The micro-foundations of ambidexterity for corporate social performance: A study on sustainability managers' response to conflicting goals

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ABSTRACT

Studies on corporate social performance advocate that interrelated yet conflicting goals, such as sustainability and profitability, give rise to specific dynamics and inherent tensions, and call for more research to investigate how the duality of goals is managed by specific individuals in organizations. Through a micro-foundational view of ambidexterity for corporate social performance, and by relying on a qualitative data analysis of 41 interviews with sustainability managers and their immediate stakeholders, both internal and external to their organization boundaries, we developed a multilevel model of sustainability managers' responses to conflicting goals. We discovered how sustainability managers enacted internal and external, long term and short term brokering behaviors, enabled by their individual values, multidisciplinary knowledge, and relational abilities and skills, although constrained by their organizational and institutional contexts. By taking into account simultaneously contextual forces and individual cognitive characteristics, we thus advance our understanding of sustainability managers' behaviors towards ambidexterity for corporate social responsibility and of microfoundations for ambidexterity.

1. Introduction

With the emergence of increasingly complex challenges, such as global competition, social problems, and environmental degradation, firms face the need to address dual concurrent demands and manage internal tensions as they strive to balance conflicting goals (Mom et al., 2019). Extensive research has focused on ambidexterity, defined as the organizational "ability to perform differing and often competing, strategic acts at the same time" (Simsek et al., 2009, p. 865). This body of knowledge has consistently demonstrated that ambidextrous organizations not only effectively address conflicting demands but also achieve superior performance (Luger et al., 2018). Going beyond the often-cited exploration/exploitation duality, organizational ambidexterity has also been conceptualized as an important determinant of Corporate Social Performance (CSP) (Hahn et al., 2016), as it allows companies to address both

"instrumental" and "moral" initiatives despite the consequent tensions and contradictions existing between them (Hahn et al., 2016, 2017).

The relevance of managing tensions and contradictions (Smith et al., 2013) within and outside the organizational boundaries of firms seeking to achieve CSP (Hahn et al., 2016) makes the role of sustainability managers, working as middle managers, critical in targeting multiple, often clashing goals (e.g., Mom et al., 2019). Middle managers have been described as covering the function of gatekeepers between their business units and the wider organizational context (Fourné et al., 2014; Gould and Fernandez, 1989), linking the operational and strategic elements of a firm's activities (Floyd and Lane, 2000; Glaser et al., 2015; Ren and Guo, 2011). They often experience remarkable challenges in covering their role as brokers (Glaser et al., 2021), as their activities rely on the senior managers' approval while they need to take into account their business units' stability, boost trust within their units, and take care of the emotional well-being of their colleagues and subordinates (Huy, 2002, 2011). As they are highly influential, given their visibility and position in the organization, middle managers play a role in driving corporate change (Wooldridge et al., 2008) and provide more hands-on support in carrying out specific initiatives (Ahearne et al., 2014; Heyden et al., 2017; Ren and Guo, 2011). In line with Glaser et al. (2021) and the evolving literature that calls for a deeper exploration of how individuals *integrate* their dual activities, rather than simply describing the activities themselves (Jansen et al., 2020), we focus on the experiences of sustainability managers serving as middle managers. Specifically, we examine how these individuals navigate the inherent tensions between two conflicting objectives, namely sustainability and profitability. We argue that managerial responses to tensions cannot be understood without theorizing about the institutional and organizational contexts where they take place and about the managers' cognitive abilities sustaining their actions. In other words, managers' characteristics *and* their contexts are likely to mutually reinforce actions. Hence, we need theories of managerial responses to organizational tensions that simultaneously account for individual, organizational and institutional factors.

Under this lens, we theorize that both an "outside-in" perspective (focusing on the context influencing individuals' behavior inside and outside their firms) and an "inside-out" perspective (focusing on individuals' cognitive characteristics as influencing their behavior) are important to analyze managerial responses to tensions. The role of the organizational context in studies on organizational ambidexterity has been usually conceived as supporting managers in solving dual demands (Birkinshaw and Gupta, 2013; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2008), hence making them able to balance conflicting needs and goals (Zimmermann et al., 2018). Regarding the organizational contextual factors affecting ambidextrous managerial behaviors, past studies have implicitly assumed that individual ambidexterity emerges through a bottom-up approach (Bidmon and Boe-Lillegraven, 2020) considering individuals as enabled to move between goals at their own pace, and according to their own preferences. In addition, past literature on managerial individual ambidexterity analyzed formal and informal knowledge integration mechanisms. These mechanisms encompass factors such as managers' level of connectedness through their internal and external network of contactsfacilitating valuable combinations of exploitation and exploration (Mom et al., 2019; Jansen et al., 2009; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2004). Additionally, coordination mechanisms, such as the decision making authority of managers, have been identified as sources of variation for managerial individual ambidexterity (Mom et al., 2019). Unfortunately, this literature does not give emphasis to how the organizational structure constrains or supports behaviors aimed at balancing moral and instrumental goals.

In terms of the institutional context, we acknowledge that corporate social responsibility "is located in wider responsibility systems in which business, governmental, legal, and social actors operate according to some measure of mutual responsiveness, interdependency, choice, and capacity" (Matten and Moon 2008, p. 407), hence our inclusion of the main characteristics of the institutional context as source of variation for the activities sustainability managers embrace (Chapple and Moon 2005; Campbell 2007; Kim et al., 2013; Amaeshi and Amao 2009; Jamali and Neville 2011). More specifically, when we discuss institutions, we are referring to their dual nature as abstract constraints including widely diffused norms that constrain behavior, legal frameworks, and the mechanisms by which they are enforced. Additionally, institutions can be understood in a more concrete sense, encompassing the patterns of cooperation and competition among firms (Eggertsson 2005; Nelson 2008). These institutional dynamics impact the external challenges faced by sustainability managers and influence their actions beyond the boundaries of the firm. Overall, we specifically emphasize the interface between sustainability managers and both the organizational and institutional contexts.

Following the idea that managers are "neither born nor made" but "they are fabricated" (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2020: 431), we also see managers' reaction to tensions as the results of their cognitive characteristics as they are confronted with a relevant array of complicated and ambiguous information about challenges, opportunities, and issues they need to process and manage (Mason, 1981). Cognitive characteristics allow managers to understand complex situations (Smith and Tushman, 2005), create meaning of emergent issues (Walsh, 1995), and make context-specific interpretations that help them make decisions and act (Goffman,1974). However, past research studies have ignored the cognitive characteristics by which individuals form and organize their perceptions of corporate social performance (Gond et al., 2017) in relation to other relevant goals, neglecting the fact that, at the level of specific tasks and activities, combining competing goals imposes different cognitive demands on individuals. Moreover, the extant literature on the individual characteristics of managers coping with tensions and on contextual antecedents to individual ambidexterity did not combine the insights from research on individual behavior and attitudes and on higher situational factors in the organizational and institutional contexts (Johns, 2006), thus omitting from consideration any personal characteristics that could enable or constrain the effects of the context, and vice versa (Tarba et al., 2020; Zimmermann et al., 2020). Therefore, the extant literature offers a limited understanding of how managers' cognition and behaviors relate to each other and depend on the context where sustainability managers operate.

By offering a multilevel view of ambidexterity for CSP, including the organizational, institutional and cognitive factors, our study holistically explores the individual cognitions of sustainability managers and the contextual elements affecting the emergence of ambivalent managerial behaviors for CSP, and therefore reveals different development mechanisms leading the organization to achieve ambidexterity for CSP. Interestingly, there is limited research on how the ambidextrous behavior of sustainability managers

translates into the firm-level capacity to pursue both 'moral' and 'instrumental'outcomes (e.g., Ployhart and Moliterno, 2011). Building on the organizational ambidexterity for CSP literature, we thus address the following research question: *How do cognitive characteristics, institutional and organizational contexts affect sustainability mangers' responses to conflicting goals as they try to contribute to ambidexterity for CSP?*

We report results from an interview-based study conducted in large Dutch firms selected on the basis of their former experience with sustainability programs, their consolidated set of activities, and CSPs. Relying on the qualitative analysis of 41 interviews with sustainability managers in eight large organizations operating in the food industry, and their immediate stakeholders both internal and external to their organization boundaries, we developed a grounded model of the sustainability managers' responses to the co-existence of conflicting organizational goals, i.e. sustainability and profitability, as brokering behaviors. We discovered that brokering behaviors were both external, i.e. indented to bridge boundaries across organizations, and internal, i.e. intended to facilitate connections within the organization. In addition, brokering behaviors engendered both long term and short term outcomes, i.e. they were intended to support either immediate and day-day-activities or more distant and extended initiatives. Additionally, through a micro-foundational view of ambidexterity, we offer an in-depth understanding of how organization structures, institutional configurations, and individual cognitive characteristics shape these managerial responses and of the related mechanisms. We discovered that organizational structures such as centralized decision-making acted as constraints inducing internal tensions that sustainability managers reacted to by enacting internal brokering behaviors. We also identified the relevant institutional configurations causing the emergence of external tensions addressed through external brokering behaviors. Brokering behaviors were further enabled by sustainability managers' values, knowledge skills and abilities, for example, their strong belief that sustainability was the right goal to pursue and their multidisciplinary knowledge.

Our findings advance the current literature along two main directions. First, we contribute to the literature on CSP by detailing the complex array of brokering behaviors enacted by sustainability managers. Second, by showing how the institutional and the organizational context and the cognitive characteristics of sustainability managers jointly contribute to the emergence of brokering behaviors, we integrate different literatures on ambidexterity, i.e. on organizational ambidexterity, individual ambidexterity, and ambidexterity of CSP, and on the role of middle managers, thus providing a more nuanced microfoundational view of ambidexterity for CSP. Indeed, our model on sustainability managers' responses to conflicting goals uniquely brings separate research strands into a common conversation of remarkable organizational relevance.

2. Literature background[1]

2.1. Ambidexterity for corporate social performance

Corporate Social Performance (CSP) involves the *achievement* of economic, environmental and social outcomes (Gao and Bansal, 2013). The achievement of CSP stems from the specific initiatives implemented by organizations, e.g. by the CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) *actions* (Bansal 2002; Margolis and Walsh, 2003) that are intended to further some "social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law" (McWilliams and Siegel, 2011, pp. 117). These initiatives follow either instrumental or moral logics, that is, the approaches and motivations of addressing sustainability problems (Aguilera et al., 2007). Moral logics emphasize addressing social problems over economic benefits in an authentic quest towards 'what is the right thing to do' for society and the environment (Davis et al., 1997; Hahn et al., 2016). Conversely, instrumental initiatives for CSP are driven by organizational self-interest (Berger et al., 2007; Porter and Kramer, 2011; McWilliams and Siegel, 2011), targeting social problems where there is an economic interest to do so. In pursuing CSP, the underlying instrumental and moral logics are often opposite in terms of motivations (extrinsic versus intrinsic), time frames (short-versus long-term), type of social problems faced (strategic versus moral issues), explanations (business case versus moral case), and organizational competences (functional integration versus stakeholder engagement) (Hahn et al., 2016; Fu et al., 2019). Yet, these logics may also reinforce each other (Starkey and Crane, 2003). For instance, initiatives conceived with moral logics primarily seek to bring significant social benefits to stakeholders by tackling environmental or social issues (Hahn et al., 2016). Meanwhile, those emphasizing instrumental logics may help firms to build a good image and long-term profit by demonstrating their willingness to address social and ecological problems (Starkey and Crane, 2003; Carollo and Guerci, 2018). These initiatives rely upon conflicting assumptions and often generate organizational tensions when firms strive for CSP (Hahn et al., 2016, 2018). This interdependence between instrumental and moral logics in corporate sustainability (Aguilera et al., 2007; Muller and Kolk, 2010) makes the organizing of firms more complex in their pursuit of CSP (Jensen, 2001).

To balance these competing yet interdependent logics (e,g., Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004; Zimmermann et al., 2018), scholars have considered organizational ambidexterity as a particularly critical antecedent of CSP (Hahn et al., 2016). In the context of corporate sustainability, organizational ambidexterity supports firms' capability to manage moral and instrumental logics simultaneously. Yet, despite the well-known relevance of concurrently pursuing instrumentally and morally led actions (Aguilera et al., 2007; Muller and Kolk, 2010), the interplay between the two logics and related activities is not yet well understood (Van der Byl and Slawinski 2015). Along this line, Hahn et al. (2018) call for research that develops a better understanding about how tensions between instrumental and moral logics affect corporate conduct. Many studies have focused on the 'how' question at the inter-firm (Minoja 2012; Fu et al., 2019;

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[1] It is important to acknowledge that certain aspects of the theory discussed in the front end of the paper were unfamiliar to the authors prior to commencing our research. As we explain further in the methods section, we followed an inductive approach, that is, we started with a broad research question and we went back and forth between data collection, data analysis and the use of the literature.

Simeoni et al., 2020) and firm (Haugh and Talwar, 2010; Grewatsch and Kleindienst 2018) levels of analysis, i.e. adopting macro-oriented environmental perspectives (Andersson et al., 2013). For example, at the inter-firm level, Minoja (2012) suggests that a firm's stakeholder relationships play a critical role in making ambidexterity for CSP effective. In addition, organizations that mediate between the firm and its stakeholders – for example, non-governmental organizations promoting 'fair trade' in global supply chains – play an essential role in ambidexterity for CSP (Simeoni et al., 2020).

At the organizational level of analysis, Hahn et al. (2016) advocated for a structural separation, yet formal coordination, of morally and instrumentally driven initiatives across distinct departments to protect moral logics from being *de facto* marginalized at a firm level. This organizational structure may favor employees to behave ambidextrously (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004), for example by supporting knowledge exchange and collaboration across organizational departments (Haugh and Talwar 2010) or by developing business models that incorporate multiple logics (Laasch 2018).

Interestingly, research on ambidexterity for CSP at the organizational level of analysis built upon studies that investigated the role of formal leadership in enabling organizational ambidexterity (see O'Reilly and Tushman, 2008; Birkinshaw and Gibson, 2004; Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004; Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996). These studies assumed that ambidextrous organizations rely on ambidextrous leaders who are able to comprehend and respond to competing demands (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2004). In other words, studies on organizational ambidexterity have started underlining the role of managers in reconciling tensions (e.g., Zimmermann et al., 2020; Tarba et al., 2020). Our study embraces this assumption and delineates the link between *middle* managers' behavior and their contribution to organizational ambidexterity for CSP, thus adopting a micro-level perspective of analysis.

2.2. Micro-level perspectives on corporate social performance (CSP)

The study of individual managers' behaviors and cognitions in developing and enacting firms' sustainability strategies has a long history (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992; Rothenberg, 2007; Dahlmann and Grosvold, 2017; Kanashiro and Rivera, 2019; Girschik et al., 2020). Relevant examples can be found in the works of Bansal and Roth (2000) and Fineman (1996). Bansal and Roth highlight the importance of managerial personal beliefs, emphasizing their influence on sustainability practices. Similarly, Fineman describes how managers navigate the impact of external stakeholders on company strategies. Additionally, the works of Wright and Nyberg (2012) explore the emotional arenas in which sustainability leaders operate, shedding light on the emotional dimensions of their roles. Carollo and Guerci (2018) discuss the identity work undertaken by sustainability leaders, examining how they establish and maintain a sense of purpose as they deal with tensions. Some have also highlighted the importance of elements of the organizational context, such as the legitimation of environmental issues as an integral aspect of corporate identity and the discretionary slack available to managers, and discussed how these elements shape managers' sensemaking and consequently the emergence of firms' sustainability strategies (Sharma, 2000).

In existing research, sustainability managers are usually described as middle managers with limited power within the organization despite the complex and significant sustainability challenges they are tasked with (e.g. Visser and Crane, 2010; Taylor and Helfat, 2009). However, the explicit role of these managers as intermediaries between the firm and its external institutional environment has not been investigated in detail. Previous studies have acknowledged the influential role that intermediaries such as sustainability managers can play in transition processes towards sustainability. These intermediaries connect various actors, including both new entrants and incumbents, and facilitate the exchange of activities, skills and resources associated with these actors. By doing so, they create momentum for change, foster new collaborations around niche technologies, ideas and markets, and disrupt prevailing socio-technical configurations (e.g. Kivimaa, 2014; White and Stirling, 2015; Fischer and Newig, 2016). Despite previous research in other domains focused on the purposive activities undertaken by actors to shape the institutional environment (Lawrence et al., 2011; 2011), little attention has been given to how sustainability managers' institutional work outside firms' boundaries an contribute to enabling the organizational capacity to anticipate and adjust to the environment. Building on the notion that firm performance is also a function of how the firms align with the business or institutional environment informed and shaped by influential politicians, politics, and policies (Mbalyohere and Lawton 2018, Kanashiro and Rivera, 2019), we argue that managers, in their struggles and contestations with the institutional contexts of their firms, can help process and respond to external changes in the institutional environment and to mobilize the internal resources to cope with changes.

Two lines of research have been developed on the role of sustainability managers in relation to micro-level perspectives of CSP. The first focuses on the psychological foundations of CSP, specifically on the mechanisms by which individuals sense, judge, and operate as a reaction to CSP in and out of the work environment (e.g. Gond et al., 2017; Jones and Rupp, 2017). A second line of research delves into the sociological micro-foundations of CSP, that is, seeing CSP as embedded in workplace transformations (Kourula and Delalieux, 2016) and examining how individuals actually implement CSP initiatives within firms (Dzhengiz and Hockerts 2022) and to lesser extent the analysis of their actions outside the firms' boundaries (e.g. Rothenberg, 2007). These studies center on discursive, political, and identity aspects involved in the implementation of CSP initiatives, as perceived by CSP managers, practitioners, and other professionals (e.g. Ben Khaled and Gond, 2020). However, this emerging literature has largely neglected to analyze how the micro-level of analysis is connected to the macro levels of analysis (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Gond et al., 2017). More in general, the theorizing about how ambidextrous behaviors of managers coalesces into the firm-level capacity to pursue competing demands simultaneously is scarce (Ployhart and Moliterno, 2011). Remarking this gap, Brès et al. (2019) have emphasized the need for bridging these two levels. Research on the micro foundations of ambidexterity for CSP is relatively recent (Hahn et al., 2016) and does not yet present a practice approach of managing the tensions that also recognizes the relevance of the context in which practices take place, i.e. the situational uniqueness of managerial tasks.

We note, however, three notable exceptions of studies zooming into how managers deal with tensions to enact the multiple,

clashing logics underlying CSP. First, the study by Gond et al. (2017) shows how sustainability managers were able, through their everyday work, to bring the pursuit of CSP objectives into the core strategy of a UK electricity company. Their work involved, for example, cognitive coupling (i.e. communicating with the aim to make CSP identical to strategy), relational coupling (i.e., altering the links between the actors involved in the making of strategy), and material coupling (i.e., incorporating CSP into strategic performance indicators) (Gond et al., 2017). Second, Sandhu and Kulik (2019) analyzed the interplay between the organization structure and the level of managerial discretion in dealing with tensions in the organization, emphasizing the process of "shaping and being shaped'' and showing how structure and managerial discretion in solving tensions co-evolve over time. Third, Soderstrom and Weber (2020) showed that employees, through their behaviors, shaped formal organizational procedures and overcame separations across departments by developing novel structures ('structuring') to enact the multiple logics incorporated in CSP.

Nevertheless, these exceptional studies did not explicitly focus on the cognitive competencies underpinning managers' behaviors that resolved these strategic contradictions (e.g., Carmeli and Halevi, 2009; Jansen et al., 2016). We, thus, still do not have a clear understanding of the managers' cognitive characteristics *and* contextual conditions behind sustainability managers' commitment to sustainability within and outside firms' boundaries. Developing this understanding helps, as Morsing and Spence (2019) put it, to work on organizational ambidexterity for CSP as a multi-level phenomenon that interweaves both top-down and bottom-up processes. Thereby, to contribute filling this gap, we develop a multi-level model on sustainability managers' responses to conflicting goals by undertaking a micro-foundations approach.

2.3. A micro-foundations approach on ambidexterity for CSP

In general, the study of micro-foundations explains how individual-level factors affect organizations, how the individual interactions cause the rise of emergent, collective, and organization-level reactions and performance, and how micro level actions and interactions mediate relationships between macro-variables (Felin et al., 2012). It also allows a dual focus on both the actor's characteristics and its context, hence facilitating the analysis of how they interact with each other (Felin and Foss, 2005; Felin et al., 2012, 2015). While prior studies suggest positive influences of individual conditions (related to actors) and contextual conditions on ambidextrous behaviors, these effects have been studied in isolation. How these conditions complement or substitute for each other has been largely unexplored (Zimmermann et al., 2020; Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2020).

By embracing a micro-foundations approach (Felin et al., 2015) and the integration of the dimension of individual, institutional and organizational characteristics, we intend to extend prior studies on micro-CSP to justify the emergence, function, and effects of behaviors sustainability managers develop to address tensions on the organizational ambidexterity for CSP. Following Felin et al. (2012), we used micro-foundations "as causal explanations for the creation of a routine or capability" to handle the tensions within the organization. Hence, we adopt a micro-foundations framework encompassing two components, i.e. individuals' personal cognitive characteristics (skills, values, abilities, and cognition), institutional and organizational structures (i.e., formal processes and arrangements separating and integrating tasks in firms; institutional constraints). This three-component framework increases comprehensiveness and allows for the acknowledgement of the interplay between individual and contextual aspects of micro-foundations to explain how sustainability managers or similar roles, with limited power, behave to foster ambidexterity for CSP. In so doing, our micro-foundational view contributes to an analysis of the organizational, institutional context and individual characteristics that allow leaders to honor competing demands and to contribute to organizational ambidexterity for CSP.

3. Data and methods

Given the exploratory nature of our research question and our interest in understanding the complex interplay between cognitions, context, and reactions of middle-managers involved with sustainability initiatives, we conducted an interview-based qualitative study (Spradley, 1979). Our exploration underscores the pivotal role played by sustainability managers, emphasizing their values and interactions with all stakeholders, both internal and external to their organizations.

In framing our contribution, we acknowledge that two main research traditions have delved into the connections between firms and society. Specifically, research on sustainability on the one hand and corporate social responsibility on the other hand, have traditionally existed as separate domains but have recently witnessed a notable convergence (Bansal and Song, 2017). Following a constructivist ontology, we do not neatly align with either a Corporate Sustainability (CS) or Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) framework. Instead, we strive to provide a nuanced view of the experiences of sustainability managers, integrating various dimensions of both frameworks. While our study may not strictly adhere to either CS (Corporate Social Responsibility) or CSR (Corporate Sustainability Responsibility) frameworks, we have opted to refer to the middle managers under investigation as "sustainability managers." This label aligns with the prevailing terminology employed within the organizations we chose for our study and is commonly used in practice (e.g., Winston et al., 2023).

Specifically, we identify the internal and external actions through which sustainability managers exert systemic influence, acknowledging the influence of the context - both within and outside the firm's boundaries - on these actions, as proposed by sustainability scholars. In addition, we emphasize the significance of managers' beliefs as drivers for agentic action contributing to ambidexterity for CSP, as proposed by CSR scholars.

In our study, we depart from treating economic and social aspects in isolation, as commonly prescribed by traditional CSR frameworks. Instead, we view these aspects as interconnected, reflecting our approach to ambidexterity. However, our focus is not explicitly on the connection between organizations and their external environment, as corporate sustainability researchers typically dictate. Rather, our emphasis is more inward-looking, highlighting how sustainability managers navigate both internal and external

stakeholders through various brokering behaviors. Furthermore, our perspective, as outlined by Montiel (2008), can be characterized as anthropocentric, centering on the systemic actions and moral decision-making of sustainability managers.

Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for analyzing interactive processes (Lee, 1999). Therefore, we conducted in-depth interviews with sustainability managers, other similar roles, and some relevant stakeholders in multiple organizations, thus enabling us to achieve a rich understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and build a grounded model (Garud et al., 2018, 2020; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Our initial entry into the field was driven by a broad research objective: to gain a comprehensive understanding of how multinational organizations achieve sustainability. As we delved deeper into our research and interacted with our informants and existing literature, our research focus underwent a gradual refinement. We established a dynamic interplay between data collection, analysis, and the utilization of relevant literature.

Table 1
Firms and interviews.

Firm	Firm's employees	Examples of Programs for CSP	Number of interviewees	Year of interviews	Formal Titles of interviewees
Firm 1	222,000 (2013)	Social sustainability certification program; Ecological sustainability certification program; Sustainability Reporting & Communication.	2	2013	Manager of Policy Engagement Unit Manager of NGO partnering with Firm 1 (external), Senior program manager for aquaculture in stakeholder platform where Firm 1 is involved (external)
Firm 2	210 (2018)	Assessment Program of 'True Cost of Food'; Sustainability Reporting & Communication.	1	2018	Communication and Sustainability Manager (internal)
Firm 3	23,675 (2017)	Social sustainability certification program; Ecological sustainability certification program; Inclusive business models program; Sustainability Reporting & Communication.	13	2014 and 2017	Manager Technical Service; Director Category Procurement; Category Procurement Manager Sea Transport; Global manager of category procurement and logistics; Dairy Development Program (DDP) Manager in Indonesia; CSR junior manager in Indonesia and Vietnam; Regional Dairy Development Program (DDP) Manager; Senior Innovation Manager and Fruit Work Group of Sustainable Agriculture Initiative (SAI) platform; Marketing Junior Manager of Firm 3; Program manager fruit and vegetables of NGO partnering with Firm 3 (external); Category procurement manager; Manager Corporate Environmental Affairs & Sustainability; General manager of stakeholder platform where Firm 3 is involved (external)
Firm 4	22,100 (2014)	Social sustainability certification program; Ecological sustainability certification program; Sustainability Reporting & Communication.	3	2013 and 2014	Marketing Manager and UTZ-certified working group member; Marketing and communications Manager; Manager of NGO partnering with Firm 4 (external)
Firm 5	110,000 (2014)	Social sustainability certification program; Ecological sustainability certification program; Sustainability Reporting & Communication.	3	2013 and 2014	Communication manager of stakeholder platform where Firm 5 is involved (external); Manager of Sustainable Cocoa Supply Chains; Senior cocoa program manager for cocoa in stakeholder platform where Firm 5 is involved
Firm 6	117,000 (2014)	Social sustainability certification program; Ecological sustainability certification program; Sustainability Reporting & Communication.	6	2013 and 2014	Policy advisor on Corporate Social Responsibility of NGO partnering with Firm 6 (external); Director international Corporate Social Responsibility; Corporate Social Responsibility Manager for Coffee and Tea; Senior program manager in stakeholder platform where Firm 6 is involved (external); Senior Value Stream Manager; Senior Tea Supply Chain Manager
Firm 7	154,848 (2018)	Social sustainability certification program; Ecological sustainability certification program; Plastic use reduction program; Sustainability Reporting & Communication.	10	2013, 2014, and 2018	Sustainability manager, Benelux; Senior brand manager; Global R&D Director for Packaging; Global Director for Sustainable Sourcing; Sustainable Sourcing Manager Dairy and Meat; R&D Manager for personal care and home care; Global Integration Manager R&D; Sustainability manager, Benelux; Manager of stakeholder platform where Firm 7 is involved; Senior researcher in NGO partnering with Firm 7 (external)
Firm 8	266 (2018)	CO_2 Emission Reduction Program; Sustainability Reporting & Communication.	3	2018	Purchasing Junior Manager; Director of purchasing and sustainability; Manager Technical Service.

3.1. Context

Scholars in qualitative studies highlight the importance of identifying shared mechanisms across diverse contexts. This approach is valuable for developing innovative theories that can withstand contextual differences and possess improved generalizability (see for example: Barley, 1996; Bechky and O'Mahony, 2015).We thus selected different companies for our interviews based on the following four criteria. First, the organizations we chose for our study were actively addressing the trade-offs between sustainability and profitability and were considered successful in enacting ambidexterity for CSP. In particular, through conversations with personal contacts of the fourth author and consultation of public sources and company documents (e.g., reports, websites), we selected companies that were considered exemplary in the ways they were able to target ambitious commercial objectives, while remaining environmentally responsible. In addition, the companies we studied strived to integrate sustainability into their business model as well as in the everyday work of managers and employees. Embedding sustainability in everyday work, however, often created trade-offs between productivity and environmental outcomes. Hence, ambidexterity for CSP represented a long-term achievement, which required firms to maintain and expand their sustainability goals and sustainable activities over time. Second, to further make sure that sustainability was a core objective, we selected companies from a single industry, i.e. the food industry, where CSP is assessed in relation to a common set of global socio-ecological challenges such as food insecurity, rural poverty and the effects of climate change. Not surprisingly, company driven programs for CSP in the food industry have been significantly growing in the past 10 years (Ewing-Chow D, 2019; Ikram et al., 2020). Third, the companies we chose maintained control of their R&D, manufacturing, and marketing operations in one country (The Netherlands) and thus experienced similar institutional pressures. We chose the Netherlands because, according to the OECD, this country faces major environmental threats deriving from intensive agriculture, e.g., loss of biodiversity, climate change, and over-exploitation of natural resources, and is significantly investing in integrating environmental concerns into economic decisions (OECD, 2015). Fourth, the companies we chose had to be large enough (larger than 100 million EUR/year) to receive comparable stakeholder pressures on their sustainability initiatives. Altogether, these conditions set an appropriate context to understand how company managers navigate the tensions arising from multiple and sometimes conflicting demands and pressures at multiple (organizational and institutional) levels.

Table 1 provides an overview of the 41 interviewees and 8 firms, which we considered a sufficient number to reach theoretical saturation (Strass and Corbin, 1998). In the years of data collection (2013–2018), each of these companies has been involved in designing new sustainability programs and strategies encompassing a broad set of their operations (i.e., supply chain procurement, processing and manufacturing, waste management and recovery, labelling in marketing). All companies engaged systematically with external stakeholders (e.g., through multi-stakeholder partnerships with civil society organizations, universities, and public entities) in the definition of these programs and strategies. Collecting data over time helped us understand the evolution of the ambidexterity-building process in our informants' organizations; discover their managerial roles and behaviors within specific projects/initiatives that evolved over time; and find support for the relationships between the different parts of our grounded model. In some organizations we conducted more interviews because we followed more projects/initiatives and we wanted to grasp more details from different informants. To this regard, Ortiz-de-Mandojana and Bansal (2015) observe that the outcomes of sustainability initiatives often manifest long term. Collecting interview data over time allowed us to better grasp these long term effects.

3.2. Data collection

We conducted interviews with sustainability managers (21 interviewees) and their immediate stakeholders, internal (13 interviewees) or external (7 interviewees) to their company boundaries (see Table 1). On the basis of our purposive and iterative sampling approach (Yin, 2003; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), we reached out directly to sustainability managers in the selected companies. Subsequently, employing a snowball sampling technique, we expanded our reach to include their closest partners both within and beyond their organizational boundaries. This diverse pool of respondents was instrumental in facilitating a comprehensive interpretation and theoretical analysis of sustainability managers' discourse and behaviors through a triangulation of well-informed sources.

During interviews, which ranged between 60 and 140 min, sustainability managers were asked to narrate their activities and strategies over time, including the challenges (if any) that they experienced in balancing social and economic returns and how they faced them through individual decision making in co-developing and implementing their companies' sustainable strategies and programs. These strategies and programs provided a fascinating setting to observe how sustainability managers interwove their work at multiple levels: individual, intra-organizational (i.e., within their company across functional units and hierarchies) and inter-organizational (i.e. engaging with external stakeholders) in heterogeneous functions, titles and tasks. For example, in relatively smaller companies – e.g., Firm 2 and 8, with annual sales between 100 and 300 million EUR/year – sustainability managers' task was respectively integrated with public relations and procurement tasks. Conversely, in larger companies – up to 1,5 billion EUR/year of Firm 7 – sustainability managers had roles more distinct from other organizational functions and geographical scope. We also asked about the surrounding organizational and institutional structures, respectively within and outside company boundaries; specifically, we asked how they adapted their work to these structures or, vice versa, how they tried to adapt these structures to their work.

The interviews with sustainability managers' partners - internal and external to company boundaries - played a critical role in complementing and triangulating their narratives. These interviewees were asked to describe their process of engagement with the sustainability managers, including how the goals and issues related to this engagement evolved over time. During these narratives, we sought purposely to elicit their views on how sustainability managers dealt individually and collaboratively with the issues at stake.

Finally, we collected documents, reports, and white papers, and we consulted other available information (e.g. financial

performance data) about the eight companies, in order to have a more specific understanding of their overall objectives and their specific sustainability and CSP initiatives and to triangulate the perspectives of our informants. These additional data also allowed us to conclude that these organizations presented themselves as - and were perceived to be - successful in their sustainability initiatives.

3.3. Data analysis

We followed a qualitative, iterative, and inductive content analysis approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Gioia et al., 2013). First, we analyzed our textual data through a systematic process of coding and identified themes and relationships. In an initial phase of open coding, all the authors read a subset of the interviews (about ten each) and met several times to identify recurrent concepts in the data. We availed ourselves of the literature to further explore these concepts and aggregate concepts into higher level theoretical categories. In other words, concepts were connected within an integrative theoretical framework through several iterations between coders, data, and prior literature. For example, our informants often told us how they worked to raise the level of attention on sustainability inside their company, how they provided specific suggestions to leaders and managers and how they tried to inspire other colleagues towards sustainably. We grouped the abovementioned recurrent concepts into a higher level category that we labelled: 'Promoting an Organizational Climate of Sustainability'. Other similar aggregate categories we discovered were 'Internal collaboration' and 'Fostering the firm's economic performance'. The three categories just described were further aggregated into the theoretical category 'internal brokering behaviors'.

In parallel, we looked for relationships between concepts, i.e. we performed axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Our inductive approach consisted of finding the underlying patterns that could link individuals' characteristics and behaviors, information about organizational and structural processes, and ambidexterity for CSP. Through such an iterative process, we started to build a grounded model that reflected our theoretical interpretation.

In a second stage of our research, we moved our emergent coding scheme to the software MAXQDA10 to make our qualitative analysis more transparent, systematic, and sharable across researchers (Sinkovics et al., 2008). With the help of a research assistant, all the interviews were re-coded using the concepts, aggregate theoretical dimensions, and relationships that we had identified. As we moved our analysis to a more structured database, we recognized some inconsistencies in our previous analyses and we met a few times to update our concepts, theoretical categories, and relationships. We also updated our model and our coding further, always in interaction with existing literature.

Overall, this approach enabled us to build a grounded model (see Fig. 1) on (a) the different types of brokering behaviors enacted by sustainability managers and (b) the underlying conditions that the behaviors were built upon.
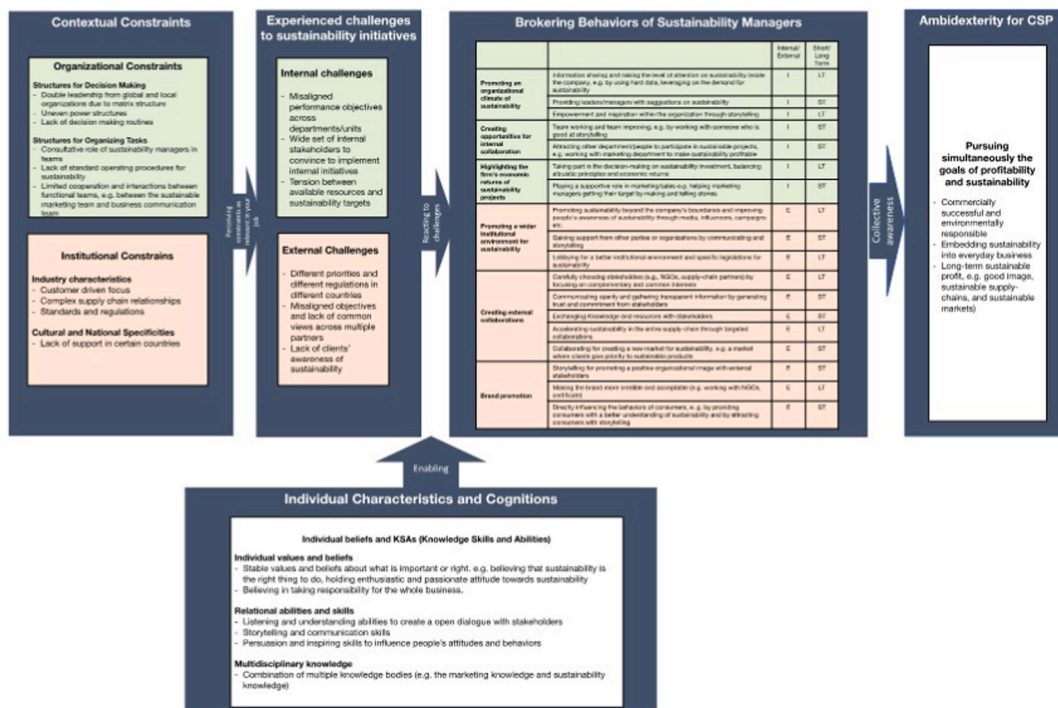

Fig. 1. A Grounded Theory on the Microfundations of Ambidexterity for CSP focusing on the Role of Sustainability Managers.

4. Findings

We structure the presentation of our findings around our grounded model, as depicted in Fig. 1. Initially, we outline the challenges confronted by sustainability managers, which arise from organizational and institutional constraints. Subsequently, we illustrate how sustainability managers address these challenges through the enactment of both short-term and long-term brokering behaviors. These emergent behaviors, not formally prescribed, are facilitated by specific individual characteristics. Finally, we provide preliminary evidence on how brokering behaviors fostered ambidexterity for CSP through a vignette that connects the different elements of our grounded model.

4.1. Challenges faced by sustainability managers

Sustainability managers faced unique challenges in their efforts to promote ambidexterity for CSP. These challenges manifested, in their everyday work, in the form of tensions between opposing demands. In the following paragraphs we e distinguish between internal and external challenges.

Internal Challenges. Sustainability managers faced tensions within their organizations when they tried to explore, promote or implement sustainability initiatives. For example, sustainability managers needed to take into account the different performance objectives of the units of their organizations (e.g., Sales, R&D). When they needed to implement initiatives across units, different goals and priorities (e.g. related to different projects) were misaligned with sustainability objectives. In describing the diverse projects in his organization, a sustainability manager (firm 7) complained that *"People have overcrowded agendas"* and wondered *" where are the priorities?"* He further explained how *"if it is not your core business and does not contribute to your goals and also growth and incremental turnover of the organization, then it becomes a lot trickier."*

Relatedly, sustainability managers faced the arduous task of "persuading" a diverse array of internal stakeholders regarding the merits of particular sustainability initiatives. In a pertinent field note, a sustainability manager responsible for overseeing sustainability practices at a prominent food company with control over local supermarkets in the Netherlands (firm 8), expressed profound frustration when encountering a lack of recognition from supermarket employees and managers regarding the authenticity of the company's sustainability endeavors. Instead, these efforts were perceived merely as fleeting marketing trends or gimmicks.

> These are supermarkets, who are going to decide for a moment, hello you're not going to tell me what/how to communicate. I understand. That is a kind of arrogance on our part, only we are so busy, this is so important story, this is, you know, we like, it's not just a kind of marketing, It is, it is unfortunate, that people see some of our actions mainly as a kind of marketing action. While we really consciously want to make the world really better, and thus go with full conviction and therefore perhaps a little naive to think that all supermarkets then or customers say of cool.

Even in situations when sustainability objectives are understood, tensions between available resources and sustainability targets create further challenges. For example, given that certain managers, e.g. VPs and unit managers, have a final say on budgeting, sustainability projects run the risk of getting halted, as illustrated in the following field note from a sustainability manager of firm 3:

> That manager [is] willing and the other is not. And because they are decision-making, "decision Creators," managers, they have the power to stop something or push something through. And that is something, look at it is now, [we are] two months away [from the end of the project] and that has actually changed in two months.

External Challenges. Sustainability managers also grappled with external challenges stemming from the intricate and heterogeneous institutional environments within which their initiatives were embedded. For example, they encountered significant tensions when endeavoring to implement global initiatives, such as initiatives aimed at mitigating child labor. These challenges necessitated the navigation of conflicting priorities and regulatory frameworks prevailing in diverse countries.

Even when operating in single countries, sustainability managers had to address a lack of common views across multiple partners, e.g. NGOs, government institutions, suppliers, and competitors. In describing the efforts in creating new industry standards for food supply chains, a sustainability manager at Firm 3 lamented the difficulty of dealing with different perspectives when he explained that the success of the creation of a new standard *"has nothing to do with competition, this has to do with your your mindset"* and underscores how such different mindsets included *"other companies, like [name removed], but also suppliers, other NGO's,other companies, big companies, so we are going to set the standard which is now going to be, let's say industry standard, and that is what we want to achieve."*

Particularly challenging, in the perspective of some of our informants, are the relations with final clients. Food companies frequently employ product labels to communicate their sustainability efforts, such as those pertaining to fair trade. However, customers, exemplified by tea buyers described in the field note below, may prioritize purchasing products at a lower cost. Consequently, a tension arises between cost reduction objectives and the implementation of fair trade initiatives represented by product labels, posing a significant obstacle for sustainability managers, as suggested by an interviewee from Firm 6.

> We think that using labels is the best way to achieve sustainability in the chain although no label is ideal. You know that your customers are not willing to spend more than a certain amount of money for their daily cup of tea. Therefore there is a certain limit to what companies can do because consumers will stop buying tea if you charge costs for sustainable tea which are too high. Then no one benefits, because you are stopping to buy the tea as a company also. Therefore, it is hard for a tea packer to find the right balance between investing money in the chain and try not to charge your customers for that. On the other hand there is a risk that there is not invested enough from the ground to really change things.

4.2. How organizational and institutional constraints shape challenges

When analyzing our interviews, we discovered that, some elements of the organizational structure and of the institutional environment acted as constraints to the work of sustainability managers and fostered the emergence of the specific challenges described in the previous paragraphs.

Organizational Constraints. We first underscore the role of the organizational structures for decision making and organizing tasks (i.e. division of labor into functional units and teams). Notably, the absence of dual or parallel structures with divergent focuses to manage competing demands, such as sustainability and profitability, as advocated in traditional ambidexterity literature (e.g., Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996), hindered sustainability managers' ability to reconcile inconsistent demands from organizational stakeholders. The formal structure and allocation of resources were predominantly driven by economic objectives, thereby frequently deeming social initiatives incompatible or of secondary importance. Consequently, sustainability managers found themselves overwhelmed by competing priorities and demands.

More specifically, the firms we studied were organized hierarchically with decision-making concentrated in a few leaders at the top of the organizational structure who '*have the power to stop something or push something through*' (Purchasing junior manager of firm 8). Strategic decisions, also in relation to sustainability, were made at the top and communicated to lower-level managers for implementation. Sustainability managers then, had to make sure that strategic decisions reflected the sustainability values they were advocating for and were well integrated into the rest of the organization. Relatedly, there were not specific decision making routines put in practice to address sustainability issues in the everyday work of managers and employees, beyond making sure that each decision gets approved from the executives. The director of international corporate social responsibility from firm 6 underlined how '*the most important thing, of course, is that that decision comes and that the executive committee says "go." And then we ensure that it becomes a communication and that it is integrated into the normal hierarchical lines.*'

Moreover, the challenges perceived by sustainability managers were strongly influenced by the constraints imposed by the existing structures for organizing tasks. Sustainability managers were formally required to embed their acts into certain business units/ functions and teams, but only in a consultative role. Without standard operating procedures for addressing sustainability issues in the work of teams and units, sustainability managers felt they could not impact single teams the way they would like. To this regard, the sustainability manager of firm 7 explained to us how, in his organization, there was a rigid departmentalization and people who were responsible for sustainability formally belonged to different units, such as safety and procurement.

> *Well, things are political and there is a certain hierarchy. But sustainability is actually one, just as the organization is organized, in a matrix structure also anchored in the company. Lean and Mean, because it really is about integration into the business … People like me who are responsible for this, is often in communication, sustainable business and communication function Integrated. Then you have in all categories, you have people responsible for it, sometimes at brand level as the large global brands are. You have in the factories people are responsible, but this is also the quality and safety and environmental function that is integrated. Then there is a sustainable procurement team, that's the team what the procurement, the purchasing function supports, because it also requires specific expertise and then you have a sustainable markets team which specifically supports the country organizations.*

Institutional Constraints. Some of the challenges encountered by sustainability managers can be attributed to specific industry-related characteristics, as well as cultural and national particularities. In the food industry, where our interviewees operated, a strong focus on costumers' preferences and desires prevails, as described in the following field note from a senior brand manager from Firm 7:

> *There are lots of things I would like to do otherwise. But you keep a company that wants to sell things. So we cannot radically upset entire portfolios because we will lose consumers. So where I can make a difference; I can think ahead of what we could possibly make a difference, but these are small steps. And we will have to make these steps more quickly. But these are now mainly driven by the more strategic teams, so where I come from. And here you actually have to run the current business anyway. And that is not always in line with what I think is good for the world.*

In addition to a customer focus, the presence of complex supply chain relationships in the industry of our sustainability managers created unique constraints to their work. Food supply chains are characterized by their intricate and interconnected nature. They involve multiple stages, stakeholders, and factors such as perishability, diverse sourcing, regulations, and consumer demands. Managing and optimizing these chains require comprehensive understanding and strategic decision-making to ensure food safety, quality, and efficiency on top of sustainability.

Relatedly, in the food industry, the existence or implementation of standards and regulations impose additional constraints on the endeavors of sustainability managers. For instance, while striving to promote a healthier lifestyle, the sustainability manager of Firm 7 emphasized their substantial reduction of sugar content in their beverages. However, they encountered challenges in effectively communicating this achievement to customers due to specific regulations governing the definition of "low in sugar."

> *The discussion was about ' low in sugar '. So you can only say that if you contain less than 2.5 g of sugar. But we can say ' low in calories ' ', because our total calorie intake is below average. Therefore, it is deliberately chosen to ' ' low in calories ' ' to appoint. So then you actually search with your party of what exactly are the objections how can we come up with something that does resonate but is also relevant to the consumer. Because it must be relevant to the consumer at all times, otherwise you might as well not do it.*

Finally, cultural differences and national specificities in different countries further constrain the work of sustainability mangers. The communication and sustainability manager of Firm 2, based in the Netherlands, mentioned an initiative that his company carried

out with partners in Germany and described how, in his opinion, national cultural differences affected how sustainability issues were interpreted and addressed:

> *I learn a lot lately about the difference between German culture and Dutch culture. I think we here in the Netherlands are very nice and very cool and super tough, that this does not work for a meter in Germany. So, and also what is important is organizations/companies or individuals who can only start thinking about idealism if they themselves are reasonably happy huh. […] Sometimes I go personally, I assume too quickly that everyone will also make that world more beautiful and better and more gifted and all the energy in it. […] And then I go, because I find it so important. I think everyone should be so important, that I can pass my enthusiasm a bit beyond that others may be busy with other things.*

4.3. Responding to challenges: brokering behaviors of sustainability managers as microfoundations of ambidexterity for CSP

How did sustainability managers react to the challenges generated by organizational and institutional constraints and helped their organizations enact ambidexterity for CSP? We discovered that sustainability managers were constantly engaged in behaviors that, in their perspective, fostered ambidexterity for CSP both in the short term and in the long term. In particular, sustainability managers interacted both with internal stakeholders (other employees, middle managers, and top managers) and with external ones (governmental agencies, NGOs, suppliers, and clients) with the objectives of diffusing sustainability ideas and bringing together different voices and perspectives. Thus, we classified the different types of interactions into internal and external brokering behaviors (see more examples in Table 2). As we illustrate brokering behaviors, we further distinguish them into short and long term.

Long term and Short Term Internal Brokering Behaviors. Sustainability managers were actively engaged in bringing together and creating alignment between different groups and units within their organization. First, they promoted an organizational climate for sustainability. To this regard, sustainability managers shared specific data and information with organizational members to engender a long-term shared understanding and awareness of sustainability issues across the company. In addition to sharing information,

Table 2
Examples of field notes for internal and external brokering behaviors.

Coding category	Examples of Internal Brokering Behaviors
Promoting organizational climate of sustainability	"It appears time and again that it takes a long time before companies recognize chain problems, they will initially deny it and will not seriously look for it themselves. However, if hard data comes on the table, companies are more willing to recognize problems." (Senior researcher in NGO partnering with firm 1) "So there is, it's is you need also to communicate internally to tell what you are doing and that really inspires employees as well, and then "hey, this is cool, we are really doing something to make to well better and how does it work" (Program manager fruit and vegetables of NGO partnering with firm 3) "Both gathering information from all our growers all over the world. And then that internally to get that well through the systems, that everyone is also enthusiastic and understands why we do this and that we are also an idealistic company." (Communication and sustainability manager from firm 2)
Creating opportunities for internal collaboration	I have always been involved. A communication lady too. Marketers are doing it now for the marketing director doing it for the second year. Someone else, for that, someone else … That you guarantee something of continuity and in terms of durability." (Sustainability manager of firm 7) "What we have also communicated a lot to the whole company. So that also creates a lot of inspiration. You can also Not always invent everything yourself … You don't always have to invent the wheel again to make big strides. Sometimes you go faster when you do that together. Or you usually go faster when you do that together." (Senior brand manager from firm 7) "That you do not want it, but often it is also when I take people to the team, I look for people too, that is actually quite automatic. I'm just looking for a supplement for the team. No, it's actually going well." (Communication and sustainability manager of firm 2)
Highlighting the firm's economic returns of sustainability projects	"I think many people of sales, for example, are very focused on getting targets. That's their drive. So, as a manager you have to make sure you speak their language … So, I need to translate it into a story. I have to make sure that all conditions are there, that I help them to keep getting their targets too." (Senior brand manager of firm 7) "I help marketing managers to bring current topics to the attention. There is also indirect contact with supply chain managers." (Marketing and communications manager from firm 4)
	Examples of External Brokering Behaviors
Promoting a wider social and institutional environment for sustainability	"Created a piece of awareness that sustainability is really important. It has always ended up in the niche corner. That is why there has also been a growing awareness among NGOs that they have to come from this niche and make sustainability a mainstream business." (Senior program manager for aquaculture in stakeholder platform where firm 1 is involved) "This is inefficient and difficult and not really for the mainstream. This means that companies and standards must cooperate more with each other and must take account of other government standards. It's not about buying coffee, but more than creating an institutional environment that contributes to producing and trading sustainable coffee." (Marketing and communications manager from firm 4)
Creating external collaborations	"NGOs are important because they have a great deal of knowledge about the problems occurring in the chains and also give legitimacy to the initiatives of commercial companies." (Marketing and communications manager of firm 4) "We can really learn from each other. That's more perhaps a subconscious effect or something yes, but really if we are aware of we are going with that and working together, because there we can learn from that I don't think. An unintentional effect perhaps." (Purchasing junior manager from firm 8)

sustainability managers tried to inspire employees to actually work towards the vision of CSP through storytelling focused on establishing a long-term vision. For example, a sustainability manager at firm 7 told us how he talked to employees through stories. He considered it inspirational to remind employees that their individual efforts were indeed helping realize the vision of a sustainable company

> *[Through storytelling] everyone can understand how it [sustainability] works and how it could be realized. So, it's a piece of the vision, a piece of empowerment … And the* inspiration *is that everyone has also made a huge effort, in any case on this site, to get it for each other.* (R&D Manager for personal care and home care of Firm 7*)*

Sustainability managers also provided other managers with concrete tips to include a sustainability perspective in their everyday decision-making, i.e. enacted behaviors intended to help managers in the short term to practically implement sustainable solutions. For example, the director of international corporate social responsibility of firm 6 told us how he directly advised the 'executive committee internally … If they agree, then things will just go. Then you have a mandate to also implement what you do but ultimately to anchor it in the business'.

Second, sustainability managers actively worked for the rapid creation of new collaborations between different functional teams and departments in the organization, such as marketing teams and supply-chain teams. Sustainability managers recognized that the problems related to sustainability were complex and required interdisciplinary and inter-functional collaboration in teams. Creating teams in the short-term with members from multiple departments also allowed to '*not reinvent the wheel*' and '*to go faster when you do that together*' (Senior brand manager from Firm 7). Fundamental to creating such teams was attracting people with appropriate and complementary skills. For instance, team members with technical skills could play a pivotal role in solving a specific problem (e.g., designing a new feature of a product), while members with good communication skills (e.g., engaging storytellers) could play an important role in transferring knowledge and influencing attitudes or behaviors within the team.

Finally, sustainability managers were continuously reminding managers and employees of the positive long-term implications for profitability of sustainability projects. In order to do so, they actively tried to be involved with decisions on relevant new sustainability projects of their organizations to advocate for balancing altruistic principles and economic outcomes, as suggested by a sustainability manager of firm 3 in the following field note.

> *It's our role as procurement representatives to ensure that such decisions are not done on a pure altruistic principle, but rather also reflect the commercial reality and that means, as I said before, it's perfectly ok if we want to invest in sustainability or so, but it needs to be a conscious investment, so the price-tag related to the initiative needs to be understood and clear, and that's the procurement role of this, which I will be representing in that case.* (Director of category procurement from firm 3)

In addition, we observed that sustainability managers played a supportive role to marketing or sales in their everyday work. In particular, they tried to create stories related to sustainability that could be used by sales and marketing representatives to present products to customers. These stories, however, had to be aligned with the short-term objectives and incentive/reward systems of sales representatives. To this regard, the senior Brand Manager of Firm 7 told us:

> *I think many people of sales, for example, are very focused on getting targets. That's their drive. So, as a manager, you have to make sure you speak their language … I need to translate it into a story. I have to make sure that all conditions are there, that I help them to keep getting their targets too.*

Long Term and Short Term External Brokering Behaviors. Sustainability managers also enacted short- and long-term activities aimed at bringing together and aligning different stakeholders in the environment outside of their organization. First, sustainability managers were often engaged in the promotion of a wider social and institutional environment for sustainability in the long term. They believed in developing broad social awareness on sustainability, as underlined by the communication and sustainability manager from Firm 2:

> *The role of wide social awareness towards sustainability in creating a sustainable world, we want to make people more aware … We, you and I, really need to take that responsibility to make that world better. So just get out of that trade and earn that money, short term profits and tackle the bigger goals and there we see a very interesting development. This cooperation, with customers and also the end consumer, but also with producers.*

Thus, sustainability managers lobbied for the creation, in the long-term, of new legislations or tried to attract the immediate attention of the general public or specific stakeholders in the short-term through storytelling and communication campaigns, e.g., on sustainable food chains. To this regard, when presenting sustainability issues in the coffee supply chain, a senior project manager at Firm 6 told us: 'It's not about buying coffee, but more than creating an *institutional* environment that contributes to producing and trading *sustainable* coffee'.

Second, sustainability managers scanned the environment for appropriate partnerships with external stakeholders, such as NGOs, government agencies, and suppliers. According to our informants, sustainability issues required the creation of hybrid partnerships (e. g., Bishop and Waring, 2016). However, an effective external collaboration represented a complex achievement, given the multiple interests of heterogeneous partners. To this regard, the sustainability manager from firm 7 stressed that there are 'always multiple interests, a project never goes as if you would like it to go, so [you need to] be [as] efficient [as] possible, because there are always people involved with other opinions and interests.' Hence, sustainability managers highlighted common interests as the necessary principle for selecting partners that could be suitable in the long term. They actively engaged, in their everyday work, in open communication with partners in order to foster trust and commitment.

Ultimately, common interests and trust led to effective collaboration, which was considered by sustainability managers as an antecedent for knowledge and resources exchanges. Indeed, exchanging knowledge and resources had a significant impact on fostering CSP, because it helped companies to accumulate distinct information, technology, skills, and expertise to address social issues. For example, the director of purchasing and sustainability of Firm 8 explained how some short-term issues, such as how to reduce electricity consumption, required the technical support and knowledge of their suppliers. In a similar vein, another sustainability manager from firm 7 introduced distinct resources that partners brought to a sustainability project regarding reducing food waste:

> The companies that help us creating the App, restaurants with whom we partner, and they help us creating and improve the recipes, or the App. Some or our partners like who are also our clients, companies like [name of company] also help us testing the ideas, the recipes and see if it works in the kitchen.

Additionally, we discovered that external collaborations accelerated sustainability in the entire supply chain and promoted the formation of new sustainable markets, ultimately helping firms in gaining long-term competitive advantages and achieving their profit-oriented goals.

> All Dutch supermarkets have agreed that 100% certified fish (MSC and ASC or equivalent) will be sold … The choice for sustainable production is a form of choice editing. This means that consumers actually no longer have a choice for non-sustainable products of their own brand. This has consequences for the purchasing strategy. [As a result] profitability will be guided by sustainability goals. (Manager of policy engagement unit of firm 1).

Finally, sustainability managers took care of promoting the image of their organization with external stakeholders, through different short-term tactics aimed at rapidly changing the general public perceptions of their organization and influencing buyers' preferences. To this regard, we identified how sustainability managers emphasized storytelling as the primary way to help firms building a good corporate image and gaining a better corporate reputation, as suggested by a senior sustainability manager in firm 7.

> I am responsible for the [Name of brand] brand …. basically, I have to make sure that sales have the whole right story to sell and so that eventually as many consumers buy it … so what are the tools to communicate. We go through outdoors or via TV or via Influencers … as brand manager … you are there for responsible if something like sugar reduction is carried out that is translated in the correct way. You are actually going to do storytelling. (Senior manager from firm 7)

In addition to using storytelling to promote firms' brands, sustainability managers tried to obtain the support of governmental agencies and NGOs by obtaining labels and certificates related to sustainability. This way, sustainability managers worked to make their brands more credible and acceptable in the long-term. The manager of a hybrid partnership Firm 7 was part of told us that 'The moment they [Firm 7] broke open and started working with certification NGOs, they became effective and their brands became more appreciated and accepted by society.'

Sustainability managers also emphasized how they wanted to directly influence their final consumers' behaviors in the short-term by providing them with rich information and a better understanding of sustainability.

Table 3
Examples of field notes for conditions for brokering behaviors.

Coding category	Examples of individual cognitions, abilities, and skills
Individual values and beliefs	"A person needs to believe in what they are doing. Especially in the sustainability area. That is fundamental. If you don't believe what you are doing is the right thing to do, because it is the best to the world at large; that is not going to happen. That is for me the first thing." (Global R&D director for packaging from firm 7)
	"Someone who believes very much in sustainability can then just walk a bit harder, or you know that on such a project because he goes with full passion and conviction." (Sustainability manager from firm 7)
	"And we want to make people more aware, all these companies: boys we have so awfully good in this part of the world that it is no longer just that others have to take responsibility. We, you and I, really need to take that responsibility to make that world better." (Communication and sustainability manager of firm 2)
	"The importance that we cannot continue like this now … Everything is what you do is embedded in the entire business and also the awareness of yes guys we are responsible for what is happening around us and that must also be packed." (Global integration manager of firm 7)
Relational ability	"You should especially [have] good listening, so of okay where is the bottleneck in a part of the Supply Chain, so where is the bottleneck for example with that farmer to apply changes." (Sustainable sourcing manager of firm 7)
	"So, listening from them first, because you know, every partner has the opinion etc, so by listening to them we know exactly what that want from us. Trying to understand their opinions etc. And make them interested in our project." (Manager of dairy Development Program from firm 3)
	"There is needed that the necessary persuasion power, but in this case, it was because the idea was already very inspiring." (R&D Manager from firm 7)
Multidisciplinary skills	"Yes, that's fairly general, that you, for me it is a combination of substantive knowledge, knowledge of the organization; All the different functions, huge network in the organization and a huge external network that combine you." (Sustainability manager of firm7)
	"Yes, well I can only talk to myself … Technical knowledge of your Supply Chains to have. So agronomic technical knowledge. There, let me say so, most CSR managers fail to do so, but these are still glorified communication lords and ladies. They have little real knowledge in the field of agronomy and Such technique, you need to have good knowledge of Supply Chain, so you need to know well of how that is organized." (Sustainable sourcing manager dairy and meat from firm 7)

> *We spend a lot of time studying the behavior of consumers. […] the majority of consumers do have some interest in the question of how that tea is produced. Or whether is environmentally friendly. Whether the working conditions of the plantation workers are good, there are few people who really want to know this in detail … things are put on the suit, as a logo, something about the origin … become a prerequisite for gaining consumer confidence or maintaining consumer confidence.* (The global director for sustainable sourcing of firm 7)

4.4. Enabling brokering behaviors: the role of individual characteristics and cognitions

Our findings revealed that various individual characteristics, including beliefs, personal abilities, and skills, played a crucial role in facilitating the emergence of brokering behaviors within organizational contexts where sustainability managers lacked explicit guidance on their operational strategies. These individual traits empowered sustainability managers to navigate and effectively address challenges, demonstrating their adaptability and resilience in overcoming obstacles. Table 3 contains a few examples from our interviews.

The presence of personal values and beliefs related to ethical and social issues, as well a sense of responsibility towards society and their organization drove sustainability managers to be proactive and attentive, above and beyond the formal requirements of their roles. In relation to personal values and beliefs, the global R&D Director for Packaging for Firm 7 Food Solution explained to us how:

> *A person needs to believe in what they are doing. Especially in the sustainability area. That is fundamental. If you don't believe what you are doing is the right thing to do, because it is the best to the world at large; that is not going to happen. That is for me the first thing.*

Informants often mentioned that their brokering behaviors were not motivated by external rewards, such their salary or a promotion, but by intrinsic motivators. For example, the global manager of category procurement and logistics, acting as a sustainability manager in Firm 3, told us that "*It is also important to get our salary increase and so on, okay, but is that really the most important? No, I don't think so. I feel a lot better about myself. If I can actually do things that accomplish something. But that is a form of self-fulfillment that you need to feel.*" Similarly, another informant, when describing his interactions with marketing and sales colleagues, clarified how his brokering behaviors were driven '*not just [by] marketing', but they had 'to do a lot with my personal, say, believe that we should do this.*'

On top of strong personal beliefs, our research identified that a more general sense of responsibility towards social issues enabled sustainability managers to implement initiatives that created substantive value for wider society beyond private interests. For instance, a manager from firm 2 linked personal social responsibility with how he talked with external stakeholders.

> *We want to make people more aware, all these companies: "boys we have so awfully good in this part of the world that it is no longer just that others have to take responsibility. We, you and I, really need to take that responsibility to make that world better" […] the importance that we cannot continue like this now … everything is what you do is embedded in the entire business and also the awareness of yes guys we are responsible for what is happening around us and that must also be packed.* (Communication and sustainability manager of firm 2)

Additionally, some sustainability managers reflected on their responsibility towards their firms and held the view that their work should be oriented also to profit maximization and financial performance in the long term, necessary for the economic sustainability of the company. By following this view, they took actions to explore ways to gain economic returns from sustainability projects, such as interacting with sales managers to help them create good sustainability stories for their clients.

> *As regards responsibility, it means that I am actually responsible for that whole business. So, basically, I have to make sure that sales have the whole right story to sell and so that eventually as many consumers buy it.* (The senior brand manager of firm 7)

In addition, sustainability managers had unique knowledge, skills and abilities that allowed them to act as brokers. In particular, they held knowledge in different fields (e.g. they had a technical background, but also took specific courses and certifications on CSP) that allowed them to understand the different perspectives of stakeholders. For example, the sustainability manager from firm 7 explained to us how fundamental it was for him to integrate the technical knowledge of the field, especially in terms of agronomic technical knowledge, with a clear overall view of the supply chain. In his opinion, sustainability managers (even when perceived as 'glorified communication lords') often lack multidisciplinary knowledge and thus are not able to perform the brokering behaviors required to successfully enact ambidexterity for CSP.

Most of the sustainability managers we interviewed also had unique relational capabilities that allowed them to concretely get access to and bring together various stakeholders. For instance, the capability of listening was defined as the prerequisite for sustainability managers' decisions on certain behaviors:

> *I think we are maybe ahead of the rest of the organization in terms of listening to the outside world. We tend to be very good listeners and we try to ask all the time 'is that the one thing that people want?'; 'is that how they want it? … if we do not get the right solution, we will not get it right and for that we need to listen to people outside what they are saying.* (Global R&D Director for Packaging for firm 7 Food Solution)

The previous examples we provided in relation to brokering behaviors had already suggested how being able to communicate, tell stories, and persuade were fundamental skills in the everyday work of sustainability managers. As the senior brand manager of firm 7 told us: '*It's all about storytelling. Especially in companies like this, it's all about influence. Make sure people start doing what you want them to do.*'

4.5. Connecting the dots: an example to illustrate the relationships between the elements of our grounded model

In this section, our objective is to provide a holistic illustration of the relationships between the different elements in our grounded model. In the following vignette we focus on a sustainability initiative launched at Firm 7 and briefly analyze how specific challenges, driven by internal and external constraints, engendered the brokering behaviors of sustainability managers. We further show how these behaviors were enabled by the personal characteristics of these mangers and how they contributed to ambidexterity for CSP by creating collective awareness within their organizations and stakeholders. We provide an additional vignette in our appendix.

At Firm 7, the sustainability managers embarked on a mission to introduce a groundbreaking initiative - labeling specific beverages as sustainable, guaranteeing that no child labor was involved in sourcing the materials. This endeavor presented both external and internal challenges that the managers had to overcome in order to drive the initiative forward.

As for the former, the materials used for the beverages were sourced from different countries, namely India, Turkey, and Guatemala. Each country had its own set of regulations concerning child labor, adding complexity to the task at hand. The sustainability managers were confronted with the daunting challenge of ensuring compliance with these varied regulations while maintaining the sustainability standards they sought to establish.

As for internal constrains and challenges, the New Product Development, Marketing, and Purchasing units were primarily focused on increasing product quality and reducing costs - factors that were deemed essential to meet customer demands. Sustainability managers faced the internal challenge of lacking formal authority to dictate the actions of these units, making it essential for them to navigate internal dynamics and garner support for their labeling initiative. To this regard, a sustainability manager told us that the previous purchase manager *"wanted to keep purchasing and sustainability really separate. Communication often went through this manager who then sometimes stopped [our attempt to foster sustainability initiatives.]"*

The sustainability managers, driven by a strong belief in the importance of the label initiative for their company and society at large, employed various strategies to address these challenges. One of the managers possessed previous experience in purchasing and marketing, providing valuable insights and understanding of the internal landscape.

To tackle the external challenges, the sustainability managers established a platform that fostered collaboration with different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in the respective countries where the materials were sourced. Through these partnerships, long-term relationships with suppliers were forged, facilitating the implementation of sustainable practices and ensuring adherence to child labor regulations. A sustainability manager, in charge of stakeholder platform, told us:

> So in my work specifically I think we try to strive to long relationships with our suppliers , so that we do not go for a penny more or less hopping, yes go, one year at that buy and the other year at that. We try to go for a long-term relations. So you, It has advantages for us, because they better understand what quality we are looking for And it does take, they are not nuts and nails that you buy, they are just specific natural products.

Additionally, the managers engaged in lobbying efforts with governments, advocating for stricter regulations and enforcement to eradicate child labor from the supply chain.

Internally, the sustainability managers adopted a proactive approach. They engaged in individual discussions with the various units involved, illustrating the significance and potential benefits of the new label they were developing. By crafting compelling stories around the label's purpose and impact, they sought to align the different parties' interests and inspire their support.

According to the informants, these collective efforts yielded favorable outcomes because they distributed awareness around the importance of sustainability. More specifically, the behaviors exhibited by the sustainability managers contributed to enhancing the company's image and fostering positive, long-term relationships with stakeholders, including clients. Furthermore, an analysis of reports and press releases revealed that the label initiative not only achieved its sustainability objectives but also positively impacted the company's profits. For example, corporate social performance reports of Firm 7 in years 2018, 19, and 20, underscore how the company was able to enhance its production processes' environmental footprint and to create an image of corporate citizenship, thus concretely influencing consumer perception. According to the report, firm 7, by constantly updating and expanding its sustainability programs, including the label initiative, was able to 'maintain its position in the consumer goods market partly by satisfying consumers' various expectations.'

5. Discussion

Through a micro-foundational view of ambidexterity for CSP, our grounded model sheds new light on i) the brokering behaviors of sustainability managers within and outside the organization boundaries and with short and long term goals, ii) their individual characteristics and cognitions that facilitate brokering behaviors, iii) the main constraining features of the context (organizational and institutional) that sustainability managers react to through their brokering behaviors, iv) the main emerging tensions at the interface between sustainability managers and the organizational and institutional context. Differently from previous studies, we theorize that the brokering behaviors of sustainability managers dealing with tensions do not exist independently of their cognitive abilities and individual values, and their social context. Hence, our work contributes to the emergent literatures on brokering for CSP, sustainability managers, and ambidexterity for CSP.

5.1. The brokering behaviors of sustainability managers: where and when?

Our evidence underscores sustainability managers' brokering behaviors, i.e. the "behavioral processes through which

organizational actors shape others' relationships" (Halevy et al., 2019: 215). Our work extends the recent literature on brokering for CSP (Kaine and Josserand, 2018; Reinecke et al., 2018; Soundararajan et al., 2018) by revealing how sustainability managers combine internal and external brokerage to support ambidexterity for CSP. This existing literature has overwhelmingly focused on brokering processes for CSP *external* to company boundaries, that is, between corporations and their global supply chain partners (Reinecke et al., 2018). Previous studies have also focused on sourcing agents (Soundararajan et al., 2018) and grassroots organizations promoting workers' rights (Kaine and Josserand, 2018), to negotiate sustainability standards that balance the pursuit of social, environmental, and economic goals. Our empirical findings add to this literature by revealing that external brokering intertwines with internal brokering. This revealed process of combining internal and external brokering emphasizes that, to build ambidexterity for CSP, brokering needs to be analyzed at both inter-organizational and intra-organizational levels of analysis (Lodsgård and Aagaard, 2017), rather than exclusively at the level of inter-organizational relationships (Ciulli et al., 2019).

Our evidence further distinguishes between brokering behaviors with immediate or short term effects (e.g., providing leaders with practical tips for sustainable decision making) and brokering behaviors whose impact is long term (e.g., lobbying for a better institutional environment and new legislations for sustainability). Only recently has literature on brokering in social networks observed that short term and long term brokering have different objectives and effects on organizations. For example, Quintane and Carnabuci (2016) found that, on the one hand, short term brokering behaviors is consistent with a *tertius gaudens strategy*, i.e. with the perspective that the broker can take personal advantage in connecting otherwise disconnected parties. On the other hand, long term brokering behaviors are consistent with a *tertius iungens strategy*, i.e. the perspective that brokers facilitate knowledge exchange across parties. Accordingly, our findings suggest that a combination of short term and long term behaviors seems to benefit sustainability managers by helping them in reaching their in-role goals in the short term and, at the same time, diffuses knowledge and creates connections that help the entire organization in becoming ambidextrous in the long term.

5.2. The individual characteristics and cognitions of sustainability managers enabling brokering behaviors

Our model also places new emphasis on the observable managerial characteristics needed to sustain the work of sustainability managers in solving tensions between instrumental and moral goals. It reveals that personal values, knowledge and cognitive skills are the three emerging elements predicting brokering behaviors. Our results are in line with the work of Molinsky and Margolis (2005) discussing the emotional challenges that managers cope with when they have to decide between the greater good of society or the organization and in agreement with Swanson (1995) underlining the relevance of personal values of executives for their decision-making, which in turn shapes ultimate social performance. The link between personal values and sustainability managers' behavior constitutes a relevant contribution to the CSR literature. Indeed, past literature tends to focus more on how individuals contribute to CSR, rather than on why they do so (Gond and Moser, 2021).

Together with personal values, our model also emphasizes cognitive skills as an additional element of personal characteristics having an impact on sustainability managers' behaviors. In line with past research, we argue that solving social dilemmas and tensions requires the cognitive skills for elaborating conclusions and judgments (Shiffrin and Schneider, 1977; Haidt, 2007). More specifically, we found that sustainability managers act as if they were consciously accepting the presence of two opposing logics, such as profitability and sustainability, within their organization. Instead of interpreting the related tensions as a trade-off, they attempted to behave proactively and creatively to fully enact both logics. By doing so, sustainability managers seem to tolerate the intense ambivalence within the firm through the exercise of wisdom, i.e. the capacity to recognize and embrace opposing positions, thereby fostering a course of action that can help both (see also Martin, 2009; Weick, 1998). In line with existing literature on wise actors, sustainability managers' responses relied on their mindfulness, and their tendency to perceive complementarity and even synergy (Ashforth et al., 2014). Their mindfulness emerged from their willingness to embrace the complexity of the phenomenon by exploring their stakeholders' points of view. Their wisdom helped them to develop a both/and rather than either/or thinking, for instance proposing long term investments in sustainability only at the conditions that there is a balancing between altruistic principles and economic outcomes. Therefore, sustainability managers choose to accept the opposition of positions, changing what has been far from their control, such as the two different developed logics, into something that they can influence (see, Meyerson, 2001).

Additionally, sustainability managers decided to diffuse sustainability logics by relying on their relational skills. In line with past studies, which have shown that individual sensemaking and cognition become "shared with the collective through relying on the interplay between conversational and material practices" (Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012, p.1241), sustainability managers started articulating and elaborating information so to build a story. Storytelling is indicated as relevant for actors' sensegiving, and it is used to reassure actors about the appropriateness and coherence of emerging concepts (Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012). Additionally, storytelling is also the means by which the diffusion of ideas occurs. The emotions a story inspires in people favors the transfer of ideas from individuals (e.g. sustainability managers') towards a collective (Schoenewolf 1990). In our case, the story pertained solutions and examples about how to combine the two competing logics.

Differently from past CSR research articles, we also acknowledge the relevance of multidisciplinary competencies which can sustain the integration effort of combining competing goals, allowing managers to behave ambidextrously with the capacity for switching between different "thought worlds" (Raisch et al., 2009: 687; Inkpen and Tsang, 2005) and thus to cope with the emerging tensions. As stated by Taylor and Helfat (2009), combining competing goals and addressing tensions requires individuals to cross-fertilize knowledge between competing business demands, to easily switch between different knowledge domains, and to combine existing knowledge with disparate, novel information (Smith and Lewis, 2011).

By connecting sustainability managers' brokering behaviors to the managers' cognitive, knowledge skills and values, we provide an "inside out" view perspective of the sustainability managers. While previous studies have discussed the individual characteristics

explaining individual engagement to CSR (Akhtar et al., 2018; Crilly et al., 2008), our study extends the literature on ambidexterity for CSP by highlighting the importance of sustainability managers' ambivalent behaviors to solve sustainability challenges, which helped them to accept and 'bring into contact contrasting action repertoires that are usually separated' (Plambeck and Weber, 2009: 998) and legitimize other organizational members to do the same in their domain of activity.

5.3. Reacting to contextual constraints: brokering behaviors as work arounds

Our model shows that the brokering behaviors of the sustainability managers are not only a function of who they are, but also of the context in which they operate. In the firms we studied, centralized decision making structures forced sustainability managers to act through their informal, interpersonal relations with decision makers to influence their decisions and to get the "go" for sustainability initiatives. Therefore, equipped with their network of internal contacts, sustainability managers behaved like entrepreneurs. They acted as brokers connecting to others within the firm boundaries and to external entities outside the firms, thus realizing the higher organizational goal of organizational ambidexterity. Our model, in contrast to some studies on sustainability managers discussing each manager as unique (Gond and Moser, 2021), devotes particular attention to the identification of an overarching structural influence of the organizational context. In the analyzed firms, there is a non-differentiation approach. Competing goals are jointly combined and distributed to subunits so that sustainability managers experience the trade-off between goals as a challenge in their everyday work. Non-differentiated structures are reported to be less complex than the differentiated ones (see for example Shore, 1998). However, they do not alleviate the struggle in actors' responses.

In line with past research underlining that managers implement CSR strategies within the framework of firm-level governance mechanisms (Filatotchev, 2012), we found that formal structures responsible for the organization of tasks and for the allocation of decision making authorities triggered the emergence of the brokering behaviors of sustainability managers, within the internal boundaries of the firm and externally to the firm itself. Past literature studies have devoted little attention on how the formal organizational structure affects the firm's leadership approach to CSP strategy and the way it is implemented (Filatotchev and NakaJima, 2014). Past research has focused on the analysis of the conditions for realizing the adherence of individual behavior to organizational ambidexterity, but has neglected situations where individuals fight the organizational inertia and the absence of a proper structure for ambidexterity by adopting workaround behaviors.

Despite the contribution of past studies on CSR to developing a deeper understanding of the economic and social challenges faced by managers, these studies do not explicitly relate managerial behaviors to the organizational structures they were subjected to (Filatotchev and Nakajima, 2014). Past studies have linked some characteristics of the firms, e.g. executives' incentives and board monitoring (Filatotchev and Nakajima, 2014), but they do not consider organizational mechanisms as key antecedents of managerial behavior. There are still few exceptions such as the work by Sandhu and Kulik (2019). These authors emphasize the co-dependence and co-evolution of organizational structure and managerial behavior, but they do not identify the link between organizational design and the level of managerial discretion in dealing with competing demands. Indeed the study does not detail the concrete solutions adopted by managers to cope with the tensions in the specific organizational configuration scenario they operate, failing to connect the peculiar organizational structure with the specific implementation of CSR approaches chosen by managers.

Regarding the managerial reactions to institutional constraints, our study contributes to enrich the debate on how institutional constraints affect firms in their implementation of sustainability programs. Past studies focused more narrowly on firms' economic constraints. A relevant example is the work of Bansal et al. (2014) showing that firms with greater slack resources are more likely to continue their strategic CSR during times of economic constraint. Firm slack has been used as a key factor explaining many organizational phenomena, including buffering changes in an organization's external surroundings (Geiger and Makri, 2006; Lawson, 2001; Thompson, 1967). Along similar reasoning Bag et al. (2021) found that institutional pressures (i.e., coercive pressures, normative pressures, and mimetic pressures) have a positive association with tangible resources such as the voluntary disclosure (Clarkson et al., 2008) of a sustainability report that evaluate the three main components of environmental protection, economic growth and social equity. Other research studies (e.g. Berrone et al., 2013) have analyzed the reactions of firms to institutional pressure demonstrating that firms' responses to institutional pressures are affected by organizational characteristics including ownership structure, board of director interlocks, and geographic proximity to peer organizations. We extend this line of research by showing that institutional pressures can have differential effects on the focal firm, depending on the actions of sustainability managers.

5.4. Extending the literature on ambidexterity for CSP

Our paper offers a number of relevant contributions to the academic debate on CSP (e.g., Hahn et al., 2016). First, we provide a micro-foundational view of the ambidextrous behaviors of sustainability managers that includes both the components of the context in which they operate and their salient individual characteristics. Our approach allowed us to zoom into the microprocesses through which relevant actors, such as sustainability managers, deeply committed to the institution they belong to, wisely accept the tensions and look for a win-win solutions mitigating them. Some other papers have already discussed the co-enactment of dual strategies within firms' boundaries (McWilliams and Siegel, 2011; Porter and Kramer, 2011; Surroca et al., 2010; Van der Byl and Slawinski, 2015), sustainability and profitability, showing how actors acknowledge and embrace the tensions arising from the dual strategies, and attempt a win-win solution, for example by overcoming the tension and prioritizing the sustainability initiatives when they increase economic returns. Some other works have also emphasized the instrumental legitimacy of the sustainability initiatives proposed by managers (Hahn et al., 2016, 2018; Van der Byl and Slawinski, 2015), associating the act of decoupling to the situation in which managers find it difficult to present sustainability initiatives through the paradigm of profit-seeking. More recently the work of Hengst

et al. (2020) presented the case of managers working towards a different approach to legitimate sustainability initiatives. They revealed that actors highlighted the moral values over the economic ones, showing their ability to distinguish between moral and business discussions and to prioritize the moral arguments when they are central to the firms' values. Despite all these past papers implicitly linking the individual choice on how to realize the co-enactment of the sustainability and mainstream strategies to the overarching organizational commitment to them, they do not develop a substantive approach to integrate them. Indeed, they fail to clarify the contextual elements and the individual characteristics of managers influencing their response to the duality of strategies. We also show how managerial actions are influenced by their personal experience of contradictions derived from the structural configuration of their organizational and institutional contexts. Adding to the above conversation, our results reveal how sustainability managers navigate these tensions and, therefore, support ambidexterity for CSP. Thereby, our finding opens up a new perspective in the study of ambidexterity for CSP, that is, how individuals work around existing constraining structures to foster the organizational ability to carry both moral and instrumental rationales for CSP.

Second, our empirical findings also connect the recently thriving literature on CSP micro-foundations (Gond et al., 2017; Gond and Moser, 2021) to the level of the organizations and institutional contexts that managers inhabit. We found that individual managers' KSAs not only enable their CSP engagement and shape their reactions to CSP initiatives (Gond et al., 2017), but also support organizational-level changes towards ambidexterity for CSP. For example, sustainability managers engage in storytelling not only to cope with the competing demands they face (Carollo and Guerci, 2018), but also to build structural bridges across departments within their company and, outside their organization, between their company and government agencies, civil society organizations, and less powerful supply chain actors (e.g. NGOs). By building these bridges within and outside their organization, sustainability managers support organizational ambidexterity for CSP.

Finally, our study also contributes to the ambidexterity literature. While previous research studies have mainly focused on either cognitive or behavioral drivers of individual ambidexterity, we have considered cognitive skills as well as micro foundations which are deep-rooted in managers' individual characteristics such as their value systems and relational abilities. In doing so we have answered the call for more research studies connecting leaders' personal characteristics to their ambidextrous behaviors (Tarba et al., 2020). We have also extended our understanding of the effect of coordination mechanisms such as formal decision making structures on managerial ambidexterity behaviors by illustrating how managers compensate the lack of decision making authority with brokering behaviors and by leveraging on their values, knowledge and beliefs. Additionally, despite the fact that the literature on individual ambidexterity has underscored the relevance of integrating the information on managers' characteristics with the information on the contextual aspects describing where they operate to better explain individuals' behaviors in dealing with tensions, no other empirical study has presented a comprehensive insight about how and under which conditions, the organizational and institutional context affects individual work and leadership behaviors. Our study has done so, having investigated the types of different cognitive characteristics and the structural elements of the context corresponding to the specific manager's behaviors in dealing with tensions. By combining both cognitive (or micro) and organizational (or macro) theories, our study has also addressed the micro-macro divide between individual ambidexterity and organizational ambidexterity research (see Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2020).

5.5. Managerial implications

Our case offers a relevant illustrative example that could help sustainability managers to achieve their objectives. The sustainability managers we interviewed operated within varying degrees of autonomy both internally and externally to their organizations. Within the company, they lacked the authority to make independent decisions or directly influence organizational systems and processes. Instead, their role necessitated working through others to exert influence on internal stakeholders, as collective decision-making with these stakeholders was the norm. Having a limited power, sustainability managers were not capable of changing the organizational context and to design an enabling context for them. Therefore, they had to work to balance strategic contradictions developing different angles of attacks to achieve their goal. Relational abilities and competences sustained the behavioral abilities of sustainability managers, i.e. the capacity of leaders to engage in a wide repertoire of behaviors (Hooijberg and Quinn, 1992), and the "ability to exhibit contrary or opposing behaviors" (Denison et al., 1995, p. 526). As the tensions were embedded in the configuration of an organization implementing a non-differentiated approach to the decision making process, sustainability managers' competences and cognitive skills became essential, as well as their values, as they justified sustainability managers' engagement and proactive behavior towards the launch of moral initiatives. This has relevant implications for the selection and hiring of proper sustainability managers and for the development of human resource management practices aimed at nurturing managers' individual multi-disciplinary skills and at boosting their global view of their organization so to allow them to understand the operations on which they might operate.

Our study also suggests that long term solutions could rely on modifications to existing managerial control systems such as diagnostic controls (used "to monitor organizational outcomes and correct deviations from pre-set standards of performance", Simons, 1995, p. 59) and boundary controls (used to prescribe certain behaviors regarding day-to-day activities, Durden, 2008; Journeault et al., 2016; Norris and O'Dwyer, 2004) which can facilitate the work of sustainability managers. Diagnostic and boundary controls should be redesigned so to manage the organizational attention and the resource allocation towards a true balance between moral and instrumental goals. By providing goals to managers and employees and monitoring their performance, individual actions can be guided and constrained to follow an organizational strategic balanced (between the dual objectives) direction. Accordingly, incentives and performance measurement will be necessary to ensure that managerial and individual actions and decisions are congruent with organizational objectives (e.g., Jensen and Meckling, 1976; Widener et al., 2008). As for boundary controls, codes of conduct and other forms of communication towards managers and employees should inform about the initiatives that should be avoided and, at the same time, allow managers and their subordinates flexibility to take actions and make decisions that do not cross off-limits boundaries

(Simons, 1994).

In addition, our case shows an unbalanced set of interactive control mechanisms, e.g. "formal information systems that managers use to involve themselves regularly and personally in the decision activities of subordinates" (Simons, 1995, p. 95). These informal mechanisms were not sustained by a shared set of goals among decision makers and routines to guide decisions and the evaluation of opportunities and risks. Accordingly, past literature studies have reported the implementation of a 'package' of sustainability managerial control system (Sundin and Brown, 2017; Svensson and Funck, 2019), showing that informal rather than formal controls might have a more positive effect on sustainability performance (Crutzen et al., 2017). Thus, sustainability managers can be connected to their subordinates and their peers in frequent meetings in order to develop a unique view on the implementation of CSP requirements. Through emerging and designed interactions strategic information about threats and opportunities for the organizations and relevant debates can be triggered, thus facilitating firms' ability to be responsive to moral and instrumental challenges.

5.6. Limitations and implications for future research

The boundary conditions of this study may open the door for future research to investigate the theoretical generalizability of our empirical findings. As our empirical study is based on interviews, we cannot claim generalizable to any context, but we can only propose theoretical generalizability. In particular, the companies we studied were in a specific industry, i.e. the food industry, which is characterized by a strong pressure towards sustainability. It would be important to understand if the same categories and relationships we described are relevant in contexts characterized by a lower pressure towards sustainability, less complex and invasive social and environmental issues, or in contexts where sustainability is not perceived as an 'additional cost'. In addition, our interviewed sustainability managers, in line with many in the same role, did not have formal power in choosing and allocating resources. What happens when sustainability managers are given formal resources and power may lead to other processes and outcomes, where organizational structural constraints may play different roles. Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that the utilization of snowball sampling used in our study has limited researchers' ability to engage with partners who may have conflicting relationships with the interviewees. In this particular study, we have mitigated potential bias by corroborating information from various documents, but we encourage further research to delve into the intricate network of relationships and perspectives surrounding sustainability initiatives.

In this study we underscored how sustainability managers used storytelling in their brokering behaviors. While some literature has started to explore how storytelling is related to the institutionalization of CSP practices within organizations (e.g. Paynter and Halabi, 2021), more research is needed to explore how storytelling can contribute to ambidexterity for CSP. For example, further research could extend our approach by including stakeholder groups in order to collect their multiple perspectives in the same context of change (see also Thatchenkery and Upadhyaya, 1996). We also encourage scholars to analyze brokering behaviors over time and at multiple level of analysis, possibly including rich ethnographic data in order to enable the exploration of other actors' arguments.

Our analysis has supported the view of organizations as affected by competing goals and fragmented discourses. Future research should underline more discursive clashes among stakeholders with the purpose of better describing the different logics and the mechanisms of influence in their discourses. While we analyzed the link between organizational discourses, sustainability managers' actions and interactions, and organization outcomes, further research could also look at the dialectical connections between the discourses themselves and broader organizational and industry contexts. We also invite scholars to undertake further research on ambidexterity for CSP as a distributed, multi-level phenomenon—thereby revealing how the different approaches and respective strategies for addressing tensions interplay over time.

Existing ambidexterity literature has dealt with how firms embracing specific combinations of strategies pursue and maintain ambidexterity (e.g. House and Price, 2009; Raisch, 2008). This study has analyzed the approach firms adopt to achieve ambidexterity at different levels (the organization, and the individuals) and thus allowing a more holistic view on how organizational ambidexterity for CSP was pursued. Our integrative approach is also crucial to reduce the micro-macro divide between managerial behavior and organizational research (Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2020).

Authorship contributions

Please indicate the specific contributions made by each author (list the authors' initials followed by their surnames, e.g., Y.L. Cheung). The name of each author must appear at least once in each of the three categories below.

Category 1.

Conception and design of study: M.C., Annosi; E., Mattarelli; A., Petruzzelli; D., Dentoni; acquisition of data: Dentoni, D.

analysis and/or interpretation of data: M.C., Annosi; E., Mattarelli; A., Petruzzelli; D., Dentoni;

Category 2.

Drafting the manuscript: M.C., Annosi; E., Mattarelli; D., Dentoni; A. Petruzzelli

revising the manuscript critically for important intellectual content: M.C., Annosi; E. Mattarelli; A., Petruzzelli;, D. Dentoni,

Category 3.

Approvai of the version of the manuscript to be published (the names of all authors must be listed): Maria Carmela Annosi; Elisa Mattarelli, Domenico Dentoni, Antonio Petruzzelli.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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Appendix: A. second example to illustrate the relationships between the elements of our grounded model

Firm 3, a multinational company, embarked on a dairy development program with the aim of improving the conditions of farm workers in various regions around the world, such as Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Vietnam. Their objective was not only to enhance the livelihoods of farmers but also to increase awareness about animal well-being and sustainable agriculture. However, they encountered distinct challenges both externally and internally.

Externally, the company faced different institutional practices and regulations related to small farmers in the countries they operated in. For instance, in Indonesia, small farmers operated within cooperatives, making it difficult for Firm 3 to work directly with individual farmers. In the words of one informant from Firm 3:

> *The corporate communication from [our subsidiary in Indonesia], they have the main agenda regarding the corporate affairs or something like that, so if we would like to go to the local government or to the Dutch embassy in Indonesia, usually we go together with them, and then, because about managing the cooperative, we don't buy from the farmer directly but from the cooperative.*

Internally, Firm 3 was composed of different business groups, and every new initiative had to align not only with the overall business strategy but also with the specific targets of each business unit.

To address these challenges, sustainability managers enacted multiple brokering behaviors. Externally, they established relationships with multiple stakeholders, including NGOs, local governments, and cooperatives. They engaged in regular meetings with partners, as one field note highlighted:

> *So usually we go there to the cooperative almost every month, that is how we manage our Dairy Development Program with the cooperatives. We have quarterly meetings with all our partners via tele-conference or something like that. Then we have consortium meetings once a year, where all partners come to Indonesia. We also have steering committee meetings with the Dutch government and representatives from the cooperatives.*

Internally, sustainability managers held regular meetings with the communication work group and key internal stakeholders, to ensure alignment between sustainability initiatives and corporate objectives. They focused on effective communication and utilized various communication channels, such as fact sheets, letters, web text, and even films. Face-to-face conversations were highly valued, as expressed by one sustainability manager:

> *My preference is to have face-to-face conversations because paper is very patient and also open to multiple interpretations. Talking to somebody allows for more in-depth conversation and understanding of the topic.*

The ability to persuade and communicate effectively played a crucial role in enacting brokering behaviors. Additionally, the complex supply chain in the dairy industry required sustainability managers to possess diverse knowledge in agriculture, government affairs, politics, and corporate matters.

According to our informants, Firm 3 achieved success in the Dairy Development Initiative. As stated on their website and in their corporate bi-annual journal in 2019, the collaborating farmers experienced an improved quality of life, increased milk production for Firm 3, and contributed to a 5% increase in revenues.

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