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Article

Futures imagined: Navigating sustainability, digitalization, and entrepreneurship in business and management research

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Futures Imagined: Navigating Sustainability, Digitalization, and Entrepreneurship in Business and Management Research

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1 Introduction

The future has become a central yet deeply “problematic temporal category” (Wenzel et al. 2020, p. 1442) in business and management research. This is not only because organizations face increasing uncertainty (Dorobat et al. 2026), but also because the field itself is undergoing profound contestation over its purpose, orientation, and societal role (Hollensbe et al. 2014; Porter 2021). Once treated as an extension of the present supported by forecasting, planning, and managerial control (Mintzberg 1994), the future is now widely experienced as open, ambiguous, and contested. Among others, climate change, the digital transformation, and artificial intelligence repeatedly destabilize organizations, markets, and institutions (Wenzel et al. 2020); and draw attention to entrepreneurship as a way of finding solutions to future challenges (Thompson and Byrne 2022). These developments are not incremental but epochal, confronting business and management research with fundamental questions about what kind of knowledge is needed (George et al. 2016; Parker 2018; Sharma et al. 2022). Those questions are reflected in Gibbons’ (1994) canonical distinction between “Mode 1” of discipline-centered knowledge production, and “Mode 2” of problem-oriented and transdisciplinary inquiry. The core argument is that discipline-centered research (Huff 2000) has created a persistent relevance problem for business and management scholarship. Since Mode 1 research is organized around academically defined problems and mono-disciplinary standards rather than real-

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world challenges, it systematically privileges theoretical gaps over practical concerns, producing “knowledge for knowledge’s sake” (Huff 2000, p. 288). Therefore, critics argue that a shift toward problem-oriented and transdisciplinary knowledge production is necessary for business and management research to remain socially and managerially meaningful (Huff 2000; Van de Ven 2007). Such criticism fuels debate over whether business and management research should primarily generate knowledge *of* business or knowledge *for* society (George et al. 2024).

Under these conditions, the future of business and management research itself resembles a wicked problem (Mason and Mitroff 1981; Rittel and Webber 1973): there is no single agreed-upon problem, and progress depends on iterative sense-making with different stakeholder groups—academics and practitioners—that “not only know different things, but also know things differently. That is, each would have a different system of meaning through which its members interpret [technology-market] issues” (Dougherty 1992, p. 187). As a result, the future of business and management research is open-ended, in flux, and negotiated. Consequently, the “making” of this future—our future as business and management scholars—requires dialogical modes of imagining and enacting ways forward for our field (Wenzel et al. 2025).

Yet, unfortunately, explicit debates about the field’s foundational assumptions, theoretical perspectives, and methodological approaches remain rare in standard journal publications. If the future is increasingly contested and wicked, understanding both problems and possible solutions cannot be achieved through isolated and accumulated contributions alone. It requires structured confrontation between alternative positions and critical interrogation of taken-for-granted assumptions. Following Popper (1965, p. 266, transl.): “Without contradiction, without criticism, there would be no reasonable motive for changing our theories: there would be no intellectual progress.” In response to these challenges and necessities of business and management scholarship, we provided space for interactive debates across sub-disciplines of our field at the 2024 Conference of the German Academic Association for Business Research (VHB) in Lüneburg, Germany. These sessions—called “I-WK”—revolved around sustainability, digitalization, and entrepreneurship as central drivers of and responses to the future uncertainty of both contemporary organizations as well as business and management scholarship as a whole. The concept of those I-WK sessions, then, inspired this Special Issue as a *call for curated debates* that do not simply add new findings, but actively orchestrate interdisciplinary conversations around central and important themes in business and management research at the nexus of sustainability, digitalization, and entrepreneurship.

In fact, this nexus connects three central pillars of contemporary transformations in business and society. Sustainability defines the normative direction of value creation, digitalization provides the enabling medium, and entrepreneurship acts as the mechanism through which organizations and ecosystems adapt, innovate, and shape future-oriented activity. In this introduction to the Special Issue, we articulate the relevance of the “wicked” nexus of sustainability, digitalization, and entrepreneurship for the future of business and management scholarship. By introducing the articles included in this Special Issue, we show how this nexus opens up broader philosophical and methodological debates on the future of our field.

2 The Nexus of Sustainability, Digitalization, and Entrepreneurship

Across sustainability, digitalization, and entrepreneurship, the literatures themselves are marked by internal debates that underscore the contested nature of contemporary business and management research. In *sustainability research*, scholars continue to debate whether and how business can reconcile economic performance with ecological limits and social justice, revealing disagreements about both problem framing and solution pathways. A dominant stream advances the “business case for sustainability”. This stream emphasizes the synergistic logics in which firms create joint economic, social, and environmental value through stakeholder engagement and innovation (Schaltegger et al. 2019). From this perspective, sustainability is attractive insofar as it aligns with firm’s competitiveness and long-term value creation. Critics, however, highlight that a strong reliance on instrumental justification risks hollowing out sustainability’s normative and systems-oriented foundations. This would reduce sustainability to a contingent managerial choice to differentiate firm’s products rather than an existential societal imperative (Bansal and Song 2017). Drawing on systems thinking and planetary boundaries (Kimsey et al. 2025), these scholars argue that sustainability challenges cannot be resolved through firm-level economizing alone, as business activity is embedded in—and constrained by—biophysical and social systems whose limits are increasingly violated (Bansal et al. 2025; Buyl et al. 2022; Randers 2014). This tension is mirrored in strategic debates over whether addressing sustainability requires fundamentally new paradigms that foreground interdependence, long-term horizons, and collective action, or whether existing economic and strategic frameworks remain sufficient if appropriately extended (Foss and Klein 2025). Related debates concern the role of organizations as agents of societal transformation. Some emphasize incremental change through responsible innovation and sustainable investing (Marti et al. 2024; Voegtlin et al. 2022), whereas others highlight institutional constraints and path dependencies that limit managerial agency and call for broader field-level and policy interventions (Greenwood et al. 2015; Schuessler et al. 2023). In sum, these debates underscore why sustainability constitutes a wicked domain for business and management research, one in which normative commitments and empirical realities remain deeply contested, and where progress depends on sustained dialogue.

In *digitalization research*, debates center on whether the digital transformation should be understood primarily as a technological challenge or as a broader socio-technical and institutional transformation with far-reaching consequences for work practices and organizing (Leonardi and Vaast 2017) as well as value creation (Amit and Zott 2001; Wirtz 2024). One stream conceptualizes digitalization as disruption driven by new technologies that trigger organizational adaptation (Hanelt et al. 2021), new business models (Wirtz 2024), and competitive dynamics (Porter 2001), often emphasizing managerial choice, dynamic capabilities, and performance implications (Vial 2019). Closely related work on platforms frames digital technologies as new organizational forms that restructure markets through network effects, ecosystem governance, and value co-creation with complementors, raising strategic questions about scale, scope, and competition (McIntyre et al. 2021; McIntyre and Srinivasan 2017). In contrast, socio-technical and institutional perspectives challenge technol-

ogy-centric views by emphasizing how digital transformation re-configurates power, legitimacy, and meaning systems across organizations and fields (Berente et al. 2022; Hinings et al. 2018; Orlikowski and Scott 2008). This tension is further intensified by the rise of artificial intelligence, where debates oscillate between human–AI collaboration as augmentation and algorithmic management as control (Berente et al. 2021; Hillebrand et al. 2025). Critical voices highlight the danger of a new self-imposed immaturity, undermining individual and organizational creativity, reflection, and responsibility (Scherer et al. 2023; Schwarting and Reihlen forthcoming). At a more political–economic level, scholars question whether digitalization reinforces monopoly capitalism (Haucap and Stühmeier 2016) and undermines democracy through surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2022). In sum, these debates illustrate why digitalization constitutes a wicked domain for business and management research. It simultaneously promises efficiency and innovation while having the potential to destabilize institutions and enable power asymmetries.

Entrepreneurship research is characterized by enduring debates over its core constructs, levels of analysis, and underlying theoretical assumptions. A central controversy concerns the nature of entrepreneurial opportunities: whether they exist as objective conditions waiting to be discovered, are subjectively constructed by entrepreneurs, or are socially constructed through action and interaction (Alvarez and Barney 2007; Davidsson 2015; Wood and McKinley 2010). This seemingly irreconcilable debate has far-reaching implications for how entrepreneurship is theorized, studied, and taught, shaping research designs and normative assumptions about agency and uncertainty. Closely related is the tension between planning-oriented, causation-based models of entrepreneurship and processual, effectuation-based perspectives (Alsos et al. 2020). The former views entrepreneurship as a quasi-linear mapping of ends to predefined means, whereas the latter frames entrepreneurship as a non-linear inquiry into the ends that can be accomplished with the means at hand. This theoretical divide has fundamental implications for research designs and units of analysis at hand. Whereas causation-based entrepreneurship prioritizes thinking over action, effectuation is action-centric (Alsos et al. 2020; Sarasvathy 2001). At the same time, the field remains divided over its appropriate level of analysis. Psychologically grounded approaches foreground individual cognition, motivation, and behavior as key drivers of entrepreneurial action (Frese and Gielnik 2014), while others argue for multi-level perspectives that situate entrepreneurship within organizations (Burgelman 1991; Reihlen et al. 2022), ecosystems (Adner 2017; Spigel 2017), and institutional contexts (Battilana et al. 2009; Greenwood and Suddaby 2006). This shift is particularly evident in research on corporate entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial ecosystems, which highlights how entrepreneurial outcomes depend on organizational structures, strategic renewal processes, and interdependencies among multiple actors (Girma Aragaw et al. 2025; Urbano et al. 2022). In sum, these debates indicate why entrepreneurship constitutes a wicked domain for business and management research, one in which the contested nature of its conceptual foundations exhorts sustained dialogue.

Given their prevalence in and for contemporary organizations and society, these domains are relevant for the future of business and management research as a whole. Yet, going further, a growing body of research combines these domains into what

we call a “nexus”, i.e., an interconnected assemblage of sustainability, digitalization, and entrepreneurship that reveals fertile ground for cross-fertilization and reshapes how future-oriented value creation is imagined and enacted.

Digital technologies increasingly serve as enablers and amplifiers of entrepreneurship, lowering entry barriers, enabling experimentation, and supporting the scaling of solutions to business challenges (Nambisan 2017). Accordingly, research on digital entrepreneurship highlights how platforms, data infrastructures, and digital artifacts reconfigure opportunity creation processes, shifting entrepreneurship from firm-centric activity toward ecosystem-based, collective, and distributed forms of value creation (Elia et al. 2020; Nambisan 2017). At the same time, sustainability scholars emphasize that entrepreneurial action is central to addressing grand challenges by discovering, creating, and exploiting opportunities that generate environmental and social value alongside economic returns (Dacin et al. 2010; Johnson and Schaltegger 2020).

Recent work explicitly integrates these perspectives through the concept of digital-sustainable business models, which examines how digital affordances—such as connectivity, generativity, and data-driven coordination—can be leveraged to advance sustainability goals through new value propositions, value creation processes, and value capture mechanisms (Palmié et al. 2025). This “twin transformation” foregrounds entrepreneurship as the mechanism through which organizations and ecosystems navigate the tensions and complementarities between digital innovation and sustainable development (George et al. 2021). Yet, these intersections also surface new tensions: digitalization can both enable sustainability transitions, but also intensify resource consumption, inequality, and extractive dynamics (Crawford 2021). This demonstrates that entrepreneurial choices are inherently normative and, therefore, potentially contested.

Overall, cross-fertilization across sustainability, digitalization, and entrepreneurship underscores the need for more integrative debates. These debates seek to build bridges across disciplinary boundaries, open up new theoretical and methodological directions, and, with this, create more impactful business and management research communities.

3 The Nexus and Beyond: Contributions to this Special Issue

From the very start, this Special Issue was designed as a forum for integrative debates at the intersections of sustainability, digitalization, and entrepreneurship across the sub-disciplines of business and management research to imagine futures for our field. In a field like ours where discipline-centered Mode 1 scholarship (Gibbons 1994) prevails within many, if not all sub-disciplines, such integrative debates are not self-evident. In our field, Mode 1 research tends to rely on publications in discipline-specific, peer-reviewed journals that prioritize engagement with identifiable and oftentimes confined conversations within a discipline. Such scholarship does have merit, as it also contributes to knowledge progress and might even be impactful (Wenzel et al. 2025). Yet, it is not particularly conducive to the integrative debates needed to imagine futures for our field. Such integrative debates, we argue, require

less conventional formats that bring together voices and perspectives across the sub-disciplines of business and management research.

We found such a less conventional format in “curated debates”. By “curated debates”, we refer to articles on relevant and partly contentious topics of business and management research that bring together and connect a diversity of voices and perspectives from our field. Curated debates invite in the pluralism that characterizes our field rather than suppressing it. These debates, then, move business and management research forward through a discussion across diverse perspectives that opens up new futures for our field. Like any regular article submissions, the curated debates submitted to this Special Issue were peer-reviewed according to the high-quality rules and guidelines of the *Schmalenbach Journal of Business Research*. Yet, rather than foregrounding theoretical contributions to narrow debates as the typical gold standard for publications in our field, a central criterion for publication in the Special Issue was to unfold a dialogue that inspires new ways forward for business and management research. The competitive peer-review process left us with five curated debates to be included in this Special Issue. Three of these highlight important future-oriented topics at the intersections of the nexus of sustainability, digitalization, and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, two of the included curated debates demonstrate that the nexus of the three “wicked” domains inspires broader reflections on the methodological and philosophical foundations of business and management research.

First, Trittin-Ulbrich et al. (2025) curated debate is situated at the intersection of sustainability and digitalization. This debate focuses on “digital responsibility”, i.e., the design, adoption, and use of digital technology according to ethical principles and standards. This debate brings together voices from organization studies and information systems research, illuminating the complex array of technical, organizational, and institutional aspects that digital responsibility involves. As this curated debate shows, accounting for these aspects has far-reaching theoretical, methodological, and impact-related implications for research at the intersection of sustainability and digitalization, including suggestions on how to “inquire”, “involve”, and “integrate” voices to build and sustain bridges between diverse sub-fields of business and management research at this intersection.

Second, Haase et al. (2025) curated debate also illuminates the intersection of sustainability and digitalization. It focuses on the “corporate actor”, a diffuse notion used to describe powerful participants of society. The debate brings together voices from marketing as well as management and organization studies. It surfaces perspectives on the responsibility of corporate actors in the light of their massive impact on society, as well as their ever-greater impact as the possibilities of digital technologies are used. Given the collective nature of the “corporate actor”, the debate also discusses the importance of taking such collective notions seriously as a way of surfacing and challenging their impact so as to move our field into a more sustainable future.

Third, Vogel et al. (2025) curated debate is primarily positioned at the intersection of sustainability as a necessary end and entrepreneurship as a central mechanism of moving toward this end, yet also with considerations of the role of digital technology as a medium in this process. This debate focuses attention on “impact entrepreneur-

ship”, i.e., a version of entrepreneurship that defines itself not only in terms profits and growth, but also the “positive societal change” that it fosters. The debate brings together scholars from different sub-disciplines of business and management research to explore diverse dimensions of impact entrepreneurship. This debate shows that “impact entrepreneurship” is more than just another form of entrepreneurship with a different qualifier (social, sustainable, responsible, transformational, etc.). It has fundamental implications for how entrepreneurship must be examined and practiced in order to move organizations as well as business and management research as a whole into a sustainable future.

Fourth, Seckler et al. (2025) curated debate is located at the intersections of sustainability, digitalization, and entrepreneurship. It brings together five sub-disciplines of business and management research in and related to these domains to discuss “design science” as a methodological alternative. Through this dialogue, the authors explain how this approach promises knowledge production that is both rigorous and relevant. In doing so, this curated debate illustrates the potential of taking the nexus of sustainability, digitalization, and entrepreneurship seriously as a springboard for imagining futures for our field.

Finally, Soliman et al. (2025) curated debate equally cuts across the domains of sustainability, digitalization, and entrepreneurship. Inspired by the “replication crisis” in psychology, the curated debate brings together scholars from psychology, management, and marketing to reflect on “open science” as a future for business and management research. As the debate shows, such reflections extend beyond procedural questions of how we do research: they highlight deep-seated philosophical questions regarding the credibility and replicability of findings and results advanced in our field. In doing so, the curated debate inspires new ways forward for business and management research.

4 Conclusion: Toward the Future of Business and Management Research

In this introduction to the Special Issue, we positioned the nexus of sustainability, digitalization, and entrepreneurship as a central driver toward the future of business and management research. While each of these domains is “wicked” in itself and inspires imaginations of what the future of our field might be, we argue that it is the connections and intersections of these domains that moves our field forward. Sustainability is the inevitable but contested end that business and society need to strive for to safeguard the persistence of humankind; digitalization is a central medium that both enables and undermines movements toward sustainable futures; and entrepreneurship is the mechanism that affords to drive such movements, yet also with potentials for adverse outcomes. Hence, this nexus provides a thematic framework for meaningful debates in business and management research that afford to give rise to relevant insights for business and society.

Yet, as this Special Issue also shows, focusing attention on this nexus raises profound questions that extend beyond thematic intersections: what perspectives and research approaches do business and management scholars deem desirable or

appropriate if heterogenous domains with different disciplinary research standards are brought together? How do we, as a field, give voice to varying perspectives and approaches that do not necessarily comply with narrow conversations within sub-disciplines of business and management research, but are nevertheless important for rigorous and relevant knowledge production? How, then, do we define the identity of business and management scholarship as a pluralistic field of highly differentiated sub-disciplines?

All these questions demonstrate the relevance of integrative debates that challenge conventional wisdom, spur critical reflection, imagine alternatives, and inspire ways forward. As we argued, the dominance of discipline-centric publication formats in business and management research requires complementary formats, or alternatives, that are more dialogical in nature. We proposed “curated debates” as such a dialogical alternative that connects perspectives and approaches across sub-disciplines of our field. With this format, we hope that this Special Issue motivates continued debates that give rise to futures of business and management research.

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