

**Sustainable Stakeholder Experience:
introducing a framework using the dairy industry as a case example**

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Abstract

Objectives: New values are emerging within corporate identities dynamics. New meanings are revealing latest tendencies in strategies and business models, and this phenomenon shows multiple dimensions and new trends in what companies want as part of their identity, such as sustainability, network collaboration and experiential marketing. This paper attempts to contribute by offering a conceptual framework that pulls all of these concepts together, reporting a theoretical discussion that is part of a larger inductive project.

Methodology: This conceptual contribution is presenting initial findings of a literature review based on a scoping study method, driven by the main research question: “*What is known in the existing literature about sustainable business models, sustainable network collaboration, and sustainable experiential marketing?*”

Literature review: This literature review narrative is an explorative exercise useful to highlight several literature gaps on combinations of different concepts, such as sustainability, corporate identity, collaborative business models, customer experience and experiential marketing.

Results: From a theoretical perspective, results report that the literature is still stuck in silos and shows little attention to the combination of these concepts. Moreover, the introduction of a new framework on Sustainable Stakeholder Experience enables the combination of emerging concepts, such as sustainable ecosystems, stakeholder experience, sustainable experiential marketing.

Limitations: Due to the nature of this conceptual paper’s narrative, being this study part of a bigger research design, we recognize that the main limitation of this conference presentation is the absence of data demonstrating all the results found in previous research phases. However, data discussion is not the purpose of this contribution.

Originality: This short contribution aims to stimulate the discussion with a multidisciplinary approach to corporate identity analysis and related corporate strategies. Literature gaps highlighted in this scoping study could stimulate in advancing theories on Collaborative Sustainable Business Models, Sustainable Ecosystems, Sustainable Experiential Marketing, and to call for further research on Sustainable Stakeholder Experience.

Keywords: corporate identity, sustainability, sustainable business model, network collaboration, experiential marketing.

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Collaborative Sustainable Stakeholder Experience: introducing a framework using the dairy industry as a case example

Introduction

Research is not keeping up with what is currently happening in the world of business as it relates to corporate identity. Specifically, a gap exists between how companies are managing their corporate identities and what is reflected in the extensive literature on corporate identity. Recent studies have begun to close this gap by revealing that corporations actually anchor their identities on multiple meanings that may or may not fit well together (Flint, Signori and Golicic, 2018). However, even this new emerging research does not capture the integration and the dynamics of multiple meanings for a company and its connections with other partners. Additionally, the research ignores the fact that there are multiple dimensions to this phenomenon and new trends in what companies want as part of their identity, such as sustainability, network collaboration and experiential marketing. This paper attempts to contribute by offering a framework that pulls all of these together.

Corporate identity congruence refers to this idea of a company anchoring its identity on multiple meanings and values. In the research that introduced the concept (Flint et al. 2018) four key meanings emerged (traditional, classic, modern, innovative) that apply in various combinations to hundreds of firms in the wine industry. In a previous study, we adopted the same framework and methodologies for the dairy industry and validated the original findings, both on the same core meanings and the dynamic nature of them. In addition, that study highlighted some new trends in meanings and values that are emerging in corporate identities. Consistent with inductive discovery research, we then returned to the literature to explore theoretical foundations that might partially explain what we discovered. Thus, this is a conceptual paper based on a literature review of main topics that emerged from our study, revealing limitations and additional gaps. A new framework is then introduced and discussed through a case study example.

Objectives and methodology

This paper reports a theoretical discussion that is part of a larger inductive project. Originally, our main research goal was to validate the Corporate Identity Congruence framework of Flint, Signori and Golicic (2018), which was a large-scale study involving in-depth interviews, observation, document analysis, and interpretive data analyses from companies in the wine industry. In particular, adopting the same research methodology, the initial scope of our study was to verify if the same corporate meanings also appear in other food industries, in particular in dairy supply chains. We then developed a case study analysis, including seven Italian dairy companies and their supply chain partners. Our findings support the original study, but also revealed new relevant concepts in corporate identity meanings dynamics. These new trends, caught throughout corporate identities analyses, may be considered hints into the latest tendencies in corporate strategies. Our next research phase was then to return to the literature, in order to review applicable theoretical backgrounds (Hart, 2018). We initially found that the three general topics that are emerging in corporate identities (sustainability, network collaboration and experientiality) have sound theoretical roots, with numerous studies exploring each concept in depth. What was unexpected is the gap that was revealed when these topics are considered together. This explorative exercise led us to connect these terms to

other related topics, such as sustainability, corporate identity, collaborative business models, customer experience and experiential marketing. So that, in this conceptual paper we are presenting initial findings of a scoping study driven by the main research question: “*What is known in the existing literature on corporate sustainability, network collaboration and experiential marketing about the possible intersection in corporate identity of such concepts?*”

Scoping studies ‘aim to map rapidly the key concepts underpinning a research area and the main sources and types of evidence available, and can be undertaken as stand-alone projects in their own right, especially where an area is complex or has not been reviewed comprehensively before’ (Mays, Roberts and Popay, 2001, p. 194, in Arksey and O'Malley, 2005). We adopted the scoping study method as suggested by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), that is composed of five stages: identify the research question; identify relevant studies; study selection; data charting; collating, summarizing and reporting the results. Our literature review selected 300 relevant studies:

- 119 selected from five electronic databases, as suggested by Praveen, Rahman and Kazmi (2013) (Emerald full text, Elsevier's science direct, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, Springer-Verlag), searching on 6 keywords (corporate sustainability, sustainable business model, triple bottom line, customer experience, sustainable customer experience, online customer experience). All of these articles were published between 2000 and 2018, with one dating from 1993;
- 181 selected hand-searching of key journals and existing networks, relevant organizations and conferences on 8 related topics (sustainable business model, collaborative business model, sustainable collaborative business model, network collaboration, sustainable ecosystem, sustainable supply chain, sustainable relationship marketing).

Thanks to this scoping study, we found some literature gaps in particular in the intersections of the three main literature streams on which our research was concentrated: sustainability, networking and experientiality. In this paper, we avoid the data charting and statistics reporting, to allow more space to offering a narrative literature review on a sub selection of these articles, aiming to discuss a new framework that emerged. Using a case study analysis, we then verify how this framework could also be useful in practice.

Literature review

Sustainability is a topic that has been intensely developed from many researchers in the last decade. The contribution, in terms of scientific articles, is very high, and the theme has been addressed in multiple ways and by multiple viewpoints. In particular, Engert and Baumgartner (2015) conducted a study in order to investigate the formulation and the implementation of corporate sustainability. Their attention is mainly focused on the research of the most relevant factors to improve sustainability in corporate strategy: organizational structure, organizational culture, leadership, management control, employee motivation and qualifications, and communication (internal and external).

Wu, He and Duan (2013) show that firms need to follow the triple bottom line logic in order to offer not only economic, but also environmental and social values. As such, firms need to find new ways that permit the transformation of their sustainability efforts in their private interests, to make sustainability a way to reach economic goals (Przychodzen and Przychodzen, 2012): a way to do this is to develop dynamic capabilities within the corporate strategy. Avery (2004) analysed two critical factors that are necessary to reach corporate sustainability goals: engaging the board of directors, and forming a wide-ranging

collaborative partnership. Building sustainability within governance is also an important way to achieve important sustainable purposes: the more the board is engaged, the more it is possible to have successful firm collaboration. Simultaneously, employees need to know and share the sustainable strategy and values. It is possible to inform employees through the use of technical, actions and social learning, embedding sustainability across the organization (Haugh and Talwar, 2010).

Adding the sustainable supply chain orientation concept to the sustainability literature, Signori, Flint and Golicic (2015) offer insights on different pathways that companies in their networks choose to follow for their sustainability journey. In particular, these authors highlight that visionary orientations on sustainability could be individualistic, limiting strategic collaboration with other stakeholders. On other paths, other firms that are considered as “gurus”, created their best projects in sustainability when collaborating with their stakeholders in a sustainable ecosystems. Built on the sustainable ecosystem concept, Signori and Flint’s (2016) study focus on the concept of sustainable ecosystems based on virtuous cooperation between many kind of stakeholders.

The intersection of sustainability and networking topics allows for some interesting new insights about how firms change their business models by collaborating together towards sustainability: in fact, the development of an innovative sustainable business model (Boons & Lüdeke-Freund, 2013) is largely dependent on the possibility to create networks and partnerships with different stakeholders that go beyond the boundary of the single organization. Collaborative business modelling is a process that encompasses important steps, such as idea generation, prioritization and validation (Rohrbeck, Konnertz, and Knab, 2013); collaborating towards sustainability enables firms to deal with uncertainty, find creative solutions, facilitate strategic discussion and start innovative planning. However, collaborating with stakeholders is not an easy task, and the perspectives of the partners should shift from a single firm level to a network level of analysis. Lindgren, Taran and Boer (2010) found that network-level business models are powerful because different competencies are accessible through the network. Even though it is difficult to find consensus on the same value propositions, it is made easier if the network is small or directed by a lead partner. Levels of innovation are potentially higher in networks, so incremental changes in each partner’s business model could lead to radical innovation within the network.

Breuer and Lüdeke-Freund (2017) recognize a gap in the literature on business model innovation, which usually sees the single firm as an actor, who has an egocentric vision, while when networks are involved, the attention is dedicated to financial value creation and capture. The authors stress the need to focus on shared values rather than financial value extraction, in order to envision innovations, which are often grounded on common values, from a normative management point of view. Despite all of these evident considerations, the literature on collaborative business models for sustainability is not yet fully developed.

On the customer side, Choi and Ng (2010) demonstrated the influence of the environmental and social dimensions of sustainability on customers’ purchasing intention. It is possible to identify that consumers are sensitive to favourable economic environments through experiments. Consumers give positive evaluation to those companies significant focused on sustainability. Although some consumers do purchase low priced products that are also low in sustainability, the trend toward more and more consumers expecting firms to have some focus on sustainability regardless of price. By extension, more consumers prefer companies that share and promote their social causes. Thus, it is possible to highlight the effects of sustainability practices on the market value (Costa Lourenço, Castel Branco, Dias Curto, and Eugénio, 2011).

Experientiality, similar to sustainability, has a broad literature in marketing. Many studies aim to understand how to create, develop and improve the stakeholder experiences, especially consumer experiences. Chidley and Pritchard (2014) describe useful key drivers in creating value for the organizations and their stakeholders. The authors stated that people, not processes, are at the heart of experience. Liu, Sparks, and Coghlan (2016) suggest that to promote positive customer experience, managers should focus on fun and sensory aspects. Deshwal (2016) shows that demographic variables, such as age, gender, education level and family income, have an impact on customer experience. Regarding the physical store, Mohd-Ramly (2017) highlights that customer experience is influenced by merchandise, store atmosphere and loyalty programmes. Bolton, Gustafsson, McColl-Kennedy, Sirianni, and Tse (2014) highlight the importance of small details: 'Service organizations and marketers have focussed too much of their energy on their core service's performance and too little emphasis on designing a customer journey that enhances the entire customer experience' (Bolton et al., 2014, p. 253). Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) identify seven different elements of customer experience touch points, including: atmospheric, technological, communicative, process, employee-customer interaction, customer-customer interaction and product interaction elements. Roy, Balaji, Sadeque, Nguyen, and Melewar (2017) then contributed to this topic by analysing the potential for smart retailing technologies to act as an opportunity to increase the quality of customer experiences. A latest marketing trend that is focused on digital within physical experience is pervasive, with brands showing increasing efforts toward enhanced means for engaging consumers. On the consumer side, sustainability is now becoming a fundamental element of customer values and needs. However, as we noticed in our scoping study, very few studies in the literature are focused on the sustainability aspect of customer experience. One study in particular (Bothe, Schaffner, Jüttner and Schlange, 2016) on sustainable service quality, reports a new trend of consumers needing products and services containing elements of sustainability. This research demonstrates how these sustainable services influence customers' satisfaction under cognitive, emotional and normative dimensions.

In spite of the fact that markets are increasingly asking for sustainability to be an aspect of their experiences, and corporations are increasingly becoming more sustainability oriented, our review found a lack of sustainable experiential marketing within the literature.

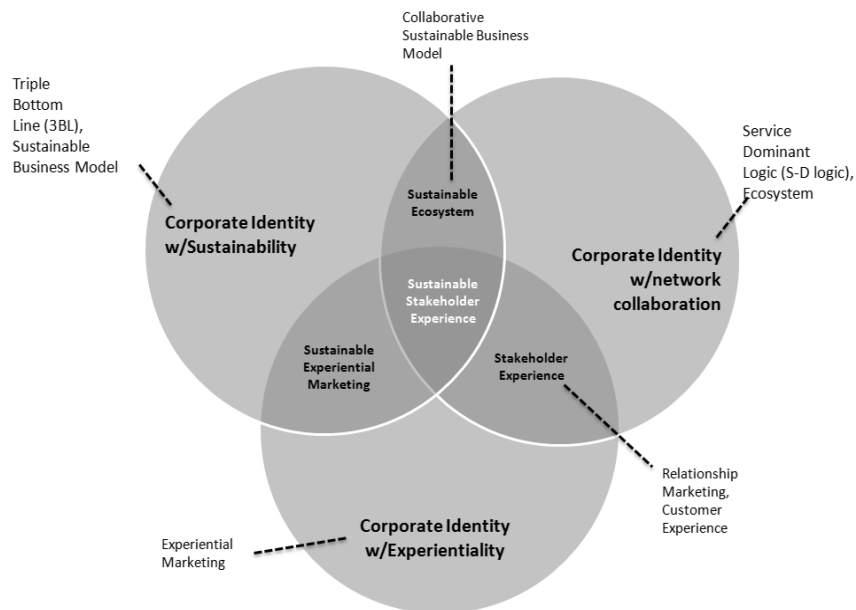
In summary, this narrative highlights several literature gaps, found by matching three different concepts emerged in corporate identity dynamics: sustainability, network collaboration and experientiality. We propose a new framework to highlight these gaps and offer a theoretical perspective that includes all three of these emerging trends.

Introducing a new framework

The Sustainable Stakeholder Experience (SSE) framework (see Figure 1) allows for the analysis of sustainability, network collaboration and experientiality topics from a new point of view. In our previous empirical research, there are three main trends concerning corporate identity meanings: a company could include in its corporate identity elements of sustainability, or underline their network and collaborative approach, and/or focus more on experientiality (digital or physical, specific for customers or stakeholders in general). Sometimes a corporate identity includes more than one of these meanings. As such, all of these elements could be combined within a corporate identity and then connected to related corporate strategies. First, following Figure 1, we could see that when corporate identity combines sustainability and network collaboration meanings, the intersection leads us to

consider strategies within a “Sustainable Ecosystem” logic. Second, in Figure 1, moving clockwise, considering corporate identity with the combination of network collaboration and experientiality, the strategic orientation and literature becomes focused on “Stakeholder Experience”, notably incorporating several relationship marketing roots. Third, a corporate identity with both experiential and sustainability meanings, drives practice and literature to focus on “Sustainable Experiential Marketing”. In summary, these three emerging trends showed gaps in the literature within our scoping study, with very few studies focused on them. Moreover, combining these three central trends in one, they form a new emerging strategic concept that could be referred to as “Sustainable Stakeholder Experience” (Figure 1, in the center).

Fig. 1: The Sustainable Stakeholder Experience (SSE) framework



Explaining the SSE framework using a case example from the dairy industry

Our case example is an Italian company which operates in the dairy industry. It is a micro family business, located in a small alpine village in North-East Italy. Its main activity is the production of cheese, by using milk derived from the alpine pasture. The company’s corporate identity main meaning, that emerged in our analysis, is “tradition”. However, its traditional approach is dynamic, and now evolving toward new concepts such as sustainability, network collaboration and experiential marketing.

Sustainability is at the base of the company’s work, and it is pervasive also in production processes. The cattle are free to move in enormous green space; animals are not tethered and the owner described them as “happy cows”. Food for animals is controlled and OGM free. Cheese production is handmade, without the support of machinery, and also in this way, as the owner declares, they are “respecting the tradition and the environment”. At the same time, this firm is very proactive in helping other producers and their local community. In particular, for many years the owner has been president of an industrial association which aims to help and coordinate all relevant companies in the food industry. Moreover, every year the

company donates its products to the community to contribute to local festivals and events, and actively participates in local initiatives and project organization.

Recently (2018), this company is producing and launching a new product, with a new brand, created in collaboration with three other small local producers (local in this case, literally means physically close to each other). Proximity, in this culture, is often a source of conflict rather than collaboration. As such, this case analysis could be considered a best practice in stakeholder collaboration. This story is only beginning, but these four companies have already found a society with the goals of doing something different in its essence, experimenting with new sustainable production processes, to obtain a unique product (cheese) and present it to dairy product events in order to receive feedback and then launch it to the market. Due to the limited production, the natural distribution strategy would be to offer it to the local market. However, its uniqueness has already attracted interest from international buyers.

This case study shows something important related to sustainable stakeholder collaboration: this innovation has been possible with the active cooperation of each member of the network: authorities, competitors, retailers, restaurants, agritourists, consultants, university, journalists, artists, customers and personal relations, and other subjects that have been involved in the project from the beginning. The project leader, owner of the company in our case example, could have attempted to do all of this alone. Instead, he decided to create a network that has the characteristics of a sustainable ecosystem: a network with members that work in synergy to reach better (i.e., overcoming bureaucracy, reaching a larger production, exchanging expertise, reducing costs) and faster results, and in which each member has an important role for giving and receiving value.

Moreover, in our case study's corporate identity we found many references to sustainable experiences. Customers that walk in their store or visit their Facebook page, are invited to visit their alpine cabin, to have the opportunity to see, touch, and perceive all the elements that compose the activity (elements of their corporate identity). In our visit during the second interview, the owner welcomed us explaining the traditional and sustainable cheese production process and machinery, taught us how to make cheese by hand, invited us for a cheese tasting (the new organic cheese included, with a feedback request) and offered a place with beautiful sightseeing up to the mountain where we had lunch (with compostable plates) accompanied by their dogs under their big trees. During and after lunch we felt to be part of their family, sitting around the same table for a drink, celebrating the birthday of one member of our team, and then we had a walk near cows exploring local natural beauties. The entire experience was full of sustainable elements. To this company, the stakeholder experience is a way to be authentic, revealing its nature in every interaction. We noticed that, maybe unaware of this orientation to an authentic sustainable stakeholder experience, the owner and its family is infusing in every relationship with their stakeholders their environmental and social sustainable essence.

Conclusion, limitations and further research

This conceptual paper presents a narrative literature based on a selection of articles from a scoping study, part of a broader research project. It highlighted several theoretical gaps, and discussed new concepts to explain the Sustainable Stakeholder Experience (SSE) framework presented in Figure 1. This new SSE framework aims to clarify emerging theoretical connections between sustainability, network collaboration, and experientiality. These meanings are emerging in practice in corporate identities, in particular in a combined mix, but the literature is still stuck in silos and shows little attention to the combination of these concepts. In spite of the conceptual scope of this article, managers could reflect on their

strategic approach to sustainability, not only considering the environmental or social impact of their actions, but also rethink the relationship quality of every contact that occurs in their network, and add to each interaction an experiential flavor of sustainability.

Due to the nature of this conceptual paper's narrative, we recognize that the main limitation of this conference presentation is the lack of data demonstrating all the results we refer from our previous research phases. Being this study part of a bigger research design, we do agree that it might be more interesting to review the overall results, but we decided to focus on the new conceptual framework rather than to an empirical study. Furthermore, the main research is still in progress. In this short contribution, our scope is to stimulate the discussion, and receive feedback about a broader view of corporate identity including strategic relationship marketing and collaborative sustainability. We also wish to stimulate a call for further research in those topics where we found several literature gaps.

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