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If you call for frameworks in sustainability management... editorial to the special issue

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Businesses are increasingly identified as core actors contributing to (un)sustainable development (Whiteman et al. 2013; Heede 2014), as recently indicated by the massive global media and activist attention drawn to the decision of the German Energy giant RWE to mine and burn an additional estimate of 300 million tons of coal (Deutschlandfunk 2022). Still, compared to other disciplines of business studies, the academic debate about corporate sustainability management is relatively young. Specifically, the theoretical and conceptual framing of sustainability management is underexplored. Numerous frameworks have been proposed, including reference frameworks such as United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015; Schaltegger et al. 2018a), planetary boundaries (Rockström et al. 2009; Whiteman et al. 2013; Schaltegger et al. 2018b) or theories picked up from business studies, such as institutional theory (Matten and Moon 2008), stakeholder theory (Hörisch et al. 2014) or resource-based view (Hart 1995; Hart and Dowell 2011; Starik and Kanashiro 2013) attempted to integrate these existing frameworks to an overarching theory of sustainability management. Thus, numerous different frameworks exist. Still, it is difficult to identify dominant patterns or interlinkages between the different frameworks that then can easily transfer to different strategic and operational contexts.

With this special issue, we called for contributions on frameworks for sustainability management. Thereby, we aimed at identifying patterns concerning these frameworks, stimulating a discussion on their potentials, and encouraging a deeper

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The contributions we received are indicative for the still dispersed nature of the research field of sustainability management, when it comes to conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Some contributions to this special issue mainly refer to existing theories also used in other fields of business studies, such as stakeholder theory (Siems and Seuring 2023) or contingency theory and system theory (Abdelkafi et al. 2003). Others refer to frameworks and theories, which are rather specific for the context of sustainability (or related realms), such as the theory of change (Ries et al. 2023), corporate purpose (Brosch 2023), trustworthiness (Lin-Hi et al. 2023) or refer to even more specific reference frameworks such as a “dynamic value network perspective of sustainable business models” (Reinecke et al. 2023). Interestingly, besides the respective key frameworks the single contributions in this special issue draw on, each submission also makes use or at least mentions further frameworks, such as agency theory, game theory, the SDGs, or most frequently, the Triple Bottom Line. To get an illustrative idea about the degree to which these different theoretical and reference frameworks are used, we created word-clouds counting and graphically highlighting the occurrences of each framework used in the contributions to this special issue (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 highlights that the Triple Bottom Line concept (Elkington 1998a, b) was referred to most frequently (53 occurrences). Interestingly, no article used it as its main framework, but nearly all articles refer to it at least to some degree. Further concepts which receive relatively broad attention are stakeholder theory (12), the circular economy (8), Life Cycles (6), Dynamic Capabilities (5) and the SDGs (5).

Fig. 1 Graphical representation of frameworks referred to in the special issue; Frameworks which were mentioned in only one article were excluded



Interestingly, Fig. 2 confirms the prominent role stakeholder theory plays for sustainability management research (76 occurrences), as well as the importance of the concept of Life Cycles (19). Additionally, and thus different to the publications in this special issue, also the frameworks ‘Bottom of the Pyramid’ (30) and institutional theory (19) receive broad attention in the seminal sustainability management publications identified by Hahn (2022). Interestingly, both Figs. 1 and 2 show that the attempt to create an integrative theory of sustainability management (Starik and Kanashiro 2013) has not (at least not yet) been picked up systematically in sustainability management research.

Interestingly, Fig. 3 shows relatively similar patterns as the word-cloud based on the seminal sustainability management publications. Again, Stakeholder Theory is identified as the most relevant framework (206 publications), followed by institutional theory (141), legitimacy theory (73) and agency theory (42). Additionally, also the resource-based view (41) and resource dependence theory (24) are relatively prominently displayed in Fig. 3, which were less prominent in Figs. 1 and 2. What is interesting is what is missing in the word-cloud on CSR, that has been prominent in the first two word-clouds, i.e. the notions of the Triple Bottom Line, Circular

[illegible]

Fig. 3 Graphical representation of theories identified by Frynas and Yamahaki in research on CSR (2016)



Economy and Life Cycles. Thus, the word-cloud on CSR shows relevant distinctions to the word-clouds on sustainability management.

What we can learn from the three word-clouds is threefold: *First*, frameworks in sustainability management evolve over time. This special issue from 2023 draws on other or at least additional concepts to the ones that were prominent in the seminal research of the past decades (cf. Figure 2). *Second*, the diversity and partly the nature of the frameworks used in sustainability management shows that the field is still evolving towards maturity. Edmondson and McManus (2007, p.1159) state as one indicator for the maturity of research fields that there is a “growing body of inter-related theories”. Against this criterion, one might at least question whether some of the most prominent frameworks in sustainability management such as the triple bottom line or SDGs, indeed qualify as theories in the sense of predicting relationships between different constructs. Additionally, the degree to which the core concepts of sustainability management interrelate varies. While for some concepts clear interlinkages are visible (e.g. Life Cycles and Circular Economy) others seem rather distant from one another (e.g. Triple Bottom Line and Agency Theory).

Third, frameworks in sustainability management are distinct from those in CSR. While there is a common base, indicated by the prominent role of stakeholder theory in all three word-clouds, sustainability management also draws on frameworks such as Life-Cycles, Circular Economy or the Triple-Bottom Line.

The frameworks most often applied in the CSR literature emphasize direct social interactions and securing legitimacy of the organization. This is in line with empirical studies that find that environmental and social management practices are dominated by a legitimacy seeking perspective (Schaltegger and Hörisch 2017). Thus, the theories used in CSR research are characterized rather by an inside-out view, thus

analyzing business options and management while considering the direct effects on the rather immediate business environment.

As a difference, the frameworks used in corporate sustainability literature emphasize restrictions and necessary consequences management needs to deduct from the macro-level social and ecological environment. Impacts of the company far beyond its organizational boundaries are considered, including future generations and planetary boundaries. This view is characterized by an outside-in approach and can be considered a distinctive feature of corporate sustainability and sustainable entrepreneurship that emphasizes the interlinkages with societal and natural environmental spheres in which the organization is embedded (e.g. Johnson & Schaltegger 2020). One reason why stakeholder theory is strongly referred to may be that it can support both views, the inside-out oriented CSR view as well as the outside-in oriented corporate sustainability perspective. Zooming in from these overall patterns to the single contributions, helps to see potential contributions of specific theoretical frameworks for sustainability management.

Nikolai Brosch's paper in this issue develops a framework on corporate purpose. He starts with the observation that the lack of construct clarity with respect to purpose hampers theoretical development and practical impact. Hence, the article aims at offering a theoretically sound and meaningful conceptualization of corporate purpose as a guiding principle for companies. The proposed concept defines purpose as an organization's reason for being, as its objective beyond profit maximization, and as its pro-social contributions. Reviewing extant literature, it then identifies seven core characteristics of corporate purpose that fit this definition and that help managers determine and communicate their organization's purpose. With this conceptualization the paper offers an important contribution to the literature and allows for a precise understanding of the relationship between corporate purpose and related concepts such as mission, vision, corporate social responsibility, and sustainability.

In their contribution "Does the Combination of Sustainable Business Model Patterns Lead to Truly Sustainable Business Models? Critical Analysis of Existing Frameworks and Extensions", **Nizar Abdelkafi, Jinou Xu, Margherita Pero, Federica Ciccullo, and Antonio Masi** intend to support entrepreneurs and managers in their efforts to identify "patterns" and develop "truly sustainable" business models. Their endeavor is remarkable in several ways. It puts the concept of "patterns" at the core of its analysis and asks how companies can contribute to turning a societal problem into business opportunities. It does so by first reviewing earlier frameworks for sustainable business model (SBM) patterns and then offering a theoretical discussion of what makes a business model "truly sustainable." In their analysis, the authors identify three different levels of the analysis for the assessment of sustainable business models. Taken together, their integrative work offers a theoretically informed state-of-the-art discussion of existing frameworks and derives important implications for managers interested in sustainable business models.

Also anchored in the SBM literature is the empirical contribution by **Pauline Reinecke, Jill Küberling-Jost, Thomas Wrona, and Alice Zapf**: exploring value network activities of RECUP, a German open network reuse system aiming to replace single use beverage and food packaging. Homing in on how value network framing can shape and refine SBMs, particularly the value proposition at the heart of the busi-

ness models and mutual value creation with stakeholders, three activities stand out based on the RECUP study: B2B-partnering, political agenda-setting and mobilizing end-consumers. The study outputs can serve as a toolkit of networking activities for entrepreneurs aiming to continuously co-create the business model of their enterprise with their stakeholders, hence making this Special issue contribution an easily transferable framework despite its deceptively narrow scope.

Deliberately impact-driven is the SI contribution by **Lena Ries, Markus Beckmann, and Peter Wehnert**. A three-step causal logic framework that links design, mechanisms, and impacts is the theory of change structure applied to connect digital technologies and product-service systems (PSS). The impacts are based on the triple bottom line framework. Hence, this contribution used a popular sustainability management categorization framework (i.e. Triple Bottom Line) and a key process framework (i.e. Theory of Change) to assess sustainability impact. The authors are explicit about the non-linear nature of the design to impact connection and offer the term multi-causal pathway. Adding detail through a systematic literature review, the study outputs are based on PSS and SBM literature. Yet, the theory of change model offered is deemed to be transferable from business model design to organizational design, supply networks, and reporting systems, making this an exciting conceptual contribution that hopefully will be explored and refined by further research.

Nick Lin-Hi, Marlene Reimer, Katharina Schäfer and Johanna Böttcher draw on the concepts of organizational trustworthiness and consumers CSR perceptions to analyze antecedents of consumer acceptance of cultured meat. In their article “Consumer acceptance of cultured meat: An empirical analysis of the role of organizational factors”, they argue that cultured meat has vast potential to contribute to a more sustainable global food system, if consumers are willing to accept this radical sustainability oriented innovation. Based on an intervention study, the authors use structural equation modelling and find that organizational trustworthiness and perceived CSR indeed stimulate consumers’ willingness to buy cultured meat. This contribution thus highlights importance of sustainability-related organizational factors in general and trustworthiness and CSR perceptions in particular for the acceptance of radical sustainability-oriented innovations.

With their literature review, **Erik Siems and Stefan Seuring** investigate stakeholder roles in sustainable supply chain management. Focal companies and their suppliers face increasing stakeholder pressure as a consequence of increasing ecological and social problems worldwide. The authors find that multiple supply chain external and internal stakeholders drive, facilitate and inspect the implementation of sustainable supply chain management practices. In this context, Siems and Seuring conclude that societal stakeholders, in addition to the usually more emphasized stakeholders, play an essential role for achieving more sustainable supply chains. The paper furthermore discusses how the roles of stakeholders relate to sustainable supply chain management practices, such as organizational learning processes through capability development, increasing understanding and awareness of sustainability, and creating knowledge.

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