roles. Second, the theme *understanding stakeholder value creation* comprised three sub-themes: communication, challenges in understanding stakeholder value creation, and stakeholder values. Finally, the last theme *shaping business sustainability* encompassed the themes of sense-making, the stakeholders' roles impact, and the stakeholders' values impact. Altogether the main themes of *sustainability stakeholder survey* and *stakeholder engagement* composed the framework for examining how the focal company utilizes the SSS as a means of stakeholder engagement for business sustainability and how it can impact business sustainability within the enterprise as presented in section 4.

4. FINDINGS

This chapter presents and analyzes the data collected. To begin with, section 4.1 adds depth to the understanding of the SSS development by analyzing primary data. Following, section 4.2 examines the phases and themes identified regarding the SSS as a stakeholder engagement means for business sustainability.

4.1. THE SUSTAINABILITY STAKEHOLDER SURVEY

Data collection provided more details on the SSS through the internal documents and interviews. Therefore, it is appropriate to start the analysis by approaching such information in order to develop a better contextualization of the survey as a stakeholder engagement means and its impact on shaping business sustainability within the focal company. Specifically, the analysis helps understanding the context of the survey, its purpose, and its development more in-depth.

Primary data revealed that the focal company commenced the SSS in 2014. Initially, a third party elaborated and conducted the SSS. The external partner, who was specialized in stakeholder engagement and sustainability services, structured the survey to gather meaningful input from various stakeholders. However, after a couple of years, the focal company incorporated the duty of running the survey and began to do it independently.

"During the years, we (...) saw that we could actually do this ourselves as well, and no need to pay that much for an external party to really run that. So, that was when we changed it to kind of our tools and our analysis." (I1)

Furthermore, the motivation to develop the SSS as a stakeholder dialogue means came originally from a sustainability reporting requirement. Initiatives such as the GRI and other sustainability rankings and awards require those candidate organizations to have a channel for dialogue with stakeholders.

"The driver has been reporting needs. But of course, without that reporting need, there would have been a lot of stakeholder collaboration anyway. We would anyway collaborate with our customers and suppliers and with media and all that. But I think the reporting requirement made it more concrete. And kind of systematic for companies to approach." (I1)

The data revealed that sustainability reporting needs have required the company to systematically collect feedback from stakeholders and maintain open dialogue means. Nevertheless, interviewees emphasized that the company would pursue stakeholder engagement initiatives despite the reporting requirements.

"I do want to highlight that even without this requirement, we would have done the majority of things already. However, maybe it wouldn't have been in such a systematic way." (I1)

It was noted that, although there was a preoccupation in highlighting the enterprise's proactivity in engaging with stakeholders for sustainability, the data analysis suggested that reporting is indeed the main driver for the systematic pursuit of the SSS as a stakeholder engagement means. In light of that, it is worth analyzing the extent to which the MNE utilizes the survey as a means of stakeholder engagement and how the SSS impacted the firm's business sustainability. The next sections do so by examining the phases of stakeholder engagement identified in the case study of the SSS.

4.2. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Based on primary and secondary data, it was possible to identify three phases of stakeholder engagement through the SSS. The first phase is Examining Stakeholder Relations, which comprises three key themes: *promotion*, *key stakeholders*, and *stakeholders' roles*. The second phase is Understanding Value Creation, which consists of three themes: *communication*, *challenges in understanding stakeholder value creation*, and *stakeholder values*. Finally, the third phase is Shaping Business Sustainability, which comprises three key themes: *sense-making*, *the stakeholders' roles impact*, and *the stakeholders' values impact*.

4.2.1. Examining Stakeholder Relations

Examining stakeholder relations comprises identifying stakeholders and understanding their role in the relationship with the focal company. To do so, this section begins with the *promotion* theme by examining the methods the MNE deploys to reach out to and identify potential respondents to the SSS. Following that, the *key stakeholders* theme identifies the more salient stakeholders in relation to the company and the survey. Finally, the third theme examines the roles of each key stakeholder group regarding the survey and the firm's business sustainability.

Promotion

It was found that the process of identifying stakeholders begins with actively and passively promoting the survey to multiple stakeholders. Firstly, based on primary data, four types of

proactive promotion were found. In the first form, the sustainability team requires account managers to approach their customers' sustainability key people.

"So first of all, you find the right people in your customers' organization, those who really have the say, (...) who are in a position to really decide." (I4)

The identification of stakeholders relies on the account managers' relationship with customers to not only identify the right people to answer the survey but also to commit them to do so. Considering that, it was inferred that such a promotion method implies a relational dimension of stakeholder engagement due to the dependency on account managers' relationship with customers. On the one hand, based on primary data, the relational aspect was considered a strength and a critical element to successfully identifying and committing stakeholders to respond to the SSS. However, on the other hand, one could question whether the account managers team has uniform capabilities and commitment to identify and commit customers to fill in the survey.

The second proactive promotion method found is a mailing list: the communications team emails a list of stakeholders inviting them to answer the survey once a year. Interviewees stated that although nearly 80% of the list consists of customers, it also contains suppliers, shareholders, NGOs, media, and research institutions. Primary data revealed that the selection criteria to include those stakeholders varies between shareholders and other stakeholder groups. The shareholders are those with greater stake rights over the focal company. The other stakeholders are selected based on their relevance to sustainability, that is, their roles in sustainability within the organizations they represent. In addition, it was identified in the interviews that the focal firm's sustainability team requires managers from other areas, such as human resources and operations development, to suggest potential stakeholders for composing the mailing list. Involving various internal stakeholders from multiple organizational areas in building such a list may support embedding the sustainability discussion in those areas, given they are incentivized to reflect on the topic to suggest

the potential respondents. However, the effectiveness of a mailing list is questionable and revisited later in section 4.2.2 in *challenges in understanding stakeholder value creation*.

The third proactive promotion method identified is publicizing the SSS on the focal company's intranet to reach out to employees.

"We also promote the survey in intranet. (...) we have this banner on the front page that asks please participate and that we kind of highlight it once in a while." (I1)

To promote the SSS on the intranet, the firm displays a digital banner inviting employees to answer the survey. That seems to be an obvious and harmless way of reaching out to employees. However, it is worthy to emphasize that it demands agency from employees to check the banner and participate in the survey. Furthermore, it was not possible to identify how often the banner is displayed, which demonstrated inaccuracy in the systematic promotion approach.

The fourth proactive promotion means identified used to take place during in-person events with customers, employees, suppliers, and other stakeholder groups interested in the firm's sustainability performance. During those events, the focal company used to make iPads available in the entrance halls to invite participants to answer the SSS.

"One way we have also done is (...) the annual general meeting. So that is the meeting where all the stakeholders and shareholders are invited to come together (...). So back in the years before the COVID, we sometimes put some iPads and had that questionnaire on an iPad in the lobby area where all the participants were. And that time it was hundreds of people that would participate." (I1)

However, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have negatively impacted the proactive conduct of the survey. The number of responses to the 2021 SSS decreased by almost 50% compared to the 2020

participation. The pandemic has inhibited the possibility of promoting in-person events, which may also be one of the reasons for that response decrease.

Finally, a passive promotion was identified based on documental data (D5; D6). Data showed that the SSS is available on the company's website year-round in the sustainability section, which any interested stakeholder could access and fill in the survey. However, it was noted that stakeholders should have exceptional motivation to do so, given it was necessary to proactively access the company's website and examine the sustainability section in-depth to find the SSS and the link to respond to it.

The promotion theme suggested that various methods are necessary to select, reach out to, and motivate stakeholders to respond to the survey, with emphasis on proactive means. The analysis highlighted that the relational aspect of stakeholder engagement is critical to the success of the SSS. Specifically, employees from various organizational areas are involved in the promotion to make use of their knowledge and relationship with stakeholders to purposefully select and commit them to answer the survey. Moreover, based on primary data, it was identified that the promotion is emphasized to employees via an intranet, to suppliers via mailing list, and to customers through the mailing list and account managers.

However, the analysis suggested a number of pitfalls, such as a possible lack of structure and systematicity in promoting the SSS and the dependency on account managers' relational capabilities and stakeholders' agency. As a result, such downsides may also be reasons for the decrease in customers' participation, which summed a similar share as of suppliers in the last survey edition. Nevertheless, it is also important to examine which are the stakeholders that responded to the SSS, and which of them are the most salient stakeholder groups.

Key Stakeholders

Analyzing primary and secondary data, it was possible to identify that the focal company focuses the SSS on specific stakeholder groups, thus deriving the theme of *key stakeholders*. Although the SSS is an anonymous stakeholder engagement means, there are two methods of stakeholder identification: geographical region and stakeholder group. Whereas geographical data were considered irrelevant to this research purpose, stakeholder group data (D3; D4) provided material for the analysis. The SSS asks respondents to identify themselves by the stakeholder group they represent. There are eight options available for respondents to choose from: customer, employee, future employee, shareholder or investor, NGO, media, supplier, and "others", which opens a non-obligatory option for the interviewee to identify their stakeholder group. Considering that data and interviews, it was possible to identify several stakeholder groups, which Figure 9 below outlines.



Figure 9: Focal company's stakeholders

As Figure 9 portrays, it was possible to identify 15 internal and external stakeholder groups linked to the focal company. (1) The internal stakeholders are the employees, which consist of all people

working at the company. For their part, the external stakeholders summed up 14 groups. (2) Future employees are people outside of the firm with the potential to work at it at some point in the future. (3) Customers are other businesses that buy products, services, or technology from the focal company. (4) Suppliers are those enterprises that provide the focal firm with raw materials, services, outsourced workforce, and other goods. (5) Competitors are other industries that provide technology and services for the PPI. (6) Consultancies are firms that provide consultancy services for the focal company itself and its customers regarding specific projects. (7) The NGOs in the firm's system of stakeholders are those who interact with specific projects or geographical areas in which the company acts. (8) Regulatory agencies are organizations that provide operation licenses and regulate the operation standards of the PPI. (9) Media are communications channels that inform the greater public and PPI specialized audience. (10) Governments coordinate societal interests. (11) Associations are several industry- or sustainability-related organizations in which the focal company has membership or intention to adhere. (12) Other organizations encompass the GRI, the CDP, and several other organizations that provide sustainability frameworks and issue sustainability rankings and awards. (13) Shareholders are the so-called owners of the company, which is a listed enterprise. (14) Research institutes encompass independent research organizations and academia, which support the development of new technologies and form the next generations of future employees. (15) Finally, communities encompass all stakeholders that surround the enterprise's factories and offices, as well as the employees' families.

Although the SSS is open to all stakeholder groups, the analysis showed that employees, customers, and suppliers are the three key stakeholder groups for engagement through the SSS for business sustainability. The documental data demonstrated that the focal company considers those three stakeholder groups the ones responsible for carbon emissions in their value chain (D2). Furthermore, data from interviews also highlighted the three stakeholder groups as the most mentioned and addressed regarding sustainability issues. In line with that, the survey results for

2020 and 2021 pointed out that, together, those stakeholder groups accounted for 80% (D3, p. 4) and 82% of respondents (D4, p. 5), respectively.

However, it is impossible to neglect that the focus on three stakeholder groups may eventually overlook the salience of other stakeholders. For instance, based on primary data, it was noted an interest in expanding the engagement with investors and the financial community due to their high velocity in developing the sustainability topic.

"I would really like to see more. (...) One big area would be our investors and owners and the financial community. Because I see that (...) the development is happening so fast, and the maturity level is growing so significantly among the entire financial community." (I1)

Primary data highlighted that sustainability is gaining momentum among investors and other stakeholders. It was possible to infer that such momentum may eventually affect stakeholders' salience and, therefore, the criticality of engaging with them. Despite that, data analysis showed that employees, customers, and suppliers remained the key stakeholder groups due to the roles they played in business sustainability in relation to the focal company.

Stakeholders' Roles

Based on primary and secondary data, it was possible to identify the key *stakeholders' roles* in the focal company's sustainability and thus understand why these groups remained salient. Interviews provided insights on how employees, customers, and suppliers influence and shape business sustainability within the firm. To begin with, data collection focused on collecting the perceptions of internal stakeholders from various organizational areas that engage with other stakeholders. Table 6 below pinpoints the interviewees and the stakeholder groups they engage with.

Table 6: Interviewees' perceptions of stakeholder groups

Code	Role	Stakeholder groups		
		Employees	Customers	Suppliers
I1	Head of Sustainability	x	x	x
I2	Key Account Manager	x	x	
I3	Sales Director	x	x	x
I4	Business Development Director	x	x	x
I5	Operations Development Manager	x	x	x
I6	Key Account Manager	x	x	
I7	Business Line Vice President	x	x	x
I8	Global HR Communications Manager	x		
I9	Global Mobility Manager	x	x	x
I10	Global Operations Director	x	x	
I11	Procurement Development Manager	x		x
Total		11	9	7

In total, the 11 interviewees expressed their perceptions regarding employees' roles according to their own experience and eventually for managing other employees. In addition, nine interviewees referred to engagement with customers and expressed their opinions in relation to this stakeholder group. Finally, seven interviewees stated to engage with suppliers and shared their perceptions regarding this stakeholder group.

The interviews were analyzed concerning how the interviewees perceived the stakeholders' influence on the sustainability of the focal company. Based on that and the documental data (D3; D4), six roles were identified, as Table 7 below demonstrates.

Table 7: Stakeholders' roles

Key stakeholder group	Role
Employees	Enabling
	Educating
Customers	Paradoxical
	Driving
Suppliers	Being a risk
	Supporting

As Table 7 shows, employees have the role of *enabling* sustainability within the company. This role refers to the employees that seek to enhance sustainability within the enterprise by suggesting improvement actions and/or by bringing insights from external stakeholders. First, primary and secondary data showed that employees have iteratively suggested actions to improve and foster sustainability within the focal company's operations, such as implementing electric vehicle recharging stations at offices, working remotely to avoid commuting emissions, and using recyclable materials at offices. Second, based on interviews, employees are responsible for bringing feedback and insights from external stakeholders. In doing so, employees enabled sustainability within the focal company by highlighting points for improvement and anticipating stakeholders' sustainability needs.

In this vein, employees also have an *educating* role. That is, employees are the interface of sustainability between the company and its stakeholders and thus have the opportunity to educate external stakeholders about sustainability.

"This is one of our biggest opportunities, the environment. If we understand it is not about sales, it is about training the customer [about sustainability]." (I3)

"What I have tried to do is to increase the competencies within our sales so that they can talk more about sustainability to our customers." (I1)

The primary data analysis highlighted that the sales force –including managers and directors– can reinforce sustainable solutions in selling processes. These employees can train customers to understand the sustainability challenges and opportunities connected to their projects. To do so, however, it is imperative that employees from sales understand their role in business sustainability and develop engagement accordingly. It was noted during interviews that although they pursue a common sense that sustainability is core to doing business in the PPI, their position in negotiations may strongly depend on customers' positioning, whether making sustainability a priority or not.

Customers, for their part, have two roles. First, it was also possible to identify that customers have the role of *driving* the focal company to become more sustainable. Customers do so by demanding the enterprise and its competitors to offer technologies that support customers themselves to also become more sustainable.

"Customers are committing to reduce or neutralizing carbon emissions and requiring us to do the same with our technology." (I7)

In that sense, it was possible to infer that customers shape business sustainability within the focal company by guiding the development of new technologies and processes. For instance, through the SSS, customers can share the most relevant topics for them regarding the focal company's activities that should be addressed in sustainability reporting. In addition, customers drive the focal company and its suppliers to adopt more sustainable practices by demanding them to pursue sustainability requirements.

"We always make a project specific guidance because the customer might have a requirement that is more strict than the government and that is why we have to follow the customer. For example, in Chile, we are having a project where the customer is very strict and we need to follow certain rules and it is more strict than the Chilean Government." (I5)

Customers are driving the focal company and its suppliers to mitigate their own risks by requiring them to comply with social sustainability requirements that can eventually be stricter than local rules. To support the implementation and supervision of these requirements, workers could use the SSS to express their needs and concerns so that the focal company can identify and tackle them.

Second, primary data analysis suggested that customers hold a *paradoxical* role. Customers in the PPI may still suffer from a dichotomy when it comes to buying processes and the comparison between more sustainable versus cheaper products.

"If my price is a little bit higher and it is manufactured in Sweden with a good sustainability record, and if my company's competitor's product is made in China with very poor sustainability record, they will buy the one from China if it is cheaper." (I2)

It was possible to identify that although customers are willing to become more sustainable, they may choose cheaper products or technologies based on the short-term economic value. Considering that, customers can discourage the focal company from moving the sustainability topic forward. In other words, if customers can incentivize the focal company to develop sustainable products and adopt more sustainable practices, the opposite is also true.

Suppliers, for their part, also hold two roles. First, suppliers have the role of *being a risk* for sustainability that must be monitored. Suppliers were linked to social risks related to human and worker rights. That is due to the fact that often suppliers operate in countries with poor environmental policies, increasing such risks.

"Almost no human rights, worker rights in these countries, almost no environmental legislation, so we still have this big fight (...) we are not only solving the problem here, we need to solve it globally. We need to solve it from the start (...) of the production (...), where to manufacture it, how to transport it around the world." (I4)

Interviewees argued that the focal company is trying to minimize suppliers' sustainability risks and has the duty of managing the supply chain from the beginning at a global level. The need to manage the risks coming from suppliers is due to securing the focal company's own sustainability performance and to responding to customers' role of driving business sustainability.

Second, based on primary and secondary data, it was possible to infer that suppliers also have the role of *supporting* customers to develop business sustainability. That is because the focal company itself is a supplier at the meso-level of the PPI and as such, it supports sustainability within customers. For instance, interviewees referred to the focal company as a supplier and emphasized its role in supporting customers' sustainability by developing, executing, and maintaining sustainable technologies. In addition, the analysis suggested that in complying with sustainability requirements, suppliers also support the focal company and customers to secure the sustainability of their products from the beginning of the production chain.

4.2.2. Understanding Stakeholder Value Creation

Based on primary and secondary data, it was possible to identify three main themes related to understanding stakeholder value creation and the SSS. The first theme is *communication*, which examines the dialogue aspects of the survey. The second theme assesses the *challenges in understanding stakeholder value creation* through the SSS. Finally, the third theme examines the *stakeholder values* identified. These themes help to understand how the survey as a stakeholder engagement means supports the focal company to identify the stakeholder values related to sustainability, which later support the analysis of how the SSS shapes business sustainability within the focal company.

Communication

Secondary data showed that the focal company considers the SSS an open channel for stakeholder dialogue by systematically collecting feedback from multiple stakeholders. (D1, p. 15; D6; D8, p. 15). Through the survey, stakeholders can opine and express their concerns and sustainability needs. Based on primary and secondary data, it was possible to infer that, as a dialogue means, the SSS is a platform for learning from stakeholders. The survey's purpose and applications exemplify this. Primary and secondary data (D5; D6) showed that the SSS primary purpose is collecting feedback to apply materiality for sustainability reporting. In addition, primary data pointed out that interviewees utilize the survey as a support to understand stakeholders' sustainability needs in order to enhance conversation with stakeholders.

"The key essence of dialogue (...) is that you get understanding [to communicate with stakeholders]." (I8)

"I used that in my work as a feedback, what to do with them [customers] next, how to improve the discussion." (I4)

However, it is possible to critically assess the SSS as a means for dialogue and learning. Based on primary data, it was identified that collaboration with multiple stakeholders, lack of feedback, and restricted reach could be bottlenecks for dialogue and learning through the SSS. First, whereas conducting the survey is a means to collect feedback from stakeholders, it may also inform stakeholders about the focal company's interest in their perceptions and needs. In that sense, the survey can be considered a two-way communication. In contrast, the SSS dynamic appeared to be limited in terms of dialogue, demanding more collaboration between stakeholders.

"So, I am also looking at more dialogue on maybe a little bit more collaborative level, not only just from a supplier to your customer." (I4)

The primary data analysis indicated that collaborating with multiple stakeholders is critical to discuss and understand their sustainability needs and thus move business sustainability forward.

Second, primary data showed that feedback for respondents is limited to intranet posts and sustainability reporting. In contrast, despite the anonymous nature of the SSS, interviewees believed that the survey results might provide insightful themes and, therefore, it would be important to provide feedback for respondents.

"Maybe it would motivate them [stakeholders] to answer next time if they hear us afterwards. Because now they are answering the survey, and probably they are not getting any feedback or any results how they are seeing us and how the others are seeing us (...) I think that would help us and promote us and motivate our suppliers to this every next time." (I11)

Providing feedback for respondents was believed to be a means to enhance stakeholders' participation in the SSS and move business sustainability forward.

Third, the primary data analysis pointed out an interest in amplifying the survey reach to collect further feedback throughout the value chain.

"We should be able to increase its visibility in our channels, in our stakeholder meetings throughout the value chain and increase the amount of feedback." (I1)

Interviewees considered that the number of responses to the SSS is still limited in comparison to the wide quantity of the firm's stakeholders. In that sense, it was inferred that the learning possibilities based on the survey are also limited due to the number of responses. In conclusion, although the SSS can be a means of two-way communication with and learning from stakeholders, it demands further collaboration with multiple stakeholders, providing feedback for respondents, and increasing the number of respondents. Based on primary data, it is possible to suggest that involving multiple

stakeholders and providing feedback for respondents could help add more dialogue depth to the SSS, whereas increasing the number of respondents could enhance the accuracy of data.

Challenges in Understanding Stakeholder Value Creation

In addition to the bottlenecks identified in communication (collaboration, lack of feedback, and low reach), primary data pointed out other *challenges in understanding stakeholder value creation* through the SSS. The first challenge is the respondents' possible lack of motivation and time to answer the survey. The interviewees described difficulties in motivating stakeholders to fill in the survey through email and even through personal contact.

"As we all know, when we get the survey questionnaire to our emails, it is maybe the last one you wanna fill in because then you have your own priorities when in your daily work." (I1)

"And it was very, very difficult for me. (...) We would have never caught these people if (...) I would not have asked personally that 'could you please do this favor because this is so important'." (I4)

The interviewees considered it difficult for stakeholders to find time and motivation to answer the SSS due to their busy routine. They argued that targeting specific stakeholders at a personal level can be a means to encourage them to respond to the survey.

The second challenge is the possible discrepancy between what stakeholders state in the SSS and their firms' reality, which appeared to constrain the quality of the generated data.

"Surveys are always complicated because often people answer how they think they are instead of how they actually are." (I7)

"Companies are made out of people, so it is also what people think company has strategies and targets, but it still made out of the decisions of the upper-level management. And, therefore, those are the people you should ask, but they are the most difficult to catch." (I4)

Based on primary data, this possible discrepancy appeared to be due to a) a mismatch between the reality of the stakeholders and their judgments of reality and b) the difficulty of engaging respondents related to business sustainability at a strategic level. Reflecting on that, the discrepancy can affect the accuracy of the SSS results.

The third challenge identified was the lack of specificity regarding business lines or areas. The interviewees suggested that more detailed information would enhance the process of understanding stakeholders' needs.

"It would be useful if it was focused on specific projects or mills." (I5)

"It would be good to have more detailed information on the customer site's problems."

(I6)

Primary data showed that having specific information about each stakeholder group would provide the focal company with concrete needs to meet at capillary levels. In contrast, it was possible to infer that the SSS results can provide a macro understanding of stakeholders' needs to the detriment of the results' applicability at tactical levels. Based on that, specificity can enhance the processes of identifying stakeholder values and understanding stakeholder value creation.

Furthermore, considering the challenges in understanding stakeholder value creation through the SSS, primary data revealed other complementary stakeholder engagement means to identify stakeholders' sustainability needs. The analysis showed that these stakeholder engagement means serve as validation and complementation to identifying and understanding stakeholders' needs.

Table 8 below pinpoints these stakeholder engagement means and the target stakeholder groups to each of them.

Table 8: Other stakeholder engagement means

Stakeholder engagement means	Stakeholder groups
Events	Customers, suppliers
Informal means	Employees, customers, suppliers
Business intelligence	Customers, suppliers
Legislation and reporting	Employees, customers, suppliers

Primary data pointed out that the focal company engages with employees, customers, and suppliers to learn their sustainability needs through four key engagement means. The first means is through events led by the organization itself or by customers. In these events, the focal company discusses sustainability and, eventually, customers' and suppliers' needs.

The second engagement instrument identified is informal learning about employees, customers, and suppliers' sustainability needs. These include team and peer-to-peer meetings, emails, Microsoft Teams messages, and commercial visits to customers and suppliers. Primary data analysis suggested that commercial and relational interactions have a key value in identifying, validating, and understanding stakeholders' values, albeit such interactions do not have a systematic character.

The third means identified is business intelligence targeting customers and suppliers. Interviewees argued that the focal company conducts sustainability perception studies to understand how stakeholders perceive determined aspects. However, critically analyzing the utilization of business intelligence, in this case, it is possible to suggest that it is rather more of a validation method than identifying stakeholders' values.

The fourth engagement method identified is legislation. The legislation appeared as a source for identifying actual and future sustainability trends regarding customers, employees, and suppliers. In line with that, primary data showed that sustainability reporting is a critical driver for learning stakeholders' needs and tailoring business sustainability efforts. Specifically, reporting frameworks demand sustainability metrics and the pursuit of stakeholder engagement methods.

Despite the SSS challenges in contributing to understanding stakeholder value creation, the analysis showed that the survey is the only official and systematic stakeholder engagement means of the focal company. The survey is open to all stakeholders year-round and maintains the same structure throughout time. However, it is important to note that the survey is part of a combination of complementary engagement means in the process of understanding stakeholder value creation. As a part of this set of stakeholder engagement means, it is argued that the SSS is, in fact, a complementary means to identify stakeholder values.

Stakeholder Values

As a form of stakeholder engagement, the primary purpose of the SSS is to gather information about stakeholders' sustainability needs. In that sense, it was possible to infer that learning about stakeholders' needs is part of understanding the stakeholder value creation process. To do so, the survey relies on a 14 rating-scale and one open-ended question. Table 9 below pinpoints the rating-scale questions.

Table 9: SSS rating-scale questions

SSS rating-scale questions	
1.	Climate change and reducing CO2 emissions
2.	Energy, water, chemical and raw material efficiency of the focal company's technology in customers use

3.	Energy, water, chemical and raw material efficiency of the focal company's own operations
4.	Energy, water, chemical and raw material efficiency of the focal company's supply chain
5.	Suppliers' safety management
6.	Health, safety, and well-being of employees
7.	Safety of focal company's technologies
8.	Good leadership
9.	Diversity and equal opportunities
10.	Employee engagement
11.	Respect for human rights
12.	Prevention of corruption
13.	Open and transparent reporting
14.	Sponsorship and donations to local communities

The rating-scale questions provide a range of issues regarding the company's own operations and its impact on customers and suppliers. Questions 1, 2, 3, and 4 regard environmental performance. Questions 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 address social values. Finally, questions 11, 12, 13, and 14 focus on ethical and economic aspects.

Furthermore, the SSS asks an open-ended question in which respondents have the opportunity to state their opinions, demands, or concerns regarding the focal company's sustainability performance. The respondents have extensively answered such a question, and the 2020 and 2021 SSS results provided a wide range of positive and negative toned comments. In that sense, the survey could confirm sustainability themes raised from the rating-scale questions and provide further insights on stakeholders' sustainability needs.

Based on primary and secondary data (D3; D4), it was possible to identify that the three key stakeholder groups pursued different values for each sustainability dimension. These are grouped and outlined in Table 10 below.

Table 10: Sustainability values per stakeholder group

Stakeholder group	Social value	Environmental value	Economic value
Employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well-being Equality Own safety on focal company's facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving environmental performance on focal company's facilities Good environmental performance of focal company's technologies on customers' sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competitiveness
Customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safety of others' employees on customers' sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good environmental performance of focal company's technologies on customers' sites: Own environmental performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Smallest price in the short-term
Suppliers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safety of outsourced workers on customers' sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good environmental performance of focal company's technologies on customers' sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survival of value chain

Although the three key stakeholder groups presented values in the three sustainability dimensions, each group has a different perspective on each dimension. As a result, the social dimension was more valued by suppliers, whereas the environmental by employees. The economic dimension, for its part, at first sight appeared to be more important for customers, however, the analysis showed that it may have similar importance to the other stakeholder groups. The following paragraphs examine each sustainability dimension independently.

For the social dimension, although employees have the biggest number of social values, suppliers are the key stakeholder group that weighs this dimension the most. Figure 10 below showcases the social values identified and the intersections between them.

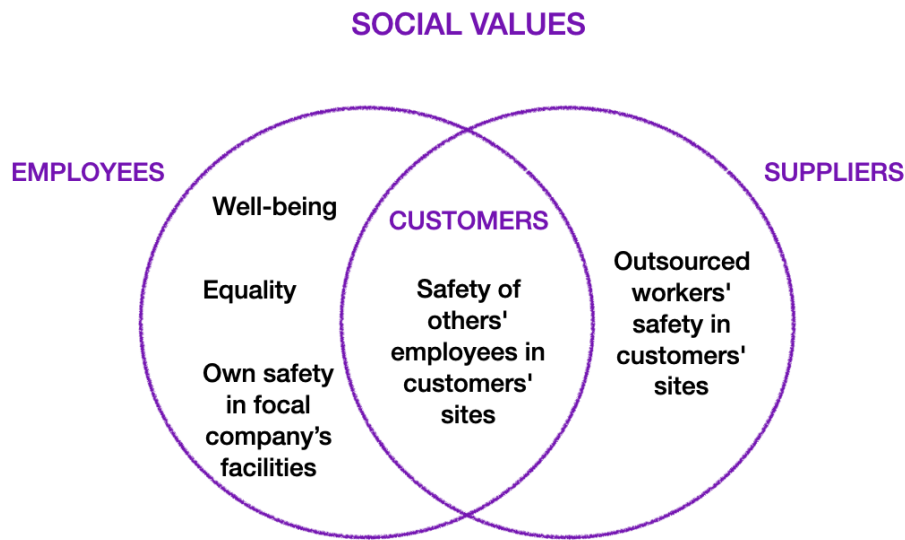


Figure 10: Stakeholders' social values and the intersection between them

The primary and secondary data analysis showed that employees value having well-being in the workplace and fair, sustainable, and equal pay, which did not appear from the other stakeholder groups. In addition, employees, customers, and suppliers share the value of the employees' safety. However, the three stakeholder groups consider employees' safety from a slightly different perspective.

The focus of employees is on their own safety in the focal company's own factories and operations. Customers focus on the safety of others' workers (from both the focal company and/or outsourced) in customers' sites, even eventually requiring stricter rules for workers' rights and safety than local governments. Finally, suppliers focus on their own employees' safety when working for the focal company in the customers' sites. Interviewees argued that suppliers are increasing the

visibility and demands of employees and outsourced workers' health and safety. Specifically, labor conditions in factories and the installation and start-up in customers' mills are critical points of social sustainability for suppliers.

"Especially from the personnel perspective, (...) the work that these employees are doing is that they travel a lot, then the work on the site is very demanding, there is a lot of overtime hours. (...) As for example, improving the risk, the sustainability and health and well-being for the individuals is, for example, increasing the resourcing or sort of making sure that the individual would have a chance to really sort of relax after the work and be home for a while before going on next time. (...) I believe that type of expectation is coming from (...) sustainability, not the environmental but like how we treat our employees and (...) how do we show that their work is important. So that expectation is definitely coming from the side organization." (I8)

The implications of labor conditions and workers' rights are the reason for suppliers to be the stakeholder group that values the social dimension of sustainability the most.

As for the environmental dimension, employees are the stakeholder group that most values it. Based on primary and secondary (D3; D4) data, it was possible to identify that the environmental values can intersect with economic values, as Figure 11 below demonstrates.

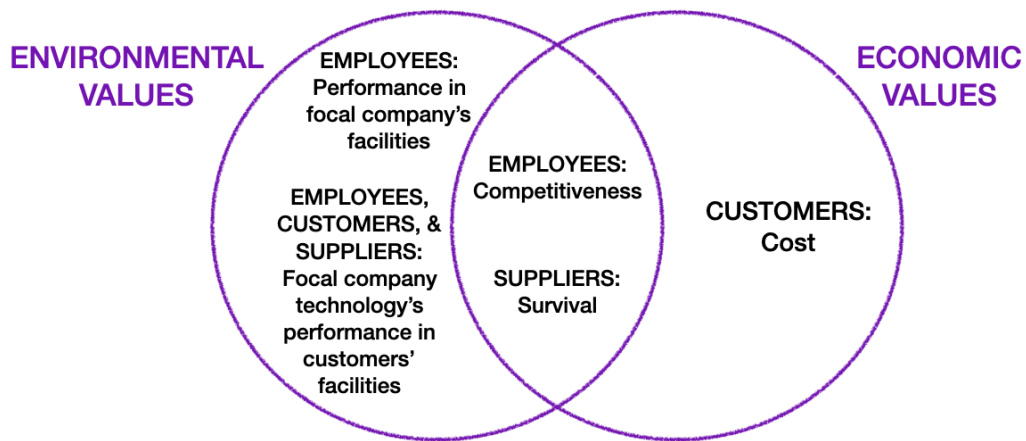


Figure 11: The intersections between stakeholders' environmental and economics values

Employees value the environmental performance of the focal company's own facilities. Employees are interested in applying sustainable solutions in the firm's offices to minimize or neutralize the enterprise's impact on the environment, for the sake of the planet. To do so, they have suggested through the SSS a series of initiatives such as deploying recharging stations for electric vehicles at offices and the extension of remote work in order to reduce emissions of commuting, for instance.

In addition, employees, customers, and suppliers share the need for a good environmental performance of the focal company's technologies. Employees, customers, and suppliers agree it is important for them that the focal company's technologies perform well on customers' sites. However, the analysis of primary and secondary data (D3; D4) identified that each stakeholder group interprets this same need in different ways. The shared need for the good environmental performance of the focal company's technologies in the customers' sites is due to the customers' value of improving their own environmental performance.

"They [customers] are always asking (...) 'if we would like to decrease CO2 or energy or water etc., what do we need to do?'. And then we have started discussions from there." (I3)

According to the primary data, customers have been demonstrating interest in improving environmental performance in factories through, for instance, reducing CO₂ emissions and optimizing the consumption of water and energy through the focal company's technologies.

Employees, for their part, have two different interpretations of the good environmental performance of their firm's technology on customers' sites. First, they value improving the environmental performance for the sake of the planet. Employees are interested in reducing the impact of the machinery and solutions they produce by making components out of sustainable materials.

"We could easily use recyclable plastics. We could use ocean recovered plastics. We could start looking at bioplastics, but we don't. So, we have a lot to do in our own company." (I2)

"I mean, actually two weeks ago, I had to call someone in the management or service business line because I am wondering why we are not using refurbished machinery more in our sales. Why do we have to dig for new metal and do it all over again when everyone is talking about sustainability?" (I3)

As examples to improve the environmental performance of their machinery and solutions, interviewees cited the deployment of recyclable or bioplastics plastics and refurbished machinery. In addition, employees have the value of maintaining competitiveness. According to interviewees, it is critical to constantly improve the environmental performance of the focal company's technologies and solutions in order to stay competitive in the PPI.

Suppliers, for their part, are becoming more aware of the environmental dimension of sustainability. According to interviewees, this is because suppliers have started to observe that sustainability is relevant to the whole business process.

"They are more active today than our suppliers were by maybe 5-6 years ago, maybe it was something extra. (...) But today it is not only about the business, it is about mentality, it is mindset that it belongs to your responsibility." (I11)

Primary and secondary (D3; D4) data suggested that suppliers are particularly starting to consider environmental performance. However, the analysis showed that suppliers' current environmental value is focused on the focal company technologies' performance on customers' site. The analysis suggested that this is to nurture the survival of the supply chain. In other words, it means maintaining the focal company's competitiveness and thus the suppliers' relevance in the chain.

Finally, at first, the primary data pointed out that the economic dimension would relate only to customers. According to the empirical data, customers are willing to have more sustainable solutions and operations, however, the cost is still a bottleneck.

"If my price is a little bit higher and it's manufactured in Sweden with a good sustainability track record, and if my company competitors' product is made in China with very poor sustainability record, they will buy the one from China if it's cheaper."
(I2)

Customers place significant weight on the financial dimension of sustainability. For them, according to the data, in addition to good environmental performance, technologies must have the lowest price in the act of purchasing. In other words, customers may prioritize the short-term cost over other aspects of sustainability and sustainability itself.

However, the analysis showed an intersection between the environmental and economic values of employees and suppliers. As aforementioned, employees relate the environmental sustainability dimension to the value of maintaining competitiveness. In a similar tone, suppliers relate the environmental dimension to the value of sustaining the value chain. Analyzing the

intersection between the environmental and economic dimensions, one could question the extent to which the key stakeholders ground their social and environmental values in an economic value, and if and how the latter may overpower others.

4.2.3. Shaping Business Sustainability

This section depicts how the SSS as a stakeholder engagement means helps shape the focal company's sustainability. To do so, the section begins with the *sense-making* theme by examining how the enterprise makes sense of the SSS and stakeholder values. The second theme is *the stakeholders' roles impact*, which analyzes how stakeholders influence the focal company's sustainability through their roles. Finally, the third theme is *the stakeholders' values impact*, which examines how the stakeholders' values identified through the SSS emerge in the enterprise's business sustainability.

Sense-making

Interviewees considered making sense of the SSS results like bringing a puzzle together. To do so, the firm collects the SSS data once a year, integrates it with other inputs, and presents the results to the executive team.

"It is part of (...) other input that we gather. So, for example, I will give you an example of how we created the [sustainability] agenda. (...) We gathered the regulatory developments we get out there, the megatrends, we gathered the consumer trends, (...) we gather in a lot of different inputs and also stakeholder input was one of the things that we gathered and we convert into a large analysis covering (...) the

inputs from different stakeholders, from regulation data, and then we take that analysis to our management, so (...) [the] executive team." (I1)

The executive team is composed of 13 members. These are the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the Chief Financial Officer (CFO), four Business Line Presidents, five Area Presidents, the Senior Vice President of Human Resources and Operations Development, and the Senior Vice President of Marketing, Communications, Sustainability, and Corporate Relations (D7). According to the documental data, the executive team determines and monitors the focal company's sustainability strategy, targets, and policies (D1).

Based on primary and secondary data, it was identified that the survey supports the sense-making of stakeholders' needs and thus the development of actions based on them.

"I think that you are giving people the opportunity to voice what they have to say, and I believe we do quite a lot with the comments." (I8)

"So, we are looking at that also from that point of view that it's not just a nice thing to read but it leads to actions."(I4)

Interviewees highlighted the focal company's posture of meeting stakeholders' needs by developing products, services, and technologies that meet such demands. However, it is possible to critically analyze such posture in relation to the SSS results. For instance, the analysis suggested that the SSS serves as a means of validation in the context of the executive team's decision-making. In this vein, primary data indicated that the survey results are used to validate rather than inform the firm's sustainability strategy according to stakeholders' sustainability needs.

"Usually that is kind of one slide among others. Just validate that it is not actually we that have invented this. This is something that is coming from the society, coming from the regulatory development, coming from this and that. So just to show them

what have been the (...) tools we have used to create kind of credible, very comprehensive approach to sustainability with these material topics." (I1)

To support validation, the SSS results are combined with several other sources of information, such as regulation and market trends. A critical analysis could question the prioritization order of stakeholders' needs versus other topics in the executive team's decision-making process and the consideration of the stakeholder values that emerge from the survey results. To uncover that query, it becomes crucial to examine how stakeholders can use the survey to impact the company.

The Stakeholders' Roles Impact

Based on the primary data, it was possible to identify that the key stakeholders use the SSS to impact business sustainability. To do so, stakeholders exercise their roles in business sustainability within the focal company. The following paragraphs examine the impacts per stakeholder group.

Regarding employees, the analysis showed that the SSS is a means for them to exercise their role of *enabling*. Interviewees reported that the SSS brings additional information for them to better understand sustainability and move the topic forward with customers and within the focal company.

"You make a puzzle, you have pieces of a puzzle everywhere and you put them together. And this [the SSS] is one more of those. And every time you put down a piece on the board and you look at this and you say, hey, here is something new. (...) you learn something from every piece of a puzzle and (...) I regard this as one more."
(I2)

"(...) when this work is communicated, when we are discussing about the results that is at least a good sign that it is (...) an expectation from the company that we are (...) always improving our sustainability results and that we focus on finding ways how to

do our business more sustainable and (...) to improve on this sustainability front in our work. So, (...) I think that has already a purpose that we are actively talking about sustainability raising these topics, identifying what goes under sustainability and then you reflect on your own work through that. Even though no one would say that these are the (...) sustainability targets, but your sort of reflect that 'well, (...) we actually have this one part in, for example, one part in our operations where we have a possibility to impact'." (I8)

The analysis suggested that the SSS supports employees to find business sustainability topics relevant to other stakeholders. In that way, employees can act based on such topics and proactively advance sustainability in discussions with customers, therefore, exercising their role of educating.

However, the primary data analysis also pointed out that not all employees are aware of the SSS. Only four out of eleven interviewees knew about the survey prior to the interview call for this master's thesis data collection. In contrast, interviewees argued that internal stakeholders other than the executive team should have access to the SSS results. Based on primary data, it was possible to infer that the survey results could help employees from various organizational levels to enable sustainability by providing insights on topical issues for stakeholders and educating customers.

For customers, the analysis pointed out the SSS as a means for them to shape business sustainability by exercising their role of *driving* and their *paradoxical* role. Based on primary and secondary data, it was possible to identify that customers are driving business sustainability by sharing their needs through the survey for the focal company to act based on them. However, it was also possible to note that there are unexplored opportunities due to a lack of market.

"We would be able to catch very much of the existing carbon dioxide moving out of the chimneys in our industry. (...) and that technology is just within (...) [the company's] reach, but we, for some reason, we have decided not (...) start doing this

yet. And probably the reason is because we don't really see the market. And I am trying to say we should do it just because it is the right thing to do." (I2)

Based on interviews, it was inferred that the unexplored opportunities are a product of the customers' paradoxical role. In other words, customers negatively influence business sustainability within the focal company by neglecting sustainability opportunities. In contrast, interviewees defended that, despite market conditions, the focal company as a supplier should move these unexplored opportunities forward because it is a moral duty.

In this vein, it was also possible to identify how suppliers exercise their roles of *supporting* and *being a risk* through the SSS to shape business sustainability. Based on primary and secondary data, suppliers support the focal company to advance business sustainability by sharing their needs through the survey. In addition, the suppliers' roles were also identified in relation to the focal company as a supplier itself. On the one hand, as the example above exemplified, the SSS was a means for the focal company to identify customers' sustainability needs and exercise its role of supporting customers to tackle them. On the other hand, interviewees highlighted that it is critical that the focal company takes action based on those needs and is proactive in seeking to do so.

"So, (...) the customer is coming with all these topics and I would say that the surveys do not lead anywhere if the industry, we suppliers, are not more also proactive." (I4)

It was noted that, although interviewees expressed perceptions that the focal company is committed to meeting stakeholders' needs, there was a tone of concern in enhancing, even more, proactivity towards customers. The analysis suggested that if the focal company is not able to be proactive in seeking for sustainability opportunities with customers, tackling such opportunities, and moving the sustainability topic forward, it can then become itself a risk for sustainability in the long-term.

The Stakeholders' Values Impact

Based on primary and secondary data, the last theme identified is *the stakeholders' values impact*. This theme depicts how the stakeholder values identified through the SSS impact business sustainability within the focal company. Empirical data pointed to three main contributions: a) sustainability reporting, b) eligibility for recognitions, and c) sustainability strategy.

Firstly, based on primary and secondary data, it was possible to identify that the stakeholder values identified through the SSS inform material topics for sustainability reporting. The feedback collected through the survey should provide the most critical sustainability issues regarding the focal company from its stakeholders' perspectives to approach in the sustainability reporting.

"We get the results in December covering the entire year, and we get the feedback and the input covering the entire kind of reporting year." (I1)

The focal company has addressed in its sustainability reporting most of the stakeholder values identified through the SSS. First, the enterprise has reported consistent financial performance (D2; D9), meeting the economic values of employees and suppliers. Second, the MNE has reported the environmental performance of its own operations (D1, pp. 23–26; D8, pp. 23–26), informing employees' environmental values. In addition, the enterprise has reported the environmental performance of its technologies on customers' sites (D1, p. 27; D8, pp. 27–29), addressing customers and suppliers' environmental values. Third, the company has reported on the safety of its employees on its own sites and on customers' sites (D1, p. 9; D8, p. 9), meeting employees and customers' social values. However, the company has not reported about outsourced employees, failing to address this value from suppliers in sustainability reporting (D1, p. 4; D8, p. 4).

Secondly, the conduction of the SSS enables the organization to submit sustainability reporting within determined frameworks such as the GRI. In that sense, based on primary and

secondary data, it was possible to infer that the second contribution of the survey is to enable the focal company to be eligible for sustainability recognition, such as being included in the DJSI and rewarded with ESI, amongst other recognitions (D2; D9). The analysis suggested that, ultimately, through the eligibility to recognition, the SSS can also meet employees' value of competitiveness and suppliers' value of survival of the value chain.

Thirdly, based on primary and secondary (D9) data, it was possible to identify that the SSS has contributed to the focal company's sustainability strategy. Data pointed out that the SSS results contributed to the strategic discussion on material topics during the annual general meeting, where the firm invites stakeholders to discuss its strategy. As a result, the SSS results provided input to renew the sustainability agenda, which is the organization's sustainability strategy.

"Usually, we use it for our annual reporting, but (...) last year, actually we used to renew (...) sustainability agenda and try to really understand what are the stakeholder inputs that we do need." (I1)

According to the primary data, the survey results provided information on what stakeholders expect from the company in a manner to support the strategic planning in an analogous way to the sustainability reporting. However, the detailed action plan for the sustainability agenda is still to be announced in 2022 (D9, p. 54).

Finally, it is possible to critically assess the impacts of the stakeholder values identified through the SSS regarding their scale of impact. First, it is valid to retrieve that the survey does not support strategy alone, it is combined with several other stakeholder engagement means. Second, one could question whether the focal company has been able to use the SSS to the fullest. Precisely, the stakeholder values identified through the SSS could guide action in more capillary ways. For instance, the answers to the open-ended question revealed several requests from employees regarding sustainability initiatives at the offices. To meet these stakeholders' needs, it would be

necessary that management members, other than the executive team, have access to such demands. Supporting that argument, interviewees stated that taking action based on the survey results is as important as conducting the survey.

"Then we also have an engagement survey (...) and we run that every two years. And the reason why we do that every two years is to give time to show people that we are listening to. To action based on it. So, I think that (...) what you do with it [the survey results] is equally important." (I8)

In addition, the analysis suggested that it is vital to demonstrate to stakeholders that the company is acting on the demands they expressed through the SSS. Doing so can enhance stakeholder engagement through the survey.

In that tone, if the SSS is a systematic form of collecting feedback from stakeholders, it could also be looked at from a long-term perspective. Specifically, the survey could serve as a platform to nurture engagement and learn about current and future issues. To do so, widening the survey with more open-ended questions to learn stakeholders' sustainability needs from a broad perspective could be beneficial.

"From an environmental perspective, from a process perspective, from a human perspective, because they [customers] are really bothered (...), they are concerned that their own personnel do not have the skills that they might need in a few years. And I am not selling anything (...) to this organization, but I am really learning everyday from what they're sharing." (I3)

Understanding stakeholders' sustainability concerns that eventually are not explicitly related to the focal company may allow it to deepen its understanding of stakeholders' values. In that sense, such values could enable learning, anticipating, and developing opportunities for long-term success.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This master's thesis examined how stakeholder engagement through the SSS can shape business sustainability within the focal company. Yin (2012, p. 114) argues that qualitative case studies provide "substantive topics or issues of interest, and the making of logical inferences" through analytic generalization. In that sense, this final chapter answers the research questions and presents the study's theoretical contributions, the managerial implications, as well as the research evaluation, limitations, and future research opportunities.

5.1. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

This study contributes to the literature by bringing together two concepts that have been under scrutiny: business sustainability (Dyllick & Muff, 2016; Bansal & DesJardine, 2014) and stakeholder engagement (Kujala et al., 2022). Specifically, this master's thesis attends to Lahtinen's (2020) call for further research on business sustainability strategy through the lens of stakeholder theory and Kujala and Sachs's (2019) call for further real-life case studies to enhance stakeholder engagement literature. In doing so, this research examines stakeholder engagement for business sustainability through a real-life case study. To do so, the main research question was:

- 1. How does stakeholder engagement shape business sustainability within the focal company?*

To answer the main research question, it was unfolded into the second and third questions. In answering these research questions, this thesis provides a framework for stakeholder engagement for business sustainability. The framework is twofold informing the second and third research questions. It begins by answering the second research question that was:

2. How does stakeholder engagement relate to business sustainability?

The theoretical chapter answered the second research question by reviewing the literature on the concepts of business sustainability and stakeholder engagement isolated to conceptualize later the intersection between them, namely stakeholder engagement for business sustainability. Considering the literature and empirical findings, this thesis suggests that stakeholder engagement relates to business sustainability in moral, strategic, and pragmatic terms.

The dimensions of stakeholder engagement for business sustainability

The literature and findings built on Kujala et al. (2022) to suggest that stakeholder engagement for business sustainability can be moral, strategic, and pragmatic. For the moral part, the findings suggested that employees expect the company to pursue business sustainability because it is the right thing to do in relation to the people, planet, and business itself. Employees' expectations reflected that enterprises must pursue ethical standards (Freeman et al., 2010) and pursue ethical, honest, and respectful stakeholder engagement (Noland & Phillips, 2010). Kujala et al. (2022, p. 18) highlight that stakeholder engagement is morally positive if the relationship holds good intentions, reciprocity, and voluntariness. In line with that, the SSS as a stakeholder engagement means aimed at giving voice to stakeholders, maintaining an open communication channel, and securing voluntariness and anonymity. However, the critical assessment of the case study suggested that the survey has limitations in terms of dialogue and making sense of its results, which may constrain the capacity of the enterprise to act based on the survey.

As for the strategic dimension, stakeholder engagement is strategic in business sustainability (Wagner & Svensson, 2014). Following Kujala et al. (2022, p.18), this study's findings demonstrated that stakeholders are willing to participate in stakeholder sustainability value creation and decision-making in order to maintain or increase competitiveness and sustain the value chain.

For instance, employees were willing to receive the SSS results so that they could reflect on them and apply them in their routines, which is in line with Noland and Phillips (2010), who argue that companies should involve stakeholders in decision-making processes. In that sense, business sustainability demands that organizations pursue a stakeholder-oriented strategic approach, enabling meaningful stakeholder engagement to identify sustainability stakeholder values and advance the change for more sustainable businesses in the value chain.

Finally, the pragmatic dimension of stakeholder engagement for business sustainability addresses the practical implications or results of such engagement. Building on Kujala et al. (2022, p. 18–19), this study suggests that the pragmatic component of stakeholder engagement can make evident the inputs, processes, and outputs of stakeholder engagement. In the context of this case study, the inputs are the answers to the survey. The processes are the annual data collection, treatment and validation of the information collected, and the sharing of that information with the executive team. Finally, the outputs are the eligibility for sustainability recognitions and the material topics used for sustainability reporting and sustainability strategy renewal. Nevertheless, it is fundamental to emphasize that companies should be capable of taking actions based on the stakeholder values identified via engagement. On top of that, enterprises must provide feedback to stakeholders about such actions. To do so, building on Freeman et al. (2010) and Kujala and Sachs (2019), it is critical that organizations develop meaningful stakeholder engagement practices by examining stakeholder relations, understanding stakeholder sustainability value creation, and shaping business sustainability.

Considering the dimensions of stakeholder engagement for business sustainability, this thesis proceeds with answering the third research question that was:

3. *How does the focal company utilize the SSS as a stakeholder engagement as a means of business sustainability?*

The empirical data and the theoretical framework answered the third research question by identifying three phases of stakeholder engagement for business sustainability and highlighting key themes of each phase. The findings suggested that the focal company utilizes the SSS as a means of stakeholder engagement for business sustainability by examining stakeholder relations, understanding stakeholder sustainability values, and shaping business sustainability based on the survey. Considering that, this thesis also contributes to enhancing literature on surveys as a means of stakeholder engagement for business sustainability. The following paragraphs examine each of the three phases of stakeholder engagement identified, composing the second part of the stakeholder engagement for business sustainability framework.

Examining stakeholder relations

The first phase of stakeholder engagement identified is *examining stakeholder relations*, which comprises three themes. The first theme is *promotion* that consists of how the company identifies and reaches out to stakeholders. It was possible to identify that deploying multiple proactive and passive means is necessary to collect answers to the survey effectively. However, the critical analysis pointed out that the promotion of the SSS lacks systematicity in the frequency of promotion and is highly dependent on account managers' relational capabilities and stakeholders' motivation to fill in the survey.

The second theme *key stakeholders* examines the firm's stakeholders and the ones most salient regarding the SSS and highlights that enterprises must engage with multiple stakeholders. This study follows Wagner and Svensson (2014) and, more recently, Attanasio et al. (2022), arguing that businesses must engage with multiple stakeholders in sustainability. Various stakeholders are interested in sustainability, pressuring, and influencing companies to adopt more sustainable practices (Touboulic et al., 2014; Schaltegger et al., 2017). In addition, stakeholders contribute to value creation and other processes within the focal company to enhance sustainability

value (Attanasio et al., 2022). In this thesis, 15 stakeholder groups linked to the focal company were identified. In contrast, only three of them were considered the key stakeholders for engagement for business sustainability through the survey. Although it was possible to note an interest in increasing the participation of the financial community, *employees*, *customers*, and *suppliers* were the most salient stakeholders in this case study due to the roles they play in sustainability within the focal company.

The third theme examines the key *stakeholders' roles* in business sustainability and how they can influence it through the SSS. It was possible to identify that employees can have two roles in business sustainability: *enabling* and *educating*. First, employees are interested in transforming the company and can enable business sustainability by sharing their needs and possible opportunities through the survey and other engagement means. In addition, they are responsible for identifying stakeholders' needs and bringing them into the company. Second, employees have the role of educating stakeholders for business sustainability. Especially those employees who interact with customers in selling processes can influence business sustainability by educating customers and pushing and prioritizing sustainable solutions in discussions with them. The survey could then help employees learn more about stakeholders' needs and identify opportunities to enhance discussions about sustainability (Ferrero-Ferrero et al., 2018). However, the analysis suggested that employees must have a consistent understanding of their roles and the courage to move the sustainability topic forward despite customers' sustainability positioning.

In this vein, it was possible to identify that customers have contradictory roles in shaping the focal company's business sustainability orientation. First, this thesis found out that customers have the role of *driving* business sustainability. The analysis showed that customers positively influence the focal company to adopt more sustainable practices, such as sustainability reporting. To do so, the SSS is a means for customers to share their interests that they would like to access in the focal company's sustainability reporting (Ferrero-Ferrero et al., 2018).

Second, Kujala et al. (2022, pp. 28–33) argue that research often ignores the "dark side of stakeholder engagement." In this study, however, the dark side appears in customers' *paradoxical* role. Customers have the power to choose or not for more sustainable options. On the one hand, if customers opt for more sustainable options in buying processes, they can positively influence the focal company and the market to enhance and adopt business sustainability strategies (Attanasio et al., 2021). On the other hand, if customers opt for cheaper products in negotiations based on the short-term economic value to the detriment of more sustainable products, customers suppress business sustainability within the focal company and the market. In summary, customers can positively or negatively shape business sustainability within the focal company depending on their buying rationale.

Finally, the analysis pointed out that suppliers hold the roles of *being a risk* and *supporting*. The being a risk role is due to their relationship with environmental and social risks, especially in countries that lack strong legislation regarding those issues. In that sense, workers could use the SSS to support the identification of such risks and workers' needs and concerns. However, the analysis suggested that the focal company itself is also a supplier at the meso-level of the PPI value chain. In that sense, suppliers can also have the role of supporting business sustainability by adhering to more sustainable practices and complying with customers' sustainability requirements (Attanasio et al., 2021) and developing sustainable solutions and technologies.

Understanding stakeholder sustainability value creation

The second phase of stakeholder engagement for business sustainability is *understanding stakeholder sustainability value creation*. To begin with, it is essential to define stakeholder value in the context of business sustainability, which to the best of my knowledge, literature has not provided. Therefore, I suggest the concept of *stakeholder sustainability value* in order to ease the referencing of stakeholder values related to sustainability dimensions in business relations. In that

sense, I suggest the following definition: *Stakeholder sustainability values are the multiple values that stakeholders encounter or expect when engaging for business sustainability.*

Considering that, this research proposes three themes related to understanding stakeholder sustainability value creation: *communication, challenges in understanding stakeholder sustainability value creation, and stakeholder sustainability values.* Regarding communication, it was possible to identify that the focal firm considers the survey as a platform for collecting feedback and dialogue. In that sense, the survey results served as a basis to enhance conversation between employees and other stakeholders. However, a critical assessment suggested that the SSS is a limited dialogue means due to the low reach of participants versus the wide number of the focal company's stakeholders and to the lack of feedback for respondents. Providing feedback to stakeholders about the engagement with them is as vital as maintaining dialogue to enhance trust and stakeholder engagement itself (Kaptein & Van Tulder, 2013).

In this vein, the second theme is challenges in understanding stakeholder value creation, here namely understanding stakeholder sustainability value creation. This theme examines the bottlenecks in utilizing the SSS as a means to understand stakeholder sustainability value creation. These challenges are: the lack of motivation and time of stakeholders to participate in the survey, the discrepancy between participants' interpretation of reality and the actual reality, and the lack of specificity regarding business lines or areas. The analysis suggested that tackling such issues can add accuracy to the survey results and their applicability. In addition, it was possible to find out that a combination of stakeholder engagement means can be best to support understanding stakeholder sustainability value creation, validating the survey results, and thus support decision-making.

The third theme identified is stakeholder values, here namely stakeholder sustainability values. In such a theme, the analysis pointed out that employees, customers, and suppliers commonly pursue social, environmental, and economic values. However, supportive to Freudenreich et al. (2019), this study showed that stakeholders pursue multiple values for

engagement for business sustainability. In other words, each stakeholder group interprets the value of each sustainability dimension in different ways.

In this study, the social dimension of sustainability is more salient to suppliers than to the other groups. Suppliers have social values regarding the safety of workers on customers' sites. Employees value their own safety within the focal company's facilities in addition to equality and well-being. Customers, for their part, have values at the intersection between employees and suppliers' values, namely the safety of others' employees in customers' sites. Although these values have similarities, they differ in perspective of focus and locus. Moreover, the salience of the social dimension is higher for suppliers due to the risks regarding human and workers' rights implied in their operations.

As for the environmental dimension of sustainability, it is more salient to employees. They value developing more sustainable solutions and mitigating the focal company's impact for the sake of the planet. In addition, the three key stakeholder groups have an intersection in the value of the good environmental performance of the focal company's technologies on customers' sites. For customers, that value is related to improving their own environmental performance. In contrast, the analysis suggested that employees and suppliers anchor that value on maintaining competitiveness and the survival of the value chain respectively.

Finally, the research demonstrated that employees and suppliers anchor their environmental values in economic values. Customers, for their part, although seeking to become sustainable, have a strong economic drive relying on the short-term cost of products and technologies. The sum of these values showed that the economic value is still a powerful driver for companies' engagement in business sustainability. In other words, these key stakeholders may consider the other sustainability dimensions as means to sustain the economic value through maintaining competitiveness and survival in the market (Pedersen et al., 2013). Stakeholder theory and stakeholder engagement can be a means to prevent the business sustainability discussion from becoming or perpetuating as a

financial trade-off. Stakeholder engagement can overcome that by involving stakeholders in dialogue and uncovering stakeholders' sustainability values. (Freeman et al., 2010.)

Shaping business sustainability

The final phase of stakeholder engagement for business sustainability identified is *shaping business sustainability*. It was possible to identify three themes within this phase: *sense-making*, *the stakeholders' roles impact*, and the stakeholders' values impact, here namely *the stakeholder's sustainability values impact*.

The sense-making theme highlighted that the SSS is part of bringing a puzzle together. To make sense of stakeholder sustainability values, the company must cross the survey results with other sources of stakeholder engagement (Kaptein & Van Tulder, 2003). These stakeholder engagement means can encompass sustainability-related events and customer meetings, business intelligence, surveys, legislation, and reporting requirements. In addition, the findings showed that the SSS results are shared exclusively with the executive team to validate and guide the firm's sustainability initiative. However, the analysis questioned the extent to which the executive team is able to examine and meet stakeholders' needs standalone.

In response to that, the second theme identified regards the stakeholders' roles impact. Employees use the SSS to exercise their role of enabling business sustainability by suggesting opportunities for development within the focal company's facilities. In addition, employees can use the survey results to exercise their role of educating to guide discussion with customers. However, the analysis suggested that expanding the access to the survey results to internal stakeholders other than the executive team could enhance the employees' educating role. Customers, for their part, use the survey to reinforce their role in driving the focal company to become more sustainable by pointing out their needs and concerns, thus influencing the company to look at and develop overlooked issues (Romenti, 2010). However, the analysis suggested that if the focal company does

not tackle these overlooked issues, it can then exercise its supplier role of being a risk to customers in the long-term. Nevertheless, as a supplier, the focal company uses the SSS to exercise its supplier role of supporting business sustainability by proactively searching for and addressing stakeholders' sustainability needs (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2013).

Finally, the third theme of shaping business sustainability identified is the stakeholders' values impact, here namely the impact of stakeholder sustainability values. Supportive to existing literature, this study shows that stakeholder engagement can enhance business sustainability (i.e., Konadu et al., 2021; Wagner & Svensson, 2014). In doing so, stakeholder engagement supports several business activities, such as reporting, learning processes, strategic planning, decision-making, and value creation (Kujala et al., 2022). In this case study, the SSS supported shaping business sustainability by providing sustainability reporting and strategy renewal and enabling eligibility for sustainability recognition.

However, the analysis highlighted that decision-makers from various organizational levels must have access to the survey results in order to amplify the impact of the stakeholders' sustainability values identified through the SSS. That could support the focal company to embed stakeholder sustainability values in everyday decision-making. Finally, it is fundamental that the company demonstrates to stakeholders that it is taking action considering what they shared through the engagement with them, in order to reinforce trust and engagement itself (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2013).

5.2. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Scholars have widely anchored stakeholder engagement research in stakeholder theory (Kujala et al., 2022, p. 5), which in turn has emerged from managerial practice and enables researchers to

enhance empirical research (Freeman et al., 2017). Consequently, in addition to the theoretical contributions, this study proposes a set of managerial implications that aim to contribute to stakeholder engagement in companies, emphasizing B2B settings and the changes necessary to make more sustainable businesses.

Organizations should develop multiple engagement activities with multiple stakeholders. First, the examination of stakeholders' roles proved that various internal and external stakeholder groups can influence the firm's sustainability in B2B contexts. This study follows Kujala et al. (2019, p. 124) in suggesting that enterprises should comprehend that "value is created in relationships with a broad variety of stakeholders" and consider stakeholders other than the financial community and executive teams to understand value creation. Second, the SSS provided input for identifying stakeholder values based on materiality analysis, which supports the company in identifying the most relevant topics for the firm's stakeholders (Herremans et al., 2016, p. 430). In that sense, this thesis suggests that companies can benefit from surveys as a dialogue means to understand stakeholders' sustainability values. However, the findings also highlighted that it is best to conduct multiple stakeholder engagement activities in order to maintain dialogue and to learn with and from stakeholders.

In addition, managers should be mindful of the stakeholder engagement activities they carry out, the resources employed in them, and the possible inputs that emerge from such engagement. Specifically, if maintaining an open dialogue channel –in this case, the SSS– is a requirement from sustainability reporting, it is essential to make the most out of it. In other words, since the enterprise must compulsorily invest resources in maintaining the survey, why not use it in more comprehensive ways? This study demonstrates that multiple internal stakeholders are interested in learning more about the stakeholder sustainability values that emerge from the SSS. Such an engagement means may provide companies with valuable input about stakeholder sustainability

value, risks, and opportunities and move business sustainability forward. However, it is critical that the enterprise takes action based on such input.

Nevertheless, making more comprehensive use of surveys demands overcoming a few limitations that this study identified. Engaging the maximum number of participants possible demands a structured promotion plan and clear communication with stakeholders. First, companies must identify the relevant stakeholders, which may eventually vary throughout time according to the firm's projects or current situation. Second, enterprises must tailor the promotion according to the stakeholder group. In addition to mailing lists and promotion during events, it is critical to send personal invitations through the account managers or other internal stakeholders that engage with the target stakeholders as part of their daily work routine. Furthermore, that should be done systematically. Third, the survey can provide deeper insights if it targets specific areas or projects.

To do so, the firm can tailor the survey according to specific goals or run the survey at specific times for each stakeholder group or project. In addition, widening the scope of the SSS through open-ended questions could eventually enhance understanding of stakeholder values and provide opportunities to develop on the long-term perspective. In that way, although the survey is anonymous, it may provide more specific information. Fourth, to minimize eventual discrepancies between the reality and stakeholders' perceptions, companies can validate the survey results combining them with other stakeholder engagement means. Finally, following Kaptein and Van Tulder (2013), companies should pursue clear communication with stakeholders. That is informing stakeholders about how often they will engage via that means, the purposes of the survey, and how the firm will use the results. In addition, it is critical to provide respondents with feedback, which can take place through internal and external communication, reports, meetings, or even sustainability reporting.

Furthermore, although the construct of stakeholder engagement has been widely used in literature and practice, it is often unclear (Kujala et al., 2022, p. 1). In this vein, managers can

understand stakeholder engagement as a practice niched to specific companies or industries outside the B2B context. However, this study argues that stakeholder engagement for business sustainability is, in fact, any interaction between the focal firm and its stakeholders that discusses sustainability intentionally or unintentionally. On top of this, it is critical to highlight that dialogue with stakeholders is itself a means to create mutual value with and for multiple stakeholders (Kaptein & Van Tulder, 2013).

Finally, business sustainability demands consideration of the three dimensions of sustainability: environmental, social, and economic. In contrast, enterprises can often focus on only one or two of those aspects in practice due to a short-sightedness. (Dyllick & Muff, 2016.) For instance, the decision-making processes can eventually overvalue the economic dimension to the detriment of the other sustainability dimensions. Stakeholder engagement can be a means to overcome the short-sightedness and support companies to adopt more sustainable practices by dialoguing, learning from and with stakeholders, and identifying sustainability stakeholder values and opportunities for collaboration and co-creation.

5.3. EVALUATION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

A fundamental part of conducting research is evaluating it and acknowledging its limitations in order to build credibility (Walle, 2015). Especially in qualitative business studies, Walle (2015, p. 129) argues that researchers must develop the credibility of their research. To do so, they may oversee four aspects: the truth of value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality (Guba, 1981, as cited in Walle, 2015, p. 133).

Firstly, qualitative research typically evaluates the truth of value by measuring the degree to which the researcher captures the interviewees' perception of reality (Walle, 2015, p. 134). In that

regard, this thesis's findings precisely focused on the interviewees' perception of the engagement between the focal company and its stakeholders. In doing so, quotations from interviews have permeated the findings and supported the argumentations.

Secondly, the applicability evaluates the extent to which it is possible to generalize the findings (Walle, 2015, pp. 135–136). To answer applicability, this thesis utilized analytic generalization, which is proper to generalize the findings of qualitative case studies by highlighting and logically analyzing the topical issues that emerge from the findings (Yin, 2012, p. 114). Specifically, the thematic analysis supported finding the most topical themes for stakeholder engagement for business sustainability in the context of the B2B in the PPI. However, such themes can also be relevant in B2B contexts other than the PPI through analytic generalization.

Thirdly, differently from quantitative research, qualitative research focuses on the participants' perceptions and, therefore, replication is likely to be impossible. Alternatively, consistency is a more appropriate measure to evaluate qualitative research. Consistency can relate, for instance, to the degree to which interviewees agree on issues or the identification of patterns in the influence relation between the findings. (Walle, 2015, pp. 138–140.) In this thesis, interviewees demonstrated a high degree of agreement in their answers. One only aspect divided opinion that was the extent to which the SSS results should be shared. For some interviewees, it should be publicized to all employees. Whereas for other interviewees, it should be addressed only to those employees that have decision-making power. However, this difference did not interfere with the analysis. In addition, it was possible to identify patterns of how stakeholders' roles influence business sustainability. It is possible to infer that these patterns are most likely to be identified in analogous situations.

Finally, the fourth criterion is neutrality, which refers to the impartiality and objectivity of the researcher. In qualitative research, the researcher must become as close as possible to the participants in order to understand the context and catch more profound and accurate perceptions.

However, it is vital that the researcher is capable of maintaining a safe distance that allows them to be impartial and objective in their analysis. (Walle, 2015, pp.140–142.) In this thesis, the researcher addressed neutrality by critically analyzing the case and pointing out the positive and the negative or not-so-bright aspects encountered and inferred from data analysis.

Nevertheless, this research presents limitations that must be acknowledged. To begin with, this is a qualitative single-case study. On the one hand, the qualitative single-case study enables the researcher to examine the case in-depth (Yin, 2018). On the other hand, this research design may overlook other issues related to the case context and imply some limitations. The following paragraphs elaborate on these limitations and provide suggestions for future research.

This research found that employees, customers, and suppliers were the key stakeholder groups for engagement with the focal company in business sustainability. This finding arose from the documental data and interviews with internal stakeholders. On the one hand, focusing on those specific stakeholder groups provided an in-depth perspective for the case study. On the other hand, the focus may imply a limited outlook, disregarding other stakeholder groups involved in business sustainability within the company's system of stakeholders. Future research could collect and analyze data on other stakeholders' roles in shaping business sustainability. Eventually, other stakeholders may influence companies at the meso-level of the PPI.

Furthermore, this study did not examine the cultural background of stakeholders or how it affects engagement and business sustainability. Although the SSS had geolocation identification of respondents, that background was considered irrelevant in the context of this thesis. Future research could investigate how the cultural background of stakeholders may affect stakeholder engagement and the shaping of business sustainability.

Another limitation of this study is observing sustainability stakeholder value in a static time frame. This limitation relates to the secondary data analysis, which focused on the 2020 and 2021 surveys. As a result, documental data provided information strictly regarding those years, whereas

interviews focused on participants' recent experiences in order to capture a more accurate perception. However, stakeholder engagement and stakeholder value evolve throughout time (Myllykangas et al., 2010). In that sense, future research could examine stakeholder sustainability value from a longitudinal perspective, evaluating the connections between value creation, stakeholder salience, and decision-making for business sustainability.

Yet, as this case study illustrates, companies are pursuing several forms of stakeholder engagement to address materiality, such as the survey. The sustainability reporting frameworks and recognitions require companies to pursue stakeholder engagement. However, the extent to which this obligation really transforms stakeholder engagement within the reporting companies should still be studied. As the challenges in understanding stakeholder sustainability value creation exemplified, this process can have a number of pitfalls. Given that, future research could investigate the transformational potential of sustainability reporting requirements.

Furthermore, this study follows Kujala and Sachs's (2019) call for further case studies to enhance real-life insights into stakeholder engagement literature. However, as this thesis shows, there is little research on surveys as stakeholder engagement means. Future research could enhance the investigation of surveys and other means of systematic stakeholder engagement and their impact on business sustainability.

Finally, this research suggests that stakeholders other than the executive team are interested in participating in decision-making and value creation for business sustainability. It was not in the scope of this study to evaluate the relationship between decision-making and stakeholder engagement from an organizational perspective. However, following Kujala et al. (2022, pp. 36–37), the findings suggest that it would be relevant to investigate more in-depth the relationship between stakeholder engagement and the multiple decision-making levels within the company. In doing so, future researchers can shed light on how internal stakeholders with different power levels can engage and influence the company to become more sustainable.

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APPENDIX 1

Semi-structured interview questions

Background:

1. Can you tell me who you are and what do you do at the company?
2. How long have you been working at the company?
3. Can you describe if and how does your function relate to sustainability?

Stakeholders' sustainability needs:

4. Do you consider that stakeholders' sustainability needs are considered in your function or decision-making?
5. How stakeholders' sustainability needs emerge in your function?
6. Do you think stakeholders' sustainability needs should be considered more?
7. How do you get feedback and information about stakeholders' sustainability needs?

SSS:

8. Are you familiar with the online stakeholder survey?
9. Can you tell me more about the online stakeholder survey?
10. Why did you develop the stakeholder online survey?
11. How is the SSS promoted to stakeholders?
12. Has the SSS changed over time?
13. Is there feedback for respondents?

Sense-making/impact:

14. How do you use the survey results?
15. How are results transmitted and discussed with decision-makers?
16. How has the survey impacted strategy?
17. Do you think that other people use the SSS in decision-making?
18. Do you think it should be considered more?
19. Would you like to have access to the survey results?
20. How could it help your decision-making?

Closure questions:

21. Could you suggest other employees that have potentially answered the survey or somehow work with its results and/or sustainability?
22. Would you like to add anything we have not approached so far that could contribute to my research?